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REACTOR
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REACTOR 

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Wolf Moon, Antler Moon

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REACTOR 

Prom Night, Wolf Moon

She can't stop seeing them—the doe-girl skins hanging from the wall, turned inside out, cut and changed so the girls could never find their way inside them again.

She can't stop hearing the things left behind. Not girls or deer anymore. Peeled, glistening raw and red under the spinning lights. Gleaming muscle and white fat. Terrible, thin legs poised to shatter as they blundered across the dance floor, filling the room with the panicked clatter of hooves and piteous, bleating screams.

The last song the DJ cued up before he fled thumped bass under the chaos and panic. Then came the first flat crack, the muzzleflash as someone—more than one someone—finally took it upon themselves to do what was needful. Shots—one, two, three, four, five—putting the prom court out of their misery because there was no coming back from what had been done.

Coach Stevens held one of the rifles, Principal Gibbons another. Maybe there were others; Merrow never saw in the chaos. The guns must have come from the Lodge's security office, protection against wolves reclaiming the land after the resort shut down. But who had been first to fetch them? How much time elapsed before the first trigger pull?

Not enough time to ask, *Is this right?* A split-second choice born out of grief and fear. But who made the call? She can't imagine Coach Stevens picking up a gun, only having one shoved into his arms. What about Principal Gibbons? Did he tremble as he raised the stock to his shoulder? Was there a tear in his eye as he sighted along the barrel?

Neither of them were hunters before the night began. And now? What have they become?

Not murderers, because the girls were already worse than dead when they stumbled—were released—back into the hall. The thud of bullets hitting meat, the thud of bodies hitting the floor, that was just batting cleanup.

Merrow runs, sucking in cold mountain air. There's never enough to satisfy her lungs. She runs, leaving behind the Lodge that isn't a Lodge anymore, an in-between thing waiting to be torn down for a new multi-million-dollar resort to be built instead. She runs under the wolf moon painting the trees silver, the perfect round of an animal with its tail tucked over its nose, not yet woken from its winter nap.

A stitch burns along her side. Her breath stutters, and she chokes on almost-tears. Not because the doe-girls were her friends, but because they're dead, all of them dead, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Everyone scattered when they burst from the Lodge. She runs alone. She lost track of Shep, his father. She lost track of the prom court as well, way back when the night began.

Now it's only her, and her foot catches a hidden root. She sprawls, breath knocked from behind her ribs with a painful huff. The sound echoes back, too close, the breath not hers. A huff, then a whine—an animal in pain.

No, please, no more. Not tonight.

It's all Merrow can think as she rolls onto her side, trying to get air into her lungs. Eyes burn in the dark, an improbable gold. Wolf. Man. Both. Neither.

Merrow bites her lip hard enough to taste blood, holding back laughter, a sob, a scream.

What are the fucking odds? That there are wolves on the mountain after all and she stumbled on one in her panicked flight.

He whines again, a high sound too much like the ones the doe-girls made. Metal jaws pin one of his legs. This isn't trapping land, not anymore, not for a long time, so it must be old. Bad luck for the wolf, good luck for her. She could run. She should.

But Merrow reaches instead.

The scent of gunpowder lingers in her nose. Her blood, all the weight and history of it, thuds in her veins. The scent of oversweet drinks and too much cologne laid atop the slaughterhouse smell. The crack of rifle-fire and the skinned girls making their terrible, broken sounds.

She needs to not be prey.

It's that simple.

And there's nothing simple about it at all.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who tamed a fox. After that, she was responsible for him. She belonged to the fox, and he belonged to her, forevermore.

The memory of her grandmother's voice in the memory of her kitchen, and Merrow's voice answering her at five or six years old.

Why was it a fox? Why not—

Hush. Which one of us is telling the story?

Her grandmother's hands on her shoulders, cigarette burning between her first two fingers, a thread of smoke rising into the air.

It's a fox because I say it's a fox.

The cigarette slipped back into the corner of her grandmother's mouth, a hard, glinting look, a cloud exhaled with a sigh.

It doesn't have to be a fox. It could be a hedgehog, a crow, a boa constrictor. It doesn't matter. The point is what happens next. To tame something, you don't need to love it, but you must care for it once it is tamed. Do you understand? You tame something, and it is yours. Whatever happens after that, it is yours to care for, because it can no longer survive on its own. Whatever harm comes to it, whatever harm it does, both are yours to carry.

Merrow pushes to one knee, crouched in the cold leaflitter. The first thing her grandmother ever taught her about the shape of the world, their world, is that there are wolves and there are deer. There's a sharp line drawn between them—predator and prey. Everything else her grandmother taught her came later, and it isn't what is in her head now. Only that sharp line, and which side she chooses to stand on—she does not want to be prey.

The doe-girls are dead; the night is already broken—a bone cracked wide so the hunter can suck marrow and magic from inside. Merrow's fingers close on the tear in the wolf's skin where the trap bit closed. She pulls.

Mine.

She doesn't take her eyes from the wolf, but he doesn't look away from her either. Hesnarls—a painsound, teeth bared. His skin unravels and pools into her hands. She stands, wolfskin a bloody mass clutched against her already gore-soaked gown—collateral damage from the slaughter inside—shaking, breathing hard.

When his skin comes undone, so does the man, trap falling away from him. He unfolds, raw, but not in the way of the doe-girls. Shivering, his shoulders hunched inward, instinctively pulling his limbs to his core to protect the softest parts of himself.

Merrow smelled like prey moments before. Now she smells like him, all musk and snapping jaws. One quick bite and it would be done, his corpse at her feet on the forest floor.

The trees wait; the night waits with them. Wolf and girl, the balance of power shifted between them. There is another balance waiting to shift too.

Wolves and deer were the first things her grandmother taught her—an old dichotomy, written into the skin of the world. Later, her grandmother taught her of the hunters who made the sharp line a triangle; two sides becoming three points, hunters neither predator nor prey, but a bit of each. Born without claws, without teeth to rend, claiming self-defense, but sometimes killing for fun. Sometimes killing because they hoped to become something more, to take the old powers and make them their own.

The wolf watches Merrow to see what she will do, and the forest, the hills, wait and watch with him.

Is she a hunter? Predator? Prey?

These hills are a place of change, and the night is already thin with everything that's happened. Old rules close around her as sure as the trap closing on the wolf's leg. She only has a split second to

choose. No, she already chose. She took his skin. She tamed him. He is hers;she is responsible for him. She—

No.

Merrow shouts it without words. This isn't what she wants, it isn't what she meant. She isn't ready. Except,deep down, this is what she was always meant to be, following in her grandmother's footsteps, because if she doesn't ...

No!

It's too fresh, too close, and Merrow screams her denial at him—the wolf-man watching her with his golden eyes.A guttural sound, a refusal, vomiting up her rage as she shoves his skin back into his arms. She tries to step away, but he catches her forearm, tacky with his blood.

"You can't," he says.

It's too late, he means.

His voice is neither wolf nor man, velvet and smoke, whiskey and cigarettes and glass scattered on the highway where a deer has just been smacked by a car.

His grip tightens; his fingers—even though he doesn't have claws at the moment—dig in.His breath is hot against the night air. There's a wildness to his wolf-gold eyes, and they're also glazed with tears.

"Once upon a time, there was a girl who tamed a fox. After that, she was responsible for him. She belonged to the fox, and he belonged to her, forevermore."

No. No, no, no.

How dare he quote her grandmother's words back at her? How could he possibly know?

"I don't—" Merrow says.

He lets go. Her words are cut off by the too-heavy sound of wolfskin hitting the forest floor.

It's not the kind of thing that can be undone.

"No!"Merrow places both hands on the center of the man's chest, shoving as hard as she can.

She expects him to fall, but he barely moves. His gaze burns, and so does hers—anger, not the threat of tears. She wants this thing. She wanted it when she reached for his skin, but she doesn't *want* to want it. She doesn't want to hurt people, and she's afraid that she will, just because she can. The line between predator and hunter is so thin. That thinness has already been crossed once tonight, in the Lodge, in the smoke, with the bass thump not quite covering the way the doe-girls screamed.

The wolf's long arms go around her. He crushes her against his chest. It's the last thing Merrow expects, and it shocks her still. His lips at her ear release breath hot with the scent of devoured things.

"I'm sorry," the wolf says.

The words are as heavy as his dropped skin, and there's an edge of relief beneath them as well. He doesn't have to carry this burden anymore. It's at her feet. It belongs to her.

The wolf holds her, like a grandparent holding a child, wrapped tight—not to hurt her, but to keep her from hurting herself. He's a wolf, but he's her wolf now.

She melts into him, this man she doesn't know, in the woods in the middle of the night, after escaping an abattoir. His mouth is close to her ear, and so also her throat, but there are no teeth, just words, a growl—not at her, but for her.

"Let it go."

And she does. A throat-shredding scream, a howl, hollowing her out. He holds her through all of it, holds her until the storm passes. They both know—when this moment ends, she will have to figure out how to live; this is when the rest of her life begins.

* * *

Six Months Before Prom, Fox Moon

The final bell echoes. Merrow spins her combination lock closed just as the prom court goes clattering down the hall. Everything stops, a parting without conscious intention, letting the doe-girls pass.

Prom is months away. No one has voted the doe-girls as the court yet, but no one needs to. They're the planning committee, the heart of the school. They are the heart of the town. They are everything.

Merrow has known the doe-girls since they were all five years old, starting kindergarten. Her first memory of them, which seems impossible, but isn't for this town, is of the five of them standing together on the field just outside the kindergarten classroom. Other students, even teachers, surrounding them, but not too close. Merrow herself standing on the asphalt, closer to the school.

Even then, she understood that she was different—the concentric circle of the doe-girls and the people surrounding them wasn't for her. Not just because she didn't have a mother and father—or at least one of the two—raising her, like most of her classmates, but because of her grandmother—who and what she was to the town. Even the grown-ups were a little afraid of Merrow's grandmother, despite recognizing her as necessary. As a result, they were a little afraid of Merrow too.

In her mind's eye, Merrow sees the doe-girls in their circle-within-a-circle wearing white shifts. She's sure they were wearing something else, but reality bent around them until the fabric was white and glowed. Arms raised, long hair hanging halfway down their backs—shiny black, brown, red, strawberry-blonde. She can't see their faces, but she knows they're smiling. Beatific, peaceful, pledging themselves to the town and one another.

It's how Merrow always sees them—too-bright things that are impossible to look at, calling down the sun, or bidding it to rise. Like right now, she wants to squint as they pass. Even though they're wearing jeans and sweaters, they glitter, already draped in prom finery, shedding sequins and rose petals in their wake.

The doe-girls move as a herd: Callie, Bailey, Saya, Devon, and Estelle. Born on the same day, side by side in separate rooms in the same hospital. Their names are spell, and magic follows everywhere they go.

Before your doe-girls, there were deer-wives in the field below the hills.

Her grandmother's voice in her memory, Merrow back home from her first day of school, telling her grandmother about the girls in her class who went everywhere together, who shone like the sun.

There were no roads then, only scattered houses connected with beaten paths. The men in those houses became hunters because they were afraid. They stole the deer-wives' skin, changed them, and made marriages through blood and bone and stone. They did it to keep themselves safe, at first, and then they did it for other reasons altogether.

How were they already deer-wives before the men married them?

Because there are things older than men who make marriages as well, her grandmother had said. *Now hush and help me cook.*

By cook, her grandmother also meant kill, because people should understand their food—where it came from, what it was before being consumed. Merrow held the chicken steady; her grandmother wielded the blade. Crimson splashed the apron Merrow wore and scattered across her skin. They'd plucked the bird together, and her grandmother showed Merrow how to pull out the organs and guts from inside.

Her grandmother had never shied away from bloody things—not in the stories she told Merrow, not in the chores she had her do. Not in what she did to protect the town.

It all happened a long time ago. Her grandmother looked through the kitchen window, rinsing the rime of gore from beneath her nails. *But that doesn't mean it's done.*

The doors at the end of the hall open to a burst of late-fall sun, letting the doe-girls out into the world. The scent of rose petals lingers in their wake; a single bright sequin winks on the floor—a promise of greater things to come.

The world restarts, and Merrow carries her books to the bleachers by the football field. Tuesdays and Thursdays she has a forty-five-minute gap between when classes end and driver's ed begins. Not

enough time to bothergoing home. Her aunt doesn't worry; if Merrow is going to be late for dinner, she'll call.

The sharp blasts of Coach Stevens' whistle and the sound of padded bodies colliding with one anothermake a nice backdrop, and it's preferable to studying inside. Twenty minutes into practice, an apologetic text arrives from her driving instructor—can they reschedule? Merrow replies that it's no problem and since no one is expecting her anywhere, she decides to stay.

When she next looks up, the players are filtering off the field, and the sun is angling low. Coach Stevens gives her a questioning look—*Is everything okay, are you safe, why are you still here?* He strikes Merrow as a kind manwho spends a great deal of time worrying about others while pretending to be gruff and not care. She feels bad for worrying him, and at the same time, a prickling at the back of her neck makes her wonder—why is he uneasy? *Is she okay?*

Merrow halfturns, but there's nothing behind her. Only a feeling, like a premonition. Or maybe it's nothing at all.

The moment passes; the fine hairs at the back of her neck settle. She holds up her textbook to indicate she's almost done and gives Coach Stevens a reassuring wave. The field empties. Merrow finishes her work, tucks everything back into her bag, descends from the bleachers, and nearly collides with Shep Hollingsworthon his way to the parking lot.

His book bag and gear bag are both slung over his shoulder, but he stands tall and carries them effortlessly. He tosses his head, a startled motion at the nearcollision, shaking caramel-colored curls out of his eyes. The sun disappears fast at this time of year, but enough lingers to warm his skin and highlight his dimples as Shep recovers and smiles. If the prom court needed a king, if the doe-girls were not whole and complete in and of themselves, Shep would wear that crown. Captain of the football team. Straight A student, and not just because of his sports prowess, but because he's genuinely smart and cares about his grades. On top of that, his

father is founder and CEO of Hollingsworth, Haber, and Belmont, the largest real-estate development firm in town.

Merrow has known Shep since kindergarten as well, but they aren't friends. They don't run with the same crowd, in that Merrow doesn't run with any crowd at all. The image fixed in her mind and associated with Shep is from third grade, picture day. Shep arrived with a cast on his arm. He'd broken it during a fishing trip with his father, except later it was hunting, and later still camping. The story changed in the telling, but no one seemed to care. Everyone swarmed around him, eager to listen regardless and sign their names on his cast.

Shep's mother was a model or an actress or a beauty queen, one of those, but she isn't in the picture anymore, and hasn't been for a long time. That's the way Merrow's aunt put it—*not in the picture anymore*—like someone took a pair of scissors and snipped her out.

"You stayed for the whole practice this time," Shep says.

It takes Merrow a moment to make sense of the words. She wasn't there for practice, she's never there for practice, just for a place to sit and do her homework.

"My driving instructor cancelled, so ..."

Her words trail as Shep's smile falters. She may as well have said, *I don't care about football*, which is technically true, but Shep doesn't need to know that.

"I'm glad you did stay." He regains his composure quickly, like someone used to pretending everything is okay. "I actually wanted to ask you whether you wanted to go to prom."

"With you?" Surprise catches Merrow off guard, lets the words pass without a filter.

A chill breeze slips past her. The moon will be up soon, the fox moon. Full and bright, and tinged faintly gold. An apple stolen and carried away in clever jaws. The fox itself never seen, only its prize.

"Sorry." She hurries past her blunder, cheeks warming. "I just wasn't expecting ... we've never really talked before."

Shouldn't you be asking Callie-Bailey-Saya-Devon-Estelle?

"Oh." Shep looks flustered now too, like there's a script in his head, and she's just thrown all the pages into the wind. "It's just that you've been hanging around to watch practice since the season started. I thought..."

Oh.

Ohhh.

Shit.

Merrow is so used to people looking past her, trying not to see her, that she's surprised Shep noticed her at all. Other than Coach Stevens, in his role as a responsible adult on school grounds, she didn't think anyone was paying her any mind. Vague panic catches her. She doesn't want to hurt him, but she doesn't want to be his prom date either. She doesn't want to be anyone's prom date, if she even goes.

Shep's expression is far more fragile than she expected. She always assumed that in the divided camps of predator and prey, Shep would be a wolf. He's captain of the football team, and the kind of adoration he receives regularly and without effort makes so many people hungry. Even when they have everything, they only want more. Shep's father is like that, why wouldn't Shep be too?

Which Merrow knows is unfair. She isn't her grandmother; she isn't her aunt. No matter who raised them, they get to choose who they want to be.

"Maybe? I mean, thank you. It's really nice of you to ask, but let me think about it?" She flails, trying to be gentle, swallowing the urge to apologize. Prey apologizes. And besides, Shep doesn't belong to her; she isn't responsible for his feelings.

"Oh. Uh. Yeah. No problem. Just let me know." Shep's smile unravels at its edges, uncertainty in the crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

Lights snap on over the parking lot on the far side of the field. Even from here, Merrow hears their faint hum. Soon moths will gather, bumping against the thick plastic as the sun falls even lower.

She gives Shep her number and takes his in exchange. An air of confusion lingers as he walks away. His shadow trails behind him. Merrow tries to discern the shape of it. A deer after all, maybe, brow marked with the faintest budding of horns. In a world abound with predators and hunters, it is a shape in need of protection.

The thought shudders through her, as if arrow-struck. She's never been responsible for anyone but herself. A sense of thrill comes with the idea, a feeling of power. But she isn't ...

She isn't her grandmother. She isn't a predator.

Having a friend might not be so bad though. As long as she makes it clear they're only going as friends, prom with Shep could even be fun.

There's safety in numbers after all.

A scent on the wind makes her turn. Like something dead, a deer struck on the road, its carcass left to bloat and rot in the sun. She scans the field and the school buildings, but there's nothing obvious to be seen.

The fox moon rises, rolling across the darkening sky from low on the horizon.

Something is coming.

Once the thought is in her mind, she can't let it go.

* * *

An Hour Before Prom, Wolf Moon

It's spring, but up on the mountain, winter's chill continues to hold. There's a bite in the air and patches of snow linger, tucked between the trees. The weather hasn't stopped girls from shedding their wraps to bare spaghetti-strapped shoulders, or boys doffing their jackets and rolling up their sleeves to take photos. Arms slung around waists and shoulders, beaming faces against the backdrop of the Lodge's weathered wood. Students wedged into the branches of gnarled apple trees to get the perfect shot.

Merrow's aunt insisted on taking pictures of her and Shep before they left. Merrow stuck her tongue out, crossed her eyes, made her

fingers into a crown of antlers and held them up behind Shep's head. She relented and let her aunt take at least few serious ones too, Shep's arm around her shoulders, her arm around his waist.

You'll want to remember this, her aunt had said, and Merrow thinks it might actually be true.

Having Shep as a friend is better than she expected. Once football season wound down, they started meeting up at a local coffee shop to study. The first time was awkward, Merrow afraid that the meeting would be construed as a date. But they'd fallen into companionable silence, interrupted occasionally by Shep helping her memorize the sequence of key events in history, and Merrow pop-quizzing him in preparation for taking the SATs.

Merrow invited Shep over for dinner with her aunt. Afterward the two of them settled onto the couch with blankets and a bowl of popcorn. It became a habit. Shep had a soft spot for classic horror, the cheesier and more cheaply made the better. In turn, she introduced him to the Thin Man movies, and their next study session had been carried out entirely in snappy Nick-and-Nora-style dialogue.

Shep had never tried to push their relationship into anything more romantic. When they watched movies, they sat side by side with their knees up under separate blankets. It wasn't until the third or fourth such evening that Merrow realized he'd never invited her to his house—and not because he was embarrassed of her, or afraid of her. Because he wanted to be anywhere other than home.

An excited stagewhisper catches her attention and Merrow turns to see the doe-girls, their heads together, their needle-thin heels surprisingly steady on the gravel as they climb the winding drive toward the Old Barn, intent on some secret prom-court mission. Their dresses are all shades of silver, bronze, gold, and champagne, a subtle shine that makes it even harder to tell them apart, a single, multi-legged creature, gliding into the falling dark.

Back in the 1970s, when Sugar Hill Farm was first built, it was the hottest winter destination around. Skiing, both downhill and cross-

country, skating, ice fishing, tobogganing, a snow fort that the staff meticulously built every year and maintained all season long, snowshoes and Ski-Doos, nightly sleigh rides, and even an outdoor sauna, hot tub, and iceplunge. Over time, newer resorts sprang up around it, and now, over the summer, the old Sugar Hill will be torn down and anew and improved resort will take its place.

Shep's father's firm is the one redeveloping the land, and as a result, just for tonight, the entire resort is theirs, courtesy of Hollingsworth, Haber, and Belmont. The Great Lodge will hold dinner and dancing, later there will be firepits outside, and for one hour the old ski lift will carry anyone who wants to go up to the top of the hill to enjoy the view. The guest rooms and cabins are off-limits for obvious reasons, but the grounds are theirs to roam as long as they stay out of the woods. There's a wolf out there, maybe more than one; Principal Gibbons made an announcement on the bus.

He also made an announcement that the Old Barn, administrative offices, and storage spaces were off-limits, but that doesn't stop Saya-Callie-Bailey-Devon-Estelle.

Before Sugar Hill Farm, there was an actual hunting lodge tucked into these hills. Merrow has seen pictures of hewn logs stripped of their bark and varnished against the rain, a sloping roof covered in snow. Shep's great-grandfather was a founding member, and everyone who was anyone in town belonged. According to her grandmother, back then, any real matter of import was debated and decided in the lodge. The mayor and town council, if they weren't monied enough, or from the right family to be members themselves, simply went along.

Merrow's grandmother was invited to a meeting at the tailend of the original lodge's heyday. She attended once, and only once.

There were older buildings in the hills before Shep's great-grandfather's lodge, and Merrow's grandmother knew those as well.

A house built of stone high on the hill overlooking the place where the town would one day be, her grandmother said.

Merrow sat on the edge of the bathtub while her grandmother told her the tale, holding towel-wrapped ice against her mouth for the swelling. Three weeks into second grade a boy named Trevor Carter told everyone Merrow had fleas. Merrow's pencil snapped during spelling practice, and when Shep Hollingsworth tried to lend Merrow his sharpener, Trevor shrieked, saying Shep would get fleas too. The teacher sent Trevor to sit in the corner to "cool down," but at recess, he rallied a group to chase Merrow away from the playground, throwing sticks and pebbles, yelling and laughing.

Merrow didn't remember hitting Trevor Carter. She remembered anger that made her vision go red, then picking herself up off the asphalt between the school and the playground, her face aching, and blood on her shirt, after Trevor, or someone else, fought back. She'd cut her lip and skinned both of her knees; Trevor had a broken nose. Trevor was sent to the nurse's office, and Merrow was sent to the principal's office to wait for her grandmother.

The man who built the house invited other men to visit him there. Her grandmother scrubbed Merrow's knees as she spoke and then swabbed her skin with iodine. When the men arrived, they found a rabbit-wife trussed on the table, and the man who owned the house handed them his two sharpest knives.

The iodine left brown-red smears behind, but the scrapes underneath were barely visible.

When the men tried to leave, the man who owned the house barred their way. He said the hills weren't safe, they were teeming with wolves, and their only choices were to eat or starve or be eaten. Then he went outside, locked the door, and left his guests alone with the rabbit-wife and their knives and made them choose.

A breeze slides past Merrow, following the doe-girls up the hill, raising goosebumps on her arms.

"Dinner's starting soon." Shep's footsteps crunch on the path behind her. "Ready to go inside?"

"Are you?" she asks.

"No." A muscle twitches in Shep's jaw, a brief shadow tracing it in the falling dark.

Merrow can't place the wrongness, but she feels it in the air, a tension, a bowstring pulled taut, an arrow ready to fly. Shep pulls a flask from his pocket, sips, and holds it out to her. Because it's Shep, she knows it's the good stuff, filched from his father's liquor cabinet, not the cheap stuff that their classmates are also hiding.

"Aren't you worried he'll notice?" Merrow asks as she hands the flask back to him.

Shep takes a longer pull, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and puts the flask away.

"I don't care," Shep says.

His fingers flex at his side, like he wants to hit something, only Merrow knows he never would. Just like she knows his words are a lie—he does care, very much.

"We can ..." But she doesn't know how to finish the sentence.

Buses brought them up the mountain; none of them have their cars. They are essentially trapped. Their choices are to go inside and pretend to enjoy dinner, stay outside shivering in the cold, or take their chances in the woods with the supposed wolves.

Eat, starve, or be eaten.

"My dad talks about this place all the time," Shep says, surprising her. "The way it used to be back when it was a private lodge. He was never even here back then, but you'd think he personally built it with his own hands, like the new resort he's building is some kind of resurrection."

Not all of the stones in the man's house were stone. Some of them were bones.

"Are you okay?" It's a useless question; Merrow can see that he's not.

"I'm great," Shep says, "I'm having a great time, aren't you?"

His smile looks like it hurts, his eyes picking up weird light from the wolf moon and the luminaria candles lining the pathway up to

the Lodge. Around the warm brown of his irises, his eyes are faintly stitched with red.

We shouldn't go in, Merrow thinks. *We should run. We should find the doe-girls, and—*

"Coach Stevens will come looking for us." Shep tilts his head toward the Lodge, grim, resigned. "Did you see how jumpy he was on the bus? We'd better go."

He doesn't give Merrow time to agree or disagree. Fight-or-flight instinct tightens the skin along her spine. She wants to fight. She wants to run. She can't leave Shep alone. She follows him inside.

People are taking their seats. Merrow scans the room; she doesn't see the doe-girls anywhere. Principal Gibbons takes the stage to make welcoming remarks, and Vice Principal Tanner follows with a toast. Then Shep's father takes the stage.

Merrow startles, looks to Shep. The tightness in his jaw and shoulders suddenly makes so much more sense. Technically, Addison Hollingsworth is their host, it's not that strange, and yet his presence here feels wrong. *Intruder*, Merrow thinks, forcing himself in where he doesn't belong.

And yet she pictures Mr. Hollingsworth arriving in his sleek silver car, striding through the doors like a lord into his hall. This is his place, rightfully claimed. She sees him with a fresh-killed deer slung across his shoulders, a brace of rabbits in either hand. A shrug and a careless opening of fingers, and the animals drop heavily, rattling plates and silverware—ready to be gutted, ready to be skinned. She doesn't have hackles, but they rise anyway, vision doubling, every smell in the room overwhelming, stinging her eyes. She blinks and everything snaps back to the way it should be with a polite smattering of applause as Mr. Hollingsworth cedes the microphone.

Shep's shoulders curl inside his jacket. Principal Gibbons invites them into the other room and onto the dance floor. Chairs scrape and the volume of voices rise.

"I hate him," Shep says.

Just that, his tone clipped. A strange trick of the light makes it look like nasty bruises ring his throat, just above his collar, the opposite of the doe-girls' glamour. Merrow hurries to catch up. Disco lights spin. She spots Shep huddled by the wall.

"I'll get us drinks," she says.

He nods, looking miserable. She still doesn't see the doe-girls. The windows are open to alleviate the heat of bodies dancing, and Merrow hears an unnerving yip-bark-scream from outside.

Principal Gibbons and Coach Stevens stand by the doors. Sentinels keeping them safe, or guards keeping them in. Merrow tries to shake the image as she fills two cups with punch. There's a slant to Coach Stevens' shoulders, like he expects something bad to happen.

And then it does.

There's a crash from the other room. A sound like a table being turned over. Breaking glass. A heavy thud against the doors. Coach Stevens jumps away, and the doors bang open. Five red and terrible figures stumble, terrified, into the room; five grisly banners unfurl along the walls around the dance floor, bundles previously hidden below the rafters by a dimness only occasionally cut through with the glare of the swirling, multicolored disco lights.

A scream, followed by another, and another, spreading like wildfire. Everyone pushes in opposite directions. Merrow loses sight of Shep, loses sight of everything but the five shapes—the doe-girls, bleeding and panicked and in horrible pain. One of them—Devon or Saya or Callie or Bailey or Estelle, it's even harder to tell apart now without their skin, which hangs in ragged, crimson tatters on the wall—lets out a wild, keening yell.

Smoke fills the room, the fog machine kicked over by accident, or turned on deliberately to add to the confusion.

A silhouette by the door. A hunter with an armful of guns.

No, she thinks, oh no.

They weren't hunters when they entered the house of stone and bone, but by the time they left, they were.

The flat crack of a shot rings out. A doe-girl—Estelle or Devon or Saya or Bailey or Callie—drops to the floor.

Another shot. And another shot.

Merrow runs.

★ ★ ★

One Week After Prom, Rabbit Moon

Candlelight flickers, a river of stars overflowing the plaza in front of City Hall. It's the same spot where every December a massive Christmas tree is lit, and vendors sell hot chocolate, cider, and mulled wine. Now, it holds a vigil instead of celebration. The doe-girls are gone, and the entire town has gathered to mourn.

Five portraits, blown up larger than life, are arrayed across the steps. Mayor Evalyn Woodson stands behind a podium, delivering words of condolence, while acknowledging that there are no words for this time.

Merrow stands at the edge of the crowd, a wall of backs subtly barring her from the collective mourning, saying without words *this is not for you*.

Wolves have always ranged on the outside of the town, snapping jaws at its ragged edges. Sometimes they kill to cull. Sometimes they kill to eat. Sometimes they protect the town from worse things, older things, and newer ones as well. But the town would rather look away from the wolves, because the doe-girls' radiant magic is so much prettier.

Was.

Now the doe-girls are gone.

There is only Merrow. Wax drips over her fingers from the vigilcandle held tight in her hands. The mayor's speech drifts back to her.

"... violation," the mayor says. "The natural order destroyed."

Is it the doe-girls the town mourns, or itself? There's a knot of families—parents, grandparents, and siblings of the doe-girls—huddled in front of the podium, holding one another up. An

epicenter, muffled sobs rippling outward from them. Merrow sees classmates, shell-shocked, reliving the slaughterhouse scene as the doe-girls found their way onto the dance floor. She does not see Principal Gibbons or Coach Stevens; they wouldn't dare.

Shep's father stands near the stage, hand possessively on Shep's shoulder, pinning his son by his side. Merrow imagines tearing her way through the crowd to Shep and stealing him out from under his father's hand. Before she can even try, she catches a gorescent on the breeze. Too much like the smells of prom night, and yet reeking of a different kind of magic altogether.

She lifts her head, tracking. It smells more like birth gone wrong than death, a thing she can't quite parse. The crowd shifts, an animal wariness. The mayor halfsteps from the podium. Everything goes still, a collective shuddering. Merrow turns to look behind her.

She's one of the first to spot the figure limping toward the vigil, but not the first to react. A shriek pierces the night, echoed by a terrified wail from the thing that stops its horrid progress to stand swaying and lost in the middle of the road.

"Nononono." The blurred sound of dismay comes from behind Merrow as someone collides with her shoulder, halftripping and pushing past her.

Instinct makes her reach for his upper arm, but he's too fast. She recognizes Kyle Merchant. His sister, Gemma, is in her class. Kyle is a sophomore. Their younger sister, Lyssy, is—

Oh.

Oh no.

Merrow catches up with the ragged ends of Kyle's words as he races toward the terrible thing his little sister has become.

"I told you to stay inside, it's too dangerous, what did you—"

Merrow tries to catch his shoulder, and again, he twists away from her, but then arrests his progress on his own. Lyssy drops to her knees, repeating her wail. Her tears are pale pink, saltwater mingled with blood, running from furrowed skin. Tattered strips of flesh hang from her in ribbons, bone showing through in the gaps

left behind. Lyssy's hands cover her face, its remains. The sound she makes is mingled terror and pain.

Words stutter, fragmented, but the only ones Merrow can make out are, "I tried, I tried," through chattering teeth. Lyssy's scapulae flex with her heaving shoulders, further splitting her skin. Becoming something like wings trying to break free as her body twists itself into an impossible shape. Snapping, the hollowness of bones breaking. Merrow is close enough to see that not all the skin hanging from Lyssy is human. Some of it is velvet-napped, fawn spotted fur.

I tried.

Kyle lurches forward. Merrow throws an arm around his chest to haul him back. The rest of the crowd surges toward them, stopping just short so Merrow and Kyle are stranded alone between the mourners and Lyssy, now writhing on the ground.

I tried.

Kyle bellows, a wordless sound of rage, throwing an elbow into Merrow's stomach to get her to let go. She clings harder, speaks through clenched teeth into his ear.

"Don't."

It's too late. He can't touch Lyssy now. She's too sharp, too awful, a would-be-protector made of gore. She tried to become a doe-girl, whether by tapping into magic she didn't understand, or whether because that magic reached out and caught her. Nature abhors a vacuum. The balance of their town has been broken. A gap remains in their defenses, like a tooth pulled, and sweet, young Lyssy tried to fill it.

Merrow tightens her grip. Kyle goes limp. His rag-doll weight doubles over with a sob, bearing Merrow with him, and they end up awkwardly kneeling in the street, Merrow half holding him up in her arms. Lyssy's bones finally stop snapping into new and terrible forms, her pleading, her screams dying in a gurgle as the twitching mass of her falls still.

She is not a doe. Not a girl anymore either. Nothing recognizably human. Something awful and in-between. Like roadkill, onlynothing struck her. She did this to herself. The town did this to her. The death of the doe-girls made her into this thing.

Lyssy and Kyle and Gemma's parents reach their fallen child. Gemma is there too, pale and shaking, and Merrow gently relinquishes Gemma's brother into her arms. She slides away from their grief, their anger, their horror.

Someone grabs her shoulder, wheels her around.

"What did you do?" Joseph Conrow—Merrow recognizes him; he's on the city council and runs a repair shop in town.

His daughter, Sarah, is in Lyssy's class. They are, or were, best friends.

She tries to shake free of his grip, but his fingers tighten, digging in. The yeasty, fermented scent of beer hangs on him. He sways, but it's everything that's happened making him unsteady, not the drink, which is his courage to confront her, to sling blame.

"I didn't do anything." This time, Merrow succeeds in shaking free of him.

"You." He catches her elbow, refusing to let go. "You're like your grandmother. You're—"

"Joe." A warning, calming voice—Tim Parker, another one of their neighbors.

Some members of the mourning crowd are getting their first sight of Lyssy, turning away, covering their mouths. Merrow spots Shep, but not his father. Joseph Conrow reaches for her again, and Tim Parker tries to hold him back.

Anger, needing somewhere to go. Joseph takes a swing, and it's Tim he hits, a clumsy strike to his jaw that sends them both reeling. Joseph looks almost as surprised as Tim, as if he didn't mean to, wasn't aware that he had. They scuffle toward each other, no one thinking clearly anymore.

The fear-scent of a herd on the point of stampede. It's her fault. She's the predator they caught wind of—except no, she was trying to

help. Or not even that. She didn't do anything at all. Lyssy wasn't her fault, but Merrow didn't protect her either.

It's all so big and so stupid and something in Merrow snaps, redredred.

Her hands fistin Joseph Conrow's denim jacket, hauling him off-balance. The accusation in his eyes becomes alarm. Merrow knows there must be something terrible in her own eyes, because she wants to hurt him. Drive the heel of her palm into his nose. Wrench his arm from its socket.

Bite him.

Because the wolf's skin pooled into her arms and the doe-girls are dead and now Lyssy is dead too and none of it is fair and the people who started this should pay but they won't and—

"Merrow." Shep pulls her away, voice stitched with concern—fear for and of her.

If she doesn't stop—

She sees Shep bathed in the gentle glow of black-and-white movies, sitting on her couch. She wants to take it back—all of it, back before prom, before giving him her number, all of it. But she can't.

She lets go of Joseph Conrow.

"I'm sorry," Merrow says, not to Joseph, but to Shep.

She walks on stiff, numb legs away from the center of town. Shep calls after her. Merrow breaks into a run.

The scent of death, failed birth, follows her. She doesn't slow until she reaches her street, and when she stops running, the trembling starts. Merrow shakes and shakes, as if with cold, even though the spring night is relatively warm.

She doesn't want this, she doesn't want any of this, but she does. More than that, she needs this—needs something to make the thing started on the mountain on prom night stop. Everything is out of balance, and someone needs to set it right. Her grandmother is gone, and if Merrow doesn't ... well, there's no one else.

She finds her wolf waiting for her in the small park sitting catty-corner from her home. Away from City Hall and the center of town, Merrow smells the wall of pines enclosing the backside of the loop that is her street. She smells the woodchips under the play structure, meant to soften falls—damp, but not quite rotting. The air, the wind, is cleaner here, but she also smells her wolf.

He sits on the sturdy plastic climbing structure, legs dangling over the side. There's a slide at one end, ropes at the other, and steps in the middle. Merrow uses these last to climb up beside him. Insects circle the sodium lights edging the park and casting everything in an odd-colored glow.

She can't do this. She can't do this, but she has to. It won't stop otherwise. The town will try to stitch itself together again and again, compensating for the loss of the doe-girls. Callie-Bailey-Saya-Devon-Estelle.

Deer that the wolves would never dare touch, because they respect balance in a way that hunters do not.

If the town is going to survive, it needs its wolves to return.

And here is Merrow and the wolf. *Her* wolf. Merrow looks at him sidelong. He's not a wolf or a man just now; he's both at once, one tucked neatly inside the other. Hair—wolf-colored. Eyes—wolf-colored. Skin hidden under shapeless clothes, muscles coiled with strength. Wolfjaws inside a human skull, with all the pounds of pressure they could apply.

"How did you know to be here?" Merrow asks.

There's a gap between them, but his scent winds into her nose. It's not unpleasant. Presumably he smells her as well.

"You called me," he says, and as he does, she can almost see the invisible red thread binding them.

"Now and on the mountain?"

He shrugs, as if to say *both*, as if to say *it doesn't matter, what's done is done*.

"Were you following someone that night?" Merrow asks.

"They've been trying to drive us away for years," her wolf says. "Trying to take what doesn't belong to them, but not all of us are willing to go."

"Hunters?" Merrow asks; she doesn't ask whether the wolf included her when he said *us*.

"Yes."

He leaves unsaid: *don't ask stupid questions, don't waste my time.*

What should she ask, then? What does she need to know to survive, to do what needs to be done? Her grandmother armed her with so many stories, but Merrow feels woefully unprepared.

She wants to burrow against her grandmother's side as she did when she was very young and breathe in the tobacco scent of her. Feel her angularity. Deceptively fragile. If she had to put a name to it now, Merrow would say rangy, hard.

Her grandmother grew tired of such closeness before Merrow ever did. Instead of Merrow as a child becoming restless and squirmy with affection, her grandmother was the one to push her gently, but firmly, away, telling her she needed to learn to stand on her own.

She needed to be ready, because one day, her grandmother would no longer be around.

As a child, Merrow never thought about her grandmother's age. All grandmothers are old, by definition, but she knows now some grandmothers are older than others. But even the kind of age her grandmother possessed has limits. Or maybe not.

Her grandmother is gone, but Merrow can't imagine death applying to something, someone, so complicated. It isn't a child's denial, or a refusal to believe, either. She was fourteen when she came home to find her aunt at the kitchen table, dry-eyed but harrowed, lips pressed into a thin line. She'd met Merrow's gaze after it had finished searching the room, as if she'd expected to find her grandmother hidden in a corner somewhere. Her aunt had

shaken her head slightly—*no, she's not here, and she won't be coming back, not anymore.*

Death is a possibility—a likelihood in fact, in a world that makes sense—but the truth is, Merrow doesn't know. Her grandmother may have been like an animal, sensing its time and crawling off to be alone at the end. Or she may be roaming, far away, changed, like so many other things in this town.

He closed them up in his house of stone and bone, left them with his knives and the rabbit-wife, and a choice of what to become.

It isn't cold, but Merrow wraps her arms around herself. She likes less and less the picture forming in her mind, the shape gathering in the dark. The way the town is subtly shifting, being tilted by an invisible hand. Except she can picture the hand too, the weight of it, resting on his son's shoulder, pinning him down.

A drawing back of the wolf's lips that isn't quite a smile, that's too long for his mostlyhuman face, revealing teeth that are too sharp. Merrow finds herself wanting to mirror it, wanting to snarl and snap at the night.

"If I asked you to, would you eat my heart?" Merrow's feet dangle over the side of the play structure beside those of her wolf.

Overhead the rabbit moon is the soft half-curve of a cottony tail left behind. In her grandmother's stories, once a month the rabbits—wives and husbands and both-and-neither—would slip out of their fur to dance skinless under their moon. Before they had to worry about hunters trussing them up for their tables and terrible ritual feasts.

They would eat the hearts, her grandmother said, but never worry about the heartless things left behind. That's the problem with hunters, always skipping steps, always mistaking the ritual itself for sacred, rather than the thing it represents. But without a heart, without fear, Merrow might have the strength to do what needs to be done to protect the town.

Her wolf's shoulders hunch, ears flattened along his skull, tailed tucked even though he's sitting down. He knows the old stories too.

"Are you certain that's what you want?"

"No," Merrow says. "Not yet. I'm still deciding."

The words are a half-truth. The full truth is, she's afraid that it's already been decided for her. She thinks about her aunt's thinness in relation to her grandmother's. A different quality—a nervous thinness, always afraid of something chasing at her heels. She sidestepped the path that might have claimed her, chose not to follow in her mother's footsteps, but even now, it's as though she expects it, always looking over her shoulder to see if it's followed behind her. If Merrow doesn't accept that road in turn, who will?

Merrow has long suspected the nameless girl in her grandmother's stories, the one who tamed the fox, was her grandmother. She never asked directly though.

It doesn't have to be a fox, her grandmother said, that isn't the point.

It wasn't a fox, Merrow thinks, and it wasn't alone. Her grandmother tamed would-be hunters, turned their violence to her own use.

There are men in that house that's all made of stone and bone, the fox said to his girl. Bad men who want to turn the deer-wives into something they are not.

Like I changed you? the girl asked her fox.

Like that, but so much harder and so much worse.

Can we stop them? If I hold them down, will you bite them all up?

I am yours, her fox replied. If that is what you want, that is what I will do.

The fox sat primly with his tail wrapped around his paws and watched the girl. In one eye, she saw sorrow, in the other, she saw hunger. If she let the fox bite up the men, how much worse would that sorrow and hunger become?

Give me a knife, instead, the girl said. You hold them down, and I will eat them up.

"When they went hunting," her grandmother had asked her after telling her the story, "what do you think the girl and her fox were doing? Were they stopping the hunters, or saving the world from what the heartless deer-wives might become?"

Both.

Merrow thinks of the five women in their five separate hospital rooms, giving birth to five doe-girls who would eventually become one. Did those women have skins secreted away somewhere that they never showed to anyone but one another?

She looks at her wolf sidelong again. He reminds her of the hard-eyed men who used to sit around her grandmother's kitchen table, drinking, smoking cigarettes, playing cards. Her grandfather, like Shep's mother, wasn't in the picture anymore. The men were though, at all hours of the day and the night, a constant, murmuring background.

Her grandmother would sit with them, smoking and drinking, occasionally joining their games of cards. Merrow can't remember the men's names; she wonders if they even had them. They never paid Merrow any mind. Except one man, once, his voice slurring, beckoning her to stand by him, saying it would bring him luck with his cards. His nails were thick and yellow, stained from the cigarettes he smoked, which were long, and skinny, and brown. They smelled like spice when he lit them, but the man himself only ever smelled of tobacco.

He never touched her; it never got that far. The man swayed in his seat a little, swayed toward Merrow, and her grandmother snapped at him, her shadow flaring behind her, huge and twisted and terrible, so much bigger than what could ever be contained by her skin. A whine, low in the man's throat, protesting he hadn't meant anything. Her grandmother's eyes like coals burning low in a fire. The sharp line of her arm, pointing toward the door. The man slunk off into the night, and Merrow never saw him again.

Her wolf could be one of those hard-eyed men's sons. Except he has no pack around him, alone and untamed until Merrow stole his

skin. There's something weary about him. The way he peeled under her hands, he might as well have pushed his skin into her arms. And now she cannot let go.

"I need to protect people," Merrow says. "I'm not sure I can do that with a heart."

She thinks of her grandmother rinsing blood from her hands, the hard protection she offered the town and how the town turned away from her. But Merrow's grandmother never stopped. She didn't have a heart to hurt—or did she? She didn't have a heart to weigh her down with indecision. If Merrow had acted quickly, coiled her muscles and sprang into action, maybe she could have saved Lyssy.

"Your boy?" the wolf asks.

Merrow startles, realizing the wolf means Shep.

"He isn't mine," she says quickly.

"Isn't he?" The wolf's lips creeping toward that not-smile again, the one with too many teeth in it.

Did she tame him with black-and-white movies and bowls of popcorn? Simply by giving him a place to feel safe, that felt like it could be home? How old was Shep when his mother was suddenly no longer in the picture? Merrow thinks back, settling on six years old, picturing his tiny body pressed back into a corner, small and powerless to help. How many similar nights had he witnessed, before his father finally—Merrow presumes—went too far? Clutching a stuffed animal—maybe a rabbit, maybe a deer. And when he could no longer bear to watch, burying his face in its softness, soaking tears into its fur.

Once you tame something, it's your responsibility.

"Not just him," Merrow says, "the whole town."

The wolf shrugs, as if it's no business of his, though it is, even if they weren't bound. Merrow stands, brushing dirt from her jeans. She climbs onto the railing, drops neatly from the play structure with hardly any sound.

"Don't go far," she calls over her shoulder. "When I do decide, I don't want to have to search all over to find you."

"You know better than anyone, I don't have a choice where I go," the wolf says.

As Merrow walks away, he calls after her. His voice is soft, but carries perfectly to her ears.

"Was your grandmother truly heartless, do you think?"

She whirls to face him, to ask what he knows of her, her family. Did he know those other wolves, the ones bound to her grandmother? Were they his kin? But he's gone. The breeze picks up, blowing across the play structure, standing empty under the rabbit moon.

* * *

A Week and a Half After Prom, Serpent Moon

There's no vigil for Lyssy, not like for the doe-girls. She is mourned in private, her family huddled in their living room, curtains twitch-drawn tight over the windows, candles lit around a framed portrait of their little girl, whispering and afraid of what their sorrow might call.

A curfew is instated, Merrow and her classmates watched closely for signs of change.

But it doesn't matter; it turns out the town should have been watching the dead, not the living. The doe-girls' bodies go missing from the morgue before their grieving families can reclaim them.

Merrow imagines them coming back, a single hollow-eyed and multi-limbed thing. Callie-Devon-Saya-Bailey-Estelle, howling their hunger, transformed.

Unintended consequences. When the hunter put a knife to the girls' beautiful skins, he was after a transformation of his own, building back what was lost, never thinking of what else might change.

Merrow finds her aunt sitting at the kitchen table. The same kitchen her grandmother sat in with her hard-eyed men, but a different table. The whole kitchen, in fact, redone—smoke scrubbed from the walls, harvest gold and avocado appliances banished in

favor of cleanwhite and stainless steel. Her aunt jumps when Merrow touches her shoulder, hastily stubbing out a cigarette with a guilty flinch.

"I wish she was here too," Merrow says.

She recognizes the cigarettes for what they are—a kind of conjuring, a desire for the safety they've lost.

"It shouldn't have to be you," her aunt says.

Her shoulders hunch under Merrow's hand, and Merrow lets her touch slide away.

"It has to be someone." Merrow looks toward the kitchen window, imagining a pack of wolves slinking through the dark of their yard.

She keeps her gaze carefully away so her words won't fall like an accusation. She knows, they both do, that it was never going to be her aunt. She doesn't have the hot, red twist of anger inside that made Merrow snap at Joseph Conrow the night of the vigil, that made her punch Trevor Carter back in second grade.

If she doesn't have a heart, maybe she wouldn't care about the people she has to hurt in order to keep a larger number of people safe.

"Did she ever tell you stories?" Merrow asks.

"Not the stories she told you, but yes." Her aunt smiles, a brief, sorrowful thing, picking a fleck of ash from her lip. "If you can imagine it, sometimes she even sang lullabies."

Merrow can't, but she almost, sort of, can. Her grandmother, kneeling between two twin beds, her hands out to rest atop the blankets covering both of her girls. Before her voice was roughened with smoke, it might have held a deep sweetness. The language she sang in, Merrow thinks, may have been older than any human tongue. Something like a prayer for protection, to keep her girls safe.

Despite everything that she was, she couldn't stop Merrow's mother and father from being struck by an oncoming car. But the drunk driver who hit them swerved to avoid an animal in the road while stone-cold sober a month after he got out on parole. He crashed through a bridge guardrail, his car went into the water,

and he drowned. Not balance, not justice, but a small act carried out by a hurting mother, because she could.

Merrow thinks of her grandmother's heart gnawed to a sliver, like the thin crescent of the serpent moon shining outside. Depending on who you ask, the curve of it is either the flick of a tail in warning, or the slash of a fang, because it's already too late.

Was your grandmother truly heartless, do you think?

Her grandmother kneeling between her daughters' beds, singing them lullabies—not one heart, but two, beating outside of her chest. A sound she could follow out of the dark, to guide her home, if she ever drifted too far.

"I have to go out for a while," Merrow says.

Her aunt nods, distracted, reaching for the pack of cigarettes again. Merrow hears the lighter spark and smells the particular scent of her grandmother's brand as she slips outside.

It's past curfew, but that doesn't matter. It didn't stop whoever took the doe-girls' bodies, whether it was the hunters, or the doe-girls themselves. Merrow imagines wolves running beside her, sleek bodies with sharp teeth, smelling improbably of tobacco. Whatever happened to those hard-eyed men once her grandmother was gone? Did they go when she did, her responsibility, forevermore?

Merrow keeps the hood of her gray sweatshirt down, hands jammed in her pockets, until she reaches the fence surrounding the gated community where Shep and his father live. It's easier to scale than it should be, the illusion of safety rather than the thing itself. She slips past hedges and lawns neatly maintained by gardeners, avoids the sprinkler systems embedded in yards. She recognizes Shep's house by his light blue car. A pine-shaped air freshener dangles from the rearview mirror, a faint spattering of rust around the wheels. Merrow knows for a fact Shep's father offered to buy him a car, and Shep insisted on paying for this secondhand embarrassment on his own with a part-time job—a small measure of freedom, a tiny slipping of control.

Merrow doesn't want to think about how else Shep might have paid for the car, but she's fairly certain she already knows. It gives her a weird feeling of pride that Shep still drives it. At the same time, it prickles rage along her spine, because it shouldn't be a fight, Shep shouldn't have to choose—his father's heart, his approval, or his own.

The low-slung silver car Mr. Hollingsworth drives is nowhere to be seen. Merrow circles around the back of the house. Soft-glowing lights shine in the pool and chlorinescent slips into her nose. It's decidedly stupid, but she does it because she can—baring her teeth, wild and reckless as she climbs the rose trellis and makes her way by guesswork to Shep's window.

She taps on the glass, briefly gratified to see him startle. For a horrible moment, she is predator, he is prey. She sees the soft point under his jaw where his pulse beats and thinks how easily she could tear out those veins. And in the next moment, she loathes herself. He crosses the room to open the window, his expression haunted, almost as hollow-eyed as she imagined the doe-girls, but this terribleness is of another kind. Sorrow and fear, no hunger to be seen. The light falls across his curls and casts the shadow of horns on Shep's brow. Not antlers, velvet nubs, like those of a fawn.

"If my father—"

"His car isn't in the driveway." Merrow climbs inside, surveying Shep's room.

It doesn't smell like a high school student's room. It's impeccably neat, bed made, books stacked beside the laptop open on his desk, shoes lined up beside the dresser. No clothes strewn around or empty plates left to attract bugs. No posters on the wall either, no sign of Shep at all, like he's afraid of treading anything but lightly, leaving any impression of himself behind.

"I don't know when he'll be back." Shep frowns, arms crossed. "If he finds you here ..."

"He won't," Merrow says.

She isn't sure she believes it, but she hopes Shep does.

A part of her wants Addison Hollingsworth to find her here, give her an excuse. Could she do what needs to be done then? Make Shep watch while she breaks his father? How much, she wonders, does Shep know?

She wants him to understand. She wants, when all is said and done, to still be Shep's friend.

She sits on the edge of his bed

"Your father ..." Merrow looks at her hands.

Shep's father is his to hate, not hers, and hate is so often bound up in complicated love when it comes to family.

"I—" Merrow starts, and Shep cuts her off.

"I know."

She brings her head up, startled. Misery etches his features, knowledge pulling his shoulders down. Wordlessly, Shep claims the space beside her on the bed, and hands her his phone.

"I went back after prom to look around, and I took this picture," Shep says. "I knew, I suspected at least, that my father was up to something. But I had no idea it was—" He falters, runs his hands through his hair like he's trying to scrub something away, then starts again. "I thought if I went back afterward, at least I might find something to incriminate him, so he'd have to pay, but there's only this."

At first Merrow isn't certain what she's looking at. Five chairs in the center of a darkened room, facing outward in a circle. Bales of what might be hay out of focus in the background—bales that would have been set up around the firepits outside the Lodge on prom night. The Old Barn. Merrow expands the image to make it larger. Marks in concentric rings on the floor around the chairs. Chalk, partially erased, as if whoever made the marks didn't care about getting caught.

Merrow pictures the doe-girls in their glittering dresses, hands bound, bloodied fingers reaching toward one another, but not quite touching. She pictures them in the sun—five years old—pledging themselves to one another, pledging themselves to something far

older than they would ever grow to be. At least in their current forms. The ritual conducted on Sugar Hill the night of prom—whose was it, truly? The doe-girls, or the hunters? A hot sourness rises at the back of her throat—like hunger, like bile.

Shep takes his phone back, grips it hard enough that Merrow hears the protective case creak.

"The point was to make them pull the trigger," Shep says. "Coach Stevens and Principal Gibbons."

"To make them into hunters," Merrow says.

"Will you go after them?" Shep lifts his head; Merrow suspects he already knows the answer.

There's the faintest glint of hardness in his eyes, not anger, something more resigned. He won't put his hand on her arm or stop her this time.

"Would you ... If it seems like I've gone too far, if I get lost, will you stop me, like you did the night of the vigil?" It isn't fair to ask him, but Merrow does anyway.

A heart outside her chest to guide her home if she drifts too far.

She doesn't have the words to say that she would be his friend regardless, that she will protect him no matter what. It isn't transactional. But she hopes he understands.

"I don't know if I can," Shep says.

There's a flatness to his tone, a grimness. He doesn't look afraid of her now, only sad.

"But will you try?" She takes his hands, for just a moment, squeezing them. "Please."

She wants him to see that in this moment, at least, she isn't like his father. She isn't a hunter, even if she is a predator. She isn't sure how much longer that will be true—if it's true even now, or if she only wants it to be. Shep gives her the very faintest of smiles.

"Of course," he says. "No matter what happens, I'll always try."

* * *

Two Weeks After Prom, Hunter Moon

There were stories her grandmother never told her, but whose edges Merrow can guess at. Not because the details were too frightening, too complex, for a young girl to hold, but because they were personal. The stories she told were always about the girl and her fox—never *me, I, this is what I did, what you might have to do one day too*. There was never a story about why Merrow's grandfather wasn't in the picture anymore, or where the hard-eyed men haunting her kitchen table came from before they were hers. She withheld these things for Merrow's protection, for plausible deniability, and because they weren't truths owed to anyone else—her granddaughter included.

The wind whispers scents to her, and Merrow's footsteps are wolf-pad soft. Her eyes see far, and far better, in the dark than strictly human eyes should. This is what she's always been, but Merrow is making a choice too. She will own it, call it, not destiny, not fate. A truth, owed to no one but herself.

She climbs the plastic play structure. The air smells like promise, like musk, like ozone and a storm about to break even though the night is exceptionally clear.

The line the moon makes is the hunter's bow, pulled taut, ready to strike.

"Yes," she says, releasing the word, then she sits cross-legged to wait.

Her wolf comes to her, never far, like he promised he would.

She is alone in the dark and then she is not. She smells him, feels the shift in the night tilting him toward her. He makes little sound as he climbs up beside her, and she allows him that, not turning until he's crouched at the other end of the structure, looking at her with his wolf-colored eyes.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

I am yours. I will do this thing for you.

"Yes."

Her voice does not waver, but his expression does—a flicker of sadness like a drooping tail. She will own this thing; the choice is

hers. Merrow stretches out on the play structure, looking up at the moon. Her wolf shifts closer. He doesn't ask if she's certain a second time.

"It's okay," she says, meeting his gaze. "Let it go."

The wolf throws his head back, howls, and the sound ripples out over the neighborhood. A shivering that stirs sleepers in their beds, causing blankets to pull tighter and those still awake to double-check the locks on their windows and doors.

Tomorrow, the moon will be at its thinnest point—the antler moon—a last bite, all but consumed, until it begins to wax again.

Her wolf lowers his muzzle. She's braced, but even so, it hurts more than she could imagine. He doesn't bother with niceties like moving her shirt aside. He bites straight through fabric, flesh, muscle, and cracking bone. Merrow suppresses a cry, but tears still leak from the corners of her eyes and into her hair as the wolf chews and chews.

She holds as still as she can, lest the wolf's teeth graze anything else, but once he's done, she lets the shivering take her—freezing cold, even though they are well into spring. Merrow sits up. The fabric of her shirt isn't torn. There is no gaping hole, not to the naked eye, but she feels it—an absence, which in time, will become a bruise. In this moment, it burns with loss.

Her wolf crouches at the far end of the play structure again, watching her. He's a predator, but his posture is wary, as if he expects her to pin him, tear out his throat. Merrow draws her legs up against her chest, hugging them, not trusting herself to stand. Slowly, never taking his eyes off her, the wolf removes his coat.

He drops it, halfway between them, and then turns, coiled muscles launching him from the play structure and loping him off into the night. Merrow watches him go. She pulls his coat to her—a beige raincoat, worn, several sizes too big for her. The sleeves overlap her wrists, and the rest of it large enough to wrap around her body, which she does.

She feels him, a trail stitched through the breeze, across the earth, between the stars. She could call him back any time, he is leashed to her, but she doesn't intend to hold him as tightly as the girl in her grandmother's fairy tale. He is hers, but she doesn't want him to be. He doesn't deserve this, but there are others who do.

* * *

Two Weeks and a Day After Prom, Antler Moon

Merrow runs, stride long, eating the ground. She tastes the air—spring with the promise of summer, rot tucked beneath it all. Shadows pace her as she flashes between the trees, feeling her muscles, feeling the weightlessness of no longer having a heart holding her down.

She gives herself permission to be monstrous, to transform and to trust that she will find her way home at the end. Merrow picks a spot where leafless trees bend strangely away from one another. There are terrible things buried on this hill, old sacrifices calling up older magic. This is where the doe-girls will return, whether the hunters bring their bodies or their own terrible legs carry them here.

She flattens herself against the rich earth and breathes hard, mouth open, not bothering to be quiet just now. Birdwings make the faintest wittering sound against the blue-gray sky—their own language as they pass from tree to tree—but otherwise, they hold their tongues.

Her breath calms, slows. She has no heartbeat, and stillness comes more easily now. In a trancelike state, holding readiness, she waits as night falls and the moon rises, a scant sliver above the trees. She pictures the stag whole, a silhouette against the dark, the moon only part of his crown. Power masses in that negative space suggested by the crescent light. The antler and the unseen beast beneath it.

A footstep crackles the leaves. Merrow stands.

Hunters move between the trees, twitchy and uncertain, answering her question about the doe-girls. They are more like

trackers now, not fully understanding their quarry. They carry no guns; guns would be useless against the thing they are hunting. Unintended consequences, but they still think they can stop what they put in motion, bring it down.

Maybe they can, but not alone, not in the shapes they're in now.

Merrow extends herself, her awareness, feels the delicate balance. It is a night of becoming, of what isn't yet, but might be. She is a wolf without a heart, but she might be something else still. There are five hunters in the woods around her—one for each doe-girl—but only one of them whose steps are sure. Four of them are only halfway things; pulling the trigger didn't finish the job. She can push against the darkness inside them, their sorrow, their grief, and make them change—hard-eyed men bound to her, tumbling and snapping in her wake.

Shep's father is the fifth. She doesn't have to see him to know. It might be harder, bloodier, but she can force him to change too.

And the doe-girls, whatever they might become, they are still waiting to happen as well.

Like her grandmother, Merrow will tame these hunters, but it will be so much harder than what she wants to do, which is rip their throats out, one by one. Because dead is dead. If she kills them, her responsibility ends. But if she tames them, they will always and forever belong to her.

A careless footstep brings a hunter too close and she leaps. Wolf-body and wolf-muscles bear the man to the ground. A whuff of shocked breath. Addison Hollingsworth. He recovers quickly, the most prepared of any of the six of them on the mountain to deal with what she's become.

He shoves back against her, gym-hardened muscles against the new barrel thickness of her chest. Merrow leans against him, shows her teeth, but doesn't snap yet. He can't shift her, but that doesn't stop Hollingsworth's sneer.

"Do you think you're going to kill me?"

Do you think my son will forgive you if you do?

He doesn't say it, but his eyes glitter triumph. He thinks she will cave. His father knew her grandmother; he should know better.

"No," Merrow says—wolf and girl both.

She puts her teeth against the softness of his throat where she imagined the ring of bruises on Shep's neck, where she imagines Shep's mother carried bruises as well. She learned from her wolf as he devoured her heart. She learned from her grandmother, long before that.

When Merrow bites down, it isn't on skin. She doesn't tear, but snips something far more fundamental than flesh and bone. It's like a ribbon going down, oily-dark, slicking her throat. And it hurts. All the rage and hot wanting in Addison Hollingsworth—the parts of him that feel the world is unfair, that he should have been born with teeth and claws and the means to match his will and make everything he sees his own—burn in her. Flames lick the cage of her ribs, the hollow where her heart used to be. Merrow wants to howl, wants to scream.

But she doesn't stop. She keeps biting, swallows it all down. Takes it into her, knotting the dark ribbon of it into the core of her. She leans her paws against Mr. Hollingsworth's collarbones, hard and harder. Hears them creak, wants them to snap. His eyes go wide; he didn't think she had it in her, didn't think she could do what she's about to do, what she's already done.

Mine.

One last bite.

The light goes out of his eyes.

Nothing physical breaks, but he breaks all the same. Hers now. She is responsible for all his anger, his darkness, his pain. Everything he did to the doe-girls, and everything else he wants to do. She will turn it into something useful, keeping the town safe from the hunters outside their walls. Keeping the town safe from the worse and older thing than hunters that may be coming for them still.

The second man she brings down is Principal Gibbons. No blood soaks her muzzle, or turns the front of her shirt crimson, but there is

still red in her throat. Mr. Hollingsworth slinks between the trees, man-shaped, but nonetheless with his tail down and his ears low. He whines once, tests his limits with a growl showing teeth and gums. Merrow snaps a correction, brings him to heel. It will be a process, continual, but he will learn.

He sinks back, watching her, and in a moment, Principal Gibbons joins him.

The third man is even easier. She doesn't give him the chance to apologize. She takes the hot burning thing inside him, devouring it like a star. She runs the fourth mandown, lost and blundering between the trees. She thinks of the doe-girls without their skin, staggering onto the dance floor. Dazed with pain, caught halfway between one thing and the next. Slipping on their own blood in their high heels and their hooves.

Maybe it's seeing the others that brings the third and fourth man to heel, not the warmth of her breath in their faces. It doesn't matter; it is done. Merrow feels all four of them like splinters under her skin. Is this how her grandmother felt all the time? She tries to remember how many there were around that kitchen table. She loses count. In her mind, they all look the same. Should she take up smoking? Learn how to play cards? The thought is wild laughter, held behind her teeth as she runs Coach Stevens down.

There's fear in his scent and sorrow in his eyes. He stops, sways, deadtired on his feet; he sees her loping toward him and he doesn't run. He's making an apology, not a last stand.

"Merrow," he says her name, softly.

Are you safe? Is everything okay?

"I'm sorry," she says. "I can't let you go."

"I know."

He pulled the trigger. He made the choice. He went into the house of bone and stone on the hill and held the knife in his hand. If he didn't want to, it doesn't matter now. He chose, but he's choosing again. A better choice now, or at least a different one.

This burden is yours now, you carry it; I don't want it anymore.

Coach Stevens is giving her his skin, like the wolf on the hill. She should hate him for it, but the space where her heart was is empty.

He kneels, bringing his face level with hers. She huffs breath scented with not-blood. Coach Stevens' chin trembles, but he tilts his head, giving her easy access to his throat. There are tears on his cheeks; they shine improbably in the light of the antler moon. A snip, a cut, and she takes his guilt and sorrow. She takes in the shattered part of him that was willing to go along with Addison Hollingsworth because he thought it would keep him safe, make him strong.

Five shadows follow Merrow through the trees as she runs back down the hills that pre-date the town.

She will bring them home, to her aunt's door. To her grandmother's door. They will sit around the new kitchen table and she will teach them how to be a wall of teeth and claws against whatever comes next.

There's a weight behind the stars, pressing down on all six of them. The stag, sketched in darkness around the antler moon. She thinks of the doe-girls standing in the sun, arms raised, pledging themselves to one another and the town. They are something else now. There is a door between the stars and it will open soon, and they will step through.

One body, too many limbs; no longer uncertain, panicked, bleating, and slipping on bloodied hooves.

The worst is yet to come.

She hopes Shep will forgive her and help her find her way out of the dark.

Merrow throws her head back and howls to the antler moon. The sound shivers out over the hill, through the trees. The five newborn wolves take up her song—howling all their pain and hunger in chorus with hers.

It is a call, whether or not any of them are ready. They wait for the door to open and the darkness to step through.



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RED LEAVES

S. E. PORTER

Red Leaves

S . E . P O R T E R

illustration by

J A N A H E I D E R S D O R F

T O R
D O T
C O M

"You just stand there and take that?" the girl said to me. I didn't see where her voice was coming from. "You let him make your mama bawl like that? You don't do a thing?"

My mother was leaning on the shape of the thing, crying so hard she didn't notice when I put my arms around her. I'd never heard her wail that way, not in all my life. And there was the man in his dark suit, his nose so high that his stare slid down his cheeks, slow, like ice breaking up on stone. Staring at my mother, crying. *Wretched woman*, he'd said. *Who are you to question the Almighty?*

"I tried to tell her he's a *terrible* liar," I said. "She didn't listen."

"None of 'em do," the girl agreed. Then I saw her, peeking over the top of the man's head. She had a thin, green look and her legs wrapped around his neck looked too bendy, but her eyes were smart and glittering. She had friends with her, I noticed all at once, a lot of them. More than I might have thought would fit on his two shoulders, and clinging all over his back. He seemed crooked with the weight. So why didn't he do something about it, like scrape them off against the doorframe? "Why don't you come with us, then?"

"I can't," I said. "I have my lessons to do."

"No, you don't," she said, and reached a hand for me. Reached it farther than I would have thought it might go. Hooked her fingers in my chest, which made me gasp, because I thought it ought to hurt. But it didn't hurt, not at all. I went slipping up her arm, somehow, like it was a rail through my heart. Landed in the tangle of them up on the man's dark collar, with its white flakes and stink of old wool.

"Emma's right, you know," one of them said to me. I couldn't tell which. "You're best off with us."

I didn't want to go. But I was fitted in among them, the lap and curl of the crowd of them. We seemed to spill inside one another rather neatly, humped on the man's spine.

"Just as long as I'm home in time for supper," I said. "I suppose it's all right, in that case."

"Oh, it's all right," the girl said. "Is it ever *all right*?"

I wanted to argue, couldn't have said what about. But then the man was leaving, our maid Mary cowering back at the door as she let him out and her eyes red and strange.

The man went in at a boarding house I'd passed before. A *very respectable place*, my mother had said. Run by a very respectable widow, whatever certain backwards-thinking people might have to say about her. Remembering my mother had said that made me less worried, about following the man inside.

At least... "He lives here?" I asked. "It's his home?"

"Home," Emma sneered. Her friends took it up, gibbering the word in a hundred voices until the man in the dark suit switched like a cow's tail after flies. "He might think it's his. We might say *something else*, if you catch my meaning."

I didn't. We were in a nice front hall, clean and shiny, but the carpet looked worn. To the left were double doors to the parlor, couldn't say how I knew, and there was soft singing coming from behind them. Not one person, but not twenty either. I could feel how the room was dark. Soft, pliant dark, calling me on. It would feel nice, I thought, like a bath soothing where I ached. I gave a little yearn toward it, but Emma and her friends yanked me back.

"That's baby stuff," Emma said. "We've got *real* business. You'll see."

The man heard the singing too and his nostrils pinched. "Disgraceful," he muttered. "Unholy drivel." A maid was in the hall, bobbing, frightened. "You! Bring up my tea. And mind it's hot this time, if you would be *so* good as to do your work decently for once."

The maid's eyes rolled like wet marbles and she mumbled and her curtsy was all bounce and flutter. But when the man turned away she stuck her tongue out at his back.

"Bet she spits in his jam!" Emma cackled, and then we were going up the stairs, a wobbling mass of us all around his shoulders. I thought we might go tumbling down the stairs, but we held on.

* * *

"Go on," Emma urged. "Just a nudge, is all. Remember your poor mama, howling like a kicked dog?"

I looked at the tea steaming on the lace tablecloth. It was very hot. The man was leaning in, jotting something in a book with its cover spread like emerald wings. It wouldn't take much.

"I'll be *whipped*," I said. "If I do a thing like that." *Like a little hooligan would do*, I didn't say.

They all laughed, and their laughter prickled through me like flying sparks. "Not ever again, you won't," said three, or five, or a dozen of them, voices all lapping and babbling. "Never again!"

I still didn't want to. "Why me?" I asked Emma. "If it's so easy, you can do it yourself."

She didn't answer.

"Can't you?" I demanded.

"You're the new one," Emma snapped at last. "You think we brought you along to be our precious pet? Show us what you're good for, rich boy."

I didn't think a girl should talk to me this way—a girl my mother wouldn't have let me play with, besides. But Emma wasn't nothing. She was the kind of something that made you do what she said. Carefully I reached down, and gave the cup a tap.

It jumped an inch and the tiny spoon clinked on the saucer.

The man in the dark suit looked down at it—*supercilious*, there was the word—all scowl and piss. He looked around and I thought he'd grab me by the ear and pull me out from the mess of us and beat me black and blue with his walking stick. But he looked, looked

twice, and pursed his lips, and picked up his pen again. I felt proud that I'd hidden myself so well from him.

"Now!" Emma squealed. "Again! You give it what for this time! Again!"

They were all babbling it with her. *Again, again!* Something in my head was shaking, shimmering, buzzing with the squeal of them all till I could hardly stand it. This time I gave the cup and saucer a proper smack and it all went sailing, off the table and onto his lap.

The man in the dark suit jumped up and screamed, and the cup and saucer smashed to bits. His trouser leg was soaked and steaming, up all the way to his privates even. He screamed and screamed, and Emma shrieked with laughter.

"Tell my mama I'm *unclean*, will you now? Tell her I'm not fit to be among the blessed? You're the one with hellfire on your boiled old prick! I hope it blisters right off, you worm!"

"Emma!" I said. "Talking like that to a minister!" Because I remembered now, the man was one. I felt a flinch that I'd scalded him. But it was only little, the flinch, and it soared up on wide wings—because he'd said to my mama too, he'd said—

There was a stamping and thumping on the stairs. "Reverend, are you all right?" I didn't know why the voices were starting to sound strange, foggy. Only because of the door, or—

"You got him!" Emma said to me, and *she* sounded fine. "That's our boy!" Her friends took it up, yammer and chatter of *boy, our boy*. I found myself wishing they had more their own voices, or their own faces. I found myself wishing they didn't blur and bubble, with a head popping from the tangle here or there and then shrinking again, like the air was leaking out of it.

It seemed hard to make friends properly if I couldn't tell them apart. And then, the fact that they were like that, so terribly confused—

But then I smiled. "I did," I said. "I showed him."
And I'd gotten clean away with it, too. He hadn't even seen me!
"Call Dr. Harriot," he was screaming. "My God, my God."

Emma laughed and laughed.

* * *

It was after the doctor had bandaged him up and dosed him with laudanum that I noticed something. Everyone sounded too far and too foggy, but at the same time everyone—in the house, anyway—sounded much too close. It didn't seem to matter what walls were in the way, what doors. Everything sifted through the same, right into my hearing. I gave a little stretch, and all at once the whole house fit me like a new-sewn shirt.

So I *felt* the landlady downstairs in her striped silk dress, as if she was sitting in my ribs. I knew when she said, "I almost think he spilled the tea on himself *deliberately*, simply as an excuse to interrupt our sitting! Of course the spirits wouldn't linger after all that dreadful carrying on!"

But when I tried to sneak home to my mama, I found the house stuck to me. I couldn't get it off.

I knew Emma was there too, stretched all over the same rooms as me, fitted into their corners and chimneys just as well as I was.

I knew she was watching to see if I'd cry.

* * *

There was a lot to know in the house. There were half a dozen boarders—slotted in me when I stretched, all stuck in my lungs and neck and shins, and dropped on their chairs when I didn't—and three servants always throwing dust where I thought my nose should be. I kept waiting to sneeze. And then there was the pretty landlady, who seemed rather grand for how many holes were in her roof, how many cold drips tingled their silvery lines inside my back. When creditors banged on her door, she shooed them away all bright and fancy and *How ridiculous! Of course, of course*—

Besides all that, there were the people who came most evenings to sit and sing in the dark. Once I had the trick of filling out the

rooms, Emma couldn't keep me away from them, no matter how she mocked.

"You won't be new forever, rich boy," she sneered. "You'd better get busy, instead of hanging around those sticky stickers."

"Those what?" I said. "What do you mean? It's only—I feel so *cold* all the time, and it's nice and warm in there. The *singing* is warm."

It wasn't only that, though I wouldn't have told Emma for anything. The people cried sometimes and their tears washed channels through my hurt and they said kind things about children and others who'd—slipped a bit. I could pretend it was my mama saying those things about me, calling and calling me to come to her.

"I bet you could still pick up a knife," Emma said, sulkily enough. "I bet you could slide it in his neck. Or you could put something on the stairs, just ahead of him going down! That would be a good one!"

I thought I could. "And will you leave me be, if I do that?"

Emma was quiet a moment. Her crowd of hangers-on bubbled their eyes at me, but they seemed tired and out of sorts. "Depends, I suppose. Worth a try, though, isn't it?"

It wasn't as easy as Emma seemed to think. The rolling pin kept dropping through my fingers. It teetered and spilled where it ought to have been a sure thing.

But in the end I got the pin where I wanted it, just as the man in the suit—I remembered his name, now, but I didn't care to use it—came mincing down to breakfast. He was moving carefully on account of his burns, but nowhere near carefully enough. Emma's friends started up to shriek and crow as he went thumping down the stairs, the whole swarm of us tangled around his face and neck like crickets in a spider web.

The man was screaming plenty loudly—it was a good, long fall. But in the end all we had to show for it was another visit from the doctor, and an ankle swollen like a gourd, and two broken ribs. I thought Emma would cry.

"Such sharp, slippery stairs!" Emma mourned. "Why couldn't he have snapped his spine, at the very least? Why didn't the edge of one catch his skull enough to whack a crack in it, and let the brains creep out? Why didn't one of those ribs poke a hole in his lung, I'd like to know? You won't be up to the job much longer, and how will I get him after *that*?"

After that, babbled her friends. *After that*. But there was a sinking to their voices, a weakening. I didn't try to tell them apart anymore.

I understood that night how Emma had tricked me. I could leave the house only by sticking to the man; I'd stuck as hard as I could whenever he'd stepped out, in case he paid another call on my mama. And now the man was in bed with his leg up on a stack of pillows.

"How about the old knife-in-his-throat?" Emma prodded. "While he's lying there like a lump of dough? You can do it, all right! Attaboy!"

"No," I said. "I need him alive, or I'll never see my mother again."

Emma was silent a bit. Then: "Roger's gone. He's only been with us since the scarlet fever went around, but he never had much juice. I knew he didn't have it in him to stay long."

The man bellowed at the landlady, saying the maid should be turned away for her carelessness. And the landlady smiled sly and said she didn't believe it was the maid.

* * *

It was one of their evenings, when the people came stepping in at the front door, and I filled the house to feel their steps shudder under my heart.

"Don't pay them any mind," Emma said. "The old worm is snoring up a fit! Just drop the crust of his bread in his wallowing mouth, that's our boy, and I bet he'll choke to death!"

There was a step under my heart that shook me all the way down, but somehow I couldn't make out the lady above her foot.

But that foot, that boot, the way it pulsed—

“I’m sorry I called you rich boy, and all that,” Emma wheedled. “You’re a brave, sporting boy. A good friend, and a loyal son! One thing you won’t ever forgive is somebody acting cruel to your mama!”

It was *her*, only her body was held so stiff and her head so straight I hardly recognized her. I couldn’t see her face very well, but I could feel the times she’d pulled me close and stroked my hair. Memories all clinging to her arms like grapes on the vine.

“Don’t be concerned, Mrs. Harnish,” crooned the landlady. “The reverend is laid up, you won’t be seeing him. He’s been troubled by accidents of late.” She said the last almost like it was a joke.

“It’s *her*,” I said—to Emma, or to the whole crowd of us, I couldn’t tell. “She’s found out that I’m here, and she’s come to take me home!”

“Well, then,” Emma said. “You’ve seen her again, just like you wanted! You don’t need wormy-in-the-bed anymore! There’s the crust still on his plate, right by the bed, and half an egg. A quick pluck, and quick drop, and maybe just a touch of shoving it in!”

“I would have come sooner,” my mother said. “Only I couldn’t bear the thought of seeing that man again. The things he dared to say to me, with my darling boy not even—”

“I trust tonight will persuade you of how very wrong he was,” said the landlady, silky-bright. “The Calvinists have much sorrow to answer for, and all of it unfounded.”

Mama, I wanted to say. I don’t want to stay here. Let’s go walking together, hand in hand, while the leaves are still red on the trees.

But then how would I explain that the house fit me now, like a shirt I couldn’t take off? If I stood up and stretched, quick and sharp enough, what would the house do? Could I get free of it then? Having my mother here, wanting so much to walk with her—I wondered if it would give me the strength to shuck the damned thing, even if I had to split the roof to do it.

No. I supposed that might frighten her.

Mama, I tried. My voice sounded clear enough, right enough, whenever I talked to Emma. But it came out different now, misty and thin. She didn't look around. *Mama!*

The landlady brought her into the room with the chairs around the table. The singing room, the dark room. She showed my mother to a chair.

My mother was inside me, inside my face. I billowed my cheeks all over her to feel her heartbeat and the drumming of her sweetness and her warmth. I didn't know how to make her know it was me, right there with her.

Everyone sat and linked pinkie fingers and sang, all in the dark, and my mother was crying so hard the song choked in her mouth and the words quavered.

Emma billowed herself right into my shape, pushing and crowding, and shook herself to shake me.

“See how she’s weeping? See what he did to her? Come on, it’ll only take a moment, and who knows when we’ll get a chance like this again?”

“Leave me alone,” I told her. “Why is it always me, who has to do these things? Choke him yourself, if you’re so keen on it.”

Emma hesitated. “I can’t.”

“Of course you can. Drop the egg down his throat, like you said. Push it in.”

I wanted Emma gone so I could feel my mother singing. Feel her tears, washing me off balance. I felt myself getting slipperier, like a dream. Soft and bending.

“I don’t have it in me anymore. Moving things. If I’d known how quick I’d lose it I wouldn’t have wasted time scattering his papers and suchlike. Or dropping his coat in the embers. Or spilling his chamber pot. I should’ve—”

But then I stopped attending to Emma, because the table started bumping. The very big man who always sat by the landlady intoned,

"Spirit! We are eager to speak with you! Will you grace us with your name?"

He said that sort of thing every evening, when they sat. The landlady's eyes rolled back and her head lolled like her neck was breaking. I knew she'd speak, and I knew she wouldn't sound right.

"It's me," she squeaked. "It's Arthur!"

My mother gasped.

"Now wait a moment," I said. Emma burst out laughing so hard she made the curtains twitch. People looked around and squeezed their linked fingers tighter.

"Have you a surname, Arthur? Can you recall—"

"Arthur Harnish," the landlady squeaked on. All the air was charged with me. Oh, I wasn't soft and bending now! Every unbound hair lifted up and seethed at the darkness. The people sitting began to make noises like a flock wanting to scatter. And my mother—she was weeping, trembling. The landlady had made my mama cry!

"Maintain the circle!" bellowed the big man. "Arthur Harnish, do you bear any ill will toward the company gathered here?"

I felt the landlady peeking below her lashes. I felt her heart pick up its pace. She was getting nervous, I thought. As well she should be! I'd stretch, and set cracks racing through her walls. I'd smash her lamps and tear down her pictures, and throw the kettle through a window! I'd—

All the furniture was creaking like a ship in a storm. The beams in the ceiling groaned.

"Of course not," the landlady chirped. How could my mama mistake that voice for mine? But she shook, she shook with every word, like it was wind bellying and gusting inside her skin. "I only wished to tell my dearest mother how I love her, and how closely I watch over her. I wished her to know how happy I am, and that she mustn't grieve so. But"—and here her voice turned sharper, slyer, like she'd had an idea—"other spirits present are not so kind."

There was a big brass bell on the table. I picked it up and it clacked and clanged. I felt stronger than I had with the rolling pin. Much stronger. I felt my fingers singing anger in lightning lines, and I held the bell firm and high. Why was my mama listening to the landlady, when she hadn't listened to me?

I threw the bell, just as hard as I could. Right at the landlady's face.

The big man yanked her aside so it only clipped her ear. But there was a lot of screaming, and the bang of the bell on the wall, and the dent it made. I was glad that the landlady shut up, anyway, and put her hand to her ear. Her fingers came away all over blood.

Emma stopped nagging and cheered, and her friends cheered with her. It made an awful din. "Whoa! You're a strong one! Don't get carried away, though. Don't waste it!"

The creak and crash and trembling of the house had set everyone in the other rooms running. I felt it, but I didn't have thoughts to spare for them. Not even when the man in the suit dragged himself from his bed and came half-thump, half-hop, out of his room. He stopped at the top of the stairs, clinging hard to the banister, with his eyes jumping down the steps and his wispy hair straight up in the storm of me.

He was afraid of those stairs, now. It made me grin through my rage.

But he braced himself and started down, hop and hobble, his left leg bent so only his toes tapped each step.

It was all his fault, I thought. If he hadn't, hadn't—well, then I never would have left my mama, and then she never would have come here looking for me, and finding something else that *wasn't* me, only pretending to be me, even though I was right here. Oh, how *could* she not know me, when I was wrapped all around her?

He was halfway down, his lips pinched and grim.

I lifted, twisted myself. The stair he was about to step on tore right up, its nails yanked out and jabbing like thorns, its wood all whine and splinter.

He reeled back a little, eyes boggling. Then he gave a nasty laugh and kept on coming.

In the singing room, a lady lit a lamp with her hands shaking. "That should weaken their activity—that should make them disperse!"

"No!" My mother grabbed her sleeve. "Don't! Arthur was here. He *is* here! I beg of you, do nothing that will send his spirit away from me!"

A lamp, really? They weren't getting rid of me as easily as all that.

He reached the bottom of the stairs. Hobbled forward and threw open the parlor door, sweeping his eyes across the people scattered among toppled chairs and the landlady streaked in blood.

He pointed a long finger at the landlady, which meant he jabbed it smartly in my jaw. "You!" he thundered. "You have called unclean forces to this house!"

I wasn't unclean! My mama had washed me with her own hands, after—

I wouldn't speak for Emma and her friends, though. For how clean they might be. Emma'd given up badgering me, but she made a sound like held breath.

And anyway, *he* was the one who'd brought us here, every one of us!

But then my mama was in front of him. I saw her clearly now. Her face dead white, her eyes full of running light, like spilled oil burning on flagstones. Her legs shook so hard it made her heels stutter on the floor.

"Reverend Crosby," she said. "You informed me that my dearest Arthur was in hell. *The boy is most probably damned*, I believe were your exact words? I fear I must correct you. Arthur spoke to me this evening, and he is at peace."

In hell? What kind of silly idea was that? That would mean I was

I stood up, sharp and quick. I hadn't known how wadded up I was. But I stood, and there was a scream of wood and stone. The house was still stuck to me, all right. It just wasn't stuck to the ground. It was all torn and tipped, a sky-filled grin stretched where the floor and wall didn't meet anymore, and there was a great tumbling. I knew the people were falling, pinwheeling down, and a lot of furniture with them. Bookshelves sliding, and below me—certain sounds. A crunch, for example, where a table crashed on Reverend Crosby's skull. I felt Emma and her friends *go out* in a gust, wobbling away like candle flames.

I knew the sight at my feet wasn't suitable for children. I knew my mother wouldn't want me to look at such things. I thought I ought to be good, to show her I was her good boy still. So she wouldn't get so confused again. Her darling Arthur, very close now.

All at once I felt awfully tired, and I had to let the house fall.

★ ★ ★

She was there. She was smiling down at me. She held out her hand.

"Mama," I said. My voice sounded right and strong. All around us were the red leaves, so many leaves, in a stirring wind.

"Arthur," she said. "My dearest, dearest boy." She lifted me to my feet, because I must have fallen.

"You thought I was *dead*," I said, remembering. "I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't mean to worry you."

The red leaves, the gray path. That was all. It was everything. I couldn't even see the trees or the sky, for all the wild and scarlet weave of leaves blowing. We were walking, hand in hand. I bent my cheek to her wrist and kissed her. The wind was in me, and the kiss flew in the wind.

"I know, darling." So why did she still look sad behind her smile? "No parent should have to outlive their own dear child. The Lord is too good to allow such a thing." She hesitated. "I should have known that He is too good."

"And that man—he told you I was damned. But I'm not damned, Mama."

"No, darling," my mother agreed. "Of course you aren't. No just God would ever damn an innocent child."



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THE SHAPE OF STONES



HILDUR
KNÚTS DÓTTIR

THE SHAPE OF STONES

HILDUR KNÚTSDÓTTIR

Illustration by DEENA SO'OTEH

Cover design by SHREYA GUPTA



June 16th

~~Dear diary,~~

No. That was a bad joke. And a terrible way to start what is supposed to be an appendix to a serious, scientific project. What a way to ruin a beautiful, pristine notebook! I really should try thinking about the words before writing them down. Anyway. What I meant to write is that I am doing a research project and these are supposed to be my personal notes about it.

First, a little background: When I was small I used to read about the Aztecs and their horrific human sacrifices. And later I learned about how some countries hide the dark and bloodier parts of their past, by writing it out of their history books or not teaching it in schools. I thought them equally barbaric.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that the settlers of Iceland were actually pretty big on human sacrifice too, and no, I don't remember ever hearing about it in school. But there are plenty of tales about it in the old Sagas.

In *Eyrbyggja* it says: "Í þeim hring stendur Þórs steinn er þeir menn voru brotnir um er til blóta voru hafðir og sér enn blóðslitinn á steininum." That would translate to something like: "In that circle stands the stone of Thor where they broke the men that were sacrificed and the color of blood can still be seen on the stone." (There is probably an official translation, by someone whose English is a lot better than mine, but I don't have it at hand so mine will have to do). So the settlers of Iceland slaughtered men and broke their backs on stones.

And that is my research project. I am going to spend my summer trying to find those stones.

We have a pretty good idea of where the stone mentioned in *Eyrbyggja* is, so that is where I will start. It is supposed to be in

Þingvellir, an old gathering place for chieftains, where they met to settle matters. This Þingvellir is in the Snæfellsnes peninsula and is not to be confused with the other, more famous Þingvellir. (Sorry, it's complicated.) The Þingvellir that interests me is located in Þórsnes, or Thor's peninsula. But the problem is, there are a lot of stones there. So here I am, in a guesthouse in Stykkishólmur, the nearest village, and tomorrow I will head out to examine them all. I don't really know what I am looking for—will the moss on the one stone be thicker than on the others? Will the earth around it be more fertile, enriched by all the blood that was spilled? Or will the color of blood still be on that stone?—but I believe I will know it when I see it.

June 17th

Iceland was settled by Norwegians. They brought slaves that were probably taken from what is now Ireland, Scotland, and England. Genetic research shows this, and so does my red hair.

Anyway, I wasn't going to write about my ancestors, the raping Norwegians, but their neighbors the Swedes. There is an account I read about them and what they were doing in the first century that has stayed with me because I think they were really onto something. In Uppsala, in around 380, the weather had been pretty bad for a few seasons, which led to failing crops and bad times all around. There was a tradition of human sacrifice to the *Æsir*, the old Norse gods, there too. They mostly sacrificed animals and slaves, but things had gotten so bad that they apparently decided that some more drastic measures had to be taken. So they sacrificed their king, Dómaldi, and let his blood soak the ground.

I am not saying that we should start killing our politicians. I don't know what I am saying, exactly. I am in a really foul mood. I spent all day mapping stones. It was a long day and the results of it are that there are exactly fourteen stones that are big enough to be the one I am looking for, and thirty-seven that are too small.

June 21st

I have devised a methodology to examine the stones. But it is quite tedious, and well documented in my scientific notes, so I will not bore these pages with the details, other than to say that it involves a lot scraping off moss and gently lifting it from the rock, just to put it down again, hoping it will keep growing, and so far it has not been fruitful. The farmer who owns the land is nice. She came up on her tractor and brought me coffee and kleinur, and after chatting for a bit we discovered that she went to school with my cousin Ástrós. It is always like this here, you always find a connection. You can't escape being known. I often wonder what it must be like to live in a big city and be able to disappear into a faceless crowd. Here, the danger of running into someone you have slept with, or worse—their parents—is ever looming. It must be nice to live somewhere where you can have a meltdown in a public place without word of it reaching both your ex and your boss, and probably along with it the reason why you were having a meltdown in the first place.

The owner of this guesthouse I am staying at, for example, is my uncle's wife's cousin. If I were to have a tantrum here and break some furniture, word of it would surely reach my parents.

June 22nd

The stones stand in a field close to the sea. It overlooks the Breiðafjörður bay, and the view is beautiful. They say that the islands here cannot be counted, and as I understand it, that is mostly because people cannot agree on what counts as an island. Like the small skerries that are sometimes visible and sometimes underwater, depending on the tides. There are so many birds here. And today I saw seals, their black heads bobbing in the water.

We are lucky that the stones have not been dragged away and the field ploughed. The farmer who brought me coffee said that the people who lived there knew not to touch the stones. They were probably familiar with the history of their land and the sagas. We have long taken great pride in them because those manuscripts are

the only thing we have left to be proud of. The traditional Icelandic house was a turf house, made from rock and dirt. Most of them have just rained away. We have no old cathedrals, no roads, no bridges, no marble statues. Those words scribbled on vellum are the only thing we have from our past.

Today, as I was about to go home, I found something. I don't know what it is, maybe it is nothing, but I will investigate further tomorrow. I am excited. Hopefully I will sleep.

June 24th

I think I've found it! The stone, I mean, THE stone. It stands in the middle of the field, and I guess you could, with some help from your imagination, say that the other stones form a kind of circle around it. It is not a neat or a perfect circle, maybe more of an oval, and a lopsided one at that, but still, the shape is there. And there is no way of knowing if it is like that naturally or if the stones were put there by people. Anyway, the stone that stands in the middle is the one that I thought most likely to be the one I was looking for. But I did not start with that one, because I wanted to be methodical about it, as per my method that I devised and did not explain here. Shit, I am rambling. So much for thinking about the words before writing them down.

This stone in the middle is the perfect height to bend a person over. By that I mean that it comes up roughly to the small of my back, if I am standing facing away from the stone. And if someone were to push me over it, and maybe then pull down my hands from the other side, I can imagine my back breaking quite easily. The stone is ... thin? I do not think that is the right word for it, but I mean that it is not round, but rather shaped like a leaf, and on top there is an edge that is quite sharp. Writing this, I have now realized that I have a very limited vocabulary in English to describe the shape of stones. Perhaps that is not something my English teachers imagined I would ever have a need for.

Anyway, if somebody were to push me over that stone, then pull on my hands, or maybe push my shoulders down, my back would undoubtedly break and my neck would be exposed. It would only take a stroke of a sharp blade to let out my blood so it would flow freely. And that is how you please a god.

I spent my day very carefully removing the moss and lichen that grows on the stone. What I am hoping to find are some markings. It took me all day to remove the lichen just from the top, and I am pretty sure that the stone there has been chipped away, making the edge even sharper. It might be weathering, of course, but then again it might not be.

June 26th

It has been two days, I know. But I have been really busy. My work is time-consuming. The moss comes off pretty easily, but it is harder to remove the lichen without scraping the stone. When I drove home yesterday evening I stopped at the farm and asked the farmer if she would be okay with me pitching a tent in the field by the stones. She looked at me a bit funny, but then she said yes, so I did, which means I can now work through the evening and into the night. The summer nights are so bright here in the west. The sun doesn't really set, it just dips down beneath the horizon for a moment and then it rises again. We sleep a lot less in the summertime. There have been studies on this, and to be honest I barely feel the need to sleep at all.

The soundscape here is out of this world. The birds screech and sing and trill and tweet in a cacophony that has its own kind of harmony, and underneath is the constant rhythm of the waves breaking on the beach. The farmer told me that there is an eagles' nest close by, but she also told me not to tell anyone about it. The eagles are endangered and their nesting places are meant to be kept a secret, so maybe I shouldn't even write this down in my notes.

June 27th

I had a weird dream tonight. I dreamt I was lying in my tent and that I heard deep voices outside. The pitch and the rhythm of their language was familiar, but I could not make sense of their words. In my dream I decided to go out and greet them. And I must have risen, because I woke up halfway out of my sleeping bag with my hand on the tent zipper. It took me a long time to go to sleep again.

June 28th

There was an eruption in the Reykjanes Peninsula in the night. That is the next peninsula to the south from the one that I am on. If I were on the other side of this one I could probably see it. It's not a very big one, as far as eruptions go, and no one is in danger. I was listening to a geologist from the Met Office on the news earlier. He said that this volcanic system in Reykjanes has been dormant since the nine hundreds, but is now active again, and will presumably stay so for some years, possibly even decades. He talked about the volcano as if it were a living thing, a beast that had been woken from its slumber and we would now feel its wrath. It struck me that the last time this volcanic system was active was around the same time that they sacrificed people on the stone right outside my tent. And now I can't stop wondering whether something might lie dormant in this ground too, and what would happen if it should wake.

We have tales of beasts, the landvættir. I don't know the best translation for that, but it is a beautiful word that means a being that protects the land. Supposedly *Úlfljótslög*, the oldest Icelandic law, thought to date back to 930, stated that ships with mastheads that had gaping maws had to take them down before land was sighted, so they wouldn't rouse the landvættir. And ships don't have mastheads anymore to wake them.

If they are still here, they have been sleeping for a long time.

I am making progress on the stone. Just now after dinner, I found a peculiar indentation just above what could be described as the center of it. It looks like a ring has been hollowed out. And up

from it there seems be a trace of a line, a groove, up to the sharp edge of the stone. It might just be how the stone is shaped naturally, but then again, it might not.

June 29th

I think I know why that line is there. Maybe I should not write this down, but it actually came to me in a dream. I know dreams are not a way to divine the future. I don't believe in any of that. But that is not to say that they are meaningless. Dreams are just another interpretation of our reality, from a different part of the mind. I don't know if a "subconscious" is actually an accurate term, but what I am trying to say is that perhaps my brain had already made this connection but I just didn't realize it. Because obviously the blood is supposed to flow down the groove and into the ring.

I will not describe the dream that made that clear to me here. It is not fit for an appendix accompanying a scientific paper. But let's just say that I think I now have a better understanding of what it might have felt like to lose your life on that stone.

June 30th

I found carvings! Definitely, DEFINITELY carvings! Made by human hands. They are weathered and eroded, but they are fupark runes and they spell Þór. And this is Þórsnes! It all makes sense.

The runes were quite hidden, down at the base of the stone, and nearly covered with grass and soil. I had to be very careful removing it. And under the runes I found a serpent carved into the rock. It is long and its tail disappears down into the ground. I had to take a break after I found it—I was quite overcome with emotion—and I also had to decide if I should call my supervisor or not. Because this is a big find, a huge one. But my supervisor is ... Well, I just know that if I called her now she would swoop in and she would take all the glory. And I don't want her to get the credit for all my hard work.

In the end I decided to excavate the base of the stone myself. And then I will call my supervisor. There is no need to get her all excited before I know what it is exactly that I have found.

I had another dream last night. It was the same one as the night before, but the roles were reversed. I guess I could say that now I also have a better understanding of what it might have felt like to sacrifice someone on that stone. It felt surprisingly exhilarating. When I woke up my heart was hammering in my chest and I felt a kind of joy coursing through my veins. But maybe joy is not the right word for it. It was a feeling of a job well done, and the certainty that I would soon be rewarded for it.

Writing this all down I realize that is probably a very wrong and twisted feeling to have in that context.

I did not like that dream.

July 1st

A weird thing happened. As I was excavating the base of the stone, I was surprised to find that it is actually a lot bigger than I thought. It seems to be rooted deep in the earth, almost as if it is growing from the bedrock underneath. I thought it was shaped like a leaf, but I seem to have been mistaken. It is more like a tooth, or a fang. I have dug away quite a lot of soil from the base, but the carving of the snake just keeps on going down, down, down.

The earth around the stone is very red. I know it is probably not from all the blood that has been spilled here, that was so long ago. Most likely this field was once a bog. They used to mine bog iron here. Supposedly it was backbreaking work.

But the weird thing happened this afternoon. I was on my knees, digging at the base of stone, and then the earth started shaking. It came in big heaves.

I know that it was an earthquake, and probably connected to the eruption. The land here is constantly moving and changing. But it didn't *feel* like an earthquake. I have experienced many in my lifetime, but none like this one. This didn't feel like tectonic plates

grinding together, or like magma pushing its way to the surface somewhere far away. This felt localized. It was like the earth directly underneath me was shifting, as if a great, sleeping beast was suddenly stirring. And for a moment it even felt like the stones around me were its teeth and I was standing in the middle of a giant maw that would now close and devour me whole.

But then the earthquake passed.

A little while later the farmer came on her tractor to see if I was all right. She had felt the earthquake too. She became very angry when she saw what I was doing. She said that her people had known better than to touch the stones and that I should too. She said that I had no right to desecrate the stones. But I told her that this was a great find for science. This is our history, our only legacy, and we deserve to know its secret. She just stared at me for a long moment, then she shook her head, stomped back to her tractor, and drove off without a word.

I had another dream. It was the same dream, but now I was the stone, and I was so thirsty.

I have still not found the tail of the serpent. It lies much deeper than I thought possible. Tomorrow, when I wake, I will keep digging.

July 2nd

There was another earthquake in the night. When it woke me I was already outside of the tent, standing in the hollow that I have dug out at the base of the stone. It felt as if it was coming from directly beneath my feet. When it was over I saw that the earth had shifted. I can see the tail of the serpent now. But that is not the end. For underneath it is another carving. I am not sure of what exactly, but I have my suspicions, and I will write them down once I have them confirmed.

I am going out now to dig. I don't know what long-hidden secret I will uncover but I am convinced that it will change my life forever. Something great awaits me at the base of that stone, underneath that dark, rich, red soil.

Tonight I will write it all down on these pages.



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THE
GIRL
THAT MY
MOTHER
IS
LEAVING
ME
FOR

The background of the book cover features a large, abstract illustration of a person's face and body in shades of teal, orange, and brown. A prominent black grid pattern overlays the entire image. In the center, a small, stylized figure of a person in orange and brown is walking towards the right. The title text is integrated into this grid, with each word appearing within a specific section of the grid lines.

CAMERON REED

THE GIRL THAT MY MOTHER IS LEAVING ME FOR

CAMERON REED

Illustration by SARA WOOD

Cover design by CHRISTINE FOLTZER



The girl that my mother is leaving me for has hair as rich and glossy as a horse chestnut. Her skin is ivory and her eyes are emerald green. Her belly is slightly round, and that's what matters.

"This is beautiful," she says. She's holding up a fabric sample, deep green embroidered with gold. I wore green at my adoption too. I'll wear black to be abandoned. She slips the little square of cloth into my hand. It's soft like the silk it is, but her voice is softer.

We're on the ninety-first floor of the tower. Outside the window, a woman walks by on the skyway, a guard. She's strong and tall—guard bodies are all made that way. The skyway's narrow and there's no handrail, but she isn't bothered, because her bare feet stick tight to the smooth glass. Her eyes scan for tiny drones, for cameras ordinary people couldn't see, signs of espionage or attack. Another guard passes her going the other way; she smiles like she's greeting a friend. I don't know if the smile is real. People whose minds are put into enhanced bodies always say they feel the same as ever. But maybe they just don't remember what it's like to feel at all.

Far from this tower, people are living in slums and in camps, starving because the world is broken. I don't want to starve in a slum or a camp. If I'm cast out, that's probably where I'll end up. I could beg the new daughter, Mira, not to take my mother from me, but what would be the point? She doesn't want to starve either. She's already carrying my mother's child. So I can't stop what's going to happen. But if I am very obedient—if I smile when I'm disowned, applaud when Mira is adopted in my place, and even help to plan the double ceremony—maybe my mother will find some kind of job for me.

"Has she set a date yet?" I ask.

"Not till September, when I'll be six months. She wants to be sure."

"You're already further along than I ever got."

She makes a sympathetic face. "They say sometimes it's harder when you were born a man."

I should smile and agree, yes, that's so, but I can't help myself. "That's a myth," I say. "And I was born a *baby*."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything."

I can't bring myself to apologize. But I pick up a square of fabric, an amethyst jacquard. "This one is pretty too."

She smiles and she agrees.

* * *

My mother is the CEO of Griffin Corporation, the third of her line. Every Griffin CEO adopts a daughter. Every daughter bears a child who is the Founder's clone, and raises her in just the same way the Founder was raised. When the CEO retires, the clone takes over. In this way every CEO of Griffin is the same.

The Founder's mother grew up poor but she still managed to start college. So my mother went through all the records of scholarship students, and I was the one that she wanted to see. She was a woman in a suit behind a desk, no older than thirty, I thought. Her hair was pulled back in a perfect twist with not a strand left free. It was red-brown, almost the same shade as mine. She didn't look like my real mother, didn't really look like me—her face was more pinched, eyes were a pure green where mine have brown around the iris—but close enough that someone might have assumed we were relatives. That was the idea. I'd tell people the clone was my genetic daughter, and it would be easy for them to believe.

The CEO told me she was impressed I started on hormones so early, even though I was poor and an orphan. She said that showed determination. I spent years pleading for help while my body changed in the wrong direction, until somebody finally listened—that's what she considered early. But I smiled and I agreed.

She said I would have to leave school, because the Founder's mother did. I'd marry a woman, because she did that too. If I had a fiancée in mind, she would have to be vetted. If I didn't, the company would find a bride. We could stay in the tower till the baby was born, rent-free with everything provided. Then all three of us would live for eighteen years in costume poverty. We'd have a little apartment, shabby and in bad repair, but the building would be solid and fireproof, free of mold, and every person in it screened for safety by the company. Enhanced guards would watch over me discreetly on the train to my low-level corporate job. The baby would go to a charity clinic, where fancy doctors volunteering just for that day would check her health. Also my mother would make sure we always had enough to eat. It was easier to eat, back in the Founder's time.

"The point," she said, "is that it will feel real to her, as it did to the Founder. But sickness and malnutrition could cause lasting damage, and I won't allow that."

I missed meals as a child, inhaled all kinds of spores, didn't see doctors when I should have. But I didn't complain that she was calling me damaged. I'm not that big a fool.

The CEO explained the rest. At eighteen my daughter would go off to college. At the end of the school year, she would be told we both died in an accident, because the Founder's mothers did. She wouldn't come home for our death, because her school wouldn't let her defer her exams—Griffin money would make sure they didn't. So there'd be no need to stage a funeral, I wouldn't have to lie still in a coffin. I'd have a lifetime stipend. I'd be free.

I was wondering why the CEO didn't just move into a new body before she could get old, like every other rich person who's terrified of death. Of course I didn't say that, but she must have guessed what I was thinking.

"To change bodies is to change perspectives. To age is to change too, even when you cheat the wrinkles by adopting a new face. I'll move on from this body when I need to, and that's when your child

will take over the company. She'll have the same body as I did, the same fire, the same spark of youth, the same mind. But all of that depends on you to raise her right."

It was a better life than I was going to get out of a college degree. So I gave up my scholarship and moved into the tower. My mother paid for my surgery. I think she liked the idea of buying a clean new lab-grown reproductive system, instead of using one that some poor person had been walking around with. That's what I'd always wanted. Not to throw away this body for a new one, but to heal it. Me, but made right.

Then I miscarried three times, and that was it, I'd missed my chance. The Founder was born when her mother was twenty, and now it was too late to meet the deadline. So my mother found another girl. Probably she found a few. After my failure, she would want to hedge her bets.

There's no reason she couldn't have had both of us as daughters. It's not like I'd inherit anything—only a clone can be her heir. But my mother likes things tidy, and she doesn't want the stink of failure clinging to her. So I'm being traded in for Mira of the auburn hair, patient and demure, everything I pretended to be. Just look at her, it's obvious I can't compete.

* * *

Mira has decided to sew her own dress, to have something to do. I tell her she should sit back and enjoy the idleness—it's the last rest she is going to get for eighteen years. She says she likes to keep her hands busy. I iron the pieces of the sewing pattern flat for her so she can pin them out. At fourteen weeks it isn't like she couldn't stand up at an ironing board, but I want to be helpful. I'm living in these rooms on borrowed time, as a companion until Mira gets adopted and married. I should look like I'm useful, so nobody gets the idea of kicking me out early.

I remember being alone here, having no one but the guards to talk to. Mira shouldn't have to live like that. Most of the guards are

nice and you can learn a lot from them, but some of what you learn's depressing. Usually borrowing money to take an enhanced body was the only way they could find work. Then most of every payday goes toward servicing the debt.

I know Mira met her future wife today. She's been quiet since she came home and she hasn't mentioned it. I watch her push pin after pin into the fabric and the paper, slipping each point underneath, then making it come up again. She makes me feel silly and idle, but I like watching her slender fingers. How they move, how they tense and then relax. Now and then she looks at me and smiles.

"How did you like her?" I ask, finally.

"She seems nice."

"When are you going to be married?"

"The same day I become the CEO's daughter. Adoption in the morning, wedding in the afternoon. It's to save money, I think. They can put all the leftover food in the fridge and serve it cold at the reception."

Mira thinks this is funny for some reason. I guess if you want to fit in with the rich kids, you treat food conservation like a joke. I never bothered trying, I wouldn't have fit in anyway.

"What's her name?" I ask.

"Colleen."

* * *

It's a small kitchen and as her belly gets bigger, it seems to get smaller. When we cook together—which for some reason she wants to do more often—she's always brushing my arm as she reaches past me for something on the counter. Touching a hand to the small of my back to let me know she's passing by, so I won't bump into her. She acts like she doesn't mind being so crowded together, but I try to keep out of her way.

* * *

Today Mira baked bread, so I make us a soup. We didn't get the carrots we asked for, another crop failure, I guess. But I have a broth I made from tops and peels before, and there are lots of potatoes and even some beef. It's not as good as it would have been, but it's okay.

Mira's always nice about my cooking, even though hers is better. She was sixteen when her parents died, she'd had a chance to learn these things. My real mother died still thinking I was a boy.

There's a table in the kitchen but we hardly use it. Mira likes to curl up on the couch, balancing her soup bowl on her plate, her legs tucked up beside her. And she likes me to be next to her—if I try to sit down somewhere else, she'll call me over. I know her feet swell at the end of the day now. I wish I dared to ask to rub them. I wish we could stay here forever, making our little meals and being alone. But I'll see her for the last time at her wedding. After that, Colleen moves in.

She puts her plate down on the table, stretches out her leg, nudges my knee with her bare toe. "What are you thinking about now?"

"The wedding," I say, which is true.

"Well, don't. Do something useful. Rub my feet."

★ ★ ★

I don't think Mira's happy with Colleen. They've met four times now and she's always quiet after. I asked what the girl looked like and she changed the subject. If she refused to marry her, would my mother find somebody else? Probably, but she'd be irritated. It's not smart to defy her just because you don't think your bride's pretty enough, or whatever. I don't know if Mira understands that.

We're sitting on the couch. She's sewing, and I'm watching her. We had a good meal and we ought to be happy. She's nervous, and she's been nervous for days.

"It's natural to worry now," I tell her. "Once you're married you'll get to know her better."

"It's not that," Mira says. She's staring at her sewing and not working on it. "Do you like living here? I mean, do you like living here with me?"

"Of course I do. I wish it could go on forever."

"What if it could? Not the *here*, but the *with me*?"

This makes me shiver but it's perilously close to treason. I'm sure there are bugs in these rooms—probably cameras too. If my mother thinks I'm tempting Mira out of her prescribed marriage, I don't know what she'll do.

"We can't," is all I dare to say.

She puts her sewing down and finally looks at me, and I can see that she's afraid. Of Colleen? I consider carefully what I can get away with saying.

"If something's wrong with Colleen that could affect the baby—"

"No, nothing like that. I like her well enough, I guess. I just don't feel the way you're supposed to feel about someone you're going to marry."

Oh God, she's going to back out of the marriage just because it's not a romance. We'll both be on the street. Or no, *we* won't, because my mother will find some way to threaten her into obedience. But *I* can be thrown out, and even if I'm not, everything will be much worse for both of us.

"This is a job that you signed up for. It's for the baby's sake. You have to think of it that way. The feelings will come after."

"That's what I thought. But then I met you. I can't think of marrying anyone else."

She looks into my eyes, and I don't know what she can possibly be seeing other than panic and disbelief, but whatever it is makes her bold enough to say it. "I love you."

She kisses me, soft and tentative. I can feel that she's trembling. This terrifies her, and me too. I never even dared to hope that she could want me. But even as we're still kissing, as she presses close against me, the certainty sinks in that what she feels now isn't love. It's not even desire. It's only mercy.

I pull away a little. We have to get this right. There are cameras and microphones to worry about. "I love you too," I say, and it sounds real.

It's not like that takes any acting. How could I not love her, when she's throwing me a lifeline? She's afraid I'll be turned out on the street—or maybe she knows I will, my mother might have said something. So she's offering me a life with her and with the baby. It would be safer for her if she married Colleen, like my mother planned. She's too good to do that, she's too kind.

She holds tight to me. "I was so worried you'd say no." She's stopped trembling, all the tension has gone out of her—it must be visible, for anyone who's watching. She's really good at this.

"I'll make you a dress for the wedding," she adds.

I think of saying that technically, she's supposed to *ask* me to marry her, but what would be the point? We both know the answer would be yes—it's not like I have any better options. Instead I say what matters.

"We have to ask my mother first."

★ ★ ★

Mira tells the CEO that we're in love, words spilling out in an excited nervous rush, sounding younger than she is. She's so much better at talking to my mother than I am. She even manages to sound contrite when she apologizes for disrupting Griffin's plans. "I can't help it," she says. "You put us together and we fell in love—that seems like fate."

I doubt my mother believes in fate and I'm sure she had her answer ready before we walked in here. She gives a practiced sigh and turns her gaze to me. "Well, you've been vetted. You already know what's required of a clone's parent. Your infertility is no defect in a daughter-in-law—a benefit, even. One of my mothers got pregnant when I was six. Of course it had to be aborted before she could show. The founder never had a sibling."

I wonder if the mother wanted that. I wonder how the CEO found out it happened.

"My mothers were never in love," she adds. "It's not essential, obviously, but it might reduce the chances of that kind of complication."

She pauses, like she's considering. Was the Founder like this—treating everyone like an object, even herself? Or did that only start when Griffin started raising clones on lies?

When did she find out her mothers weren't really dead, that they took their payoff and abandoned her? When will the child we raise find out?

"Very well," she says. "I'll give Colleen her walking papers."

I wish she hadn't said that. I don't want to think about somebody else being put out on the street for my sake. Maybe Colleen didn't give up as much as I did—maybe she still has a life she can go back to. Maybe I just won't think about it.

Mira and I look grateful and don't meet each other's eyes.

* * *

Mira wears the green-and-gold she chose to her adoption. She wears the amethyst I picked out at our wedding. She looked better in the green, of course. The cream lace dress she made for me is every bit as perfect as she said it would be. All the fabrics that I wanted for myself got vetoed. "You are not a summer, you're an autumn. You can't wear those dusty tones." This is some kind of a system, an astrology for colors. Still, I like it. Summer is smoke in the air, thought-crushing heat. It's fainting in the sun and burning yourself if you fall on the sidewalk. Autumn is reprieve. That's what I hope I'll be to her.

We weren't allowed to invite anyone. Nobody's supposed to know what CEOs of Griffin look like, because then someone might recognize her clone. She's invited the people who're in on the secret, but they all seem more like underlings than friends. None of them bother to talk to us, but we still have to keep up appearances.

Mira is the picture of a happy bride. I never knew she was so good at acting. We dance, we lean our heads together, I kiss her even when nobody's looking, except, probably, a camera. We say "I love you," and she sounds just like she means it. I quiver whenever her hand touches mine, my whole skin is embarrassed being next to her. I know all these people are wondering why she'd want someone like me. It wouldn't matter what they thought, if only she really did.

That night we share a bed, of course. She switches the light off, so the cameras can't see us as well. Then she turns onto her side and kisses me. She puts a hand against my collarbone, then moves it down. She does like to keep her hands busy. I guess so do I. I know this is because of pity, or to make the marriage look convincing to my mother. But she's lovely in the dark, the way she feels against me. I wish I could believe she wanted me, but for a little while I let myself pretend.

* * *

There's a meal she's been wanting to make for a while. She chopped up cabbage weeks ago in preparation, bathed it in brine in a jar that she'd boiled, aged it on the counter. Now the homemade sauerkraut is in the fridge and we have all the vegetables we need, leftover chicken stock that needs to be used up, plenty of ground beef and even some butter and pork. Tonight's the night. Mostly I cook the meal at her direction so she can stay off her feet, except that I have no idea how to make pie crust, so she does that sitting at the kitchen table. Meanwhile I cut up fresh cabbage to combine with sauerkraut in the soup. It seems like something you would only make because you got a lot of cabbage cheap, and I'm not expecting much, but it tastes wonderful—sour, but also a little bit sweet from the carrots. Then instead of bread with soup like usual, I get a mouthful of the meat and buttery crust.

"This is so rich," I tell her. "I feel like a queen."

"I always felt that way when I was little."

So probably her real mom or her dad made this. I don't think she likes to talk about them, so I don't press for details. I wish I could know everything about her, but it really doesn't matter. All that matters is this time, us here together, an interlude with no beginning that will never end.

But her belly's getting bigger, and sometimes reality leaks in. After dinner she picks up her sewing, but her mind keeps wandering. I see her looking at the bookshelf where we keep our wedding present from her mother, the only one we got—we wouldn't have been allowed to take anything else with us, after the baby was born. A pile of old board games that her mother told us were the Founder's, then her grandmother's, then hers. She gave them to us in the reception hall after the other guests had left. Mira carefully removed the wrapping paper and held up a box, admiring its condition. "You must have been very careful with your things."

"We were, as children go," her mother said. "But parts have been replaced as needed."

Now they're in a loose stack on the shelf, bright-colored boxes, long and flat. Mira can't stop being distracted by them. Finally she says, "Do you want to try one?"

"Sure," I say, although I don't.

I just pick the one on the top of the pile. We take it to the table, assemble the board, read part of the instructions and give up, then start to play. Parents and children are pink and blue pegs slotted into the outside of old cars, and their colors never change. We both get educations and houses, we pile up money just by moving forward. At first it just seems stupid, then it starts to feel like a sick joke. We're supposed to count up all our assets at the end and figure out who won, but we don't have the heart.

"It's colorful and things are happening all the time," she says. "Our daughter will like it."

"We're going to get sick of it, aren't we?"

"I don't know. It's different with a child, don't you think? They're having fun, so you have fun."

"Maybe." I imagine our daughter, a little brown-haired girl in a blue dress, leaning in over the board to move a car three squares. Excited, she demands more money from the bank. She's probably already winning. What lies are we telling her that day? What are we trying to make her be?

"Anyway," Mira says, putting the lid on the box, "a baby could choke on those cars. It'll have to be put away until she's old enough. Probably all of them will."

I understand what she's saying. When we move into our new apartment, we'll put the games up on the top shelf of our closet, and this one will never find its way back down again. Mira and I work well together in this way, I think. Even if she'll never love me, she can be my co-conspirator. Together we can hollow out a little space where things make sense.

* * *

Mira's due in sixteen days the night that her phone wakes us. She picks it up and listens. "Okay," she says at last, and puts it down.

"Vega Corporation is invading the tower. My mother is dead. We should each pack a bag, and somebody will take us to safety."

We wait an hour and then the lock on the door clicks, making us jump. Nobody opens it. I go to answer, hoping it's a guard, fearing it's Vega soldiers. But the hall is empty. Nothing's happened except that the door is unlocked and it won't lock again.

"I don't think anyone's coming to help us," I say.

We creep out into the hallway. The elevators are all dark, disabled. We go into the stairwell, sit on the landing and listen, and for a while it's quiet.

Vega's CEOs are clones too, but they raise their own successors. Mira's mother says they get weirder and stupider with every generation. I guess they haven't gotten stupider than Griffin yet, because it seems like they won easily. That's the only reason for the doors to be unlocked: they've finished off the guards and now

they're going through the building floor by floor. They don't want there to be anywhere to hide.

Finally we hear steps and shouts, far below, and a sound like a door being kicked open. They're pacifying another level. There's shooting right away and it goes on in bursts for a long time.

Maybe some fools are doing a last stand down there, but I don't think so. I think Vega is killing everyone. No hope of getting past them—they won't leave any exits unguarded.

"We have to go up," I tell her. "There's something we can use up there."

"How many floors?"

"I don't know. I don't know where it is, I just heard the guards talking about it."

"Okay." She doesn't press for details, she just trusts me. I've done nothing to deserve that. I should tell her what I'm looking for at least, but I don't want to think about it.

She starts up the stairs, slow but steady. I follow after with both bags. I'm afraid we're going to die because her footsteps are so heavy and her breathing is so loud, but apart from that she doesn't make a sound.

There are cameras in the stairwell, probably, though nothing big enough to see. Vega disabled all the locks, they probably have access to look through them. If they see us, I'm no one and not worth coming after, but I'm sure they would rather not have an heir running around. On the other hand, we're moving slowly, and they won't think there's any way we can escape up there. A pregnant woman trudging up the stairs toward a dead end doesn't cry out for a strike force. At least that's what I have to hope.

We make it to the next floor. Mira rests on the landing, I go in to scout. It's not what I'm looking for and it's deserted. Anybody who was working late here must have fled while we were still waiting for help, or else they're hiding.

Then we do it again, eight more times. Every time, I think Mira can't possibly make it. She pants and leans hard on the railing, but

keeps moving. I wish I could make this easier for her. All I can do is follow close and try to catch her if she falls.

On the third flight of stairs my ankle starts to ache—the revenge of a fracture that never quite healed right. I remember how my mother sang to me while I was stuck in bed. Every time we stop on a landing, I rub at the scar on my palm where I fell on a sharp rock when I was little. My mother cleaned the wound and kissed it better.

On the ninth landing I open the door and I know right away.

* * *

The first room is male bodies and I back right out again. Not that, not for anything. In the next one they're all female but for sex workers, I think—no powers I can use. We keep searching through a maze of rooms, all full of bodies lying in glass chambers. How close is Vega now, I wonder.

The last room is the biggest and it has both men and women. I pick one and read the label. Stealth. Endurance. Agility. Perception. Strength. Precision. Electronic countermeasures. *Gecko*. Gecko is what sticks the guards' feet to the skyways. But these aren't guards—guards have maybe half that many powers. There are forty-eight bodies, enough for an invasion. Maybe Vega was smart to strike first.

Mira's staring into a chamber as if a snake's coiled up inside it. "I can't," she says. "I can't leave the baby like that."

I know what she means. If she transfers her mind to another body, the baby will rot in the old one. She's carried it inside her for most of nine months—of course she can't leave it to die, even if it is the next edition of our mother. In her place I'd feel the same way.

"It's okay," I tell her. "You don't have to. I'm going to change, then we'll escape. You destroy all the rest of these bodies so no one can use them to come after us. It's this switch here, under the flip-up cover. Then see if you can find a manual for these enhancements."

I look down at the nearest of them, lying in its chamber. It's uncanny, with its empty face, its perfect body. After I've lived and

worried and worked too much and hardly slept at all in it for a few months, maybe it will look less like a doll.

I don't want to transfer. I want *my* body, with its scars and flaws. Even with the damage done by all those years of the wrong hormones. With all that, it's still mine, it's still me. But if I stay in my body I'll die here and she will too.

"Is this what you want?" she says.

"No. But it's the only way."

"What if we surrender?"

There's no real hope in her voice. She knows as well as I do they're not taking prisoners. I don't want to say it, so I just shake my head.

"Please," she says, and tears are in her eyes. "I don't want you to do this. You're my wife, the way you are, I love *you*."

She means it. If she didn't, she wouldn't be crying. Anyway nobody's watching now, there isn't any reason left to lie. She didn't marry me out of pity—or not just. She really fell in love.

I don't know why she would do something so stupid. But I'm going to save her and then maybe I'll be worth it.

"I have to," I say, and I kiss her. I try to memorize what kissing her feels like in my real body. I focus on wanting to save her. Even if I can't feel that anymore after the change, I might remember. "Help me pick one of these out."

She walks along the rows of bodies, stops with her hand on a chamber. Copper hair, skin like peaches and cream. The eyes are amber and stare up at nothing. They blink mechanically once, like a doll's. If they didn't, I guess, they'd dry out.

"This one is beautiful," she says. Her voice is hollow.

I can't bring myself to smile, but I agree.

* * *

I wake up and the room's not full of soldiers. Mira isn't dead, she's here and crying. I want to comfort her, I want to protect her. I don't

dare try to touch her yet, because I think she'd flinch away. But I can feel things. I'm still me, I'm real inside this, it's okay.

Then I open up the side of the glass chamber and climb out, and everything is wrong. The body's balance is off, its eyes are too high up. Even how my tongue feels in my mouth is strange and fake. I want to collapse to the floor, I want to lie down there and die. But I have to save Mira.

So this body doesn't feel like me, so what. I felt that way at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, most of sixteen. I was a brain cased in a robot, I pushed my body forward like a wheelbarrow, because I had to. I tuned out everything that hurt and made myself a perfect student, because if anybody could get hormones without parents or money to pay for them, it would be a high achiever, not a failure. I did that for almost four years, until my first shots of estrogen bathed me in calm, made me feel like a person. I can do it long enough to get us out of here.

I make the body walk over to Mira. She's found a manual, but it's videos. There's one about gecko, but the guards say that's simple—the body's made already knowing how to do it. I play the one on electronic countermeasures instead, because that sounds like it might help us against cameras.

The first two minutes are on motivation. I skip forward and it's talking about loyalty to Griffin. Another skip and it's explaining that these countermeasures are new and a secret, so whatever you do, don't get taken alive. Then it's telling about how the technology was invented. We're going to die before I get anything useful out of this.

"Let's just go," I say. It comes out high and thin, because I'm still trying to correct the too-deep pitch of my real body. I try to loosen up my vocal cords, remember how I used to talk, but don't repeat the line.

I go into my suitcase and pick out clothes I hope will look like office wear. I manage to get the bra on, stretching the band till the eyes barely capture the last set of hooks, but the fit is all wrong—the edges of the cups dig hard into my breasts, the band is nowhere

near my sternum in the middle. The blouse gaps between buttons, too. I throw a jacket over it and hope no one will notice. I try on my old shoes, but they're too big and they'd just slip off. Anyway, I'm going to need my feet bare soon.

I'm afraid to see my old body, but it's right there and I can't help looking. I must have turned onto my side at the beginning of the transfer, while it was still like sleep, before it was like death. One leg is stretched out and one drawn up. My hair has curled unevenly, the way it does when I air-dry it, the way my mother's did, and spread all over everywhere. It would need a lot of brushing out, if I woke up. I didn't even get to look like Sleeping Beauty in the end, I just look like I passed out in there. I want to open up the chamber, touch my body's face and stroke its tangled hair, but then I think maybe that's morbid, and anyway we need to hurry. I just leave it behind.

* * *

At the door out to the stairwell, I think of the cameras again. *The body's made already knowing how to do it.* I close my eyes and try to feel what this body wants from me. I see my right hand moving, flicking upward. I'm probably imagining it. But all I can do is try.

I push the door open a little, standing so my feet are hidden, and peek out. High on a wall I see a little winking light, a star. Is that what cameras look like to these eyes? I push my hand out through the gap.

As the body makes the gesture I realize what it is. It's the way you cup up water from a pool to splash someone in front of you. I went to a pool once, when I was little. There were public pools back then, it didn't cost too much. And I was still wearing boy's clothes, so I didn't have to worry about what a girl's swimsuit might show. I remember splashing some woman, my real mother, I guess. The memory is just a glimpse and I don't really see her face, but who else would let me splash her. I feel something shiver in my chest and flow out through my fingers in a rush. The little winking light turns red and dull.

"The cameras are disabled. Or deceived. I think."

I push the door open slowly, and when another light appears I splash it right away. Would that gesture be the same for anyone, I wonder? Or did this body search my mind to find a memory of joy?

We go out on the landing. "Can I carry you?" I ask.

I'm so afraid she's going to say no. But she's figured out what's coming, knows she'll have to let me carry her soon anyway. So she just shrugs. "I don't know, can you? We didn't watch the strength video."

I never picked up a person before, but I have an idea about how from somewhere, movies probably. I wrap one arm around her back and one behind her knees, and when I lift she just comes up. It isn't like I'm strong, it's like she's light. She puts her arms around my neck, then winces and lets go.

"I'm sorry," I say, and start to put her down.

"It's just that my belly's getting squished."

I shift my arms and she says it's better, but I think she's still uncomfortable. She should have had more time to get used to this body before she had to touch it.

We have to leave the suitcases behind. Our wedding dresses are inside those. My real body is still lying in the leaving-chamber. Vega will paw through it all, but by that time we'll be gone.

* * *

"Do you want to keep this baby?" I ask her as we're going up the stairs.

She doesn't complain that I'm talking about the future while we're running for our lives. I think maybe this was on her mind too.

"If we leave her at a hospital or something, Vega could find her and kill her. We have to keep her hidden. And she's been inside me all this time, I can't help loving her."

"Your mother put her in you. She made you feel that way."

"I know," she says, but the way she says it, I can tell she means "that doesn't matter." Then she adds, "Anyway, I couldn't bring

myself to make someone an orphan," and I know that I can't either, and that's all there is to say.

* * *

Outside, the skyway wraps around the building so the guards can patrol everything, just like on every floor. On this one there's a bridge ahead, a long and narrow path, unlit. The skyways are built on a framework of steel, but the surface is glass, polished smooth and slick, with no sides and no handrails. No one without gecko could use them to attack the central tower. But if one of the satellite towers gets invaded, guards can run across them from the main one to defend.

This bridge goes to the southwest tower, which is Marketing. I'm betting that it's safer than the one we're in. Who'd bother doing an armed incursion on a Marketing department?

"You'll have to hold on with both hands for this part. Press against me and keep your eyes closed."

I walk in place for a few steps, feeling how my feet stick, testing how the bond gets firmer when I press down, weakens when I rock my foot forward. Then I step out into the cold. The tower is swaying in the wind. The guards say Griffin's towers are the most stable ever built, and I guess the range of motion's not that big really, but I still feel like it's trying to throw me off. I'm terrified and so is Mira—I can feel the tension in her body. "It's okay," I tell her. The voice that comes out doesn't sound like it's okay. I wish this body was made knowing how to lie better.

Our tower is swaying and Marketing is swaying out of time with it. The bridge between them slips and shifts, pulls away and comes close again. It has to—if the bridges were fused rigidly, the movement of the towers would snap them. I watch the bridge until I've learned the rhythm of it, then step out and stick my foot down, pull the other one after it quickly. My grip on Mira is too tight. She doesn't seem to mind.

The bridge is only wider than my shoulders by a little, and carrying Mira I can't see my feet at all. I still feel unstable and off balance, my legs are too long, I'm going to topple even without the wind's help. How did I give up my trans body for this perfect female doll and manage to be taller than before? I keep my eyes on the opposite end of the bridge and feel my way with my feet.

It's a cold night. There are heating coils beneath the glass, but Vega didn't turn them on. By the midway point my feet are freezing, starting to get tingly—I'm afraid they'll go numb and I'll fall off.

Then I put my right foot down and there's nothing underneath the edge of it but empty space. I freeze, then shift my weight back slowly, plant the foot back in a safer spot. I can't bring myself to take another step.

If I fall off, it won't just be some doll I'm piloting that shatters on the pavement. It will be me—I feel that in my bones now. Wrong and awkward, artificial, but still me. Fear shows me that, and I know fear is telling me the truth.

"Just keep going," Mira says into my shoulder. "Don't look down."

"I can't, you're in the way of down."

She makes a noise that's kind of like a laugh. I'm freezing everywhere except the part she's pressed against. I focus on that part and let the body's feet think for me.

Finally we're at the door to the Marketing tower. I let her legs drop down, smack my hand against the door and stick it there. For a moment I just breathe. Her feet are on the slick glass, but she's pinned against the closed door by my body, held up by my arm, safe inside a cage of me. This isn't the body she loves, but it's the one that can protect her. She doesn't try to shrink away.

★ ★ ★

Inside, the elevators are alive, but I tell Mira it's too dangerous. "The door could open on anything."

"You *cannot* carry me down a hundred flights of stairs."

"I think maybe I can."

"Even if you don't pass out, my spine would never be the same."

So I stick a hand inside the elevator, splash imaginary water all around, and we get in. The whole back wall is a mirror, so I can't help seeing the body I'm wearing. Of course I'm beautiful—a little bit too much so to be natural. I look right, next to Mira. People will believe she married me on purpose. Nobody will guess I'm trans now, nobody will ever think *She's poor, or she'd have gotten a new body. Then she'd look like a real woman.*

I turn toward the door right away, avoiding the sight of myself, but the picture is still in my head and I have the whole ride down to think about it. It comes to me that maybe I won't always hate this, being perfect. Maybe hating it is one more thing I'll lose.

★ ★ ★

We get out on the second floor. I carry her to the very bottom of the stairs. I don't have a plan for this part. I push the door open an inch, spot a camera and splash it, then push it a little more.

I can see a station with two Griffin guards. Not enhanced I think, just guys in uniforms to check IDs. Does Marketing even know we've been invaded? They might let us walk out—you don't need an ID to leave a building. If not, this body's strong enough to knock them out. I hope it was made knowing how to throw a punch.

I ease the door shut, lean my head close to hers, and whisper. "You're in labor, we're both freaking out, a car is waiting for us outside. No matter what they say, keep moving toward the door."

She nods like this is normal. It feels that way to me too. Trying stupid desperate plans and hoping not to die is just our life now.

I crack open the door, just enough to make sure the guards aren't looking this way. Then I put my arm and shoulder through the gap. I skim the surface of the pool in a big arc, sending a wave out in every direction, feeling the power flow from inside me, and just for a moment it feels like joy. Then I'm back to being terrified, which is good because I won't have to do any acting. We burst through the

door and make for the lobby. She's walking like it hurts her, I'm supporting her on one side.

"Did our car come?" she asks. There's panic in her voice. Of course the guards don't know the answer, they're not there to keep track of cars. They look startled and don't try to stop us.

We turn toward the doors and there are Vega soldiers, four of them, sitting in chairs on both sides. Enhanced. They're going to notice my bare feet, how can they not. If they figure out I'm gecko then we're dead. *I'm her wife, she started bleeding, I ran out without my shoes*, I think, hoping it will somehow translate into body language. The nearest one is standing up. I don't know what to do, but I told Mira to keep moving and that's what she does, so I go with her. The soldier takes a step closer to the door we're headed toward. Then he holds it open.

"There it is!" I shout, and point at nothing down the street, away from the main tower. We hurry that way. I don't dare look around, but I can't hear anyone following.

So now we're free. I did it, we got away. I feel light, like anything is possible, these city streets could take us anywhere. But then the triumph fades into a chill. We're all alone and we have nothing, no one we can turn to. We're out here on the street exposed to cameras. Vega will find us anytime they figure out they want us. I took this body for one purpose and that's done now. Now I don't know what I'm for.

* * *

We're just walking, trying to put more distance between us and Griffin. I wish my feet weren't cold again. I wish I dared to pick her up and run, but someone might be watching from a window, or through a security camera. We're conspicuous enough as it is.

"I don't know what to do," I tell her.

"Just find a way to get us out of here," she says. "I have a plan." She's breathing hard again, and can't walk very fast. I don't know how much more of this she can take.

The streets are dead this time of night—no people and no vehicles, nothing that can help us. Nothing but corporate towers in every direction. I wish this body was made knowing how to find a bus.

Finally we come upon a whole block lined with empty taxis on both sides. It's eerie. I can't help feeling they're a herd that's going to stampede when we get too close, or flick away all in the same direction like a school of fish. But they're just drones, brought here by some algorithm to wait until demand increases.

"I don't have any money," I realize. "My wallet's still on my old body."

"I have a cash card a friend gave me that's in her name. She thought the idea of raising a clone baby to replace the CEO was sick and I might have to run."

"It was sick and we do have to run."

"I'm sure she'll put us up tonight, probably until the baby's born. She might need to yell at me a little first."

"You're a desperate pregnant woman fleeing a war. People aren't allowed to yell at you."

"You're right, she'll probably yell at you instead."

We're supposed to touch the cash card to the door to make it open. As an experiment I splash some water on the lock instead. It opens and the drone asks where we want to go. This way we'll be harder to trace.

The cab pulls out, a silent chariot. Soon we're in a part of town where there are lighted signs, things on a human scale. We're getting away. Mira leans in and puts her head against my shoulder. I stroke her hair and she melts into me. I guess after I carried her, my body feels familiar to her now. More familiar than everything else ahead of us, at least.

"You'll stay with me, won't you?" she murmurs.

"Always," I say, and it feels so good. But I can't help thinking of what *always* looks like. We're going to raise her mother's clone in poverty, just like we promised to. We're gliding back into the same

cage we were headed for, only without the guarantee of safety and enough to eat.

"Hey," she says, tugging on the lapel of my jacket to get my attention and looking up at my face. "It's okay. You did it, we're safe, you can rest now."

I feel a wave of relief. Not because I believe for a second we're safe. Because she knew what I was feeling, even if she didn't quite know why. Because even in this shell, this armor suit, she understands that I need comfort too.

"I love you," she says. It sounds just like it did before, when I didn't believe her but it was true.

I remember I'm supposed to say "I love you" back, and so I do, although I think it's pretty obvious.

She sits up, wincing, and pulls my head to her. She brushes my tears away and kisses me. "It's going to come out fine. With what your body can do, you'll get good work. I can probably get something. We'll be all right, even with the baby."

"No. Listen." I move close so our sides are pressed together and I take her hand. "We need to break out of the Griffin program every way we can. Like, tell our daughter a child-size amount of the truth about who she is, fill in details as soon as she's ready for them."

"Of course, that's better."

"And we can't just scrape by with corporate jobs. That's what *she* wanted. So I'm going to be a thief."

"What?"

"I'm going to steal from all these corporations. It's perfect. The countermeasures in this body are brand-new, no one will be prepared for them except for Vega and whatever's left of Griffin. I'll stay away from those two. I can climb up the sides of buildings and confuse any cameras or drones they have watching. Their guards will be like toy soldiers compared to me—I don't think this many powers have ever been stuffed into one body. The best part is, they'll probably blame Vega."

She thinks about it for a long time. "It's a good job for raising a child," she says. "You'll be home all day. Away one night every couple of weeks, maybe?"

"Maybe even less."

"What will you steal?"

"Bodies, if we can figure out how to keep them alive until we sell them. If not, maybe equipment. Anything I can carry."

"We should brainstorm targets, and I'll do the research."

"We'll have to do it fast. We need money for a place where we can raise a child. And we need new ID right away."

She nods at that. I hope she's up to this, I hope I am. It's one thing not to want to let a baby die, another to love her and care for her. We'll have to learn to see her for who she is, not who she looks like or what her genes want her to be.

Mira lays her hand against her belly. She strokes it soothingly, like you would comfort someone who's been hurt.

"It's okay," she whispers to the baby. "It's over. This time will be different."



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IBERATION

TADE THOMPSON



LIBERATION

TADE THOMPSON

Illustration by JENIS LITTLES

Cover design by CHRISTINE FOLTZER

T • R
D • T
C • M

Zero

At first ...

Udo Johnson is in a closed conference room with blacked-out windows, talking to an audience of corporate types, giving a speech about being an astronaut. She is twenty-seven, confident, and happy, about to fulfil a dream.

She says, "Humans were shaped by gravity. My body, my mind recoils at the idea of being in microgravity."

Then she says, "Scared, no. Excited, yes. Sure, space flight is dangerous, but we'll have dependable folks in mission control watching over us. Like guardian angels."

Now ...

Udo is on space station *Liberation*, in Earth orbit, in darkness except for one module, at one workstation.

She says, "Mission control, mission control, *Liberation*. I see flames, I see flames. Please advise."

She flinches at the sound of metal rending and her heart beats faster than it already was. The light from the work area flickers.

Then she says, "Mission control, *Liberation*. Advise, advise. I see flames, I see flames."

The light fizzles out and darkness takes hold, squeezing out hope.

One

Romeo “Bash” Bashorun stares at the interviewer’s mouth, mainly her lips, marvelling at how red she had managed to get them. Deep, deep scarlet.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat the question?” said Bash.

“I said, what do you know about the history of Nigeria’s involvement with space?”

Where to start? With the American president?

Because he is a visual thinker, he has a mental image of an object orbiting the Earth. It looks like the Death Star in miniature.

“On the tenth of July, 1962, NASA launched the Telstar 1 satellite. It was spherical, eighty-eight centimetres in diameter.”

Bash immediately pictures a man in Agbada, the Nigerian prime minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, swaddled in a turban, radiating gravitas and dignity, holding a satellite phone to his ear. He is a thin man with a light beard. He talks and listens, talks and listens.

“On August twenty-third, 1963, the Telstar enables the very first satellite phone call, which is between the Nigerian prime minister, Tafawa Balewa, and President John F. Kennedy of the United States. JFK talks about a new era of cooperation between the US and Nigeria, possibly the rest of Africa. It’s a good day. Optimism peppers the talk. They even squeeze in comments about boxing legend Dick Tiger.”

The interviewer must know all this. She sips water and her lips leave a smear of red on the glass.

Bash swallows. Pavlovian, maybe.

“History, fate, whatever you want to call it, had further plans for both men. They would each fall to assassins’ bullets, JFK in 1963 to a ... heh ... lone gunman in a window, and Balewa to renegade soldiers in the bloody Nigerian coup of 1966.”

Bash pictures Tafawa Balewa propped in a sitting position against a tree at a roadside just outside Lagos, in a flowing white gown, bloodied, unmoving, misbaha prayer beads in his right hand. And he pictures JFK by way of Zapruder, head exploding in perpetual real time, brains fanning out on the back of the presidential limo from a Krönlein shot, Jackie gathering skull fragments.

Bash experiences a brief, powerful feeling of sadness at what might have been if none of the bullets struck home. He looks to the floor to compose himself, then

back at the interviewer.

He refocuses on the present. "Our involvement has been a lot more... peripheral since that time."

He's forgotten the interviewer's name. She's a special aide to the president, which is all he knows. She's on television. Above her hairdo, the Nigeria coat of arms dominates the wall behind her.

"You went to space, right? In the old days?" she asks. Her eyes are black pits, but they are sharp and he knows she's taking in everything.

"Not quite. I was in a MiG, got stratospheric, but I've never crossed the Kármán line."

She looks puzzled.

"Kármán line is the edge of space, Ma," says Bash.

"You flew the MiG?"

"No, but I was taken up to—"

"But you are a pilot?"

"Yes, although I haven't flown in—"

"Clarify for me, Bashorun. You were meant to go to space at one point, right?"

"Yes. With the Americans. It didn't work out."

That was an understatement. In the name of international guilt about Africa, the powers at NASA decided it would be cool if the first Black person in space came from Nigeria. The search was on for a candidate. Bash was twenty and the best pilot in the country. They shipped him off to the US to train. As soon as Bash arrived, he knew it was a mistake. The Americans saw him as a token, a mascot. They condescended to him, asked him basic questions about flying. These people who, from Bash's point of view, sat in a plane that almost flew for them. But he swallowed all of the bile and focused on mission training. It would be worth it just returning to Earth having orbited it a few times. He took a ton of photos with various celebrities and was feted by Black America.

A week to the mission, he was dropped. No reason given. Within three days he was back in Nigeria. He never flew again, could not bear to enter a cockpit.

He teaches now. He likes the students most of the time.

Esan. The interviewer's name is Esan.

"What if I were to tell you we're starting a space program?" Those eyes pinning him to the spot.

"You want me to go up in space?"

"You? No, Bashorun. You're too old."

"Of course." These words pierce him, but he keeps his face like carved wood. He can bleed later.

"No, but we do want you to head up our program. Recruit, train, and run mission control."

"What's the mission?"

"First African team and spacecraft to orbit the planet."

Bold. "Okay. Do we ... where's the spaceship?"

"Funny you should ask that..." Esan smiles for the first time.

★ ★ ★

There is a pipe that drips in Bash's house, but try as he might, he cannot find it. No puddle of water anywhere, no discolouration of paint. The sound of dripping itself seems otherworldly and omnidirectional, so he can never localise it. It is loud, though. He can hear it from the lounge, where he sits in the dark, sipping a glass of Gulder and staring at nothing.

He hears wheels coming up to the front door, hears it unlock, open, close, and lock. He hears the sound of Riya no doubt swivelling and making her way towards him.

"Bash?" Her voice fills the space in seconds. Nobody expects the power of that voice coming from such a small frame, and Bash has never got used to it.

"Here," he says. He sips the beer.

"In the dark? Did the interview go that bad?"

"They offered me a job," said Bash. He stood to meet her and kissed her on the lips. Her hands rose up to his shoulders and stroked them. Her breath smelled of the egusi she had for lunch.

"Don't you already have a job? I thought they were going to fire you."

"They could have done that by letter."

"So, what?"

"They want me to build a space station in orbit, then select, train, and launch a crew that will orbit the Earth no less than twelve times, after which they will return to base."

Riya expels a loud word of surprise and disposes of the expected reaction. Yorubas expect a performance when told something shocking. This is a kind of extroverted display of high expressed emotion to make the talker feel supported. Bash waits it out because Riya's real reaction will come after.

"How do you feel about it?" she asks.

"Conflicted."

"The pay?"

"Substantial."

"Are you capable?"

"Yes."

"Will the earlier space bullshit in your life get in the way?"

Bash exhales. "I honestly do not know." He sips his drink. "But we'll find out, won't we?"

★ ★ ★

They give him an office in the statehouse and a budget. It is a weird time to be working for the federal government. The capital is in the process of moving from Lagos to Abuja, and everything is in transit and temporary. Esan abides, though. Stable and cheering him on.

They dump one hundred personnel files on him, hard copies that cannot leave the office, and they ask him to select a number of candidates for training.

"They aren't all pilots," he says to Esan.

"They don't need to be in modern space travel," says Esan. "They don't fly the shuttle, and they don't fly the space station."

He hates the selection process, knowing that he will have to interview them without telling them what job he is considering them for. Exactly what Esan did to him. He wonders who else they looked at.

He cracks the space station problem first, although he has to Frankenstein it. He buys three almost-decommissioned modules from existing stations, one from the Americans, one from the Chinese, and one from the Russians. Through a masterful piece of diplomacy, Bash gets them to retrofit the coupling parts, though the Americans grumble a lot, talking about Soviet-era ghost ships whose orbit had, by some miracle, not naturally decayed into a graveyard orbit.

Before the deal closed a strange white man came fishing around the house and places that Bash frequented.

"CIA," says Riya. "Vetting."

Bash wants to call it *Eagle One*, since the eagle is Nigeria's national bird, but Esan says the order from on high is to call it *Liberation*.

★ ★ ★

Bash keeps working, harbouring a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach because he thinks surely today will be the day the government pulls the plug, only they do not. He is on budget and solving all the emergent problems.

Too costly to build a shuttle? No big deal. We'll rent one from the USA. That's too expensive? We'll hitch a ride on an Indian space mission. Won't even have to build a super-long runway. Just ship the crew to Sriharikota.

Oh, the crew.

★ ★ ★

The components of *Liberation* mate, and it begins to orbit with all systems nominal. The Russians say they have changed all the instructions and displays to English, so the crew don't have to learn Russian.

Liberation is ugly, misshapen, like a tumour hanging in formalin, not floating in space, but it doesn't have to be pretty. Just functional for a few orbits with its historic crew in it.

★ ★ ★

When the Nigerian space effort internal documents are printed, Bash is not mentioned, only Esan and the president. He does appear deep in the article as a "consultant" with "lived experience of NASA," whatever that means.

"Why do you care?" Riya asks. She is marking papers and doesn't even look up.

"She's taking credit for my work, but also preparing to cut me loose as the technical adviser should this go wrong."

"Why does it matter? Do you want glory?"

"Of course I want glory. Do you know any pilot that doesn't? My father looped the bridge at Onitsha. You think he didn't look at that news clipping every chance he got?"

She stops. She taps her red pen on her lower lip, the colour reminding him of Esan. She stares at him. "That was an individual feat of prowess. This is politics. Worse, this is Nigerian politics. Just do your job and keep your head. And I mean that literally."

★ ★ ★

Bash meets the proposed crew for the first time in a gymnasium. The one that shines the brightest as they stand in line is Udo Johnson. She's a TV personality, *Science Girl One*, famous for popularising science among hard-to-reach groups, especially girls who are actively discouraged from being too booky. She has that attitude of being pretty and knowing it, as if she is aware of the camera angles even when there is no filming. Glamour. Movie-star charisma.

Paul Oba is next in line. Tall. The only pilot in the group. Talkative. That will be a problem in space.

Next is fair-skinned Kene Chukwu. Double PhD, academic, does not want to be here, and had to be convinced. Razor-sharp thinker, eyes like black diamonds.

Tobi Shangode is called Stub because he's like five-two or something. He's good-natured, a schoolteacher. His students love him.

Sola Kuku is quiet, almost silent. Background in biology. She has a daughter she thinks she has hidden, but Bash's job is to know everything. It doesn't disqualify her, the little deception, but it's cause to keep an eye.

"I hope," says Bash, "I hope you like to stink."

★ ★ ★

We all stink of vomit from the parabolic flights. I don't vomit the most, but not the least, either. The middle has me, as usual. I do this on purpose lest people think the gods gifted me more than others. Bash did not lie. We can die in training. We can die on take-off, or on clearing orbit, or on transfer into *Liberation*. He made us, on the first day he met us, write goodbye letters to our families, letters he would deliver if we died. He made the "if" sound like a "when." This guy.

"Udo, he likes you best," says Tobi. If only talking were a competitive sport, Tobi would win gold effortlessly.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"He asks you more questions than anybody else." Tobi has a self-satisfied smile, but you can't hate him. He's so nice.

It wasn't sexual, though. You get an eye for that kind of thing in men, and that's not the vibe Bash gives off. He's like one of those guys who see you as their child, or the child they never had. We, the crew, have dug up everything we can find about him. Heroic without being a national hero. They did him dirty.

I should concentrate.

★ ★ ★

When we finish training we take a ton of publicity photos, but these are not to be released to the public until we return. If we return. There's an official photographer for the *Liberation* mission. He also takes film. We're interviewed as if it's real time.

We meet Bash's boss, who gives us a boring speech. She smiles, showing her even teeth that remind me of a snake's.

"She would decapitate you after mating," says Tobi.

Twenty-four hours before we leave for Chennai we get a new crew member. His name is Ladi DaSilva and he looks hard. We all look hard from the conditioning we've gone through over the last eight months, but he doesn't just look fit. His soul exited a long time ago. You can tell from his eyes and the set of his jaw. He glances at me while Bash explains to us that he's been prepared on our protocols. Ladi's eyes are windows into emptiness. This you get from the deliberate trauma they give to military folks. He is probably State Security, which means be careful what you say around him. I think they are going to make him team leader, but Bash says it's still me. The first Nigerians in space! I'm excited, although it's tempered by the brass constantly lowering expectations. You might get dropped from the team, blah blah.

Sola, Kene, and I are given progesterone injections. They tell us it's to stop our periods for the duration of the mission, but Kene has done intensive study of space missions.

"Sometimes there are relations among crew members," she says. "It's a high-intensity environment with forced proximity."

Sola gets the giggles and I just know she's imagined fucking one or all of us.

Bash hugs all of us just before departure, which is somewhat unexpected. I say "all," but I mean the ones he trained. Ladi remains aloof.

Bash leans in to me last and says, "Don't let them give you any shit over there. You are customers, not supplicants. The Nigerian government is paying a lot of money to get this done. It's a taxi service."

I nod.

★ ★ ★

Chennai's hot like Nigeria, but we don't get to see much of it. We don't even go through customs. We're treated like diplomats and an air-conditioned bus shuttles us directly to the space centre, by which point I have goose flesh on my forearms. Tobi smiles all the way.

"I've always wanted to see India," he says.

"But we're not seeing India," says Paul. "We're barely breathing India's air."

★ ★ ★

In the hours before launch I take a nap and dream of being trapped in a house where the ceiling collapses unexpectedly, but not completely. There are others with me, and they scream. I push myself into a corner, but more of the masonry gives way and a dust cloud obscures my vision and I cough myself awake in my bunk.

Ladi's awake and watching me, but absolutely still on a bunk below Tobi. Eyes in the dark.

I turn away.

Two

There are two mission control centres for *Liberation*, M-zero, in India, and M-one, in Abuja. M-zero is active from the point of departure of space shuttle *Hope* until it docks with *Liberation* six hours later. M-one takes over at that point, for the remaining duration of the mission. Bash is already at M-one, with full personnel in place and monitoring the progress. Telemetry from *Hope* and *Liberation* is nominal.

Bash calls Riya in the last window he expects to have.

"They're free of Earth's atmosphere, so we should be grateful nothing blew up on take-off or on the second stage. Now let's hope they can find *Liberation* and—"

"I don't want to hear this, my darling," says Riya. "Tell me how you're feeling."

"Anxious but happy."

"No envy?"

"Of who?"

"The kids. They're in space, something you never got to experience."

"I envy them, but in a healthy way. Nothing is eating away at me, if that's what you mean."

Docking goes without a hitch and control is passed to M-one. Ram, their man in India, performs the handshake and wishes them godspeed. Bash glances at Esan, who stands impassive at the back of the room.

"Abuja, *Liberation*. We have started the first Nigerian orbit of the Earth," says Udo on the radio.

A cheer in mission control.

They have already made history, and in ninety minutes they will complete the first period.

★ ★ ★

I instruct the others to start their observations. Tobi is inexplicably morose. After *Hope* detaches from *Liberation* he stares out after it.

"There goes *Hope*," he says.

I hate him briefly for saying that. He puts fear in my heart for a few minutes. But there is a curious effect of being in zero-g watching the Earth spin. You feel above your problems, anybody's problems. It's euphoric, but you can't ease up, and you fall into routine. Mistakes cost lives.

We are in the Chinese module and it is as they told us. All controls are in English, the monitors have no Chinese characters, and you wouldn't know this used to belong to the People's Republic. Just in case, there is a Mandarin speaker in M-one. Contingencies and redundancies.

Ladi is my first problem. He doesn't stay for the briefing. He floats off, saying he's going to explore the Russian module. We were going to do that, but I haven't got round to assigning it yet. I cover up by saying, "Good idea." It still leaves a poisoned feeling in my gut, like Ladi doesn't recognise my leadership.

We have approximately three days. I want to make sure everybody gets EVAs, which are really photo opportunities for Earth and us.

We're astronauts! I'm flying through space at 7.7 kilometres per second.

"Boldly," says Paul. "Where no Nigerian has ever been before."

★ ★ ★

While the others prepare for a spacewalk, I go looking for Ladi, who has not returned after several hours. I find him in the main module. It's cramped, with exposed wires and panels in seeming disarray. Ladi floats there, one hand around a handle, anchoring him in place, the other holding an open instruction manual. The writing on the cover is Cyrillic.

"What are you doing, Ladi? We have instructions," I say.

"Continue without me," he says.

"I know you probably think you're older or something, but I'm team leader."

"Then lead." He turns a page with his nose. "Lead them. I'll be fine, and ... and I won't get in your way."

"Is that in Russian?"

He nods, but I don't have his full attention. "It truly is."

I snatch the manual. I don't know what bothers me most, the fact that the Russians didn't do as they promised and left the instructions in Russian, or that Ladi clearly speaks and reads it.

His face darkens for a moment, then he smiles. "Give it back."

"I'm going to read it."

"No, you won't. You don't read Russian. You speak Igbo, Hausa, some French, and some Spanish. I've read your file."

I haven't read his.

"I have a different mission, Udo. I serve a different master to you. But I promise I will not hamper your mission. Is that fair?"

The manual is useless to me, so I give it back. "Should I even factor in a work schedule for you?"

But he's already back in study mode. I leave him. It's not worth fucking with State Security agents. They can get your entire family incarcerated for no reason.

★ ★ ★

The rest of us rejoice in microgravity. We frolic and sing. We tell stories, and by the time we've gone round the Earth ten times, it's old hat.

We go on EVAs two at a time, swapping the role of photographer. We basically pretend to carry out repairs and get our photos taken. Then we photograph the other person doing the same thing. We make sure the green-white-green Nigerian flag is prominent.

This makes me sad. It's a sort of mockery of a space mission. Here we are in the cast-off, sloppy seconds of other nations, pretending to be explorers. Is this something to be proud of? What have we built? We just bought this trip with oil money. Even the concept of exploring may not necessarily be an African priority. We just think we should do as our colonial masters did. But why? Do we think this is a marker of development? Like we take on the master's religion, the Christianity?

I had never thought this on Earth, but I'm thinking it now.

★ ★ ★

We sleep standing up, hanging in bags.

Ladi does not sleep among us.

Paul will not shut up. He gets on everybody's nerves at bedtime because he literally talks until his brain shuts down. Which it never seems to do before mine. And he hums.

★ ★ ★

I will not speak of the toilet arrangements.

★ ★ ★

My calls with Bash are the brightest spot of my day.

"The exercise equipment is broken," I say.

"It doesn't matter."

"Exercise is part of our work schedule," I say.

"And who designed your work schedule?"

I wait. He did, but I'm not playing ball.

"*Liberation*, three days is too short to develop osteoporosis. Exercise is good, but it's busywork."

"Roger, Abuja."

"Anything else?"

"The food tastes ... bland."

Laughter. "That's just the microgravity, *Liberation*. Your circulatory system is confused and blood is pooling in your head. It is, in fact, larger. A lot of your bodily functions will change slightly, including your taste perception."

"So it's not just because the food is designed for white astronauts?"

"Afraid not, *Liberation*. Just smear every meal in hot sauce."

★ ★ ★

On day two I'm resting when I hear someone breathing in front of me. I open my eyes and Sola floats there, staring.

"What?"

"We're losing power."

I blink the sleep out of my brain. "Say again?"

She helps me out of my sleeping bag.

"We are losing power. At this rate, I'm guessing we've been using stored power continuously since arrival."

"What are your theories?"

"Check my figures first, then we can speculate."

I do. She's right.

"Shit," I say.

"Indeed."

"It's the solar panels, isn't it?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"None of us is qualified to fix anything on this rig," I say.

"Maybe Ladi?" Sola asks.

"I wouldn't count on him having anything to do with us," I say.

"Listen, maybe we don't have to do anything."

"Explain."

"You'll have to check my figures again, and triple check with someone else, but I think we have enough energy for the next three days. We'll be home before this tin can runs out of power. Which is fine, because it's going to a graveyard orbit after this."

I check her figures again. She's right. I go to one of the windows and look out, as if I can eyeball a misaligned solar panel. I see nothing wrong. Maybe a micrometeorite impact at an unlucky angle?

"I'll tell Abuja. Don't tell any of the crew," I say.

Sola makes a zipping gesture across her mouth and floats away.

Three

Tobi sits in front of the camera, sweat dripping over the bruises on his face and inside the cast on his arm and legs. Everything hurts. The air is still, in spite of the air conditioner. He is sure the orthopaedic doctors missed a broken rib.

An assistant brings him a cup of water with a straw hanging out. He sips. The assistant disappears while giving the thumbs-up to a supervisor Tobi can't see.

"State your name," says someone from behind the camera. Heavy south India accent. Telugu-tinged English.

"Tobi Shangode," says Tobi. "But call me Stub."

An assistant slaps a clapperboard shut.

The disembodied voice pipes up. "It's day two on board *Liberation*, and all is going well. Is that correct?"

Tobi tries to nod, but pain flowers down both of his arms and up his neck. "Yes, we all felt pretty good, apart from Ladi, who just wouldn't come out of the Russian module. Udo knew what he was doing and was evasive whenever I asked."

"Then what?"

"Then two things went wrong at the same time, one on *Liberation* and the other down at mission control. A synchronised terrorist attack would have been less devastating, and I still suspect foul play of some kind. But it was just synchronicity. The universe screwing us."

"Let's start with *Liberation*. What happened there?"

Tobi takes a deep breath and suppresses his emotions. "It was Paul's turn for a spacewalk, with Sola as the EVA camera. We were checking their suits ..."

★ ★ ★

I wish Paul would stop talking.

We're in a can. There's nowhere to escape that droning voice. Here we are, fitting him for a suit and he won't give us peace.

"... And this guy, a true Stakhanovite, worked his entire life but still died in penury. I told the priest, I said, this is unfair, Father. What does God have to say about this? What did he deserve? And the father, he said, we can't understand God's ways. I'm like, Father, that's not the lesson here. The lesson here is there is

no God, and the universe is indifferent. And that's when my fiancée broke off the engagement. I'm—"

"Shut the fuck up, Paul," said Sola, just before her helmet lowered and clicked in place.

Paul is shocked into silence for a moment, and I shove his helmet on while he's distracted and slap it to signal the seal. Everybody laughs. Before long both of them are out of the air lock, and we monitor them as Paul pretends to do maintenance and Sola films him. Paul clowns, but then, what else are you supposed to do? Udo records a section, and I wonder if she's going to use it for her show or whatever it is the kids in my classroom watch. *Science Girl One*. How does she manage to smell good when none of us have showered? Her sponge bath game is better than mine, no doubt.

I leave the monitor for a second to suck a tube of water, but I stop when I feel a slight vibration through the hull, after which there's a series of clicks. New sounds.

"Udo, what is—"

We're all shaken by an ear-shattering boom, then it seems like *Liberation* quakes and shakes us all loose from our mooring. A shock wave hits, and I'm disoriented.

The lights go out, and we're lit by the glowing Earth from a port hole.

My first thought is that *Liberation* is in the process of exploding, and I calm with the acceptance of death. I think I see metal plough into the midsection of one of the spacewalkers. I hope I'm mistaken. I remember a weird thing. Sola has the smallest waist I have ever seen on an adult human, and the hardest abdominal muscles, like teak. Absurdly, I think the muscles are so hard, no metal can get through.

Screams cut through my brain fog. Then I see a yellow glow from inside the space station, from what I assume to be the direction of the Russian module. All this is compressed into a few seconds.

Udo says, "Anybody conscious, on me."

Only three of us left to respond. Kene moans. I sound off. Metal groans somewhere. I aim for the port. I feel a trickle of liquid in my ear. Am I bleeding? I plug my ear with a finger.

"Biohazard alert. Bodily fluid," I say. "I'm bleeding from the left ear."

"Copy," says Udo. Nothing from Kene, but I'm not sure she's conscious.

A panel lights up with emergency power. A comms array. Udo immediately propels herself in that direction.

The world spins. Earth. It's spinning ... no, we are spinning. *Liberation*. Whatever exploded threw us into a slow spin. Marvellous. Turns our external light source into a disco.

"Tobi," says Udo. "The hatch."

I had forgotten. In the event of an explosion hatches need to be sealed to slow the spread.

"What about Ladi?" I ask. I seal it, though.

"Look," she says, and points.

A monitor shows a feed from the external camera, which seems to be operating, but barely so. There's a debris field around us, and the Russian module sports a massive hole. One astronaut is entangled in cables, broken visor, not moving. No signs of any others.

"Fucking Russians," I say.

"Not sure we can blame this one on them," says Udo.

By which she means whatever Ladi was messing with caused this.

"Mission control, mission control, mayday, mayday, mayday." Udo waits for the return. Nothing. Yet.

I secure Kene with Velcro straps, so she won't float about. I examine her best I can in the poor visibility. She seems stuporous. I wonder if she hit her head.

I hear another boom and flames bloom on the other side of the hatch. Burning up precious oxygen. We're screwed.

"Abuja, Abuja, *Liberation*, over," says Udo. She glances at the hatch window, and I see the flames reflected in her eyes.

She says, "Mission control, mission control, *Liberation*. I see flames, I see flames. Please advise."

She flinches at the sound of metal rending and the light from the work area flickers.

Then she says, "Mission control, *Liberation*. Advise, advise. I see flames, I see flames."

I look at the panel. There's nothing from mission control, not even a keepalive network packet or an identifying signal. It's like they ceased to exist.

Udo grabs my hand. "Get into a suit. Then get Kene into a suit. We are in competition with fire now, and we will lose."

"What about you?"

"When you two are dressed, I'll change. Go! You're wasting time."

★ ★ ★

Tobi sits wide-eyed staring at the camera. He has no tears, but then, he's cried so much that his body has decided enough is enough and shut down his tear ducts.

"So you'd lost half of your crew, *Liberation* was on fire, and you couldn't raise mission control?" asked the disembodied voice.

"Yes."

"What was happening on the ground, in Abuja?"

"I didn't know. We had no—"

"But you know now?"

"Yes."

"Tell us."

★ ★ ★

Bash is in one of the bathrooms in mission control, washing his face and armpits. He's lathered his face in order to shave.

"I can smell you from here," says Riya. She is a face on his phone, which is propped up on the sink.

"Sorry," says Bash.

"No, I imagine you smell kind of musky right now. That always makes me horny," she says.

Bash is about to speak when the phone disconnects.

He picks it up, getting shaving foam on it. He redials, but nothing gets through. There is power, but no signal. Nothing from the cell tower, nothing from the internet. He wipes himself dry, puts on his shirt, and heads to the control room.

Everybody is clustered around one small radio. All the monitors are dead and the overhead lights are giving out a sickly colour, like they are uncertain whether to glow or not. Martial music emanates from the radio.

"What's going on?" asks Bash.

"Military coup, we think," says a woman. "The president's dead. Most of the cabinet too. The government is suspended."

Bash tries dialling his phone again.

"Don't bother. Cell towers are jammed. It's a nightmare."

★ ★ ★

Bash is old enough to have experienced coups before. What you do is wait it out, unless you're in government, in which case you find somewhere to hole up until the killings and arrests are over. Usually, one would leave the urban areas and settle in the villages, although that's the first place soldiers check for those wanted.

The power goes out at mission control within hours, which shouldn't be possible because the supply is independent of the local grid. Bash knows it's been cut off. He tries to locate Esan, but her assistant says she has been shot. This turns out not to be true. No cars moving on the roads, but lots of people on foot. Cars and trucks either smoking husks or brightly burning torches lighting up the night. Bash finds Esan among a group walking along the side of the main road, considerably less glamorous.

He stops her. Her haunted eyes focus with difficulty, like she doesn't recognise him.

"Oh. You," she says.

"I thought you were dead," says Bash.

"They did come for me. Not me. They came to 'clear' my area. I was lucky. The leader of the detail was my cousin. He wouldn't let them shoot me."

People flow past, not curious, trying to get away. Anywhere but here.

"What are we going to do?" asks Bash.

"Like ... what do you mean?"

"*Liberation*. The mission ends in less than twenty-four hours."

"Mission? There is no mission. The federal government has been liquidated. Go home, you idiot. Don't you have a wife?"

"What about the kids who are stuck up there? We sent them!"

"Look around you! There are six of them. How many do you think are dead down here? How many do you think will die before this is over? Go home and pray nobody comes for you."

She brushes past him, and Bash never sees her again.

★ ★ ★

After a while, cell service returns, albeit intermittent. Bash uses all the numbers he has, trying to get in touch with someone in power. Futile.

"Keep your head down lest you lose it, my love," says Riya. "This is a bloodthirsty lot."

She's right, but Bash can't let it go. It would be easier if they had died on the platform in a hydrazine accident.

He broods and paces, unable to eat. At intervals military jeeps with armed soldiers thunder past. One time a megaphone tells everybody to stay indoors and be vigilant for saboteurs. News broadcasts start up after a fashion. Prepared statements given by haunted heads. No doubt, gun barrels just off camera providing encouragement.

When the knock comes it's a suited man at the door, and he's polite when he asks Bash to follow. There are two others in the SUV and they search him first. They take him to a field command post, a large tent, and he's soon face-to-face with a leader of some kind. Bash doesn't catch his name, but he's a lieutenant.

"You've been making phone calls. What do you want?" asks the lieutenant.

"My name is—"

"I know who you are. What do you want?"

"I have six astronauts in a—"

"I know about that."

"I ... we need to reactivate mission control," says Bash. "Bring them down safely."

"Need?"

"They'll run out of air and die."

"That's sad, but *Liberation* is not a priority right now."

"We sent them up there! Sir."

He grunts. "No, you sent them up there. The previous administration. I know you were thinking of a weapons system—"

"Wait, what? There was no weapons system. It was all cosmetic, for photo opportunities."

The lieutenant seemed genuinely surprised. "You didn't know. Ah. That makes sense."

"What weapons? What are you talking about?"

"R-23M Kartech."

"Yes, I've heard of that. Russian space cannon from 1975. Decommissioned as impractical. What of it?"

"*Liberation's* Russian module had a prototype installed. They didn't bother uninstalling because that module was supposed to fall and burn up in the atmosphere. There's an agent onboard *Liberation* whose job is to test-fire it."

"Oh my ... Ladi."

"You really didn't know any of this. Amazing. Well. Another example of how your administration threw bad money after bad."

"It'll be a PR disaster for the new military government if you don't bring them back."

"No, suegbe. It won't. You know why? Because you never told anybody they were up there. You never announced it. Nobody knows they're there."

"The Indians do."

"The Indians signed nondisclosures when they took our money. This will end up as a conspiracy theory like Ilyushin. No evidence."

"Sir, I beg you."

"I am not going to spend millions on a space mission that is of no benefit to anyone. You wasted the resources of the country on these follies when people had no food to eat. Why do you think we are here? Why are we fighting running battles in the street with counterinsurgents and other loyalists? What do you think all the guns are for? Starving people don't need space propaganda, Bashorun. Nigerians don't need orbital guns. They need bread."

"Sir—"

"Get the fuck out of here before I have you shot."

★ ★ ★

Back at home, sitting in the dark, brooding.

He leaps up. Riya, at the far end of the room, straightens.

"I need a favour from your father," says Bash. "I need his satellite phone."

★ ★ ★

In his father-in-law's home office, Bash copies a number from his own phone and dials the satphone.

"Hello?" says a voice tinged with a South Indian accent.

"Ram, it's Bash."

"Oh, wow. How are you, brother?"

"Not good. Listen, I have to dispense with the pleasantries. I don't know how long this phone will stay connected. I need ... do you know what's going on with *Liberation*?"

"I've seen photos that suggest there's been an explosion."

"Shit! Are they—?

"Some analysts think some of the photos show bodies. Others disagree. Who knows? *Liberation* is surrounded by a debris field, and the whole station is rotating."

"Ram, you need to reactivate M-zero, as per the plan."

"I don't have the staff or the authorization for—"

"I hadn't finished. I want you to bring them home."

Ram laughs. "Oh my days. No, Bash. No authorisation, no money. I can't launch a shuttle to rescue your lot. They wouldn't just jail me. They'd decapitate me."

"Ram, my kids will die."

"They might already be dead, baoji. And your government hasn't settled its debt with us. You don't *have* a government right now. I just run the space centre. I don't authorise anything."

Bash thinks furiously. "Okay, how about ... how about birds already in the air."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have shuttles in space right now? Does anybody?"

"Nothing for humans. There's a freight mission coming to an end. Supplied our guys in the International Space Station."

Bash smiles. "Best news I've heard all day, sahib."

★ ★ ★

The cameras combined with the lights make Tobi sweat. Or maybe it is the anxiety involved in organising stories unfolding in different locations, but all representing peril to him.

"Go on," says the producer. "Do you need water?"

Tobi shakes his head, takes a deep breath, and continues.

"Bash's plan was to send the cargo shuttle from ISS back to India, but after a pit stop at the partially destroyed *Liberation*."

"And Ram agreed?"

"He refused at first, but then considered it an intellectual problem, then a practical challenge. Which I think Bash was counting on."

"So what happened next?"

"We have to go back to *Liberation* for that ..."

★ ★ ★

Udo stares at the lit panel, shaking her head. Everything is red. She turns to me.

"Put on your helmet. You're going outside," she says.

"What?"

"There are two priorities here. One, we need to put out the fire before it eats up all the oxygen, and two, we need to stop this bird from rolling. If I can trust this panel, the fire's spread to module two, the one adjacent to the Russian module."

"But module two has a hatch that can be operated from the outside. Right." I nodded and left. The most complicated thing on that EVA is compensating for the spin as I crawl along the hull, dodging flotsam. I see Sola, headless, a frozen smear of red at the topmost part of her suit.

I open the hatch and it burps flame for ninety seconds before it dies.

"It's out," I say. "I'm going in."

"Negative. You have no idea what's in there. Melted plastic, stray exposed wires, sharp metals. Don't risk it. Come back via the air lock."

Udo tries the slowing burns. "They didn't work. Rockets didn't fire. Chineke me. I don't even know what I was thinking. Slow the roll, then what?"

The radio comes to life, startling both of us.

"*Liberation*, *Liberation*, this is M-zero. Come in."

Udo mouths, *India*?

"Mission control, *Liberation*. Good to hear your voice."

"Likewise, *Liberation*. Report? And keep concise."

Udo does.

"Listen, *Liberation*. I will talk you through the burns to slow the spin. After that a shuttle will dock with you."

I raise a fist in the air, like my team just scored a goal.

"It's a supply drone. I have no idea if any of you can fit in it. It's not authorised, but you can look inside. If there's space and you fit in there you can come home. I have to emphasise, this is not a passenger shuttle. You could die."

★ * *

All the items on the shuttle are fixed in place. We can't undo them without special tools. There is space, but only for one. We load Kene and make her as comfortable as possible.

"That's it," I say.

"Not quite, Stub," says Udo. She tucks a recording device into my space suit. "There's enough space for your stubby body. Tight, but you'll make it."

"What about you?"

Udo smiles and shoves me in the shuttle. She ignores my protestations. The last words she says are, "Don't forget me, Stub."

She slams the hatch and engages the manual lock.

★ * *

Tobi is wrong. He still has tears.

"I broke ... the ricochet fractures alone ..." He takes a moment. "Kene is still unconscious, but she's alive. I'm alive. And we are the last survivors of the *Liberation*."

"And you believe your team leader died in the *Liberation*."

"Yes."

"I'd like to show you some imagery."

A series of still shots on a screen off camera. The air lock of the *Liberation*. Like early animation, hatch open, an astronaut emerging, out, spreading arms as if flying. Gone.

"I'd like to stop," says Tobi. "Now."

★ * *

The camera pans on the rookie astronauts. Paul waves and turns to Tobi, saying something that makes him laugh.

It settles on Udo, who smiles. Demure but, as ever, aware of camera angles and tilting to favour her best side. The camera loves her back.

In the background, palm trees sway in the wind, not a single cloud in the sky. The wind changes direction and blows directly into Udo's face, and she squints.

"You all right?" asks someone off camera.

"Yes," says Udo.

"Do you want to touch up your makeup?"

"No, I'm ready."

"Mission Specialist Udo Johnson, what would you like to say to your fans?"

"Can I talk to my family first?"

"Of course."

"Mother, I love you." She spreads out her arms. "I made it. You won't know until I'm back, but I'm going to space! I'm team leader. I know the question you'll ask: Does it pay better?" Udo laughs. "Tell them in Agulu. I'm here. I come from Agulu and to Agulu I will return, Mama. To be continued."

Udo blows a kiss to the camera.

"Science Girl One, out."



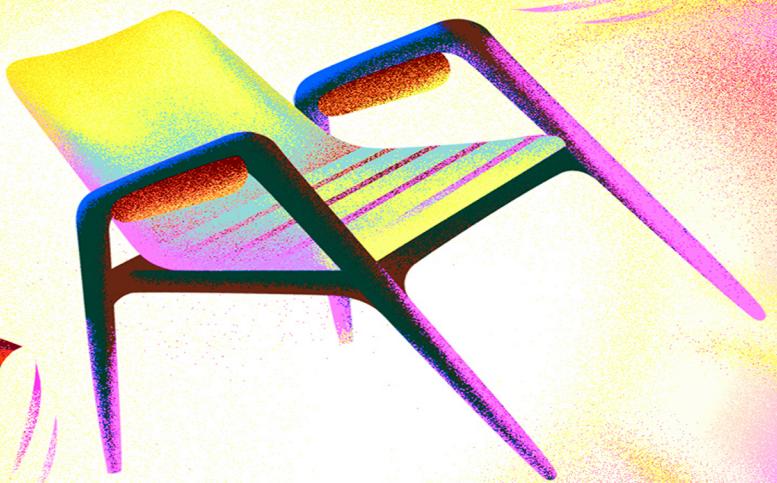
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DAVID
ERIK NELSON



THE
NÖLMYNA

THE NÖLMYNA

DAVID ERIK NELSON

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As soon as she heard the cop's question Sadie Espinoza knew, in her heart of hearts, that her cousin was almost certainly gone forever.

"Yes," she answered, her blood thudding in her ears. "I knew Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann. He was my cousin. What's happened?"

The cop took so long to answer that she checked to make sure the call hadn't dropped. "We're not certain," he began, then explained that Itzie's neighbors had grown concerned when they noticed his mail piling up. They called the building manager. She came over with a passkey. The door had a security bar engaged. They called Cincinnati PD for a welfare check. The cops battered the door down. No Itzie, dead or alive. No sign of trouble. No unlocked windows. No other doors. Just a note.

Sadie's heart dropped. "A suicide note?"

She heard the cop perk up. "Did Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann show signs he might harm himself or others?"

Sadie didn't know how to answer. Itzie wasn't precisely self-destructive. Certainly not maliciously so. But he was like a high-torque table saw with zero safety features: it'll get the job done, but might take your finger or destroy itself in the process.

"What's the note say?" Sadie asked.

"Don't know. It's sealed. The old man mailed it to you, care of his own address. Wrote on the outside 'If I'm found missing, call Sadie Espinoza' and this phone number. We can't open sealed and postmarked mail without a warrant. We don't even know if getting a warrant is warranted. Old lady on the ground level said there was a young Black guy who used to come and go all the time, but she hasn't seen him either. Right now, that guy is our main person of interest—"

Sadie rolled her eyes. "The 'young Black guy' is Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann."

The cop might have heard, but did not listen. "Hopefully this Black kid can shed some light on what's happened to Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann. In the meantime..."

Unbidden, Sadie recalled a conversation she and Itzie had in their twenties, when he admitted that he hadn't known he was Black until he was five. "I know that sounds insane," he'd said as she'd cackled with laughter. Itzie was absolutely, unambiguously Black; he looked like an extremely nerdy Wiz Khalifa. "But it's true. I knew I was 'dark,' but it never occurred to me that I was 'Black.' My dads raised me as their own, raised me a Jew. I'd never met a Black Jew—or even heard of one. I didn't think you could be both."

The cop had kept talking while Sadie took her side quest down memory lane, but she snapped back when he asked for her to give him permission to open the note Itzie'd taken pains to be sure no one would open but her.

"Do I have your permission to open it?" the cop reiterated.

"No. You don't." This clearly annoyed the cop. "I'm on a roof, in the middle of a home inspection," Sadie added. "But I'm nearby. I'll wrap this up and come there myself."

It only took Sadie fifteen minutes to finish up and get to Itzie's apartment, a converted brownstone stitched into Cincinnati's patchwork of gentrification. Parking on his block—where \$2,000-per-month apartments surmounted trendy draft kombucha cafés—was impossible. Parking one block over—where an affable hobo peed on the ancient ashes of a fire-gutted chili parlor—was easy.

The cop was waiting on Itzie's stoop.

"Ms. Espinoza?"

"Officer—" She squinted at the name tag over the right breast of his Kevlar vest, then paused. The cop sighed.

"It's pronounced how it looks," he said, heading into the building. "Like 'Picket,' with a *g* instead of the *ck*."

"And you became a cop?" she asked his back. He offered no answer, simply trooped across the tiny hex-tiled foyer and up the beautifully restored stairs, asking his own question:

"You're from that stupid ghost real estate show?"

Sadie offered no answer either. Their questions were equally stupid: Officer Pigott obviously became a cop, despite his last name. She was clearly "that dumb bitch" from *Haunted House Home Inspectors*. In fact, she'd recently returned to *Us Weekly's* "top 10 most hated people on TV," even though *HHHI* had been off the air for nearly five years. She had Netflix to thank for that.

Itzie's place was on the second floor. The battered door stood open, a single strip of police tape symbolically barring the entrance. Sadie ducked under the police tape. Officer Pigott followed, making no attempt to stop her.

The place was still a cluttered mess: open books arrayed across sofa and floor, fast-food wrappers overfilling the kitchen trash, a scatter of half-disassembled chairs from ÖLEI, that ready-to-assemble wonderland of fast-fashion furniture and Swedish home decor. But Itzie's place didn't smell like anything, which was unnerving. Every house smells, and all those smells are signs: new paint and varnish (hiding water damage?), mildew (from a long-ignored leak?), fresh lumber (shoring up bad steps?), cats and cigarettes (ugh).

Last week Itzie's apartment had smelled like unwashed Itzie and neglected kitchen trash. Today Itzie's place smelled like nothing at all. It seemed absolutely and eternally vacant. That brought it home: Itzie was gone beyond gone. She bit the inside of her lower lip, using the pain to stifle a rising sob.

Sadie's eyes immediately went to Itzie's lovely oak Art Deco dining room table, which he'd restored himself, and the tacky-ass ÖLEI Nölmyna chair still sitting at its head. The genuine class of his prized table made the Nölmyna's bullshit

Scandinavian minimalism—with its cheesy bentwood birch arms and gray plastic mesh seat—really pop. An envelope lay squared up on the table in front of the chair, like a single place setting. It was addressed to her. She snapped it up and tore it open.

The letter was short; she read it at a glance.

"What's it say?" Officer Pigott asked.

"Itzie sends his warmest regards," she said, holding up the note for the officer to read, careful to do so in a manner that in no way implied she was handing it over. It read, in full:

Dear Sadie:

If you are reading this, then

- 1. Fuck the police ☺ (who I assume called you)***
- 2. I sat in the chair***
- 3. The chair is yours now (sorry)***

I am at this moment transferring the rights of the PROPERTY (1 chair) to you in all respects. I hereby certify the transfer of this PROPERTY in good condition in your name, and which can be used immediately.

The letter was then signed and dated. The date was five days ago.

"Do you mind if we take this letter as evidence?" Officer Pigott asked. She pulled it back.

"Yeah, I mind. First off, Fourth Amendment. Second, this is *my* receipt for *my* chair."

"You're not taking any chairs," the cop said. She already knew she couldn't take the chair—no one could—but this still made her blood boil. "Your mail is your mail," he added, "but you aren't removing anything from an active crime scene."

"Active crime scene!" She was boiling over now. "What's the crime?!"

The cop hooked his thumbs into the armpits of his Kevlar vest. "We don't know. But a man is missing."

"And you aren't going to find him if you're looking for a little old White man who doesn't exist! This is so fucking typical!"

The cop sighed. "I knew you were going to make this a thing. I apologize for our misunderstanding on the phone. I was given incorrect information about Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann's identity based on a neighbor's assumption and had not yet double checked it when I called you. The matter seemed urgent, so I proceeded quickly out of an abundance of caution."

"Yeah, well now you know better," Sadie spat. "But riddle me this, crimefighter: if you still thought Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann was an old White man, would you be

calling this a 'crime scene,' or would you be calling hospitals to see if they had him in their ER?"

The cop's jaw stiffened. "Listen, Ms. Espinoza, I intellectually understand that anyone could be anything—that you might be a 'he' or a 'they,' that women can rape men, that any kid can grow up to be president—but I do *this* every day, and I'm telling you: I'd *love* it if, just once, I got a call on a strong-arm robbery and it was the little old White lady who'd shaken Malik down. But the fact is it never is. I had bad information. I've got better information now. I'm here to help."

"OK, Officer, that being the case, what'd they say when you called the ER at University of Cincinnati Medical Center looking for Itzie?"

Officer Pigott just looked at her. He hadn't called any hospitals, because he didn't think Itzie was in a hospital, because even though there was no elderly victim, Itzie was still a suspect.

Of course, Sadie knew perfectly well Itzie wasn't in any hospital either. She knew exactly where he was. He'd sat in the chair.

But she wasn't going to tell this cop any of that.

★ ★ ★

Itzie and Sadie had grown up as siblings in all but name, saving each other from single-childhood. The Espinoza brothers had bought adjacent houses when they came to Cincinnati, houses their kids treated as a single household. Sadie and her "Itzie-bitsy lil brother" grew up swapping *Goosebumps* and watching *Paranormal Activity* movies together under the same big quilt.

Despite graduating as valedictorian and attending the New England Conservatory of Music for violin and viola (at his dads' insistence), Itzie had ended up in TV production, first as a boom operator and sound assistant, then doing Foley, ADR, mixing, and post. Eventually he clawed his way into showrunning, the first Black showrunner at House & Yard TV.

"It's all in a name," Itzie had told her. "They see 'Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann' in the email and assume they're gonna meet a little old Jewish guy with throwback Borscht Belt sensibilities. Then a tall young Black guy shows up. They're so busy being not-racist that they accidentally hear you out, and hear that you've got some good ideas."

In the case of *Haunted House Home Inspectors*, the genius of Itzie's "good idea" was that it was The Worst Possible Idea:

Haunted House Home Inspectors was your standard paranormal investigations reality show with a twist: the ghost hunting team consisted of an earnest psychic medium (Miss Tammy), a remarkably credulous ghost hunter with academic bona fides (Dr. James Hodge, a tenured professor of folkloristics at a third-tier

Midwestern private college), and a legitimate home inspector, certified and licensed by the state of Ohio (Sadie). Each episode would be told in three acts:

Act I: the initial interview with the ghost-vexed homeowners/occupants.

Act II: an overnight investigation with Professor Hodge and his devices, Miss Tammy and her regrettable spirit guide "Chief Stonefeather," and the camera crew.

Act III: a full home inspection and walk through, roof beams to foundation, including all mechanicals.

"Sadie won't just eviscerate every paranormal claim; she'll tell 'em how to fix 'em," Itzie had told the executives at HYTV, who were still gobsmacked by the fact that "Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann" was a skinny Black kid. "We come back a week after the repairs are done and reinterview the occupants, see if they are still vexed."

When one of the execs finally regained the power of speech, she pointed out that *Haunted House Home Inspectors* was a terrible name—overlong, hard to say, redundant, impossible to make into a good logo—and the format itself was guaranteed to enrage the viewers: people who watch ghost hunters on HYTV aren't looking for intellectual rigor, she explained. They're looking for ghosts.

"Yes," Itzie had said. "That's the whole point: it's a dumb name for a dumb show that will attract exactly the wrong viewers. Miss Tammy and Professor Hodge one hundred percent believe in ghosts and the spirit world. They don't just find ghosts in a creaky old Victorians. They find 'em in never-occupied condos. Jeez, they'd find ancient, unsettled spirits haunting a brand new ÖLEI store built on a brand new space station one week before ribbon cutting. They are True Believers. And Sadie is a legit licensed home inspector with a professional reputation to protect. Tammy and Hodge will set them up, and Sadie will knock them down. The viewers will *hate* it and kvetch up a storm on Facebook and Reddit—and then all their kookie friends, family, and followers will tune in to get just as pissed off, at which time *they'll* head to Insta-Face-Reddit to piss and moan and rage. Wash, rinse, *repeat*. 'Hate viewers' are still eyeballs, and eyeballs sell ads."

Of course HYTV was in—eyes are eyes, ads are ads, and money makes the world go 'round. And of course Sadie was in. A part of that was the money. A bigger part—one she wasn't particularly proud to admit to—was that it was fun to troll the sorts of credulous Midwesterners who crowded her Facebook feed with "hopes and prayers" and All Lives Matter.

But it wasn't really about the money, or about the dark pleasures of tweaking the People of Walmart. Sadie *wanted* to believe. But she needed to be convinced. And inspecting every haunted house within a day's drive of Cincinnati seemed like a good start.

As it turned out, while "haunted" houses often had legitimate safety issues—failing light switches, ancient wiring, poor gas burner ventilation—it was rarely anything truly challenging. As a general rule, your average home owner could

clear a domicile of all “unsettled spirits” in under thirty minutes using standard hand tools. Sadie ended up saying, “*It’s nothing you can’t fix!*” so often that HYTV printed it on merch and tried making it go viral.

From a revenue standpoint—which was the only one that interested HYTV—*Haunted House Home Inspectors* was a smash hit. It cost next to nothing to make (the primary “talent,” the property’s occupants, weren’t even paid a pittance) while advertisers—especially those hawking commemorative gold coins, dubious home health solutions, and “risk-free” investment schemes—competed viciously to snap up every thirty-second ad spot they could.

It was Itzie’s genius running at full wattage. If anything, he’d underestimated the potential of every aspect of the show: the ad revenue, the free viral promotion, the viewership, and its rage.

Itzie’d gotten bullied a lot in high school. He got it on one side for being one of the few Black kids, on the other for being an “Oreo,” and all around for having two elderly White gay dads. One day, out of the blue, he’d told Sadie that it wasn’t so bad, because no one ever got on him for being a Jew. “It sorta almost feels like they’re picking on the *idea* of me, not the real me,” he said through a mouthful of Cheetos, watching her play *Grand Theft Auto*. “I’m like a gecko: predators get a thrashing stub of tail, and the rest of me gets away.”

Hearing that had, in a way, saved Sadie’s life. She was on the swim team. Try as she might, her thick hair never got fully dry after morning practice. A bunch of the swim girls had taken to calling her “Wetback”—*You know, because she’s so dedicated to swim team that the back of her shirt is always wet from her hair.*

She would never tell anyone that she’d started thinking an awful lot about what her dad’s four-pound single-jack hammer could do to those girls’ faces.

Itzie’s observation flipped her perspective: Jewish Espinozas weren’t remotely “wetbacks.” They weren’t even “immigrants”: they’d been in New Mexico—where her dad and his brother grew up—since before it was “New Mexico.” The only thing calling her “wetback” did was make it clear how stupid those girls were, like a house cat strutting around thinking it caught a snake when all it had was a shitty old lizard tail.

Unfortunately, the most dedicated *HHHI* hate-viewers turned out to be a good deal more toxic than the Learned Council of Aryan Swim Girls of Central Ohio. Their emails were vile, calling her every sort of bitch—“White bitch,” “Black bitch,” “Mexican bitch,” “light-skinned bitch”—except for the one that actually mattered to her, because it hadn’t dawned on them that a Brown girl *could* be a “Jew bitch.” But even with all the murder-rape threats, the hate mail was fundamentally sort of a yawn, and really HYTV’s problem anyway, not hers.

The flooding of her business’s Yelp and Google pages with fake one-star reviews was more of a concern, as were the handful of fraudulent complaints lodged with the Better Business Bureau and Ohio Department of Commerce. The afternoon

that a stone-faced middle-aged couple followed her around a Home Depot for an hour, recording on their phones, she called it quits with *HHHI*, despite being three months into shooting the second season.

There'd been no bad blood with Itzie, who was good-natured to a fault. Besides, professionally speaking, he'd gotten everything he needed from *Haunted House Home Inspectors* after the first season: he'd proven that if you gave him a film crew, he could catch lightning in a bottle. The shows that followed—*Ghost Van*, *Polterfight*, *Ley Line Hunters*, *Shinto Investigation*, the one where Vanilla Ice spent a night in haunted castles in the Carpathian Mountains—had Itzie running just to stand still.

Which was why Sadie had been shocked when, five years after *HHHI* wrapped, Itzie called out of the blue on a Saturday morning and asked her to come over.

"You're in Cincinnati?!" she cried. "The dads said you got one of those absurd houses perched on the side of a bluff in the LA valley."

"Pfshh," he dismissed. "I rent that disaster when I'm in LA. You know what insurance is like for a thing like that?" Sadie, in fact, did. "My real place—my address-of-record—is here in the 'Nati. Home is where the absentee ballot goes." He laughed jaggedly. "Why we even talking about mailing addresses, Sadie? You gotta come over here. I—it—" He laughed again, then blew his lips out in a flapping raspberry, something he'd done since they were kids to loosen up when he got tongue tied.

"You gotta come down here, cuz. You gotta see." Sadie was on the verge of asking more questions, but then Itzie added two words—"legit *woo-woo*"—and that was all it took. She'd be right over.

★ ★ ★

"Woo-woo" had been Sadie's husband Ben's affectionately derisive catchall for the supernatural phenomena Itzie and Sadie adored. Ben had died the summer before Itzie pitched *Haunted House Home Inspectors*. He'd died the stupidest possible death in the stupidest of all possible worlds: No one had been doing anything particularly wrong, but all the factors had meshed in exactly the wrong way. It had been a slightly slick morning, the mom behind the wheel had been a little distracted by her fussy baby, her minivan's tires had just barely started to go bald, Ben had been listening to a podcast on his big chunky Beats, and there was a thin spot in his skull from a childhood fall. Any two or three of those would have still left him alive, perhaps even totally unscathed. All five together put him in a casket.

Ben and Sadie had been married six months. Sadie was three weeks pregnant, but had not yet told Ben. She had been saving the news for his birthday. The morning of his funeral she miscarried.

Itzie knew all of this. He'd been at Ben's burial and sat shiva with Sadie, staying with her through the entire first day and a half, during which she never slept. She'd been struck dumb with grief, and he'd made no effort to cheer her up or get her to "let it all out." He answered her phone, he received guests—and their countless kugels and casseroles and coffee cakes—he made her tea, he held her hair as she vomited.

It was that first sleepless night that Sadie told Itzie about the pregnancy and the loss—something she never told anyone else—weeping bitterly at the fact that she never got to share the joy of the possibility of a child with Ben, nor have his help bearing the burden of that loss.

"I never really believed in God until this shit," she told Itzie. "Random chance couldn't conceivably be this capricious and cruel." She sniffled hard, sucking in her burgeoning tears and smearing snot with the heel of her hand. "But since there is a God, then there are indestructible souls and all the rest of that woo-woo, and so Ben is still somewhere out there."

In response Itzie quietly sang, "*Beneath the pale moon light...*"

It was the "Somewhere Out There" duet from *An American Tail*—the one animated movie about Jews like them (albeit ones who were Russian mice). Itzie and Sadie had sung it for the talent show at Jewish sleep-away camp the first year Itzie went, when he was terrified and miserable. As a wedding present, he'd somehow surreptitiously prepped the entire crowd into serenading her and Ben with it when they entered the banquet hall.

★ ★ ★

The first thing Sadie noticed when Itzie opened his apartment door that Saturday was an ugly new ÖLEI chair. She even knew the name of the design; it was a "Nölmyna." Ben had wanted one when they first moved in together. Sadie had thought it looked awful—on top of sounding like something that had crept from an eldritch tomb long lost beneath the deserts' shifting sands. But she'd humored Ben. They'd driven all the way out to the ÖLEI in West Chester, he'd sat in it for fifteen seconds, then grimaced. "Well," he'd admitted, "their website's right: this chair *does indeed* 'reimagine comfort'—in much the same way Jeffrey Dahmer reimagined charcuterie. You want some meatballs?"

Despite the unfortunate juxtaposition, she did. The meatballs had been all they bought at ÖLEI that day, and it was still kind of one of her favorite memories of their extremely short marriage.

But, of course, none of that would explain why Itzie, of all people, had bought one. Itzie's tastes in architecture and interior design stopped just shy of 1930 and put the "anal" in "artisanal."

"Why in the world did you buy a Nölmyna?" she asked as she walked in.

"I didn't," Itzie said. "It's an *apport*."

"No," Sadie said, taking a closer look. "I'm positive that's a Nölmyna."

But Itzie's sudden willingness to entertain the possible charms of cost-conscious Swedish design wasn't what worried her. It was the state of his apartment as a whole. It wasn't a disaster, but it wasn't like Itzie: the trash was a few days overdue, the counters littered with Burger King bags and pizza boxes, the surface of his treasured oak dining room table gritty with crumbs and sticky with orange pop rings from the bottoms of forgotten Big Gulps. It was the apartment of a depressive slump, but Itzie himself was giddy, almost manic, and smelled of BO.

"Watch this," he said. "Do not take your eyes off the chair."

She watched the chair intently. Just another Nölmyna. ÖLEI's Chinese suppliers must poop out ten thousand of them every day.

She watched Itzie pick it up, stride past her, then slip around the corner into the spare bedroom he used as his office.

"Am I supposed to follow you or—"

"No," he called from the little office. "Turn around."

She turned around. Then froze.

The Nölmyna was still at the head of Itzie's table.

Her heart was pounding fast and hard, cramming into her throat, making her want to vomit.

"Itzie-bitsy," she said, more a wheeze than a word. "What the fuck?"

"It's an *apport*," he said in her ear. "Stay put. This time, when I pick up the chair, just keep watching the spot where the chair was."

Sadie did as she was told. Itzie's hands grabbed the chair, pulled it out of her frame of reference. She kept her eyes glued to the spot. No chair. She heard Itzie pace away, heard him set his chair down in the little stub of hall between the two bedroom doors. She kept her eyes on the open space at the head of the table, focusing on the little scuffs on the hardwood where the Nölmyna had stood.

Nothing happened.

She glanced up; Itzie was standing between the two bedroom doors, grinning, one hand resting on his chair's back. She looked behind her, to the head of the dining room table. The Nölmyna had returned. She did a double take: there were now two chairs, one with Itzie, one at the table.

"The craziest part," he said, gesturing at the original Nölmyna. "I took out one of the bolts that holds the seat in place, carried it in my pocket all day, all over town. It didn't reappear on the chair, or duplicate, or anything. It was just like any other ÖLEI bolt in the universe. And the chair still couldn't be moved. Crazy, right?"

Sadie stepped away from the dining room table, her legs moving with no real participation from her brain. She walked over to Itzie and his chair in the hall,

touched it. Solid. She looked back. The Nölmyna was still where it had been at the table.

"This one is just a regular chair," Itzie said, indicating the chair in the hall with them. "Move it all you like."

He picked it up and carried it to his little office. It stayed gone. The Nölmyna at the dining room table stayed put. She followed Itzie back.

His tiny home office was crammed with a jackstraw heap of Nölmyna chairs, at least twenty of them.

"They're all regular. Every one but the one at the table. That one ain't going nowhere."

"I. Don't. Understand."

"It's an *apport*," Itzie enthused. "A material object transferred from an unknown source. Classic of séances and poltergeist investigations. Every *single* apportionment ever investigated has been shown to be a fraud, Sadie. Every one but this one. This is fucking *proof!* Legit, verifiable *woo-woo!* I've been bouncing around haunted woods and paranormal strip mall kitchens for almost ten years looking for proof, and proof showed up on its own. What are the odds?"

Sadie stood in the home office, staring at the heap of chairs without seeing them, thinking about the Nölmyna in the living room. The same stupid, ugly chair Ben had thought he wanted, before actually sitting in one of the uncomfortable bastards. What are the odds?

"Where'd you *get* this thing," Sadie asked, looking at Itzie's new chair, thinking about the one crouched at the head of his table.

"I didn't get it anywhere. I flew in three days ago, arrived hella late. No chair. Woke up the next morning, it's sitting at my table. I couldn't figure out where it came from, and was sorta freaked out that someone was getting into my place to mess with me. I moved it over by the windows to get a better look in the good light and see if there was anything weird about it. And then I had two chairs. And —" He gestured at Mount St. Nölmyna crammed in his office. "And, well, you can guess how things went from there. Isn't this *amazing!*?"

The front door buzzer brayed.

"My DoorDash!" Itzie shouted. "Be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail." Itzie was out the door and down the stairs.

Alone in the apartment, Sadie wandered back to his oak table and gingerly rested one hand on the primal Nölmyna's seat back. It seemed normal at first. But as she held it, she realized that it was thrumming, and had been all along, like an airplane hull when you're at cruising altitude. It dawned on her that she and Ben had never flown in a plane together. The pain of losing him was suddenly fresh and new.

And here she was, a widow quickly cruising toward spinsterhood, one hand resting on the ineffable.

Legit, verifiable woo-woo.

Sadie took a breath and sat down in the Nölmyna.

★ ★ ★

As soon as her ass touched the mesh, she knew she'd made a tremendous mistake. But by then, she was already through the chair, on the other side of that thinning of the fabric of the Universe.

She was in a garden, not so different from the garden of weeping cherry trees in Ault Park, east of downtown, where she'd spent plenty of afternoons ambling around with Ben. But that was maybe only the case because it wasn't so different from anywhere, because it was somehow *everywhere*, and everything, all at once. The grass was shorn perfectly even, like an Army recruiter's brush cut. The sky was a pale bleached-out yellow somehow undergirded with a terrible, geometric webwork. She didn't know what could possibly be terrible about a shape—something like a mesh, something like a honeycomb—but it was awful. The sun was at the zenith of the sky, but it did not hang there. It was dividing steadily, like time-lapse footage of a cell in a documentary about cancer or evolution.

And Ben was there, because Ben was everywhere, because everyone was everywhere there. She was steeped in Ben, soaking in him and soaking him up. She knew the reality of his delight in seeing her on their wedding day, and his final thought of her as he lay dying. She knew a strange teen had touched him in a swimming pool when he was six. She knew Ben had been addicted to online pornography.

It was a tremendous relief to be home with her husband again.

It was awful knowing everything.

She shot out of the chair, then bolted out of Itzie's apartment.

★ ★ ★

Itzie was bounding up the stairs as Sadie headed out the door.

"Gotta go," she said in a rush.

"But I got two-for-one Crispy Ch'King chicken sandwiches!" He held up the bulging Burger King bag for proof.

Sadie pushed past and carried on down the stairs, loose limbed as a rag doll.

Itzie rushed after. "Sadie, c'mon, I need you. You're *the* haunted house home inspector! You're the only person who can bounce ideas around with me on this, help me explore it. At the very least, we've got, like, two dozen chairs to take apart and figure out if they're for-real ÖLEI crap, or some sort of paranormal mimics of ÖLEI crap!"

She was already to the first landing, not slowing down. "This is a you thing, not a me thing," she told him.

"Of course, it's a you thing!" Itzie said. "This is the thing you been looking for since Ben..."

She didn't slow.

"This is *proof*, Sadie. The chair is proof—not that there's a God or an afterlife or any of that—but it's proof that it's worth asking the questions we been asking since we were kids. Proof that there *is* somewhere out there."

She was at the front door.

"Hey! At least tell me you'll be my, like, trip-sitter when I try sitting in the chair?"

For that Sadie stopped. She turned back to look at Itzie—who really didn't look like he'd aged a bit since they'd been kids. And maybe, in the most important ways, he had not.

"You haven't sat in it yet?" she asked, almost incredulous. After all, isn't sitting in a chair the first thing you do?

Itzie snorted in reply. "If I'd woke up one morning and there was an oven-fresh mystery pie on my counter, it ain't like I'd just cut a slice and dig in."

"Ok. Agreed. But knowing what you've seen so far, *now* you're gonna dig in?"

"Not *dig in*, per se. Just *taste* it. Tasting this pie is the only thing that's left to do, Sadie."

She took a breath. "Itzie, definitely do not sit in that chair. Trust me." Then she was out the front door, putting much-needed distance between herself and the edge of the Eternal.

These were her final words to her cousin.

A week later she got the call from Officer Pigott.

★ ★ ★

Sadie didn't drive straight home after meeting Pigott at Itzie's now vacant apartment. Instead, she drove to Ault Park, where she ambled around the gardens and beneath the weeping cherry trees until sundown, alone, wondering why she hadn't checked in on Itzie sooner herself, and knowing it was because of that chair, the Nölmyna.

She'd only spent a few seconds in the Nölmyna, but the weight of having known everything, for even that fraction of a moment, lingered. It felt like she'd swallowed something radioactive.

And she'd only sat down in the Nölmyna for an instant. Itzie'd been in that all-place for days. It was inconceivably awful.

Once the sun was below the horizon—good old sun, still traversing the sky as it always had and would—Sadie drove home. Her house was at the end of a block

that dead-ended into a trashy little nature preserve choked with invasive buckthorn and hogweed.

She was far from shocked to unlock the door of her little brick bungalow and find the Nölmyna already waiting in her entryway, squared up under the coat hooks, the sorta chair you sit in to pull on your galoshes.

After all, Itzie *had* written her a receipt.

* * *

Officer Pigott was on Sadie's porch the next morning. She was about to leave for work, coffee mug in one hand, car keys in the other. The cop began to speak, but then he saw the chair in her entryway. His face hardened. He rested his hand on the butt of the Taser at his hip.

"Please step aside, Ms. Espinoza. I'm coming inside." Sadie opened her mouth, but Pigott gave her no chance to speak. "You're being detained. That chair was removed from an active crime scene."

"You can take it," she stammered, knowing that was impossible, knowing he didn't know that. "I don't even—"

"Please slowly set down your coffee and keys. Keep your hands where I can see."

Pigott stepped in. Sadie backed away, stopping just past the entryway.

"I haven't done anything—"

"Yesterday, when I called to ask you about Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann, you said you *knew* him, past tense. I hadn't even told you there was concern he'd gone missing. But you already knew he was long gone. I have no clue what anyone is up to here, but we passed into probable cause territory a while ago. We'll figure it out at the station. Please turn around."

Sadie did as she was told, presenting her wrists for cuffing, knowing that as soon as those cuffs went on, it was unlikely she'd walk free anytime soon: a man who'd practically ruined her life had gone missing and she'd been acting suspicious as hell, including appearing to have stolen a seemingly worthless chair from his sealed apartment.

Pigott took hold of Sadie's left hand to cuff her. She let her knees buckle, collapsing back into Pigott, dumping them both into the Nölmyna. As soon as they landed, Sadie immediately rolled off, terrified of passing through the thin place in the chair again. She glanced back, expecting to see an empty chair.

Instead she saw what passing through the Nölmyna entailed, something she'd dwell on for a long time to come. The cop in the chair appeared to be frozen in time, and yet also dissolving: skull peeked through eye peered through eyelid; chair back was visible through ribcage seen through shirt and Kevlar vest gone gauzy.

The best she'd ultimately come up with to describe it was "digestion," in some awful way distinct from "decomposition."

In an instant the process was complete and nothing remained—not a tooth or nail or bullet or thread. It was as though the cop had never existed. All that remained was her stunned realization that she'd killed him.

Sadie looked outside. The empty cop car was idling across the street from her place, pulled off onto the grass, blocking the trailhead. She didn't know what to do, so she went to work.

The cop car was gone when she got home, but there was a detective in a dark sedan in her driveway. He had questions. Sadie was cooperative, but was afraid she couldn't help:

Yes, she'd seen the cop car when she left for work.

No, she hadn't seen any officer. She'd assumed he was on the trails; kids got up to creepy shit back there.

Yes, she'd spoken to Officer Pigott about her missing cousin yesterday.

No, she had neither seen nor heard from either since.

Could the detective come in and look around? Sadie scowled, then grudgingly acquiesced.

He found nothing. He didn't even notice the Nölmyna.

Later a pair of cops in a cruiser arrived and parked where Officer Pigott had. They sat there all night, and were relieved by a new pair who sat there all day. Rinse. Repeat.

★ ★ ★

In the middle of the next night Sadie got up from tossing and turning in her wide and empty bed. She wanted to think of nothing at all, but mostly she thought about Itzie and Ben and a universe that seemed hellbent on carving you down to a sliver.

"It's nothing you can't fix," she reminded herself.

Then went out to the Nölmyna, sat down, and fell through the hole in the Universe.

It was nice to be in and with Ben again.

And it was awful.

It was awfully nice.

He screamed and sang and spoke to her, as did everything and everyone else, ever. It was noisy, in the way that a silent room can somehow be deafeningly loud.

Itzie and Pigott were there, but not in the way Ben was—not everywhere all at once. They were present bodily. They sat on the perfectly shorn grass beneath the weeping cherries and the kaleidoscopically propagating suns. They sat cross-legged, kneecaps nearly touching, holding hands. They were skeletal with hunger,

eyes closed, bodies blurry with dissolution. Itzie's eyes jiggled beneath the eyelids, dreaming. It was like seeing a corpse in its casket slowly crack a grin. Sadie wanted to scream and run. Yes, Itzie'd done this to himself. But the cop? It would be hard to argue that his state was not her fault.

"Sadie," Pigott and Itzie said, exultant, eyes closed. Both their lips moved as they spoke, but the words themselves came through the suns steadily consuming the sky. "We're glad you're here." Their skin bled out into the air, like ink applied to wet paper, forming tendrils that grasped and consumed the drifting petals of sunlight. "We've learned an awful lot in our years here. For example—" And then, instead of explaining, they put a notion in her head that she would never be able to fully articulate. The closest her mind could come was to imagine something like an immense whale sucking in water and straining out brine shrimp. But the shrimp were stars, and each star was orbited by planets, and each planet was populated by billions, and each of those billions clung to their kin in terror as they found themselves shorn from existence and devoured.

"We think we're ready to return now," they sighed. "As god. Help things along. Clean up the clutter. But we aren't sure of the way any longer. You'll lead us back through the thin spot in the Nölmyna, yes? And then join us all in the Godfold?"

Sadie abruptly flashed on a joke Itzie had told her when they were kids:

Hey, cuz, what did the Buddha ask the hotdog vendor?

"Can you make me one with everything?"

Sadie was acutely aware of time passing, so fast that it seemed like it wasn't moving at all. She recalled what happened to the cop when she dumped him into the Nölmyna, and knew it was happening to her body back in her entryway.

"Sure," Sadie answered, nearly mad with her inundation in all of everything. "Sure, I can help."

Then she stood up from the chair, leaving them behind.

Over the ensuing years she'd often debate with herself as to why it was she could come and go through the Nölmyna while others could not.

She hoped that it was because some essential element of Ben, pulsing through the annihilating Godfold, buffered her from absorption. But she suspected it was simply because she kept her visits so short, leaving before her dissolution could start in earnest.

Sadie found herself in her entryway, gasping, skin burning, eyes buzzing, ears ringing with the imminent immanence of the New God Thing's voice.

She had inspected the Universe and found an extremely dangerous structural deficiency.

Once her heart calmed she went down to her workroom, returning with hex wrenches, two sets of pliers, a long flathead screwdriver, and a utility knife. Over the next several hours Sadie patiently and completely unmade the Nölmyna. She started by pulling all the bolts. Bending the first into an irredeemable curl, she was

struck by a tremendous flash of bitter agony, knowing that Ben was really and truly gone from her forever. Her choice had been between eternal union collapsing into her best beloved, or saving this ugly, petty world; she'd picked her poison.

The rest was easy, if tedious: Sadie carefully cut the seams of the Nölmyna's seat cover, then unwove it strand by strand. She worked the screwdriver between the layers of laminated birch and peeled them apart. She stacked the pieces along the wall under her coat hooks as she worked, just where the chair had stood, patching that thin spot between worlds.

The next day the police came with a warrant and a wrecking crew. They tore out drywall and dug up the basement, searching for bodies or evidence or clues.

Yes, it was a mess. But nothing Sadie couldn't fix.

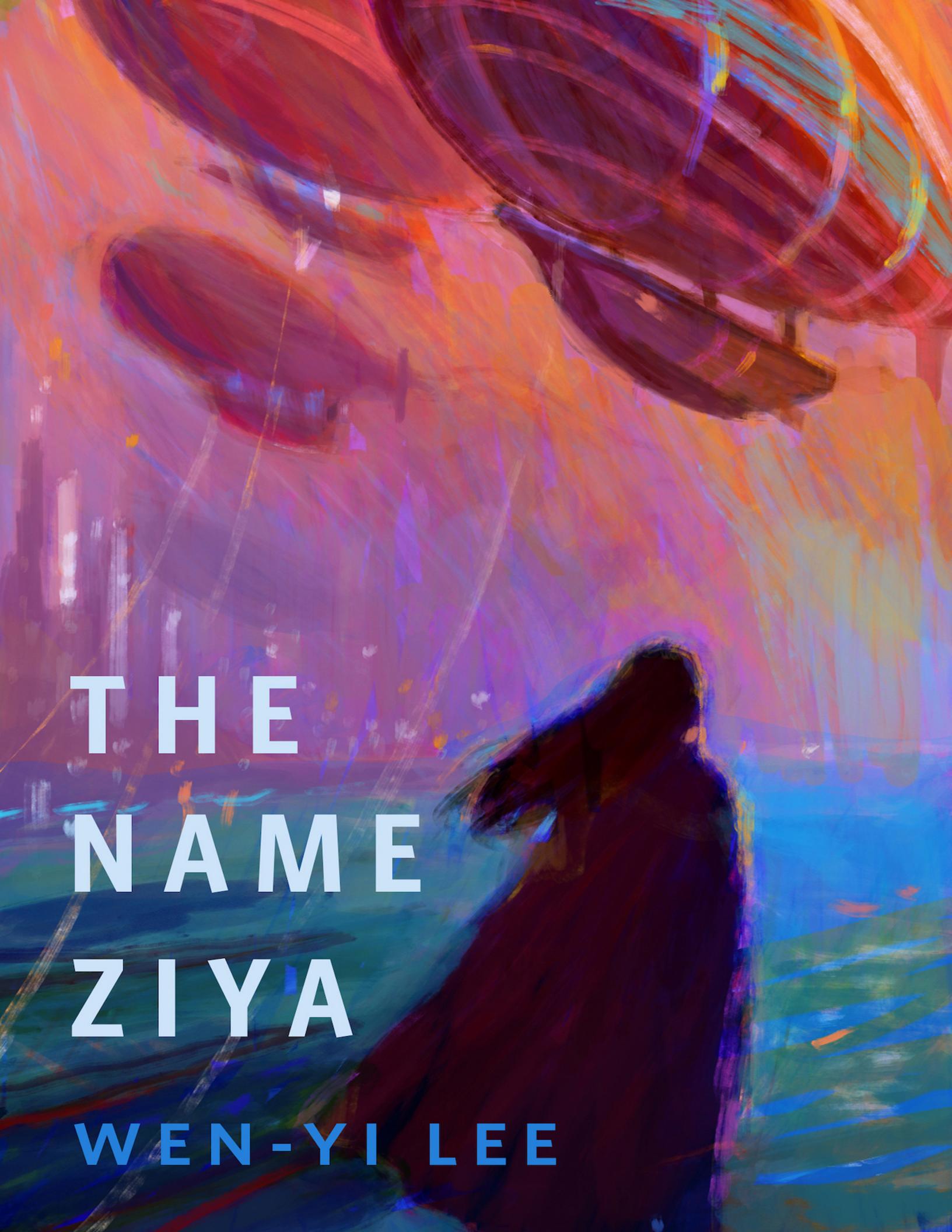


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An abstract painting of a woman in a red dress, set against a background of swirling colors. The woman is positioned in the lower right, her back to the viewer, looking out over a body of water. The background is a vibrant mix of reds, blues, and purples, with dynamic brushstrokes creating a sense of movement and depth.

THE NAME ZIYA

WEN-YI LEE

THE NAME ZIYA

WEN-YI LEE

Illustration by HOLLY WARBURTON

Cover design by JESS KILEY

T • R
D • T
C • M

When the cutter offered forty thousand shada for all five parts of my name, my mother puffed up. *Absolutely not*, she said, *you brain-gored swindler*.

I sat on his bench as they haggled, naked from the waist up. It was a cool morning and my skin pimpled around the ideograms on my bare chest. The full set of five was worth the most; forty thousand shada was more money than we took from ten harvests, and would have covered my tuition with coin to spare. But I was glad my parents had rejected the first offer. I was not prepared to lose the entirety of my name just yet.

“All right, all right,” Durudawanyi relented. Earlier, the rector had murmured and prevaricated as he examined my ideograms, evaluating their specific powers and different combinations, along with my age and other factors. “Twenty-five thousand, for the affective three.”

My mother hesitated. It was unfortunate that I had been born with my more powerful names all at the end: the ones that let me shape earth without cracking, find my way in the dark, share our dogs’ senses. You could only sell from the end, and never out of order, so selling three names would mean losing most of my magic. But where I was going, money was more important than magic. “Thirty,” she said.

Durudawanyi scrutinized her. “Twenty-eight.”

My parents exchanged a look. “Done.”

I clutched my blouse. Two days ago, I would never have fathomed sitting in the rector’s lush, airy hut, the place where people went and came back changed. But then the letter arrived. I had, beyond all hope, tested into the University of Ustonel—a place far, far away—a place that produced consuls and guildmasters and

airship captains—a place that had never, until this cycle, accepted students from the Angze Hills.

The tuition for three years' study was thirty-five thousand shada. A discounted price, as a welcome.

Not going was out of the question. And so I was here, selling the most precious thing an Angze was born with.

When the namecutter sliced the first part-name from my chest, I screamed. I had promised not to, I had sworn to be brave, but it ripped from me with a pain like I had never felt in my life. Blood was running down my chest. "It's all right, darling," my mother whispered into my hair. "It's all right." She had sold one part of her name to feed us during the drought a few years ago. My father had sold one when I was a child, and one before I was born. Now inducted, I pressed into my mother's arms, fighting back tears. I thought of my name being carried to the anchorites in the hills, whose prayers from our names the bethel claimed kept the soil rich and the rivers flowing through the valleys. There were even those devout who offered up their part-names willingly. Though our village did not particularly subscribe to the faith, who was I to judge it when the bethel were willing to open their treasures like this?

Durudawanyi deftly slipped the ideogram into a vial. It fluttered, leaving specks of red on the glass. For all the knowledge of its greater destination I stared at it hazily, wondering how that could have come from me; how such a fragile-looking thing could cause so much pain.

When he took the second part-name, I fainted.

I awoke at home, with pungent bandages around my chest and a throbbing ache in both my skull and my ribs. My sister wiped my face with cool cloths, while at the stove behind her my father was boiling lemongrass tea. A trunk was open on the floor. My mother was putting my things into it. It had been done.

I once had a name of five segments. But henceforth, and onward to Ustonel, I would simply be Ziya.

Two weeks by carriage took me to the port. I barely had time to take in the new surroundings before I was on a boat headed across the ocean.

Ustonel was a coastal empire, but I had never seen the sea. The sight of that much water felt like ascending into a tossing, frothing divine. I clutched the rails, trunk squeezed between my knees, and stared in equal terror and veneration as afternoon bled into evening with a chiaroscuro of color.

As the sun set, the spires of the university emerged on the horizon.

Second-hand tales had done little to prepare me for the city of white turrets, wrapped around a rock pillar that emerged from the beating waves like the many-fingered arm of an old god. It was surrounded by smaller outcrops, which bore smaller buildings and a flashing lighthouse, but the main spire that was the University of Ustonel cast its long, long shadow over us as our boat crawled up to it. I tipped my chin all the way back. Lamps glittered like stars in the slits of its turrets and along its crenellations. As we approached the docks I saw our entrance: a twisting, punishing staircase cut into the rock.

The boat anchored. We bobbed beside the jetty, damp with spray. A minute later, a squad in turquoise cloaks thundered up the gangway. They were not much older than I; metal crests gleamed on their cloakpins. Older students, I thought, before one of them shouted, "Get in line, double-time!"

I and the couple dozen others on the boat with me—largely Ustonels who had spent the journey lounging in the cabin sipping tea—scurried into a nervous queue.

We were marched off the docks and along a precarious path that veered into the caverns within the pillar itself. We came to a shallow cave pool populated by silvery fish, upon which the older girl at my shoulder threw me down onto the bank.

"All right, tadpoles, listen up!"

I was handed a blade, the handle's leather worn to burrs. I had never seen a knife like this: long and flat, with a wicked hook in its tip that made it look like a silver tooth. The girl took half a second to notice my features. "Huh, Angze," she said, and I tensed. But then she simply nodded at the pool. "Spear a fish and cut the head off."

I was so dazed already, a culmination of the long journey and the assault of new sights and here, stepping into an institution where no Angze had ever been before. I would have done anything in that instant if I was told. Numbly, I gripped the knife, and set about plunging it into the water.

Soon the cave echoed with the sound of splashing and whipping tails. Fortunately, I'd caught my share of fish from streams deeper than this pool, although never with a knife. I managed to spear a fat one and drag it onto the ground where it wriggled, gasping.

With a sharp breath, I severed its head. The knife was not made for this purpose; it took three hard hacks to take it off completely. The body stilled surprisingly quickly. Decapitated chickens would continue tottering around the yard, waiting for their death to catch up to them, but the fish instantly flopped cold, slick in the pooling blood. I retrieved the wayward head, ignoring how its bulging eye glinted accusingly, and presented it to the girl with raised, red hands. "Mistress."

She laughed, raspy and pleased, and accepted the head. Her fingers dipped into its sockets and pressed out its eyes with wet squelches. She tossed the head aside and held the gleaming, accusing spheres out to me. "Together."

There was only one way to understand this. I scooped one eye from her hand. Together, we dropped the eyes into our mouths and swallowed. It tasted like brine and the blood off my fingers, but otherwise had the consistency of firm jelly, and went down smooth. Down the row, someone vomited into the water.

The girl looked pleased. "What's your name?"

"My name is Ziyar—"

My awkward, traitorous mouth tripped over its missing syllables. My throat hitched and spat out feed instead: the eyeball shot up my throat like a marble and splattered onto the rock.

The girl's expression turned cold. She looked from me to the mulch.

Hurriedly, I scooped it up. I couldn't then, but I can name the parts now: cornea, pupil, retina, sclera—all sloshed into my nails, and dripping in vitreous humor. I picked it up, I fed it past my lips, I swallowed. This time it stayed down. "Ziya," I repeated. It scratched my throat to say.

She grasped my wet hand and pulled me to my feet. "Ziya," she said, pleased again. It sounded like welcome.

★ ★ ★

Once I conquered the thousand sea-slick steps, I found myself sharing a narrow set of apartments with four others: three Ustonels and, to my surprise, an Angze boy. He slipped into the spot beside me as our house gathered in the kitchen to introduce ourselves. I gave him a grateful glance as we drew chairs.

The only other girl, who sported pretty white curls and long-lashed, expressive eyes, was absolutely chirpy. "I'm Caelan Burnetta Karthe Ruh, but you can just call me Caelan."

"Aradika Denja Orys Dae Chandrea," said the boy who wore airship goggles atop his short hair. He offered no truncation, but I soon learned he, too, answered simply to Aradika. The indulgence of their names shocked me; it also made me ache.

The final, pouting Ustonel boy was Haval Janika Lott, and there was a slight *tsk* to the way he cut off the last consonant, as though he was bothered by his name. Or perhaps he was simply bothered by us. He rolled his cuffs carelessly as he spoke.

I was prepared this time. "My name is Ziya." A brief silence followed, as though I had underused my span of air.

"Ziya," Caelan repeated savoringly, pronouncing it almost right. "I've always thought you're all fascinating, the way your names are

spells. I'm just named after my grandmothers! What does Ziya mean?"

My heart twinged with loss, but I did not want to cause unnecessary awkwardness. "It means nothing on its own." That was not entirely true. *Zi* was for fortitude, a purely moral ideogram that built character but lacked actual power. *Ya* was acuity, which gave me quick reflexes and sharp senses. But I had lost three-fifths of the phrase. Together they were a prophecy. Apart, they meant very little.

"Did you sell the rest of it?" Haval drawled. The matter-of-fact way he asked made my skin prickle. "What were they?"

"Haval!" Caelan chided. "She can't tell you."

He shrugged and nodded at the Angze boy next to me. "What about you?"

The boy hesitated. How much of his name did he have left? How much had he sold to be here? His clothes and skin looked as worn and sun-beaten as mine, and his fingers looked calloused. I doubted he was wealthy. I tried to give him a reassuring look, but he wouldn't turn my way.

Finally he said, "You can call me River."

"River?" Aradika asked, before being elbowed by Caelan. I was starting to figure out that she was quick, and tactful. She'd realized what I instantly had: River had none of his original name left. He had sold it all to attend.

Haval made a pleased little sound.

That night, tipsy on the ale Haval had produced for the welcome party, I lay in bed staring out the window. The party had been held with about a dozen other Ustonels that Caelan and Aradika knew. It had been my first time trying Ustonel liquors—bitterer, stronger than anything from the Hills, brewed for sailors—and playing Ustonel games (I had turned out excellent at cards). On the effusive arm of Caelan, who seemed to have taken a liking to me, I had even found myself at the fascination of her friends, whose endlessly long names made my head spin. We chatted and discussed upcoming classes,

and it was altogether an enjoyable time. I was asked questions about the Hills, and the long journey here, and whether everything was confusing and new.

Despite the niceties, I had the unease of being a leaf dropped into the current: buoyant, yes, but ungainly, impossible not to notice. More than once, Caelan told off someone else for asking about my lost names. Toward the end of the night, some drunk boy tugged insistently at my collar, wanting to see them on my skin. I was paralyzed; Aradika and Haval had to force him from the premises.

Lying in bed with the sound of the sea beneath, higher up in the world than I had ever been, I felt the ache of my missing names acutely. A large part of me had been scooped out and left hollow; not a tangible thing, except for the three scars under my collarbone, but bone-deep all the same. Into its place, something nebulous and tangled was beginning to trickle in. But before I could properly discern it, I drifted off to sleep.

★ ★ ★

As first-years, we learned everything. I spent my days on mechanics, mathematics, ethics, the chemical and biological sciences. In history I spoke more of the Angze Hills and its hinterland role in the development of Ustonel than I had ever thought to consider in my life. I became the expert. Two evenings a week, we traipsed up to the vast courtyard at the top of the pillar and learned to chart the stars, key for both airship and boat captains alike and the very foundation of guild trade. Back in the Hills, we followed deer trails and birds, the sky too vast for the shorter distances we traveled. These lessons taught me new breadth to the world.

The classes challenged me and I rose to them fiercely, to the compliment of my teachers. Despite my initial discomfort, I determinedly settled into this new sound of myself: clipped, neat, a version that slipped into even the most rushed of conversations. That reminder of what I'd paid to be there spurred me on further

with every hello. I made myself efficient. I drew up schedules and assigned myself three books per week from the labyrinthine granite library—I was fluent in Ustonel colloquially, but academia demanded a much greater vocabulary, and a certain flowy, laborious voice quite different from the staccato patterns of the Hills. We were curiosities, I knew, so I was determined to make myself as uncurious as possible.

My second name gave me a talent for mimicry; I could sing birds' songs back to them. Now I dedicated myself to the way the Ustonels constructed their arguments and, like the birds, fed them back until we both sang. Like names, there was a pattern and a weight to language; words had to be in certain places, in certain orders, before the spell would take hold.

Not all the Angze students were so successful. There were about ten of us, six boys and three other girls that I saw intermittently. One girl, Siluintong, struggled immensely with her inflections. Hearing her attempt to debate was embarrassing; worse, she kept looking at me, as though willing me to translate. It frustrated me that she wouldn't simply try a little harder to make herself better understood, especially since she was clearly wealthier than I was. Magic or not, I had put in the work; why couldn't she? She was pleasant enough in the early weeks, and we took lunch together a few times, figuring out the seafood offerings and frowning over strange new tastes. But she eventually began to grate on me, and I found myself meeting up instead with Caelan and Aradika, who all but adopted me. Haval occasionally deigned to join. Surprisingly, I started seeing River and Siluintong together, with a couple other Angze students.

The centerpiece of university life was the full moon dinner. Three weeks after I arrived, we gathered in the courtyard at the very top of the university. Hundreds of sitting mats had been laid out across the stone, beneath the cloudless sky. I was seated between Caelan and River.

After a brief ceremonial address, dinner was served promptly by waitstaff in dark blue suits. That was the first thing that unnerved me; I had never been formally served before. Second was the opening course: a chilled fish head placed before me on a wooden platter, garnished with ginger and seaweeds.

I subconsciously understood, but it was only until I saw the Ustonel students around me vigorously popping out eyes and swallowing them that it truly sunk in. We ate eyes in the Hills too, often stewed, along with tongues, livers, feet, intestines, and testicles—every part of the animal we could, because we couldn't afford to waste it. But this dish unsettled me. It was the manner in which it was served, a violence made beautiful in the name of luxury.

"You're not eating?" Caelan asked. She had already polished off hers and set the rest of the head aside. *What waste.*

"Oh, I—" I was ashamed to say it, when everyone around me was nearly finished. But then from several seats down there was an audible pop and a muffled giggle. I looked around and saw River scowling, fingers dripping and a caved-in, jelly mess pooled where his fish's eye had been. I turned back to Caelan, heart quickening inexplicably. "I don't know how," I admitted with some difficulty.

"Haven't you got a knife?" I realized she was holding a knife like the one I'd killed the cave fish with, and that every other Ustonel had one in hand as well. They must have had their own, and no one had remembered this little detail for the new Angze students.

Caelan reached over. "Here, I'll show you." I watched intently as she slit the fish's cheek and extracted the eyes. She was sweet, and the eyeballs, especially paired with ginger, were delicious—gooey on the outside and crispy and briny on the inside. But I burned with a particular embarrassment at needing to be helped like a child.

Two days later Caelan knocked unexpectedly on my door, carrying a lacquered case that she opened on my desk. "Choose one."

Inside were over a dozen fish knives. Longer, shorter, nicked blades and smooth; some diamond shaped, some narrow, some with intricate engravings. "I got that for my fifteenth birthday," she explained, of one with a particularly fine leather handle. The one she currently carried around, silver inset with lapis, had been a matriculation gift.

I protested, but secretly I was desperate to take one. After the dinner I had looked into purchasing a fish knife, but the ones the university sold—engraved with the academy's crest—were cripplingly expensive. Now, with this dizzying selection, I kept gravitating toward the leather, and after my fingers brushed it on a fourth pass Caelan pressed it into my palm, ignoring all my exclamations. She closed my fingers around it firmly, until the leather settled into the lines of my hand and I had to admit that I rather liked the weight.

* * *

Winter was weeks of early nights and studying by firelight, sipping spiced wine that Caelan brewed. The storms were brutal, mooring the university alone at the axis of its own tidal world. I missed more than ever the mild mists of the hills, but when nostalgia began to distract me I tucked it away. Classes did not stop for the weather.

Eventually the days started warming. Moss bloomed on the rocks, and one day I found Aradika frying fish with his sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Gold peeked from under the hem. It looked almost like Lin, first formulation—but then he shifted and the sleeve covered the lines. It was just a trick of the light, I told myself.

Talk began popping up about the Spring Festival. For the first time, everyone else seemed distracted. It was a big celebration, the Ustonels explained, welcoming the first merchant fleets of the new year. Caretakers draped the courtyard in gossamer curtains woven with flowers and lights. The kitchens smelled constantly of fresh bread and fried fish. Spiced wines gave way to sweet ciders and candied berries, and Caelan emerged one day in a pink dress, tossing her hair and declaring that spring had officially arrived. Her

skirt spun; her sleeves billowed. Again, I thought I glimpsed something on the side of her leg, but then her skirts settled and it was gone.

The day of the Festival, I followed my housemates up to the courtyard. "My mother sent my envelope yesterday," Aradika told Haval and Caelan eagerly. "My first year, they wanted to say congratulations—"

"All right," Haval sniped. "What did you get, then?"

"Ten, but Caelan got at least fifteen, she won't tell..." I didn't know what they were discussing, evidently some Ustonel tradition. Regardless, Haval looked irritated and curtly changed the topic.

The Festival was already in full swing, tables of pastries and snacks and cold salads, merchants with all kinds of trinkets and games that had been arriving by ship in full force for the past few days. One side of the courtyard had been left clear, however, with sturdy platforms extended from the edge.

I didn't have to wait long to discover their purpose. Within minutes, dots appeared in the sky, steadily growing. Airships.

I gaped despite myself. I had never seen them so up close: sleek miraculous blimps rutted with copper and bronze, tails to the wind, emblazoned with their guilds or other associations. As they descended to the gangways, we had to grab at our hair to keep it from being whipped into knots.

"Come on!" Aradika shouted, already pushing forward. "Before there's a long line!"

With Aradika's elbowing, we made it to the somewhat-front of a queue for a blue airship that looked more finely made than all the others. Every strut gleamed. The merchants themselves were dressed equally well, in exquisite blue silk and gold rings. There were racks of shining amulets, stoppered bottles of oils, cut gemstones, and velvet-lined chests glimmering with some kind of glass. Guards with revolvers and batons kept close watch as our line moved.

While the first few people browsed, I noticed a boy taking a seat on a chair near the chests. He rolled up his sleeve as a merchant popped a cork off a vial. With a flat blade, the merchant scooped something from the suspension and plastered it onto the boy's arm. After a moment it was done; the boy handed over what looked like a staggering amount of shada, and ambled away.

Haval was squinting after him. "I wonder what he got?"

"I hope there's a good variety," Aradika said. "I don't know what I'll do if not."

We were ushered into the ring. I was curious about the vials, and my friends made directly for them as well. "Oh!" Caelan exclaimed delightedly, reaching into one of the chests. I came around a moment later, and my breath caught.

Part-names. Suspended in clear liquid, floating in vials like exquisite creatures, or flakes of gold. Like stars in a glassy galaxy. My head spun, recognizing words I hadn't read in a long time. *Pan, second formulation. Yi, eighth formulation. Sek, third formulation. Earth-sense, age-wise, confidence, patience, river-breather, wolf-seer, corn-grower.*

Then I saw the price tags, looped onto the vials with string, and everything blurred. Somewhere to my left, Caelan's voice snaked into my consciousness: *How much is that? Fourteen? I can do fourteen.*

Fourteen *thousand*, I realized. Fourteen thousand shada to buy the part-name that the merchant stuck onto the side of her ribs with a flourish of the flat blade. I recognized the gold lines as Ke, second formulation, number-mind. She didn't need that, I thought distantly, she was already prodigiously good with her accounts.

The anchorites in the hills, I thought. Our names like spells in their prayers. But here our names were in the same vials that Durudawanyi had, starting from five thousand shada. It was an exorbitant amount of money, and yet—how could it be worth so little? This had been part of a person once, one-fifth of their identity.

It was the fundamental magic of the universe. It was worth only five thousand?

But equally, the Ustonels were *paying* five thousand. I saw more shada exchanged that day than I had ever seen in my life, amounts that could have fed our village ten, fifty, a hundred times over. I had known my tuition was at a steep discount. I had never considered just how steep. Despite the confidence I had gained in the past months, that moment swayed me, face hot again with the same fumbling embarrassment I had felt not knowing how to eat fish eyes at dinner. I didn't know how little I had until I met someone else's excess, and I burned to think I had ever been content with my own possessions.

"That makes no sense," I said, struggling to sound casual as Haval handed over eight thousand shada for Han, first formulation. Everyone around me was buzzing, excited; I felt like that leaf again, unable to flow like the water did. "Han is much less powerful than Du, except perhaps the eighth form, but it costs so much more."

Haval rolled his eyes, but it lacked animosity as he admired his new mark on his right arm, simultaneously chewing hard candy he'd bought by the bag. "It *sounds* nicer." His voice came out muffled.

I didn't understand. Despite my best efforts, I spent my first Festival in a daze. It wasn't as if they could have used the magic. They couldn't pronounce the letters; their mouths did not fit. My first part-name, for example, a sharp static scuff of toughness and confidence, became stretched like glue between their teeth. Zee.

But I soon realized that the magic itself was inconsequential. The Ustonels simply collected the part-names to display. It was fashionable. In summer midriffs and biceps emerged, and with them the entire script: part-names curling up the underside of their ribs, dotting their upper arms like freckles, balancing on the nodes of their spine. They cut panels from their clothes to show off the ideograms underneath. Haval had four. Aradika and Caelan both had six. Now that the weather permitted, they compared at every chance.

They were genuinely interested in what the different characters meant, once the topic was broached. They tried their best to learn the pronunciations from me, and I explained their meanings, as well as the different ceremonies we had in the Hills for the reveal of a baby's name. It was bad luck, for example, for anyone to see the name before the mother. Toward the end of a birth, midwives wore blindfolds, which would only be removed once the mother had read out the name.

These facts they absorbed with fascination; I was glad to see their newfound appreciation, but still seeing the part-names casually adorning their bodies reawakened an ache I should have long resolved. It was pointless, and irrational. We had exchanged the names freely, and such was the nature of commerce—why shouldn't someone buy what had been sold? Why shouldn't the Angze bethel draw on the power of storytelling to placate people in such a painful moment of releasing part of their name? Had it not given me peace, in my own moment with the namecutter? Had the sale not enabled me to be here?

Unfortunately, superstition, taught since birth, is not rational. It would be a while before I came to terms with it.

As the summer wore on, news came from the Hills that the dry season had turned into a drought. The harvest was blighted. I walked across the courtyard reading my parents' letter, hearing the sea splash against the rocks below, feeling the wet air. *Yayimindeisi may sell a part-name if the season continues like this*, my mother wrote. *Though your father insists it's his turn instead. Do not worry, either way. Your money is safe. Focus on your classes and make us proud.*

Someone laughed. I looked up. On the shallow steps leading up to the library, two students had shaken back their sleeves and were comparing part-names on their arms. Somehow, the implications of the trade hadn't quite sunk in all that time; it was this moment, with the letter in my hand and the two Ustonels on the steps, that made it dawn on me.

Our names could be restored.

* * *

Over many months I perfected the delicate art of enucleation: the best place to cut the cheek to get easier access to the eye; the precise angle at which to dig my nails under the skin to sever the muscles without popping the humor; the exact amount of strength needed to break the nerves with a single elegant yank. When the new year rolled around, our house plotted our induction of the incoming first-years. We marched down to the docks that night and cast the wriggling things onto the banks of the rock pool. I handed a gangly Ustonel boy my fish knife and he took it without question. When he presented me the fish with all due respect and I gave him his eye to swallow, I knew I had properly moved up the ranks.

River did not participate. He had become increasingly withdrawn since the Festival, scuttling back and forth from his rooms without even a greeting. He skirted me with particular animosity, and being in any shared space with him became unbearable. I would postpone meals rather than enter the kitchen with him in it. It was juvenile. I remembered what that initial emptiness felt like, the friction of a severed name and the alienation of navigating a new world, but it had been a year past at this point and felt distant to me now. Of course I, too, occasionally wondered what it would be like to regain my old name, or during some conversations with Ustonels felt as though there were an abyss I could not cross. But moping was simply wasting away this opportunity we'd both fought so hard to attain.

"Why's he like that?" Aradika asked once, and I felt a spark of genuine hatred for River. Because we were both Angze I was meant to understand his moods, like some sort of ethnic augur, and it annoyed me that I didn't, because he simply refused to act reasonably.

Second year ushered in new fraughtness all around. I saw Siluintong was once again sharing a class with me—The Economies

of Airships—and not having seen her for some time, I felt rather guilty in retrospect for the way I had deserted her. “Siluintong,” I called politely, lifting a hand as she walked past the slateboard.

She stiffened, and I thought perhaps my prior coldness had ruined too much. But then she said curtly, “My name is Siluin.” She crossed the room and took a desk on the far other end, laying out her books with exacting deliberation.

And so we began the new year, brisker.

It was a sort of omen. Amidst our sharply demanding new classes came rumors of Angze students going mad. There were almost twenty of us now, between the two years, but rather than increase our presence it seemed to make it more starkly clear which of us had the ability to succeed here—a sufficient sample size, as my professors would have taught it. It was not merely mettle and hard work. Instead, much of it was something more abstract, a certain habitus and versatility, a will and capacity to adapt on an existential level. I flourished, advancing in classes, falling in with Caelan’s friends, and joining the committees of several distinguished societies. But there were others who noticeably flagged behind, who became known for lurking together in corners never speaking to anyone else. Like River, they kept to themselves.

I didn’t immediately take the rumors to heart. Students told all kinds of ghost stories (and those of sirens and leviathans and murderous water spirits to boot), and the whispers that Ruby, an Angze girl in our year, had screamed at her Alchemics professor before collapsing on the ground sobbing and clawing at her chest seemed just like a particularly unfortunate stress episode. Exams were approaching, after all. Everyone was on edge.

But then another boy started drifting around wordlessly at night, buying smokeweed from whoever would sell it and coming to class drenched in the scent. A first-year allegedly sought out affairs with the fervor of the dying and was seen purchasing illicit abortive drugs come spring. There were rumors about black-market merchants being met on the rocky shore in the middle of the night, selling false

part-names that poisoned instead of healed, or were just shriveled things cut from cow leather. It was the Festival incident that convinced me, however. Kai, an Angze girl who had previously excelled in Engineering, snuck on board the part-name ship after the Festival and held a knife to the merchant's throat while turning over boxes of vials. The guards intercepted, but the story went that she had escaped by jumping off the ship in midair, clutching a vial all the way down.

I knew that wasn't a rumor because we all saw the body washing up on shore, stiff fingers still cinched around the vial, whose cork had been pried off. Her collar was torn, revealing five scars. It seemed that, mid-fall, she'd tried to stick the part-name back on. She hadn't succeeded. The name was lost now, somewhere in the ocean. Torn apart, perhaps. Or otherwise tumbling over and over in the current, lost without direction.

That episode shook me. I became more determined than ever that I would not succumb to that kind of insanity. It would not be me at the center of those stories, whispered over drinks with raised eyebrows and cautious looks at the next Angze student who walked past. I had a stronger constitution, one that adapted.

I will admit that since the initial realization, my thoughts had strayed to restoring my name more than once. At that Festival which Kai would later ruin, I eyed the merchant's vials, looking for familiar part-names. I did not find any, though I could not have afforded them regardless. After the incident, however, I put all thoughts of restoring names out of mind. That path had led a first-class student to her downfall. I refused to go the same way. I had gotten along just fine without it.

It was not all terse, though. When not stormy, the university was a place of dreams. The sky seemed bluer than it had ever been in the Hills, and so close I could touch. The intricate stone buildings were so solid, so lasting, the kind of place that featured in tales and legends. They were buildings that would accumulate and hold up to the weight of the history its scholars uncovered: new discoveries,

axes of language, policies of governance, ways of knowing the unknowable. It made me dizzy to think I was a part of it. I even learned things about the Angze Hills that I never had while living there: the political and economic forces in which it was a crucial participant, its role in the land's spokes of commerce and supply, the philosophical value of our cultures and linguistic genealogies. I became aware of the flaws in our systems and the adaptive cleverness of our architecture.

For the first time I truly understood my home in the currents of the world; I realized one must leave a place in order to see it completely.

And finally, the summer of that second year, I fell disastrously in love with Caelan Burnetta Karthe Ruh. How it happened exactly, I couldn't tell you. It was something between Spring Festival and summer boat trips drifting on the lazy waves, telling stories while she took my fingers and taught me to weave cords in the Ustonel way, her head on my lap on the settee in our apartment as I read through a passage that had struck me in my studies. She kissed me first, and when we pulled apart gasping she rested her forehead against mine and stroked my cheek. "Ziya," she whispered wondrously. Still dazed, all the blood pounding in my head, I thought it was the most magical thing I had ever heard anyone say.

* * *

Third year was a milestone. For the first time, there were Angze in all levels of the university, thirty-six in total. Some had dropped out. One other had been found dead in the ocean, with a botched part-name over the third scar on his chest. *Fool*, I thought when I heard, *you can't do it out of order*. I was restless all day that day, and Caelan noticed that evening while we were having dinner. "What's wrong?"

I wanted to answer, but I couldn't explain the apprehension in a way that felt right, even though it sat at the bottom of my stomach in a hard knot, like an unwelcome pearl. I merely shrugged and

speared another fillet, changing the topic to ask about her coursework on modeling air currents for predictive flight and adaptive engineering. With third year, our coursework had shifted sharply into practicalities and ambitions. No longer were we learning theories; we were expected to synthesize and apply them in novel ways, preparing a portfolio of ideas for our eventual applications to the most esteemed guild positions. Caelan was a sure thing for the Engineers; her face lit up as she dived into the mechanics of her newest model, which would increase the capacity of airships to change path mid-air. Her sheer enthusiasm, and the way it brightened her entire being, warmed me. I couldn't take my eyes off her. It loosened the knot in my stomach, just enough for me to forget it.

Our professors drilled us relentlessly, making it clear that they were the ones making recommendations to the guilds and that we could not afford to slip up. Caelan, Aradika, and I spent hours in the library, or, when the weather was nice, in the open squares with picnic baskets. More than one of our classmates developed a reliance on smokeweeds; I heard rumors that the Angze boy who'd become addicted the previous year had sold off another part-name to pay for the habit. On the other end of the spectrum, there was no shortage of stimulants circulating, as our hours grew longer and deadlines mounted. Everyone else's vices meant nothing to me. I had to focus, and that meant my world shrank to only my own necessities.

Winter came as it always did and made our cramming even more miserable. But amidst the dreariness of the storms and early darkness there were hot dinners cooked by Aradika that we ate together by lamplight—clam chowders and milky fish soups and seaweed fritters, paired with warm spiced wine. We read books and played cards and kept the fireplace stoked. I laughed harder than I ever had in my life, wrapped snug in blankets by the flames. Haval mellowed, grudgingly drawn by the excellence of Aradika's cooking, but River was always absent. Haval mused that perhaps River was a

bit mad too, because he saw him mumbling to himself at night, and touching his reflection in the mirror as though not recognizing it.

“Don’t say that,” Caelan said, with the same discomfort I felt.

“It’s not like he’d be the first. Wasn’t he friends with … Kai, or whatever her name was?”

“But it’s different when it’s...” Aradika gestured vaguely, but we all understood. It was different when it was one of us; as little as we saw River, he was still our housemate, and we felt that obligation toward him. Rumors were different when they were under your roof. I pulled my blanket tighter, feeling something strongly but unable to verbalize it.

To stave off the cold, Caelan and I started spending nights together. By the end of it, I was almost always feverish. She left kisses all across my collarbone and along my stomach, carefully avoiding my names.

“You can touch them, you know,” I told her one night.

She sat up. “Really? I didn’t know if—” She fell quiet at my reassuring look, and placed a gentle fingertip over the first curve of *Zi*, right over my sternum. A ripple went through me. I’d managed to forget hers were there, most of the time; in the dark, especially, they were easy to make peace with. But mine were different, rooted to my core. Even she must have felt the difference because she traced them in slow, tingling awe. “*Ziya*,” she read. I felt that jolt again through my veins. Magic, or just the way she said it?

“What’s this?”

She had landed on the scars. I knew what they looked like; I had stared at them obsessively in my first year. About the length of my thumb, jagged brown shadows of old names. Caelan’s hand withdrew, understanding dawning. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve never seen it scar. Did it hurt?”

“It was the worst thing I’d ever felt,” I replied honestly. “But I’m all right now. I don’t even feel it.” Then she still looked unconvinced, so I took her hand and placed it over my heart, *Zi* and *Ya* and scars and all. My pulse thudded against her palm. I interlaced my fingers

over hers. "I don't regret it. I would do it all over again. Kiss me," I said.

She kissed me. "Ziya," she murmured. "Ziya, Ziya, Ziya."

* * *

My third Spring Festival was a more subdued affair, as the first exams were scheduled for the week after, but I let Caelan indulge me in pastries. There was a staggering variety of part-names on sale, some of them going for only four thousand shada. The drought, I thought distantly. It must have driven up sales, depressed prices. Then I thought, *Is one of Papa's in there?*

But I didn't see it.

"I should have gotten it on my cheek. I've been thinking about it, just to get on the examiners' nerves," Aradika mused that night, as we lounged by the fireplace allowing ourselves the day off. Aradika had sworn that if he spent Spring Night with theorems he would pluck out his own eyes. "I was going to move the one I got last Festival, but I don't like it that much anymore."

Caelan perked up. "That was the one I said was pretty. What was it called, Ziya?"

Aradika tugged down his collar helpfully. "Lan," I read. "Fifth formulation. It means foal-bringer." Excellent for horse rearing. Useless out here.

"It kind of looks like a horse. Well, I've got this one." Caelan tugged up the hem of her skirt to reveal the ideogram on her thigh: Kan, third formulation. "You said you liked it, didn't you?"

"Sure. But I couldn't pay for that."

Caelan waved it off. "From mine to yours, Aradika Denja Orys Dae Chandrea. So? Shall we trade?"

Aradika brightened. "Let's."

Without further ado, Caelan took from her pocket her fish knife, and just like shucking a scale, she snuck the blade under the name and pulled.

It unraveled from her skin with a wet tear. Red welled to the surface where it had been uprooted. I was taken aback both by the casual violence, which she executed without flinching, and by how little blood there was. I had half bled out when my part-names were removed; Caelan simply licked her palm and wiped the specks away before sliding the name off her knife onto Aradika's cheek. With the flat of her blade, she pressed it into Aradika's skin, until Aradika grunted that it had taken hold. Then Aradika fetched his own knife, and slit the character in question from his collarbone to stick onto Caelan. They sat there with Caelan's compact mirror, admiring their new adornments.

In that moment I saw, in the reflection of Caelan's mirror, River hovering in the doorway. His eyes were wide, inflamed. They did not seem to notice, but River caught my gaze and rapidly whisked away.

It was over in a heartbeat, and Caelan snapped the mirror shut a moment later, pleased. But I could not shake the way River's stare burned holes through the air, leaving something scorched and empty hovering with the lingering scent of blood.

* * *

Unease followed me for days afterward, sapping my focus from the upcoming final exams. I could not understand it, and yet it felt as familiar as an instinct. One day while tucking into a jellyfish salad I thought bizarrely that it felt like how the women back in the Hills described birth.

Angze children are born with their magic, names revealed at the moment of birth. When the name was read out for the first time, the baby drew its first breath. Life was its first magic. But with such a powerful moment, my mother and aunts and grandmothers had described the moments leading up to it as portentous. As they pushed the baby from them, they felt a rising sense of deep significance, one that only broke when the name-magic was first cast. But they knew they were waiting for life—what was I anticipating?

It was the night before the first exam, The Ideas of Good Governance. Everyone was bitterly terse. Caelan claimed she needed ten hours of sleep and had retired early, while Aradika was snappish after not sleeping for days. I had elected to do my last revisions on my own, preparing tedious hypotheses that required thoughtful postulation and reference to the theories of no less than three notable scholars and leaders. Night had come and sunk deep. I was alone in my room with twin lamps and the distant sound of waves echoing up the stone.

My senses felt scraped over a whetstone. Uneven pulse in my ears, scritch of the pen, the coarseness of paper against my skin. In a few hours, I would decide my future. It had all come down to this.

In the fever of memorizing I heard stumbling footsteps outside, but did not think much of it until they stopped outside my room, and my door creaked open.

I pushed sharply back from my desk, but my anger turned rapidly to shock as River stepped in, trembling. He had one hand pressed to his heart, his collar bunched up beneath it. Frenzy played on his mouth, halfway between a grin and a sob. I opened my mouth to demand an explanation—he couldn’t do this tonight, not before the exam—but then my lamplight glinted off something in his hand.

He was holding a fish knife, and it was stained red.

“It won’t stick right, Ziya,” he whispered. He peeled back his hand, just enough for me to see what was under it. There was a flap of someone else’s skin hanging off his chest, bloody around the edges, unevenly thick with bumps of flesh. Beside it was a row of four puckered scars. “I’m trying. But it won’t stick anymore.” In the center of the skin was the character I had seen Caelan press into Aradika’s cheek—Kan, third formulation, meaning—

“Kan,” River cried.

My lamps flared.

Meaning *fire*.

We were awash in gold, coruscating light, the tears pouring down River’s face white in the blazing glow. It was like weeping in the

presence of the sun. His eyes widened, twin moons. "It worked?"

Dread pinned me to my seat, even as the heat wrapped its fingers around me and squeezed. I couldn't breathe. "River, what did you do?"

"My name is not River!" he screamed, slapping his chest. The flames leapt with fury so bright I ducked my head, gasping.

Footsteps thundered down the hallway outside. The guards, it had to be the guards. I did the only thing that came to mind. "*He's in here!*"

River blinked at my outburst. The lamps flickered as the turquoise silhouettes of the night guards appeared in the doorway. One of them raised a revolver.

There was a gunshot, and then there was darkness. The lamps died all at once as River crumpled. My muscles unfroze. The cool air flooded back in, stealing away the heat.

Such a simple, logical exchange. One violence for another, death for a death, because I was certain at that moment that Aradika was dead. Yet the only thought that kept beating against my skull like a broken metronome was *not tonight, not tonight, why tonight*.

The little bit of moonlight illuminated the dark edges on River's body—the puncture in his forehead and the protrusion over his chest, flesh shot out and skin stuck on, appended, but too far to keep the wound in his head from bleeding all over the carpet and the turquoise capes as they carried him out. I stared at the blood left behind, thought, if I can clean it up, it will be like it never happened, and I can finish my revisions. I can still save it.

But one guard stayed. "What's your name?"

"Ziya," I murmured, still thinking of where I could obtain a scrubbing brush.

She squeezed my shoulder. "Thank you, Ziya. You did the right thing. Come," she said, "let's get you into another room."

I let her usher me into a new, warm bed, with the promise to discuss in the morning. It was only in that new room, without the smell of fire or blood, that everything in me unraveled. It took me a

long time to fall asleep; I kept seeing River bathed in light and feeling a deep pit of sorrow. *You fool*, I nearly sobbed. *Look. Look. It's not so hard to stay alive.*

The next day, I put on my formal robes and presented my evaluation of hierarchical leadership in the proliferation of a trading empire.

* * *

The university delayed one exam for Aradika's funeral. We stood on the edge of the cliff, scattering his ashes out to the waves as the organ played a heaven's lament. The chords echoed over the pillars and the brine beneath. Caelan clung to my hand as she wept. The last I heard, River's body had been sent back to the Hills.

Not River. Kan. And Sek. In the cleanup, they'd found in his room a carefully kept second vial with Sek, third formulation, swimming in dubious liquid. He must have gotten it earlier, but he was storing it, waiting to recover the part-names that came before it in the pattern.

Months later we stood on that cliff again to graduate. I had done fantastically well, as had Caelan. Already we had met with representatives of all the prestigious guilds. Just yesterday a telegraph had been delivered to my door, appended with the golden seal of the financiers' guild, offering employment to commence immediately after graduation. The rush of relief had crumpled me; I sat on the floor sobbing, tracing the seal over and over again.

As they read out our names at the ceremony—long Ustonel ones punctuated by the Angze, usually said wrong—I found my parents in the watching crowd.

“Mama? Papa?” I said in disbelief after, temporarily leaving Caelan alone to be fretted over by her countless relatives. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

I had sent them notice of my results and subsequent ceremony, but they had given no indication they would be here, in the bright red-and-yellow of the Hills' best silk that stood out like a sun amidst the Ustonel blue and the surrounding sea. Their clothes were new

and must have been an extraordinary expense, yet it paled compared to the fact that they had found the resources to travel all the way here.

“We had to come see our daughter graduate.” They enveloped me in hugs and endless questions—When did I start work? Was that really what I would be earning? Such a prestigious position, in the most competitive guild! Where would I be living? As I answered I became increasingly distracted by a surreal feeling coming over me from multiple directions at once. I noticed suddenly that their hair had seemed to gray a decade in the past three years; that they seemed smaller, frailer than I remembered, despite their glowing silks. They clung onto every answer I gave, wide-eyed and teary and beaming, as though they were the children and I was their provider. I realized I now was.

“Kaidin, Kaidin—” My mother suddenly gestured effusively at my father—he was shorter a part-name since I had last been home—and he perked up and rummaged in his pockets. He withdrew a folded handkerchief of the same fantastic fabric. With more care than I had ever seen him hold anything, he unwrapped a familiar vial, swathed in his palm and yellow Hills silk.

“We found this for you,” he said reverently. “Now that you will be in the Guilds, they gave us a loan for the expense. You deserve it all, but it’s the only one we could find just now.”

I was used to these vials now, in my classmates’ hands, but I was struck with a dumb strangeness as I turned it over in my palm and recognized the character floating within. Rei, fifth formulation.

Ziyarei.

A shiver of some long-lost memory went through me, right and very wrong all at once. Three-fifths of an echo in the back of my mind: *Ziyarei, Ziyarei, Ziyarei*. I recognized the voices. They were my mother and grandfather and siblings and old friends, and yet as they overlapped I felt more and more as though I were floating away, swimming in the haze of someone else’s memories.

The bell rang, summoning us to the shore for the final anointing. With a flurry of fragile words and embraces I drifted away from my parents, the vial grasped in a damp palm.

I didn't know who that person was. A little girl, from a place far, far away. Just moments ago I had been announced to the world as Ziya. The letter stamped and sealed by the guild had unfolded a future for the thusly inscribed Ziya; Ziya upon whose aforementioned future and wealth this formerly impossible luxury was guaranteed. It was Ziya who had become learned, and far-sighted, and transcendent, Ziya who had come this far, against all odds.

And more than that, I had been loved as Ziya. It was Ziya whose name had been whispered like a prayer, Ziya the name spoken again and again, softly and miraculously, like saying it was a magic in itself.

As though summoned by the thought, Caelan appeared by me on the steps, looking radiant in her blue cape and silver headpiece. "Ziya!" she exclaimed, spotting the vial in my hand. "You got one!"

"My parents' gift."

Her fingers ran across the glass, light and curious. "So it's all yours?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going to put it?" Caelan appraised me expertly, no doubt with manifold ideas about where it would look best, but right now I couldn't stand the thought of it on my skin. It didn't feel right. *It won't stick anymore.*

"I don't know," I said. I tucked the vial into my pocket and took her hand, interlacing our fingers. "I'll think on it. Let's go. They'll be wondering where we are."



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REDEMPTION SONG

QUAN BARRY



REDEMPTION SONG

QUAN BARRY

Illustration by JUN CEN

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But my hand was made strong by the hand of the Almighty. We forward in this generation— triumphantly.

There's no more putting it off. On the exterior synchro-glass, Pandora comes into view, a pale mint green. Misty atmospheric tendrils flare out into space, some reaching as far as two hundred aerilons above the planet's surface. Unlike a star with its fiery corona of superheated plasma, Pandora appears as if wrapped in an ever-shifting vapor. And to think there's only one being somewhere down there wandering around in the mist and fog, one lone figure who calls Pandora home. Dio wonders how they'll find her.

"Don't you remember? We won't find her," says Sola. He flinches as Sola tightens the seal around her respir-shield. The thing is mostly transparent, her mouth and nose still visible, her lower face illumined with an eerie glow. Sola grins. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it, bucko," she says. "She'll find us."

Dio hates the way Sola does this, at times seeming to read his mind. He's given up trying to hide the fact that although he would kill her in half a heartbeat if ever given the chance, he can't help but find her unbearably attractive. The first time she catches him fantasizing about laying her down on an old-fashioned sleeping pad, she looks him dead in the eye and says, "Not if you were the last man in formation. What?" she adds, as his mind begins to spin, wondering how she knows what he's thinking. "It's easy," she says. "You Shit Breathers are all the same." At the time, he chalks it up to a lucky guess, resolves to hold his cards closer to his chest from then on, but it doesn't matter. She always seems to find her way in, the more transgressive his daydreams, the more likely she is to suss them out. And worst of all, he knows she knows it drives him nuts. Now it feels like she reads him just for sport.

Yet somehow she never seems to sense his sorrow. Maybe it's because he tries to keep it a secret even from himself. If they're lucky, everyone he's known for the past astral year is dead. And if they're not lucky, then even now four days after the breach, they're still convulsing back in the space port orbiting Vipara, each of

his fellow Soil Breathers and friends dying the slow death that takes a lunar week when your exposure is secondary rather than direct.

That's how it goes. It's why the pay on any extraction planet where the harvesters are Geckoes is three times what it is working on any other rig. Anytime you add Geckoes into the equation, there are a million things that could go wrong, resulting in a mass exposure. If the respir-barrier springs a leak. If said barrier is poorly maintained and develops a crack. Or more sinisterly, if someone tampers with it, some lone Gecko deciding he's had enough of being a Company man, that he's damn mad and someone ought to pay for the world making him what he is. And once you've been exposed to the Geckoes, it's either instant death if you're exposed for longer than ten solid minutes or the slow desiccation that comes with a secondary exposure, over seven days your bones turning to dust while you're still alive, your brain drying up like a clam that's been dropped on the rocks, its shell broken open, the creature slowly shriveling in the air.

Only four days ago there was a mass exposure on Vipara. From the look of things, it was probably planned. Great. Just what the Universe needs. A Gecko uprising. Dio can only hope his buddy Xin is dead. Another three days of Xin's prefrontal cortex slowly drying up is something he can't stomach imagining.

It's no secret. Dio knows why they're keeping him alive. At the space port on Vipara, he was just stepping out of a panjugal chamber after a *very* satisfying encounter with a *schatzi* when someone threw a LifeSac over his head and the exposure alarms started screaming. He felt himself being muscled up a ramp and thrown in a room, his LifeSac torn off as the air filled with a sedative. Later he woke in the first mate's chair on the bridge of his own ship, the *Stella Maris*, only to find the bridge entirely manned by Geckoes in respir-shields, each one with their lower face outlined in that eerie glow, their smiles rendered whiter than white, his own hands and feet bound with magnetics.

At best the respir-shields the Geckoes wear when interacting with him will buy him maybe another thirty days or so. Yeah, he's probably got one lunar month tops until he succumbs to a rare tertiary exposure. Everyone knows just being around the buggers is enough to get you in the end, respir-shields be damned—the Geckoes are just too toxic. The question is: will a lunar month be long enough for him to pilot this cargo ship crammed with Geckoes wherever the hell it is they're looking to go while allowing him enough time to then take himself to the nearest decon box for a long retamination? Dio can only hope. Every second is precious, as each instance in their presence, he absorbs more and more of the lipid-shattering GVP they emit, most of it spewing out in their breath. There's very little science on the slower tertiary exposures that occur simply by being around them. One lunar month might be overly generous. There's a possibility his prefrontal cortex is already drying out. All he can do is hope for the best.

And so here he is on Day Four of being a Soil Breather living in a Gecko world. From across the viapod Dio watches as Sola finishes punching in the coordinates that will shuttle the two of them down to Pandora. She slides on her thermapanes, the green suns that are her eyes now hidden behind four layers of trivex polycarbonate. In his own way, he's sorry to see those eyes encased in darkness. Normally when she looks at him with those fiery green eyes, the mark of a pure-bred Gecko, Dio feels the hate rise in his gullet, then the unbearable lust that follows, his body wanting hers against his better judgment, wanting the heat of those small green suns all over his skin. He wonders if it's purely biological, something embedded in every Gecko's pheromone print. Before the mass exposure four days ago, he'd never even seen a Gecko much less been strapped into a viapod with one, the two of them on the verge of shuttling down to a planet from which few ever return.

"Ready?" she asks.

As if you care, he thinks.

"We're launching in five, four—"

The viapod's self-navigator takes over the count. "Three, two, one—" Dio feels himself slammed back in his seat. He grips his harness as the viapod shoots down the launch tube of the *Stella Maris* and out into space. Within minutes, the tiny vessel is no longer visible from the cargo ship's main deck, the viapod lost among the confectionary wisps scrolling off Pandora's surface.

Dio tries to remember the ancient legend. Something about a box and a woman. He can't even remember what civilization the legend comes from. Zeran. Acquali. Or maybe from the hive world of Marqana 3. A woman and a box. The woman letting something loose in the world, though for the life of him he can't remember what exactly that something is, if it's something that will save the world or destroy absolutely everything.

★ ★ ★

Because she's wearing thermapanes, Dio can't tell if Sola's awake or sleeping. Either way, she appears deeply relaxed, her long legs stretched out on the empty seat across from her. He wonders how she manages to look so calm, considering where they're headed. At this point what do his roaming eyes matter? He lets them go where they will—to each of her collarbones like G clefs, the V of her thighs, the outlines of her nipples faintly visible thanks to the tightness of her vapo-suit.

"Drink it all in, cowboy," she says. "We'll be there in ten." For a moment she pulls her thermapanes down. "Looking forward to it?" she asks with a wink.

"I told you all a thousand times—I was just a kid. I don't remember any of it."

Sola puts her thermapanes back in place. "No worries, hot stuff," she says. "We know you won't let us down."

"How do you know that?"

"We know your type. You're a survivor."

It's true. He can't argue with that. Dio didn't get to be an intergalactic navigator by playing nice. None of them ever do. Hell, all of them working for the Company are scoundrels in one form or another. If what happened on Vipara didn't kill his buddy Xin, some other planet, some other woman, some other karmic event would. In their own way each Company man has a bullseye on his back and a clock on his forehead counting down to *splat!* What else do you expect when you do bad things for a living?

And now Dio is four days into his own personal countdown, twenty odd days from doomsday. He gazes out the window and tries to hide a shiver. Those eyes. Of all the Geckoes Dio has encountered since the mass exposure, Sola is the most striking, her radium-green eyes set in a smooth topaz face, her skin like toasted sand. True, most of the Geckoes are melanated people. Their skin tones vary from blackest space to the occasional lunar white. Regardless of skin tone, they all have the same piercing green eyes, a sign of genetic GVP poisoning. While it's not unusual to find melanated people throughout the Universe—Dio himself is as dark as the Old-Order metal called iron—in all his travels, he has never met anyone with eyes like Sola's, her pupils seemingly many-faceted and blinding as gems.

"And why should I keep helping you?" he says. "Each second I'm around you freaks, my GVP-per-minute keeps rising."

"We made a promise, or did you already forget?" She re-crosses her ankles, licks a finger, and rubs a smudge off her vapo-suit. "Don't dry out on me yet, loverboy," she says. "Once you help us get where we're going, we'll cut you loose. You can jet off in a viapod and take your sorry self to the nearest decon box for a long soak. Or you can go back to one of your panjugal chambers and have the time of your remaining life."

He imagines the two of them in such a chamber, how he'd dip a hydroberry in whipped substrate, then run it over—The viapod enters Pandora's atmosphere, jolting him back to his senses. "You and I both know there isn't a world with a functioning decon box within fifty light years of here," he says, clutching his restraints as the tiny ship thrashes through the clouds.

"Then we better make this little trip quick, grasshopper. And remember," says Sola, tapping her respir-shield. "Any monkey business down there and I will whip this puppy off so fast you'll be dead before your head hits whatever on Pandora passes for ground."

Through the porthole he can see the viapod's heat shields glowing white hot, the heat in the cramped interior climbing. Suddenly it's as if a giant hand has taken hold of the viapod and is shaking it. Sola remains in her seat, her legs still

stretched out like a woman enjoying a day at the beach. He has to hand it to her. She is one tough cookie. As an intergalactic navigator, he's seen it all, breached a thousand atmospheres, made it through the absolute worst, like the upper stratosphere on Tau B9, the way the solar winds make the metal in any craft sing at high E above middle C, high enough to make a man's ears bleed. Dio wonders how Sola remains so non-plussed. A seasoned pro, he's having a hard time keeping his last meal down. Yet she looks positively—He searches for the right word. Smug, maybe even post-coital. Like satisfaction is her middle name.

"In your dreams, starboy."

Dio sighs. "I can't believe you still doubt me," he says.

"Are you still on that?"

As the hard entry continues, Dio finds himself hoping this particular viapod was built on Toulou 3 where the shipwrights still take pride in their work and not Luun XK where everyone knows the craftsmanship is shit. "Am I still on what?" he says. "On saving all your green-eyed asses and getting the Company off our tail?"

"What do you want? A medal? You done good—don't let it go to your head, killer."

But that's exactly where he's let it go. On the second day of the Geckoes commandeering his ship, the *Stella Maris* picked up a signal from a Company frigate sailing full speed for them, the thing most likely charging forth to perform a repossession.

"But we left everything we harvested back on Vipara," said Arias, the Gecko leader. To Dio, he sounded almost whiny, a child not getting his way. What did he expect? When did the Company ever play fair? It was why the Company was the number one manufacturer of arable planets in the Alliance. In truth, it was starting to act like a monopoly.

The thing Dio hated even more than Arias sitting in his captain's chair was the way the Gecko leader would from time-to-time put a hand on Sola's lower back. The gesture was obviously proprietary in nature, the Gecko leader signaling that no other man might touch her. Dio was surprised she even allowed it.

But that day the Company frigate was closing in. They would have to act defensively—there was no time to go on offense. "They're coming for you," said Dio, as he diverted more energy to the ship's propulsion sanctum. "You all signed *Facta Vitae*."

"Our *ancestors* signed *Facta Vitae*," corrected Sola.

"A Deed of Life is good ten thousand astral years," said Dio. "They let you get away, what kind of signal does that send to the rest of the Geckoes across the cosmos?"

"Then get us out of here," said Arias.

"And what will you give me if I do?" He'd been waiting for a moment like this. What every survivor knows. Ask for your terms when your opponent can't say no.

The negotiation was quick. In addition to getting the magnetics removed from his hands and feet and his old captain's chair back, they also agreed to set him up with a viapod and let him go after he brought them safely into port, though they refused to tell him where exactly they were headed.

"It's a strictly need to know basis," said Arias.

And so Dio did what he was good at. He lost the frigate, jumping through hyperspace in a random pattern it would take the Company countless gila-hours to figure out.

When it was all over, he sat back in his captain's chair, his wrists and feet unfettered, for the moment his whole being feeling utterly untouchable. Eons ago as a young Lunarian he had learned in his anon family to take things one astral at a time. For the first time since the mass exposure he saw a path for himself out of this shitstorm. Then Sola approached him and wrapped a hand around his throat. Instantly, he knew she wasn't playing around. He could see the green fires blazing in her eyes. He imagined what her breath would smell like without the respiration shield, the sheer rage pumping out with every breath, poisonous and in this case personal. "Never call us that again," she whispered. "We're humans, just like you. Call us Geckoes one more time and I don't care if we need you—we'll find another way." She squeezed his windpipe for good measure. "Capisce?"

Now in the viapod barreling through Pandora's atmosphere, he looks over at this woman and remembers the feel of her hand on his skin. He can't help it. Must be something in her pheromone print. At the memory of her wrathful touch, he smiles.

The viapod has stopped shaking, his stomach settling back down. There's one last lurch, the viapod's landing apparatus deploying. "We're here, shuggums," sings Sola. She undoes her harness and stands up, stretches. The door opens. Instantly a carpet of fog enters. He can no longer see his feet. "After you," says Sola.

Dio takes a deep breath. I don't remember this place, I don't remember, why would I—it was before my life on Lunari S, he silently intones, thinking, I was just a kid. The air smells surprisingly electrical, like something on the verge of burning. He feels somewhat naked as neither he nor Sola have a weapon on them, arriving clean just one of the many rules of entry. I'm a survivor, Dio thinks, then a snippet of the ancient myth floats up in his memory, something about a woman on her wedding night, yes, the first woman ever, a kind of Eve, a gift from the gods to mankind. They should have sent her back, he thinks, women are nothing but trouble. With that, he heads out onto Pandora.



From space, Pandora had appeared a pale green globe streaked with wayward clouds that periodically escaped the planet, to the eye, the whole world sheathed in peace and restfulness. Consequently, Dio imagined that once they landed, they might find endless emerald oceans, everywhere the white caps like foam, or perhaps vast veldts with small green flowers blanketing the land. What they find instead is beyond anything he was picturing.

"Should we have seen this coming?" says Sola. "Does it ring any bells?"

"How could it?" says Dio. "There's literally nothing here."

At first they move cautiously, wondering if what they walk on will bear their weight. The two find themselves inching along on state-of-the-art polarized crystal, the glass smooth, tractionless, easy to slip on. Stretching below their feet where one would expect earth or water is simply an endless digi-screen. There are no seams, no panels. The screen perfectly clear so that Dio can see straight down into the planet, a mass of cables and optics and logi-chips and junction receptors threaded together like ganglia. Pandora isn't so much a planet as a giant processor, a data pool floating on the edge of a forbidden galaxy, its outer crust a computer screen. And everywhere a white mist rises off the surface, the mist some kind of coolant deployed to keep Pandora from overheating, the smell as if the whole planet is on the cusp of a meltdown.

"This is unexpected," says Sola. "I don't think we really need to go anywhere."

"Agreed."

"Maybe we just mentally request access."

"No," Dio says slowly. "I remember something." He closes his eyes, tries not to force it. "I remember an actual world. Trees. The sound of birds. Someone speaking, maybe even laughing."

"Who?" says Sola.

"Me," says a voice. "Have I aged?"

Fast as lightning, Dio and Sola whip around. From out of the mist, a figure is walking toward them. As it approaches, Dio can see that it's a woman. He blinks hard as if to clear his vision, then looks again. He was right the first time. The woman is completely naked.

"Where'd our ship go?" says Sola. Instinctually she has a hand on her empty holster.

"No worries, it's safe up here," says the figure, tapping her forehead with a finger. Sola frowns. "Relax," says the woman. "It's in my memory. I can download it in a snap if you need it."

"What do you mean 'if'?" says Sola. The naked woman sighs, snaps her fingers. Instantly an image of the viapod appears on the screen under their feet.

"You do know the rules of this place," says the woman.

"Yeah yeah," says Sola. "You're like an Old-Order immigration officer. We answer some questions, get our 'passports' stamped, so to speak, then you let us in."

Without looking, Sola reaches out and punches Dio on the shoulder.

"Ow," he says, rubbing his arm.

"Roll your tongue back in, Fido," says Sola. "We're this lady's guest."

The woman laughs. "Will this help?" she asks. With a wink she takes on the form of the *schatzi* who entertained Dio in the panjugal chamber on Vipara, though as a *schatzi* she is still only somewhat clothed.

"Look, this is your nest," says Sola. "We want you to be comfortable."

"Thank you for that," says the woman, who takes the opportunity to transform back into herself though now she's clothed in a loose tunic, a flower wreath in her hair, like something out of ancient times, maybe a muse or even a goddess. "Yes, she says. "Like the Sphinx of the black sands of Kemet, answer my question correctly, and gain the world; answer it incorrectly..."

"I remember trees," says Dio. "A lake. The smell of real air—not the canned kind you get on ships, and definitely not this electrical smell," he says, wrinkling up his nose. Suddenly the three beings find themselves standing in a grove of trees beside a crystalline lake. "Exactly!" he says. He walks over and runs a hand over the bark of an oak. On the trunk Dio notices a small brass plaque. *None but ourselves can free our minds: 2107*, it says. For a moment Dio thinks he hears music playing, someone strumming an Old-Order guitar, but then he realizes he has never even heard a guitar before and doesn't even know how he knows what a guitar is.

"Thanks for the trip down memory lane," says Sola, "but we got a B16R full of people up there waiting for us to come back with the golden ticket, so if you don't mind."

The woman stops smiling. "We could've done this the easy way," she says. Her voice has changed. "But alas." She closes her eyes and they're once again back on the empty planet, she herself once again naked. The woman raises her arms, revealing a small patch of hair in each pit. "I'm Pandora," she says, her voice now both human and synthetic, "the gateway to the Helican System." She lowers her arms. Somehow her skin seems to shine from within, as if she herself were made of glass. She is both beautiful and terrible to behold.

"The Helican is an ancient system," she says, "one of the oldest in any quadrant of the Universe. More than a Tasic age ago, something sacred was stolen from the Helican and sent forth through the Universe, and so the ancestors created me, Pandora, to keep watch over this system. And now, when any traveler is looking to come or go from the Helican, they must first come to me, Pandora. I am not a being, I am not even a computer, though I know that that is what I appear to be. No, I am the avatar of this system, of all 1,928,558,367,082 stars, planets, and everything in between, and as the embodiment of the Helican, I ask you in the name of what was stolen back in the realm of time out of mind to tell me a one-word story."

"You mean like a password," says Dio.

"You don't think an entire story can be conveyed in a single word?" Pandora pulls a flower from her hair left over from the wreath she was wearing. "You humans are the ones who still believe an AI can't appreciate poetry," she says. She considers his question a second time, then says, "No, not a password. Tell me a story in the span of a single word, a story I might savor for all of time, and if your story touches my heart, I will let you into me."

"What heart?" demands Sola. "And what happens if you don't like the story we have to tell?"

"Then you and your people currently orbiting this world will no longer exist."

"How?" says Sola.

"The laws of the Helican System are malleable. Alter the strength of the covalent bonds that hold all matter together, and poof!" She smiles.

"This is bullshit," hisses Sola. "We are rebel fighters seeking asylum."

"Some say the entire Universe was born from a dream seeded in the Helican's cosmic dust," muses Pandora, as she begins to sashay away back into the mist. "It's more than a fair trade. You get access to the deepest secrets of the Universe, and all for a single word." Suddenly Pandora stops, looks over her shoulder. "Here," she calls, and tosses a small object to Dio. He catches it in one hand. Then she turns and is gone.

★ ★ ★

How long he and Sola have been standing on this digi-screen planet, Dio doesn't know. He has been lost in thought. When he comes back, there is Sola, moving through her body and cracking her joints one by one. "Shit shit shit shit," she says. "We got nothing. No weapons, no auxiliary cognition systems, nada." With a long satisfying neck crack, Sola starts all over again with her hands as she paces back and forth, a bundle of energy with no outlet. There's nothing to throw, nothing to kick, nothing to smash. She can only take it out on her own body. "I can think of at least one word I'd like to tell this galaxy," she huffs. "And it only has four letters."

Dio stands fingering what Pandora threw him. It's a stone, smooth and white, with one tiny black spot on it. He closes his eyes, clutches the stone, wanting to be sure. The stone as if rubbed by a river for a millennium. His mind once again filled with memories, though again, he's not sure whose memories they are.

There is a river. The sunlight sparkling on the water. Someone standing knee-deep in it, skipping stones, the circles radiating out where each one kisses the surface. Then someone is holding a puppy, the dog white with a black spot on its side, the puppy licking his face. The world is beautiful, the seasons come and go, white flakes falling from the sky. Men pouring over the earth with hand shovels,

faces grimy. Wonders launching into space. Buildings rising, space flight, more men combing over the earth, the men mostly Black and Brown, every one of them weary. Then everything drying up, everything dying, the river filled with sludge, trying to skip stones and watching them just sit on the thick surface, dead things bloated in the muck, water pouring from a sink and catching on fire, the puppy looking at him but no longer moving, its stomach distended, its eyes a pale irradiated green.

Dio opens his eyes. "I know a one-word story," he whispers.

There is something in his look that scares Sola. She lets this fear move her, spur her into action. Thinking back on it later, though she will never admit it to anyone, she is sure of what she saw in his face. For the briefest of moments, his eyes burning a familiar jeweled-green. "Pandora, Pandora," she calls. "We're ready."

"I'm here." Pandora is back, naked as before, her voice slightly more human this time.

"We have a story for you," says Sola. "Well, Captain Fantastic does."

"Very well." Pandora gestures for him to approach.

Dio moves as if in a dream. Pandora turns her stony face from him, offering him her ear. He closes his eyes, remembering what he saw, then breathes a single word into her ear. For a moment she looks startled as if remembering a truth long forgotten. Finally, she turns and chastely kisses him. When he opens his eyes, he's back on the bridge of the *Stella Maris* in his old captain's chair.

★ ★ ★

The Helican System is strange and primeval. It is the oldest quadrant of space, a place no one ever travels anymore, the region unexplored, forgotten, uncharted. Dio spends his days in the captain's chair. Once they entered the System, many of *Stella Maris's* instruments stopped functioning, most of them generating nonsensical data if any data at all. Consequently, he navigates as if piloting during the Old-Order, using star charts and gila-lobes. It's a strange sensation to steer by feel. At the end of each astral period, Dio has to ascend into the *Stella Maris's* cupola and scan the stars, then use manual instruments to calculate complex equations that indicate where they are in space, how much further they have to go. He remembers some of the legendary voyages the Commanders taught them at the Akedemy. Legends of Old-Order men lashing together the trunks of trees and sailing out across an ocean. Life spreading across some old-timey planet and then eventually the Universe.

Though she's dying to know, Sola doesn't ask what the single word is he spoke to Pandora, the word that bought them entry. True, she wants to know so bad she finds herself being temporarily nice to him, but her pride keeps her from asking outright plus she doesn't want to jinx it. The *Stella Maris* is five days into its

voyage through the Helican System, the travel eerily smooth despite the instrumental glitches. Soon the ship will arrive at the coordinates Arias reluctantly transmitted to Dio. Planet L2905F674. To Dio, it's just a number in the big sky. But to Sola and all those on board, it's a dream. Who knows what they'll find once they land, and if it will all have been in vain or if it's just the beginning?

"Hey." Dio turns to his first mate, a capable young navigator named Motts who always seems to be smiling, his front left tooth chipped.

"Captain-Captain?" says Motts. Even when Dio was chained up in magnetics, Motts called him Captain-Captain. Nothing has changed now that Dio has free run of the ship.

Something about Motts feels familiar to Dio. When the LifeSac was thrown over his head back during the mass exposure on Vipara, he vaguely remembers a voice similar to Motts's, a bass like sugar and thunder all mixed in one telling him not to fight.

"I gotta head into the BiblioBox, pull up some more charts. You got this?"

"Aye aye, Captain-Captain," Motts says, his respir-shield giving his deep-brown skin a sickly cast. Motts presses a button and issues a command, his voice rumbling through the entire ship. "Clear H deck," he says. "Repeat: clear H deck; a Soil Breather coming through." Only recently has Dio figured out the strange name his first mate calls him. As a Gecko, Motts obviously never attended the Akedemy. Consequently, everything he knows about navigating must be self-taught. Somewhere he has gotten it in his head that one refers to the head of a starship as captain-captain, that for clarity, one must repeat everything of importance.

Dio stands up and stretches, giving the ship's other inhabitants a few minutes to clear a path for him or at the very least to put on their respir-shields as he walks through. Today is Day Ten since the mass exposure on Vipara. He wonders how his brain is holding up, if he's experienced any withering yet.

After enough time has passed, Dio heads for the BiblioBox. As he walks through the tunnels and byways, Motts's statement rises in his consciousness. I'm a Soil Breather, he thinks. How did it all come to be this way? The poisoning of everyone on this ship has made his life possible—hell, it's made life all over the Universe possible. Some paying the ultimate price so that others might thrive.

Once in the BiblioBox, Dio plugs himself in. "Amaya old girl," he says, "show me star charts for coordinates 901-926-5611." Instantly the AS Network brings up a projection of the Helican System, a many-armed spiral of stars, the system steely yet beautiful. Slowly Dio works his way through the data. "Amaya, why aren't there any present-day navigationals?"

"Six point four arch-ages ago the Helican System was declared a non-functional galaxy," replies the Network. "Akedemy-standardized navigationals were all purposefully destroyed in order to obstruct travel."

"So all we have left is the Old-Order star charts?"

"Correct." For a moment, Amaya pauses before continuing. The Network is an auxiliary system—an artificial intelligence that can act as a pure AI when needed, but that can also supplement human intelligence, magnifying a thought, a memory, building on a perception, a hunch that's buried somewhere inside the human but only faintly. "As it's on your mind, here is some adjacent data that might interest you." On the projection, a series of constellations appear—a horse with wings, an archer with his bow, a scorpion scuttling across the sky, an Old-Order cup with a long handle. "These are the pictures Ancient Sapiens drew of the Milky Way."

"The Milky Way?"

"That is what the Helican System was called before it was declared obsolete."

"Amaya, what is Planet L2905F674?" Dio had assumed it was just some cosmic backwater, a place for the Geckoes to hide out from the Company as they regroup.

"Planet L2905F674. Terra A1."

"A1," murmurs Dio. He himself grew up on Lunari S, a moon that orbited Terra N9. Thanks to the Company and its farms, there were Terra all over the Universe. You couldn't go ten feet without running into life.

"Terra AI," repeats Amaya. "Earth."

Instantly Dio flashes on an image of white flakes falling from the sky, of water from a faucet suddenly catching on fire. "Thanks, Amaya," he says, and begins to unplug.

"One more thing, Captain-Captain," jibes the Network.

"Not you too."

"Bear with me," says Amaya. "Written circa 1979 in the Terran A1 year of Jesu Christo. Released June 1980 on the Island/Tuff Gong label. Marley, Robert Nesta, born 1945, died 1981. 'Redemption Song' was written as Bob Marley was suffering from the melanoma that eventually killed him. Recorded in the key of G major for voice and Terran acoustic guitar."

Then Dio hears it again, what he heard on Pandora as he stood considering the oak tree by the lake. The guitar's light strumming, simple yet powerful. The man's voice relating what happened to him. How he was stolen by pirates and thrown into a bottomless pit. How he was taken from that bottomlessness and sold straight into bondage. How he overcame his suffering by the grace of the Divine.

"Your father sang this song to you," Amaya says in a soft voice. Dio closes his eyes and listens. *Won't you help to sing this song of freedom? Cause all I ever have—redemption songs.* Strange, because Dio has no memory of either his father or his mother, but Amaya never lies.

Finally the song ends on an unresolved note. Dio hears his own voice crack but asks anyway. "Amaya, on Earth, what kind of ship would this man have been thrown in?"

"A slave ship." The schematic of a nineteenth-century hull flashes on the projection, black bodies crammed on top of bodies. "Beings from the continent of Africa were kidnapped and sold westward," explains Amaya, "their uncompensated labor ushering in what was then called the Industrial Revolution."

Dio remembers hearing something about slavery, but it happened so long ago, it seems like a myth. "Slavery was a barbarian practice in which human beings were sold to other human beings under a system that thrived for hundreds of Terran years during the oldest period of the Old-Order," says Amaya. He tries to imagine such savagery. Human beings forced to work against their will; children sold away from their parents. The Company's Facta Vitae system was completely different, or so it claimed. Genetically suitable men and women voluntarily signed on to work for the Company, and in exchange, they and their offspring were guaranteed goods and services as well as monetary compensation for the span of the deed. It was widely known the Facta Vitae system had lifted billions out of poverty and brought life to every corner of the Universe. It was seen as a win-win. True, because of their genetic toxicity, the Geckoies were relegated to their own worlds. When moved from job to job, they were sealed off deep within a ship so that there was never any contact between the Geckoies and the Soil Breathers. Most Soil Breathers went their whole lives without ever seeing a single Gecko.

"Amaya, publish a Terran guitar for me," says Dio.

"Aye aye," says the network. "It'll be waiting for you in your quarters."

"Thanks." Dio then calls Motts and asks his first mate to announce that he'll be returning to the bridge via the H deck. As he waits for a path to clear, he tries to imagine being jammed inside the BiblioBox with as many people as the space will hold, perhaps as many as twenty beings crammed in this very box for months at a time. No windows, no air. Maybe only the sound of your own voice to keep you sane.

★ ★ ★

Even before Dio has a chance to knock, the portal slides open. "What's on Earth that's so important to you?" he says.

Sola is wearing her off-shift uniform, a long flowing robe that Dio finds even sexier than her skin-tight vapo-suit as it leaves more to the imagination. She stands in the doorway adjusting her respir-shield, obviously having just thrown it on for his sake. "Where'd you get that?" she asks, pointing to the strange object he's carrying.

"I asked you a question first."

Sola sighs and cracks her neck but steps aside, allowing him to enter her berth. She doesn't ask how he knows where the *Stella Maris* is headed. "Earth is where we became toxic," she simply says. Dio can see there's something else on her

mind, that she's attempting to act casual despite their proximity. In turn, he tries to hide his incredulousness that she even let him into her space. "But everyone knows your Company schools don't teach the truth of what happened," she says. "There's an old saying: history is written by the lion, not the antelope." She turns and offers him a chair, then reclines on her suspension mat.

"To answer your question, it's called an acoustic guitar," says Dio. "It's Terran." At the word, Sola's eyes begin to burn, a small muscle twitching along the side of her hairline. "I think I got the hang of it. Wanna hear?"

Slowly, as if against her better judgment, she nods.

Dio places his fingers along the frets. All third shift he sat in his room, running the drills Amaya published for him. For the first time in maybe never, Dio feels nervous. Somehow the act of what he is about to do feels more intimate than anything he has ever done before. This small room, this beautiful woman, her phosphorescent eyes, this Old-Order instrument in his hands, his soul about to escape his mouth. Dio takes a deep breath and does what no man has done in an arch-age. He strums the first chord. G major. Sola gasps but remains silent, utterly rapt.

Old pirates, yes, they rob I
Sold I to the merchant ships

Eventually the last note hangs in the air. Dio puts down the guitar and goes to Sola. There are tears in her eyes. With a finger he wipes one from her cheek before kissing her on her respir-shield, the barrier cool to the touch.

All I ever have, redemption songs.

"How did you know?" she asks.

"Know what?"

Another tear escapes her eyes. "That is the secret song of our people."

Dio doesn't answer, his mind already miles beyond the guitar. Instead he lifts her mask and kisses her directly on the lips. Her breath tastes green, like things that sprout from soil and fresh air, clean and free. After a few tender moments he puts her mask back down.

"Now you only have seven days to live, maybe less," she whispers.

When he replies, "You're worth it," she lifts her robe over her head. Then she is the one who grabs him by the shoulders and hungrily throws him down on the suspension mat.

★ ★ ★

Afterward Sola traces a finger along an old Akedemy tattoo on Dio's chest that consists of six unconnected dots. "Tell me a one-word story," he says.

She laughs and shakes her head. "I don't know any of those," she says. "But I'll tell you a story with many words that still has no ending."

"I'm listening," Dio says with a yawn.

Sola caresses one of the dots inked on his chest. "A long time ago in what we now consider the first days of the Old-Order, in the entire Universe there was only life on Earth and the Earth was dying," she says. "Many didn't believe it. They kept their heads buried in the sand. But we knew."

"Who's we?" Dio asks.

"We were the tired, the struggling, the hungry," Sola says. "The oppressed always know what hardship is coming well before it arrives for everyone else." She lifts the shield on her porthole. Everywhere the stars glitter, deep space as if strewn with salt. She tells him about the first small signs—the working poor cordoned off by concrete, landscapes with few trees, the temperature ten degrees hotter in the cities than in the suburbs, those places kept green and leafy through watering programs, then corporations building power plants in under-resourced neighborhoods, governments storing nuclear sludge on First lands, planners mapping flight routes over beleaguered communities, over and over the haves exposing the have-nots to rampant toxicity.

"If Earth had a motto, it was consume," she says. "But how do you stop an economy based on having more? When are you only eating yourself?" Sola's eyes burn bright at the collective wrongs, ancestral memories she still carries in her blood of droughts, of fires, in winter the polar cold creeping southward, then people fighting other people for resources, the rich attempting to decamp for Mars, billionaires spending their fortunes to try and escape what they'd created. "Do you know what synthetic *yartsa gunbu* is?" she asks.

Dio lies, shakes his head. "Of course you don't, magic man," she laughs. "*Yartsa gunbu* used to grow naturally. Ancient Sapiens called it Himalayan Viagra. It grew in the shadow of the highest mountains on Earth. Above fifteen thousand feet, a parasite would invade a living caterpillar, killing the creature and then turning its body into a kind of fungus. It was believed this fungus gave men—what to call it?" she wonders. "Let's just say a supernatural prowess." Playfully Dio growls.

"The Viridia Parasite is similar to *yartsa gunbu*," Sola says. She tells him how scientists believe that billions of years before when the Earth was just a primordial soup, the Viridia Parasite infected the first anaerobic organisms, causing them to start "breathing," thus turning the Earth into an oxygen-based atmosphere. The parasite then lay dormant in the permafrost for millions of years, but as the planet warmed, it became reanimated. In the 21st century the newly thawed parasite returned, this time using the common earthworm as its host. Like the Himalayan Viagra, the parasite killed each worm, gradually turning it into a fungus with spores that enriched the soil with oxygen, in time leading to the over-oxygenation of the planet, causing it to dry out and warm up even faster.

In the 22nd century, it was the Company who figured out that if you took the resulting fungus to other worlds and introduced it to the alien soil, within a decade you could have an arable planet, a world with air and a water-cycle just like Earth, the air primarily produced in the soil. But harvesting the fungus proved deadly to most people, the spores so small even protective equipment couldn't keep the harvesters safe. "At first, there was a top-secret government-funded study to find out if any human beings might have immunity," Sola says. "It didn't take the scientists long to realize our capabilities. We had been living in toxic spaces for so long, of course the answer would be us." Her voice trails off.

There is no need to continue. Dio knows the rest. How even to this day the Company casts itself as the savior of mankind, in time, seeding other worlds with the fungus created when the Viridia Parasite infects earthworms. The Company introducing it on Mars, then within ten years Mars becoming another Earth, and thus the East Martian Trading Company was born. Those who could afford the one-way ticket went as soon as the first ships began to leave. They called themselves Soil Breathers. Then the prices came down and the middle class were the next to go. This exodus lasted for generations.

"Finally we Harvesters were the only ones left on Earth," says Sola. "We were told we were essential workers. The presidents of all the new planets created by our labor commended us. They sent gifts, named holidays after us. Our harvesting the fungus made it possible for humans to live on other worlds, to become Soil Breathers.

"Then when the Earth was truly dying, the Company came to us. Despite all our hard work, most of us still couldn't afford the ticket off-world, and even if we could, we were so toxic, there was nowhere to go—the Soil Breathers didn't want us. So the Company said if we signed our labor over to them for one hundred generations, they would provide for us, take care of us and all of our needs, pay us money even, as long as we and our children and our children's children continued to perform this essential labor for mankind. It was our choice. We boarded the first ships on which we were consigned to forever wander the Universe as itinerant workers."

Sola glances out the porthole. Suddenly, her face softens, the green of her eyes like a forest canopy.

"We're home," she whispers.

Dio wraps one of her locks around his finger. "That's the one," he says. "What I told Pandora, the one-word story that brought us here. 'Home.'" He smiles sadly.

"What?"

Just outside the window is the planet they'll soon be orbiting, the place where it all began. "I'm a survivor, remember?" he says. "That means I'm also a realist."

"No," Sola cries.

Gently he frees his finger from her hair. "I probably wouldn't even make it back to Pandora in a viapod," he says. "It's just too damn far. This is the end of the road for me."

"There's gotta be something we can do." Her voice fills with desperation.

"There is," he says softly. Dio lifts Sola's respir-shield and tosses it across the room. "This is how I've always wanted to die," he jokes. Then he kisses her long and hard, this human woman with the sweet green breath. Ten minutes, just give me ten full minutes, he asks the Universe. For the second time that shift, she grabs him by the shoulders and throws him down.

★ ★ ★

Arias and Motts are standing on the bridge, one of them with both fists balled. The Earth shines before them, this planet that poets throughout time have described as a startling swirl of blue-green now wrapped in brown clouds, the oceans a dark ashy gray or maybe that's the scorched land—from outer space it's hard to tell them apart.

"How long can we sit here?" asks Arias. His agitation fills the room. Outside the ship a solid band of debris whips around the planet like an asteroid belt, everywhere pieces of defunct satellites and exploded rockets whizzing haphazardly through space. Arias slams his fist down on a console. The *Stella Maris* has come too far to now be destroyed by ancient trash. "Where's that Shit Breather?" he bellows.

As if by way of answer, a soft rumbling can be heard outside the main bridge doors, the sound moving closer. In the room, the crew exchange worried looks. Finally the doors slide open. Two figures stand on the threshold, the light pouring around them as they move forward holding hands. Behind them, a crowd has formed, the people whispering, their murmurings filled with wonder.

"It's about time," says Arias. "We're about to be pummeled by junk." Calmly Dio lets go of Sola's hand and takes his seat. Carefully he steers the ship into a high orbit above the planet but beneath the debris. It's a tricky maneuver, but he pulls it off. Even after the ship is out of harm's way, the crowd remains huddled in the entrance, their amazement still front and center. "What's everyone going on about?" asks Arias, his irritation still evident even though the ship is now safely tucked away in a clean orbit.

Dio rejoins Sola. It's only then that Arias realizes she is maskless, her lovely face radiating a joy-filled light without the manufactured glow of a respir-shield. "They're going on about this," Sola says, and grabs the front of Dio's uniform, pulls him into her, and kisses him. The crowd lets out a loud cheer.

"Wowzer!" shouts Motts.

"How's that possible?" whispers Arias. "He should be deader than dead."

Sola ends the embrace but doesn't stop smiling. "It's because I love him, Father." Now it's Dio's turn to look amazed. Sola simply nods.

For the next astral hour, Dio is poked and prodded, blood drawn from every region of his body. The results are all the same. He is perfectly healthy—there is no contaminant in his system, no trace of toxins. "A fine specimen," remarks one of the doctors. "If I had to guess, I'd say he gradually built up a tolerance to us by being here so long."

"Either way, he's still a Shit Breather," grumbles Arias.

Sola adjusts her vapo-suit one last time. "Daddy, don't call him that," she says.

"I'll call him what I want to call him," Arias retorts. "No daughter of mine is going to go—" But it's too late. Sola steps into the viapod where Dio and the rest of the exploratory team are already waiting. She blows her father a kiss and seals the door closed.

★ ★ ★

The descent down to Earth is beyond smooth, the crew barely aware that they're moving. "Wowzer," says Motts. "This must be what it feels like when you touch down in Heaven."

Minna, the climatologist in the group, explains that the Earth has less than five percent of its original atmosphere left. Consequently, there's nothing to slow down the viapod as it approaches the Earth, nothing to create the punishing friction that normally heats up the outer shields. "That's why each of our respir-breathers is equipped with six astral hours of oxygen," she says. "No atmosphere means no O₂."

"No atmosphere also means no shooting stars," says Dio. Suddenly he feels the eyes of everyone on the team hone in on him. "What?" he says. "Can't a guy like shooting stars?" Playfully Motts elbows him in the ribs. Dio doesn't tell them about the memory in the back of his mind, how as a child he spent a night with someone—who was it? his mother?—sitting out under the vault of some planet's sky, the heavens periodically alive with bursts of color.

"No, he's right," says Minna. She explains that since there's no atmosphere, even the tiniest space rock will sail right down to Earth unimpeded. "The place must be completely cratered, just like the moon," she says.

Now, five hours later, their explorations are almost over. Everywhere they have gone, everything they have seen, speaks of the same story. Desertification. Fire. Flood. The land cratered just the way Minna said it would be. On each continent the team makes the requisite stops. At each location, they set up their equipment, take their samples, perform a sowing, snoop around, then move on.

North America is their final destination. In Mexico City, the Plaza del Zócalo is only recognizable from the coordinates displayed on the navigationals. There's

nothing left of the grandeur of the main square, the flagpole that, according to Old-Order histories, once seemed to stretch all the way up to heaven. Because Mexico City was a mile-high city, at least the location still exists. Florida, on the other hand, is just a word on an Old-Order map, a place described in the histories as a paradise people flocked to for its natural beauty and temperate weather.

The team continues to work their way around the continent. In a place called Chester, Pennsylvania, near the Old-Order city of Philadelphia where many of the first generation of Harvesters came from, they find the first sign of life, tiny footprints scrawled in the sand. Even before landing, they had ascertained that there is still some small-form life left, the oxygen level too low to support anything mammalian, the temperatures too hot. Still, something has found a way to live on this planet, which is mostly sand and ash, fires raging that are perhaps thousands of years old. The team never finds this creature, but secretly Dio feels hopeful each time he sees its tracks.

On what was once the west coast, they discover a vast glassine plain that stretches all the way to the horizon. Sola thinks of Pandora, how that planet's surface was made of glass. Here, the sands must have melted from the killing heat, creating what Lenis, the team geologist, now calls the Glasslands. The spot is incredibly beautiful, an infinite variety of colors melted into the vitrine layers. In the Glasslands they cannot perform a sowing as there is no soil to be treated. They simply soak in the majesty of the spot, the play of colors in the landscape before moving on.

Just outside Milwaukee, Wisconsin, they find the ruins of actual buildings, mostly silos, a few boats beached on land. The area was once called the Driftless Region, the one spot on the Earth where during the final Ice Age the glaciers never swept through and sanded down the landscape, instead leaving the surroundings hilly and wild. During the Old-Order, this was probably one of the last places on Earth to support life. The Great Lakes were nearby, the region far from the rising oceans. Ancient Sapiens might have staggered on here well into the rise of the Cosmovoyene Age.

In a place called Prairie du Chien, the team performs their final sowing. Dio falls on his knees one last time to dig a hole in the parched earth. Then Sola steps forward and closes her eyes, intones a prayer to Mother Earth. When she's done, she opens the last of their receptacles and drops in the remaining earthworms their scientists infected with the Viridia Parasite. In time, these worms like the others they've buried around the globe will die, their bodies becoming hosts for the fungus that may one day return this ruined planet back into the place that was once the source of all life in the Universe, a garden filled with endless varieties.

"We're not that far from HQ," says Gryphon, the team's logistics member. "We should see what's there."

"Agreed," says Dio. The team piles back in the viapod to make the short trip to Madison, a college town once located between two lakes. It's here where the Company set up its first office. This is also where the Company hunkered down in the Earth's last days. Consequently as they arrive the team is not surprised to see one lone building rise up out of the dead prairie.

"It's the Promethean," says Gryphon. He explains how the Promethean was a billion-dollar building constructed to withstand absolutely anything climate-related. Dio gasps. Old-Order relics are mostly nonexistent as Ancient Sapiens generally built things to become obsolete, to be thrown away, replaced. Yet here is a building still standing through fire and flood, death and global destruction. It's a testament to what Ancient Sapiens were capable of. Together the team approaches the entrance. Sola places a hand on the metal, and the doors slide open.

Inside the air is cool. Instantly the lights come on. Soft music plays. "Solar and geothermal power," says Phan, the group's resident archi-builder. "This thing'll keep going and going until the sun explodes."

Adda comes forward next, their digi-operator, and moves off to look for the building's mainframe. Others disperse to various floors. Sola and Dio take the elevator all the way to the top where they let themselves wander, each silently surprised at the awe they feel. How could Old-Order man build something so colossal, so enduring, yet not take care of his own world?

"Think of the things they could've done if only they'd had the right priorities," says Sola.

"You talk about them as if they died out," says Dio. He runs a finger over the dark wood paneling decorating the walls, the wood still rich in color. "Remember, they became us," he says.

The two of them enter an office. Judging from the sheer size of it, the room's floor-to-ceiling windows, the magnificence of its view, it must have belonged to the Company's commander. On the oversized desk are various devices, a coffee mug, Old-Order optics of a family, a man and a women, small children smiling beside some kind of shrub decorated with lights.

And so Dio finds the answer just by chance though the answer is on display in plain sight for anyone to see. Sola is off in another part of the suite, rummaging through some kind of cold box filled with Old-Order cans. When Dio sees the answer, his first instinct is to tear the optic from its frame, rip it in pieces, burn it, deny the truth of what it means. But he also knows the power of denial, the havoc it wreaks. Just look around. Carefully he slips the optic from its glass. What else is there to do? He can hear Sola humming to herself in the other room. After only a few bars, he recognizes the melody. It's the song he sang for her on the Terran guitar the first time they loved each other, "Redemption Song," a man singing his

way out of slavery. Solemnly Dio approaches Sola and hands her the photo. For a moment she doesn't understand what she's looking at.

"There's more," he says, leading her to a wall beside the desk where the history of the Company is told in photos. A group of young men stand smiling in a lab, one of them holding aloft a glass beaker. In picture after picture, the evolution of the Company unfurls, everywhere people smiling, over time the lab growing more and more ornate, the Company's success evident. Sola studies the images, not putting it all together until she does. When the truth of what she's looking at finally hits her, she lets out a scream of such rage that even this billion-dollar building constructed of adamantine seems to shake.

★ ★ ★

On board the *Stella Maris*, Arias and the Elder Council sit around a table. They are in-session formulating a plan for how to proceed once the first part of the multi-targeted strategy is complete. "We'll know within three astral years whether or not re-sowing the Earth with fungus will bring back the atmosphere," says Arias. The other Elders nod. It is a long time—some of them may not live to see the result, but as the Old-Order saying goes: A journey of a thousand gila-miles begins with a single step. "Okay then," Arias says, pleased that all are on board with the plan. "In the meantime—" Suddenly, the doors to the chamber slide open and the exploratory team hurries in.

"What's this all about?" demands one of the Elders.

Sola tosses a sheaf of documents onto the table. "It's not love," she says. "Look for yourselves."

"What's not love?" someone asks.

"It's not love keeping Dio alive," Sola answers.

"I could have told you that," grumbles Arias. "A scoundrel always finds a way to survive."

Dio ignores this comment. "It's all here," he says. He picks up one of the photos from the Promethean. "See? In the beginning, we were friends," he says. The Elders lean in, their bright green eyes hungry for answers.

"What exactly are we looking at?" asks one of Elders.

"This one's labeled 'Christmas 2097,'" says Dio. "It was their seasonal party. Look who's there, smiling into the camera. They're everywhere."

There's a long moment of silence as the Elders grapple with what they're seeing. "Harvesters," Arias finally whispers. "There are Harvesters in among the Company Soil Breathers. Just look at their eyes."

"And not a respir-shield in sight," points out Sola.

"Maybe we become toxic later," says an Elder.

"I scoured the Old-Order mainframe for data," says Adda. "According to the Company's own records, the eye mutation occurred naturally through the mixing of several ethnicities. As the upper and middle classes departed the Earth, the mutation spread quickly among those left behind."

Sola is the one to speak the final terrible truth. "We're not toxic," she says. Her voice remains controlled through her rage is palpable. "We never were."

"But why?" asks one of the Elders.

Dio pulls up a series of projections of Old-Order Harvesters toiling in a field. "The work of harvesting the fungus was back-breaking manual labor," he says. "Machines couldn't do it—the fungus was too fragile. So the Company needed a group of people willing to stay on Earth and work under terrible conditions as the planet heated up."

From there Sola takes over the story. "The Company began to spread the lie that we were the perfect candidates to handle the fungus. Due to multi-generational exposure to environmental pollutants, they told the Universe we were already toxic and therefore immune to the parasite. No new worlds wanted us—we were effectively quarantined on Earth. And our eyes meant we were easy to identify.

"In the last days of the Earth, the Company categorized us as essential workers," says Sola. "We were lauded as heroes." Her eyes shine with pride and anger. "And every passing year there were fewer and fewer people left on Earth who weren't Harvesters. Then even the Company forgot their own lie. They thought it was the truth, that we were toxic. They bought into it and shaped their policies accordingly."

"In the early days, there were Harvesters who helped the Company build this lie," says Dio. "Even today there might be Harvesters who know the truth but prefer to maintain separate Harvesters / Soil Breathers societies. It's one of the oldest truths there is. Having an enemy gives you power."

The Elders look suspiciously around the table. Slowly they begin reading through the reports, combing through the ancient photos. There is so much to unpack. This is only the beginning.

Dio finds himself standing by the three-sided bay window that looks out into space, the Earth spinning below, a dull brown orb.

Sola takes his hand. "What's next?" she asks.

Dio looks at her, his eyes tinted with the faintest whisper of green. How many days has it been since the mass exposure on Vipara? And what really happened there? Could his buddy Xin and all his friends still be alive? He takes no joy in telling her. In some ways, it's the end of his way of life. "What's next?" he repeats, then answers his own question. "War," he says. "The Company must be destroyed."

He wraps her in his arms. Together they stand in the window and look out at this scorched world that may be their future. Suddenly he remembers the last part of the myth of Pandora, how on her wedding night, her curiosity overpowers her. Gingerly Pandora opens the box which has been gifted to her husband by the gods. At the lifting of the lid, terrible things instantly fly out to all corners of the world. Pestilence. Famine. Death. Hatred. Pandora slams the lid down. When she regains her courage, she lifts it again to see if there is anything left. Lucky for us there is. Right then and there Dio prays that his first child will be a girl. If it is, he resolves to name her Hope.



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FREE DIVER

ISABEL J. KIM

FREEDIVER

ISABEL J. KIM

Illustration by MOJO WANG

Cover design by JESS KILEY

T O R
D O T
C O M

The first thing that happens is Joyce breaks up with him. The second thing that happens is Crane arrives on the *Anhinga*. The third thing that happens is the meteoroid falls upward.

But let's start with the meteoroids:

Approximately forty-five billion light years away, the collision of one interplanetary body into another causes a scattershot stream of meteoroids to go hurtling through space. There will be meaningful effects from this meaningless interaction.

★ ★ ★

At night, when Glasser leans against the *Anhinga*'s stern, when the subship sails the waveless stretches of the contiguous ocean, when the void gleams through the thin skin of water preventing the *Anhinga* from falling through space, this is when Glasser feels the closest thing to alone. Like he's the only person in the universe.

This is a lie, of course. Beneath Glasser, beneath his ship *Anhinga*, beneath the film of water comprising the contiguous ocean, there are seven hundred and fifty thousand lines of telecommunications cables hanging weightlessly in the clear cold void of space underneath the world.

And also, there's Crane.

★ ★ ★

Crane is Joyce's replacement on the *Anhinga*. Crane pilots the deep space drones, which had originally been Joyce's job. Glasser misses Joyce a normal amount. Joyce had nimble hands and a good laugh and also Glasser had been in love with her for eight years, most of which had been reciprocated.

Glasser is still in love with Joyce, but Joyce is gone. Not dead. Just—one day Joyce sat up next to Glasser and told him she was tired of living on the *Anhinga*, and she missed her family, and she wanted to go home.

That was a lie earlier, by the way. Glasser misses Joyce like he misses french fries, like he misses live music, like he misses his childhood bedroom and the way Christmas felt when he was eight years old, which is to say that Glasser misses Joyce like something he was always supposed to lose. He kind of feels like an asshole about it.

Glasser thinks maybe when Joyce said that she wanted to go home, he was supposed to say "Okay, so we'll sell the boat."

But he didn't say that. He just said, "Okay."

★ ★ ★

All land on Earth extends to the depth of the planet's core, but if there is any true depth to the water, nobody has been able to confirm it. The contiguous ocean—all saltwater, the Pacific and the Atlantic and all the rest—ends at a depth of one hundred meters, at which point you meet the meniscus. Think of all oceans as fundamentally analogous to a layered Jell-O mold. The top layer: saltwater, and everything suspended within it. The middle layer: the meniscus, a clear, planet-spanning portal that has existed for the entirety of recorded human history. The bottom layer: a patch of space forty-five billion light years away.

They hang telecommunication cables in that patch of space. The cables hang weightlessly, safe from weather and sea life and everything except the void of space. The *Anhinga* and its two-man crew are responsible for the maintenance and repair of the cables

that connect Asia and North America. Without them, eventually the cables hanging underneath the ocean will be severed—the occasional piece of space debris, a tangle, deliberate sabotage, or some other unforeseen event can all potentially lead to a snapped wire, and subsequently, a break in communication.

When this occurs, the *Anhinga* will be dispatched to the repair zone and Crane will shoot their drones a hundred meters down and forty-five billion light years away. After the drones return and their footage is inspected, Crane keeps the boat steady while Glasser goes belowdecks to their gimbal-mounted workshop and puts together the slivers of cabling that will be spliced into the broken wires. For particularly complicated jobs, Glasser calls in over the radio and the *Anhinga* waits on location for delivery of materials by aerodrone.

While they wait, Glasser handles whatever repairs he's been putting off, like fixing the *Anhinga*'s electronics and warding off the many corrosive effects of seawater, taping cables to the ceilings and floors, sewing patches in his old jackets. He used to repair Joyce's clothes, but he's not sure whether he should be repairing Crane's. He would be amenable—but Crane hasn't asked, and Glasser doesn't know whether it would be odd to offer.

* * *

The meteoroids are traveling in directions determined by the angle of the original collision and the transference of force from one body to another. Most of the momentum is conserved in the silent vacuum of space. The meteoroids are traveling at terrific speeds.

* * *

Crane spends his time fixing the drones, writing letters, and swimming. This is the oddest thing about Crane: the moment the *Anhinga* is anchored at a suitable location, Crane swaps his dayclothes for a skintight wetsuit and plunges into the water. Glasser watches him from the deck and worries when he takes too long to come up. He doesn't want a dead body on his hands. But Crane has

always come back, dripping water all over the deck, sometimes shivering, usually smiling.

"I used to dive competitively," Crane had explained once. "I find the whole thing perversely relaxing. Well, I suppose it stimulates the vagus nerve."

This is the way Crane talks. Using phrases like *perversely relaxing* and *vagus nerve*. Glasser wonders, sometimes, what academic hole Crane crawled out of.

★ ★ ★

The meteoroids are not a metaphor, by the way. They are very real. They will be reaching their point of intersection shortly.

★ ★ ★

The *Anhinga* is a two-person subship capable of brief dives without sustaining hull damage. It holds three drones, which hang off the two sides of the *Anhinga* and deploy directly into the water. As a backup, the *Anhinga* retains the old space divesuits per protocol, which allow a person a few hours of oxygen and the thinnest protection against the water and the void. They have never been used, because the last freedive was in 2003. Prior to that, freedivers had a similar life expectancy to telephone pole repairmen. That is to say: short.

One of the divesuits is missing. This is because Joyce took it with her as a souvenir in the breakup, along with: the rest of her clothing, the clock shaped like a cat, and their shared future that Glasser assumed would come to pass. Glasser sometimes jokes to himself that he got to keep the house. By this he means the *Anhinga*.

Joyce lives in America now, somewhere landlocked. Colorado, Glasser vaguely remembers. He hasn't visited. He doesn't know whether Joyce wants him to.

★ ★ ★

The meteoroids slice through the cables underneath the world not like a knife but like a ragged series of bullets. They sever the communicative tendrils that connect Asia and North America. This effect is not visible from space, but the global effect on computing devices is immediate.

* * *

They get the call early in the morning, Glasser blearily flicking the receiver on and getting a faceful of static and noise for his trouble.

“—peat, this is Dispatch, repeat, this is Dispatch, Alpha November Hotel Niner respond, repeat—”

Glasser wrinkles his nose and presses the outbound. “Copy, this is the vessel *Anhinga*, code Alpha November Hotel Niner, this is Alpha November Hotel Niner, Dispatch, what’s the issue?”

“Copy, seven transpacific cables have broken, we’ve identified the most likely location near coordinates 44.1668790 and 164.1362843. Our readings show that you’re the closest ship, estimated ETA to site six hours at ten knots. Can you confirm acceptance?”

Glasser rubs his eyes, sits up straighter. Seven cables probably means that they’ve lost the redundancies, too. Seven cables are a lot for a single incident.

“Copy, confirmed. Will route and report back after drone deployment. Over and out.”

He flicks the outbound off. He turns to Crane, who is already unfolding out of his bunk.

“I’ll start running the checks on the drones,” he says, before Glasser can speak.

“Copy,” Glasser says, and then tumbles out of bed and toward the helm, without bothering to change out of his sweatpants and sleep shirt.

* * *

Glasser would have preferred to be alone on the *Anhinga*, rather than having Crane aboard. He doesn’t dislike Crane, it’s just that

Crane's presence introduces a piece of friction into the closed system of the ship, a second body that Glasser hasn't known for eight years. Crane is a person with wants and needs that cannot be accurately predicted, because Crane is effectively a stranger. Glasser's no good with strangers. Glasser is the sort of man who would have preferred to die alone at sea, but the *Anhinga* needs two for the cabling jobs. And Glasser believes in the job. If he hadn't believed in the job, he would probably have left with Joyce.

The nice thing about Joyce was that her presence had felt like clear water, or smooth glass. It had been so easy, until it wasn't.

* * *

There is another meteoroid, by the way. It is traveling at terrific speeds, though not so terrific as its siblings. It is traveling in a highly charged cloud of electromagnetic particles. It has not yet reached its destination.

* * *

The sun is high in the sky by the time the *Anhinga* arrives at the incident site. The trip was smooth and painless. On deck, Crane whistles while he programs the first drone sequence into the terminal. Once the drones break the meniscus between sea and space, they will immediately lose all contact with the ship and will rely on the prewritten instructions to return.

Glasser has spent a decent amount of time on air with Dispatch, trying to get a sense of how extensive the patch job will be, which cables specifically have been cut. Dispatch didn't have much more information, but from what Glasser can tell, the internet is down in a large bicontinental slice.

A tremendous amount of information passes between Asia and North America every day. Financial numbers, diplomatic exchanges, medical data, love letters, memes, emails circling back, stories, selfies, and all the other detritus that forms the backbone of the internet, day after day, night in and night out.

Dispatch won't tell Glasser that "If this isn't resolved in twenty-four hours, your contract will not be renewed," or "Without the *Anhinga*'s prompt attention, millions of people will go without service, causing great damage to the global economy."

They don't need to do that. Dispatch can't fire Glasser, because there are not so many cablers that they can afford to lose one. This is not a popular profession: it's long hours, loneliness, and the occasional piece of physical discomfort. And Glasser would never laze on the job; he knows that every second they delay has tangible, grossly negative effects on the world. This is the sort of thing that haunts him, that keeps him up at night. He doesn't expect anyone to feel the way he does—Joyce didn't. Joyce was efficient, but had always held the frustrating attitude that a few minutes' delay was meaningless. Glasser had never understood that.

So. They're not on a time limit, except for the one that exists in Glasser's mind.

"How quickly can you get the drones down," Glasser says to Crane, anchoring the boat with the float-anchor.

"Deploying in two minutes," Crane says.

"Finalized the flight plan already?"

"I have a system. Yes," Crane says, sounding more amused than crotchety about the interrogation.

"I don't mean to backseat drive," Glasser says, apologetically. He does want to get along with Crane. Glasser's mild neuroses aren't Crane's fault.

"No, you're fine. I'm not offended. But please be quiet. I'm trying to focus."

Glasser watches Crane press buttons and rotate dials. He calibrates differently than Joyce did. Crane flicks the deployment switch, and the drones fall into the water.

★ ★ ★

The drones push through the meniscus into the void of space, undergoing an insane pressure differential that automatically kicks

the drones into their preprogrammed routes. The drones run their circuit, taking video of—

* * *

The meteoroid breaches the meniscus between space and the sea with the force of a missile. The meteoroid instantly superheats the liquid around it. It barrels through the water at astounding speeds, breaking into the atmosphere two meters from the *Anhinga*, the transfer of force sending the boat swaying, a column of water shooting upward in a huge spout that blooms into a heavy spray, soaking the vessel underneath.

* * *

A sound like a jet engine before the sky darkens and Glasser has the realization that the shadow is being cast by a column of water, quickly overshadowed by the second realization that the boat is shaking underneath him. These aren't conscious realizations—Glasser falls over, and for a long moment his entire world is just the bodily experience of crashing against the deck, the vertigo as the sky tilts, the water falling on him with a force like he's belly flopping into a pool.

"Look," Crane shouts, and Glasser turns his head blindly to follow the arc of Crane's arm across and up the sky at the meteor shooting into the atmosphere, disappearing in a streak of white debris, wobbling in Glasser's vision as the boat rocks.

More water falls, hitting Glasser's face like a slap from the universe. There is no great realization in his mind, just the awe, the shock of how close they had come to death, how rare and incredible this sight is, like being next to a volcano erupting, like seeing the northern lights, all chased down by the next thought: *Joyce, you should have seen this.*

* * *

The meteoroid, prior to puncturing the meniscus, traveled in a cloud of electromagnetic particles which instantly blasted the two nearest drones with a wave of electromagnetic force, wiping the data from their hard drives. They lose their programmed patterns. They drift away.

The third drone, far enough from the ersatz EMP to avoid the blast, completes its circuit, taking video footage in both infrared and normal vision before passing back through the meniscus and laboriously returning to the surface.

★ ★ ★

"We lost two drones," Crane says flatly, his hands on the dials. He's covered in saltwater. He hadn't wasted any time changing or drying off, working with his shirt off and a towel around his neck. "Only getting feedback from one, not the whole pod. The meteoroid must have been part of a cosmic event on the other side."

"How's the remaining one looking?"

"So far fine, I'll have to manually review the footage," he says. He glances up from the dials. "Hopefully there's not too much damage. One drone will be..."

Glasser nods, grimacing. Drops of water roll down his forehead. Getting the job done with one drone will be difficult. There are at least seven broken cables—three drones would have been slow already. And with every second they delay, great swathes of the world continue in silence. It gnaws at Glasser.

He's also worried about damage to the *Anhinga*, from the roll. He'll have to inspect it at the nearest port.

"I'll relay to Dispatch," Glasser says.

"I'll load up the footage and start scrubbing," Crane says. They break.

★ ★ ★

Crane has been on board the *Anhinga* for three months. In that three-month period, the *Anhinga* has responded to three minor

repairs, and handled routine maintenance on ten more cables. There haven't been any major storms, or emergencies. Crane performed exemplarily, professionally, with only a few hiccups due to the unfamiliar layout of the vessel.

In their downtime, Glasser and Crane had played cards. They had traded books. Crane had shown Glasser how to make tofu from dried beans—the sort of thing that is only exciting if you have run out of shelf-stable tofu on your subship. They hadn't talked about their pasts. But the subship and all the objects in it were the bare bones of Glasser's psyche, pinned and splayed for easy viewing.

In contrast, Crane had come aboard the *Anhinga*, a narrowbody frame carrying a single large duffle bag and backpack.

★ ★ ★

The video footage plays silently on the small computer screen hooked up to the drone. The first view is of a massacre of wires, punctuated by the bright flare of the meteoroid, and then the clean tight loop of the drone finishing its circuit, highlighting the absolute wreckage across the cables.

"A swarm of meteoroids," Crane says. He plays the video back again, zooming in on the cables. On the screen, cables hang weightlessly, aimlessly. Two of them are tangled. The breaks look clean, at least.

"Dispatch can't get anyone out here for another week," Glasser says. There's a pit in his stomach. Two of their three drones are down. In an ideal world, this would be a job for one of the big cabling subships, the ones that are spaceworthy and carry a ten-fleet of drones. Maybe even two or three of them.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Christ."

Crane drums his finger on the drone shell. "How quickly can you get the splices done?"

Glasser thinks for a moment.

"Maybe fourteen hours," he says, tilting his voice with a question. All the fiber-optic cable in the world doesn't matter if they don't have

drones, if they can't program the repair path.

Crane smiles. He looks eager. He looks like he does when he comes up from a dive.

"I have a proposal for you, then. You finish the splices and submerge the subship. I go through the meniscus in a tethered divesuit, to repair the cables manually. Since the *Anhinga*'s got a forty-five-minute dive window, during each dive I should be able to get a couple cables up and running pretty easily."

"No," Glasser says. He imagines Crane never resurfacing. He imagines sitting on the *Anhinga*'s deck, tugging Crane's dead body back with the line, unable to know what went wrong on the other side of the meniscus.

"Why not? It shaves a week off the downtime."

"Haven't you seen the fatality numbers? The risk—"

"Wipes out a hundred and sixty-eight hours of delay, Glasser," Crane says.

"One in ten—"

"None of them were me," Crane says.

"What makes you so special," Glasser says, and it comes out vicious. Not Glasser's intention but Glasser isn't practiced at tone modulation, Glasser lives on a boat in the middle of the ocean, and until six months ago the only person he regularly spoke with was the love of his life.

Crane sighs. Looks out at the horizon and back.

"You know what the problem is? The problem is that you don't trust me, Glasser," he says, the tone of his voice perfectly even. "You double-check my actions. You micromanage. At first I thought you had a problem with *me*, and that would have been fine, but I'm beginning to realize that this would have been a problem with anyone you brought on board. I don't know how your last partner put up with it."

"That's not related," Glasser says, stung. "I trust you plenty."

"No, you don't."

"I'm sorry I don't want you to be killed!"

"You don't care if I die," Crane says. "All you care is that it isn't your fault. It's useless, baseless fear. Get over yourself. *I* want to get these cables up and running as fast as possible. I thought we were aligned."

Crane presses a few buttons, turning off the screen display, before walking back out onto the deck. Glasser doesn't say anything, just watches him leave. Glasser is too busy being struck by a realization: this is what it must be like talking with him.

★ ★ ★

Crane had been the first person to apply for the position, nearly four months after Joyce had left. He was a stranger.

Dispatch had told Glasser that if he had had any leads on anyone suitable, they were happy to fast-track the application. Glasser didn't. A decade of deepwater cabling had narrowed his connections back on land to the slimmest thread. Except for Joyce, he didn't have anyone else he wanted to live with. A stranger was as good as anyone. He'd looked over Crane's resume. A list of his education and certificates, his work experience, recommendations from his stints on two other cabling vessels. He was qualified, fine, in the abstract. But the application hadn't prepared Glasser for the reality of him.

★ ★ ★

Crane is standing at the stern of the boat, staring down into the water. Glasser walks over. Leans against the railing. The water has cleared from the meteor's traversal, and he can just make out the faintest smudges of the universe and the cables below. Crane glances over, but doesn't say anything.

"Okay," Glasser says.

Crane glances back. "Okay? Just like that?"

Glasser wants to ask where Crane's confidence stems from. How he spoke with so much conviction. Why Crane is here, on the *Anhinga*. What makes a man want to dive into the deep ocean. What makes a man so eager to plunge into the black morass of space,

with only a thin tether holding him to reality. What brought Crane to the middle of the Pacific.

“Just like that,” Glasser says.

★ ★ ★

After she left, Glasser had played the conversation out with Joyce a thousand times. It drifts to the forefront of his mind more than he wants it to. He thinks about the things he could have said, instead of just “OK.”

“Joyce, what changed? I didn’t know you were unhappy, and it worries me that you were able to hide that unhappiness on our boat.”

“Joyce, this is my life. I don’t know how to live differently.”

“Joyce, our job is important, and I believe in the mission here. There are so few boats, and so few people who want to live on them, and the entirety of the global telecommunications system hinges on the efforts of real human people, flesh and blood, repairing the breaks in the system.”

“Joyce, did you say yes to the *Anhinga* because you loved me? Did I trap you on the *Anhinga* for seven years?”

The Joyce in his head gives him different answers every time. Glasser doesn’t like that he can’t emulate her. It means he’s forgetting her. He worries that it means he never really knew her at all.

★ ★ ★

Things move fast after Glasser agrees to Crane’s proposition. Glasser goes to the workshop and starts making splices. Crane runs around prepping the divesuit, the propulsion, preparing the *Anhinga*’s systems for the plunge. Glasser pops out of the workshop and double checks the systems, eats a protein bar, makes more coffee, discusses their approach. The *Anhinga* is an old ship, and it can only submerge for about forty-five minutes at a time. They have to get right up against the meniscus to properly eject Crane. So, they’ll do

the repairs in stages. Crane will be ejected at the nadir of the *Anhinga*'s dive, and pulled back in right before the *Anhinga* ascends. And then they rinse and repeat, dive again and again, until all the repairs are done. Each dive would be tight, but it would be doable. It would be more freedives than anyone has done in the last thirty years.

They work. They drink coffee. Crane takes a break to make sandwiches, which they eat while discussing the dive pattern.

“What changed your mind?” Crane asks.

“I don’t know how to argue with you,” Glasser says, after thinking for a moment. “I agree with you on principle, so I can’t think of a way to change your mind.”

“Good,” Crane says.

Glasser finishes his sandwich. “Are you sure.” Like a statement, not a question.

“Of course,” Crane says. He stands up. Glasser stands, brushes crumbs from his shirt. Heads for the cockpit, stops in the doorway.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why ... all of this?” Glasser says, gesturing vaguely at the schematics, the divesuit, the whole mess of the plan they’ve put together. He means the personal risk. He means the desire to freedive.

Crane frowns. His expression goes clouded.

“I used to dive competitively,” Crane says. “Without the suit. In freshwater, where there’s no chance of breaching the membrane. I’ve always wanted to do a *freedive*. And I can do it for a good reason. I mean—think of all those people. All those god damn people who can’t talk to each other without us.”

“That’s it?”

The ideological reasoning seems thin, like it comes from someone else. It seems too similar to Glasser’s own reasoning: he doesn’t want to participate, but he likes knowing that his actions have

massive effect. The lonely megalomania of it all. It seems too abstract a driving principle for one's entire life.

Crane shrugs. "Sure. What else is there. Why are *you* out here?"

Glasser frowns.

"I guess it's my ship," he says. He doesn't want to detail the ways in which they're similar. It feels cheap, from the other side.

* * *

They work through the night. Glasser gets a few hours of sleep; Crane crashes for maybe four hours. The sun is glimmering at the edge of the horizon by the time they're ready. Crane in the pressurized divesuit, ready to be shot out of the propulsion chamber. Glasser at the helm.

"Ready?"

Glasser looks at the first-person video feed piping from Crane's suit. Right now, there's nothing to see, just the interior of the propulsion tube.

"Ready," Glasser says, and he does a deft series of manipulations ending in a strong push of a handle that plunges the *Anhinga*'s nose downward as it begins to accelerate.

The world goes silent and dark, the sky replaced with sea. Glasser chews on the inside of his cheek and checks the instruments. It's been a long time since he's taken the *Anhinga* under. He knows it's safe, intellectually.

"Ten minutes 'til we hit the edge of the meniscus," Glasser says.

"Copy," Crane says.

Glasser keeps his hand on the controls. The water continues to darken. Pure velvet blue turning to black.

"I'm out here because I don't know how to live on land, with other people," he says. He sees Crane tilt his head upward by the way the camera angle changes. The human impulse to think that any unseen voice is coming from above, even though Glasser is speaking through the radio in Crane's suit.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. My last partner was my wife."

Glasser can't see Crane's face, but he sees the way Crane shifts his frame, tilts his head.

"That's awful. My condolences—"

"No, she didn't die or anything," Glasser says hastily. "God, nothing like that. She's in Colorado. I just meant. I didn't even know she wanted to leave, until she did, but the point I'm making is—I'm no good at talking. Or knowing the right thing to do. I can do it for myself, and I trusted Joyce to make her own choices, but anyone else? Christ. It's too complicated."

"Sure."

"So, I guess what I'm really saying is, are you sure? I'm going to shoot you out into space, and reel you back through, and—"

"—it really does concern you, why I want to do this," Crane says.

"Yes," Glasser says.

"Hm. How much time do we have before you shoot me down?"

"Six more minutes."

"Hm," Crane says again.

They're both silent for a few minutes. The subship continues to descend. Glasser's depending mostly on his instruments, now—the universe underneath the water is growing clearer, but the stars and planets and space debris are so far away as to be useless as locational markers.

"There's no real reason, I guess," Crane says. "Nothing I could make you understand in words. I grew up near the ocean. I dove competitively for years. Why do I want to do it? I don't know, I just do. Like, why did you end up a cabler to begin with? You probably couldn't tell me. I know I can make it back. I know that this is going to work."

One minute on the clock.

"Okay," Glasser says. He keeps the nose tilted down. He readies his hand on the propulsion switch.

Thirty seconds.

Fifteen seconds.

Zero.

And then they're skimming the border of the meniscus and Glasser pulls the throttle back and slam the propulsion switch, and Crane is flung through the thin film that borders space and the camera on his suit cuts to stars.

* * *

Glasser had gone with Joyce once, to the desert. Arizona. They had rented a camper van. They had met Joyce's mother. They had gone hiking in the early morning, just as the sun was rising.

"Why'd you end up cabling, after," Glasser had said, gesturing at the landscape around them. The sheer reddish expanse, the way that the sky was like the sea inverted.

"At night, the sky here—it looks like the sky under the sea," Joyce had said. "The same, but different."

"That's a nothing sentence."

Joyce had laughed. "Yeah, but you understood."

* * *

The *Anhinga* has cameras pointed at the portal into space. Through it, Glasser can see Crane's divesuit darting among the cabling, the wavering line of the cord he's clipped to the cabling and the second cord that ties him back to the ship, the sparks of the handheld soldering iron as the splices are braided in.

Glasser keeps an eye on the timer. They have fifteen minutes before the *Anhinga* has to surface. Every second feels like a century.

He wants to pull Crane out early. But he doesn't. He watches the timer count down, he watches Crane on the screen. When they hit fourteen minutes, he reels Crane back into the tube, closes it behind him. The radio blooms to life.

"Got a couple of them done," Crane says. "We were right on the timing. This is going to work."

"Jesus."

Glasser's focusing too hard on draining the propulsion chamber, tilting the *Anhinga* back up, pushing acceleration into her frame, and his response comes out harsh. Crane takes it in stride.

"Not to say I told you, but..."

The *Anhinga* breaches the surface of the water and light floods the helm. The weightless feeling. Glasser braces himself for the impact of the *Anhinga*'s bow hitting the water. In the propulsion tube, Crane braces against the wall.

The *Anhinga* crashes up and onto the surface of the water.

"Okay, yeah, you told me," Glasser says. He's feeling more optimistic about this now. Two more dives. Maybe this all works out. "Five minutes until the next dive."

* * *

The collision of one interplanetary body into another sent debris hurtling across space. This debris ranged in size from microscopic to gargantuan. A meteoroid is commonly classified as any space rock between the sizes of a grain of sand and a small asteroid.

I apologize for misleading you earlier: there is still one last meteoroid on its way.

* * *

Glasser tilts the nose of the subship back down, aiming to skim the *Anhinga* across the meniscus. Closer, closer. He cuts the acceleration before slamming the eject, and Crane is thrust into darkness.

Glasser watches Crane's actions through the helmet cam video feed. Just Crane's hands and the wires in front of him. It's not particularly interesting work to watch, and Glasser's eyes dart between the screen and the countdown timer. Back and forth.

This is how he misses Crane's line being cut by a piece of debris, precisely six minutes and thirty-two seconds into the dive, when the video feed fails.

* * *

Crane doesn't hear the meteoroid sever his cord. The only notice he gets is the faint vibration of the line being torn. When he looks back, there's nothing connecting him through the meniscus. He feels fear, then. The same fear that he felt when he tried for a world record at holding his breath underwater. The fear that he's going to die out here, in this inhospitable environment he brought himself into, and that nothing will save him. All his goddamn pride dashed.

He holds his breath on instinct. This is unnecessary—there's enough air in the divesuit for two and a half more hours. It's just that the divesuit is no longer tethered to Earth, only clipped to a loop of cabling. The seven-meter distance between the cables and the meniscus feels long enough to be a lightyear.

★ ★ ★

"Shit," Glasser says. Swapping to the video feed from the bottom of the boat, he sees the untethered line swaying like a strand of seaweed in the water. Glasser can only make out the faintest outline of the other half of the line swinging free on the other side of the meniscus.

Crane's divesuit is still in place. The neon cord of the second line is visible. He's tethered to a loop of cabling. He won't drift into the black. But he can't pull himself back through the portal, either. He could unhook himself and push off the cabling, but would he generate enough force? Could he manage to tilt himself in the right direction? One misstep and he'd be flung into deep space. There would be no way to retrieve him. There's a beacon on the divesuit, but the beacon is only useful on the other side of the portal. To organize a rescue would take days—the divesuit only contains enough air for a couple hours. The dive was supposed to be minutes, not days.

Glasser runs his hand through his hair. He can't ask what Crane wants him to do. To ask Crane, Glasser would have to send a drone through, record Crane's diver's handsigns, and review the footage. That would take half an hour, to program, send, return, and watch.

But—he can send the drone across. Glasser could surface and program the drone to hover in front of Crane for a few minutes, and then deploy it into the water and across the meniscus. Crane could clip himself to the drone and let it tow him back across the meniscus. But after that, Crane would have to swim up to the *Anhinga* on his own. Glasser can't deploy the drones when the *Anhinga* is submerged—the equipment is in a different part of the vessel than the helm—and the drone wouldn't support Crane's weight in Earth's gravitational field. But Crane dives, every time they've got a spare moment. Crane swims ferociously.

Glasser agonizes about it for a minute. On the screen, Crane's form tethered to the cable. On the countdown, ninety more seconds. Glasser can't talk with Crane. He can't know what Crane would say. What he would want.

What would Joyce do if it were her, at the helm? He doesn't know. What would Crane do, if it were Glasser, down there? He doesn't know. What would Glasser have done for Joyce? If this were Joyce, there would be no question. Glasser would go for her in a heartbeat.

Glasser turns the handle and thrusts the *Anhinga* toward the surface.

* * *

On the other side of the meniscus, Crane watches the shadow of the *Anhinga* shrink. *Fifteen minutes*, Crane thinks to himself. He's on the other side of despair, now—just numb. Like this is all happening to someone else.

He looks away from the portal. The rest of the universe, forty-five billion light years away from where he was born, looks back. It is so beautiful without the filter of the water. The undersea constellations that he memorized when he was young are perfectly visible. Hyperia. The Sea Urchin. The Golden Chain. Fewer than three hundred people have seen these from this side of the void.

He looks back down at the cables in front of him. He could start climbing the cables. Maybe he could find a point where they sit skimming the meniscus, where it would be safer to push through. But there's no guarantee. The cables stretch for miles, and he only has so much air.

Crane suddenly remembers something his father told him, when he was young and they were walking in a forest: if he ever got lost, he should stay in place to be found. He doesn't think his father ever anticipated Crane's situation.

★ ★ ★

Back before the drones were developed and cablers still freedived, the majority of cabling deaths were situational. A cord that frayed. A knock on the head from a cable moving the wrong way. A missed clip. But the strangest reasons for deaths were described by freedivers returning from near-death incidents, or who had watched their diving partners unclip their divesuits. They described the strange sickness that affected divers after punching through the meniscus. The feeling of vertigo. Of being in a dream. A mental shift led them to unclip themselves and float off into the black. They say that this is a particular type of psychosis that affects spacewalkers, but the sample size is too small to say anything conclusive. It might just be that divers are a specific sort of population; the sort of person who swims willingly into the void.

★ ★ ★

On board, Glasser punches through the calculations as fast as possible, crunching the numbers while simultaneously activating the drone equipment. He runs back to the helm and grabs a grease pencil and a marker.

He writes on the front of the drone in grease pencil, and then in marker: CLIP YOURSELF ON. There isn't much space to write. He doesn't remember if the marker is water soluble. He looks over the side of the subship. The wind is picking up. The troughs of the

waves deepen. The universe below is only faintly visible, and Crane is completely obscured.

Glasser turns back to the drone equipment. He hits a button, and the drone drops into the water.

* * *

Glasser had been thinking about Joyce, while he ran the calculations. It was inadvertent. Joyce was his pink elephant; Joyce was the Rubik's cube that soothed the part of his brain that wanted answers to unanswerable questions. It was better to think about Joyce than to think about whether Crane would die. He imagined Joyce's response to the whole situation. Joyce was always better at cutting her losses—no, that was a cruel thing to say about Joyce. She had been kind, until her decision to leave. And that wasn't even mean, only terrible to Glasser, to leave him alone.

If Crane lived, Glasser would call Joyce, he decided. He would call Joyce and tell her about the meteor—the first one, the one that was a wonder. He would go visit her in Colorado. It all seems so easy now.

* * *

The drone drops into the ocean, making contact with the water. The marker is washed away instantly. The grease pencil is abraded by the waves. But the drone continues to dive. It passes through the meniscus, engaging its automatic second-stage programming in the presence of vacuum.

* * *

Crane sees the shadow before he sees the drone. He turns his head. The drone, in all its shiny chrome glory, hovers in front of him. On its surface are the letters YOUR O. He plays a brief game of mental hangman, before discarding the concept of language. His mind is going a million miles a minute. What can he discern from the drone's presence? The silent metal device hanging weightlessly in front of

him. It has no face. Only the shielded camera, the smooth exterior, the jointed limbs. What would he mean by this, if he were Glasser?

Crane closes his eyes. He imagines being Glasser. Glasser, in his taciturn shell, at the helm of the subship that is a reflection of his personality. Glasser who asked him again and again, *Are you sure.*

Crane unclips himself from the cable. For a brief second, he's unmoored to anything connected to the Earth.

Then he clips himself to the drone.

★ ★ ★

Glasser peers down over the edge of the *Anhinga*. The froth of the water from the drone drop has turned the surface a foamy white. It's like looking through a clouded window. He wants to run back to the helm, but he has to be in place to receive the drone, to help Crane back on board if Crane arrives.

For a long time—what feels like a long time, anyway—there's no change. Just the dark water, the foamy caps of waves. And then he sees a round shadow. The drone resurfacing. Nothing is tied to it. He hopes Crane understood what he needed to do.

Glasser holds his breath. He wishes he had some way to explain. He wishes that he had been kinder, that he had asked more questions; he wishes that he was better at explaining himself, someone who was more easily known and more interested in knowing.

No sign of Crane. Glasser almost wants to cry. He wants to call Joyce, after. If Crane lives, he's going to tell her everything. The bad things, too. He's going to ask her all his questions and listen to her answers. He's going to do all the things that are hard, while he still has time to do them.

And then, a blur in the depths coalescing into a form. Glasser feels a great weight drop from his chest.

Crane's narrowbody frame, swimming upward, stretching toward the light.



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CHAMP WONGSATAYANONT



WHERE THE HELL
IS NIRVANA?

WHERE THE HELL IS NIRVANA?

CHAMP WONGSATAYANONT

Illustration by WENJING YANG

Cover design by CHRISTINE FOLTZER

T ● R
D ● T
C ● M

ผู้ได้กระทำบุญอันดี ไส้ เทพยดานั้นเขียนชื่อผู้นั้นใส่แผ่นทองสุก
แล้วผู้ได้อันกระทำบาปไส้ เทวดานั้นก็ตราบานุชีลิงในแผ่นหนังหมา

When someone performs a meritorious deed, a deva writes their name
on a sheet of gold.
When someone performs a sinful deed, the deva records the account
onto a dogskin parchment.

- *Traibhumikatha (ไตรภูมิกatha): The Story of the Three Planes of Existence*
Written by Maha Thammaracha I (King Lithai)
(1843-1911 Buddhist Era)
(1300-1368 Anno Domini)

First Noble Truth: Suffering Exists

Karmic Profile: Wandee Kumhom	
Daily Record of Karmic Flow	
15th Night of the Waxing Phase for the 6th Moon on Year 2567 of the Buddhist Era	
<i>Note: x1.7 Karmic gain on the auspicious Visakha Puja Day</i>	
POSITIVE KARMA FROM DAILY ACTIVITIES	
Joined Candlelight Procession around the Temple	+800
Conditional: Performed at historic Wat Maheyong temple	+400
Conditional: Performed with both parents	+100
Conditional: Homemade lotus bouquet	+20
Donated 1000 baht to the Temple	+100
Conditional: Performed with intention to get a good career and love life	-20
Chanted Metta Sutra in Prayer Hall	+50
Conditional: Offered Libation	+100
Conditional: Meditated	+40
Conditional: Listened to Sermon	+20
Gave Morning Alms to 3 Monks	+300
Released Caged Birds	+100
Treated Parents to a 500-baht Meal	+200
Conditional: Vegetarian food	+100
Hugged and Kissed Parents' Cheeks	+10
Bought a 50-baht Meal for a Beggar	+50
Petted and Fed 5 Temple Dogs	+100
Subtotal	2,470

Karmic Profile: Wandee Kumhom	
Visakha Puja Day Adjustment (x1.7)	+1,729
Total Karmic Merit	4,199
NEGATIVE KARMA FROM DAILY ACTIVITIES	
Told a White Lie to Neighbour when Asked about Evening Plans	-100
Told a Lie to Boss to Leave Early	-500
Swore at Another Driver due to Road Rage	-50
Maliciously Imagined Hitting the Driver with a Sandal for 30 Minutes	-30
Accidentally Killed 4 Ants by Stepping on them	-200
Impatiently Snapped at Parents	-100
Maliciously Killed 5 Mosquitoes by Slapping	-500
Conditional: Felt Satisfaction	-100
Accidentally Killed a Frog by Stepping on it and Splattering its Intestines	-1,000
Conditional: Felt remorse	+200
Subtotal	-2,380
Total Karmic Sin	-2,380
Net Karmic Flow by End of Day	1,819
TOTAL LIFETIME KARMA	20,593
TOTAL SOUL KARMA	378,295

Alone in the gleaming gold office of the Karma Calculation Department (Thailand Division), Garmuti collapsed onto his crystal desk, his necklace and chest chains jingling, his gold-spired headdress clanging. He was going to die. No deva or devi had it worse than him in the Six Heavens. Truly, no humans, no animals, no pretas, no hell-beasts, no condemned sufferers in hell were having a worse time than him at this moment.

He still had one thousand and forty-six profiles to fill. And it was today, out of all days, when the Visakha Puja party was raging in the

Himmapan Forest. Big players would be there, including Lord Vishnu, Lord Indra, and the Four Heavenly Kings too, according to Jarvi. That betrayer, dropping that news as she was flying out of the office to leave Garmuti alone.

So many profiles. So many inventories to fill. There was always more. Every shift he squared up against stacks of gold sheets and dogskin leathers, piled high into the stratosphere, for the five thousand humans in his charge. He preferred lower animals. Dogs, cats, or even insects. Their merits and sins were straightforward, without intention. But the humans were cunning. Thanks to Lord Buddha (Rest in Nirvana), they had cracked the ethics of karma and made the life of accounting devas as complicated as possible. On this most pious day of the Buddhist calendar, celebrating Lord Gautama Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, they scrambled to make merit like birds flocking to sprinkled corn, scraping every dreg of good karma to make the most of the occasion. Very inconsiderate to the devas filling in their profiles.

His forehead resting on his arms, he stared at his bare feet on the soft golden cloud-carpet. He tapped twice with his toe and the floor rippled transparent to reveal the gargantuan yawn of the Cosmic Ocean below: shimmering black depths of existence with distant foam wakes of the glimmer-scaled Godfish Anon. Out of the Cosmic Ocean rose Mount Sumeru, the centre of the physical, metaphysical, and spiritual universes. From this lowest heaven at its bottom ridge, the mountain gleamed burgundy, its ruby-encrusted side reflecting galaxies of starlight above, the concentric peak vanishing into astronomic skies. Streaking around Mount Sumeru were the blazing orbits of the vehicles of the Navagraha, the Nine Celestial Bodies. Lord Sun's lion mount was vanishing behind the peak, ushering in the period of night, while Lord Mars' buffalo was galloping into sight, radiant, glorious.

Garmuti groaned. He was very late to the party. It had been going on for a celestial-hour already. The Anodad Pond at the base of Mount Sumeru danced with strobes and beams of multicoloured

light dazzling up the mountain, and Garmuti could hear the pulsing heart of the party even here. Surrounding the lake was the Himmapan Forest, where every leaf was a shade of emerald, lapis lazuli or gold, and its denizens were mystical creatures conceived from Lord Brahma's imagination. All kinds of creatures would be joining the celebration.

Meanwhile, in some distant dark corner of the Cosmic Ocean, an island huddled at the threat of being swallowed by the glittering waves. The tiny realm of earth.

Why was Garmuti toiling for those mortals? He was always the last deva left in the office.

This was not the life he had been promised. Since he opened his eyes, born fully-formed and gold-garbed as a deva floating on the marble doorstep of the Karma Calculation Department, he had found that he could recall all his past lives as a mortal. In those lifetimes, he/she/they/it had been told that pain no longer existed in heaven. Pleasure was meant to suffuse every corner of the Six Heavens, even in this lowly circle of Catumaharajika.

That wasn't true. Unpaid overtime still existed. So did FOMO.

Nirvana, though. It was said that Nirvana was a place *beyond* pleasure or pain. He had asked other devas about it and Jarvi had scoffed at him, saying, "Is heaven not enough for you?"

Garmuti flicked Wandee Kumhom's karmic profile to be processed. No use complaining. The sooner he completed the profiles, the sooner he could join the party. He was sure the amrita would be all drunken up by then.

New sheet for Samit Jaisook. Garmuti aligned the crystal globe on his desk and saw the human male wearing orange robes walking barefoot on a country road. A monk, wonderful. They did nothing all day long. This should be an easy profile. Samit entered a little government clinic and said that he was donating all his savings to it. Conditional: total renunciation of worldly possessions. Garmuti raised a perfect eyebrow. He supposed a pure-hearted donation was 30 percent extra karma.

He hauled an archaic reference book onto his desk with a mighty *thud* and began browsing through the karmic tier for the health centre and what bonus it might entail. No conditional bonus for the small, rural hospital.

Except Samit's karmic profile was fading right before his eyes. Disappearing completely.

But he was still right there in the crystal globe! Serenely smiling as he strolled back to the temple. Only one explanation left. Samit just went straight to Nirvana because of a tiny donation. It wasn't even in the millions of baht.

Stupid lucky mortal.

This was the tenth case of human enlightenment he had supervised. Every now and then, without rhyme or reason, these people would cheat their way through the system. None of them even had the karma to be a deva. There was no fairness in the universe. Grinding his pearly teeth, Garmuti moved on to the next profile.

After a while came a familiar voice. "Greetings, Garmuti."

It was Sikhala from the Karma Auditing Department.

"What do you want?" Garmuti had his head down, writing neatly with a red-clayed pencil. "Can't you see that I'm busy here?"

"You forgot the anumodana merit again. Around a thousand humans under your care said it, I checked."

Anumodana. A statement of congratulation for another's merit-making, an appreciation of their good deed: +2 per utterance. The most pedantic of karmic gain.

Garmuti snapped his pencil, crunched the gold sheet in his hand.

"You preta! Why are you telling me now?" he yelled. "I need to redo them."

His mind beamed with a psychic image of numbers:

Swore in Anger: -50 Total Soul Karma: 1,000,959

Oh no. No, no, no.

It always scared him how rapidly the Karma Machine evaluated the deeds of devas.

For the first time in a celestial-decade, the time it took for a mortal empire to rise, stagnate and become overtaken, he sweated. He could smell it, the mortal stench excreting out, clinging to his luminous skin. Even Sikhala wrinkled her nose.

But frustratingly, she smiled in pity, in her superiority, saying, "Breathe, Garmuti. Be mindful of your breath. Let anger flow over you like a stream of water. Do not be gripped by ephemeral emotions and desire. Fixate instead on their inherent illusory nature. If you let it consume you..."

She continued spouting unsolicited advice to someone drowning. If he fell below a million karmic points, he would descend to humanity, born as a prince, nobility or trust-fund baby. How could he live on their honey instead of soma, their wine instead of amrita? Icky, stinky human reproduction instead of the divine, fragrant coitus? Imagine the back pain, imagine the piss and shit, the horror of aging or giving birth. He gagged at the thought of having to wipe his own ass.

Garmuti wrested back control and bit down his panic. He smiled and returned gracefully, "I am sorry for my outburst. I will amend my mistakes as quickly as I can. Please don't wait on my behalf. You will miss the party. I will file this myself."

Showed Remorse: +10 Total Soul Karma: 1,000,969

Sikhala shook her head, resplendent headdress tinkling. "That is kind of you, but don't worry. I will be here for you. We will ensure that these profiles are accurate as possible, for the sake of the mortals who rely on us."

Garmuti bit his tongue to stop another outburst. Why must he be paired up with this smug devi? The snake Jarvi boasted that her auditor was so good she could brush aside the karmic sins of politicians and no one had ever come to report or punish her.

A celestial-hour of intense, undistracted suffering later, he carried his audited stacks of gold and leather, and swooped toward the hall of the Lord of Karma, Lord Yama. His fingers and shoulders were cramped from rewriting the karmic profiles. Bodily aches, another symptom of looming mortality. There was no such thing as making amendments on the karmic profiles, so he had had to fill them from scratch. Any strange formatting or unsystematic scribbles would make the Karma Machine burp out errors in the dogskin ledgers. When each soul faced judgement after death, the Lord of Karma must be able to announce their verdict with the stern, unhesitating gravity of a judge. If his ledgers made Lord Yama stumble, he would face a direct punishment from a superior, more severe than any automatic penalty. He might be born an ordinary human with inherited debt.

He dove toward a cave at the base of Mount Sumeru and zoomed through the melting diamond walls. Crystalline stalactites gradually gave way to carved formations that held dancing fires, spraying prismatic shades across the floor. In the hollow belly of the mountain gaped the Karmic Archive, shelves containing a near infinite number of dogskin ledgers, as many rows as there were varieties of organisms, as high as the history of the universe, as long as the breadth of the galaxy.

At the unseen centre of the archive, the Karma Machine was the heart of the cosmos. It hummed constantly, vibrating the archive, each oscillation arranging the atoms of the ledgers to record the deeds of all beings, occasionally overridden by the devas' karmic reports. Ledgers were flying off the shelves in an unceasing stream, each summoning a death of a mortal, conjured up into the judgement hall of Lord Yama to be read and delivered the verdict of their reincarnations.

No one knew the workings of the Karma Machine nor its creation. They said it existed before the laws of gravity or time, its truth so fundamental, it outlasted entire universes. They said Mount Sumeru was formed when the elementary dust of the big bang coalesced

around the Karma Machine. Even the Lord of Karma himself was subject to its rulings, a mere reader of its decrees.

Garmuti never swung around to see it.

Dodging the swirling books, Garmuti descended toward the humongous IN tray where an army of bookkeeping devas from a hundred worlds were delivering the deeds of sentient beings. The tray was more like a starry pit with its own gravitational pull, leading to the sorting pipes that run through the entire library, ending at the calculating heart of the Karma Machine. He dumped his documents in its general direction and flew out without another glance.

If he was lucky, he could make it to the Visakha Puja party in time.

Second Noble Truth: Suffering Has a Cause

Under the careening vehicles of the celestial lords, Anodad Pond was a glittering expanse in the centre of the Himmapan Forest, where a single gulp of the lucid, glacial-blue waters could quench a mortal's thirst for a year.

Garmuti arrived too late to witness the duel between Lord Garuda and a King Naga. The muscular torso of Lord Garuda was splattered with blood, and he leisurely pecked at the snakelike hood of the naga with his beak, the talons of his feet clutching at the scaled ravages of the serpent's huge body. With each mighty arm around a giggling deva and devi, he was in conversation with Lord Indra, the emerald-skinned king of the celestials, among other dignitaries descended from Daowadueng Heaven.

Garmuti arrived too late to watch the apsara cabaret or a host of kinnaras performing their titillating burlesque. The latter was always his personal highlight, to see the tease of the female kinnarees' winged, feathered thighs and backward-bending knees. Now their bejewelled bridles, girdles and bras were strewn all about the diamond-dewed grass. Hand in hand with deva or devi, the naked half-bird-half-humans flew giggling into private corners of clouds or canopies. Others had already begun copulating, some so fiercely that the branches broke and they fell squirming and moaning on the ground, or scattered their clouds in their aerial acrobatics across the green-streaked sky. Once the mythical kinnaras were spent, the devas were not yet satisfied so they drifted deeper into the woods in pairs, threes or fives. The musk of their orgy bloomed like thick, fragrant jasmine, their fluids and semen sweet as syrup. Devas mated only for pleasure.

Garmuti arrived too late for the once-a-century fruiting of the nareepol tree, where the gnarled ancient branches sprouted fruits in the shape of women. The ripe ones looked like curvaceous women, the unripe like girls on the brink of adolescence, the overripe like

crones with fragile, wrinkled skin. But the tree was now bare, its base sprawling with devas murmuring with glazed eyes, their minds exploring the most distant reaches of the highest heaven. It was said that the riper the narepol, the more potent the psychedelic effect, while the fresher ones lent the trip a sharper texture for the edgier devas who wanted to taste the cousin of pain.

He arrived in time only to see a few ugly, fanged asuras unenthusiastically twirling fire and lightning. A couple of instrumental gandharvas plucking trance tunes of the after-after-afterparty. And the devas who gathered on the grass chatting with each other, or the lame handful who listened quietly to Lord Buddha's sermons in a distant corner, far, far away from the orgy, preached by a bodhisattva who had descended from an even higher heaven.

Of course, Sikhala was there, sitting with palms together at her chest in a wai, basking in the goodly light of dharma. She didn't care about being late because the bodhisattva would be droning until Lord Sun's gleaming chariot swung around Mount Sumeru.

She saw him arriving. He looked away, but too late, she was already flying over.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault for keeping you." Sikhala approached with an apologetic smile. "Shall we go to the sermon?"

"Uhh, I'm thinking of going that way," Garmuti said, already fleeing.

"You must not get too addicted to pleasure," she called after him, "For it is only ephemeral fulfilment, a mere illusion of satiety that lasts only until the next desire takes hold and the cycle of suffering —"

"What took you so long?" called someone from a group of devas sitting on a mat. It was Jarvi waving him over. "Come join! My friend from the Karmic Justice Department got some goodies from the mortal world. They're so quaint and exotic."

Garmuti swooped in immediately and sat down with the assembled group. There were plates of grilled chicken, a rack of crispy pork, boiled prawns, tangerines, dragonfruits and bananas,

bottles of rice wine and even a syrupy, fizzy red Fanta that tasted like a mockery of soma. Might as well have some small consolation, even if it was a meagre mortal's meal.

His stomach growled. He tried his best to mask his horror at the return of the oldest mortal desire. Devas ate for pleasure, for gastronomic transcendence, not something so base as hunger or sustenance.

But before he realised it, he was gorging himself with the chicken, the pork, the prawns, their savoury, fishy stink assailing his delicate nose, juices running down his chin, but he could not help it.

"Oh my, are you ... hungry?" said a beautiful devi in the group in bemusement. Her headdress was a filigreed, multi-tiered spire. She wore so many chest-chains they looked like a golden suit of armour clinking over her breasts, her neck heavy with jewellery. Her karmic score must be very high, maybe close to five million, verging on the Daowadueng Heaven. "Nice to meet you, my name is Shantarni."

"Sorry," he said, mouth full, chewing. "I'm Garmuti."

"Indra bless, you eat like a human!" Jarvi exclaimed, daintily stripping fibres from tangerine flesh. She turned her slitted eyes toward her friend from the Karmic Justice Department. "How generous of you to share with us your bounty from the mortal world."

He was one of those stoic deliverers of karma, strong-jawed, his headdress a neat and practical frame around his face. "Just a perk of the job. Mortals will do anything to avoid their karmic punishment. They gave these offerings to atone for their sins."

"How very admirable of you to extend Lord Yama's reach into the mortal world. They must be some truly heinous individuals that they were judged before they die. I wonder, did they still get the karma they deserve?"

The stony-faced punisher sliced his eyes at her. "Of course. Struck by lightning and smoking crisp in Lord Yama's hall. How else could I clear the offerings through heaven's customs otherwise? Eat up, newcomer. You work at the same place as Jarvi?"

Garmuti nodded, tried to swallow, and quickly realised he was not used to the greasy physicality of mortal's food that lodged in his throat. He coughed, wheezed, and reached for the rice wine to wash it down, only to find that the cheap offering from the 7-Eleven convenience store burned his throat and nose. He spluttered, trying not to spatter bits of partially chewed food everywhere.

He reached for the crystal flask lying next to Jarvi. It contained the amrita. The devi made no move to help him, stifling her laughter with a hand over her mouth. "Don't waste the amrita. We can't just trick the asuras to help us churn the Ocean of Milk again!"

Instead, it was the high-ranking devi who fetched it, unstopped it and gave it to him.

He drank the elixir gratefully, the liquid ecstasy that awakened every tingling sensation in his mouth, washing away the offerings inflicted by rot and decay, overwhelming the profane taste with sheer bliss and he swallowed the mouthful, gasping, drooling mouth liquid. Saliva, that was what it was called. Another mark of mortals. He slurped it back into his mouth.

"You must excuse Garmuti, Lady Shantarni," said Jarvi. "He has a soft spot for humans. He considers it a privilege to eat mortal foods. He takes such good care of his mortals, gives them so much attention to detail that he made sure to write up each karmic profile at least three times before submitting them to the Karma Machine."

Garmuti stared at the sweetly smiling Jarvi and wondered how many karmic points were being deducted by her sardonic lies. It was a major offence, breaking the Five Precepts, for something so petty.

"That isn't true, Lady Shantarni," he said, wiping his mouth. "I never make a mistake because I don't want to make the poor mortals suffer further with their existence."

Told a Boldfaced Lie to One's Superior: -750

Conditional: To Save Face and Avoid Shame: -100

Total Soul Karma: 1,000,119

Wait, he had way more to lose. Why was he being pulled into Jarvi's game? Even the devi was staring at him in pleasant surprise. Was this her plan?

But Shantarni smiled at him, nodding. "That is a noble sentiment, Garmuti. Would you accompany me to get some soma? I believe I also have another flask of amrita in my personal storage."

"I-I would be honoured." Blinking, he stood up and followed the swaying saunter of the devi. Blades of grass sang against their feet. Strange that she chose to walk but he appreciated the rhythm of her buttocks, the lustrous silk about her thighs, its many slits whispering hints of what they concealed. He cast a backward glance to witness the shards of Jarvi's broken smile, scattered about her face. He sniggered.

Felt Satisfaction at Another's Pain: -10 Total
Soul Karma: 1,000,109

He grimaced just in time for Shantarni to turn to him. She gave him a bemused look. "I believe we are not properly introduced. I am the assistant of Lord Vessavana. His personal secretary, some might say, I am the devi stationed in front of his office."

He gaped. "Lord Vessavana? One of the Four Heavenly Kings?"

"That very same. And you work at the Thailand Division of the Karma Calculation Department."

"Yes...?" he said, suddenly engulfed by an impending dread. How did she know? They had moved away from the hearing of Jarvi when Shantarni turned toward him. She was incredibly beautiful and he tried to not look at her pink nipple, peeking between the golden chains.

Her eyes swallowed him in their azure depths. "You are close to falling."

"How did you know?" Garmuti resisted the urge to smell his armpits. He had powdered himself with perfumed marble dust before coming to the party. How could his mortal-stink leak out?

"It's your jewellery, among other things. They are becoming tarnished. Darkened. How many more karmic points before you fall, I wonder?"

Garmuti stiffened, his voice coming out as a strangled cry. "Not many. Not many at all. What should I do?"

"When is your next karmic compensation?"

"When Lord Jupiter's stag aligns with Lord Mercury's elephant ... I will not last that long."

"You poor karmic counters of heaven, carrying the cogs of the cosmos. How little are you regarded..." She made a thoughtful sound. "I can help you."

He felt ready to grovel, to cling to her feet so he wouldn't slip between the cracks of heaven. "What can I do? I'll do anything."

"I want you to help my friend. She was a devi once but now her soul has been born as a man. Let's call him Opa. Even now, he is so pretty. I want you to bring their soul back to Catumaharajika Heaven and I will spare you any karma I can."

They continued walking but might as well have been floating, as he no longer felt his legs. The gravity of her request took a long time to find its way into his skull.

"You want me to *alter* their karmic profile? But I can't commit anymore sin. I'll fall before I can deliver the documents."

"I have prepared a major offering platter to give to Lord Indra on the behalf of Lord Vessavana on this Visakha Puja Day. At my discretion, I may add a commendation to a deva of exceptional virtue to receive a share of merit. Just don't forget to say anumodana to receive your share."

Garmuti could feel sweat breaking out of his skin. "What about the Auditing Department?"

She leaned closer and the pearly aura of her purity bathed over him, her breath smelling like newly bloomed lotus. "I hold the seal of Lord Vessavana. Do you think they'll have the nerve to question an officiated document?"

His face felt hot. His crotch felt hot. "But the Karma Machine..."

Her lips brushed his ear like a feather falling from a higher heaven. "It will work. The Karma Machine relies on inputs; it is more fallible than you think. Trust me, I have done this before."

He swallowed and thought how he would fill the gold sheet with a deed he'd never observed from the crystal ball. He also had to find out what Opa's real name was. His soul might be under his care. If not, he would probably have to slip a fake profile sheet into some other deva's pile with the official stamp from Shantarni and...

Contemplating on Committing a Cosmic Fraud
(Counting) : -3, -6 ... Total Soul Karma: 1,000,100

"Deal!" Garmuti blurted, his heart fluttering at the rapidly accumulating sin.

Shantarni's smile could light up stars with its radiance. "Excellent. Now don't move, don't even think. I shall complete the offering immediately."

As she flew toward Lord Indra, Garmuti stood in meditation for the first time in what must have been forever, forcing himself to stop his thoughts from roaming. When he saw Lord Indra extending his hand to accept Shantarni's offering of a golden wax statue, exquisitely carved in the shape of a lion-elephant, Garmuti put his palms together in a wai and whispered, "Anumodana."

Mentioned in a Divine Karmic Offering: +100,000
Visakha Puja Bonus (x0.7) : +70,000 Total Soul
Karma: 1,170,100

The influx of karma was like a shower of auroral rays, purging away all impurities, collapsing his knees in a crash of pleasure. He shivered in his new radiant skin, rendered clean with the karmic worth of a monk's life dedicated to sermons and meditation. That was much more than his karmic compensation.

Oh, he was *so* back.

Third Noble Truth: Suffering Can End

Back under the sparkling chandelier of his office, Garmuti found good news and bad news.

Luckily, he was indeed in charge of Opa's account.

But watching over his shoulder was sanctimonious Sikhala. The kind of auditor who would question outstanding items, even when verified by the seal of Lord Vessavana.

He had to be subtle with this ... adjustment.

Rigging some conditional bonuses in Opa's profile would be the easiest way to go about it. Easiest meaning also the least amount of sin being inflicted upon himself. Maliciously tinkering with the cosmic system would set him back 20,000 points, whereas maliciously submitting significantly altered record would be 55,000 points. What was the point of ruining his reputation if he ended up right where he was, perched on the edge of falling, or worse?

He found himself thinking a lot about Shantarni. He realised he missed her. It would be forever until the next party. So, he asked her to meet him in the Himmapan Forest during his break, claiming to want to run some ideas by her, but really only so he could see her again.

"I am scared of being caught," Garmuti confessed while walking through the dappled glades under the purple beam of Lord Saturn soaring on his tiger mount. No karmic deduction, because it was not thoroughly a lie. "My auditor is a snitch. The document won't get through to the Karma Machine and they will find out your involvement through the seal. We will be reborn as earthworms."

Shantarni sighed. "You can be mysterious with instructions for the Karma Machine. Influence its calculations."

"How so?" he asked, despite already knowing. He loved hearing her talk.

"Haven't you implemented bodhisattva-lifetimes before? You can add a karmic multiplier across the entire lifetime, multiplied by one

to ten. I believe it works retroactively too, converting an ordinary life into context for enlightenment."

"Does this bypass the auditor?"

"Don't you know anything about your job? Bodhisattva-lifetimes are divined by the oracles at the Department of Fates. It's beyond the authority of the Karma Auditing Department. Just forge the paperwork and stamp the seal. Quick, before Opa dies. It's already been ten years on earth and I've sent him a dream prophecy, a vision of the Avici Hell. He's doing whatever he can so he won't be damned. He's already ordained as a monk."

Perhaps he had made himself appear too stupid, so he shifted to a different topic. "There's something I have always wondered. Why can't we tune the Karma Machine so the mortals' karma is displayed like the deva?"

She stared at him in disbelief. "Do you trust the mortals with that knowledge? Heaven will be overcrowded if they can game the system! It is bad enough that Lord Buddha gave away the Five Precepts and Eightfold Path after his enlightenment. Honestly, I am surprised they aren't following his teachings much more closely."

"But why do we need to work for these humans? We're higher, wiser, better-looking. Doesn't the Karma Machine already judge everything that happens? Why do we need to double-check everything?"

"Only some things have intrinsic moral values. The Buddha of each cycle also cultivated a slightly different tradition of Buddhism. So some things are relativistic. For example, in this aeon, we have sacred sites, specific mantras, anumodana, and so on. These karmic benefits are to be calculated by hand. If you've been a deva as long as I have, you'll know that the universe is vast and ancient. Humanity is not the only species with a high potential for enlightenment. Now I really have to go. Lord Vessavana will be looking for me."

She took off, flying toward the golden palace on the cloud, visible even from the base of Mount Sumeru. That whole conspiratorial

conversation cost 2,000 karmic points, but for him, it was worth it.

After that break, which took an entire mortal-year, Garmuti returned to the office to learn that Sikhala was gone. Ascended. Not just ascending to a higher heaven either but *ascended*. Gone without a trace. To Nirvana.

This had never happened before. Or it did and no one ever spoke of it. The whole office pretended nothing happened, too envious to acknowledge the occasion. When Garmuti asked Jarvi, she muttered through her teeth, "Good for her. Anumodana."

It was so unfair that such an obnoxious devi could ascend while hardworking devas like him had to toil until the end of time. Surely, Nirvana must be a random lottery draw from some higher heaven. There was no mention of it in any orientation training, but then again, neither were the fifth and sixth heavens. Only myths that they existed. None of the devas seemed to know much about Nirvana either, or they were keeping the knowledge a secret.

To be fair, if he ever found a way to Nirvana, he wouldn't tell a soul either.

The replacement for Sikhala was a round-faced deva that Garmuti liked instantly. By way of introduction, he asked Garmuti to always submit his profiles before Lord Moon came around Mount Sumeru. "I must get to this apsara cabaret at this celestial club," he said. "Come with me after work tonight. I'll introduce you to my favourite dancers. Their lap dances, oh Indra, they are divine!"

Garmuti was locked in. Moving like a blur. His red-clayed pencil flying over sheet after sheet. A policymaker who was so responsible with her budget allocation that Garmuti would need a library of reference books to go through her spreadsheet. Why should she get extra karma since it's her job anyway? *He* wouldn't get any for his trouble. Skip. Now a CEO who donated a million baht in crypto to join an exclusive Michelin-starred dinner reserved for top ten donors. What was the campaign for? Who cares. A donation was a donation, a nice, simple conversion. Congratulations on a well-earned 100,000 karma!

In the wink of a single mortal-day, *mortal-day*, he had all his accounts audited and verified, including Opa's documents, guaranteed with ten times karmic multiplier. He had never finished his shift so quickly before. It was dizzying to be freed from the tyranny of Sikhala. It was the right of every being to be emancipated from office slavery. Lord Sun's chariot still wheeled on this side of Mount Sumeru as he dumped the stack into the IN tray.

156 Instances of Negligence in Cosmic Duty:
-78,000 Total Soul Karma: 1,079,045

Malicious Forgery of Documents: -5,000 Total Soul Karma: 1,074,045

Malicious Abuse of Bodhisattva-Lifetime: -25,000
Total Soul Karma: 1,049,045

He almost fell into the vacuum hole himself. It might've been better that way. An eyewatering 500 karma per error? He didn't know an error cost this much. He'd never made a mistake before. Sikhala wouldn't let him.

Over a hundred thousand karma, gone in a blink of an eye ... He deserved a treat for such woe, he decided, as he meekly joined his new auditor in the revelry.

Within moments, Garmuti forgot what had bothered him. He couldn't believe he hadn't been to this celestial club before. The wondrous lights, the gandharvas' tunes, the apsaras' hips and bosoms. Garmuti laughed at the glorious sights, just as they blinded an ascetic next to him who was visiting the realm in his astral body, shattering his jhana meditation, ejecting him back to his mortal body, dooming his decades of abstinence for spiritual purity.

But despite the erotic excess on display, Garmuti could only think about the figure of a single body, caught in glimpses and gasps, barely covered by those silks and golden chains.

He left the club early and flew to the Himmapan Forest to collect a spectrum of flowers from the polychromatic vines.

It took much longer than he thought. He kept on getting distracted by the bathing kinnarees.

When he was done, his next shift was soon starting. With a dazzling bouquet in hand, Garmuti waited awkwardly in a queue to seek an audience with the secretary of Lord Vessavana. The whole hallway might be made of solid gold interspersed with diamond veins, but there was nothing to pass the time in the gleaming palace except meta-dimensional murals and elevator music. By the time earth's oceans had risen by half a centimeter, he was finally the next in the line, and already, the queue stretched behind him all the way through the corridor. How many contracts and favours was Shantarni juggling?

She sat radiant behind a grand marble desk in the antechamber, curtained by stacks of paperwork, dwarfed by the massive door to the throne room behind her. She looked exhausted, stamping sheet after sheet.

Garmuti flew into the chamber, arms wide and flexing to fill out his bicep bangles, announcing, "Lady Shantarni, I have done what you've asked!"

She watched three towers of documents collapse from the gust of his arrival. "I know. Where have you been?"

Her tone made him shiver. Weakly, he offered the bouquet. "I've been collecting these flowers for you."

With a cursory smile, she put it aside on her papers. "You put the highest grade of bodhisattva-lifetime for Opa, didn't you?"

"Yes. Only the best for your friend! Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No. Well, it depends, doesn't it?" She rubbed her forehead. "Didn't you look at his life before you submitted the paperwork? As a monk, he started going on an international enlightenment tour, giving sermons on the national TV of a dozen countries. He set up charities to help climate refugees and war orphans. He was so handsome he converted hundreds of new Buddhists. He was close to

become a bodhisattva without your help, would have been reincarnated as a deva. But now because of your intervention, he's reborn in Daowadueng Heaven."

"Oh." Garmuti adjusted his headdress. How could he know that humans could go to such lengths of virtue? Frankly he didn't even know what Opa looked like. "But your friend must remember you now, right? Can't he visit you in Catumaharajika even if we can't visit them?"

She shook her head, sighing. "Time is different between realms. A minute there is an hour here. And *she* was born as an attendant serving the palace of the gods, assigned to Lord Shiva. She can't come and go as she pleases. I always have to wait to be in her company. Not to mention that she is a higher order of devi, closer to a deity. The next time we meet it won't be the same. What will she think of me?" She put her head in both her hands, peering at him between her fingers. "Do you understand any of this?"

Did he look blank to her? He resummoned his disappointment for missing the Visakha Puja party and nodded mournfully.

"No, you don't get it." Shantarni stared at him now in a half-veiled-light way that made his heart rock. "Have you ever truly loved someone?"

"Of course. I was married in past lives too, you know."

"You really don't get it," she remarked, but her face had changed. She seemed to be thinking. He met her eyes, blue as Anodad Pond under Lord Venus's passage, and then she gave him a smile that cracked the diamond surface of his heart. "But perhaps I can teach you. Meet me after work."

Arrived Late to Cosmic Duty: -1,000 17 Instances
of Negligence in Cosmic Duty: -8,500 Total Soul
Karma: 1,039,545

Garmuti did his best to be thorough with the profiles but his brain was mired by her smile, so distracted by desire he couldn't sit still.

He had dated hundreds of times, if not thousands, both deva and devi, but none of them had taken his whole attention like Shantarni. She was the most beautiful devi he had ever seen and he felt like a mortal yearning for heaven. Her presence neutered the delights of divine sweetmeats, drained amrita of its savour, turned the thunderous re-enactment of Ramayana drab and dreary in comparison to her side profile beside him. He imagined their flight back to her abode, hand in hand, and the rest of the theatre became anguish.

Was this finally ... love?

Her home was much like his, a golden pavilion on the cloud, except his view was the emptiness of the Cosmic Ocean and hers was the Himmapan Forest, bathed by the perfumes of endless blossoming, a constant, fragrant mist. They alighted on the edge of her bed and she told him to wait as she climbed under the gossamer canopy. Garmuti swallowed as her lithe silhouette positioned herself, chains chiming with each movement. She didn't need to get changed. There wasn't much to begin with.

"You may come in."

She luxuriated on purple and gold sheets, back partially arched, legs frustratingly crossed. Her eyes like slitted night, her lips parted, cooing:

"Can I ask you something, Garmuti?"

"Yes, anything," he gasped.

"Will you cheat heaven again for me?"

"Yes, easy!" Some of the golden chains had fallen in the valley between her breasts.

"Will you use your *powerful* office to lift my profile high into Daowadueng Heaven?"

"Of course, yes. Anything for you." Slips of silk spilled around her thighs, a maddening strip covering her crotch.

"Thank you, Garmuti," she purred. "Well, you've disappointed me with false hopes. Now you'd better make it up to me."

She opened her legs, the little silk falling, revealing an orchid that bloomed more beautifully than any that adorned the Himmapan Forest. Garmuti crawled toward her on his hands and knees, like a mortal toward food. Yes, that was how it felt. That same *hunger*. He stroked her smooth, supple thighs, ran his hands along the pearly, unblemished skin. Her jasmine musk made his crotch tighten, so did her delicious sigh, her flushed face, long lashes encrusted with glittering gems.

But her eyes. They were fixated at him, watching.

“One moment,” she said, sitting up, folding her legs.

Garmuti swallowed. “Huh?”

“I changed my mind. Let’s continue later.”

“What? Why?”

She turned aside, already drifting away. “A sudden thought occurred to me. It makes me uncertain.”

“About what, the fraud? I told you I will do it. Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not about trust but proof. *Can* you do it? You might fall before you make it happen.”

“Of course, I can do it! Come back.”

But she had already left the canopy, a delightful figure behind the veil. “Prove it to me. Do me the favour first, *then* we may continue.”

He had a fistful of bedsheet in his hand. “Why do you want to go to Daowadueng so badly anyway?”

“Oh?” The shadow of her head angled back at him. “Well, I suppose that’s where my soulmate is. You know her. You lifted her there yourself. Make it up to me.”

“Soulmate?” Garmuti seized his chest, a twinge from the crack she’d left on his diamond heart. All this time, she belonged to someone else. She had just been *playing* with him?

“No! I’m done. Find yourself another fool.” He stormed out of the gossamer sanctuary, ripping through it, and streaked out of her abode like a comet, flying across the sky with such speed his skin warmed red from air friction. The denied pleasure choked his balls.

It also smothered his chest, drowned his heart, flooded his throat, but could not overflow because devas may weep, but not cry.

In all his heavenly existence, he had never felt anything so close to pain.

Fourth Noble Truth: There is a Path to End Suffering

No more.

No more of this endless chase. The wishing and their unfulfillment. No more suffering from unmet desires.

Garmuti was so sick and tired of love, of the humiliation. He wanted escape. He wanted peace. He yearned for Nirvana. He didn't belong in this lower heaven.

His life had also become a limbo of numbers, a blur on the torturous grind. He focused his attentions on his bookkeeping to avoid falling. He missed Sikhala. Life was hard when you couldn't trust your auditor to do a good job. His karmic compensations could barely keep up with his mistakes. If only Lord Shiva would go on a rampage to scour the world and drive humanity extinct. Then he wouldn't have to work anymore. But unfortunately, the gods had mellowed out.

A long time ago, he had heard a bodhisattva say that Nirvana existed beyond even the highest of the Six Heavens. But to ascend to Daowadueng Heaven, a deva needed at least five million karmic points. He had no idea how much merit would be required to get to Yama, Tusita, and the other two unnamed heavens beyond.

But a bodhisattva. They would know the way. That was how Sikhala did it, right?

When Lord Gautama Buddha was enlightened, he visited Daowadueng Heaven to give a grand sermon, opening the eyes of all divine beings to the possibility of Nirvana. Following this example, a rotation of bodhisattvas sat cross-legged in one corner of the break room, observing the bustle with the infuriating serenity of office shrinks.

The bodhisattva smiled at Garmuti beatifically as he approached, shaved head and orange robe resplendent. Out of the corner of his eyes, Garmuti spied his colleagues gathered around the soma cooler,

jerking a thumb at him, already gossiping. The bodhisattva took one glimpse into his soul and spoke, "It is more difficult for a blessed deva to achieve Nirvana than a lowly human because—"

"Come on, that's impossible," Garmuti interrupted. "We are higher beings, with higher minds and better cognition. We are also much better looking, and stronger. They aspire to be like us..." He continued ranting for an entire lunar cycle, finishing angrily with, "... and why am I not good enough for her?"

The bodhisattva listened with a mother's love and patience before speaking again. "It is more difficult for a blessed deva to achieve Nirvana than a lowly human because a human walks the middle path between pleasure and pain. As Lord Buddha once said, enlightenment comes neither through self-indulgence or self-denial, but an awareness of desire as the originator of suffering. The sooner you are aware of this ultimate truth, the sooner you can be released from the defilement of desire."

Garmuti thought about it. "So you're saying that the human experience is the secret to enlightenment. Why didn't you say so from the beginning?"

He flew back to his desk. Not to work, of course, but to slip into a state of meditation to relive his past lives as a mortal.

Did anyone think he would spend millennia in mindful meditation, each moment denying all the heavenly pleasures that lay within literal reach?

There had to be an easier way.

Most of his past lives were the uneventful living of billionaires where it was logical to hedge one's bets and bankroll his/her/their way into a better afterlife. It was altruistically fashionable to donate an annual ten million baht toward the Siriraj Hospital for tax refunds. The mortals Garmuti had been didn't know it then, but Siriraj Hospital provided one of the biggest karmic bonuses in the world, because it was endorsed by all the great Buddhist institutions.

But the life he found the most interesting was that of a tech entrepreneur who had changed the world. Garmuti had been an

ambitious American who converted to Buddhism when his soul was besieged with an existential crisis. Like all builders of empires, shady conducts hounded him, leading him to be knocked a few rungs down the reincarnation ladder after he died from cancer.

Day after day, especially during office hours, Garmuti went about his routine in a half trance, partially reliving his past life to absorb the wonderful and complex mind of this great inventor. Initially, it was inspiring to view the world in search for the potential it could become, but soon his thoughts became plagued with the burdens of a protagonist: to disrupt, to innovate, to synergise. In such a state, he became deeply dissatisfied with the monotony of his life as a deva. He roamed like a frustrated predator, seeking work processes to streamline. The anumodana tradition became a pain point that entered his scrutiny. So archaic and arcane, it was incredible no one had thought to create a fix to save millions of accumulated bookkeeping hours.

If the Karma Machine worked like a quantum computer that used ledgers as the database to process all sentient souls, surely an app could be implemented to access and alter the data in real time.

That was how Garmuti came up with the Anumodana Tax.

In principle, anumodana was a simple unconditional rule that required no supervision. No matter the context, the occasion, the timing, as long as anumodana was uttered in attribution to a good deed, the speaker would receive +2 karmic points.

If nothing else, his brief relationship with Shantarni had made him realise that the edicts of the Karma Machine were not preordained but alterable. Garmuti could rewrite this quaint tradition of the current aeon into a universal law of the Karma Machine.

So efficient! Who cared about loopholes? If someone was smart enough to find them, they should be rewarded for it.

Contemplation on Committing a Cosmic Fraud(?) :

-258 Total Soul Karma: 1,014,120

Now, imagine if Garmuti got a karmic commission as the patented inventor of this app. There were around 100 million Theravada Buddhists in the world. If half of them said anumodana daily ... No, actually, more like 10 percent were so devout. That would be around +20,000,000 karmic points transferred per mortal-day, +7,300,000,000 per mortal-year. *Mortal*-year. All that karmic merit changing hands. If only he could tap a tiny fraction of it.

Garmuti leaned back in his crystal ergonomic chair, grinning. And the best thing? It would not even be considered a sin since he was improving the lives of all devas and mortals.

Self-Delusion from Pride: -5 Total Soul Karma:
1,014,115

All he needed was Lord Vessavana's seal...

Honestly, it could be the seal of *any* of the Four Heavenly Kings. He could swoop into one of their secretaries' offices and simply ask for the permission to shift the ethical foundations of the universe.

Who was he kidding? Not only would they punish him to be reborn as a stray dog, they would also steal the idea for themselves.

Only *she* would listen. He would have to play into her hands again.

But then again, he might also finally get laid.

On one of his slower days, he wrote the code for the app on a stack of gold sheets and flew to the palace of Lord Vessavana. Three crops of rice had grown and perished in the mortal world before he was granted an audience with Shantarni.

She did not look up from her paperwork as he flew up to her desk. Or even when he bowed with his hands in front of his chest in a wai.

"I'd like to file a patent," he announced.

"What?"

Did he really utter a human concept? He was about to curse himself until he realised that it was also a stupid human concept that

would be the tool for his ascension. "I mean, I would like to propose a way we can both gain passive karma to ascend to the Daowadueng Heaven."

She was looking at him now, feigning disinterest with eyes like glacial ice. Still heartachingly beautiful.

"I propose to add a new universal law into the Karma Machine." He showed her the neat stack of gold leaves, the codes for the app. "Uttering anumodana under the right conditions shall result in an intrinsic karmic merit. There shall be no need for any manual input by us devas."

There were ripples beneath her radiant face, crooking her eyebrow. Flickers of a scheme. She said, "Tell me more."

"As a patented inventor, I shall receive an infinitesimal point-zero-one percent of each karma received by these transactions."

He had already made his calculation. He would receive +730,000 passive karma per mortal-year. That meant he would reach Daowadueng Heaven in six mortal-years, a mere celestial moment. The aeon would barely blink its eye before he was soaring through all the layers of heaven to arrive at Nirvana.

"You may," Shantarni said, "As long as you add my name for half your share of karma too."

"Already done." He flicked through the stacks to show her the relevant line of code. Signifiers for Garmuti and Shantarni, next to each other, each reaping half the skimming. "All I need now is your seal."

They exchanged a smile. Had they been lovers and rivals in some other reincarnation, linked through the machinations of karma? Could a soul have more than one soulmate?

"One more condition then," Shantarni said. "End my share at 10,000,000. You may take your full cut from then on."

"Why?"

"Did you see the line of devas waiting to strike a deal? Lord Vessavana is too busy pleasing the deities of Daowadueng, so there is only me. My karmic growth is stagnant as I try to maintain all the

contracts and favours. I can only balance my losses with my gains. It is the burdensome power of my station. I want to sit comfortably in Daowadueng and never fear of falling back to this hell ever again."

"Don't you want to go to Nirvana with me?"

"Some say it already exists within one's heart." She smiled and stamped the glistening red seal.

"So, do you want to grab dinner tonight?"

"I'm busy," she said, handing back the documents.

"Maybe later then?"

"I will be busy."

Rejection stung less when you were soaring on karma. After filing the document, his aura intensified with every passing day. His headdress bloomed an additional tier and gemstones sprouted among its nooks and crannies. His skin brightened, his eyes became opalescent and his physique grew even more sculpted and perfect, accentuated by golden chains and bangles. Finally, his colleagues began to notice.

"What are you up to these days?" Jarvi said, scowling. "Why are you so luminous all of a sudden?"

"I saw the light of Lord Buddha's dharma." Garmuti smiled with shining teeth. "You should try it sometime."

Even the penalty from the lie didn't hurt as much.

Total Soul Karma: 5,000,000 Ascending to Tavatimsa Heaven

Tavatimsa? Oh of course, that was the universal name for Daowadueng.

For Garmuti, ascension felt like becoming translated into rays of prismatic light, streaking up the height of Mount Sumeru like photons cast from the sun. He was reformed on the cloud at the peak of the universal mountain, upon which stood glorious Trai Trueng, the City of Deities, where music flowed as naturally as air. At its centre was Lord Indra's Palace, as great as the tallest mountain

on earth, composed entirely of diamonds, pearls, lapis lazuli and other gemstones.

Below him, the palaces of the Four Heavenly Kings and their departments were like toys. The Nine Celestial Bodies were balls of coloured lights. He could see the Cosmic Wall that circled the edge of the Cosmic Ocean, keeping the water contained like a gigantic tub. Scattered about like pebbles in a pond were hundreds of mortal worlds.

For the next few weeks? Months? It was hard to tell the time with the sun and moon orbiting under his feet. Garmuti spent his existence as a servant scurrying about the dazzling hallways of Lord Indra's palace, polishing every bejewelled surface or doing the bidding of the deities who strode the halls. Shantarni had become a handmaiden within the palace and three times they had crossed paths as underlings running between chores. She ignored him completely, always walking hand in hand with another devi, always giggling, exuding rays of sunshine between them. Her soulmate. The fire of jealousy burned within Garmuti's chest but he reminded himself that it would not be long before he would ascend past her.

He didn't need a soulmate where he was heading.

Total Soul Karma: 50,000,000 Ascending to Yama
Heaven

This heaven existed so far above Mount Sumeru that everything was pitch-black. Mount Sumeru, the Cosmic Ocean and the orbiting Celestial Lords, they were reduced to one tiny dot below him. His feet touched the soft wispy threads of space dust. Upon them grew a sea of star-flowers sown across the whole sky. Sometimes they bloomed bright like tiny pockets of day, other times their petals folded to hold secret their illumination like a shy moon.

He and the other denizens sojourned like pilgrims in the dark, eating these specks of light. The blooming star-flowers tasted like summer memories with your mother at the end of a holiday, the

closed ones like your final nights in the arms of your child. With each careful step, they gave birth to newborn stars.

Total Soul Karma: 500,000,000 Ascending to Tusita Heaven

The heaven remained black as a void, but everything and everyone was radiant with shades of swirling nebulae. These were the luminous bodies of bodhisattva who remained, not yet departing to Nirvana in order to guide the hapless souls on earth. It was also the realm of future Buddhas, infinite souls in repose, waiting to be born whenever Buddhism became forgotten by the mortal world.

This entire heaven echoed with the timbral sermon of the universe, teaching impermanence to every atom in his body. Garmuti was a deity here, an equal to the legendary figures around him. He didn't expect them to be so boring. All they did was meditate, engage in debates or outshine each other in serene competitions of charity to lesser beings.

But the karmic multiplier was transcendental, so Garmuti made sure to follow the bodhisattvas in every worship, every sermon, every visitation to the realms of mortals and devas. Anything to ascend past this place. He might not fit in here but there would be better heavens beyond.

Total Soul Karma: 5,000,000,000 Ascending to
Nimmanarati Heaven

He gathered form within a palace made from pulsar glow. Neutron stars were its foundations and red giants were its lights. Electromagnetic beams weaved within his mind and he knew that he could conjure anything he wished with a mere thought.

A vial of amrita, two vials of amrita, an earthenware jug of soma, an earthenware jug of amrita, a ripe narepol fruit, an overripe narepol, two female kinnarees, a male kinnara, a flock of twenty

male and female kinnaras, a levitating bed of magnetically charged nebulae, a likeness of Shantarni, a bed with purple and gold sheets with a gossamer canopy, a dozen deva and devi servants, a jacuzzi of superheated and super-compressed water, a mirror made from a shaved block of diamond, a prismatic flute made from a crystal stalactite within the hall of karma, a gandharva to play it, a thousand human monks chanting the Metta Sutra prayer, a mortal platter of grilled chicken and crispy pork, two unripe narepol fruits, a likeness of Shantarni, a likeness of Shantarni, a likeness of Shantarni, a likeness of Sikhala, a likeness of Lord Indra and a likeness of Lord Garuda, a vial of amrita, a jasmine flower, a bee, a jasmine tree, a patch of soil, a teardrop to fall from Garmuti's own eye, an ocean, a ray of light, a gust of air, a barren planet, a forest, a sun, a moon, birds, sea creatures, land animals, a human male, a human female.

Total Soul Karma: 100,000,000,000 Ascending to
Paranimmitavasavatti Heaven

Here, he had no form. He did not understand the space he occupied. He only sensed a host of deities that existed to worship him. They knew his desires and willed them into being for him to enjoy. His every whim, every want, fulfilled before he even knew them.

It was a state of unceasing pleasure. A drowning churn of ecstasy. Showers of matter and electromagnetism. An unending stream of delicacies. Orgasms after transcendental orgasms. Without physical limits of satiety or habituation, without a heart that could burst or a brain that could melt, there was no cessation of pleasure. No opportunity for a decline that would provide a contrast to dim the pleasure before. It was an eternity of peaks, crushed to a plateau.

Time lost meaning in its entirety. Garmuti could not even form thoughts. Dimly, he perceived the grinning Lord Mara, greatest demon of desire who once sought to tempt the Buddha with his armies and daughters. This was his realm upon the highest

sensuous heaven. A deity predicted Garmuti's desire and showed him the Soul Karma counter, continuing to rise: 999,000,000,000.

Nirvana was within reach! Let's goooo!

Total Soul Karma: 999,999,999,999 MAXIMUM KARMIC
CAP REACHED

VALUE ERROR

ERROR: INTEGER OVERFLOW

TROUBLESHOOTING

PLEASE WAIT

PLEASE WAIT

RESETTING

EXISTENCE RENEWED

RESTORING KARMIC PROFILE

FORMATTING SOUL SETTINGS

Total Soul Karma: -999,999,999,999 Descending to
Avici Hell

It was a place without respite. Without waves. Without ceasing. Only flames. The deepest of hells for matricides, patricides, killers of bodhisattvas and harmers of Buddhas.

Garmuti dwelled in a naked body, packed into a cramped box of red-hot metal. He was impaled by so many iron spears that he could not move. Roasted from outside and within. Trapped in the box without air.

He died within seconds. Immediately he awoke in the same body, to suffer again. And again. And again. Until his karmic debt was repaid.

Like in the highest heaven, he could not form thoughts in this deepest hell. Nor could he keep track of time. Every moment of birth was a shock, the physical limit of agony. Death too was writhing, his final moment dreading the reemergence of consciousness and pain.

He knew he had to atone, but he could not remember his crimes. He did not know what he did or who he was, the slate of his past lives wiped clean.

The only trace to cling upon his soul was the karma he carried.

Total Soul Karma: -999,999,998,999

All eight hell realms shared the same rule. After one hell-year, the sufferer may be restored 1,000 points of karma.

Like all condemned souls, Garmuti screamed for Nirvana and the cessation of suffering.



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BARNACLE

KATE ELLIOTT

BARNACLE

KATE ELLIOTT

Illustration by JUAN BERNABEU

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T ● R
D ● T
C ● M

A sharp report shocks Rose out of her sleep. Without sitting up, she rolls off the old cot, one hand pushing back so it doesn't tip over onto her. Although her five years as a medic during the war happened decades ago, she's never lost the training.

The gunshot had the distinctive gassy cough of the CM-70 used by company sentinels. From her knees, she scans the dark room with her old military inserts. Seen through infrared, the room's outlines remain recognizable: table and chairs, sofa and lamp, cupboard and changing screen, the curtained alcove where her grandsons share a double bed once used by the boys' parents—her son and daughter-in-law. The two sleeping forms create a blotchy intensity visible through the gauze curtain.

The ceiling fan turns in a slow grind, shifting the muggy air. Maybe the sound was merely another flashback in a lifetime of bad dreams. Her gut tells her otherwise. This might finally be the link they've been struggling to connect with for years, as long as the shot doesn't mean the company already killed the messenger.

She rises stiffly, knees popping and crackling, and shuffles to the window. This time of year, she leaves it open to bring in circulation. Anything to break the heat. A scan of the dark sky turns up no movement, although she hears the high alarm call of a killdeer amid the island stacks and the pillars of the drowned city, stretching east toward dawn. There! A brief glimpse of its energetic flight over the water before it vanishes from sight.

The town sprawled haphazardly along the ragged shoreline remains lightless, powered down for the night. No one and nothing is moving except a solitary dull red figure on the sentinel tower overlooking the salvage yard. Two more sentinels join the first.

That's unusual. Maybe they heard it too. Maybe they are the shooters. If that's so, then what were they shooting at?

Motion out on the surface of the water catches her eye. She zooms in with her implanted lenses. The company has never discovered her military inserts because, from the outset, they stripped comprehensive health care away, so there was never anyone to identify and report her augments.

A boat glides behind one of the island stacks, visible to her from this angle but not from the sentinel tower's line of sight. The boat displays no engine heat, just two bodies working oars. Night salvagers. Usually they'd have put into shore before dawn could betray illegal activity to the sentinels. Is it coincidence they've stayed out so long? Or is their delay related to the shot? How will they get in safely, especially if the sentinels see them? There's nothing she can do, not until the morning siren allows people to leave their homes.

She blinks off the inserts, rubs her scratchy eyes, and checks her old combat comms link in case by some miracle there's been a breakthrough past the company's total blackout. No pings, no static; all quiet, like the dawn. As long as they can't communicate, and the only public legal record available is that of their employment leases, the company can speak on their behalf to the Neutral Zone, which lies beyond the company's shore operations and inland enclaves.

She leans against the sill to study the scene. The sky lightens. The curve of the sun breaches the horizon. Elongated rays of sunlight spread gleaming stripes across the murky waters. The landscape's hushed mystery shimmers with simple beauty, even here, even now, in this broken, fragmented world.

The morning siren cracks the silence with a shrill hoot, repeated three times. The tracker embedded in her shoulder buzzes. The work day has started. For the next fourteen hours, everything is on the clock.

She leaves the window open and goes out to use the hall toilet. Handprint first, to register the user—all weight, volume, and analysis

of waste and wash water calculated by WasteNot! WantNot! LLC and added to the cost of rent. While she is peeing, her combat link gives a proximity shiver. The company turned off the comms transmitter and receiver, but even the company's blackout can't eradicate the link's proximity alarm. In this case, the two-fold shiver signaling the approach of a friendly, another servicemember from the old federal army.

When Rose comes out of the toilet, LaChelle is waiting by the door for her turn. LaChelle is older than Rose, so old she grew up in the city before the rising waters took it all. A career army officer, she is now an eighty-year-old shoreline trash picker. She uses her picker to lean on as she clips a thank-you nod at Rose for the gift of food Rose left for her last night.

"Damn crow woke me up," she says to Rose. "Did it wake you too?"

"Yes. That squawk always jars me." They've developed a complex code to get around places in the buildings where there are cameras and listening ears.

LaChelle scratches the side of her right eye to show she'll keep an eye out on her shoreline trash patrol for anything unusual that might wash up.

"Plenty of birds out," Rose adds, and there are: a pair of wrens in the bushes, a grackle investigating a patch of scrubby grass, even a robin pecking along the ground. "Feels like their population is growing. Could swear I even saw a pair of owls out hunting over the water."

"I'll check their nest. Maybe they'll have a fish we can share."

"A fresh fish this time, we can hope," agrees Rose. Neither glances at the surveillance camera hanging above the toilet door in a corridor where people may gossip while they wait in line. "A shame the last three fish were too poisoned to eat."

"I heard yesterday out on Spearhook Point from one of the rakers that there was a catch down south that didn't have to be thrown

out," says the colonel, not that anyone calls her that now that the country she once served no longer exists.

"The tide is turning," Rose says. It was their catch phrase in the closing days of the war, although it tastes bittersweet now, given that they ended up on the wrong side of the border. It all happened so long ago that the boys have never known anything except company rule. We old-timers haven't forgotten, she thinks with stubborn pride.

LaChelle gives what once-sergeant Rose still thinks of as "an officer's nod." "May we all be so fortunate. Have a blessed day."

"Have a blessed day." Rose echoes the company-mandated phrase.

By the time Rose returns to their room, the boys are up and dressed. Tai will be fifteen next month. Leon is eleven. They're responsible boys. They've been through a lot, having sat vigil by their father as he died from a highly resistant staph infection three years ago. Best Outcomes! LLC refused to approve intravenous antibiotics because his work detail in the salvage crews wasn't rated high enough to warrant the expense. Soon after Eddy's death, the boys' mother's contract was renegotiated by the central office inland, the office no one in this town has ever been to, as there is no way to get there. Sela was required to leave town—and her boys—to teach in one of the hill enclaves whose communities demand in-classroom teachers. She gets leave to come home just once a month, although each time she smuggles home a discarded print book.

While the boys visit the toilet and wash their hands, Rose divides up two bean and barley burritos she received as unrecorded payment yesterday. The third she tucked into a little hiding slot out of the camera's line of sight on the landing, for LaChelle, who can barely eke out enough credit for a tiny sleeping closet and a single meal per day at the town's company cafeteria.

A WasteNot! WantNot! LLC placard hammered into the wall reads *Food In The Home Is Unsanitary!* but they're careful and haven't been caught.

They sit at the table by the window that overlooks the flooded city. An osprey glides overhead, although she can't imagine it will have good hunting here. A sheen of oil turns the water mirrorlike beneath the rising sun. Dead trees stick up as posts, remainders of a park where she took Eddy to play as a child. Leon leafs through a decades-old science book whose still-bright photos depict stars and supernovae remnants, gas clouds and galaxies. Tai studies a bedraggled old pamphlet on hacking telecommunications systems he borrowed from Sawyer, using a contraband pencil stub to make notes in the margins.

The fan clicks off as electricity is shut down for the day in all housing units. The warning siren blares. As they hurry down the echoing, concrete stairs, the boys tell her about a girl who was expelled from school yesterday because the family couldn't pay her fees.

"What happened then?" Rose asks.

Tai shoots her a warning look. "She's my age," he says, which means he doesn't want to say any more in front of Leon.

"Ah. You mean that pretty girl, Becka."

Tai blushes. "That's not what I meant," he groused.

"I know it isn't," she says gently. "I'm worried too. She's a sweet girl. She brings her malnourished little sister into the clinic every week for her vitamin shot."

"I saw her parents outside," says Leon unexpectedly. He's a sharply observant boy, wise beyond his years. "They said she wasn't fifteen yet. Too early to start her service. The sentinels arrested them for causing a disturbance. Amma, they weren't even shouting. Just asking for a recalibration on the fees. She was supposed to have earned extra because she tutors younger kids in math. They said she was given no extra credits for the work she did."

Tai breaks in. "The company never gave her the high score bonus she was due. She scored top of the school in math and engineering proficiency."

He closes his mouth as they reach the bottom of the stairs, where they might be overheard. It's not flood season, so the rooms on the ground floor of this former office complex have been set up as a dormitory for one of this year's two cohorts of debt laborers. It's best never to be heard criticizing the company. People get extra credit for reporting malingeringers and malcontents. But the ground floor lies empty. The "summer sparrows" have already left to buy a meal from Healthy Kitchen! LLC before the time clock shifts from "prep period" to "task period."

Outside, Rose and the boys each click over five credits to step up onto the raised boardwalk owned by Secure Walking! LLC. The rent they pay to Hope Housing! LLC is low here on the flooding verge, but it's against the law to use the old non-fee roads and sidewalks, which have been condemned and placed off-limits even though they're no worse than the poorly maintained and cheaply constructed boardwalk. *Freedom isn't free!* proclaims a sign on the boardwalk as they walk into the center of town, carefully stepping over warped boards and patches of dry rot. Eddy used to do maintenance on his day off, on his own time. There's been no one to take his place.

They check in at the Pure for You! LLC vending machines to fill their old stainless steel bottles with the daily water ration and accept their Complimentary! LLC cigarette, courtesy of the company. The line moves quickly, after which they join the queue at Healthy Kitchen! LLC for the mandated daily weigh-in. A dispenser spills out grimy tokens in an amount equal to their allowed calorie allotment based on their weight plus credit rating, which they can trade in at the cafeteria or one of the two automat annexes.

Inside the big cafeteria, the boys pick out their favorites: bread with spread, kelp pudding, protein sausage, and hash browns. They'll get a protein smoothie for lunch at school. Rose prefers oatmeal with whatever seeds, nuts, and dried fruit are on hand along with a scoop of protein powder. She hasn't tasted wheat or butter for years but the bread's all right, some combination of millet

and amaranth, and there's always plenty of peanut butter. They sit at a table to eat.

Over the years locals have decorated the cafeteria wall with a bright mural depicting the town and its environs: the drowned city with ghost outlines of its old contours, half-sunken boats covered in barnacles, owls skimming over the oily waters, raccoons scavenging out beyond the fence, cheerful mice and responsible rats busy at work although, if you understand what to look for, the decorative flower wreaths are really chains sealing doors and windows. Crows circle overhead, spying on everything. In the distance, tucked into a tree-lined valley beyond shadowy hills, a dappled cow with a distended udder grazes peaceably and a watchful hawk soars in the distance, barely more than a sketch of outstretched wings.

Rose knows everyone, and greets people as they arrive and leave. Tai whispers intently with a pair of friends who made fifteen a few months ago and were sent to apprenticeship positions in the salvage yards, roaches in the ruins, as this new generation call themselves. But all too soon they have to bus their dishes and head out as the time clock ticks inexorably down toward "task period."

She checks the boys in at the school and, after they've gone in, pauses in the entry foyer with its racks for coats and shelves for outdoor shoes. Through an open door she watches all ages of children sit at tables facing a big screen; there is no image playing, just a blank, black void. The screen is where Best Outcomes! LLC pipes in classes from an inland enclave where company citizens live. That the screen is dark now is unusual since in the morning it always plays a recorded ball game from one of the enclaves' professional sports leagues, sponsored by Your Entertainment! LLC.

Many children slump with bored faces, but a small group has clustered around Tai's chair as he explains something in a low voice. His passionate expression worries her, although she would never ask him to change. He is his father's son, angry and determined to make whatever small changes are within his power.

Uncle Cristiano, the school's custodian, makes his laborious way up to her. The foyer is a good place to talk as it lacks a surveillance camera.

"The feed cut out twice yesterday, but it was running fine when I put it on sleep mode just before curfew," he tells Rose in a voice softened by early-stage mesothelioma. He ought to be retired and resting, but to receive the minimal treatments available he has to be employed.

"Sure does seem glitches and cuts happen more often these days," she agrees. "It wouldn't be so bad if they'd adjust the fees when it happens. Or offer an alternate curriculum. Books, maybe."

He wheezes a sarcastic laugh. The school removed the library of print books six years ago and now requires the students to pay per page viewed on tablets they can only access at school. "Central office didn't credit any of the children the last set of their community maintenance work hours and in-class shared tutoring. You heard about Becka?"

"I did. What do you think?"

He frowns. "Nothing good. We have to hope her engineering potential will spare her the worst. The thing is, Doc, I'm not sure the screen shutdown this morning comes from the company's end. It costs them nothing to run the old AI teaching program. That thing was out of date thirty years ago. You hear anything about a gunshot just before dawn?"

"I heard it. CM-70"

Abruptly he coughs, hand pressed to chest and bending forward with a spasm. A proximity alert shivers in her combat link, the triple buzz signaling an unknown who is potentially hostile. Before she can step forward to see if Uncle Cristiano is all right, his gaze flashes up to meet hers, then flickers past her with a warning look. Belatedly, she hears the tromp of confident footsteps. Definitely hostile. She sets fists on hips, arms akimbo, to block the view into the schoolroom.

The children have already heard. Inside the classroom, they scatter to their assigned seats. Tai slips something into a pocket.

A sentinel unit stamps in through the entry: tall, well-fed young men from the hill enclaves. They patrol the town in threes, wearing the gold badges of Safe For You! LLC pinned to the glossy black uniforms that give them the nickname of crows. They carry the dual-shot carbines like they are third appendages.

“How d’you do, Doc?” they say with big, bullying smiles as they sweep past and take a turn through the classroom, ogling the older youth in a grotesque way that makes her think of pretty Becka. All the students stiffen, keeping their gazes safely lowered.

“Hey! Uncle Crusty!” The sentinels beckon to the custodian, who shuffles toward them as they laugh at his crooked gait. “Why’s your screen down? You get a fine for turning the equipment off!”

“I didn’t turn it off, sirs. Our screen was down when I got in this morning. I sent one of the students to the supervisor’s office to report the shutdown. Must have come from the company side. No fine, in that case.”

“You township lowlifes are all lazy liars,” scoffs the corporal, who looks maybe nineteen, cocky with power. “And you, old man, you’re just a waste of air. Can’t even work a decent day’s labor, can you?”

Tension scalds the air. The children don’t like the old man being mocked, but they keep their mouths shut and heads down. Tai gives a flick of his hand to send Rose off. He’s growing up. Taking responsibility. So like his dad and mom.

Her tracker buzzes as the time clock siren wails a last long blare signaling the end of the morning “prep period.” She’s late. She takes the hint from Tai and heads out.

Fortunately, the clinic is only a block away, on the corner of the central plaza, next to the barber shop and public baths. All three are owned by the health branch of Best Outcomes! LLC.

Winnie, the clinic’s clerk, sleeps in the clinic, which allows her to unlock the doors at the first tracker buzz. It also allows Winnie to take twilight raccoon deliveries of off-market herbs and bits and

bobs of outer-reaches salvage that the clinic uses to supplement the meager supplies and equipment the company provides. Rose hands her complimentary cigarette to Winnie, who will use them for barter. Even if Rose wishes people did not smoke, she understands why and how the company works to make it happen. They encourage people to go further into debt however they can.

The waiting room is already full, people seated on hard benches. A thin child coughs exhaustedly, slumped against an elderly woman, Arlene, who is draped in a threadbare shawl. With a palsied hand, Arlene is signing a promissory note for treatment for her sick grandchild. Arlene herself has a treatable condition, but from the beginning the company dealt harshly with any persons who had worked in the legal professions. Once a paralegal at a firm specializing in consumer protection lawsuits, she had been assigned to clean toilets and to muck out the filtering grids and drainage pits in the salvage yard. When she could no longer manage the punishing physical labor, the company refused to transfer her to a desk job. So now she can only get medical care for her grandchildren, who have future worth for the company.

As Rose adjusts a medical grade mask over her face, Arlene says, "Those crows sure made a ruckus early."

"So they did. Woke me up." They exchange a nod.

A baseball game plays on the big screen, Wings versus Hammers, the volume turned down to background chatter. "Fly ball to right field ... and...Smith catches the ball at the warning track!"

Rose walks on through the waiting room. There's another mural here, a sequence of old-fashioned farm scenes: a red barn with sparrows roosting along its roof ridge, a henhouse with smug hens overseeing fluffy chicks, a green tractor with a calm cat at the controls, a herd of cows with calves grazing in a wide open pasture, mice and rats seated at a table in the hayloft sharing cheese, monstrous mosquitos and ticks with stolen plates being marched off in disgrace by officious dogs, a gate in the shadows half open to reveal a bounteous garden beyond.

She nods at people she knows, and notes individuals she's never seen before, twice as many as yesterday, most coughing or wan with fever: a virus has hit the dormitories, brought in by the most recently arrived summer sparrows.

Clarissa, the clinic intern, moves through the room taking histories, triaging the patients, and handing out reused masks to people who don't have one even though Best Outcomes! LLC policy states that it provides masks free of charge to prevent epidemic disease outbreaks, according to the terms of the armistice.

Clarry is a bright, eager sixteen-year-old with what Rose judges is an authentic calling toward healing. She can't afford the next level of schooling, only available in the inland enclaves. The company has allowed the girl a waiver to work as an unpaid intern at the clinic rather than sending her to the yards or one of the raking crews. Rose can't pay her either. Knowledge is the only currency she has after forty years as a medic turned nurse. The town will need someone to look after people when she's too infirm to work since the town isn't on the list to receive a nurse after she's gone.

Winnie points with her right elbow toward the back. Clarry looks up, giving a sharp dip of the chin. *Urgent.*

Rose goes into the back, past the exam room and the sterile procedure room to the storeroom with its half-empty shelves and a surveillance camera that's been hacked by Sawyer with a staggered loop for the last eight years. In the shadowed back, on a scrupulously sterilized foldout metal table, lies a young woman curled into a ball, arms clenched over her abdomen, moaning with a quiet, hopeless keen. There's blood on her skirt and no one with her.

Rose comprehends the situation at once. She doesn't recognize the young woman, who wears a debt laborer's uniform, always a skirt and blouse for women. She's a new seasonal from the cohort housed on the other side of town, closer to the salvage yards.

"I'm Rose." She wants to rest a reassuring hand on the patient's shoulder but they've never spoken, so she needs to wait and establish trust.

"Doc Rose," whispers the young woman, repeating a name someone has told her.

This isn't the time to share that she's a nurse, that the town hasn't had a doctor in twenty-four years, only a screen that connects to Your Friendly Doctor Art Gence! LLC. "What's your name?"

"Gloria." After a pause, she adds in a frightened whisper, "I don't want to die."

"Gloria, you're losing blood. To figure out a treatment I need to know what method you used." She doesn't say "abortion" out loud. Even with the hacked surveillance camera it's too risky.

"I didn't! I'm not! They'll arrest me."

"Help me help you, Gloria. Once you're stabilized—" She doesn't say *if*. She needs her patient to believe in her. "—is there a safe place you can rest for a few days?"

"I got no free days to cash in." The young woman catches in a sob. "Anyways, there's nowhere safe, is there? They ... they came into the dormitory."

Rose's heart hardens as she sets her rage and fear aside and closes it off so she can work effectively. "Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to diagnose you with respiratory syncytial virus. A fresh variant is going around right now. I'll tuck in someone else's positive results to your paperwork. That means I can assign you a place in the isolation hall. It's over behind the bathhouse. There's a twenty-four-hour sentry on duty to make sure no one leaves so sickness doesn't spread."

"Sentry? A sentinel?" The girl shudders, arms folding tight over her breasts. There's a rip in her blouse's collar.

"Sorry. It's not a company sentinel. I say sentry but I mean the janitor for the bathhouse. He lives there, always on duty. He was a marine in the war, a long time ago now. No one gets past Sawyer if he doesn't want them to. That means no crow can get to you there."

"Crow?"

"It's what we call the sentinels."

Gloria shrugs, shaking her head because she doesn't understand.

Rose can talk to her about the local code later. "Since I sent two sick folks over yesterday, you going there today won't light any alarms. Four days' quarantine is what I can give you. Then you have to return to work"

"But what about food? I don't got an allowance or any extra. What about the toilet cost? Won't it report the blood? They track our periods."

"I understand your concerns. Let me reassure you. Quarantine has a separate set of regulations because the company wants to avoid an epidemic. You get two meals a day brought to your door. As for the other, there are no toilets in the quarantine building. You get a toilet bucket with an odor lid. There's a separate waste sterilization vat for quarantine. It won't be analyzed except for disease. You'll be isolated, no one to see you or talk to you. Can you manage that, Gloria?"

The young woman releases a pain-filled sigh. She begins to talk in a low, frantic tone about the assault that happened ten weeks ago. She was one of two women who arrived three days ahead of the other seasonals because of a schedule glitch in the cargo trucks that haul the cohorts. The sentinels who came into the dormitory wouldn't take no for an answer because why should they? The company owns her like it owns this town.

"Who was the other woman?" Rose asks with sudden dread.

"Oh, they didn't touch her. She has that skin thing. Lizard scale. Afterward, she was crying and let me sleep with her in her bunk. I felt safe there. That's where I've been sleeping, between her and the wall. She told me not to say anything. If they find out you been raped, then they fine you for being a sex worker. I'd get moved to Funnel Point. No one wants to go there. It's a slaughterhouse. She said it would be okay, there will be fresh fish soon, but who eats fish? They're all poison."

Fresh fish soon. Is the other woman an informer from the central office hoping to find out whether the township had been infiltrated by outreach from the Neutral Zone? Direct outreach is illegal

according to the terms of the armistice. Or maybe the other woman is just a regular sparrow who keeps her eyes and ears open and learns from the people around her?

“What happened to her? Is she still around?”

“Yeah. She works out at Rock Wall with a freight unit. She’s the one told me to find Doc Rose. She asked at Rock Wall. Said she wanted to know who the local doc was because of her skin condition. No one traced the question to me.”

“I see. Does she have a name?”

“She goes by Lizzie. Like lizard scale, don’t you think?”

“Could be.” Although in the bedtime stories told to the children, a “lizzie” is a splendid magical creature who grants wishes. Rose sets the thought aside and gets back to business. “Now listen, Gloria, this matters a lot. You’re bleeding. I need to know how you did it. That’s the only way I can help you.”

The young woman wipes her eyes, convulsing at a fresh wave of pain. “Snakeroot. Picked it myself, up past the fence. There was a place where the chain-link was cut and you could peel it back. That’s how I got through. In the transit dormitories, they say snakeroot works.”

“All right. It does work, but not in a safe way. It’s dangerous for multiple reasons. Here’s what I’m going to do, Gloria. I’m going to insert seaweed into your cervix to dilate it, get it to open. Then I will do a procedure called a D & C that will basically clean out your uterus. I need to do the procedure to make sure you don’t get an infection in there. Dilation will take until tomorrow. I’ll send you over to the bathhouse while you wait. You will feel a lot of discomfort as the seaweed expands. You must stay quiet. Can you do that? Good girl. Buckle up.”

Rose works in silence as Gloria alternates between holding her breath with stubborn courage and sniffling out weak sobs. The military inserts prove useful in procedures since she can use them to zoom in for a high-resolution look at injuries, and to measure tissue for elevated temperatures that might signal a local infection. After

the seaweed is in place, Rose gives Gloria a second pan of sterile water to clean herself up as well as a clean skirt and underpants with several changes of reusable sanitary pads and a pail to soak them in.

She walks Gloria out the back into the courtyard with its covered cistern shared between the clinic and the public baths. A proximity shiver on her link warns her that Sawyer is moving her way. A moment later, he opens the locked back door of the baths and wheels out to see why she's come. He's a stocky man about her age, tough and sarcastic, with a sharp tongue and both legs lost above the knee during the war. He assesses the situation with a glance and gently takes the girl under his wing. Maybe it's the squeaky old wheelchair that comforts Gloria or maybe just something about Sawyer's twinkling eyes and compassionate gaze.

The rest of the day passes quickly, one patient after the next with the usual complaints: three skin infections, two infected abrasions, a rush at lunch break of patients coming in for their daily pain meds—since the company requires each dose to be dispensed in person to prevent drug sales or barter on the gray market—and this season's spike of viral respiratory disease. She sends two more people to the bathhouse's isolation hall. If more show up, she'll have to double up rooms or ask for a dispensation to establish a quarantine zone in one of the dormitories.

It's a long day, with one short break for a lunch of protein sausage, bread with spread, and maize porridge, but it's always a long day. A few people leave modest gifts of food or produce or random items on a little alcove shelf tucked out of the way in the foyer behind the coat closet, a place not visible to sentinels should they barge in. At five o'clock, the tracker buzzes to announce final shift, the long three hours from five to eight. There's a twelve-minute transition with ten minutes of calisthenics and stretching and a two-minute gratitude meditation that is a recording sponsored by Healthy Outcomes! LLC.

About an hour later the boys come in together, having completed their after-school community chores. Tai hangs up his jacket and goes over to the bathhouse where the time clock will show him as assisting Sawyer with janitorial duties for further work credits. In reality he and the wily old marine will be working on something they hope will bring down the blackout through explosive sabotage, a last-ditch option Sawyer is skeptical about but Tai insists has to be considered should no fish be caught.

Winnie and Clarry juggle a late rush of patients who take advantage of final shift's lower penalties for taking time off. Clarry has gotten very good at delivering vitamin shots for young children with as little discomfort and fear as possible. Leon cleans the clinic, his work so efficient that he can sneak five minutes here and there to continue studying an anatomy book whose yellowing transparencies reveal how the structures in the human body are layered together.

At seven, the tracker buzzes to signal "cool down." The last rush eases as people head home before curfew. While Leon and Clarry and Winnie close up, Rose goes through the back to the bathhouse.

Gloria's gritted jaw suggests she is in pain from the seaweed, but she doesn't complain.

"I'll do the procedure tomorrow," says Rose. "Be patient. Be a barnacle."

"What's a barnacle?"

"A creature that holds on over the years, even in erosive settings."

"Oh. Okay. The soup is good here. Better than we get in the dormitory."

"Make sure to tell Sawyer. He likes a good compliment. It isn't easy to cook tasty soup with what we have to work with. But we've learned."

"Do you have to go?" Gloria clutches her hand as if it is a lifeline. Rose's years as a medic and town nurse have taught her that, in truth, she bridges the gap between death and life. It's a big

responsibility, but then again, the town functions not because of the supervisor seated in his air-conditioned office with twenty-four-hour-a-day electricity and access to the company's up-to-date technology, but because each individual even at the lowliest job has a part to play in the community's constant struggle to survive.

"I do have to go, love, but I'll be back in the morning. We'll get this sorted out. You'll be all right."

Gloria wipes away a tear. "How can I be all right? They'll do it again. Who's to stop them? Lizzie said rape used to be a crime, a long time ago. Is that really true?"

"Would you like to live in a place where the company wasn't in charge?"

"There is no place like that."

"What if there was? What if you could call out so someone in that place heard you? And what if once they heard you, then the company would have to let you go and live there?"

"Oh come on, Doc. That's just a stupid story people tell, about a cow that gives milk from its breasts ... no, they call it something else."

"Udder."

"Yeah. But no one even has cows except rich people in the enclaves. There is nowhere else. Just more of this."

Rose's anger swells to become something stronger, a righteous rage that this young woman has no hope for anything better, no belief there could be a future beyond the regimented life of debt labor to the company. To those who grew up inside the company, there is no other world they know, and thus no pathway except to more of the same. But Rose and LaChelle and Sawyer and Arlene and a few others are old enough to remember the armistice and its legal fine print. Arlene had long since memorized the salient clauses and wrote them down in secret.

Epidemics need to be protected against since they cross borders. No dumping waste in river or sea water, which crosses borders. Air quality controls, since the wind blows pollution where it wills. People

have the right to ask for severance, to leave and go elsewhere, even into the Neutral Zone, as long as their debt gets paid.

Section 3. Right to Leave and to Seek Asylum. No State, no corporate entity exercising the powers of a State, and no officer or agent of the same shall abridge the right of any person to depart the jurisdiction thereof and to petition the Neutral Zone for asylum. Every person so petitioning shall be received by the Neutral Zone as an asylee, save upon a specific finding by a court of competent jurisdiction that such person poses a clear and present danger to the physical safety of the inhabitants of the Neutral Zone. This right of egress and asylum shall not be suspended or denied on account of distance, the passage of time, any declaration of emergency, or any other pretext whatsoever.

The old civil government hadn't quite lost the war, but it hadn't quite won either. An armistice with concessions agreed to on all sides was the most any could manage. Being stuck on the wrong side of the armistice line hadn't seemed so bad, not at first. Not until the company had shut down all communications and even the supposedly unassailable combat comms links.

Sawyer has a tiny secret office tucked out of sight past a tool closet behind the cistern. He's back there with two of the owls, supervising Tai as the boy removes their trackers. Rose figured out a physical workaround some years ago: For trusted volunteers, she extracted the tracker and inserted it into a tiny ceramic cylinder that is securely taped into their armpit, easy to miss unless the supervisor mandates a strip search of all yard workers. The tiny cylinders will go to the boarding house to make it look as if Shorty and Paulina are asleep in their bunks. The salvagers will go out on the water, unable to be tracked.

"Are you the ones who were out last night?" Rose asks.

"No, Doc," says Shorty. "That was Joey and Handsome. Didn't they come by?"

"I saw them at dawn." She adds anxiously, "Any chance they got caught?"

Paulina shakes her head. "We'd've heard if there was a ruckus."

"What was crow bait last night?"

"Odds on it being a flying fish from outside. We heard a rumor at Rock Wall that someone saw a white tanglefish in the water by Lao Point. It was broken and only half submerged, so they threw rocks at it until it sank. We're going tonight to fetch it, if we can."

"Take care."

The night salvagers leave for their boarding house, where they'll nap until the last siren at midnight and then head out.

"What do you think about the squawk we heard? Besides it being a CM-70, I mean," Rose asks Sawyer as the boys shoulder their packs for the walk home.

"Hard to say. Let's see if Shorty and Paulina find anything. Could've been debris."

"What if nothing ever changes?" Leon asks, not angry, just resigned.

"Then we keep working," says Sawyer.

"I'd rather just blow it all up!" snaps Tai, clenching his hands, breathing hard.

Rose rests a hand on his arm. He never grew taller than her. All of the children born here are shorter than their parents, shorter even than Shorty. "Day's not over yet. Let's go before we get a curfew fine."

The boys understand their grandmother can't afford a fine, so they hustle up. After clicking over the required credits, they head back along the boardwalk on the familiar route. The proximity link shivers in three short bursts.

Ahead, three large figures loom out of the late twilight gloom. Their swagger makes Leon shrink back and Tai puff up angrily. Rose doesn't falter. She walks right up to the one in the lead and halts, keeping her body between them and her grandsons.

Sentinels are required to keep guns and uniforms in best order. One of the guns is so new the sentinel hasn't yet peeled its label off the shoulder-stock: *Carbine, Multipurpose, Model 70, featuring an advanced gas regulator detection system to switch between lethal*

and less-than-lethal rounds without any additional adjustments. For the discerning peacekeeper. Caution: using multiple types of rounds in the same magazine not recommended.

“How can I help you?” she asks. “We’re on our way home.”

The sentinels laugh coarsely. “Looks like we got us a tiny troop of lazy liars. Why you out so late...”

The corporal gestures for the sneering speaker to stop. “Doc Rose? That you?”

“It is,” she says cautiously. It’s never good to be stopped by the sentinels, especially at night, next door to curfew.

“Good thing!” says the corporal. “We got a medical question.”

“Your unit has a medic,” she says evenly.

“Yeah but we get a demerit if we come down sick. Frankie here got scratched by that little hellcat. It was just a scratch so we didn’t think anything of it. But it got all red and nasty. Show her, Frankie.”

Frankie winces as he unbuttons his uniform shirt and peels it back to show lurid, puffy red lines across his shoulder. It’s infected.

Rose has a lifetime of experience controlling her expression. A white-hot burning part of her soul wants to tell him to rub salt in the wound, but she doesn’t. Becoming a barnacle when the toxic waves roll through is the hardest part of the work.

“You’ve got a skin infection. I don’t have any antibiotics—”

“How can you not have antibiotics?” the corporal scoffs. “The salvage rats get cuts all the time.”

“And die of them,” she snaps.

Taken aback by her harsh tone, they shift away from her, hands restless on their carbines. The tracker buzzes, two short, one long: fifteen minutes to curfew. She has a long-practiced medic’s tone for fraught situations.

“Corporal, I recommend you buy honey from the garden market and smear it on the infection. It’s a natural antibiotic and might help. If it doesn’t, you’re going to have to go to your medical unit, demerit or no demerit. An infection like this can spread to the blood, if it hasn’t already.”

"But—!"

"You can come see me tomorrow at lunch, if you must. I'll clean out the wound, see if there's anything else I can do with what I have. But I strongly recommend you take the demerit and see your medic. If that is a highly resistant staph infection, you don't want to be on the other end of what it will turn into, if it isn't already too late."

She wants to say more, much much more, like it would serve him right, but she doesn't. She grabs Tai's elbow and steers him past the men, Leon right at her heels. The sentinels let them go as they start arguing with each other about whether to report to medical or not.

She and the boys hurry home.

The electricity comes on at eight, rationed through an elaborate system she doesn't understand, something the company has plenty of resources to implement. They have two hours of electric light, after which only the fan will run, and that only because fans help keep mildew at bay. The mandate changed ten summers ago after a rash of heat-related deaths, after which Arlene staged a sit-down protest on the former supervisor's doorstep and reminded him of the company's legal obligations respecting basic human care.

Leon finishes the book on the universe and asks Rose for permission to read her hefty *Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*, the one she keeps hidden in their room because it would be confiscated if anyone saw it at the clinic.

"It's pretty heavy going," she says.

He gives her a wildly expressive eye roll, and she gives him a hug, which he shrugs off with a blend of annoyed independence and little-boy affection. Then he opens the book and is lost to the world.

Tai tells her he's headed down to the far end of the building to hang out with a schoolmate until ten, and goes out.

Rose tucks a pair of carrots and a gnarled potato into her shirt, making it pouch forward as if she is a prosperous person with plenty to eat and a proud belly to show for it. She climbs to the roof. LaChelle sits at an old café table on a spindly chair. Her seamed face

is illuminated by low red light arising from an old night-fighting technology implanted in officers' hands.

There's no camera up here, no one at all. The laborers aren't allowed, and not many locals live out so close to the shore. Rose sits down opposite LaChelle and pushes over the produce, which the colonel tucks into a pocket. She sets an object on the table. Her faintly glowing hand reveals it as a sleek silvery cylinder no longer than a small thumb.

Rose stares in awe, touching it as if it is a holy relic, forbidden. Of course, such a glittering little minnow is indeed forbidden. "I heard there was some tanglefish debris out by Lao Point. Shorty and Paulina are going to fish it out tonight, if they can. What is this?"

"When you said where you saw the rowboat, I searched where the currents would pull wreckage. It took me all day because the wind patterns are shifting, but I know this shoreline."

"None better," agrees Rose.

"I found this washed up on Maizy's Beach in a sealed pouch, wrapped in seaweed for disguise. This is it, Rose. The fish that's not been poisoned."

They sit for a while in silence overlooking the drowned city. A searchlight sweeps the water beyond the sentinel tower, where the company's pier juts out with its official salvage boats tied up in a line, ready for tomorrow's work. Lights give sparkle to the town. Rose can't quite hear people talking in their homes, but she feels them: the coughing child, the traumatized young woman, the elders keeping the old knowledge alive and the youth seeking to learn and create new patterns, the night salvagers whispering to each other as they decide what course they'll take across the water, the laborers settling to sleep as they brace for another day of exhausting work.

A shadow appears at the stairwell's entrance. Tai slides noiselessly over as he sometimes does. He's got an instinct, that boy. He sits in the third chair. LaChelle gestures. Carefully, trepidatiously, he picks up the cylinder and examines it from all angles. His grin is something to see, more brilliant than a thousand stars.

"I'll plug it in just before second buzzer. I think that will work?"

"We can but try," says LaChelle. "You know the tech better than I do. But most of us know the drill, should we succeed."

The final warning buzzes. Lights out in fifteen minutes. Rose and Tai go downstairs. He clutches the cylinder as if he is never going to let it go. When they reach the room, he whispers a few choice words to his little brother, whose eyes widen although he says nothing. Rose isn't sure how well the boys sleep that night, but she sleeps well, because back in the day she learned to sleep wherever, whenever, and she's never lost the habit.

No shot wakes her. Birdsong wakes her, the old soundtrack from a lost world where wings trace vast pathways across the land, able to migrate where they will.

The boys are silent this morning, nervous, determined. They click over the credits for the boardwalk, make their way into town. Arriving early at the school, Tai gives her an entirely unexpected hug before he hurries in. She needs to check on Gloria, so it's with some concern that she sees Winnie standing at the clinic door facing a tall young woman whose face and hands are speckled and gleaming with the silvery condition known as "lizard scale."

The woman steps right up to Rose, towering over her. "You're Doc Rose, aren't you?"

"Yes. You must be Lizzie. Gloria told me—"

"No. Listen."

"Not out here."

Rose takes her into the back, into the storage room with its looped camera. "You aren't here to check on Gloria?"

"No. I mean, yes. Of course. God, what a nightmare. That poor girl. She's only fourteen, did you know that? I wanted to kill them. But hold on, hold on. Not now." With a deep sigh, and a sharp exhalation, she controls herself. "I heard a rumor from that hot sexy gal Joey that the old colonel found the breaker."

"The breaker?"

"Do you have it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lizzie grits her teeth impatiently. "If you do, and you're going to try it, it won't work without this."

She holds out a black pin that's about an inch in length. "There's an insertion point in the cylinder. You put it in, then plug the cylinder into any of the company screens. They all have a scrambler and a control node. This will break through the company lockdown. But you won't have much time. They'll reboot and scramble within sixty seconds."

She might be a company informer. Yet her easy and casual reference to Joey as a hot sexy gal suggests she might be the real deal. Under company rule no one would dare say that aloud about a person of the same gender. Lizzie seems oblivious, as if she's from a place where no one cares, the way it was when Rose was a young woman. During the war, Rose survived more than once because she went with her gut feeling.

"All right," says Rose. "I'll take it where it needs to go. We know what to do."

"Do you?"

Rose says nothing, just looks at her with weary eyes.

Lizzie has the grace to look abashed. "They told me not to underestimate you all."

Rose snorts. Lizzie hands over the pin, so slender and seemingly frail. Rose closes her fingers over it. "Best you get on, Lizzie. If this works, you'll see."

She heads toward the front, then feels a proximity shiver: hostile. From the clinic waiting room, the corporal's voice raises, loud and insistent. He's asking for her on an urgent matter. She dodges out the back, past the cistern and into the bathhouse. Sawyer looks up from the front desk. She gestures a "cover me" as the footsteps and voices of the sentinels come closer; they're searching for her in the back courtyard. He nods. She ducks out through the barber shop and its alley back door, jogs as best she can on her arthritic knees to

the alley entrance to the school where trash is set out. She knocks with the SOS rap on the storeroom door.

Leon opens the door. "Amma! What are you doing here?"

Eight minutes to the second buzzer.

She slips inside, into the storeroom where Leon has been reading a print book away from the eye of the classroom camera. "Get your brother."

He gives her a startled glance because of the sharpness of her tone but understands that her clipped voice means "emergency." After grabbing a broom and dustpan for disguise, he hurries back through an interior door into the classroom. A minute later Tai returns with the broom and dustpan, which he sets down before he takes the pin. He understands the object immediately in the same way she understands a medical condition she's studied and treated.

"Oh, of course," he breathes. "I get it. That's really clever. I need to connect them before the daily feed turns on."

Six minutes to the buzzer.

Her hands and feet turn ice cold. She can't catch her breath.

He's already gone back into the classroom. She shakes herself free of paralysis. It takes her two minutes to reach the clinic. She shoves the door open with so much strength it bangs against the wall. The people waiting on the benches jump nervously, look up, see her, and relax.

From the desk Winnie says, "You all right, Rose?"

Rose looks at the screen. The Wings player wearing jersey 19 has just hit a single and halted at first base when the image flashes white, obliterating the game. A garbled voice emerges from the light, cuts out on a crackle of static that resolves into a tone so high-pitched that everyone winces, followed by silence. The bright screen darkens, like shadows emerging to swallow what can't be seen. A face comes into focus. No: two faces, staring in wonder and concern out at people they cannot see. They wear their hair oddly, one with his head wrapped in a colorful scarf and the other with her scalp shaved down as if for a medical procedure. From what Rose can see

of their clothing, they aren't wearing company-mandated uniforms or any of the seasonal clothing offered for rent at the company store in limited styles and colors.

Standing at the door into the back corridor, Clarry blurts out, "Those are outsiders. Like you said there were, Doc. I didn't believe anyone really lived beyond the enclaves."

Winnie calls out, to the screen, breathless, as frantic as someone gulping in a last gasp of air before their head goes under water. "Can you hear us? By the rights accorded all civilians and former soldiers in the armistice, we request asylum. We desire to move territory."

A murmur runs through the waiting room. Rose raises a hand for silence. "They can't hear us. They can only hear where it's connected."

The door from the back slams open. The sentinels barge in. Everyone hunkers down, trying to look small.

"Where's that coming from, Doc?" demands the corporal.

She shakes her head. "I can't hear anything," she says, since it's better to speak truth when you don't want to reveal what you know.

The two people on the screen are nodding, listening. After a bit they speak, as if in reply. Tai knows the necessary phrases. So does Leon, Uncle Cristiano, and a few of the other students whose families have clung to the struggle all these years and never given up on the idea that each node and each pathway and each fresh connection can in time spark with life.

The screen snaps to black with a final pop. The clinic lights go out. Someone has cut the power. The sentinels scramble outside. Winnie opens the shutters of the window behind her desk.

"Do we go outside?" she says to Rose. Her voice trembles.

"We go outside. They heard us. They'll come."

Will they, truly? She doesn't know, but she does know that, for this one moment, they have touched the greater community, the wider world, beyond the wall the company built.

She opens the door and goes out, scanning for the sentinels, but they're running toward the tower where they can find out what's

going on. Sawyer wheels out of the bathhouse, tipping her a nod. Gloria walks gingerly behind him, holding tightly to the wheelchair's push handles.

Others emerge mouselike onto the streets from the small factory shops where they do company work: five, ten, twenty in a group. Rose walks out onto the plaza, to the plinth where once a statue of a man holding a rolled up piece of paper stood, although the statue has long since been taken down. Uncle Christiano leads the children out of the school, walking in neat lines with young children paired with older ones. After fifteen minutes, more than two hundred people have assembled in silence in the plaza.

From up here she sees a flood of workers leaving the salvage yards, headed their way. Not everyone will come. They just need enough to stand strong together, to wait for an hour or more. She knows the borders; she knows how fast helicopters flew, back when she was in the military, but there's surely something newer, faster, more fuel efficient.

Sentinels appear up on the tower. There is a water gun on the tower alongside two machine guns. Will they panic and fire? Or will the supervisor tell them to stand down? How long can anyone endure this tension without breaking? No one is meant to be out and about on company time. Everyone here is breaking company law by walking off their jobs. But the salvage workers march closer, singing a song about roaches. The sentinels don't shoot.

Arlene pushes through the crowd, leaning on a cane and carrying a burnished leather briefcase. "I've got my copy of the armistice in here," she says.

Leon breaks free from the line of students and comes over.

"Where's Tai?" Rose asks him.

"He stayed in case the connection comes through again. He'll hide if he hears anyone."

The crowd grows. The minutes pass, one after one after one. Ten. Twenty. An eternity.

A small electric cart races into the plaza, scattering people. The supervisor gets out beside the plinth. His assistants unfold a portable stairway for him to climb up to the top. Once up in this commanding position, he raises a bullhorn.

"This is an unlawful assembly. As a courtesy, and pursuant to clause three point two point nine in your contracts, I am giving you one warning to disperse. After that, you will force me to take drastic action."

Rose waves to get his attention, then steps forward to speak in a loud voice that carries across the crowd.

"Supervisor, we have the right according to the armistice to request transfer into the Neutral Zone, which we have done. Let any others raise their hand to show they request transfer."

Leon raises his hand. Arlene. Winnie. Clarry. Sawyer. LaChelle, still puffing from her long walk up from the shoreline. Cristiano. The children. The barber. The salvage workers as they crowd in, old rats and young roaches with their hands to the sky. The people, those who have come out onto the street based on what has been passed mouth to mouth, ear to ear, over the years. Many have come. Even wan Gloria raises her hand, although she seems unsure what is going on.

The supervisor's grimace is fierce with anger and a touch of panic. He shouts into the bullhorn. "This is your final warning!"

No one lowers their hand. They stand there, united in a purpose so many have worked on together for so long to bring about.

Leon tilts his head. "You hear that?"

She looks up. Everyone looks up.

A light flashes in the distance. She uses her inserts to zoom in, but she doesn't recognize the vessel, and it's not yet close enough for her proximity link to register its presence. Sawyer has the same inserts. He looks at her, his grin like lightning.

"Not a company vessel," he shouts.

The supervisor lowers his bullhorn and stares at the sky. The wind rising off the water rumbles. A seagull glides past, headed for

the sea. An old promise grows in the distance, coming their way.
The sun gleams across the waiting multitude.

Author's note: I wrote a very early and much shorter exploration of this story concept in 2019 because I'd been thinking a lot about a road trip conversation with my beloved dad back in 2000 in which he asked, "What would a pay-as-you-go society look like?" (he was not a fan of the concept). A chance to expand on the ideas and plot came during the 2023 Vaster Than Empires writers' workshop sponsored by the Berggruen Institute. The help of everyone at the workshop in refining these ideas is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks to Ken Liu for answering an in-story legal query with his usual aplomb. Many thanks to Oliver Dougherty for editorial guidance and keen line editing, and to the Reactor Magazine team for their usual excellence.



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ALL

THAT

MEANS

OR

MOURNS

RUTHANNA EMRYS

ALL THAT MEANS OR MOURNS

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In the foyer, I shed the hospice's cleansuit. The medically-licensed plastic sticks to my skin; the vent draft chills where I peel it away. I want to tear it off in handfuls. But I pull slowly, excruciatingly aware of every blocked pore, and finally stow it in the UV box contaminated but whole. Another visitor will need it soon, to dull their senses and reassure the dying.

Outside, Florida's humidity is a living slap. I'm drenched in sweat despite my neck fan. My eyes sting; gut microbes churn with anticipatory grief. At least I'm no longer isolated. Sporulated whispers surround me. Even the parking lot holds life: gnats and tenacious anoles, bacteria in the soil beneath the permeable pavement, cracks pressed wide by choirs of lichen. My mycelial network yearns toward its kin, but the Animalia Serenitas Center would not approve if I sank to their killed-myco brick graytop to meditate.

The rental car automatically unplugs as I approach. No trains or tramlines here, in the sinking lands stolen from the Everglades. The driving assistant has regressed to default settings, and I have to readjust it—again—to my rare driver reflexes. I try to appreciate the trivial distraction, but it only feeds my pain. Mom's dying grows tendrils into everything.

I need my fellow hyphae. At home I would bike to the cranberry bog or the maple swamp or the dunes, immerse myself in friends and neighbors. But Naples is an antifungal enclave where most people only step outside in sterile cleansuits. Corkscrew Sanctuary is the nearest option. The winding boardwalks, the miles of mangrove

and cypress and sawgrass, the alligators and herons let everything in.

At the entrance, a screen lists birds sighted this week. When I was little, the board would be full by Friday, notes crowding into the margins. It's sparser now. Watchers still spot the white ibis, the great blue heron, the peregrine, and the bald eagle, but the wood storks have been gone since the second-to-last avian flu, and other species have fallen to heat or storms. Or salt water, rising through porous ground to claim the grassy river. The swamp lets everything in.

The sun beats onto the tall grass and I'm forced to open my parasol, blocking the cloudless blue-gray sky. But there's relief in the shade of the cypress trees. Even the mosquitos, fellow *psilocordyceps* hosts, take only a token blood offering. Their sting's been bred out; I offer them a taste of megafaunal complexity and receive in turn an instant of blur-fast wings, ganglial hunger, and the purity of their swift satiation.

The boardwalk winds through shingled bark and cypress knees, slow water thick with fallen leaves, the sudden chitter of a cormorant, baby alligators sunning on logs. No turtles for years now. Mom loved this place, used to take hours identifying species while I raced impatiently ahead. Even before the cancer, she lost that; the hike was too hard in a cleansuit.

I don't see any other humans until I reach the hyphae nest. We've taken over one of the old pit-stop gazebos, added hammocks and live-myco cushions to make comfortable laybacks, wound vines and branches through to ease connection. Two people sprawl with closed eyes and peaceful smiles; one is up and stretching. She bends her knee and lunges, back leg taut.

"Welcome!" she calls, unworried about waking the others. It's just another greeting, natural as the cormorant's. I fall into her offered hug, already sobbing.

Her body is more familiar than mosquito or moss, easy to interpret. Heartbeats and lungs sync up. Nerves fire like city lights.

Her digestive system's busier than mine. Fibroids snake through her uterus and something's off in her lower back, a practiced drone of pain. Nothing unusual in her brain. I pay attention to brains, lately.

"My mother has glioblastoma," I tell her. "She's antifungal; I can't make it feel real. I'm not ready."

She holds me tighter. "I came out here with my brother every week while his lungs were breaking down. We *could* share everything. It's never enough." She leads me to a hammock, wraps me in vines. I close my eyes.

Mycelia transmit more slowly than neurons, and over longer distances. The world enters in patches. Strangler figs drink in sun and water and carbon dioxide, basking and growing and sending out lazy chemical signals. They drape over ink-scratch branches of cypress and curl against ragged bark. Branches stretch up from the trunk, trunks from knees that drink deep of the shallow water. Mushrooms grow into the roots, digest fallen logs, extend microscopic tendrils through mud and heron. The swamp flows slowly, shaped by every tree and fish and leaf and pebble, feasting on rot and breathing out abundance. I stretch my senses, loving and becoming.

As the whole rich system fills in, so do the lesions: acidity that singes gills, salinity that leaves larvae scrawny and weak, hungers where no hunger should last. Flickers of incomprehension, wordless mourning for prey long gone. Through it all winds the same *psilocordyceps* that inhabits me, that grows through almost everything now. Infection, bond, witness.

The human brain can only imagine itself a swamp for so long, even with practice. We have always been torn between wholeness and the quick, anxious passions that separate us. My hearing is first to retreat into my body: The other hyphae are awake and arguing.

"It has to have been deliberate. Random mutation would give you itchier athlete's foot, not make you one with the universe."

"I'm not saying it was random mutation. I'm saying the *release* was accidental. Someone meant to use it in a lab, for medical

imaging or surveillance or some shit. If there was meaning in it getting out, it wasn't *human*."

"Are you talking about divine intervention?" This voice belongs to the woman who welcomed me. "Or are you saying the mushroom escaped on purpose?"

It's a familiar discussion, endlessly interesting to some, endlessly dull to others. I go back and forth. Should it matter if the greatest gift of the twenty-first century was truly a gift? Nothing, god or human, has ever demanded our gratitude. But we would have questions, if we knew some cause beyond chance, and perhaps the unwanted offering of our gratitude anyway. Why not be grateful? Few things are better than they used to be.

"Purpose is a human thing," says the second voice. When I open my eyes, the two earlier sleepers are sprawled together on the bench, one nested in the other's arms. In the mycelial network they feel like a single organism, skin comforting skin.

"Purpose is a human illusion," I offer, letting the conversation draw me into a different sort of connection. "We're not as good at choosing actions, and their consequences, as we like to think."

"So accidents are a human thing, too. Everything else just *is*."

The argument continues: The question of how we, who now share senses with all of nature, can claim that nothing else has goals or choices or screwups. The question of whether there's some higher purpose to those screwups, whether we're ants unaware of the anthill. The question of what sort of purpose would allow the sheer *levels* of screwup that humans have managed.

This connection I can hold even less easily than the swamp: I let it fade again into a background drift of primate calls. The idea of purpose, and the thought that there is none, are both too painful. We can't be all that means things, or all that mourns. There are flocks of feral macaws in the trees. We can't translate them, but surely like us they circle the same questions over and over.

Like us, wherever they came from originally, they're bound now to something dying.

* * *

I spend the next morning sorting papers at the house. Staying there means I don't have to worry about hotel quarantine policies, but it also surrounds me with work of dubious utility and endless urgency. Dad had just moved into the antifungal apartments, and Mom was trying to sort everything out so she could sell the place and join him, when she got sick. Everything is half started or half done.

I might be able to sell the house to an antifungal, but not for much. Everyone knows Miami is in its last years. Salt infests groundwater and eats holes in the land above, and soon the antifungals will find another place where sinking land is cheap. I could abandon the place. After she dies. When she can't know that I gave up on what she left behind. Or I could talk to her friends who side-eye me for being hyphae, ask them for help finding someone who needs the space and can take over the mortgage, someone who will glare at me for the gift.

So many places are salvageable, even on the coasts. Places where the bedrock is less porous, where long years of local organization and semifunctional state governments have funded seawalls, pumps, purification plants. There the hyphae do more than witness: We diagnose and treat and help the world adapt, find points where the right push can save a sliver of world.

I picked up signals once from a frog that we'd thought extinct. I recorded their calls and the pattern of their heartbeats, shared my data with other searchers, and we found enough to bring a breeding population together. We worked with the psilocordyceps to protect them from simpler and more deadly fungal infections. There's a type of frog now in northern Maine that wouldn't be there if I hadn't paid attention and chosen to do something about what I found.

There's nothing I can do for Mom. There's nothing I can do for the Everglades. My love is useless here.

* * *

In the hospice cafeteria I sit with Dad. I can't eat through the cleansuit and would quail at food I couldn't sense—even aside from the fungicides, there might be anything in it. I haven't shared a meal with my parents for two years.

I would've said we were close. We called every week, told each other about concerts and meals and broken appliances and broken weather, about birds spotted and books read and friends visited.

The question, unasked for two years, sits in the back of my throat.

He prods at his sandwich: fresh-baked sourdough piled with eggplant and roasted tomato. He takes a slow, forced bite. His eyes are distant. It would be cruel to ask him, now, why they pulled away from the world they taught me to love.

I remember the debate in the hyphae nest, the pain of unanswerable questions eased by shared sensation. I touch Dad's arm with my suited hand, knowing he'll flinch, offering and taking comfort anyway. At least he doesn't pull away, just lets his head fall with the weight of everything we're carrying.

"The nurse says it could be any day now," he says finally. "But it could be a week or more. She's got a strong heart."

"She was always about..." I wave my hand vaguely, indicating years of hikes and high-fiber foods. "Do you remember the carob chip cookies?"

"Unfortunately. And that one stand at the farmers market that I swear put dirt in their muffins."

"God, she loved that place, I have no idea why. She thinks they're delicious." I hesitate over tenses. She's not quite past, not yet, but she'll never again buy a dozen gravelly muffins for a potluck. Or else *she* is past, only her unconscious body withholding permission to acknowledge the loss. But the talking, at least—about her, not about us—creates some sort of backup, an echo of *hemess* in our shared memories. "I wish healthy food were as nice as healthy exercise—she could always find the best walks."

And Dad lifts his head, a fraction, and talks about the research she did when I was a baby, ten different apps to find one that could consistently recommend stroller-friendly hikes, and the places they got stuck, laughing and lifting, when the first tries failed.

★ ★ ★

In the corner beside the spare room couch I find the archaeology of Mom's knitting: half-finished hats with crumpled patterns on top, simple pairs of slippers in all her family's sizes, then the little spring-green afghan that I snuggled when I was five, and finally the lowest layer revealing some forgotten decade of leisure: an exuberance of lace shawls dewed with sparkling beads.

It should be the hats that hurt most, with their evidence that her organized mind was breaking down before anyone noticed, pushing against the start of the project again and again, as if this time she would find her way past the barrier. When I came to visit two months ago she was doing that with simple things: shuffling her feet forward and back, forward and back, lifting her walker and putting it down, explaining to us that "I just need to ... first..." before trailing off.

Or it should be the afghan that makes me cry with safe-childhood nostalgia, as though childhood ever feels safe to anyone but grown-ups. Maybe the shawls should make me pine for the selfhoods she set aside in the press of work and childrearing. But it's the slippers, of which I have a dozen pairs at home in Massachusetts, one from each Chanukah since my feet reached their adult size minus those worn out by late-night fridge raids. No one will ever take care of me in that precise way again, and I'm not ready. I curl over the pile, burying my tear-streaked face in yarn. Sometimes it comes like an avalanche: no one to sing "Old Devil Moon" as an off-key lullaby, no one extolling a specific breed of yeast over the rhythm of homemade bread dough, no emailed list of local trails every time she knows I'm traveling. And someday—it feels as real now as losing Mom—someday Dad will die and I'll lose his ability to identify even the

rarest out-of-place birds, his perfect foraged salads, his ability to turn everyday frustrations into giggle-worthy gossip.

And no matter how many hard conversations I try to have or avoid, there will be things I regret never asking and things I regret saying at all.

I sleep with the afghan that night. It's not safe, but it's simple. My mycelia reach out through the fabric, along the bed and the walls, looking for something to touch. They find a spider weaving above a dusty shelf, and my dreams are full of vibrating silk and mosquitos winking out like candle stubs.

* * *

The hospice calls at four AM: any minute now. I struggle awake with cold tea and pull the car jerkily out of the driveway before I remember again to reset it. Breathe in the calm of sleeping birds in the parking lot, gulp morning mist, take too long to get the cleansuit on with shaking hands. What if I've missed it?

Dad is by the bed; I join him in the comfortable chairs. Mom's favorite klezmer plays quietly from hidden speakers, anomalously cheerful. Her breathing is abrupt: inhaling into a frightening gurgle, snorting out, long pause, repeat. Every pause might be the one. We sit watching, waiting.

"Do you want some time alone with her?" asks Dad. "I've already said everything I need to." I nod, and then it's just me.

"Why won't you let me be with you?" I whisper. But hearing is the last thing to go, and asking her is even crueler than asking Dad. "I love you. I have a good life, I'm doing good work. I'll be okay, and I'll keep going, and I'll remember you every time I go for a hike." I go on like that, saying the little reassuring things that I guess I'd want to know, if I were dying and had a grown child. I feel bad, because I do want kids and I don't have them yet, and they'll never get to meet her. I don't say that, and I don't thank her for not nudging me about grandchildren. Nothing aloud, except for the things I can promise will continue past her horizon.

I run out of things to say, and she's still breathing: gurgle, snort, pause, repeat. Time feels impossible: We'll be in this limbo of waiting forever. Dad isn't back. I could slip off part of my suit, brush her face, let the hyphae give us a last moment of connection. Isolated in her body, maybe she would appreciate it now.

I hover. But it's a childish urge: to do the forbidden thing, to get castigated with crumbs still on your tongue. The remnants of Mom's choices depend on our cooperation. Then there would be Dad's choices lost, and the other patients' and their families'; my hand drops, clenched with responsible misery.

Dad returns. "The nurse says that sometimes people wait until they're alone. That they don't want their family to see."

"I guess that makes sense." It makes sense as something they tell you to give meaning to the meaningless, or to help you feel okay about not being in the room, waiting forever. Somehow, someone who hasn't been able to move her foot consistently for two months will claim this last bit of control over her movement from being to not-being.

★ ★ ★

It's dusk when I return to Corkscrew: almost cool, almost comfortable. Sawgrass chirrs. A heron rasps, and an owl sends up its banshee cry from amid the mangroves. I stretch for memories of what it sounded like when I was younger, here with Mom and Dad: What's been lost? I must have neglected so many details.

I hoped for human company, but the hyphae nest is empty. The park closes in half an hour. In Massachusetts it wouldn't matter: There would be as many witnesses to the nocturnal ecology as to the daylit one, defenders and scholars of peep frogs. Maybe the disapproving neighbors discourage it, or maybe no one wants to sit vigil in the dark, waiting for salt water to slowly drown the fresh. Loons call, and early nightbirds, and I hear the low rumble of an alligator chiding her babies.

We never know, for all that we share our senses, what else in this world feels grief.

I lie there for a long time, trying to lose myself in awareness of other creatures. The precipice will come soon, and I'm not ready. I can't get away from telling myself stories about how I'll feel tomorrow. The opposite of anticipation: *Now my phone will vibrate, and I'll know. It'll happen now. Now. Now.*

I imagine talking with my mother, something I haven't been able to do for four months. *Why come here? Why did you choose to separate us this way?* But no, if I had one more chance to talk with her, I'd pick another conversation. Something trivial, gentle. *I'm thinking about getting a new cat. A tabby, like the one we had when I was little.*

But then, that circles back to the same thing. The relationship I would have with a cat now is different from toddling after shape and fur, never understanding the fear that leads to a scratch or the way a purr feels from inside. Those things I couldn't talk about, or must, would form a barrier either way.

At first it was common: So many people who weren't infected immediately found ways to hold it off. We'd rather wait, they said. We want to know more about what we're getting into. See if there are any long-term effects. Then the hyphae didn't get sick, and we saved frogs and put intimate sensations into scientific papers. People got curious, or comfortable, or bored, or just tired of barriers. The holdouts grew fewer.

Why you?

Steps echo, hollow percussion on the boardwalk. I lift my head even as I realize that this isn't the company I sought, let alone imagined. The cleansuit outlines a blank space in the world.

The swamp is all shadows now, glints of salmon and indigo through the trees. It takes me a minute to recognize Dad: his stride slowed by hesitation, squinting even now to track one of the bird calls, familiar striped shirt compressed under the suit. Mom always

rolled her eyes at those shirts, but he bought them five at a time. Hard enough to find one thing that fits, he'd said.

"What are you doing here?" slips out, rude and foolish. But I didn't tell him where I'd be. It's been years since we walked here together. My stomach drops, and my voice. "Is she—?"

He shakes his head. "I guessed you'd be here. It's where—" He waves at the nest. "I guessed." He sits on one of the laybacks, awkwardly, brushing aside dangling leaves. This place isn't made for avoiding touch.

I'll only have so many conversations with him; that feels real now in a way it never did until this year. This one isn't the last. But it's the one for today, the one we'll remember having in the suspended hour before Mom is gone and only matter remains. Here on my side of the thinnest barrier, alone with a dying world, I try to decide what to say.



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About the Authors

A.C. Wise is the author of the novels *Wendy*, *Darling* and *Hooked* and the recent short story collection, *The Ghost Sequences*. Her work has won the Sunburst Award, and been a finalist for the Nebula, Stoker, World Fantasy, Aurora, Locus, Shirley Jackson, British Fantasy, Lambda Literary, and Ignyte Awards. In addition to her fiction, she contributes a regular review column to *Apex Magazine*. Find her online at www.acwise.net.

S. E. Porter is a writer and artist. As Sarah Porter, she has published several books for young readers, including *Vassa in the Night*. *Projections* is her adult debut. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and daughter.

Hildur Knútsdóttir was born in Reykjavík, Iceland, in 1984. She has lived in Spain, Germany, and Taiwan and studied literature and creative writing at The University of Iceland. She writes fiction both for adults and teenagers, as well as short fiction, plays, and screenplays. Hildur is known for her evocative fantastical fiction and spine-chilling horror. *The Night Guest* is her first book translated into English. She lives in Reykjavík with her husband, their two daughters, and a puppy called Uggi.

Cameron Reed is a science fiction writer and the winner of the 1998 Otherwise Award (then the James Tiptree, Jr. Award). She is an avid dragonfly-watcher, a moderately skilled insect photographer, and a hopeless birder. After a long and complicated path through gender, she has come to rest as a nonbinary trans woman and uses the pronouns she or they. She lives with her found family in an old duplex full of books and cats.

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David Erik Nelson is a Jewish horror author living in Michigan. His dark fiction has appeared in Asimov's, the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Pseudopod*, *Best Horror of the Year*, and elsewhere. He's the author of several hundred reference articles and almost a dozen textbooks, but now focuses his freelance energies primarily on writing technical and commercial copy. David Erik Nelson is available to work on your promotional, educational, informational, or diabolical campaign. Want more? Go to davideriknelson.com.

Wen-yi Lee likes writing about girls with bite, feral nature, and ghosts. A University College London alum currently based at home in Singapore, she is the author of YA horror *The Dark We Know* and has published fiction and essays in venues like *Lightspeed*, *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Reactor*, and various anthologies. *When They Burned The Butterfly* is her adult debut.

Born in Saigon and raised on Boston's northshore, Quan Barry is the Lorraine Hansberry Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she has directed both the MFA Program in Creative Writing and the Wisconsin Institute of Creative Writing. Barry is the author of eight books of fiction and poetry, including the novel *We Ride Upon Sticks*, which *O: Oprah Magazine* describes as, "Spellbinding, wickedly fun." The *New York Times* named her poetry collection, *Auction*, once of the five best poetry books of 2023. Barry is also one of a select group of writers to receive NEA fellowships in both poetry and fiction. In 2021, she was awarded the American Library Association's Alex Award, and she currently serves as Forward Theater's inaugural Writer-in-Residence. Her first play production, *The Mytilenean Debate*, was staged in spring 2022.

Isabel J. Kim lives near New York City in an apartment filled with books and swords. She is the author of numerous short stories and has won the Nebula, Locus, and the Shirley Jackson Award. Her work has been translated into multiple languages and reprinted in multiple best of the year anthologies. When she's not writing, she's practicing law or podcasting. Sublimation is her first novel.

Champ is a writer from southern Thailand, who was once ordained as a Theravada Buddhist monk and now (unrelatedly) practices Shaolin Kungfu. He studied BA Psychology with Philosophy at University of Oxford to learn the secrets of mind control. He attended Tin House Workshop 2025, Clarion West Workshop 2024 and Faber Academy 2023, and somewhere along the journey, he had an epiphany that he would punch for the trees.

Kate Elliott has been publishing science fiction and fantasy for over thirty years with a particular focus in immersive world building and epic stories of adventure & transformative cultural change. She's written fantasy, science fiction, space opera based on the life of Alexander the Great (*Unconquerable Sun*), Young Adult fantasy, the seven volume (complete!) Crown of Stars epic fantasy series set in a landscape reminiscent of early medieval Europe, and the Afro-Celtic post-Roman alternate-history fantasy with lawyer dinosaurs, *Cold Magic*, as well as two novellas set in the Magic: The Gathering multiverse. Her work has been nominated for the Nebula, World Fantasy, Norton, and Locus Awards. Her novel *Black Wolves* won the RT Reviewers' Choice Award for Best Epic Fantasy 2015. She lives in Hawaii, paddles outrigger canoes, and spoils her schnauzer.

RUTHANNA EMRYS lives in a mysterious manor house on the outskirts of Washington, DC with her wife and their large, strange family. Her stories have appeared in a number of venues, including *Strange Horizons*, *Analog*, and *Tor.com*. She is the author of the Innsmouth Legacy series, which began with *Winter Tide*. She makes home-made vanilla, obsesses about game design, gives unsolicited advice, and occasionally attempts to save the world.

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