



Garth Nix
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DISLOCATION SPACE

GARTH NIX

Dislocation Space

GARTH NIX

illustration by

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The young woman was short, not quite five feet tall, and very slight, though this was disguised by her over-sized black coat with its white patch on the shoulder, her camp identity “Kh-112” indicated there in fading blue paint. Her pale blonde hair was cut very badly, very short. It looked as if it had been hacked off with a knife, because it had been.

She carried her hat, which was little more than a bundle of stitched-together rags, and her rough padded mittens were thrust through the rope she wore in place of a belt. She had not removed the ragged wraps she wore around her hands for extra warmth, nor taken off her felt boots when she had entered the HQ hut, even though it was much warmer than outside.

It was thirty below zero outside, but the sun was up and the air was still, in camp terms a beautiful winter day. In the distance, the roll call could be heard, the guards counting the prisoners by fives in their teams before they were marched out to the forestry work area.

Two guards had brought the woman in, because that was the rule with this particular prisoner. Tough Siberian men, each twice her size and weight, but even so they kept their distance and held their plaited leather goads ready, and watched the woman as if she was something swift and venomous, to be constantly observed. They did not have their submachine guns or pistols, because that was another rule with this prisoner. She was never allowed to be within a dozen paces of a firearm.

If the guards had dared, they would have shot her and been done with it. But there were a lot of special rules about Kh-112, and one of them was that she be kept ready to be presented to important visitors from Moscow, who could turn up at any time, without notice. No one knew why this was so, or what might happen if she could not be presented, or was visibly injured or evidently maltreated. Which was to say maltreated beyond the usual scarcity of food, rest, warmth, and medicine that was the baseline of camp existence.

Anyone responsible for breaking the special rules would be forced to take the prisoner's place in the camp. Even worse, there was the likelihood of collective responsibility: they might all be punished. This was not to be risked. All the guards, warders and trusties watched each other's behavior with Kh-112.

None of the camp warders were in the HQ hut, which was very unusual. An abandoned game of chess, a half-eaten loaf, and a partially chewed sausage indicated they had been there until very recently, warming themselves as usual by the well-stoked stove, and had been unceremoniously kicked out. Not even the warders would leave food behind voluntarily.

Instead of the usual guards, there was only the Major, the disciplinary officer for the women's side of the camp, who was almost unrecognizable in full uniform, complete with greatcoat, rather than her regular sheepskin coat. She too, had left her pistol behind, the holster flap at her side yawning open. But even her appearance was not the most surprising thing that day.

There was a civilian present. He still wore his thick fur coat and hat despite the heat of the room, evidently a new arrival to eastern Siberia, who did not know true cold. He was fortyish, and bald, and his eyes were weary behind his gold-framed spectacles. He sat on the only chair, looking up at Kh-112, a dossier open on his knees. Her dossier, as indicated by the faded photo pinned to the top corner.

An officer stood near the civilian, presumably of State Security, for no others ever came to the camp. But the shoulder boards on his thick, fur-collared greatcoat were a curious orange, not blue, and his rank insignia were neither of the MVD nor the Red Army. There was a large, leather suitcase by his feet and he held what at first glance looked like a small wooden crate, for oranges or perhaps lemons, but the bottom had been knocked out of it, to make it a cube open on two sides. His holster was not empty, though it was clasped shut.

The civilian spoke, his voice warm and casual, not the sharp bark of a command.

“Comrade Captain Aleksandra Vasilyevna Levchenko.”

The guards and the disciplinary officer exchanged swift, furtive glances. The zeks were never addressed as “comrade”, and most definitely never allowed any of their former ranks or titles. They were known by a

letter and a number, that was all.

The young woman did not respond. She stood easily in the centre of the room, completely still, only occasionally blinking. It was hard to tell if she was even breathing.

“Comrade Captain Aleksandra Vasilyevna Levchenko.”

“She doesn’t talk, Comrade Academician,” said the Major. “She has not spoken since she arrived here. At least not to us.”

“Has she lost her wits?” asked the civilian. He sounded anxious, even upset at this possibility.

“No, sir. She simply chooses not to talk.”

“And you allow this?” asked the strange officer.

“Kh-112 is a special prisoner, under a directive from ... the office of the General Secretary,” replied the Major, cautiously attributing the order to the office of the Great Man rather than to Stalin himself, just in case some revisionism was in play. Though the original orders bore Stalin’s signature this might be better forgotten. The visitors had arrived with a paper with that same signature, but all it had said was to obey their every instruction. “She does her work, she causes no trouble, we let her be.”

The Major did not mention the few occasions when new or particularly stupid guards had sought to evade the special directives, had not let Kh-112 be, and had suffered for it. But what was three or four deaths, or maybe five, when they had brought it on themselves?

“I see,” replied the civilian, who from the title accorded by the Major was perhaps a doctor, or a scientist of some kind. He addressed the prisoner again.

“Comrade, perhaps you can incline your head to acknowledge that you are in fact Comrade Captain Aleksandra Vasilyevna Levchenko?”

The prisoner nodded once, slowly.

“Parts of your dossier are missing or incomplete,” said the Academician. “Records have been destroyed by criminal elements. Errors have been made, including your arrest and sentence. Those responsible have been punished.”

The prisoner nodded once again, even more slowly.

“We have been looking for you for some time,” continued the civilian. “There is a great service you can do for the Motherland. Even more important than the work you have already done at Stalingrad, and Kursk, and the final battle for Berlin.”

The thinnest of smiles spread on the prisoner's mouth. Everyone present knew what was what. The State needed her for something, and so her arrest and imprisonment were suddenly mistakes. If she had not been needed there would be no talk of mistakes.

"You will be compensated for your temporary absence," continued the civilian. By "temporary absence" he meant the four years as a prisoner in the camps, first at Norilsk and now at Kolyma. "Reinstated at your rank, with full back pay."

He hesitated for a moment.

"But the work you will do ... it requires you to communicate. To talk."

"I talk if there's a need for it," said Aleksandra Levchenko, with a shrug. She spoke easily, as if among friends, drinking. "Who does Koba want me to shoot now? Someone else on the Central Committee?"

The Major made a choking noise. The guards' faces froze as if their expressions could indicate they heard nothing, knew nothing, would remember nothing. Only the Academician and the strange officer acted as if what she said was of no importance, that she should so casually call Comrade Stalin by his nickname and mention shooting members of the Politburo.

"It's not a shooting job," said the civilian. "I am ... Professor Lev Sergeyevich Termin. This is Science Investigator Ignat Vasilievich Shargei."

"Not a shooting job?" asked Aleksandra. She walked to the bench near the stove and sat down, ignoring the guards' nervous starts and the Major's hand clutching at the flap of her empty holster. She took a small, roughly stitched pouch from the top of her boot, opened it to gather a piece of newsprint and a careful pinch of tobacco, and began to roll a cigarette.

Aleksandra was, or at least had been, a killer. A sniper first and foremost, though not only that. Her official tally was 190 confirmed kills, though she had certainly killed many more people. The Germans at Stalingrad had called her *Todesgeist*, the Death Ghost, for her ability to reach impossible firing and ambush positions, squirming through rubble and ruin, climbing up chimneys and factory ducting, progressing along sewers too small for humans to pass, dragging her rifle behind her. Or sometimes just taking a knife, and picking off sentries one by one ...

Professor Termin looked at the Major and jerked his head.

"You may leave us. Take those two with you."

“Comrade Academician, are you—”

“If she wants to kill us, I doubt you or they could do anything about it,” said Termin wearily. He looked directly at Aleksandra, taking off his glasses so she could see his eyes clearly. “But I think you would do better to leave with us, don’t you, Comrade Captain?”

“I don’t know,” said Aleksandra thoughtfully. “If it’s not a shooting job, what is it? And have you anything to drink?”

Termin waited as the Major and the guards left. The officer with the strange rank of Science Investigator knelt down and opened the suitcase. He took out the bottle of vodka that rested on the pile of uniform clothes inside and tossed it over to Aleksandra. She caught it easily and smiled. A real smile this time, as she glanced at the label.

“The good stuff. And I thought Comrade Stalin had finally decided to have me shot.”

“As I said, there was an error—”

“Spare me,” spat Aleksandra. She laid her newly rolled cigarette carefully down on the bench next to her, drew the cork from the bottle with her teeth, and took a deep draught, rolling the vodka around in her mouth, her eyes half-closed in deep satisfaction. But only half-closed. Termin and Shargei noted the brilliance of those lidded eyes, still watching them, alert to their every movement.

Aleksandra set the bottle down, used the toe of her boot to swing open the stove door and lit a stick of kindling from the box at the side to ignite her cigarette.

“The job?”

“It is ... a question of access,” said Termin. “Tell me, you have been here some time. You do not seem greatly debilitated by the ... uh ... environment, but are you still able to perform your contortions?”

Aleksandra took up the bottle and had another swig of vodka, ignoring his question.

“Are you?” asked Termin again.

“Perhaps,” said Aleksandra. “That box represents the dimension of whatever I need to get through?”

She made her mouth strangely, almost obscenely, quadrilateral and blew a smoke *square* rather than a ring, and then another through the first. “A cube about thirty centimetres a side?”

“Thirty-one point one five centimetres,” said Shargei, lifting the open-

ended box like a prize exhibit, though he did not stop watching the strange smoke square drift across the room.

“Why should I do this job for you?” said Aleksandra softly, almost to herself.

Termin scratched his nose and looked at the floor. Shargei put down the box. Aleksandra watched him. She held the bottle negligently, but she could smash it on the stove in a second, slash both men’s throats ... and she wasn’t fooled by Shargei’s “Science Investigator” title.

Shargei didn’t unbutton his holster, as she’d thought he might be stupid enough to do, to threaten her directly. Instead, he reached inside his coat and removed a small buff envelope. He held it out to Aleksandra. She put the bottle down again, took another puff of her cigarette, licked her fingers to pinch it out, returned the stub to her boot-top, and then took the envelope.

There were four photographs inside. Head shots, but not Lubyanka or camp portraits.

Aleksandra’s father and mother, her older sister, and younger brother. They looked older than when she had last seen them, but not visibly hurt, injured, or terrified.

“They are not in camps, they are not prisoners, they continue to live their lives,” said Shargei. He smiled, but his eyes were cold. Whatever his shoulder boards proclaimed, Aleksandra knew him for what he was, and she received his unspoken threat as to what would happen to her family if Aleksandra did not agree to do whatever it was Shargei and Termin wanted her to do. It was the old lever, thrust into position once again. Ever reliable, to move the world, or just one person.

“Do I come back here after?” asked Aleksandra. “To finish my tenner?”

She had been sentenced to ten years in the camps, but knew it was unlikely she would ever be released. Everyone got ten or twenty-five years, but the former was notional, it simply meant “at least ten” and anyone who got twenty-five knew it was effectively a death sentence.

“Who knows?” answered Shargei. “Maybe not. And while you do the job for us, you’ll have special treatment. And your family, too.”

Again, there was an unspoken threat in his words. “And your family” echoed in Aleksandra’s mind. She had heard the phrase before from Security Service officers.

Aleksandra slid the photographs back in the envelope, and the envelope up her sleeve. This was how it worked. She could kill these two, but even if she escaped direct retribution herself, her loved ones would pay for it. Just as Aleksandra could have escaped the camp, in summer at least. But she was kept here, by fear. Not for herself, but by what would happen to her family in retribution for anything she did.

There was no escape. Little hope, save that if she could continue living, anything might happen. Like the story of Nasreddin and the Sultan's horse. Stalin might die. Aleksandra might die. Maybe she would even be set free.

"So thirty-one point one five centimetres," she said. "Put the box over by the wall."

Shargei placed the box as instructed.

"Stand over by the other wall. You too, Professor."

Aleksandra went to the door and lowered the bar. The hut had only one window, small and high up, the glass grimy with smoke. But weak sunshine streamed through it, little tainted by the grime, putting the light from the hanging lantern to shame.

"Don't get excited," said Aleksandra. "This is serious work, and I don't like gawping men."

A tiny knife fashioned from a piece of saw-blade, utterly forbidden in the camp and previously unseen, flashed in her hand. She made a groin-high cutting motion, before the knife vanished again.

"Understood," said Termin.

Shargei nodded.

Aleksandra undid her rope belt, took off her coat, jerkin, felt vest, smock and undershirt, padded trousers, and drawers and laid them in a careful heap. There was no fat on her anywhere, even the little she once had long dissipated by the lack of food in the camps. Naked, she was incredibly wiry and muscular, but also somehow otherworldly, or elfin.

"It would be better if I had my rifle to drag behind me," she said, lying down on her stomach, facing the open end of the crate.

"You won't need a rifle," said Termin.

"I'm used to it," replied Aleksandra. "It helps me, psychologically."

This wasn't true. But it might lead to her getting a rifle.

She eased forward, putting her head into the box, and at the same time, smoothly and easily dislocated both her shoulders. She continued to move, undulating like a snake, and within seconds was through the box and out

the other side. Her arms moved back into position with only the faintest audible click, and she stood up, flexing her fingers. She poked out her tongue and picked up the tiny knife she'd held there, though neither Termin nor Shargei had seen her put it in her mouth.

“Well? Do I pass?”

“Yes, yes indeed,” said Termin. “Wonderful! Even better than...”

His voice trailed off.

Aleksandra cocked her head to one side. The tiny knife moved through her hand as if it had a life of its own, rolling over and around each finger, and back again.

“Better than who?”

“You’ll be told more as required,” said Shargei. “We must go. Your uniform is in the suitcase.”

He slid the suitcase towards her with a grunt.

“Other clothes. Everything you need.”

“I want a pistol,” said Aleksandra. “It goes with the uniform, no?”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Shargei. “Get dressed.”

She quickly dressed in the clean clothes from the suitcase. Her uniform tunic was pressed, laid down in tissue paper, and even had her Hero of the Soviet Union, Order of Lenin and campaign ribbons. But there was no chocolate brown leather holster for a Tokarev TT-33, as there should have been. “Where are we going, by the way? Somewhere warm, I hope?”

“A little warmer than here,” replied Termin. “Still Siberia. Some five thousand kilometres west. But we have an aeroplane.”

Shargei put the shackles on her himself, wrists and ankles. He didn’t bother to make them tight.

“I know you can get out of these,” he said, leaning close. “Don’t. Remember what you have to lose.”

“I remember,” said Aleksandra quietly. “I remember.”

★ ★ ★

She slept on the aircraft, a new type she had not seen before. It was called an Antonov AN-2 and they only had to land six times to refuel, every stop at strange little airfields in the middle of nowhere, staffed by skeleton crews of orange-tabbed soldiers manning basic facilities. The last two refuellings were at night, the aircraft guided in to land by lines of flares

and truck headlights.

Somewhere along the way the flight crew changed as well. The only passengers were Aleksandra, Termin, Shargei and four silent soldiers, who sat at the back of the passenger cabin and paid Aleksandra no attention, only coming fully alive at each stop, where they paced out at the cardinal points of the compass and stood on guard. Looking outward, not in.

Soon after dawn, Aleksandra peered through the small, round window by her seat, watching the forest beneath. Pine, spruce and larch, as far as the eye could see. The taiga, which she knew well, though better in its more western reaches, towards Karelia. She had not been to Siberia before the camps.

But as the aircraft droned on, the forest suddenly disappeared. There was a demarcation line ahead, beyond it lay a wasteland of dead trees entirely stripped of their branches. From high above they looked like toothpicks stuck in pale ash. The destroyed area stretched for kilometres ahead and to either side, a vast swathe of desolation.

“What happened here?” asked Aleksandra. “The American bomb?”

She knew about the atomic bombings of Japan, though she had already been in her first camp at the time. Arrested, tried, and transported between June 10 and June 12, 1945, immediately after she had completed her last mission on Comrade Stalin’s personal orders, in Moscow. But prisoners arriving after her had talked about the end of the Japanese War, about the American A-bombs.

“No,” replied Termin, shaking his head. “The devastation is much older, from 1908. There are various theories. The most popular is that it was a very large meteorite.”

The aircraft shuddered and nosed forward.

“We are landing here?”

“Near the lake. Lake Cheko. You see the landing strip, and the camp?”

“Another camp,” said Aleksandra sourly. She could pick it out, a rectangle of huts, a perimeter fence, the beaten ground around it where the trees had been bulldozed away, caterpillar track scars still visible in sweeping curves. That was a good sign, for it meant no zeks were involved in the tree-clearing labour. There were no guard towers, either. This was not a prison camp. Or not one of the usual ones.

“You will be treated well here,” said Termin. “Your own hut, exclusively yours. There is a bathhouse, excellent food, the baker in

particular is a genius. He was at the Hotel Metropol for years. We have vodka, wine from Abrau-Dyurso, even caviar at times!”

“All dependent on good behaviour,” added Shargei.

The aeroplane sank lower. Aleksandra continued to look through the window, examining the camp and the surrounding area, looking for landmarks, roads, other signs of habitation. Anything that might be useful when the time came to escape.

“What is that enormous construction at the far end of the camp?” she asked suddenly. “Like a very long rabbit hutch ... many rabbit hutches joined in lines ... a maze? Some folly, an amusement?”

“No,” said Termin. “It is not a folly. It is a model, of sorts. We call it the Replica. It is a representation of a network of narrow tunnels, made on a one-to-one scale, as best we can gauge.”

“Ah,” said Aleksandra. “It is extensive.”

“The main line is one thousand, four hundred and eleven metres long,” said Termin, enthusiastically. She had not seen him so energised. Whatever this was, he was deeply invested in it. “As you can see, not at all in a straight line. There are six branch lines, accounting for another nine hundred and eight metres, collectively. You cannot see all the twists and turns from up here, but there are many. Vertical and horizontal.”

“What is it a replica of, exactly?”

“You will be informed at the appropriate time,” interrupted Shargei.

“What is it made from? It is a strangely uniform colour.”

“Welded steel, painted grey,” said Termin. “The interior is lined with five millimetre cork. This attempts to mimic a small amount of flex in the Original.”

Aleksandra frowned. This “replica” was a very, very expensive construction. And what was this reference to an “Original”?

“What is the ‘Original’ and what is it made from?”

Termin began to answer, but stopped at a movement from Shargei, who spoke instead.

“We will be landing in a few minutes. I will take your shackles off.”

Aleksandra raised her hands and the shackles fell into her lap. She lifted her legs and her ankle chains fell to the floor. She’d slipped her hands out while Shargei and Termin were sleeping, picked the locks on the ankle manacles with the wire she kept in her hair and closed them again, unlocked.

Termin looked impressed.

“These small rebellions can be tolerated,” said Shargei, his voice even and conversational, his eyes as dead as ever. “But no more. You know what is at stake. Do not overplay your hand, or overestimate your usefulness.”

★ ★ ★

Close up, the Replica was even stranger than it had looked from the air. Aleksandra stood on a short stepladder to look into the entrance point of the cork-lined 31.15 cm square tunnel, which was raised up a metre from ground level. From there it ran straight for only two or three metres, then made a sharp left turn of some one hundred degrees or so, carried on for several metres more, then corkscrewed down three turns, always maintaining that basic dimension of a 31.15 cm cube.

She climbed down and followed the tunnel along the outside. After the corkscrew there was another straight horizontal section, longer this time, then more turns, to left and right and up and down, and then something different. A larger chamber, from which the “main” tunnel continued a little offset to the right, but there was also another branch going off sharply left.

“This is Junction A,” said Shargei. Termin had disappeared into what Aleksandra assumed was the HQ hut or equivalent. “It is a cube 249.2 centimetres on each side. Four times the dimension of the basic tunnel. There are three more junctions like this: B, V, and G. Plus a total of four smaller junctions: O, P, R, and S which are only twice the dimension of the tunnel. Insofar as we have mapped inside the Original.”

“Mapped inside,” said Aleksandra. “How? By whom?”

Shargei didn’t answer her question. He asked one instead.

“Can you move through this tunnel?”

“Of course,” scoffed Aleksandra. “It is a little ... roomier ... than some of the sewers at Stalingrad. And not so long.”

“Show me,” said Shargei. “To Junction A, and then return. As fast as you can.”

He pushed back the sleeve of his greatcoat, and folded back the top of his glove, to reveal a gold Rolex. Undoubtedly the former property of a zek, or someone who never made it as far as a camp.

“It’s cold,” said Aleksandra, looking over to the twisting tunnels of the Replica. “Colder inside that steel, cork lining or not.”

“Don’t linger then,” said Shargei.

“I need grease. A thick layer on my torso. For the cold, not for slipperiness. Bear grease is best.”

Shargei nodded, gestured to one of the guards, who held out a large canister. It had a handwritten label “good grease”.

Aleksandra took the canister, forcing herself to glance away from the label. She recognised the handwriting, and had felt her heart leap, but she hoped that this had not shown on her face. Allowing someone like Shargei information was always a bad idea.

“I will need blankets, hot tea, and vodka as soon as I come out,” she said. “Or better, a sauna. And I’ll still need the tea and the vodka.”

“We have a sauna. It will be ready.”

“Tell your soldiers to turn around,” said Aleksandra. “Remember what I said about gawping.”

She didn’t actually care, but it was a way to exert control over the guards. Even the smallest victories could accumulate, become larger ones. If the guards got used to obeying her requests, it could become habit.

Shargei gestured, and the guards faced outward. Termin turned to the side, and looked at the ground. Shargei kept watching Aleksandra as she stripped quickly, opened the jar and slathered herself from knees to elbows with bear grease, afterwards wiping the stuff off her hands on the rocky ground, gritting them up.

It was cold, but nothing like the far eastern cold. Maybe only five or eight degrees below freezing.

“You said quickly,” she said, standing by the stepladder. “How quickly?”

“Sixteen minutes to get to Junction A and return,” said Shargei. “Or you are of no use to us. Slap the side when you reach the Junction, so I know you are there.”

He looked at his watch, waiting for the second hand on the smaller, inset dial to sweep around to the top, and said “Start *now*.”

Aleksandra did not rush. She climbed into the entrance, dislocating her right shoulder as she did so, undulating forward and pushing with her feet. The cork lining actually slowed her progress a little at first—she was unused to it—but soon she moved more swiftly, pausing to dislocate her left

shoulder before the first turn.

She'd expected total darkness in the tunnel, but there was light. There were tiny pinholes drilled through the steel, which had been set with coloured glass, allowing the sunlight to enter. At first it was red, then a bit further on it changed to an orange hue, and then yellow.

Like a snake or an eel, she wriggled around the corkscrew turns. They were difficult, not like anything she had gone through before, but she did not allow herself any doubt. Her mind was thinking through the bigger situation, as she automatically twisted and writhed and edged forward.

What was the point of this place? What could it possibly be replicating? It made no sense as a sewer, or a building conduit. But it had to be something like that, some secret way in to a secure place, somewhere they wanted Aleksandra to infiltrate.

But Professor Termin had said it was not a shooting job. She was inclined to believe him, he seemed an innocent. A foolish innocent, unaware he too would undoubtedly be consumed by the beast he served. She would not trust Shargei's word in any matter.

She slithered on, around and down and up, the cork-lined walls tight around her, but never so tight she could not go on. It would be harder to go backwards, but not impossible, and she presumed she would be able to turn around in the Junction A space. The size of the junctions wasn't like anything she could think of either. Surge chambers in a stormwater drain? But the drain would not twist and turn as this tunnel was doing. Not that it mattered what the Replica was mimicking. She had no choice.

Go on. Try to stay alive.

Maybe something would change.

Stalin might die. Aleksandra might die. The Americans might drop lots of their new bombs ...

Aleksandra popped out of the tunnel into the larger box that was Junction A, clicking her shoulders back in so she could use her arms to lower herself to the floor. The pinholes here had been set with blue glass, and there were more of them, so she could see clearly.

She slapped the walls on the left and right, hard. Even deadened by the cork, the sound echoed through the chamber and the tunnels, and would be clearly audible outside. A few seconds later she heard an answering knock, presumably from Shargei, the harsher sound of a pistol butt or something similar on the exterior steel.

Aleksandra looked back up at the tunnel where she'd come in, and saw there was something written on the cork just under the exit hole. In blood, with a forefinger, she guessed, though it was surprisingly neat.

It said "V.N.N." and "Shargei is a cocksucking liar".

"I knew that already," whispered Aleksandra, smiling as she hoisted herself up and into the tunnel again, moving swiftly, because the cold was leeching her strength and suppleness, making it harder to do everything. Shargei might be a cocksucking liar, but he'd spoken truthfully about not lingering.

Aleksandra thought about "V.N.N." as she squirmed towards real sunlight and the promised sauna, vodka and tea.

The initials had to mean Vladimir Nikolayevich Novitski. He was the master, the chief instructor in contortion and gymnastics at the Moscow Circus School where Aleksandra had trained from the age of six in 1933, until they were both swept up into the Red Army in late 1941. She'd only seen him once since then, very briefly, learning he'd been assigned to a tank unit, and seen lots of action. Small, extremely flexible people were useful in tanks. Aleksandra had almost become a T-34 driver herself, until her extreme natural ability for shooting people from very far away had been noticed.

It made sense that Vladimir Nikolayevich was the one who had mapped out the Original, whatever this Replica duplicated. But if so, where was he? If they had the master, why bring in the student?

Aleksandra had an unpleasant premonition she knew the reason. But she pushed it down, like so many other such forebodings. If you expected terrible things to have already happened to those you love, it was less of a blow when you found your expectations met ... or horrifically exceeded.

She emerged from the Replica into bright sunlight, but it delivered little warmth. One of the women guards handed her a thick blanket, which she wrapped around herself, as she stepped into her felt boots. Her clothes were already tied up in a bundle, carried by another guard.

"Fourteen minutes," said Shargei, folding his glove back over the Rolex and pulling down his greatcoat sleeve. "Sufficient. Escort Comrade Captain Levchenko to the sauna. She is to be issued vodka, one litre bottle."

"And hot tea," said Aleksandra. She had to grit her teeth to stop them chattering. The shivers she could control better, though her knuckles

gripping the blanket ends were blue.

“The babushka who tends the sauna will get you tea,” said Shargei dismissively. “You are off duty until tomorrow, Levchenko. You will be shown your quarters, and the mess hall. I do not think I need to remind you why you are here and the consequences of any ... foolishness. But should you forget, I tell you now: there is nothing living, no refuge within sixty kilometres of this place and unlike the camps you know, we have dogs. German dogs, in fact. Very unpleasant dogs, they are still Nazis I think. We have a dozen of them in the kennels. You understand?”

Aleksandra nodded. She understood. Any attempt to escape would end in failure. At least any attempt by land. Perhaps if she could commandeer an aircraft, make the pilot fly south ... but to where? And as always, her family would pay. She could not live if the price was their death.

Escape was not possible. Not for her.

“Sauna,” grunted Aleksandra.



On the way to the sauna, trudging between unmarked huts, Aleksandra asked the guard where the infirmary was located.

He did not answer, but his inadvertent glance indicated the direction.

“The infirmary?” prompted Aleksandra again.

The male guard who was carrying her clothes still did not reply. After ten or twenty seconds, the woman guard cleared her throat.

“We are not to talk to you unless necessary. What do you need? We will fetch it for you.”

“Aspirin,” said Aleksandra, though she didn’t actually need anything. The aches and pains were simply a reminder she was still alive.

The guard nodded.

They plodded on in silence, towards a large hut where gouts of steam emanating from one chimney and smoke from another indicated the sauna. The guards led her to the door, and handed her over to an unsmiling babushka, a crone with a decayed orchard of a face rather than the apple-cheeked, smiling grandam of the colourful children’s books of Aleksandra’s distant, now seemingly almost fantastical childhood.

The babushka accepted Aleksandra’s clothes and jerked her head.

“We will take you to your quarters afterwards,” said the woman guard.

“Don’t wander around.”

“Vodka,” said Aleksandra. “Tea.”

“I will bring it. Go in,” muttered the babushka.

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Three hours later, the guards carried an apparently completely drunk Aleksandra from the sauna to her assigned hut, wrapped in several thick off-white towels she refused to let go, along with the empty vodka bottle. They didn’t know most of its contents had gone down the drain. The babushka grumbled along behind carrying a bundle of Aleksandra’s clothes, both old and new.

Aleksandra counted the paces between the bathhouse and her own hut, and noted the direction from the sun and shadows. The guards put her down on a bed, a proper bed with a sprung mattress—and the hut was warm from the iron stove in the corner—flung some blankets over her and left, locking the door behind them.

Aleksandra opened her eyes after a while, inspected the room, and went to sleep. She had always been able to tell herself when to wake up, a skill honed during the war, so six hours later her eyes flashed open. It was dark in the hut, save for a thin band of light coming through the gap in the curtained window from the arc lights that illuminated the walkways between the buildings and the perimeter.

She let her eyes adjust for a minute, then crept out of the bed. There was a lidded chamberpot under it, which she used. Then she spent the next little while crawling around and examining the floorboards by touch. Finding several that were beginning to rot, she got out her saw-blade knife and worked at them, until she could lever up several boards and make a gap wide enough to slide through.

Cold air blew in viciously through the hole, but she ignored it, poking her head down and feeling the space under the hut. The building was raised up on four bricks, a sufficient space for her to slide under and get out.

She put the floorboards back and applied the knife to the white towels, cutting head holes in two of them. After a few minutes she had made a makeshift smock, and cut a number of strips to use as a belt and for head, foot and hand wrappings. In the snow outside, the makeshift white

clothing would serve as camouflage.

Shortly thereafter, the Todesgeist of Stalingrad was loose in the camp.

As she'd expected given the lack of other prisoners, it was very quiet and there were no active patrols between the buildings, not even sentries pacing in frozen endurance outside any particular locations. She didn't doubt the perimeter was guarded, and that the German dogs existed, but they were clearly not routinely let loose to roam. Only to pursue, when necessary.

It didn't take her long to find the infirmary. It was the first large building in the direction the guard had glanced, and it was brightly lit. Aleksandra listened outside the door for a little while, then eased it open and crept into the vestibule. Crouched against the empty snow boot rack, she listened again, before easing open the inner door to look inside. A nurse was asleep in his chair, head down on the desk in front of him. Beyond the desk were six hospital beds in two rows of three.

Five beds were empty, the sixth was not.

Aleksandra crept close to the nurse, and sniffed. He smelt even more vodka-soaked than she did. One drawer in the desk was half open and, sure enough, there was a vodka bottle in it, with only a faint sheen of the spirit remaining inside.

She considered whether to kill him and stage it as an accident—maybe a drunken attempt to urinate outside in the snow gone wrong—but decided against it. She was a killer, sure enough, but only when it was absolutely necessary. For too long she had let the State determine whom she should kill, whether ordered by a superior officer or as at the last, by Stalin himself, the embodiment of all authority. Since she'd been in the camps Aleksandra had only killed when her survival depended upon it.

There was a slight movement in the sixth bed. She left the nurse and crossed the room, silent as ever. But not silent enough, it seemed. The heavily bandaged but curiously small figure in the bed spoke through the jagged hole of the cloth on its face, like some Egyptian mummy come to life. Aleksandra smelt burned flesh, the stench familiar from Stalingrad and many other places, the burned-out tanks of both sides in the long fight towards Berlin ...

“Sashenka?”

The voice was a faint, cracked whisper, but Aleksandra knew who was in the bed.

“Yes, Vova,” she whispered, holding back a sob. She hadn’t cried for years, but now tears were close and had to be forced back. “How did you know—”

“I knew they’d bring you,” whispered Vladimir. “And who else would creep in here after midnight?”

In many ways, Vladimir had been Aleksandra’s second father. She had not seen him since a chance, brief meeting in East Prussia in late 1944.

“What have they done to you?”

The bandage-wrapped figure made a slight move, almost a shrug, and growled at the pain.

“This I did to myself,” he whispered. His voice rose and fell as he spoke through terrible pain. “Though I admit they gave me the opportunity. Listen.”

Aleksandra sat on the side of the bed, but was careful not to touch him or move the single gauze sheet that was laid across his bandaged body. His foreshortened body, because his legs had been amputated above the knee.

She knew the slightest touch would be agonizing for him, and turned her head aside so even her breath could not fall upon him.

“I had hoped I would ... if not see you ... speak to you before I die,” whispered Vladimir.

Aleksandra moved, just a little closer, but before she could say anything, he continued.

“Listen. They do not really know what has happened to me. The burns are only part of it. But you, my little Sashenka, you must use what I have learned.”

“Use?” whispered Aleksandra.

“Listen. Have you seen the Replica? Been in it?”

“Yes.”

“It was built based upon my exploration of what they call the Original. But I didn’t tell them everything. You can—”

“I can do nothing but what I am instructed,” said Aleksandra. “Shargei warned me. Again. If I do not comply, it is my parents they will punish, and Konstantin and Marie—”

She stopped. Vladimir was making a noise that was partway between an excruciating cough and a sob.

“What? What is it? Is there medicine I can—”

“No, no,” husked Vladimir. “I am sorry, so sorry, Sashenka. Your

parents and the children ... they are already dead.”

“But the photographs,” said Aleksandra slowly. “Shargei showed me ... they are older, but...”

Her voice trailed away. They both knew what could be done to make photographs show what was wanted, not what was true. They sat in silence for a minute, before Aleksandra spoke again, her whispered voice like a knife slowly run along a sharpening steel.

“You are sure of this?”

“Yes,” groaned Vladimir. “It was only the day after ... after you were taken. Boris Ivanovich Russov saw it done ... from his attic window, he could look into the courtyard ... he told me ... I wrote to you, but...”

“Yes. I will kill them. All of them. All of them. Shargei first. And Stalin too.”

“Sashenka, Sashenka ... you cannot kill them all ... and to kill ... like them ... is to be ... like them.”

He took a rasping breath to gather strength.

“There is a ... better ... better way. Listen.”

Aleksandra bent close enough that she could feel the faint waft of his breath as he whispered, the awful stench of his burned flesh so strong in her nose and throat. He spoke with both difficulty and urgency, as if he had waited almost too long to impart the information he wanted to share. He made her repeat what he had told her, to be sure it was fixed in her mind. Then he sighed. Aleksandra was afraid he had died in that moment, till he took in another raspingly slow, painful breath.

“Aleksandra. There is something more ... I ask you ... you must help me to ... to make *my* escape.”

“Yes.”

“You have the ... extra inch of height ... and my knowledge. You will make it. I should not ... have turned back. It would have been ... been better to ... die inside than here.”

“Sssh,” soothed Aleksandra. “Where is ... ah!”

She spotted the drug cabinet, walked to it, and picked the lock in less than a minute.

The first vial of morphine seemed to hardly affect Vladimir at all. She injected another, into his neck. His breathing grew more ragged, and he made a rhythmic, slow sound in his throat like a drain unblocking.

The third vial did the job. Aleksandra waited by his side until she was

absolutely sure he was dead, and then took the empty vials and the metal syringe and put them on the desk by the nurse's hand. Waking from his alcoholic stupor the man might think he had somehow administered the overdose, and would be frightened enough to hide the evidence. Or he would be found like this, and blamed. Either way worked for Aleksandra.

Back in her hut, she slowly burned the towels in the iron stove, then went to bed. But she did not sleep. She lay there, thinking, going over what Vladimir had told her. Remembering the directions, the technical suggestions, the timing.

And she thought of her family, dead for so long. The day after she had been arrested. All that time ... Aleksandra had always feared they had been executed or sent to the camps, but she had forced the suspicion aside. Their continued existence in the everyday world had been something to live for.

A treasured delusion.

No more.

There was no commotion in the camp the next morning. No obvious signs that Vladimir had been found dead, or that he had been there at all. Guards came for Aleksandra, escorted her to breakfast, escorted her to the Replica where Termin was waiting by himself, without Shargei. She was given a skin-tight suit to keep her warm—Termin said it was the kind that divers wore—made from a rubber-like fabric that was not rubber. Someone had removed the main label, but there was printing inside the leg that said it was made in America.

Aleksandra was sent into the strange cork-lined steel tunnel again, encouraged to go as far as she could, to go as fast as she could, to remember the intersections and turns and risers and down-shafts.

Shargei was there when she came back out. Neither he nor Termin explained anything, nor would they answer any of her questions about the Replica, or the Original it modeled, or anything else.

Not that Aleksandra needed them answered. Vladimir had given her the key points, at least as he understood them. Which was likely more than either Shargei or Termin knew. After all, they had never been inside the Original.

Then there was the sauna again, but only a half-bottle of vodka, and dinner served in her hut. Aleksandra left the floorboards in place, and did not creep out for nocturnal roaming.

This was the pattern of her days, for a week. Practice in the Replica. Recover from practice. That was all.

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On the morning of the seventh day, the guards escorted her a different way through the camp, to the northern side she had not seen. There was another, internal compound there, a small area surrounded by concertina wire three coils deep and stacked six coils high on special pickets. It had a double gate, manned by four guards. There was an odd, wooden tower in the middle of this compound, a rectangular edifice like a tall, very narrow church, with a high-peaked roof. Or perhaps a bizarre, over-sized grandfather clock case.

Shargei and Termin were waiting outside the door to this thin building, which on closer inspection reminded Aleksandra very much of a four-storey outhouse. It wasn't big enough to fit more than a couple of people inside, standing up. The door had an enormous bolt on it, and a very large padlock, an American Lockwood which Aleksandra knew she could not easily pick. Not that she needed to, since Shargei had already put the key in the padlock, though he had yet to turn it.

"We are sending you into the Original today," said Shargei. "The entrance lies behind this door. I remind you that the existence of this ... anomaly ... is most secret and is not to be discussed, even with others at this camp."

"Anomaly?" asked Aleksandra. She kept her face still, revealing nothing of what she knew, or suspected, or feared.

"It is a tunnel, of sorts," said Termin enthusiastically. "An inter-dimensional tunnel."

"Show me," said Aleksandra.

Shargei looked at his watch.

"In two minutes," he said. "We must wait for the orange light phase."

"We don't understand the nature of the tunnel, or its composition," Termin rushed along, waving his hands. "Its walls are coherent energy that behaves as mass or imitates it, yet it has additional characteristics, visible states, indicated by light. It cycles through these states from red to violet, the spectrum visible to the human eye, which is doubtless no coincidence. But the red state at the beginning is very dangerous, a lethal form of ... of

radiation, as is the violet at the end—”

“The sixteen-minute deadline in the Replica,” said Aleksandra. “That relates to this cycle? And the junctions are safe?”

Shargei smiled coldly.

“No,” he said. “The junctions are not safe. But the rate of progress necessary to get from the entrance to what we believe is an exit to another world requires you to reach Junction A in sixteen minutes from the end of the Red phase, during the Orange period. The phases inside the Original are each of twenty minutes’ duration, or to be exact, nineteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds. You must get to the known exit at the end of the tunnel within thirty-five minutes, make an investigation of no longer than ten minutes and return within thirty-five minutes, before the Violet phase begins. From the times you have managed in the Replica, this should be achievable for you.”

“What’s at this other exit?” asked Aleksandra.

“Another world!” exclaimed Termin, throwing his hands up in excitement. “Think of that!”

“How do you know?”

“The operative who mapped the Original saw a sky and felt the breeze from the other exit, though he could not manage to climb out into it. You did, in the Replica.”

“What if I can’t get back?” asked Aleksandra. “I might get killed by something in this ‘other world’. Or what if I’m too slow and the Violet phase—whatever that is—gets me.”

“If you allow that to happen, then your family will suffer the consequences,” said Shargei. “But if you do well, they will prosper. It is your—”

Aleksandra pivoted on her heel and sliced the throat of the closest guard with her saw-blade knife, blood spraying in a high arc across Termin. As the guard clutched at his throat, gargling, she snatched his PPSH-41 submachine gun, cocked it and fired one swift, sweeping burst, killing the other three guards. She swung the weapon back on Shargei as he scrabbled at his pistol holster and emptied the drum into his head, catapulting him against the door of the narrow building. He rebounded off it and slid to the ground, essentially decapitated.

Termin made a pathetic, mewling noise.

Aleksandra ignored him. She threw down the PPSH-41 and picked up

her knife, tucking it back behind her ear. She turned the key in the padlock, snapped it open and slipped it out of the catch.

Behind her, a siren sounded, a call to action. Quicker than she'd thought. Gunshots must not be as common here as in other camps. It was followed a moment later by distant shouts, and the baying of dogs.

Termin continued his strange mewling noise.

“Shut up!” barked Aleksandra. “I’m not going to kill you.”

The Academician choked, coughed and managed to splutter out, “Why? They *will* kill your family—”

“They’re already dead,” said Aleksandra bleakly. “Yours too, probably. Is it safe to open?”

Termin looked at his watch and nodded.

She opened the door, blinking at the bizarre sight of a tunnel made of luminous orange ... orange air ... suspended in the air at head height, extending through the back of the building as if the wooden wall didn't exist. Though she knew from the Replica the tunnel only extended several metres before turning, it looked as if it went on forever, straight as a die.

She dragged Shargei's body over, took off his Rolex and strapped it on her ankle, then stood on his chest, to make it easier to haul herself up into the tunnel entrance.

The shouting was getting closer, and the sound of the dogs.

“Y-y-ou're ... g-g-oing through?” stuttered Termin.

“Obviously,” said Aleksandra. She pushed up on her toes and threw herself up and into the tunnel, at the same time slipping her left arm out of its socket so she would not get stuck.

“If you come back, and tell me ... tell us ... I think ... I think ... you'd be forgiven,” shouted Termin, his voice desperate. “I'm sure!”

His voice was drowned out by a sudden growling and barking and Termin's voice rose an octave.

“No! No! Not me! It was her—”

Aleksandra undulated easily forward. The sides of the tunnel did flex under her skin, a little, and felt like nothing she had ever moved through before. Not cloth, or timber, or metal. The description of “velvet” was close, but still not right. And there was a faint sensation, like static electricity, a mild discomfort where her skin touched the tunnel.

The sweeping left turn was no problem. Aleksandra didn't even need to dislocate her right shoulder. The corkscrew turns were a challenge, but no

more difficult than in the Replica, though she was glad of the daily back bends and contortion rolls she had done at the camp, keeping her spine supple.

The right and immediate left turn *was* difficult. Even with both shoulders dislocated, Aleksandra felt herself beginning to stick and slow down. The weird orange surface wasn't the same as the cork-lined steel. For a moment she felt a tinge of panic, but she forced it away and managed to continue on, to Junction A and beyond.

She couldn't help thinking about what Vladimir had said the Red or the Violet light could do. He had only been a few seconds too slow, his lower body still in the Original as he struggled to get out. But that had been enough. His legs had been cooked from the bones outward, requiring immediate amputation, and his upper body—even though out of the tunnel—had suffered something similar to the flash burns they both knew from the war.

Aleksandra forced those thoughts away, to concentrate on her progress. From Junction A it was easy going for a while, until she came to a series of very close right-angle turns that required her to bend at maximum extension from neck and waist, in opposite directions.

Halfway through, Aleksandra got stuck.

She couldn't move forward or back, she needed just a few millimetres more behind her shoulders and under her hips, and that space wasn't there.

The panic came back, and again she forced it away. She thought about the other things Vladimir had told her, and simply waited, slowing her breathing, letting her mind and body relax.

After a long minute, perhaps two, the deep, solid light all around her suddenly changed from orange to yellow, and the sensation of static electricity disappeared. The tunnel was suddenly warm now, the luminous, otherworldly surfaces felt like a stone floor warmed by summer sun.

There was also now more flex in the tunnel. The material gave way far more than in the Orange phase, much more than the thick cork lining of the Replica.

But even with the extra flex, Aleksandra only managed to wriggle and writhe forward five or six centimetres before she ran into the section where the tunnel ahead turned back on itself. It had been almost impossible in the Replica, and she had gouged the cork lining there. It would be actually impossible here unless something else Vladimir told her was true.

“Oh Vova,” whispered Aleksandra, and though she had not believed in God for many years, she uttered a short prayer that her mentor had not confused the extraordinary reality of the Original with morphine hallucinations.

She pushed her face into the side of the tunnel, hard into the yielding surface of yellow light, until her nose was crushed flat and her mouth was buried in whatever mysterious material the tunnel was made from.

It shouldn't have been possible to breathe, but she believed Vladimir and tried anyway, and cool air came whistling through her just-open mouth, even though it was pressed tight against what seemed to be a solid wall.

With her face and body pushed into the side, Aleksandra had just enough additional working room to squeeze around the three close right angles, with every segment of her backbone seeming to move independently to urge her forward, like a worm's concentric rings.

She moved faster after the triple bend, remembering what was ahead from the Replica. The tunnel, at least in its current state and without the extra difficult turns, was easier than the cork and cold steel, and Aleksandra felt she was ahead of the deadline, moving well.

Then the light changed again, to green, and she paused, struck by the change. She could no longer press her face or any part of herself into the tunnel sides, which had become much more rigid. Worse than that, it felt like the walls were intruding into her flesh, a multitude of tiny little needles touching her skin, pressing against it without actually drawing blood.

Aleksandra grimaced and pushed on. She'd gone a metre or so when she realised she could feel the rasp of those needles everywhere, not just on her exposed skin, but also through her American diving suit.

Vladimir had not mentioned this. Aleksandra touched her forehead to the tunnel surface. The strange material looked completely smooth, but she felt the prickles. She pushed her head harder, but the sensation didn't change and there were no other effects. If they were real needles, they would have gone into her, drawn blood.

“It doesn't matter,” muttered Aleksandra to herself. “Not important. That's why Vladimir didn't speak of it. He had such little time.”

She didn't notice that the many small scratches she'd sustained from the Replica slowly disappeared, the green light washing them away as if

they had never been. The puckered scar from where the rival German sniper's bullet had grazed her left arm also vanished. She felt the itch as it happened, but ignored it, and of course could not look to see what had caused it.

At Junction B, Aleksandra rested for two minutes, as measured by Shargei's watch, while she clicked her joints back in and massaged her tendons and muscles. She figured she had time, since she only had to get to the exit and get out.

Not go back. She was never going back.

There was a bad moment when it was time to go forward. Her mental map from the Replica faded out of her mind as she looked at the three tunnels that continued on from the junction, only discernable because the green light was different in those places, less intense, indicating a tunnel opening. For several seconds she couldn't recall which was the one she should take. Then it came back to her in a rush, and she stretched up and slithered into the correct tunnel, dropping one shoulder back, pushing off with her legs and feet and toes at maximum extension.

The light turned a light, sky-ish blue as she reached Junction G and slid out into the relatively open space, arms outstretched. She saw the bones of her hands through her flesh, like an x-ray, but her skeleton was limned in dark, fuzzy blue as if the bones had been sketched in crayon. Vladimir had told her about this part, to not be bothered, but she still could not help but stare at the second finger of her left hand, able now to see where it had been broken and though set straight, the bone had thickened in a knot, like a gall in a tree.

It was only a few seconds lost, she thought, as she tore her gaze away and looked for the next tunnel entrance. It was easier to find in the blue light, the edges seemed more defined. Aleksandra found the right one, then shut her eyes for a moment, remembering the Replica, to make absolutely sure she had identified it correctly.

When she opened her eyes again, she had the sensation that she had somehow lost time. She shook her head, and raised her ankle to look at Shargei's Rolex, ignoring the view of the bones in her feet. But the watch didn't make sense. The numerals had changed to symbols she didn't know, the shorter hour hand had a bifurcated end like a snake's tongue, and the smaller inset dial with the second hand had become a wheel of several dashes, all blue in the current light, which was turning slowly to create an

illusion of continuous, wavy lines.

Aleksandra blinked again, and looked away. The watch was no use, but the light was still pale blue. Not yet the darker blue that Termin called indigo, so she had at least twenty minutes. She inserted herself into the correct tunnel, this one almost at floor level, and pushed on.

But she *had* somehow lost time. Slithering up the corkscrew turns that led to the small junction S, the light changed to indigo. Tilting her chin to her chest to look back along her body, Aleksandra could no longer see the bones in her hands where they trailed behind her at the end of her dislocated arms.

She remembered Vladimir's warning about this last survivable stage of light.

"Indigo is the worst," he'd whispered, with such difficulty. "It brings memories. You must not dwell on them. You must not stop."

Even as she recalled those words, she saw him vividly. Not burned and reduced in his hospital bed, but in his prime, at the school, roaring encouragement to a group of children making a human pyramid.

"Higher, higher, come on! A pyramid doesn't end with three on top, two more up, and then Aleksandra you go on top like the star on the New Year tree in the House of Unions!"

Aleksandra smiled, a smile that relaxed her whole face, till she felt she was that child again, clambering up to stretch high on the human pyramid and they were all so proud, all twenty-eight of them and Vladimir beaming

—
"Do not stop!"

She blinked. She had stopped, lost in memory. For how long? She pushed on again, scraping her head against the tunnel, hard, using the pain to banish the memories that were rising up. Happy memories, ones she had long since let go, since it only weakened her to recall them. The past was gone.

The light was still indigo. Aleksandra wriggled hard, using up energy faster than she normally would. She had no idea how much time she had lost.

The tunnel ahead bifurcated into two passages. She slithered into the left one, sure this was correct. But it ended almost immediately and she had to back out and take the right side, and now she was panicking. The light was indigo, but for how long? Soon the searing heat would come and

she would be cooked from the inside out ...

The tunnel turned left and ended. Aleksandra cried out and began to back again, but stopped. This was what was supposed to be here, it was right, then left ... and up.

She slid forward, rotated herself inside the tunnel, ignoring the pain of scraped sides and aching joints.

High above, the light was not the glowing indigo of the tunnel walls—there was a tiny patch of softer blue, four or five metres above.

The distant sky of some far-off world.

Memory pressed at her again. Another sky, the sky above the steppe, the week she was sent back to get a medal, far behind the front line. Riding in the back of a truck, the canopy down, looking up at that endless sky. Happy to still be alive, and the world so big, and herself so small beneath it—

Aleksandra screamed, using the sound to push the memories away. She tilted her head up and began to inch up the shaft, forcing one arm back into place so she could work the shoulder. Slowly, ever so slowly, she rose up, centimeter by centimeter.

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Memories assaulted her. Flashes of childhood derring-do; the secret feast during recruit training; the meeting with Stalin that had seemed such an honour at first ... vivid memories that were so distracting, so real she almost felt she could step into them, escape into her own mind—

“No, no, no,” growled Aleksandra. That was not escape. She had seen people do that so many times. Give up and retreat inside their own heads, abandoning their bodies, always dying soon.

That was surrender.

She would not surrender.

Groaning, she kept squeezing herself up the shaft. The patch of blue sky grew closer and closer and then her working arm reached up, she got two fingers over the impossible edge of nothingness, made them into a hook, and pulled herself that fraction more to get a full handhold, all four fingers.

Sudden cold bit her hand.

Her fingers were *outside*.

Outside somewhere.

Using all her strength, she hauled herself up and out—and fell, like a cork popped from a bottle.

The exit she had climbed *up* opened *down*.

Instinct and training, all those years of circus school, took over. She rolled on impact, steadied herself, looked up.

For a moment, she saw the indigo tunnel, a strange contrast of different blue to the sky beyond it. Then it disappeared, as if it had never existed.

The Original, whatever the hell it was, only went one way.

Aleksandra looked back down from the sky. The memories no longer thronged in her mind, threatening to overwhelm her. She simply felt exhausted, and stupid, unable to take in what she was seeing.

Broken, splintered trees stretched as far as she could see in all directions.

A familiar landscape.

The dead forest of Tunguska.

It was not another world. It was the same terrible, old world.

She had not escaped.

★ ★ ★

A dog barked nearby. Aleksandra's hand flashed to the knife behind her ear, but she did not lift it out. After a second, she let go, leaving the blade where it was.

Better to be killed by dogs than be taken back alive.

She dropped to her knees, and bent her head, shutting her eyes.

"I do not believe in you, God," whispered Aleksandra. "Not in heaven, or hell, except the hells we have made ourselves. But maybe I am wrong. Perhaps I will see Vladimir again, and my parents, and Konstantin and Marie, and all the others..."

She heard the dog come closer, but it had stopped barking.

The world was quiet, save for the faint whistle of the wind in the splintered trees. Then footsteps. Heavy boots. One person.

"Kill me," said Aleksandra loudly. "I am not going back."

"Why would I do that?"

Aleksandra opened one eye.

"I saw you fall from the sky," said an old woman. She spoke Russian,

but with an accent unfamiliar to Aleksandra. She was dressed in reindeer hide, had a wolfskin hat on her head, and cradled a rifle in her arms as familiarly as she might a baby. An older Mosin-Nagant, from the first German war. Her dog was at her side. Not a German dog at all, but a Borzoi, a good Russian dog. The woman gestured, and the dog lay flat, disappointed it had not found a wolf.

“Are you a spirit?”

“No,” replied Aleksandra. “How close are we to the camp?”

“What camp?” asked the woman.

“The camp,” said Aleksandra. She repeated the words dully. “The camp.”

“Are you sure you are not a spirit? My children tell me not to hunt wolves here, because of spirits. But I have never seen a spirit before, and because no one else comes to hunt, there are many wolves.”

“I am not a spirit,” said Aleksandra. “I am a zek. Shoot me please, before the guards come. You might even get a reward.”

The old woman scratched her forehead, right in the middle, under the protruding snout of her wolf’s head hat.

“What is a zek? What guards? There is no one else here. I told you. No one comes here. Only me. It is a long walk from anywhere, many days. Maybe not for you, falling from the sky—”

“Days,” interrupted Aleksandra. “Years.”

She opened both eyes, wide, and stared about her. The forest looked the same, but that would be true of any time since the initial explosion, it would be true for decades to come, maybe longer ...

“What year is this?”

The old woman shrugged.

“Forty-eight, forty-nine, I don’t know...”

Aleksandra’s brow furrowed. Not the future, or the past?

“Does Comrade Stalin still rule us all?”

“Who?”

“Comrade Stalin.”

“Who’s that?” asked the old woman. “And why do you keep saying ‘Comrade’? No one talks like that. I think you must be a spirit.”

Aleksandra stared at her, and then glanced at the sun. She felt its warmth, strong and beautiful, heat she had not felt for many months. The artificial heat in the Original did not count. It was not the same. This was

the real warmth, but ...

“It’s summer!”

“Yes. It’s summer.”

“There is no Stalin.”

“Never heard of him.”

“The Central Committee?”

“What is that?”

“Are there camps?”

“Hunting camps, you mean?”

“No, no, for prisoners.”

“Not since the Czar went away to England, oh, years ago now. All that stuff, the secret police, camps. None of that in the Republic. People wouldn’t stand for it. Not nowadays.”

“People wouldn’t stand for it,” repeated Aleksandra. Tears started in her eyes. It was so long since she had cried, the tears felt very strange. Drops of water sliding down her face, but not from rain. “People wouldn’t stand for it.”

She laughed, and cried, and stood on her hands and walked on them in a circle around the wolf hunter.

The old woman muttered something about a spirit again, but she smiled, a toothless smile.

“I’ve escaped!” cried Aleksandra. “I have escaped!”

She flipped upright, hugged the hunter and kissed her on both papery, sun-scorched cheeks.

“Escaped from what?” asked the old woman, looking up at the endless sky.

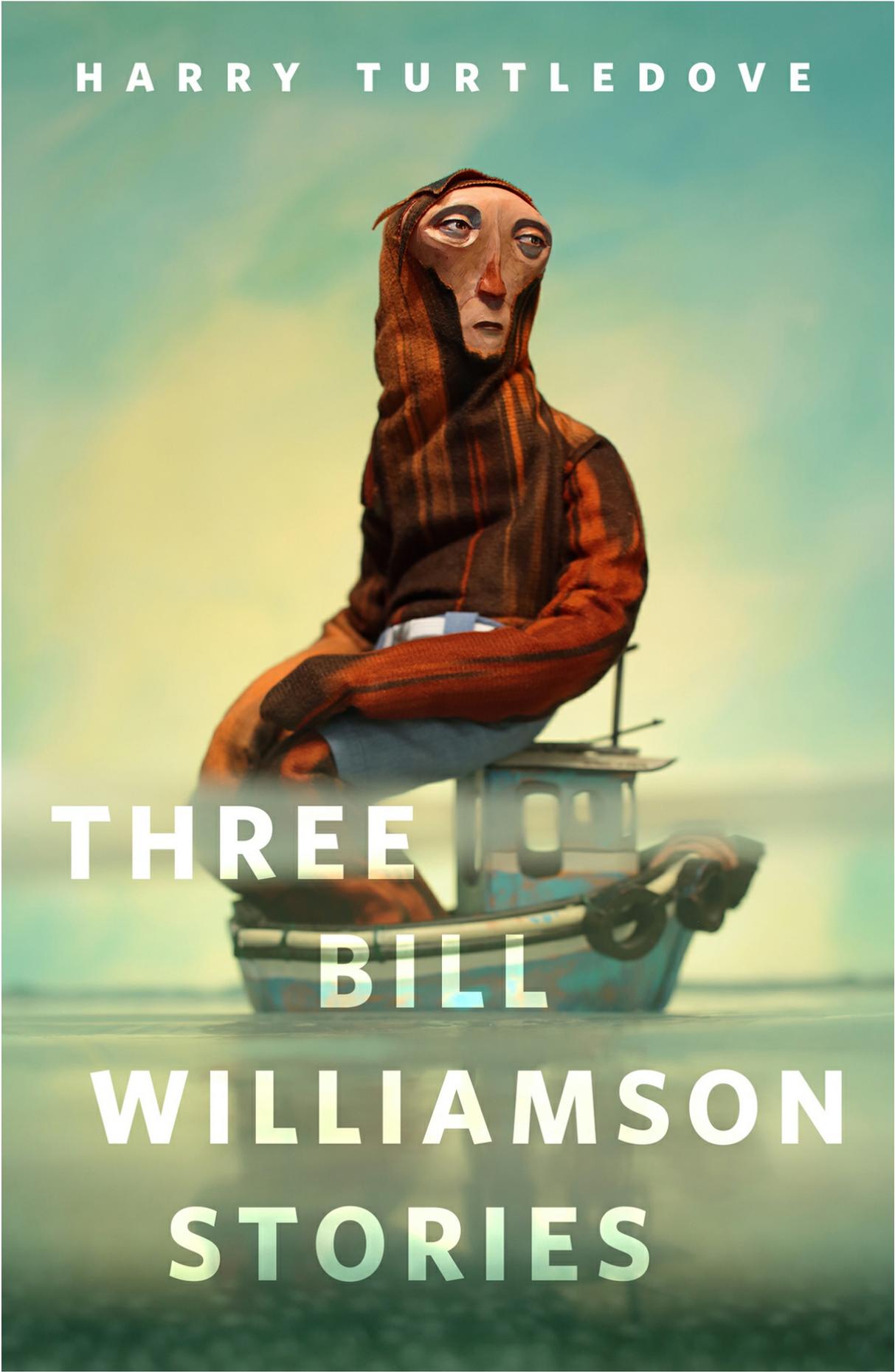
“Another world, grandmother,” said Aleksandra, wiping her eyes. “Another world.”



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HARRY TURTLEDOVE



THREE
BILL
WILLIAMSON
STORIES

Three Bill Williamson Stories:
Something Fishy,
Always Something New,
Tie a Yellow Ribbon

HARRY TURTLEDOVE

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

TOR·COM 

SOMETHING FISHY

Piles of paper cluttered Governor Bill Williamson's desk. Jefferson wasn't a very populous state, but it had plenty of legislators and an even greater plenty of lobbyists. One lone governor didn't stand much of a chance against them all.

Almost at random, he plucked one sheet from the closest stack. It was about a proposed change to the laws about dredging for gold in the state's rivers. Or he thought so, anyhow; the words blurred on the page. He held it out at arm's length. He was a Sasquatch; arm's length went a long way. The typing looked clear enough, but the letters were too small for him to read.

Muttering, he reached into the top center desk drawer and pulled out a pair of glasses. When he put on the spectacles, he could read again ... unless he looked down too vertically. Then his glasses slid away from his eyes. If he wasn't careful, they'd fall off. His nose was low and broad and flat. It didn't have the kind of bridge most little people's snoots did. Securing eyeglasses was one more adventure in a world where he fit none too well.

The phone rang. Answering it meant he could decipher the changes to the dredging law later. The handset was made for a much smaller hand, but he could use it even so. "Yes?" he said.

"Sorry to bother you, Governor," his administrative assistant said, "but Chief Hobbs is here for his ten o'clock appointment."

"Is he?" Bill said tonelessly. He glanced at the clock one stack of papers almost but not quite hid. As he watched, a digital 9:57 went to 9:58 with a soft *thwup*. He sighed. Steve Hobbs was right on time. "Okay, Phyllis. Send him in."

The door to the office opened. The chief of the Karuk tribe walked in. Bill stood up. He wanted to greet Steve Hobbs ... and to intimidate him a bit. Hobbs was big for a little man—he stood about six-two, and wasn't what anyone would call skinny. But the governor overtopped him by three

feet, and his hand swallowed the chief's when they shook.

After the clasp, the Karuk seemed relieved to get his paw back unsquashed. *Good*, Bill thought. He didn't care for Indians, and he was sure Hobbs didn't like Sasquatches, either. Their two kinds had been neighbors and rivals ever since Indians found their way to the New World more than ten thousand years before. Sasquatches had learned a lot from their first encounters with little people. One of the things they'd learned was not to trust their neighbors very far.

Rules these days were different. Neither Sasquatches nor Indians had made many of them. None of the old-time stuff counted any more. None of it was supposed to count, anyhow. The two statements sounded very much alike. What they meant, though ...

"Have a seat, Chief," Bill said. "Tell me what's on your mind."

The office—the whole governor's mansion—was made to Sasquatch scale. Charlie "Bigfoot" Lewis, the governor who'd built it back in the twenties, had been a Sasquatch himself. Bill enjoyed not needing to worry about ducking when he went through doorways or banging his head on a low ceiling.

Little people, though, often felt like third graders in the principal's office here. To ease that feeling, high chairs let them sit across the desk from Bill at something close to eye level. Or they did most of the time. When he found out Steve Hobbs was coming, Bill had thoughtfully removed the little-people seats that usually sat in the office and swapped in some with shorter legs.

So the Karuks' chief looked up and up at him when he sat down. Hobbs' sour smile said he understood why he was getting the kind of welcome he was getting. No doubt he would fix up a memorable reception for Bill if the governor ever visited Happy Camp, the tiny town near the Klamath River where the Karuk tribe had its headquarters.

But Hobbs was in Yreka now. If he pitched a hissy fit, he wouldn't get whatever he'd come here to ask for. Playing by the rules, he might. Annoying him for the fun of it was one thing, denying him that to which he was legally entitled was something else again.

"You know we take a lot of salmon out of the river when they come upstream to spawn," he said.

"Oh, sure." Bill's big head bobbed up and down. Back in the old days, Sasquatches had come down out of the mountains to scoop salmon from

the Klamath, too. The Karuks had shot arrows at them and set traps to keep them away when they did. But those were the old days—gone, if not forgotten.

“We depend on those salmon.” Steve Hobbs ran a hand through his shock of silver hair. He looked more like, say, an Italian than an Indian. He probably had white folks in the woodpile.

Well, Bill thought one of his own great-grandmothers had been a little woman. Jefferson was the kind of place where all sorts of people went into the Mixmaster. Nodding again, Bill picked up the paper he’d been looking at when Hobbs got there. “We’re cutting back on dredging again, to make sure the spawning grounds stay good. The miners don’t like it, but the fish need protecting.”

“Good. You aren’t telling me anything I don’t already know,” Hobbs said. “The fish *do* need protecting—and not just from the greedy-guts get-rich-quick jerks with the dredges, either.”

“Ah?” Bill Williamson got the feeling the chief of the Karuks was coming to the point.

Sure enough, Hobbs said, “Our catches have been way down the past couple of years. It’s not getting better—it’s getting worse. I can tell you why, too.”

“And you’re going to, aren’t you?”

“Damn right I am.” Hobbs nodded vigorously. “Some of the men from the tribe, they fish on boats out of Requa at the mouth of the Klamath and from Crescent City farther north. From everything they say, the merfolk are stealing salmon right, left, and center. If the fish don’t even make it to the river to spawn, we can’t very well net ’em out, can we?”

“Mm, no.” Bill’s head started to ache. As soon as you mentioned the merfolk, you talked about jurisdictional nightmares—nightmares for everybody but the people of the sea, anyhow. “Are you sure you ought to be bringing this to me?” he asked. “Are you sure it isn’t the coast guard’s baby?” One thing a good many years in politics had taught him was how to pass the buck.

“If you let me down, I’ll go to them next,” Steve Hobbs answered. “But I’d sooner keep it at the state level if I can. You turn the Feds loose on something, Christ only knows where it’s liable to end up. And those coast guard guys, they aren’t from here. To them, I’m just a dumb-ass hick, and a dumb-ass redskin hick at that.”

Jefferson was nothing if not a clannish place. The clans didn't always get along with one another—Sasquatches and Indians were only the most obvious example of that—but they did mostly pull together when outsiders tried to get them to do anything they didn't fancy. (Of course, if not for Federal rules and regulations, the Karuks wouldn't have their riverside reservation and their fishing rights along the Klamath; but that was old, settled law by now, and everybody here had gotten used to it.)

“Well, okay. I hear what you're talking about,” Bill said.

“Yeah. You would. You may not like me a whole bunch, but you know where I'm coming from,” Hobbs told him. “That's another reason I came to Yreka. We talk the same lingo.”

That lingo was, of course, English. Both Sasquat and Karuk were nearly extinct, understood by more scholars than folk from the groups who'd once used them. Maybe it was progress. Maybe it was tragedy. Whatever it was, Bill couldn't do a thing about it. He knew only a handful of Sasquat words himself.



Not five minutes after Bill got back to the office from lunch, the telephone on his desk rang. When he picked it up, Phyllis said, “Liam McMichaels is on the line, Governor.”

“He is? Why am I not surprised?” Bill said. “Tell him I'm molting, okay?”

“Excuse me?” his administrative assistant said, in lieu of *What the hell are you talking about now?*

Bill sighed. “Never mind. Put him through.”

Something electronic clicked. A moment later, a hearty voice said, “How are you today, Governor?” Liam McMichaels sounded like what he was: a lobbyist. He buttered people up for a living. He did a damn good job of it, too.

“I'm fine, Liam. How's yourself? How's the family?” Bill also knew how to play the game.

“Couldn't be better,” McMichaels said enthusiastically. After a discreet pause, he went on, “A little bird told me Steve Hobbs visited you this morning.”

“That's right.” Bill wondered who the lobbyist's little bird was. If he

found out, he could fire the bastard ... or maybe not. Maybe a known snoop was better than the unknown replacement McMichaels would assuredly find.

“And it’s why I’m calling,” McMichaels said. Among other clients in Yreka, he represented the merfolk. They rarely came out onto dry land themselves. They seldom even followed the salmon upstream into Jefferson’s clear, cold, swift-running rivers. Fresh water left them prone to nasty skin fungi and other parasites. They stayed in the ocean almost all of the time.

When they needed somebody like Liam McMichaels to do something for them in the dry world, they had plenty of clams to keep him happy. Metaphorical clams and, if he happened to want them, literal clams as well. Unless they were happy, dry-land folk might well find trouble on the sea. They were in the insurance business, even if some people called it protection money. They did this and that for and with the U.S. Navy. Across much the bigger part of the Earth’s surface, they were the ones who knew where the bodies were—or, more often, weren’t—buried.

So yes, they had plenty of clams.

“Hobbs, he’s not happy about how many salmon they’re taking,” Bill said. “The Karuks have to eat, you know.”

“So do the merfolk,” McMichaels replied. “Things aren’t so easy for them these days.”

“How do you mean?” Bill asked in surprise. Didn’t Liam McMichaels’ clients live off the fat of the land? Well, of the water? Since the end of the Second World War, they’d used some of their clams to buy spearguns from the little men who stayed dry most of the time. Didn’t those let them plow through schools of mackerel the way Buffalo Bill and his merry men disposed of the bison herds on the Great Plains? (And, not so incidentally, didn’t they turn into the most popular underwater murder weapons? Bill imagined political billboards on the seafloor: SPEARGUNS DON’T KILL MERFOLK! MERFOLK KILL MERFOLK!)

“I’ll tell you how, Governor.” The lobbyist’s voice saved Bill from his own imagination. “The Russians and the Japanese—and now the Koreans, too—have these huge fishing boats. Fishing factories would be a better name for them. They’ve got nets and dredges and longlines and I don’t know what all else. They park just outside the coastal limit—or sometimes just inside, if they think they won’t get caught—and they suck up fish the

way your Hoover sucks up dust. When they leave, the merfolk go hungry for miles and miles around.”

“I ... see,” Bill said. He wasn’t sure McMichaels was giving him the unvarnished truth. Spreading varnish over places that looked rough without it was part of a lobbyist’s job. But he was sure things were less one-sided than Steve Hobbs had made them out to be. Hobbs had his own axe to grind, of course, and his tribe’s. Bill sighed. One of the things you soon found out when you plunked your backside into this seat was that nothing was ever as simple as it looked. He sighed again. “You can get hold of the folks you represent, right? You don’t have to wait for them to call you?”

“Yes, I can do that.” McMichaels confirmed what Bill had expected.

“Okay. Good, even,” the governor said. “Let’s see ... Today’s Wednesday. Tell them I’ll come out in a boat from Requa on Saturday morning. We can talk about it then, if that suits them. If it doesn’t, call me back and let me know. We’ll work out something else.”

“Thank you very much, Governor. You’re a gentleman.”

“Well, I try.” The only definition of *a gentleman* Bill liked was that he was somebody who kept his weight on his elbows. When you weighed around five hundred pounds, that wasn’t just gentlemanly. It was mandatory. Liam McMichaels would have laughed had he told the raunchy joke, but he didn’t. This latest mess felt anything but funny.



You couldn’t go straight from Yreka to Requa. Bill drove the Mighty Mo up the I-5 to Grants Pass, down the US 199 to Crescent City on the Pacific, and then south along the coast on the US 101 to get to where he needed to go. He piloted the humongous 1974 Eldorado past any number of genuine political billboards. Some touted Ronald Reagan, others Jimmy Carter. Polls showed the race in Jefferson was close. Nationally, Bill figured the ex-governor of the state next door would trounce the hangdog Georgian with the Chiclet teeth.

Once he got to Requa, he wondered why he’d bothered. Crescent City was a real port. So was Port Orford, farther north. So were Eureka and Arcata, farther south. Requa should have been, sitting right where the Klamath River poured into the sea. It should have been, but it wasn’t.

It had a post office and a general store with a screen door so old, the mesh was made from rusting galvanized iron, not aluminum. The airstrip was too short for anything bigger than a Piper Cub. Most of the houses were shacks. The piers ... They weren't built out of Lincoln Logs, the way he'd guessed when he got his first look at them. Lincoln Logs would have been sturdier and more uniform.

Three or four fishing boats were tied up at the pier. They looked as outdated and as badly in need of paint as everything else in Requa. When Bill opened the Mighty Mo's left rear door and got out (the car had no left front seat, which let someone his size drive it), a little man in jeans, a windbreaker, and a Giants cap waved to him.

"Welcome to Requa, Governor!" he called, ambling down the pier toward the Cadillac.

"Thanks." With a distinct effort of will, Bill didn't add *I think*.

The little man held out his hand. "I'm Dave Super," he said as Bill shook it. Smiling crookedly, he went on, "Yeah, that's my real name. Translated from something in Karuk, y'know? Steve called me, said you wanted me to take you out to talk to the merfolk."

"That's right." Bill eyed him. "You don't seem thrilled about it."

"Only on account of I'm not," Super answered. "If I had my druthers, I'd buy a coupla crates o' dynamite, take the *Sweetheart on Parade* out over the closest merfolk village, and fix them thieving bastards for good."

"You wouldn't get 'em all, and you'd never dare go out on the water again," Bill said. "And messing with the merfolk is a Federal crime."

"I know. I don't like any o' that worth a damn, but I know," Dave Super said. "You don't see me doin' it, even if I want to. But I hope like hell you can make 'em cut it out. Not everybody here's got a fuse as long as mine."

Back in the day, the merfolk had had the edge on the local Indians who went out on the sea to fish. They could sneak up on a canoe unseen underwater. Fishermen seldom lasted long after that. The balance of power had shifted when big sailing ships came into these waters, and when little men had started using rifles and explosives. Some merfolk still resented not being able to call all the shots on the ocean.

When you got down to it, how could you blame them? Bill's own ancient ancestors must have felt the same way when the newly arrived Indians started aiming arrows at them. They hadn't known about archery

till then; all they'd had were sharp stones and spears. But they'd learned ... and the Indians soon discovered they didn't want to stop an arrow from a bow pulled by a five-hundred-pound Sasquatch.

Learning how to copy firearms and dynamite wasn't so easy. The Indians and the Sasquatches hadn't managed that. With the extra handicap of needing to stay in the water, neither had the merfolk.

Like Indians and Sasquatches, they'd stolen or bought what they couldn't copy. And they'd learned the political game, as had the Indians and Sasquatches. Governor Bill Williamson was living, blathering proof his folk had.

Dave Super pointed down the pier toward his boat. "You ready to take a ride and do some palavering?"

"Sure, if those planks will hold my weight," Bill said.

"Don't worry about it," the Karuk said. "They're stronger'n they look."

They couldn't very well be weaker, Bill thought. The rickety pier creaked and shook when he set foot on it. None of the planks snapped, though. He didn't go into the Pacific sooner than he'd wanted to. He also made it across the fishing boat's gangplank.

"Why do you call her the *Sweetheart on Parade*?" he asked.

Super cocked his head to one side. "You don't listen to John Stewart, do you?"

"Nope," Bill admitted. "Rod Stewart, yeah. Al Stewart, yeah. But not John."

"You're missing something," Super said.

Bill shrugged—politely, he hoped. From what little he knew, John Stewart was a country singer, and he had no use for what he thought of as shitkicker music. Even Sasquatches carried vagrant opinions with no visible means of support.

Dave Super's crew consisted of one man who looked enough like him to be his kid brother—and who turned out to be named Pete Super. Pete fired up the boat's diesel. Stinking black smoke belched from the exhaust. Dave undid the lines that secured the boat to the pier. With the grace and dignity of a turtle waddling across a mudflat, the *Sweetheart on Parade* chugged out to sea.

A glance at the watch on his left wrist told Bill it was just past ten. He was supposed to meet the merfolk three miles from shore at eleven. Unless the boat crapped out altogether, he would get there in good time. Dave and

Pete seemed to take for granted the idea that she would keep going. Bill decided he would do the same.

It was somewhere in the mid-sixties. The air smelled of salt. It was moist, even misty. When Bill looked at the sun, he didn't have to look away at once. Gulls fluttered above the *Sweetheart on Parade*, screeching and jostling for position.

Pointing up at them from behind the wheel in the little cabin, Dave laughed and said, "They scrounge from us."

"They steal fish, too, every chance they get," Pete added.

"Damn right they do," Dave said. "If they knew about money and booze, they'd make pretty fair people." Bill laughed at that. When he did, Dave asked, "What? You think I'm kidding?"

"Not even slightly," Bill answered. "I was laughing because I thought you meant it." That seemed to satisfy the fisherman.

Waves rolling out of the northwest sent the *Sweetheart on Parade* up and down, up and down. The motion was pretty steady and not too severe. Bill didn't especially care for it, but it wasn't bad enough to make him worry about whether breakfast would stay down. He caught Dave and Pete eyeing each other a couple of times, no doubt wondering if he was turning green under his russet pelt. He was glad not to be more entertaining.

Behind them, the shore receded. The mist made everything not just small but also indistinct, as if it might not really be there at all. Bill knew it could have been worse; fog might have altogether swallowed the land. Back before boats carried compasses, let alone radios, how had anybody ever had the nerve to go out on the trackless water?

Dave killed the engine. "Stand away from the anchor chain, Governor, if you please," Pete said.

Bill did. Pete pulled a lever. The anchor splashed into the cold, green-gray Pacific. "We're about where we're supposed to be," Dave said. "They'll know we're here, too. They've got damn good ears, the merfolk do."

Pete lit a stogie. The smoke smelled nastier than the diesel exhaust. Bill moved upwind from him. Two dolphins sprang into the air before arrowing back into the sea. He eyed them with delight. Pete was more experienced and less delighted. "The merfolk use 'em for watchdogs," he said. "Sheepdogs, too."

"Do they?" Bill said.

“Oh, yeah.” Pete nodded. “Dolphins drive fish an’ chase off sharks even on their own. When the merfolk tell ’em what to do—”

“It ain’t just dolphins, either. Killer whales, too,” Dave Super broke in. “They’re like ... I dunno, the merfolk’s Dobermans, maybe. If they told one to smash up this boat, we’d be swimming pretty damn quick, but not for long. Somethin’ my size—even somethin’ *your* size, Governor—that’s just a snack for a killer whale. Like a seal, say.”

“They want to talk. They don’t want to fight.” Bill spoke to reassure the Super brothers ... and himself.

As if on cue, there was a soft splash not far from the *Sweetheart on Parade*. Pete Super pointed into the Pacific. “We’ve got company,” he said with no great liking in his voice. “If they do want to talk, they’ve got the chance.”

★ ★ ★

Bill stared at the merman. He’d seen photos of merfolk before, of course—who hadn’t?—but photos always told you less than you wished they would. It was like the difference between a photo of a steak dinner and the dinner itself on the table in front of you.

He could see only the top third of the merman’s body. The rest stayed under the sea. The merman’s skin was wet and shiny and the exact color of a Greek olive. His head was large and round, with ears as tiny—as rudimentary, really—as a sea lion’s. His eyes, set farther apart than a little man’s or a Sasquatch’s, were black all the way across. His nostrils were no more than a couple of slits; his split upper lip bore a bushy mustache of stiff yellowish hairs that gave him something of the look of an aquatic Otto von Bismarck.

When Bill’s gaze swung to his hands, he was reminded how far apart merfolk were from those that peopled the land. Sasquatches and yetis and the various races of little men were all primates, all apes too smart for their own good, all close cousins. The merfolk’s closest relatives were dugongs and manatees and the sea cows the Russians had hunted to extinction in the eighteenth century. Just about any digit on the merman’s hands could oppose any of the others. They might almost have been bird feet, only without claws and with half-webbed fingers.

He held a slate, a grease pencil, and a sponge in those odd hands. The

first two could have come from a Kmart. The sponge was ... a sponge. A real sponge. Not a block of cellulose taken off a supermarket shelf, but a once-living thing plucked from the ocean floor.

“Hello,” Bill said, and the merman’s ears twitched as they turned his way. “What do I call you? You speak English, right?”

UNDERSTAND ENGLISH, the merman wrote—he was a lefty. NOT SPEAK. MOUTH TOO DIFFERENT. As he rubbed the words off with the sponge, he opened wide. He wasn’t kidding. He had bony plates instead of teeth, and a tongue that could only be described as weird.

“What do I call you?” Bill asked again.

CALL ME ISHMAEL, the merman answered. Bill didn’t guffaw. How and why he didn’t, he couldn’t have said, but he was proud of holding back. Ishmael rubbed again, then wrote, NOISE IN MY TALK MEAN NOTHING TO YOU.

“Okay. Fair enough. I’m Bill Williamson. I’m Governor of Jefferson. I can speak for the people on land here.” *I hope I can, anyhow*, Bill thought.

I HEAD SQUID CLAN. Ishmael rubbed and continued, OTHER CLANS CLOSE BY LISTEN TO ME.

How big was the Squid Clan? How many other clans lived or roamed close by? What did Ishmael think *close by* meant? Just because the other clans listened to him, would they follow his lead? Those were all interesting questions, weren’t they? Bill had answers for none of them. He’d paid less attention to the merfolk than he should have. They were like the lilies of the field—they toiled not, neither did they spin. In a modern politician’s terms, they paid taxes not, neither did they vote.

“If we can agree about salmon, your clan and these others will stick to the agreement?” Bill asked.

Ishmael’s head went up and down in a slow nod. By the way he did it, Bill guessed it was a learned gesture for him, not one he used naturally. WE STICK, he wrote. UNLESS WE STARVE, WE STICK.

“You could drive a semi through a hole like that,” Dave Super remarked.

“Maybe you could,” Bill said. “But anybody will do almost anything if he gets hungry enough.”

LAND PEOPLE STARVE WITHOUT SALMON? Ishmael asked.

“Well ... no,” Bill said, and won identical dirty looks from the two Super brothers. He went on, “They won’t have such an easy time, though.”

SAME LIKE US, THEN, Ishmael wrote. Bill supposed it was. Ishmael erased his words and scribbled again: WE GIVE A LITTLE. THEY GIVE A LITTLE.

Bill grinned, even if he wasn't sure the expression meant anything to Ishmael. "You know how politics works, all right."

Before Ishmael could answer, another merman broke the surface next to him. No, this was a mermaid. She was just as bald as Ishmael, just as olive-colored, just as mustachioed. But those cannonball breasts left no doubt of her gender. For centuries, European artists had painted mermaids as scaly below and blond, fair, and blue-eyed up top. If that wasn't Wishful Thinking with a capital W and T, Bill had no idea what would be.

She also carried a slate, a grease pencil, and a sponge. Bill took that to mean she understood English, too. But she wanted to talk to Ishmael. She tapped him on the shoulder. When she got his attention, they both ducked their heads under the water. People's languages dissolved into meaningless noises when they did that. Maybe the merfolk's talk did the same thing in the air.

After longer than Bill would have been comfortable without breathing, Ishmael and the mermaid came up again. SHE SAY BIG SHIPS GO AWAY FOR NOW, the Squid Clan's chief wrote.

"That's good to hear," Bill said. Without the factory ships close offshore, the merfolk would have less need for salmon near the mouth of the Klamath. They would for a while, anyhow. One thing at a time was all you could do—when you could do even that much. The governor nodded, he hoped politely, toward the mermaid. "Thanks for bringing the news. What do people like me call you?"

I GO BY ETHEL. Her printing was neater than Ishmael's, her grasp of idiom better. Both of them, though, were light-years ahead of anything Bill could have done with their style of communication.

"Ethel ... Mermaid," he said slowly.

YES, THAT'S RIGHT, she wrote.

"O-kay," he whispered. Sometimes you could twist the long arm of coincidence till it came off in your hand.

WHAT? she asked—she hadn't heard him. Then she added, SING OUT, LOUISE!

Bill's older daughter had just graduated from Jefferson State Ashland as a drama major. *Sing out, Louise!* wasn't coincidence. It could only be

malice aforethought. “Do you like dry-land people’s drama?” he asked her.

YES, THAT’S RIGHT, Ethel Mermaid repeated. She rubbed. HELPS TO UNDERSTAND YOU AS MUCH AS I CAN.

“I guess it would,” Bill agreed. Dry-land scholars studied the merfolk’s way of life like that. Why shouldn’t their opposite numbers in the water return the favor?

WE NEED SOME SALMON, the mermaid wrote. WE STAY BY RIVER MOUTHS BECAUSE OF THEM. She rubbed, then added, WITHOUT THEM, WE WOULD HAVE A GYPSY LIFE.

He looked at her. Her expression was unreadable, at least to the likes of him. All the same, he asked, “Do your people think you have an odd sense of humor, Ethel?”

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU MEAN, the mermaid wrote. And either she had no idea what he meant or she’d just answered his question for him. He didn’t know which, but he had a pretty fair notion of how he’d bet.

Ishmael had watched and listened to the byplay without seeming to care about it at all. Now he wrote, IT IS AGREEMENT?

“It is as far as I’m concerned,” Bill said. Dave and Pete Super looked glum and ticked off, but they kept their mouths shut. Bill went on, “I’ll make sure it suits the Karuks’ chief, too. If it does, we’ll go on from there. If it doesn’t, I’ll come back here in a week to tell you. Then we’ll see what else we can work out.”

TELL HIM ONE MORE THING, Ishmael wrote. MAN WHO RUNS BOAT, TELL OTHERS WITH BOATS, TOO.

“Go ahead,” Bill said. He called back to the cabin: “Dave, you paying attention?”

“I’m watching, yeah,” Dave Super answered.

Ishmael wrote, DON’T MESS WITH US, YOU WITH BOATS. SEALS OUR FRIENDS. WE TRAIN SEALS. THEY HELP US.

Dave and Pete both snickered. “You mean, like for SeaWorld?” Dave said.

NO. FOR NAVY, Ishmael answered.

Both Karuks stopped laughing very abruptly. Bill Williamson didn’t blame them a bit. Navy SEALs were no laughing matter. If they shared toys with their aquatic instructors, boats full of hotheaded troublemakers might find themselves in trouble, not making it.

And SEAL stood for SEa, Air and Land. Like Liam McMichaels, SEALs could go places and do things the merfolk couldn't on their own. Troublemakers who bothered the Squid Clan might end up in hot water on dry land.

YOU UNDERSTAND, YOU KARUKS? Ishmael asked.

"Oh, yeah. We gotcha, all right." Dave sounded anything but happy. He did sound thoughtful, though. And Pete looked thoughtful. As far as Bill was concerned, that all went on the plus side of the ledger.

To the governor, Ishmael wrote, TELL KARUK CHIEF SAME THING.

"I will. You bet I will," Bill promised.

THIS IS BEST WE DO, Ishmael wrote. ANYTHING ELSE, HE LIKE WORSE.

"That's how it looks to me, too," Bill said. "But I still have to talk to him."

IS GOOD. HOPE I NO SEE YOU IN WEEK, Ishmael wrote, and disappeared into the Pacific. Ethel Mermaid followed a moment later. Dave Super started up the *Sweetheart on Parade's* diesel. Among other things, it powered a winch that hauled up the chain and the anchor at the end of it. When the anchor came out of the water, Dave started back to Requa.

"Ask you something, Governor?" Pete said.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"What the hell were you going on about with that ugly old mermaid?"

"John Stewart," Bill answered, deadpan. Pete stared at him. He swallowed a sigh. "Never mind. Any joke you've got to explain, it isn't funny any more." He hadn't much expected to find himself with more in common with a mermaid than with a little man. But there you were. And here he was—on his way back to shore, thank God.

★ ★ ★

The phone on Bill's desk jangled. His hand jerked. He was working on a speech. He scratched out the word he'd just messed up, then lifted the handset. "Yes?" he said.

"Chief Hobbs is here for his eleven o'clock appointment, Governor," his administrative assistant said.

He glanced at the clock. It was 10:56. Sure enough, the Karuks' chief was as compulsively punctual as usual, like most people who dealt with other people for a living. "Well, send him in, Phyllis," Bill said.

As he had before, Bill stood up to greet Steve Hobbs. He hadn't gained as much for the Karuks as Hobbs had wanted him to. Better to remind the Indian ahead of time that getting huffy about it wasn't exactly brilliant.

By the chief's sour expression, he didn't need that kind of reminding. "I got a phone call yesterday," he said without preamble.

"Did you?" Bill kept his voice as neutral as he could.

"Uh-huh." Hobbs nodded. "Fellow on the line sure knew a lot about where things were at in Happy Camp." Meditatively, the chief went on, "Sounded like he knew how to blow up just about everything in Happy Camp, too."

"Did he threaten to do that?" Bill asked. Threats crossed the line, even for a SEAL. One of Ishmael's friends or students or whatever he was might be getting too enthusiastic for his own britches.

But Steve Hobbs said, "Nah. He was just ... theoretical, if you know what I mean. If you planted a charge here, this'd happen, or you'd hide in the crawl space under the gun shop if you wanted to ambush a car—stuff like that. Never said he would, just let me know he could, or one of his buddies could."

"You didn't trace the call, did you?"

"Nah," Hobbs said again, which was what Bill had expected. "We aren't set up to do anything like that. Who would've figured we'd ever need to?"

"All right, then," Bill said. "Why don't we all just see how the agreement goes for a year or two, in that case? As long as you keep your excitable boys in line, I bet Ishmael can do the same with his, regardless of whether they swim or walk on two legs. If he doesn't, the Feds will come down on him."

And if you don't, the Feds will come down on you. Bill didn't feel the need to say that. No, he didn't like Indians any better than they liked his folk. Like Steve Hobbs or not, though, he knew the Karuks' chief was no dope. Hobbs could read between the lines.

He could also read between the lines of the agreement. "Damn merfolk're gonna cheat," he said morosely.

"Probably," Bill agreed, which made Hobbs sit up straight in his short-

legged chair. The governor continued, “As long as they don’t cheat too much, though, you’ll come out all right and so will they. They’ve got to eat, same as you do. And isn’t a bargain, even one that’s not perfect, better than going broke fighting each other through the courts for years and years?”

“Cheaper, anyway,” Hobbs said. “I’m not so sure about better.”

“Cheaper all kinds of ways,” Bill said, thinking of Karuks with crates of dynamite and SEALs with plastique and rocket-propelled grenades.

“I guess.” Yes, Steve Hobbs followed him again.

“Cheaper and better,” Bill said. “When you try to cut the other guy’s heart out and eat it, most of the time you find he’s got his knife in your chest, too, just about hilt-deep. Politics isn’t pretty, but it’s better than that.”

“I guess,” Hobbs repeated. He didn’t want to admit any more than he had to, but he couldn’t very well call Bill a liar, either. After all, they were both in the same racket.

ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW

Darkness reigned outside the governor's mansion in Yreka. November 4, 1980, had been a cold, gray day. Daylight Savings Time had gone for the year, bringing night on all the earlier. It was only six o'clock, but it felt like midnight.

Gloom also prevailed inside the governor's mansion. Bill Williamson was a Democrat. So were the men with whom he watched the Presidential election results: Al Rafferty, the lieutenant governor of the state of Jefferson, and Hyman Apfelbaum, the attorney general. Their party was getting trounced.

Bill was halfway down his second gallon mug of beer. He'd started drinking when he started watching: at four o'clock Pacific time, when polls back East started closing. He was a sasquatch. At nine feet two and somewhere right around five hundred pounds, he needed a lot of beer to get a buzz. He needed a good deal more than he'd drunk, in fact.

Apfelbaum nursed a scotch. Rafferty'd gone through a lot of bourbon for a little man. Bill gave a mental shrug. He'd seen Al do plenty of drinking, but he'd hardly ever seen him drunk.

Most of the furniture in the recreation room was made to sasquatch scale, including the sofa Bill filled. The lieutenant governor and the attorney general sat on long-legged little-people chairs so they wouldn't have to look up and up and up at him ... and so they'd look less like nine-year-olds at the grownups' table.

"We're going to cut away to President Jimmy Carter in the White House," David Brinkley said, "for his concession to Governor Ronald Reagan, who is now President-elect of the United States."

"For his *what?*" Al Rafferty sounded as loud and shrill as if he'd suddenly sat on a tack.

"Stupid backwoods *shmuck*," Apfelbaum said. "Doesn't he know the polls out here don't close for another two hours? Doesn't he care how many votes for the down-ticket guys he's *kakking* away? He can't *do* that."

But he could. There he was on the TV, in a dark jacket and a red-and-blue striped tie. “I promised you...” he said, and then had to pause and gulp and start again: “I promised you four years ago that I would never lie to you, so I can’t stand here tonight and say it doesn’t hurt. The people of the United States have made their choice, and of course I accept that decision, but I have to admit not with the same enthusiasm that I accepted the decision four years ago. I might say, I have a deep appreciation of the system, however, that lets people make a free choice about who will lead them for the next four years.

“About an hour ago, I called Governor Reagan in California, and I told him that I congratulated him for a fine victory. I look forward to working closely with him during the next few weeks. We’ll have a very fine transition period. I told him I wanted the best one in history, and then I sent him this telegram, and I’ll read it to you. ‘It’s now apparent that the American people have chosen you as the new President. I congratulate you, and pledge to you our fullest support and cooperation in bringing about an orderly transition of government in the weeks ahead. My best wishes are with you and your family as you undertake the responsibilities that lie before you.’ And I signed it, Jimmy Carter.”

Lieutenant Governor Rafferty clapped a despairing hand to his forehead. “Ronald Reagan! Good God in the foothills!” He drained his latest bourbon, looking like an Irish Mask of Tragedy. “That’s that. The United States is washed up. All fifty-one states, completely and totally fucked.”

“I dunno. It may turn out better than you think, Al,” Bill said. “He left office down in Sacramento before I got to be governor here, but I met him a few times when I was in the State Senate. Say what you want about him, but he’s nobody’s dope.”

“Wonderful!” Rafferty said. “That’ll just help him set the country back a hundred years. Christ! He wasn’t even a good actor.”

The phone on the end table chose that moment to ring. Bill reached out to answer it with a certain sense of relief. He didn’t feel like getting into a shouting match with his lieutenant governor. The phone was a standard model; the handset seemed a toy in his big, hairy mitt (when he made calls, he punched buttons or spun the dial with a pen).

“Bill Williamson here,” he said. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Hyman shushing Al so he could hear whoever was on the other

end of the line.

It was the evening operator. Phyllis Ward, his administrative assistant, had already gone home for the day. “Sorry to bother you, Governor,” the woman said, “but I have a game warden from Grants Pass on the line, and he says he’s got to talk with you right away.”

“Well, put him through, Iona,” Bill said. “Whatever he’s all excited about, it has to be better news than the election returns.” Iona sniffed. By that, she’d voted for the ex-governor of California herself. Jefferson was fairly evenly split between bleeding hearts and flaming reactionaries. Elections often turned rowdy. They would have been worse if both sides hadn’t had a certain amount of live-and-let-live (or at least of leave-me-the-hell-alone-and-I’ll-do-the-same-for-you). People here did try to get along. It didn’t always work, but they tried.

A click said she was connecting the game warden. “Go ahead, Mr. Bishop,” she said. Another click announced that she’d left the line.

“Hello?” A male voice, deep for a little man’s.

“Go ahead. This is Bill Williamson.”

“Hello, Governor. Good to talk to you. I’m Eric Bishop, game warden up in Grants Pass. Reason I’m calling is, a fisherman just pulled a speartooth out of the Rogue River four or five miles west of town.”

Bill laughed out loud. “Sure he did. And rain makes applesauce. Thanks for the call, Eric. I appreciate it, believe me. It’s a hell of a lot funnier than what’s on TV right now, and that’s the truth.”

Speartooths (or, if you happened to be feeling Groucho Marxist, spearteeth) inhabited that Bermuda Triangle whose corners were marked by the dodo, the unicorn, and the jackalope. Maybe they’d swum in these rivers millions of years ago. Maybe they were mythical. Or maybe they were nothing but fast-talking wise guys’ bullshit.

Bill had always leaned toward the unicorn corner of the triangle himself. Indian legends in Jefferson, and in southern Oregon and northern California as well, spoke of big, fierce, toothy fishes in the rivers. So did sasquatch legends, which were (or at least might be) older yet. How big? How fierce? How toothy? Hey, they were legends. Nobody really knew.

Eric Bishop blew out air through his nose: an exasperated noise if ever Bill had heard one. He heard this one very clearly; they had a good connection. “Governor, honest to God, I’m not pulling your leg. Greg Donovan caught the damn thing. I happened by not fifteen minutes after he

did. He was about ready to shit himself, pardon my French. So I've seen it. I've touched it. I've got photos—I had an Instamatic in my pickup, and I filled a roll and a half of film. I wanted to call you before the story hit the papers.”

“I'll be damned. You mean it,” Bill said slowly.

“Bet your ass I do, uh, sir,” the game warden said.

“Jesus,” Bill muttered. Back before the Second World War, that South African scientist found out fishermen had caught a coelacanth. How impossible was that? Only about 70,000,000 years' worth of impossible. But there it was, and they'd brought in others since.

So why not a speartooth?

“Tell you what,” Bill said. “Give me your office phone. Give me your home phone, too. I may just have to make a trip up there tomorrow.”

Without hesitation, Bishop gave them. Bill wrote them down. If Grants Pass had a game warden named Eric Bishop, and if he had those phone numbers, maybe this wasn't one of the all-time practical jokes. If it wasn't, the world had just got even stranger than a Grade B Hollywood movie star moving into the White House.

And they said it couldn't be done!

* * *

Bill called the Jefferson Department of Fish and Game. It was, not surprisingly, closed for the evening. He called the Jefferson State Police. They were open. Once he managed to convince them he was who he said he was, and that he didn't aim to screw Eric Bishop of Grants Pass to the wall, they coughed up home and office phone numbers for Bishop. The numbers matched the ones the guy on the phone had given.

“You don't really *believe* there's a speartooth up there, do you?” Hyman Apfelbaum said. “I mean, if they really existed, somebody would've caught one a long time ago, right?”

He'd been a prosecutor, and a good one, before he got elected attorney general. He followed logic the way a bloodhound followed a lamb chop. What he said almost always made good sense.

But brute facts had a way of knocking the fanciest chain of logic into a cocked hat. “Right now, I don't know what to believe,” Bill answered. “I think there *may* be something up there. I don't know if I'd even trust

photos. If I go up there and see a hell of a big fish with pointy teeth, though, I'll know what's what." He stuck a large, russet-fuzzed finger in the air. "Hang on. Be right back."

"Where are you going?" Apfelbaum asked.

"I need a book," Bill said on his way out. He returned a couple of minutes later with a Jefferson State Ashland catalogue. Flipping through it, he explained, "They should have an ichthyologist in the biology department. Here we go.... Yeah, they do. Guy's name is Mervin McDougald."

"Mervin?" By the way Apfelbaum said it, the very sound of the name offended him.

"He won't be in his office this time of night," Al Rafferty put in.

"So I'll call him at home. How many Mervin McDougalds d'you think there are in Ashland?" Bill reached for the telephone again. Directory assistance showed—surprise!—exactly one Mervin McDougald in the college town on the way to Grants Pass. Bill wrote down the number, then dialed it.

Ring ... Ring ... "Hello?" A woman's voice.

"Hi. This is Governor Williamson," Bill said. "I'd like to speak to Professor McDougald, please."

"You *would*?" The woman sounded dubious. In her place, Bill would have, too. But then she called, "Merv! It's for you. He says he's the governor."

A faint male "You're kidding" came over the line. A moment later, the same man spoke loudly and clearly: "This is Mervin McDougald. *Who* are you?"

"This is Governor Bill Williamson," Bill said again. "Reason I'm calling is..." He explained the call he'd just got from Eric Bishop.

A long silence followed. Then McDougald said, "Governor—if you *are* the governor—I don't know if you're pulling a fast one on me or if this Bishop character is pulling one on you. Assuming you are who you say you are—you do sound like him—then the latter is the way to bet."

"Sure." Bill nodded, though of course the prof couldn't see him. "But suppose, just suppose, he isn't. Don't you want to be in on it? It'd be the biggest discovery in Jefferson since ... since I don't know what, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly in terms of ichthyology," McDougald agreed. "I don't know

how it would stack up against striking gold or something like that, but it'd top anything fishy I can think of."

"Me, too," Bill said. "So how about I pick you up at your house about half past eight tomorrow morning, and we'll go on up to Grants Pass and see what they've got there."

"Can you pick me up at the biology building on campus? I need to get someone to cover my lectures or else let the department know so they can cancel them. And I want to hit the library and do a little research before I go."

"I'll see you there," Bill said. "But how can you research something that everybody thought was nonsense up till now?"

"There are some possibilities," Mervin McDougald answered, which told Bill nothing. Then McDougald said, "I'll see you tomorrow," and hung up.

"You're gonna be in Ashland at eight-thirty tomorrow morning?" Al Rafferty said. "You poor sucker."

"That's why God made coffee," Bill said resignedly. He looked at his watch. The speartooth saga had chewed up an hour, anyway. He sat down on the couch again. "Polls here close in forty-five minutes. I'll see what's what with our elections, and then I'll hit the hay."

"Stupid goddamn Carter," Hyman Apfelbaum said. "If he costs us that House race by giving up early, somebody ought to kick him in his big, prayerful teeth."

"Line forms on the left," Bill said, and gave his attention back to the idiot box.

★ ★ ★

Jefferson was not a big state. Oh, it was fair-sized in terms of area, but people were thin on the ground. They'd been even thinner on the ground in 1919; California and Oregon hadn't thought they were losing much when the new state broke away from them. Quite a few of the people who did live there, pot-growing freaks and moonshining Birchers alike, wanted authority to have as little to do with them as possible. Left and right united in keeping the state government small and puny.

All of which meant that, if the governor felt like getting away for a couple of days, he could. Nobody would miss him. Hardly anyone would

even notice he was gone. His wife noticed when the alarm went off, though. “Good God!” she said. “What time is it?”

“Six o’clock. Sorry, Louise,” Bill answered around an enormous yawn. He’d stayed up with Al and Hyman till almost midnight. The Democrats *were* going to lose that House race. Hyman had had some more interesting things to say about Jimmy Carter.

“Good God!” Louise repeated, and put her pillow over her head.

Bill lurched into the bathroom. He took a leak, cleaned his teeth, and ran a brush over his red-brown pelt. When he came out, he put on the same beige shorts he’d worn the day before. They saved his modesty and gave him somewhere to stick keys, wallet, and comb. Sandals on his feet and he was ready to go.

In the kitchen, Ray had a big pot of coffee waiting. “You’re a lifesaver, man!” Bill exclaimed, filling a sasquatch-sized travel mug and securing the plastic lid. “How did you know?”

“What do the news guys say? I never reveal my sources,” the steward answered. “Want a couple-three danishes to eat with the coffee?”

“You bet I do.” Bill wrapped them in paper towels and carried them out to the Mighty Mo, which was parked by the flagpoles flying the Stars and Stripes and the Jefferson state flag, a dark green banner with the state seal in the center of the field. The seal was a gold pan emblazoned with two X’s, symbolizing the double crosses Jefferson had got from Sacramento and Salem before becoming a state in its own right.

A state of confusion, Bill thought. *A state where legends come to life*. He opened the Mighty Mo’s left rear door. The 1974 Cadillac Eldorado—the last of its kind, a monument to the days of cheap gas, and nearly as big as its battleship prototype—would fit a sasquatch who drove from the back seat. There was no left front seat, only a long steering column that housed the ignition and the shift.

Bill turned the key. The humongous engine under that long, long hood rumbled to life. It sounded a little rough; the Mighty Mo’s odometer showed over 100,000 miles. Bill didn’t know what he’d do when the car crapped out on him. They didn’t make ’em this size any more, and he didn’t fit into anything much smaller. Well, that was a worry for another day—he hoped.

He put the Eldorado in drive and headed for the northbound onramp to the I-5. He drove past the domed state Capitol. Like the governor’s

mansion, it had gone up under Charlie “Bigfoot” Lewis, Jefferson’s first sasquatch governor, during the prosperous 1920s. The ugly, square state office building next door dated from the next decade. It looked like what it was: a WPA special.

The onramp wasn’t far past the state office building. Bill sat at the red light, waiting for a green arrow so he could turn left. He didn’t have to wait long. His own big foot—a size thirty-two—came down on the accelerator. He swung onto the Interstate and rolled north.



Haven’t been in Ashland since I saw A Midsummer Night’s Dream this past spring, Bill thought as he pulled off the highway and drove east toward the university campus. His daughter had played Miranda in that Ashland Shakespeare Festival production. He muttered under his breath. The director, an out-of-stater who didn’t grok how Jefferson worked, had wanted to cast her as Caliban. Some gubernatorial arm-twisting took care of that.

He didn’t need to worry about the theatre arts department today. Neither did Nicole, who’d graduated in June. Now she was doing what so many new theatre-arts graduates did: hustling for anything she could find. It was tough for everybody. It was, no doubt, tougher if you were female, more than seven feet tall, and covered with hair.

Parking on campus cost \$2.50, which seemed outrageous to Bill. Many spaces were marked COMPACT ONLY, and didn’t come close to fitting the Mighty Mo. He finally found one that did. He didn’t bother locking the car. Only another sasquatch could have driven it. By the nature of things, his kind weren’t really into grand theft auto.

A man outside the entrance to the yellow-brick biology building waved as Bill came up. Bill waved back. “You Professor McDougald?” he called.

“Call me Merv. Everybody does,” the ichthyologist said. He was lean and, for a little man, tall. He had hair down almost to his shoulders and a bushy brown mustache with some gray in it—he was in his mid-forties. His style wasn’t cool any more; he either hadn’t noticed or didn’t care. After shaking hands with the governor, he went on, “I still think we’re chasing fool’s gold, but I’m not as sure as I was when we talked last night.”

“Tell me more while we walk back to my car,” Bill said. He slowed his pace to let McDougald keep up without jogging. He didn’t have to slow much. His companions moved athletically, as if he’d been a decent high-school basketball player who hadn’t slid too far out of shape since.

“If the speartooth isn’t just the figment of your people’s imagination —” McDougald began.

“And the Indians’. Don’t forget the Indians,” Bill broke in.

“Right.” McDougald grinned up at him, which made him smile back. “Like I was saying, if the speartooth is real, I think it’s most likely to be a survival of *Oncorhynchus rastrosus*, a fossil fish that lived in these parts from the Miocene to the Pleistocene.”

“How long is that in years?” Bill asked.

“From about seven million years ago to less than a million. It seems to have gone extinct some time during the Ice Age,” McDougald said. He grinned again when he saw the governor’s Eldorado. “That’s a hell of a ride you have there, man, but what kind of mileage does it get?”

“Godawful. Worse than godawful. Price I pay for being a sasquatch in a world full of little people,” Bill said mournfully. Food was part of the price, too. The only things he saved on were clothes and razor blades. He returned to the business at hand. “So if it didn’t go extinct...”

“Then it may be what we’ve got in Grants Pass. Or it may not. We’ll find out when we get there,” McDougald said. At Bill’s waved invitation, he slid into the Mighty Mo’s right front seat.

Bill got behind the long-shafted wheel. As he started the car, he said, “Pronounce the name again for me so I don’t sound like a goofus if I have to say it to a reporter or something.”

“*Oncorhynchus rastrosus*.” Mervin McDougald said it slowly, several times. He went on, “*Oncorhynchus* is also the genus of modern Pacific trout and salmon. The Atlantic varieties are in *Salmo*.”

“Salmon,” Bill murmured, piloting the Cadillac back to the I-5. He thought they were delicious, but that wasn’t what gave the murmur a certain edge. The Indians of Jefferson also thought they were delicious. So did the merfolk, out in the Pacific. Keeping the two groups from fighting over who got what was one of the more interesting things he’d had to do lately—if you meant *interesting* in the sense of the Chinese curse.

From Ashland to Grants Pass was a little more than forty miles. Bill got there in a little less than forty minutes. The double nickel speed limit

remained the law of the land. It also remained the most widely ignored law of the land in the history of laws of the land, possibly including Prohibition. You needed to go somewhere, you floored it and you went.

Bill got off the Interstate at US 199. He took the smaller road west and south, across a bridge over the Rogue River, to Rogue River Highway. The Fish and Game Department had plainly been at its current digs for quite a while. The building reminded the governor of the state offices, though it was much smaller. It had that same blocky, homely practicality. Sure as hell, a bronze plaque by the front door declared that the Works Progress Administration ran it up in 1936.

That front door was tall enough for sasquatches. Bill didn't have to duck in the reception hall. Even that early, the WPA had noticed that Jefferson was a different kind of place. A secretary looked up from her IBM Correcting Selectric and said, "You're the governor, aren't you?"

"Guilty," Bill said. "And I've got Professor McDougald, the ichthyologist from Jefferson State Ashland, here with me."

"You'll want Eric Bishop." The woman punched buttons on her phone, spoke into it in a low voice, and hung up. "He'll be right out."

Bishop wore a Smokey Bear hat, a forest green shirt with a badge on the left breast, khaki pants, and hiking boots. He shook hands with Bill and with Merv McDougald, and then said, "I'll take you over to see Greg Donovan and whatever's left of the speartooth. I left my film at the Fotomat a couple of blocks from here. I had 'em do the twenty-four-hour service, so the pictures'll be ready this afternoon."

"That all sounds good." Bill remembered the days—they hadn't been that long ago, either—when you had to wait a week for your photos, and you'd forgotten what some of them were about by the time you got them back. He went on, "Meeting you in person makes me start to believe this may be real. I sure didn't when we were on the phone."

"Oh, it's real, all right." The game warden tilted his hat back so he could scratch his forehead. "If Greg's neighbors don't know how real it is today, they sure as hell will by this time tomorrow."

Bill held his nose. It was flatter than a little man's, so his gesture was slightly different: he pushed the tops of his nostrils down instead of pinching them together. But it meant the same thing. Pitching his voice as high as he could, which wasn't very, he said, "What's that offal smell?" McDougald winced, so he noticed what Bill had perpetrated, poor bastard.

Eric Bishop didn't. "Come on with me," he said, and then paused to take another look at the governor of Jefferson. "Um, maybe you'd better follow me over, huh?"

"That sounds like a plan," Bill said dryly. No, he and unmodified little-people cars didn't mix.

Bishop's Fish and Game car was an aging Plymouth the same color as his shirt—about the same color as Jefferson's flag—with a yellow light on top. It was easy to follow, in other words. And, since Grants Pass had only about 15,000 people, following a car wasn't exactly the kind of thing that would challenge the FBI.



Greg Donovan lived in a big white clapboard house near the west edge of town, on a lot full of pines and spruces a couple of hundred yards from the Rogue. A Steller's jay screeched in one of the trees. A golden retriever ran up to Bishop's car and Bill's, barking its head off. As soon as Bill got out, stood up, and stretched, the dog ran in the other direction even faster. It might not fear strange little people, but a sasquatch was a different story.

The dog's racket made Donovan and his wife come out to see what was going on. He was about fifty, with a neat graying beard. He wore a Pendleton, beat-up jeans, and Nikes. His wife looked at least ten years younger than he was. Her hair was redder than Bill's pelt. Her sweatshirt and jeans did more for her shape than Greg's clothes did for his.

"Holy moly, Eric!" Greg called. The retriever trotted over to him. He patted it and scratched its ears. "You said you were gonna call the governor, but I didn't think you meant it."

"You've known me twenty years. How often do I say stuff I don't mean?" the game warden answered.

"There is that," Donovan allowed. He nodded toward Bill. "I know who you are. This is my wife, Kelly Ann. Who's your friend?" After Bill introduced Mervin McDougald, Donovan nodded again. "Good to meet you, Professor. I can see why you'd want to come along."

"My curiosity got the better of me," McDougald said. That was as polite a way as Bill could think of to say he still didn't fully believe the Grants Pass man had caught a speartooth. Since Bill didn't fully believe it, either, he understood the ichthyologist's doubts.

Eric Bishop took the bull by the horns: “How much of the fish is left, Greg?”

“There’s a whole bunch of meat in my freezers,” Donovan answered.

“It looks a lot like trout,” Kelly Ann put in. “It’s not red the way salmon is. It tastes a lot like trout, too. I pan-fried some for supper last night. It was good. Fried up some potatoes to do with it.”

“I was going to feed the guts to the dog,” Greg went on. “Then I thought, How many speartooths are there? I went to 7-Eleven and Safeway and bought all the ice they had. So that stuff’s in trash bags in one of the sheds back here.”

“It is?” Merv McDougald’s eyes went wide, wider, widest. “I love you! Will you marry me?”

“Hey, I saw him first,” Kelly Ann said. If Greg was as straight as he seemed, Bill didn’t think she had to worry about the competition.

“I saved the skeleton, too, and the whole head,” Greg said. “I cut the fish into four parts so I’d have manageable chunks to deal with, but I didn’t toss any of it in the trash.”

“I do love you!” Merv said.

“C’mon back. I’ll show you guys,” Donovan said. “Somebody’ll have to keep Rex out of things, but I expect we can cope.”

As they walked around the house and back toward a sheet-metal shed with a corrugated roof, Bill asked, “How’d you manage to go fishing on a Tuesday afternoon, Greg?”

The local sent him a crooked grin. “You mean, how come I wasn’t stuck in an office somewhere, shuffling papers from one pile to another and writing more for other people to shuffle?”

“You said it that way,” Bill responded. “I didn’t.”

“Yeah, yeah. But that’s what you meant,” Donovan said. “Reason I wasn’t is, I don’t like it and I don’t have to do it. I’m a computer programmer and a writer, and I can work right here. I do things for a lot of little companies, write articles for magazines like *onComputing* and *Byte*. I can send ’em what they need on floppy disks.”

“On what?” Bill asked.

“Information-storage goodies,” Greg answered patiently.

“Oh.” Trying to show how up-to-date he was, Bill said, “The state government’s using more and more wadayacallits—word processors, that’s it.”

“Those babies are okay now, but they’ll be obsolete like a Model T in a year or two,” Donovan said. “I’ve been doing some freelance work for Apple, and the GUI they’re working on’ll blow the doors off the way people use computers.”

Bill began to realize how out of his depth he was. “The what? The gooey?”

“G-U-I. Graphical User Interface. I can tell you that because you haven’t got any idea what the hell I’m talking about. Otherwise, I’d have to kill you.” By the way Donovan said that, maybe he was kidding and maybe not.

“Can we see the fish, please, and worry about computers some other time?” Merv McDougald, by contrast, sounded plaintive, or perhaps desperate.

“Oh. Yeah. Right.” Greg, who’d slowed down to talk with Bill, got moving again. “Sorry about that. The governor pushed a button, I guess.”

“You think?” Kelly Ann said. He gave her a look. She stuck out her tongue at him. They’d been together for a while, all right. Bill recognized the signs.

Greg Donovan took a key ring from his pocket and unlocked the stout Yale that secured the shed’s sliding door. The door slid without vibration or squeak, which said he took good care of gadgets other than computers and floppy disks. As soon as air wafted out of the shed, Bill’s nostrils twitched. “Fish in there, sure enough.”

“Funny how that works.” Greg flipped a switch on the wall. A bare hundred-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling blazed to life. The fish smell got stronger as Bill ducked inside. He stayed ducked; the ceiling wasn’t high enough for him to straighten up again. But it didn’t smell like *old* fish. Not all the ice in the plastic bags Greg had bought was melted yet.

Rex the golden retriever thought it smelled fascinating. He charged into the shed in spite of Bill’s intimidating presence, mouth open in a doggy grin. Greg Donovan grabbed him by the collar and hauled him away from the goodies. “Outa here, you dumb mutt,” he said.

Kelly Ann turned to Bill and Merv. “What are you supposed to do with a guy like that?” she said. “He talks to me the same way.” The spark in her eye made Bill believe her about as far as he could shot-put the Mighty Mo.

“Hey, sweetie, I never called you *mutt* in my life,” Greg said.

“Something close,” Kelly Ann returned.



Laughing, Greg shook his head. He gave his attention back to the governor and the ichthyologist. Merv McDougald was shifting from foot to foot as if about to pee in his pants. “Here—this is the tail end,” Greg said, picking up a dark green Hefty bag. “Like I said, after I gutted the thing I cut it into four pieces so I could get it into my truck without killing myself or rigging a block and tackle.”

Careless of his clothes, Merv undid the paper-wrapped wire tie that held the trash bag closed and reached into pull out the hunk of fish. “Oh, my,” he said softly, examining the big tail the way a teenaged kid examined his girlfriend’s body the very first time he got lucky. “Oh, my.”

“What does it tell you?” Bill asked.

“It’s definitely *Oncorhynchus*,” McDougald said. “The shape of the tail and the raying tell me that at first glance. The adipose fin, too.” He tapped a small, fatty fin on the back, near the front end of the butchered piece of fish. “It’s much bigger than any species of *Oncorhynchus* I’m familiar with, though.”

“How did you land it, anyway?” Bill wondered. If the rest of the fish was in proportion to that tail, it was ginormous, all right.

“First thing I asked him when I drove by,” Eric Bishop said.

“I was at the edge of the river, going for trout,” Greg said. If he’d told the story once, he didn’t mind telling it again—he was a fisherman, all right. “And I got this strike, and it damn near pulled me into the water. The fish jumped, and I saw how big it was, and I kinda freaked out. I felt like Ernest goddamn Hemingway with a swordfish or something. I figured it’d break the line and get away and nobody’d ever believe me if I talked about it. I hardly believed it myself, and I was there.”

“You’re lucky it *didn’t* pull you in,” Bishop said.

“Yeah, that woulda been all she wrote, huh?” Greg said. “But anyway, it jumped again, and it must’ve hated the hook so much, it came right out of the water and onto the bank. I bashed in its head with a baseball bat.”

Merv McDougald made a small, distressed noise. “May I see the head, please?”

“Sure. Here you go.” Grunting a little at the weight, Donovan picked up another bag and gave it to the ichthyologist. He seemed to know exactly which bag held what. A bit slower than Bill should have, he notice a stick-

on label, with HEAD neatly printed in Magic Marker. The others bore similar tags. Greg was organized, as a programmer ought to be.

Hands trembling in excitement—and, no doubt, worry with it—McDougald undid the tie, opened the bag, and reached in. He gave forth with a loud sigh of relief as he lifted out the head. “It’s not as bad as I was afraid it would be,” he said. “Damage to the dorsal region, and some to the left side, but the right side is in excellent shape.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Eric Bishop said. “You wouldn’t want to swim in any river where that baby lived.”

“No kidding!” Bill agreed. The speartooth’s golden eye was dull and dead; its green-and-brown speckled scales no longer shone. But there could be no question about how it had earned its names. It bore some of the longest, pointiest teeth Bill had ever seen on anything this side of a crocodile. They included an upward-projecting tusklike fang in the lower jaw and a matching downward-projecting one in the upper jaw.

“It’s not quite identical to the fossils we have of *Oncorhynchus rastrosus*,” McDougald said. “Clearly a close relative, probably a descendant, but not identical. The relationship would be something like the one between *Homo habilis* and modern man.”

“*Homo sapiens*, you mean,” Bill said dryly—he didn’t roost on that branch of the primate family tree.

Anthropologists still argued about where sasquatches and yetis did roost. Some said they were related to *Gigantopithecus*, the enormous extinct Asian ape. Others claimed they were an odd offshoot of *Homo erectus*, which would make them closer kind to little people. Bill, like most people big or little, didn’t waste a whole lot of time worrying about it.

“Can we go out and buy more ice?” McDougald said. Or maybe visit a funeral home and get some formaldehyde? We have to preserve the specimens till I can take them down to Ashland and freeze them or prepare them properly. Who knows when—or even if—we’ll ever see another speartooth?”

“Blows my mind that we’ve seen this one,” Bill said. “All this time, I thought the legends were a lot of hot air, but I was wrong. There’ve been just enough of them here and there for people to come across ’em every now and then. Who would’ve thunk it?”

“You know what I’m gonna do when I get back to Ashland?” Merv

said. “I play racquetball with Steve Halvorsen, from the anthropology department. Tracing how legends grow is part of what he does. He’s talked about it till I almost think I could do it myself. This might be right up his alley.”

“That sounds great,” Bill said. To the ichthyologist, it was a scientific question. Oh, he’d gain prestige when he announced it, the same way the gal who found the coelacanth had. When you made a big discovery, the glory stuck to you, even if it was the discovery that was big and not your own self. Bill, a politician, viewed the speartooth through a different set of lenses. The first thing that cross his mind was *what will this do for Jefferson?* The second was *What will this do for me when I run for reelection in two years?* Some politicians—Al Rafferty sprang to mind—would have found his second question first.

“This will be a book. It has to be. Articles and a book, in fact.” Yes, visions of academic sugar plums were dancing in Merv McDougald’s head. If he wasn’t already tenured, he would be after he started publishing.

“We have the speartooth—” Bill began.

“The specimen,” Merv broke in.

“Okay, the specimen,” Bill said equably. “We’re gonna have the photos. When will those be ready, Eric?”

“Kid at the Fotomat promised me by four o’clock,” Bishop answered. “And I ordered double prints, so I’ll keep a set and you and the professor can split the other one. I’ll have the negatives, too. I’ll make more prints whenever somebody needs ’em.”

“Will you give me some from your batch?” Greg Donovan asked. “I don’t want to be one of those guys who tell fish stories with nothing to back ’em up.

“Hang on, everybody,” Bill said. “I’m gonna call a press conference down at the state Capitol in Yreka Monday morning. I’ll announce it tomorrow, so the news people can get their act together. I’d like all of you to be there to talk about the speartooth and what finding it means. Merv, if you want to invite Professor, uh—”

“Halvorsen.”

“Halvorsen, thanks. If you want to invite him, too, that’d be great. We may even see Jefferson on the national news. Last time it happened, I think, was when the Yeti Lama visited summer before last.”

“And this would be because of something that happened inside the

state, not because somebody from the other side of the world was paying a call,” Eric Bishop said.

“You betcha!” Bill beamed at the game warden. Somebody got it, maybe even almost in the estian sense. The governor went on, “So—can everybody be at the Capitol Monday morning at, say, nine o’clock?”

“Why so bloody early?” Greg asked, miming a tormented, or at least a decaffeinated, soul.

“Because that’s already noon on the East Coast,” Bill said. “Gotta give the news crews some time to put their stories together and get ’em ready to air.”

Nobody told him no. The programmer who’d caught the speartooth gave a theatrical groan. Kelly Ann Donovan, by contrast, said, “I’ll be there with bells on. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Can I see some more of the speartooth, please?” Merv asked Greg. “The stomach and intestines, if you can find them in a hurry. They’ll tell me what the speartooth ate.”

“Anything that didn’t eat it first, is the way to bet,” Eric said. “That would be just about everything except people.”

“When they’re full grown, sure,” Merv said. “When they’re still little ... This one won’t tell me anything about that. I wonder if we’ve been pulling babies out of the Rogue for years and just thinking they were funny trout. If the big teeth don’t grow in till maturity, it’s possible.” Greg handed him a Hefty bag labeled GUTS. He smiled like Christmas as he opened it.

★ ★ ★

Bill backed out of the shed. His spine creaked gratefully as he straightened up. He’d brought Mervin McDougald here to examine fish guts. That didn’t mean they interested him.

Kelly Ann stepped outside into the fresh air a moment after he did. she took a deep breath. “It did get a little smelly in there when he undid the tie on that one,” she said.

“Yeah, just a big,” Bill said. The odor wafted out in her wake. He and Kelly and moved farther away. Rex the golden retriever tried to go inside again. Whatever McDougald was doing smelled great to him. Greg shoed him away.

Kelly Ann lit a Virginia Slim. She glanced at Bill. "You don't mind?"

"I'm not rude enough to tell you what to do on your own property," he said. "I hope to God I'm not, anyway."

"That means you do mind but you're too polite to say so," Kelly Ann said accurately. She didn't step on the cigarette, but she did move downwind of him.

Inside the shed, Merv kept making little excited noises. Every so often, Eric Bishop echoed him. The game warden seemed to know a good deal about how the insides of fish worked. Well, that was part of his job, even if not all of it. The dominant refrain seemed to be *Will you look at that?*

After a while, Greg Donovan stepped out of the shed. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm glad I saved the offal, but I'll be damned if I can get excited about it."

"I'm with you," Bill told him. "I'm glad you saved everything, too, and I can't get excited about it, either."

Greg turned to his wife. "Let me bum one of those off you, huh?"

As she gave him the pack, she teased, "You want the governor to see you smoking a women's cigarette?"

"Like I care," he said, lighting up. "They'll rot my lungs same as my Marlboros, and this way I don't have to go in the house and find those." He held the pack of Virginia Slims out to Bill. "Go for one yourself?"

"No, thanks," Bill answered. "I already have plenty of bad habits. I drink beer. I drink scotch. I do politics." Greg chuckled and gave the cigarettes back to Kelly Ann.

Merv and Eric showed no signs of coming forth any time soon. They would have been happy pawing through the speartooth's entrails for the next week. Bill took a surreptitious look at his watch.

"What time is it getting to be?" Kelly Ann asked.

"Close to eleven," Bill said. "I crawled out of bed early to pick up Merv in Ashland before we came here. I'm getting hungry. Where's a good place to go grab some lunch that isn't too far?"

"If you want, I can fry up some more of the speartooth. Lord knows there's enough of it to feed an army." Kelly Ann paused, thinking. Then she said, "Heck, I'll bring it outside for everybody. I'm sorry, Governor, but our house is little-people-sized."

"Most of them are," Bill said easily. "A lot more people your size than mine." Even in Jefferson, sasquatches were a small minority.

Accommodations laws here said hotels and restaurants and other public buildings had to make allowances for them, but you couldn't hope to pass legislation like that for housing. The governor waved. "It'll be fine. It's a nice day—a lot nicer than yesterday—and this is a nice place.

"You're a nice man, is what you are," Kelly Ann said. She went inside. Pretty soon, savory smells floated out of the kitchen."

Not quite out of the blue, Greg Donovan said, "You know something, Governor? I think I'm the luckiest fella alive."

"Well, I understand that. I feel the same way with my Louise," Bill replied. "Find the right one, she's worth her weight in gold and them some. You guys have kids?"

"Boy and a girl, senior and a sophomore at the high school." Greg dug out his wallet. He wore it in his left front pocket, not on his hip the way most little men did. "Wanna see pictures?"

"I'll put up with yours if you put up with mine," Bill said. The deal was made. Bill pulled out his own wallet. Each agreed that the other's spouse and offspring were superior specimens of their kind. Ritual satisfied, both men stowed their billfolds.

Kelly Ann slid the kitchen window open and hollered "Lunch!" through the screen.

Merv and Eric failed to come out of the shed. "Hey, you guys!" Greg said loudly. "Better get it while it's hot! C'mon out and clean up. When'll you get the chance to eat speartooth again?"

That did the trick. The ichthyologist's arms and shirt were somewhat the worse for wear. They cleaned their hands at the garden hose. Most of their talk flew straight over Bill's head. He knew no more about the intricacies of scale and ray counts than they did about the gears and wheels and pulleys behind passing legislation.

Kelly Ann passed out plates of fried fish and fried potatoes. When she got to Bill, she said, "I know you'll want more. Don't be shy. I've got plenty—it wasn't a little fish."

"Shy? Me? I'm the governor, remember? If I were shy, they would've run me out of town a long time ago." Bill ate a forkful of fish. He chewed thoughtfully. Yes, it was closer to trout than to salmon—definitely in that range. Whatever it tasted like ... He nodded approval. "That's mighty good!"

None of the little men argued with him. Greg fed Rex some scraps. The

retriever wolfed them down, then tried to climb his master in hopes of getting more. “Forget it,” Greg told him. “If you had your way, you’d be a basketball with legs.” Rex did an excellent impression of a dog that didn’t speak people—excellent, but not good enough for seconds.

Bill, on the other hand, took not only seconds but thirds. “You don’t get any extra salary or allowance because you’re a sasquatch, do you?” Kelly Ann asked.

“I wish!” Bill said sincerely. “But I don’t. The taxpayers, Lord love ’em, would come after me with pitchforks and tar and feathers if I asked for one.”

“I don’t see why. You’re as big as three of us. You eat like three of us. Seems only fair you should be able to afford to,” she said.

“You *are* a nice lady,” Bill said. “But it depends on what you mean by ‘fair.’ Most people think it means everybody should be treated exactly the same no matter what.”

“That’s dumb. People aren’t all identical, like the stupid Farkel Family on *Laugh-In*. We’d be boring if we were,” Kelly Ann said.

He was inclined to agree with her. Even in easygoing Jefferson, the vast majority of the voters weren’t. Anything that smacked of special privilege for anybody was a political kiss of death. You might not like that particular fact of life, but you flouted it at your peril.



Eric and Merv hopped into the game warden’s car for a run to get more ice and possibly some formaldehyde. They came back with the frozen water but without the embalming fluid.

“Wouldn’t work.” Merv sounded said. “I’d have to cut up the specimens and put them in bottles. We don’t have the bottles and we don’t have the time. I’ve got got to keep everything cold till I can get it down to Ashland and into the freezers in the lab there.” He glanced over to Bill. “Governor, I can use your trunk to move things, right?”

“Well, there’s plenty of room,” Bill said, which wasn’t exactly assent. It was true enough; the Mighty Mo’s trunk would hold anything this side of a 747. All the same, Bill added, “Make sure you close all the bags up good and right. Otherwise, I’ll be remembering this trip every time I open the trunk for the next five years.”

Greg laughed. "Isn't that why God made air freshener?"

"I don't think God or Procter and Gamble ever made air freshener strong enough to beat old fish," Bill said. Greg spread his hands, yielding the point.

Eric Bishop pulled a Fotomat receipt out of his wallet. "May I use your phone for a minute?" he asked Kelly Ann. "I want to see when the pictures will be ready. I told 'em to hurry as much as they could, so maybe we won't have to wait till four."

"Sure. Go ahead. There's one on the wall by the fridge," she said.

Bishop walked inside. When he came out, he was grinning from ear to ear. "They've got 'em!" he said. "The kid in the booth put in a special rush on 'em, bless her heart. I've got to find something nice to do for her."

Money works, Bill thought. But that was the game warden's business, not his. Eric piled into the Fish and Game Department Plymouth and peeled out of there at the best speed its small, unexciting engine would give him. Plainly, he would have liked to burn rubber on his way to the Fotomat. Just as plainly, the car wouldn't let him.

"If I'm working that Fotomat now, I'd tell him, 'Sorry, none of the pics came out,' just to see the look on his face," Greg said.

"That's evil!" Kelly Ann sounded more admiring than not. Bill would have said the same thing, but perhaps not in the same tone of voice.

Half an hour later, Eric Bishop came back. By his expression as he got out of the car, he hadn't got any bad news at the booth with the yellow roof. He held up two envelopes full of prints. "I put these on the state's nickel, Governor," he said. "I figured they're official business."

"That's fine." Bill nodded. "Your boss grumps, tell him to talk to me."

"Okay. And I gave the Fotomat girl ten bucks out of my own pocket for hurrying the orders. I had to talk her into taking it. Can you believe that?"

"Can we see the pictures? They're as close as I'll come to the speartooth *in vivo*." Merv McDougald had literally salivated over fried speartooth at lunch. He seemed much droolier now on account of the photographs.

"Here we go." Eric Bishop pulled prints out of the first envelope. Everybody crowded around him for a look. Bill bent forward to get as close a view as he could.

"Oooh," Merv whispered. Bill doubted whether the sexiest, nakedest

Playmate of the Month could have coaxed that noise from him. He'd seen naked women before. A naked speartooth? Nope.

There it lay, on the muddy bank of the Rogue. It was greenish brown above and silvery below. Greg Donovan stood beside it to give a sense of scale: it was about as long as he was tall. *That's a hell of a lot of fish*, Bill thought. The speartooth's golden eye stared back at the camera with what the governor imagined to be reproach.

Other photos were tighter shots of the speartooth's head, of its fins, and of its tail. One, taken from a little too close for the Instamatic's lens, tried to show its toothy mouth.

"Okay, on to the next roll," Eric said. He put the first batch of photos back into their envelope and took the second batch out of the other one. On the first picture here, Greg was digging into the speartooth's belly with what looked like ... "Is that a bayonet?" Bill asked.

"Sure is," Greg answered. "Came off the M-1 I carried in Korea almost thirty years ago. Still as good a utility knife as I've ever found." Something dark passed across his face. "I'd sure rather use it on a fish than —" He broke off, shook his head, and didn't finish.

"Hey, babe," Kelly Ann said quietly. He put his arm around her.

There were the speartooth guts, spilled out onto the riverbank. Bill had to glance away from the photo for a second. The entrails looked too much as if they'd come out of a human belly, not a fish's. He hadn't been ready for that; his stomach's slow lurch caught him by surprise.

Merv McDougald, on the other hand, focused on the picture like a burning glass. He made learned comments on the shape of the liver and the relative lengths of the small and large intestines that did nothing to help Bill's poise or equilibrium.

The last pictures were of Greg cutting up the salmon so he could lift the pieces—and the guts, for which science would bless him—into the back of his pickup. That made Bill find another question: "How many times have you hosed down your truck bed?"

"Three or four so far," Donovan answered. "That may do it—or it may not." Bill nodded. He wouldn't be able to clean out the Mighty Mo's trunk the same way if something went wrong on the way south.

Eric kept one set of photos for himself. Bill and Merv divided up the other set, except for a couple that went to Greg. "I'll have 'em make you a full set from the negatives," the game warden promised.

“Good. I want ’em,” Greg said. “When I get old and stupid—”

“Stupider,” Kelly Ann put in.

“Stupider.” Greg accepted the correction without a blink, which seemed to disappoint her. “When I get old and stupider, I’ll be able to pull ’em out and remember it wasn’t just another bullshit fish story.”

“Well, now I’m gonna call the *Daily Courier*. You can pull that story out, too,” Eric said.

“And I’ll be getting hold of the *Daily Tidings* in Ashland,” Merv added.

“And I—or my publicist—will be talking to every reporter and his brother-in-law,” Bill said. “That’s why we’ll want you at the press conference Monday.”

“We’ll do it,” Greg said. Kelly Ann nodded.

“That’s right,” Eric agreed.

“With these photos, you couldn’t keep me away,” Merv added. Bill smiled. He’d got them all moving his way.

★ ★ ★

But you had to give to get. That was a basic lesson of politics. Even so, a certain number of lardbrain politicians never got it. Bill had it down solid. He kept right on smiling when Merv and Eric filled the bottom of the Mighty Mo’s trunk with bags of ice. Then Merv and Greg took bags of fish parts and set them on top of the ice. Bill sniffed. No, it wasn’t bad. With luck, it wouldn’t get bad. Still more ice went on top of the Hefty bags. Bill slammed down the trunk lid—*thud!*

“That’s a hell of a big trunk, Governor,” Greg Donovan said. “And you’re a hell of a good sport about this, too.”

“I’m excited about it,” Bill said. “My ancestors were probably telling stories about speartooths before the Indians ever got here. Nice to know those stories weren’t total bullshit.”

“There you go.” Greg nodded.

“Yup. Here I go.” Bill raised his voice: “C’mon, Merv. I’m taking you back to Ashland and me back to Yreka. The sooner we get to Jefferson State Ashland, the less time your specimens have to spoil.”

“I’m coming.” McDougald came with such alacrity that Bill smiled his inward smile again. He’d been in this game a while. He knew which

buttons to push, all right.

He found his way back to the I-5 with only a couple of little fumbles. Grants Pass wasn't like Ashland or Yreka, where he knew his way around without needing to stop and think. Once you were going the right way on the Interstate, though, you could turn off most of your brain till you got close to where you wanted to swing back onto surface streets.

One trucker had turned off too much of his brain. His rig lay sideways on the soft shoulder of a curve he'd missed. Several tons of grapes spilled onto the shoulder and the field around it. The driver hadn't hurt himself. He stood by the overturned cab and stared glumly at the mess he'd caused.

"He's kissing his job good-bye," Merv said.

"Uh-huh." Bill nodded. "And if he had a beer or two at a truck stop in Grants Pass, he's in worse trouble than that."

The accident cost the Mighty Mo about five minutes on the trip back to Jefferson State. By the way Merv McDougald fidgeted in the right front seat, he either needed a rest stop or he was picturing the Hefty bags full of rotten, stinking speartooth.

But everything seemed fine when the governor parked near the biology building. He sniffed anxiously at the Eldorado's trunk as Merv hauled bag after bag to the freezers. Bill dropped the ice bags into a dumpster. Then he did some more sniffing. Everything still seemed okay. He hoped that, unlike Fotomat prints, the stink wouldn't take twenty-four hours to develop.

"Thanks for everything, Governor." Merv held out his hand one more time.

Bill shook it. "Thanks for coming along. The speartooth isn't a myth—and we've got the pictures to prove it."

"And the specimens," the ichthyologist agreed. "I'll see you Monday morning in Yreka."

That saved Bill the trouble of nagging him about it one more time. He slid into the Mighty Mo instead and headed back to the Interstate.

★ ★ ★

Thursday morning, Bill knocked on Barbara Rasmussen's open door. He didn't go any farther till his publicist said, "Come on in." He knew he intimidated little people if he just suddenly loomed above them. It was too

much like Godzilla coming over the hill and descending on the village.

“Got something to show you,” he said.

“What’s up?” Barbara was a tall, well-made blonde, certainly publicist-pretty, very possibly starlet-pretty. She was pretty enough to carbonate Bill’s hormones. Like a lot of members of small minorities, he got most of his ideas about beauty from the larger society in which he lived. He hadn’t done anything about them with Barbara; he liked being married to Louise. But that didn’t make them go away.

“Check these out,” he said, and set some of the best speartooth photos in front of her. Not all of his ancestors had been so scrupulous as he was; if family stories had it straight, one of his great-great-grandmothers was a little woman.

“Good God!” she said, staring up at him. Her eyes were big and improbably blue. “They said you went up to Grants Pass yesterday for something that had to do with a speartooth, but I thought it had to be a joke or a hoax. It wasn’t, was it?”

“Sure wasn’t. I ate some for lunch, matter of fact. Can’t very well do that with a hoax.” Bill smacked his lips. “*Oncorhynchus rastrosus*, in the—pretty tasty—flesh.”

“Oh-kay.” Barbara made two very distinct syllables of it. She peered down at the photos again. “The speartooth looks ... pretty much like a speartooth’s supposed to look, I guess. Wow! It’s really big.”

“I know. Isn’t that crazy?”

She looked up at him again. He went a little weak in the knees. *You are a happily married man*, he told himself. *If you want to stay a happily married man, keep your mind on business*. She helped, tapping the pictures with a fingernail and saying, “What do you want me to do with these?”

“Call a press conference—Monday morning. Let’s get Jefferson national notice for something besides growing weed,” Bill said. Police in Jefferson turned a blind eye toward that part of the state economy. The Feds loved them for it. He went on, “We’ll do it at the Capitol, at, say, nine o’clock. We’ll have the guy who caught it here. He’s a computer programmer. His name’s Greg Donovan. A game warden named Eric Bishop took the photos. And Merv McDougald is an ichthyologist from Jefferson State Ashland. He identified the fish. He damn near creamed his jeans when he did it, too.”

Barbara grinned as she scribbled notes. “Donovan ... Bishop ...

McDougald. Maybe I won't tell the networks that last bit."

"Spoilsport." Bill grinned, too. "We'll have a Jefferson State anthropologist along, too—Steve, uh, Halvorsen—to talk about the legend of the speartooth. And you can tell people the governor's car carried some of the speartooth's remains from Grants Pass to Ashland."

"The Mighty Mo?" Barbara had ridden in the Eldorado lots of times. She wrinkled her pert nose. "What's it smell like?"

"Well, it was okay when I got back here yesterday afternoon. The guts and the head and all were in Hefty bags, and we had a ton of ice."

"Gotcha. If it gets bad, you can dump in a gallon of lemon juice. If anything'll kill the stink from old fish, that's it."

"Sounds like a plan. Anyway, can you fax those photos to the networks and the press agencies?"

"I'll try. I don't know how well they'll come out. They may just be big black squares on the page. If they are, people will think we're playing April Fool's games in November."

"If you talk to Al Rafferty, he'll tell you the voters did that day before yesterday," Bill said.

"I sure didn't vote for Reagan," Barbara said.

"Neither did I, but a whole bunch of people did."

"Didn't they just?" she said mournfully.

Bill went off to do other things, confident Barbara would take care of everything that needed taking care of with the speartooth. He found out how right he was a few minutes after he came back to his office from lunch. He was reviewing a proposal to create a state park not far from Port Orford when his phone rang. He shoved the proposal aside with relief; the prose was at best uninspired.

"This is Bill Williamson," he said.

"Hello, Governor," his administrative assistant said. No, Phyllis wasn't nearly so decorative as Barbara, but she was damn good at what she did. In Bill's mind, that counted for more. She went on, "I have Charles Kuralt on the line."

"You do? Well, for heaven's sake put him through!" Bill said. The bald, folksy newsman was one of CBS's heavy hitters—a heavier hitter than Bill had expected to deal with.

"Governor Williamson?" Those deep tones were as familiar as an old friend's, all right, from the evening news and from his Sunday morning

show.

“That’s me.” Bill’s voice was deeper still, but not so mellow.

“I talked with your charming publicist—” Kuralt began.

“I’ll tell her you said so,” Bill broke in. “It’ll make her day.”

“I told her myself,” Kuralt said. “But I wanted to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. You’re the governor of Jefferson. You don’t do puff pieces—I hope not, anyway. Are you telling me on your word of honor that a computer programmer out there really and truly pulled a speartooth out of the Rogue River?”

“On my word of honor,” Bill said solemnly. “I saw the photos. I saw the fish. Hell, Mr. Kuralt, I ate the fish.”

“I couldn’t be much more astonished if you told me you’d had dragon steaks,” the newsman said. “But okay, I believe you. Because I believe you, I’ll fly out there for your press conference Monday. And I’d like to ask you for an interview afterwards, if I may, with an eye toward running it on the news next Sunday morning.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Bill said. *Or whatever is one step up from wonderful*, he thought giddily.

“Okay. I’ll see you Monday, then. ’Bye.” Kuralt hung up.

Bill picked up a pencil and punched the numbers for Barbara’s extension with the eraser end. When she answered, he blurted, “Charles Kuralt!”

“I know! Isn’t that fabulous?” she said, and then, a beat later, “He’s such a nice man.”

“He sounds like one, anyhow,” Bill said. “We’ll get to meet him Monday and find out for real.”

“I know,” Barbara said. “I can hardly wait.”

★ ★ ★

A hallway led to the press room in the Capitol. Bill stood there with Barbara, Greg, Eric, Merv, and Steve Halvorsen, who looked professorial in a tweed jacket and cords. They waited for the clock on the far wall to say it was nine. Kelly Ann sat in the press room with Vicki Bishop, Donna McDougald, and Ellen Halvorsen. Bill hadn’t met any of the last three or Steve till a few minutes earlier.

Most of the people in the room, though, were newspapermen and TV

reporters. The television lights made Bill want to blink. Somebody plainly from out of state said, “How come this damn room’s so huge? The Jolly Green Giant could do a news conference in here.”

“Jerk,” Greg Donovan said, *sotto voce*. Bill nodded.

“It’s time,” Barbara said. She walked to the podium and took her place behind the lectern. On the podium were chairs and easels with blowups of two of Eric’s photos: the one of Greg by the speartooth and the closeup of the fish’s head. The head itself sat in a big jug of formalin on a table by the closeup. No trick photography here. They had the goods.

“Welcome to Jefferson,” Barbara told the crowd. “I’m Barbara Rasmussen, the state public information officer. Governor Williamson will give a brief statement, and then we’ll let you talk with Mr. Donovan, Mr. Bishop, and Professors McDougald and Halvorsen. Ladies and gentlemen, here’s Governor Bill Williamson.”

When Bill came out, the guy who’d wondered why the press room was so big went “Ohhh.” Hadn’t he ever seen, or even heard of, a sasquatch before? If he came from somewhere like New York or Massachusetts, you never could tell.

Bill tilted the extra-long microphone stalk up so it reached his mouth. “Thanks very much, Barbara,” he said. “Like you, I want to welcome everyone here to Jefferson. The speartooth is a fabulous fish that’s been the stuff of legend in these parts for as long as anyone can remember. Now, thanks to a fisherman’s lucky catch, we find that the legend turns out to be true after all.” He waved to the head in the jug. “Effective immediately, Jefferson has declared the speartooth to be a rare and endangered species. Any others that may be caught must be released at once. We have also asked the EPA to issue the same order for national parks, national forests, and Indian reservations in Jefferson, and they have agreed to do that. We must protect the speartooth if we possibly can.”

He introduced Greg, Eric, Merv, and Steve, then sat down in the chair made for someone of his bulk while they told their stories in turn. He quickly decided Halvorsen was someone from whom he would have wanted to take a class in his own college days. The anthropology prof talked about other surprise discoveries. He mentioned the coelacanth. He talked about the platypus, which people in Europe had thought to be a jackalope-type creature when the first skins came back from Australia. And he talked about the okapi, a large, not particularly rare or

inconspicuous mammal Europeans had somehow missed till the end of the nineteenth century.

“This is what makes science fun,” he said with a little-kid grin. “We find new stuff, and so we have to try to work out what the dickens it all means.”

Then it was question time. The first one was for Greg: “Mr. Donovan, what did you think when you got a good look at the speartooth?”

“I thought, *Holy, uh, moly, that’s the biggest, uh, darn fish I ever saw,*” Greg answered. He drew some laughs for his edited-for-television thought process. He went on, “The next thing I thought was, *Gosh, I hope it doesn’t break my legs or squash me,* because it was flopping around on the bank right next to me. You don’t want to get clobbered by a fish that’s as long as you are tall, believe me you don’t.”

Someone asked Merv McDougald, “What did you think when you heard a speartooth had been caught, Professor?”

“That somebody was playing a practical joke on me,” the ichthyologist said. Bill nodded to himself; he’d thought the same thing. Merv continued, “Being wrong never made me so happy before.” He got a laugh, too.

He also got a follow-up question: “What is this speartooth doing in modern Jefferson, anyway?”

“Well, you have to understand that its near relatives lived here for millions of years. Probably the closest relation we have fossils of is *Oncorhynchus rastrosus*.” Merv thoughtfully spelled the scientific name for the reporters. He added, “The people who know about it often call it the tiger-toothed trout.” That won him some more chuckles.

“Is the speartooth a surviving, um, tiger-toothed trout?” The reporter who asked that had the sense not to try to say *Oncorhynchus rastrosus*.

“I thought so when I first saw it, but I don’t now,” Merv answered. “Enough details are different to convince me it’s a new, related species. When I publish, I’m going to propose the name *Oncorhynchus jeffersonensis*.” He spelled *jeffersonensis*, too.

“In the legends, the speartooth can do things like fly and breathe fire,” a newspaperman said to Steve Halvorsen. “This is a great big fish, but it’s just a fish. Are we sure it’s what caused the legends?”

“Are we sure? No. Is it very, very likely? Oh, yeah,” the anthropologist answered. “Look at the siege of Troy, three thousand years ago. There was one; archaeology makes that clear. Was it full of magic and Greek gods,

the way Homer tells the story in the *Iliad*? Probably it wasn't. Legends are stories that grow in the telling. That's what makes them legends."

Charles Kuralt raised his hand. When he was recognized, he said, "Mr. Bishop, when you saw Mr. Donovan there on the riverbank with that enormous speartooth, did you ask him if he had a fishing license?"

"No, sir." Eric shook his head. "I didn't need to, on account of I sold him the license myself."

"That will do it," Kuralt agreed. "What were you thinking when you saw that fish and realized what it was?"

"It blew my mind. I don't know how else to put it," the game warden said. "It's blown everybody's mind who's had anything to do with it. You don't think something that's always been just fancy talk will turn out to be for real. But there it was." He pointed to the preserved head. "There it is."

TV cameras swung from the lectern to the big jug. There it was, all right. You could see it with your own eyes. If that didn't make it real and not legendary, Bill didn't know what would.

A few more questions came. The conference wound down. Finally, Barbara stepped up to the mike and said, "Thanks very much, folks. We appreciate your coming, believe me." Newspaper reporters hurried out of the press room to file their stories. Most of the blowdried, hairsprayed TV guys went outside to film their reports against the imposing backdrop of the Capitol. One enterprising fellow stayed behind so he could be shown in front of the state seal.

"I think that went well," Bill said to Barbara.

"Me, too." She nodded. "We made as much of a splash as a speartooth can—and that's one big fish."

★ ★ ★

That afternoon, Charles Kuralt interviewed Bill in the covered patio behind the governor's mansion. The weather stayed decent. It was in the upper sixties. Flowers bloomed in the garden the patio looked out on. Birds hopped and pecked and chirped.

Bill had offered his office as an interview site. Kuralt took one look at it and shook his head. "No, thanks," he said. "I'd feel like Gulliver in the land of the Brobdingnagians."

"Sasquatches aren't as big as all that," Bill said, but he didn't argue

very hard. It wasn't as if he hadn't felt like Gulliver in Lilliput more than a few times himself.

The CBS crew aimed one camera at Bill, one at Kuralt, and one from the side at both of them. They set up lights on metal poles. Several lamps hung from the planks of the patio roof, but the crew sneered at those. A white-crowned sparrow perched on one and watched the setup proceedings as if it knew what was going on.

A makeup girl powdered Kuralt's bald dome so it wouldn't shine too much under the fierce lights. "Joys of television," the reporter said ruefully. "You ready, Governor?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Bill answered.

"You'll have done this kind of thing before. You know how it goes. Don't worry about fluffing. We'll film way more than we need, then edit it down to a couple of minutes of good stuff for Sunday morning. People won't just want to know about the fish. They'll want to know about you, and about your state here."

"I hope so," Bill said.

Kuralt glanced at his cameramen. One by one, they gave thumbs up. So did the sound guy. "Let's do it, then," Kuralt said. The little lights under the TV camera lenses went red. Just as quickly, the newsman went from ordinary fellow to personality. "This is Charles Kuralt," he declared, as if anyone could be in any doubt. "This afternoon I'm in Yreka, the capital of Jefferson, talking with Governor Bill Williamson. Thanks for inviting me to your state, Governor."

"Thanks for coming," Bill answered. "I was thrilled when I found out you would be."

The newsman cocked his head to one side to study the governor. Almost at the same moment, and almost with the same gesture, the sparrow cocked its head to study the newsman. "And this is a remarkable state you have here," Kuralt said.

"We do like to think so," Bill said.

"Remarkable," Charles Kuralt repeated. He scribbled a note in a little book held together by a spiral wire at the top. Phyllis Ward used the same kind for jotting things down. Kuralt went on, "Sometimes it seems as though the rest of the USA hardly hears about Jefferson, and it should. It really should."

"We aren't one of your big, crowded states," Bill said. "The people we

have, most of 'em hope to get left alone most of the time, and they pretty much leave the rest of the world alone, too.”

“But that’s a shame,” Kuralt said. The white-crowned sparrow fluttered its wings, as if about to take off from the lamp. It sat tight, though. The CBS man went on, “Everyone I’ve met has been warm and friendly, ready to give me the shirt off his back.”

“When you’re here, you’re our guest. We try to treat guests right,” Bill said. “We wish we had more of them. With our mountains and forests, there’s a lot to see in the state.” The Jefferson Tourist Board would be proud of him.

“There’s a lot to see other ways, too,” Kuralt said. “Take you, for instance. As far as I know, no other state has had a sasquatch elected to anything above local office. You’re the second sasquatch governor of Jefferson. There have also been state legislators and Senators—”

“I was a state Senator myself before I ran for governor,” Bill put in.

“Yes, of course. And you had a sasquatch Congressman back in the 1950s,” the newsman continued. “So what is it about Jefferson that makes the state so different?”

“Well, for one thing, this is where most of us have always lived, ever since the Ice Age,” Bill said. “And everybody in Jefferson, big and little, has a live-and-let-live attitude. It’s the flip side of wanting to be left alone, you might say. People here do leave other people alone. They don’t hassle them for being different. And, because of our accommodations laws, sasquatches just fit in better here. They literally fit better, here, too.”

Kuralt took more notes. The sparrow flapped again, but didn’t fly off. “It all makes sense when you explain it, but Jefferson still seems ... exotic to the rest of America,” Kuralt said. “A sasquatch governor! And now a speartooth pulled out of the river! Amazing!”

“If Professor McDougald is right—and he knows his business—speartooths and their relatives have lived here for millions of years. They’ve lived here longer than sasquatches have.”

“But they’re *still* here! And so are you.” Charles Kuralt waved his hands. “The Romans said, ‘Out of Africa, always something new.’ With us, it’s ‘Out of Jefferson...’ What should we expect next? A live dinosaur?”

That wave was finally too much for the white-crown. It flew out toward the garden, right over Kuralt. And, as it flew, it left a souvenir

behind. "Sorry about that," Bill said.

"It got my notebook, not my suit." Kuralt tore out the soiled page and gingerly crumpled it. "Just another editorial." He glanced after the sparrow. "Stupid little bird."

TIE A YELLOW RIBBON

Governor Bill Williamson's breath smoked as he opened the 1974 Eldorado's right front door. It was a chilly February day in Yreka. It was supposed to get to fifty later on, but Bill had his doubts that it would. The clouds blowing in from the west looked as if they meant business.

Barbara Rasmussen slid into the Mighty Mo. The governor's publicist was in a skirt that showed a lot of leg; she had to be colder than he was. Sure enough, she said, "Brr! As soon as you start this beast, I'm gonna crank the heat all the way up."

"Whatever you want." Bill didn't like to argue unless there was a payoff at the end. He closed the door, watched Barbara lock it after she put on her seat belt, and went around to the driver's side of the two-and-a-half-ton Detroit behemoth. He got into the left rear seat. The Eldorado had no left front seat. The steering column was extra long, which let a nine-foot-two sasquatch drive from in back.

The governor of the state of Jefferson turned the key. The engine ran raggedly. He was glad it ran at all. Since the energy crisis, cars had shrunk while inflation soared. Even with special arrangements like this, he didn't fit into more modern vehicles.

Barbara turned on the heater. She said "Brr!" again as soon as she did—till the engine warmed up, it would blow cold air. Bill didn't care. The long, russet hair that covered all of him except his eyes, his mouth, the palms of his hands, and the soles of his feet left him indifferent to weather worse than this. He wore shorts for modesty and to hold his keys, wallet, and comb; sandals protected his size-thirty-two feet from stepping on anything pointy.

When he put the Caddy in gear, the transmission hesitated before shifting. It wasn't warm yet, either. The Mighty Mo had a lot of miles on it. One of these days, he really would have to trade it in—chances were, on an equally elderly but less decrepit machine.

"Morning in America," Barbara remarked as they rolled away from the

governor's mansion. Her voice held a certain edge. Like her boss, she was a Democrat, and viewed the new administration with something less than delight.

"Hey, Reagan's been President for two weeks now," Bill said, shrugging behind the wheel as he piloted the Mighty Mo east on State Highway 3. "We haven't gone to war with the Russians yet, and we aren't in a depression yet, either. So things could be worse."

"They could be better, too," she said darkly.

"Yeah, I guess." Again, Bill turned down an argument. Barbara was too pretty for anyone male to want to argue with her. But he'd lost all respect for Jimmy Carter when the new ex-President conceded the election with polls in the western part of the country still hours from closing. How many votes had he cost down-ticket candidates with an idiotic stunt like that?

Signs on Highway 3 directed motorists to the Charles Earl Lewis International Airport. The airport that served Yreka actually lay in the little town of Montague, half a dozen miles to the east. That wasn't why Bill smiled when he passed one of those signs. Only they gave Jefferson's second governor, who'd led the state through most of the Roaring Twenties, his full name. He'd been "Charlie" to some people, "Bigfoot" to the rest. Bill was proud to try to fill his sasquatch-sized shoes.

He pulled off the highway and onto the access road that led to the airport. By the first parking lot stood a tall flagpole with Old Glory flying above the state flag of Jefferson: a dark green banner with the state seal in the center. The gold pan held two big black X's to show how Sacramento and Eugene had double-crossed northern California and southern Oregon till they got together as the forty-ninth state in 1919.

A wide yellow ribbon was tied onto the aluminum flagpole with a fancy bow. More yellow ribbons decorated the doors to the terminal. Bill felt a big grin stretching itself across his face. "Hey, they got rid of the old ones!" he said. "These are all nice and new."

"I should hope so," Barbara said. "I called the airport to make sure they would, but they were already on it."

"Good for them. Nice to know they don't need somebody to hold their hands all the time."

One of the terminal doors was tall enough to let Bill enter without ducking. The ceiling was tall enough so he didn't feel claustrophobic

inside. Most sasquatches in the country called Jefferson home; unlike too many other places, the state had laws mandating accommodations that suited their size. Bigfoot Lewis would have approved. He'd built the governor's mansion to his scale, which made Bill and his wife happy every day of the week.

"We're going to Gate One, Governor," Barbara said after checking a little notebook.

"Uh-huh." Bill's big head bobbed up and down. She'd told him that the day before, too. Maybe she'd forgotten she had; more likely, she figured he'd forgotten. Publicists often treated the people they worked for like dull four-year-olds. Depressingly, a lot of the people they worked for needed to be treated that way. Bill hoped he wasn't one of those—Barbara would never admit it if he was—but you never could tell.

The waiting area in front of the gate was packed with little people and sasquatches. TV lights blazed into Bill's face. "Isn't this a great day, Governor?" a reporter said, holding a mike high enough for him to answer into it.

"It is, but you don't want to talk to me," Bill said. "I'm not the show. I'm just here to see it myself and welcome him home, same as everybody else. Poor guy's been away a long time."

"You're too modest, sir," said the handsome, blow-dried talking head in the expensive suit. Beside Bill, Barbara nodded. She thought him modest to a fault. He didn't. He was a politician, after all. If he hadn't banged his own drum, he never would have got elected. But, as he'd said, this wasn't his show.

One sasquatch-sized seat had a RESERVED FOR GOVERNOR WILLIAMSON sign on it. As far as he could see, it was the only unused chair near the gate. Barbara must have come to the same conclusion. "Guess I'll just have to sit on your lap, Governor," she said with an impish grin.

"Heh." Bill hoped he didn't sound too nervous. Part of him—the part in his shorts—wouldn't have minded Barbara in his lap at all. He hoped Louise didn't know just how attractive he found his publicist.

Sasquatches and little people, of course, had been getting it on in Jefferson for as long as there'd been sasquatches and little people here. Bill thought one of his great-grandmothers had been a little woman. He wasn't sure, but he thought so.

And there stood Haystack Thornton, chatting easily with Hyman Apfelbaum. The pot grower from Eureka towered over Jefferson's attorney general. He was almost seven feet tall, and wide in proportion—a great big little man. His bushy red beard and a hairline better than Reagan's also argued he had some sasquatch in his family woodpile.

Authorities in Jefferson didn't go out of their way to help the Feds prosecute people for marijuana. Did discreet campaign contributions from Haystack and his friends have anything to do with that? Stranger things had probably happened. Bill also knew the growers had helped pay for the Learjet flight everybody was waiting for.

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than the private jet came in and landed. It taxied to the gate. The ground crew heeled out a sturdy movable stairway. The door in the Learjet's flank opened. The PA system began blaring "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree" at heart-stopping volume. Bill had never been enamored of Tony Orlando and Dawn. The more he listened, the less he liked them.

And he had to listen to them three times in a row, because there was a delay aboard the charter plane. After what only seemed like forever, Mark Gordon crawled out of the doorway, angling his shoulders so he could squeeze through the narrow opening. Once all of him, finally emerged, he stood up at the top of the aluminum stairway and threw his arms wide. Since his height was about the same as Bill's, it made quite a gesture.

Everybody inside the terminal burst into cheers and applause, briefly drowning out the annoying music. A TV guy near Bill spoke into his mike for a breathless live shot: "After four hundred forty-four days of captivity in Iran, after a journey that bounced from Algeria to Germany to New York, after a ticker-tape parade through the Canyon of Heroes in New York City, State Department analyst Mark Gordon comes home at last to Jefferson!"

As Gordon made his slow way down the steps, several of the sasquatches sitting near Bill—the analyst's family—got up and went to the door that would let them out onto the tarmac. A guard in a Smokey Bear hat saluted and stood aside to let them through. TV crews and reporters followed to record their meeting with the newly returned hostage.

The joyful screams and cries and embraces were much the same as they would have been among little people, only on a larger scale and an octave deeper. Bill and Barbara followed the sasquatches and the newsies

out onto the blacktop, but hung back till a little of the commotion had died down.

When the analyst's mother and two sisters started dabbing at their eyes (and his father wiped his with the back of his arm), Bill moved toward Mark Gordon. The analyst was skinny for a sasquatch, and looked desperately tired. As photographers clicked away and a TV cameraman bored in for the kill, Bill held out his hand and said, "On behalf of the whole state of Jefferson, Mr. Gordon, I'm honored to welcome you back to freedom."

"Thank you very much, sir." Gordon sounded weary, too.

"Would you and your folks do me a favor and stop by the residence for dinner tonight? We'll slay the fatted calf for you all, and it will be on my dime." Bill made sure he said that last bit loud enough to let the reporters hear. No one on the right was going to be able to throw rocks at him for wasting state money on someone for whom the United States had almost gone to war.

"I don't know what they have planned. Let me talk to them for a minute."

"Sure." Bill stepped back.

The Gordons put their heads together. Mark and his father bent to do that. Like most sasquatch women, the ones in their family were a couple of feet shorter than the menfolk. After a minute or two, the freed hostage turned back to Bill. "We'll be there, Governor. Thank you. What time?"

"Say, half past six, and we'll eat at seven or a little later?"

"That should work." Mark Gordon grinned crookedly. "I'm so jetlagged right now, I have no idea what time it is or what time it's supposed to be."

"I believe it. Well, if you sack out, your dad or mom can call, and we'll set something else up."

"Okay. I hope I see you." This time, Gordon held out his hand. Bill took it. The photographers snapped more pictures.

★ ★ ★

Mark Gordon's father was Tim. His mother was May; his sisters were Bonnie and Samantha, both of them younger than he was. They came to the governor's mansion in a pair of aging Oldsmobiles almost the size of

the Mighty Mo. Tim's machine had arrangements like Bill's. Mark rode in the back seat, too, with the front seat shoved all the way forward. May could drive a standard little-people car, and her daughters just about fit in with her. They all looked relieved to escape their cramped quarters, though.

Tim Gordon surveyed the mansion with undisguised envy. "Now this is all right!" he said. "I mean, our house is okay for us, but it's still on the crowded side. You've got room to spread out in, Governor."

"Our own place is like that," Louise Williamson said.

Bill nodded agreement with his wife. "It sure is. The residence is Bigfoot Lewis' baby. From what the old-timers in Yreka told me when I first got elected to the State Senate, Bigfoot never did anything halfway."

"Sounds like a Jefferson kind of guy," Tim Gordon said, not without pride. "If we did things by halves here, we'd still be stuck in California and Oregon."

When they got inside, Mark Gordon kept staring in wonder at ceilings more than three feet above his head. "This is ... amazing," he said. Bill suspected he almost modified the word with an imperfectly polite participle. "Governor, Mrs. Williamson—"

"I'm Bill, please," Bill broke in, at the same time as his wife was saying, "Call me Louise."

"Thanks." The freed hostage needed a second to reboard his train of thought. "The embassy in Tehran was made for little people. I didn't fit real well there, but whenever you leave Jefferson you have to get used to that."

"Oh, yeah." Bill nodded. "Congress needs to do something about that, the way we've done for the airport and hotels and restaurants."

"Outside the country, they have to use the buildings that are already there," Mark said. "I managed ... pretty much. But after we got captured, some of the places the Iranians kept us were too small for little people. They were way too small for me. I'm just glad I'm not a claustrophobe."

"Those fucking bastards." That wasn't Tim Gordon. It was May.

"Now that you mention it," Bill said, "yes."

In black tie and tailcoat, the chief steward looked like a negotiator working to settle the Russo-Japanese War—or possibly, since he was so much smaller than the sasquatches, more like a dignified penguin. "Dinner is ready," he said. "If you'll follow me to the dining room..."

“Thank you, Ray,” Bill said as he obeyed. He was used to doing what Ray told him to. The chief steward had taken care of several governors before him, and would likely make several more feel at home in the mansion after he was gone. Bill had no idea how old he was; he had one of those faces that didn’t change much between thirty and sixty-five.

More mansion staff popped bottles of champagne as the governor, his wife, and his guests came in. The flutes at the place settings were more like bassoons; one problem with being a sasquatch was that you needed to drink more to feel it. That didn’t stop sasquatches from drinking, but did make it cost more.

Bill raised his glass. “To freedom!” he said. Everybody clinked. Everybody drank. The dry, dry sparkling wine smiled down Bill’s throat.

“Amazing,” Mark said again.

“Glad you like it,” Bill said.

The main coast was salmon poached in white wine and dill. “I think that’s the best fish I’ve ever eaten in my whole life,” Mark said after putting away a couple of pounds of it. “Is it extra good, or is it just me? I mean, a lot of what the Iranians fed us was pretty nasty, and there wasn’t that much of it to begin with. And when we got to the military hospital at Wiesbaden, they gave us Army rations.”

“I’m so sorry,” Louise said.

“Yeah.” Mark gave another of those crooked grins. “You know that old joke—‘The food was lousy, and such small portions!’? That was us.”

“Maybe some of it’s you, Mark, but not all of it,” Bill said. “I’ve got connections for good salmon.”

“Connections like the ones that paid for that Learjet for me?” Mark asked.

“No, no,” Bill said. *Well, not exactly*, he amended to himself. “I helped settle a quarrel about salmon fishing between the Karuk Indians and the merfolk.”

“And the Indians pay you back?”

“No, the merfolk do. They nab the fish before they even start going up the rivers.” Bill paused a moment, then went on, “Speaking of that Learjet, how did you ever fit in there?”

“First thing I asked him,” Tim Gordon put in.

His son nodded. “It sure was. They had the plane specially fitted with a recliner big enough for somebody my size. But I don’t think the ceiling in

a Learjet is even six feet high, so I had to crawl on and off. You saw how I came out of that miserable little door.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve flown a few times. Even when you can arrange for a seat that sorta fits you, airliners are no fun. That private jet must have been worse,” Bill said.

Louise asked the question that was also in Bill’s mind: “How did the Iranians treat you, Mark. I mean, they can’t be used to sasquatches.”

“No, not hardly,” the ex-hostage agreed. “Wasn’t much fun when a bunch of wild-eyed students pointed M-16s at my chest.”

“You didn’t say anything about that to us before,” May Gordon told him in accusing tones.

“Sorry, Mom. They didn’t fire—you can see that. But still, it was scary,” Mark said. “They were yelling in Farsi, things like ‘It’s a monster!’ and ‘No, it’s a demon!’ and ‘It’s an animal! Kill it!’ I didn’t want to let on that I could follow their language, so I spoke up in English. I said something like ‘I’m an accredited diplomat with the State Department. If you shoot me, it’s an act of war.’ A bunch of them had been to school in the States. They understood me just fine.”

“They treated you better after that?” Bill asked.

“Better. Not good. For the first few days, they kept me separate from the rest of the Americans they’d grabbed. That worried me, because I didn’t know if anyone else at the embassy knew I’d been captured. If nobody did, they could do whatever they wanted with me, and who’d be the wiser? But then I got a visit from an older man, somebody the students listened to. He said, ‘You are a yeti? I didn’t know America had yetis.’”

“That’s interesting. They would know about them, wouldn’t they?” Bill said. When Communist China invaded Tibet in 1959, yetis had fled the Himalayas along with the little people among whom they’d lived since time out of mind. He was still proud of meeting the Yeti Lama a couple of years earlier. “So what did you tell this honcho?”

“I said, no, I was a sasquatch, and we were close to yetis but not what the same, sort of like Japanese and Nigerians. He got that, all right.”

“What did he do about it?” Bill asked.

“He told me that yetis were kafirs—pagans—and that the new government was running them all out of Iran unless they converted to Islam,” Mark replied. “Then he asked if I was a kafir myself.”

“You should have told him yes,” his mother exclaimed. “Then they

would have thrown you out, too, and you wouldn't have gone through everything you went through.”

“It was more complicated than that, Mom,” the diplomat said with what sounded like exaggerated patience. “For one thing, I didn't want to go while they were still holding the rest of the embassy staff. It would have felt like selling out.”

“Foolishness,” May Gordon sniffed. Her husband opened his mouth, then closed it again. They'd been married a long time. He knew nothing he said would change her mind.

“For another thing,” Mark went on as if his mother hadn't spoken, “they weren't just expelling the yetis who'd taken refuge in Iran when the Shah was still there. They were stealing everything the yetis had and mobbing them. I'm pretty sure one or two got killed. We were working on that, trying to see what we could do to protect them, when the embassy got seized.”

“So what did you tell this SOB who thought you were a yeti?” Bill asked.

“I told him the truth. I said I was a Christian, and that under Muslim law Christians and Jews were People of the Book and entitled to good treatment, and I asked him why he wasn't living up to the Prophet's teachings.”

“Good for you!” Tim Gordon said.

Bill wasn't so sure. “How did he like that?”

“He turned red as a tomato. Then he said jailhouse lawyers had a way of winding up sorry they ever opened their big, fat mouths—not quite in so many words, but that's what it boiled down to.”

“Did he?” the governor said with interest. He'd heard exactly the same thing from cops and attorneys here in Yreka. If it worked the same way in fanatically Muslim Iran, that had to be a piece of human nature. “What happened then?”

“They kept me by myself for another day and a half, then they put me back with the rest of the Americans. I got a hell of a welcome, pardon my French, 'cause till then nobody'd known whether I was alive or dead. They kept us all together in Tehran till the American military tried to rescue us.”

“Oh,” Bill said: one word full of pain. Jimmy Carter's failure to extract the hostages from Iran had gone a long way towards electing Ronald Reagan. Maybe it was just bad luck; maybe the military still felt the

hangover from the long, disastrous Vietnam War. Whatever the reason, the rescue effort fell apart in the Iranian desert.

“Uh-huh.” Mark Gordon nodded unhappily. “They didn’t like that much. They kept screaming that the Great Satan hadn’t saved his spawn. It sounds better in Farsi, I will say—not as stupid as it does in English. But if I never hear ‘Death to America!’ again, I won’t be sorry.”

“I believe that,” Bill said. “So they split you up after the helicopters couldn’t hack the sand?”

“Uh-huh. They didn’t want to give the USA another chance to get hold of everybody at once. They sent me and a few other people to a jail in the northern part of town. The cell was just bigger than I was, and they fed me the same slop Iranian prisoners got.”

“Doesn’t sound like a real enjoyable place for you to be,” Louise observed.

Mark gave her one more of his lopsided smiles. “Now that you mention it, no,” he said. “The good news was, none of the Americans I was with let on that I knew Farsi. The Iranians ran their mouths around me a lot. Half of them seemed to think I was some kind of big animal even though I spoke English.”

“They’re the animals,” Bonnie said. She was the younger sister, in her early twenties—about ten years younger than Mark. She did not care for the people who’d held him hostage. *And who can blame her?* Bill thought.

“Well, I hope I managed to do them a bad turn or two,” Mark said. “When the Army doctors were debriefing us in Wiesbaden, I wrote down as much as I could remember. Our people know more about where the Iranians have bases and weapons than they did before.”

“Good!” That was Samantha, who might have been halfway between Mark and Bonnie in age. “Now the only trouble is, it’s our numbnuts military that’s got the info.”

“They do the best they can,” Mark said in reproofing tones. Sure enough, he wanted to hear no evil of the government he served. After a moment, he went on, “And the Iranians have more to worry about than the United States. They’ve been fighting the Iraqis since last September.”

“Serves ’em right!” Both his sisters said the same thing at the same time.

Mark Gordon only shrugged. “Saddam Hussein isn’t anybody’s nice guy, either. He jumped Iran when he thought the revolution had it all

messed up. Oh, my God—the way our guards carried on when Iraq invaded! But the Iranians fought back harder than Saddam ever dreamt they could. Now they’re banging heads with each other, Saddam and Khomeini, each hoping the other guy falls over first.”

“Is that why the Iranians finally let everybody go?” Bill asked. “So they didn’t have to worry about Iraq and us at the same time, I mean?”

“Probably had something to do with it. I don’t know how much.” Mark yawned an enormous yawn. This time, the smile that followed seemed distinctly sheepish. “Sorry about that, Governor—uh, Bill. Sometimes I don’t notice how worn out I am till it hits me all at once.”

“Go home, then, or back to your hotel, or wherever you guys are staying,” Bill said. “Sleep. Get used to being free again. And look, if you ever need an ear to talk to, give me a buzz. I’ll make sure the secretaries put you through no matter what time it is.”

“Thanks very much, sir. I may even take you up on that,” Mark said.

“I hope you do.” Bill meant it. There would be things the freed hostage didn’t want to talk about with his family or his close friends, for fear of alarming them. They might be things he hadn’t wanted to tell even the military debriefers in Germany. If he did feel like letting his hair down, who better to listen than another sasquatch man, one who wouldn’t judge him or freak out?

Tim Gordon clasped Bill’s hand. They both squeezed carefully; neither, no doubt, was used to shaking with someone whose hand his own big, hairy mitt didn’t swallow. “This was nicer than I know how to tell you, Governor,” Mark’s father said. “You savvy *umglatch*?”

“You bet. I don’t know a lot of the old talk, but I know that one.” The language sasquatches had spoken among themselves was drowning in a sea of English. Bill understood only little bits and pieces of it. Luckily, Tim had hit on one of those. *Umglatch* meant something done better than properly even though it didn’t have to be done at all. It lingered not least because it had no simple English equivalent.

“Well, it was. We all appreciate it, believe me,” Tim Gordon said. He and his family headed for the front door. Bill and Louise went with them to finish the good-byes.

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Bill didn't like bifocals. He needed them; that was one more unpleasant fact of middle age. But they were a damn nuisance. He couldn't read through the tops or see anything past arm's length through the bottoms. He'd loved to read till he got into politics. Sadly, the gobbledygook masquerading as English in legislation had gone a long way toward curing him of that.

He wasn't entirely disappointed, then, when the phone on his desk rang and gave him an excuse not to keep plowing through the appropriations bill he was studying. His hand swallowed the standard-sized handset as he picked it up. "Yes?" he said.

"Sorry to bother you, Governor, but you told me you'd take a call from Mark Gordon any time," his administrative assistant said.

"I sure did. Put him through, Phyllis," said Bill, who was not in the least sorry to be bothered.

"Yes, sir." Phyllis Ward sounded resigned. She had a filing cabinet for a mind—anything out of place distressed her. She made a terrific aide, even if she wasn't always thrilled dealing with a looser thinker like Bill.

The phone clicked and popped a couple of times. Then the freed hostage said, "Is that you, Governor?"

"In person—accept no substitutes," Bill answered. "How does Jefferson feel now that you've been back for a week or so?"

"Everybody's so *nice* to me. Not just my family, but everybody," Gordon said. "After all the students shouting and waving guns in my face, it doesn't seem natural, if you know what I mean."

"Maybe," Bill said. "Like the good cop after the bad cop?"

"There you go! You nailed it in one," Marks said. "I don't trust friendliness any more. I keep wondering when the bad stuff will start up again. Isn't that terrible?"

"I'd say it's natural." Bill glanced at the clock on his desk. As he did, it went from 11:38 to 11:39. "You want to have lunch with me? If it'll cheer you up, I can make like I'm interrogating you."

Gordon's laugh was shaky, but it was a laugh. "That's one of those jokes that would be funny if only it was funny. But I'd love to have lunch with you, if only because you're somebody who makes jokes like that."

"One of the odder compliments I ever got, but maybe not one of the smaller," Bill said. "You know where Fat Albert's is, around the corner from the residence here?"

“No, but if it’s that close, I can find it. I’ll look up the address in the phone book.”

“Okay. See you there around half past twelve?”

“Sounds great. ’Bye.”

Fat Albert’s was half a step up from a Denny’s. You could get fancy burgers or salads with enough meat and cheese in them to clog your arteries in spite of the greenery or (since the owner, who was fat, was a Greek in spite of his name) things like spanakopita and keftedakia and dolmades.

“Hey, Governor!” Albert said when Bill and Mark walked in together. “Who’s your big buddy?” A second later, recognizing Mark, he did a double take. “No, wait—I know who. Lunch onna house for you both.”

“No, I’m buying,” Bill said. “That way, I don’t have to do the what-kind-of-favors-did-you-accept? dance with the accountants.”

“No, *I’m* buying,” Mark said. “I’ve got fifteen months of back pay burning a hole in my pocket, and hazardous-duty bonuses on top of that. And you’re kind enough to let me bend your ear a little.”

Bill let the diplomat talk him into it. The bookkeepers wouldn’t get their knickers in a twist over lunch with a former Iranian hostage. Or if they did, he figured he could outface them.

They sat down at one of the three sasquatch-sized tables. When the waitress—who, Bill happened to know, was Albert’s niece—took their order, the governor chose dolmades. Mark Gordon asked for three cheeseburgers, a double helping of fries, and an extra-large vanilla shake.

“I’m going to eat American for a while,” he said, and then, thoughtfully, “or maybe Chinese. Chinese would be great ... but not here.”

“No, not here,” Bill agreed. To him, spiced lamb in grape leaves was interesting and exotic, but he could see why Mark aimed to get reacquainted with the tastes of home. He sipped from his glass of ice water, then asked, “So how’s freedom feeling after all that time when you didn’t have it?”

“Funny. Funny-peculiar, I mean, not funny-haha,” Mark answered. “I have to get used to being outside, for instance. They kept me under a roof almost all the time, so no reconnaissance plane could spot where I was. I’d sort of stand out in a crowd of Iranians.”

“Oh, maybe a little,” Bill said dryly.

“The only times they did let me out in the open were when they had

crowds of students cursing me and the people they were holding with me,” Mark said. “I had to play dumb, make like I had no idea what they were saying. Some of the things they said, that wasn’t so easy.”

“Lucky you,” Bill said. Mark Gordon nodded.

A little woman with graying brown hair hesitantly approached the table. “Excuse me,” she said, “but you’re Mr. Gordon, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Mark replied.

“I just wanted to tell you how glad I am that you’re home safe.”

“Thank you very much, ma’am,” Mark said. The woman gave a shy nod and went back to where she’d been sitting. Mark spoke to Bill in a low voice: “That’s nice, but I don’t want to have to keep doing it the rest of my life. I don’t want to be ‘ex-hostage Mark Gordon’ the rest of my life, either.”

“You can’t always get what you want.” Bill’s try at channeling Mick Jagger was none too good. If he hadn’t already known that, the look on Mark’s face would have told him. He went on, “One of these days, it may open some doors for you. Still has to be raw now, though.”

“‘Raw’ isn’t a tenth of it.” Mark didn’t amplify that, because the waitress came back with their food. Albert had piled enough dolmades onto Bill’s plate to let him built a fair-sized log cabin. He started eating them instead. Marked worked through the burgers and fries with little happy noises. His shake was the size of a young lake. He proceeded to drain it. “Wow!” he said. “The animal part of me feels better, that’s for sure.”

“Me, too,” Bill said. “You look like you could do with some weight back on. I wish I could say the same, but I can’t.” That hadn’t stopped him from making the stuffed grape leaves disappear.

“The animal part of me...” Mark let his voice trail off. When he didn’t pick up right away, Bill made a small, questioning noise. Mark sighed. “I wish I had a drink.”

“They sell beer and wine here,” Bill said. “The state Capitol’s only a few blocks away—they’d better.”

“Heh.” Yet another lopsided smile from the freed hostage. “Wouldn’t go with the shake, I’m afraid.”

“If you want something, I’ll never tell. But you started to say something about the animal part of you, only you didn’t finish.” Most of the time, Bill wouldn’t have pushed. But the freed hostage had sad he

wanted to bend his ear. Mark might need reminding of that.

“Right,” he said now, and eyed the glass for the sasquatch-scale vanilla shake as if he really did wish it had been half rum. Then he sighed again. “While I was locked up in that jail in the suburbs, one of the guys who was guarding me said to his friend, ‘My father has a tiger skin on the wall of his living room. He shot it up by the Caspian when he was my age. I wish I had this thing’s hide on my wall like that.’”

“‘This thing,’ huh? Would’ve been fun hearing that and pretending you didn’t get it,” Bill said. “You must’ve earned yourself a best-actor Oscar tht day.”

“Fun? Mm-hmm. I don’t remember the last time I had so much fun. Good thing I’d been there a while by then. I’d got used to playing dumb—but not as dumb as the guards thought I was.”

“If they talked about skinning you, I guess not!” Bill cast about for some way, any way, to change the subject even a little. To his surprise and relief, he found one: “I didn’t know there were tigers near the Caspian Sea.”

“As far as anybody can tell, there aren’t—now,” Mark Gordon said bleakly. “Nobody’s seen one around there for ten years or so. For all I can prove, that asshole guard’s dad shot the last one in that part of the world.”

“Wonderful.” Bill found himself also wishing for something stronger than water. When he was starting out in politics, a lot of the veterans took their first drinks as soon as they rolled out of bed and kept at it till they hit the hay again. Some of the local politicians still did, but not so many; a lot of those veterans had found out the hard way they had but one liver to lose for their country. Bill rarely indulged with the sun in the sky.

“Oh, at least,” Mark said.

“I’m sure you didn’t tell your family about that one,” Bill remarked. He waited for the analyst to nod, then asked, “Did you say anything about it to the debriefers in—where was it?—in Wiesbaden, that’s right?”

“Nah.” Now Mark shook his head. “They were nice enough, but they were all little people—and not little people from Jefferson, either. I could tell they didn’t quite know how to deal with me. You’ll know what I mean.”

“I will, will I?” Bill clicked his tongue between his teeth. Even here in this easygoing state where sasquatches had always lived, some little people saw them as nothing more than big, dangerous critters—not a whole bunch

of little people, or he wouldn't be occupying the governor's mansion, but some.

"I think you just may," Mark said. "For all I could tell, some of those guys might not have minded a sasquatch-skin rug for their living room, either. So I kept my mouth shut."

"If you could do it around the Iranians, you could do it around the Americans, too, huh?" Bill said.

"That's about it," Mark agreed.

"Glad to give you the chance to open up a little bit, then," Bill said.

Mark Gordon sent him a quizzical look. "Not 'Glad you could share that with me'? If one debriefer and counselor told me 'Thank you for sharing that,' a dozen of them did. More than a dozen."

"Mark, I'm a politician. I hear a lot of bullshit—it comes with the job," Bill said. "I come out with bullshit every now and then, too. That's also part of the job, and sometimes people expect it of you. But I try not to do it when I'm not on the job, so to speak."

"No wonder I like you," Mark said. "I got called on the carpet a couple of times for writing reports in English and not in the fuzzy talk they like to use at State. I can write that stuff, too, but it makes me want to brush all the crap out of my hair afterwards every time I do."

"I hear that—you bet I do." Bill caught the waitress' eye and raised a forefinger. When she came over, he said, "Can we have the check, please?" He intended to grab it as soon as she brought it back.

But she said, "There is no check." Bill and Mark both spluttered. Grinning, she went on, "Uncle Al says you can fight him if you don't like it, but he figures he's big enough to whip the two of you together."

Bill looked over toward the counter. Albert, who couldn't have topped five feet eight, flexed a flabby bicep at him. Laughing, the governor said, "Okay, I know when I'm licked." Albert stopped flexing. His niece went away. Bill left a tip about twice the size of what he would usually have put down. If the waitress didn't want it, she could give it to the United Way or something.

Outside the restaurant, Mark said, "Thank you for letting me bang my gums. Nice to talk to somebody who kinda knows where I'm coming from."

"Any time—and I mean that," Bill answered, though he wondered how much he understood about being held captive for fifteen months by people

who hated his country and thought he was one short step, if that, above a beast. They shook hands. Mark Gordon headed for his father's car. Bill ambled back toward the governor's mansion. It was all very civilized—and that, thought Bill, was one more thing the freed hostage would have to get used to all over again.

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This time, Bill was answering a missive from a woman in Arcata who was unhappy the state wasn't doing more for sea otters. The way her letter sounded, she wanted him to put them on the Jefferson welfare roll. Bill had nothing against sea otters, but he thought that went a bit far.

When the phone rang, it was still a relief, even if one different from that caused by escaping bureaucratise for a little while. "Yes?" he said.

"Governor, I have Mr. Asianto Supandy on the line," Phyllis Ward told him.

"Who?" Bill said—the name reminded him of something out of *Star Wars*. But then it rang a bell. "Wait. Isn't that—?"

"The Indonesian honorary consul—that's right," his administrative assistant finished for him.

"I wonder what he wants," Bill said, bemused. "Well, put him through. I'll find out." The nearest Indonesian general consulate was down in Los Angeles. When Supandy wasn't helping Jefferson's small Indonesian community and the even smaller number of Indonesian travelers who ran into trouble here, he ran the only Indonesian restaurant in Yreka.

"Hold on, please," Ms. Ward said.

A few seconds later, another voice came on the line: a high, resonant, accented tenor. "Is that you, Governor Williamson?"

"It's me, Mr. Supandy. What can I do for you today?"

"I hope you and your family are well, sir?" Supandy went through a couple of minutes of small talk before he got down to business. Thinking back, Bill realized he always did that. It might not be the American way, but it was how his culture handled things. At last, he said, "I have heard that you have honored Mr. Mark Gordon with your friendship."

"I'd say it's more the other way around," Bill replied. "But where did you hear that?"

The restaurant owner chuckled. "It may be better if I do not say."

Bill grunted. That most likely meant Fat Albert had been bragging. Bill knew realtors heard things from other realtors, and politicians from other politicians. It was bound to work the same way with restaurant guys. Where Supandy'd got the news didn't really matter, though. Bill focused on what did: "What if we are?"

"If you are, Governor, I would like to invite the two of you to my establishment, the Bird of Paradise, for a dinner to celebrate the friendship between Indonesia and the United States of America."

"You would?" Bill said. "What brings this on, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I do not mind in the least, sir—not in the least," Asianto Supandy answered. "I have received a communication from Mr. Kertosudiro, the consul general in Los Angeles. Our President, General Suharto, seeks to reassure the American people that not all Muslim nations are enemies to your country. Thus, around the United States, Indonesian officials are seeking to do what they can to promote good relations between themselves and the brave people who endured captivity in Iran."

"I ... see," Bill said slowly, wondering if he did.

Supandy chuckled again. "I am proud to do this for my country. It is mostly Muslim, as I told you. I myself, though, happen to be Catholic. The small island I come from, Pulau Flores, was held by Portugal until two lifetimes ago. Almost all the people there took on the faith of the ruling power. We are Catholic to this day. Like America, Indonesia enjoys religious freedom."

"Isn't that interesting?" Bill said, which seemed safe enough. Even a small, lightly populated state like Jefferson was bigger and more complicated than it looked from the outside. Jefferson didn't have a hell of a lot to do with Indonesia, but he was willing to believe the far-off island country was also bigger and more complicated than it seemed from Yreka. He was also willing to believe he couldn't turn down the invitation without offending. "Let me have your phone number, Mr. Supandy. I'll get hold of Mark and find out when he's free, then I'll call you back. I appreciate the gesture, and I'm sure he will, too."

"You are doing me the favor, not the reverse." Supandy gave Bill his number, then said, "I hope to hear from you soon, sir. Good-bye." He hung up.

Bill used the eraser end of a pencil to punch the phone button that

connected him to the outer office—his fingers were too big for the job. “You have a number where I can get hold of Mark Gordon, don’t you, Phyllis?”

“I sure do, Governor. Hang on for one second, please.” His administrative assistant needed hardly longer than that to find it and read it off for him.

“Thanks.” He hit 9 for an outside line, then punched it in. Mark’s mother answered the phone. Bill chitchatted with her for a little while (*the way Supandy did with me*, he thought, and smiled), then asked to speak to the State Department analyst.

“What’s happening, Gov—I mean, Bill?” Mark asked after May Gordon called him to the telephone. Bill told him—no beating around the bush now. After a small delay, the diplomat sighed. “General Suharto is a nasty, murderous son of a bitch. You didn’t hear that from me, by the way, but he is.”

“Hear what?” Bill asked innocently.

“Okay. I knew I had reasons for liking you. Suharto is what he is, but he’s aligned Indonesia with the United States.”

“That makes him *our* nasty, murderous son of a bitch?” Bill suggested.

“Now I didn’t hear you.” Mark chuckled. “As a matter of fact, though, yes. And Indonesia has more Muslims than any other country in the world, even if it’s not real close to the Middle East. What it does carries weight. It’s Sunni, too, like most Muslim countries, not Shiite like Iran. That adds to its influence in places like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. So okay, I’d better show the flag and let this guy give us a dinner.”

“Supandy’s a friendly fellow. Interesting, too. I’ve met him a couple-three times.”

“Interesting how?” the ex-hostage asked.

“You’ll see. Shall I call him back and set this up? I’ll let you know what we work out. If you have problems with it, I’ll change it, promise.”

“That sounds great,” Mark said. “Bye.”

When Bill called Asianto Supandy, they quickly agreed on a day and time. The little man from Pulau Flores asked, “Do you mind if some reporters and photographers are there? I wish it to be seen that Indonesia is making a point of showing its friendship with your country.”

Our nasty, murderous son of a bitch went through Bill’s mind again. Hadn’t Suharto slaughtered a raft of Chinese and Communists when he

overthrew Sukarno back in the mid-Sixties? Bill reminded himself that had nothing to do with Supandy personally. The restaurateur was just doing what the Indonesian consul general in L.A. told him to do. “Publicity is fine with me,” Bill said. “I’ll give Mark a heads-up about it, too, of course. I don’t expect it will bother him, but if it does I’ll tell you.”

“That will be excellent, sir,” Supandy said. “And I will see you at seven o’clock next Friday. Good-bye.”



Mark Gordon came to the governor’s mansion before the dinner. Bill took him to the Bird of Paradise in the Mighty Mo. Any car with two male sasquatches in it was bound to feel crowded, but the enormous Eldorado felt less crowded than most would have.

“My knees aren’t too bad up against the back of the front seat,” Mark said. “When I’m a passenger in my dad’s car, I feel like I’ve got some of those Italian Red terrorists kneecapping me.”

The Bird of Paradise was near the western edge of town, in a neighborhood carved from orchard and forest in the past twenty-five years. The restaurant shared a strip mall with a beauty shop—by the little red-and-white flag in the front window, also Indonesian-owned—and a Rexall and a liquor store. The parking lot was crowded. A TV news van’s crew had set up lights in front of Asianto Supandy’s eatery.

A reporter from the *Siskiyou Daily News* waved to Bill as he unfolded from the Mighty Mo. Mark got out on the other side. “Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he muttered when he did.

“What’s the matter?” Bill asked.

“Look at the poles holding up the awning in front of the place.”

Bill looked. Sure as hell, both iron supports were decorated, if that was the word, with enormous yellow ribbons. “A little tired of that, you say?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “No, a big tired. I never could stand that stupid song to begin with.”

“Now that you mention it, neither could I.” As Bill spoke, the TV lights brightened. He went on, “Performance starts now. Here comes Supandy—somebody must have tipped him off that we’d got to the lot.”

“Ohh,” Mark said in soft surprise. Most of the time, Asianto Supandy wore the same kind of clothes other restaurant men did: black slacks and a

white shirt, sometimes with a tie, more often without. Today, though, he'd decked himself out in Indonesian national costume, with a batik shirt above a striped, skirtlike sarong.

But that wasn't the only thing that made Mark Gordon exclaim. Supandy was one of the Duendes, the little people of Pulau Flores. *Duendes* was a Portuguese word that meant something like *goblins* or *leprechauns*. Supandy had once told Bill he was three feet seven and five-eighths inches tall; he'd stressed those five-eighths with considerable pride. Over the past fifteen years or so, English-speakers who'd devoured *The Lord of the Rings* had started calling the Duendes hobbits, and the name seemed to be spreading.

Waving to Bill and Mark, Supandy called, "Governor! Mr. Gordon! In the name of the Republic of Indonesia, I am proud to welcome you to my humble establishment!" in his ringing tenor.

"Thank you very much, sir," Bill boomed back. "In the name of the state of Jefferson, I thank you for inviting us here this evening." He wasn't a Federal official; he couldn't speak for the USA. What he could do, he did.

Reporters scribbled in their notepads. Photographers' flashes filled Bill's eyes with purple-green spots. The red light under the TV camera's lens was on. They were being immortalized for posterity, or at least for the eleven o'clock news.

One of the shutterbugs said, "Can we get the three of you together for a group picture?"

"Absolutely! I would be delighted!" Asianto Supandy said.

Bill sounded more temperate: "Sure, Hank. We can do that."

Out of the side of his mouth, Mark murmured, "How much you wanna bet they caption the damn thing 'The long and short of it'?"

"I won't touch that one," Bill answered the same way.

They posed in front of the awning. It was high enough to let sasquatches pass under it without ducking; Supandy went along with Jefferson's equal-access laws. The name of the restaurant and a bird-of-paradise silhouette appeared on the dark green cloth in gold leaf. They'd show up in the photographs, too. *Won't do the business any harm*, Bill thought as he took his place.

Supandy gravely shook hands with Bill and Mark in turn. Bill was cautious whenever he shook with a member of *Homo sapiens*. With the

Duende, he was extra careful. The top of Supandy's head came past his knee, but not very far past it. The hobbit might have weighed fifty pounds—say, a tenth as much as the governor. He was hairier than a *Homo sap*, but nowhere near as shaggy as a sasquatch. Whether he had hairy toes like a real fictional hobbit, Bill didn't know. As usual, he wore tiny black oxfords, highly polished.

The photographers grumbled at trying to get everybody into their pictures at the same time. Finally, Hank—who at six-one or so was about halfway between the long and the short of it—said, “Governor, can you maybe pick him up to get all your faces close together, like?”

“Mr. Supandy, it's up to you,” Bill said. “I will if you don't mind and if it doesn't offend you. If it bothers you any way at all, just say the word and I won't.”

“Go ahead, sir,” the restaurant owner replied. “You will not drop me. I am an American citizen now. If you drop me, you will lose a vote.”

“You understand how politics work here, that's for sure.” Bill gently lifted Asianto Supandy. The Duende's grin showed a mouthful of teeth—and a gold crown on one in front. Supandy shook hands with Mark Gordon again, this time without the sasquatch needing to bend almost double to do it. The photographers got the pictures they wanted. The TV camera recorded the moment, too.

“I'm pleased to thank Indonesia for showing me such generous hospitality,” Mark said.

“Are we good?” Bill asked. When nobody told him no, he lowered Supandy to the concrete once more.

“Now we will enjoy an Indonesian feast,” the restaurateur said. “Gentlemen of the press, I think eating should be a private affair, fit for talk that will not be in tomorrow's newspapers.”

The reporters grumbled a little, but only a little. They had the story they'd come for. Now they could go write it up so it would be in tomorrow's newspapers—and the TV crew could edit their tape so people could watch it before they switched to Johnny Carson.

A long vertical bar that Duendes, ordinary *Homo saps*, and sasquatches could all handle opened the Bird of Paradise's front door. Supandy used it. Holding it with one hand, he waved Bill and Mark in ahead of him with the other. Bill thought he heard a grunt of relief when the hobbit let go. For someone his size, that door would have been a lot of weight.

Unfamiliar spicy smells tickled Bill's nose. Unfamiliar music played at about Muzak level. It wasn't Muzak, though. To Bill's untrained ear, it sounded like a cross between a catfight and a series of car crashes, luckily heard from some large distance.

"Gamelan music began on the island of Java, west of Pulau Flores," Supandy said. "It has become the national music of Indonesia, though people there also like music from this part of the world."

"Iran is the same way," Mark said. "It has its own music, but a lot of Iranians like the Western stuff, too. The ayatollahs aren't very happy about that—they're clamping down on music from America and Europe."

"Foolishness," Supandy sniffed. An Asian—probably Indonesian—woman came up. She was short for *Homo sap* but towered over him. When he spoke to her in a tongue they shared, though, his voice crackled with authority.

She dipped her head to him, as hirelings did with bosses all over the world. To Bill and Mark, she said, "Please follow me." Sure enough, her English had an accent like Supandy's.

She took them to a table suitable for sasquatches. Along with their chairs was a tall bar stool with a phone book and a sturdy pillows on the seat. Perched on that foundation, Asianto Supandy could eat at the table with them.

"I have chosen tumpeng for us tonight," he said. "Like the gamelan orchestra, tumpeng comes from Java, which is our island with the most people. Now it is a national dish. Tumpeng is traditionally served at a selametan, a feast that celebrates the unity of those who take part. I think it is fitting for tonight, when we remembered the friendship between the country I come from and the country where I live now."

"That sounds wonderful," Mark said. Bill nodded.

"It is the least I can do. And would you care for beer or wine? I have not a full liquor license, but I can do that. And, being a Christian, I can do it without fear of sin, as Muslims may not." He spoke sharply in his own language. A waiter brought him a bottle of beer. "Anker lager is brewed in my country," the restaurant owner told Bill and Mark. "Is it as good as a fine German lager? I think not. But—forgive me—it is much better than the dishwasher your American breweries turn out."

The waiter came back with two buckets full of ice and bottles of Anker. He set one by each sasquatch, then brought glasses and church

keys. “Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen,” he said.

Bill and Mark opened their brews. “To American-Indonesian friendship,” Supandy said. They clinked glasses and drank. Chuckling, the Duende went on, “I envy you how much you can hold. This one bottle will last me all night, and I will be tiddly by the time I finish it.”

“We ought to envy you,” Bill replied. “When generous friends don’t give us beer, drinking enough to feel it gets expensive.”

Their host looked comically surprised. “I never thought of that!”

“Why should you? You don’t need to worry about it.” Bill sipped more Anker. “You’re right—this is better than most American stuff. A couple of little breweries down in California make good beer. A guy here in Yreka is talking about starting one like that. I hope he can get it off the ground.”

“No, no.” Mark shook his head. “If he gets his brewery off the ground, he must be making light beer, and there’s nothing worse.” His large and small tablemates sent him identical reproachful stares.

The Iranians should have kept you. The words got to the tip of Bill’s tongue, but no farther. Had he known Mark better, or had the ex-hostage been free longer, he might have said them. As things were, he feared he’d hit a nerve. Sometimes the best thing even for a politician was keeping his yap shut.

“This is not a perfectly proper *selamatan*, and not only because of the beer,” Asianto Supandy said, using words about another subject the way Bill used silence. “In Java, it is a Muslim ceremony, and begins with prayer. But it is a ceremony of celebration, and you, Mr. Gordon, you have returned safe from trouble and danger. So I thought it was fitting here.”

And the bigger wheel in Los Angeles told me to do it, Bill thought. But that was one of the things that went with representing your old country’s interests here in your new one.

Two waiters came up, each carrying an enormous circular tray. One set his in front of Bill, the other in Mark. In the center of each tray sat a tall cone of rice. The setup put Bill in mind of a volcano surrounded by a jungle of delicious-smelling food.

“Each of those is usually tumpeng for a table,” Supandy said. “But you are bigger than ordinary people. I hope this will be enough. If not, please ask for more. It is my honor to serve you.” As he spoke, the woman from Indonesia gave him what looked like a child’s portion of tumpeng, complete with its own minivolcano in the middle.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Bill said. Even for someone of his size, there was a lot in front of him. He gently tapped the banana-leaf wrap that topped the cone. “How do you get the rice to stand up like this?”

“Inside is a woven-bamboo frame. And the rice is cooked with coconut milk, to remember Mr. Gordon’s sweet return,” Supandy answered. “Sometimes the rice will be made with turmeric instead, to give it a golden color. That is done for prosperity. I thought sweetness would be more fitting tonight.”

“I think you’re right,” Bill said.

“Me, too,” Mark said. “Nobody goes to work for the State Department expecting to get rich.”

Bill tasted the rice. It was sweet and moist and spicy and good. He waved at the rest of the tray. “What all else have we got here?”

“You see the fried prawns and the hard-boiled eggs.” Supandy waited for Bill to nod, then went on, “The eggs come still in the shell. When you peel them, in a way of speaking you show how you plan and do for time to come. The shrimp are from the sea. So are the *teri kacang*—anchovies with peanuts, that is in English. Anchovies school together. Is that the word, school?”

“That’s the word,” Bill and Mark agreed.

“Thank you,” the Duende said. “This means you have harmonious relations with people near you and with your family.”

“It all has a meaning, doesn’t it?” Bill asked.

“Oh, yes, certainly. This is worked out over many, many years. Along with eggs, the *ayam goreng*—the fried chicken—stands for the creatures of the air.”

“Spicy,” Mark said, setting down the bone from a chicken thigh. He opened a fresh Anker to help put out the fire. After Bill tried the *ayam goreng*, he needed more beer, too.

“For land animals, we have here tonight *semur*. This is beef stewed with sugar in soy sauce. Also there is *empal gepuk*, which is fried beef. It is also sweet, and highly spiced, too. The vegetables from the earth are called *urap*. They are steamed and flavored with seasoned dried coconut meat chopped fine. The spinach in them stands for a peaceful, safe life.”

“It’s good,” Bill said in some surprise—spinach wasn’t usually one of his favorite vegetables. Coconut improved anything.

“So glad you like it. And the bean sprouts, they mean you will pass on

your legacy to those who come after, while the grown beans mean long life.” As Asianto Supandy explained the symbolism of the dishes in the tumpeng feast, he worked away at what was on his own plate. He didn’t have a lot, but he had some of everything.

“This is all so good,” Mark said. After so much deprivation in Iran, he was still making up for lost time—and doing to his tray what General Sherman did to Georgia. After another swallow of beer, he went on, “I like it that so many of the dishes have to do with friends and family.”

“That is what the tumpeng stands for,” Supandy replied. “People are what matters in this world, is it not so? Big, middle-sized, small—that is not important. Good people, people someone cares about, people someone loves, they are what makes life worth living. When we work, we work so we can be with those people and so we can care for them, yes?”

“Yes,” Bill said before Mark could. “You have a good way of looking at things, Mr. Supandy.”

Mark nodded. “You sure do, sir.”

“Pah!” The Duende held out both hands, palms down, as if denying anything. “You are too kind to a small person from a faraway land.”

“You said it yourself—big and little aren’t what counts,” Bill replied. “We’ve felt that way here in Jefferson for a long time. If we didn’t, we’d tear ourselves to pieces. Before we figured that out, we damn near did.”

“And that you’re stretching friendship all the way across the Pacific just makes everything tonight more special.” Mark might have worked out of the public eye in Iran till the students seized the American embassy, but he had the makings of a pretty fair diplomat himself. He added, “It’s the word my dad used with you, Governor. This is all *umglatch*—better than it needs to be.”

“*Umglatch*?” Asianto Supandy pronounced it with care. “This is not an English word I hear before.”

“It’s not an English word at all,” Bill said. “It’s from the language sasquatches spoke before we ever knew there was such a thing as English. Maybe there are a few way up in the mountains who still use it all the time, but I wouldn’t even bet on that.”

“Most of the students who learn it in college these days are little people researching sasquatches.” Mark chuckled self-consciously. “I should talk—that’s what I was doing, taking Farsi down at Berkeley. I passed the Foreign Service exam, and they shipped me to Iran ... and look how well

that turned out.”

“My people, we have our own speech, too! This is so fascinating, that we are so much the same, big and little, in a medium-sized world,” Asianto Supandy said. “And our language is also withering. More and more folk on Pulau Flores, my kind and the bigger ones, we use Bahasa Indonesia instead of the older tongues. That must be the same as it is with English here. A few words live on and give spice to the local dialects, but not much more.”

“Here, it’s not just sasquatches and Indian tribes that that happens to,” Bill said. “The attorney general’s mom and dad came here from Eastern Europe. They spoke Yiddish at home, and Hyman grew up knowing it. But his kids use English all the time. They understand a few words of Yiddish, but that’s about it. Their children won’t know any. It’s a shame.”

“They’re Americans first,” Mark said. “Hell, I’m an American first. The Iranians sure thought so—when they didn’t think I was a monster, anyway—and they made me believe it. Why not? Doesn’t matter where you come from. Doesn’t matter how big you are, or how hairy. Room for everybody here. And you know what else? That’s the way it oughta be.”

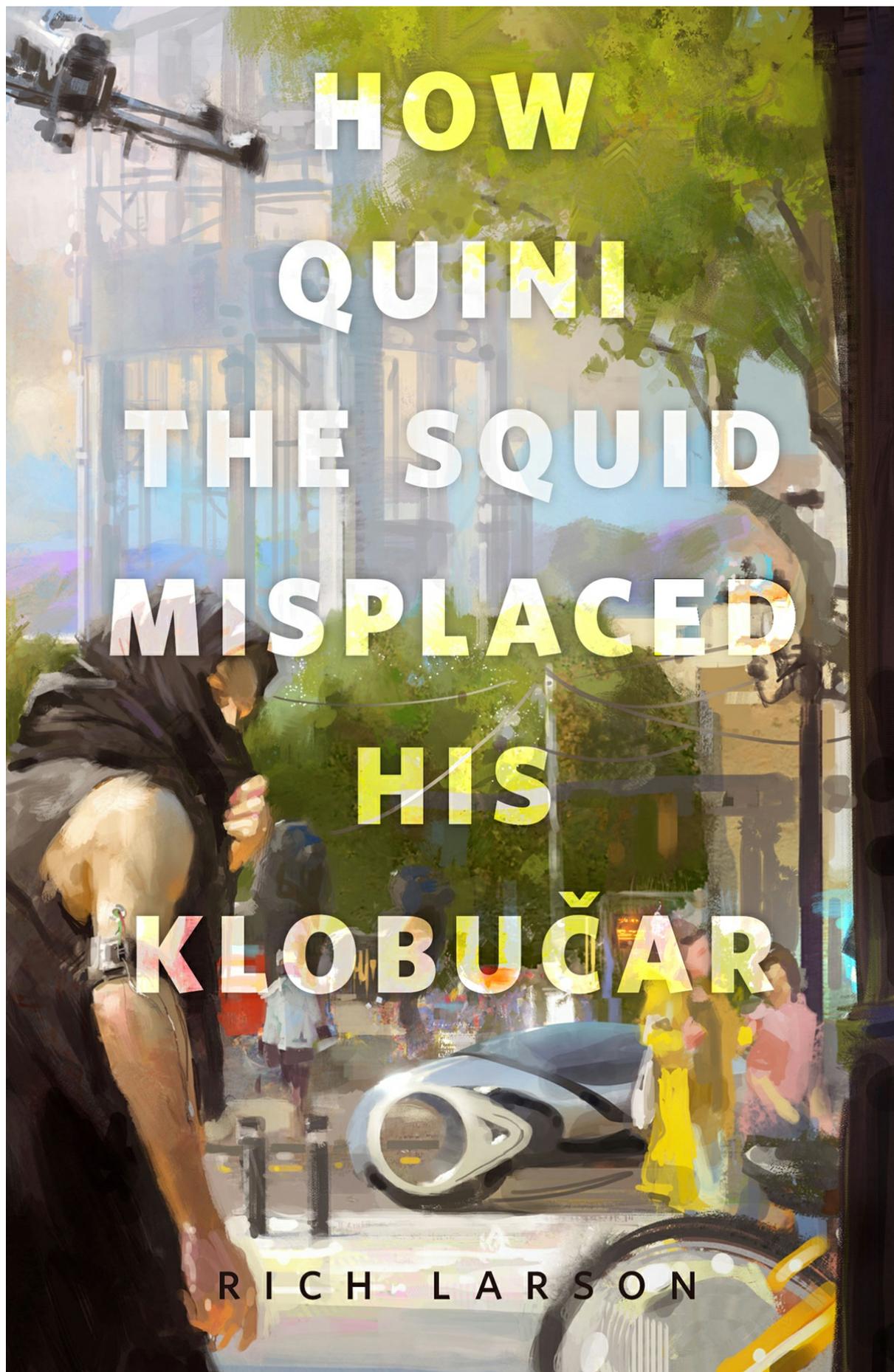
“Damn right!” Bill opened another Anker. So did Mark. Supandy was still working on the one with which he’d started the tumpeng feast. They all clinked glasses together one more time and drank.

END



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HOW
QUINI
THE SQUID
MISPLACED
HIS
KLOBUČAR

R I C H L A R S O N

How Quini the Squid Misplaced His Klobůcar

RICH LARSON

illustration by

JOHN ANTHONY

DI GIOVANNI

TOR·COM 

I want you to help me rip off Quini the Squid, I say, or at least that's what I say in my head. It comes off my tongue as:

“Rebum lau kana'a chep fessum ninshi.”

Which would leave any linguist flabbergasted. But Nat understands exactly what I mean, judging from the disgusted look on her face. We're speaking the same procedurally generated language, invented on the fly by blackmarket babelware in our implants.

“Yam switta b'lau bi,” she says, and the babelware feeds my language lobe an unequivocal *Get fucked*.

It's for this reason I ordered her a steaming mountain of mussels in black pepper sauce. I know she won't leave until she's sucked every last quivering invertebrate from its shell into her small but agile mouth. Which gives me time to bring her around on the idea.

We're in a wharfside resto on La Rambla, one of those polyplastic tents that springs up overnight like a mushroom and is almost fully automated, packed with sunburned tourists guzzling drone-delivered Heinekens and comparing their unhealthy Gaudí obsessions. It's not the kind of place Quini's thugs would hang around in, and if they did they would stick out like scowling, vantablack-clad sore thumbs.

But it pays to be paranoid in public in this day and age, what with the feds now legally able to hijack phones and implant mics. Ergo, the babelware. If I'm using *ergo* right.

“Dan tittacha djabu numna, numna ka'adai,” I say solemnly, which of course is *Eat your seafood and let me explain*.

“Yugga,” she says, which is actually a pretty good word for *idiot*.

I understand her reticence. Quini the Squid is everyone your mum ever told you not to get mixed up with mixed together, and also they used to bang. Nat and Quini, I mean. Not Quini and your mum—though he is in many ways a motherfucker.

He clawed his way out of some shithole town in Andalusia during the worst of the drought years, first pirating autotrucks transporting precious olive oil and later graduating to human traffic. God knows how he got Catalonia to let him in, but once they did he stretched his tentacle into pretty much everything: weapons, drugs, viruses, the lot.

Of course, me and Nat are transplants too. Catalonia's secession triggered an economic boom that brought in all sorts of wealthy investors, and where wealthy investors go, thieves and scammers follow. Nat came all the way from a ghetto in Ljubljana. Her original hustle was small time but well polished: She picked up rich shitheads in classy bars with her Eastern Euro smolder and bone structure, got them somewhere private, then kissed them paralyzed before robbing them blind.

She showed me the biomod once, this tiny little needle under her tongue that delivers a muscle-melting dose of concentrated ketamine. I try to spot it as she slurps a mussel. She says the needle can also be loaded with party drugs just for fun, but I'd never trust her enough to risk it.

You hate him as much as I do, I say, and it turns into a series of clashing consonants in my mouth as our language evolves again.

Nat is stacking empty shells with blistering efficiency, but she pauses long enough to wipe her mouth with a napkin and give a clicking answer that becomes *I hate salt water. Doesn't mean I pick fights with the tide.*

You're really comparing him to the fucking ocean? I demand. *He's a puddle. At best a small pond.*

"Shepakwat," she says: *He's dangerous.*

"Bu iztapti bu," I say: *No shit.*

I stand to carefully peel my shirt up to my ribs, which draws a few stares. The violet bruises go from below my hips all the way up my side. Nat can't quite disguise her wince, and I almost feel bad for darkening up the injuries with makeup. They were healing too fast for the effect I needed.

I heard about that, she says in two low syllables. *The job in Murcia, right?*

I sit back down. My jaw is starting to ache from making unfamiliar sounds. *Yeah,* I say. *I was doing the hackwork for a break-and-enter. Owned all the cameras, all the doors. Then one of Quini's clowns forgot to turn on his fucking faraday gear, and when he got pinged Quini put it on me. Did this right in front of everyone. Called me a maricon. Took my*

pay. I add the last one so she won't know how bad the second-last one bothered me.

As soon as the bruises are out of sight, Nat attacks the mussels again. *So this a revenge thing,* she says, but pensive now, licking her fingers.

If that makes it more appealing to you, then sure. I want the money he owes me. I wrap my black scarf tighter around my neck. *And some humiliation on the side would be a bonus.*

Her ears go red, but also perk up. She and Quini didn't split amicably. Humiliation is a soft word for what he did. *You eating?* she asks, and I know my foot's in the door. *You look skinny. Or something.*

She can pretend zen, but I know she needs the money and wants the payback. And even though we've had our ups and downs over the years, I know she hates seeing me hurt.

Mine's coming, I say. *Now here's the deal.*

★ ★ ★

I lay it all out for her, all the blocks I've been stacking and rearranging in my head for the past three days, ever since I got wind of Quini's little storage problem. Like I said before, he's a well-rounded businessman: narcotics, guns, malware. Usually none of the product stays in Barcelona long, and while it's here it's circulating in a fleet of innocuous cars driving randomized routes.

But he recently got his suckers on something very rare, something he hasn't been able to move yet, and it's so valuable he's keeping it in his own home. He even felt the need to get himself a new security chief to keep tabs on it. Which might have been a good idea, except his old security chief was awfully unhappy about her loss of employment.

I helped her get shit-faced last night at a wine bar and when the Dozr kicked in I dragged her to the bathroom and cracked into her cranial implant. She had some decently feisty defenseware, but I got what I needed—specs and layouts for the house, patrol maps, intrusion countermeasures—then wiped a few hours of data from her aurals and optics to cover my tracks. I also got confirmation on what exactly Quini was storing.

You heard what it is? I ask Nat. *What he's got in the safe room?*

She picks over the last of the mussels. *I know the rumor. People are*

saying it's a Klobučar.

I'm not much for gene art, not much for sophisticated shit in general, but even I know Klobučar, the Croatian genius who struck the scene like a meteor and produced a brief torrent of masterpieces before carving out her brain with a mining laser on a live feed.

Anything with a verified Klobučar gene signature is worth a fortune, especially since she entwined all her works with a killswitch parasite to prevent them being sequenced and copied. But Quini is the furthest thing from an art fence, which makes the acquisition a bit of a mystery and explains him seeming slightly panicked about the whole thing.

Damn right it's a Klobučar, I tell her. And we're stealing it.

That's not my area of expertise, Nat says. Like, not even close.

It's mine, I agree. But you know Quini. You know his habits. And because you're a clever one, I think you must have some of his helix bottled up somewhere.

She gives a low laugh in her throat. *You think I keep a DNA catalog of everyone I fuck?*

Probably only the ones that might be valuable later, I say. "Bazza?"

"Gazza," she admits.

The safe room is coded to Quini himself, nobody else, I say. I can spoof the signature from his implants, but for fooling the bioscanner we need to get creative.

Nat takes a small sip of water and swishes it around her mouth. *You know what he'll do if he catches us, she says.*

I know, I say. I'm not a yugga.

She frowns—maybe the babelware can't handle that kind of callback. *So long as you know, she mutters. I'm in.*

Under the table, I pump my fist. Then I finally ping the kitchen, which has been faithfully keeping my order warm, and the squid paella arrives in all its steamy glory, dismembered tentacles arranged in a beautiful reddish-orange wheel.

Then Quini is cooked, I say, raising my Estrella cider. Here's to payback.

Nat raises her water glass but also her eyebrow. *You don't even like seafood, she says. You only ordered that to be dramatic. Didn't you.*

I shrug; we clink drinks. Nat eyes the dish for a second. Sniffs the spices wafting off it. She does her own shrug, then pulls the plate across to

her side of the table as the little server purrs off with her mountain of empty mussel shells.

So, she says. You going to explain this new look you have going on?

No, I say, self-consciously adjusting my scarf again.

Okay. She spears the first piece of squid and stuffs it into her mouth. Her eyes flutter shut in momentary ecstasy. You always did find good places to eat, she says, reopening her eyes. Now. How soon do you need the helix?

“Andidana,” I tell her: Yesterday.

There’s a tight clock on this one.

* * *

Two bottles of cider later, I wobble out into the sunshine feeling pretty good about the whole thing. Even with the tourist quota imposed, La Rambla is fucking chaos, an elbow-to-elbow crush of holidayers sprinkled with resigned locals and eager scammers. I pick out the hustles as I walk:

The apologetic woman helping clean some kind of muck off a man’s trousers while she slides the gleaming bracelet off his wrist.

The smiling couple peddling genies, those little blue-furred splices that come in a cheap incubator pod and die a few days later.

The elderly lady groaning from the mossy pavement where a rented electricycle supposedly sent her sprawling.

One gent’s got something I’ve never seen before, a tiny prehensile limb that flexes out from under his jacket like a monkey tail and slips into every open handbag he passes.

It’s beautiful, really, this whole little ecosystem where the apex predator is a blue-black Mossos police drone that swoops in and sends everyone scattering.

Since I’m in the neighborhood I do a bit of window shopping, sliding past a storefront to see some new prints in from Mombasa. The mannequins track my eyes and start posing—I hate that. As soon as I get off La Rambla onto Passeig de Colom, I’m all business again. Nat is essential, and talented, but she’s not the only helping hand I’ll need for this job. It’s that final bioscanner that makes things so tricky.

Having Quini’s helix is only half the battle: We also need a body, and neither mine nor Nat’s fits the bill, in large part because we’ve got

implants that are definitely not Quini's. Masking or turning off tech built right into the nervous system is actually a lot harder than simply hiring what our German friends call a *Fleischgeist*.

It's not as snappy in English: meat ghost. But it gives you the idea—someone with no implants. None. No hand chip, no cranial, no optics or aurals. Nothing with an electronic signature. In our day and age, they might as well be invisible. Ergo, the ghost part.

There are basically two ways to find yourself a *Fleischgeist* in Barcelona. You can go to an eco-convent slash Luddite commune, which doesn't really lend itself to the skills I need, or you can go to Poble del Vaixell, which is where I'm going now, sticking to the long shadow of the Mirador.

The tower's old gray stone is now skinned in the same green carbon-sink moss as everywhere else; the top has been taken over by a whole flock of squawking white seagulls. Beyond it, the Mediterranean is the bright rippled blue of travel holos. I order a rotorboat and it's waiting for me when I get to the docks, jostling for space with an old man fishing plastic out of the water. The salt-crust screen blinks me a smiley face.

"*Bon dia,*" the rotorboat burbles. "*On anem avui?*"

"Just take me out to the buoys," I say, because technically Poble del Vaixell doesn't exist.

The smiley face on the screen winks as if it knows. Then I climb in and we push off hard at the perfect angle to drench the fisherman with our spray. He sputters. I give him the apologetic hand shrug as we sling out into the harbor.

★ ★ ★

The waves are a bit choppy today but the rotorboat is up to it, dicing precisely through the traffic of yachts and sails and autobarges. We peel away from the coastline and head straight out to sea. The salt wind blows my hair all around, which I hate, and even with the gyroscopes I manage to slam my tailbone against the boat bench hard enough to smart. Fortunately it's not a long ride out to the border buoys, a long line of gray columns blinking authoritative yellow hazard lights.

And just beyond them, Poble del Vaixell, a massive floating labyrinth that sometimes looks bigger than Barcelona itself. It actually is a little

snappier in English: Shiptown. Originally composed of all the south-up migrants who couldn't get through Catalonia's vetting system, in the past decade it's become a force unto itself. Plastic fishing, plankton farming, solar storage, you name it.

For a lot of people it's the final jumping off point to Europe, but for a lot more people it's home. I've done a couple month-long stints here myself when I needed to lie low. The rotorboat nuzzles up as close as it can to the border. I cover my face on muscle memory, even though the buoy cams were hit with a virus barrage last year and still haven't recovered, then take a flying leap onto the polyplastic pier.

It judges my athleticism in mid-air and shoots out to meet me; I still nearly eat shit when my boots hit the algae-slimed surface. But I'm over the border, in Shiptown proper, and the rotorboat burbles goodbye before it skids away on a blade of foam. I wave, compose myself, and head for the downtown.

Shiptown's original skeleton was a flotilla of migrant boats, some huge, most tiny, lashed or welded together in solidarity against the 3-D printed seawalls and aggressive border drones preventing them from reaching the coast. Since then it's sprawled outward in all directions, an enormous maze that seems to grow by the hour, its web of walkways crammed with pedestrians and cyclists.

I go right through the market, where there are tarps heaped with dried beans and grasshoppers beside tarps with secondhand implants, some so fresh you can practically see the spinal fluid dripping off them. You can get by with a few different currencies in the market, but barter is still the go-to. I traded a designer jacket I didn't want anymore for my *Fleischgeist's* contact information.

His name is Yinka, and he's waiting in a bar called Perrito that used to be a fishing boat called *Perrito*—the bit of the hull that had the name painted on is now welded to struts over the door. The interior smells like fish guts when I walk in and the biolamp lighting shows a few pinkish stains on the floor.

"*Bones, com va?*" I try.

Perrito's bartender glances at me from behind a repurposed slice of nanocarbon barricade, then goes back to rearranging her bottles of mezcal and rotgut vodka. She doesn't pull out a scattergun or anything, though, so I head toward the back. The only Nigerian in the place is posted up in the

corner with an untouched glass of what looks like bog water but is probably bacteria beer.

I measure him as I sit down. Retro white buds in his ears are blaring some *kuduro* hit and he's wearing a sleeveless windbreaker with a shifting green-black pattern meant to fool basic facial recognition ware. He's even younger than I expected. Small, which is typical for a break-in artist, with wiry arms and chalky elbows resting on the table. Fashionably half-buzzed head, blank and angular face, hooded eyes fixed on the fresh-printed slab of a phone in his hands. Which I guess isn't an affectation, since he's got no implants.

"Yinka?"

He doesn't look up, but his thumb twitches on the phone and the music volume drops slightly. "Yes."

"You do good work," I say, which is a bit of an exaggeration—he does work. "A few real slick jobs in Lagos. That one in Dakar. You ready to try something a bit harder?"

"I'm ready to hear about the money, man," Yinka says. "We're pinching art? My auntie did that once. Fence took everything but the crumbs."

"We'll be getting some very big crumbs," I say. "Klobučar-sized crumbs."

I put my hand out; he grunts and slides the fresh phone across. I tap it with one finger and my implant sends the rest of the job info, the stuff I didn't want floating through Barcelona air, including the estimated value of Klobučar's currently verified works.

He peers at the screen, then blinks. His eyes bulge for a split second. "Oh. Yeah. I'm in, then."

"Good," I say. "How are you with virtual?"

"Depends how much virtual. I get a little sick."

"I already got pods rented here in Shiptown," I say. "We're cramming about a week of prep into eighteen hours."

Yinka cocks his head to one side, still not looking up. "Eighteen hours straight, we're all gonna be podsick. For guaran."

I don't get podsick myself, but I know how to counter it. "I've got the pharma to balance you out," I say. "There's no other way. We hit the safe room tomorrow night."

He finally meets my eyes, and for a second I see the nervous kid

hidden under the *I'm a cold pro* act, out here in a foreign country trying to hustle and not sure what he's getting into. Reminds me of me, but I had a better game face even back then.

"Okay, man," he says, gaze back to the phone screen. "But if I don't like the feeling, I don't go."

His thumb slides the volume back up and I let the tinny clash of *kuduro* play me out.

★ ★ ★

Shiptown's best quality virtual is in Xavi's sex house, so that's where three clean pods are waiting for us. It's a lurid little place, scab-red carpeting and black-and-white pornography stills coating every inch of the walls, with a lingering scent of bodily fluids that the air freshener can't quite mask.

I go in to check the pods—Yinka's is modified with the old-school electrodes—and shake hands with Xavi, who owes me one for getting a bug out of his biofeedback interface and doesn't know I put it in there in the first place. Then I come back out to share a vape with my just-arrived *Fleischgeist* while we wait for Nat to show up.

"Never been to Lagos," I say. "There's a lagoon, yeah? Must be nice."

Yinka grudgingly turns his volume down, I imagine only because I'm smoking him up. "Hazy, man. Dirty." He puffs out a blue-tinged cloud. "Shanties all around."

"That where you came up?" I ask.

He passes the vape back. "Nah nah. I was born in a hospital." He pauses, looking over my head. "My ma could afford the imps. She just didn't want me to have them."

"Why's that?"

He shrugs his bony shoulders. "She was in a death cult."

"Ah."

Nat arrives fashionably late, just as the sun's turning smelter orange and I'm turning antsy. She comes striding up the walkway with her immaculate black coat slicing open on long stockinged legs, and I can see Yinka get lovestruck in realtime, which is a perk of working with Nat and might be useful later.

"The bioprinter wanted to haggle," she says, raking a strand of hair off

her face. “Doesn’t usually run the thing overnight. We’ll be good for the pickup time, though.”

“Good,” I say. “Nat, Yinka. Yinka, Nat.”

“Pleasure,” says Nat. She looks him up and down. “Nice jacket.”

Yinka’s eyes don’t make it to hers, but they stick briefly on her beestung lips before they flit away. “Thanks. New.”

“You two are going to really hit it off,” I say. “Let’s get started.”

I usher them into the back, where the pods are levered open and Xavi’s setting up our extra hydration packs. Eighteen hours is a long go, and for all he knows we’re doing a marathon *ménage à trois* with the biofeedback on. I go over to my pod and poke my finger into the conduction gel.

“It’s clean,” Xavi says, sounding wounded. “I drained and refilled.”

My finger implant runs a little scan and agrees with him—no nasty bacterial surprises. We get Yinka set up first, helping him into the sensor suit that will compensate for his lack of implants and hooking it into a glinting spiderweb of electrodes. He lies back in the pod, head bobbing slightly in the gel, and shuts his eyes. Xavi shuts the lid.

Nat takes the pod beside mine, strips down, and climbs in. She’s run enough sex scams in virtual that the whole thing is automatic. I’m worried about Yinka getting podsick, not her. “You tell him?” she asks. “About fooling the bioscanner?”

“Broad strokes,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, and closes the lid herself.

That leaves me and Xavi, and I tell him to go watch the front. I wait until I hear him settle into his orthochair before I strip. Even then I keep an eye on the other pods, as if Yinka or Nat might pop up and start gaping at me. There’s a reason I only pulled my shirt up to my ribs in the restaurant, no higher. I don’t care about showing off the bruises Quini left me, but I’m a bit self-conscious about the work the hormone implant’s done in the past few months. Nat doesn’t know, and now’s not the time.

I fold my clothes and stick them on the flimsy plastic shelf, then climb inside my pod. As soon as the conduction gel hits my bare skin, my implants start to sing.

★ ★ ★

Quini’s villa on the edge of the city is, of course, a tasteless monstrosity.

Basically he fed Park Güell and the Sagrada Família into an architectural AI and it spat out a cheap Gaudí imitation overrun with geometric lizards and fluted-bone buttresses. I'm floating in the sky above it with Nat on one side of me and a slightly blurry Yinka on the other.

"You ever ask about his decorating?" I mutter.

"He's still trying to prove to himself he's in Catalonia," Nat says. "Still scared to wake up dirt poor back in the *pueblo*. But no. I didn't ask."

"Fortunately he worked a little Andalusia in there too," I say, and pivot the view so we're in the copse of twisted olive trees that shades the back half of the villa. "That's our cover. We're coming in cross-country."

Yinka looks around. The motion of his head leaves pixelated traces in the air. "They got dogs?"

"One dog," I say, and pull up the schematics I took from Quini's sacked security chief. The dog materializes with us in the woods, right in front of Nat, who flinches a little. I don't blame her. It's a vicious-looking thing, all angles, long whippet legs and a sensor bulb head with a disc of glinting teeth underneath.

"That's a power saw," Yinka says. "He rigged a power saw to its head?"

"He likes things messy," I say, glancing over at Nat. "But in this case, it's a good thing. We'll hear it coming. And I'm writing a backdoor into its friend/foe mapper. Once we're past the dog..."

I glide us forward, out of the olive trees, toward the soft blue glow of the swimming pool. Tendrils of steam waft off it, frozen midair. The surrounding white tiles are etched with, I shit you not, lizards. There's a walkway and glass door leading into the villa itself, and from there it's only a short trip down a hallway to Quini's bedroom.

Its main feature is probably the bed itself, a massive black slab floating in the air above a magnet pad. Other contenders include the sparring dummy strutting back and forth by the mirrors and mats, the holo on the ceiling of naked faceless bodies writhing together, and the oversized print of Quini's own scowling face on the wall.

"That's you," I say, pointing it out to Yinka. "Or it will be. Here, have a better look."

Quini appears in the room with us, cobbled together from all the free-floating footage I could grab of him from the past two years plus the few unfortunate interactions I've had with him in person. Nat looks the

composite up and down, frowning a little at his sinewy folded arms, but she doesn't say anything so it must be accurate enough for her.

Me and Yinka walk a circle around him. He's not big, Quini, but even in virtual he radiates a kind of ferocity, like a cat with its hackles up. His eyes are pouchy and bloodshot and his buzzed hair is bleached reddish-orange. His sun-browned skin is feathered with white scar tissue here and there, but no tattoos. Quini hates needles.

"We have the schema for the bioscanner," I say. "It's looking at height and weight first. We're going to bulk you out a bit, add a couple centimeters to your shoes. It's got some limited gait recognition, so you'll have to get the hang of walking like him, too."

I wave my hand and Quini slouches forward, toward the sparring dummy. Yinka watches intently.

"Nat has generously donated some of his genetic material," I continue. "Which the printer is hard at work turning into a palmprint glove and a facemask. It won't be a perfect match, but these things never get a perfect match. It'll be enough so long as I'm spoofing his implant signal at the same time."

Quini turns and starts walking back, loping steps, one arm a little stiff. I hope Yinka's a good mimic.

"Safe room is through here," Nat says, and I get the impression she doesn't like hanging around with even the virtual version of her abusive ex. We follow her past the bathroom to a blank stone wall. The only sign of the bioscanner is a tiny blue light, blinking at eye level. Yinka goes up on tiptoes for a second to meet it. His hand pats at his pocket.

"And we don't know what it is," he says. "Just that it's Klobučar."

"We know it's small enough to be transported in an incubator pod this size," I say, holding up a clenched fist. "We know Quini didn't even take it out of said incubator pod. So we don't have to worry about dragging some kind of, I don't know, giraffe-orca hybrid back to the car. You go in, you grab it, we leave the way we came. Five minutes in the safe room, tops. Twenty in the house, tops."

"Quini's where?" Yinka's hand pats his pocket again, and I realize he's feeling on muscle memory for his antique phone, which did not come to virtual with us. "While we're doing all this shit. Where is he?"

I understand the question. I understand that even looking at Quini, you know he's not someone you want home during a home invasion.

“It’s a Saturday night,” I say. “He’s busy at Flux. Nat will keep an eye on him while she sets up the spoof. So all we got for occupants is a skeleton security crew—four people, I got their files—and a cleaner.”

Yinka gives a slow nod.

“We’ll be good,” I say, trying to reassure both him and myself. “It’s time to start rehearsing.”

★ ★ ★

Seventeen hours later and we’re as ready as we can be. If you’ve ever done deep virtual, you know how time gets twisted. The longer you’re in the pod, the harder it is to tell if you’ve been in there for a week or ten minutes or your whole fucking life. Which is why I was a little worried for Yinka, but he seems to be holding up fine.

He’s even smiling; Nat’s telling him a Ljubljana story, some naked businessman chasing her through the snowy street behind his hotel. She’s always been good at making shitty things sound funny, and I also feel like virtual helps you bond. When everything around you is artificial, you have to lean a little harder on the real people.

I didn’t hear anything more about Yinka’s childhood, but he did confess he’s working on a few of his own *kuduro* tracks. That was sometime between the tenth and eleventh run on the house. I did some prep work alone while Yinka practiced being Quini under Nat’s tutelage, but mostly we ran the whole thing together. First with the patrols on their planned routes, then with minor randomization, then with disaster scenarios.

Nat has a job all her own, planting the spoof at Flux, but she knows that place like the back of her hand.

“All right,” I say, cutting her story short at the high point. “That last one felt good. Let’s run it one final time, then get out of here.”

Nat stares at me and the grin drops off Yinka’s face.

“We’re out, man,” he says. “We been out. You were the one who woke us up.”

Shit.

I take a closer look at my surroundings. We’re gliding still, but that’s because we’re in the back of a car heading up Avenida Diagonal through the synchronized swarm of black-and-yellow cabs retrieving and

depositing revelers. Through the window I see dark sky splashed with holos. Nat and Yinka are across from me—Yinka’s not blurry at all—and the duffel bags are on the floor. We’ve already been to the bioprinter.

“We’re on our way to Flux,” Nat says; then, on a private channel our *Fleischgeist* can’t hear: *Up your dose.*

I look down and see the baggie of speed in my palm, the pharma Xavi slapped into our goodbye handshake. Reality warps and shivers around me. I don’t get podsick. I never get podsick.

“You good?” Yinka says, voice pitching up, nerves creeping in.

“I’m fucking with you,” I say. “Gallows humor, Yinka.”

We drop Nat a block from Flux, and while Yinka’s looking away I dry-swallow as many pills as I can fit in my idiot mouth. A sweaty, skin-humming minute passes before things brighten. Sharpen.

I never get podsick. It’s a bad omen and I can’t help but think it’s because of the hormone implant, the new chemical messengers in my body messing with my metabolism, with my brain.

Don’t fuck this up, Nat chats me, and strides around the corner without looking back.

★ ★ ★

The copse of olive trees behind Quini’s villa isn’t more than a square kilometer, but at night, with a gut full of speed battling a podsick cerebellum, it seems big as a fairy-tale forest, a dark, dense thicket eating us whole. I’m trying real hard to keep my shit together.

“We trip anything yet?” Yinka asks.

“No tripping,” I say.

The perimeter is sewn with sensors, but I own those already. As soon as we were in range I hit them with a maintenance shutdown, courtesy of some malware written by a ten-year-old in Laos who really knows her shit. That’s the thing about this line of work: There’s always some tiny genius coming up behind you doing it better.

But the backdoor for the dog, that I had to do myself. The AI is a custom job, modified from a military prototype I’m not getting anywhere near without some serious social engineering, so I’m lucky the security chief had a vested interest in its inner workings. It only took one night of sifting source code to find a vulnerability. But we have to be in range.

For a second I can't remember if we're on the fifth run or the sixth. Then I look at Yinka, clear, not-blurry Yinka, and get a cold needle jabbed into my spinal column. Real. This is real, and we're coming up on the dog. I can see its bobbing signal in my implant, and I can hear the soft whine of the saw. I tighten my grip on my duffel bag. Look over at Yinka again. He mostly trusts me now, mostly because he has no other options.

"I'm starting," I say, and sit down.

The dog spots our heat through the trees. It comes running, loping along, the serrated saw humming. I'm in my implant loading the code, line after line of custom script. All I need is the handshake. Which is funny, because it's a dog. *Sit. Shake. Don't maul us.*

Yinka catches sight of it as it ducks around a twisty trunk. I hear him suck in a breath.

"My connection is slower than I thought," I say, and I nearly say, *Let's try it again*, before I remember that we can't. This is real, and the dog is breaking into a run. The saw is a spinning blur. I can picture it ripping into my face, spraying the olive trees with bright red blood. My heart is a fist pounding at my ribcage; in another second it'll bust right through.

"Man, it's coming right at us," Yinka says. "Get up. Get up, it's coming right at us."

He's right. The dog hurtles toward us and I dimly feel Yinka yanking under my arms, trying to haul me to my feet. Client and server collide. The code shuttles across.

"Shake, motherfucker," I say.

The dog skids to a stop in front of us and wags its plastic tail. The whine of the saw makes my teeth ache in my jaw. It didn't do that in virtual. We sit tight for a second until it trots away, then both of us breathe. The fairy-tale forest swells and contracts around me. I pop another pill, not caring if Yinka sees it.

"Well done, man," he finally says, and gives me a hand up.

My legs are shaking when we come out of the woods. I'm still waiting for the speed to kick my head clear. *Real, real, real.* We can't run this again, and that means I have to be perfect. We pad across the bone-dry tiles, past the steamy swimming pool, and Yinka stands watch while I crack the door into the villa. I've done it so many times it feels like a dream.

Not a dream. Real. I'm podsick, and I need to keep my shit together.

“After you,” I say, as the door slides open. I’m in the house cameras. Three of the four guards are in the kitchen with a vape, one is fucking the cleaner in the guest bathroom, both of them muffling their grunts with soft white towels clenched in their teeth. I run my tongue around my mouth, thinking how much I’d hate that. Lint and whatnot.

Yinka leads the way down the hall to Quini’s room, the way he’s done eight times at least. He’s a little jumpy. I want to tell him to relax. Tell him we could run down the hallway screaming. It’s only virtual.

Podsick. Podsick. Podsick. I have to chant it in my head. The speed should be balancing me out. Maybe Xavi gave me some real stepped-on shit. It’s working for Yinka, though, and I hope to God it’s working for Nat. Maybe my tolerance is too high.

The cleaner hasn’t made it to the bed yet; the sheets are a tangled mess hanging off one end. The sparring dummy sees us and starts shadowboxing, reminding me of the mannequins on La Rambla I hate so much. I flip it the finger as we walk past. The door to the safe room is still invisible, a thick stone plane, the scanner winking innocent blue at us.

I set my duffel down; Yinka drops his.

“Okay,” I say. “Time to check in with Nat.”

★ ★ ★

Nat is in the bathroom of Flux, and because she’s cutting me into her eyefeed there’s a blissy moment where I am her, where the reflection in the smart mirror is my reflection. The geometry of her dark hair hitting her perfect collarbone is so beautiful it hurts. She puts a pill between her puffy lips and washes it down with a slurp of water from the faucet.

We’re at the safe room, I chat her.

The rental timer on the stall behind her expires; the electronic bleating almost drowns out the sound of the occupant vomiting.

He’s on the upper level, she chats me. *Can you reach?*

She drops her defenseware, which we both know is a polite fiction—I installed that defenseware. Her body becomes an antenna, boosted by the graphene conduction pads she taped to her dress, and I can suddenly see every implant in the club. Quini’s are tagged a bright red, but I can’t touch them.

Bathroom must have a concrete ceiling, I chat her. *Get out in the open.*

The smart mirror makes a read on her body language and throws up a filter, unfurling blackened wings behind her shoulder blades, turning her into an avenging angel. It probably thinks she's about to pull or punch someone. I put another five minutes on the stall for whoever's puking.

Nat slices past the vending machine, where a couple girls are already printing up cheap flats for the stumble home, and plunges out into the club. This is her element in the way I've only ever pretended it's my element: She moves through the crowd like a fluid, depositing precise air kisses and brief embraces where she has to, never getting caught in conversation.

In another world, I can hear Yinka moving beside me, putting on the bodysuit designed to give him Quini's almost exact proportions.

Nat's eyes scan the upper level and suddenly there's Quini, wearing a specifically tailored spidersilk suit, arm wrapped through the railing. He's got his chin to his chest, laughing at something that makes the people around him look vaguely uncomfortable. She ducks behind the steroid-pumped bulk of a bouncer to break line of sight. The signal flares strong.

Got it, I say, and I start the spoof, using Nat's implants to mirror Quini's and send the signal, by rented pirate satellite, all the way to the villa.

The bouncer moves, and for a second it feels like Quini is looking right at us, but then I realize his eyes are squeezed shut. There's a glimmer of tears on his face, sickly green in the strobing lights. Nat slides away into the crowd.

Please don't let him see you, I chat her.

No shit, she chats back. *You tell Yinka yet?*

"Man, they fucked up," our *Fleischgeist* says, not in my head but in the air beside it. His whisper is hoarse. "The suit's missing one sleeve."

"Yeah," I say. "That's the thing."

I drop Nat's eyefeed and come back to the safe room door. I should have told him back in the car, or back in virtual. But I couldn't. Not after he said that thing about his ma being in a death cult, and then me hacking his phone and using a police timeline AI to figure out which cult it was, and then me finding out their main thing was dismemberment. Me finding out the sting caught his mom standing over him with a machete. Even ghosts have traces.

"What thing?" Yinka demands.

So instead I modified the virtual Quini, and I lied. It was a hell of a

coincidence, and way too late to find another *Fleischgeist*.

“Quini’s nickname, ‘the Squid’?” I stroke my finger down my duffel’s enzyme zipper. It peels apart to reveal the refrigerated case and the surgical saw. “It’s one of those ironic nicknames.”

I show him an undoctored image of Quini, projecting it from my finger implant onto the stone wall. He stares at the wrinkled stump where Quini’s right arm used to be and sucks in air through his nostrils.

“He’s only got one tentacle total,” I say. “He had a bad time with some drug runners when he was a kid. Stole a pack of cigarettes from them, is the story. So they did that. Even after he made it out, even after he made money, he never got a new one grown. Never got a prosthetic.”

I can’t tell if Yinka’s listening. He’s looking down at the surgical saw with his mouth sealed tight. I wish Nat were here, to look at him through her lampblack lashes and make Yinka feel like the whole thing was his brave and beautiful idea.

“It’s temporary,” I say. “Five minutes in the safe room, remember? We take it off, put it on ice. You get in, get the Klobučar, get out. Twenty minutes, we’re back to the car—there’s an autosurgeon waiting in the back—and it gets reattached en route with zero nerve damage.”

Yinka looks me right in the eye and enunciates. “You fucking snake.”

I try to shrug, but it ends up more like a shudder. “Tight clock. You do it and we walk away rich as kings, or you dip and we did all this for nothing.”

Yinka looks away again. “How much time you set aside to convince me?”

“Four minutes.”

He curses at me in Yoruba—my babelware only gets half of it—then grips his head in both hands. He stares up at the ceiling. “Nat. She knew too.”

“It’s temporary,” I say. “I’ll bump your take. Forty percent. How’s that?”

“How high you gonna go?” Yinka asks dully.

“You can have my whole fucking share,” I snap. “It’s not the money for me. It’s personal.”

Yinka stays staring at the ceiling, not blinking. “Your whole share,” he finally says. “And if the reattach goes bad, I’m going to kill you with one hand, man.”

“You’ll have to beat Quini to it,” I say. “But yeah. It’s a deal.”

I put out my hand to shake and he ignores it, which is, you know, understandable. Instead he lies down on the stone floor and lays his right arm out flat. His face is expressionless but his chest is working like a bellows, ribcage pumping up and down. He’s terrified.

“Try to relax,” I say to both of us, sticking anatabs up and down his arm.

Yinka’s nostrils flare. “I’m not saying another fucking word to you until my arm’s back on.”

The tabs turn bright blue against his dark skin as they activate, deadening his nerves. The limb goes slack from his shoulder down. I wrap the whole thing in bacterial film, to catch the blood spray, and mark my line above the elbow.

Now it’s time for the bit I practiced on my own, the private virtual Nat and Yinka were not invited to. I switch on the saw and the high-pitched whine makes me gooseflesh all over.

We do the amputation in silence, even though when I practiced it I practiced mumbling comforting things, explaining the procedure—bedside manner and shit. The saw is so shiny it hurts my eyes. Everything is too bright. Too sharp. If I take any more speed I’m going to OD.

But my hands are still steady, and I know this is real. Virtual doesn’t get smells quite right, and right now I can smell the sour stink of fear coming off Yinka’s body, contaminated sweat leaking out from his armpits. When the saw bites into his flesh another smell joins it: hot, greasy copper.

The film does its job and seals the wound on both ends. Not a drop spilled, but my stomach lurches a bit when I transfer the severed arm—Yinka’s arm—to the refrigerated case. He’s already getting up, bracing carefully with his left arm, levering onto his knees and then onto his feet.

He stands stock-still while I slip the bioprinter’s mask over his face. It’s alive the way a skin graft is alive, warm to the touch, and the lattice of cartilage underneath approximates Quini’s bone structure. It would never work on its own, but there’s also the glove, more live tissue coated in Quini’s DNA and also etched with the exact ridges and whorls of his palm and fingerprints.

And now Yinka’s got the right proportions, too.

“Just how we practiced,” I say. “I’m sending it the open-up.”

I back away, dragging both duffel bags out of the sensor's sight, leaving Yinka standing eye level with the blinking blue light. Nat's signal is still coming strong from Flux, meaning Quini's signal is also coming strong, and now all I have to do is bounce it to the safe room sensor with a simple entry command.

Yinka's swaying on his feet. I did my research. I know field amputations can send people into shock, knock them out entirely. But I made sure there was minimal blood loss, and I stuck his nerve-dead stump with a cocktail of stimulants and painkillers. He should be feeling weirdly good, and alert enough to remember procedure.

We can't run it again. The realization jolts me for the hundredth time.

The stone wall slides apart, offering up a palmprint pad. Yinka leans forward, slightly off-balance, and slaps his remaining hand against it. I watch the bioscanner deliberate in real time. The wall becomes a door, swinging inward. Yinka hunches against the bright light for a moment, then heads inside with Quini's exact swaggering stride.

Five minutes is a fucking eternity during a break-and-enter. I start checking the cameras again. The three overpaid security guards are still in the kitchen, learning to blow smoke rings from some net tutorial. The pair in the bathroom are still fucking, still clutching at each other and at the towels.

Still.

I get a tingling at the nape of my neck, and it only gets worse when Nat chats me: *Quini's leaving*.

I go back to the kitchen camera and check the timestamps. Masked. I peel them out the hard way, and the tingling at the nape of my neck becomes jagged ice.

Nat, we're burnt, I chat her. *Get the fuck out of there. We're burnt*.

I'm opening my mouth to tell Yinka the same thing when the barrel of a scattergun shows up in my peripheral vision.

"Hush," says a man's soft voice. "Let the *Fleischgeist* finish his job."

I shut my mouth. The man pulls something out of the folds of his jacket, and suddenly my head is stuffed with steel wool. I lose contact with my cranial implant, with Nat, with everything else. I feel the faraday clamp attach itself to the back of my skull, digging its tiny feet in. I'm blinded. But I was blinded before too. I was watching a fucking loop on the house cameras.

“So you don’t make any more mischief,” the man says. “My name is Anton. I’m Señor Caballo’s new security consultant. I believe you met my predecessor in the bathroom of a shitty wine bar.” He rests the scattergun on my shoulder.

“You had a trail on her?” I choke.

“Yeah. Been waiting for you ever since. Pawns move first.” He exhales. “Tonight’s been very educational. We’re going to make some major improvements here.”

Yinka emerges from the safe room with a tiny incubator pod cradled in his hand. He stops short.

“Sorry,” I say.

He says nothing back, which is understandable. Anton holds out his hand for the incubator. Yinka gives it up. Anton motions with the scattergun. We start walking back down the hallway, through Quini’s room where the sparring dummy clasps its hands over its head, victorious. All I can think about is my conversation with Nat in the restaurant, about seafood and salt water and how I am a *yugga, yugga, yugga*.

I know this is real, because now I can smell my own sweat. I smell terrified.

★ ★ ★

The drugs are wearing off and Yinka’s face, no longer hidden under the Quini mask, is contorted in pain. We’re outside by the steaming pool with Anton and two more armed guards. Anton has his pants rolled up and his feet in the water, swirling them clockwise, counterclockwise. I can see his leg hairs rippling.

“He needs medical attention,” I say. “Come on. He’s a fucking kid.”

“You cut his arm off,” Anton says. “He’s a fucking kid.” But he tips his head back, blinks, and I can tell he’s looking at something in his implant. “Reattachment should be viable for another five hours. Since it’s on ice.”

Yinka sinks slowly to his haunches. Neither of the guards try to make him stand back up.

“I fucked up,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

Quini arrives just as dawn is streaking the sky with filaments of red. His eyes are bloodshot and his grin is amphetamine-tight and he’s not

wearing any shoes with his tailored suit. His arm is slung around Nat's shoulders. I try to make eye contact with her, but she's not making eye contact with anything.

"Afterparty at my place, and nobody fucking tells me," Quini says. "Not even Natalia, *mi gitanita favorita*. Who tells me everything." He kisses her cheek; her lips flex just a bit in return. I want to tell her we can get out of this, somehow, somehow, but my implant is locked up and seeing Quini does the same thing to my mouth.

He leaves Nat to go over to Anton, who reaches into his jacket for the incubator pod. Quini takes it—he doesn't look happy to see it, more disgusted—and puts it in his pocket. Then he comes to me.

"And here's my favorite hackman," he says. "How are you?" He throws his arm around me and I can't help but flinch. The last thing my body remembers about him is him beating the shit out of me. This time he's exuding a cloud of sweat, cologne, black rum. He makes a rumbling noise in his throat and gives an extra squeeze before he steps back, cupping my face in his hand, beaming at me.

"My three favorite people all in one place," he says. "Me makes three. Him, I don't know." He looks over at Yinka, who's still crouched, clutching his stump. "Who are you, *negrito*?" He rubs his thumb on my cheek and his eyes flutter shut for a second. "Your skin is so fucking soft, hackman. You moisturize that shit."

Then he goes to Yinka, who isn't wearing the mask but is still wearing the suit, and squats down across from him. He puffs out half a laugh.

"I get it. You're me." He champs his teeth together—twice, three times—dentin clacking. "You're me! You're Quini. That's how you got into the safe room." He points at the stump. "He really did you like that, huh? He really took your fucking arm off?" He tips back his head. "Ha! My four favorite people. Me twice."

Yinka doesn't react. Still in shock. Better that way, with Quini. I'm cycling through the disaster scenarios we ran, but with the faraday clamp freezing my implant it's only memory and it's jumpy, erratic. Fear keeps bullying in.

"You want to know the real story? How I really lost it? You're me, so I can tell you." Quini sits down cross-legged on the tiles. He rubs his hand along the pattern. "I was just small. Just a little *cabroncito*. I grew up during the droughts. You're African. You know. Getting food was tough."

I don't want to hear this story. I know it's dangerous to be hearing this story. I can tell from the look on Nat's face.

"My family used to work the *aceituna*. The olive trees. Always had Africans up to work, too. You from Senegal? They were mostly from Senegal. But one year the trees stopped producing, because the new gene tweak didn't take, so people started chopping them up for firewood instead. It gets cold in Andalusia. People up here don't know that. So, me and my brother, we were chopping firewood."

Quini's eyes turn wide and gleeful, like he's a kid recounting his favorite part of a flick. "He thought I was going to pull my arm away! I thought he wasn't going to swing! And just like that, gone. Oh, I was angry. Even back then, even little Quini, he got angry. But my brother was family, you know? And it was an accident. Nobody's fault. Just the peristalsis of an amoral universe. You like that word? 'Peristalsis.'"

"But then, years later, years and years, I heard my brother was talking. Was saying he did it to teach me a lesson. Saying he's the only person that makes Quini the Squid flinch." Quini snorts. "So one night I went over to his house—his house, *qué tontería*, I bought him that fucking house—and I brought an autosurgeon with me. And I made things right. First I took his arms, then I took his legs."

I can hear the whining of the blade all over again. My gut heaves and for a second I can't look at Yinka, can't look at anything except the backs of my eyelids.

"I cried while I did it," Quini says. "But when it was finished, my anger was gone. Gone! We were brothers again. I bought him a chair—you know, to get around. A really fancy one." He gets nimbly to his feet and heads over to my confiscated duffel bag. He grins at Nat while he gropes around inside. The saw emerges with Yinka's blood still splattering the casing. "So who wants to go first?" he asks. "Hackman, how about you? You're quiet tonight. I remember you like talking. I'm surprised you're not talking yet. Trying to save your skin."

I've done the thinking and I already know. Quini blames me for the job in Murcia going bad. He pulled my contracts for any other hackwork. Now he's caught me breaking into his house to steal the one thing he cannot afford to have stolen.

"Nothing is going to save my skin." I can't keep my voice from quavering. I look at Nat, then Yinka. "I blackmailed both of them," I say.

“I took Nat’s bank account, and I poison-pilled his Catalanian citizenship request. Forced them. To help.”

Quini nods, inspecting the saw blade. “Okay. Sure. But what’s this all about, hackman? Why did you do this to me?”

I look straight ahead, not meeting his eyes. “I’m a big Klobučar fan.”

Quini stares at me, then barks a laugh so loud one of his guards jumps. “You too, huh? I’m starting to feel real uncultured, you know that? Everyone loves this shit. Me, I wish I could get rid of it. Swear!” The saw clangs onto the tiles. He pulls the incubator pod out of his pocket instead and waves it in the air, arm swinging dangerously close to the edge of the pool.

I can see Anton’s wince. “We should get that back in the safe room, Señor Caballo.”

Quini ignores him. “I’m working with some Koreans now. Some serious *hijoputas* until they get liquored, then friendly, real friendly. We’re in Seoul and the boss, he starts talking about Klobučar, how visionary she was, how killing herself was art. That was art! Bullshit.” He tosses the incubator pod up into the air, watches it, catches it. “But one thing leads to another, we seal the malware deal, and he says he wants to loan me his favorite piece for a month. One month, and it’ll change everything, he says. Doesn’t tell me it’s worth a billion fucking Euros until I’m babysitting it.”

He clutches the pod tight and rubs his face in the crook of his arm. “Makes me nervous, hackman,” he says, walking back toward me. “If I somehow lost it, no more deals with the Koreans. And there would be a bunch of ninja motherfuckers in chamsuits trying to knife me in my sleep. You knew that, I think. You knew it would hurt me. So now I’m going to make what I did in Murcia look like a tickle.”

My throat winches shut. I can feel the ghost of Quini’s boot swinging into my ribs. I can hear his men laughing.

“But I’ll give you a look first,” he says. “So you can decide if this was ever really worth it.” He thumbs the pod open.

It’s empty.

He scrapes his finger around the inside, and the first thought in my fear-fogged brain is that I do not understand art, that I am just as uncultured as Quini the Squid and I’m going to die that way.

Then his eyelid starts to twitch.



I can see my reflection in the pool and it's uglier than ever, a faceful of processed meat, every centimeter of skin either split or swollen. Blood keeps burbling out of my mouth and down my chin, more blood than I ever realized I had. All I want to do is topple forward into the pool and drown, but the guard behind me has his arm around my waist.

Nat is on one side of me; Yinka on the other. They're making him stand. He looks like he's about to be sick, then swallows it back down. After the initial flurry of anger, Quini lined us up by the pool and stuck one of my anatabs to his skinned knuckles. Now he's walking up and down the tiles behind us, bare feet slapping the ceramic, and he has the surgical saw tucked under his stump.

"Where is it?" he asks again.

"Don't know," I try to say again, breathing broken glass.

"Natalia, *mi amor*, where is it? You know I don't want to hurt you. I love you."

I'm praying Nat will stay silent, how she's been since arriving, but the words break her ice and she blinks. "Get fucked, Quini."

He hurls the incubator pod against the tiles and it smashes apart. Then he comes up behind me, enveloping me in the cloud of sweat and alcohol, and his breath is hot in my ear. "I do love her, though. Still. You know, hackman, if it wasn't for her, I never would have hired you the first time. We wouldn't know each other." He balloons a sigh. "I bet she feels bad about that. I bet that's why she agreed to help you."

I shake my head, making the faraday clamp throb. "Blackmail."

"I'm trying to decide now. Who I start cutting." Quini hefts the saw. "The *negrito*, he could use a break. So between Natalia and the hackman, I think it's you. I think she cares more about you than you care about her. So even though she hates me, she'll talk. To avoid seeing you flopping around in the pool with no limbs like some deformed fucking *manatí*."

"Señor Caballo." It's Anton. I almost forgot about him. For a moment I think he's going to save me, but he's only being businesslike. "We should search him first. If it's on his person, you don't want to damage it by accident."

Quini shrugs. "Go."

Anton pads over to me, chasing the guard away. I stand spread-eagled,

arms straight out, and think for the first time about not having them. He frisks from the bottom up, and as he's checking my coat lining he pauses.

"Just out of curiosity," he says. "How loud can you whistle?"

For a split second his hand passes over the faraday clamp. Then he finishes the frisk, finding nothing, and steps away. Quini grunts, like he expected as much. He switches the saw on. Cold sweat starts trickling from my armpits down my ribcage. I feel the whine in my teeth.

"We're starting with the right," he says. "That's the trend. You will fit right in. Natalia, *cielo*, feel free to start theorizing. About where my fucking artwork is."

"I wasn't fucking here," Nat says. Her voice is brittle. I hate that. I hate it when she's hurting too much to hide it. "I was in Flux. With you. Remember?"

"We're all in flux," Quini says solemnly. "You know? Lie down, hackman. Arm out."

"It's all right, Nat," I mumble through my torn lip. "We'll just run it again."

I lie down on the cold tiles, extending my arm the way Yinka did, and look up at the sky. It's beautiful. The red's faded out to one stripe of soft pinkish orange, and above that the morning light is breaking through a wall of cold blue cloud. I don't have to look at any of Quini's ugly architectural choices.

I do have to look at my choices, though. I'm about to get my limbs amputated by an unbalanced criminal, and there are no anatabs. No painkiller cocktail. These are probably the last few moments I'll get to think about anything except screaming, and at some point in the very near future I'll bleed to death.

Maybe it's not just the peristalsis of an amoral universe. Maybe it's what I deserve. For lying to Yinka and for a hundred bad things I did long before that. What I hate most is that I won't even be dying as myself. I should have at least told Nat.

I squeeze my eyes shut, as if I can open up our private channel by force of will. Quini is muttering to himself in Andalusian Spanish, too fast for me to catch without my babelware. The whine of the saw intensifies.

Suddenly I understand what Quini's saying. The steel wool in my head is gone. My implant comes unfrozen and I see the backdoor in my mind's eye. The friend/foe mapper. I make the signal, the whistle, as loud as I

possibly can.

Someone is screaming; maybe it's me. The whine of the saw is a furious buzzing centimeters from my face. Hot liquid splatters my neck.

I open my eyes in time to see Quini sundered from hip to shoulder. The dog is up on its spindly carbon hind legs, saw spraying blood in all directions, tearing Quini's flesh into pink ropes. It seems to go on for an eternity before the blade stutters to a halt on splintered bone. There's a bang. Another. The dog drops to all fours. Quini sways.

"*Mi cachorrito*," he says, not unfondly, then falls backward into the pool.

Nat yanks me to my feet. Her other hand is clutching Yinka. I look around, still lost, and see two dead guards, Anton reloading the scattergun. Quini is floating in the water, a red cloud billowing out around his shredded body.

"I don't actually like Klobučar's later stuff," Anton says. "She got self-indulgent. I like money, though. And I liked your hackwork tonight. Very creative." He produces an incubator pod from his jacket, identical to the one Quini smashed, but probably less empty. "I was stumped by that bioscanner." He shakes his head, rolling his eyes, smiling a bit. "Stumped. Don't forget your bags."

Then he's gone, off into the villa, scattergun propped on his shoulder. That leaves me and Nat and Yinka huddled together on the red-slicked tiles. Somehow none of us are dead. Yinka looks closest; he leans over and heaves.

"Can you walk?" Nat demands. "I've got your arm."

Yinka heaves again, giving up a thin bubbly vomit and then something dark and solid that splats against the tile. He scrabbles for it with stiff fingers. We all stare.

Cupped in his shaking hand is a miniature human heart. Its beat is inaudible, but I can see it pumping and imagine the sound in my head. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Alive. Alive.

"Let's dip," Yinka rasps. "Before he figures out his pod is empty, too."

I get Yinka under his undamaged arm and Nat grabs the refrigerated case. Then we all three stagger off into the olive trees, Quini's gore-smeared *cachorrito* trotting along behind us.

★ ★ ★

When do you leave? I ask, but we're talking in public, out on the beach by Pont del Petroli, so it comes out more like:

"Napta zuwani?"

"Napta imo yun," Nat says: *Tomorrow night.* She toes a hole in the sun-heated sand. We're sitting just out of reach of the tide's soft gray pulse, watching runners move up and down the length of the bridge. *Barge out of Shiptown,* she adds with a tangle of clicks and plosives.

You see our Fleischgeist there? I ask.

Nat nods. *Talked to him, even. Arm looks good.* She pauses, turns her head to look at me. *He never wants to see you again, though.*

"Vensmur," I say: *Makes sense.*

For a while we sit in silence. The tide pushes and pulls. Gulls wheel and shriek out over the waves. *How about you?* Nat finally asks. *Where are you going?*

Been looking at some clinics in Laos, I tell her. *Been planning some changes.*

Nat nods. *I saw that. See that.*

I finally did something with my hair, and I'm wearing one of those new prints from Mombasa. Makeup is hiding the worst bits of my face. It's too bad I have to let it all heal up before I can have a more qualified surgeon mess with it.

So this is you, she says. *Not just a fresh way to hide from the feds.*

It's me. And it's sort of the opposite of hiding.

Nat grabs my hand, and I release the breath I didn't even realize I'd been bottling up. *Good,* she says. *Good. You want a scan of my nose?*

I blink. "M'mut?"

You want my nose, Nat laughs. *You can admit it. Whenever we're drunk, you say how perfect it is.* She suddenly frowns. *That shit will be expensive. The clinics. And the lying low. But you gave Yinka your whole share.*

Yeah, I say. *We made a deal back at the safe room.*

Nat narrows her eyes. *So it really was just revenge?*

I take a heavy breath. *He knew. Quini knew about me. He was a lot of things, but he was sharp. He saw it before I wanted anyone to see it. So when he beat me. When he called me a maricon. Laughed at me. It was personal.* I chew the inside of my cheek, hit a suture and immediately regret it. *I wanted him hurt,* I mumble in nonsense. *I don't know about*

dead.

I wanted him hurt, too, Nat says, staring at the sea. Never thought about dead. But the world's better off. Net total.

The silence swells until I can't take it anymore. That was her heart, you know, I finally say. What we stole? It was grown using her cells. She had the whole thing automated. For after she killed herself. I looked it up. It's the last Klobučar.

Nat raises her immaculate eyebrows. No wonder me and Yinka are so rich now.

Don't rub it in, I say in one nasal syllable.

She wanted to live forever, maybe, Nat says. With people fighting over her heart. Buying it and selling it and killing for it.

Maybe she wanted us not to, I say. But knew we would anyways, so she did it on her own terms.

Nat stands up, brushing the sand off her pants. Fucking artists, she says. You hungry?

I could eat, I say. Good pintxos around the corner. Good curry a block down.

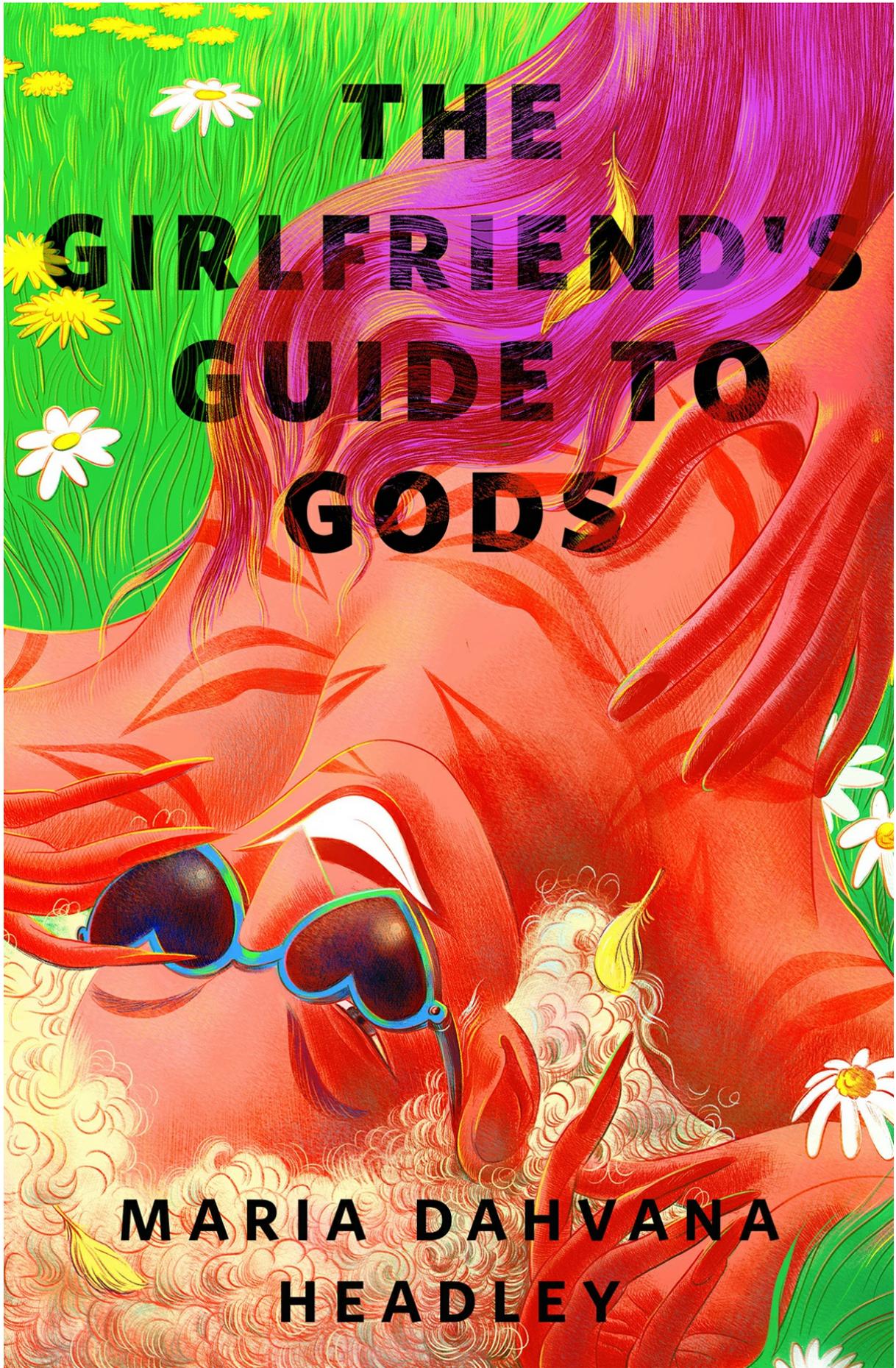
"Unta da unta," she says: Both.

We've got time. At least a bit of it. And hopefully after a year of lying low, we both end up back in Barcelona. There's lots more shit I want to do here as myself.



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The Girlfriend's Guide to Gods

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This is the first myth: that your boyfriend from when you were fifteen will come and get you out of hell. He might come, but he won't get you. You will never have an interesting conversation with him, though his haircut will suggest that he should be interesting. He'll buy you a book of poetry called *Love is a Dog from Hell*, and this will convince you temporarily that he understands your transgressive nature. Later, you'll parse that title. You'll wait for him to become what he is destined to become, which means you'll sit around for a year on couches in basements, watching his band get stoned. He will know two chords, then three. He will know nothing about laundry, nor birth control. All his songs will be about the girl before you, who'll wear leather pants and also turn out to be his babysitter.

He will learn how to drive, and you'll find yourself sitting in the backseat while his best friend rides shotgun. He will ferry you to a field to watch the Fourth of July. You'll be on your back on a blanket. There will be a rattlesnake. It will smile at you, and you'll think, *Shit. I'm a goner.*

You'll be gone awhile.

You will eventually find yourself standing on a long dark staircase, dress wet, underwear in your purse, your boyfriend walking in front of you. He will step out into the sun, breaking the rules as he does, turning around to turn you into salt. You will protest that you're not Lot's wife, but Orpheus's girlfriend, that your name, in case he's forgotten it, is Eurydice.

"Everything's always drama with you," your boyfriend will say.

You will be the cold French fry left in the basket as everyone else in your group leaves to find someone to buy them beer.

Here's the reality, girl, girlfriend, goddess, goddamn goner: You're gonna have to get out of hell all by yourself.

This is the second myth: that your boyfriend from freshman year of

college will teach you how to fly. The only way to learn to fly anything, you'll know by now, is by getting on it. Magic carpet. Pegasus. Dragon of darkness. It's all the same old shit.

You're still trying to get out of hell, and it's a long climb. You'll think flight may be the answer, but you don't learn to skateboard by watching boys on the half-pipe, and you don't learn to fly by watching boys jump off cliffs, shirtless, skinny, while you hold the car keys.

You'll ignore what you know, and get it on with Icarus in an extra-long single dorm bed. When he rolls off, there will not be any room for you on the mattress, so you'll sleep on the floor. He'll be super sweet though. When you wake up, he'll give you half a protein bar and take you to the free screening of *Satyricon*. You'll meet his father. He'll have a lot of money. You'll sit at dinner saying nothing while they talk about pilot's licenses and charter planes. None of the boys you date will ever have mothers, but they will all have mother issues. "He takes after me," your boyfriend's father will say. "I used to date girls like you."

Then, to his son, "I get it, man, I feel you." You will find yourself standing on a rocky beach, while Icarus and his dad are up in the sky, barely visible. You'll aim the camera at them, taking footage for the documentary your boyfriend will have already managed, through paternal connections, to get accepted into Sundance.

Icarus will be dead by the time the film screens. You'll flunk out of college due to spending a season in the dark, cutting the footage into a documentary that will win an Oscar. You'll edit Icarus into a generous genius. The moments involving hot wax and feathers? The one where he gave you chlamydia, for sure, despite denying it? You will delete those moments from the footage, as well as the moment when your boyfriend on purpose collided with the sun.

At the funeral, his father will embrace you, grab your ass, and lift you off the ground. This is not the same as flying.

Your name will appear in the credits under *Special Thanks*.

This is the third myth: that the man you marry in your twenties will let you rule alongside him. You'll walk up the long staircase out of hell in a white dress, and then you'll walk down an aisle. You'll get a ring forged at Tiffany. When you fuck him, it'll be thunder and lightning.

You'll think that marrying Zeus will fix your problems, but shocker, spoiler alert, hello woe, it won't.

He'll be newly divorced from a wife who has a long history of turning his girlfriends into cows. You'll live in fear of horns, but she won't turn you into anything. This will be your punishment. You'll remain uncomfortably human.

You'll vow fidelity, and you'll sit on top of your mountain, looking down at the green, cloud-dappled world. You will be missing some information.

Your husband will have an office with a door that locks. He'll sit in there, talking to oracles on Facetime all day long, but the door will be soundproofed, so you'll only hear mumbles.

When you mention that maybe you'd like to go down the mountain and grab a drink with a friend, he will bring you a bottle of wine, and tell you it's made of grapes from the vine of life, and then he will say "nbd," in the way that someone a few thousand years old would try to use the language of the kids.

When you mention you might like to go out for dinner, he'll take you to a molecular gastronomy restaurant where there's a dish called Haruspicy. It will be gold-leafed guts inside of balloons spun of bird's eye chilies. Your husband will explain the pun to you. You will, by this point, have a classics degree, which, hey, is an attempt at getting yourself stealth to therapy. There will be a specialist sommelier who'll come out and read your fate before you take the first bite.

This will not go well.

Zeus will ignore the fact that you're a vegetarian. "You just haven't had the right meat," he'll say, and offer you a slice of something that is part goat, part fish. "That's pescatarian," he'll say, pointing at the tail.

He will have a closet in which hundreds of sex toys are alphabetized, mounted on pegboard and outlined in black Sharpie, as though they are tools in a home carpentry workshop. You will, the day you open it, see a silhouette of a Zeus-sized swan suit, complete with beak, but the suit itself will be missing.

Your husband will travel without you. He'll take flights that leave when it's still dark out. You'll take his kids to school. There will be an unlikely number of babies, showing up at the door, in baskets, in shoeboxes, in giant eggs. When you ask your husband where they came from, he'll shrug, and say "Women, lol."

"No one says that anymore," you'll tell him.

Zeus will still have an AOL account.

You'll drive all the kids around in a minivan with a trailer attached. You'll bring a salad of canned mandarin oranges, shredded coconut, and marshmallows to potlucks and call it ambrosia.

You'll run into his ex-wife on the stairs from soccer to Olympus and beg her to make you into something, anything, better than this. A bird. A star. A tree, even, just a basic little tree?

"Who are you again?" Hera will ask. "Oh, right. The nympho."

"Nymph," you'll say, but she'll already be two flights above you, her gown billowing, her pedicure perfect.

A few years in, your husband will have an affair with someone younger than you. She'll be made of sunlight, and all the sex toys in his closet will start to glow so brightly under the door you will not be able to avoid knowing all about it.

You will step backward down the staircase. You'll taste salt.

This is the fourth myth, unwritten in the larger canon, but it goes like this: You will be the woman who finally walks back into the place everyone else calls hell, and you'll stay there.

You will wander the darkness until you know every inch of it. You will be unexpectedly good at winter. You will not be lonely alone.

You'll bed down in an abandoned underworld, gutting fish from Styx and cooking them over the fire you make of the books bad boyfriends bought you. You'll blaze the Bukowski, and fling the Fellini into Phlegethon. You'll melt down your old wedding ring, and forge it into a claw.

You will not just be gone, but *goner*. Everyone you ever knew will wonder what the hell became of you, and you will not feel like being in touch.

You'll write your own books. You'll make your own films. You'll paint your own portrait. You'll be the leader of your own band.

You'll fall in love again. You'll fall out. You will not await anyone else's version of salvation.

This myth will not be recorded, but it will be yours. You will not shrink until your body is invisible. You will not become a whisper, a breath, a beast. You will not be the tears that salt the earth.

You will not, in the end, be broken by this history of hell, these hurts, these old boyfriends and husbands and rapists and forget-me-nots.

You'll forget those fuckers, those fucks, those fields other than Elysian.

You will be on your back on a picnic blanket in your own kingdom, with Echo between your thighs, and your phone will rattle, and a smiley face will appear on the screen. You'll throw the thing into Lethe, get up, and walk.

This is the fifth myth, the one they name after you, and you alone, the one that gets written down in blood and scratched into cave walls, the one that women see when they look up at the sky and consider trying to live through this and make it to their futures.

You stand at the mouth of your own cave, looking out over your own kingdom. You step off the cliff when you feel like it, and you spread your wings and soar.

How many times can you be shattered in the toasting, a champagne flute lifted and listing? How many times will you survive, a woman made of her own history, and more than it? How many times can you put your heart back together?

As many times as you need to. You can make it through this.

That's what you'll whisper when they pray to you, asking for ways to leave their own disasters, asking for methods, begging for the lineage of the living.

You will be wounded, you'll tell them, those who ask for clarity, those who want to know how to keep themselves out of hell, but your wounds will not kill what you were. You will be injured, but your injuries, even if they are fatal, will not erase you. You will make yourself again out of the ashes, and

you will be loved

you will love

you will be loved

you will love

you will be loved

you will love.

Now you're the one who pours it out and fills it up, and now you're the one who knows what love is worth, who knows what it costs.

They didn't give you this knowledge. You gave it to yourself. You made your own heart, and you made your own mind. You are the divine result of crumpled receipts and pretzel salt, of expired condoms and

forgotten phone numbers, of lipstick and longing, of hands opened and spread out, of dogs running and of trucks on the highway, of cheap champagne and of diner coffee, of address books thrown out the window, of paperbacks and of pregnancies, of crow's feet and of silver streaks in the dark night of your hair.

You are made of rolling over to make love at four in the morning and you are made of walking barefoot through the kitchen, heating croissants for the one you've left sleeping. You are made of wild strawberries too small to see until you step on them, of roses smashed at the end of a bodega day, of funerals where you wore your wedding ring and of weddings where you knew that one day, one of you would die first. You are made of road trips and radios, of reading aloud, of hotel rooms in cities neither of you have been to before, of permission, of oysters on platters full of ice made of water from the beginning of the world, of cowboy boots and belt buckles, of blood on thighs, of words written in ink and spit and wine.

You are the one who receives the tributes, the love letters and the text messages from strangers who've fallen for their biggest dreams, the dick pics and the tits and the toasts at all the ceremonies.

You're the one who watches over those who wish for companions, and the ones who are lonely, and the ones who are holding hands right now, fingers laced to those of their beloveds. You are made of deserts and of phone calls, of emojis shaped like things that look like love to no one but you and them.

You are the one who listens. You are the one who climbed up here, skirt torn and rumpled, legs covered in scars from thorns and barbed wire, skinned knees, toenails polished, and you are the one who's on this mountain now, looking down at everyone living. You are still trying to learn how to give it up in the entirety, and you're doing it with the rest of everyone, because hello heart, hello hope, this is how motherfucking goddesses of love get made. Out of smashed things and blasted things and things burnt and blistered, out of old bad knowledge and out of making your way through the holy impossible.

You'll open your hands and from them will fall hotel keys and kissed papers, first dances and worn out high heels, flowers and honey and bees drunk on desire, snakes looking for throats, your boyfriend from when you were fifteen, and all the songs he played you when you were both so

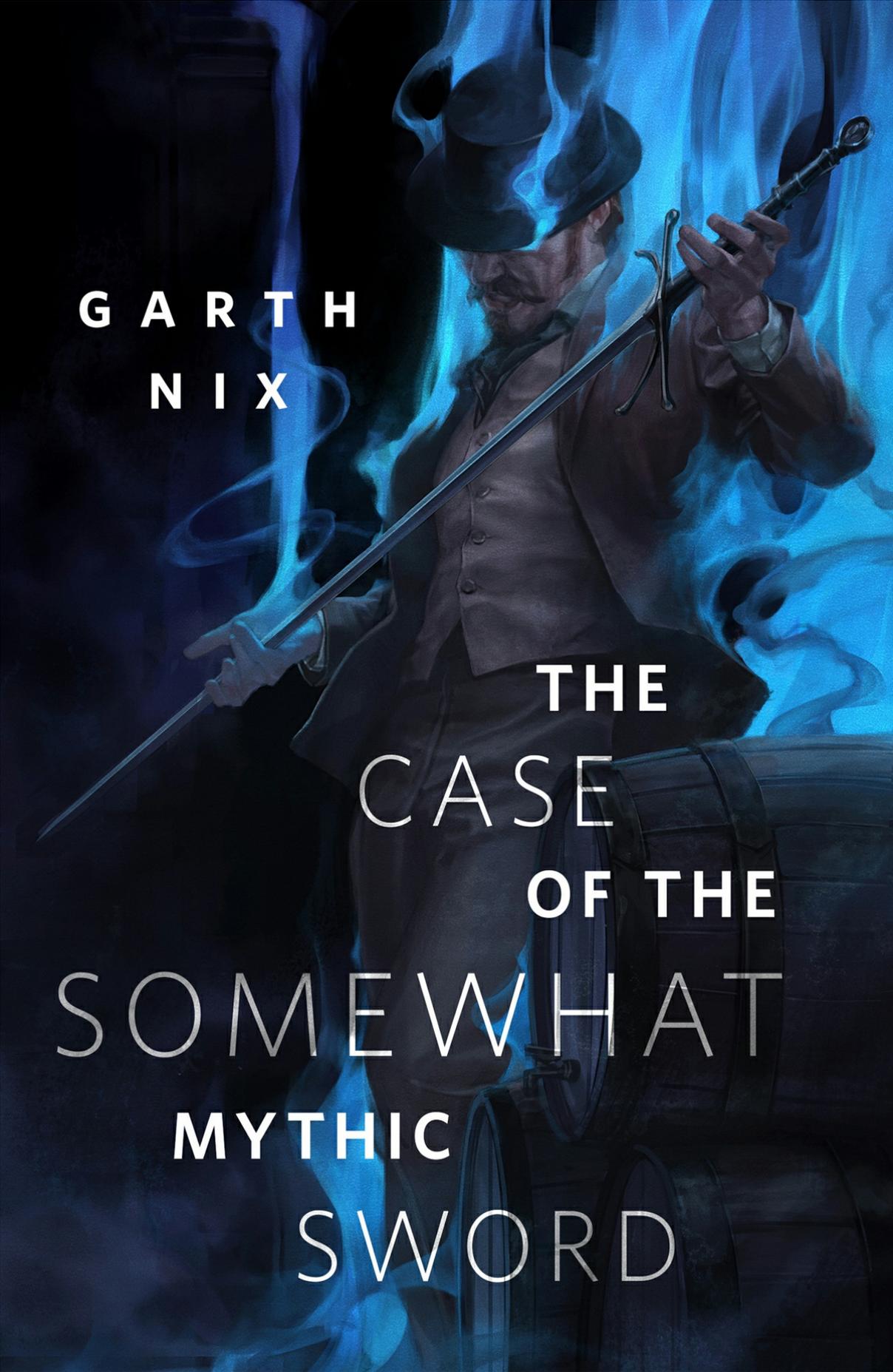
young you didn't know how to get old.

They used to call you by another name, but now they'll call you Aphrodite. The job of love goddess is a rotating one. You get it when you get there. You used to be the girl in the dark, but now there's light. That's how the story goes; that's how morning happens.



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GARTH
NIX

THE
CASE
OF THE
SOMEWHAT
MYTHIC
SWORD

The Case of the Somewhat Mythic Sword

GARTH NIX

illustration by

MICAH EPSTEIN

TOR·COM 

“We was ’oping for t’other ’Olmes to take an interest,” said the publican. He wiped his fingers again on his striped apron as if this might somehow remove the strong aroma of beer that emanated not just from his hands, but his entire being. “Meaning no hoffence, your ’onour.”

He might mean no offence, but there was considerable doubt evident in his gaze, and some suspicion. This was centred on the recently regrown, rather wispy Van Dyke moustache and beard on the sprig of gentility in front of him, as if the facial hair might in fact be a disguise of some sort. A very bad one.

“Everyone wants Sherlock,” replied Sir Magnus Holmes with a heartfelt sigh. “However, I am here at his behest.”

“Beg yer pardon?” asked Jolyon.

“Sherlock sent me in answer to your note,” explained Sir Magnus, with an air of resignation. Nearly all his conversations, whether involving anything of importance or not, began with his cousinly connection to the very famous Sherlock.

Jolyon brightened a little at this, as Magnus continued.

“He considers this more of a matter for my particular talents, as it were. I do have my own expertise in certain areas. Allow me to introduce you to my keeper, Almost Doctor Susan Shrike. Mister Jolyon, isn’t it?”

“Julius Jolyon,” answered the publican automatically. “Er, your *keeper*, sir?”

“Sir Magnus will have his little jokes,” said the raven-haired young woman who did indeed carry a doctor’s Gladstone bag as if it were her constant companion, her attitude toward it making it seem not out of place

with her otherwise modish, though sombre, ensemble of a deep blue velvet coat over a long dress, lace-cuffed and -collared. This was topped with a soft cap in a lighter shade of blue, adorned with a diamond brooch of some antiquity. “He meant to say medical consultant.”

“Oh yes,” said Jolyon. “Wery pleased to meet you, miss ... er ... halmost doctor.”

“What exactly is the trouble?” asked Sir Magnus. “Sherlock wasn’t very forthcoming, nor Doctor Watson.”

Susan Shrike sniffed at the mention of Doctor Watson, indicating her opinion of the man’s medical skills. He was very much of the old school and quite out of date as far as she was concerned. Susan hadn’t quite graduated yet from the London School of Medicine for Women, which was why Magnus liked to call her “almost doctor”, but she soon would be one of the very first officially recognised female doctors in Great Britain. Though this was only formal recognition of her skills and experience. Susan had been practicing medicine, of one kind or another, since she was fourteen.

“Best I show you, but the cellar’s ... wery dirty,” said Jolyon doubtfully as he looked Sir Magnus up and down. The baronet was nattily attired, sporting a dove grey top hat, a frock coat of a similar shade, and a darker waistcoat with an unusually heavy gold watch chain. His collar was highly starched, his shirt white as the proverbial driven snow, his tie inimitable, and his immaculately pressed trousers seemed to almost merge with his shoes of brilliant patent leather.

He carried a cane with an ivory-and-gold handle, and all in all looked like someone who had never once crossed the threshold of a dirty cellar and never would.

“Nothing I like better!” exclaimed Sir Magnus. “Old holes in the ground are something of a specialty of mine.”

This was true, after a fashion. Sir Magnus’s primary area of knowledge was arcane practices, many of them necessarily conducted out of the sight of ordinary folk, and so very often underground. From necessity he had become more conversant than he would have liked with caves, hypogea, catacombs, Mithraeums, vaults, crypts, cellars, tunnels and all the other subterranean lairs and dwellings of those whose delvings were sorcerous as well as earthly. He was also quite knowledgeable about sacred groves and the like.

“Your inn, I believe, was built in 1539, as is proclaimed by the date in the stonework above the stables?”

“Rebuilt, sir,” said Jolyon proudly. “The hinitial hestablishment was one of them beer monks’ places, put up in the first William’s time, and as my grand-dad ’ad ’ad it they weren’t the first ’ere, oh no, there’s been beer ’ere since druid days, and Romans and all, some say.”

“Cistercians, I fancy,” muttered Sir Magnus to Susan, correctly divining the question forming on her lips concerning “beer monks”.

“If you’ve no hobjection, sir, it’s this way,” said Jolyon. “Would you care to take a gin and water in the parlour, the private parlour, miss ... doctor—”

“I would not,” said Susan. “Where would Sir Magnus be if he needed my medical advice in the cellar if I’m in the parlour? I am not afraid of dirt. Or blood, for that matter.”

“Blood! There ent no blood!”

“Is your cellar well lit, Mister Jolyon?” asked Susan.

“Bright enough to see blood, if there was some!” protested Jolyon.

“Oh, that’s not what I meant,” said Susan. “Only Sir Magnus has sensitive eyes and does not see well in the dark. A storm lantern or similar will be necessary.”

“I am ... that is my eyes ... are almost completely better!” protested Sir Magnus, but he subsided as Susan arched her left eyebrow a fraction. He could see extremely well in the dark, as a matter of fact, but darkness of the kind that would be found in a cellar after, say, a single candle was extinguished, might trigger an unpleasant change in Sir Magnus, though he was *mostly* better.

Some months before, also while assisting a cousin, in this case Mycroft Holmes, Sir Magnus had been involved in a fracas with a particularly powerful sorcerer, a famous Hanoverian magical philosopher known as Krongeitz. He had originally come to England with George I, attempted to meddle with matters of state, been found out, tried to flee to join the Pretender, and got caught. He had then been immured in a bronze casket by Conyers Darcy, bearer of the white staff as Comptroller of the Household and thus, far less publically, Walpole’s secret Master of Magic.

Unfortunately, the records noting who was in the casket had been misplaced. Decades later the casket itself was moved from the deep cellars of the Tower of London and it had eventually ended up for sale at a church

fete in Kent. The buyer, a curious curate, had opened the casket. Krongeitz had emerged alive and apparently none the worse for his long confinement, apart from a raging desire to wreak his revenge upon King George. Or, as it turned out, George's descendent, Queen Victoria.

It had taken all the genius of Mycroft, some detective work from Sherlock, and the arcane talents of Sir Magnus and several others to defeat Krongeitz. He was once again in the casket, but it had been a very close-run thing, and Sir Magnus had copped a very powerful curse, which, despite various ameliorative spells and treatments continued to lurk within him.

The curse was triggered by darkness and certain other stimuli, so it was important to keep Sir Magnus well illuminated. An unpleasant change in the baronet would result in the irreversible change commonly known as "death" to everyone in the vicinity, in this case not just Mister Jolyon's inn, but the entirety of Clerkenwell, and perhaps even farther afield.

"There's two candles under glass to light 'im," said Jolyon. "And I generally carries down a lamp."

"Him?" asked Sir Magnus.

"Best y'see yourself," replied the publican, leading them behind the bar to a storeroom, well stocked with bottles, kegs and barrels, with a door at the far end propped half-open. Beyond the door lay rough-hewn stone steps heading down into the twilit depths, accented by the flicker of candlelight.

Susan reached into the surprisingly voluminous pocket of her coat, and checked her purse revolver was positioned for swift removal and use. She had a larger British Bulldog revolver in her medical bag, but often the few seconds gained by using the little .32 were more important than the Bulldog's .450 bite. Should gunfire prove to be ineffectual, Sir Magnus had a silvered blade within his cane. Should that not be sufficient, Sir Magnus was currently a weapon himself, after a fashion, albeit a double-edged sword ...

Jolyon paused at the top of the steps to take down a lantern, which he lit with a match struck against his heel, the puff of sulphur-tainted smoke it sent up making Sir Magnus wrinkle his nose. After trimming the wick, the innkeeper settled the glass and held the lantern high as he started downwards.

"Watch yer step," he warned, tapping with his boot to indicate that the

middle of each stone step was deeply worn from use over centuries, creating slippery hollows, so it was safer to tread on the sides.

The cellar was much larger than anyone might have expected, far larger than the inn above. Even Jolyon's lamp illuminated only a small portion of what seemed to be a limitless cavern, supported here and there by pillars of stone and brick and beams of ancient oak, evidence of several different ages of excavation and expansion. There were many barrels and kegs, and racks of wine holding cobwebbed and dusty bottles.

Some thirty feet away, in a straight line from the steps, there was a simple candle lantern set on a crate. In its small pool of light, Sir Magnus saw a man sitting on the stone floor, cradling a sword.

Not merely a man. A knight. Rusted mail hung off him, under a surcoat so rent and torn it was little more than rags over the metal. His battered shield, split in several places, lay at his side. His dented helmet was upended by his feet, which were wrapped in straps of leather, reinforcing the remnants of boots that had been marched on too far and for too long.

The knight's hair was long and filthy, as were his moustache and beard, and was of no discernable colour, save that of dirt. His face was obscured by more dirt. He did not look up, his attention fixed on the goblet he held in his hand, a battered thing also, of brass or bronze, held at such an angle that wine slopped from it over his fingers, which were as dirty as his face. An empty bottle lay nearby, companionably nestled against a plate of gnawed chop bones.

Only the sword was bright and clean. A great sword, made to be wielded in two hands, its cross-guard dark iron above the brighter metal of the blade. It towered above the sitting man, the point wedged in a gap between flagstones, the flat of the blade resting on his chest and shoulder, the hilt high above his head, the bronze-wired grip and heavy bronze pommel gleaming.

There was writing on the blade, gold runes brighter even than the steel.

"He doesn't stink," whispered Susan to Magnus. "He should reek."

"He's not entirely present," Magnus whispered back. "In this world, I mean."

"Why is the sword so bright and clean when he is not?"

"Ah, there you have it," whispered Magnus infuriatingly. "It is all about the sword."

He raised his voice to speak to the publican.

“How long has he been here? Has he spoken?”

The knight did not move, or show any sign of hearing Magnus.

“My Norbert wuz first to spy ’im,” replied Jolyon. “When I sent ’im down for the ’48 claret. Day afore yesterdee. Just as ’e is now, sitting with that there blade. Norbert arskes ’im what ’e’s up to, but ’e don’t talk until Norbert gets up close and then ’e says foreign for ‘wine’—which Norbert knows on account of his Navy times in the Mediterabeum—and ’e ’ands over a coin or two.”

“He’s been here two days, like this?” asked Magnus. “But you only sent word to ask for Sherlock’s assistance this morning?”

“The coins wuz gold...”

“I see,” said Sir Magnus. “Could you show me one of these coins, please?”

“I ’spose I might ’ave one on me person,” said Jolyon reluctantly. He rummaged under his apron, hands moving in an apparent attempt to misdirect the onlookers as to where he actually kept his cash. After several more mysterious movements, he withdrew a small gold coin and slowly handed it over to Magnus.

“Hmmm. A Byzantine *ιστάμενον*, which is to say, a histamenon,” remarked the baronet, holding it up close to his left eye. “Of Isaac I Komnenos. Here, take it and touch it against one of the iron hoops of that barrel.”

“Wot? Like this—”

The gold coin turned into sand as it touched the cold iron, trickling through the publican’s fingers. He gasped in surprise and, very quickly, sorrow.

“But! It wuz ... it wuz gold!”

“Some would call it fairy gold, Jolyon,” said Magnus. “How close do you have to get before he responds?”

“Close,” replied Jolyon, faintly stunned. He was rummaging about under his apron again. “I ’spose the gold would stay good along as it doesn’t touch no iron?”

“Only until the new moon,” said Magnus. “Best not try and use it, Jolyon.”

“But ’e’s ’ad a dozen bottles of my best Burgundy,” protested Jolyon, his mind apparently more ready to grasp the concept of “fairy gold” than it was his own monetary loss. “And prime wittles as well. Best Yorkshire

'am, sausage, Mother Jolyon's pork pie..."

"Why did you ... eventually ... ask for Sherlock's assistance?" asked Susan. She delicately did not dwell on the fact that the prospect of more gold had clearly delayed any earlier attempt. But why had fear or suspicion eventually overcome the greed?

"Well, at first I took 'im for a heccentric gentleman," replied Jolyon shiftily. "A payin' one ... but then there was the water..."

"Water?" asked Magnus.

"I come down this morning and 'e's sitting in a river! Water a-gushin' and rushin' all around 'im, coming from nowhere, going nowhere! Now that ent natural, is it?"

"No, it isn't," said Magnus. "I think I know what it is happening here, but I'd better have a few words with the chap myself. Susan, there is a slight chance that the ... um ... mythic envelope around this chap might trigger the Krongeitz ... er ... effect, so if you would prepare yourself?"

Susan nodded, set down her bag and undid the straps. Jolyon looked properly mystified, as was to be hoped.

Almost Doctor Susan Shrike's primary responsibility as Magnus's keeper was to be alert for the effects of the curse that the sorcerer Krongeitz had placed upon the baronet. This very powerful malediction that had resisted all attempts at removal, even by Magister Dadd, current leader of the coterie of official British sorcerers. The curse was fading, but until it was entirely dissipated, Magnus had to spend his nights locked up in the most private and secure wing of the Bethlem Royal Hospital for the Insane, and either Susan or more rarely one of Dadd's other associates accompanied him everywhere in daylight hours.

This was a form of torture for Magnus, who was deeply in love with Susan, but he would not declare himself until he was free of the curse. Susan was also in love with Magnus, but would not admit it, since she was his keeper.

In the meantime Susan was both witness to the more humiliating effects of the curse on Magnus and was also at great risk in her role as his keeper and safeguard, both things Magnus wished she were not subjected to. All this, combined with typical British reticence to discuss their relationship and its problems, led them to behave in such a repressed way to each other that everyone else around them knew immediately they were in love.

“Be careful, Sir Magnus,” said Susan.

Magnus stepped up close to the knight, who instantly reared up, lifting the sword. Curiously he did not hold it as a weapon, but grasped it under the hilt and brandished it as a cross.

“I have sanctuary here!” he growled. “I will not return to the Lady!”

He spoke a form of Latin, interspersed with some Welsh words, as Magnus had expected. He replied in his more classical Latin, knowing he would be understood.

“I’m not from the Lady,” soothed Magnus. “Nor do I seek to take you from sanctuary.”

The knight did not lower the sword. Magnus could smell him very strongly now, the stench of days or weeks without washing mixed with old blood and fear. Interestingly, apart from the few feet around the knight, the rest of the cellar had vanished into impenetrable darkness. Magnus was grateful the candle lantern was close by, light sufficient to hold back the curse that sought to rise within his blood and bone. He could feel it trying to manifest, an evil within that desired to join the darkness without.

“That sword,” said Magnus. “It is the king’s?”

“Yes,” said the knight dully. “It is the king’s.”

“I think the king asked you to take it somewhere in particular,” suggested Magnus gently.

“Aye,” said the knight. He glanced at Magnus, but kept peering off nervously to one side and then the other, as if he couldn’t make out what he saw there. “But he was wounded, nigh unto death. His mind was wandering, he was tempted by devils ... I am a good Christian, I could not do as he asked!”

“I see,” said Magnus, his voice still soft, without threat. “You are Sir Bedivere, then?”

The knight shook his head. “My name is Bedwyr ap Pedrod.”

Magnus nodded. They were essentially one and the same, albeit differently named in various strands of the legend.

“I will not give up the sword to anyone save the bishop,” said Bedwyr firmly. “But he does not come...” He stared to the sides, eyes hooded, mouth working, dismayed words held back, until he could hold them back no more. “This is not the chapel!”

“No...”

The knight clapped a hand against his eyes and peered between his

fingers. “Chapel ... tavern ... the very ground shifts and changes ... I will not relinquish this sacred trust, no matter how long the Lady keeps me in this prison hole!”

Magnus looked around again. It was entirely possible Bedwyr did see himself in a prison hole. It was a kind of hole, in fact, though not one dug in earth, but a pinched-off pocket of unreality that should not exist.

“Have you tried to leave?”

Bedwyr looked near him, his half-crazed eyes trying to focus.

“How can I pass solid rock? Or reach the clean air so high above? Unless I take your ladder—”

He lunged at Magnus, but the baronet was already skipping backwards, out of the darkness, back into the storm lantern’s brighter light, where Susan and Jolyon looked on. Bedwyr subsided back into his crouch, oblivious to the greater world.

Magnus noted Susan’s searching gaze. He nodded to indicate he was unaffected by his curse. So far, at least.

“Well,” he said to Jolyon. “I think this can be sorted out. Tell me, have you any guests in the rooms upstairs at present? Any unusual guests, in particular?”

Jolyon’s rubicund forehead wrinkled.

“No guests at all just now, sir,” he said. “We only ’ave the three rooms, our main business being beer, as it were, and a little wine, and Mother Jolyon’s cooking, none finer for ordinary fare.”

“They must be close,” mused Magnus. “Any interesting characters become neighbours recently? Or, in fact, any new neighbours?”

Jolyon scratched his head, wiped his hands on his apron and scratched his head again.

“None I can think on,” he said. “None ... none new.”

“Odd,” said Magnus. “Proximity is necessary ... have you engaged any new servants? Any new customers hanging about?”

“No,” replied Jolyon.

“You said no *new* neighbours,” said Susan, who had caught how the publican had phrased his answer. “What about former neighbours who’ve returned after time away?”

“There’s old Mrs Davies!” said Jolyon. “You mean her? She ain’t new, but she has come back—”

“Where has this Mrs Davies returned to?”

“Next ’ouse along,” replied Jolyon, indicating an easterly direction with this thumb. “David Davies’s grand-dam she is, ’im as ’as the rag and bones shop, only ’e calls it a marine hemporium. He lives above, with his rib and I ’spose ’alf a dozen little ones, no it would be seven with Liccy as wuz born last month...”

“Where did Mrs Davies come back from?” asked Magnus. “And how long was she away?”

“She come back from wherever it wuz she went,” answered Jolyon with a shrug. “Nigh on twelve year ago she went off and just last Thursdee come back, as if she’d never left, and David ’aving to move the elder three chillum from the second-best room upstairs as was always ’ers. ’E never could gainsay ’is grand-dam, but then who could?”

“A commanding woman?” asked Magnus.

“The original matriarky,” confirmed Jolyon with a shudder. “I wuz that frightened of ’er as a boy. She leads ’er face, see, like the olden days. Frightful white, it is.”

Magnus and Susan exchanged a look. Certain kinds of sorcery and its associated alchemical practices led to gravely pockmarked skin, which practitioners covered up with a mask or heavy face paint. Indeed, as Jolyon said, in the old days often with the white lead paste favoured by great ladies.

“But what’s Mrs Davies got to do with this feller?” asked the publican.

“Oh, hard to say, hard to say, but her arriving at the same time may be of significance,” said Magnus. “We’ll have a chat with her, bye and bye.”

“And what about ’im?” asked Jolyon.

“Oh, he’ll be gone by nightfall,” said Magnus confidently. “As if he was never here. But let us ascend into daylight; we need not stay here any longer. Lay on, MacJolyon!”

“Pardon?”

“Go ahead,” said Susan gently, taking Magnus’s arm to hold him back for a few seconds.

“What exactly is going on?” she whispered close to his ear as the landlord huffed his way up the steps, being careful to tread on the sides and avoid the bowed middle.

“That’s Sir Bedivere back there,” Magnus whispered back. “With Excalibur. Which he has *not* returned to the Lady of the Lake. He’s a good Christian and is waiting to give it to a bishop.”

“Bedivere? Excalibur? But how is that poss—”

“Perhaps I should say he is a sort of echo of Sir Bedivere,” said Sir Magnus. “A shadow cast by the primary legend, twisted aside from its proper course ... lesser in all ways, but still somewhat potent. The sword too. I mean it is not *the* Excalibur, but even a second-hand mythic resonance holds power.”

“But you said he’s not really here! I presume the sword likewise—”

“It is present enough for the adept who summoned or created this little mythic bubble to fetch it forth,” said Magnus. “Come on, let’s catch up with our chrysophilist landlord.”

Jolyon had already left the storeroom and gone into the public bar, where faint sunshine forced its way through the smoke-begrimed windows. A single patron—a working man of indeterminate age—lay slumped over one of the six rough-hewn tables. He’d been there when they came in, albeit not snoring quite so loudly as he was now.

“Which would be the point, as it were,” continued Magnus. “It is very difficult to get hold of magic swords by other means these days, even lesser ones. It’s almost certainly wanted for some particular killing. I hope not another plot against Her Majesty, or the Prime Minister ... damnation ... I fear Mrs Davies has anticipated us.”

The bell above the door jangled as a white-faced, red-bonneted old lady in a black bombazine dress with an enormous bustle thrust her way inside, holding a large wicker basket ahead of her like a shield. She shut the door, muttering something under her breath.

“No.”

This last word and a momentary grip on Susan’s elbow arrested her motion towards her pocket, and the revolver therein.

“She’s an adept, it’ll only ricochet into her foes. She may not know us; we can bluff our way out—”

Even as he spoke, Mrs Davies saw him, stopped in the doorway and hissed like a train venting steam. Quick as a snake she reached into her basket, snatched a bottle and threw it at the baronet’s head.

Magnus jumped one way, Susan the other. The bottle hit the wall behind them and smashed, the green ichor it contained exploding into a web-like pattern of concentric circles and anchoring lines. The whole thing shivered, and the plasterwork behind it began to smoke and disappear.

“Blue pill!” snapped Magnus.

Susan was already on her knees, opening her bag, fingers expertly thrusting into the right pocket, gripping one of the large blue pills. She practiced exactly this for hours every week, knowing full well that when it was needed she would have to be swift and very accurate. She was swift, and the accuracy was demonstrated as she flung the pill unerringly into Magnus's open mouth.

Even as he crunched down on the pill, Susan had the necklace of shimmering blue stones out and around her neck. There was only one such necklace in England, perhaps in all of Europe. It would only protect *her*, but all other mortals present would be in extreme peril from whatever Magnus was going to become.

Fear rose in her, but her greater fear was for Magnus. The blue pill activated the curse. Every time he took one, the curse's hold on Magnus was strengthened and there was always the chance that with the encouragement of the blue pill, the curse would grow so entrenched it could never be removed. Then there would be only one recourse.

The yellow pill, to end the curse forever. And Magnus with it.. And Susan too, in all the ways that mattered.

All this flashed through her mind in an instant, but she did not, could not, dwell on it.

"Run, Mister Jolyon! Get everyone out!" she shouted. It wasn't only what Magnus was becoming that scared her. The web of ichor now hung in a dark void where the old plasterwork had disappeared entirely, making a doorway into otherness. Something horrible, so horrible it could not be looked upon directly, was climbing up it, its wet multi-jointed legs scrabbling for purchase as if it were lifting itself up from some deep, differently oriented well at right angles to the wall.

Magnus screamed in agony and his clothes burst from him in all directions. Susan dropped to the floor as buttons flew overhead like bullets. Jolyon fell, struck by something, perhaps a patent leather shoe. He had not acted upon Susan's warning; he'd just stood there with his mouth agape, eyes staring.

"Krongeitz!" swore Mrs Davies. She recognized what was happening and started to back out the door, scrabbling for something in her basket. But she was too slow. Magnus had become a cloud, an angry, roiling cloud of intense sapphire gas that rushed forward as if driven by an unseen, unfelt hurricane. The cloud fell upon the sorcerer in a fury, enveloped her,

and there was a terrible shriek and the *snap! snap! snap!* of breaking bones. It dropped her a second later, a crumpled remnant, smashed flat like a worker crushed in a giant press.

Susan reached into her bag for the reversal powder, but the blue cloud was both swifter than she expected and smarter too, which was very unusual. Typically a Krongeitz transformee was a creature as stupid as it was lethal. This one wasn't. The cloud moved so fast she barely saw it cross the room. It swept down and lifted her bag away, though it did not and could not touch Susan while she wore the necklace. She tried to snatch the bag back, but the cloud creature deposited it high in the beams of the sixteenth-century ceiling, beyond her reach.

The other creature chose that moment to launch itself out of its web, scuttling on its many limbs towards Susan, who leaped up on the closest table and drew her pocket revolver, emptying it at the thing even as she averted her eyes, unable to look directly at the abomination.

The bullets had little or no effect. Susan jumped to the next table, over the body of Jolyon.

The thing pursued her, but stopped at the innkeeper and lowered its bloated, blurry abdomen upon him. A moment later Jolyon's arms and legs began to jerk and muffled cries began, which were mercifully cut short.

Susan choked and coughed as bile rose in her throat, but she kept moving. For a moment she hoped the blue cloud would attack the otherworldly entity that had come from the web, but Magnus did not. The curse made him into a monster tasked to kill people, and the web creature was as inhuman as you could get. Instead the cloud flew into the kitchen.

Someone in there—probably Mother Jolyon—screamed, but Susan ignored that. She ran for the storeroom, raced down the steps (remembering to tread on the sides) and rushed up to the knight, who jumped up and once brandished the sword as if it was a cross.

"I'm Saint ... Saint Susan!" screamed Susan. The necklace of blue stones shone so brightly her head was surrounded by a nimbus of unearthly light, a veritable halo. "Give me the sword!"

Bedwyr handed over the sword with a sigh of great contentment and immediately vanished. Susan gripped the almost-Excalibur with both hands, surprised by its lack of weight, for it was not as heavy as she expected. Turning on her heel, she saw the thing from the web had finished with Jolyon and come after her.

It was fast, too fast. For a terrible fraction of a second Susan thought it would be on her before she could raise the sword.

But it went down the middle of the steps, and even with its many legs, it slid on the bowed and shiny stone and fell over itself, its terrible charge almost a pratfall, if anyone could bear to look at it long enough to laugh.

Susan brought the sword down once, twice, three times. She shuddered and choked and tried not to breathe in the hideous stench as sprays of ichor, pieces of wiry chitin and gobbets of horrid flesh flew from every sword stroke.

Interestingly, once the creature was dismembered and thoroughly dead, Susan had no difficulty looking at its component parts. But she did not pause for longer examination. She laid the ersatz Excalibur down with a whispered “thank you,” took the brooch from her cap, opened it with her fingernail, removed the emergency screw of paper that held the reversal powder and ran up the stairs.

Though she wished no ill will on Mother Jolyon or the staff of the inn, it was too late to hope for anything save that killing them had delayed the transformed Magnus long enough that he was still in the building. If he got outside, into the streets of London ... if he remained in that shape until nightfall ...

The blue cloud emerged from the kitchen as Susan came out of the storeroom. Again it moved more swiftly than she had anticipated, crossing the room in a split second to reach the door. But even as it gripped the handle and pulled upon it, Susan ran and threw the powder.

The cloud darted aside, fast as ever, and Susan gasped as she thought it had evaded every last grain of the antidote. But the cloud shivered and stopped in place. It shrank in on itself and with a pathetic popping noise, suddenly became Magnus again.

Naked and sobbing, he dropped down on all fours and vomited.

The single, drunken patron had been killed by the cloud and like Mrs Davies was now only a pile of compressed bones and skin, but his many-times patched overcoat was still over the back of the chair. Susan took it and draped it over Magnus’s shoulders. She had to tread around the remains of Jolyon to do so. His corpse was like something fished from the river after several weeks, all jelly and slime.

“You used the almost-Excalibur on the creature Mrs Davies summoned?” asked Magnus, wiping his mouth, though he did not get up.

He glanced around, his eyes hooded, noting the crushed and flattened bodies. Then he looked over at the door to the kitchen.

“Yes,” said Susan. She followed his glance and added, “You did go in there. I’m sorry.”

“What was I?”

“Nothing I’ve seen before. A cloud. A thing of vapour, or gas. It was clever. Unusually so.”

Susan pointed to her bag in the roof beams.

Magnus nodded wearily.

“I’ll write it up in the book,” said Susan.

Magnus nodded again, even more wearily.

“Are you fit to move?” asked Susan. “We probably only have a few minutes. Someone will come in, and I don’t suppose Mycroft will want to be explaining you to the authorities for the second time this month.”

Magnus rose to his feet, pulled the overcoat around himself and buttoned it up. Susan got a chair, put it on the table, stood on it and retrieved her bag. While she did so, Magnus went to the front door, shot the top and bottom bolts, then walked over to the kitchen door and looked within. His shoulders sagged and he turned away.

“It wasn’t you,” said Susan. “Mrs Davies would have killed everyone anyway. Anyone who saw her with the sword.”

“Perhaps,” said Magnus. “We shall have to look into her family, you know. She was probably a descendent of Huw Llwyd, the so-called ‘Welsh Wizard’, and there might be others of the blood who have taken her path. We should leave the front door locked, go out through the kitchen. Did the sword vanish after you used it?”

“No,” said Susan. “Should it have? Bedwyr disappeared.”

“Yes. I’d better make sure,” replied Magnus. “Splash as much brandy and gin about as you can up here—we need to burn the place. I don’t like the look of Jolyon’s corpse. There’s something moving about inside it. Eggs, I imagine.”

Susan was sick then, despite herself, despite everything she’d seen and done, both as a medical student and as one of Dadd’s keepers. But she vomited efficiently, wiped her mouth and went to work, grabbing bottles from the bar, pulling corks with her teeth and liberally sprinkling alcohol everywhere. She poured an entire small keg of the inn’s best brandy over the corpse of Jolyon.

Magnus came back up with a long package wrapped in sacking under one arm and the candle lantern held high. Susan looked at the package and raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know why it persists,” said Magnus. He was pale and moved slowly, as if his feet were weighed down. “It is only a mythic echo; it shouldn’t be here. Such things are summoned for a single use. But it remains ... and we can’t leave it behind. Come on.”

At the doorway to the kitchen, he threw the lantern. Glass shattered, candle grease spewed out, there was a sudden whoosh of sapphire blue flames as the alcohol caught. The fire spread instantly, following trails of gin and brandy back towards the many bottles and barrels in and around the bar. Smoke billowed up, not quite quickly enough to cloak the horrid writhing as whatever was within Jolyon’s corpse reacted to the fire.

★ ★ ★

In the lane behind the inn, Magnus suddenly stopped. Susan, who had paused to shut the kitchen door behind her, almost ran into his back.

“What?”

“I’ve just realised,” said Magnus.

“What?” asked Susan. She looked up at the sky. Though there were probably two hours till sunset, she was very keen to get both herself and Magnus back to Bethlem. She took his arm and urged him on to the next lane, from which they could cut back through to Rawstone Street, where Carstairs was waiting with the hansom cab. The sooner they were out of sight the better. Particularly the barefoot, wild-eyed Magnus, who was quite evidently naked under the greatcoat, since it lacked its three lower buttons and couldn’t be entirely done up.

“Mrs Davies had greater powers than I suspected. She managed to conjure more than the echoes of Bedivere and the sword.”

“What!”

“The water flowing through the knight’s pocket reality. Think of the legend, the usual story.”

“Ah, I see,” said Susan. She looked around as they emerged from the lane, almost in a panic. But there was only the usual London horde thronging in the street, and Carstairs had spotted them and was whistling up his horse and forcing the cab into an imaginary gap in the foot traffic.

“You mean there will be a Lady somewhere *here* ... a mythic creature ... will she be hostile? We have to tell Dadd!”

“No, I don’t think she’ll be hostile,” said Magnus thoughtfully. “Provided we complete the legend as it should be.”

“Right,” said Susan, calming herself. “That makes sense.”

She stared down a newsboy who was looking at Magnus and his burden with unusual interest, and led the baronet over to the cab. Carstairs reached down from his seat to flip open the door, his expression changing not a jot at the transformation of Magnus from the elegant gentleman of an hour before to a semi-naked tramp with traces of vomit around his mouth making his wispy beard even more horrible than before.

Susan got straight in with a sigh of relief, but Magnus paused on the step to give directions.

“Hyde Park, Carstairs! We have something we need to throw in the Serpentine.”

“The Thames is closer,” said Susan as Magnus passed her the sacking-clad Excalibur. He climbed in and shut the door.

“Yes,” replied Magnus. “But I don’t think a river would do. It really has to be a lake.”

He knocked on the ceiling, and they heard Carstairs whistle. The cab began to rumble and sway as it moved away. Susan put her bag up next to her on the seat, and rummaged inside, replacing the screw of paper in her brooch, making a production of it so her face was turned away while Magnus wiped his face and put on the simple, spare underclothes, trousers and shirt that were kept for him in the cab. He didn’t bother with stockings or shoes, since soon enough he would be chained up in his cell again.

They drove on in silence, surrounded by all the noises of the modern city, until Magnus cleared his throat and spoke, his voice harsh and sudden.

“Where do you keep the yellow pill, Susan?”

Susan started and looked out the window, eyes blinking away sudden tears.

“I do know about it,” said Magnus apologetically. “Both Mycroft and Sherlock told me. Mycroft knew, of course, and Sherlock deduced its existence—its purpose, if not its colour. They thought I should be told, though evidently Dadd does not.”

Susan tapped a button, outwardly of jet, upon her sleeve.

“Here,” she said. “But it is truly a last resort, Magnus. You are so much better! I’m sure in a few months—”

“But when the curse is dissipated, who shall be fed blue pills to fight against the enemies of England?” asked Magnus. He touched the wrapped Excalibur upon his lap. “Magic swords being somewhat out of fashion.”

“I don’t know,” whispered Susan, taking his hands. “Magnus, I do not know. But it will *not* be you. No more blue pills soon, and never the yellow. Never that.”

“Unless it proves necessary,” said Magnus bleakly. “Perhaps I might even choose to take it myself.”

“No,” said Susan, very sternly. “Stop talking nonsense. Tell me. Will we actually see the Lady of the Lake?”

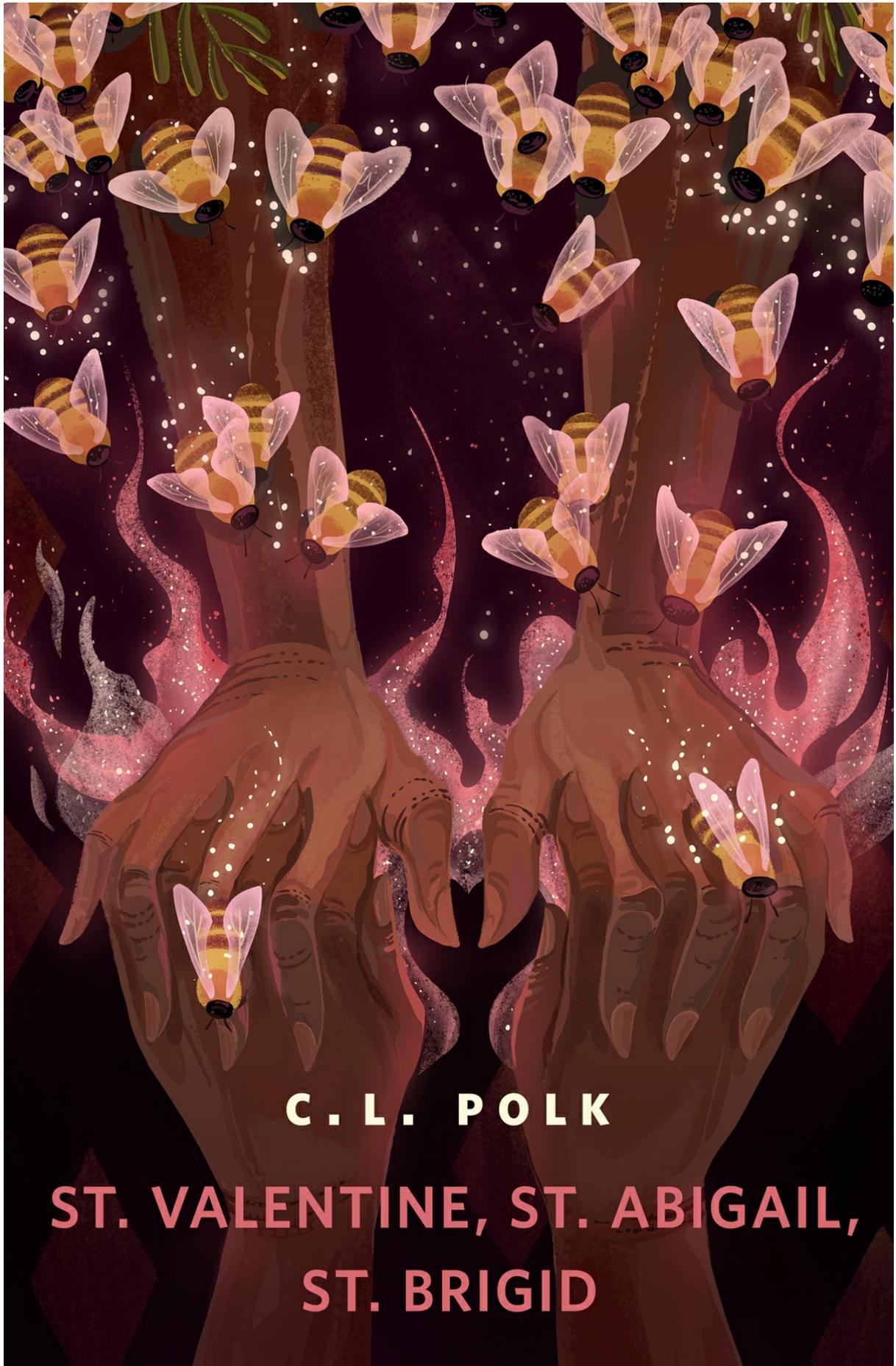
Magnus smiled, a smile that did not banish the sadness in his eyes.

“We might see her arm,” he said. “That’ll scare the swimmers...”



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C. L. POLK

ST. VALENTINE, ST. ABIGAIL,
ST. BRIGID

St. Valentine,
St. Abigail,
St. Brigid

C . L . P O L K

illustration by

A L Y S S A W I N A N S

TOR·COM 

I was somebody's firstborn child, the price somebody paid for gold and a spotlight. I was made to be given away to a woman with the wisdom of the bees. Mama sends me to school with perfect braids plaited up tight, buys me new clothes each spring and each fall, and though she wards me against sickness, accident, or ill-wish, she doesn't love me.

No one has ever loved me, not for my whole life.



Jefferson carries my schoolbag and my lunch (but never my book) and helps me inside Mama's white-walled, tail-finned Cadillac, my kid-gloved hand nested in his big brown one. Every day we drive along the avenue that borders the park for miles. Mama's bees gather and fly, greeting every flower with a kiss.

I watch the other side of the street, walled with buildings where the wealthy live. Their big windows gaze at the wilderness in the middle of a maze of concrete and steel. A lone figure walks in the building's shadows, and I lurch over the front seat to tap Jefferson's shoulder.

"You see that girl? Pick her up. She's in my class."

"Miss l'Abielle don't pay me to be a school bus." "Have some mercy! Lucille's my friend." She could be my friend, if I stop in a big black car and ask her if she wants to ride with me. If I say just the right clever thing to her in school. If I say anything, anything at all. Jefferson eases into the intersection. "We'll be late."

Lucille Grady walks on. One of her socks bunches around her skinny ankles. She lists to one side under the bulk of textbooks and composition books, the battered leather case holding her clarinet strapped to its bulk. A wisp of ebony-wood hair whirls from her head, floating upward against a breeze. Sunlight falls on her face, lighting it up gold as desert sand.

She is the smartest girl at Reardon Picking's Youth Academy, and

Mama would never let us be friends. As we pass I raise my hand, but she never looks at the car.

★ ★ ★

Zola holds the door open for me when I come home. I dash past her up the wide staircase, my soles thumping on the mezzanine's carpet. The piano tinkles a snatch of Chopin as I grab the newel post and fling myself around it with unladylike haste.

Announced, I run all the way up to the fourth-floor working room and wait outside the entrance with my hands behind my back. The door swings open at Mama's word, closing behind me with a click.

Mama wears an apron over a yellow frock with tiny hand-tucked pleats. Her hair's set in beauty-parlor waves, and her nails are pale pink shells. She wields a pestle in a wide marble bowl and casts her frowning eyes on me.

"Is that how a young lady climbs stairs?"

"No, Mama."

"Do I have to send you downstairs to do it again?"

"No, Mama. Sorry, Mama."

I wrinkle my nose and sort through the scents of rosemary, lemongrass, the soapy smell of lavender, the earth-dark smell of valerian. The pestle's scrape as it crushes dried herbs makes my scalp smooth out and my eyelids droop.

I shake my head to clear the spell from my senses. "Who's having nightmares, Mama?"

"Fetch the jar of passion flower."

"I'm right? You're making sleepwell?"

"Theresa Anne, you could tell sleepwell when you were five." She points at the center table. "Tell me what you see in those cards."

Cards lie in a cross on a square of saffron-yellow silk. Diamonds: ace and ten. The deuce of clubs, the lady of spades, and at the bottom, the eight of hearts. "Money coming from gossip from a visitor, and that invites talk about a woman."

"What woman?"

I squint at the queen. "Dark hair. Dark eyes. She's not married. She's a widow, but she's not married. It's you, Mama." The ten of diamonds

becomes a narrow building, the red shapes somebody's windows. "The money's in a house."

Mama hmphs and sticks her hand out. "Where's my passionflower?"

"But you asked me to—"

She snaps her fingers, stilling my tongue. "The passionflower."

It isn't fair. I stomp to the corner shelves, the wheeled step-stool rattling before my angry toes. The passionflower's on a shelf over my head, drowsing in a deep brown glass jar.

She taps the other jars on the counter, her long pink nails tapping on the tin lids. "Put these away."

I can move and talk at the same time. I pick up the jar of French lavender and shake it. "Mama, can you tell Jefferson to stop and give my friend a ride to school?"

"Your friend?" she cuts a glance at me. "What's her name?"

"Lucille Grady."

"What do her folks do?"

"I don't know."

"Tell your friend to tell her mother to call on me."

I cover up my heavy stomach with the jar. "They don't live up here."

"They don't?" Mama huffs out a breath. "Her pa's a factory man."

Not good enough for me, she means. Or else Lucille's mama wouldn't be caught dead on our doorstep, to chat and take tea with the lady neighbors speak of with caution. "Can you please tell Jefferson to stop for her?"

"Not without speaking to her mama first. You tell her at school."

I can't do that when I never even say hi to her in the halls. It isn't fair.

"Fix your face, Theresa Anne."

"But it's just a ride—"

"Enough. Go upstairs and tell the bees someone's coming." She flicks another glance at the cards. "And do your schoolwork. If you have to waste your years with that, least you can do is your best."

★ ★ ★

The bees come home at teatime. They dust pollen on my hands, track it along the straight rows of my braids, then light on a dish filled with tumbled agates and fresh water to drink their fill. The hives dot the

rooftop, surrounded by flowers and herbs that shouldn't grow here, but under Mama's hands, they do. I sit at a table next to the glass dome that fills the stairwell with light, the surface sparkling clear after a washing. Sunlight passes through the glyphs of protection painted on every crystal-cut pane with blessed water, pouring good fortune and safety inside.

"Lucille got three perfect scores today," I tell the worker sister on my knuckle. I consult the textbook and copy another line in my composition book. "I did too. But Lucille's already read a hundred books, and I'm only on ninety-eight."

The worker sister flexes her wings, listening. The bees always listen to me.

"I need to think of the perfect thing to say to her." I don't ask for the wit to say the right thing, or the charm to make her notice me, but my tongue aches with the unspoken wish. I may talk to the bees all I like, but I must never utter a desire in their presence.

Movement catches my eye. I peer through the skylight down the stairwell and glimpse a woman in powder blue climbing past the mezzanine. She's one of Mama's clients. Probably a weeping woman—seems like half of them are always weeping. They don't know what to do, they don't know who to turn to. So they come to Mama, wearing their best hats with shoes and gloves to match, and she gives them tea that takes a spoonful of honey to swallow and no sip tastes the same from one draught to the next.

The weeping women go home with beeswax candles to light while they pray, or with sachets to tuck into their pillows, or with herbs to sprinkle in the family's supper. They come back in a month or a week, still lost, crying for more.

But there are the ones who don't weep. The ones who leave their tea untouched, the ones who know exactly what they want, and exactly who to come to. Mama sends most of them away. Sometimes she smokes out all seventeen rooms of the house after one of them comes. One time, she stood in the front hall and picked up the telephone, dialing it herself to call the police.

But sometimes she puts them in the iron birdcage elevator and sends them up five stories, all the way up to the garden on the roof.

Sometimes, she sends them to tell the bees.

* * *

“Three B’s been empty since Enos died three months ago,” an old man tells the bees. They circle and whirl around him, landing on the shoulders of a suit that’s been sewn together longer than I’ve been alive. I know him. He sits on the stoop of the Henri Louis Arms with the other old men, their glass beer bottles hidden in brown paper bags, playing guitar and harmonica and singing with reedy, spiritual voices. “Landlord says he’s renovating, but nobody been in there since Enos’s grandson came to get his things. Now he says Four C has noise complaints, but nobody minds Marlon’s music. He plays real sweet, and not a minute after eight. My hot water been broken for a month without him coming to fix it. I live in that building forty years. I know what he’s up to.”

He sweeps his hat off his head, a crease in his brow from the brim. He still has his hair, close shorn to his scalp like fine white lamb’s wool. “St. Valentine, St. Abigail, St. Brigid, save us,” he implores. “Save our home.”

The bees gather on the brim of his hat. A bee sups at the track of salt water on his cheek, and then they gather in a great murmuring cloud and fly off.

“They heard you,” I say, and he grips the curlicued iron bars of the elevator and cries in relief. Mama doesn’t charge him a dime.

Three days later she’s head to toe in rose pink, from her Italian-made shoes to her skirt and smart jacket, on her way to the bank. The Henri Louis Arms is for sale, after the owner died in debt.

She doesn’t ask me why Lucille’s mama never calls on her.

* * *

It is my first day as a senior student. The collar of my new school blazer scratches at my neck. My brassiere straps dig into my shoulders. My new flute case doesn’t have a scratch. Mama won’t let me dress my hair in anything but plaits, or use even a little makeup. Everything I wear is new, washed in herbs for power and success, smelling like flowers and the dark earth they grow in.

Lucille stands waiting at the crosswalk.

“Please stop here,” I ask, but Jefferson keeps on driving.

I win the class mathematics quiz. Lucille’s sonnet is read aloud in class. At lunchtime, I catch up to her on the way outside. She tilts her head

at me, and I knock my teeth together trying to think of something clever.

“Congratulations,” I say.

“Thank you.” She smiles, and it catches at my heart. “I thought yours was wonderful. Longing and sad.”

All the heat in my body rushes to my face. “You read my poem?”

She lights up and starts to say something else, but one of the upperclassmen yells, “Lucy! You get over here!”

Lucille turns around, startled, and heads her way. The other girls eye me before they saunter off school grounds toward a mean-faced boy in a crested burgundy blazer, his coat and face the wrong color to be a pupil of Reardon Picking’s. I wait on the concrete staircase.

Maybe Lucille will look back.

★ ★ ★

I don’t like the guidance counselor, but I have to ask him for college applications. He looks at my tests, looks at me, looks at my tests again. Pages through all of them, gaze flicking through wire-rimmed oval spectacles at my dark skin, at my braided hair. I wish I had some bad-luck root, but Mama never lets me in that cabinet and she can’t grow it on the roof. That needs blighted land, or graveyard dirt.

He shuffles the papers back into a pile. “Your test scores are exceptional. Unlike anything I’ve seen.”

Lies. He’s seen Lucille’s, and he probably gawps at her like she’s some freak too.

“You’re bright. You’re quick. What do you want to set your mind to?”

What do I want to shut the door on forever, set aside to pursue one thing? I want everything. I want English literature. I want chemistry. I want architecture, music history, Latin, Greek, philosophy. I want to race Lucille to the dean’s list. I can’t bear to leave the bees.

He’s waiting for an answer.

“I don’t know.”

★ ★ ★

“Stop, you have to stop!” I shake Jefferson’s shoulder. “Look at her face! Stop!”

Jefferson slows the car, eases it next to the curb. I push the door open

myself. “Lucille!”

Her left eye’s swollen shut and purple, her lip bruised. She swivels her head around to stare with her good eye, and I’m hot with fury.

“Who hit your face up?” I demand.

“Nobody.”

“Tell it to a fool, not me. Get in.”

She glances up the street, down the other way, ducks in fast like somebody might see us together. “You got your own driver? You really rich like they say?”

“It’s Mama’s. Lucille, this is Jefferson.”

“Morning.”

“How do you do?” Lucille asks, but Jefferson’s back in traffic.

“Was it your daddy?”

“No.” She shakes her head and curls bounce. “It’s my fault.”

“Who?”

“Gerry Riley. I didn’t mind him right.”

“Why you have to mind Gerry Riley?”

“He’s the boss’s son,” Lucille says. “Pa works at the rendering plant. He makes me do his English essays. He—”

Is going to die. “Tell me.”

She scowls. “What do you care for?”

“Nobody in that school smarter than you.”

“Except you.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” I look ahead, park on one side, sky towers on the other, traffic in between. “Tell me about Gerry Riley.”

“He found me walking after school, said I was his girl. I said I wasn’t anybody’s girl. He hit me, and made me kiss him after.”

“That’s the last time,” I say. “You come to school with me now. You go home in this car. Gerry Riley can kick rocks.”

“I can’t make him angry. Pa can’t lose his job,” Lucille says. And she’s right. She’s right. I can’t keep her safe.

Not by myself.

★ ★ ★

Mama sits back in her scroll-armed chair, the long, curved fingers of kentia palms towering behind her. A teapot, cups, and honey rest on a little

table at her left side. She gestures to the seat opposite the table, diamonds and gold sparkling on her fingers.

“Sit and tell me about it.”

I don’t drink Mama’s tea, and I don’t cry. I tell her what Lucille said about Gerry Riley and her pa’s job at the plant. I tell Mama how smart Lucille is, how fast she does figures, how well she remembers, how she can’t be used and knocked up by a clean-cut thug like Gerry Riley, and Mama hears me out. She drinks her tea.

And then she asks me, “What do you want?”

For Gerry Riley to die. “I want her safe.”

“This girl your friend?”

“I wish she was.”

Mama cocks her head. “You love her.”

I put my chin up. I do. Enough to ask Mama for help. Enough to ask for her sake. “What can I pay you?”

It doesn’t matter that she’s my mama. She has a price. I’ve got money. I get five hundred-dollar bills on my birthday, my name day, and Christmas. I get stock certificates, property deeds, and savings bonds on New Year. Money isn’t anything to me.

“What will you give me to make Lucille safe?”

I don’t really understand.

“Whatever you want,” I say.

“Oh, child.” She purses her lips, squints her eyes, and nods. “Go tell the bees.”

I go up the elevator to tell the bees everything, and they hear me.

★ ★ ★

Jefferson picks Lucille up every morning and drops her off after school. Lucille sits by me in class. She comes with me to sit in the reading tree. If she comes in first, I’m on her heels, and when I lead, she’s right behind. Gerry Riley waits for her by the school, but he can’t get close to her with me there. He glares at me through the back window, hating me so hard it bounces off the Cadillac’s protections.

We sit in the orchestra hall on a rainy day munching cinnamon red hots, our chairs side by side in the empty room. She plays me the fluttering, delightful opening of “Rhapsody in Blue” and shivers rush over

my skin as she pops the clarinet away from her mouth and grins.

“Do it again.”

“Do you really live in a mansion?”

“It’s a brownstone.”

“A whole brownstone. How do you keep it all clean?”

“We have a maid, a cook, and a housekeeper,” I say. “And Jefferson.”

She makes a face. “My mother’s a maid, in the Beaumont Hotel.”

“You’re going to be more. A scientist. An engineer. A doctor. Anything.”

“What about you? You could do anything too.”

I sigh. “I don’t know how to choose.”

“I do.” She pulls her clarinet apart. “What makes the most money? But that won’t work for you, will it? You’ve got buckets of it, you and your mansion and your household staff. You gonna have a come-out? Do your fancy people do that?”

“With the white dress?”

“Yes.”

“Why’s it always a white dress?” I ask. “I was named in a white gown. Confirmed in a white gown. Now it’s the come-out.”

“Then marriage,” Lucille says. “The biggest white dress of all.”

“I won’t get married.” I know in that instant it’s true. I’ll never wear that particular gown, never stare through lace at a man and promise to obey him.

“Because you’re a girl’s girl?”

My heart crawls up my throat.

“That’s what the other girls think. That you stare at me because you love me. Do you love me, Theresa?”

I want to laugh. I should laugh. It should sparkle out unoffended, but still a denial. I should laugh.

I don’t make a sound.

“Tell me. I won’t tell.” Quick as a cat, she grabs my wrist and pulls me close enough that I can smell the red hots on her mouth. “Do you love me?”

This close her eyes are brown, like mahogany wood. I love her eyes. I love her smile, her quickness. She is asking, and I’ll give her whatever she asks.

“Yes.”

She smiles then, red lipped and knowing. “I like that. You should kiss me.”

I can’t believe it. It’s not real. She slides her hand up my shoulder, under the narrow snakes of my braids, her cold hand on the back of my neck to pull me closer. Her tongue slips into my mouth and I flinch, make some kind of squeak.

She cocks her head. “You never kiss before?”

No one ever loved me before. I shrug, turn my face away.

She guides my chin back. “Then let’s try that again.”

★ ★ ★

Lucille and I find every secret place in Reardon Picking’s Youth Academy and we kiss in it to make it belong to us. She asks me if I love her, again and again. I always say yes.

She never says it back.

I bring her to my house, where she stares pop eyed at the hand-carved wood, the wrought iron in the staircases, the rosewood piano on the mezzanine, and the elevator.

“In the house! You have an elevator in your house!” Lucille cranes her head back, staring at the vines and morning glories cast in iron, bees nudging at blossoms. Lucille trembles and reaches for my hand.

Maybe one day it’ll be her elevator too.

She squeezes my hand and smiles. I open the gate and lead her to the roof.

It’s like seeing the garden for the first time. She wanders along the slate pathways, cocking her head at the plants, at flowers that shouldn’t grow here, but they do.

“What kind of flower is this for a garden?” She stops at a vine and touches a heart-shaped leaf. A trumpet-shaped fuchsia bloom nods its head. “My mama says morning glory is a weed.”

“It’s special.” Its root is powerful, granting success and luck, but I don’t say that. A worker sister dances on the air, hovering near our faces. Lucille twitches in alarm, shying away. The bee comes closer to me, and Lucille shrieks.

“A bee! A bee!”

“It’s all right,” I say. “She’s from the hive.”

“There’s a whole hive?” Lucille’s chest pumps like a bellows, the whites showing all around her eyes. The bee ventures a little closer and Lucille swats at the air, screaming.

“Don’t! You’ll rile her up!” I turn to the worker sister. “I’m sorry. Please go.”

The worker sister flies away. Lucille runs for the elevator. My stomach is a clenched fist, and the need to cry fills my throat with a stone.

I find her inside the wrought-iron cage. Lucille trembles on the ride to the third floor. She lets me put my arms around her, and she’s breathing better when we walk into the library.

“We can do our forms here.”

Lucille’s gasp is worth everything. She turns in a circle to take in the high shelves, and spins the huge globe in its rosewood stand. “You have a whole library. All to yourself.” She raises her head and gives me a half-embarrassed smile. “I’m sorry I’m afraid of bees.”

“It’s all right.” Maybe she can get used to them. Maybe I can show her they’re safe, special. I sit next to her and bring out my folder of university applications. Lucille’s got forms for dozens of schools, as if the best universities wouldn’t have her as a scholar. I write my application slowly, every letter perfect. It’s the neatest application anyone ever saw. I want to show it to Mama. I want to read it to the bees.

“Where are you applying?”

I show her. She fills out the ones we have in common first. “We could go together. Room together. Wouldn’t that be fine?”

Our own little place. An apartment with floors the color of honey and a fireplace with green tile, a window seat that looks out on a lawn with blossoming trees and sugar maples. It’s so real, I know it’s a vision. Our apartment. Our home.

I shudder as the vision bursts, a chill premonition crawling up my back.

“You okay? You look like— Oh, I…” Lucille’s face goes pale and her throat flexes, like she’s trying to breathe but she can’t. I touch her shoulder, my fingers hooked into a summoning sign, and the moment I finish sketching God’s eye on her, she’s breathing in deep gasps of air.

“I feel strange,” Lucille says. “I feel—”

“How are you girls?” Mama comes into the library, her big smile showing the gap between her front teeth. She bustles right over to me, her

hand on my head like she's checking for fever. I melt in relief. Mama's here. Mama knows.

"Lucille's not well."

"Let me see." She smooths fragrant hands on the crown of my head, leaving a feeling like she cracked a warm egg on my scalp, and asks Lucille when she's supposed to be home.

"Eight at the latest, Miss l'Abielle."

"Plenty of time." Her fingers tangle in Lucille's hair. "Such a blessed color." She weaves a tiny plait into Lucille's curls, every twist and bump a linking spell, a ward against evil. Lucille sits still for it, and gasps when she sees four strands in a ladder-braid.

"It's so pretty." She looks up, wonder in her face. "I feel better. I feel ... " She looks around, awe in her eyes. "Safe."

All the saints Mama could call on were in that braid. "It's good luck," she said. "Theresa's showered in luck every day."

"She has to be lucky, to read on the rooftop and not get stung."

"Lucille's afraid of the bees."

"Now bees don't hurt unless they're scared or mad." Mama runs her hands over Lucille's scalp, and Lucille shivers as the protections spread over her. "Theresa, go into my study and get the raspberry-leaf tonic. Lucille needs a little bracing."

She cuts me a look over Lucille's head, and I rush to her suite. I stroke the stuffed cheetah that guards the door, partly for affection, and partly to touch Mama's wards. I bow to the fetish masks on the wall, and the feeling of being watched eases from dreadful focus to sleepy curiosity. Her desk chair lies on its side, as if Mama rose in haste and knocked it over.

Mama dealt a hand of patience. The ace of spades lies next to the jack. Then the two of clubs, the deuce of spades, the nine. Black cards of doom and red cards of lust spell a dire sentence, enough to make her come running to my side before I could call out to her.

They cascade downward, all pointing at the queen of hearts.

Those cards of dark plots and ill fortune end with Lucille.

I rush up the stairs to the roof. The sunset is a ribbon of salmon pink and pale violet, sinking into the west. I reckon the Chaldean hour of Saturn and dash to the hives, drowsy and peaceful. The bees go quiet with the sunset, too logy to rise and hear what I have to say.

I implore them anyway. "St. Valentine, St. Abigail, St. Brigid," I plead.

Saints and beekeepers all. “My beloved lies under attack. What must I do to keep her safe?”

A single bee crawls out of the box, taking flight. It lands on my hair, and I ask again. “St. Valentine, St. Abigail, St. Brigid—”

The worker sister crawls down to my ear, and I hear her voice.

“What will you give to keep her safe?”

Mama never took anything from me the first time I asked the bees for Lucille’s safety.

“Anything.”

“Will you pledge yourself to us?”

Mama taught me all my curiosity demanded, except for the things from which I could never turn back. I was the price she asked of some long-ago woman, someone who didn’t weep or drink her tea. Mama kept me and braided blessings into my hair. She stitched the glyphs and signs of all the saints in my clothes. She never took my choices away from me.

“Will you love me?”

“Always.”

“Then I am yours.”

The sting brings tears to my eyes, and I put my hands out to soften my fall.

I stand up, but my body lies on the warm slate tile. The wards shine over the house, glowing with the signs that tell the spirits that a mistress of the bees dwells here. All the house spirits bristle with vigilance, watching for another assault.

Mama never taught me how to pull my soul out of my body. I am a mistress of the bees now, and I can never turn back. I sink through the floors, down and down to the library, where Mama stares at my soul-body with huge eyes.

There is so much I know now. So much I see. Mama is splendid with power, and her tears spill at the sight of me. I put my hands on Lucille and her eyes flutter back some, her mouth going a bit slack as she shivers.

I find the sorcery that reached her: a dart, poisoned with infatuation. Mama will give a girl a spell to make her womanly charms strong, or to a man to magnify his handsome ways, but those have nothing to do with the enslavement of love spells. It’s sunk deep in the pit of Lucille’s belly, meant to give her the deepest need. I pull the nasty thing out; it feels like slime and iron chains.

And I know right where it leads, right where a candle dressed in the fluid of male lust and carved with Lucille's name burns. Fury sparks bright and terrible in me, and I hold the thing tight in my hand even as it pulls away, eager to go back to its source. So Gerry Riley bought a bewitchment, did he? I'll show him a bewitchment—

“No!”

Mama shouts it just as I slide through the walls, through the wards, set on finding the punk who tried to bind Lucille. I look back to her outstretched hand. Why does she look so afraid?

The little dart writhes in my hand. It hooks into my palm, teaching my soul pain, and yanks me back to the spell-candle in Gerry Riley's room.

Right into his trap.

★ ★ ★

Gerry Riley's room is full of models—model cars, model ships, model airplanes. Posters of long-nosed cars hang all over his walls, between shelves full of books with unbroken spines. They perch on the edge of the shelves to hide a bag of weak reefer, a fifth of cheap bourbon, and a pulp magazine full of girls in lingerie who advertise an afternoon's delight. Why can't he go to one of them? A rich man's son could take the cost. But a rich man's son thinks he has the right to whatever he stretches out a hand to take.

He can tell I'm there, but he can't see me.

“So you caught the enchantment instead,” he says, and sits up in his bed. “I told the magician about you, about how you took Lucille from me. He told me what to do if I trapped you.”

I slap his face. My hand passes through his cheek, and he shivers just before he smiles.

He turns on the light. I'm in a room that smells of model glue and a hint of blood, with a sour salty smell I can't place. On the walls are signs, marks to make the room a cage for a spirit.

He picks up a card from the desk and reads from it. He chants Latin that makes my bowels shiver, words that wind their fingers around me and hold me down. They slide over my face, shading my view as if I see him through lace.

I know my Latin. I know the words of Mass and the forbidden poetry

of Catullus and the twisted summoning version he speaks now, the magic of chains and control. I slap him again, and he falters, but tells me how I'll obey him and speak no untrue word to him and put his life before my own. The words seep into me, and if he speaks them all, I'll be his thing, and the first command I will obey is to bring him Lucille.

I haul back and hit him again, smashing the hook of his spell against his cheek.

He yelps, and blood trickles from his lip. Wide eyed and white as tissue, he stops chanting, reaches up to smear his fingers in the red.

I can hurt him. To make the candle send out its hook, he had to make it a living thing, with his blood and his seed and his ugly desires.

The spell binds him as much as it binds me.

The card full of Latin flutters to the floor. He scrabbles backward to get away from me, the hook in my hand, the line that binds me to the candle that is his body for as long as it burns. I make a loop of that line, wrap it around his neck, and pull until he stops kicking.

The candle is a stub of wick in a pool of wax when the maid opens the door and breaks the prison holding me tight. I slip through the door and return to my body, ushered out by her screams.

★ ★ ★

Lucille writes when she goes to college. First they come every other day, thick with pages and excitement. Then a week can pass before I see another, apologizing for not writing sooner, for the letters being thinner.

Then she starts writing about Jean, the girl she studies organic chemistry with. Jean is in possession of a great many insights profound enough to relate to me in letters. Jean is so clever I would love her on sight. Jean makes the coffee in the morning, and sits in the window seat with a cup, watching the maple leaves turn brilliant red while a fire burns in the green-tiled hearth and warms up the common room.

I bring a package to the post office. I send her a jar of honey from the bees, combed to a clear golden liquid and infused with rose petals for love and beauty. Then Jefferson takes me home and on the steps is a woman in her best hat, with her Sunday shoes and her gloves to match, her eyes red like she's been crying.

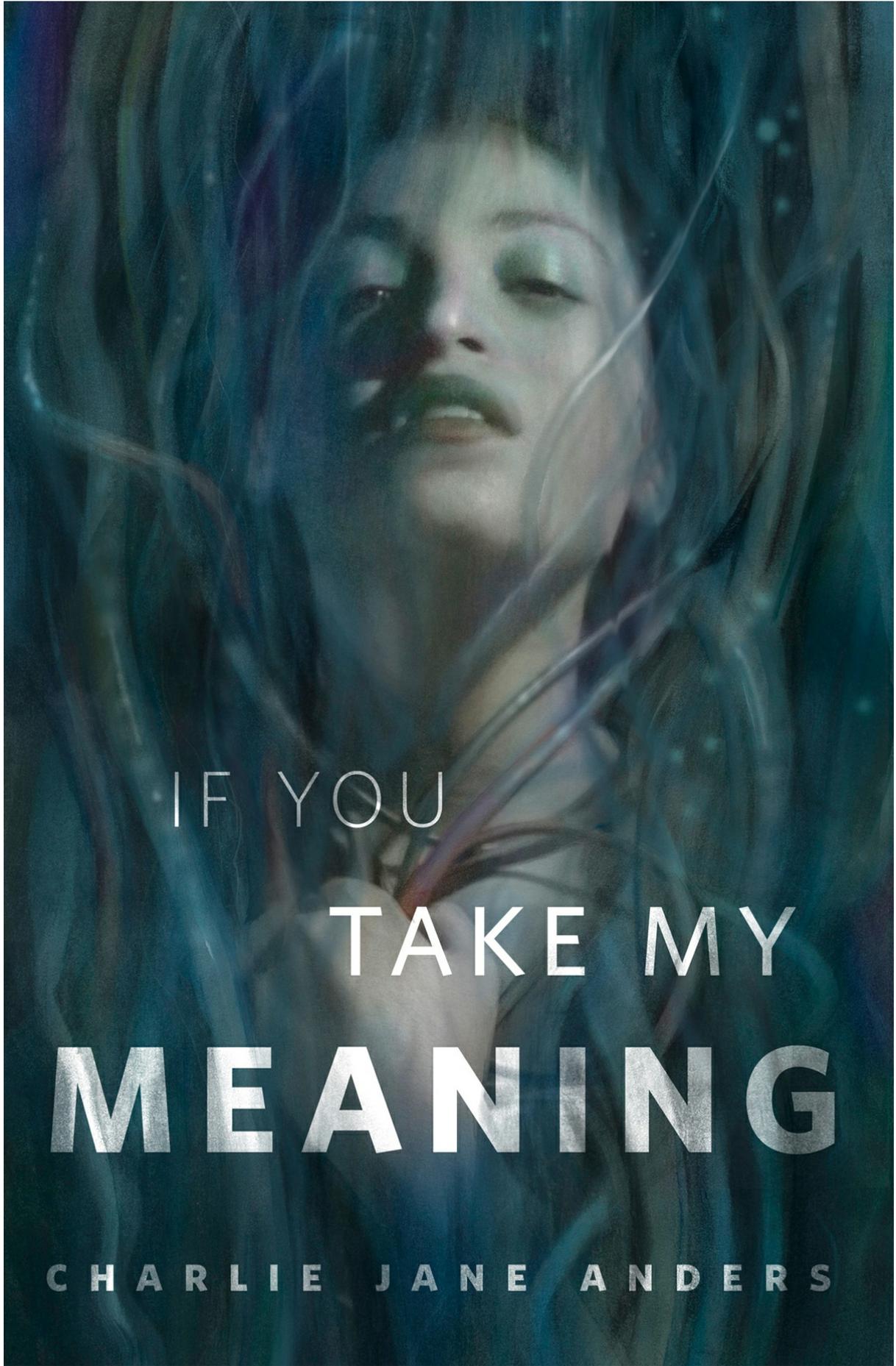
I go to her, put my hand on her shoulder, and invite her inside Mama's

house for tea.



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IF YOU
TAKE MY
MEANING

CHARLIE JANE ANDERS

IF YOU TAKE MY MEANING

CHARLIE JANE ANDERS

illustration by

ROBERT HUNT

TOR·COM 

They woke up stuck together again, still halfway in a shared dream, as the city blared to life around them. The warm air tasted of yeast, from their bodies, and from the bakery downstairs.

Mouth lay on one side of Sophie, with Alyssa on the other, sprawled on top of a pile of blankets and quilted pads. Alyssa couldn't get used to sleeping in a bedpile out in the open, after spending half her life in a nook—but Sophie insisted that's how everybody did things here. Sophie herself hadn't slept in a bedpile for ages, since she went away to school, but it was how she'd been raised.

"I guess it's almost time to go," Sophie whispered, with a reluctance that Alyssa could feel in her own core.

"Yeah," Alyssa muttered. "Can't keep putting it off."

Sophie peeled her tendrils off Mouth and Alyssa carefully, so Alyssa felt as if she was waking up a second time. One moment, Alyssa had a second heart inside her heart, an extra stream of chatter running under the surface of her thoughts. And then it was gone, and Alyssa was just one person again. Like the room got colder, even though the shutters were opening to let in the half-light.

Alyssa let out a low involuntary groan. Her bones creaked, and her right arm had gone half-numb from being slept on.

"You don't have to," Sophie whispered. "If you don't ... if you'd rather hold off."

Alyssa didn't answer, because she didn't know what to say.

Mouth laughed. "You know Alyssa. Her mind don't change." Mouth's voice was light, but with a faint growl, like she wished Alyssa *would* change her mind, and stay.

The tendrils grew out of the flat of Sophie's ribcage, above her breasts, and they were surrounded by an oval of slightly darker skin, with a reddish tint, like a burn that hadn't healed all the way (just a few inches upward

and to the left, Sophie's shoulder had an actual burn-scar). Someone might mistake the tendrils for strange ornaments, or a family of separate creatures nesting on Sophie's flesh, until you saw how they grew out of her, and the way she controlled their motion.

Whenever Alyssa's bare skin made contact with that part of Sophie's body, she could experience Sophie's thoughts, or her memories. Whatever Sophie wanted to lay open to her. But when the three of them slept in this pile, Sophie didn't share anything in particular. Just dream slices, or half-thoughts. Mouth still couldn't open herself up to the full communication with Sophie most of the time, but she'd taken to the sleep-sharing.

All three of them had their own brand of terrifying dreams, but they'd gotten better at soothing each other through the worst.

"So that's it." Mouth was already pulling on her linen shift and coarse muslin pants, and groping for her poncho. "You're going up that mountain, and the next time we see you, you'll ... you'll be like Sophie. The two of you will be able to carry on whole conversations, without once making a sound."

Mouth looked away, but not before Alyssa caught sight of the anxiety on her face. Alyssa could remember when she used to have to guess at what the fuck Mouth was thinking, but that was a long time ago.

Sophie noticed, too, and she sat up, still in her nightclothes. "You don't ever have to worry about a thing." Sophie's voice was so quiet, Alyssa had to lean closer to hear. "No matter what happens, after all we've been through, the three of us are in this together."

"Yeah," Alyssa said, punching Mouth's arm with only a couple knuckles. "No amount of alien grafts are going to mess up our situation."

"Yeah, I know, I know, it's just..." Mouth laughed and shook her head, like this was a silly thing to worry about. "It's just, the two of you will have this whole other language. I'll be able to listen, but not talk. I wish I could go through that whole transformation, but that's not *me*. I need to keep what's in my head inside my head. I just ... I want you both to fulfill your potential. I don't want to be holding the two of you back."

Alyssa leaned her head on Mouth's left shoulder, and Sophie's head rested on the right. "You speak to us in all the ways that matter," Sophie said.

"It's true," Alyssa said. "You already tell us everything we ever need to know."

Alyssa had grown up with romances, all about princes, duels, secret meetings, courtships, first kisses, and last trysts. She'd have said that real life could never be half as romantic as all those doomed lovers and secret vows ... except now, those stories seemed cheap and flimsy, compared to the love she'd found, here in this tiny room.

For a moment, Alyssa wanted to call the whole thing off. Climb the Old Mother later, maybe just go back to bed. But then she shook it off.

She pulled on her boots.

"It's time."



Alyssa had handled all kinds of rough terrain in her smuggler days. She'd even gone into the night without any protective gear one time. So she figured the Old Mother would be nothing. But by the time she got halfway up, her hamstrings started to throb and her thighs were spasming. Next to her, Mouth spat out little grunts of exhaustion. Only Sophie seemed to be enjoying pulling herself up from handhold to handhold.

"Shit shit shit. How the fuck did you ever get used to climbing this beast?" Alyssa wheezed.

Sophie just rolled her shoulders. And mumbled, "It wasn't a choice at first."

Behind them, Xiosphant had gone dark and still, just a valley of craggy shapes without highlights. Except for one light blaring from the top of the Palace, where the Vice Regent could never bring herself to obey the same shutters-up rule that all of her people lived by. Alyssa didn't want to risk falling, so she only half-turned for an instant, to see the storm damage, still unrepaired. And the piles of debris, where the fighting between the Vice Regent's forces and the new Uprising had briefly escalated to heavy cannon fire.

Everyone knew Bianca couldn't last as Vice Regent, but they had no notion whether she would hold on for a few more sleeps, or half a lifetime. Alyssa tried to avoid mentioning her name, even though her face was impossible to avoid, because Sophie still nursed some complicated regrets, and Mouth still felt guilty for helping to lead Bianca down a thorny path. Alyssa was the only one in their little family with clear-cut feelings about the Vice Regent: pure, invigorating hatred.

Alyssa wanted to stop and rest mid-climb, but the cruel slope of the Old Mother included no convenient resting places, especially for three people. And it would be a shitty irony if they almost reached the top, but slipped and fell to their deaths because they wanted to take a breather. The air felt colder and thinner, and Alyssa's hard-won aplomb was being severely tested.

"My fingers are bleeding," Mouth groaned. "Why didn't you mention our fingers would bleed?"

Sophie didn't answer.

They reached the top, which also formed the outer boundary of nothing. Ahead of Alyssa were no sights, no smells (because her nose got numb) and no sensations (because her skin was wrapped in every warm thing she could find). No sound but a crashing wind, which turned into subtle terrible music after a while.

Alyssa's mother and uncles had sent her off to the Absolutists' grammar school back home in Argelo, when she was old enough to walk and read. That was her earliest distinct memory: her mom holding one of her hands and her uncle Grant holding the other, marching her down around the bend in the gravel back road to the front gate where the school convened at regular intervals. That moment rushed back into her head now, as Sophie and Mouth fussed over her and prepared to send her away to another kind of school.

Mouth was pressing a satchel into Alyssa's hands. "I got as many of those parallelogram cakes as I could fit into a bag. Plus these salt buns, that taste kind of like cactus-pork crisps. And there are a few of your favorite romances tucked in, too."

"Thank you." Alyssa wrapped her arms around Mouth's neck. She couldn't tell if her eyes stung due to tears or the wind, or both. "I'll be back soon. Don't let Sophie take any more foolish risks."

"I'll do my best," Mouth said. "Say hi to the Gelet from me. And tell them..." She paused. "You know what? Just 'hi' is plenty."

Then Sophie was hugging Alyssa. "I can't get over how brave you are. You're the first person ever to visit this city, knowing exactly what's going to happen."

"Oh shut up." Alyssa was definitely starting to cry.

"I mean it. Your example is going to inspire a lot more people to go there. I think Mustache Bob is close to being ready." Sophie choked on the

mountain air. “Come back safe. We need you. I love you.”

“I love you too. Both of you.” Alyssa started to say something else, but a massive, dark shell was rising out of the darkness on the far side of the mountain. “Shit. I need to go.”

Alyssa let go of Sophie, clutching the satchel, and gave Mouth one last smile, then turned to face the writhing tentacles of the nearest Gelet. These two slippery ropes of flesh groped the air, reaching out to her.

★ ★ ★

As soon as they swathed Alyssa in woven moss and lifted her in their tentacles, she freaked out. She couldn't move, couldn't escape, couldn't even breathe. Her inner ear could not truck with this rapid descent down a sheer cliff, and somehow she wasn't ready for this disorientation, even though she'd talked through it with Sophie over and over. Alyssa wanted to yell that she'd changed her mind, this was a mistake, she wanted to go back to her family. But the Gelet would never understand, even if she could make herself heard.

She kept going down and down. Alyssa tried to tell herself this was just like being inside the Resourceful Couriers' sleep nook next to Mouth, except that she was alone, and she couldn't just pop out if she wanted to pee or stretch or anything. She held herself rigid as long as she could, and then she snapped—she thrashed and screamed, twisting her body until her spine wrenched.

A random memory popped up in Alyssa's head: huddling with the other Chancers in the hot gloom of a low-ceilinged basement on the day side of Argelo, after the Widehome job had gone flipside. (Because they'd burned down the wrong part of the building.) Lucas had squatted next to Alyssa, listing chemical formulas in a low voice, his usual anxiety strategy, and Wendy had fidgeted without making any sound. Every bump and croak above their heads instantly became, in Alyssa's mind, the Jamersons coming to murder them for what they'd done. This was the most terrified Alyssa had ever been, or probably ever would be, but also the closest she'd ever felt to anybody. These people were her indivisible comrades, any of them would die for the others, they were safe together in horrible danger.

Alyssa would always look back on that time in her life as the ideal, the

best, the moment when she had a hope-to-die crew by her side, even though she could see all the flaws and the tiny betrayals. Honestly, she'd had way better friend groups since then, including the Resourceful Couriers, but that didn't change how she felt.

Alyssa did not do well with helplessness, or chains, or trusting random strangers. But wasn't that the whole point of this leap into darkness? Alyssa would get this mostly untested surgery, and then she would be able to share unfalsifiable information, and have massively expanded threat awareness thanks to the alien sensory organs. Sometimes you have to be more vulnerable in the short term, so that you can become more formidable later.

They must've reached the foot of the Old Mother without Alyssa noticing, what with all the turbulence. She had a sensation of moving forward, rather than downward, and her position in the web of tentacles shifted somewhat as well, and then at last they came to a stop and the Gelet unwrapped her tenderly. She landed on her feet inside a dark tunnel that sloped downward. This was almost scarier than the aftermath of the Widehome job, or at least it was scary in a different way.

They led her down the tunnel, patient with all her stumbles. She couldn't see shit, but at least she was moving under her own power.

Alyssa kept reminding herself of what Sophie had said: she was the first human ever to visit the Gelet city, knowing what awaited her there. She was a pioneer.

The air grew warm enough for Alyssa to remove some of the layers of moss, and there were faint glimmers of light up ahead, so she must be entering the Gelet city proper. They needed to find a better name for it than "the midnight city." Something catchy and alluring, something to make this place a destination.

"I'm the first human to come down here with my eyes open, knowing what awaits," Alyssa said, loud enough to echo through the tunnel.

"Actually," a voice replied from the darkness ahead of her. "You're not. You're the second, which is almost as good. Right?"

★ ★ ★

His name was Jeremy, and he had worked with Sophie at that fancy coffee place, the Illyrian Parlour. Ginger hair, fair skin, nervous hands, soft voice.

He'd been in the Gelet city a while already, maybe a few turns of the Xiosphanti shutters, but they hadn't done anything to alter him yet. "I can show you around, though I don't know the city very well, because large areas of it are totally dark." He sounded as though he must be smiling.

"Thanks," Alyssa said. "Appreciate any and all local knowledge."

Jeremy kept dropping information about himself, as if he didn't care at all about covering his tracks. He'd been part of the ruling elite in Xiosphant, studying at one of those fancy schools, until he'd fallen in love with a person of the wrong gender. Fucking homophobic Xiosphanti.

So he'd gone underground, slinging coffee to stressed-out working people, and that had been his first real encounter with anyone whose feet actually touched the ground, instead of walking on a fluffy cloud of privilege.

The Gelet had cleared a room, somewhere in the bowels of their unseeable city, for human visitors, with meager lighting, and some packs of food that had come straight from the Mothership. Alyssa and Jeremy opened three food packs and traded back and forth, sharing the weird foods of their distant ancestors: candies, jerky, sandwiches, some kind of sweet viscous liquid.

They bonded over sharing ancient foods, saying things like: "Try this one, it's kind of amazing."

Or: "I'm not sure this stuff has any nutritional value, but at least the aftertaste is better than the taste."

Alyssa chewed in silence and half-darkness for a while, then the pieces fell into place. "Oh," she said to Jeremy. "I just figured out who you are. You're the guy who tried to get Sophie to use her new abilities as a propaganda tool against the Vice Regent. She told us about you."

"I know who you are, too." Jeremy leaned forward, so his face took on more substance. "You're one of the foreign interlopers who helped the Vice Regent to take power in Xiosphant. You stood at Bianca's right hand, until she had one of her paranoid episodes. We have you to thank for our latest misery."

Alyssa couldn't believe she'd shared food with this man, just a short time ago.

"I'm going to go for a walk." Once she'd said this out loud, Alyssa was committed, even though it meant getting to her feet and walking out into a dark maze that included the occasional nearly bottomless ravine. At least

the Gelet would keep an eye on her.

Probably.

Alyssa tried to walk as if she knew where she was going, as if she felt totally confident that the next step wouldn't take her into a wall or off the edge. She swung her arms and strode forward and tried not to revisit the whole ugly history of regime change in Xiosphant, and her part in it. She had trusted the wrong person, that was all.

What was Alyssa even doing here? All she wanted was to bury her past deeper than the lowest level of this city, but soon she would have the ability to share all her memories with random strangers. And she knew from talking to Sophie that it was easy to share way more than you bargained for—especially at first.

Alyssa might just reach out to someone for an innocent conversation, and end up unloading the pristine memory of the moment when she'd pledged her loyalty to a sociopath. The moment when Alyssa had believed that she'd found the thing she'd searched for since the Chancers fell apart, and that she would never feel hopeless again. Or Alyssa might share an image of the aftermath: herself wading through fresh blood, inside the glitzy walls of the Xiosphanti Palace.

"This was a mistake," Alyssa said to the darkness. "I need to go home. Sophie will understand. Mouth will be relieved. I should never have come here. When they offer to change me, I'll just say no, I'll make them understand. And then they'll have to send me home."

She almost expected Jeremy to answer, but he was nowhere near. She'd wandered a long way from their quarters, and there was no sound but the grumbling of old machines, and the scritch of the Gelet's forelegs as they moved around her.

★ ★ ★

"I'm not sure I can go through with this," Alyssa told Jeremy, when she'd somehow groped her way back to the living quarters. "I can't stand the idea of inflicting my past on anyone else."

"I'm definitely going ahead with it," Jeremy replied after a while. "When Sophie showed me what she could do, I couldn't even believe what a great organizing tool this could be. This is going to transform the new Uprising, because people will be able to see the truth for themselves,

without any doubt or distortion.”

Alyssa had wanted to avoid Jeremy, or shut out his self-righteous nattering. But they were the only two humans for thousands of kilometers, and she couldn't go too long without another human voice, as it turned out.

“So you're about to become one of the first members of a whole new species,” Alyssa said, “and you're just going to use it as a recruiting tool for another regime change? So you can take power, and then someone else can turn around and overthrow you in turn? Seems like kind of a waste.”

“At least I'm not—” Jeremy barked. Then he took a slow breath and shifted. His silhouette looked as if he was hugging himself. “It's not just about unseating your friend Bianca. It's not. It's about building a movement. I spent so much time in that coffeehouse, listening to people who could barely even give voice to all the ways they were struggling. We need a new kind of politics.”

“Bianca's not my friend. I hate her too, in ways that you could never understand.” Alyssa found more of the rectangular flat candy and ate a chunk. “But if enough people become hybrids, and learn to share the way Sophie shares, we could have something better than just more politics. We could have a new *community*. We could share resources as well as thoughts. We could work with the Gelet.”

“Sure, sure,” Jeremy said. “Maybe eventually.”

“Not eventually,” Alyssa said. “Soon.”

“What makes you think a lot of people will buy into that vision, if you're not even willing to go through with it yourself?”

Alyssa groaned. “Look. I'm just saying ... You have to be doing this for the right reasons, or it'll end really badly. You'll lose yourself. I saw it again and again, back in Argelo, people burning up everything they were just for the sake of allegiances or ideology or whatever.”

They didn't talk for a while, but then they went back to arguing. There wasn't anything else to do, and besides, by the sound of it, Jeremy had been a good friend to Sophie, back when she'd really needed someone. So Alyssa didn't want him to wreck his psyche, or his heart, or whatever, by turning his memories into propaganda.

“I can be careful.” Jeremy sounded as if he was trying to convince himself. “I can share only the memories and thoughts that will make people want to mobilize. I can keep everything else to myself.”

“Maybe,” was all Alyssa said.

These Xiosphanti believed in the power of repression, way more than was healthy. Or realistic.

“I wish we could ask the Gelet.” Jeremy was doing some kind of stretches in the darkness. “It’s a terrible paradox: you can only have a conversation with them about the pros and cons of becoming a hybrid, after you’ve already become a hybrid.”

Alyssa went for another walk in the chittering dark—she shrieked with terror, but only inside her own head—and when she got back, Jeremy said, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m going to regret this. Maybe I should stick to organizing people the old-fashioned way, winning their trust slowly. I don’t know. I’m out of options.”

Alyssa was startled to realize that while she’d been trying to talk Jeremy out of becoming a hybrid, she’d talked herself back into it. She needed to believe: in Sophie, in this higher communion. Alyssa kept dwelling on that memory of cowering in a hot basement with the other Chancers, and pictured herself sharing it with Sophie, or Mouth, or anyone. What would happen to that moment when it was no longer hers alone? She wanted to find out.



The Gelet surrounded Alyssa with their chitinous bodies and opened their twin-bladed pincers, until she leaned forward and nuzzled the slick tubes, the slightly larger cousins of the tendrils growing out of Sophie’s chest.

An oily, pungent aroma overwhelmed Alyssa for a moment, and then she was experiencing the world as the Gelet saw it. This Gelet showed her a sense-impression of a human, being torn open to make room for a mass of alien flesh that latched onto her heart, her lungs, her bowels. Alyssa couldn’t keep from flinching so hard that she broke the connection.

But when they offered her a choice between the operating room and safe passage home, Alyssa didn’t even hesitate before peeling off her clothes.

Alyssa had always said that pain was no big thing—like the worst part of pain was just the monotony of a single sensation that overstayed its welcome. But she’d never felt agony like this, not even on all the occasions when she’d been shot or stabbed or shackled inside a dungeon. Sophie had made this operation sound unpleasant, pretty awful, a nasty

shock. But Alyssa started screaming cursewords in two languages before she was even half-awake, after surgery.

The pain didn't get any better, and the Gelet were super-cautious with their hoarded sedatives, and Alyssa was sure something had gone wrong, perhaps fatally. All she could do was try her best to shut out the world. But ... she couldn't.

Because, even with her eyes closed and her ears covered, she could sense the walls of the chamber where the Gelet had brought her to rest, and she could "feel" the Gelet creeping around her, and in the passageways nearby. Her brand new tentacles insisted on bombarding her with sensations that her mind didn't know how to process. Alyssa had thought of Sophie's small tentacles as providing her with "enhanced threat awareness," but this was just too much world to deal with.

Alyssa screamed until her throat got sore. Even her teeth hurt from gnashing.

She looked down at herself. The top part of her chest was covered with all of these dark wriggling growths coated with fresh slime, like parasites. Like a mutilation. Before Alyssa even knew what she was doing, she had grabbed two handfuls of tendrils, and she was trying to yank them out of her body with all her strength.

Alyssa might as well have tried to cut off her own hand—the pain flared, more than she could endure. Searing, wrenching. Like being on fire and gutshot, at the same time. And even though her eyes told her that there were foreign objects attached to her chest, her skin (her mind?) told her these were part of her body, and she was attacking herself. She nearly passed out again from the pain of her own self-assault.

The Gelet rushed over, three of them, and now Alyssa could sense their panic even without any physical contact. Her new tentacles could pick up their emotional states, with more accuracy than being able to see facial expressions or body language, and these Gelet were very extremely freaked out. Two of them set about trying to stabilize Alyssa and undo the damage she'd just caused to her delicate grafts, while the third leaned over her.

Alyssa looked up with both her old and her new senses. A big blunt head descended toward her, with a huge claw opening to reveal more of those slimy strips of flesh, and Alyssa felt a mixture of disgust and warmth. She didn't know what she felt anymore, because her reactions

were tainted by the sensory input from her tentacles. The Gelet leaning toward her gave off waves of tenderness and concern—but also annoyance and fear—and this was all too much to process.

“I would very much like not to feel any of what I’m feeling,” Alyssa said.

Then the Gelet closest to her made contact with her tendrils, and Alyssa had the familiar sensation of falling out of herself, that she’d gotten from Sophie so many times now. And then—

—Sophie was standing right in front of Alyssa, close enough for Alyssa to look into her eyes.

“What are you doing? How are you here?” Alyssa asked Sophie, before she bit her tongue. Because of course, Sophie wasn’t present at all. This was a memory or something.

Sophie was looking at herself, with her tendrils as fresh as the ones Alyssa had just tried to rip out of herself, and she was reaching out with her tentacles to “feel” the space around her, and Alyssa was doubly aware of Sophie’s happiness, thanks to her facial expression and all the chemicals she was giving off. *At last*, Sophie seemed to be saying. *Thank you, at long last my head can be an estuary instead of just this reservoir.*

Alyssa wanted to reach out for Sophie, but Alyssa wasn’t even herself in this memory. Alyssa was a Gelet, with a huge lumbering body under a thick shell and woolly fur, with a heart full of relief that this operation might be working better than anyone dared hope—

—Alyssa came back to herself, and looked at the Gelet leaning over her. The disgust was gone, and she “saw” every flex of the segmented legs and every twitch of the big shapeless head, as if they were the tiny habits of a distant family member.

“I’m sorry,” Alyssa said, hoping they understood somehow. “I didn’t mean to do that, it was just instinct. I hope I didn’t ruin everything. I do want to understand all of you, and go home to Sophie as her equal. I really didn’t want to, I’m sorry—I didn’t want to, it just happened. I’m sorry.”

Maybe if her tendrils weren’t damaged beyond repair, she’d be able to tell them in a way they understood. As it was, they seemed satisfied that she wasn’t going to try and tear herself apart again, and that they’d done everything they could to stabilize her.

Alyssa lay there cursing herself and hoping and worrying and freaking out, until she heard shrieks echoing from the next room. Jeremy. He’d

gotten the procedure too, and he'd just woken up, with the same agony and loathing that had struck Alyssa. She wished she could think of something to say to talk him down. Or at least they could be miserable together, if she could talk to him.

This operation was supposed to help Alyssa to form connections, but she was more alone than ever.



The pain ground on and on. Alyssa would never get used to these stabbing, burning, throbbing sensations. Alyssa couldn't tell how much of this discomfort was from the operation, and how much was because she'd attacked herself when she was still healing.

Alyssa rested on a hammock of moss and roots until she got bored and the pain had lessened enough for her to move around, and then she started exploring the city again. This time, she could sense the walkways and all the galleries, all the way down into the depths of the city, and she was aware of the Gelet moving all around her. She started to be able to tell them apart, and read their moods, and all their little gestures and twitches and flexing tentacles began to seem more like mannerisms.

One Gelet, in particular, seemed to have been given the task of watching over Alyssa, and she had a loping stride and a friendly, nurturing "scent." (Alyssa couldn't think of the right word to describe the way she could tell the Gelet's emotions from the chemicals they gave off, but "scent" would do for now.) This Gelet stayed close enough to Alyssa to provide any help she needed, and Alyssa found her presence reassuring, rather than spooky.

Alyssa's new friend had survived the noxious blight that had killed a lot of her siblings in the weave where all the Gelet babies grew. (But she was still a little smaller than all the older Gelet.) When she was brand new, the other Gelet had made a wish for her that boiled down to "Find reasons for hope, even in the midst of death."

That thought reminded Alyssa of a nagging regret: she and Sophie still hadn't succeeded in helping Mouth to figure out a new name, mostly because Mouth was impossible to please.

And this Gelet, whom Alyssa started calling Hope, had devoted most of her life so far to studying the high wind currents, the jetstreams that

moved air from day to night and back again. Hope's mind was full of designs for flying machines, to let people examine the upper atmosphere up close, and find a way to keep the toxic clouds away from the Gelet city. But Alyssa's communication with Hope still only went one way. Her new grafts, the tendrils she'd tried to rip out, still hurt worse than daylight. She tried to shield them with her entire body, as if exposure to air would ruin them further.

What if they never worked right?

What if she could never use them to communicate, without feeling as if hot needles were poking in between her first few ribs?

That moment when she'd grabbed with both hands, tearing at her new skin, kept replaying in Alyssa's head, and she wanted to curse herself. Weak, untrustworthy, doomed—she cringed each time.

Hope kept offering her own open pincer and warm tendrils, which always contained some soothing memory of playing a friendly game with some other Gelet, or receiving a blessing from the Gelet's long-dead leader, in some dream-gathering. Alyssa kept wishing she could talk back, explain, maybe learn to become more than just a raw mass of anxiety with nothing to say.

At last, Alyssa decided to take the risk.

She raised her still-sore tendrils to meet Hope's, and tried to figure out how to send, instead of receive. Alyssa brought the awful memory to the front of her mind: her hands, grasping and pulling, so vivid, it was almost happening once again. She felt it flood out of her, but then she wasn't sure if Hope had received it. Until Hope recoiled, and sent back an impression of what Alyssa had looked like to everyone else, thrashing around, and the Gelet rushing in to try and fix the damage.

Alyssa "saw" them touching her body, in the same places that still hurt now, and felt their anxiety, their horror, but also their ... determination? Bloody-mindedness, maybe. She had the weird sensation of "watching" the Gelet surgeons repairing the adhesions on her chest, while she could still feel the ache inside those torn places. And the strangest part: as she watched the Gelet restore her grafts in the past, Alyssa found the wounds hurt less fiercely in the present.

The pain didn't magically fade to bliss or anything like that, but Alyssa found she could bear it, maybe because she could convince herself that they'd repaired the damage. She started thinking of it more like just

another stab wound.

And once Alyssa decided she could use her new organs (antennae?) without wrecking something that was barely strung together, she started opening up more. She shared the memory of this caustic rain that had fallen on her in Argelo, which had seemed to come from the same alkali clouds that had doomed some of Hope's siblings. And the moment when Sophie had first given Alyssa a glimpse of this city and the Gelet living here, suffused with all of Sophie's love for this place. And finally, the first time Mouth, Sophie and Alyssa climbed onto the flat shale rooftops of the Warrens while everyone else slept, the three of them holding hands and looking across the whole city, from shadow to flame.

In return, Hope shared her earliest memories as a separate person, which was also the moment she realized that she was surrounded by the dead flesh of her hatchmates, hanging inside this sticky weave. Tiny lifeless bodies nestled against her, all of them connected to the same flow of nutrients that were keeping her alive. The crumbling skin touching hers, the overwhelming chemical stench of decay—with no way to escape, nothing to do but keep sending out distress pheromones until someone arrived to take away the dead. And then later, when Hope had left the web, and all the other Gelet had treated her like a fragile ice blossom.

Alyssa felt sickened in a deep cavity of herself, somewhere underneath her new grafts.

She tried to send back random scraps of her own upbringing, like when her mom and all her uncles died on her, or when she got in her first serious knife fight. But also, cakes, cactus crisps, and dancing. And kissing girls and boys and others, in the crook of this alleyway that curled around the hilt of the Knife in Argelo, where you felt the music more than you heard it, and you could get trashed off the fumes from other people's drinks. Always knowing that she could lose herself in this city, and there were more sweet secrets than Alyssa would ever have enough time to find.

Soon, Alyssa and Hope were just sharing back and forth, every furtive joy and every weird moment of being a kid and trying to make sense of the adults around you—and then growing up but still not understanding, most of the time. The intricacies of the Gelet culture still screwed Alyssa's head ten ways at once, but she could understand feeling like a weird kid, looking in.

Alyssa started to feel more comfortable with Hope than with 99

percent of human beings —until a few sleeps later, Hope showed Alyssa something that sent a spike of ice all the way through her. They were sitting together in one of those rooty-webby hammocks, and Alyssa was drowsing, finally no longer in so much pain that she couldn't rest, and Hope let something slip out. A memory of the past?

No—a possible future.

In Hope's vision, hybrid humans were moving in packs through this city, deep under the midnight chill. Dozens of people, all chattering with their human voices, but also reaching out to each other with their Gelet tendrils. This throng seemed joyful, but there was this undercurrent of dread to the whole thing, which made no sense to Alyssa.

Until she realized what was missing. Hope could see a future where the midnight city was filled with human-Gelet hybrids—but the Gelet themselves were gone.

★ ★ ★

"I have something I need to show you," Alyssa said to Jeremy.

He jerked his head up and gaped at her, with his new tendrils entwined with those of two Gelet that Alyssa hadn't met yet. He blinked, as if he'd forgotten the sound of language, then unthreaded himself from the two Gelet slowly and stumbled to his feet.

"Okay," Jeremy said. "What did you want to show me? Where is it?"

"Right here." Alyssa gestured at her tendrils.

Jeremy pulled away, just a couple centimeters, but enough so Alyssa noticed.

"Oh," he said. "I hadn't ... I didn't."

"Don't be a baby," Alyssa said. "I know you bear a grudge, you blame me, I get it. You don't want to let me in."

"It's not even that," Jeremy stammered. "I don't even know. This is all so new, and even just sharing with the Gelet is unfamiliar enough. Being connected to another human being, or another hybrid I mean, would be ... plus I heard that you ... I heard you *did* something. You tried to damage yourself. They won't show me the details."

Fucking gossip. Alyssa shouldn't be surprised that the Gelet would be even worse than regular humans about telling everyone her business. The look in Jeremy's eyes made her feel even worse than ever, and her scars

felt like they were flaring up.

“This isn’t anything to do with me,” Alyssa said. “I promise, I won’t even share anything about myself, if you’re so worried about mental contamination.”

“I don’t mean to be...” Jeremy sucked in a deep breath. “Okay. Okay. Sure. Go ahead.”

Among the thousand things that the hybrids were going to need, some kind of etiquette would be one of the most important. A way to use their words to negotiate whether, and how, to communicate with each other non-verbally.

Jeremy leaned forward with his tunic open, and Alyssa concentrated, desperate to keep her promise and avoid sharing anything of her own. But of course, the more she worried about sharing the wrong thing, the more her mind filled with the image of herself inside the Xiosphanti Palace, tracking bloody footprints all over the most exquisite marble floor she’d ever seen.

No no no. Not that. Please.

“Wait a moment.” Alyssa paused, when they were just a few centimeters apart. “Just. Need to clear. My head.”

Curating your thoughts, weeding out the ugly, was a literal headache. If only Sophie was here ... but Alyssa didn’t want to open that cask of swamp vodka, or she’d never conjure a clean memory.

Breathe. Focus. Alyssa imagined Hope’s scary vision, as if it was a clear liquid inside a little ball of glass, cupped in her palms. Separated from all her own thoughts, clean and delicate. She gave that glass ball to Jeremy in her mind as their tendrils made contact, and felt Hope’s dream flow out of her.

A few strands of thought, or memory, leaked out of Jeremy in return: a slender boy with pale Calgary features and wiry brown hair, pulling his pants on with a sidelong glance at his forbidden lover. Bianca and her consort Dash, smiling down from a balcony as if the crowd beneath them was shouting tributes, instead of curses. A woman holding a tiny bloody bundle on a cobbled side street, wailing.

“Ugh, sorry,” Jeremy said. And then Hope’s vision of a possible future sunk in, and he gasped.

“That’s...” Jeremy disconnected from her and staggered like a drunk, leaning into the nearest wall. “That’s...”

“I know,” Alyssa said. “I don’t think ... I don’t think I was supposed to see that.”

“We can’t let that happen.” Jeremy turned away from the wall and sobbed, wiping his eyes and nose with his tunic sleeve.

“Our ancestors already invaded their whole planet. This would be worse.” Alyssa looked at her knuckles. “Way worse than when I helped those foreigners to invade your city. I’d rather ... I’d rather die than be a part of another injustice.”

The two of them walked around the Gelet city for a while. Watching small groups of children all connected to one teacher, puppeteers putting on a show, musicians filling the tunnels with vibrations, a team of engineers repairing a turbine. A million human-Gelet hybrids would need centuries just to understand all of this culture. Sophie had barely witnessed a tiny sliver of this city’s life, and she’d spent way more time here than either Alyssa or Jeremy had so far.

“We can help, though.” Alyssa broke a silence that seemed near-endless. “They didn’t turn us into hybrids for our own sake. Right? They need us to help repair the damage that our own people did. Hope showed me some designs for new flying machines that could help them figure out how to keep the toxic rainclouds away, but they can’t stand even partial sunlight.”

Jeremy covered his face with one hand and his tendrils with the other. His new tentacles retreated behind his back, wrapping around like a pair of arms crossed in judgment. He shivered and let out low gasps. Alyssa wasn’t sure if he was still crying, or what she ought to do about it. She just stood there and watched him, until he pulled himself together and they went and got some stewed roots together.

“We’re not going to make it, are we?” Jeremy said to his hand. “We can’t do this. We won’t change enough people in time to help them. I know you did something terrible, right after they changed you, and I...” He couldn’t bring himself to say what came next. “What I did was much worse. I can’t. I can’t even stand to think about it.”

Between her new tentacles and all her ingrained old skills of reading people, Alyssa felt overwhelmed by sympathy for Jeremy. She could feel his emotions, maybe more clearly than her own, almost as if she could get head-spinning drunk on them. That sour intersection between fellowship and nausea. At least now she knew that she wasn’t the only one who’d had

a nasty reaction after the Gelet surgery.

Jeremy was waiting for Alyssa to say something. She wasn't going to.

After a long time, he said again, "We're not going to make it." Then walked away, still covering his mouth and tendrils, shrouding himself with all of his limbs.

★ ★ ★

Alyssa didn't see Jeremy for a few sleeps.

Meanwhile, she was busy gleaning everything she could from the Gelet, even though her brain hurt from taking in so many foreign memories, and concepts that couldn't be turned into words. She learned way more than she would ever understand. She kept pushing herself, even when all she wanted to do was to be alone.

Hope kept turning up, but Alyssa also got to know a bunch of other Gelet, most of them older but not all. Some of them had come from other settlements originally, and she caught some notions of what life was like in a town of just a few hundred or few thousand Gelet, where everybody really knew everyone else by heart. She got to witness just the merest part of what a debate among the Gelet would feel like.

In her coldest moments, Alyssa caught herself thinking, *I need to learn everything I can, in case one day these people are all gone and my descendants are the only ones who can preserve these memories.* That thought never failed to send her into a rage at herself, even angrier than when she thought she had ruined her own tendrils.

She thought of what Mouth had said to her once, about cultural survival. People died, even nations flamed out, but you need somebody left behind to carry the important stuff forward.

"You were right."

Jeremy had caught Alyssa by surprise when she was dozing in a big web with a dozen Gelet, waiting for their dead Magistrate to show up. Jeremy seemed way older than the last time Alyssa had seen him, his shoulders squared against some new weight that was never going to be lifted away. He faced her eye to eye, not trying to cover any part of himself or turn aside.

"Wait. What was I right about?" Alyssa said. "The last time I won an argument, it involved handfuls of blood and a punctured lung. I've stopped

craving vindication.”

“There’s so much more at stake than who sits inside that ugly Palace back home in Xiosphant.” Jeremy shook his head. “I came here hoping to find a new way to organize people against the Vice Regent, but we have more important work to do. You were right about all of it: being a hybrid isn’t just a means to an end, it’s way more important than that.”

“Oh.”

Alyssa looked at Jeremy’s shy, unflinching expression, and a wave of affection caught her off guard. They’d gone through this thing together, that almost nobody else alive could understand. She couldn’t help thinking of him almost as a sleepmate—even though they’d only slept near each other, not next to each other.

“We can’t just send people here and expect them to handle this change on their own. Anyone who comes here is going to need someone to talk them through every step of the process, someone who understands how to be patient,” Jeremy said. “So ... I’ve made a decision. I think it would be easier to show than to tell.”

Alyssa understood what he meant after a moment, and she let her tendrils relax, slacken, so his own could brush against them.

She was terrified that she would show him the moment when she tried to rip these things out of her body—so of course that’s what she did show him. The screaming panic, the feeling of her fingers grasping and tearing, trying to rip out your own heart.

Jeremy stumbled, flinched, and let out a moan ... and then he accepted Alyssa’s memory. And he gave back a brief glimpse of his own worst moment: Alyssa was Jeremy, lashing out, with a snarl in his throat, the heel of his hand colliding with the nearest terrified Gelet, a blood-red haze over everything. *I’ll kill you all* repeating in his head, *I’ll tear you apart, kill you kill you*. The new alien senses flooding into Jeremy’s brain, bringing back all the times when he’d needed to look over his shoulder with every step he took.

“It’s okay,” Alyssa said, wrapping her arms around Jeremy under the roots of his tentacles. “It’s really okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Jeremy trembled. “I’m a monster. At least nobody was badly hurt.”

“You’re not a monster. You were just scared. We both were.” Alyssa clutched him tighter, until he clung to her as well. “We prepared ourselves,

but we weren't ready. We need to make sure it goes better next time."

"That's what I was going to tell you about." Jeremy relaxed a little. "This is what I decided." He sent Alyssa another vision, this time of a future he'd envisioned.

Jeremy was here, still inside the midnight city, studying everything the Gelet could teach him. And then, when more humans arrived from Xiosphant, Alyssa saw Jeremy greeting them. Guiding them around the city, preparing them, talking them through every step of the way. The Jeremy in the vision grew old, but never went back to the light.

Alyssa had to say it aloud: "You want to stay here? Forever?"

"I ... I think it's the right thing to do," Jeremy whispered. "I can organize, I can be a leader, all of that. Just down here, rather than back in Xiosphant. Humans are going to keep coming here, and there needs to be someone here to help. Otherwise, more people will..."

"More people will react the way you and I did." Alyssa shuddered.

"Yeah."

Alyssa found herself sharing a plan of her own with Jeremy. She imagined herself going back to Xiosphant, back to Sophie and Mouth—but not just helping them to convince more people to come here and become hybrids. She pictured herself carrying on Jeremy's work: finding the people who were being crushed by all the wrong certainties, helping them to form a movement. Maybe opening someplace like that coffee shop where Sophie and Jeremy used to work. Giving people a safe place to escape from all that Xiosphanti shit.

"You were right too," Alyssa told Jeremy. "People in Xiosphant need to come together. If they had someplace to go in that city, maybe more of them might be open to thinking about coming here."

"Can you take care of Cyrus, though?" Jeremy sent a brief impression of the biggest marmot Alyssa had ever seen, purring and extending blue pseudopods in every direction. "I left him with a friend, but he needs someone reliable to look after him. Sophie already knows him."

"Sure," Alyssa said, hugging Jeremy with their tendrils still intertwined.

Alyssa stayed a while longer in the midnight city, healing up but also keeping Jeremy company. After she left, he might not hear another voice for a while—and weirdly, the longer Alyssa had these tendrils, the more important verbal communication seemed to her, because words had a

different kind of precision, and there were truths that could only be shared in word-form. Alyssa introduced Jeremy to Hope, and explained in a whisper about everything she'd been through, and Jeremy introduced Alyssa to some of his own Gelet friends, too.

Her surgical scars settled down to a dull ache, and then slowly stopped hurting at all, except for when she strained her muscles or slept weird. The new body parts and what remained of the pain both felt like they were just part of Alyssa, the same way the Chancers and the Resourceful Couriers would always be. "I guess it's time," Alyssa said to herself. She walked up towards the exit to the Gelet city with Hope on one side, and Jeremy on the other, though Jeremy planned to turn back before they reached the exit.

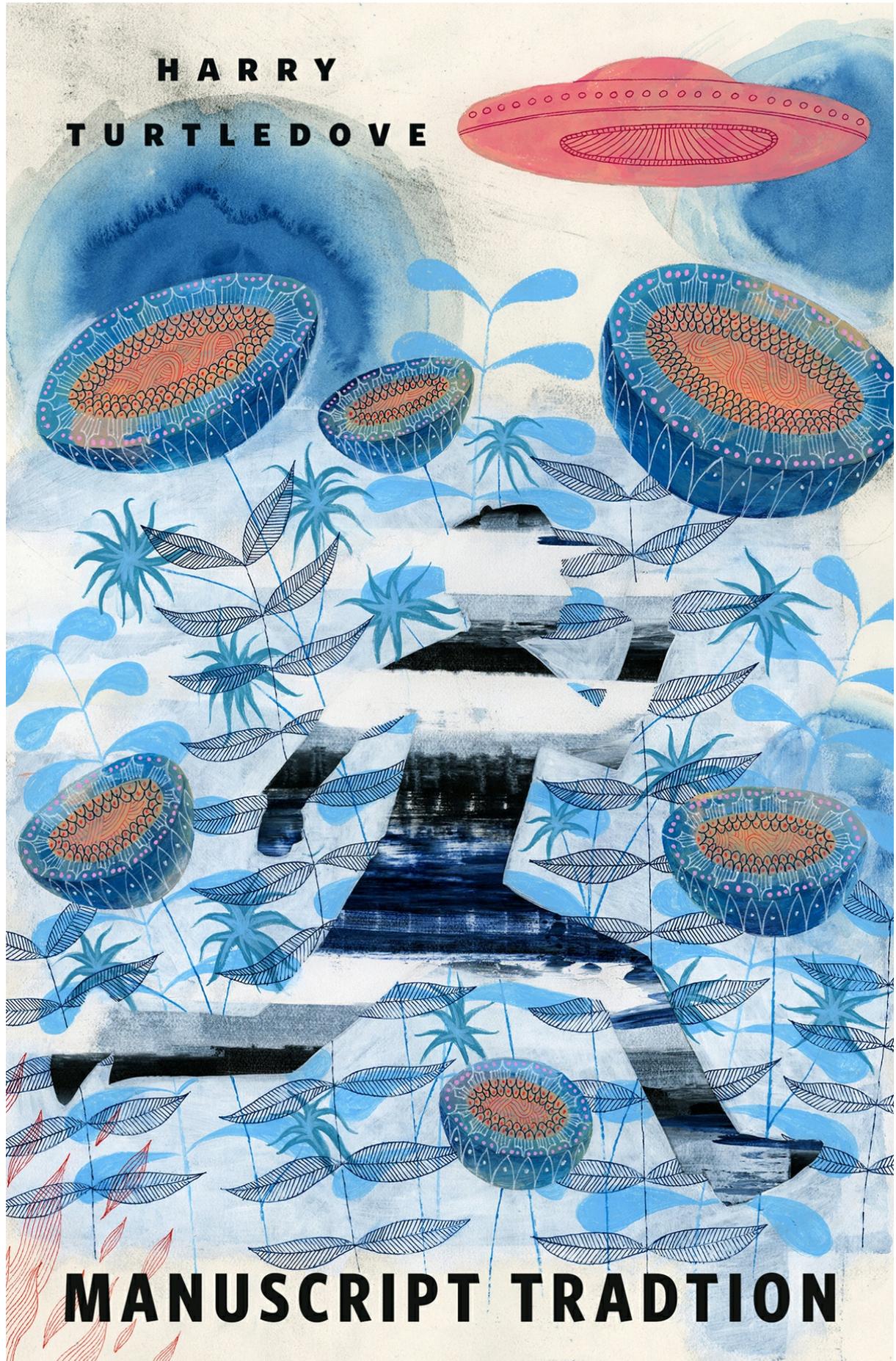
Almost without thinking, Alyssa extended her tendrils so she was connected to both Jeremy and Hope, and the three of them shared nothing in particular as they walked. Just a swirl of emotions, fragments of memory, and most of all, a set of wishes for the future that were just vague enough to be of comfort. They stayed in this three-way link, until the first gusts of freezing air began to filter down from the surface of the night.



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**HARRY
TURTLEDOVE**



MANUSCRIPT TRADITION

MANUSCRIPT TRADITION

HARRY TURTLEDOVE

illustration by

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Dr. Feyrouz Hanafusa glanced at the wall clock above the exit. In big red numerals, it told her the time was 7.08. In smaller numerals below, the clock admitted it was also 1700. Conversion to decimal units had been under way for more than fifty years: since Feyrouz was a girl. It remained incomplete. The curator of the Beinecke expected it would still be incomplete in 2269—fifty years from now. For the *really* old-fashioned, still smaller characters called it 5:00 PMPM.

While she watched, it went from 5:00 to 5:01 and from 1700 to 1701. Less than half a thousandth later, 7.08 became 7.09. However you marked it, however you looked at it, it was quitting time.

As if to underscore that, the soft rumble of plastic wheels on industrial-strength carpeting announced that Tony Loquasto was making the last cleanup swing of his shift. The janitor took a hand off his rolling trash barrel and touched it to the edge of his tricorn. “G’night, Professor,” he said, as he did more evenings than not. He tried to time that last swing so he came to the door at the same time as the curator.

“Good night, Tony. See you in the morning.” Dr. Hanafusa smiled fondly at him. The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library had preserved such things at Yale since the middle of the twentieth century. Loquastos had been sweeping up there from at least the 2070s on. Tony claimed they’d been doing the job even longer, but the Great Data Smash of 2071 made that hard to prove.

She remembered seeing a Yale print yearbook from the 2080s. Vic Loquasto’d been the Beinecke’s head custodian then. He’d worn a bushy mustache and had a lot of curly hair sticking out from under his dumb-looking baseball cap. Such details aside, he looked a lot like his several-times-great-grandson.

Out into the muggy warmth of a July early evening she went. She smiled again. How fitting that even the Beinecke’s janitors had so much history behind them.

Thinking of history made her look back at the building where she lived her professional life. It was built in the spare style that had been called modern architecture all those years ago. Five stories tall, it was shaped like a shoebox and resembled nothing so much as a gray-and-white waffle.

By now, several stylistic movements had come and gone since the Beinecke was modern. The swooping lines and translucent finish of the Tereshkova Xenobiology Hall across the quad were only half as passé as the Beinecke's resolute rectangularity.

Except for the microbes of Mars and the odd oceanic creatures under Europa's icy crust, xenobiology had been theoretical when the Tereshkova Hall went up. The swarm of people coming out of the building now showed how much it had grown in the past century and a quarter. Probes had found life on a planet of Tau Ceti and on another one revolving around Epsilon Eridani. Analyzing, comparing, and exploiting different biochemistries was as hot a field as computer graphics had been a couple of hundred years earlier.

And, odds were, it would be heating up still more. Nothing had gone wrong with the robot ship launched toward TRAPPIST-1 as the twenty-first century drew towards a close. Now it was sending data back to Earth. Or rather, now the data it had sent back to Earth forty years ago were starting to arrive.

TRAPPIST-1 was a piss-poor excuse for a star. An M8 dwarf, it was only a little bigger than Jupiter, though more than eighty times as massive. But even in the early twenty-first century they'd learned it had seven planets with at least the potential for life. That made it a most intriguing target for starships. It was an old star, billions of years older than the Sun. The life its planets bore—if indeed they bore any—would be older than Earth's, too. As far back as the late twentieth century, David Gerrold had realized extra gigayears of evolution could mean corresponding extra sophistication.

A headline ten meters tall appeared in the air in front of Tereshkova Hall: CRAWLER LANDING ON FARADAY. Back in the day, TRAPPIST-1's planets had borne letters from *a* to *g*. Now they were named, alphabetically still, after famous old scientists: Avicenna, Bohr, Curie, Dawes, Eratosthenes, Faraday, and Goodall. Their orbits, all close to their star, were full of complex resonances. The inner five always turned

the same face toward TRAPPIST-1; Faraday and Goodall rotated three times for every two revolutions. A crawler had already come down in the libration ribbon between Dawes's light and dark sides.

Feyrouz knew vaguely that getting the landers to good areas on those unimaginably distant worlds hadn't been easy. Modern savants kept worrying that the primitive, slow, stupid computers on the starship weren't up to the job. They seemed to have been wrong, though. The curator didn't worry about the details, any more than a Victorian businessman in Salt Lake City worried about *how* the telegraph sent his message to Indianapolis.

Feyrouz walked to the edge of campus and waited for the bus to take her to her apartment building. Its electric motor as quiet as the inside of a library was supposed to be, the bus rolled up to the stop a few minutes later. Like so many industrial products these days, it was manufactured in the Brazilian Empire. The Naviopetra batteries that powered it were a Brazilian specialty; they held more power in less space and weight than any competitors.

Ten minutes later, she got off. The bus glided away. She went up one block and over two to reach her building. Her head was on a swivel while she did it. New Haven had always had its share of crime and maybe a little more. Cameras everywhere made robbers more likely to get caught. That didn't stop a lot of them. And, if one of them clouted you in the pot so you wouldn't hold on to your goodies, you might be too damaged afterwards to care.

No one bothered her on the way to the her apartment. The DNA sniffer at the security gate confirmed that she was entitled to go inside. The door sighed open. She went in. The door slid shut behind her.

Another DNA sniffer (a newer, better model, one she'd paid for herself) on her door agreed that she really did live in Unit 27. She walked inside. The door closed. The lights and the air-conditioning came on.

The cat walked out of the bedroom. His complaint-filled meows said she'd stayed away from him much too long, even if today was no different from any other day. "It's all right, Wilfrid," Feyrouz said. Wilfrid was unconvinced, as he was almost every evening. She scratched his chin, then sat down on the carpet beside him and petted him and rubbed his tummy while he did flop-and-rolls and purred like a boat with an internal-combustion engine.

She fed the tropical fish. It was a peaceable tank: cardinals and neons and danios and little rasboras and the like. A Corydoras catfish went along a side wall, nibbling on algae and keeping the view clear. Wilfrid batted at the fish he couldn't reach. They were as much fun for him as a good immersive was for her.

Once the critters were taken care of, Feyrouz could tend to her own dinner. She took a tilapia-and-rice pack out of the freezer and stuck it into the microwave. The oven's sensor registered the ration points when she touched the HEAT panel. She sighed. The authorities insisted things were getting better, but she remained convinced food packs had been more substantial when she was a kid.

As she waited for the microwave to finish, she glanced at the photo of her son on the little table. Sam was living his own life, homesteading and doing urban archaeology in the ruins of Sandusky, Ohio. Feyrouz wished he would call or vid more often, but what mother didn't?

She ate, rinsed the pack and chucked it into the recycle bin, and washed her *hashi* before sticking them in the dish drainer. Then she said, "News." Words and pictures appeared before her, on a smaller scale than in front of the Tereshkova Xenobiology Hall but with the same principle.

The Red Sox were going through their pregame warm-ups against Havana. Feyrouz gestured impatiently. No matter how the algorithm felt about it, she didn't think that was news. The West Coast and New Texico had tightened their infoblockade against the United States. She gnawed on the inside of her lower lip. Colleagues in both countries had warned her that was likely. It didn't make living in a data-driven world any easier, though.

Spokesfolk for the shah of Iran were denying that the outbreak of antibiotic-resistant plague in Kurdistan had anything to do with his government. Spokesfolk for the Kurdish prime minister said genetic work in their labs proved the shah was a lying Shiite dog. Feyrouz wondered whether the Middle East would ever know peace. It struck her as unlikely.

She waved away reports on the bribery scandal in Brussels, the data-access scandal in Washington, and the anti-Mormon riots in Sacramento (grainy video almost scrambled by the blockade). They were a fine basket of deplorables, but she couldn't do anything about any of them. "Space news," she told the AI.

A report that the planetary probe had gotten down safely on Faraday

made her smile and nod. An atmosphere with 22 percent oxygen had already shown that Faraday held life. The crawler was starting to analyze it. Genetic material there seemed to use nineteen amino acids, seventeen of them among the twenty that terrestrial DNA employed. “The crawler appears to have landed in a forest, not far from the edge,” the voice-over said. “First pictures are expected in ten to twelve hours.”

Feyrouz sighed. The little pea brain inside the starship—the best they could do back in the twenty-first century, she reminded herself—would be crunching numbers as hard as it could, crunching them and putting them together to make images and beaming back across the light-years. Or rather, it would have been doing that almost forty years ago. Those images would have left TRAPPIST-1’s system when she was a college sophomore.

“Enough news,” she said when the starship report finished. It was a little past seven. If she wanted to, she could watch the Red Sox and the Cigarmakers bang heads. But she didn’t feel like it. New Haven lay almost on the border between Red Sox Nation and the dark kingdom of the Yankees farther west. She wasn’t tempted into rooting for the false gods in pinstripes, but her faith in Holy Fenway had weakened in recent years. A string of sorry Bosox finishes didn’t help, either.

She put on a pair of headphones, letting one rest a few centimeters above each eye. Then she asked for the immersives menu. She chose an adaptation of a classic, Mary Renault’s *The Mask of Apollo*. She’d been inside that one before; she knew it was good. Something familiar would help her wind down and get ready for bed.

Closing her eyes, she said, “Begin!”

By anything her brain could prove, she wasn’t a middle-aged woman in modern New Haven any more, but a child on a stage in Athens 2,600 years earlier. Everything Nikeratos, the main character, experienced or thought or felt, so did she. Part of her dimly realized she and the people around her were speaking English, not ancient Greek, but it didn’t matter.

When they came in a hundred years before, immersives had changed acting forever. You didn’t just have to sound and look convincing; you had to make the people who would be there with you—well, with the recording of you—believe that you were going through everything that happened in the story. There’d been a great shakeout of performers at the time, the way there had been when talkies conquered silents a couple of centuries earlier.

The only thing wrong with *The Mask of Apollo* she could see was that its ending was almost too painful to stand. But she found herself smiling anyway when she took off the headphones. Whenever she dipped into this immersive, she better understood—at least for a little while—what her son felt for his husband.

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She was still smiling when she went to bed, and again when she got up the next morning. She fed Wilfrid and cuddled him and gave him fresh water, then ran him around with a laser pointer till his sides heaved. He wouldn't have much excitement till she got home unless a fish jumped out of the tank. In that case, he'd have a snack, too.

After a quick shower, Feyrouz fixed her own breakfast: coffee, along with natto and green onions and mustard on top of leftover rice. The slimy fermented beans were better for her than bacon and eggs, and much easier on the ration book. She splurged every once in a while, but only every once in a while. A curator wasn't made of money.

"News," she said as she cleaned up and made herself a second cup of coffee so she'd be sure her heart would keep beating all morning. A moment later, she added, "Space news."

"Here are some early images the Faraday crawler transmitted to the starship in the TRAPPIST-1 system," the AI said. "You will see them two ways: first in the very red light the star actually emits, and then with processing to make the light peak appear yellow, as it would under our sunlight."

The first photo that appeared in the air in front of Feyrouz was as murky as the newsbriefer had warned her it would be. The sky looked purplish; the dust was a deeper red than Mars, and the plants seemed a brownish-black mass, with few details visible no matter how she squinted.

The photoshopped version seemed magically better. The sky turned blue—not quite Earthly blue, but something closer to turquoise. The few clouds changed from the color of wet, bloody cement to grayish white. And the dirt looked like dirt, and the plants looked like plants.

Not quite like terrestrial plants, though. Despite image processing, their green wasn't that of the green hills of Earth. The leaves didn't look like any Feyrouz would see growing on campus—or in an arboretum, either.

In spite of their alienness, some of the plants in the image from the probe seemed oddly familiar to Feyrouz. Those blue flowery things with the golden oval central structures and the small leaves that looked like starfish with too many legs, the other blue growth that rose on a peppermint-striped stalk from something that resembled a pitcher plant ...

“Where have I seen those before?” Feyrouz asked aloud. Like a lot of people living alone, she’d gotten used to talking to herself. Over the past century and a half or so, having an AI at one’s beck and call had given even more folks the habit.

This time, the AI didn’t respond. It couldn’t work out the association. For a little while, neither could she. She rubbed her chin, thinking hard. Was it in the small semitropical piece of Iran just south of the Caspian Sea, where she and her first husband went on their honeymoon? She frowned, shaking her head. She didn’t think so. If she’d seen those funny plants at all, if she wasn’t just imagining things, she’d come across them more recently and closer to home than that.

Closer to home? Her jaw dropped. Yes, one hell of a lot closer! She could have gotten the answer from the AI now that she had a clue, but she didn’t. She could do it at work. Oh, could she ever!

When she got to campus, the headline in the air in front of the Xenobiology Hall was INTELLIGENT LIFE ON FARADAY! The enormous image below it showed the ruins of a gray stone spa or swimming pool or fountain or something of that sort. It wasn’t full of water now, the way it was meant to be. Only a few scummy puddles lay on the bottom, with something like a bunny-eared rat lapping from one of them.

Feyrouz gave the photo no more than a passing glance. It came as no great surprise to her, no matter how gobsmacked the rest of the world might be right now. The rest of the world plainly hadn’t made the connection she had, though someone else in it was bound to before long.

She hurried into the Beinecke. Bland, cool, dry, air-conditioned air replaced the hot, sticky stuff outside. Tony Loquasto paused in sweeping the front hall to touch the edge of his hat and give her a polite nod.

“Mornin’, Professor Hanafusa,” he said. He had a faint New England accent and, under it, what might have been an even fainter Italian one. Or maybe Feyrouz was imagining that.

“Good morning, Tony.” She grudged even that brief reply. She had to

get up into the stacks as fast as she could.

But the janitor, blast him, felt like chatting. “Wonderful day, ain’t it?” he said. “Now we know we got company out there. That’s really somethin’, know what I mean?”

“It sure is.” Feyrouz made herself stop, made herself smile, made herself nod. You had to behave like a human being with the people who worked for you unless you wanted them to talk about you behind your back. The world wouldn’t end—she didn’t suppose it would, anyhow—if she checked things in a couple of thousandths, not *right now*.

Though she did her best not to be rude, some of her urgency must have got through to him. “Don’t want to keep you or nothin’,” he said, and went off with his broom and his rolling trash can. He didn’t move very fast; Feyrouz couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a janitor in a hurry. As long as he was chinning with her, he didn’t have to do any actual work.

At the elevators, she poked the UP panel with an impatient forefinger. She didn’t have to wait any more—a door slid open. She went inside. The door closed behind her. This was the fourth generation of elevators in the building. They were far safer than the originals, and used less than half as much energy. Similar improvements had gone into the AC and the lighting and the fire-suppression systems.

On the top floor was a room with special air-conditioning, fire suppression, and surveillance even by current standards. The Beinecke as a whole housed and protected rare books and manuscripts, as its name said it did. That room housed and protected the rarest of the rare. The DNA sniffer above the latch put the one on Feyrouz’s apartment door to shame.

She knew just where in the room the manuscript she wanted lived. If she hadn’t, she wouldn’t have been likely to name her cat Wilfrid. The Voynich Manuscript wasn’t very big: no more than twenty-five centimeters by seventeen. Scholars had been certain for centuries that its parchment cover wasn’t the one it had originally worn.

They’d also been certain its 234 surviving pages (some—no one knew how many—were missing) dated from the early fifteenth century. Studies of bookbinding techniques and radioactive dating of vellum and ink led to the same conclusion.

And there certainty ended, sloppy dead on the floor. Many of the manuscript’s pages pictured plants—plants portrayed nowhere else, plants resembling nothing people had ever seen anywhere else. The writing that

presumably explained the illustrations was in an unknown tongue; the script itself also had no known duplicate.

The Voynich Manuscript—named for Wilfrid Michael Voynich, a twentieth-century owner and researcher—came to the Beinecke in 1969 as a donation from the man who'd bought it from the man who'd inherited it from Voynich's widow. It had been a curiosity, a mystery, for hundreds of years before that. It still was. Plenty of people claimed to have solved the mystery of its script. Nobody'd done so in a way that satisfied scholars.

Feyrouz carried a pair of thin white cotton gloves in her belt pouch so she could handle delicate manuscripts without harming them. She put on the gloves before taking the Voynich Manuscript from the shelf and carrying it to a carrel. Eight hundred years separated her from the unknown author and artist, who'd almost certainly created the manuscript in northern Italy. She turned the pages gently and carefully.

Her breath caught. There were the blue flowery things with the golden oval centers. A couple of paragraphs' worth of incomprehensible text dodged past and among their stems. When she went a page farther, she came to the maybe-pitcher plant, again with something in that unknown script written alongside it. Above and to the right of the flower (?) with the candy-cane stalk was the number 35, in ordinary Arabic numerals. Most of the pages were numbered. Those numbers, with a few Latin-alphabet words probably not by the original creator, were the only decipherable bits in the manuscript.

All of which meant ... what? What could it mean but that whoever'd made the Voynich Manuscript had somehow known what plants on Faraday, forty light-years from Earth, were like? How was that possible? With the manuscript around eight centuries old, was it possible at all?

"The idea's insane," Feyrouz said—again, where no one could hear her, though surveillance cameras in this secure room might pick up the words.

It might have been insane, but all other possibilities struck her as crazier yet. The photos sent back from Faraday didn't just kind of look like the illustrations in the manuscript. The illustrations were what a good artist—not a great one, but good, plenty good—would have turned out if he or she had been painting from those photos.

And the pool or spa or whatever it was looked like the pictures of such things the artist had also included in the manuscript. There were several

pages with such illustrations. In them, though, the pools had been full of water and were populated by rather chunky naked women. Or maybe they weren't women, or not exactly women. Maybe they were the friends or family the artist had left behind.

"Maybe my brain needs reprogramming," Feyrouz muttered. But she didn't think so. She also didn't think she'd be the only person asking those questions for long. Someone else familiar with the Voynich Manuscript would make the same associations she had—would very likely not just make them but spread them all over the infosphere.

Someone might well have started doing that already. Feyrouz didn't fret about it. The wild urge to be first wasn't a social disease she'd ever caught. Page by page, she went through the manuscript. The astrological diagrams, if that was what they were, had never made any Earthly sense. Would they in the context of Faraday's sky and the other planets in the TRAPPIST-1 system? Again, she had no idea, but the question seemed worth asking.

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The door to the special room clicked open. The small rumble of plastic wheels on carpet told Feyrouz it was a janitor making rounds. Probably Tony Loquasto; no one else from the custodial staff would be authorized to come in here. She hadn't known he was, but it made sense. Even with no academic rank, he was as trusted, as reliable, an employee as the Beinecke boasted. And, while air filters ensured that the special room didn't get dusty in a hurry, it did get dusty.

Thanks to the noise from those wheels, Feyrouz kept an ear on where Tony was going. Somehow, she wasn't completely astonished when he turned down the aisle that led to the shelf where the Voynich Manuscript usually perched. She also wasn't astonished when the noise stopped right about there. She hadn't expected the janitor to know about the manuscript, but one never knew, did one?

She closed the volume, stood, and carried it back to its beige-painted metal case. Sure enough, there stood Tony, doing a not quite good enough job of pretending to dust.

"Hello," she said. "Were you looking for this?" She held up the Voynich Manuscript.

He did a not quite good enough job of pretending he had no idea what she was talking about. Then he must have realized it wasn't quite good enough, because he chuckled and shrugged and nodded. "As a matter of fact, Professor Hanafusa, I was."

"Have you looked at it before?" Feyrouz asked, her voice a bit tight. If he'd pored over images from it on the infosphere, that was one thing. If he'd got not just eyeprints but perhaps greasy fingerprints on the actual, irreplaceable physical book, that was something else again.

He hesitated. Then he nodded. "The pictures, you know, they're pictures of plants and stuff from, ah, Faraday."

"You saw that, too?" she said.

"Yeah, I did." Tony Loquasto nodded again. "Which ones made you spot it, you don't mind my asking?"

She still had the gloves on. She opened the Voynich Manuscript and pointed out the plants. "This one ... and this one. I saw them on a news projection this morning, and naturally I recognized them."

"Thank you," Loquasto said, which baffled her. Then he nodded one more time. "The hadadband and the potta, hey? Yeah, them are a couple what stand out from the crowd, like."

"The which and the what?" Feyrouz was baffled again. "Do you mean the plants? Why do you call them that?"

He sighed. By the look on his face, he wished he'd kept his mouth shut. Since he hadn't, though, he needed to answer. "Why? On account of those're their names."

"They are? In what language?" Feyrouz didn't call him a nut right out loud. But no one had ever deciphered the Voynich Manuscript. Plenty of people had claimed they'd done it, but none of the claims held water.

She might not have called him a nut, but he knew what she meant. "I don't think I better talk about it no more," he said. "You'll send for the boys in the white coats with the straitjacket and the butterfly nets."

Not many people would have had the slightest notion of what he was talking about. Feyrouz had never heard anybody use the idiom he came out with, but she'd run across it in print once or twice—she enjoyed old books. "No, I won't," she promised, raising her hand as if taking an oath. "You're the best janitor the Beinecke could have, and you don't have to be sane to do the job. Maybe being crazy even helps."

He grunted laughter. "Boy, you got that right, Professor!" he said. But

he kept quiet after that for some little while. “You really mean it? ’Cause what I got to say, I know it’ll sound screwy to you.”

“There’s nothing about the Voynich Manuscript that *doesn’t* sound screwy,” Feyrouz said. “So go ahead. What’s your take on it?”

“I don’t got no take on it,” the janitor said. “I wrote the damn thing, that’s all.”

Feyrouz giggled. She knew she shouldn’t have; a second later she pulled her face straight. But it was too late. She could tell right away. And when she said, “Did you?”, she knew she sounded like someone humoring a real nutjob. That careful neutrality in her voice meant the same thing the giggle did.

“See? I told ya ya wouldn’t believe me,” Tony Loquasto said without heat. “But I did, yeah.”

“Um, how is that possible?” Feyrouz asked. “It was eight hundred years ago, after all.”

“We don’t die as quick as you. Rocked me back pretty hard when I seen how quick you people peg out,” Loquasto said. “We sent a starship here. Something musta gone wrong. Don’t ask me what. I was in cold sleep—the travel time wasn’t to sneeze at, even for us. When I woke up, the emergency pod’d already kicked free. All I could do was ride it down, so I did. I landed in Italy, like you’d guess. Learned the language, wrote the book when I could afford to. Best I could do to remember what the old place was like, y’know?”

“Why haven’t there been more starships from Faraday, then?” Feyrouz did her resolute best to stay reasonable.

“Probably on account of we had ourselves a big old no-holds-barred war,” Loquasto answered, his voice bleak. “Almost happened here a time or three. You guys’ve been lucky. I bet we weren’t.”

“It could be.” Again, Feyrouz kept her voice neutral. He was one of those rational-sounding lunatics. She almost wanted to believe him. But that would mean believing he’d been on Earth since around 1400 and on Faraday for who could guess how long before that. Occam’s Razor said—shouted—he was a fruitcake. She tried another question: “When did you come to America?”

“In—lemme think—1893, that’s when,” the janitor said. “I hoped it’d be better, and I guess it was. And after the Beinecke got the manuscript, I figured I oughta keep an eye on it. I been here since ... I guess it was

1980-something when they hired me. I been sweepin' up ever since, even if I had to change my handle and my style every so often to keep folks from gettin' snoopy, like."

He still sounded rational. She was tempted once more to believe him. Vic Loquasto, from almost a century and a half earlier, had looked just like Tony now except for the haircut and the mustache and the funny old-time clothes. But if you started believing in a nearly immortal refugee from another planet, wouldn't the boys with the butterfly nets and the straitjacket come for you next? And wouldn't you need coming for?

She held out the Voynich Manuscript to Tony. "Do you still want this?" she asked.

"Nah, that's okay, Professor Hanafusa. I'll just go back to making my rounds. Gotta keep things neat, right?" The janitor turned his wheeled trash barrel around and headed for the door. He opened it and went through. It clicked shut behind him.

Feyrouz didn't realize she'd been holding her breath till she let it out in a long sigh. She put the Voynich Manuscript back on the shelf. So small, so nondescript—and so very, very strange on the inside. Shaking her head, she started back to her office.

* * *

Her administrative assistant jumped out of his chair—he almost jumped out of his skin—when she walked in. "Great God in the circuit diagram!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

"What's the matter, Paulo?" she asked, blinking. He was usually the calmest thing on two legs. That was part of what made him good at his job.

Not now. He gaped at her, goggle-eyed. "Check your messages. Check the news first, though. What have you been *doing* this past hour?"

"Research," she said, which even had the added virtue of being true. She walked into her sanctum and closed the door after her, something she hardly ever did. Only then did she address the air: "News, please!" On a hunch, she added, "Space news."

A headline appeared in the air in front of her: FARADAY CRAWLER DESTROYED! SEE SHOCKING IMAGES! Her nod, shaky though it was, meant she wanted to see the images, whether they were shocking or not.

The infosphere obliged. The first photo didn't seem particularly shocking, not to begin with. It was a shot of what might have been the base of a statue. If there'd ever been a statue on top of it, though, that was long gone. As bases sometimes will, this one had an inscription carved into it, commemorating what it didn't hold any more.

Feyrouz couldn't read the inscription, of course. She wouldn't have expected to be able to, not in a million years. But she could recognize its script. She hadn't expected that, either, though later she supposed she should have. It was a cleaned-up, formal-looking version of the writing that filled the parchment leaves of the Voynich Manuscript.

The next picture, which was also the last, showed a naked blonde woman carrying a big rock. No—a second look told Feyrouz it wasn't a rock: it was a chunk of concrete, with rusty rebar stubs sticking out of it here and there.

The woman was dirty and muscular, and slightly on the chunky side—like the women in the pools in the manuscript and, now that Feyrouz thought about it, quite a bit like Tony Loquasto himself. She didn't think about it long. The way the woman was staring in the direction of the crawler didn't exactly require one to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out why it stopped transmitting right after that.

Probably on account of we had ourselves a big old no-holds-barred war. The janitor's words echoed in Feyrouz's head. So did other, older ones from Thomas Hobbes, about the life of man in a state of nature: ... *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.* If that blonde woman didn't epitomize them, Feyrouz couldn't imagine what would.

But she didn't have time to deal with any of that now. As Paulo'd warned her, a huge tsunami of messages had swamped her in-box. Some were from obvious nuts, some from Voynich Manuscript enthusiasts who might not be nuts, some from scientists who might be nuts, some from government officials and clergyfolk who were surely going nuts. She had to sort through them all to figure out which ones she needed to answer as soon as she could, which could wait, and which could be erased without answering.

Lunch? She never got the chance. A video crew interviewed her for two thousandths—the most time she could spare—for the infosphere. Fame and notoriety were the last things she wanted. She never would have gone into library science had she wanted them. Want them or not, she had

them now.

It slid toward 7.08. Quitting time? She wouldn't get the chance for that, either. Maybe Paulo or somebody could bring her food and coffee, lots more coffee. She feared she'd end up sleeping in the office tonight, leaning back in the chair with her feet on the desk.

Thinking of quitting time did make her remember Tony Loquasto. She called his phone code. He didn't answer, which surprised her. Bonkers or not, Tony was nothing if not reliable. She left a message, asking him to call her back. When he didn't, she called the general custodial code.

She got the number two custodian, who said, "He left this morning, Professor Hanafusa. Didn't you know? Said he had a family emergency. I bet he did, too—he looked big-time green around the gills, if you know what I mean."

"Thanks, Olga." Feyrouz disconnected and went back through her messages to see if she'd overlooked one from Loquasto. She didn't find one, and she didn't think she would have scrubbed one from him. In the madness today, though, she couldn't be sure.

Just then, she got a call from the governor of Connecticut. She had to deal with that, and it made her forget about the errant custodian for a while. And the urgent calls and messages kept pouring in. By the time 9.58—2300 in the old system—rolled around, she was fielding queries from early risers in Europe. She gave it another couple of hundredths, then said the hell with everything, shut down her messaging, and headed for home. Wilfrid deserved that much, didn't he?

It was dark and quiet, except for fire engines screaming like lost souls off in the distance. She had to wait at the stop longer than usual; buses didn't run so often once it got late. And she wished she had a stunner in her pouch as she walked to her building down poorly lit streets. She got there without trouble, and breathed a small sigh of relief after the security door let her in.

Wilfrid wanted to know where the hell she'd been and why he was out of cat food. She fed him and petted him and took care of the fish, all more or less on automatic pilot. Then she said, "News."

"Big fire in West Haven," the infosphere announced; the AI must have known she would have heard the klaxons on her way back.

"Show me. Tell me," Feyrouz instructed. Sure enough, it *was* a big fire: a house that, to judge by the ones nearby, would have stood there

since the twentieth century. It wasn't standing any more. By the enthusiasm with which it burned, whoever lived there might have used it to store acetone or mineral oil.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind than the voice-over said, "Public Information Officer Horowitz says the flames' fierceness makes arson not just possible but probable. The residence, which has belonged to the Loquasto family since at least the 1980s, is of course a total loss. Heat and smoke have prevented firefighters from gaining entry. At this point in time, we simply have no way of knowing whether anyone was trapped in the house when fire engulfed it. Emergency calls were placed by neighbors."

"Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad!" Feyrouz exclaimed. She tried Tony Loquasto's phone code again. This time, she didn't get invited to leave a message. An antique artificial voice—you could tell it was computerized, a dead giveaway that it was antique—informed her that that code was not currently in service.

She did some more swearing. What was it trying to tell her? Did the phone system already know Tony was dead, even if the rest of the infosphere didn't? Or had he canceled the code himself? The police would be able to find out about that, but she couldn't.

Had he torched his own house? Why would anyone do such an insane thing? His family'd lived there forever. The voice-over'd said so. You wouldn't all of a sudden turn two and a half centuries of life to smoke and ash, would you?

Not unless you were covering your tracks, she thought with wintry clarity. But where would he run? His name and all the data the infosphere had soaked up about him would warn if he tried to get a plane ticket or rent a car or probably even take a bus, though you could still feed some buses cash. Surveillance cameras scanned almost every square centimeter.

People still talked about living off the grid. They talked about it, but very few did it. The grid had grown tighter and tighter year by year, decade by decade. These days, hardly anything slipped through it.

Feyrouz was getting ready for bed when she stopped short, her mouth still all foamy with toothpaste. Suppose Tony Loquasto wasn't nuts. Suppose he'd come to Earth from Faraday eight hundred years ago, maybe longer. Suppose years, decades, even centuries weren't that big a deal to him. Wouldn't he have something up his sleeve, something this oh-so-up-

to-date twenty-third century might not know anything about?

She laughed at herself, finished brushing, and went to sleep. She'd be tired and grouchy in the morning as things were. The way she was getting silly now said she really needed to grab what rest she could.

A West Haven police lieutenant waited for her outside the Beinecke when she got there. Mandela Jeter wanted to hear everything she could tell him about Tony Loquasto. She didn't hide anything. It wouldn't have done any good anyway, as she knew. She called up the video from the secure room and let Jeter listen to the custodian claiming to be an alien.

"Wow!" the police officer said, shaking his head in bemusement. "He had a glitch in *his* firmware, didn't he?"

"Plainly, there's a connection between Faraday and the Voynich Manuscript," Feyrouz said. "If you want me to think that connection includes our janitor..." She shook her head, too.

"I hear you." Jeter spiraled a finger by his ear. "Well, we'll run him down pretty soon, I bet. There's nobody in what's left of the old house—we know that now."

"Oh-huh." Feyrouz had learned as much over breakfast. "When you do find him, would I be able to talk with him?"

"I can't promise, but I don't see why not." The lieutenant whistled between his teeth. "I don't know what I figured you'd tell me, but aliens from another planet wasn't it. Can't wait to see the captain's face when I drop this on her." Away he went, leaving Feyrouz to get on with the rest of the craziness of her day.

But they didn't run Tony Loquasto down, not pretty soon and not later, either. Feyrouz wondered about him till she retired at eighty-eight, and, in fact, till she died at 107—a good age, if not a great one. Every so often, she'd put on white gloves and flip through the Voynich Manuscript. It never told her anything she didn't already know. Her best guess was that it never would.

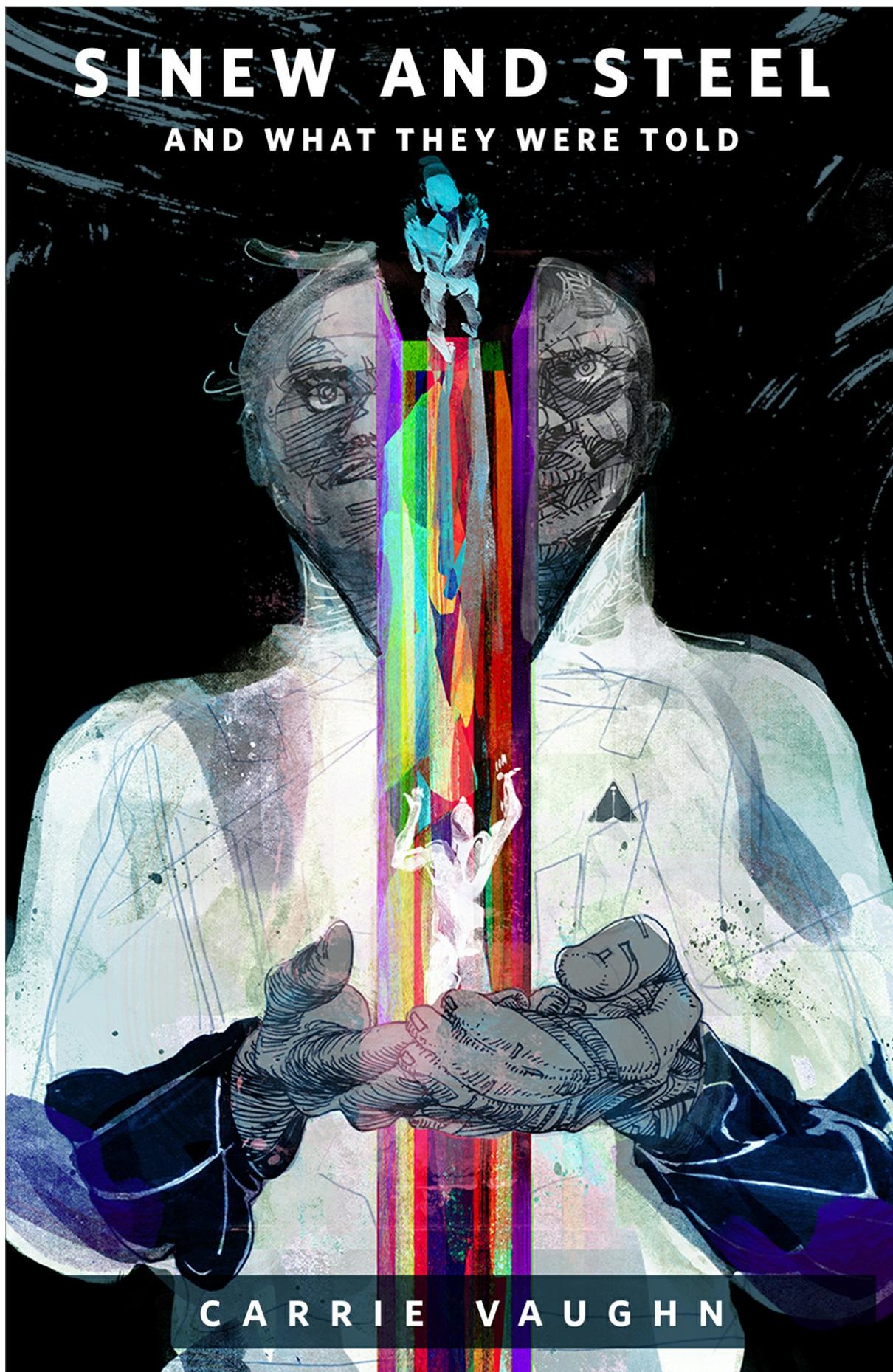


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SINEW AND STEEL

AND WHAT THEY WERE TOLD



CARRIE VAUGHN

Sinew and Steel and What They Told

CARRIE VAUGHN

illustration by

ELI MINAYA

TOR·COM 

I am cut nearly in half by the accident. The surviving fibers of my suit hold me together. I am not dead.

And this is a problem. I expected to die in this job, in my little scout runner, blasted apart, incinerated, torn to pieces with nothing to recover. All that would follow would be a sad memorial service with a picture and an old set of boots on a table. That is how scout pilots usually die. But I am just cut almost in half. And the doctor on my ship, *Visigoth*, is very good.

My biologics are mostly shut down with shock, though I'm dutifully trying to monitor the pain. It's all-enveloping, a fist squeezing my brain. My mechanics are in full self-repair mode, overheating because there's so much to knit back together. Because of them, I have survived long enough that I will probably not die. This is going to be awkward.

From my own internal processor I send out an emergency signal to piggyback on ship comms, so that maybe someone can come and explain.

On autorecovery, my half-exploded runner manages to slam into its berth on the *Visigoth* and rescue crews are standing by. Once they seal all the locks, I try to help them peel me out of the cockpit but it's not really working. There are many pairs of hands and shouting voices.

"Graff, stop, lie back, you'll be fine, it's fine, it's going to be fine—"

I might laugh at this.

The dock crew and medics are full of panic and repressed horror at what they must be looking at. Then I am horizontal, fully supported, no strain at all on my body, which feels wet and wobbly, and the pain is lead weight on every nerve. Fingers pry at my eyelids, a light flashes, and I see him, Doctor Ell, who is also my lover. He has a pale face and a shock of blond hair and intense eyes, and his whole expression is screwed up and serious. I want to pat his shoulder and say everything will be fine but nothing is working. So I look at him.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur.

“Graff, no, what are you talking about?”

“You’re about to find out I faked my medical scans.” I try to smile.

He stares. “What?”

A medic’s voice interrupts. “Doctor! God, look at this—”

Finally, happily, I pass out.

★ ★ ★

Five other people are in the room when I wake up. Ell and Captain Ransom. A support medic, standing by. Two guards at a door that has never had guards at it before.

“When will he wake up?” Ransom asks.

“He’s awake now,” Ell says. He must be watching a monitor.

I’m listening hard—I can hear heartbeats, if I focus. I think I can open my eyes. But I can’t move anything else. There’s a fog; I battle past it.

“Am I paralyzed or on medical restraints?” My voice scratches.

Some rustling as the guards flinch, like they didn’t believe I was awake. The medic perks up.

“Drug-induced paralysis,” Ell says.

“So both.”

“Yes.”

“Because of the injuries or because of everything else?”

Nothing for a long pause, then, “It would be better if you lie still for now.”

“Okay.” I sigh. My lungs still work but feel like they’ve been scrubbed out with pumice.

Ransom curses and begins to pace. He doesn’t have a lot of room and his steps fall hard. His presence always seems to expand to fill whatever space he’s in. It’s actually a comfort right now. Ransom is here, he’ll fix everything.

My processor seems to be fine. Ell didn’t mess with it when he had a chance to look inside me. The self-repair has settled down; I’m still recording. I check the time; it’s been two days since they pulled me out of the runner. Diagnostics say I’m ... mending. Mechanics repaired. Biologics will need more time. I took a beating. But Ell didn’t try to dig in or disconnect anything important. He could have, if he’d wanted to.

I have a lot of questions. I imagine they do, too. We try to wait one another out. My eyes open to a dimly lit ceiling in Medical. I want to see Ell but he's standing back.

Ransom and Ell finally break at the same time.

Ell says, "How did you fake the scans—"

The captain says, "You sent a signal—"

I chuckle. I can't help it. This would be funny if it weren't me. Ransom curses again.

"This isn't funny," Ell says.

"No, I know that," I reply. "I'm sorry." I would laugh outright except it hurts too much, because if I had thought about it before the accident, what Ransom would do if he ever found out about me, this is about how I'd have expected it to go. My ongoing chuckle comes out like a cough.

Ransom is losing his temper. "Graff—"

"Let it go. You know how he is," Ell says.

"I thought I did."

I stop chuckling. "Ask me. Ask me everything."

Ransom starts. "Are you dangerous?"

"Yes. I mean no. Not to any of you."

"Graff, you're not helping," the doctor says.

"What do you want me to say?" I murmur.

"What are you?" the doctor asks.

"Human."

"No, you're not—"

"I didn't fake the DNA records, just the physiological. Look at the DNA." I'm tired. But I need to get through this. I need to know what they're going to do with me.

Ell has touched every inch of me. He must have thought he knew me.

"When was all this work done? How..." Now Ell is pacing. "I've seen cybernetic implants, but this ... this is extensive. This is part of your nervous system. Work this extensive should kill anyone ... but you don't even have any scarring from it. It's all perfectly integrated. How?"

They think I'm dangerous. They think I'm going to go off like a bomb. "Can you send the kids out, please?"

The two guards, the medic. They're not kids, of course they're not. I know them all; I trained with them. But I outrank them. Another long, taut silence follows.

“I’m not going to hurt anyone,” I insist. My head is throbbing. “There are more secrets than mine here. I’ll tell you and the captain but no one else.”

Ell comes to my shoulder, a syringe in hand. I can’t flinch, I can’t resist. He pumps the liquid into a tube already connected to my body somewhere that I can’t see.

“For the pain,” he says gently. “Your vitals are spiking.”

He touches my shoulder, naked under a thin sheet. I almost start crying. My blood stops pounding quite as hard. Nerves fray a little less. Ell steps away. I want to reach for him.

“Drugs work on him at least,” he says to the captain.

“Do you trust him?” Ransom asks. A question that cuts. He’s always trusted me before.

“I don’t know,” Ell says.

I think I might start crying. I wait. We all wait, in air thick with anxiety, like trying to wade through gelatin.

“Marcel, Xun, Brown. You’re dismissed,” Ransom says finally.

“But sir—” He must give them a look, because no one complains further.

They leave reluctantly. Ell murmurs reassurances at them. They all take second, third looks at me. I wonder what the ship’s rumor mill is saying. It will never be the same.

“All right, Graff,” Ransom says. “How ... what...” He waves his hand at me, shakes his head.

I’ve never explained this; I’ve never needed to. I don’t regret having to do so now. It’s how I’m going to survive. Assuming they believe me and trust me at the end of it.

“It’s done in utero,” I say. “It’s grown. Artificial gestation, of course, but that’s—”

“Oh starry fuck,” Ell curses.

I’ve never heard him say ‘fuck’ in all the years I’ve known him. This is probably going to go badly for me.

“Is that even legal?” Ransom asks.

“I’m not sure. It’s certainly not ethical,” he says.

Except it is. It is for us.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Ransom asks calmly. I recognize the tone, the resolve, that he now knows what the problem is and is closer to

figuring out what to do about it. “Why not tell us what ... about this? Why bother hiding it with fake scans?”

“Because we don’t tell anyone.” This drops even harder than the first confession.

“We,” Ransom says.

“I hope you understand what I’m trusting you with, telling you this. I’m trusting you.” This is a plea. I am vulnerable. I trust them. Not that I have much choice. Or I could shut myself off. Burn out my processor, keep all the secrets. But I don’t want to.

“We,” the captain repeats. “You sent a signal. At least, the signal originated from your position. It tried to sneak out on ship comms.”

“But you blocked it before it got out,” I say. And start chuckling again. “I thought that might happen but I had to try. I ... I wanted someone to come and download my processor in case I didn’t make it.”

“How many of you are there?” he asks.

“Not as many as you’re afraid of,” I say.

“Fuck, Graff, what am I supposed to do with you?” Captain Ransom asks.

“I don’t know, sir. Right now I think I would like to sleep. But I’m a little wound up.” I need to know I’ll wake back up again, if I go to sleep. I’m not sure right now.

“You should be dead,” he said. “If you were anyone else in a runner that blew up like that you’d be dead.”

“Yeah, I was sort of thinking if I ever blew up in a runner there wouldn’t be enough left for anyone to learn about any of this.”

“Bad luck there,” Ransom says, deadpan.

“Yeah.”

“I’m about to kill you myself,” Ell says. Then to Ransom: “We should let him sleep.”

“Does he really need to sleep? All those wires...”

“Yes, I need to sleep. And eat. And everything else.” Sex. I need that, too. Just maybe not right now. Where did Ell go? They’re conferencing in the back of the room. Like they can’t bear to look at me. I try to stay awake, so I can explain some more, but the painkiller is also a sedative and it pulls me under.

★ ★ ★

The very best thing I ever ate was ice cream with pieces of dark chocolate and brandied cherries mixed into it. Decadent and comforting at once, served at a too-fancy café with real wood furniture and paneled walls. They made everything themselves with dairy from real goats. I remember thinking, *this*, this is what it's all about.

I got that memory out on a previous download, at least.

I try to send out another message, masking it as a trojan and slipping it in with another signal before the comms operator notices it. But they've got the whole room jammed. I can't access anything, not even the medical computers.

This is bad. I'm not Graff anymore; I'm a thing on a table. Explaining hasn't helped.

I can't explain it, that's the problem.

The memories are pristine. I've got them all stored away, and with them the emotions that goes along with them. The flush on my skin when Ell asked if he could buy me a drink like he was making a dare. The flush on *his* skin when I said yes, because he hadn't thought I would. This was right after he'd come on board as ship's doctor; we'd been in a station-side tavern that was too dark and loud with lots of people dancing. Two days of leave and better make the most of it, right? Ransom had been there, rolling his eyes at the both of us flirting like it was a contest. And only a couple hours later, out in a quiet corridor, I put my hand on Ell's neck, gently pushed him against the wall, and kissed him.

That was a good night.

I write the best after-action reports because I remember. No one ever questions it. I just have a good memory, right? I can still feel the exact sensation when the reactor on the runner blew out, my gut parting like taffy as shrapnel went through it.

Leave that memory and go back to that first night with Ell. That's better. Close my eyes, slow my breathing.

Checking my processor, I know exactly when I've slept and when I haven't. I fall in and out of sleep all day. The door opens, waking me. There are footsteps. I try to look and still can't.

"Doctor?" I ask, rasping. I'm getting hydrated through a tube in a vein, but my mouth is bone dry.

Ell appears next to me. I sigh, relieved. I shouldn't be relieved.

"What's happening?" I ask. I'd meant to ask for water.

He turns away, and my heart lurches. But he's back a moment later with a bottle and straw. "Drink," he orders, and I do. "Better?"

"Yeah. What's happening?"

"Are you a spy?"

"What? No." I mean, I don't think so? Would they think I was, if I told them everything?

"Because Ransom thinks you're a spy."

"For who?"

"I don't know. For whatever you are."

"How bad am I hurt?"

"You should be dead. Your spine was severed. At least I thought it was, but then ... it fixed itself."

"Yeah, it does that."

"You'll be on your feet in another week, and I've hardly done anything but hook you to a feeding tube." He's offended that he can't take credit for saving my life.

"I'd be dead without the feeding tube. That stuff needs calories."

Flustered, he sighs. "What are you?"

"I'm me." That will never be a good enough answer. "What is Ransom saying?"

"He suggested dissection. I think he was joking."

I chuckle.

"It's not funny," Ell says.

"No, I guess not." I look at him because I don't know how much longer I'll get to. My smile feels a bit ridiculous.

He doesn't smile. He's pursed and worried and hurt.

I can move enough to breathe. This takes a deep breath to get it all out. "I would like to be able to move, if you think I might be ready to stop with the nerve block."

"I'll have to ask the captain."

"So it isn't for medical reasons."

"No."

Yeah, this may not go well. "I'm not a spy, I'm not a danger to you or anyone, I would never hurt this ship or anyone on it. Where is Ransom, let me talk to him—"

"He doesn't trust you. Not after this. You *lied*—"

"I didn't!"

“The medical scans? You hacked into the ship’s computers and hijacked my diagnostics systems! You always scanned out as an ideal textbook human and now I know why!”

“Yeah, okay, I guess that was sort of like lying.”

“Graff.” He says it as a reprimand. He’s wondering if everything was a lie.

“I was raised by the ones who provided my genetic material. I have parents. Does that help?”

“It might.” He gets up, puts the bottle of water on a table.

It’s infuriating, not being able to see anything, except that I’m too drugged to be really furious about anything. “Captain’s listening right now, isn’t he? On a monitor? Is he outside the door or what? Or does he have marines ready to storm in if I do something screwy?”

“You can’t do anything, you’re immobilized. Unless the drugs really don’t work on you and you’ve been faking it.” He raises a brow, as if this is a question.

“Well, fuck.” I seriously can’t move. He knows this. I roll my eyes at the ceiling, as if I could get Ransom’s attention that way. “Okay. Captain? Remember the time you had me sit in a runner out on that asteroid for two weeks waiting for those pirates to show up? And remember how you *didn’t tell me* why you wanted me to sit on that rock, or for how long, or anything?”

“Graff—”

The door to Medical slides open, slides shut. Footsteps. And Ransom says, “So you wouldn’t anticipate and launch your burn too soon and spoil the trap.”

“Right!” I exclaim, excited, probably too excited, because Ell appears in my peripheral vision, looking at a monitor and frowning.

Ransom continues, “It’s not that I didn’t trust you—”

“No, see, that’s the thing. It was a good plan, and it wasn’t about you trusting me. I trusted *you*. I’d have sat on that rock for a year if you told me to.”

“Now you’re just trying to guilt me into listening to you.”

“Yes. Yes, I am. Also, I want to keep on following your crazy plans. They’re kind of fun. You know what I was thinking, when I was stuck on that rock?”

“How you were going to kill me for not telling you?”

“No. That I couldn’t wait to see what you had planned. I knew it’d be good.” And it had been. Lots of explosions. “And I was thinking of how many drinks you were going to owe me when I got back.” Those had been my first words when I got back to *Visigoth*, sweaty and stinking from being cooped up for so long: “You owe me a drink, sir.” He’d laughed. I’d known Ransom since flight school, almost right after I left home. I can’t imagine what this looks like from his end. I’ll never make it up to him.

The captain’s voice is taut. “This might have been easier if a switch flipped and turned him into some killer robot.” He’s talking to Ell, who grumbles.

I ask, “Why didn’t you burn out my processor when you had me open, right after the accident?”

The doctor says, “I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Doctor, can we have a word?” Ransom says. I can picture him jabbing a thumb over his shoulder, but he never enters my line of sight.

Ell nods, looks at me one more time. “Do you need anything? Anything critical to your current state of health, I mean.”

“You?” I ask hopefully.

He looks away. The door shuts, and I close my eyes.

* * *

I spend the next two days trying to think of exactly the right thing to tell Ell and Ransom that will make everything all right and get everything back to the way it was. Or at least have them not look at me like I’m a villain in a bad drama. And I think I’ve got it. I stay awake by sheer force of will. Assuming I ever get to download again, whoever gets the package is going to know every inch of this ceiling. It’s got just the littlest bit of texture, like a partially worn pebble. The gray is rather pleasant once you get used to it.

The door opens. Many footsteps enter. My heart rate increases. The pain is so much less than what it was but that makes it harder to lie still. I want to sit up. I want to use my hands when I speak.

Ell appears at the side of the table. I get it all out in one go before he can say anything.

“It’s the stories. The stories, the experiences. Everything. A computer could do it, but then we wouldn’t get the ... the experience. The hormones.

The dopamine. The endorphins. The meat and nerves of it all, right? *That's* the important bit. We go out into the galaxy and collect stories, and then we bring them home. It's who we are, it's what we do. And love, we go out to find all the love we can and try to keep it..." This ship is full of love and I'm afraid I've broken it. "I've never had to explain it before and I know it doesn't make sense—"

Ell studies me for a long time. He seems calm. Some decision has been made.

"Love?" he says, his tone even.

"Yeah. Just like that."

He lowers his gaze, raises a syringe full of some ominous liquid.

Well. I tried. I set my jaw in what I hope is a picture of fortitude. "This is it, then."

"This is what?" he asks.

"You induce a coma and ship me off to some military R&D facility. Or is this ... I mean, you wouldn't."

He gets this very familiar—delightfully familiar—frustrated look on his face. Like he's about to snarl. "I wouldn't *what?*"

"Just finish me off."

"God, Graff. No." He injects the syringe into the line. "This is probably going to hurt. At least, I think it'll hurt."

"It already hurts."

"I wasn't sure you could hurt, after I saw all that metal. Until I looked at your readings."

"You know me, Ell. You do." I finally catch his gaze. His familiar, shining gaze. He sort of looks like he's about to cry, too.

Then there's a warm rush though my veins that hits my heart and all my muscles seem to melt into a dull throb. I groan, but it's kind of a relieved groan because I can wiggle my fingers and toes now and that feels pretty good. My processor's diagnostics hum away; I'm still not optimal but stress levels are decreasing.

"Warned you," Ell says, leaning in. "Now don't move. You're still not entirely in one piece yet."

"Okay."

I reach out, touch his hand. Just brush it, then let him go because I don't want to scare him. He jumps a little. His breath catches. But he stays near.

Finally, I can turn my head to look at the rest of the room. Captain Ransom is standing there, arms crossed. And someone new is with him. She appears female, fine boned, with short-cropped red hair and a wry frown. A smirk. A judgment. I've never seen her before, but I know who she is. Tez, her name is Tez. My circuits hum in proximity to hers.

I look at Captain Ransom. "You let the signal get out after all."

"I did."

"Why?"

"To see what would happen. She showed up a day later. Do you people just hang around in deep space waiting for edge-of-death signals?"

"Yes," Tez says calmly.

"I'm not dying actually, it turns out," I say awkwardly.

"You had a close call," she says.

"Very."

"Is it a good story?"

"I'm not sure."

She comes to the table, holds out her hand. I take it. The spark of a circuit completing pinches my palm, and hers.

The download takes a few minutes. I get all of her memories as well. It's like meeting an old friend from home. We're all old friends from home. It's kind of nice. I'm not sure I can explain that part of it to Ell and Ransom.

Tez holds my gaze, and in hers is forgiveness and understanding, along with the mildest of reprimands.

You convinced them, I tell her.

No, you did or I'd never have gotten your signal. They wanted to be convinced. You know you should meet up with someone to download a little more often, don't you?

Yeah, I just get distracted.

But is it a good story?

It is. I'm sorry I told them about us.

No, you're not.

The connection breaks. She takes a breath, resettling herself into her skin. Looks around. Sees Ell with new understanding. He ducks his gaze, self-conscious.

"So. They know," she says, just to get it out in the open.

Tez can take me back home for this. If I can't keep the secret, then I

can't be allowed to travel. But ... I'm valuable. I almost start whining like a child, telling her how valuable I am, out in the universe, collecting stories.

"I trust them," I say.

"They may not want you to stay." She looks up, around. "He's afraid you won't want him to stay."

"It's a lot to take in," Ransom says flatly. "I confess, I'm not sure what to do next. I was hoping you might tell me."

But she doesn't. She asks, "Graff does a lot of good where he is?"

"He does," Ransom says. I wasn't sure he would.

"Thank you, sir," I murmur. But it's Ell's decision that matters most, and I look at him next.

He says, "I can purge all the files from the accident and recovery. Go back to the faked scans. Keep that secret. With the captain's permission." Ell looks; Ransom shrugs. I want to laugh at the back and forth but that would probably be bad so I don't.

"You want him to stay?" Tez asks Ell.

"I do. I think I do."

She looks at me. "Graff?"

"Is it going to be weird? It's going to be weird, isn't it? Me staying."

"Yes," Ell says. "But I think you should stay anyway."

We both look at Ransom. He's like a rock, his chiseled expression unmoving. He says, "Yeah, it'll be weird. For a while."

She smiles, her brow crinkling. "I like them."

"Yeah, me, too," I say.

Tez brushes off her jumpsuit. "Captain, if you can spare the time, I wondered if someone on your crew might take a look at my ship? Just a routine once-over."

It's not very subtle. He looks at her, then at me, then at Ell. He raises his brow. "All right. This way."

He actually flashes a little bit of a wry smile over his shoulder as they leave. Then Ell sits by the table and gives me the most exhausted, long-suffering, and sad look I've ever seen.

I'm also exhausted, which is frustrating. I've slept enough. "I was never going to tell you because I couldn't tell you and it didn't make a difference anyway and I'm sorry."

After a hesitation, he touches my forehead. He ruffles my short hair,

looks me up and down like he's studying me. Studying his handiwork, or maybe he's really looking at *me*.

"I have a lot more questions," he says.

"Yeah, I know."

I open my hand. Wait for him to make the move. And he puts his hand in mine.



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About the Author's

Garth Nix has been a full-time writer since 2001. He has also worked as a literary agent, marketing consultant, book editor, book publicist, book sales representative, bookseller, and as a part-time soldier in the Australian Army Reserve. Garth's books include the award-winning fantasy novels *Sabriel*, *Lirael* and *Abhorsen* and the science fiction novels *Shade's Children* and *A Confusion of Princes*. His fantasy novels for children include *The Ragwitch*; the six books of *The Seventh Tower* sequence; *The Keys to the Kingdom* series; and the *Troubletwisters* books (with Sean Williams). More than five million copies of Garth's books have been sold around the world, his books have appeared on the bestseller lists of *The New York Times*, 'Publishers Weekly', *The Guardian* and *The Australian*, and his work has been translated into 40 languages. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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