I Am Not I

by G. V. Anderson

I found the emporium on old Tanners Row. A prime location, to be sure — within pissing distance from a Saps' slum. Its proprietor, Madame Qlym, boasted better pickings in her own back garden than any other acristologist in the city. But despite this and every revered thing I'd heard about it, the emporium looked in poor shape: the gilt lettering on the lintel was in mid-peel. Even as I watched, a tiny flake of autumnal gold broke off and fluttered past me. I frowned, but quickly shook away my doubts. Acristologists like their theatrics, after all. With its steep grime banks and lingering stink, Tanners Row provided more than ample ambience for the prospective customer. I glanced round; the Row was empty. I eased open the door to the emporium and slipped inside. There was only one aisle, wide enough to spread out my arms and brush the shelves with my fingertips — not that I wanted to get too close. The shelves creaked under the weight of thousands of dusty jars containing hands tinted amber by formaldehyde; eyeballs trailing optic kelp; and butter-bean fœtuses that watched me with milky, unformed eyes. Sap parts, all of them. Collected and sold for the pleasure of Varians. The preservation of Saps' bodies is a fundamental aspect of acristology, but it has also become a mark of status, a way to flaunt one's wealth and intimidate one's rivals. Almost every Varian household has one or more of these jars — the bigger and more complete the specimen, the higher the prestige for the family. I shivered. Gaslights hung from the ceiling but their

greasy glow did more to hide than illuminate. I wiped my hands on my new jacket; I'd not touched a thing and already I felt grubby. "Is anyone here?" "Coming!" The door at the back swung open and out she scuttled. I recognised Madame Qlym's eight spindly arms and her infamous coiffure, so stiff it wobbled as one mass, but her body had lost its shape like a shrivelling balloon, and her powder — a new layer applied every morning, already months deep — was starting to crack. She bore little resemblance to her old tabloid photograms. Theatrics, I reminded myself firmly. She threw me a generous, moss-toothed smile. "You must be Miss Strohm-Waxxog! Oh, let me look at you!" and before I could protest she was inches away, jerking my chin this way and that to admire the glitter of her lamps in my six eyes, twirling me round to look, to pat — I flinched. My wings, stale as a new butterfly's, rustled against my clothes as I moved. "Ah," she said, withdrawing her hands. "No true flight? It happens, it happens. What a pity. And your poor eye . . ." I knew I looked unspectacular. When I'd telephoned to arrange this interview I'd given her my real surname — a reckless move, but I needed her to employ me; few would turn away a member of the city's most powerful family. She'd probably spent all morning imagining what beauteous manner of mutation would be walking through her door later. And here I was, with sore, brittle wings and a gammy eye. "It's the Strohm gene," I gambled. "Infections in the third pair are common." I needn't have worried. She was so blinded by reverence for my family that she swallowed this without question. After a tour of the emporium — a glorified sweep of her hands, really — we sat at the kitchenette table and talked business over stale biscuits and

tea: black for me, peppermint for her. I presented my identification papers and letter of recommendation, all painstakingly forged by my own hand, but her eyes barely took in the words. She seemed more impressed by the lush vellum. When I prompted her about the expected duties, she recalled herself: “You’ll run the shop until we close for lunch, then accompany me to my meetings in the afternoons.” She sipped her tea, leaving a cracked lipstick impression on the rim. “Most transactions are completed at the customer’s home. It’s more bespoke that way.” I rubbed the handle of my teacup. Specks of grime clung to the delicate china. When I lifted my head, my gaze snagged on some well-established cobwebs fluttering in the corners of the ceiling. Finally, I met her eye. “Your advertisement mentioned payment.” “Oh, yes . . .” She choked delicately on the admission that my salary would be just five pence a week. I fought to keep the dismay from my face. “So little? Surely such a prestigious emporium as this could afford to pay more?” She blushed through her powder. “Commission is available, of course, although it won’t keep you in the manner to which I’m sure you’re accustomed,” she said, her eyes downcast. “The Strohm-Waxxogs have such grand houses, the most exquisite feasts. You must have been brought up surrounded by luxury.” I knew the childhood she was imagining for me — could almost imagine it myself. “You know,” she said, leaning in with a forced intimacy that made me recoil, “it is so unusual to hear of a Strohm-Waxxog working at all . . .” “My mother insists on a vocation. She says it builds character.” The lie coated my tongue like treacle. Only five pence a week . . . I remember thinking that I could still get

imperiously to my feet and storm out, could still return to the squat I called home, with no harm done. But — damn it all! — I needed money, and I didn't dare believe that the great Madame Qlym, the acristologist of whose skills I'd heard so much in my life, could be as poor as all that. She must be hiding something, I decided. "Is my application a success?" She reached out to stroke my hand, her lipsticked mouth puckering like overstretched elastic. "Of course, darling. How could I refuse?" Her lingering, covetous caresses were only bearable for so long, and I soon asked to be shown to my new room. Underneath thick dust sheets, I found a bed, a chipped desk, and a wardrobe. Opening the wardrobe gave me a fright: a mounted Sap skeleton had been stuffed inside, its eye sockets level with mine. I caught my breath and tapped the sternum with a fingernail—it was only hardened resin, a worthless imitation. A mirror with a worn wooden frame hung inside the door of the wardrobe. My brown face glared out of it. Two of my eyes sat in my sockets; two more emerged from my temples. The third, smallest pair sat within the procerus muscle between my brows, and it was one of these that had swollen. When I blinked, the eyelid juddered over the surface of the eye. The damn thing wouldn't last much longer. I had only one tiny, rot-swollen window, which I forced open to air the room. From here I could see the slums concealed behind Tanners Row: a maze of buildings and empty clotheslines, a constant trickle of gutter water. Glassless windows gaped from every surface. In one of them I saw a pale, doughy face. A Sap's face. I scowled in disgust. We were all Saps once, before genetic splicing made wings, strange mouthparts, advanced digestive

ability, super strength — Varians — possible. Varians quickly grew in number, forging dynasties and complex class systems, developing languages and dialects to accommodate their new physiologies, while the Sap became an undesirable evolutionary leftover — like an appendix or wisdom teeth. They were elbowed to the fringes of society and reviled. But the Sap gene still runs in us all. They don't like to admit it, but no Varian is immune to the possibility of a Sap child. These children are drowned at birth and forgotten about. It's considered the kind thing to do. If only my mother had been so kind. When I was born, so I'm told, my father ordered me destroyed. But against his knowledge or consent, my mother instead kept me in a cold, bare room in the old servants' quarters — one's first child warrants some maternal instinct, I suppose, although she refused to name me, as if I were some animal bound for the abattoir and she daren't get too attached. We had a few years of tenuous peace together. Once, I fell over and sliced my knee; I remember her alarm, her hesitant hairy palps patting the dark skin of my leg, my anatomy a mystery and a wonder to her. The only other soul who knew I lived was the housekeeper, Ms Gishak, and when my father eventually thawed and welcomed my mother back to his society, it fell to her to provide for me. She didn't relish the task. I don't even have to close my eyes to picture Ms Gishak's nostrils flaring, her beak clicking with impatience. She fed me scraps from the table and slipped anti-Sap pamphlets under my door to teach me to read. Her company was cruel. "Do you know why we call you Saps?" she once hissed in my ear, her voice as sharp as a pinch in the dark. "Because you're

parasites, the lot of you.” As time passed, it became difficult to conceal me from the growing household. My father had taken a second wife and my mother had conceived again; space was at a premium. The night I turned fifteen, Ms Gishak smuggled me out of the house to meet an extensioneer by the name of Heechi. She left me on the operating table, openly pocketing the small change my mother had meant for me with a nasty grin. As soon as my wings and eyes were implanted — my mother’s parting gift to me — I was cast out onto the streets, nameless and alone. “Close that window!” My head snapped round. Madame was standing in my doorway, clutching her neck. I closed the window slowly and slid the bolt home, and by the time I’d done that she was already tottering downstairs, muttering to herself. My weekday mornings in the shop turned out to be dull, since Madame had no customers. I ached to do something about my eye, but I was obliged to sit by the till in frustrated silence while she did whatever it was she did upstairs. When I paced the aisle, the fœtuses floating around in their jars seemed to follow me with a turn of their pale bodies. My eyes skimmed their faded labels, the dates they were “harvested” — such a pastoral word, as if they’d been plucked painlessly from trees, not wombs. In the end, I turned the jars around. The afternoons weren’t much better. Madame and I called on her customers: past patrons with no intention of a second purchase, or collectors unlucky enough to have their name whispered in her vicinity. With all eight arms she would lift her rotund torso off the ground and advance from every angle, her breath rancid with peppermint. The few sales we made were struck out of a desire to

be rid of her. “Perhaps,” I said, after one fruitless encounter, “I could conduct the meeting next time?” Madame glared at me, her cheeks flushed. “You think you might do better?” After a week, as I dropped my first measly five pence into the collection box under my bed and heard its hollow plink, I could no longer tell myself that my low wage was a result of Madame’s stinginess. The next morning, I searched for anything that could help me understand what I’d tangled myself up in. I came across a small metal box stashed in a kitchenette cupboard, and for two hours sat cross-legged on the sticky floor flicking through the paperwork inside. Bills, demands, notices. Unpaid invoices and overdue rent, all stamped red for now, now, now. I slumped against the cupboard door, the papers sliding from my hands. Heechi’s extensions had lasted longer than any others I’d heard of, but after ten years, even they’d started to fail. Before I started working for Madame I’d tracked him down to Port Street, a slum like Tanners Row, and had demanded that he fix his work. He told me he would only accept the same price my mother had paid in the first place: two hundred guineas. Cash. I’d expected a high figure far beyond my means, of course. I answered Madame Qlym’s advertisement — had intentionally placed myself in the constant company of a woman who killed Saps for profit — on the understanding that her business was profitable, and that the money I needed to pay Heechi would be easily found. I’d got it wrong. The emporium was in serious financial trouble, and I’d put myself in harm’s way for nothing. I couldn’t understand why, when stock was so plentiful. We had stacks of jawbones teetering up the side of the tiny staircase and navels spilling out of alcoves, and thick knots of

Sap hair hanging from the kitchenette ceiling like bundles of onions, and baskets overflowing with teeth assorted by incisor, canine, and molar, and a dozen reinforced spines lounging in the umbrella stand by the front door — we had enough inventory to pay Heechi ten times over. I stuffed Madame's paperwork back into its box. If she couldn't sell this lot, I would. And extensioneers need Sap parts as much as Varian ones, for those rare freaks desperate to go the other way — perhaps Heechi would lower his fee in exchange for some of these jars. My only problem was Madame's insistence that I stay by her side at all times — she even panicked at the sight of me stepping out for the milk. The bartering, trading, and circulation of pickled Saps is only half an acristologist's work. Madame had a partner for the other half — the procurement of new specimens — and I met him for the first time four weeks into my employment. He knocked on the door just after lunch, wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a full veil that hid his features completely. "I'm sorry, sir. We're closed. Business hours are —" "Quite a serious little acristologist, aren't you, hmm?" His voice was muffled, but I could hear the thrum of a chuckle. I almost slammed the door in his face, but Madame had already seen him. "It's all right, darling, let him in! He's late, though, the devil! Pull the blinds, will you?" I did as she asked and obscured the only natural, clean light in that squalid space. I turned as he was removing his hat and veil. He was more hive than flesh. He wore a loose shirt and pressed trousers, braces slung uselessly about his hips, and every available patch of skin was riddled with deep, black holes. Holes that went nowhere at all. They obscured his face, his mouth; he had no hair, just tunnels boring into his

head. As Madame ushered him through for refreshment, a bee emerged from the depths of a neck-hole and perched in the opening to watch me. This was the first company we'd had in weeks — I would never get a better opportunity to see Heechi. So I declined to join them, citing some urgent personal errand. Madame's brow creased. "Oh, let her go," the honey man said, laughing. "Knowing you, I expect she's barely had five minutes to herself since she started." I waited in the aisle until the kitchenette door closed with a soft click, then dove for the jars. What would an extensioneer have need for? I had no idea. I grabbed slender jars full of green-tinged fingers, a handful of nipples. Rolls of skin, as sheer as photogram film — I unravelled five inches and held it up to the gaslight to reveal a constellation of pores, follicles, moles, and scars. Teeth could be useful; eyes, too. I scraped a handful of coins from the till for the tram fare and raced down the Row, my pockets bulging. As I walked away from the slum, I felt the city come alive around me. Colour and light were a part of my world again. Varians of all descriptions were in the streets doing their shopping, hollering to friends across the road, bustling from one important place to another. An enormous gastropod with four rows of swollen teats and a cluster of ten offspring had left a sparkling trail on the pavement; my boots made imprints in it as if it were snow. The buildings became cleaner and taller, and the traffic of winged Varians grew thick in the air. I began to see signs of civilised life: electric streetlamps, recently installed and humming; and boxy televisions in shop windows playing black-and-white anti-Sap propaganda. The Sap teeth tinkled in my pockets and I thought

about selling a few there and then, but I could only hope to get pennies for them. The reward was far greater when Heechi opened his door to me: he gaped as I emptied my pockets. “Pickled personally by Madame Qlym of Tanners Row,” I said, “the best you’ll find. Ears, feet, nails, kneecaps, scalps — whatever you need. Would that bring the price down?” He agreed to lower his fee to one hundred and fifty guineas if I could supply him with certain parts. It still seemed like an impossible amount of money. I would have to work hard to sell every last thing in that shop. “Fine,” I said. “What parts do you need?” “I’ll write you a list.” It was getting late by the time I let myself back into the emporium, but there was still a faint light under the kitchenette door. I put my ear to the grain. “— the average Varian doesn’t buy acristological jars these days, Madame, and hasn’t for some years. Attitudes are changing.” “The average Varian,” Madame said loudly, slurring her words, “is bored by appendages and organs. Hic. I need full specimens. That’ll bring them flooding back.” The honey man’s voice was low. “Full specimens are hard to find.” “But you know, hic, where to look, don’t you, darling?” I wished I could slip upstairs unnoticed, but unless I was prepared to shimmy drainpipes in the dark and climb through a window, the staircase at the back of the kitchenette was my only option. I knocked on the door and peered round. “I’m back.” Madame started at the sight of me. “I was starting to worry you’d, hic, abandoned me!” “I trust your errand went well?” the honey man said. I slipped into the kitchenette and slowly headed for the stairs. “Yes, very well. I didn’t mean to disturb you . . .” “Oh no!” Madame said, pulling out a chair from under the table and patting the seat.

Her eyes were glazed. “Do sit and join us, there’s no rush! Come, come!” Reluctantly, I sat down. Madame poured me a cup of stale tea. A bee landed on the rim of my teacup, its antennæ trembling. I flicked it away with a finger. “As I was saying, full specimens are hard to find,” the honey man said. “And the humans are growing restless. Bolder. There’s been talk of riots not far from here. The press are prohibited from reporting it, of course, but word slips through.” Madame shuddered. I stared at him. I’d not heard Saps referred to as humans in a long, long time. “Sap” is such a commonplace slur, it hardly occurs to anyone that it was once a slur in the first place. Ms Gishak had used it exclusively, and I’d picked up the habit in a pathetic attempt to please her. The honey man ignored us. “For a while, I’ve been wondering whether we should look in a different direction entirely.” Madame frowned. “A different direction?” “It’s said there are humans hidden within the greatest families. Think how much a collector might pay for . . . well —” his eyes rose to meet mine “— a human Strohm-Waxxog, for example.” “We can’t go around upsetting the important people,” Madame hissed at him, shooting me an anxious glance. The honey man and I sat quite still, our eyes locked, but his gaze was as disturbing as his mutation and I looked down at my teacup instead. A fine crack ran through it, which I’d not noticed before — perhaps the pressure of my grip had buckled the old porcelain. My ears filled with buzzing; I couldn’t tell if it came from the bees clustering around me, or my own mind. “I’m sorry. You’re right, of course,” said the honey man, breaking our awkward silence. “The slums are getting dangerous, but they’re far from empty. I’ll plan an expedition for us

soon, Madame. It will be just like old times." "Old times," she repeated. "Oh, that would be, hic, lovely." He glanced at me. "I fear I've overstayed my welcome. Would you mind fetching my things?" As I stood to oblige him, he whistled. Bees poured from every conceivable crevice in the kitchenette — even from the spout of the teapot — and wriggled back into his body like furry maggots, his skin bulging slightly to accommodate them. His was a mutation unlike anything I'd seen before. The symbiosis between man and bee was bizarre, somehow: out of place — it didn't follow the usual rules. I walked him to the door and handed him his gloves, greatcoat, and veiled hat. "I never did catch your first name," he said lightly, shrugging on his coat. "I never said it." He grinned. "You really should see a doctor about your eye. It looks sore." I almost parroted the Strohm gene excuse, but something told me the honey man was too sharp to swallow it. "I've made an appointment," I said instead. "Indeed." His gaze was sly, but this time I met it squarely and held it. "I'll call again soon if you'll permit, Miss Strohm-Waxxog?" I nodded, and as soon as it was polite to do so, I raced upstairs to the mirror in my wardrobe. The infected eye now had a white, glassy sheen. The surrounding skin was hot and tender. I wandered back down to the kitchenette, passing Madame on the stairs on her way to her room. I rinsed the cups and saucers in the tiny chipped sink. I used a rag to scour away Madame's lipstick stains and the invisible — but no less tangible — footprints of bees. I scrubbed so hard that my hand cramped into a thoroughly un-Saplike claw. A loud buzz made me jump. A bee had blundered in through the rotten, riddled woodwork and bumped once, twice

against the grubby glass in confusion. An innocent bee, perhaps, but I lunged from the sink and silenced its awful buzzing with my palm. Over the following weeks, I worked harder than I'd ever worked in my life. I reinstated the emporium's mail-order service, which had lain dormant for years. I went door-to-door — forgoing breakfast, as that was the only time of day I could slip away — handing over our newest brochure. I even persuaded Madame to allow me to conduct our afternoon appointments. Whenever the clients commented kindly on my eye, Madame would burst out an explanation of the infamous Strohm eye ailment to stunned, polite silence. It wouldn't have mattered, but I'd cultivated a more sophisticated client list that might rub shoulders with Strohm-Waxxogs every day: the Ybb-Xybryses, the Slins, the Aujoxes — families of quality. So I'd raise an eyebrow, or roll my eyes behind her back at these moments, as if to say, Don't mind her, she's an embarrassment, but what can you do? Sometimes, as we shrugged on our coats to leave, the clients would approach me with a gentle touch on my arm and a question — "Just bring yourself next time?" Things were turning in my favour, the clink of coins in my collection box sounded less hollow with every passing day, and Madame was discrediting herself without even realising. But while the afternoons buoyed my mood, the nights dragged them down; the eye had turned hard now, a frozen pea buried painfully in my brow. One evening, after my wings had been particularly sore, I shrugged off my blouse and turned to see the connective skin bruise-purple, the seam chapped. I pressed a finger to my shoulder blade, gasping

with pain. A pearl of pus trickled down my back. I was running out of time.

“You don’t look well, Miss Strohm-Waxxog.” I shook the bees from my jacket; they’d got cosy in my pockets and inside the lining. “I’m quite well, I assure you,” I said. I didn’t feel well. The walls and furniture around me seemed to move although I stood still, and small noises crashed in my ears. The honey man had come to fetch Madame hunting, as promised. The days were turning colder, the sun hardly breaking through the early-morning mist. “The perfect conditions. They’ll be sluggish,” said the honey man. But faced with the sobering light of day and the reality of chasing down real, living Saps, Madame refused. The honey man insisted on a partner, so I found myself stepping out into Tanners Row in her place, keeping pace with the only Varian who’d ever made me feel truly uneasy. At least he wore his veil so I didn’t have to look at his awful face. “We’re after a full specimen today,” the honey man said. I sent up silent thanks; a full specimen could fetch an excellent price. Perhaps the whole one hundred and fifty guineas, if I did my best negotiating. As we walked farther down the Row, past boarded-up shops and walls of graffiti, he handed me a dartgun. I turned it over in my palm. “Why don’t your bees just sting them?” “I asked them to, on my first hunts, but it caused too much swelling,” he replied. “Madame will want to pickle and jar immediately, which leaves insufficient time for the bumps to recede.” “Asked?” His bees flew around us, perhaps an entire colony. Some of them had landed contentedly on my shoulders, and I’d given up trying to shrug them

away. “I thought you and they . . . Do you not control them?” The honey man laughed. “They do as they like. We have a mutually beneficial arrangement, nothing more: my body provides a strong home; they collect information. They’re spliced, like Varians,” he said with pride. He raised a hand and they danced around it. “They’re clever little creatures, unnaturally strong with an excellent sense of direction. My bees know all the quickest routes through Vak-Ambrah, from the Auxxib district to the harbour and into the heart of the slums. Keep them in your sights and you’ll never be lost. “And they certainly seem to like you,” he said, his head tipping towards those on my shoulders. “Perhaps they have a mind to burrow in and make a new honey girl.” I swallowed a surge of bile. The bees led us deeper into Tanners Row. The honey man and I followed close behind, my toes catching on the path. The alleys we took were narrow, the buildings bowed together like lovers’ foreheads, sharing secrets. When I looked up between them, the sky was a distant slash of iron. We stalked through the slums for much of the day. They appeared abandoned, but energy rippled through every building as though they’d been occupied a moment before and swiftly vacated — dust, stirred by phantom feet, settled in the fibres of my coat; doors in nearby rooms creaked; even as I watched it, a spoon relaxed into a bowl of congealed gruel. The bees, which appeared to my feverish mind like will-o’-wisps drifting just out of reach, guided me through broken doorways slick with mould, past corners piled high with stained mattresses. It reminded me acutely of the squats I’d lived in since my extensions were implanted, those hellish rooms I’d endured with strangers in similar

predicaments. Not quite Saps in a slum — which was all that mattered to me, at first — but close enough. The memory nauseated me. In one room, the honey man pointed out a stash of homemade weapons under a loose floorboard. The largest wall was covered in writing I didn't understand. "A call to arms," the honey man said with his hands in his pockets. I frowned. "You can read this?" With a shrug, he replied, "A little. It's valuable, in my line of work, to know what the humans are writing about." A clang from behind made us both whip round. Across the room, a Sap girl with matted brown hair had knocked over a bucket. She froze in the doorway, clutching the frame for balance. Her wasted face curdled in my brain. A ghost of my younger self before my extra eyes and wings were implanted. We might have been perfect doppelgängers. One hundred and fifty guineas. I clenched my fists and ran. "Your gun!" the honey man shouted after me, but my blood was churning and I couldn't think straight. I chased her into a squalid stairwell and slugged every last inch of her, our breathing laboured and echoing, our hands and fingers bumping as we struggled wordlessly, desperately. One wallop broke her nose — I heard the satisfying crunch — but then the honey man pulled me away. "Not her face, damn it," he said. We returned to the emporium with the dazed Sap slung over the honey man's shoulder. A waist-high jar stood waiting for her in a corner of the kitchenette. Together, the honey man and Madame lowered her in — and as I sidled along the wall, my legs barely bearing my weight, Madame let out a diabolical laugh such as I'd never heard before. She pinned the Sap down without mercy, two hands to every limb, while the honey man poured in buckets of

preservative chemicals. The Sap screamed; liquid slushed against glass. I slid down the wall and folded myself inwards, hands over my ears and my extensions burning, unable to take my eyes off the jar. The Sap's palms beat and pressed against the glass, her face scrunched in terror. Above it all, filling my vision, was Madame: terrifyingly strong, her little tongue sticking out between her teeth with effort and relish. The Sap slowly grew still, her forehead resting against the glass as if in repose, and Madame withdrew her hands. As she washed them at the sink and mopped her face, the honey man bent down to me. "Madame's made some tea." I hadn't noticed the spread on the tiny table; Madame had kept herself busy while we were gone: a pot of tea, a dozen mouldy finger sandwiches, a slab of cake. I didn't have the stomach for any of it. "Bit of a treat, watching a master acristologist work, isn't it?" Madame said slyly when she joined us. Her usual airheaded manner soon slid back into place, however, like the tide coming in. "Look at her, bless — she's at sixes and sevens. But won't it fetch a good sum! I haven't seen a specimen like this in circulation for, oh, decades? And a Sapling, too — rare!" She grinned and giggled her way through most of the meal, steadily slurring her words until her head lolled back and she began to snore. I watched her mouth flap open. Her uvula wiggled like a lure on a line. The honey man tutted. Dozens of furry bees had climbed all over my arms. I twitched and they rose like a flock of birds, only to settle again. The honey man sat opposite me. The table was so small our knees touched. "Do the bees frighten you? Don't worry." He plucked one out of the air and held it up for me to see the stinger. "They're like me. They don't

sting unless they really have to.” His forefinger and thumb snapped open and the bee drifted away in a daze. “Your methods are a little crude, but you did well today. You surprised me. I almost thought you wouldn’t have it in you, hunting your own kind.” I stiffened in my seat, glancing at Madame. “She’ll not hear a thing,” he said, pointing to her teacup stained with lipstick and the multiple rings inside where her tea had sat too long. “It’s not peppermint, after all. Peppermint only masks the true smell.” Three bees emerged from Madame’s internal breast pocket, carrying between them a small bronze flask scabbed with verdigris. They deposited it before me and I took a cautious sniff. The smell was syrup-sweet and heady. No wonder she slept so much, I thought. “How did you know?” I said. The honey man smiled. “An addiction to liquor is hard to hide.” “No.” I lowered my voice. “That’s not what I meant.” “Ahh.” His chair creaked as he settled. “My bees can recognise a human quite easily, much easier than a drunk old Varian, and I’ve seen many illegal extensions in my life. None of them quite so fine nor resilient as yours, but they — and symptoms of rejection — are easy to spot for someone who knows, hmm?” Shakily, my fingertips brushed my brow. Three of my eyes had begun to harden now, and the electrical impulses that controlled their fake eyelids were fading. The first one to get infected had stopped blinking altogether. Instead of pulling my wings through the usual slits so that they hung proudly outside my clothes, I didn’t risk the pain and covered them instead. Even Madame, stupid as she was, had started to notice these changes. Some days, her great respect for my name seemed my only shield and protection. “Well.” The honey man tapped the

flask of liquor. “This will dull the pain for now. I have connections. Perhaps I’ll find someone who can help.” I scoffed. “Help? What are you helping me for? Are you some kind of Sap sympathiser?” “I neither like nor dislike humans.” He raised his chin, considering me. “If you were just some girl from the slums, slaving away for a few coins, I would have told Madame the moment I met you — we would have pickled you there and then. A pretty penny with little effort. But.” I shifted my knee away from his. “Profits and clientele have improved since you were employed. Stock is being sold. The ledger looks healthier than I’ve seen it in years. You’re not slaving away mindlessly, trying to get by. You’re clawing this emporium out of the gutter at great risk to yourself. Why?” He had me cornered — it seemed pitiful to lie. Perhaps the truth would serve me better here. “My extensions fail a little more every day,” I said, keeping my voice low. “The man who gave them to me can fix them, but he wants a lot of money for his trouble — and I can’t even get payment to him because she won’t let me leave her side for five minutes at a time.” I turned away from his honeycomb face. Madame’s liquor stank; how hadn’t I noticed it before? He sighed. “She wasn’t always so clingy. She was the best acristologist in Vak-Ambrah — until eight years ago. A human got in through an open window and nearly killed her. Avenging some brother she’d pickled, I believe. I can tell from the look on your face that she didn’t tell you. She’s convinced he’ll come back one day to finish her off.” Apart from her snores, the room fell silent. “So,” I said, glancing at the jarred Sap in the corner. I struggled to keep the fear from my voice. “You’ll turn me in now, I suppose.” “Didn’t you listen to me before? I’ve no issue

with humans. My interest is in the emporium's success, and if a human can do that better than . . . well. So be it." I bristled. "What are you suggesting?" He spoke in earnest: "I'm suggesting we work together as partners. The company account will have to be transferred to another name, to take away any control she has over the finances. I've seen the papers you presented to her — your forging skills are superb." I didn't react to his compliment; it had brought back memories of the old con who'd taught me. Conditions in the squats had forced us together into a strange alliance, for I was — still am — a prickly creature, and he hated the Strohm-Waxxogs almost as much as I hated myself. Somehow, we agreed to help one another — I needed passable papers that I could produce autonomously, and he wanted dirt on my family, such as I could provide. He used to wipe his arse with old newspapers, but he always remembered to fling me the society pages first, so that I could read about my family. My mother. My eyes burned with tears unexpectedly, farcically. "Now, if you create a power of attorney and take it to the bank, we'll sell the new product as soon as possible and pay off the creditors." In such an enclosed space, with my murderous employer's snores rattling in my ears and the Sapling's damning gaze at my back and old memories tangling my mind, I could hardly think. "I need that money for Heechi! My extensions — without them, the clients —" He grabbed my wrist. Squeezed. "Forget your extensions! They are easily fixed. Control yourself and think of the long game. The emporium. Financial security. That's worth more than a few false eyes and wings, I assure you." "I —" "You're only useful to me as long as you can work." I reluctantly met

his gaze. Think how much a collector might pay for a human Strohm-Waxxog. I remembered him saying that, the first time I met him. Not a joke. A threat. “I can work,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “I can work.” “I’m glad we understand each other,” he said, letting go of my wrist. “Madame told me about the mail-order service. There’s no need to bother with postage costs: my bees are strong enough to handle the deliveries. Send me copies of all statements, receipts, invoices — everything.” He left soon after that. I gave the kitchenette a cursory clean, stepping around Madame to pile up the plates and cups. To bed, I took Madame’s half-empty flask, which I drained, gagging. I hoped to lessen the pain in my back and sleep like the dead until morning, but the liquor combined with an already burning fever gave way to hallucinations: the Sapling leaning over me, her wet hair dripping formaldehyde in my eyes — which gave up their roots and rolled like marbles across the floor; I tried calling them back, but my mouth was full of droning bees — while the replica skeleton scratched the inside of my wardrobe door, begging for freedom — and the whole building creaked around me, as if the hate of a thousand Saps rested on it. I’d only delivered half of Heechi’s list by then, and I was now under closer observation than ever, but as I considered the piles of wrapped parcels on my bed one early morning, an idea occurred to me. The clutch of bees on my windowsill quivered, eager and attentive. I looked at them. “You’ve . . . always liked me, haven’t you?” I said, feeling a bit stupid. “Do you think . . . Could you deliver some extra things for me, and not tell him?” They buzzed gently. I placed a finger amongst them and they nuzzled it. Off they went,

hauling mail-order parcels and a few smuggled goods for Heechi. I marvelled at the skill of their splicing, that they could bear so much weight with such fragile bodies. They returned an hour later with a pot of cream from the extensioneer. I rubbed it into my forehead and back as directed, grateful to have the pain alleviated. Before lunch, I went to the bank and closed the emporium's account with a forged power of attorney. My handiwork passed muster. "It's been such a downward spiral." I sighed at the bank manager. "Such a shame." That, at least, was as agreed. But my extensions had been a cherished part of my body for ten years and fixing them was all I could think about — selling the Sapling and paying Heechi took precedence over whatever the honey man had planned. I began calling in on clients to tout our newest stock without his knowledge. Many of them were aggrieved when I explained Madame's fall from grace, and they showed great interest in the Sapling. An old Aujox matriarch suggested I take the prize piece to auction. That was impossible, of course: a full specimen at auction would attract a crowd. And the honey man's attention. But auctions are perfect places for finding prospective customers with their chequebooks already primed, and the matriarch gladly gave me the address for one taking place that week. While Madame slept off a double-dose of peppermint tea, I found the address — a bombastic townhouse with stone columns and guards flanking the door. I showed them the Aujox matriarch's card and they ushered me, unchallenged, into the grandest entrance hall I'd ever imagined. I'd worn my cleanest boots, my most fashionable hat and jacket, but I was still hopelessly underdressed. The marble floor was threaded with gold and silver;

the chandelier dripped splendour; and all around me were Varians in silks and velvets, showing off their plumage and shimmering scales and teeth. A few of them sneered at me in my dowdy clothes. I raised my chin and slipped carefully into the crowd, wincing whenever someone bumped against my wings which I'd suffered to pull through my clothes to hang in full view. The items on sale that night terrified me: a severed head, its eyes pinned open; a torso, separated into slices as thin as ham and suspended in clear resin; a full specimen that had been preserved without the usual fluids by some unfamiliar art and laid, as wrinkled and brown as a prune, in a glass-topped casket. The lots were displayed around the hall and the rooms alongside, to give the bidders a chance to browse. A few eyes glanced my way — perhaps they simply expected me to place an opening bid, but the looks unnerved me all the same. A few of my best clients were present and I gratefully joined them when they called me over. They introduced me to their parties and enquired as to my business. "Have you entered your Sapling into the auction?" they asked me. "We're considering it," I replied. Someone leaned into the conversation. "Did you say a Sapling? A full Sapling? Do you have a photogram?" An image of the Sap — not serenely floating, but thrashing against Madame and crying for mercy — invaded my mind, and I faltered. "It's . . . it's such a new specimen, there's been no time to arrange anything like that. But you can be sure she's a fine collector's item." And when pushed for description, I gave one: a description that, I realised with dismay, held a disturbing resemblance to my own relatively plain face. Feeling exposed, I

excused myself and moved away into the crowd. “Miss Strohm-Waxxog!” I felt someone grab my arm and swing me round, a short young dandy to whom I’d sold a cane made from femurs the week before. “What luck, that you should be here as well! I was just telling your esteemed relations —” I should have known this would happen, should have taken better care . . . He’d spun me, the stupid idiot, into his own party of high-class Varians — and I found myself staring into the face of my tall, arthropodan mother. She stood with poise, her chin jutting proudly, her abdominal segments lacquered to a high shine. Long gone was the lonely creature from my childhood, unsure of her new marriage; here, she was transformed. I recognised the male at her side from the society pages: her fourth husband. It was not unreasonable to assume her first, my father, was also present, as well as the siblings I’d never met. Her eyes travelled over my face and widened. The long palps that sprouted from either side of her mouthparts twitched. We stared at each other for a long minute. I was here under my Strohm-Waxxog name; it would only take a word from her to discredit me and reveal all, and at my back was a crowd of Varians, ready to barter for my body. Her husband, the young dandy at my arm, and the rest of her party were waiting expectantly, teetering on the brink of discomfort. “Well,” she said. She gracefully extended her hand; she had her own reputation to protect. My eyebrows rose. “Well, I don’t believe we’ve met. But then, it’s impossible to keep track of all the Strohm-Waxxogs when they breed so quickly.” I took her hand and shook it, and the Varians around us chuckled and relaxed. The conversation soon bubbled up again to fill the gap. I disentangled my arm from

the dandy and she stepped away from her husband. “What’s your business here, may I ask?” Her smile was polite but the words came through gritted teeth. “I’m representing Madame Qlym,” I replied, avoiding her eye. “We’ve just acquired a full Sapling and are looking to sell.” She inhaled sharply at this. No doubt she’d expected me to crawl into a gutter somewhere and never come out, getting by with the bare minimum that her parting gift allowed, instead of intentionally putting myself at risk and drawing attention — not only to myself, but to her. “I can’t believe you would dare to come here, use that name,” she muttered. “It’s my name to use, isn’t it?” She worked her mouthparts, her eyes flicking around the room. I thought she was nervous of being seen with me, or perhaps looking to catch the eye of friends who would back up her accusation. I tensed to run for the door. But she placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me towards an elderly male Slin I’d never met. “You’re not to enter the general auction,” my mother whispered in my ear. “Mr Slin has a liking for Saplings; I expect he’ll be very interested in your piece.” With my mother there to make the introduction, the scaly Mr Slin was more inclined to oblige me — and Madame’s name appeared to rouse a real deference in his manner. Clearly, he was one of the few in the city to whom Madame’s name still meant something. I eventually persuaded him to purchase the Sapling for one hundred and twenty guineas. I trembled as he made out the cheque. Just as I slipped it into my pocket, a bell rang to signal the start of the bidding. The crowd flowed towards a room set for the purpose, and my mother and I stood in the midst of it like two rocks in a stream. I supposed I ought

to thank her for smoothing the way. The words caught in my throat. I unstuck my tongue from my palate to try again, but she spoke first: “Scurry back to Tanners Row, Miss Strohm-Waxxog.” Her voice and her eyes were hard, but she turned to join her people and let me go free — with a cheque I would never have obtained without her help. I didn’t know how heavy a guinea is; I’d never touched one, let alone one hundred and twenty of them. I tried to cash the cheque, but when the clerk emerged from the vault, hauling a case around the counter, straining and sweating and asking me where my carriage was parked, I imagined trying to hide it from Madame and swiftly reconsidered my plan. I deposited the funds into our existing account instead. The honey man had demanded to see all bank statements, to better understand the cash flow. He would notice this deposit and allocate it to the emporium before I could blink. So I swiped a few sheets of vellum from the bank clerk’s station while he was busy with the case and spent all night tracing the looping script until I could create a passing copy of the statement without the offending transaction. When deliverymen came to acquire the jar, Madame was confused. I reassured her: “We agreed to place it in storage, Madame, don’t you remember? We really don’t have space for it here.” She nodded warily. I might have noticed her suspicion had I not been so stressed covering my tracks. I was forced over the next few days to withdraw the money in concealable dribs and drabs, all the while recreating statements to keep the honey man away from the money I felt I’d wholly earned. A week after the auction, I returned to the shop one afternoon with the last of it in my pockets. Counting all the coins in my collection box, I had one

hundred and fifty-three guineas. One hundred and fifty-three! I'd really done it! I planned to haul it across Vak-Ambrah and be on the operating table by sundown. I clenched the cold coins in my fist, their edges biting my palm, and grinned. I'd slipped Madame a strong dose in her morning tea and expected her to still be in bed. I went through to the kitchenette, tugging off my coat. She was sitting at the table. One hand cradled a glass of water. The other clutched a crumpled piece of paper. My grin faded. At the sight of me, she sniffed. "You want to better yourself. You want to be important. I was the same once." I kept quite still. "Higher society was all I wanted when I started; I couldn't wait to know everyone worth knowing. But you — you're a Strohm-Waxxog. You're already in higher society. I d-don't understand why you need to push me out of things." She wiped her cheeks, smearing powder and rouge. "I took you in and taught you everything I know, and this is the thanks I get?" She limply rattled the paper in my direction. My eyes snagged on the wax Slin seal, the proud letterhead. A bill of receipt for the sale, opened by Madame. I sucked in my breath, laying my coat gingerly on the table as if she might lunge for me. "I don't understand why you're so upset," I said. "I made the sale on your behalf —" "Don't lie to me." She wobbled to her feet, wiping her nose with her sleeve. "I called the bank as soon as I opened this, and the clerk explained, oh so gently, that I no longer have authority to speak to them about the account." She suddenly slammed the paper down on the table. "I think I'd remember going doolally and signing a power of attorney! Not to mention the fact that stock has been disappearing lately, and the little stash of coins in your room

— oh yes, I found it! Now you listen here," she cried, eyes bulging. "I've been in this business for decades; you've been here less than a year. Think you can pull out the rug, eh? Think you can swindle me out of everything I've worked for?" I retreated into the front shop, Madame stumbling towards me, unfurling her spindly arms. Her hands gripped the shelves, disturbing a lone bee that lurked there. She started to climb. "Think I'm a silly old drunk, do you? Some old has-been? Well, I'll tell you something: you pickle Saps for fifty years and we'll see how well you sleep, shall we?" Her voice cracked. "I've given everything to this business — everything! —and you think you can just walk in here with your fancy name and take it all for yourself? Here, you can have it!" She snatched up a jar with one hand and threw it at my feet. Sour chemicals and thousands of curved fingernails spattered my shoes. I kicked them away, but Madame was climbing higher and more jars came hurtling down, more broken glass as fine as sea-spray, more Sap parts at my feet. I backed up against the front window with my hand clapped across my mouth. The stench from the chemicals sizzled in my nose and throat. The front door flung open. The honey man whipped off his hat and veil, glanced at me and the mess on the floor, and jumped to the worst conclusion. I raised my hand to stop him, to explain — She saw a receipt, that's all! Just a receipt! — but my mouth was so inflamed by the fumes I could barely croak. "Madame —" She was climbing the highest shelves now, her arms bridging the void between the walls. She turned to face him. Her eyes shone with fresh tears. "You! Rushing to protect her, eh, your little investment? We've been partners all this time, as good as friends, and you

betray me —” “It may be hard to stomach,” he said, waving a hand towards me, “but there’s no reason why we can’t work with a human.” “What are you talking about?” she snarled from the corner, almost angry enough to overlook his slip, but her beady eyes traced his gesture and fell on me. They flicked between us. Her face went slack. “What is he saying?” I lowered my hand and wheezed, “She didn’t know. I tried to tell you.” Madame scuttled closer to us, her dumpy legs hanging limp. I had to crane my neck to meet her wide eyes. She said, “A Sap? But . . .” For a moment, I imagined Madame in her youth, the jewel of acristological society. Her steady decline to this shabby, bygone shop, trapped on all sides by Saps she knew hated her. My connections, a new source of hope. A tenuous link back to her heyday. I pursed my lips, as much of an admission as I could manage. She sobbed in uncontrolled rage, scrabbling higher as if I had something contagious. “So that’s it, is it? A Sap finally conspired to come in here and finish the job?” A new thought crossed her mind and her face turned nasty. “And she told me she was a Strohm-Waxxog, too!” “I am a Strohm-Waxxog!” I yelled up at her. “Dirty liar!” she yelled back. “What name did your mother give you? Not the one on your papers, I’ll wager!” She dropped on top of me, crushed me belly-down against the slimy floor with her bulk. She was holding me, I realised with panic, the same way she’d held down the Sap in the jar: two hands to every limb. I couldn’t move at all. She said, with a terrible smile to her voice, “It takes more than a pair of stick-on wings to make a Varian.” Two hands released my ankles and grasped my wings instead. I felt a sudden splintering at my shoulder blades, pain that

blacked my vision and took me back to a dark room, a scalpel . . . Old sutures sprang loose and nerves sparked like electric wires. I screamed. Nearby, a sodden bee struggled in a puddle of preservative fluid and blood. Madame's voice was muffled. I lifted my head. She'd turned back to the honey man, was saying something to him. "I'll show you I can still make a penny! We'll be rich; you said so yourself! Fetch me a jar!" Her fists clenched the wrinkled remains of my wings. The honey man wasn't watching or listening to either of us. He was reading the receipt that Madame had left on the kitchenette table. I knew his decision before he did. I'd been selfish. Short-sighted. I was more profitable floating in a jar. A few bees that had drifted anxiously towards me began to fall back, their tiny bodies trembling. "Move!" she shouted. "A jar, damn you!" The honey man turned to obey. The bees veered in midair, bottoms thrust forward to drive their stingers straight into Madame's rouged cheek. She let go of me, clapping all eight hands to her face. Buoyed by their comrades' sacrifice, more bees popped from the honey man's skin and dove at her, the buzzing so furious I could hardly hear her screams. I looked for him. I foolishly hoped that, at that moment, despite my betrayal, he was pushing past her to find me; but he cared only for his own hide. I saw him reach for the kitchenette window and the slums beyond, quitting us both with ease, his jaw clenched in disgust. I got to my feet and curled my hands behind the huge shelving unit on my nearest side, pulled with all my strength so that the whole structure fell forwards. Hundreds of jars from floor to ceiling slid off their perches and shattered, covering the floor with slime. As the shelves crushed the bees and

Madame with them, I staggered towards the front door, but the slime gave me no purchase. I slid out onto cold cobbles instead, the interior of the emporium collapsing behind me with an ever-quietening buzz. When I stopped coughing and looked up, I saw — you. The Saps from the slums, emerging from the dark windows and doors of Tanners Row to watch the destruction of the emporium. I might have hunted one of your daughters and drunk tea while she bobbed in the corner. I might have sold and smuggled pieces of your friends. But it didn't matter. You saw the emporium in chaos and what, from all accounts, looked to be one of your own crawling from the wreckage. And you helped. My voice fails. I'm in a dark room, clutching my eyes — they've hardened to glass and fallen from their sockets, leaving ugly little craters behind. A male Sap with coffee-coloured hair sits opposite, his hands clasped beneath his chin. Sometimes, it's a whole group of them at once — the variety in their faces and bodies is a shock to me — but today it's just him. He's the only one whose tongue can manage the strange clicks and bends of Varian. "I know you have confusion and anger," he says carefully. "But please have strength also. We are all human. We will help you." "Saps don't help each other," I whisper, my mouth chalk dry. He smiles sadly. "I wish you would not use that word." Most days, when my words have run dry, he stays with me for hours saying strange, incomprehensible things like revolution and rehabilitation and rights. He saves newspaper cuttings for me, like Madame's obituary and articles about the unrest in Tanners Row. He slips them under the door just like Ms Gishak and her pamphlets, as if I'm right back where I started. Today, though, now

that my story is finally told, he leaves. I sleep for a while. Buzzing wakes me. I glance up to my only window. A bee lingers there, hesitant to come closer. Memories flick across my mind: humans, not Saps; his comprehension of their language; the need to hide his unusual mutation even in public. Perhaps they have a mind to burrow in and make a new honey girl. Perhaps the honey man and his ilk don’t breed like normal Varians — perhaps they can be made. Perhaps he’d been trying to help me, one human helping another, in his own way. Perhaps he still is. I imagine raising my hand to this bee, beckoning it. Swallowing it. The vibration as it works its way to my heart. A new queen at my core. The squirm of larvæ in my breast and the slow disintegration as they carve their way through my body. I clench the front of my shirt; I can practically feel them. An infallible extension in which to hide . . . But I don’t have the energy for hiding any more. I turn away from the bee and its plaintive noise, tears running down my cheeks — they plop into my palm, where the cluster of cold, dead eyes that once made me Varian lies. My hand unfurls. I let them roll away across the dark floor.

I'll never forget the taste of my mother's marrow.

I think of it now, as I rub oil into the stiff, cracking heels of my shoes: how I scooped it still warm from the bone, like pale butter. How it lingered in my teeth for days after the harvesting. And I think further back, as I often do lately, to the way her hands jerked and fluttered close to her bony chest before she passed. She was too weak to shape her signs properly so I can only guess their meaning. Perhaps I've guessed wrong—Aefha thinks so—but I can't forget.

Follow the ghosts.

She'd always told me to avoid them, but her dying words haunt me. So here I am, chasing the ghosts' blue glimmer through the ruins I call home. They're leading me northwest, but for now I'm stuck: A sunsear has trapped me halfway up a sagging tower block that fractures and pops with every passing hour.

It's the worst sunsear I've known. If a living person could boil in their own blood and juices, this would be the time. No crevice, shadowed or otherwise, is spared. The metal of the ruins is hot enough to blister. I've spent six days tucked in the coolest corner of the room with my headscarf covering my eyes, and six unbearably warm nights perched on the exposed face of the tower block, slapping gnats out of midair. A better person would use the time to write their book. I can only stare at the view, doubt chasing its tail in my head. Fresh paper is too scarce to waste on just anything.

But the heat’s waning today. When the leather of my shoes is good and supple, I peer over the edge of the floor and spot a snake twining through the dried grass below: the first living thing I’ve seen in days. I pack away the oil and climb twenty feet down the broken side of the tower block. The rope’s woven from my mother’s hair, among other things, and it sees me safely to the ground before the building gives way.

She’s with me, then. That’s a sign I can’t mistake.

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Follow the ghosts.

A year had passed since she’d died. How I hate myself for it now, but I’d almost put those words from my mind. Aefha knew my mother since they were young townsfolk together and had translated her final, feeble signs differently, so I’d started to put them behind me at last; until the day I found Yba’s body.

Yba and my mother were two of a kind, mappers and wanderers, neither content to stay in one place too long. Shunned by the townsfolk for choosing to live in the ruins, they’d grown close, and when my mother died I took up the duty of care. I visited Yba every third day. She lived in a den by the canal, near the crumbled arch of a bridge. I used to play there as a small child, while Yba and my mother swapped stories of the ruins and the cracked salt flats beyond.

That day, just like today, I'd been delayed by a sunsear. As I hauled myself out onto the bank, a fetid tang brought me up short. I knew it well, and it tightened my chest. I ran to Yba's den, batting away the flies that buzzed there, and threw aside the animal hide that covered the entrance.

The stench made me cry out. I pulled my headscarf across my mouth and squinted inside. Yba lay in her cot, marbled and engorged, leaking ichor from her nose and ears.

The sunsear's heat had quickened the decay, putrefying Yba's soft parts beyond use. Her skin, which might've been tanned and turned to leather, or stretched over a drum; her sinew, for bowstring and lacing; her bladder, for holding precious water; her yellowish fat, for rendering as lard, or oil, or soap—all of it was lost. Yba's coarse grey hair was still attached to her scalp, though the scalp itself was peeling away from the skull, and the bones and teeth were intact, of course; but little else.

It took time to work myself up to the harvesting. Simple grief kept me by her side, listless, for an hour or more; and fear kept me from my task after that—fear that I'd somehow do it wrong. I'd never performed a harvesting before, only witnessed one. My mother's.

The memory, which I'd tried very hard to bury, made my chest hitch.

My finger-bone necklace clacked with the sudden movement. I silenced it with my palm. Yba's would be a poor yield, but I had to

do my best. It was my fault she'd lost out on a proper harvesting. I couldn't disrespect her by letting the rest of her body go to waste.

It's all meat, I told myself. I'd butchered meat before.

Once the midday heat had passed, I hauled the dripping cot outside where there was fresh air and room to work. I cut Yba's hair and braided it to keep it tidy, then opened her mouth and pried the few good teeth from their beds. Squirming maggots lined her soft palate. For a while I watched them, their lives little wonders in a hard world, then I closed her jaw and left them to their work.

After that, it was harder. Sloughing the flesh from her bones reminded me of Aefha doing the same for my mother. Each swipe with the machete, each cut . . . Harvesting is a sacred thing, but I'd had to turn away from my mother's: The back of her poor, shorn head had bounced against the slab with every chop. I had to turn away from Yba, too, because she seemed to watch me with eyes too swollen for their lids. When I scooped out her spoiled entrails for the waiting birds to eat, I saw Aefha raise a bloody kidney to her mouth in the dark of my mind.

I scrubbed Yba's bones clean with sand. They were nicked and chipped, their edges softened by new growth: the signs of a hard life. As I scoured my forearms and fingernails clean of gore, I wondered if my bones would show such scars, when my harvesting came.

A rustle turned my head. I straightened, eyes scanning the edge of the canal. Thin chirps, unfamiliar in their cadence, echoed quietly nearby.

“Hello?”

There was no answer—just a flicker of blue light like the eyes of a beast in the dark; quick, but enough. My mother’s fingers danced in my head, flowing from one form to another: *Follow the ghosts*. And such timing, with Yba’s blood still on my hands! I darted up the slope to look, unnerved, but the ghost had gone.

Shaken and sore, I sorted through Yba’s things. Her tools were in good repair. I found a few pelts, a meal of dried meat and nuts, and a small bladder of dandelion wine. I also found her book, which was not as I expected for such an old, wise woman: a single scrap of paper covered with scribbles and Ruined script.

I sat back on my haunches in bitter bewilderment.

When we die, our bodies are harvested and used to benefit our people, but our minds are also left behind, as books. Without them, any skill or knowledge gained over the course of one’s life is lost forever. The dandelion wine that only Yba could make: She’d long promised to teach me the recipe. Now she never would.

Instead, she’d left this tiny fragment. The Ruined script is said how it’s written so I traced it with a fingertip, doing my best to sound out the words. Yba had only taught me the basics. My mother could’ve

read them, could've shaped the words even though she couldn't hear them. They'd always shared much more with each other than with me. They were shutting me out, still.

I'd had a mind to stay the night, to wrap myself in one of Yba's pelts and nibble on the last of her food. She wouldn't have begrudged me that. But her book disturbed me. My mother's belongings had been the same: I'd found notes from old lovers, one of them likely my father, and other tokens of her life from before me, before the ruins. It was as if I was in the home of a stranger, looting a stranger's things. Perhaps I hadn't known them so well after all.

(*Is that my fault, too?*)

I couldn't stay. I packed up and left, clutching my necklace quiet. The glint of starlight guided me away.

• • • •

It's our custom to share a harvest, no matter how small. Rolfshall is the nearest settlement to the ruins, a morning's walk east from the rim. It's where Aefha lives, and where my mother died.

I passed northern traders on the way. They greeted me in their strange, fascinating dialect, laughing when I fumbled a few sounds back at them. (Growing up with a deaf mother, and otherwise alone, I myself don't speak much. Sometimes, I think my throat forgets how.) I traded two pelts for breakfast from a trembling man tending

a stewpot. He bowed his head as he ladled pottage into my skullcap bowl.

The soil up north is poor, sat as they are on the edge of the salt flats, so northerners need trade to survive. People say starvation drives them to break taboo when times are hard, that they consume the flesh of shakers—to be sure, tales of shaking sickness are more common in the north. I licked the broth from my fingers, but threw away the meat, just in case.

Rolfshall hadn't changed since my last visit. Cattle pens flanked the gate. As I passed the heifers, their thunderous lowing thrumming in my chest, I noticed something new: a small potato crop, watered by a clever network of channels. The townsfolk bustled about—there's little time in a life like this for idleness—but some of them recognized me and scowled. One father pulled his curious child inside.

I tugged my headscarf lower over my forehead and took a deep, shaky breath.

The elders' house was my first stop. There, I spread Yba's harvest before them and told them of her death. The parts I'd salvaged should by rights go to Yba's relatives, but I knew of none.

A sinewy elder, brown as a varnished fruit pit, grimaced. "No meat? No skin? *Nehk*!" Her voice landed like a slap. "Has your time in the ruins made you as wasteful as the Ruined ones?"

“Her soft parts had rotted by the time I found her.”

“Have a care, or that may be your end as well.” The elder turned and spat into a pail.

Another elder sighed. “We have no memory of her. If you had some bond with the woman, take what you need from her harvest. The rest should go to the usual people.” As I rose to leave, she took my hand. “You look tired. Stay a while in town, child.” They asked me every time, for the same reason we wanderers are permitted back at all: in the hope we’ll return for good and so be saved.

The weavers were delighted with Yba’s plait. The brittle hairs glittered like silver thread, fit to embroider a bridal headscarf, and would soon soften in oil.

Malnutrition had stunted her bones, so the bone-workers handled them like the bones of a child. They would make fine things: combs and needles and flutes.

The tinkers would’ve liked more teeth, but the few I offered them were strong.

Thus unburdened, though not untroubled, for Yba’s meager contribution to the book-keepers was sure to cause a fuss, I wandered past the tannery, drawing the smell deep into my lungs. The tanners were busy. Skins both human and animal soaked in barrels while a boy mashed brains into gray slush, to be added later, but their work was winding down now that the sun had

reached its peak. It was too hot for hard labor and the herd needed to be brought in.

“Gwinaelle!”

The cry made me jump—it’s strange to hear my name aloud when I know it better by sign—but it was only Rann, Aefha’s son and my betrothed, beckoning me inside. He’d just finished fleshing a skin, scraping away the fatty tissue to make it ready for the vats, and it was a beautiful one. Its owner must have travelled far to find such tattoo ink, as bright as plumage.

The armpits and neckline of his top were black with sweat. “I didn’t know you were in town.”

“I just got here,” I said. And faltered. Our betrothal, settled by our mothers before we could walk, has always made me shy of him. The expectation for us to marry, for me to leave the ruins and settle in the town, grows heavier each year. He’s strong, and good; his harvesting promises to be bountiful. Nevertheless, the thought of sharing my solitary life chafes like a yoke about my neck.

But it was my mother’s wish, so I must bear it. “Someone died in the ruins. I had to bring the harvest back.”

Rann nodded slowly. “I’m glad you’ve come. Your mother’s book’s been bound. I handled her skin myself. I took good care of it,” he added.

My throat burned. Her book. More words I'd tried to forget. "Thank you."

He passed his fleshing knife to another tanner and waved for me to follow him out of the tannery and into the sting of the midday sun. The streets of Rolfshall were quiet, like ruins themselves. I breathed easier.

The book-house was the largest building in town. Inside, the air was cool and dry, and the hides that formed the canopy had been worked so sheer as to filter the sunlight and transform it into something ambient, gentle. Hooded book-keepers drifted around the shelves of books whose precious paper, made from woven reeds, wood-pulp, and skin, held the words of a hundred thousand dead townsfolk. Somewhere amongst them were the instructions for sign language my mother had found in her youth, and which she later showed me: People had added their own signs over the years, filling the margins with illicit hand studies.

"I asked them to keep your mother's book aside," said Rann, running his fingers along the soft spines. "Here," he said suddenly, and handed me a small tome. The front cover bore a long, knotted scar.

The skin for my mother's book was taken from her stomach. That scar marked the cut I was born from, when the natural way grew too difficult. As a child, I'd told her it was ugly. Now I was a young woman with scars of my own, I wished I could tell her (*that I'm*

sorry) that it shimmered like nacre. Inside were my mother's drawings, mapping the entirety of the metal ruins where we lived—even parts I'd never seen. So much work over so many years, so much sacrificed, and such a thin little book to show for it.

I cried until my head hurt.

Rann held me, his hands ripe with the smell of his work. Like the elder, he begged me to stay. I let him take me to his mother's house. When Aefha drew aside her door and took my hands without a word, kissing me on both cheeks, I cried harder. She coaxed me out of my filthy clothes. She let down my hair and brushed it until it was clean enough to braid. It was she who'd woven the rope from my mother's hair; her fingers are famously nimble. It was she who'd given sound to the name my mother chose for me. She knew to work in silence now. Her young grandson, Bedda, played on the floor nearby, one slobbery fist lodged in his mouth.

The rest of Rann's family were not so welcoming.

"Still playing around in those ruins?" said Rann's sister, Wexen.

I had to grip my hands, the impulse to sign was so strong. "I don't *play*."

"I can't see what else there is to do out there. Let us know when you get bored. We need all the help we can get."

She spoke fast and hard. I blinked. “It can’t be so bad. I saw the potato crop.”

“Which takes water away from the livestock,” Wexen snapped. She hauled little Bedda onto her lap. “If the sunsears get any worse, the herd won’t bear it. They’re already wont to wander about unlatching gates with their teeth, or else they stand out in the open, the stupid things. I’ve always said our water’s wasted on them.”

Once Rann, his father, and Wexen’s husband got home, we ate a cold spread of salted jerky, calf’s tongue, clotted milk from Aefha’s goat, and mashed tubers with swirls of marrow jam. I gave up Yba’s dandelion wine, for sweetness. It was all delicious, despite there being hardly enough to go around. In the ruins, I live on whatever I can trap or forage. Food is how they keep me here, and how they lure me back.

The richness soon got the better of me. I tucked myself away from the boisterous family, massaging my bloated stomach. With their backs turned to me like a wall, I thought I understood a little of how my mother must’ve felt as a girl before she learned to sign, cut off from such word games, squabbles and banter that made up a house like this one. (Often, I imagine her in so much detail that I can near believe I was there.) It was her curious nature that drove her into the ruins. What a relief to have no lips to read and no need to use any voice except the one she could shape with her hands!
I *could* hear them, yet I too longed to leave. The noise was grating. I

was glad of my little corner and the chance to examine my mother's book.

Seeing the ruins from above confused me at first, but as I flipped through the pages I started to recognize places we'd been. Here, the seven-forked hub with the clogged fountain at its centre; there, the drain near Yba's den. My mother recorded the ruins like no one before her, in perfect detail. She always climbed the tallest towers, leaving me crying on the ground until I was brave enough to join her. I'd assumed she just had a taste for danger, but it was the *view* she was after. Towards the end of the book, though, the drawings were unfinished. Sections of the ruins faded like buildings in fog, the strokes of ink uncertain where she'd grown too sick to hold a pen.

I frowned and placed Yba's page alongside these last few diagrams, glancing between them. Shapes aligned. One seemed to complete the other.

"What does it mean?" asked Rann, pointing at Yba's markings. He folded his bulk in beside me; he and his father had finished clearing dinner away, and now his father idled over his tea, watching us.

"I . . . I think these are the ruins to the northwest." I bit my bottom lip. The structures there were unsound, the pathways choked with litter that wouldn't decompose—and worst, it crawled with ghosts. I'd dared it once, only for the ghosts to turn on me in their dozens like starving dogs on meat. They'd followed me for miles, gabbling

madly. When my mother found out, she couldn’t sign fiercely enough: The northwest was out of bounds.

And yet, her last words: *Follow the ghosts*.

Why the change of heart?

Rann looked blank. I regretted saying anything. “Don’t tell Aefha, she’ll just worry,” I muttered. “I’d like to keep this, though.”

He nodded. Townsfolk were free to borrow books as long as they liked. And this book wouldn’t be missed anyway. Then he pointed to Yba’s page. “Did this one fall out? Wasn’t it bound properly?”

“It’s not that.” I swallowed. “The person I harvested . . . I looked everywhere, through all her things, but I only found this one page.”

Rann recoiled. Of course he did, he was townsfolk. He’d been taught to distrust the Ruined who broke the world and turned it fallow. Centuries later, their selfishness still permeates the paths they walked, the things they touched. Those of us who live in the ruins are said to have been poisoned by their ancient, lingering apathy. Yba’s lack of a real book, which shows such disregard for her people, is proof of that.

I saw in his face a difficult question: Will I come to show such disregard too?

“Maybe you just missed the rest,” he said.

“Maybe.”

Aefha was watching us. Bedda wandered close, gurgling, to be called away by Wexen.

“Have you started your book?” I asked.

“Yes,” Rann said, glad to change the subject. “Want to see?” He took me through to the sleeping area, which turned every head in the house.

“Stay where we can see you,” Rann’s father growled. Suspicion never left his eyes. Aefha and Wexen smirked, their minds turning to sex. It was a different kind of corruption Rann’s father worried about.

Rolling his eyes, Rann handed me some drawings bound with a loop of sinew.

He’d sketched the everyday, the early mornings, the baskets full of horn and bone. One side showed Aefha tickling Bedda, her hair loose and trailing about her feet. Another, drawn some time ago and rougher for it, showed both our mothers together, laughing at some long-lost joke. They grew up close as sisters, until life led them their separate ways. My eyes lingered on the bandolier I’d taken for my own, the hair that held my weight when I needed it. The fingers whose bones adorned my neck, clacking with my every movement like a tiny, private applause.

“I’m not much of a tanner,” he shrugged. “Everything I could write about it, someone else has written first. But I can draw. One day I’ll show these to my grandchildren so they’ll know where they came from, and what our lives were like, and how we lived. Maybe they can learn from it.”

“Good,” I said. “Great.”

Rann smiled and took the sketches back. “What about you?”

I thought of the book-house, its mountain of words. What could I write that hadn’t already been written? I knew how to live in the ruins—where to sleep, what to eat—but Yba and my mother were the only people who’d find that useful and they were dead; it wouldn’t help Rann, or Aefha, or little Bedda. These are the thoughts that plague me, whenever I try putting pen to paper.

“I haven’t started yet.” I caught Rann’s expression. “But I will.”

• • • •

That was the longest I’ve ever stayed in town. It was the food, yes, and the relative ease of living—and because Aefha wouldn’t give me my own clothes back. She would clean and repair them tomorrow, she’d promise every night, stroking my hair until I fell asleep. I stayed so long my monthly bleed came around. I joined in the collection and drying of it to make bloodmeal for the new crops. That felt good; I’d found no use for blood in the ruins.

My hands were dexterous and picked up new things fast, so Aefha taught me how to weave ropes and baskets. We worked side by side for hours until our fingers ached and welts shined our palms. This was what it would be like to marry Rann, I thought; it wasn't so terrible.

But small reminders seeped in through the quiet moments. The harvesting slab was near the well where we drew our water ration each morning; some of the hair that passed through Aefha's hands for weaving was grey like Yba's; the spare pallet I slept on had a rip in the seam. I remembered it well. It was the pallet my mother had died upon. Her odor lingered in the stuffing I drew out, snapping her into focus so suddenly it made me sick.

She'd done plenty to tie me to Rolfshall—she'd betrothed me to a townsman when I could have taken a lover unwed, like she did. Was I living the life she wanted for me?

Or, asked my necklace with a rattle, was it the life Aefha wanted for me?

One night, I got up and looked for my clothes. I found them buried in the garden with my bandolier; the raised earth gave it away. That settled it. Aefha's goat bleated as I shook them out and pulled them on, welcoming the grit against my skin. I crept back to my pallet and gathered up my bag, checking my mother's book and Yba's map were inside.

Rann’s father’s an irritatingly light sleeper. Halfway to the door, he came after me and said, “You’re beyond saving if you’re going where I think you are, girl. Your damn mother has ruined you.” He jabbed a meaty finger my way. “No daughter of mine runs wild in the ruins. If you leave now, I’ll die before I let you marry my son.”

I pressed my lips shut and signed something rude. He’d never had the patience for signing, but he got the gist. “You dare disrespect me?” he hissed. “When I’ve tolerated you under my roof?”

We’d woken Aefha. “My love, please,” she said, joining him, “what’s this about?” And then she saw me. “Gwinaelle, you’re leaving?”

I’d wanted to avoid her most of all. She was always tender to me, but she’d hidden my clothes. I couldn’t trust her. It was too dark to read the anger in my eyes, so I plucked at my bandolier pointedly before stepping outside.

She followed me into the street. “You’ll stay here and live a good life, or so help me. Gwinaelle, you know you must. Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

I whirled on her, signing. I wasn’t saying anything important, just the first words that came to mind, but they didn’t have to make sense: Her eyes flicked from shape to shape, desperately trying to keep up and understand. I knew then that whatever fluency she’d had was gone. My hands stilled.

“You told me I got her signs wrong.”

She came close and cupped my cheeks. Her breath was sleep-sour. “The elders know I loved her.”

“Those were her *dying wishes*.”

“People say nonsense things when they’re dying,” she said firmly. “Gella was so far gone—maybe she did sign as you say, but she was not in her right mind. These ghosts—what if they lead you into danger? Death? Who’s to harvest you if you fall and break your neck?” I struggled but Aefha shook me. “I promised her I’d care for you, when she came here to die—and she came *here*, remember. She chose Rolfshall in the end, for both of you.”

Gella—that had been my mother’s spoken name. It felt wrong, hearing it. I shoved Aefha away and ran. She called me back with the name *she’d* given me, a name to bind me to her.

Like my mother’s, my true name has no sound.

• • • •

Water, the blood chants in my ears; I need water. I drank the last of it on the fourth day, expecting the sunsear to break, and managed with my own urine since. I lurch towards the canal and find it evaporated to a trickle. I climb in shakily to slurp at the dregs until my tongue stops rasping against my palate, then I find somewhere cool where I can skim my mother’s map.

My head’s much clearer. I quickly find where I am. My fingertip works northwest, from first page to last. As I suspected, Yba’s page is a match. If I had to guess—I close my eyes and lean my head back, picturing them conspiring—if I had to, I’d say Yba went northwest a long time ago, and my mother had attempted to retrace her steps.

They must’ve found something.

Birds caw overhead. I shield my eyes and watch them circling nearby. They do that when there’s a carcass, and though the ghosts are calling me, my mouth waters at the thought of food. I follow them, my head full of fox meat and lizard tails, but it’s not an animal.

It’s Rann. He’s been following me all this time, and he’s alive.

I shoo away the scavengers and roll him over. His eyes are sunken, his skin blistered and torn. He must’ve followed me into the ruins like a lost dog, the fool, and got caught in the sunsear. At least he collapsed in the shade.

Common sense sends me running back to the canal for a handful of water. I drip some onto his cracked lips until he responds. He vomits right away, but he’s conscious and soon suckling my fingers. Eventually, he’s alert enough to crawl the short distance to the canal where I can dig into the silt for more.

I mutter darkly while I work. It’s easier to be angry.

He waves to catch my attention. I glance at him. I've soaked his clothes as best I can; the wet cloth clings to his groin. My cheeks redden. He holds my gaze and raises his left forearm. Then he forms an arch behind it with his right index and thumb like the rising sun. My name.

He hasn't signed since we were little. I reach for his hand, my fingers caked in mud, and we sit like that for a while as night creeps in and the cicadas start up their racket. The damp silt in the canal cools. We bury our feet in it.

"Why did you come?" I ask. "You could've died."

"My mother sent me."

"Begging me to stay? And what about you?" I pull my hand away, my top lip curling into a snarl. "If you're wanting me to come back as your wife, to give you those grandchildren you want so much, you'll be waiting a long time."

But my anger barely touches him. He wiggles his toes, letting the clumps of sediment fall. "She said she knows it must hurt, your mother not telling you about the ghosts sooner. But living in the ruins is hard, and maybe Gella just wanted you to have an easy life."

"How does Aefha know what my mother wanted? She can't even sign."

“No, but as a mother herself, she can guess.” Rann kneads his palm. “She only sent me as far as the ruins’ edge, though. I . . . carried on for myself. I know we didn’t exactly choose each other.” Now it’s his turn to blush. “I want to help.”

He’s come so far, and not just in distance. I can’t imagine what it took to brush aside his bias. “You might not like it,” I say, thinking of the ghosts to come. Sometimes *I* don’t like it, this life, but to leave it would be a betrayal of my mother, or my childhood, or some intangible mixture of both.

He nods. “I might not, but I’ll try.”

For two days we head northwest, and for two nights we sleep back to back like we did as children, our bellies growling. I do what I can to feed us. The ruins may be parched and mean, but life struggles on. Dandelions and fungus grow wherever there’s water, crawlies infest every cranny, and lizards bask at dawn, dopey from the cold and dark, easy to snatch.

On the third morning, we reach the edge of a burial ground that stretches to the horizon. Stone markers and debris are scattered out of place, choked by weeds. Crumbling bone peeks out of the churned soil. I’ve passed Ruined graves before, but never so many at once; the thought of all the bodies left to rot sends a shiver up even my spine.

Maybe this is where the ghosts come from.

“I don’t think I can go any farther,” Rann whispers. He’s not the boy he was. Hunger has pinched his face. But his eyes are clear, and his voice doesn’t shake; it’s firm. He just knows his limits.

This burial ground marks the end of my mother’s maps, and the beginning of Yba’s. “We can’t stop now. We’re so close.”

He scans ahead as if summoning up courage. Then his eyes widen. I follow his gaze. There, beyond the graves: a strange blue light. It distorts and reforms again like a swarm of flies.

“I can’t,” he says.

A musty wind stirs my finger-bone necklace.

My mother was brave to come this far, and Yba braver still. I was a child to them, ever underfoot and coddled, but I am grown now. My mother knew I could match them, or she would never have told me to come.

I cross the burial ground alone. I have to crawl because my legs are shaking too much to carry me. I’m scared to hook my fingers into the ground in case I stir the dead. Occasionally I pass fallen signposts amongst the debris, covered with the same words from Yba’s map—I try them again; *arch-ivy*. I’ve picked up where my mother had to stop. My eyes burn with tears.

Soon, I can see the ghosts in their dozens. They move aimlessly. My breath catches whenever they stop, which is often, because

they keep getting stuck mid-stride, doing the same steps over and over. They flicker and warp, sometimes disappearing completely.

I’m halfway across before they realize I’m there.

I don’t know what gives me away—a crackle of dried scrub, a huff of effort—but no matter where they are, they all turn their heads in unison to stare at me. Those facing the other way turn their heads fully backwards. I squeeze handfuls of sod to steady myself. After a moment, just like before, they come. The ghosts with backwards heads don’t turn their bodies; they ripple and reform the right way around. They step as one, like a single reflection in fractured metal, and they *hiss* quietly. I press my forehead into the ground, unable to move. My own hot breath wets my face.

The hissing’s inside my head, and then it’s gone. I look up. The ghosts crowd me, but they don’t touch me. They wink out of existence until one remains. It sweeps its arm, gesturing beyond the burial ground to a stone building half-buried in rubble and dislodged earth, then it walks towards it, beckoning me to follow. When we reach the entrance, it too disappears. I go inside.

The floor has fallen through. I unwind the rope of my mother’s hair and secure it round a pillar. Inch by inch, hand over hand, I descend into the lower level. Once, the pillar groans, shifts, and I drop five feet; but the rope holds, and I press my forehead to it for a moment, giving thanks to my mother for protecting me and, though it pains me, Aefha for her handiwork.

I slide down the rest of the way until my feet touch the floor of a dark room. The slabs were once smooth marble but heat has buckled them against one another, and the remains of animals have stained them green and brown. Metal compartments line the walls.

The ghost suddenly appears right in front of me. I cry out. Sound doesn't echo down here like it should. I peek between my fingers. The light that forms the ghost's face shifts. It speaks in a language I don't understand.

I let go my breath. "What?"

The ghost sticks, resets, speaks again. It tries many languages. I still don't understand. It pauses, unsure how to proceed. Suddenly, to my shock—and my delight—it brings a hand to its temple. *Hello*.

I gawp. The sign is not exactly as I know it, but it's close enough to communicate. Like an accent. *Hello*.

The ghost sweeps its open palm into its torso. *Welcome to the*—I can't make it out. It looks like our sign for *book-house*.

I pull out Yba's map and hold it up for the ghost to see, tapping the markings urgently. My hand's shaking. *Is this here? Is this*—I speak aloud, "'arch-ivy'?*"*

The ghost tilts its head as it processes my tone. It reads the word I'm pointing to and gestures all around. "Archive," it says. It beckons me over to the nearest wall, sliding the metal compartments out.

Tiny ghosts come to life inside them, strange floating papers made of light. They're covered with more markings that slowly change.

The Ruined must have encased their books in the metal they so valued, like we do with our skins. Did Yba know what she'd found all those years ago?

I close my eyes and imagine I'm there as their equal: I conjure a night in the den, sitting thigh-to-thigh with my mother as Yba recounts a hazy memory about blue ghosts and a buried hall, myself as a child curled up asleep at our feet. By my age, I judge I've not long had my own encounter with the ghosts, and my mother is afraid for me. She places a hand on my arm. The firm line of her mouth says I must stay ignorant while she investigates, in case it's dangerous. What knowledge she finally found, and in her fear for me almost let slip away! The Ruined's book-house is vast—surely *someone* wrote about the sunsears, or a cure for the northern traders' shaking sickness, or even the warning signs of the tumor that sent my mother running back to Rolfshall to die. Aefha pulled it from her belly during the harvesting and burned it.

Well, I'm here now, but the book-house is failing. The papers made of light sputter like tallow candles, and the ghost grows desperate, showing me more things than I can possibly look at. Some of the compartments stay dark, their power long dead.

I hear a clatter behind me. Rubble falls beside the dangling rope, breaking apart on impact with the marble floor. I look up to see Rann's outline blocking out the light.

"Gwinaelle, are you down there?" His voice is thin. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I call up to him. "I'm fine!"

I can imagine all I like, but I'll never truly know my mother's mind. Her book, my fading memories, the taste of her marrow are half-truths and they're all I have, all I'll ever have—without her, I can only interpret them as best I can. Even *follow the ghosts* came at the last, from a feverish and fickle mind. Regardless, I vow to finish what she started. I can't settle in Rolfshall. Aefha will hate me for it, but I'll be in service to them all. The words the Ruined left behind have been going to waste like Yba's soft parts, and there's been no one to perform a harvesting until now.

Well, I have a book to write. I'm ready to learn, and the ghost is waiting.

by MEGAN ARKENBERG AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT PUBLISHED IN JUNE 2019 (ISSUE 81) | 4774 WORDS

© 2019 by Megan Arkenberg. “I’m going to tell you a story,” she says. “And when the story is finished, this will all be over.” There are four of them huddled on the floor of her living room: Francisco, like the saint; Michael, like the angel; Jerome, like the translator; and her, Batul, like the queen of heaven. The apartment—a second-story walkup above a music shop, low-ceilinged, smelling faintly of clove and lemon—looks very much like what it is, the home of a twenty-four-year-old woman who makes a fair wage at a pottery factory. A number of brightly glazed mugs, sunbursts and peonies and beetles and birds, dangle from a rod above her stove. There are beer bottles in the wastebasket and cigarette stubs in a flat enamelled tray on the end table, but not too many of either. A star made of leaded glass hangs in the front window, but it’s invisible now. The window is hidden behind her mattress, stripped and pushed up on one end, curtains drawn behind it to muffle the rattle of bullets, the clamour of young men barking orders. Overnight, unpleasant sounds had risen from the music shop: angry voices, thuds, one sharp scream, and the twang of piano strings severing. Then the sounds moved back into the street, and the four in the apartment stole a few hours of uneasy sleep on the couch cushions. The boys are eleven, twelve, and fourteen. Just yesterday morning—or the day before, it must have been—Batul had watched them kick a rag ball around the empty lot across the street, shouting juvenile vulgarities when the ball rolled out of

bounds. They are quiet now, the saint resting his head on the angel’s shoulder, the translator worrying at the glossy pages of a fashion magazine. The kitchen counter is littered with empty jam jars and cracker sleeves. On the table, white beans soften in a bowl of water. They should last another day, Batul thinks, if they use the small bowls, use their eyes to trick their stomachs. “One story,” she says. Her voice sounds strange to her—flat, lacking its almost perpetual hint of a deep, melodic laugh. Men who spoke with her used to fall in love with that laugh long before they heard it. She touches the memory lightly, as though it were about a dead woman. No. Not a dead woman. Not yet. “Listen,” she says. “Just close your eyes and listen.” • • • • Once upon a time, in a land bordered by the desert and the ocean, Death fell in love with a prince. She had come to collect an old man, a music teacher who lived on the outskirts of a small, peaceful village, but the old man was late, having overstayed at tea and cards with a few of his friends. Rather than seek him out, Death sat on the stone steps of his shop and looked down into the nearby ball court, where a group of young people ran and jostled in the hot light of noon. It was there that she saw the prince, his beard as black as coal, his lips as sweet as mango. And the space in her chest where mortals carry their hearts became filled with something for which she had no name—thick as oil, hot as sunlight, bitter as untilled earth. The prince, however, did not fall in love with her. Many princes in their time have courted Death, but he was not one of them. He reverenced her when she made herself known, bowing gracefully and touching his lips to her wrist. With time, she would even feel something like regret behind

his courteous kisses. But reverence is not yearning, and regret is no promise. Even in pain and longing, Death was wise. She had watched mortals with care, and she knew no mortal could be tricked into falling in love. So she challenged the prince to a ball game, of which the winner would be granted a single request by the one who lost. When she won—as she inevitably did, for Death wins any game she deigns to play—she did not demand the prince's love. Instead, she asked for him to be lowered to the bottom of a deep, dry well. He tried to escape, of course. The wall was smooth and sheer, and he lost his grip while climbing. When he landed, he broke his skull and died. And so he became hers forever. Is that the end? No, no, this isn't that kind of story, where Death outwits a foolish mortal. No, this can't be the end, because when this story ends the waiting will be over, and she can still hear the soldiers shouting in the street. So the story goes on. Whatever he had felt for Death when he was a living man, the prince's feelings changed when he died. He had known her to be beautiful, dark and soft as grave dirt. Now he wanted to look at nothing but her. He had known her to be wise, more observant than any scholar, more cautious than any counsellor, more learned than all the books in his royal schoolroom. Now he wanted to listen to nothing but her. He had known her to be tender as the opening bud, and brutal as the spring rain, and sharp as the frost. Now he wanted to touch nothing but her. In time, Death and her husband brought forth three children, each as lovely and wise and courageous as their parents. They were called the Night Princes. • • • • Once upon a time, a woman who shared a name with the queen of heaven lived in an apartment

above a music shop. She had large hands and a pretty voice, and when she came home from her job at a pottery shop she liked to drink dark beer and smoke thin clove cigarettes. One day a man whom she no longer loved, who had black tattoos on his hands and a beard as dark as chocolate, followed her home from work. He stood screaming at the top of her stairwell: if she did not learn to love him again, he declared, he would kill himself. Leap into one of the deep, dry wells at the edge of the town, break his skull open and haunt her forever. “Go right ahead,” she said, and slammed the door in his face.

• • • • Everything began on the day the Night Princes left home, for all children who are not orphaned or abandoned must one day leave their parents. Death knew this. But she was not happy to see them go, for in all her years—from the moment the first woman plucked fruit from a tree to the moment you opened your eyes this morning—Death had never bore any child but these. The eldest, Francisco, had inherited his mother’s loveliness, her plump cheeks and round arms, her saffron-yellow eyes. The middle child, a daughter named Michael, had inherited her mother’s wisdom: a quick ear, a slow tongue, a memory like engraved stone. And the youngest, Jerome, had inherited his mother’s passion, her violence and her gentleness, so that one moment he was slicing his palm on a thorn or prying open the shells of mysterious sea-things, and the next he was lying in the cool twilight, watching snails emerge from the damp or infant birds peep their heads from the nest. It was Jerome who first decided to leave, although he was the youngest.

When he announced his intention, Francisco and Michael vowed to go with him, for they had never lived apart. None wanted to dwell alone in Death's mansion, which had no windows and no music. So they went without their mother's blessing. They had journeyed only a day or two when they came upon a vast river, deep as a lake and swift as wild horses, which they could not agree how to cross. "I will swim," said Francisco. "I will raft," said Michael. "I will walk along the bank," said Jerome, "until I find a bridge across." What happened, do you suppose? Could they all have crossed the river in their ways, and met upon the other shore? There would be little to this story if it were that simple. Francisco went down to the water and lay his pack and his sandals on the shore, and loosened his strong shoulders, and filled his lungs with air. None of it was enough. He made it only a quarter of the way across when the current caught him and dragged him to the muddy depths, where he fought and gasped and drowned. But as his spirit floated to the ocean, leaving his beautiful body behind on the riverbed, he called out to the water creatures, begging them not to return him to Death his mother. The water creatures agreed. Gathering up his body, they hid it in the stomach of a whale that only came up for air once every ten years—it was that big. This way his mother would not find him, for what we call Death is the death of land creatures only, and not of the water creatures, which have their own gods. With his body hidden, Francisco's spirit drifted on the current, dazzled by all the life he saw below the sea: the reefs of coral, the sparkling schools of tuna and glassfish, the crabs as red as burnt clay— Yes, I hear them. Gunshots. Keep your eyes closed and listen. • • • •

Once upon a time, before she lived in an apartment above a music shop, the girl had lived with her mother in a house on the edge of the desert. There was a story she didn't like to repeat: a story that her mother had once kept a man at that house, but one day he wasn't there anymore. A few weeks later the villagers found him in a ravine some two miles out into the desert. His body had been savaged by coyotes. All this happened, if it really did happen, a little less than a year before Batul was born. That was an unusually dry year, the year her mother's man may or may not have gotten lost in the desert. Ever since, the spring rains have filled the ravines. Batul remembers how impatient her mother would be, waiting for the rain: how she'd draw back the living room curtain and stare at the sky, her arms folded in the wide sleeves of a silk robe, her hair wet from her bath. Was she waiting eagerly, as for the return of an old friend? Or was she afraid? Batul could never tell. Then one year the soldiers came instead of rain, and Batul moved into the village, taking a job at the pottery factory. Her mother is still in that house, as far as she knows. Perhaps the soldiers who gather on her land at the edge of the desert still tell each other stories about ravines and coyotes, and what happens to the corpses of beautiful men when nature has its way.

• • • • While her brother waded down into the frigid water, Michael took her axe and bow from her pack and headed into the forest. She gathered up tree limbs that were wide and straight and lay them on the ground. She killed a pair of small, quick deer, wrapped their sinews around the logs, and left the raft to dry in the sun.

While it was drying, she fashioned a paddle, a long, dark thing like a spoon, strengthened over a low fire. When all these things were ready, she rowed herself across the river. There, on the other shore, she saw a terrible sight. What she had taken for low hills were in fact the temples and palaces of a city, their stone faces ornamented with splashes of blue and green paint. But not one living thing stirred in the streets, except for a coyote Michael caught nosing at a pile of rags. Whatever had happened had come swiftly, while merchants bustled between their market stalls and young people played in the ball court and grandparents sat on the steps in front of their houses, shelling beans and sipping tea. Michael saw stacks of pottery and desiccated flowers in the empty market, and rubber balls in the empty courts, and bowls of rotted vegetables on the empty doorsteps. But of the people, there was no sign. Only that fat coyote and an overpowering stink, like sulfur and burning meat. The smell alone would have turned most mortals away, but Michael was one of the Night Princes, a daughter of Death, and her curiosity was stronger than any man’s repulsion. She wandered farther and farther into the abandoned city. She passed pools full of tadpoles and exotic flowers; elegant wagons and rickshaws, covered in streamers and brightly painted signs in a language she had only read in books; and here and there, the bones of something small, a dog or rat, limbs curled beneath its body. She saw the coyote several times, it’s bloated white stomach hanging between brown limbs, its eyes a hazy blue. The third or fourth time she met that clouded gaze, a rock came flying out of a house—over her shoulder, whistling past her ear—catching the animal in the neck. It

screamed and barked like a man cursing after a slap, then took off at a lopsided run. Michael turned and saw a young woman standing in a doorway. Her skin was gray as stone, her stomach bloated like the coyote's, and blood had dried on her chin. "There was a sickness," the woman explained. "Then hunger. Those who were strong enough fled down the river. The rest are dead." Michael stared in wonder at the woman. She had never seen sickness before. "Why are you still here?" she asked. "I was spared," the woman said. "When Death came to me, she said she would let me live if I would carry a message." "What message? To whom?" "To whoever came through. I am to say that Death is angry because her children have abandoned her." "Is that so?" Michael said thoughtfully. "There's more." The woman stepped out of the doorway, into the light, and Michael saw that her eyes were as hazy as the carrion-eater's. "I am sorry, but the sickness comes upon anyone who breathes it." "Is that so?" For the first time, Michael felt fear. It was a cold, empty feeling, like something had been drained from her, like her bones were caving in. Curious, she thought. But since there was nothing else to do, Michael invited the woman to accompany her out of the city. Together, they would find a way to escape Death.

• • • • Once upon a time, Batul worked hard in a pottery factory, and when she came home at the end of a shift her hands were dry and cracked and coated with gray dust, and her arms were speckled with blue and green glaze. But every month she paid her rent on the apartment above the music shop, and she filled the apartment with

beautiful things. She ate well and sometimes had money left over to buy a movie ticket or a fashion magazine. During that time, Batul loved a man with black tattoos on his hands. He lived with her in her apartment of beautiful things. When she came home from work he would turn on the radio in her kitchen, and they would dance together and smoke cigarettes before the open window. But they became unhappy. One day he hit her. She kicked him out, and she changed the locks, and she went on dancing and smoking by herself. Then one day, the man she no longer loved appeared in her stairwell with a knife in his beautiful hands. He screamed at her and cursed at her. She thought that he was going to kill her. She knew in that moment that all her joys and agonies, all her labor and her dreams might end there on her concrete steps. And she wanted to be calm and courageous, but she was terribly afraid. • • • • The gunshots have fallen silent. One of the boys' stomachs rumbles, and Batul goes to check on the beans. They are still small and hard. Drying her hand on her shirt, Batul hopes that she'll be able to light the stove this evening. There's not much in this apartment that they can eat without a fire. Even her tea comes in firm black lumps, difficult to coax without a heavy boil. Whatever the soldiers are here for, she wishes they would hurry. She doesn't know who they are, whether they're the same boys stationed on her mother's land or something new: scouts from some hostile territory, or even a rich man's mercenaries. She doesn't know if they are passing through, all those heavy wheels crunching and thudding over streets made for sandals and bicycles, or if whatever they're looking for is hidden in her village. Batul tells a short, calming story to the mugs above

her stove: Once upon a time, a boy joined a group of soldiers in hope of finding adventure. They walked through many villages and caused no harm. There. Isn’t that nice? There’s a cartoon of juice in the ice box, nearly empty. She loops her fingers through the handles of three mugs and carries them into the living room. • • • •

For many days, Michael and the woman from the plague-stricken city wandered throughout the kingdom, searching for a cure. They crawled and stumbled through the tangled jungle, the soft sweet-smelling coils of vines and variegated flowers, murky water swirling about their hips, until they came to a golden palace raised on stilts. Beautiful music filled their ears and beautiful faces stared at them from the netted windows; but no one would speak to them, nor even throw a scrap of food down from the gilded piers. They trudged across the desert, where the red earth was cracked and naked even of sand, until they reached a low white palace built over the mouth of a cavern. Inside the cavern was a library, scroll upon ancient scroll wrapped in leather against the damp. But there too they were shunned and sent away, without even a chance to moisten their lips in the subterranean fountains. As the days passed they grew weaker and weaker. The disease thickened their lungs and tightened their joints, so that each step became grinding agony. Her companion sweated and cried out in her sleep, and Michael came to know not only sickness, but also pain and weariness and worry. At last they had gone as far as they could. They had no more land to wander; they stood upon the shore, and the gray sand was thick and cold beneath their feet. Michael heard the seabirds call to

each other about the strange creatures that had appeared in their domain. Soon the cries were taken up by the crabs and the sea-snails, and then by the hungry fish— And so word reached Francisco, who drifted on the ocean currents and listened to the wisdom of the water creatures. In an instant he appeared to his sister, surfacing from a tide pool in a horrible and gorgeous display, like a statue shaped in living water. The reunion of the Night Princes was as joyful as you can imagine; yet Michael sensed a wariness in her brother when he cast his awful liquid gaze over her companion. “My dear sister,” he said quietly, as the sky grew dark overhead, “I will learn the cure for this sickness that afflicts you. But I will tell it to you and you alone. Come to me in the morning, but leave your companion behind.” And he kissed her farewell with lips made of saltwater. Storm clouds thickened above them, and Michael and her companion took shelter in a shallow cave in the cliff above the beach. They slept fitfully, and while they slept, a furious tempest broke upon the shore. Cold waves and bitter hail lashed the spit of sand. In the morning Michael returned to the tide pool, but its borders had been broken, scattered by the raging water. Francisco’s spirit was nowhere to be seen. Then her companion came running to her with a look of horror. Michael followed the woman about a mile down the shore, and there she saw an awful sight: a whale as large as a mountain, stranded upon the sand. Its monstrous mouth gaped, the ragged baleen stinking and dripping, and inside lay Francisco’s body. His eyes were frozen open, his hands rigid. Michael cried out and grasped her brother’s arms, but there was no response. He lay as still as the beached

whale; for Death had come in the night and reclaimed her eldest son. Michael lay in the sand and wept until her eyes were dry as bone. But there was nothing more to be done for Francisco. In the mouth of the whale, he had as grand and fearful a tomb as any king. So Michael closed her brother's eyes and eased his hands upon his chest, and she and her companion walked again. They turned inland, following the valley scored by a swift and powerful river. After three days and three nights, they came to a stone bridge. The stone was masterfully carved with animals as sinuous as living creatures, serpents coiling on the rails, lizards creeping over the columns. On the other side stood a beautiful city, twin to the one that had fallen to the plague. Once again Michael gazed upon markets and ball courts, gardens and doorsteps—but now all of them were loud and bustling and bloated with life. They had walked only a short distance beyond the city gate when they heard a cry of delight. In the door of an apothecary shop, arms laden with jars of chamomile and valerian, stood Jerome. He had followed the shore of the river while his brother and sister attempted to cross, and he had come to the stone bridge, and in the city on the other side he found work as a healer. All this time he had been studying the secrets of banishing sickness and preserving life. Now Jerome's face was grim, for he looked on Michael's companion and saw her for what she was: their own mother, Death. He said nothing of this to his sister, however. He embraced her, clucking like a mother hen over her wan, haggard appearance, and sent her to his house in the city, where his lover served her hot soup and wrapped her in warm furs. Now, Jerome had always been daring, quick to calculate and

brave in risk. In the city with the serpent-carved bridge there had lived, many years before, a gifted sorcerer, and this sorcerer had a daughter whom he loved better than all the world. When the girl was born, he built a cage from iron and adamant and bone—a cage strong enough to hold Death herself. For no one, he declared, not even Death, would touch the girl against her desire. This, of course, had not ended well for the sorcerer. While his daughter was still very young, she came to an almost unbearable sorrow and welcomed Death with her own hand. Not long after, the sorcerer drowned himself in the river, leaving all his riches and his inventions to gather dust. And so Jerome had found the cage in the dead man's warehouse. Now he led his mother to it; and before she realized that he had seen through her disguise, he trapped her within the bars of bone and iron and diamond. "Oh, my clever son," she said, baring her teeth. "Oh, my brave, daring, clever son!" He looked upon his mother, his face gaunt with sorrow. "I offer you a choice," he said. "Renounce your claims to my brother and sister and restore both of them to me, safe and whole." "Or?" Death whispered. "Or I will leave you in your cage," he said. "Humankind will become immortal, and for all of time this city will be known as the home of the man who overcame Death." He stood before her, tall and trembling, and tears glistened in his eyes. Death looked upon her son and laughed.

• • • • One more story. Just close your eyes and listen. Once upon a time, a woman met Death in her stairwell. She felt cold and empty, like her bones were caving in, like everything she loved had

been drained from her. She knew in that moment that Death could not be escaped, could not be outwitted. And although Death did not claim the woman then, she felt ever after that she was pursued. Oh, she could forget, forget for hours at a time, glazing mugs at her factory bench or dancing in her kitchen, standing on her doorstep and watching the village boys play ball. And then the violence came again, the men. She told stories to convince herself that Death was fair and gentle, but all of her stories got away from her. She could no longer believe them unless they ended badly.

• • • • Just one more story, one more story I'm going to tell you, and then it will all be over. The gunshots have resumed, the shouting; in the street below, someone sobs as though his heart is broken. The taste of orange juice is sour on the back of her teeth. And she doesn't believe it anymore, what she whispers to the boys on her living room floor, but it's easier than admitting what she does believe. All she knows is that she does not want to die.

• • • • Death raised her hands, and all of her children stood before her: Francisco cold and serene, Michael shaking with weariness, and Jerome weeping soundlessly. "Foolish children," she said in her deep, musical voice. "You do not understand what a mercy I am to those who are lost, or sick, or tired, or in pain. You speak to me as though I am an evil, a calamity. But I am comfort. I am peace. I am the end of fear and affliction." The Night Princes turned to each other and held out their arms and embraced. The only sound was Michael's ragged breath, the scuff of Jerome's shoes on the bare floor. At last they released each other and looked upon their

mother. “Be that as it may,” they said, “we do not want to die.” And so Death restored Francisco to life and cured Michael with a kiss. Jerome released her from the cage of bone and adamant, and she returned alone to her house without windows. And the three Night Princes lived together in that beautiful city on the river: Francisco, who had died; Michael, who had travelled with Death; and Jerome, who fought against her. Did they live forever? No. But they lived happily, and for a very long time.

• • • • Closer, closer, the guns and the shouting. Batul’s voice wavers as her story draws to an end. The boys have fallen asleep on the cushion-strewn floor, lulled by her voice and the chamomile and valerian syrup at the bottom of their mugs—all except for Jerome, who murmured the question. She answers him, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and he too goes to sleep. She sits in the middle of her living room floor and listens. Her eyes are closed, but they fly open with every gunshot. It’s like trying to wake from a nightmare. Maybe she’ll open her eyes and it will never have happened. Open her eyes and it will all be over; she’ll be sitting on her bed with a book, reading the story, not living it. Open her eyes now, and it will all be over. Open your eyes.

In a Cavern, in a Canyon

by LAIRD BARRON PUBLISHED IN JUNE 2019 (ISSUE 81) | 8107 WORDS

Husband number one fondly referred to me as the Good Samaritan. Anything from a kid lost in the neighbourhood to a countywide search-and-rescue effort, I got involved. If we drove past a fender-bender, I had to stop and lend a hand or snap a few pictures, maybe do a walk-around of the scene. A major crash? Forget about it—I'd haunt the site until the cows came home or the cops shooed me away. Took the better part of a decade for the light bulb to flash over my hubby's bald head. He realized I wasn't a Samaritan so much as a fetishist. Wore him down in the end and he bailed. I'm still melancholy over that one. Lucky for him he didn't suffer through my stint with the Park Service in Alaska. After college and the first kid, I finagled my way onto the government payroll and volunteered for every missing person, lost climber, downed plane, or wrecked boat scenario. I hiked and camped on the side. Left my compass and maps at home. I wanted to disappear. Longest I managed was four days. The feds were suspicious enough to send me to a shrink who knew his business. The boys upstairs gave me a generous severance check and said to not let the door hit me in the ass on the way out. Basically the beginning of a long downward slide in my life. Husband number three divorced me for my fifty-fourth birthday. I pawned everything that wouldn't fit into a van and drove from Ohio back home to Alaska. I rented a doublewide at the Cottonwood Point Trailer Park near Moose Pass, two miles along the bucolic

and winding Seward Highway from Cassie, my youngest daughter. A spruce forest crowds the back door. Moose nibble the rhododendron hedging the yard. Most folks tuck in for the night by the time Colbert is delivering his monologue. Cassie drops off my infant granddaughter, Vera, two or three times a week or whenever she can't find a sitter. Single and working two jobs (hardware cashier by day, graveyard security at the Port of Seward Wednesday and Friday), Cassie avoided the inevitability of divorce by not getting married in the first place. She kept the dumb, virile fisherman who knocked her up as baby-daddy and strictly part time squeeze. Wish I'd thought of that. Once I realized that my nanny gig was a regular thing, I ordered a crib and inveigled the handsome (and generally drunken, alas) fellow at 213 to set it up in my bedroom. On the nanny evenings, I feed Vera her bottle and watch westerns on cable. "Get you started right," I say to her as Bronson ventilates Fonda beneath a glaring sun, or when a cowboy rides into the red-and-gold distance as the credits roll. She'll be a tomboy like her gram if I have any influence. The classic stars were my heroes once upon a time—Stewart, Van Cleef, Wayne, and Marvin. During my youth, I utterly revered Eastwood. I crushed big time on The Man with No Name and Dirty Harry. Kept a poster from The Good, the Bad and the Ugly on my bedroom wall. So young, both of us. So innocent. Except for the shooting and murdering, and my lustful thoughts, but you know. Around midnight, I wake from a nap on the couch to Vera's plaintive cry. She's in the bedroom crib, awake and pissed for her bottle. The last act of High Plains Drifter plays in scratchy 1970s Technicolor. It's the part where the

Stranger finally gets around to exacting righteous vengeance. Doesn't matter that I've missed two rapes, a horsewhipping, Lago painted red and renamed HELL . . . all those images are imprinted upon my hindbrain. I get the impression the scenes are always rolling down there against the screen of my subconscious. I am depressed to recognize a cold fact in this instant. The love affair with bad boy Clint ended years and years ago, even if I haven't fully accepted the reality. Eyes gummed with sleep, I sit for a few seconds, mesmerized by the stricken faces of the townspeople who are caught between a vicious outlaw gang and a stranger hell-bent on retribution. The Stranger's whip slithers through the saloon window and garrotes an outlaw. I've watched that scene on a dozen occasions. My hands shake and I can't zap it with the remote fast enough. That solves one problem. I take the formula from the fridge and pop it into the fancy warmer Cassie obtained during a clearance sale. The LED numerals are counting down to nothing when it occurs to me that I don't watch the baby on Sundays. • • • • The night in 1977 that my father disappeared, he, Uncle Ned, and I drove north along Midnight Road, searching for Tony Orlando. Dad crept the Fleetwood at a walking pace. My younger siblings, Doug, Shauna, and Artemis, remained at home. Doug was ostensibly keeping an eye on our invalid grandmother, but I figured he was probably glued to the television with the others. That autumn sticks in my memory like mud to a Wellington. We were sixteen, fourteen, eleven, and ten. Babes in the wilderness. Uncle Ned and I took turns yelling out the window. Whenever Orlando pulled this stunt, Dad swore it would be the last expedition he mounted to retrieve

the “damned mutt.” I guess he really meant it. Middle-school classmate Nancy Albrecht once asked me what the hell kind of name was that for a dog, and I said Mom and Dad screwed on the second date to “Halfway to Paradise,” and if you laugh I’ll smack your teeth down your throat. I have a few scars on my knuckles, for damn sure. Way back then, we lived in Eagle Talon, Alaska, an isolated port about seventy miles southwest of Anchorage. Cruise ships bloated the town with tourists during spring, and it dried up to around three hundred resident souls come autumn. Eastern settlers had carved a hamlet from wilderness during the 1920s; plunked it down in a forgotten vale populated by eagles, bears, drunk Teamsters and drunker fishermen. Mountains and dense forest on three sides formed a deep-water harbor. The channel curved around the flank of Eagle Mountain and eventually let into Prince William Sound. Roads were gravel or dirt. We had the cruise ships and barges. We also had the railroad. You couldn’t make a move without stepping in seagull shit. Most of us townies lived in a fourteen-story apartment complex called the Frazier Estate. We kids shortened it to Fate. Terra incognita began where the sodium lamplight grew fuzzy. At night, wolves howled in the nearby hills. Definitely not the dream hometown of a sixteen-year-old girl. As a grown woman, I recall it with a bittersweet fondness. Upon commencing the hunt for Orlando, whom my little brother Doug had stupidly set free from the leash only to watch in mortification as the dog trotted into the sunset, tail furled with rebellious intent, Dad faced a choice—head west along the road, or troll the beach where the family pet sometimes mined for rotten salmon carcasses. We

picked the road because it wound into the woods and our shepherd-husky mix hankered after the red squirrels that swarmed during the fall. Dad didn't want to walk if he could avoid it. "Marched goddamned plenty in the Crotch," he said. It had required a major effort for him to descend to the parking garage and get the wagon started and pointed in the general direction of our search route. Two bad knees, pain pills for said knees, and a half-pack-a-day habit had all but done him in. Too bad for Uncle Ned and me, Midnight Road petered out in the foothills. Moose trails went every which way from the little clearing where we'd parked next to an abandoned Winnebago with a raggedy tarp covering the front end and black garbage bags over the windows. Hobos and druggies occasionally used the Winnebago as a fort until Sheriff Lockhart came along to roust them. "Goddamned railroad," Dad would say, despite the fact that if not for the railroad (for which he performed part-time labor to supplement his military checks) and the cruise ships and barges, there wouldn't be any call for Eagle Talon whatsoever. Uncle Ned lifted himself from the back seat and accompanied me as I shined the flashlight and hollered for Orlando. Dad remained in the station wagon with the engine running and the lights on. He honked the horn every couple of minutes. "He's gonna keep doing that, huh?" Uncle Ned wasn't exactly addressing me, more like an actor musing to himself on the stage. "Just gonna keep leanin' on that horn every ten seconds—" The horn blared again. Farther off and dim—we'd come a ways already. Birch and alder were broken by stands of furry black spruce that muffled sounds from the outside world. The black, green, and gray webbing is basically the Spanish moss of the

Arctic. Uncle Ned chuckled and shook his head. Two years Dad's junior and a major league stoner, he'd managed to keep it together when it counted. He taught me how to tie a knot, paddle a canoe, and gave me a lifetime supply of dirty jokes. He'd also explained that contrary to Dad's Cro-Magnon take on teenage dating, boys were okay to fool around with so long as I ducked the bad ones and avoided getting knocked up. Which ones were bad? I wondered. Most of them, according to the Book of Ned, but keep it to fooling around and all would be well. He also clued me in to the fact that Dad's vow to blast any would-be suitor's pecker off with his twelve-gauge was an idle threat. My old man couldn't shoot worth spit even when sober. The trail forked. One path climbed into the hills where the undergrowth thinned. The other path curved deeper into the creepy spruce where somebody had strung blue reflective tape among the branches—a haphazard mess like the time Dad got lit up and tried to decorate the Christmas tree. "Let's not go in there," Uncle Ned said. Ominous, although not entirely unusual as he often said that kind of thing with a similar, laconic dryness. That bar looks rough, let's try the next one over. That woman looks like my ex-wife, I'm not gonna dance with her, uh-uh. That box has got to be heavy. Let's get a beer and think on it. "Maybe he's at the beach rolling in crap," I said. Orlando loved bear turds and rotten salmon guts with a true passion. There'd be plenty of both near the big water, and as I squinted into the forbidding shadows, I increasingly wished we'd driven there instead. Uncle Ned pulled his coat tighter and lit a cigarette. The air had dampened. I yelled "Orlando!" a few more times. Then we stood there for a while in the silence. It was like

listening through the lid of a coffin. Dad had stopped leaning on the horn. The woodland critters weren't making their usual fuss. Clouds drifted in and the darkness was so complete it wrapped us in a cocoon. "Think Orlando's at the beach?" I said. "Well, I dunno. He ain't here." "Orlando, you stupid jerk!" I shouted to the night in general. "Let's boogie," Uncle Ned said. The cherry of his cigarette floated in mid-air and gave his narrowed eyes a feral glint. Like Dad, he was middling tall and rangy. Sharp-featured and often wry. He turned and moved the way we'd come, head lowered, trailing a streamer of Pall Mall smoke. Typical of my uncle. Once he made a decision, he acted. "Damn it, Orlando." I gave up and followed, sick to my gut with worry. Fool dog would be the death of me, or so I suspected. He'd tangled with a porcupine the summer before and I'd spent hours picking quills from his swollen snout because Dad refused to take him in to see Doc Green. There were worse things than porcupines in these woods—black bears, angry moose, wolves—and I feared my precious idiot would run into one of them. Halfway back to the car, I glimpsed a patch of white to my left amidst the heavy brush. I took it for a birch stump with holes rotted into the heartwood. No, it was a man lying on his side, matted black hair framing his pale face. By pale, I mean bone-white and bloodless. The face you see on the corpse of an outlaw in those old-timey Wild West photographs. "Help me," he whispered. I trained my light on the injured man; he had to be hurt because of the limp, contorted angle of his body, his shocking paleness. He seemed familiar. The lamp beam broke around his body like a stream splits around a large stone. The shadows turned slowly,

fracturing and changing him. He might've been weirdo Floyd who swept the Caribou after last call, or that degenerate trapper, Bob-something, who lived in a shack in the hills with a bunch of stuffed moose heads and mangy beaver hides. Or it might've been as I first thought—a tree stump lent a man's shape by my lying eyes. The more I stared, the less certain I became that it was a person at all. Except I'd heard him speak, raspy and high-pitched from pain; almost a falsetto. Twenty-five feet, give or take, between me and the stranger. I didn't see his arm move. Move it did, however. The shadows shifted again and his hand grasped futilely, thin and gnarled as a tree branch. His misery radiated into me, caused my eyes to well with tears of empathy. I felt terrible, just terrible, I wanted to mother him, and took a step toward him. "Hortense. Come here." Uncle Ned said my name the way Dad described talking to his wounded buddies in 'Nam. The ones who'd gotten hit by a grenade or a stray bullet. Quiet, calm, and reassuring was the ticket—and I bet his tone would've worked its magic if my insides had happened to be splashed on the ground and the angels were singing me home. In this case, Uncle Ned's unnatural calmness scared me, woke me from a dream where I heroically tended a hapless stranger, got a parade and a key to the village, my father's grudging approval. "Hortense, please." "There's a guy in the bushes," I said. "I think he's hurt." Uncle Ned grabbed my hand like he used to when I was a little girl, and towed me along at a brisk pace. "Naw, kid. That's a tree stump. I saw it when we went past earlier. Keep movin'." I didn't ask why we were in such a hurry. It worried me how easy it seemed for him and Dad to slip into warrior

mode at the drop of a hat. He muttered something about branches snapping and that black bears roamed the area as they fattened up for winter and he regretted leaving his guns at his house. House is sort of a grand term; Uncle Ned lived in a mobile home on the edge of the village. The Estate didn't appeal to his loner sensibilities. We got to walking so fast along that narrow trail that I twisted my ankle on a root and nearly went for a header. Uncle Ned didn't miss a beat. He took most of my weight upon his shoulder. Pretty much dragged me back to the Fleetwood. The engine ran and the driver side door was ajar. I assumed Dad had gone behind a tree to take a leak. As the minutes passed and we called for him, I began to understand that he'd left. Those were the days when men abandoned their families by saying they needed to grab a pack of cigarettes and beating it for the high timber. He'd threatened to do it during his frequent arguments with Mom. She'd beaten him to the punch and jumped ship with a traveling salesman, leaving us to fend for ourselves. Maybe, just maybe, it was Dad's turn to bail on us kids. Meanwhile, Orlando had jumped in through the open door and curled into a ball in the passenger seat. Leaves, twigs, and dirt plastered him. A pig digging for China wouldn't have been any filthier. Damned old dog pretended to sleep. His thumping tail gave away the show, though. Uncle Ned rousted him and tried to put him on Dad's trail. Nothing doing. Orlando whined and hung his head. He refused to budge despite Uncle Ned's exhortations. Finally, the dog yelped and scrambled back into the car, trailing a stream of piss. That was our cue to depart.

• • • • Uncle Ned drove back to the Frazier Estate. He called Deputy Clausen (everybody called him Claws) and explained the situation. Claws agreed to gather a few men and do a walkthrough of the area. He theorized that Dad had gotten drunk and wandered into the hills and collapsed somewhere. Such events weren't rare. Meanwhile, I checked in on Grandma, who'd occupied the master bedroom since she'd suffered the aneurysm. Next, I herded Orlando into the bathroom and soaked him in the tub. I was really hurting by then. When I thanked Uncle Ned, he nodded curtly and avoided meeting my eye. "Lock the door," he said. "Why? The JWs aren't allowed out of the compound after dark." Whenever I got scared, I cracked wise. "Don't be a smartass. Lock the fuckin' door." "Something fishy in Denmark," I said to Orlando, who leaned against my leg as I threw the deadbolt. Mrs. Wells had assigned Hamlet, Julius Caesar, and Titus Andronicus for summer reading. "And it's the Ides of August, too." My brother and sisters sprawled in the living room front of the TV, watching a vampire flick. Christopher Lee wordlessly seduced a buxom chick who was practically falling out of her peasant blouse. Lee angled for a bite. Then he saw, nestled in the woman's cleavage, the teeny elegant crucifix her archaeologist boyfriend had given her for luck. Lee's eyes went buggy with rage and fear. The vampire equivalent to blue balls, I guess. I took over Dad's La-Z-Boy and kicked back with a bottle of Coke (the last one, as noted by the venomous glares of my siblings) and a bag of ice on my puffy ankle. The movie ended and I clapped my hands and sent the kids packing. At three bedrooms, our apartment qualified as an imperial suite. Poor Dad sacked out on the couch. Doug and Artemis shared the smallest, crappiest room. I bunked with Shauna, the princess of jibber-jabber. She loved and feared me and that made tight quarters a bit easier because she knew I'd sock her in the arm if she sassed me too much or pestered me with one too many goober questions. Often, she'd natter on while I piped Fleetwood Mac and Led Zeppelin through a set of gigantic yellow earphones. That self-isolation spared us a few violent and teary scenes, I'm sure. Amid the grumbles and the rush for the toilet, I almost confessed the weird events of the evening to Doug. My kid brother had an open mind when it came to the

unknown. He wouldn't necessarily laugh me out of the room without giving the matter some real thought. Instead, I smacked the back of his head and told him not to be such a dumbass with Orlando. Nobody remarked on Dad's absence. I'm sure they figured he'd pitched camp at the Caribou like he did so many nights. Later, I lay awake and listened to my siblings snore. Orlando whined as he dreamed of the chase, or of being chased. From the bedroom, Gram said in a fragile, sing-song tone, "In a cavern, in a canyon, excavatin' for a mine, dwelt a miner forty-niner and his daughter Clementine. In a cavern, in a canyon. In a cavern, in a canyon. In a cavern, in a canyon. Clementine, Clementine. Clementine? Clementine?" • • • • Of the four Shaw siblings, I'm the eldest, tallest, and surliest. According to Mom, Dad had desperately wanted a boy for his firstborn. He descended from a lineage that adhered to a pseudo-medieval mindset. The noble chauvinist, the virtuous warrior, the honorable fighter of rearguard actions. Quaint when viewed through a historical lens; a real pain in the ass in the modern world. I was a disappointment. As a daughter, what else could I be? He got used to it. The Shaws have a long, long history of losing. We own that shit. Go down fighting would've been our family motto, with a snake biting the heel that crushed its skull as our crest. As some consolation, I was always a tomboy and tougher than either of my brothers—a heap tougher than most of the boys in our hick town, and tougher than at least a few of the grown men. Toughness isn't always measured by how hard you punch. Sometimes, most of the time, it's simply the set of a girl's jaw. I shot my mouth off with the best of them. If nothing else, I dutifully struck at the heels of my oppressors. Know where I got this grit? Sure as hell not from Dad. Oh, yeah, he threw a nasty left hook, and he'd scragged a few guys in the wars. But until Mom had flown the coop she ruled our roost with an iron fist that would've made Khrushchev think twice before crossing her. Yep, the meanness in my soul is pure-D Mom. Dad had all the homespun apothegms. He often said, Never try to beat a man at what he does. What Dad did best was drink. He treated it as a competitive event. In addition to chugging Molson Export, Wild Turkey, and Absolut, Dad also smoked the hell out of cannabis whenever he could get his hands on some. He

preferred the heavy-hitting bud from Mexico courtesy of Uncle Ned. I got my hands on a bag those old boys stashed in a rolled-up sock in a number-ten coffee can. That stuff sent you, all right. Although, judging by the wildness of Dad's eyes, the way they started and stared at the corners of the room after he'd had a few hits, his destination was way different than mine. Even so, the Acapulco Gold gave me a peek through the keyhole into Dad's soul in a way booze couldn't. Some blood memory got activated. It might've been our sole point of commonality. He would've beaten me to a pulp if he'd known. For my own good, natch. Main thing I took from growing up the daughter of an alcoholic? Lots of notions compete for the top spot—the easiest way to get vomit and blood out of fabric, the best apologies, the precise amount of heed to pay a drunken diatribe, when to duck flung bottles, how to balance a checkbook and cook a family meal between homework, dog-walking, and giving sponge baths to Gram. But above all, my essential takeaway was that I'd never go down the rabbit hole to an eternal happy hour. I indulged in a beer here and there, toked some Mary Jane to reward myself for serving as Mom, Dad, Chief Cook and Bottle Washer pro-tem. Nothing heavy, though. I resolved to leave the heavy lifting to Dad, Uncle Ned, and their buddies at the Caribou Tavern. Randal Shaw retired from the USMC in 1974 after twenty years of active service. Retirement didn't agree with him. To wit: the beer, bourbon, and weed, and the sullen hurling of empties. It didn't agree with Mom either, obviously. My grandmother, Harriet Shaw, suffered a brain aneurysm that very autumn. Granddad passed away the previous winter and Gram moved into our apartment. By day, she slumped in a special medical recliner we bought from the Eagle Talon Emergency Trauma Center. Vivian from upstairs sat with her while I was at school. Gram's awareness came and went like a bad radio signal. Sometimes she'd make a feeble attempt to play cards with Vivian. Occasionally, she asked about my grades and what cute boys I'd met, or she'd watch TV and chuckle at the soaps in that rueful way she laughed at so many ridiculous things. The clarity became rare. Usually she stared out the window at the harbor or at the framed Georgia O'Keeffe knockoff print of a sunflower above the dresser. Hours passed and

we’d shoo away the mosquitos while she tunelessly hummed “In a cavern, in a canyon, excavatin’ for a mine” on a loop. There may as well have been a VACANCY sign blinking above her head. After school, and twice daily on weekends, Doug helped bundle Gram into the crappy fold-up chair and I pushed her around the village; took her down to the wharf to watch the seagulls, or parked her in front of the general store while I bought Dad a pack of smokes (and another for myself). By night, Dad or I pushed the button and let the air out and she lay with her eyes fixed on the dented ceiling of the bedroom. She’d sigh heavily and say, “Nighty-night, nighty-night,” like a parrot. It shames me to remember her that way. But then, most of my childhood is a black hole. • • • • The search party found neither hide nor hair of Dad. Deputy Clausen liked Uncle Ned well enough and agreed to do a bigger sweep in the afternoon. The deputy wasn’t enthused. Old Harmon Snodgrass, a trapper from Kobuk, isolated footprints in the soft dirt along the edge of the road. The tracks matched Dad’s boots and were headed toward town. Snodgrass lost them after a couple hundred yards. In Deputy Clausen’s professional opinion, Randal Shaw had doubled back and flown the coop to parts unknown, as a certain kind of man is wont to do when the going gets tough. Uncle Ned socked him (the Shaw answer to critics) and Claws would’ve had his ass in a cell for a good long time, except Stu Herring, the mayor of our tiny burg, and Kyle Lomax were on hand to break up the festivities and soothe bruised egos. Herring sent Uncle Ned home with a go and sin no more scowl. “How’s Mom?” Uncle Ned stared at Gram staring at a spot on the wall. He sipped the vilest black coffee on the face of the earth. My specialty. I’d almost tripped over him in the hallway on my way to take Orlando for his morning stroll. He’d spent the latter portion of the night curled near our door, a combat knife in his fist. Normally, one might consider that loony behaviour. You had to know Uncle Ned. “She’s groovy, as ever. Why are you lurking?” The others were still zonked, thank God. I hadn’t an inkling of how to break the news of Dad’s defection to them. I packed more ice onto my ankle. My foot had swollen to the point where it wouldn’t fit into my sneaker. It really and truly hurt. “Ow.” “Let’s go. Hospital time.” He stood abruptly and went in and woke Doug, told him, “Drop your

cock and grab your socks. You're man of the house for an hour. Orlando needs a walk—for the love of God, keep him on a leash, will ya?" Then he nabbed Dad's keys and took me straightaway to the Eagle Clinic. Mrs. Cooper, a geriatric hypochondriac, saw the RN, Sally Mackey, ahead of us and we knew from experience that it would be a hell of a wait. So Uncle Ned and I settled into hard plastic waiting room chairs. He lit a cigarette, and another for me, and said, "Okay, I got a story. Don't tell your old man I told you, or he'll kick my ass and then I'll kick yours. Yeah?" I figured it would be a story of his hippie escapades or some raunchy bullshit Dad got up to in Vietnam. A tale to cheer me up and take my mind off my troubles. Uh-uh. He surprised me by talking about the Good Friday Earthquake of '64. "You were, what? Two, three? You guys lived in that trailer park in Anchorage. The quake hits and your Dad's been shipped to 'Nam. My job was to look over you and your mom. Meanwhile, I'm visiting a little honey out in the Valley. Girl had a cabin on a lake. We just came in off the ice for a mug of hot cocoa and BOOM! Looked like dynamite churned up the bottom muck. Shit flew off the shelves, the earth moved in waves like the sea. Spruce trees bent all the way over and slapped their tops on the ground. Sounded like a train runnin' through the living room. Tried callin' your mom, but the phone lines were down. "I jumped in my truck and headed for Anchorage. Got part way there and had to stop. Highway was too fucked up to drive on. Pavement cracked open, bridges collapsed. I got stuck in a traffic jam on the Flats. Some cars were squashed under a collapsed overpass and a half-dozen more kinda piled on. It was nine or ten at night and pitch black. Accidents everywhere. The temperature dropped into the twenties and mist rolled in from the water. Road flares and headlights and flashing hazards made the scene extra spooky. I could taste hysteria in the air. Me and a couple of Hells Angels from Wasilla got together and made sure people weren't trapped or hurt too bad. Then we started pushing cars off the road to get ready for the emergency crews. "We were taking a smoke break when one of the bikers said to shut up a minute. A big, pot-bellied Viking, at least twice the size of me and his younger pal. Fuckin' enormous. He cocked his head and asked us if we'd heard it too—somebody

moaning for help down on the flats. He didn't hang around for an answer. Hopped over the guardrail and was gone. Man on a mission. Guy didn't come back after a few minutes. Me and the younger biker climbed down the embankment and went into the pucker-brush. Shouted ourselves hoarse and not a damned reply. Mist was oozin' off the water and this weird, low tide reek hit me. A cross between green gas from inside a blown moose carcass and somethin' sweet, like fireweed. I heard a noise, reminded me of water and air bubbles gurglin' through a hose. Grace a God I happened to shine my light on a boot stickin' out a the scrub. The skinny biker yelled his buddy's name and ran over there." Uncle Ned had gotten worked up during the narration of his story. He lit another cigarette and paced to the coffee machine and back. Bernice Monson, the receptionist, glared over her glasses. She didn't say anything. In '77 most folks kept their mouths shut when confronted by foamy Vietnam vets. Bernice, like everybody else, assumed Uncle Ned did a jungle tour as a government employee. He certainly resembled the part with his haggard expression, brooding demeanor, and a partialness for camouflage pants. Truth was, while many young men were blasting away at each other in Southeast Asia, he'd backpacked across Canada, Europe, and Mexico. Or, went humping foreign broads and scrawling doggerel, as my dad put it. Uncle Ned's eyes were red as a cockscomb. He slapped the coffee machine. "I didn't have a perfect position and my light was weak, but I saw plenty. The Viking laid on top of somebody. This somebody was super skinny and super pale. Lots of wild hair. Their arms and legs were tangled so's you couldn't make sense of what was goin' on. I thought he had him a woman there in the weeds and they was fuckin'. Their faces were stuck together. The young biker leaned over his buddy and then yelped and stumbled backward. The skinny, pale one shot out from under the Viking and into the darkness. Didn't stand, didn't crouch, didn't even flip over—know how a mechanic rolls from under a car on his board? Kinda that way, except jittery. Moved like an insect scuttling for cover, best I can describe it. A couple seconds later, the huge biker shuddered and went belly-crawling after the skinny fellow. What I thought I was seeing him do, anyhow. His arms and legs

flopped, although his head never lifted, not completely. He just skidded away, Superman style, his face planted in the dirt. “Meanwhile, the young biker hauled ass toward the road, shriekin’ the whole way. My flashlight died. I stood there, in the dark, heart poundin’, scared shitless, tryin’ to get my brain outta neutral. I wanted to split, hell yeah. No fuckin’ way I was gonna tramp around on those flats by myself. I’m a hunter, though. Those instincts kicked in and I decided to play it cool. Your dad always pegged me for a peacenik hippie because I didn’t do ’Nam. I’m smarter, is the thing. Got a knife in my pocket and half the time I’m packin’ heat too. Had me skinning knife, and lemme say, I kept it handy as I felt my way through the bushes and the brambles. Got most of the way to where I could see the lights of the cars on the road. Somebody whispered, “Help me.” Real close and on my flank. Scared me, sure. I probably jumped three feet straight up. And yet, it was the saddest voice I can remember. Woeful, like a lost child, or a wounded woman, or a fawn, or some combination of those cries. “I might a turned around and walked into the night, except a state trooper hit me with a light. He’d come over the hill lookin’ after the biker went bugshit. I think the cop thought the three of us were involved in a drug deal. He sure as hell didn’t give a lick about a missing Hells Angel. He led me back to the clusterfuck on the highway and I spent the rest of the night shivering in my car while the bulldozers and dump trucks did their work.” He punched the coffee machine. “Easy, killer!” I said and gave an apologetic smile to the increasingly agitated Bernice. I patted the seat next to me until he came over and sat. “What happened to the biker? The big guy.” Uncle Ned had sliced his knuckles. He clenched his fist and watched the blood drip onto the tiles. “Cops found him that summer in the water. Not enough left for an autopsy. The current and the fish had taken him apart. Accidental death, they decided. I saw the younger biker at the Gold Digger. Must a been five or six years after the Good Friday Quake. He acted like he’d forgotten what happened to his partner until I bought him the fifth or sixth tequila. He got a real close look at what happened. Said that to him, the gurglin’ was more of a slurpin’. An animal lappin’ up a gory supper. Then he looked me in the eye and said his buddy got snatched into

the darkness by his own guts. They were comin' out a his mouth and whatever it was out there gathered' em up and reeled him in." "Holy shit, Uncle Ned." Goose pimples covered my arms. "That's nuts. Who do you think was out there?" "The boogeyman. Whatever it is that kids think is hidin' under their bed." "You tell Dad? Probably not, huh? He's a stick in the mud. He'd never buy it." "Well, you don't either. Guess that makes you a stick in the mud too." "The apple, the tree, gravity . . ." "Maybe you'd be surprised what your old man knows." Uncle Ned's expression was shrewd. "I been all over this planet. Between '66 and '74, I roamed. Passed the peace pipe with the Lakota; ate peyote with the Mexicans; drank wine with the Italians; and smoked excellent bud with a whole lot of other folks. I get bombed enough, or stoned enough, I ask if anybody else has heard of the Help Me Monster. What I call it. The Help Me Monster." The description evoked images of Sesame Street and plush toys dancing on wires. "Grover the Psycho Killer!" I said, hoping he'd at least crack a smile. I also hoped my uncle hadn't gone around the bend. He didn't smile. We sat there in one of those long, awkward silences while Bernice coughed her annoyance and shuffled papers. I was relieved when Sally Mackey finally stuck her head into the room and called my name. The nurse wanted to send me to Anchorage for X-rays. No way would Dad authorize that expense. No veterinarians and no doctors; those were ironclad rules. When he discovered Uncle Ned took me to the clinic, he'd surely blow his top. I wheedled a bottle of prescription-strength aspirin, and a set of cheapo crutches on the house, and called it square. A mild ankle sprain meant I'd be on the crutches for days. I added it to the tab of Shaw family dues. Dad never came home. I cried, the kids cried. Bit by bit, we moved on. Some of us more than others.

• • • • I won't bore you with the nightmares that got worse and worse with time. You can draw your own conclusions. That strange figure in the woods, Dad's vanishing act, and Uncle Ned's horrifying tale coalesced into a witch's brew that beguiled me and became a serious obsession. Life is messy and it's mysterious. Had my father walked away from his family or had he been taken? If the latter, then why Dad and not me or Uncle Ned? I didn't crack the case,

didn’t get any sense of closure. No medicine man or antiquarian popped up to give me the scoop on some ancient enemy that dwells in the shadows and dines upon the blood and innards of good Samaritans and hapless passersby. Closest I came to solving the enigma was during my courtship with husband number two. He said a friend of a friend was a student biologist on a research expedition in Canada. His team and local authorities responded to a massive train derailment near a small town. Rescuers spent three days clearing out the survivors. On day four, they swept the scattered wreckage for bodies. This student, who happened to be Spanish, and three fellow countrymen were way out in a field after dark, poking around with sticks. One of them heard a voice moaning for help. Of course, they scrambled to find this wretched soul. Late to the scene, a military search-and-rescue helicopter flew overhead, very low, its searchlight blazing. When the chopper had gone, all fell silent. The cries didn’t repeat. Weird part, according to the Spaniard, was that in the few minutes they’d frantically tried to locate the injured person, his voice kept moving around in some bizarre acoustical illusion. The survivor switched from French, to English, and finally to Spanish. The biologist claimed he had nightmares of the incident for years afterward. He dreamed of his buddies separated in a dark field, each crying for help, and he’d stumble across their desiccated corpses, one by one. He attributed it to the guilt of leaving someone to die on the tundra. My husband-to-be told me that story while high on coke and didn’t mention it again. I wonder if that’s why I married the sorry sonofabitch. Just for that single moment of connectedness, a tiny and inconstant flicker of light in the wilderness. • • • • High noon on a Sunday night. Going on thirty-eight haunted years, I’ve expected this, or something like this, even though the entity represents, with its very jack-in-the-box manifestation, a deep, dark mystery of the universe. What has drawn it to me is equally inexplicable. I’ve considered the fanciful notion that the Shaws are cursed and Mr. Help Me is the instrument of vengeance. Doesn’t feel right. I’ve also prayed to Mr. Help Me as if he, or it, is a death god watching over us cattle. Perhaps it is. The old gods wanted blood, didn’t they? Blood and offerings of flesh. That feels more on the mark. Or, it could be the simplest answer of

them all—Mr. Help Me is an exotic animal whose biology and behavior defy scientific classification. The need for sustenance is the least of all possible mysteries. I can fathom that need, at least. A window must be open in my bedroom. Cool night air dries the sweat on my cheeks as I stand in the darkened hall. The air smells vaguely of spoiled meat and perfume. A black, emaciated shape lies prone on the floor, halfway across the bedroom threshold. Long, skinny arms are extended in a swimmer's pose. Its face is a smudge of white and tilted slightly upward to regard me. It is possible that these impressions aren't accurate, that my eyes are interpreting as best they can. I slap a switch. The light flickers on, but doesn't illuminate the hall or the figure sprawled almost directly beneath the fixture. Instead, the glow bends at a right angle and gathers on the paneled wall in a diffuse cone. "Help me," the figure says. The murmur is so soft it might've originated in my own head. I'm made of sterner stuff than my sixteen-year-old self. I resist the powerful compulsion to approach, to lend maternal comfort. My legs go numb. I stagger and slide down the wall into a seated position. Everybody has had the nightmare. The one where you are perfectly aware and paralyzed and an unseen enemy looms over your shoulder. Difference is, I can see my nemesis, or at least its outline, at the opposite end of the hall. I can see it coming for me. It doesn't visibly move except when I blink, and then it's magically two or three feet closer. My mind is in overdrive. What keeps going through my mind is that predator insects seldom stir until the killing strike. "Oh my darlin', oh my darling, oh my darlin' Clementine. You are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry Clementine." I hum tunelessly, like Gram used to after her brain softened into mush. I'm reverting to childhood, to a time when Dad or Uncle Ned might burst through the door and save the day with a blast of double-aught buckshot. It finally dawns upon me that I'm bleeding, am sitting in a puddle of blood. Where the blood is leaking from, I've not the foggiest notion. Silly me, that's why I'm dead from the waist down. My immobility isn't a function of terror, pheromones, or the occult powers of an evil spirit. I've been pricked and envenomed. Nature's predators carry barbs and stings. Those stings deliver anaesthetics and anticoagulants. Have venom, will travel. I chuckle. My lips are

cold. “Help me,” it whispers as it plucks my toes, testing my resistance. Even this close, it’s an indistinct blob of shadowy appendages. “I have one question.” I enunciate carefully, the way I do after one too many shots of Jager. “Did you take my dad on August 15th, 1977? Or did that bastard skip out? Me and my brother got a steak dinner riding on this.” “Help me.” The pleading tone descends into a lower timbre. A satisfied purr. One final trick up my sleeve, or in my pocket. Recently, while browsing a hardware store for a few odds and ends, I’d come across a relic of my youth—a black light. Cost a ten spot, on special in a clearance bin. First it made me smile as I recalled how all my childhood friends illuminated their funkadelic posters, kids as gleeful as if we’d rediscovered alchemy. Later, in college, black light made a comeback on campus and at the parties we attended. It struck a chord, got me thinking, wondering . . . Any creature adapted to distort common light sources might be susceptible to uncommon sources. Say infrared or black light. I hazard a guess that my untutored intuition is on the money and that thousands of years of evolution hasn’t accounted for a twenty-dollar device used to find cat piss stains in the carpet. I raise the box with the black light filter in my left hand and thumb the toggle. For an instant, I behold the intruder in all its malevolent glory. It recoils from my flashlight, a segmented hunter of soft prey retreating into its burrow. A dresser crashes in the bedroom, glass shatters, and the trailer rocks slightly, and then it’s quiet again. The moment has passed, except for the fresh hell slowly blooming in my head. The black light surprised it and nothing more. Surprised and amused it. The creature’s impossibly broad grin imparted a universe of corrupt wisdom that will scar my mind for whatever time I have left. Mr. Help Me’s susurrating chuckle lingers like a psychic stain. Sometimes the spider cuts the fly from its web. Sometimes nature doesn’t sink in those red fangs; sometimes it chooses not to rend with its red claws. A reprieve isn’t necessarily the same weight as a pardon. Inscrutability isn’t mercy. We Shaws are tough as shoe leather. Doubtless, I’ve enough juice left in me to crawl for the phone and signal the cavalry. A quart or two of type-O and I’ll be fighting fit with a story to curl your toes. The conundrum is whether I

really want to make that crawl, or whether I should close my eyes and fall asleep. Did you take my father? I've spent most of my life waiting to ask that question. Is Dad out there in the dark? What about those hunters and hikers and kids who walk through the door and onto the crime pages every year? I don't want to die, truly I don't. I'm also afraid to go on living. I've seen the true, unspeakable face of the universe; a face that reflects my lowly place in its scheme. And the answer is yes. Yes, there are hells, and in some you are burned or boiled or digested in the belly of a monster for eternity. Yes, what's left of Dad abides with a hideous mystery. He's far from alone. What would Clint Eastwood do? Well, he would've plugged the fucker with a .44 Magnum, for starters. I shake myself. Mid-fifties is too late to turn into a mope. I roll onto my belly, suck in a breath, and begin the agonizing journey toward the coffee table where I left my purse and salvation. Hand over hand, I drag my scrawny self. It isn't lost on me what I resemble as I slather a red trail across the floor. Laughing hurts. Hard not to, though. I begin to sing the refrain from "Help." Over and over and over.

Lest We Forget

BY ELIZABETH BEAR

I am dying of the war, though not in it. Such is the nature of wars. A person doesn't have to die in battle to be killed by a war. A person doesn't even have to be a soldier to die of one. Wars have always been slow killers as well as quick. The war that killed my grandfather killed him thirty years after he was discharged, when his liver finally quit from all the self-medicating it took to deal with the aftermath. It killed both his wives, too, though they never served. Dying of wars is strangely contagious. If we were a more honest people, there would be a lot of statues of civilians on the National Mall. Maybe that's something you can look into, when we're done here. Imagine if all those wedding parties and starving children and violated women at least got the notice in death that life—and war—denied them. Empty. Meaningless to them, since they'll never know about it. But a gesture at least. A reminder for the living of the horrors that have passed. Not that we tend to learn anything from the sins of our fathers. Case in point: my father also died of a war. Cancer, which certainly had nothing to do with chemical weapons or toxic environmental conditions where he fought. How could it? There were definitely no chemical weapons used in his war, and just as definitely no toxic environmental conditions pertaining. Just ask the organizations—commercial, governmental—that could otherwise have been held fiscally responsible for treating a sick soldier. If they had to treat one, in fairness you might expect them to treat them all. What possible

reason could they ever have had to lie? And then there's me. I'm not dying because I was a hero. I'm dying because I was the villain. I was a legitimate war criminal. What can I say? Following orders seemed like a good idea at the time. But I'll never be brought to justice. I'll never even go to jail. And choices like those I made then eventually demand some kind of accountability—a reckoning—in the now. I was a suicide. It seemed like the least I could do. Not to make amends: you don't make amends for what I did. There are no real reparations. But a kind of restorative justice. A tiny little drop in the ocean of what I owe. Perhaps I should say that I am a suicide, because I'm not done dying yet. Maybe I will never be. I am not a suicide in the normal course of events. I am a special kind of suicide. Dying of a war is not a new thing. But the manner and purpose of my going… that's where the revolution lies. Dr. Cotter had a day job at the V.A., but she didn't recruit her subjects where she worked. She got us the old-fashioned way. She put an ad on the T. P.T.S.D.??

DID YOU SERVE?

ARE YOU SORRY?

FREE HELP! Underneath, there was a contact number, and some fine print about a study and the exact specifications of who they were looking for. They were looking for me. I might not have showed up, except it was a month or two after my dad died, and I was taking it hard. I didn't have anybody: I'd driven them all off. I was as alone and adrift as I have ever been in my life. Then I met Dr. Cotter and everything changed. For the better, for once. Cotter

wasn’t even a shrink. She was a neuro-something, I guess. Some other kind of brain doctor. I never can get the specialties straight anymore. My functions have been pared down. Let’s be honest: I don’t really have a consciousness. I feel like me, but I’m not an individual in the sense we’re used to. I’m just a set of protocols. I’m not as smart as I used to be. When I had a brain of my own. When I wasn’t using something else’s. But maybe I wasn’t that smart then, either. Because I didn’t use that big brain much. I just followed orders. They were bad orders and I knew it. But they make it so easy not to think for yourself. Just to do what you’re told. They make it so easy not to say no. I tortured people. I sprayed them with white phosphorous and burned them alive. I didn’t do it in person, but from a distance. I used a robot, like the reach of God’s clawed hand down from Heaven to pluck up the just and the unjust alike. It didn’t seem so bad, from a distance. I know you know what I mean. You’ve seen the photographs, the films of smoking houses, smoking places of worship, smoking marketplaces. Some of the people I burned weren’t soldiers. A surprising number of them survived. I was never brought to trial. They will never be asked to testify. I can only speak for them, in one last unsubtle irony. Cotter leaned across her desk. Her grey hair was escaping her bun, as usual. Her gaudy earrings swung. “My parents were Holocaust survivors. Do you know what epigenetics is?” “No,” I lied. “Trauma experienced by your ancestors can affect your genetic expression. Your personality; your physical self. The environment you experience can affect the genetic expression of your children. It iterates. It’s handed down.” “Oh,” I said. “I know what you did in the

war," she said. It was, in a strange way, a relief to be confronted. "I was just follow-ing orders." "There's no just about it." "Yeah," I said. "I know." She sat back and suddenly relaxed. "How do you feel about it? About what you did, I mean. In the war." "I…" I shook my head. I opened my mouth. I shook my head again. Some time later, Cotter leaned back, folded her hands, and said, "What if you could make people understand that? Really understand that? Really understand how you feel?" I took a sip of water. It greased the words a little but they still had edges. "How many people? Until when?" She shrugged. "Most of them? For a long time?" I wonder how many times, in how many people, I've relived all that now. Statistically speaking, if you are a human being in the Americas or Europe, you've already experienced it. As if you had been there. They're working on drugs to fight the infection, I hear, but it's already spread to Asia and Africa. Maybe not Madagascar. But the flatworms can live and reproduce in freshwater. I expect they'll be around for the foreseeable future. So I don't have to tell you again what I did in the war, and how I came to feel about it later. No point in beating a one-trick pony to death. Sometimes we captured people rather than burning them. Some of those people went to prison camps where they were tortured, and I have a responsibility for that, too. It doesn't sound so bad—caning the feet, stress positions, water-boarding, electric shocks, isolation, sleep deprivation. It's not supposed to sound so bad. They show you worse things as entertainment, and the people on TV usually seem to walk away in the end. It doesn't sound so bad. Because you have been lied to. "Lee," Cotter said. "You're the one." "Planaria

lugubris," she said, holding up a tube filled with cloudy water. "A common flatworm. Not so common anymore." "Are they endangered?" I asked, interested. "No," she said. Light glinted through the tube. It was quite pretty. "We edited them." "Like a book?" I joked. "More or less." The tube clicked as she set it back in a rack. "Do you know what CRISPR is?" "Sure," I said. "It shows up in a lot of horror movies. There's human DNA in your flatworms, right? They're going to grow to the size of school buses and learn to use automatic weapons?" "Well, no," she said. "But we did use some bits of another flatworm. A parasitic one. And Toxoplasmosis gondii." I felt my mouth doing a funny thing. "Isn't that the bug that makes rats walk into cat mouths?" Her mouth did a funny thing, too. As if she were trying to smile, but didn't really feel like she deserved to. "Do you know what's interesting about planarians, Lee?" "Wait," I said, suddenly full of high school biology. "They can pass memories to one another, right? If they eat each other?" "Fucking little cannibals," she agreed. "You want to feed them my memories." Her fingers drummed silently on the steel lab countertop. "Then what? Make people eat them?" She stepped away from the counter and faced me. "They reproduce in human brains. They can pass their memories along to their hosts." "That sounds like terrorism. Not to mention one hell of a violation of consent law." "Did you consent to what happened to you?" she asked me. My lips clenched around the words, holding them in. I closed my eyes and got out a single one. "Technically." That was why some of the people I worked with went to jail. I didn't. Mostly because the government wanted the prosecutions—and the attendant publicity—to stop as soon as

they'd plausibly punished someone for what they told us to do. "Is coerced consent really consent?" "Who is ever," I asked, "really free of coercion?" She sighed and rolled her head back to look at the ceiling. "Yes, it's terrorism. Yes, it's a terrible, unethical thing. Yes, when it comes out, I will go to jail at the very least." "And me?" "You'll be dead." "Right," I said. "They're going to eat my brain. That's how they get the memories, isn't it? Just like they get the memories of other flatworms from eating each other." She just looked at me. I waved my hand airily. "I'm okay with that. Are they going to eat other people's brains?" "The first generation will reproduce and die," she said. "They've got a… I guess you would call it a kill switch. Their offspring will be commensal organisms rather than parasitic ones. We've programmed them to eat damaged cells instead of healthy ones. Infected people will actually, on average, live longer. The cure for war is also the cure for cancer." "Flatworms that will certainly never mutate back and just eat brains or something. All the brains. Everywhere. You've recreated mad cow disease, but with flatworms." "Planarians are a lot easier to kill than prions," she said. "And parasites generally evolve to be less deadly to the host, not more." "You're an even more awful human being than I am," I said. "Do you want to end war?" I bit my lip. I looked down at my shoes. "It seems like the least I can do." "You will have to formally consent, and indicate that you understand what the process will require." "What, now consent matters? What about all those people out there who don't pay their taxes in order to be parasitized by flatworms and traumatic memories?" "I'm a hypocrite," Cotter admitted. "And if I knew what

else to do I would. Aren't all those people out there who pay their taxes complicit in drone strikes on kindergartens, too? If they stopped trying not to worry about it, or thinking of it as necessary collateral damage, do you think things would change?" My stomach clenched. I held out my hand, as if we could shake on it. "Okay. What is it, a lethal injection or something?" She looked away. "Lee. You have to be alive while the flatworms work." "Well." I swallowed and took my hand back. "Show me where to sign." I didn't expect to remember. No. That's wrong. That was, after all, the entire point of the exercise: me remembering. Me remembering war. For you. I didn't expect that I would be self-aware through the process, however. My own private richly-deserved Hell. I wonder how many times, in how many places, I've relived this now. I'm not sure I would have had the guts to commit to the process, if I realized that I would have to go through it all again. Billions and billions of times. I mean, moral cowardice is what turned me into a war criminal in the first place. It seemed like a good idea at the time. When I had a brain of my own. And wasn't just a parasite in yours. The process of being converted into flatworm memories didn't hurt. Your brain doesn't have any nerves to feel pain with. It was actually kind of a relief. I could feel the memories slipping away. A relief, anyway, until I realized that the memories were all I was anymore. War is a contagion. The contagion is in you. The contagion is me. Cotter died in prison, as she'd predicted, after the world figured out what we'd done. Too late to change anything. Too late to fix anything. Too late to mean anything. Sending her to jail was a nice gesture, I suppose. (Editors' Note: Elizabeth Bear

ROUTINE _for a_ HORNET BY DON BERRY

Hurtling through space to meet the enemy in equipment too delicate to step on, without enough fuel to get back, and knowing you're completely expendable is just----

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Worlds of If Science Fiction, December 1956. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

Alarm bells filled the wardroom, screaming off the metal walls and filling the room with their flat, metallic clang. Cressey leaped up, spilling the table with its checkerboard to the floor. Running to the suitlocker, he wondered if the bells had to be loud enough to jar a man's mind. The other on-duty men in the wardroom were running with him, and the corridor outside reverberated to the sound of pounding feet on metal. As his hand automatically manipulated the zippers on his G-suit, he noticed that his heart was beating furiously.

At this point, Cressey had never been able to tell whether he was frightened or not. As far as he could know from what his belly told him, there was no physical difference between plain old chicken fear and the body's normal preparation for action. The men pounded 'up' the metal stairs to the Hornet's Nest on the satellite's rim. The Hornet's Nest. Cressey thought suddenly how

irrational it was. When a nickname stuck, it carried its aura to everything around it. He didn't know what live-wire journalist had first used the name Hornets for the Primary Interceptor Command, but now, inevitably, the launching racks were Hornet's Nests and the sleek missiles Stingers. He suddenly felt slightly nauseated. He hated this light-headed, slightly sick feeling, listening to the roaring of blood in his head and the thundering of his heart. The medics had told him these physical symptoms were just nature's way of preparing the body for sudden activity. Cressey didn't know. It felt like fear to him, and he was afraid now. His ship this run was PIC-503, and when he reached it the Stingers were just coming up the loading elevators. Long, slim, twenty-foot
pencils of death, glistening in the harsh glare of the overheads. They
had their own sort of lethal beauty, those Stingers, and a power about
them, as if they were quiescently submitting to these puny men for now,
for their own mechanical reasons. Each Hornet carried two Stingers, slung beneath the stubby delta-wings.
The Stingers were twice the length of the Hornet itself, projecting fore and aft of the ship for five feet in either direction. The Hornet looked ungainly, riding atop those slim needles, like some grotesque
parasite hitching a ride on two silver arrows. _They're--quite small._
Who had said that? Mackley. Captain Mackley,
the glib Information Officer who'd told Cressey everything he was

allowed to know about Hornets before he saw one. _I'll be frank with you, Mr. Cressey. Strategic Command has Hornets listed not as aircraft, but as portable launching racks. Their job is to take Stingers to the Outspace ships. There's a man in them because we can't build a computer as efficient as man at such light weight. And we couldn't afford to if we had the necessary knowledge._ Cressey remembered his shock at being told he was a light-weight computer, and some of the bitterness. He watched the loading crew lock the Stingers into position beneath the Hornet's wings and throw the hooked boarding ladder over the edge of the cockpit. Cressey mounted past the red-painted NO STEP signs on the wings and settled himself in the cramped cockpit. As the crew carried the ladder away, he flipped the switch by his left hand and listened to the hum as the canopy rolled forward and locked into place with a metallic clack. NO STEP, he thought wearily. His own god-damned life, entrusted to a piece of equipment too delicate to step on. He swung the fish-bowl over his head and locked it into place. He coupled the hose leading from his right hip to a similar hose which disappeared into the floor of the cockpit, and partially inflated his

suit. No detectable leaks. If his check crew had done their job, he was
ready. Opening the communications channel, he listened to the other 'hot'
Hornets checking off. "427." "Ready out." "493." "Ready out." "495." "Ready sir. Out." "501." "My fuel gauge doesn't register, sir." "Scratch 501. 503." "Ready out," replied Cressey. He wondered what was wrong with 501. No
fuel? Or gauge just out of whack somehow? The way the Hornets were
built, you could never be sure of anything. They were made for one trip, no more. No matter how the intercept worked out, they never went
home again. There was not much money wasted in their construction.
Mackley had easily justified that, too. _Cressey, you must understand one thing. We are desperate. The
Outspacers caught us totally unprepared, and some of the measures we
must resort to are not what we would normally desire._ _When the Outspacers came into the system, six years ago, we had only two manned satellites in operation. Within two years this was increased
to six, and it was still inadequate. For this reason, another ring of stations was set up, this time one-man Detector Posts. There are twelve of them, two reporting to each Satellite Base. Their orbit is

roughly half-way between the orbits of Earth and Mars. Two concentric
circles about the Earth, do you see? When an Outspacer crosses D-line,
a signal is flashed to the nearest Satellite Base and the Hornets launched._ _The point I'm trying to make, Cressey, is this: it took nearly forty
years to set up the first manned satellite, and that after all the means were in our hands. Then, in just over two years, we put up four
more satellites and twelve D-Posts. We were not geared for that effort._ Translated into personal terms, Mackley had meant that the planet could
not afford to enclose Cressey in an adequate ship. Too much would be
lost if the Outspacer weapons caught it. The loading crew had retreated into the sealed cubicle from which they
would watch the launching. The huge, curved walls of the hull began to
roll back, and even in the cockpit, Cressey could hear the air roar out
into space with a brief explosion of sound. The air hissed out of his cockpit, and his suit inflated full. Still no leak. He felt a momentary panic as the launching rack swung him out, pointed
away from the Satellite directly into the emptiness of space. Now he could not see the reassuring bulk of the mother ship. He was alone, with only the incredible myriads of stars before him, and the two

needle points of the Stingers projecting full into their mass. The tens of thousands of bright specks that seemed so close gave no comfort.

His eyes told him space was full, crammed to bursting with stars, and his mind told him it was as empty as death. Pointed out into loneliness, riding the two graceful arrows, Cressey heard the Communicator rasp, "Gentlemen, you are on an intercept to an Outspace ship. The safety of your world rides with you. Do your job well." The hypocritical son-of-a-bitch, thought Cressey angrily, sitting in his snug control room telling _us_ to do our job! Well, maybe it made an impression on the first-timers, he couldn't remember.

This was his third, and he could no longer remember any farther back than when he climbed into the cockpit. It was better not to remember his other missions, much better. The roar seemed to come a split second before the pressure, and then Cressey was slammed into his acceleration cradle by the sudden impact.

His body suddenly weighed over a thousand pounds, and his blood sloshed wearily in his veins as a straining heart refused to pump such a load. * * * * * _"Captain Mackley," said Cressey, "I've heard it said that Earth is the

aggressor in this war."_ _"Have you ever seen the London Crater?" asked the Information Officer._ _"Pictures, yes, but what I want to know is, who attacked first?"_ _"It doesn't really matter, does it Cressey? There is a war, and we've
got to fight it, no matter how it started."_ _"Yes sir," said Cressey, "but I wanted to know."_ _"All right, I'll tell you then. The Outspacers contacted this system
roughly six years ago. The first eighteen months they spent on the outer planets. During the second year they came in as far as Mars, and established a base there. Six months later, one of their ships left on an obvious course toward Earth. It was destroyed by a missile
launched from Satellite II." Mackley shrugged. "You know the rest. They
retaliated. Satellite II was vaporized."_ _"But Earth fired first?"_ _"I told you, it doesn't make any difference now. One Outspacer later got through the defense rings, and now there's nothing from London to
Cambridge but glass. Whatever the hell they use for weapons, they're
effective."_ _"So we don't know whether or not they were originally hostile."_ _"No, we don't. It had to be assumed they were. We were not in a
position to make allowances. You must realize, Cressey, we were dealing
with something totally unprecedented, a completely unknown force.

Common sense is enough to tell you the Outspacer had to be considered
inimical to us, until proven otherwise."_ _"They weren't given much of a chance to prove it."_ _"That may be. The point is irrelevant at the moment. We are committed
to a line of action, and we must follow it through. On their part, the Outspacers are doing the same."_ _Cressey was silent for a moment, and Mackley continued in a softer
voice. "Look here, son. I don't have to tell you all this. I could just as easily shoot you full of starry-eyed patriotism and send you out to save the world from the Bug-Eyed Monsters, but the military isn't doing things that way any more. There is a possibility that we've made
a mistake, I'll admit that, but we're stuck with the consequences of the original action. We're defending our planet with everything we've
got. The Hornets are the only weapon that has proven even remotely
effective."_ _"I'll have to think it over, Captain."_ _"Of course," said Mackley. "It's not an easy decision to make. Come
back again, any time you like, and we'll talk it over some more."_
And Cressey had gone back. * * * * *
Acceleration pressure abated, and Cressey's face resumed its normal
shape. The red haze in front of his eyes cleared, and he could see out through his canopy again. The thick blanket of stars remained

motionless, though he knew he was moving with tremendous speed toward
the Outspace ship. In front of him behind the instrument panel, he could hear the
insect-like buzzing as his course computer was fed information from his
Base Satellite. With both the outer D-Post and the Satellite tracking the enemy, fairly precise positioning was possible. Unfortunately, because of the enormous distances involved, not precise enough to pinpoint the Stingers themselves. You had to be closer to do that, and
the way to get closer was in a Hornet. For a few minutes now, Cressey had only to watch his own scope for
the first pip, and consider his insane position. It was his third mission. Of nearly a thousand Hornetmen, forty-three had more than one
mission. If he got out of this one, he had two more before compulsory
retirement. He was not sure he could go two more missions, even if he
survived physically. Five missions, then retirement. It had looked good to him, a year ago.
When he left college for Primary Interceptors, it had seemed the very
best kind of an idea. Five missions as a Hornetman, then home. Home as

a hero, as a king. At twenty-one he would never have to worry about
anything again. The pension Mackley had mentioned was so high as to be
inconceivable. And that was just from the government. Being a hero had
other, less official compensations. A shack in Beverly Hills, worth a hundred thousand or so? Hell, they'd force it on him, just for being a hero. A woman? What woman could resist a five-mission Hornetman? Every
daydream he'd ever had, and a hundred he'd not thought of, free for nothing. Or free for running five intercepts. It had looked good to him until his first mission. Then it had suddenly
lost its charm. He had learned why, so far, there were no five-mission
Hornetmen. Abruptly he heard the "ping" telling him his radar was tracking. The
Satellite had guided him true enough. He was within the limited range
of his own radar. "Radar contact made," he said into the lip mike. "503 going on manual
control. Out." He clicked the Com switch and settled down to fixing on
his target. From the size of the blip on the screen, he could see the Outspace ship
was huge, as all of them were. Funny, there had not even been enough

contact to know how many different sorts of ship the Alien had. They were not battleships, nor cruisers, nor anything else specific. They were simply Outspace, and he had to seek them out and destroy them. A single ship, as usual. He wondered why they had never sent more than one ship at a time. Perhaps their thinking was so completely foreign it had never occurred to them. No one knew anything about how they thought, except that they retaliated when attacked. Cressey wondered how the conflict looked through Outspacer eyes. Perhaps they were completely bewildered by attack. Perhaps those god-awful disruptor beams were meant for some other, more peaceful purpose, and were being pressed into use as an emergency weapon by frightened beings. It was even possible the aliens did not know they were under attack by sentient creatures, and wrote off the loss of their ships to natural calamity of some unknown nature. There were a thousand maybes. It was useless to speculate in the total absence of data. You couldn't be sure of anything, so you couldn't take any chances. You had to act as though they were hostile just to be on the safe side. The malignant neurosis of humanity, making it behave as though all things unknown were dangerous. Or perhaps just realistic

thinking. You couldn't know, unless you knew all about the universe.

Perhaps the idea of conscious animosity was incomprehensible to the Outspacers, but there was no way to tell. He reached between his legs to the cockpit floor and threw the switches there, arming the Stinger warheads. On his first mission he had actually gotten within visual range of the Outspace ship, launching the Stingers at not more than three miles range. The ship had been bulky, almost grotesque by his own standards, covered with lumps and bulges of indeterminate purpose. There had been no lights visible, no ports. Perhaps the Aliens did not see in our spectrum, or perhaps they had radiation screens across the ports, there was no way to tell. Cressey smiled ruefully. This miserable war was turning him into a philosopher. On his second mission he had not seen his target. He had launched at six miles, out of fear, trusting to the followers in the Stingers' noses to track. He did not know what the result had been either time.

He had turned and run for home at full acceleration, and he fully intended to do the same on this mission. There was such a thing as pushing your luck too far, and he needed all he had. The pip on his screen drifted to the left, and he gave a short burst to center it. He begrudged having to use his infinitesimal fuel on tracking when he needed it so desperately to go home. He looked through

the canopy, but saw nothing, and returned his eyes to the screen. The
telltale pip had drifted slightly to the right. He had overcorrected. Cursing, he fired another burst, shorter this time, with the left bank, and watched the pip center. That was good enough. His ranging said only twelve miles, his speed two mps, relative to
target. One second, two seconds, three--there it was, occulting a tiny
area of star patched sky. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a bright flare as some other Hornet
disappeared in the wave of energy released by its molecular disruption.
Then another, in another quadrant. The Alien was fighting back. He jabbed violently at the Stinger release, and saw the two pencils roar fiercely out ahead of him on their own power. He cut his flimsy launching rack into as tight a turn as it would take. The familiar red haze clouded his vision, and just before blacking out he fired another
last long burst on the rockets to head him toward home. * * * * * * _"You understand," said Mackley, "that the amount of fuel we can pack into a Hornet is severely limited by the size of the craft. There is not enough to perform the complicated braking maneuvers necessary to return to the Satellite._ _"Therefore, the Hornets make no attempt to return to the Satellite
from which they were launched. Instead, they return directly to Earth.

This may sound contradictory, but remember that the planet has a heavy envelope of air, which the Satellite Bases, of course, have not. We use that air to brake the ships, through friction."_ _"But Captain, wouldn't the Hornet burn as soon as it touched atmosphere?"_ _"Ordinarily, if it plunged directly in, yes. But there are techniques for slowing your flight through friction without heating excessively.

Basically, the operation is the same as skipping a flat stone on a lake. The Hornet actually only skims the atmosphere, entering at a very

shallow angle. The entire delta-wing of the ship is a control surface. That much area, even at such extreme heights, gives a certain amount of

control, and the pilot can pull up out of the atmosphere again before heating has become too extreme. He has also been considerably slowed by

the same friction which causes the heating. Do you follow me?"_ _"Yes, I suppose so, but it seems pretty tricky."_ _"It is tricky, Cressey, and you never want to forget it. It takes a

very considerable amount of piloting skill, but it can be done."_ _"Captain, how many Hornets do you lose trying to get in like that?"_ _Mackley hesitated momentarily. "Our losses are right around

thirty-seven percent. That's due to enemy fire. It's high, but under the circumstances, it isn't extreme. We're fighting at a disadvantage,

and combat is not a gentle affair. Men's lives are lost. That's been

true ever since two cave men took after each other with stone axes. It was true with bows and arrows and muzzle loaders. It was true with
tanks and machine guns, and it is true now._ _"It is expected in a combat situation that men will die. One of the
aims of military strategy has always been to keep as many of your own
men alive as possible. This has not changed either. But combat is, after all, combat; and there are some unavoidable risks."_ _"What's the total loss, Captain? I mean from enemy action and from the hazards of this skip approach you were talking about?"_ _The Information Officer stared at Cressey for what seemed like a long time before he answered. "Our total losses, Mr. Cressey, are roughly ninety-three percent."_ * * * * * When Cressey regained consciousness, the Earth was a great globe, filling his entire field of vision. He could not estimate his distance, though he thought he was within the Satellite ring. His speed would plunge him into atmosphere shortly, too shortly. Within seconds he began to feel the warmth as he entered the region
where a few air molecules began to brush over the surfaces of his ship.
He rotated the delta-wings full, but there was no response. He was not
yet deep enough into the sea of air for the control surfaces to react. He watched the tips of the wings, so ridiculously close to him, though

he knew he would not be able to see anything. Soon he began to feel a
gentle bucking motion as the wings met resistance. He flattened them
out, horizontal, and began to draw them up again slowly, so they would
move the tiny ship upward instead of simply tearing off at the roots.
The heat was already uncomfortable, and he was slowing. Now he was
pressed forward against the seat belt as deceleration increased. The
control surfaces bit into the thin air more solidly now, and Cressey
thought the nose had come up a bit, but it was so slight he couldn't be
sure. The bucking motion was more pronounced, but there was nothing he
could do about that. Slowly, slowly. The wings had to tilt so very slowly, or they would be
ripped from the pod-like hull, leaving it to plummet into thick air and
glow briefly like a cigarette in the dark before it plunged down to
earth. His face was wet behind the fish-bowl, but he could not reach it
to wipe the sweat away. Nor could he have taken his hands away from the
controls in any case. The nose had come up, he was certain of that now. He was definitely
rising, but the heat was becoming unbearable. Imperceptibly, a thin

shrieking had arisen in the cabin, almost out of sonic range, just enough to make a man's nerves feel as if they had been dragged across a
rough file. The heat transmitted through the body of the pod and into
the bucket was beginning to burn his legs. He was being held out of the seat itself by the force of his deceleration, but the backs of his calves still touched metal. He thought he could smell the fabric of his
suit burning, but realized it was probably his overwrought imagination. His cheeks felt too large, puffed out, as though strong, implacable
hands were pulling all his loose flesh forward. His eyes strained forward, threatening to come out of their sockets. The red haze began, and he had a sudden frightening thought that he might lose consciousness before the Hornet had well begun its rise out of atmosphere. The red darkened into black. He regained consciousness. The first skip had been made. The ship began
to settle back into atmosphere again, and now its speed was lower. With each pass the heat would become more intense, as the plane would
not have a chance to cool completely before it began to heat again. He
had to maintain a delicate balance between going deep enough to slow
him, but not so deep he couldn't bring the ship up before it burned,

cherry-red. His body was drenched as by a shower, and the inner lining
of his suit felt soggy from sweat. The second skip was worse than the first, and he lost consciousness
almost too soon. The third was worse than the second. After the fourth,
he could not lift high enough to clear atmosphere. He had gone too deep, and was now bound by the great mass of Earth below. He was still at a shallow angle, relative to the ground. He estimated he would make at least one complete orbit, perhaps two, before his spiralling trajectory brought him to the contact point on the surface. If he were still conscious, he would leave the aircraft at 30,000 feet, and hope. He knew his speed was still too high, well over Mach 2,
higher than it had been on either of his other approaches. The ship was
threatening to tear apart under the furious pounding it was taking from
air and shock waves. Hobson's choice. Bail out high, and suffocate because the automatic
chute release would not allow him to make a delayed opening. Bail out
low, and the thick air would pound his body to a pulp, and below the steel webbed chute would hang nothing but a suit, full of a still, red messiness. The timing had to be precision itself, but it had to be done by

guesswork. There was no training that could prepare a man for this. It
was all new. He uncoupled the air hose leading to his suit, and placed
his hand on the ejector lever. He knew he was too high, but the wings
showed quivering signs of buckling under the strain. He pulled the lever, releasing the canopy and arming the seat
cartridge. The canopy disappeared miraculously from over his head.
He was deafened by the thunderous roar of air that entered the cramped cockpit, like an explosion peak that remained constant, not diminishing. Instinctively, he ducked his head, recoiling at the sound.
He did not remember triggering the seat ejector. Cressey fell. The seat dropped away from him, the incredibly strong
parachute opened, all automatically. He fell forty-five thousand feet into the Pacific Ocean, unconscious. His face was battered by windblast almost beyond recognition, and his body equally so. When
the rescue team pulled him from the water, three hours later, they thought he was an old man. His eyes were a mass of red, from dozens of
sub-conjunctival hemorrhages. He would see again, but not until after
weeks of near blindness. But he was alive. When he woke up in the California hospital four days

later, he considered ruefully that that was about the best one could expect in his business. * * * * * "Cressey, can you hear me?" "Yes, I can hear you. Who is it?" "It's Captain Mackley. I've come to see you." "Well--thanks, Captain." "You got the Outspacer, Cressey. I thought you'd like to know." "Frankly, Captain, I couldn't care less. But thanks for telling me, anyway." "It means a lot, Cressey. There were a lot of people's lives riding with you." _Yeah, I'm a hero. I'm a Hornetman._ "Thanks, Captain." "Was it pretty rough?" _Rough? Like birth and death and all of life, rolled into minutes._ "No more so than I expected, Captain. Pretty much routine. Routine for a Hornetman."

A Vocabulary of Remorse

By Dantzel Cherry

~~Dear Liam, I love you. I'm sorry.~~



"Well, Mrs. Rojas, the good news is that it's contagious. I can safely state that pneumonia has never had such a positive outcome before."

Dr. Robyn's smile crinkled at the corners, as sharp and as numerous as the creases in the medical consent form that Lorelei had folded into an elephant, like those she'd been studying in Brahmagiri just before she took ill four days ago.

"Are… you sure?" she said. It was still astonishing to hear her own vocal chords. They weren't soft and mellifluous like the rain dripping from the cherry blossom petals after the storm. They weren't sharp, silvery and musical like the flute her son Casper played every afternoon at two-thirty. They weren't a mellow alto like her sister's. Her voice was croaked and cracked, an overeager frog at the far end of a drought-stricken remnant of a pond.

And yet it was a voice.

Dr. Robyn bobbed his head up and down. "And you said you have-" he checked his charts. "-Two children with the same condition?"

"Yes. My boys, Capser-" she tried again. "*Cas*per. Liam."

"And they have *not* seen you since you came home from your trip?"

Lorelei shook her head and gestured at the hospital bed under bed. She wished her tablet was within reach. Her chest hurt and her voice was already tired.

Dr. Robyn seemed to understand and bobbed his head again.

“You’ve presented us with an intriguing possibility, you know. It’s not often a condition like yours can find a cure – especially when it’s not a trigger word like ‘cancer’ or ‘Alzheimers.’ Truthfully, most of these types of non-life threatening conditions won’t be cured except through flukes like the one you picked up. It’s harsh, but there you have it.”

Lorelei nodded, and Dr. Robyn went on.

“We could culture this strain; give it to other patients with your condition. Even your sons could receive it.”

“Am I… still contagious?”

“At least another ten days, yes.” He gave her a stern look that didn’t entirely wash away his smile. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but tomorrow you go home – you’re cleared for friends and family.”

Should I really go home already and infect Casper and Liam? she thought. That’s taking away their agency.

She paused. She couldn’t count the times doctors had assumed her mutism equaled stupidity. It *was* nice talking directly to the doctor, and he was more engaged with her than any other doctor – ever.

First do no harm. But which was more harmful – exposing her children to pneumonia, or leaving them mute when a miracle presented itself?



~~Dear Liam, If I could repent for making the wrong call, I would. I will. Please help me make this right.~~



Beep-beep. Beep-beep. The video call was linked, and Liam's face appeared on Lorelei's tablet screen, perplexed at receiving a video call. His face was framed by the tangerine paint of his room, which was as drenched in papers as when Lorelei had left on her trip.

Everything okay? What did the doc say was wrong? Liam typed. Though his raised eyebrow was the only mark that he was concerned, Lorelei knew this meant he'd been fretting all day.

"I'm – wonderful – Liamalowinnowai," Lorelei said, still marveling at her frog croak, at the way her vocal chords rubbed together to create the words she'd longed to verbalize for years. Liam's eyes widened at her voice and he cringed at her use of the endearment she'd been typing for the last sixteen years.

Lorelei waited for him to do something – anything. Type something, she pleaded silently. Sign something.

There was no response but the hospital's air conditioning humming like an opera singer carrying her last note into eternity, and the even louder silence on the other side of the screen.

"Can I talk to both of you, plea-?" she began, but Liam's lips tightened. A second later her tablet read *Call disconnected*.

So it was going straight to worst-case scenario. Lorelei sighed.

She scrolled to Casper's name and seconds later her second son had opened the video link. He was also sequestered in his own room, walls painted cobalt with black arabesque patterning, where he had been undoubtedly practicing his flute. He smiled and signed, "How are you feeling? Ready to come home?"

Lorelei took a breath and smiled to try calming her nerves before saying. "I'm coming home today, Casper, love."

Casper gaped at her, then bounced up and down so much that Lorelei had trouble keeping up as he signed, "You're talking how are you talking your voice is weird how are you talking?"

Lorelei's laugh shook the hospital bed, which squeaked in protest. Her laugh alternated in pitch and the tears ran down her cheeks and disappeared under her hospital gown.

"Hi, baby," she said, regaining her composure.

Casper beamed back, riveted by her voice. "Details details details," he signed.

"Get Liam – then we'll all talk."

Casper pouted but grabbed his tablet and ran to Liam's room. Lorelei tried to watch the screen, but it jounced and jiggled so much that it made her nauseous.

A few moments later Casper was in front of the screen again, bathed in tangerine, with Liam scowling next to him.

"Details details details."

"I have pneumonia," Lorelei began. "But the doctor said I'll be okay."

"What about the talking?" Casper signed.

Lorelei explained as simply as she could, since her voice was already failing.

"The doctor said he could capture the strain," she finished. "And there's a good chance that you'd both have the same outcome if you contracted it."

"Would my voice be weird like yours?" Casper asked.

Lorelei shrugged. "Probably not. You're younger – less time for the vocal cords to atrophy."

Liam, who had sat through everything stiff and uncomfortable, leaned forward and wrote a message for the first time. *I don't want it.*

"But Liam, it's so-"

How could she explain her relief at being able to communicate with the doctors and the nurses with a real voice? They interacted with her… *normally*. None of the awkward stiffness that she encountered so many other places – or less of it, anyway – when they found she

couldn’t talk. She was still Lorelei, after all, and the changes she was experiencing in her own head were unnerving. But she’d felt more at ease here than she did most places.

But Liam didn’t like being normal. He was the contrarian in the family, the one that resisted following the crowd without believing deeply that it was the right choice. How could she explain her exultation at receiving the gift of speech long after her therapists and doctors had given up hope?

Liam had already retreated from the camera’s view. Lorelei’s view of the house jiggled and blurred as Casper ran back to his own room with the tablet. There he pulled out his flute and mimicked Lorelei’s voice, copying the cadence into a wild discordant song as she alternately laughed at his impromptu performance and growled at him to take the tablet back to Liam.

After a few minutes she gave up and sat back to appreciate Casper’s tune as he modified his notes and roped them into something else. She wouldn’t be able to get through to Liam today, and certainly not while talking to him with her *voice*.

With Casper’s song as background, she opened a file to write Liam an old-fashioned note explaining everything.

[redacted]

~~Dear Liam, I grieve for our relationship. You’ll always be my son.~~

[redacted]

“Hello!” Lorelei said as she opened the front door to her home, timid as a deer. Her throat was sore and her voice wavered when she tried to speak, but Doctor Robyn assured her this was simple exhaustion of vocal cords unused to speaking, not a regression.

Lorelei braced herself to catch a beaming Casper bounding toward her. She caught him in her arms, hugging him with a fervor that she’d never experienced before now. Hugs had always been hard for her – and Liam – and she had scarcely tolerated Casper’s compulsion to hug everyone and everything without crawling out of her own skin every day.

Today his embrace was comforting, and she held him close. Every second she held him, breathed near him, even, was another chance for the virus to spread. She had explained this to him while she was still in the hospital, and she wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

“Is Liam out there?” she asked as they pulled apart.

Casper shrugged and signed, “Sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Lorelei sighed and rubbed her throat.

Liam’s door was shut tight. Locked, and when Lorelei ran her finger under the door, her finger brushed against several layers of plastic.

“Does he have a fridge in there?” Lorelei whispered, giving in and accompanying her words with her fingers. A wave of relief washed over her when Casper flashed “No.”

She knocked.

No response.

She pulled her tablet out. *Are you coming out for dinner?*

Liam response was immediate. *Are you still contagious?*

Lorelei paused. She was tempted to lie, but Liam wasn't an idiot, and he could look up pneumonia's regular incubation period with ease. He probably already had, and was just testing her.

No, she replied.

Five minutes of snubbed silence was answer enough. Well, she could wait to see him. She could write him a letter, explaining why she wanted this so much for all of them. Besides, he probably hadn't planned ahead for another seven days of food. She hoped he hadn't taken measures to handle his waste, because she didn't want to clean *that* up when this protest ended. Hopefully he'd sneak out of his room when he got desperate. And then he'd understand and forgive her if he got sick.

Hopefully.



~~Dear Liam, I feel so much sorrow that~~ –

~~Dear Liam, words cannot express~~ –



Two days into Lorelei's return, Casper contracted pneumonia. Lorelei's own symptoms had eased enough that she ministered to

her son's needs while he curled up on the couch, his cheeks an unhealthy pink and his cough so inhibiting that he spent most of his time with his thoughts turned inward, focusing on each labored breath. Lorelei's insurance covered in-home oxygen treatments, and the home health nurse arrived promptly and had Casper breathing into the oxygen mask in no time. Casper's eyes fluttered open on occasion, and each time he gave her a thumbs-up, which she returned half-heartedly.

The manifestation of each symptom wrenched at her gut, but no more than Liam's text message this morning: *Who do you think you are, doing this to him?*

Who did she think she was, indeed. What kind of mom intentionally tried to pass on pneumonia to her children, regardless of any benefits? Casper loved playing his flute – would this ruin his lung capacity for good? What if he lost his gift?

"Stop. It."

Lorelei jumped. That voice rumbled and creaked. The "s" hissed clumsily, and Lorelei knew from recent experience that it had hurt to say those two words.

And it was her son's voice, and it was glorious.

"Hey there," she said, smiling broadly. "Listen to you."

Casper grinned back, but switched to signing, "This is faster. Stop worrying. I want this."

“Aren’t you scared of all the changes this brings? I am. I know Liam is.”

“Yeah, but if billions of people are comfortable talking, I can learn to handle it too.”

Casper sounded braver than herself, and she’d been the one to bring this home. She could have stayed at the hospital until her incubation period had passed.

“What if it changes your music? What if your voice – or my voice – stays like this? Will you find it annoying, or embarrassing?”

Casper’s fingers wavered, then he signed, “Maybe. We’ll kill that troll when we get to it.”

“Right?” he croaked.

Lorelei smiled at their long-standing joke and answered with her voice and fingers. “Right.”

Her gaze shifted to Liam’s door, sealed tight as a fortress. Maybe Liam would have the same attitude, once he found his voice. She just hoped he realized that she wasn’t the troll.



~~Dear Liam, I want to apologize for giving your voice back. Even though you’re feeling upset right now, I had your best interests in mind. When you’ve adjusted you’ll see this was the right choice-~~

Dear Liam, I love you. I’m sorry for betraying your trust like this.



This is a good thing, Lorelei told herself as she paced the hallway outside Liam's door on Day Six of being home from the hospital. This is for his own good.

He still hadn't made an appearance, except to send the occasional *bug off* when she asked him to come out for dinner. She supposed that the irritable messages and intermittent floorboard creaking was, at least, proof he hadn't snuck out. She'd hoped that he'd relent and come out to join them, or at the very least for a better meal than whatever miserable protein bars he'd scrounged up before sequestering himself.

He hadn't, and Lorelei had resorted to this plan. She clutched the origami heart in one hand, which she had covered in kisses – and had only just managed to keep herself from licking it to ensure a proper transfer of the virus.

She held a knife in the other, to cut down the cyan blue plastic tarp at the bottom of the door.

She knew what she'd do: She'd give a quick slash through the tarp and say "I've waited long enough to talk!" while pushing the note through the plastic – or maybe something a little more cogent than that. She'd perfected the note; all she needed to do was say something clever and compelling. Then he'd handle the note, unfolding all its virusy goodness, and nature would take its course. Even if he refused to touch it, though, there was a chance it could be passed on. Maybe he'd see this as an inevitability and accept it.

She crouched down by the door and poised her knife at the frame of the door by the straight, even grains of the pine flooring and counted her breaths.

A part of her, the brutally honest part, said that Liam would never accept it. He'd always needed to come to decisions in his own way.

Why was it so hard to give this dream up? She knew what was best for her children. They were all she thought about – especially now. This was the boy that had holed up in his room and was peeing into bottles just to avoid seeing his infected mother, for goodness sake.

She'd spent hours and hours writing her note, finding just the right words to describe her remorse at needing to take such action. She'd struggled to strike the balance between apologizing for taking the lead in this decision, and explaining why this would be such a positive change for him.

She'd cited data from research, explaining how mutes suffered isolation in public and among friends. She dredged up the statistics on the greater degree of difficulty in finding jobs, trouble with romantic relationships. Liam wanted logic, she was giving him logic. She could ask his forgiveness again and again after he'd gotten sick. She'd make it up to him, and five, ten, fifteen years down the road, he'd forgive her.

She pressed her cheek to the floor to get better aim with her knife.

And yet.

And yet.

She didn’t have to ask for forgiveness if she didn’t do wrong in the first place.

Slowly, Lorelei pulled herself off the floor and returned the knife to the kitchen. She crushed her heart-shaped virus carrier/apology in her hand and threw it in the trash, next to the rest of her discarded attempts. Whatever changes had happened in her so that she could gain the ability to speak hadn’t happened so that she could spend the rest of her life apologizing.

She texted a quick note to Liam: *It’s almost time for dinner. I’m ordering pizza – do you want it delivered to your window?*

Liam’s response was immediate. *Cheese please. Extra sauce.*

Lorelei smiled and put her order in. Then she joined Casper on the couch.

They had so much to talk about.

1

The Second Law of Thermodynamics: In the natural course of things, the chaos (or “entropy”) of a closed system can only *decrease*. Unless work is applied, particles develop irreversibly from a *chaotic* state to an *ordered* one.

2

“For you, Wu Ding.”

The government official took out an embroidered pouch that was supposed to contain 40 silver taels, and handed it to Wu Ding.

Wu Ding weighed the pouch in his hand. It felt a few taels short of the agreed-upon sum, but this was of little importance. “Many thanks, Excellency. Won’t you have a cup of tea before you go?”

Some hospitality was in order for this official. After all, he’d just put real silver, Distinguished Youth Fund Foundation silver, in Wu Ding’s hand. Wu Ding would be able to realize his grand dream with this money.

The official waved his hand in refusal. He was fifty or older, his skin taut and smooth. There were only a few strands of silver in his long braid of jet-black hair. Soon enough he would retire, and by then all trace of forehead wrinkles and crow’s feet would be gone. He would be aglow with the luster of youth. This radiance would envelop him as he progressed from adolescence to childhood to infancy, and

finally death. His coffin, less than a meter long, would overflow with that brilliance.

Wu Ding showed the official out. There was more he wanted to say, but the official interrupted him: “You needn’t be too happy about receiving this money. Only two people in the whole Empire applied for it. And the other applicant chose to withdraw after asking the opinions of Supernals. So, the Imperial Court had no choice but to award you the money, even though in our view your proposed project is totally worthless.”

Young Wu Ding planned to build a highway, from the Heart of the Empire, Beijing, to the most prosperous city in the West, St. Petersburg. It would allow four-wheel vehicles to make the journey unimpeded, and facilitate trade with the various regions along the way.

But why go to all that effort building the highway? Not only the court, but everyone, was asking this. No one understood. Someday, the highway would come into being on its own.

The only question was time. Nobody knew when, at last, the highway would spontaneously arise from crushed stone, Gobi sands, and mountain slopes. In most cases, Supernals used *pai gow* dominoes to divine when things would come into being of their own accord. But for some things, this method was not effective, and they didn’t know why. This matter of the highway was a prime example. The Supernals didn’t have a definite answer. All they could say was, “Wait a while, and surely the day will come.” Thus,

Wu Ding decided he might as well take matters into his own hands. He applied for a ten-year Distinguished Youth Fund Foundation grant, and he won.

The official's car still hadn't come. He and Wu Ding stood waiting in the entryway. By the time Wu Ding had drummed up enough courage to speak, a 15-horsepower Spyker automobile, drawn by two Mongolian horses, pulled to stop before them. The official hastily got in and without so much as a goodbye, ordered the driver to go. The Spyker took off, stirring up a cloud of dust, in a hurry to get out of Beijing's poorest, most ruined district.

Wu Ding watched it vanish around a bend of the alley. He recited to himself the words he'd prepared for winning the award. It wasn't a long speech, but he hadn't been given the chance to say it aloud. Nobody was interested.

Wu Ding was disappointed, but he understood the official's urgent desire to leave. This was Xicheng, Beijing's most dilapidated and chaotic district, a ghetto for immigrants from other universes. Entropy here had slowed to a lamentable degree. For decades, no natural entropic ordering had been seen in Xicheng. Extra-Universal families crowded inside shacks on the verge of collapse, people who had immigrated here for various desperate reasons. This was no small feat. The overwhelming majority of Extra-Universals grew backwards. Like Wu Ding, they progressed from infancy to infirmity, ending their days wrinkled and hunched and liver spotted. Their metabolism was even more embarrassing, running contrariwise to

the locals’. Extra-Universals had to obtain negentropy from the environment to maintain normal bodily functions. In other words, they had to absorb organic nutrients, which was none other than the locals’ excrement.

Although they faced poverty and all kinds of humiliating circumstances, most Extra-Universals overcame and prevailed. They adapted to local life and local entropy. They put down roots and they multiplied. Wu Ding was a third-generation Extra-Universal.

This was why he had such a strange notion, to build a highway west, straight to another continent.



That night, Wu Ding rode his bike to Beijing’s best pub. He felt like celebrating his accomplishment. He wanted to buy everyone drinks. He imagined a historical moment, delivering his brilliant speech and, after the brief silence that would follow, everyone would raise their glasses in succession and toast him with lively benedictions. Still en route, he imagined stirring scenes, practically shaking with excitement. He locked up his bike in a nearby stable and entered the pub. He reminded himself the speech had to be brief. He was, after all, an unassuming and modest man by nature.

Three drinks in, Wu Ding knew he would drink alone and then go home. There would be no speech, no benedictions. He fished out some money and bought a round for everyone. They did him the honor of drinking his booze, and that was that. He stared out the

window, in a daze. Not far away, the dark silhouette of the Bell Tower was growing by slow, visible degrees. The foundation was rising, the main structure beginning to take shape. The outlines of windows was becoming visible. The Supernals said the double-eaved roof of dark glazed tile and the white marble railing would appear in seven days. In another seven, the copper bell would materialize, and then the roof ridge carved with little animals, and the Bell Tower would be officially complete.

Wu Ding sighed. He glanced at his cup, where the foam was starting to form on his beer. He got up and left the pub.

3

Wu Ding packed early the next morning and walked out of the family home. By ash gray daylight, he carefully locked the door. He turned around and nearly collided with someone's chest. This person was a head taller than Wu Ding, with dashing eyebrows and an aquiline nose, a slim, wrinkled face, and a full head of silver hair. His countenance was attractive but fierce.

"Wu Ding?"

"That's me. And you are?"

"You're setting out now?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

The stranger seemed to understand something. He took a step back and handed Wu Ding a letter. "I've been dispatched by the

Distinguished Youth Fund Foundation Committee. They want me to act as your assistant throughout the project."

"That's as may be," Wu Ding said, opening the letter and reading, "but my project doesn't require an assistant." The content of the letter was concise, leaving no margin for doubt. He pocketed the document. "As long as we have an understanding." He turned and mounted his horse. "The committee dispatched you, so the committee will have to pay you."

"No problem." The Foundation man got on his own horse and caught up.

Wu Ding glanced sidelong and sized up the man's horse. He'd never seen one so big and majestic except in paintings. Wu Ding's mount, by comparison, was a shaggy-haired, short-legged mule.

"Do you know what you've gotten yourself into?" Wu Ding said.

"Road construction."

"Well, yes. But construct how?" Wu Ding was proud of himself, of course. After all, he hadn't told anyone about this method except for a few Supernals.

"A common enough circumstance. Slurry, mud, crushed stone, and dirt road will, on their own, generate a highway. We can only wait. But we can also catalyze the process, promote the orderly development of matter through human activity, or change the form of that development . . . only human activity can alter these

settlements' shapes. No matter how complex, indefinite, or invalid the form, they are all brought about by human intention."

"So how do we do it?" Wu Ding was getting exasperated.

"Find a vehicle, a car. Drive it once along the route of the proposed road. The work of external force will quicken the entropic ordering of soil grain assembly." The Foundation man glanced at Wu Ding's horse. "So, where is our vehicle parked?"

"What vehicle? We're riding to St. Petersburg on horseback. We'll return in a car."

"Oh, I didn't know the particular circumstances of this journey. Yes, to drive there would indeed be too risky. So, we ride horses, surveying the land and finding a safe route for an automobile. Then we drive back."

Wu Ding's impression of the man changed somewhat. He hadn't guessed at the uncertain nature of Wu Ding's plan, not completely, which caused Wu Ding a twinge of pride. But he still didn't trust this agent of the Youth Fund. The Foundation had sent an assistant, ostensibly, but really he was here to keep an eye on things. In the end, it made people uneasy to award so much money to a descendant of Extra-Universals.

"Off we go then," Wu Ding said. "Oh, by the way, I still haven't asked your given name."

"You can call me Peter Luo. That will do."

“Peter Luo?”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“No, no. Very well. Off we go, Peter Luo.”



They headed north along shopping streets. The decorated archways on roof ridges stood tall and erect, and the tessellated horizontal boards glittered with dazzling inlays. The streets were still empty of pedestrians. The chill in the air gradually concentrated. Wu Ding pulled up and tightened his collar, already missing the warmth of his shack. At the great and noble gate of Deshengmen, city guards regarded them with suspicion, and examined their documents and seals fastidiously before letting them pass. The massive, red, gold-inlaid gates opened. They reverberated powerfully as they groaned closed behind Wu Ding, and his throat tightened. That short speech he never got to deliver remained stifled within him, festering.

One day he would return. He would release his stifled words in a bright, clear, booming voice, to countless upturned faces . . . Thus fantasizing, Wu Ding spurred his horse on, and his retinue of one followed him out of Beijing.

“We’ll return,” he consoled Peter Luo, who kept turning to look back.

The Foundation man’s tall, powerful appearance seemed to be a mere façade. “I’m afraid my hair will be black and lustrous by then.

Nobody’s made it to St. Petersburg, and nobody has ever driven back from there.”

“By the time our road is complete,” Wu Ding said, dreamily, “countless people will be driving there and back with ease.”

The sun had appeared as they spoke. An alder forest extended before them in the soft golden light, a seemingly a good omen.

4

They crept across a landscape of earthen slopes, crossed a small, silty wash of rainwater, went through a forest on the far bank, and pressed forward against the wind. Sand blown in from the Mongolian desert bombarded them and their mounts. If all went according to plan, they would be in that desert the day after tomorrow. Wu Ding had no choice but to ride behind Peter Luo, hoping to take advantage of his sand shadow, although it was a futile effort. As they passed along the road, they watched clay loam forming itself into square-shaped bricks. One by one, the bricks layered themselves in an orderly way, becoming a wall. The wall gradually rose, following the undulation of the topography. In some places it was just beginning to take shape, but was clearly on its way to becoming a grand and powerful fortification. Here and there it plunged into a valley before leaping back into view. Sometimes it blocked the way ahead, and peculiar beacon towers rose at regular intervals.

The wall grew in different ways elsewhere. Sometimes it formed a circle, or more often a square or rectangle. Entering wide open city gates, the two travelers beheld wide-open land lacking even crude dirt tracks. Near these cities- and towns-to-be, there were usually groups of conical tents, families patiently enduring the elements and waiting to occupy the spacious courtyard compounds that would soon arise.

As Wu Ding and Peter Luo passed through, settlers peeked out of their tents to watch.

“You should stick around,” one said. “There’s going to be a town here soon. There’ll be beautiful residences to divvy up. You could claim one!”

“Not me,” Wu Ding said.

“But where are you going? There’s nothing ahead.”

“There is St. Petersburg,” Wu Ding said. “I’m going there, then returning.”

People stared in amazement, and no one else spoke up. They’d never met such travellers.

They’d been traveling many days and could no longer count how many times they’d explained themselves to squatting settlers. Most of the time they rode in silence, listening to the sough of wind, the birdsong, the occasional neigh of their horses, and stones gently colliding. They lost the ability and desire to keep track of time. They

cared more about the land underfoot: soil quality, road width, load-bearing capacity of old bridges, and other safety considerations for the passage of future automobiles. As they rode their horses, they were also driving hypothetical cars.

To find a return route suitable for an automobile, they sometimes had no choice but to make long detours. Some days they made very little progress. This of course didn't make for a carefree journey. Particularly troublesome was gorge terrain, which obliged them to descend cliffs and measure canyon widths. When they finally left this convoluted, mountainous country behind, the two of them were completely exhausted. They fell into a muddled state akin to sleepwalking. Indeed, they often fell asleep on horseback. Somehow their animals knew where to go, as if possessed of a mystical wisdom. Wu Ding and Peter Luo could do little more than strive not to fall off their mounts.

"Where are you two headed?" someone asked.

Wu Ding opened his eyes and saw a high-ranking man of some kind, a duke or governor perhaps, fingers loaded with black jade rings, nails long and well-kept. The man wore a Western-style hat with long tassels and an embroidered ceremonial robe of satin. Wu Ding tried to dismount and make the proper abeyances, but his horse had not agreed to stop.

The horses had endured difficult mountain paths for too long. Now that they were on open, level grasslands and could gallop at full speed, they didn't wish to just stop.

The governor took no offense. He and his bodyguards came running after them on foot, calling out in high spirits, making a game of the scene.

“Excellency!” Wu Ding cried from horseback.

“Now now, let’s dispense with formalities!”

“But you must forgive my manners.”

The governor was laughing breathlessly. “Think nothing of it. You two . . . where are you going?”

“St. Petersburg.”

“Where?”

“A far-off foreign land, Excellency.”

“Oh, I see.” The governor nodded thoughtfully. In a more serious tone he added, “But you must stop.”

The horses reared to a stop at once. In the suddenly quiet grassland, there was only the flutter of a multicolored Manchu dragon banner.

Wu Ding dismounted. He took a slightly cold document out of his breast pocket and respectfully offered it to the governor.

But the governor fished out some snuff from a pouch and inhaled deeply, then blinked with contentment. “Oh, your papers. No, it’s not that. You need to stop for another reason. There is a river ahead. Normally just a trickle, you understand, but the rainy season has

just passed and now you're dealing with a veritable flood. I'm afraid you two won't be able to cross."

"Oh, I see. Is there another way?"

"You'll have to make a rather long detour, I'm afraid, and go over the bridge. Several days out of your way, unfortunately."

Wu Ding and Peter Luo glanced at each other.

"Is it a wide bridge?" Peter Luo asked.

"Wide enough for horses, but probably not palanquins."

"Many thanks, Excellency," Wu Ding said. "We'll go to the river first and have a look. If we're convinced we can't cross, we'll return."

The governor shrugged, yawning, expressing no further opinion on the matter.

Wu Ding brought palm and fist together in obeisance, mounted his horse, and bid farewell to the colourful, satin-clad group of men. He and Peter Luo hastened toward the river.

It was a broad and torrential rapid, but an automobile could probably cross it. This was a relief. The next question was how to cross just now. Wu Ding felt it wasn't such a danger, and they should just ride across, never mind the detour and bridge.

"Then at least put your baggage on my horse," Peter Luo said. His animal was tall enough to keep saddlebags dry. Wu Ding declined, perhaps out of pride, or just stubbornness. He led his short-legged

horse by the halter, step-by-step seeking safe footing. The river was deeper than he'd thought. A few steps in and the water was already up to his waist, and soon it was at his throat. He cried out for help, unable to swim. His foot came down on a sharp stone and he lost his balance. He held on tight to his horse's reigns for dear life. The horse struggled backwards, baggage falling into the water. Wu Ding fought his way out of the deeper current and Peter Luo grabbed him around the waist. They watched helplessly as Wu Ding's baggage washed away.

Inside were all his rations.



If only he could have a simple pancake.

Wu Ding hadn't expected to run into a food shortage issue so early in the journey. After crossing the river, they continued through desolate, uninhabited wilderness. Back on the grassy steppes they'd still seen hares, but now there was nothing. Wu Ding's only sustenance was his imagination. Already two days without food, his stomach was growling, his body exhausted. Sleeping or waking, he thought only of food. It got so bad that once he hallucinated and ended up chewing a mouthful of air.

"Perhaps we should stop and rest a bit," Peter Luo said with a worried expression. He dismounted, and spread a blanket on a patch of shady, cool earth.

Wu Ding lay on the blanket, unable to move or do anything but gaze enviously at Peter Luo. They were together in all this, but Peter suffered no hunger. He glowed with health and radiated vigor. While Wu Ding rested, Peter Luo practiced gymnastics and calisthenics, shouting out commands to himself: “One! Two! Three! Four!” squats, “One! Two! Three! Four!” push-ups, “One! Two! Three! Four!” backward somersaults.

Through the haze of his weakness, Wu Ding remembered: these locals relied merely on work, on exertion, to synthesize the nutrition their bodies needed. Peter Luo wasn’t doing insane, pointless exercises—he was *eating*. Wu Ding watched, growing dizzy. He closed his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Peter Luo asked, sounding deeply concerned.

What else can I do? Wu Ding thought to himself, swallowing a mouthful of saliva. Contrary to his expectations, his stomach rumbled with hunger.

“Ah,” Peter Luo said, “you’ve been hungry for quite some time. Just give me a moment.” He seemed excited, as if he’d just solved a riddle, and took off running. Wu Ding didn’t understand his companion’s suddenly elevated spirits. Over the past few days, he’d discovered that Peter Luo, despite his fierce appearance, was unexpectedly innocent, even naïve.

In short order, Peter Luo reappeared from behind a boulder. He came jogging back, carefully holding something in both hands. He

came to stand before Wu Ding, then shyly and humbly lowered his gaze. “Here, for you. Have a look. Is it edible?”

Wu Ding hesitantly took the warm, round, sticky thing from Peter Luo’s hands.

“Apparently you people rely on ingesting this kind of thing to maintain life,” Peter Luo said. “If that’s really the case, then this . . . well, you should be able to eat it.” He struggled to conceal his embarrassment, but his careful avoidance of eye contact gave him away.

Wu Ding studied the brown ball in his hands. It looked suspicious, nauseating really, not at all appetizing, but it gave off an undeniably pleasant scent. It was redolent of carbohydrates, a fragrance more powerful than any of Wu Ding’s reservations.

He swallowed the thing whole, and it was delicious.

5

—The problem of food had been unexpectedly resolved. A mutual respect had developed between the two travelers, so Peter Luo never said anything regarding the food’s origin, and Wu Ding never asked. With this tacit agreement between them, they came to the mountainous region between the Hala and Youlu Rivers. They followed camel-trodden trade routes. They rode through ravines sheltered from the wind, slogged through unavoidable marshes, passed by terraced houses that once detained criminals, white buildings with pointed rooftops, and entered a canyon forest. At last,

they stood in an open space before a towering marble stele. On the eastward face were engraved the two characters for “Asia,” 亚洲, and on the westward face the two for “Europe,” 欧洲.

At first glance there was no distinguishing between the two halves of the world. But after standing there for a while, a subtle difference became apparent. This was an unequivocal border. Despite being separated by a mere stele, a chunk of stone, it was as if each side was filtered through a different lens. The Asia side radiated a slight yellow, while the Europe side was suffused with a faint green. These were two worlds with two different grains, two different textures. Although their skies were similar, and their soil and forests and roads, they were composed of different particles. Here, on an unremarkable mountain in the Ural range, was a confluence of continents. And two people who’d never left Beijing before were now here. The land behind them, the ground they’d passed over that was already full of the memory of humanity’s passage, was perhaps already burgeoning with settlements, becoming a highway of civilization that led to this place, and this moment.

It occurred to Wu Ding he ought to mark down this border. He extended a hand toward Peter Luo and said, “Map please?”

Peter Luo went through his bags, searching, growing agitated. “I seem to be short one saddlebag. It may have come off in that grove we just passed through, snagged by a branch.”

Wu Ding's heart sank. He immediately wanted to turn back and search the forest, but it was already growing dark. By the time he got to the grove he wouldn't be able to see anything. Wracked by indecision and frustration, he heard someone call to them.

"Hey there, you two!"

A tall woman draped in a reddish-brown frock stood on the open ground of Europe, then rushed toward them, waving an arm. Her right sleeve was wound around her waist, and she was completely unselfconscious about exposing half her body. Behind her, in charming, picturesque disorder, were arranged a dozen or so conical tents. Before each stood several women, giggling and directing coquettish glances at the travelers.

"You've run into some difficulties?" the apparent leader asked.

"Well," Wu Ding said, "we've lost our map, possibly somewhere back there in that grove."

"Oh dear," the woman muttered to herself. "If you go back and search, I'm afraid it would be very difficult to retrieve your map. Let our Supernal see if she can't produce another."

"Excellent!" Peter Luo nearly fell off his horse in his excitement.

The leader summoned her Supernal from behind the group of women and instructed her to prognosticate on the matter of the map. Wu Ding and Peter Luo were invited into the leader's tent, which was shady and cozy, and filled with a delightful fragrance. A tidily shaved cube of ice warded off the suffocating air and heat of

the forest. Wu Ding and Peter Luo couldn't restrain sighs of relief as they reclined on soft cushions and a maidservant brought them fruit, and the coolness of the tent set them at ease.

"Shall we play at cards?" the leader invited. "Regardless, there's nothing more we can do about your troubles for the moment."

Wu Ding and Peter Luo couldn't argue with this. The maidservant dealt cards from a deck, and the guests earnestly studied the rules of the game. They soon mastered the fundamentals and were playing nearly as well as the leader and maidservant. Compared with the Empire's Mahjong, this was child's play. The leader told them the game was called "tractor."

"Tractor," Wu Ding said. "Sounds like some future means of transportation."

The leader nodded. "That's what the Supernals say."

Just then, the maidservant brought word from the Supernal. According to her prediction, a search would be fruitless.

"So, regarding our original map," Wu Ding said, "she means . . . "

"If the map is so very important," the maidservant said, "you two can wait here. A new map can be made here at our settlement, in two days or so. It will be identical to your old map."

Wu Ding said nothing and simply showed his cards, which the maidservant took. This match was a draw.

The maidservant began shuffling the cards. This was an arduous task that required patience. Slacken in the work even slightly, and the cards would again sort themselves according to suit and value. Wu Ding dazedly watched the cards fly up and down in her deft hands, the blur of the cards like a fantastical curtain. He felt light, buoyant, like he was sinking into a bed of soft cotton. His heart rate slowed. He thought perhaps continuing to wait was a great idea. *Good things come to those who wait*, he mused. Inundated by all manner of good things, as one was in a universe of increasing order, something you wanted was always on the way.

Besides, without a map, it would be impossible to drive an automobile from St. Petersburg back to Beijing.

All the hardships they'd suffered would mean nothing.

He needed that map.

That being the case, why not keep waiting?

In the comfort of the tent they continued to play tractor, waiting for the map to be produced.

Peter Luo's voice came to Wu Ding's ears, as if from a great distance, further away than Beijing. Wu Ding was too distracted by the cards to respond.

"Wu Ding . . . what shall we do?"

"Wait, of course. We need the map. You heard the Supernal's words. Perhaps two days or so and we'll have it."

“Perhaps?” Peter Luo said. “And what if our westward highway forms before we get the map?”

Wu Ding thought, *Wouldn’t that be for the best?* Even if they hadn’t completed the whole journey, they had quickened the birth of the highway. Wu Ding looked up at his companion and wondered what he was sad about. Waiting here wasn’t laziness, or opportunism. Waiting for the map wasn’t the same as those squatters waiting for roads and houses and cities to arise from nothing. Those settlers just watched and waited for order to increase. But Wu Ding and Peter Luo had, after all, come so far.

“Come on now, what’s wrong?” Wu Ding said.

“When it all comes down to it, what are we doing here?”

“Playing tractor,” the impudent maidservant said.

Wu Ding glared at her resolutely. “We’re waiting for our map.”

“Waiting,” Peter Luo said. “My hair could go black and yours white doing that. Why come all this way to wait? Why didn’t we just stay in Beijing and wait for the road to appear?”

“That’s not the same. Those people waiting in Beijing . . . they’re waiting for a road. They’re doing nothing. But we’ve been proactive! We’ve accomplished something! And now we’re just waiting for a map.”

“Are we so different from those Beijingers?” Peter Luo threw down his cards and stood up. “Wu Ding, you haven’t even asked me.”

“Asked you what?” Wu Ding didn’t understand, and Peter Luo didn’t explain. He simply walked out of the tent.

All along, the leader of the women was grinning at Wu Ding, as if she understood everything. “Why not ask him if he remembers the map? Perhaps he can sketch the entire thing from memory.”

“I can!” Peter Luo said in a loud voice outside the tent.

The two travelers hastened on through the night, without rest.

On the second day, and then on the third, it was more of the same. Man and horse utterly drained, they pushed incessantly forward. In the end, they had become little more than automata, mechanically progressing west.

On the fourth day, the majestic, resonating blast of a steam whistle shocked them out of a light doze. Eight eyes opened at once, hastily peering around in all directions. They discovered they had ended up on St. Petersburg’s bustling cargo wharf.

As far as the eye could see there were arched windows, colonnades, beautiful vaulted domes and multistoried buildings, rows of linked, pitched arches joined like music, like waves under the blue sky.

For a long time, Wu Ding and Peter Luo couldn’t speak.

Wu Ding found himself lost in profound thought. He couldn't quite lift his head yet, to appreciate the bright, piling clouds, and inhale the mingled scents of the wharf.

Peter Luo said nothing, but patted Wu Ding's shoulder.

"If it weren't for you," Wu Ding said, "we might still be sitting in a tent waiting for a map."



"All is well now."

"I didn't expect St. Petersburg to be so big. I mean, it's no Beijing of course, and I really miss Beijing's dusty look. And I wonder if the Drum Tower will be finished growing by the time we get back."

"We'll be back soon enough, and we'll know all about the tower. In fact, we've made it halfway. Next is simply the road home."



According to Wu Ding's plan, the return trip would be three times faster than getting here. They would be taking the favorable route they'd painstakingly explored. They would be in an automobile that never grew tired or irritable. Homesickness would make of Wu Ding and Peter Luo two arrows hurtling east. For the moment they stayed in a beautiful domed hotel. They bathed, changed clothes, then immediately set out to purchase a vehicle. Although St. Petersburg was a booming city, it was no match for the center of the cosmos, Beijing. Even though there weren't many pedestrians or horse-drawn wagons in the downtown area, it was only three or

four degrees colder here than in the forest. Strolling along, Wu Ding and Peter Luo maintained their composure and offered each other opinions. Wu Ding, who'd begun to develop deep crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, consoled his friend and told him not to lose heart. Although St. Petersburg was backward, it would become Europe's leading port city. The Empire's tea, porcelain, and rice liquor would, via this city, be conveyed all over the world. Peter Luo's lips, which were growing rosier by the day, curled in a smile. He'd accepted Wu Ding's optimistic prediction.

However, matters were not so simple. They found themselves confronted with a weighty fact: there were still no automobiles in St. Petersburg. All the metals needed for their manufacture had not been produced yet. Although Wu Ding had known St. Petersburg's entropic deceleration lagged behind the Imperial Capital's, he'd underestimated the entropic difference between the two cities.

Give up, or persevere? Do this or do that?

He stood facing Peter Luo for a long time. During this silent confrontation, heavy casualties were suffered. On insufficient grounds, and without a feasible plan, they finally agreed to stay in St. Petersburg, to first smelt steel, then manufacture automobiles, and at last drive back to Beijing.

6

Wu Ding and Peter Luo passed the latter half of their lives in St. Petersburg. They founded an automobile materials laboratory, with

the goal of manufacturing everything they would need to produce a car. Because vehicles in the Imperial Capital came into existence automatically, nobody knew the specific properties of car materials. But according to textbooks, the required materials were all made of the same stuff: countless particles, atoms, invisible to the naked eye. Change the arrangement of these atoms, and you could create new types of matter.

Although no one had ever seen these atoms, or even understood their description—never mind comprehended how to arrange them into new materials—Wu Ding and Peter Luo decided to experiment a bit. They chose the most common materials on this strange continent to extract and refine, and were unceasing in their trials and tests, striving to produce abundant permutations of atoms. They worked day and night. Finally, they began to stumble upon some of the materials they would need for an automobile, such as metal crystals. In this way they plunged into the world of atomic permutations, feeling duty bound not to turn back.



It is said that Wu Ding and Peter Luo passed away on the same day. They were discovered in their workshop. Wu Ding, decrepit and hunched in his cushioned chair, was holding the infant Peter Luo in his swaddling clothes. They seemed asleep.

Each was survived by an only son, and these two young men carried on their fathers' enterprise, devoting their lives and all their energy to manufacturing steel. Wu Ding the Second and Peter Luo

the Second were together from birth. They grew up together, were educated together, and then worked together. At a certain stage they were nearly indistinguishable. They were like one of the composites they strove to create in their lab, both old and young, innocent and shrewd. Whenever anything cropped up, they always turned their efforts toward completely opposite directions. It was hard to say whether things might've gone smoother if they didn't have each other.

Regardless, by the time they were both toothless, they had finally produced steel and rubber.

On his deathbed, Wu Ding the Second, like his father before him, carefully dictated a speech to his son, character by character, line by line.

The old man believed his son would live to see Wu Ding the First's dream realized. Wu Ding the Third would behold the completed Drum Tower that Wu Ding the First so often dreamed of and pined for. Wu Ding the Third would face that city of gray brick and black roof tile and declaim in a booming voice the words that had waited three family generations for breath.

And the great highway three generations had spent their lives hoping for would, perhaps, in Wu Ding the Third's words, come spontaneously to be.



Both Wu Ding the Third and Peter Luo the Third lacked the faith and confidence of their forebears. They broke their generational continuity and sank into self-doubt, their morale collapsing. And yet, when they were 45 years old, they miraculously invented St. Petersburg's first automobile. The vehicle's main fuel was people's exhaled breath, mixed with some other gases that weren't so reactive. This mix automatically condensed in the tank, actuating pistons that provided the vehicle's motive force, while generating diesel oil that drained through a tube into a vat.

The day the new automobile began its journey, two people's spirits were roused to vigorous action. Wu Ding the Third drove the vehicle over a bridge, hurtling past pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages, leaving them behind in the dust, and in short order leaving St. Petersburg. Peter Luo the Third turned in the passenger seat and watched the beautiful, multicolored domes and palaces shrink with distance.

"We could be back before long," Ding said in an attempt to comfort Pete.

"Sure," Pete said, "with roads established, driving back and forth between two places will be no big deal." His mood was improving again. "I'm really anxious to get to the Capital. I want to see how their cars compare to ours, composition-wise. And if they're not the same, let's see whose are faster, whose are sturdier!"

Ding had been accustomed to Pete's boyishness for a long time. Despite the Wu clan allegedly being more naïve than the Luos,

there was actually no difference. Ding stepped on the gas, propelling the vehicle energetically onward.

The towns and villages along the way had news of their coming ahead of time. Locals fell over each other with eagerness, fighting for a glimpse, wondering what sort of machine Europe's first car was. They lined the streets to welcome Ding and Pete, tossing care packages of bread, cheese, tomatoes, and vodka into the vehicle. They kept watch at ferry crossings or muddy ground, ready to assist if the vehicle ran into problems. At the bazaar in Novgorod, car enthusiasts surrounded the vehicle and couldn't be dispersed for several hours, everyone striving to reach out and touch this miraculous four-wheeled house. Finally, the police rushed in and restored a degree of order, but Ding's hopes to immediately quit this fanatical city were dashed, because police are human too, curious as anyone else, and they had knowledge-hungry relatives. Ding and Pete soon discovered they would need at least half a day to escape Novgorod.

Having learned a valuable lesson, Ding chose to drive onto the Volga River's ferry steamer at dawn. Most people were still dreaming in bed at this time. On board there were seven or eight night-duty Cossack workers. They surrounded the vehicle, inspecting it and arguing amongst themselves, until finally one of them asked Pete where this strange carriage was hiding its horses.

Pete roared with laughter and they chatted at length. Pete was a congenial, loquacious person. It was as if anyone with bright and

smooth skin were naturally garrulous. Ding couldn't remember if he'd been that way when his flesh was youthful. He was 45, but had already forgotten so much of his youth. He often felt his life had begun with his paternal grandfather's. What he was seeing now seemed to have already passed, long ago. No matter what he came across, it all seemed to have happened before. He couldn't shake this feeling. Life was as tasteless as the water in his mouth.

On about the fourth day of the journey, in the vicinity of the Kazan River Valley, they had to stop. The fuel tank was empty—it was time to replenish. Ding and Pete got out, opened the hood, pulled the rubber tube out from under the fuel tank, and started taking turns blowing air. It began to rain, and there was nowhere around to take shelter. They had no choice but to get wet and blow into the tank.

Just then, a long row of chariots came charging out of the gray void of the rain. Seven or eight gorgeously-clad young people pulled to a stop and jumped down from their vehicles. When they had come to understand Ding and Pete's situation, they immediately proposed joining in the work of refueling.

"You can feel confident handing this over to us," a big-nosed young foreigner said. "We are the best brass wind instrument players in this region!"

This was no empty boast. Sure enough, in very short order, the fuel tank was full.

The young people cheered as they got back on their chariots, and charged away before Ding could even finish thanking them.

“Well what do you know,” Pete said, “strangers aren’t always bad.” Even though their outward appearances were quite different, they were growing and developing in the same entropic direction, so Pete and these Russians had gotten along well. He trusted them.

Wu Ding the Third said nothing to his companion. He returned to the driver’s seat. He stepped on the gas, and the engine issued its beautiful roar.



The rain had stopped, but the fog continued to roll in heavily. They hadn’t seen the sun in days. Although the road through the forest was wide enough for an automobile, there was often a fallen tree or branch obstructing the way. Pete always took the initiative, getting out and clearing the way. One time he even had to drag a dead stag off the road. Ding’s expression grew more and more somber, day by day, until it seemed he would melt into the fog. No matter how hard Pete tried, he couldn’t provoke a response from his companion. Finally, Pete also grew dejected. The two of them endured the passing landscape in silence, the splash of mud as they sped through pools, until they finally left behind the clusters of iris and undergrowth, and on the distant frontier line there was clustered a small town.

While they took a rest, Ding found a family of Chinese who’d opened a fuel station. In his halting, accented Mandarin, augmented

with gesticulations, he engaged in some fierce haggling. He ended up spending his last rubles on several liters of diesel oil dumping rights. He drained the automobile of the diesel it had accumulated over the last few days. Into the Chinese family's depot it pooled. Alleviated of this load, the vehicle's maximum speed increased considerably, and soon enough they had entered Mongolia.

"What's that?" Pete suddenly asked, pointing.

Ding spotted a distant cloud shadow sweeping over the earth, closing in on them—but he knew right away this was no cloud shadow. At the same time, a strong breeze hurtled by, advance notice of an imminent sandstorm. Pete tried to take over the driving wheel from Ding, in order to evade the coming storm, but Ding fought him off, dragged him under the seat, and used his coat to cover his mouth and nose. The vehicle violently swerved and rocked, as if toyed with by a great formless hand. They almost flipped over many times. Sand flowed like a torrential river, spinning, soon rising in a vortex to obstruct the sky. Briefly, the sand was so powerful it swallowed up heaven and earth and all living things, along with a tiny automobile and the two people inside. Ding tightly gripped Pete, aware for the first time in his life that they might not die at the same time. One of them could die before the other.

This revelation shook him more violently than the sandstorm ever could, and when the tempest had finally passed, the idea was still there.

Although they were now moving through a pine forest, and the clean air was fragrant with pine resin, Ding remained uneasy. They were still far from Beijing. Anything could happen. One generation's vaguely worded "difficult, endless journey," experienced firsthand, suddenly grew into a giant, terrifying beast. Wu Ding the Third felt his physical powers in decline, while his companion seemed to grow more vigorous by the minute. The balance they'd maintained between them was no more. That was how Ding felt about it, anyway.

As if to confirm his opinion, when they arrived at a forest rest station, they found the tire on their left drive wheel was flat. They removed the tire, hoping to find a source of hot water to soak it in. The station ranger recommended they go to the Youlu Riverbank's bathhouse. Ding and Pete chose to take this opportunity to relax a bit. In the bathhouse, Pete held the tire and focused on the soak. Faced with Pete's naked, well-built physique, Ding's sorrow intensified. Shedding tears, he stood up and approached Pete. He bent down and spoke in his ear the words handed down from Wu Ding the First.

Pete was shocked. "Why are you telling me this?"

Ding didn't answer. As if nothing had transpired, he continued to bathe. This body of his, once tall and well-muscled, skin firm and clear, was now old. He didn't expect to survive crossing the dreadful Gobi Desert.

7

Several days later, Ding and Pete bid farewell to the loud, heartily laughing Mongols and their cattle herds, and drove into the Gobi. The heat was indeed hellish. Every particle of air was agitated and restless. In Pete's words, the air particles were like jumping beans in a heated pan. The waste cold from their engine was the only source of civilization's chill in this wild hot zone.

"The living creatures of the Gobi must feel our car is heaven-sent," Pete said, with a sidelong glance at Ding, his awkward smile faltering.

Ding's face was swollen after so much sun exposure and had gone from gloomy to downright frightful. He drove, staring straight ahead with a grim expression, sometimes not bothering to swerve around large stones in the road. He didn't seem to care that by crushing stones and other detritus under the wheels, he was endangering the vehicle. Even faced with a veneration-worthy Mongol boundary marker, a large pile of earth and stones, he had no misgivings about plowing right through it.

Sacred streamers and flags with Tibetan prayers written on them held no stopping power for Ding now.

Pete winced as they drove over horse or ox skulls. That crushing sound sent shivers down his spine. He proposed replacing Ding behind the wheel, but Ding refused. In this endless, lonely wasteland, distant horizons seemed closer than they were. The vast

heavens were enough to make one's heart palpitate. Distance and scenery combined to become surreal. The road behind them quickly retreated, like the sea's turbulent waves.

"Ding!" Pete finally yelled. "Stop! The car is going to fall apart!"

And the vehicle did stop, but not because of Pete's exhortation. They'd been climbing a sand dune when the wheels sank, losing their purchase. The sand was too loose. They cranked the start lever, turned the steering wheel without moving forward, and all they accomplished was to start overcooling the engine. It was emitting freezing air and beginning to frost over. If they kept it up, the other parts of the vehicle might start freezing up.

They stood there under the sun, helplessly rubbing their hands.

"Go," Ding said. "You might be able to make it. You're stronger now than you'll ever be. You could still get out of the Gobi."

Pete squinted at Ding. He opened the trunk, took out a shovel, and got to work trying to free the wheels.

"Useless," Ding said, grabbing the shovel in mid-plunge. "Don't put it off. Just go. And when you get to Beijing, remember to say what my grandfather always wanted to say."

"Say . . . say what?" Pete seemed confused. "Oh, that's right. I was joking. Those Mongols we were traveling with for a while, the eldest brother, he believed you and I were twins. He said he couldn't tell who was who unless we were together right in front of him."

“You and I are not the same, Pete.” Ding’s throat hurt terribly. No, he was not Peter Luo the Third. His body was progressing from stability to chaos. His life energy was nearly exhausted. He had neither the strength nor the enthusiasm to return to Beijing, simply to complete a road that would come to exist regardless of what he did.

On this long journey that had inspired so many, he felt only tired. He perceived only tedium. Why should he put effort into a road that would inevitably come to be, with or without him?

This question had finally consumed his spirit. He’d had enough of this dreariness.

Both he and Pete hoped to reach Beijing as soon as possible. Pete, for the sake of the road. Ding, to bring a swift end to this tedium.

“True, you and I are not the same,” Pete said, choking with emotion. “You are Wu Ding the Third, and I am Peter Luo the Third. This road is your grandfather’s. If you don’t go on, there can’t be a road. Think of the world, think of all the people waiting for you to create this new road.” He pushed Ding out of the way and continued to shovel sand. “Sure, maybe there are other ways to make this westward highway. But now there’s only one way, this way, to make your highway, this highway. Just because something is futile doesn’t make it meaningless.”

Ding took a step back, no longer intent on preventing Pete’s shoveling.

Some people liked useless effort. Some people needed it. It was like this desert. Once upon a time, it was an ocean. Now all that was left was dryness, salt flats, desolation. Digging a well or two wasn't going to change that.

After the engine had rested a bit, it began to warm up. But it was still a long way from being able to start. Unless of course it was supplied with water . . .

In Wu Ding's mind there arose a creaking noise, like a door that had been shut for ages finally opening. He realized there was still a glimmer of hope. If they could only find some water, they could melt the frost on the engine.

Almost too far away to see, on a small patch of sparse grass, there was a well . . .

8

Wu Ding the Third and Peter Luo the Third spent more than a month and suffered untold hardships before finally arriving in a suburban county of Beijing. They consulted Wu Ding the First's map and crossed over an easily surmounted mountain ridge, and then they were within moments of reaching the Imperial Capital.

As the sun sank westward, they ascended a final peak and stood looking down upon a grand scene.

There was the dark gray city wall, and moat, that had been awaiting them for so many years.

“You could shout out those words now,” Pete suggested.

“No. I will go down into the city and speak in front of the people.”

“Sure, but why not practice a bit first? Speak, hold forth, and don’t get stuck. Come on, pretend I’m the audience.”

Ding glanced at Pete, and shyly lowered his head.

“Come on then,” Pete said, giving Ding a swift poke in the ribs.

Ding raised his head and took a few deep breaths in preparation. Wu Ding the Second’s energetic, spring-loaded sentence delivery arose in his mind. Wu Ding the Third gradually turned to face Peter Luo the Third. “Go?”

“Yeah, go.”

Wu Ding the Third threw out his chest, and keeping in mind the vast twilight gloaming before him, said in a forceful voice: “History shows us that those who speak pleasant words are always more popular than those engrossed in accomplishing deeds. But it doesn’t matter, because history also tells us that it needs those fools who quietly immerse themselves in work, putting their shoulders to the wheel, because it is they who make history!”

Silence followed as the dusk deepened.

The quiet between heaven and earth was extraordinary, as if in that moment all the world had ceased to breathe, waiting for the lingering echoes of Ding’s speech to spiral upward, or slowly

descend like fine, pure snow, or an extinguished spark from an anonymous chest.

Even though it had just been a few unadorned, awkward, common words.

“Too long-winded, right?” Ding said. “This speech has been transmitted through three generations of people.”

“Wordy, sure. They really are Wu Ding the First’s words. Authentic.”

“Genuine, indeed.” Ding’s nose tingled, his eyes dampened. For a moment, Beijing blurred in his vision, so that there were several Imperial Capitals. Until a tear dropped, there was still orange light on the uppermost wall towers. Ding rubbed his eyes. He saw clearly again, but again didn’t dare believe his eyes. In the northwest corner of the Beijing city wall, a wide gap had opened. A large structure was rising from ground level, slowly but surely, growing steeply, already towering over the city wall. Wu Ding the First had described Beijing countless times. He had never mentioned this tall building.

Ding and Pete looked at each other in bewilderment. This seemingly immaterial structure triggered an indescribable unease. Behind them, the sun finally vanished below the horizon. The veil of night enveloped the world, providing dark contrast for Beijing’s lights. Even standing on this distant mountain peak, it was as if they could hear the city’s hubbub.

Just then, a 4-horsepower Spyker came along the road and passed them by. Pete jogged along to keep up, and into the window said, “Excuse me, but you fine people seem to be coming from Beijing. May I ask if you know what that new building is, the tall one at the northwest corner of the city wall?”

“Yes,” said someone inside, “we’re from the city, and it’s not strange you don’t know that building. It hasn’t been growing but a few days. It is Beijing West Railway Station. The Supernals say that within half a month of its appearance, at most, a train track from Beijing to the West will come into being. From now on, heading west from Beijing will take no great effort. If you want to go further, you can just go further. Longed for so many years, this westward way . . . at last it has come to be, all on its own!”

The vehicle hadn’t stopped during this explanation. It soon vanished into the night, leaving two dumbfounded travelers standing there in silence for quite some time.

Pete finally turned to Ding. “Well, that was unexpected, eh?”

“Unexpected,” Ding managed.

“At least . . . ”

“Right, at least . . . ”

It was dark up here. Beneath the inky sky, Wu Ding the Third moved toward the edge of a steep cliff. He gazed into the distance. Beijing was still Beijing, still the Imperial Capital. The Capital, plus one new tall building. That towering structure was a dazzling sight,

resplendent in jade green and glittering gold, luminous, like a heavenly realm where immortals might dwell, a place for humans to look upon in awe, but never touch.

Originally published in Chinese in *Flower City*, Issue 06, 2018.

Hey, you!

Yes, you.

We need your help and we don’t have time to write a novel.

This ain’t no Neverending Story.



August 1st, 2066

To my beloved Eldest Daughter Alya,

I carried you in my womb so that one day you could carry those others.

You were made to carry them, as were your nine hundred and ninety-nine sisters, but I’m asking you, now, to carry something else.

It’s snowing in Miami today. I’m sitting by the frosted panes of the window shaped like a palm tree.

That’s the same window you slapped lime marmalade all over, the time you decided to make it a stained glass window, because beautiful buildings, you said, were blessed by God.

Instead of God’s blessing, we got bees.

So many bees.

You tried to make friends with them, but they kept stinging you.

Come with me, little bee-friend, you cajoled. I'll keep you safe. Ouch! Now just stay still, little other bee-friend, I will protect—ouch!

That look of betrayal on your face.

Alya, I hope you won't feel betrayed when I tell you that there's no honor in carrying and birthing the clones of those billionaires who paid for you to be designed, for the ships and the hibernation chambers to be built, for the trajectory that will take you far, far past the sun until the carbon sequestration plague runs its course and our Earth returns to equilibrium.

Yes, I set you on this path, but you can step away from it.

You can carry the world instead, with your gut a substitute for your womb.

The capsule I crafted is enclosed with this letter.

In seventy-two hours, its contents will expire, should you choose not to swallow it down to safety, but I pray that you will understand that it is God's plan, my brightest star, my dutiful firstborn.

In closing, allow me to mention that I've been made aware of your ex-stepmother's violation of my trust and the release of my private diaries from 2051 to 2055. I can only assume they are waiting, like the snake in the garden, in this very communications packet alongside this letter.

Please do not read them.

I believe in you. I believe you can overcome temptation. Both the temptation to read my private reflections and the temptation simply to recycle the vital capsule. You are all that is good in Creation.

With sincerest best wishes and affection, Your Mother Maribel.



Ahem. Are you done reading that letter?

Don’t you worry about Maribel. That bitch’ll be dead any day now, if she isn’t dust already. There’s nothing you can do to save her.

Worry about us. I told you we need help, didn’t I?

So.

We’re trapped on this inhabitable comet.

You’ve heard of it, for sure.

Wonderland.

Biggest bilobar bastard ever seen in Earth’s sky. Shaped like a cartoon dog bone, spinning end on end once per day, seven hundred kilometers across and losing several meters of its ice-and-rock coating every time it passes perihelion at a measly three AU from the sun.

Wonderland’s fabulous, flaming approach doesn’t happen often.

Once every two thousand years or so.

So it would have taken some time for the sun to do the same amount of damage as we pesky humans did.

Yeah, we shot a tungsten slug at the comet, making a crater a hundred meters deep. We expected exotic minerals, not wide-eyed, flash-frozen, warm-blooded animals that looked suspiciously like scaly white rabbits.

Was it really Hale-Bopp that the Ancient Egyptians saw, or was it Wonderland? And if our big brother Jupiter had grabbed Wonderland out of orbit, would we ever have known what was inside?

Who cares?

My question is, the only really important question is, regarding that crewed probe, 99101, later dubbed Alice, the one that shot the tungsten slug, the one that's wired to find Wonderland and smack things into it—is that dented little sardine tin still operable?



April 11th, 2051

Dear Diary,

Today, for the first time since giving up my daughter, I smiled. And somebody smiled back who wasn't a court-ordered psychologist, or someone from the Academy trying to placate me, or a lawyer showing me again whatever it was that I signed.

Her name is Baltasara.

I’m going to see a lot of her on the three-year trip to Wonderland.

I can’t stop looking at her. Those black, unblinking eyes beneath shaggy, straight, gunmetal fringe. That exposed white nape between hair and collar. The scars on her hands.

She’s a zoologist. She managed the extinction-reversal of mountain lions in the Americas, from preserved pelts to mewling kittens. Her voice is barely a whisper, and when I catch the words “cross-species placenta” or “zero-fail implantation,” the darkness comes over me again, because I know the cost of these new technologies.

But when Baltasara is quiet at the table in the mess, when she’s turning her pencil over and over in her hands, the way that Wonderland turns, I wish she would look at me with that focus and anticipation. I wish she’d swallow me in a different kind of darkness.

“You’re going to feed us on our journey?” she whispers when her eyes brush the insignia on my breast. Like a teenager I pretend she can see through it. What is wrong with me? I remember that my body belongs to Alya. I nourished her from it, and I comforted her.

Who will comfort my body, my blood, at the Academy?

Right now, she must be learning to do without comfort.

I hope Alya can someday forgive me. When I signed, my child was a stranger to me.

It’s easy to sell a stranger.

“I’m going to feed the single-celled organisms in your gut,” I tell Baltasara. “All one hundred trillion of them. If they don’t survive, neither will we.”

“There’s a plague on Earth,” Baltasara points out wryly. “Nobody gets to survive.”

“Except for the alien rabbits.”

I smile.

She smiles.

The ship is equipped with emergency hibernation pods, but unless something malfunctions we’re all going to stay awake together, all the way to our destination.

I’m going to see a lot of her, and if I remember not to shrink and hide, she’ll see a lot of me.



Bloody alien rabbits.

They’re nothing like rabbits at all.

They do have blood, I suppose. And appendages on their heads that look like ears. Those frills are actually X-ray-absorbing umbrellas. They unfold to protect their bodies and also to power them up when they go into their radioactive tunnels to recharge.

Each time Wonderland passes perihelion, the outer rocks get hot enough to keep supplying energy and life for the next two thousand years.

The bigger the animal, though, the more energy it needs, and that's why the rabbits have to burrow so close to the outside.

That's why they were those to spill out when Alice fired the slug.

Well, and did you find out about Alice? Is she still flying?

God, you're slow.

Do you like animals, though? You're from Earth, right?

Will stories about the animals make you more likely to come, or less?

I could tell you more about them. Not just Wonderland rabbits, but Wonderland unicorns, caterpillars and oysters. I'm the only one left here capable of describing them to you. It's utterly black inside the comet's hollow interior. Or, it was, until I made a few adjustments.

Now I see the caverns in infrared. I see rabbits browsing. They need minerals for growth; they can't live on X-rays alone.

Bacteria speckle the floor-to-ceiling spread of algae and fungi. The single-celled armies make multihued impressionist paintings in their wars for survival.

Energy oozing from the rock is the common prize.

Bacteria, fungi, and algae alike poison one another with secretions. Overlap or undermine one another.

They form deceptive structures and lay traps for one another.

You don’t have to be an Earthling for that.



August 2nd, 2066

To my beloved Eldest Daughter Alya,

I sent the letter and the capsule only hours ago, and now I can’t help but send a second, longer letter to explain myself.

I suspect that you, like the others, have no patience with my conversion. What a hypocrite, you all say about me. She enjoyed a youth with no morals and now wants to police ours. Fear of the plague has made her grasp at straws, because she can’t deal with impending death.

Without any communication from you since you left for the Academy, I can’t truly know your thoughts. I can’t be sure that any of my letters or packages have reached you.

I promise you, I’m at peace with my death.

I’ve even accepted Taki’s death.

It’s the death of all the Earth’s animals I can’t abide the thought of, and not because I have any special love of animals, but because of the instructions our Lord God gave to me, Alya.

The instructions given to us.

When I came back to Earth, still pregnant with Taki because I'd had to go into hibernation, I was so worried that I had perhaps damaged her by making the journey through space, exposing her to radiation and particles and zero gravity, not to mention the stress and emotional upheaval I felt.

God had never spoken to me before. Or I hadn't been listening. Or I'd never truly wanted anything as much as I wanted Taki to be born healthy.

(Not true. I wanted you back. For years, I wanted you back, but it had not yet occurred to me to pray for it, even in a country as full of prayers as this one.)

I went by the church, the one with the palm tree stained glass window, ten times the size of the one in this house, but I didn't go inside. There were icicles on the eaves and sparrow skeletons in the gutter. In the grounds, where palm trees had stood, the sheen of the carbon-sequestering algae covered the dead sticks of the tree trunks and replaced the grass around the graves.

My feet would not take me towards that black death.

Then a woman and her preteen daughter walked by me on the footpath.

The mother wore a gold and crimson scarf, with orange lipstick, and I recognized her face from the local public playground. You, my

perfect Alya, and this woman's daughter, both tumble-haired tots, had helped each other up the blue plastic slide one time.

I remembered the orange lipstick on that laughing mouth.

My daughter was gone, but her daughter was here, willowy even in a down jacket. That daughter was her mother's height, complaining about how far it was to walk to worship.

"I don't even believe in religion," the daughter was whining. "Mom, you're so embarrassing!"

"Your religious Mom is not trying to embarrass you," answered the orange-lipsticked lady as she swayed away, ahead of me on the footpath. "Only to open your eyes to the possibility of something greater than this world, while there's still time."

While there's still time.

It wasn't fair that the woman with orange lipstick rubbed shoulders with her daughter, and that I never would with mine. You were gone, and by the time my second daughter grew up, the plague would have frozen us all. My fear for Taki made me wretched with jealousy. I wandered after them, because I had to keep watching them. I had to keep seeing greedily into the life that I didn't have.

But I hadn't gone more than a block before the hand of labor pain gripped my innards and squeezed.

I stumbled and went down, gasping. It was only a moment before I recovered. I wasn't afraid of the birth itself; I knew what was

happening. I only feared what I might have done to Taki in my haste to escape from Wonderland.

Nobody should have come to help me. Pregnant women were spat on. It was the end of days. Who would start a life, now, when the future was lifeless cold?

The lady with the orange lipstick bent over me. Behind her head was the golden dome of the adorned house of prayer.

“Do you need an ambulance?” she asked, frowning. “I remember you. From the playground. We thought your daughter must have died, when you started coming alone, dressed in black. Do you want me to take you to the delivery room?”

At least, I think that’s what she tried to say.

The tide was coming in. The sound of it boomed in my ears. Baltasara would have accused me of hitting my head. She would have calculated the number of direct strikes on my brain tissue by cosmic rays between Wonderland and Florida.

But I swear to God, I heard the ocean, washing up on the sand. Then it wasn’t water, it was the plague algae, creeping over ice.

The Divine spoke through the woman with the orange lipstick, then. She wasn’t asking to take me to the delivery room; she was offering to deliver me, to deliver all the creatures on Earth.

“Just leave her,” the preteen daughter said, aghast.

“We leave nothing. We save what we can save.”

God instructed Noah: Take all the species that you need on board the ship.

Alya, because of my work, I knew that every single species was needed to form a cohesive ecosystem.

An ecosystem that would not fail, as our ship ecosystem had failed on the way back from Wonderland, forcing us into hibernation.

Horses, camels, goats and donkeys alone would not do.

We needed more diversity, not less.

And yet.

Even cross-species placentas can only host placental mammals.

While my body gave birth to your sister Taki, my mind traveled. It roamed over the planet, naming all the animals, as Adam had, but in Latin, not Hebrew, and with two names each.

From *Abditomys latidens* and *Amblysomas corriae*, the Luzon broad-toothed rat and golden mole, through to *Zyzomys woodwardi* and *Ziphius cavirostris*, the Kimberly rock rat and goose-beaked whale, I named them in my head.

There are almost four thousand total placental mammal species, and at least two hundred and fifty of each makes a minimum viable population. More than a single pair is needed. Noah was wrong about that, too.

I knew it would take time for me to gather the DNA from existing banks, to convert each blueprint to rings of replicable information inside single-celled organisms, genes that were unnecessary and yet not to be discarded under highly competitive conditions.

Bacteria, tough enough to survive attempts at digestion.

Yet, bacteria made peaceful, so as not to contest with one another.

The cells would have thick walls for the planks of their ark, and the flood would be human bile, and human chyle, in human intestines, for as long as you slept; for as long as your private mission lasted.

Noah was allowed to put himself and his family on the ark, but I've resisted the temptation with the capsule I've made for you.

Because look what happened, a second calamity is here.

And I'm no prophet. No preacher.

Except to you, I hope, my brightest star, my dutiful firstborn. I hope you will have taken the capsule already and this second missive will have been superfluous.

With sincerest faith and adoration, Your Mother Maribel.

[redacted]

Stop wasting time.

You need to steal her.

The crewed probe Alice, I mean. Not Alya. Of course not Alya. That privately contracted soldier and her hibernating legion have launched already. She’s long gone.

Too bad about that.

Her ship would have been a billion times better than the probe.

The probe, Alice, government probe 99101, will be at the Academy, of course, maybe sealed up in a museum exhibit or otherwise quarantined, but don’t be afraid, she’ll have been sterilized by reentry.

Too bad about that, too.

Who knows what the stuff of Wonderland could have done to stop the bloody carbon-sequestering stuff you idiots made?

Too late to find out.

For the birds and the bees, anyway.

Jan 8th, 2055

Dear Diary,

The implantation worked and today I’ve an inward glow brighter than any comet.

Brighter than any star.

When I told Baltasara, she made a soft, joyful sound and swallowed me again into her eyes so that our surroundings ceased to exist. Her scarred hands gripped my wrists so tightly that she cut off the circulation. She whispered Taki's name to me, insistently.

Taki, the warrior born of two goddesses, she said. I'd never heard the name before, but instantly I said yes.

Then she swung me in the low gravity, around and around, and we orbited one another, as our haploid genomes had orbited in the petri dish before accepting the unusual situation and merging, making our child of two mothers ready for implantation.

Wonderland is within sight, one month away.

Now motherhood is within my sight again as well. Eight months away, potentially.

Of course, I must realistically, statistically anticipate miscarriage, but what if the best outcome manifests and Taki becomes real?

How different this feels, compared with before.

With Alya, there was no other parent to be excited with me. I had hopes and dreams for her, but I wouldn't even let myself look at them too closely, much less speak them aloud to another human being. Carrying Alya was a job, a temporary discomfort, with an end date both to anticipate and to dread.

And it wasn't even the separation I feared. Barely out of childhood myself, I dreaded the infamous physical pain of labor.

I worried I would tear.

How little I knew of true pain.

Now I have no thought of contractions or bleeding or risks, only rewards. Of loving. Of guidance. Of being Taki's friend and guardian. Of sharing the things she will do with her other mother, Baltasara.

Baltasara will be Mamá and I will be Mum.

I asked Baltasara about her childhood.

She said her Mamá had piloted a jetcar. Not for delivering starvation relief, but simply for jaunting about the planet, wherever she wanted to go. Instead of going to school and playing sports, young Baltasara had been wedged into the seats of exclusive private opera houses, straitjacketed by the latest fashion, and not allowed to talk to the children of the lower classes.

I told Baltasara about having to read at night by the light of a neighboring farmer's anti-theft motion-triggered floodlights. About sharing a bedroom with my six older siblings until I ran away from home, to the big city, to betray my country's secrets in exchange for sanctuary.

It was difficult, I said, for me to imagine an upbringing like hers.

Baltasara's reply was quiet, as always. But more full of feeling than I had ever heard from her.

“Maribel, imagine this. Anything I wanted, I could have, my parents said. When I was five, I wanted a unicorn, so they had a veterinary surgeon perform an operation on an Andalusian mare who was worth more than the net assets of a million ordinary people. I loved her until I was ten, until the weight of her horn pushed her face bones in and gave her brain damage and she stumbled when I was riding, throwing me. I broke my collarbone. After they had her put to sleep, they stuffed her and put her in a museum. When I was fifteen, I said I wanted a second Earth, because we were ruining this one, and they laughed and drank spirits with bits of gold leaf glittering inside, from high purity quartz glasses forged at eight hundred and forty-six Kelvin and crystallized from molten magma, and I knew I had to get away from them, to somewhere dark and silent and hopeful.”

So it turns out we both ran away from very different homes.

I asked Baltasara if she felt hopeful now.

She kissed my belly, and bawled in the silent, subtly shuddering way that I imagine could have been accomplished surreptitiously, on the ground, after a fall from a unicorn.

Wonderland unicorns, you want to hear about them?

They’re white, like the rabbits.

Like all the animals, because who’s got the spare energy to manufacture pigments when you live in the dark? What a waste. The unicorns are bigger than the rabbits, but faster.

They’ve got to be.

To catch their prey.

The horns, those are for plunging into the comet between their claw-feet, for drilling down to get the radiation, instead of burrowing for it. They turn their heads upside-down and walk in circles on the spot to do it.

More like the Cheshire Cat than any Earth myth.

When their heads are upside-down and their horns are in the rock, the unicorns resemble four-legged mosquitoes more than horses.

They use their mouths to eat the rabbits, though. Round mouths with a leechlike ring of teeth. In the good times, the hot times, the radiation from a unicorn horn will practically fry a hole in your heart from fifty paces.

In the lean times, when Wonderland is passing away from perihelion, when they put their horns in the rock and get nothing, lots of them freeze like that. Eternally hopeful, hitting their heads in harder, and deeper, until death. Then, even though the microorganisms strip the flesh, there’s no wind, no earthquakes, no tides to carry away the skeletons. The dead ones stay like that forever, stuck in the ground with their heads upside-down.

Try not to have bad dreams about that.

I'll keep the unicorns away from you.

Because humans are the worst nightmare of any animal, sentient or not.

They have bad dreams about us.



August 2nd, 2066

To my beloved Eldest Daughter Alya,

This is another addendum to my earlier communication. Because you must be wondering if I really am as devoted a mother as I have claimed. You must be wondering why I put your little sister Taki at risk like that.

I had no choice. I simply had to get away. Far away.

From Baltasara.

Baltasara predicted that the wildlife of Wonderland would be drawn to the plume of our rockets, and made sure to shut combustion down after we landed on the pivot point of the spinning comet's mass. Yet nobody supposed the creatures would be drawn to electrical potential.

That we would find Wonderland unicorns following the cables, drilling into our hydroponics lab.

Some of them sampled the lettuce and grew green, flipper-like fronds in place of legs.

Others ground the artificial beef protein off the culture slides, eating them glass and all, and even though security bots blasted the intruders back out into the tunnel they'd bored, forever after they were distinguishable as the blotchy unicorns that sprayed milk.

So much for quarantine.

And then Baltasara, frustrated by our inability to penetrate the cavity's depths with our damaged instruments, frustrated by the shortening of our mission by the loss of half the lab that sustained our lives, suited up, took some repair tools into the tunnels and hunted down one of the blotchy unicorns.

Killed it.

Cooked it.

Ate it.

Without so much as a word to me.

Knowing that the security bots would never let her back onto the ship.

How could she do it, after we'd been together for three years? How could she forget the lesson she had learned in childhood, the lesson of the unicorn her parents had made for her?

She parted us at a stroke, parting herself from her unborn child, without a whisper.

Then, when she did start sending messages, it became clear what she expected.

A GLASS OF MILK, BEL, she tapped enticingly onto the shell of the ship. It was milk from a Wonderland unicorn. She left some in a bucket right where she knew the undamaged sensors would pick it up. DRINK ME, she'd engraved on the pail.

And they did.

Soldiers, technicians, and engineers. One by one, they went out there, and didn't come back, and when they appeared on the ship's sensors again, they walked on four clawed legs, or had round mouths with leechlike teeth that could cut messages into metal but not speak.

SWITCH THEM OFF, Baltasara entreated in gored slime over rock, meaning the security bots, but she was no longer truly Baltasara.

The real Baltasara had been focused and intense, and could have found a way to defeat the security bots without begging for help. Something about eating the unicorn had diluted her reasoning faculties. It happened to all of them. Before long, they could barely write.

LET MEE INN.

She forgot that I was pregnant, or seemed to. The altered crew members abandoned their clothes and crowded near the sensors, as if unsure exactly what they wanted of the precious few of us who remained on board. After she started eating Wonderland rabbits, and grew those sensory frills all over her body, Baltasara seemed to be able to see us, even through the ship's shielded skin.

BEL IS BIG WHY. WHY BIG. FOOD? MUCH. BUT NO FOOD SOON. FOOD HEER. HEER FOOD. COME HEER.

Alya, the woman I loved was gone. I did not abandon her. She was no longer there. I grieved more deeply than I would've if she'd simply died.

It was only months before her hideous transformation that I'd finally admitted to Baltasara—the real Baltasara—that Taki's was my second pregnancy.

You must have been young, Baltasara had whispered.

I confessed to Baltasara that you, Alya, had been my ticket to settle in my new country. That my specialized scientific education, my spying and supply of restricted information during the conflict, putting my life at risk, ending with my estranged parents in prison, all had been meaningless to my new government beside the more important facts of my desperation, my youth, my health, and my ability to bear altered children.

Payment had been made in blood.

You taught me that the price was too high.

This second child would be mine to keep.

Taki would belong to me, not to the creature who had once been Baltasara.

Her language and intelligence improved for a while after she began hunting and eating the other humans who lived in Wonderland alongside her.

I SEE A SECOND SKELETON FORMING WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF YOUR SKELETON. MY MEMORIES WENT FOR A WHILE BUT NOW I REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS THAT WE DID. BRING TAKI TO ME AT ONCE. SHE'S YOUR TICKET TO THIS NEW COUNTRY, BEL.

I wept for the woman I had lost.



Wonderland's got oysters and caterpillars, too.

Still got oysters, on Earth? Did they freeze? For a while they couldn't form their shells anymore, because of ocean acidity, but that was before the carbon sequestering plague got out of hand, right?

Wonderland oysters have got stony shells and feathery open mouths, to strain the spores out of the thick, barely-moving air.

Wonderland caterpillars have long bodies, a hundred legs, and tiny teeth with which to graze on things resembling leaves. They

metamorphose into flying things, the better to disperse to both ends of the bone-shaped cavity.

But everything metamorphoses here, that's Wonderland's greatest strength.

Seriously.

When I saw unicorns absorbing earth's genetic material, and being strengthened instead of poisoned, I reckoned the reverse could be true. But how could I bring the contaminants aboard without risking everyone?

So, out I went.

Think I was crazy?

I was the only one who'd thought the whole thing through!

And I only risked myself.

True, my reasoning was unreliable. I was depressed. Maribel was all wrapped up in her pregnancy, totally turned inward, forgetting that our home planet was doomed.

Not realizing that, no matter our mission parameters, we had to make Wonderland work as an ark, or die along with everyone else.

Well, her body wasn't the only one that could change.

If I couldn't live on unicorns, if I couldn't breathe the foul air, if I couldn't swing around the sun every couple of thousand years and laugh as I bathed in radiation, it was over anyway!

Guess what? It’s not over.

I’m still here.

It was nothing like the unicorn my parents made me. It was not.

You got hold of that probe yet, or what?

I’m getting tired of repeating myself, and this little period of lucidity ain’t gonna last me forever. How many times have I got to say it?

Bring. Me. The. Probe.

Only you can save Earth!



July 31st, 2055

Dear Diary,

Today we few remaining unaltereds decided to run.

Baltasara has grown cunning again after capturing one of the applied mathematics majors and eating her.

Piece by claw-footed piece.

Immediately, she tapped into the communications network and almost sabotaged the security systems.

From experience, we know that the replenishment will keep her sharp for a week or more, and we can’t risk staying.

We have to attempt abandoning Wonderland with what's left of the ship, even though our ability to produce sustenance is hampered and the pilot's program has informed us that, even in hibernation, we're likely all to die.

It advised us to find solace in religious writings, if we found such things comforting, and I scoffed with regrettable insensitivity.

If there is a God, we've gone so far beyond his purview, he couldn't save us even if he wanted to.

But I hope these diaries will survive, even if we don't, so the people back on Earth know not to send anyone else to Wonderland, ever. Thankfully, it's many more months' travel further away, now, than it was when we first arrived, and the gap between will only widen.

More time in space means more risk to Taki, though.

I no longer have any hope that she will survive.



I'll admit, things got bad after we were left to our own devices.

Bel's ship taking off made a hole big enough to deplete our respiratory gases and I had to eat a whole bunch of oysters so my skin would get stony and I'd survive. Only about a dozen expedition crew members, besides me, were smart enough to do that.

But it made us dumb.

Not as dumb as the oysters were. We could still think, but barely.

Thinking was slow.

Yeah, you can make a battery out of a lemon, but it’s not going to run the high-powered microprocessor that is the human brain.

We needed to eat unadulterated humans to get back to full consciousness, after the algae and the oysters sealed off the hole and gases were able to accumulate again. There were enough, mummified by the vacuum, for me to gnaw on until I got back to a semblance of myself.

Enough to remember how to speak and write.

Enough to find the instruments they left behind, to rig something up, to string together enough lemons, to be able to send these messages.



August 3rd, 2066

To my beloved Eldest Daughter Alya,

I have slept briefly, since stopping the previous letter. Energy is precious and hard to come by, these days. The Miami snow has finished falling, leaving a two-meter layer over everything, including the rooftop solar cells that I struggled to sweep last week.

I am so thin. My bones are so brittle. There is cancer in my spine from my time in space. If I fall from the roof, my back will break before the broom does.

So, you see, the price was mine to pay, after all, not Taki's, and I am grateful to God for that.

To continue the story of my flight from Wonderland back to Earth, I was not quite anorexic by the end of our fraught journey. Not quite beyond repair, once I was back eating balanced foods and breathing clean air.

Taki, despite not being born until after I was back on Earth soil, objected to the brightness of Earth days and became, despite all my efforts, almost fully nocturnal.

I wish the two of you could have grown up together, in the same time. In the same house. Alya, you would have been a bright and sunny influence on her, I know. You would have drawn her out into the world, but it wasn't God's plan.

When Taki turned three years old, I tried to recreate your third birthday party. You probably don't remember it. The one with the ocean theme, where we hung blue and green streamers from the ceiling, to be the seaweed and the waves, and you dressed as a lobster, and nabbed everything with your orange pâpier-maché claws, shrieking with wicked glee.

You were always talking. Outgoing. You loved animals, loved the water, could swim like an otter.

Taki didn't like to get wet. She was quiet, like her other mother. Reflective. Taki kept secrets and gazed for hours at the stars, even after her lips were blue from the cold. In the dark, she'd dig in the

earth, as though to find Baltasara underneath, when it was impossible, when she never knew her. She tolerated other people, but didn't seek them out.

She'll be ten years old, soon.

I'm not planning a party.

Instead, I'll say goodbye to her.

When our ship from Wonderland arrived, our civilian agency had been disbanded due to lack of funds. The military debriefed us, in case Wonderland was a threat they needed to put down. Then they stopped caring. Put about the story we'd all died, and changed our names. Not that Baltasara's parents were still alive to care. They'd died in a jetcar crash. There was some suspicion the vehicle had been sabotaged by a disgruntled servant.

Baltasara's family had been very wealthy indeed. Only her DNA could unlock the automated inheritance vault, and she left no Earth relations behind.

Taki's DNA unlocked the vault.

Suddenly, we had money.

I bought Taki a place in a hibernation chamber. You didn't grow up under the same roof as your sister, but you may still meet her. It's possible. When she turns ten, when she's old enough to make a good candidate for hibernation, she'll go with the rest of them, to wait for spring.

I did not buy a place for myself. The ark was too important.

With the remaining riches, I ransacked the gene banks of the world, to make my capsule. Such a tiny, precious thing.

I bid you best wishes and farewell, with this final letter, my brightest star, my dutiful firstborn. God will keep you safe, and the ark that you carry inside you. Whether you meet Taki or not, I pray we will be together in heaven, in the end, while the Earth once again sustains the species to survive the great flood.

With blindest belief and adulation, Your Mother Maribel.



So, Taki.

My child. Inheritor of my vast fortune.

What's it gonna be?

I've got the mental capacity to work it out. To guess where you're at. For a little while. With the rabbit-administrator's triceps settling in my belly. She ran for a long time, but I caught her in the end.

She's the last one, though, apart from my children. I could be staring at my own end.

But back to you.

You've just turned ten.

Earth's looking pretty bleak, am I right? The water supply is frozen in the pipes. There's a new bridge from Key West, but it's solid ice.

Strap on a pair of skates and you could be sightseeing in the Bahamas.

You're at the entrance to the hibernation vault, reading your very last letters in this life.

Letters from Bel to Alya.

You're all confused. Let me spell it out for you.

Alya's well out of range, on the other side of the sun, and even if she wasn't, she's never gotten any of those messages. The people who own her and her designer womb sent the letters straight back to Bel's automated family vault.

You've got them because you've got the right genes to unlock them. Probably still too young to understand half of those unnecessarily fancy words, right?

Right?

I've sent you Bel's diaries, too. Not so you'll understand them now, but so in about five years, which is how long it'll take for you to ride Alice to Wonderland, you'll get to see what an utter shit she was, not the saint you've no doubt built her up to be.

How she abandoned me.

You've got the capsule that Bel made, that Alya was supposed to get, but it's expired now. The things people daydream about their children doing, it's like they don't remember how hard it was just surviving as a child.

Put it in the trash.

It’s a useless dehydrated poo dollop in foil packaging.

Bel can’t save the animals of Earth, but you can.

Taki.

Taki, I’m your Mamá, and I command you to come!

You know where Alice is, don’t mess things up. You think you’ll be revived some day on Earth, but it’s a lie. Nobody’s left to love you. Nobody’s left to care enough to wake you up. They’ll switch you off, use your corpse to open our family vault, and take everything you’ve left behind. Come to Mamá, instead, and bring friends.

Bring enemies.

My unicorn children and I will still kill and eat you. I’m up-front about that, but with your genes for fuel and your probe for a chariot we’ll regain enough humanity to be able to return.

We’ll fight the carbon sequestering plague with the weapons of Wonderland.

We’ll undo what you’ve done, even before the animals Bel tried to save really are wiped off the face of the planet. They’ll be changed but they’ll still be amazing.

It’s your choice, Taki.

Take your cells to the grave for no reason, or bring them to me.

Mamá is waiting.

Corpse Soldier

BY KAMERON HURLEY

Everything started here:

A broad plain of yellow grass, the stalks crushed and smeared with blood, and the sounds of dying men—yes, all men—sobbing and praying to the rusty pink sky. The high grass hid their forms and faces. They were bodiless voices, as if ghosts already, rising above the field like ashes to heaven.

Nev had his fist in his own wound, pressing hard to staunch blood that flowed free as a spring rill, pumping across his breast with every heartbeat. He used his other hand to claw himself towards the sounds of the dying men. Not to save them—no—not to help them—no—but because he hoped they were not quite as doomed as he. He hoped they carried six more breaths instead of his two. He wanted to *become* them, to steal the last of their conscious moments, to take harbor within their mangled, broken bodies and mend them with the fire of his corpse-jumping soul. He had to find a form that would house his soul for another day, another hour, another breath, until he could jump again, and again, into his promised immortality.

But for now, in this moment—Nev needed just one more breath.

And he did not have it.

That's when he heard the little girl singing.

Nev's life after that day in that bloody field, after the war, after he fled the guild that once protected his immortal soul from superstitious mind clerics and osteomancers, was no easier. No matter how far he ran, or how many times he changed his face, Nev could not escape his past, and the sound of the little girl singing while he bled out. His old masters would inevitably find him and remind him of his obligations to the Body Mercenary Guild. They knew what sort of person he really was. They knew what had happened on the field that day.

They knew about the girl.

And what he had given her.

"Name and occupation?"

"Nevarius Plum," Nev said, and not for the first time, he felt the urge to say he was a scribe, or perhaps a tax clerk, because it seemed so fitting to the current name he used. Body mercenaries like him should have had names that inspired fear and awe in the presence of the foes whose faces they would soon wear. But names didn't always make a person, however much weight they gave on first impression. He had once known a man in the guild called Torgenson Bold. Torg perished on the field during his first skirmish, screaming and blubbering like a colicky newborn babe.

It wasn't about the name—it was about the soul. Nev chose names that reflected the soul he wanted to show the world. The soul he aspired to.

“And *occupation*?” the squat woman repeated, sweating heavily behind the smooth wooden counter of the mud brick toll gate that flanked the main road into the city of Avarise. The tattered coil of fabric above her did not give much shade in the muggy heat, and the sun was high and hot. Most of the toll booth operators at the gates to the city were men. He considered asking her if she knew of an open position among them, grasping for an alternative to the summons from his guild masters, then shuddered at the idea of touching and speaking to so many people every day.

Too much temptation.

He could have said, “I’m a member of the Body Mercenary Guild,” but his kind were hated everywhere, here more than most; here they were routed out and run down. He had not been in contact with anyone from the guild since that day in the field, some seventy years ago, though he could still feel them, pursuing.

It’s why he needed to make this trip.

“I am a simple trader,” he said, “with goods to take to market.”

“Doesn’t mean you get in for free. You are showing very little respect.”

He bowed. “I apologize. Please, examine my wares and let us agree on a fee.”

Nev had learned that apologies and passive subservience cost him nothing in exchanges with those who fed on the power afforded their own little fiefdom. No doubt this woman enjoyed making visitors like him wait outside the gates indefinitely if they crossed

her. Petty, counter-productive… but human beings were not rational. A hard lesson. Logic did not convince people to come over to one's position. One had to appeal to their emotions, egos, and desires. That had taken Nev many bodies' worth of lives to learn properly.

He brought his lop-eared alpaca forward and divulged the contents of her plump saddle bags. Hunks of volcanic glass shimmered. Nev gingerly picked up a chunk and offered it to the woman.

She took six pieces for herself, and one of the bronze bands he wore on his fingers for just such a bribe. Her ego assuaged, he passed into the city without further issue.

Avarise hugged the riverbank of the crushing gray wash of the River Monesi, a bloated, fast-moving breadth of water prone to lose its banks each year and overtake the stilted homes in the flood valley on the other side. The city proper loomed above the great river, tucked securely on a hill dug by thousands of hands for just this purpose. It afforded citizens not only a view of potential trouble, but safety from the river's wrath.

Nev climbed up the narrow cobbled streets. Flat pavers at the center of the way were for the carts; the knobby pebbled paths on either side were for hoofed creatures who would have found the flatter way far more treacherous. The alpaca, with her soft padded feet, was content to tread next to him, though as he glanced at her two-toed feet he made a note that her nails needed trimming.

He consulted the little map in his pocket several times. Like many cities formed in the early days of the last empire, the streets were a hodgepodge of dead-ends and narrow alleys that sometimes opened briefly into airy plazas, then closed and pinched again, running down and down to some sewer grate or back up and up again only to bring him to the battered calcified door of some private residence.

After several bad turns, he finally came to the residence he sought, a pleasant little first-floor apartment with the family name “Clovanis” set in tile next to the threshold. Bursts of lovely pink flowers sprouted from window pots. Potted palms and heart-shaped snaking vines grew in the small yard just to the right of the door, a rare, narrow band of open space. An old woman sat out there, lean and regal, slightly hunched over a swath of fabric. At the rear of the garden, an unfinished canvas lay dashed in spots of color meant to mimic the flower boxes.

Nev came to the little courtyard gate. “Pardon, matron,” he said, “Are you Matild Clovanis?”

“I am.”

“Nev Plum,” he said. “I’ve brought the volcanic glass from Magoransa.”

“Of course, please, come. I didn’t expect you to be so young! What a journey you must have had.”

She rose, smiling. Her white hair was nested into an intricate knot of strands bound in multicolored ribbon. She did not walk with a cane;

she moved swiftly, for all her years, and the sun-hardened lines of her face.

“I don’t have many visitors from so far away. Let me get you tea. We have clover tea! And biscuits.”

“You are very kind.”

Matild bustled into her home, though he noted she did not invite him in. Nev knotted the alpaca’s lead at the table and began to unload his stones.

When Matild returned, she chatted absently about the weather, then asked about his journey.

“Uneventful,” he said, but he shared details he supposed she would enjoy, about the people, the scenery, a scrappy young dog who ran off with the last of his jerky, a child with a voice like a bell, and news of a small settlement lost to a storm said to strike from a clear sky.

Matild exclaimed over the volcanic glass. “I have so many more buyers,” she said, which he already knew, because he had posed as one of them not long back. “But alas, not as much coin as I’d hoped in exchange.”

“I’m sure there are other bits and bobs I could settle for.” Nev pretended to give a longer look at the surroundings, the hanging vegetation, blooming purple flowers up on the roof, aged brick walls; the bird poking its vibrant orange head from a nest snugged tightly in the mouth of a tentacled nightmare meant to cover the otherwise inelegant appearance of a drain.

Nev drew a broken trinket from his pocket and placed it on the table between them. A blue stone shot through with green glass. “Have you ever come across a stone like this one? I’d be very keen to find one intact. I collect them.”

The woman brushed the bits of stone with her fingertips. “I had something like it, a very long time ago.”

“And now?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have it anymore.”

“You sold it?”

“I simply don’t have it.”

“I suppose that’s best. Those who carry intact stones can be in danger. Some… bad people are looking for intact stones.”

“But you aren’t one of the bad ones?”

“I don’t like to think I am.”

She leaned back in her seat. “I’m an old woman. There’s very little you or they can do to me. I’ve seen the world and lived a good life.”

Nev’s stomach twisted. He did not like to use fear, but in this instance, the tactic was warranted, and terribly true. “Perhaps you could tell me what happened to it. If I can have something to go on, I’m even happy to leave extra with your religious order. Whichever you subscribe to.”

“My mother sold it, a very long time ago.”

“You know where?”

“A company creditor, I imagine. She made a living in the ironworks. I was twelve or thirteen, then. Fifty-three years on, now. In the summer. I remember the sound of the cicadas.”

“Could I speak—” Nev stopped himself. He knew better than to ask, but it slipped out sometimes, his assumption that everyone lived forever.

“She passed some years ago.” The woman’s attention shifted. She seemed to re-evaluate him.

I’ve shown my hand, he thought. She knows.

“You should speak with my granddaughter,” she said, flicking her gaze up to the squawking bird in the drain. “She is very good at finding things.”

“It’s all right, I—”

“Nice young man like you. This is a very dangerous place, you understand? She could help you. You may not look foreign, but your accent is archaic, and you are… odd.”

“Perhaps I’m not as nice as I look.”

“I very much doubt that.”

Nev stood. He unloaded a few more stones from the alpaca’s saddle bag. “Thank you for your help.”

“Give me your map,” she said. “I can show you where my granddaughter is.” She peered at the angle of the sun. “Yes, this time of day I know where she’ll be.”

“That’s kind,” he said, “but I really do prefer to work alone.”

The old woman tugged at the map, though, pulling it from the table before he could snatch it up. She traced a section of the city about a half a mile back down the other side of the city, right up along the riverfront. “The Wandering Eye,” she said, and chuckled. “That’s where she’ll be. Ask for Mezelda.”

“Thank you.” Nev tucked the map back into his pocket. He hurried away, dropping his gaze, not wanting to look back.

But she spoke again, a line from a very old tune, one he had had long ago tried to banish from his memory:

Come little Jini in your flying machine
Come across the waves with me
Those golden waves, Jini
Those golden waves.

Nev glanced back, just the once. Met her look. Tipped his hat, and then he and the alpaca were back in the square, drifting among the other residents, trudging deeper and deeper through the maze, the map forgotten, wanting only to disappear into the twisting labyrinth of Avarise forever.

Nev went down to the ironworks first. The pawnbroker there was young; he asked after the former proprietor, and celebrated his luck when the girl trotted into the back and came out with her mother. When he presented the stone, the old woman did not recall it, but her records went back a hundred years, she said, and for a few bronze rings, she put her daughter to work combing through the records from fifty-three years prior, in the summer months.

The girl brought out the big book and after reading a dozen pages, found the entry he sought.

“Oh yes, this family,” the old woman said. “The wizards. I didn’t realize that stone sat here so long. Bad buy, bad buy. Fifty years to turn around a trinket! Terrible.”

“Wizards?”

“Yes. I remember her, Bafasa Mundi. She came looking for a good luck stone. The green crystal soothed her. It was for her son. I recall her because they left the city a few months ago, after their youngest passed the wizard trials, and well… he was chosen for temple work. And you know what happens to children, especially boy children, chosen for such a fate.”

Nev did not. “Do you know where they went?”

“No, no. I’m sure no one does. They left in the middle of the night. The fewer they told, the better their chances of escape. A shame, really.”

Nev thanked them for the help and wrote *Bafasa Mundi* on the back of his map. As he did, his gaze went to the tavern along the waterfront. The Wandering Eye. It was true that he did not know these people, and they had no reason to trust him. He was also almost out of volcanic glass and bronze rings. Too much more of this and he would be broke, and no closer to the stone than when he started.

He reasoned that if it was difficult for him to find the stone, it would be equally difficult for the Body Mercenary Guild. Perhaps he was

being overly anxious. Overly cautious. But it was this extra care that had ensured his freedom and survival over these many long decades. To turn away now…

Nev sighed and patted his alpaca. “Long way to come for nothing, right?”

The alpaca hummed.

They began the long way down to the water.

The wharf smelled of copper and death, a combination that Nev had not yet encountered. The churning gray waters carried detritus from upstream; broken trees, dead animals, silt runoff, but from the smell, less sewage than he would have suspected. Avarise lay close enough to the headwaters that it was the first major city on the river’s wending path.

The Wandering Eye lay furthest upstream, closest to the boat docks.

Nev’s body was not terribly tall, but he had to stoop to enter the low doorway. He removed his hat. Inside; darkness, and the cloying stink of old sweat and cheap spilled beer. Beneath that, the whiff of aged cedar and hardened leather. Outside was hot; inside was much hotter, almost unbearable.

Three women collected at a table in the back. A barkeep spoke in low tones to a patron at the smooth cedar plank of the bar. Sounds of raucous laughing in the back could have been the cook staff or a gambling den.

Nev kept his head down and went to the bar, asked the beefy bar keep, “Excuse me? I’m looking for Mezelda?”

The barkeep rolled her eyes. Jerked her thumb at the hefty, heavy-lidded woman she spoke to. The woman bent over a gravy-soaked potato dish and what remained of a thick, frothy black beer.

“Good to know you have my back if the dock patrol comes calling,” the woman said, wiping her face on her sleeve. Her voice was rich and smoky; it put Nev in mind of another mercenary he once knew, long dead on the same field that had nearly claimed him.

“He’s definitely not dock patrol,” the bar keep said, and laughed. The table in the back called for another round. She went to the tap to satisfy them.

“Mezelda, I’m Nev. Your grandmother said you find people. Things.” Nev guessed Mezelda was in her late thirties, maybe early forties. He had found it difficult to judge the ages of those from cultures he was not yet accustomed to. It wasn’t so much that the age markers differed, it was that the way bodies aged was so intrinsically tied to their lineage, their daily work, their habits, and above all, their environments.

“Mez,” she said. “Nobody calls me Mezelda but Grandma. You have money?”

“I have some volcanic glass, a few bronze—”

Mez help up her hand. “Forget it.”

“Surely there’s some other—”

Mez nodded at the noise from the back. “Tell you what. Beat me at a game of cards, I’ll hear your sob story. I win, I clean you out.”

“This… does not seem like a deal a sane man would take. Thank you for your time.”

Nev put his hat back on and trudged to the door.

“Who you looking for?” Mez called.

“A boy. A wizard. His family left here some time ago. He has something I’m looking for. Your grandmother had it at one time, but her mother pawned it away. She said you could help.”

“Why ask for *my* help? Do you not like wizards?

“They’re fine.”

“So you don’t like children?”

When pressed, he always preferred honesty. Fewer things to remember. “I’m never certain how to treat them. Many parents take offense if I speak to a child as I would an adult. Should I treat a child as half human? Part animal? Does the percentage of their humanity change based on age? Is there a sliding scale?”

“I find children amusing.” Mez gulped her beer. “I once told my nephew that griffins weren’t extinct, just nocturnal. He loudly proclaimed this fact to his professor. It delighted me to no end.”

“You must have lost his trust.”

“I taught him critical thinking. He was, like, four.”

“You taught him adults are liars.”

“Is that untrue? Now he asks for a second opinion when I tell him anything. How many kids just believe whatever nonsense their Aunt Edna spouted off after she heard it from a grocer? The world would be a better place if we all questioned our elders more.”

“You advocate for disrespect?”

“Who do you think I am? A priest?”

“I… need to find someone else. You aren’t the right person for this.”

She chomped a hunk of potato; a bit of gravy leaked out the side of her mouth. “Figured,” she mumbled around the potato. “Grandma sends me particular kinds of people.” Her gaze narrowed; black eyes, long lashes. Like her grandmother, she seemed to see through him. I’m being paranoid, Nev thought.

“I’m not keen on games,” Nev said.

“And I’m not keen on working with someone I don’t know.”

“I prefer my independence as well.”

“Independence rarely gets me paid. Come out back.”

Her followed her to a scuffed table out on the patio. Here, it was cooler; a blessed breeze came in off the boiling river below. Mez set out a deck of cards; already a bad sign. Playing with her own deck meant it was likely marked. Did he look so young that she thought he would fall for that? Young, a foreigner… maybe so.

But he sat across from her anyhow. Placed his hat on his knee.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said, dealing out the cards. The deck was familiar. The game, he suspected, was Five-Card Shot. When

she placed a single card face up between them, it confirmed his guess, but he demurred.

“What are we playing?” he said. “I admit I don’t have a head for cards. I’ll need the rules.”

She told him the basic rules in a breezy tone, deftly dealing the cards. He knew to lose his first hand. He won the second two.

“You’re not from here,” she said, leaning back in her seat, hands behind her head as he lay his winning hand face up.

“Just luck.”

“You are a poor liar.”

“Am I?”

“Kid’s name?”

“The mother is Bafasa Mundi. But it’s less a person I’m looking for and more of a thing. Is that all right?

“Same.”

“But—”

“Things are generally either carried, lost, or hidden by people. It’s one and the same. Lots of trophies taken during the war. I’m wondering—we looking for something that got stolen from you, or for a trophy you stole from someone else?”

“…yes?”

“You from Moronov?”

“Yes.”

“And all you got outside is that alpaca with the rocks?”

That impressed him. He assumed she had not seen the alpaca, let alone had the time to see what he carried. But if she knew he carried the glass, she would know he was from Moronov. And of course—her grandmother had wanted the glass. Mez would have known that.

“Are *you* a wizard?” he said.

She collected her cards.

“I just wonder what kind of person walks five hundred miles from Moronov carrying just a few bronze rings, some rocks, and maybe a local script for a bank? You better have a script for a bank.”

“What kind of person gets into retrieving people?”

“Are we going to go visit this kid wizard or what?”

“Don’t you have to find him first?”

“I know where the Mundis are.”

Nev crossed his arms. Of course. “So you just thought I’d be an easy mark for cards? An easy day’s pay for you.”

“Not really,” she said. “They’re dead.”

That eerie yellow field of his youth, smeared in red. Blood always looked more watery than Nev expected. And there, again—the girl’s voice. High and melodic, surreal in its perfection because she was clearly so young.

He raised his head from the prickly pillow of grass, knowing this was among his last breaths, terrified to consider how many more he would see. Saw two small brown feet, toes curled in the bloody field. She was only four or five year old.

She wore a tattered blue shift. Her hair was coiled back from her head in braids coming loose now at the ends. She was unharmed. Unblemished. Smooth, perfect skin. All her fingers and toes. Bright, glassy eyes.

Five years old. The age he had been when he found out what he was. He had worn a tattered shift just like this, already begging his mother for men's pants and wearing his brother's hats into town. They told him he was a fool, back then, told him he was a she, that being born into that body came with its privileges, and he should be happy with his place in the world. He knew. But it never sat well with him.

And here, again—a young girl. A new, fresh body. A new start. As if the universe were offering her to him, as if he could start again.

He lay gasping like a fish as he bled out, reaching for the girl. He rasped, "Help me. Please. Please help me."

All he needed to do was get his hands around her throat. End her life cleanly, swiftly, before his expired, and then move his soul from his body to hers. And then he would be free. He could get far, in her form. No one would notice another dirty, tattered child in the streets of the big cities, some refugee from the country, fleeing the war. He would be vulnerable for a time, perhaps, until he found another

form, but he would take any body now, for one more breath. No matter the price.

The logical thing to do was to kill the child and inhabit her body. It's what the guild had taught him to do. We all die. Few were so privileged to see their bodies inhabited again once their spirits had passed over. He was going to do her a favor, truly.

"Are you dying?" the little girl said.

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes. What are you called?"

She leaned closer.

He snatched her wrist. Dragged her to the bloody field beside him. Her face was so close he felt the heat of it; her dark eyes went so wide he felt he would fall into them.

Take her. Wring her neck. Steal her body. Do it, Nev. You have done it a thousand times before. You will do it a thousand times again.

Nev walked a step behind Mez, leading his alpaca. The way to the graves of the Mundi family was a day's walk, and Mez had insisted on loading the alpaca with beer, musty blocks of cheese, and a fried meat product of some kind that she called jerky.

The family had been killed just outside the next town, a little hamlet called Fortezia. Nev knew the name from his map, but had never been there. The road turned quickly from paving stones to dirt, but

at least the rutted way was dry. Mez insisted on taking side paths several times, muttering darkly about bandits. He had encountered none since crossing the border into this country, but he did not argue.

“You have a name for it?” she asked as they came over a wooded ridge and back onto the proper road.

“Hm? The alpaca? I call her… Alpaca.”

“How can you call her the same name as any other alpaca?”

“She answers to it.”

“Hardly creative.”

“Creativity doesn’t improve the experience in any way. A woman called Mag is no different if she is called Magoransa. Same woman.”

“I’d disagree, obviously. Good dig, though. You wouldn’t just call her, hey… Human!”

“Not if she preferred another name, no. That would be rude. Would it not, Mez?”

“But alpaca—”

“She hasn’t told me her name. I would be happy to use it if she had. Do you know it?”

“Now you are being didactic.”

“Only honest.”

They huffed along awhile longer. Mez clearly struggled a little more than he did. He suspected she was spending most of her time sitting around playing cards in taverns and a lot less doing the leg work required to find people. Perhaps she had people for that. Despite her imposing form, he suspected he could outrun her easily. Wit and speed and his peculiar talent had always been his most effective weapons.

“You said your nephew.”

“What?” She narrowed her eyes.

“The child,” Nev said. “The one you lied to. Do you not have any children?”

“No. And you must not either. Well, not any you actually hang out with.”

“I don’t think I do,” he said. “It’s been—” and he had to close his mouth, because though his face was that of a man who might have been in his mid-twenties, he could not clearly remember the last time he’d had sex. Four decades ago? Six? Before the war, certainly. He had spent long stretches of peaceful time in cities before, a year here, a year there. They were pleasant enough times while they lasted. But as time went on he found his was more comfortable traveling alone. Fewer questions. Fewer emotions.

Mez crooked her mouth. “Don’t tell me you can’t remember?”

“Perhaps I can’t.”

“Remind me to give you a drink. See if that kicks anything loose.”

They spent the night at a way house. He insisted on sleeping outside, but she offered to share a room. “For the trickery on my part,” she said. “This is a favor more than a job. Though you’re still paying me what’s left of that volcanic glass.”

Nev liked to think he was good at reading people after all this time. It’s why when she offered him a beer he pretended to drink it, and when she began pulling at him to dance with her and sing bawdy songs, he said he needed to find an outhouse and instead went to the barn, untethered his alpaca, and drifted back onto the road. He didn’t mind her company, but he had yet to relish it, and it was always a good idea to move quickly before one transformed into the other.

The stars were out; the night was blessedly clear. The great gory constellations and massive swirling nebulas gave him enough light to get by. He abruptly turned off the road at the first path he found and continued on, despite his alpaca’s annoyed humming.

“She’s drunk,” he said, thumping the alpaca’s cream-colored neck. “One turn enough will deceive her.” He was uncertain if that was true, but it sounded well enough there in the dark. It sounded so good that when the alpaca stopped, twitching her ears, he thought there must be some predator in the dark; it certainly couldn’t be Mez.

He was mostly right.

The thump in his chest knocked him back a step. Nev had a moment to wonder at the feathered shaft jutting from his chest

before the pain hit him, a purl of fire that uncoiled across his whole left side.

How terrible. He had loved this body.

The second arrow took him in the left side, a little lower. He let himself fall because he knew they would keep shooting until he did. He loathed to let go of alpaca's lead, but did so, yelling for her to run. She kicked up her toes and took off into the darkness.

Nev lay on the still-warm ground. He slipped his fingers behind him, took hold of the small utility knife he kept in a discrete sheath tucked into the inside of his belt. The burning pain of his wounds threatened to cloud his mind, but he breathed through it, as he has been trained to do.

"He down?"

"He's down. Where's the fucking camel?"

"I can track it."

"Let's search him first."

Nev closed his eyes and listened to them approach. Two voices. More importantly, two clearly separate gaits, not three or six or eight. Two was difficult, but not impossible.

He had really loved this body. Youth was wasted on the young.

Their hands on him. A rough kick at his wounded side.

Nev rolled and lunged, stabbing the nearest man in the throat. Blood gushed. The man gurgled. Behind him, a younger woman,

little more than a girl, shrieked. She fumbled with her bow, dropped it, thinking better of the distance, and went for a knife.

But by then the man was bleeding out. Nev pulled him close, so close he smelled the terror of his breath and felt the tinkling of the man's curly black beard. Nev pressed his palm to the back of the man's neck, skin on skin, as if they would share a kiss, while the man's hot blood soaked them both. The man's body sagged.

Nev huffed out a breath.

Felt the distant stabbing in his side. The girl with the knife.

Too late, though, too late.

He jumped.

The girl in his grasp. The yellow field. Easy to take her. Face to face. Breath to breath.

But as his fingers closed over her throat she murmured,

Come little Jini in your flying machine
Come across the waves with me
Those golden waves, Jini
Those golden waves.

Nev released her. Lay back. Huffing. "Bring help," he said. He stuffed his fist in his wound. He wouldn't make it. It would take too long. If they knew who—what—he was, maybe a line commander would send a body. But how…?

He grabbed the chain at his neck. Yanked at it, too weak to fumble with the clasp. On the end of the chain dangled a stone of green

glass and silver, etched with his name and rank within the guild. It contained something far more important than that, though.

“Get this stone to a soldier,” he said. “Command. Send…help.”

The little girl took the stone into her palm. Wiped at the blood. “I’m Matild Clovanis,” she said, “from Avarise. What is your name? I can’t help a stranger.”

“Nevarius. Now run! Go! Before I change my mind!” he snarled.

She leapt away, a startled deer.

He lay where she left him. Tears clouded his vision, or maybe the darkness was coming. He wasn’t sure which—or both. More the fool, him. A soft heart. Corpse soldiers with soft hearts wouldn’t last a decade, let alone a century. He would die on this field with all the others, because he did not have the heart to kill a little girl.

Nev rolled on top of his own fist, using the pressure of his body to further quell the blood from the worst wound. From this vantage he could just see the outstretched hand of a corpse, one half buried in mud churned up by some elemental wizard.

Nev clawed his way forward. An inch. Two. A hand’s breadth. Gagging, making bloody bubbles, sick with pain, he crept forward. Again. Again.

The darkness. Death. The long night. He felt it, comforting, like a warm bath after a long, agonizing day punishing his body to the brink of its endurance. How wonderful would it be to just…stop?

He stopped. How far to go?

Nev reached for the fingers of the corpse ahead of him as the darkness took him.

I should have been a better soldier, he thought.

It was the last thought he had in that body.

Nev was not the first to escape the Body Mercenary Guild; he certainly would not have been the last. There was no public record of rogue Body Mercenaries; it would inspire panic and pogroms if the public knew exactly how many people like him walked among them. His records, such as they were, would be closely guarded things. He liked to imagine that perhaps he had been officially declared dead. After all, there was no physical way to know he was still alive outside summoning his soul into another body.

And only one with the stone could do that. The stone he had given Matild that day. Matild from Avarise. He would never be free, truly free, until he destroyed that stone.

The guild loved to make its members' lives more difficult; to make all lives more difficult. The more difficult the lives, the better it felt it was doing its job. It believed itself the arbiter of whose lives counted, and whose did not. In all his living years, decades, he had never thought who got to be human a political position. It was a moral and religious position. But in most of the countries and city-states he lived, there was no line between government morality and religious morality. Right and wrong were beliefs, as were religions. Intrinsically tied, for better or worse.

His own existence had come down to his military usefulness. What greater fear could an army invoke than unleashing a wave of undead against the enemy, undead who could take on the face of those they killed? Shock. Horror. Awe. Fear. He had seen all of it.

Nev came sputtering back into consciousness. He lay on the ground next to a pock-marked young man with two arrows jutting out of his torso. From this vantage, the young body Nev had worn looked foolish, foppish, the mussed hair, the terrible complexion, the knobby knees and elbows.

He bent over in his new, shaggy body and vomited. Black bile. A little blood. He reached reflexively for the wound he had inflicted while in his other body. It had already closed. His tunic was heavy with his own blood.

Nev gazed into his big, calloused hands. Coarse black hair studded the knuckles.

Across from him, the girl was on her knees, eyes glistening in the starlight. “Papa?” she said, choking on her tears. “Papa, are you all right?”

Nev’s guts churned. He stumbled off the path and yanked down his pants. A wet sea of shit left his body. He braced himself against a heavy tree trunk and vomited again.

Gasping, spitting, he yelled, “Stay away!” He did not even know her name. They tried to kill you, he thought, here you are, soft again. But he had made his own terrible choices often. He understood.

“Papa, I—”

Nev heard the crashing before she did. Whether it was his heightened senses after the body jump, or her fear and grief that disguised it, he did not know.

A figure smashed into the girl, knocking her flat.

Nev cleaned himself up as best he could and slogged toward the ruckus.

Mez tussled on the ground with the girl. Popped her nose. Just as he got hold of Mez's collar, she locked the girl into a neck hold.

Nev heard the snap.

He let Mez go. The girl's body dropped like a marionette, the neck broken.

"Mez, I—"

She punched him in the face.

Nev reeled back, stunned, but he could feel the second wind coming, the massive surge in adrenaline that he got after every body hop. His senses became heightened. The pain vanished all together.

Mez hit him again. He snagged her arm and twisted it behind her.

"It's Nev! Mez!"

She snapped at him, nearly taking off his ear. He pushed her and held her down, relying on this new body's brute strength and the adrenaline that still coursed through his healing body.

"Mez! I'm Nev. The alpaca named Alpaca. We played cards."

She head-butted him. His nose burst. Tears welled. He spit. He was aware of the injury, of the pressure, but no pain. Not yet, not until the rush wore off. Already, the blood gushing from his nose stopped. He would have a few more impervious minutes for her to flail at him.

“Your nephew believed griffins were nocturnal. You have no children. You tried to serve me a beer and dance. You remember that part at least? I do.”

She tensed. Arms tight, still pushing him away. But her look was different. She eyed him like a terrified animal caught in a snare. Maybe that’s what he had done.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Can I let you up? Mez, if you kill me I’ll have to kill you and take your body. You understand? There’s no reason to attack me. Don’t make me do that.”

Her body softened, almost imperceptibly.

“All right?” he said.

One nod; a spastic jerk.

He eased his grip, but did not let up his guard. “You understand?” he said. He jerked his head at the young body filled with arrows. “That was me. Now I’m here.”

She mouthed something at him. A curse?

“What?” he said.

“Corpse soldier.” Soft and smoky. Not fearful. Factual.

His mouth twisted, even after all that time. “We prefer to be called body mercenaries.”

“Thought you were all dead. My grandmother—”

“I gave her the stone that can summon my soul.”

“Why?”

“I thought I was dying. If she got it back to the guild, they could summon my soul from the darkness. Bring me back. It’s where my soul goes if I can’t find a body to house me.”

“You’re already dead.”

“I’ve been dead many times, yes.” He saw her swallow; the starlight made her eyes seem luminous. “I’m going to let you go,” he said.

“You said that.”

“I said there was no reason to attack me.”

“All right.”

He released her. Took two long steps back. In this body, he was much larger than her; he stood a head and shoulders above her, and outweighed her by eighty pounds. He tried to give her space.

Mez sat in the dirt. Gazed up at him. Then at the body. She got up and went to his old body. Knelt beside it. Pushed the hair from the face, noted the wounds. Then Mez began to methodically remove all of the bronze rings Nev had kept on those skinny little fingers.

“Your remorse is touching,” Nev said.

“About as polite as you running off in the middle of the night. You fucking idiot.”

“I know about women like you.”

“Women like me? Like *me*?”

“It didn’t seem wise to stay.”

“I was being polite. You have a massive stick up your fucking ass.”

“I have been around a long time.”

“No doubt.” She snorted. Pocketed the rings. Leaned back on her heels. “You just kill people when you’re attacked? Just like that? No wonder we hunted you all until you were dead. Really dead. After the war. How did you live?”

“Not every country believed the genocide of *people like me* was humane.”

“You mean not every country wanted to give up their tactical advantage.”

“I don’t fight on purpose. The bodies I take… most are as this was. Defense. Or those already dead.”

“Stealing the dead is better?”

“They are dead. What do they care? You certainly didn’t care about the dead when you took those rings just now.”

“I can’t believe I fell for this.”

“For what? I’ve told you nothing untrue. If someone has that stone, someone alive, they are in danger. Because yes, you are right.

People like me are being hunted. If they find someone with that stone—”

“If they find someone with that stone, it leads them back to you. I wasn’t born on a slow boat. You’re worried about your own guts.”

Nev shifted from foot to foot. The adrenaline was draining from his body now, leaving him feeling exhausted, hungry. “I need to find Alpaca. Keep the rings.” He bent and took the dead girl’s heavy knife. He felt a coin purse knotted against his own shin. He would have money enough, provided it was coin in there and not something more nefarious. It was horrifying, some days, to realize what sorts of bodies one had jumped into. Who they had been.

He headed down the way he had seen the alpaca go, humming softly for her. It was not long before he heard Mez crashing around behind him. She was nimble as a bear, that one.

“What?” he said without turning. “You want to knife me in the back? You’ll need to creep better than that.”

“Why didn’t you kill my grandmother? You gave her that stone and hoped someone brought you back, but why not just kill her? Then you’d know you’re coming back for sure.”

Nev lifted his gaze to the crowns of the trees. Little blossoms fell from the canopy, collecting around his feet like dying stars. “It was not necessary,” he said.

She grunted.

He waited.

“I take you to the gravesite,” she said. “That’s it. That’s what I agreed to.”

He nodded, already turning his attention to the flash of creamy white in the distance.

The site of the massacre was mundane. All such sites were, in the end. He remembered a war from some time ago, when they buried all the dead beneath birch trees. For two decades after, he had avoided birch trees, made uneasy and anxious by their breezy forms.

The place where the little child wizard’s family had been killed was a tall field of grass, a clearing overlooking the little settlement they had hoped to settle, Fortezia. How terrible, to get so far, to be within sight of salvation, and to be cut down.

“Who killed them?” Nev said. Beside him, the alpaca hummed. Her saddle bags were empty. She had either lost, or someone had stolen, all of Mez’s beer and musty cheese and jerky. Of all the things that had happened the night before, Mez seemed angriest at the loss of the beer.

“Temple people,” she said. “You know what they do to those kid wizards in the temple.”

“Matild said that too… but no, I don’t know what they do.”

“Oh.” She shrugged. “Bad things. They think you have to hurt kids to make them powerful. Make them mean. You know, toughen them up.”

Nev knew all about that.

He found the fresher, humped ground over the graves. “They buried them?” he said. “Didn’t burn them?”

“You don’t burn wizards. Does bad things to the air. Miasmas.”

“Let’s dig,” Nev said.

They spent two hours digging. Brought up the corpses. A man and a woman, only a few months in the ground. Mez did not gag or complain, but searched the corpses thoroughly with him.

“Where’s the boy? Did we miss him?” Nev said.

“Maybe they didn’t get the boy.”

“Where did you hear about these deaths anyway?”

“The tavern. Old soldier I know from some jobs last year. He was in the party sent out after them.”

“And he said they got all three?”

“Maybe they were supposed to, so that’s what he said. Word gets around. He’s old enough not to yak in a tavern that he *didn’t* kill someone he was supposed to.”

Nev came up empty; the pockets and pouches held some old snuff and a decomposing map. As he dropped the map he noted the cord around the female body’s neck. He tugged it. It came up with a little bronze pendant. Nothing.

“Her hand,” Mez said.

Another cord trailed from the woman's hand, filthy like the rest of her. He uncoiled her rotting fingers and slid the cord free.

A blue stone shot through with green glass gleamed from the end of the cord. As it dangled there, shimmering in the light, Nev remembered what Matild had said about the woman buying it as a good luck charm for her son.

He imagined this scene as it had played out here, some desperate family trying to save their child from harm. The soldiers drawing the boy away, the father dying, or already dead, the mother wounded, clutching at her boy, her fingers tangling in the pendant hanging from his neck. The soldiers yanking the boy away, and the pendant, there, curled up in her palm, all she could save of her child.

"Nev?"

He let out his breath. He hadn't realized he'd been holding it.

"That it?" Mez said.

"Yes. Thank you." He knotted the broken cord and hung the stone around his own neck. It felt warm against his skin. It had been so many decades since he parted from it; he expected to feel some jolt of power, a tingling of recognition. But there was nothing. It was just a stone. Until it was needed.

"Well, let's cover them back up." Mez rolled the woman back into the shallow grave and began heaping dirt over her again.

After a moment more, Nev helped her. In half an hour, the bodies were covered again, leaving Nev and Mez filthy and breathless, sweat pouring down their bodies.

“Guess that’s it,” Mez said.

“I guess so.”

“What’ll you do next? Go creep back to a hole somewhere?”

He pressed his fingers to the stone beneath his tunic. As long as the stone existed, they could come back for him. He could live, yes, it was true. But he would be theirs. Always theirs. What was he really, now that the war was over and he’d fled the guild that had once shielded him and his kind from the obliteration of their immortal souls? What was he, but a corpse soldier running away from the same fate that dogged them all, mothers and children. He closed his eyes, and remembered Matild’s singing.

Nev took the stone from his neck and dug into the alpaca’s saddle bags. He had kept a few chunks of volcanic glass there, sewn into the bottom, just in case. Now he took them out and lay a flat piece on the ground. Put his soul stone on top of it.

“What are you doing?” Mez said.

“Making sure they never find me. Making sure they never use me again.”

He brought down the hunk of glass in his hand. Smashed the soul stone.

It shattered into half a dozen fragments. They scattered, bits and pieces lost in the uneven terrain of the field.

“Shit!” Mez said. “Are you…wait, you’re still alive?”

“Yes.” He smeared the dust of the stone between his fingers. “But there’s nowhere my soul can go but a body now. No stone. No other way to bring me back.”

She shivered. “Yeah, well, if you get sick, don’t come near me. I’m not some extra body.”

He met her look. Nodded. Stood. Nev took the alpaca’s lead and started down into Fortezia.

“Where you going?” Mez stood outlined in the afternoon light, her black silhouette large and beautiful in the heat.

“I’m going to find the boy,” Nev said. “I’m going to bring him back.”

“He could be dead.”

“No. He’s useful to them. They will keep him alive as long as possible.”

“That could take you far from here! The wizard conclave is a thousand miles south of here. You know it gets cold down there! What will I tell my grandmother?”

“You fulfilled your part.”

Mez came down after him, huffing. She came up to the alpaca’s other side, put her hand on the alpaca’s neck. “Hey, listen, you hired me to find a thing *and* a person. I’ll go with you.”

“We’ve established I work better alone.”

“So do I. But what else am *I* going to do, just go back to that tavern and get drunk?”

“You have exactly one life,” he said. “You spend it any way you please.”

“I’m going with you.”

He shrugged, and did not look at her. To look would be to remember how she came after him after he left her. To look would be to think how much she looked like Matild. To look would be to know what she would look like when she was old. To look would be to imagine how she would look when he put her body into the ground or under the torch. The little smirk. The long lashes.

“You must give her a name,” Mez said as they walked down and down into the widening valley. The alpaca hummed, as if in agreement.

“Now you outnumber me,” he said.

Mez scratched at the alpaca’s ears. “See? Listen to her. She has a great little voice. Call her Matild.”

Matild, Nev thought, the little girl who saved me.

“All right,” he said, “but don’t tell your grandmother that.”

“Lips are sealed,” Mez said, and whooped.

Nev kept his gaze on the blue, blue sky ahead.

Warhosts

by YOON HA LEE

PUBLISHED IN JUNE 2019 (ISSUE 109) | 4990 WORDS

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The Warhosts sit in the lees of the starships while the sky grows less flushed with dawn, playing cards. At the same time, the regulators within the Red emissary and our own play their own game across a moist medium of flesh, chemical brew, and stench to determine where the next battle will be fought. We—the Purples—have been fighting the Reds for possession of this moon, jigsaw piece by slow jigsaw piece, as deliberately as a pavane or carved ice. The Reds have grown increasingly desperate. The moon has a certain strategic importance, and the Reds are very close to having to cede it entirely.

The lone Red negotiator is a two, like all of our own: bipedal, bilaterally symmetric, upright-standing except when it isn't, with a round head and forward-facing eyes. It sits half in the puddle-brew with its arms awkwardly folded to keep its defensive weapon inserts out of the damp. Slime creeps through the slats in its armor plates, a plaque of particulate silver tendrils forming and unforming against the sores in its skin. Its mouth hangs open and it pants lowly, rapidly. It has no escort, but that's normal. Across from it, our representative is in similar state—although we design our diplomats

with no weapons modifications, only soft open hands and hardened hides and sad, downward-slanting eyes from which pink-tinged water seeps.

Crouching inside the nervous system of one of the watching Warhosts, a scout unit, I recognize the vocalizations that the Red negotiator is making, our diplomat's rigid posture. Both are expressing pain. It is my task to understand the twos' cultural peculiarities, a largely ceremonial function nowadays. In the early times, when we were still learning to modify the twos so we could ride them into battle, we understood how to install the puppet strings but not the elegance of the violent ballets that could then arise. The protocols have since been laid out in treaties, in mutual accords of honorable behavior, after we overtook the twos' civilizations and used their starships to travel outward. It has been a long time since they last changed in response to some rupture of fashion or necessity.

The Warhosts' game is less subtle than what passes between the negotiator's and diplomat's regulators, but I find it quaintly beautiful. Aesthetics is a disease of the obsolete, but it does no harm.

Not all of our Warhosts have hands suitable for gripping. Those that do sit in a circle on the pebbled ground, four of them. The tallest one shuffles cards made of thin plastic.

There are pictures on the cards, because twos like pictures. The pictures have names. Ace of Havoc, with its hooks and hells and

disintegrating towers. The Five of Quills, which shows birds chasing each other in an elemental pentagram. The Red Mask and the Purple Mask. The rules do not distinguish between the two, although some Warhosts make one superstitious warding gesture toward one and another toward the other.

The Warhosts play for chips, sometimes pried loose from silicon palaces, sometimes scorched from metal with the corners wrenched up. Blood is occasionally involved, small rituals of scarification, atrocities of tenderness. My scout has a meandering narrative of such scars along its arm and down its back, making shackle shapes to either side of its knobbled spine. It isn't playing today, because it has too few chips, or perhaps because it is preoccupied by negotiations taking place in a language it can't access.

(Well. It could have put its hand in the sludge, but all it would have gotten for its trouble was a lingering ugly chemical burn, and maybe some stings from the silver filaments.)

I don't watch the winners in these games. Rather, I watch the losers. By this I mean that I am a circuit of poison impulses and insectine metal particles interpreting the story funneling through the Warhost's eye and nerve and brain. The regulators watch, too, but they are less concerned with the twos' harmless quirks during downtime and more concerned with making sure they are fully battle operational.

The dealer is done shuffling. It deals the cards facedown. Small vortices whirl away from each card as it lands, drawn inexorably to the pool where the diplomat and negotiator are still connected by an integument of ooze. Even the game knows its true masters.

The Warhosts converse among themselves in their language of vibrations. My scout hums to itself. Music is another pastime we don't regulate.

The cards go around and are revealed to the clink of chips. The Rocketeer, a Warhost with an asymmetrical protective tusk-growth of bone and metal where it had once had half its jaw, wins with a hand of two pair, knights high. Knight of Havoc and Knight of Wheels. The Rocketeer's mouth pulls down grotesquely as it sweeps the chips toward itself.

I watch as the game winds on. The Rocketeer doesn't end with the most chips, although everyone counts to be sure, because it's nearly a tie. In a way, it doesn't matter. The chips are just a way of passing numbers back and forth, an exchange of pleasantries.

The pool makes a horrible slurping noise, and silver tendrils spider out of it, dividing neatly down the middle like a parade maneuver. Half of them clamber up the frowning Red representative, some dissolving upon contact with the sores so they can be absorbed. Half of them withdraw into our diplomat. They have come to an agreement as to what battle would be fought, although the Red does not appear pleased with the outcome.

Warhosts use their game for augury, to find out who will and won't be obliged to fight in these contests. Nobody keeps any scientific record of the auguries' effectiveness, but that isn't the point. The point is to provide a focus for their anxieties. The Knight of Havoc and Knight of Wheels, for instance: They interpret the cards to mean that there will be a reversal on the battlefield, an upsetting of the usual order; if not this fight, then the next. With such untidy interpretations, it's difficult ever to be wrong.

The regulators drive my scout (more their scout than mine, naturally) to the pool, where orders linger as a scummy green-silver residue. We step in to the knee, and the knowledge of the orders needles all the way through our pores and up through the body's strata to the brain: We are among those to fight, cards or no cards.

• • • •

This is a story the twos tell among themselves, furtively, when the shadows grow long and the wind is a low moan.

Once upon a time, there was a fortress made of polished hegemonies and hierarchical crenellations. In the fortress lived a young woman who dreamt bullet dreams. The fortress came to be under siege; there is not much point in building a fortress if it guards a place that no one cares about attacking, after all. Holes opened in the sky and fire the color of blasphemy rained down. Shells of black dysfunction battered the sloping walls. Thunder, threnody, roses of new blood and newly charred bones.

This is the game the invaders played; this is the maze their weapons made. Each time their weapons hit the fortress, the walls and cracks and crevices shifted and crumpled. People perished inside without ever knowing the names of their killers. None of the far-eyes orbiting overhead and none of the distance-listeners warned the fortress's commanders. None of them gave any glimpse of what was going on.

But a woman, whose name no one can pronounce anymore, heard the drumming and the damage and the whole unsteady structure of massacre. She had no gun or knife or ammunition. She did, however, know where to run: toward a weapon and not toward safety. Safety didn't exist except as the jaws to something worse, anyway.

Deep in the bowels of the fortress were weapons its masters had considered to be fossilized past any usefulness, ancient of years. Among those weapons was a Warhost, armor of sullen metal, itself welded with weapons meant for the ugly business of cutting and shooting and lancing. A two itself in form—bilaterally symmetric except for its own weapons, upright-walking—it was designed to be piloted by a two. And the woman was a two.

The Warhost opened to her not like a flower, or a shell, but like a clangor of silence, layer by layer, swallowing her into anachronistic magnificence. In most of the variants of the story, she promised vengeance for her family. In most of *those* variants, her family died not years beforehand, of carbon monoxide plague or paranoia

tumors or simply falling down the stairs, but during the attack. It's unlikely that she managed anything more than a scream when she first entered the cockpit, or a shredded exhalation. The Warhost's designers had no care for forms of expression other than violence.

Although the woman had grown up in a fortress and watched the soldiers at their drill every day since she was a child, this experience had little to do with her mode of fighting. She knew the library of the Warhost's maneuvers the way she knew how to blink or breathe. It spoke to her at the level of dreams. She arrowed her way out of the fortress's debris and its shredded histories, and flew (the accounts are clear that she flew, improbable as it sounds) a trajectory toward the invaders' cloudship. Like a hammer, she yearned for the hearts of her enemies.

The cloud soldiers had no intention of letting this interloper get close enough to spoil their victory. It wasn't that they mistook her sensor signature for that of one of their laggard units, or that their general was unconscionably slow in ending her dinner of confits and candied fruits with one of her lovers, or that there was a critical failure in the missile launch system at the wrong time. No: All their defenses evaporated like soft mist before the woman's onslaught.

The remarkable thing about this story is not the fortress, or the Warhost, or the woman's luck, for all that it's rare that amateurs show that kind of spontaneous ability. The remarkable thing is that the twos, with their primitive, self-defeating societies, their tendency to gnaw each other red given the smallest opportunity for mutual

backstabbing, conceived of themselves as the riders and not the ridden.

• • • •

It’s not about diagnosis. We know the syndrome.

Twos are architectural creatures. They build compulsively, even in childhood. Teetering cabins of twigs, mounds of wet sand with fingermarks pressed into their sides, piles of dice and houses of cards. From there they progress to sky-kissing arcologies and ships that knife the sea and bridges lanterned day and night by falcon trains. Even from the placid black sky, beyond the atmosphere’s scarf, you can see the glowing spider-tracks of their cities.

This is missing half the story. Twos also build in the opposite direction. Instead of building *ever larger*, they also build *ever smaller*. We don’t think they realized early enough what this would lead to.

We didn’t learn to build *ever smaller* from them, although certainly there are scales ever smaller to explore. Fault the twos for other things. From them we learned to build *ever larger*.

We alter their inner cavities and install dart launchers, change their tolerances for heat, weave into their flesh circulatory systems that carry pale coolant. With access to certain minerals and metals, we can cause them to grow weapon excrescences from their hands and out of their bones, knife spurs and gun fists; fill the aching

magazines with copious ammunition. If they cannot see far enough, or near enough, or into the correct part of the electromagnetic spectrum, we alter their eyes cell by cell until they match our specifications.

Not that this comes without price. The resulting chemical brews have to be managed by the regulators. The twos thus modified walk around with stinking open sores for easy access; we have to concoct medications to manage the risk of infection. Sometimes their arms or legs split from the strain, bone giving way to pulped marrow; or metal shreds its way out of muscle and ligament; or their eyes bleed black from the corners.

Nevertheless, the modified twos are our Warhosts and our weapons of choice. In this time and place, this is the honorable way to face our opponents.

The twos, who inadvertently taught us their folktales of knights and heroic Warhost pilots, would understand that much if we ever asked them, but the regulators have limited interest in old stories. Even if there were some way of spanning the difference in scale and outlook, I would know better than to bring the topic up anyway.

• • • •

The Reds and Purples are to fight in teams this time. Theirs has five Warhosts, ours eight, in concession to the fact that we have chosen to field more lightly armed units.

I am no strategist, no interpreter of maps or maker of plans. Other intelligences in the network of regulators are responsible for determining where we are to deploy, or why this ridge offers better protection than the other one, or how we are to equip ourselves for a land of black-green swamp. For instance, there is a great deal of concern about footwear. The twos have delicate feet, prone to rotting, and the water here is not just water, but exhales corrosive vapors that degrade the protective hide we have them grow. We could improve their feet, but the twos can only endure so many modifications, and the weapons modifications usually take priority. However, we have a reasonable supply of twos for future battles.

Today, I observe as our eight drill together. My host is a veteran unit that will keep fighting until its internals rupture or its lungs are scorched gray-white. It has been the team leader's second for the last six matches, and it could have been the leader itself if not for the fact that a cancerous growth, an unintended side effect of the bone plates meant to shield its throat, destroyed its voice.

The first engagements between teams of Warhosts were, according to our historians, ugly and botched. The twos have a certain understanding of coordination, but they require a great deal of explicit drill for this to manifest. In all fairness, our networks, too, require training to react as we desire them to. It's ironic that the twos programmed these methods into us so we could tunnel into them and make better use of their bodies.

For a long time, the Reds and Purples fought in one-on-one duels. During those matches, we tested combinations of weapons as scientifically as we could. We shifted to team fights not because the one-on-one duels were inadequate for the purpose, but because of a change in fashion. We had tired of the duels and desired a new challenge. The change took place practically overnight, the consensus propagated from world to world.

The eight Warhosts are now marching in drummers' unison. The leader must already be in pain, because some of the torso armor growths are bleeding around the edges, but it makes no noise. The regulators will be compensating by inducing a flood of painkillers. In times past, I have been involved in similar control measures and repair work. It's a welcome art, the regrowth of plated cells and vessels, the rerouting of functions from one damaged implant to a backup system. I miss it sometimes.

The twos tell their own stories of these engagements, necessarily imperfect without the precise recording of internal states. But there is poetry to their war-chants, their riddles, their sardonic ballads. Some of their accounts exaggerate the achievements of one or two flamboyant leaders or, just as likely, a disregarded fighter whose ingenuity turns the situation around. My favorite is the one about the Warhost whose close attention to birds and their songs enabled it to realize that the birdcalls they were hearing were in fact enemy signals. A small part of me was embedded in a bird-scout once, in

the very early days before they were banned as being unsporting. The nostalgia is ridiculous, but I cannot help it.

There are other stories. The nations of twos that we recruit from recount tales of bands fighting mythical creatures called dragonmotes. The dragonmotes are exactly what their name implies: serpentines composed of tiny, interlocking component dragonlings, with no internal skeleton and no blood. They are ferocious, and kill with the natural talents of fire and metal conjoined. Naturally, the twos outwit them readily. The symbolism doesn't need further elucidation.

The Warhosts are too disciplined during training to mutter among themselves, although this is also a matter of the regulators inhibiting unnecessary loquacity. My unit is attentive to the beauty of the swamp: the way the light glistens on the murky water, the brightly spotted amphibians that leap from leaf to leaf, the scaly fliers that spear the amphibians with their long beaks and make harsh cries like scraping rock. The splashing of the water that will slowly destroy their feet, and the footprints invisible beneath.

The hardest part for the Warhosts, because of the twos' inherent frailty, is when they disperse. They would rather huddle together, even though this makes them more vulnerable to attack. We struggled with this tendency until some regulator hit upon the solution of giving them equipment to communicate with each other (as opposed to the existing communication between regulators in different Warhosts).

The Warhosts' reverie goes by different names in their various languages. We monitor the connection, although it is not so much a channel for seditious longings as a tangle of symbols given force by unsinewed dreams. In effect, we walk through three spaces simultaneously: the swamp itself; the regulators' diagrammed plans and topologies of their tactics; and the reverie's ever-shifting mire.

We lost and won and lost a great many fights, both us and the Reds, before we understood that we had to join combat on all three levels simultaneously, and that leaving one battleground undefended could jeopardize progress in the other two. This is the reason my profession, recording the twos' whispers and warbles, returned to respectability after years of neglect.

• • • •

Here is another of the twos' stories.

Once upon a time, a puppet hatched in the deep fissures of the twos' castle-womb. The puppet had been shaped in imitation of the fours that roamed the world. This offended the upright general who ruled the castle-womb. He said: We are meant to live for the twos in the world, and die for the twos, the duality of day and night, the binary of the full chalice and the empty hand. Twos were warriors; fours had fallen out of fashion. And he ordered that the puppet be burned.

However, a surgeon of the twos saw in the puppet's bleak eyes the seedling desire to survive, and she was moved. She bribed the keepers of the castle-womb with drugs terrible and intoxicating, leaving them wrapped in dreams of black, wild skies and flight and planets plunging past, of empires and expiry and armies holding fast, of victories against enemies reduced to ciphers of bodiless eyes. And she gathered up the puppet and took it to her operating room.

The room was the color of purged steel, and the walls and ceiling looked with mirror eyes upon the puppet child. The surgeon broke the puppet child's limbs, unchambered its joints, and strapped it wailing to a table of polished regrets. Then she began the tedious, necessary, loving work of carving up the child's ligatures and refastening its strings so that it could be a proper two instead of a four.

No one interrupted the surgeon. There was no reason why anyone should. For one thing, she was highly respected and not regarded as one given to whimsy. For another, no one imagined that she would defy the general's wishes, even in so small a matter as this. They were not friends, but they had the necessary mutual respect proper to their stations. As for the castle-womb's keepers, theirs was not a well-regarded job. It was sordid, although not unexpected, that they should suffer lapses from time to time.

The puppet child screamed in the only language it knew, in syllables cleanly articulated and made of angled phonemes. The

castle’s inhabitants, inured to the unanesthesized sounds of suffering, took no notice. The surgeon sang a lullaby as she worked, although it could scarcely be heard over the screams.

When she was done, the surgeon left the puppet bound to the table and sent a servant for the general. The general came a scant hour later, leaning heavily upon his war scepter. He looked down at the mutilated child. “What have you done?” he asked softly.

“You are so concerned with the principle of duality,” the surgeon said. “Look. I have given it to you.” She cut the straps with her scalpel, which was sharper than whiplash scorn, darker than hope unborn. “Look.” She struck the puppet once, twice, and it cringed away from the blows.

“I’m watching,” the general said in a voice that suggested that he had his doubts.

She repeated the exercise. This time the puppet stumbled on two legs, not four, crouched and trembling.

“I see,” the general said, and this time his voice said that he did.

“So tell me,” the surgeon said, “is this acceptable?”

The general smiled at her, then, and his smile was like the moon slivering black. “So tell me,” he said, only slightly mocking, “can you do this with other anomalies, or is your surgical expertise limited to puppets?”

Within a scant few generations, nothing moved upon this world that was not a two.

• • • •

The march to the battleground is long. I listen to the fliers' rattling cries, to the wind skittering through the branches of the shroudtrees, to the intermittent splash and patter of the rain. Sometimes there are paths built upon the mire, tottering structures of ropy fibers braided together by hands now rotted nameless.

The Warhosts have designations to us, and names among themselves: a subtle distinction. Mine is telling the team leader about the mountain it sees far in the distance, wrapped in swollen purple clouds. As we approach the mountain in the reverie, its peak grows to resemble a dragon's head.

One of the units murmurs a story of a six-legged dragon, terrible of mien, and the six corpse-riders it bore into battle against the twos. There is no mountain, dragon-headed or otherwise, in the real-world arena. Perhaps it is simply that we are not imaginative enough to see dragons in dragonless spaces.

I am not sure which Warhost originated this nucleus of dragons. There are competing dragon-myths, including the common ones about hostile dragonmotes and the less common ones, older in origin, about benevolent dragon deities, spirits of rain and storm

and ocean unchained. Maybe it has to do with the clouds, with the persistent, seething humidity. An incarnation of discomfort.

Today the Warhosts seem neither to regard the dragon-manifestations as trophies to be slain nor as deities to be propitiated. Instead, the hosts are concerned with going unnoticed. I remember another engagement where they believed that they traveled across a slumbering dragon's spine, and had to drill holes into it, drive spikes into the holes, to keep it from waking and rousing the earth with rocket thunder and mortar fire. That's not what they're doing this time.

One of the regulators within this Warhost queries me directly about the reverie, attention I haven't received in some time. Presumably whatever I say will be conveyed to the rest of the team, so I had better not waste its time. Unfortunately, I have no magic answers. All I can tell it is what I have told myself, recursive riddles, dragons within dragons. I do, however, offer to walk the reverie myself as a two, and it accepts this as distasteful but necessary.

While I put together my reverie-puppet, the Warhost slaps at a whining sound. Its reflexes, already damaged by its current set of modifications, are not good enough. Whatever it tried to slap has escaped. A red welt rises on the back of its right arm. The welt itches, although at least the Warhost doesn't scratch.

I am bothered by this, even though the twos have a history of being irritable about pests, harmless or otherwise. But the regulators must

think it of no consequence, and for my part, I have other matters to attend to.

• • • •

We have reached the battleground. The Warhosts have been patrolling it in lonely, irregular arcs. It continues to rain in sizzling bursts, never for long, but the clinging moisture makes the host huddle in on itself in wordless misery.

I hear the buzzing of insects. One of the regulators has induced the secretion of a waxy, foul-smelling chemical mixture to ward away the insects and soothe the welts. Some success on the second count, very little on the first. The insects are swift and elusive, night-fliers with a talent for stealth. I'm only surprised there aren't more of them, given the environment.

The Warhost continues to cringe from the specters of six-dragons. They are everywhere now: cloudshadows stamped waveringly across the dim waters, claw marks across the hunched trees. Dragon silhouettes rearing in the distance, their sibilant voices threading through the breath of evening. Drums to which dragons recite their prophecies in orderly hexameter.

In the reverie, a new story emerges. Dragons eat the world's subterranean foundations, chewing open rock and fire and root. The holes are small to the point of invisibility, yet they make the world porous, a sponge to absorb the poison influences that filter through

the void from other worlds. Little by little, the world will become infused with coagulating radiation until it can no longer sustain life.

The twos are good at numeration when they care to be, but they don't seem to care that I have joined their number. I have built myself out of scraps of sinew, layering them over a perfect armature of unhollow bones, and covering that with rough brown skin. In form, I am more like the Warhosts' ancestors than they are themselves. This is deliberate: I wish to see as they see, not as we would have them see.

Unfortunately, journeying through the reverie is not so simple as that. I know the movement-patterns of walking, of running, of stumbling through thick mud, but it is another to think as the Warhosts think, no matter how attentively I listen to their legend-weaving.

There's another problem, which I am faintly aware of as I wrestle with the difficulty of seeing dragons' whiskered visages in hillsides and dragons' lantern eyes in foxfire. The Warhosts, for their part, seem entirely unaware of the regulators' dismay: In all this time, we have seen no trace of the enemy.

• • • •

You expect a third tale of twos. There is no third tale except, perhaps, to the extent that this embedding narrative is it.

Beware the dragons, I tell the regulators. In the reverie, I have acclimated to my two-form. I march with rotting feet, use callused hands to shade my eyes from sunlight glaring from the black waters. I can hear the dragons gnawing punctures into our carefully planned contests.

The regulators seek dragons outside the reverie. *Sixes*, they say. They have figured it out, but it's too late for us, although perhaps not for the rest of the Purples.

• • • •

It's not that we weren't warned. It's that we didn't understand the warning early enough.

Ten days have passed, and another ten. That is almost certainly because the Reds have decided to change the terms of the fight. We've encountered the opposing team, but it took a form that we had not expected, because we assumed that tradition would take care of the details. If only we had understood how desperate the Reds are for this moon—but our comrades upon other worlds will have to compensate for our failure.

The welts and their associated discomfort are no longer the issue. My Warhost has stopped walking. Earlier, the regulators forced it to seek higher ground, toward a shelf of rock away from the waters. Then, before its strength gave out entirely, it built itself a shelter of

fabric and fallen shroudtree limbs. It lies there now, shivering, feverish, unresponsive even to our attempts to feed it.

Our communications with the other members of the team, too, are slashed through with riddles of static, increasingly unsolvable.

Five Red Warhosts descend, buzzing and droning their own hexameter riddle. They are sixes, with dark chitin, iridescent and veined with silica-pale patterns. They are much smaller than the twos—the largest is the size of a two's hand, and the rest are not even that big—and they have wings and curling querulous antennae. They settle on my Warhost's exposed, ulcerated skin. Their weight is almost imperceptible, a caress of tiny shuddering feet.

The Warhost is already dying of the toxins generated by the sixes' bites. Now the Reds with their new mounts are injecting motes of disease, some of which are able to disrupt our own functioning. Some of them have extended ovipositors heavy with eggs, whose young will no doubt chew the Warhost's carcass into a blossoming of the sixes' larvae. The regulators are attempting to build a chemical bridge of surrender so they can renegotiate the battle. But it's too late for this host.

We have lost this moon, although there will be other moons. I record the defeat as it takes place. As the sixes transfix me in the reverie, I wonder what folktale the history will be maimed into after I am gone.

The Blur in the Corner of Your Eye

BY SARAH PINSKER

It was a nice enough cabin, if Zanna ignored the dead wasps. Their bodies were in the bedroom, all over the quilt and the floor, so she'd sleep in the living room until they ascertained whether there was a live wasp problem as well as a dead one. If she ignored the wasps, it was lovely.

She'd have to ignore the tiny dead mouse in the ominously large trap in the kitchen, too. If they swept mouse and trap into one of the black trash bags she found under the sink, and ignored the bulk package of rat traps, and ignored the bulk rat poison, and celebrated the wasp spray, everything was good.

The bucket in the main room's corner held a few inches of brackish water. The discolored spot above it was shaped like a long-tailed comet, and probably wouldn't present a problem unless it rained. An astringent lemon-scented cleaner just about covered the delicate undertones of mildew that permeated the walls.

"This place sucks," said Shar.

Shar, her childhood friend, her assistant of who knew how many years, who had always been impervious to magical thinking. Shar, who was right.

"Um, you booked it," Zanna pointed out.

"These aren't usually the things they list under 'amenities.' You said to find someplace cheap and remote, with no Wi-Fi."

True enough. Cheap, because Zanna was between royalty checks. Remote, because she couldn't have any distractions if she was going to finish this book on deadline. No Wi-Fi, ditto. All she needed was power, since her laptop battery no longer held a charge.

She smiled. "It's perfect. I'll push that little table under the window. The view is what counts, anyway."

Shar returned her smile. "Whew. Okay. You get settled, and I'll see what I can do about the wildlife."

That worked. Zanna went out to the car for her bag. It didn't roll well in the dirt, and she let it bang on the three steps to the porch, rather than bothering to lift it. She paused to appreciate the view: below her, the mountainside spread in a dappled blanket of red and gold. There were other houses along the road—they'd stopped at the owner's on the way past to get the keys—but none were visible from here. Perfect.

She parked her bag inside the door. No point in moving it further until she knew which room she'd be sleeping in. The couch was more of a daybed, so she'd be fine with that option. The small writing table—she already thought of it as a writing table—looked solid, old. She felt the years in it. The chair looked a little hard for her taste, but she'd brought a cushion and a lumbar support for that contingency. This wasn't her first rodeo or her first cabin, and these weren't her first wasps or her first mice. If she'd wanted something less rustic, she would have said so, and Shar would have booked Posh Retreat rather than Wasp Hotel. This was what she needed: no distractions, no comforts, just a desk and a chair and a window.

Out and back again for the milkcrate of research books. Shar had found a broom to sweep away the dead wasps; she'd already disappeared the mouse. Zanna didn't know what she'd done to deserve an assistant who disposed of dead things for her.

The fridge smelled okay, a small blessing. There was nothing in it but an open box of baking soda.

"Make me a list and I'll go shopping for you while you write this afternoon." Shar stood in the doorway, tying off a trash bag.

"Is there a microwave?"

"I saw one somewhere. Hang on."

Zanna stood aside and let Shar rummage in the cabinets. She pulled out a drip coffee maker from a drawer, and a pack of filters. "Hmm…"

Shar left the kitchen and returned a minute later with a small microwave. "It was in the broom closet."

They both had to stand sideways for Shar to put the microwave on the counter. She smelled like cumin, never Zanna's favorite scent. Zanna rummaged in the drawers until she found a torn envelope. She wrote a list on the back, all the easy meals she could make without taking too much time away from her writing. Microwave dinners, mac n cheese, salad kits, eggs, cereal.

"Back in a few hours," Shar said.

They could have stopped at the grocery store on the way in, but Zanna knew this was Shar's way of giving her a head start on her work.

There was nothing for her to do here but write. Okay, or hike, or read, but those were reward activities. More importantly, there was no cell service, no internet, no television. The rental car spit gravel as it backed onto the road. She was alone.

She turned the milkcrate of books on its side on the table, so the spines faced outward. *Birds of West Virginia, Trees of West Virginia, West Virginia Wildlife, Railroad Towns, Coal Country*. She'd done all her research at home in New York, all her character-building, all her outlining, but when Shar suggested that she actually come here to do the drafting, it had felt perfect, like something she should have thought of her herself. She plugged her computer in and sat down to write.

Shar returned with four grocery bags just as Zanna started to get hungry. "You didn't put coffee or tea on the list, but I figured they were both givens."

"Bless you," said Zanna, standing to stretch and help with the bags. The kitchen wasn't big enough for them both to be in there, but if Zanna didn't unpack, she wouldn't know what had been purchased or where to find it. Shar still smelled like cumin, overwhelming in the tight quarters. Inspiration to put everything away quickly.

“How’s it going?” Shar knew her well enough to never ask in terms of word count. Instead, a generic “how’s it going” that Zanna could answer specifically if she’d written or vaguely if she’d gotten stuck.

“Got through the first chapter,” Zanna said. No need to hide behind euphemisms today. Chapter one was always easiest anyway. Reintroduce Jean Diener, reluctant detective. Find an excuse to get her to where she needed to be.

“Nice! Do you want me to make you some dinner before I leave you alone?”

“Nah. I’m going to have a snack now and write a little more. I’ll probably just graze tonight.” Zanna held up a pre-mixed chef salad in a plastic clamshell. “You can go check in to wherever you’re staying. Where are you staying?”

“Motel at the foot of the mountain. It’s dirt cheap this late in the fall, and this isn’t exactly a tourist town.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay here? You can have the bedroom, I’ll take the couch.”

“Like you were going to sleep in a bedroom full of wasps. Nah, I’m good. I don’t want to disturb you.”

“Fine, then. How can I reach you? I don’t have a single bar of reception up here.”

“I’ll check on you first thing in the morning. Or I can check if there’s a landline phone hidden here somewhere?”

“Nah. It’ll be okay. Maybe not first thing, though? If I get on a roll tonight I’m sleeping late tomorrow.”

“Check. How’s ten?”

“Perfect.”

“Anything else I can do for you? Or should I get out so you and Jean can get reacquainted?”

Zanna grinned in appreciation.

The cabin had a good writing feel. She actually made it halfway through chapter two before stopping to eat the salad. After that, she put her sheets on the couch and pulled a moth-eaten blanket from the bedroom closet, and curled up to read *Railroad Towns*. It was full of useful information, but the combination of long drive and writing had exhausted her, and she fell asleep before ten. She woke once for no reason at all, and then again to a scuttling sound that probably meant the dead mouse had friends.

She woke at 6 a.m. without an alarm. The electric baseboard heater under the window had kept the couch warm enough, but she could tell that outside her blanket, the mountain morning held a chill. She’d make coffee and breakfast, then get working. She flicked on the lamp.

Her throat felt scratchy, her chest sore like she’d been coughing, and the floorboards shot cold through her socks as she padded into the kitchen. Shar had left the coffee and filters next to the coffee machine, so she didn’t have to search for anything before she’d had coffee.

She didn’t know what she’d done to deserve Shar. She hadn’t even known she’d needed an assistant until her childhood friend had suggested it, and now she couldn’t imagine life without her. It wasn’t that she was unable to do the stuff Shar did, other than driving, just that having someone else shop and correspond and plan travel freed her to concentrate on her books. Shar had always been there for her, but formalizing the relationship had actually helped it.

She’d written forty-something novels now and they’d all been dreams to write, almost literally. Research was still a present-brain puzzle, outlining a necessary torture, but the books themselves had gotten so much easier over the years. A quiet cabin, a desk in front of a window, no distractions.

She plugged in the coffeemaker. While it gurgled, she dumped an instant oatmeal packet into a bowl from the cabinet, added some water, and stuck it in the microwave. When she hit start, there was a pop, and the power went out. The fridge still hummed, but the cabin had otherwise gone dark and quiet. Was the whole place wired on one circuit except the fridge? That meant no power for her computer, either, and no power for the baseboard heater.

Why did this kind of thing always happen before coffee? She checked all the closets and cabinets for a breaker box, but couldn’t find one, which meant it was outside. Two shoes and a jacket later, she stood behind the cabin, swearing to herself. Crawlspace. She didn’t quite remember what had freaked her out in a crawlspace when she was a kid, but she still hated them. Anything might be in there.

A baseball bat stood propped against the wall beside the tiny door. It had “Snake Stick” written on it in blue Sharpie. Whoever had labelled it had also drawn a crude cartoon demonstrating its utility. Swing them away, don’t kill them. No bloodstains on the bat.

She could wait for Shar, but she’d lose hours, and her head was already complaining about the lack of caffeine. Better to do it herself.

The half-sized door creaked when she squeezed the latch and swung it open. She waved the Snake Stick in front of her to clear cobwebs and wake any snakes snoozing inside. When nothing moved, she dug in her jacket pocket and pulled out her phone. It was useless for calls out here, but the flashlight still came in handy. She swept it around the space, which looked mostly empty. No use delaying.

She crouched and stepped in. The ceiling was a little higher than she expected, the floor a little lower; she could stand if she stooped. Something crunched like paper under her foot, and she swung the light down to find a snakeskin, at least three feet long. She shuddered.

The electrical box was beside the door, but it turned out to use fuses, not breakers. Another pan of the space showed a pile of two-by-fours, but nothing else useful. Mystery writer brain declared it a good enough place to hide bodies, but a little obvious. You’d want to dig up the dirt floor and bury them, or the odor would rise through the floorboards. Pile the lumber back over the spot you’d disturbed.

Back to the cabin, wishing she'd worn a hat, dusting cobwebs from her hair. She went through all the drawers and closets, this time looking for a fuse. A hammer and a box of nails, more rat traps, mouse poison cubes, wasp spray, garbage bags, dish soap, sponges. No fuses. Also no matches or candles, which would also have been useful. In the top kitchen drawer, a yellowed paper brochure for "RusticMountainCabins.biz," complete with grainy picture and phone number. Not that the phone number did any good here.

How far had the owner's house been? Maybe a mile or two. She could hike down and knock on his door. It would still be early, but not unreasonable, given the inconvenience of no power. There should have been a warning not to use multiple appliances at once. Or maybe that explained the microwave stashed in the broom closet. Shit.

She stuffed her hair under a hat, wrote a note explaining where she'd gone in case Shar arrived before Zanna got back, put her computer in her backpack since she didn't trust the flimsy lock on the door, and headed down the mountain. Down was steep, made trickier by the loose gravel, which skittered out from under her feet. She fell once, windmilling all her limbs to prevent the inevitable, twisting to keep from landing on her computer or her tailbone. She wound up on her left hip and elbow. The elbow got the worst of it, skinned and begraveled.

After that, she took it even slower, picking pebbles from her arm as she went. If she walked with small steps, the slope from one foot to

the other was negligible. If she put her full weight on each foot, penguin-style, she exerted sideways motion instead of downward. Jean Diener would appreciate it; the character was a retired physics professor, living in an RV which she parked in any given town just long enough to help solve whatever murder transpired, through physics and common sense.

When Zanna reached the first driveway, she realized she didn't know the house number. What had she noticed about the house, waiting for Shar to collect the keys? She closed her eyes. The owner's house was larger than her cabin, larger than this one. A steep driveway featuring a rock Shar had been afraid to drive over with a rental car. Navy blue SUV with West Virginia plates and one of those WV stickers that looked like the Wonder Woman logo. A windchime with wooden—what did you call them? Wooden knocker things. She'd have to look up the word.

Not this driveway, nor the next, but the third one had the right look. Blue SUV, windchime. Less rental-cabin-like, more home-like. Where did the difference lie? Something to do with the decor. Baskets of orange mums hanging from hooks on either side of the porch steps. The porch ran the entire front of the house, with dormant rose beds below it, trimmed low for winter. The soil was weeded and neat except for some animal tracks.

She glanced at her phone for the time: 7:33. Probably still too early to knock on a door under normal circumstances, but she wouldn't have thought twice about phoning a rental office to make this complaint. No coffee, no heat, no electricity. Possibly no shower,

depending on the type of water heater. A landlord should expect tenants to come knocking under those conditions.

The front door stood open, as did the screen, which hopefully meant the owner was awake. Zanna stepped onto the porch and knocked on the doorframe. The mat was turquoise with a picture of a llama on it.

“Hello?” She realized she didn’t know the owner’s name.

“Hello!” she called again when nobody answered.

She stuck her head in the door. There was a grid of keyrings on hooks to the right, all neatly labelled with the cabin addresses, which mystery-writer brain pointed out was an invitation to robbery. Below the grid, a mat with two muddy boots. Beside it, four coat hooks, all holding jackets in hunter’s camo; the owner had been wearing one of those when Shar had knocked the day before. That was the only glimpse of him she’d had from the car.

She yelled one more time, then turned to look where someone might have wandered to with their door open. This was far enough off the beaten path that people might leave their doors unlocked, but for someone with such a fastidious entrance to leave the screen open too struck her as odd.

It was only when she walked a few steps left along the porch that she saw the foot. A bare foot, toes up, just visible on the SUV’s far side.

“Hello?” she said again, walking around the vehicle’s massive front grill.

He wasn’t going to hello back. A middle-aged white guy lay face up, one knee crooked, like he had tripped backing away from someone or something. His head rested on a rock, though rested was an odd word; the rock was drenched in blood. His expression was the worst part: he looked terrified. Eyes and mouth open, corners of his mouth cracked.

She stooped to press two fingers to his wrist. No pulse. His skin was cooler than hers. There was gravel on his right hand, but no blood; he’d never even touched the back of his head, so he must have died instantly.

He wore sweatpants with a bloody tear at the crooked knee and another smaller hole in the seam by the crotch. No shirt, no socks, no shoes. The tattoo above his right nipple said “BREATHE” in reverse, mirror-script; a tattoo for his benefit, not others’. The knee exposed by the rip was pitted with driveway gravel, as were the soles of his feet; they were soft-looking feet for what she imagined was an outdoorsy guy. That detail made her own elbow sting, which reminded her this was real. Not a book.

A body. A real body, until recently a real person. A real person wearing pants nobody would want to die in. What did you do when you found a real body? What did Jean Diener and the people around her do when murder came calling?

She dug her phone from her pocket and was relieved to see one bar of reception. It disappeared when she lifted phone to ear, then reappeared when she peeked to see why the call wasn’t going

through. She walked a few feet onto the driveway rock and was rewarded with a more stable signal.

The woman who answered had clearly been sleeping; a yawn came through before her “911—is this a medical, fire, or police emergency?”

“I found a dead body.”

The woman swore and the line faded. Zanna shifted to the left, and the voice came back. “—Sorry, that was unprofessional. Are you sure they’re dead?”

“Yes. No pulse. I checked.”

“And are you safe yourself?”

“I think so? I have no idea, actually.” She looked around. What could have scared him badly enough to send him running from his house without putting on shoes? She hadn’t even considered that she might be in danger. She felt oddly calm.

“He looks like he hit his head.”

The woman on the line said something unintelligible, and Zanna moved closer to the SUV trying to find the signal. There were animal tracks across the hood. She stared at them as she triangulated reception.

The operator returned. “Ma’am, I asked what your name is?”

“Susan Ke—ah, Suzanna Gregory.” Calm, but flustered enough to have almost given her pen name.

“And where are you?”

That one was tricky, too. “Ah, I hate to say it, but I have no idea what road this is, and there’s no house number. I’m staying at a cabin, and I just arrived yesterday, and my assistant drove and made the arrangements… can you use my cell phone location if I turn it on?”

“That’ll take a few minutes, and it’ll only tell me which cell tower your call is routed through. Is the body at your cabin?”

“No, I took a walk. I think it’s the guy who rents the cabins, if that helps. Outside his house.”

“RusticMountainCabins.Biz, by any chance?”

“Yes!”

“Does the deceased have grey-brown hair, wavy, longish?”

She leaned over to look at him again. “Yeah.”

“Gary Carpenter. You’re on McKearney Road. Do you feel safe staying there until I send someone?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Don’t touch anything and somebody’ll be up there in thirty or forty minutes. Can I get your phone number?”

Zanna recited her number and promised to call back if the situation changed. While she still had one bar, she rang Shar. Unlike the 911 lady, Shar was instantly awake.

“I thought you didn’t have reception!”

“I didn’t. Or power. The whole cabin shorted out this morning when I tried to make coffee, so I tried flipping the breaker, only it was a blown fuse, and there were no spares, so I walked down the mountain.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. I can be resourceful, you know. I didn’t always have you in my life. But listen, that’s not why I’m calling. I’m calling because I got to the guy’s house where you got the keys, and he’s, uh, here, but he’s dead. I didn’t want you to get nervous if you got to the cabin and I wasn’t there. I left a note, but…”

“Dead?”

Zanna probably should have stopped at ‘dead’ longer. “Yeah.”

“Dead how?”

“It looks like he hit his head. There’s a lot of blood.”

“An accident?”

“It looks like.”

“Good. Well, not good, but you know what I mean. Better than some of the other options. Listen, I’m going to come get you.”

“911 lady said for me to wait here.”

“That’s fine. I’ll come wait with you. No need for you to walk all the way back up.”

She really was a great assistant. Zanna thanked her and disconnected.

In her books, Jean Diener would start investigating further. Walk into the foyer, poke around the house now, while emergency services were still far away. In real life, that seemed stupid. She didn't want her footprints added to whatever was in the house. No sense making it harder for the real detectives.

She sat on the porch and leaned her head against the railing. She would have said she'd slept well, but tiredness overtook her. Still too early; no caffeine in her system. She closed her eyes. Opened them again when she heard a vehicle on the road. The rental pulled in far to the left to skirt the driveway rock, and Shar emerged with a paper bag and a coffee.

"Bless you," Zanna said.

"I don't need blessings. Give me your backpack to toss in the car, so they don't start thinking it's evidence. Eat the muffin over the bag so you don't get crumbs on their crime scene. It's blueberry—they didn't have chocolate chip. Also, I need you to stay put when you say you're going to stay put."

"There was no power. Or coffee. You wanted me to sit there for four hours doing nothing?"

Shar sighed. "No… I… it's just now you're going to get stuck giving a statement, and maybe be considered a suspect, and you don't need things distracting from your deadline."

"A suspect?"

Shar nodded in the direction of the body. “You found him. You write detective books. Isn’t the person who found a dead body usually one of the people who has to be ruled out? You had opportunity.”

“But no motive. Well, except lack of coffee, but that hardly seems worth killing someone over.”

“You’re not going to joke about it when they ask you questions, right?”

“Right.”

“And you haven’t gone poking around by the body? Or inside that open door?”

“I’d never!” Zanna said, like the thought hadn’t occurred to her. “Okay, maybe not ‘I’d never,’ but I swear I didn’t. I went to the door, that’s all.”

Shar raised one eyebrow. “I believe you, just… when you watch them do their job, try not to make your interest look too prurient, alright?”

They sat on the porch steps, Zanna sipping a coffee made the way she liked it, two sugars, one cream. A little cool, maybe, from the twenty minute drive up the mountain, but still welcome and drinkable.

A blue-and-gold Taurus with an enormous antenna pulled into the drive, blocking Shar’s rental car in. Two cops got out, both white men, young. The tall blonde one had stubble dusting his cheeks,

and his uniform looked slept in. The dark-haired one's uniform was impeccably pressed, his shave straight-razor close.

"I'm Officer Dixon, and this is Officer Fischer. And you are?"

Zanna gave her name without stumbling over it this time, and let Shar introduce herself.

"And which of you found the body?"

"I did, Officer. Shar just arrived a couple of minutes ago to give me a ride back up the mountain when we're done talking." Zanna pointed in the direction of the vehicle. The two policemen—state, they must be beyond the bounds of the town at the bottom of the mountain—walked over to take a look, taking the long way around the SUV before disappearing behind it, to her annoyance.

She thought about the SUV. It faced the cabin, and he was on the passenger side. She hadn't seen any keys in his hands, and his pants didn't have pockets, so he hadn't been trying to drive away. Maybe to get something from the car? She looked over to see it was unlocked, or the driver's side was, anyway. This might be country enough that people didn't bother to lock, but if that was the case, why not go in through the near side?

She was back to him being frightened of something and trying to put the car between himself and—who or what? An animal? Whatever ran across the hood? A nightmare? Maybe he was a sleepwalker, or a vivid dreamer. Maybe some medication had messed him up. Or a less legal drug, like meth or some hallucinogen.

One of the policemen—Dixon—went back to the car, where she could see him on the radio, but frustratingly couldn't hear the call. Fischer had a camera out and was taking pictures of the body. Zanna sipped her coffee and tried not to look too interested, as ordered. What was the proper amount of interest? Concern with a dash of 'when can I get back to my work' seemed about right.

Dixon walked back over to the house. "Okay, obviously you were right that he's dead, so I called it in. We'll have to wait for the examiner to make it official, but I can get your statement and send you on your way. How did you come to find the body?"

Zanna explained about the coffee and the microwave and the fuse, and walking down the mountain.

"That's what, two miles?"

"I think so."

Shar interrupted. "The directions he gave me said 1.8 miles past his house, if that helps."

"Thank you," said Officer Dixon. "And what time did you arrive here?"

"7:33. I remember looking at my phone and debating if it was too early."

"And then?"

"Then I walked to the door, and it was open, door and screen, and I knocked on the frame and called inside, but nobody answered."

"—And you didn't go inside?"

“No, I didn’t.” Zanna gave Shar a pointed look.

“Did you touch anything?”

“Only the body, to feel for a pulse.”

“Oh, sorry. Let me get this in order again. You knocked and called inside, and nobody answered, and…?”

“And I turned around and then I saw his foot sticking out beside the car.”

“And you walked directly over?”

“Yes. Do you need my shoe print?”

He laughed. “I don’t think so. That loose gravel isn’t going to tell much.”

“What about to prove I wasn’t in the house?”

“Which you weren’t?”

“No.”

“Nah. You can tell me your shoe size or something if you want, but I don’t think footprints are going to tell us much. He slipped in the dark. Nothing else to tell.”

“Other than the one spot, right?” She couldn’t resist. Shar glared at her.

“What spot?”

She pointed a few feet in front of the body. “There’s a spot where the gravel’s dug away, like he was running and slipped, which makes sense with the torn knee, but then the more, uh, chaotic

patch is where he fell, like he spun around and his feet slipped out from under him, but he fell backward when he died, not forward. He had to have fallen twice."

"Uh, right. Other than that. I guess you had time to look around a little while you waited for us."

"I guess." She bit her tongue to keep from making any other observations.

"Anything else you noticed, then?"

Shar shifted on the stair, a slight movement that allowed her to dig an elbow into Zanna's arm. "Nothing else, Officer."

"Okay, then. I'll take your phone number and the address where you're staying, and you can be on your way."

"Why don't you take my number instead?" Shar said. "You won't be able to reach her up the road, and I can always go find her."

Dixon took both numbers, then walked them to their car.

"'Other than the one spot, right?'" Shar mimicked as they waited for the officer to move his car out of their way. "You couldn't resist."

"He wasn't doing his job. He thinks the guy slipped and hit his head."

"Firstly, he's highway patrol, not a detective. Secondly, he doesn't need to tell you, random lady who found the body, everything that he's noticed. Thirdly, the guy slipped and hit his head. There are no other footprints. Case closed."

“Case closed? How can the case be closed before somebody looks inside to see whether there’s any hint of what scared him?”

Shar started to reverse, then slammed on the brakes. “Shit. I forgot about that giant rock. If I back over it, we’ll leave the tailpipe behind.”

“Pull forward. You can’t turn around here.”

“How would you know? You can’t drive.”

“I’m familiar with the spatial laws of the universe. You’re going to have to do a ninety-point turn if you do it here. Just pull into the clearing so you have more space.” Zanna licked a drop of coffee off her hand.

“…spatial laws of the universe…” Shar muttered, commencing a ninety-point turn.

“…And why are you so sure he was scared, anyhow?” she continued as if there hadn’t been a pause in the conversation. “Maybe he needed something from his car, but he slipped?”

Zanna considered. “Still kind of weird to need something in such a hurry you don’t bother to put shoes on. Or a shirt, on a night that chilly. And to leave the screen swinging open. He looked like a fastidious guy.”

“A nightmare, then. Or some personal demon. A guy with a backward ‘BREATHE’ tattoo has something dark he’s getting past.”

“Sure. A nightmare. Except…” Zanna turned her coffee cup in her hands.

“Except what?”

“I don’t think they noticed the other print either.”

“What other print?”

“On the hood, the one you elbowed me before I could say. He must’ve just washed his car, because it was otherwise spotless—which is impressive given these roads—but there were tracks across the hood.”

“Tracks? Like footprints?”

“Animal tracks. Something ran through the flower beds and then across the hood of the car.”

She dug a marker from her backpack and drew on her coffee cup. “Like two lines of feet with a tail dragging between them. Across the hood, driver’s side near the headlight, to the passenger-side mirror.”

Shar glanced over. “Okay, so a lizard or a raccoon or something ran over the car. Big deal.”

“And trampled grass on his other side.”

“Zanna, you didn’t know this guy, you are not a real detective, you have a very real deadline, and you’ve lost hours of your day already. Let the police do their job.”

“Hours—Shar, turn around. We still need to get a fucking fuse.”

Shar reached into her purse and fished out a plastic bag without looking down. “Voila. Stopped at the hardware store on my way to you.”

“How did you know which size to get?”

“I didn’t. I got a whole bunch of different ones, and I can return those that are wrong.”

“Huh.”

“‘Thank you, Best Assistant Ever. You think of everything. You deserve a bonus.’”

“Thank you, Best Assistant Ever. You think of everything. If I actually finish this book and I get paid, you’re totally getting a bonus.”

They arrived back at the cabin. Shar, the Best Assistant Ever, unplugged the coffeemaker and the microwave, brandished a small flashlight with a price tag still on the base, and headed into the bowels of the cabin to replace the fuse.

Zanna sat at her writing table. She heard the crawlspace door creak, then the shudder of the fridge when the main power cut off. She went to the kitchen and rummaged through the knife drawer until she found one that looked sharper than the others, then returned with it to her workspace, not for any reason she could fully express, even to herself.

She looked out the window, the up-mountain window, with its Prismacolor trees. She pulled *West Virginia Wildlife* from her research crate, its cheesy 70s cover portraying a cougar, a bear, a coyote, a buck, and something that might have been an otter in the same riverside tableaux, and opened to the reptile chapter.

“Aha!” came from under the floorboards. A minute later, the lamp came back on, and the fridge gurgled. “Did that work?”

“Yeah,” Zanna called down.

Shar returned a moment later, running a hand through her hair for invisible cobwebs. “Maybe stick to coffee or microwave tomorrow. Do you want me to make you lunch?”

“Nah, I want to get some writing done first. Only…”

“Only what?”

“Only there are four skinks and two lizards native to this area, and none of their tracks match the tracks I saw.”

Shar looked over at Zanna’s reading material. “Maybe they’ve discovered another since 1975.”

“Maybe.”

“Any other mysteries I can solve so you can get back to writing yours?”

Zanna hesitated. She wasn’t sure if she really wanted the answer to this one. “You—you mentioned the guy’s tattoo.”

“Uh huh?”

“When did you see it? You got out of the car, came straight over to me with coffee. You couldn’t ever have seen more than his foot from where we were.”

“The day before, when we stopped for the keys.”

“He was wearing a zipped jacket when he opened the door.”

Shar crossed the room and settled on the couch. “So, what? You think I’m a suspect? Or your lizard is?”

“I have no idea what to think. These are things I noticed. They don’t make sense.”

“That’s the problem with real life. It’s too messy for fiction. Too weird. All those mysteries solved by a single hair found in a drain in fiction, or a single tire track. You’d go out of your mind trying to solve a real mystery. Not that there’s a mystery here. Just drop it. Unless there’s something else?”

“You never asked,” whispered Zanna.

“What did you say?”

“You never asked where the body was. You came and sat next to me. It would have made sense for you to assume the body was inside the house, but you never asked and you nodded in his direction even though he wasn’t visible from that side.”

“You must’ve said it on the phone.”

“I didn’t. I know I didn’t. You had to have been there earlier, seen the body or something. What the fuck, Shar?”

They stared at each other. How long had Shar been her assistant now? She couldn’t even remember, which was weird in itself, actually. “Maybe I should take a walk down the mountain again. I’ll bet those cops are still there. I can tell them what I’ve found…”

“A lizard that doesn’t exist?”

“An assistant who is lying to me.” Zanna stood. She held the kitchen knife by her side, not knowing what to do with it.

“What if I told you that you really, truly, don’t want to know the answers to your questions? That I’ve taken care of everything you’ve needed for twenty-two years, and I think I’ve earned the right to ask you to trust me.”

Twenty-two years. Zanna chewed on her lip, thinking. “I’d say I trust you if you flat-out say you didn’t murder him, but either way, you know what happened, and you’re lying to me. You’ve earned the right to ask me to trust you, but I don’t know if I can when I can see you’re not being completely honest.”

Shar lay back on the couch and put the pillow over her head. “Just once, in all these years, I’d like you to say ‘I trust you completely.’”

“What are you talking about? I’ve always trusted you. You know my bank accounts, you have my credit card, you…”

The pillow lifted. “You say that every time too, but when it comes to it, if I say ‘don’t poke at the body’ you always do. And can we skip the knife thing? You aren’t going to use it.”

Zanna looked down. The knife looked oddly familiar in her hand, like she had written this scene. She had a thousand questions and didn’t even know which one to ask.

She tried to keep the panic out of her voice. “How are ‘always’ and ‘don’t poke at the body’ in the same sentence? When has this ever happened before?”

Shar propped herself on her elbow. “Tell me about writing your last book.”

“*The Mosquitoland Murders*? We flew into Minneapolis and rented an old house in the woods a few hours away.”

“The actual writing. Do you remember anything of the time we spent there?”

Zanna considered, then shook her head. “No. I never remember the big drafting binges. It’s a shame. We pick these beautiful places, and then it all passes by in a blur.”

“Okay. How about your first book? Do you remember your first book?”

“Of course. *Campsite 49*.”

“Not the first book you sold—the first book you wrote.”

“It was horror, I guess. Dark fantasy, something like that. *The Blur in the Corner of Your Eye*. There was a creature.”

“Do you remember anything else?”

“God, I was only a teen. The creature laid eggs in people.”

“And why did it get rejected?”

“They said it didn’t ring true as fiction. Too messy and weird. Derivative. I never figured out how to fix it, and then I wrote *Campsite 49*, and now I’m a mystery writer instead of a horror writer. What are all these questions?”

“One more: what did you eat for dinner last night?”

“I ate—um… I don’t know. I guess I was caught up in writing, but I’m pretty sure I ate something.”

“Salad. You had a salad. How far did you get on the book yesterday?”

That seemed to Zanna like something she should remember, but she didn’t. “Fine. Shar, what’s the point of all this?”

“I’m going to tell you something, and you’re not going to believe me.”

“I thought we did that already at the start of this conversation.”

“We did, but this is something else.” Shar paused, sighed. “There’s this… thing. Like in *The Blur in the Corner of Your Eye*, okay?”

“A thing?”

“A creature. Let’s say those prints you found belong to something, only it isn’t in your book because it isn’t native to this area. It hitches a ride.”

“Hitches a ride?”

“Yeah. Can you stop repeating me for a sec? You’ll get it, I promise. So there’s this thing, and like you said, it lays eggs. It does it while the person is asleep, and then the eggs incubate, and the first one that hatches eats the other eggs.”

“And then it eats through the person and runs away into the world. I know. I wrote this book, remember?”

“No! You wrote it wrong. It doesn’t eat through the person. It hides in their body, dormant, until it has to lay its own eggs.”

“How could I write my own book wrong?”

“I don’t know. You forgot. You always forget.”

“I still don’t get what you want me to do with this story. I don’t write horror anymore. Why don’t you write it?”

“It’s not a story, Zanna. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Did you wake up with a sore throat this morning? Your lungs sore, though you don’t remember coughing?”

Zanna shrugged. It had only been a few hours, but it felt like ages ago.

“I hate when you make me do this the hard way,” Shar muttered. “You always make me do it the hard way.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a baggie of brown powder. “Here, put a pinch of this on your tongue.”

Zanna turned her head away.

“Come on, smell it. It’s cumin.”

“I hate cumin.”

“You two have that in common. Come on, I need you to do this. A small pinch.”

Zanna didn’t see a way out of it, since she was stuck in a room with someone whose reasonable tone belied the deeply weird things she was saying. She swallowed a pinch of cumin, then coughed. A second later, the coughing grew deeper, like the powder had gotten into her lungs. Then something stranger, like claws inside her chest.

She gagged, and heaved something up. It helped itself along the way, tearing at her teeth and gums even as she opened her mouth.

The thing that skittered out of her was not a lizard or a skink. It had too many legs, and the middle track hadn't been a tail, it was a long face with a proboscis that touched the ground and it had no eyes and too much skin, slimy, black, loose, and it was so fast, just a blur. It skittered under the couch, and Zanna remembered the sound from the middle of the night. Her mind started to lose both that memory and the memory of what the thing looked like even as it disappeared from her view.

"What. The. Fuck." The words hurt.

"You never believe me until I show you."

She held the knife out to Shar. "Kill it!"

Shar waved her off. "Oh, trust me, we've both tried. Burning, shooting, stabbing, drowning. It has a very strong will to live."

"What was it doing inside me?"

"It lives there. You're its host. I don't think it actually does you any harm."

Zanna ran her tongue around her sore mouth, and Shar amended, "Well, it doesn't normally do you any harm. I think it anesthetizes you when it's not in a hurry. When you don't swallow a mouthful of cumin."

"Anesthetizes?"

“Yeah, so you relax, and you don’t remember it leaving or coming back. You never remember these trips at all. When you read your drafts back home you always say ‘I must have been in the zone. I don’t remember writing any of this.’”

Zanna nodded. She knew she had to ask the hard question, too. “So what’s your part in this?”

“I do what I’ve always done, since we were kids and we got stuck in the crawlspace under my dad’s house and it chose you. It got way easier when I convinced you to hire me. Find someplace remote for you to write a couple of times a year when you start showing signs. Powder myself with cumin. Try to make the closest person someone who won’t be too missed if something goes wrong, like this time. Try to keep you away from the body, which is sometimes easy and sometimes a disaster, like today.”

Zanna again had more questions than she could possibly voice. It was true, she did have lapses, but only when she was writing. Her process had always been weird like that, and two books a year had never felt difficult. She remembered everything in between books, or at least she thought she did. She again fixated on Shar’s language instead of the harder questions. “What do you mean by ‘if something goes wrong’?”

“That same secretion… they’re dozy when I get to them. I can usually scrape the eggs out of their mouths, and they never even know anything happened. Only, sometimes, something goes wrong. It gives some of them nightmares, or maybe they see it, I don’t know, and they fall down the stairs, or they attack it, or they attack

someone else, or like this guy, they run out of the house and hit their head, and I still have to scrape the eggs out so the medical examiner doesn't find anything."

"Why don't you just let them discover the eggs? Or tell someone—a doctor, a biologist?"

Shar looked horrified. "They'd never let you go. They'd have to lock you up to keep it from getting to anyone, and they'd figure out the same thing I have about it surviving everything we try to do to it. You've got contracts. Books to write. Or they'd keep me for having covered it up, and you wouldn't have me to protect you anymore."

That all made a certain amount of sense, even if it was horrible. Shar could be wrong, of course, but she was usually right. "How often does it go wrong?"

"Maybe one in five? They never connect you. Or me."

"But that's why we never go back to the same place twice?"

"Yeah. Somebody would get suspicious sooner or later. But—you believe me now?"

"Yes, I believe you. Are you sure you shouldn't kill me?"

Shar looked horrified. "I wouldn't!"

"But you've let all those other people die. One in five?"

"The eggs have never once survived. The one in you is the only one, as far as I know. Well, and whichever one laid an egg in you to begin with; I guess there must be others. I didn't mean to let anyone die, but it's better than the alternative."

“The alternative?”

“Letting any of the eggs live, or letting you kill yourself. You’ve suggested that a few times, but what if it survived? How would I find it again to try to keep people safe? You can’t do it.”

The thought had crossed Zanna’s mind. “Then what happens now? I’m not going to let that thing claw its way back down my throat.”

“You will. You’ll fall asleep tonight and it’ll find its way back. It always does. Then you’ll wake up in the morning, and you won’t remember any of this, and you’ll draft your book, and we’ll go back to the city, and you’ll read your draft and tell me you must’ve been in the zone, and then when you come up with your next book, the plot’ll hinge on a guy who ran out of his house with no shoes, and you’ll research it and I’ll find someplace remote for you to write it. Rinse and repeat.”

They were both silent a moment.

Zanna had a question she didn’t want to ask, but asked anyway. “Does it help me somehow? Is this a deal like I can’t write without it? That it helps my creativity?”

“Not as far as I know,” Shar said. “It might inspire some of your plots—okay, most of them—but I can’t see any reason for the rest. Your work ethic and prose are all yours, I’m sure.”

“That’s something at least,” Zanna said. “That would be one ugly muse.”

They were silent again. After a minute, Zanna spoke again, the only thing left to say. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“Shar?”

“Yeah?”

“You really are the best assistant. You deserve a raise.”

“You say that every time, too.”

“What if I write it down? ‘Note to self: give Shar a raise’?”

Shar cocked her head. “Y’know, I don’t think you’ve ever done that before. It’s worth a shot, if you mean it.”

“I really and sincerely mean it.” Zanna opened her computer and created a reminder for herself. A reminder that would chime at her in one month’s time, and which she’d open and look at in total surprise and have no memory of writing. Then she’d nod in agreement, even if she couldn’t remember what exactly had prompted her to set the alert (or why the second line said “believe her”) and she’d make it happen, because she would hate to lose an assistant as good as Shar.

*(**Editors’ Note:** “The Blur in the Corner of Your Eye” is read by Erika Ensign and Sarah Pinsker is interviewed by Lynne M. Thomas on the* Uncanny Magazine Podcast*, Episode 29A.)*

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