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FROM THE EDITOR
Welcome to Lightspeed’s 109th issue!
This month Deji Bryce Olukotun serves up a complicated story of morality, justice and interstellar cannibalism in “Between the Dark and the Dark.” In her new SF tale “The Harvest of a Half-Known Life”, G.V. Anderson creates a post-apocalyptic world where knowledge is precious, but so is your hair and skin. We also have SF reprints by Ken Liu (“An Advanced Reader’s Picture Book of Comparative Cognition”) and Yoon Ha Lee (“Warhosts”).
All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns. We’ll also have an interview with debut novelist—and frequent Lightspeed contributor—Cadwell Turnbull.
Our ebook readers will enjoy an ebook-exclusive reprint of the novella “Dust to Dust,” by Tochi Onyebuchi. We also have a pair of excerpts this month: one from Bryan Camp’s new novel Gather the Fortunes, and one from Peter Cawdron’s book Reentry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
John Joseph Adams is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a science fiction and fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy, as well as the bestselling editor of more than thirty anthologies, including Wastelands and The Living Dead. Recent books include Cosmic Powers, What the #@&% Is That?, Operation Arcana, Press Start to Play, Loosed Upon the World, and The Apocalypse Triptych. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a two-time winner of the
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Two hundred ships moved through the stars, leaving an iridescent trail of transmission beacons in their wake. Five billion kilometers long, the beacons stretched all the way to Earth, a desiccated and shaken planet that the passengers once called home. Sometimes simple messages from the ships arrived in the data. After a long time, images came and—after an even longer time—clips of the passengers going about their lives. But the vast distances meant these clips were rare.

Normally an image arriving on Earth was cause for celebration, because it meant the crew was still alive, or at least the ship’s systems were still functioning. Such moments affirmed they were still following their route to a habitable planet that could save mankind. But Steward Mafokeng recoiled from her module, and the image recently downloaded from the Lion’s Mane.

“You think we should retire the ship?” she asked her fellow steward. The other steward was on the lunar base, while she was on Earth buried twenty stories underground, protected against the torrential storms.

Steward Hutchins nodded his head on her communication module. “Clear evidence of cannibalism. Look at the missing hand. It was intentionally severed.”

“The wound seems to have healed.”

“Cauterized, I think. Look at the captain.”

Mafokeng looked at the woman bringing a detached finger to her lips, as if about to eat it. The fingernail on the brown flesh was painted a dull gray. “How do we know that finger is from the missing hand?”

“What does it matter? They’re eating fingers. That is cannibalism. We must assemble the stewardship council.”

Thin, tall, and without a hint of congeniality, everything Steward Hutchins said always felt like a judgment.

“You’ve run the checks?” Mafokeng asked. “The image isn’t doctored?”
“There’s no evidence of tampering.”
“And you’re confident we can rule out murder.”
“We cannot rule out murder—”
—in which case, the internal justice system of the ship would punish the offender.”
“Authority on the ship rests with the captain.”
“Not on every ship.”
“Not every ship has a captain, this is true,” Hutchins sighed. “Some are run by consensus or by computer. But Captain Chennoufi is wearing official insignia. The insignia has changed somewhat, of course, from its original picture of a lion—after a hundred years, it would be natural for the heraldry of leadership to evolve.”
“It looks more like a fish than a lion,” Mafokeng admitted. “But she does appear to be the captain. Could it be a mutiny?”
“A possibility. There are many possibilities. All of which we have considered, and not one of them can justify the fact that the captain is about to eat a human finger, and she currently holds authority over the passengers on the vessel. That is a clear violation of the Exploratory Covenant.”

Steward Mafokeng examined the image again, scrutinizing the face of the victim. Difficult to place his ancestry: He seemed to be a mixture of Mediterranean, with full West African lips, a long, slender neck, and eyes that might have been Korean or Japanese. He looked oddly resigned to his fate, raising his mutilated arm in the air over a sort of raised platform covered with shallow dark water. He appeared poised to say something, but it might also have been the pain causing him to grimace. The captain, meanwhile, was gazing triumphantly around her as she held the severed finger aloft like a trophy. Worse, the other crew members in the photo looked celebratory, as if attending an immaculate feast.

Steward Hutchins was correct. The evidence was alarming enough to consider retiring the ship.
“Convene the council,” she said.

• • • •
No one hides in the same way. I remember watching my elders being hauled away to the Renewal Pond. Elder Volker was cowering in his own urine as they came for him in an escape hatch. The following year, Elder Amina was hiding under her berth, the most obvious place in the world, when they discovered her. They were intimate lovers who had been born on the Lion’s Mane, and shared every confidence together throughout their short lives, but even though they knew each other intimately they still hid differently, as if they had never spoken about it at all.

There is no shame in being found, you should know. Indeed, the most courageous elders celebrate the moment of their discovery, knowing that the Pond will forever preserve them in our journey. So I was embarrassed when Elder Amina clawed at me as they pulled her away. And I remember turning my head in disgust as Elder Volker pulled against his restrainers when they dragged him out of his escape hatch, thrashing about until they stunned him into unconsciousness. I felt ashamed at their desperation, as any child would. The Finding brought honor and fecundity to our voyage, and without it we would not survive. Didn’t they understand that?

“You have my eyes, Rory!” Elder Amina shouted on that day, clutching at her bedsheets. “Look in the mirror and you will know!”

But the idea was preposterous to me. I hadn’t spoken to either of them for four years, not since I’d commenced the initiation. None of us children had—we’d been sealed off from them. And we had learned during the mysteries that the seeds of our elders are intermixed by our ship system so that we have no parents and they have no children because all of them are our parents and we are all their children. We prize the health of the journey above everything else, and because I looked so healthy, the other elders and even my young peers always complemented me on my looks, how my face, skin, and hair were the perfect blend of all the elders on the ship. They said I had Elder Miyoko’s thick eyelashes, Elder Anatoly’s compact torso, and Elder Michael’s curly hair, which grew so short that it rarely had to be cropped. To them, I was a marvel of our ship’s gen-gineers. So I did not believe Elder Amina when she claimed I was her child when everyone
else aboard considered me their own. Who did she think she was? Did she think she was more important than our journey?

“What a healthy child,” people said as Elder Amina wept from fear in the dark waters of the Renewal Pond. I tried to hide my pity for her as the fight began. “He knows he belongs to our journey,” they said. “Surely he’ll one day be captain!”

• • • •

They were the ones who forced us to consider cannibalism. They arrived as crystalline blooms on the mountains, first Kilimanjaro, then K2, McKinley, Denali, and the Matterhorn. It was as if smoked glass covered the peaks. The blooms were impenetrable and, according to the radiologists and chemists, completely inert. They spread down the snowy peaks, cloudy thick crystal, through the plunging gorges and foaming rivers all the way to the mountain’s base. If the blooms were alien, they did not care to communicate. Sensors could not detect any readings inside or out, until the seismic activity began. Elemental earthquakes that shook the mountains and sent shockwaves across the land and tsunamis raging through the seas.

The East River swallowed the United Nations headquarters in New York; London was swamped by the New Fens; and a tidal wave deluged Shanghai before world leaders agreed that the crystal blooms were threatening life on the entire planet. UN delegates reconvened in Geneva in the middle of a tornado, offering a last gasp of consensus before the international body was permanently dissolved in favor of the Exploratory Stewardship Council. The blooms could not be attacked, and they could not be stopped. Without the ability to communicate with them, there was no feasible way to understand their intentions or negotiate. The only solution was to leave the planet as quickly as possible.

The world would assemble two hundred ships to venture into the cosmos to find a new home. The ships themselves were made from different designs—lightsails, ramjet engines, liquid propellant, solid propellant, and fusion engines—developed by a mixture of private
industry and government. Twenty-five ships voyaged to Mars. The rest to the beyond, crewed with a range of peoples and cultures on voyages in which generations would rise and fall before they reached their destinations of theoretically habitable moons and planets. The ramjet engines lost contact almost immediately, warped as they were by constant acceleration and the limits of spacetime. Even if they settled on new worlds, people on Earth wouldn’t know for centuries, and then only if they could invent new methods of communication that defied our current understanding of physics.

But the conventional crafts could communicate—and were required to remain in touch with Earth at all times—through the beacons and relays they dropped behind them, which would boost their signals.

The Exploratory Covenant set forth many rules: pooling resources to build and launch the ships from the largest moonbases; shared ownership over any resource discoveries; military support, but not intervention; and then strict prohibitions: genocide, crimes against humanity, human bondage and slave labor, and its simplest article, a prohibition against cannibalism:

Art. 3. Cannibalism. Evidence of cannibalism, whether or not induced by starvation, shocks the conscience and warrants instant retirement of the vessel.

Retirement was defined as a pulse transmitted from a Council base ordering the ship computer to automatically kill the crew, by asphyxiation, exposure to the vacuum of space, or conflagration. In no instance was retirement ever permitted to be slow or painful.

Sickness could be healed. Rights could be wronged. But not cannibalism. If in doubt, the Covenant held, kill the cannibals.

Before I entered the initiation, the crew often paid me compliments on my physical form and cool head under pressure. As I mentioned, people expected me to become captain of the Lion’s Mane one day. This
assumption was so widespread that I visited the fish tanks at the age of just nine, an immense privilege reserved for the most trusted engineers. We only learned about the trout in the mysteries—their biology, habits, and propagation—but I was able to see them firsthand as a young boy! The captain allowed me to scoop a handful of the most beautiful roe, thousands of little eggs that felt like I was slipping my hand through jellied diamonds. Such was their value that this was not far from the truth. My head swelled with pride, and I hoped I would one day be an excellent captain just like her.

Everyone who survived the initiation had to take a genetics test before qualifying to enter the ranks of the crew. For most of us, this was a mere formality because the computer system already knew our parentage. The test was essential for the health of our journey to remove any anomalies. I remember feeling that it would be my final triumph after I had mastered the mysteries—everything from propulsion systems, to mathematical languages, to electrical maintenance, to EVA walks, food conservation, and Finding-evasion—the test would confirm my genetic health, one last blessing before I became a trusted elder.

Then, just like that, I was the one who was chosen for a Finding.

“I’m sorry,” the chief engineer said to me, reviewing my file. “But the results are clear. Look at your markers. You’re missing some crucial haplotypes. I’m afraid you were the product of just one pair of elders.”

Before I could reply, he said seriously. “Would you like me to tell you who they were, Hiroko?”

I could barely force my head to nod. I was too devastated to move, as if my very breath would fail me.

“It was Elder Amina and Elder Volker,” he said.

“No, it can’t be.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. They were good people. Friends of mine. I would even say you have many of their best qualities.”

“It can’t be!”

I was ashamed. Very ashamed. I brooded over his revelation in my quarters, crushed. Elder Amina had told me herself and I had not believed her. I had genuinely thought they had been lying to me. And
besides, didn’t attachment convey weakness for the journey? That’s what the mysteries had taught us. These were the attitudes that made me fit to be captain! Except now I knew I had been their offspring all along—two people bound by love and not the shared mission of the journey. There was nothing wrong with coupling, other than that they should never have conceived a child. Now I was the weakest link in the ship. The very definition of an unhealthy crew member. There was no way I could become captain now.

“There are some people, Hiroko, who believe the Findings should stop,” the chief gen-gineer whispered to me when he found me sitting at the cafeteria, absently stirring a bowl of tofu. “Everyone thinks you’re fit to be captain one day. You were a standout through the initiation, from what I heard. Perhaps genetics aren’t as important as people believe they are. Maybe things have gotten out of hand.”

During the initiation we also learned that if we pushed a dead crew member from the airlock, their flesh was lost for the journey. It was a total waste of resources, when we had so precious few to survive.

“We can take on water in space,” I said, keeping my eyes on my food. “We can harvest minerals. But we can’t replace complex organic matter.”

“That’s from one of your mysteries, isn’t it? From the initiation?”

“I cannot tell you that.”

“I’m merely asking—” he insisted. “Look, I’m trying to say that it’s all right if you miss Amina and Volker. I do too, from time to time.”

I stirred my tofu. No Finding had ever been canceled, and he did not hold the authority to do so. What did he want from me? To weep like a baby? To grow weak when a Finding would require every ounce of my ingenuity and strength? My self-pity had died on the Renewal Pond with the people who had created me.

“Findings are the only way,” I said.

He gave me a disappointed look, a look not too dissimilar, in fact, from the look Elder Volker gave me when he was dragged away, as if he was about to say something that might upset me, and did not.
For practical reasons, the Exploratory Stewardship Council did not convene in person because some stewards lived at lunar bases, others in low-Earth orbit, and several on Mars, even if most remained on Earth sequestered in underground filter domes. There were over two hundred stewards in total, one stewarding each ship, with responsibilities for tracking the movements of the vessel and the health of the crew. That was before the ships started failing.

Steward Mafokeng waited as the other stewards took in the image of the captain of the *Lion’s Mane* raising the severed finger to her lips, some furrowing their brows, frowning, or shaking their heads.

“Savages!” one declared.

“Barbarians!”

After the delegates calmed down, Steward Hutchins spoke to the assembled group, displaying information about the vessel before them. “The image was transmitted fifty-five years ago, 80.3 billion kilometers beyond the Kuiper belt. The *Lion’s Mane* is carrying three hundred individuals en route to Tau Ceti. It’s an Interstellar Galleon Lightsail, class four.”

“Any deviations from the flight plan?” a steward asked.

“The *Lion’s Mane* orbited a near-planetary object for two months, and continued on, with full crew remaining on board at all times. It took on water as it pushed through the Mars-Jupiter asteroid belt, and several times more through the Kuiper. All healthy deviations from the prescribed flight path.”

“Signs of distress?”

“No emergency signals were triggered. The hull reveals full structural integrity. Oxygen levels are at optimal levels, perhaps even slightly elevated.” Hutchins waited for these facts to sink in as the stewards cycled through the information. He wasn’t repeating anything they hadn’t yet read themselves. “This was a clear violation of the Covenant, which required decisive action. Accordingly, I move for a vote.”

Steward Hutchins nodded assuredly, wearing a look of resignation.
Mafokeng raised her finger to indicate an objection, but held it there, feeling indecisive. It was all happening so fast. The evidence was incontrovertible, but given the consequences, wasn’t it worth prolonging the discussion? She had read the brief forwarded by Hutchins, like the rest of the stewards, but didn’t three hundred souls deserve a little more deliberation? It was a chance she had never been afforded with her own ship, the *Medallion*.

“The council moves to retire,” the Council President said. The rotating President was chosen for their reputation for impartiality, and held final decisions on procedural matters. They largely stayed out of debates. “Any objections?”

“Yes. Steward Hutchins, are you not charged with the well-being of this ship?” It was a steward interjecting from a sealed cavern in the Philippines. Machines and blinking lights were interspersed amongst giant, crystalline stalagmites that glistened from a trickle of limestone water.

“I am indeed charged with its well-being, Steward, as we all are.”

“Then why does it seem to me that you are all too quick to condemn this ship to retirement?”

The Filipino steward had a reputation as a contrarian, for which Mafokeng was grateful at this moment. She stewarded a fusion vessel, which meant that she lived with the knowledge that it could melt down at any time, or send shockwaves across the asteroid belt, killing the crew instantly. Like her, most stewards of fusion vessels tended towards the religious. She was a zealous advocate of her crew, a caretaker who delighted in every report that they were alive and well. “The *Lion’s Mane* has traveled farther than any other ship, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That’s not entirely true,” another steward chimed in. “The *Halios* is a full twenty billion kilometers beyond the *Lion’s Mane*.”

“But we are certain,” the steward insisted, “that the *Halios*’s crew is dead, bless their souls. We haven’t received a message or signal for fifty years.”

“I am not sure I follow your reasoning,” Hutchins said.

“My reasoning is this: If the *Lion’s Mane* is the farthest exploratory
ship of the Council, then it deserves more than a rushed vote to destroy it. We owe a full discussion and consideration of the evidence before us.”

“I have shown you the evidence,” Steward Hutchins grumbled. “It’s all there in the dossier. It pains my heart to see the captain about to devour her own crew member. I’ve seen her grow up from when she was just a child.”

“You mean you have clips of life on the ship? Couldn’t they help us understand the context?”

“Sadly, Steward, we haven’t received a clip for thirty-five years. The ship lost the ability to transmit large data packets in a radiation storm off Neptune. I’ve conducted my investigations through the automated still images sent by the ship, which we receive in bursts of eight bytes each. And telemetry, of course. The transmission speed is painfully slow.”

Steward Mafokeng finally realized what was bothering her. “Steward Hutchins, you said that you were forced to take decisive action.”

Hutchins gritted his teeth, the thin tendons of his jaw knotted and severe. “Steward Mafokeng, we know that you enjoy participating in these debates, but the Medallion was lost a decade ago—”

“—I was appointed by the Stewardship Council as lead crew behavior expert.”

“—expertise that did not help save your own vessel, the very one you were charged with protecting under the Stewardship Oath.”

Mafokeng reeled at the accusation in the most public of all chambers. She had spent years rebuilding her career after she had lost the Medallion. She had utterly shamed her family. Not to mention what it had done to her soul, studying the images of the sheer terror of her crew as the ship ripped them apart, over and over again.

“The loss of the Medallion,” she said, keeping her voice steady, “was fully investigated, documented, and confirmed by the council.”

“And yet with no ship to steward,” Hutchins went on, “you feel it’s appropriate to intervene in this proceeding—indeed, every proceeding—when the most base, most heinous behaviors are evident before us, namely people eating people. I should remind you that the crew will be retired, but the Lion’s Mane will continue on, sending us data about its
discoveries as it follows the mission. Your ship offered nothing of value once it was destroyed. At least allow us to gain from the *Lion’s Mane’s* discoveries through its automated systems.”

*Focus,* Mafokeng thought. *Forget the Medallion.* “You did not answer my question.”

“We have most certainly answered the question,” Steward Hutchins said. “That this is cannibalism. And it must be stopped.”

“No, about the decisive action. You said you *already* took it, Steward Hutchins. Now, please share with the council—before we vote: What decisive action did you take?”

Hutchins peered at the various delegates in view, as if assessing their opinion. Then he solemnly said: “An extra-plenary body of this council sent the signal to retire the *Lion’s Mane* yesterday.”

The delegates roared back to life all around the solar system.

“How could this be!”

“You had no right!”

“They could still be alive!”

“There are three hundred people out there!”

Hutchins held up his hands as the council protested, waiting for the clamor to die down. Mafokeng was aware of how much he seemed to thrive in the tumult, even when the voices were turned against him.

“As you all know, the Covenant authorizes rapid action by the ship steward, the rotating council president, and the council judiciary for any crimes that shock the conscience. This is one of them. We voted unanimously in favor of retirement. The evidence is before you. Had we waited, you would still have voted for retirement. In my view, every day wasted is another day of descent into madness and suffering for the crew. Now I plead with you to affirm the vote. If we are to disclose this incident to the public—who deserve to know—we need full unanimity from this council. So I put it to you now, for posterity. Is there anyone amongst us who would vote to preserve this disgusting display of cannibalism, the basest of all human inclinations? Your voting shards are before you. Make your choice.”

Mafokeng watched as the votes poured in across the council, a pile of
blue-gray tridymite shards interlaced with each steward’s DNA. Even the steward from the Philippines reluctantly voted in favor of retirement, signing the cross on her chest as she dropped in her shard. It quickly linked to the other shards already assembled, beginning to form the crest of the Council.

Mafokeng could feel the eyes of the other council members upon her. Was Hutchins right, she wondered, and she was merely transferring the loss of her own crew on the Medallion to the Lion’s Mane, so desperate to avoid another tragedy that she would tolerate cannibalism?

She refused to believe this. She refused to believe that the council could so easily kill an entire crew without deeply studying the evidence. Killing three hundred souls with a rushed decision was not much better than the crimes retirement would punish. The Covenant had drawn a clear line that could never be crossed, but she felt they owed it a deep review, and she mistrusted Hutchins’ motivations. He moved too quickly, too adroitly to have his word taken at face value. He had mastered the council and his swift rise in the bureaucracy attested to that fact. Mafokeng dropped her shard in the no vote. The crest of the Council shattered before their eyes and she signed off.

• • • •

To prepare myself for my Finding, I train while everyone else is sleeping, using the resistance machines to firm my muscles and the simulators to hone my reflexes. During the initiation, we learned that you need every skill available to you to evade a Finding for three full Earth days of pursuit—what we call Evasion. You have to be quicker than your finder in body and mind. It was one of our earliest mysteries. Only the most celebrated elders had ever achieved Evasion, and they inevitably became leaders on the ship. Not captain, but revered crew considered beyond reproach, with the caveat that they enjoyed no right to propagation.

I practice crimping onto the smallest handhold on the climbing wall with servoweights. I hold my breath for minutes on end and paint my
face with anti-surveillance makeup patterns before washing it clean and starting all over again. I study the devious ways elders have hidden before, and try to imitate them, remembering the mysteries. And when no one is paying attention, I visit the tanks, where the fish open and close their small puckered mouths as if waiting to devour my flesh.

“Not me,” I whisper, “not me.”

On the day the Finding begins, the entire ship comes out to watch as I am paraded through the corridors and galleys in ceremonial regalia. My short black hair is shaved bare and my naked body is adorned with preserved trout, their fileted skin sticky on my body so that I look like a glimmering, rainbow colored being. I make my way slowly through the ship to the sound of a marimba fashioned from decommissioned exhaust piping.

My finder—a strapping woman in her twenty-second cycle—stays close to me, sobbing ritually, for she knows that if she finds me I am only marking a fate which could one day befall her, too. Anyone can be named to the Finding if the health of our journey demands it. I walk proudly through the open hatches and lurch at children with my teeth bared, causing them to giggle or sometimes run shrieking to the elders. The other initiates watch me amble by, some of them mournfully shaking their heads, others pleased to see my injured pride after the favoritism I had received. I resolve inwardly to prove them wrong—I will outlast my finder for three days and become an elder crew member. I will not stand on the renewal pond.

When I finally arrive before Captain Chennoufi, my finder strips me clean of the trout skins on my naked body. We each take a bite of a fish and force ourselves to keep down its pickled flesh, flush with carefully cultivated psychotropics. Then we retire to a berth and make love together, aroused by the substances coursing through our bodies, one last intimate shared moment before we become enemies.

She locks her legs around me and hisses like a snake, while I douse myself in oils until I am slippery, simulating the watered death that awaits me if I fail. Some initiates never make it beyond this point, overwhelmed by the sheer ecstasy—and there are worse ways to die. But
I am determined to outlast her. After what feels like hours of this passionate embrace, she loses her grip over me and I escape. Thus the Finding begins.

• • • •

Hutchins will come for you, the message warned on Mafokeng’s module. There was no information about the sender. The message could have originated from anywhere within the past hour—the Earth, the Moon, or Mars. She knew Steward Hutchins would be upset, but this disturbed her. Had he taken her vote as an insult? Did it humiliate him in some way? He sat on various committees within the council—so many, in fact, that she had lost track—but what would he do to her? What could he do? No steward had ever physically threatened another steward. Their weapons were words, reasoning, persuasion, and, above all, consensus, which meant everyone should agree, even if the agreement was a compromise. Even idle threats ruined such goodwill. But the message was clear: Hutchins will come for you. She had to move quickly.

The pictures from Hutchins’ briefing popped up on her module. Each appeared to have been taken from a different part of the Lion’s Mane, a four hundred-meter vessel that had been assembled in space near the central lunar base. The first image depicted a crew member in motion, walking past an open area with exercise machines, a fold-down table, and a passageway to the next part of the ship. It was likely the mess hall or recreation hall. The second image showed the shimmering golden sail of the spacecraft, spread out to harness the Sun and patiently edge the ship forward. The third image caused Mafokeng to pause. The image was taken in the same corridor as the one with the severed finger, but she couldn’t find anyone in the image. She could clearly see the pipes snaking down the corridor. This was a different angle, where she could clearly discern a tank of water. It would have been directly opposite where the captain had been standing when about to consume the human finger. And inside the water she saw a something silver and snake-like. A fin.
The fourth image was even stranger. Here, one of the crew was adorned in strange regalia, with makeup applied asymmetrically across his face. His hair, too, poked out at irregular angles, but appeared to have been intentionally fixed that way. It was difficult to spot him in the image, as he blended in with the machinery, and the jagged-edge makeup made his features unidentifiable. Who was he trying to hide from? Surely, he knew that the ship sent automated images back to Earth? Every ship had a duty to maintain its transmissions. Then who?

_Fresh air_, Mafokeng thought. She visited the closest atrium, a colossal biodome with a simulated sky. Her steward’s cloak gave off a faint haze from its superconducting body armor. She took comfort in the slip of vision because it meant she would be protected—stewards didn’t threaten other stewards, but there were plenty of fanatics who held grudges. Artificial clouds hung in the top of the dome, and bright-colored songbirds circled overhead in a geofenced aviary. This base was one of the finest on Earth, carefully excavated by the mining companies that operated near the Kivu mountains of the Eastern Congo, supplying the spaceships with the rare minerals that powered their electronics. Her own family’s mines had benefited from the way the blooms shook the land, which exposed minerals previously too deeply buried for regular extraction. People were going about their lives, shopping, sipping tea, courting, listening to music. They bowed their heads to her out of respect, for stewards were rare, and more trusted than domestic politicians, considered selfless servants of the human race, as coveted as an astronaut before space travel became commonplace. No one seemed threatening. Maybe the message about Hutchins had been wrong.

She _did_ feel horrified by the notion of humans consuming each other, of humanity turned against itself. She hadn’t seen any children in the still images, yet feared for their stunted lives, children she had never met and who would be adults by the time she even glanced at their images. But such was the lot of a steward—living vicariously through others, inspecting ancient digital transmissions like breadcrumbs. Light moved fast through the cosmos. But not data. Data was messy and it took the most powerful processors to reassemble the scattered transmissions into
a coherent image, a herculean task that required unwavering patience and perseverance. Her training had included sociology, history, empathic awareness, astronomy, 3-D modeling, physics, engineering, and archaeology. But nothing about cannibalism, other than a strict prohibition against it. She had not expected to be confronted with its visceral reality.

Maybe this was why the words *savages* and *barbarians* kept repeating in her mind. The other stewards had used these words to justify destroying the crew, but she remembered how her own ancestors had once been described in those terms centuries ago, justifying their slaughter by the Gatling gun. *Barbarians*. *Savages*. Kill them all.

And she recalled how the media had covered the loss of the *Medallion*, focusing on Captain Trent Tieman Deng, a man born and raised in Canada and touted as humanity’s hope until the ship exploded, at which point he became Trent Deng the child of Sudanese immigrants, his stature stripped to its barest essentials.

Mafokeng searched the word cannibalism in an isolation pod of the Council archives, sorted by word cloud.

**Anthropophagy. Human sacrifice. Crimes against humanity. Genocide.**

Then she looked up anthropophagy:

*The eating of human flesh by human beings.* Orig. Greek.

In one definition, anthropophagy linked the eating of human flesh with sexual pleasure. Hutchins had not mentioned anything about sex in his report, so she suspected she was going down the wrong path.

Next she looked up “human sacrifice,” which led to a word tree that branched down the screen: Greeks (ancient), Aztecs (Mexico), Rome (ancient), Maya (Mexico), Yoruba (Nigeria), Shang dynasty (China), Ur (Iraq), Cahokia (United States), Israelites (ancient), Hitobashira (Japan), Inca (Peru), Igbo (Nigeria). The list included dozens of cultures scattered across millennia.

*Here*, she thought, *here is something*. Time to learn. But she had been sitting for hours already. She told the archives to read the entries back to her as she moved through some stretching poses, breathing deeply as the
information washed into her. The archive compressed the information down into its essence, layering on olfactory notes to ensconce the data into her memory. Each inhalation affirmed the data; the deeper she breathed, the more it etched into her consciousness. It was not the same as remembering information in rote form, or even studying it closely, but there was an associative purity to it that she preferred over raw data. Besides, she didn’t have any time to spare.

Mafokeng left the biodome as the clouds began raining, a light pleasant swish that turned into a deluge complete with thunder, which delighted the children as the water splashed about their feet, draining into a graywater system where it would be reused once again. Like the passengers aboard the *Lion’s Mane*, these children had likely never experienced a real summer rain, for the torrential acid rains on the surface would burn exposed skin. This was safe, recycled water, purged of any dangerous bacteria or toxins but too sullied with particulate matter to drink. Not potable but usable. She could feel an insight beginning to take shape, as if the revolting image of the captain eating a finger, strung out over decades, was coalescing into meaning. Her deep breathing from the archives was stringing together the separate strands into a theory. Something about the water.

The attack came as three short flashes in the corner of her vision. She was thrown into the moist air of the biodome. She landed with a heavy splash in the French drain that ringed the foliage. When she opened her eyes, everything around her suddenly seemed crystal clear. Her shield was down. Its haze had disappeared and she was completely vulnerable. She threw her hands over her head, expecting a follow up blast. But nothing came.

A family saw her curled up on the ground and the father ran over to help. “Are you all right, Steward?”

“Where did it come from?”

“Somewhere in that tree.”

His little daughter pointed up. “The flower,” she said, “it got very bright.”

The police arrived shortly after to investigate, and confirmed that the
daughter had been right. The brugmansia blossom was a short-range device, designed to short out any body cloak, placed there intentionally apparently several weeks ago. Normally the device disabled any shielding for a blunt force attack, but she was lucky enough that no one harmed her when her shield went down. She thanked them and went on her way.

Safe, for now, Mafokeng returned to her dwelling, an expansive underground villa that her aunt had donated to stewards visiting from off-planet. Ten years ago, after the Medallion had been destroyed, she had planned to stay at the villa for a week to decompress before returning to the lunar base. She had never left.

The dark walls were interlaced with sparkling minerals with a central fountain that dribbled water over the rock, and national treasures donated from governments all over the continent—sculptures, tapestries, and bas reliefs. The hope was that if the smoky crystal blooms covering the nearby mountains ever made contact, there would be enough fineries to impress them. The entire villa—like the underground biodome—was suspended within a jelly polymer, protected against all seismic activity save molten magma itself. Mafokeng had never prevented other stewards from enjoying the hospitality of the villa, maybe because her aunt’s towering presence haunted every corridor. Watching her, judging her. Nonetheless, the villa pleased the Council, since stewardship was psychologically taxing work. For her part, she spruced it up, refreshing it with eucalyptus and hardy succulents that responded to the inset biostrip lighting.

When she returned, a steward was relaxing on a chaise longue, sipping on a tincture of honeybush tea mixed with cannabinoids and electrolytes as a machine stimulated his muscles. He was a large man with an ample belly, which seemed to have grown after a six-month visit to the Vallis Marineris.

“Ah,” he said, “the lone holdout. Ms. Obstinance herself.”

“Is that what they’re calling me, Steward Kusago?” Mafokeng asked.

“Gossip to stewards is like water to the well. And some of them are quite thirsty.”

“You’re stoned.”
He laughed loudly. “Everybody feels high after living on Mars for six months. Even underground. The air in here—it lends a certain delicacy to everything. Their habitations are getting better, but they really don’t compare. This tea is delicious. Your family certainly knows how to entertain.”

“This is the sovereign land of the Council.”

Kusago chuckled. “Quite the prickly one today. The Council does not provide food of this quality. This is your doing.”

“I do try to make visiting stewards comfortable, of course. That’s my duty as an emissary. The villa was donated by my aunt. She’s never set foot in it.”

*And thank the gods she hasn’t,* she thought. She did not feel charmed by Kusago’s playful mood, and sat heavily across from him in an antique chair wrapped in kudu-skin shagreen. “I was attacked in the biodome.”

Kusago raised an eyebrow. “Attacked? What happened?”

She told him about the blossom that had shorted her armor, and the way the family had saved her. The police still didn’t have any leads.

“If it was placed several weeks ago,” Kusago guessed, “then they could not have known you would vote against retirement of the Lion’s Mane.”

“But it’s possible Hutchins had already seen the photo then.”

“I suppose that’s true. That would have required remarkable foresight on his part to suspect you would vote against him. Do you suspect anyone besides him?”

“No one.”

“Strange. I won’t deny that Hutchins is angry with you. He’s moving for the council to affirm the retirement again. When you broke consensus it makes his decision appear to be extralegal. He expects to be celebrated around the world, perhaps even nominated to the council presidency. You’re ruining his plans. He wants to be known as the steward who sacrificed his own ship for the good of humanity.”

“The wrong kind of sacrifice.”

Steward Kusago, she recalled, specialized in living systems, moving between Council bases to optimize their food sources. He was allowing
his hair to grow out, and she was surprised to see white mixed with light brown. The stresses of interplanetary travel affected people differently.

“Steward,” she asked, “have you heard of fish being kept aboard a ship?”

“Fish? I’ve heard of attempts. The early vessels did not have the technology to support lab-grown meats. Each one contained some form of hydroponics to provide food and sustenance for the crew. It was the only way to ensure a food source for a long voyage, with crew members trained to select the best plants that could resist the radiation from space, usually by manipulating the transcriptome and omics. Aquaponics were never successful.”

“Why not?”

“Aquaponics were meant to be a symbiotic system. In theory, people could eat the fish. The fish droppings would fertilize the plants, which the fish in turn feed upon. The Council abandoned plans to install aquaponics on the ships before launch. The systems failed because of the nitrate problem. You see, the fish droppings contained too many nitrates for the plants, and eventually killed them. Thus any aquaponic ecosystem would eventually collapse. The Council modified various bacteria through gene sequencing to convert the nitrates to nitrites, but none were proven before launch. The cell-based artificial meats common today were not yet developed, and full of unpleasant mutations. It’s a shame, too, because there was another benefit to aquaponics, which was the radiation shielding. Lead can shield the crew from radiation, but water is also effective. Water is useful. In an aquaponic system, the water would sustain the fish while protecting the crew from radiation.”

Mafokeng thought it over. “My ship, the Medallion, had hydroponics but it depended on a seed bank for renewal, not the amount of water you’re describing. What do you make of this image, Steward?”

He leaned in to look at her module. “I must have glanced over that one in Hutchins’ dossier. Certainly a fish. An aquarium, perhaps?”

“That seems unlikely. It would be wasteful. This is the fin of a brook trout—meant for consumption, not display.”

“It could be some sort of mascot. Or maybe a talisman.”
“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Like a parrot on a pirate ship. Something to boost morale. There was a glow worm kept as a pet aboard my transport to Mars. Hungry little fellow. Do you have a higher resolution image?”

“No.”

“Then Hutchins would be the most knowledgeable, given that he is the steward of the Lion’s Mane.” He took a long sip of his tincture and his eyelids drooped.

“I very much doubt,” Mafokeng sighed, “Hutchins would share anything with me at this moment.”

The quake began first as a light rattle and moved through the villa in waves, the magnetic force of it shaking the lights. The villa switched over instantly to a different source of geothermal power.

“Minor quake,” Mafokeng said.

Kusago used his free hand to unclench a balled fist. His entire arm had locked in cramp. “I feel queasy.”

“You get used to it. The nausea of the quakes passes after the first few days.” Mafokeng peeled open his fingers and massaged his forearm, the first time she had touched another human’s flesh in months. “You need potassium.”

“I’ll add it to my tincture,” he groaned. “If only you would leave this lair of yours to join the daily affairs of the council.”

Her eyes alighted on a ceremonial mask with bulging eyes and protruding lips wrapped in antelope sinew that had been donated by the Mafokeng royalty. It had graced her aunt’s immaculate reception chamber as a child, when everything her aunt had touched felt perfect and gilded with elegance. That was before she had lost the Medallion and her aunt had disowned her for the loss of the ship.

“Being on Earth keeps me close to the people,” she said. “They’re the reason why we’re acting as stewards in the first place.”

“True, of course. But here there is a certain kind of people. The Martians feel somewhat differently, that people on Earth are inherently wasteful. I can’t say that they’re wrong.” He took a big swig of his beverage. “But I also think they lose sight of the finer things in life. I will
be more direct: I fear you may not be safe here, Steward. Hutchins has a nasty way of treating people who disagree with him, and you did so quite publicly.”

“He should never have acted so rashly without consulting the full council. Not with so many lives at stake.”

“That is not how he sees it, I’m afraid. And he sees things more clearly than most. You need only look into his eyes.”

“His eyes?”

“Both eyes are augmented. It’s subtle, but I’ve heard he uses heat and pheromonal data when addressing the council. He’s not merely speaking, he’s watching for reactions, very closely.”

Mafokeng considered this. That would explain why almost all of Hutchins’ motions on the floor tended to pass the Council. If he could read his audience to the very level of their pheromones, he could swiftly change tack in the middle of an argument.

“It is worth my asking,” Kusago went on, “if you don’t mind, why you persist in this cause, if the pulse to retire the Lion’s Mane has already been transmitted?”

“Integrity, Steward Kusago. And I would very much like to know where that pulse was generated.”

“It’s closely guarded information, of course. Don’t want sabotage.” He balled up his fist and relaxed, rotating his hand around. “Logic would tell you that it must be sent from a stable source of energy, unfettered by atmospheric pollution, which would be . . .”

“The Moon.”

“That would be my first guess, although again, I couldn’t confirm it.”

“Thank you, Steward Kusago.”

“I hope you can prove us wrong about the Lion’s Mane, Steward Mafokeng. Godspeed.”

“Only if the gods can travel faster than that pulse.”

He took one last gulp of his tincture and drifted off into a deep sleep.

• • • •
After I escape from my finder’s embrace, I distract her with various trails which lead to nowhere. I trick her into entering the cargo bay, with its dozens of hatches and storage units, and even into the septic tank, where the stench alone delays her for hours, until I gain enough time to lower myself into the fish tanks in an EVA suit. I hook myself onto a section of the tank which bends around a corner, thickened like an aorta to protect against the heavy surge of current from the nearby oxygenation pumps, where no one can see me. The rainbow trout first swarm around expecting a meal but soon ignore me. I reduce my breath to the bare minimum and meditate to pass the time.

During the initiation we learned how the plants filtered the water, which sustained the trout, and the importance of the Renewal Vats, completing the virtuous cycle. I knew exactly how much protein and potassium each fish produced (30 grams and 800 mg per kilogram, respectively) and the exact wavelengths of light required for the various herbs and greens that fed us.

The captain and her most trusted gen-gineers were the only people who knew the formula for the renewal vats. I had always assumed, naïvely, I would learn the formula one day as captain. It was the most coveted mystery on the ship. The mystery that is never taught yet always known.

But I had learned enough secrets of my own to help me survive the Finding. Several cycles ago, I had discovered an old access hatch to the tanks that was partially covered over but still possible to open. Within minutes of being selected for the Finding I dropped extra air canisters inside.

I was so well hidden in the pipes that my finder would never have been able to find me. Except on the second day I realized I had packed one canister too little. I had not anticipated how much effort it would take to keep myself from being wedged into the tunnel with the strength of the current, even with the carabiner keeping me attached to the side.

Soon I’m struggling to breathe. Each flush of water loosens my grip against the side of the tank and the current tugs at my consciousness. The trout cluster now by my faceplate, somehow aware that I will soon
be theirs, even in a different form. Before long, I give in and I’m swept away.

It takes several elders to extract me from the tanks, coughing and sputtering. In my finder’s eyes I can tell she is disappointed.

“You would have evaded me,” she confesses. “I was searching in the septic tank, and I would have continued looking for you there. The next place I was going to look was the entertainment hall. You shouldn’t have to fight me on the Pond. It would be dishonorable.”

I think of what the chief gen-gineer told me, recalling how the crew might have allowed me to refuse to participate in the Finding. But to do so would mean the death of everyone aboard. Of that I am certain.

“Didn’t you find me?” I ask.

“Only because you ran out of strength.”

“Isn’t that what makes for a successful finder? The ability to outlast your quarry?”

“It does,” she nods warily. I can see she remains unconvinced.

“The watered death is my right. Don’t deny it to me.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” she asks. She touches me lightly on the cheek as she says this, seeking a tenderness that has long since left my body with the psychotropics. Sober now, the only love that I feel is for the mysteries of my initiation.

“It’s my right.”

• • • •

On approach to the council lunar base, Mafokeng could make out the solar collectors branching like golden sea fans into the darkness. The square habitation units wafered across the regolith, punctuated here and there by jutting observation towers. She felt the gentle tug of the moon’s gravity upon landing and could spot the coal-black entrance to a Helium-3 mine on the horizon; even after forming the Exploratory Stewardship Council, industry remained a core part of everyday life.

The flags of the Council ships lining the arrivals hall had once thrilled Mafokeng, but she now saw how many of the flags had shifted to the
opposite wall—another fifteen or so flags hung above the viewing window onto the Sea of Tranquility. These ships had lost their crews but were still operational as exploratory vehicles. And soon the *Lion’s Mane* would join them.

There was no time to dwell on such matters; she had lost a full twenty-four hours traveling to the base. In two weeks, the high-energy pulse transmitted from the lunar base would clear the Kuiper belt, and then there would be nothing capable of stopping the rest of the three-month journey to the *Lion’s Mane*. The crew would be dead.

Mafokeng took a shuttle directly to the Lunar archives and spent the time waiting for the Council to reconvene sifting through its voluminous records. Hutchins may have been angered by her obstinance, as Kusago had called it, but he could never revoke her access to the archives. That was a coveted privilege held by all stewards—the ability to look at the archives of every ship without explanation. The council believed that transparency would help ensure the longevity of all the missions.

Hutchins hid his surprise when she arrived at the delegates hall, pretending as if he had expected her on the Moon all along.

“I heard about the attack, Steward Mafokeng,” he said, as she made her way to an empty chair. “It must have been quite traumatic. We would have been happy to grant you more time to recover. You could have cast your shard from Earth. Now that you are here, of course, you’re most welcome.”

“Thank you, Steward,” Mafokeng replied curtly. Nothing in his smile suggested he meant it. She paid closer attention to his eyes now, trying to determine if Kusago had been right, and that Hutchins was using enhancements to monitor her. But she could see nothing unusual other than his customary aloofness.

Hutchins immediately called for a vote after confirming a quorum of delegates was present. “Thank you for joining us at this emergency session. There are seventy-five ships with living crews that deserve the time and attention of this body. Accordingly, I move to confirm the retirement of the *Lion’s Mane*. Let’s end this aberration. There can be no equivocation over this decision, and the public deserves to know we’re
acting in their best interest. This is a stain on humanity, one that should be quickly effaced.”

Mafokeng rose from her seat to stride into the center of the delegates hall. “I couldn’t agree more, Steward Hutchins,” she said. “It’s a stain on humanity that we did not even give the passengers on that ship the benefit of the doubt. It’s a stain on humanity that this council sent a pulse to kill them all. They cannot speak for themselves and they have traveled for over a century to find us a new home. Giving a few moments to prolong their lives seems like a worthwhile use of our time. I humbly ask you to delay their final death sentence for another Earth hour.”

“This is pointless,” a steward shouted. “The pulse has already been sent. Nothing we do here will change that.”

“The point is integrity,” Mafokeng corrected. “The point is justice. And I believe there is time to stop the pulse before it is too late. I ask that you allow me to speak.”

“Seconded,” Steward Kusago said from her villa on Earth, catching a nasty look from Hutchins. This was all Mafokeng could get Kusago to promise her. He had not said he would change his vote.

“To understand what I am about to propose,” Mafokeng began. “I ask you to imagine yourselves aboard the Lion’s Mane.”

“We are Stewards,” a steward observed. “That is the very essence of our duties. To protect and to serve our vessels.”

“But not this vessel. The Lion’s Mane is different. The passengers have traveled farther than any ship in our council. Much farther. They receive almost no news from Earth, the Moon, or Mars, or any other ships, to our knowledge. We have always known this could happen, which is why we encouraged all ships to be able to make their own decisions that would prolong the health of their crew and raise their chances of reaching their destinations. We are stewards. We are charged with the safe and prosperous journey of our ship. We do not send instructions; we send support. Aid. Encouragement. Meanwhile, they act alone. When they deviate from their assigned trajectory, we interpret that as a healthy act. It tells us they’re still alive. These ships must be able to act without our interference, and to adjust to the conditions before them.
Steward Hutchins, you explained that the *Lion’s Mane* deviated slightly from its path several times, likely to take on water. Is that right?"

“It’s in the dossier I provided to the Council.”

“What you did not include in the dossier was *how much* water the *Lion’s Mane* needed to survive. By the telemetry we have available, the vessel took on water at least four times more than similar vessels before it moved beyond Neptune.”

“There could have been any number of reasons,” Hutchins said. “It was not my place to question their judgment.”

“No, their water intake confirms what you failed to disclose, Steward Hutchins—that the ship used water for radiation shielding. And beyond that, the ship utilized aquaponics to feed its crew.”

There were murmurs amongst the delegates as they took in this information. This meant, to Mafokeng, that they were at least paying attention. She glanced at her time counter. She had less than four Earth days before the pulse traveled beyond the Kuiper belt.

“You make it sound,” Hutchins protested, looking offended, “as if I deliberately omitted this information. It was not material to our decision. The ship relied on traditional lead-polymer radiation shielding, with the aquaponics system as an experimental backup. The aquaponics system failed, just as predicted.”

“It did not fail, Steward Hutchins. Much to the contrary: It thrived.”

“What evidence do you have?”

“The ship manifest details the aquaponics system. And I ask you all to look at the third image from your dossier. You will clearly see a fish. Specifically the dorsal fin of a brook trout.”

“Even if it’s a fish. It doesn’t mean anything, Steward Mafokeng,” a steward said. “It could be a pet.”

“Possibly, but then look at the Captain’s insignia. In the dossier, Steward Hutchins told us that the insignia meant she was the captain, and she was the one supervising the eating of the finger in the image. Here, I have had the computer enlarge it for everyone to see.”

The insignia appeared over their modules. The circular blue patch appeared to depict two fish, each eating its own tail.
“From afar, it looked like a lion’s head, so it’s an easy mistake, given the swoosh of the fish tails, but those are clearly fish.”

“Get to the point,” a steward huffed.

“My point, my fellow stewards, is that the aquaponics system was not just an experimental resource on the ship. I would argue that it was the most important resource on the ship—so important, in fact, that the very culture of the ship evolved to incorporate fish into its way of life. This is why the ship stopped much more often than other ships to take on water. It needed the water for the fish to survive. The fish provided protein to the passengers, and their droppings nurtured the plants, allowing for a rich vegetarian diet. This virtuous cycle fed the crew for decades. Indeed, I believe it is still feeding the crew today.”

“Aquaponics have never been proven to be sustainable,” a steward interjected.

“And you would be right to observe that, steward. On Earth, the nitrates in the fish droppings overwhelm the roots of the plants, causing them to die. That’s why we switched to cell-based meats. Isn’t that right, Steward Kusago?”

“Steward Mafokeng is correct,” Kusago acknowledged.

“The crew of the Lion’s Mane would have known that there was natural entropy from the aquaponics system, requiring a source of renewal. Something to lower the nitrate levels, or convert them to nitrite. Our experiments in cultivating bacteria to convert the nitrate failed on Earth. But every ship had basic gene sequencing technology aboard. So it’s possible the fish were genetically modified, with the crew selecting out fish that excreted less nitrate. Or they selected plants that had a higher ability to absorb nitrate. Would you agree that’s accurate, Steward Kusago?”

“You have described the nature of the problem. All are possible, although not yet documented by science.”

“I do not know how, and I do not know why, but I suspect the rituals of the crew had something to do with it. I believe that the fish are thriving, and they are central to the culture.”

“None of this explains the cannibalism in the images,” Hutchins
declared.

“I have been thinking about that quite a bit, Steward Hutchins. I believe we are not using the proper term. I would call the eating of that finger anthropophagy, not cannibalism.”

“A semantic difference.”

“Not semantic at all. I agree with the Covenant that cannibalism as practiced by an individual, for the purpose of inflicting terror or self-titillation, or even avoiding starvation, is aberrant and should never be preserved. Anthropophagy is a symbolic consumption of human flesh. It is not intended to provide real sustenance, but to signify the contribution of the flesh to society. Throughout human history, cultures have practiced human sacrifice, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Druids of Stonehenge, the Hitobashira rituals of Japan, the Carthaginians, the Israelites, or the Igbo of Nigeria. It was a way to bring the spirit world in balance with the terrestrial world, often by culling the aberrant from society—when there was disease, overpopulation, or genetic mutations.

“But those that practiced anthropophagy went a step further and consumed the flesh itself. It was the opposite of the Christian eucharist, in which bread and wine are taken to symbolically represent the body and blood of Christ. With anthropophagy, the devouring of the flesh reflects the culture. The Aztecs dismembered and devoured the body like the chinampa crops they depended upon. In the case of the Lion’s Mane, I believe it was the dependence and cultivation of fish and their aquaponic ecosystem. What you saw before you, my fellow stewards, was a ritual sacrifice, not cannibalism. It was affirmation, not barbarism.”

“There is nothing in the images that speaks to anything you just described,” Hutchins objected. “This is all conjecture, completely unsupported by facts.”

“I beg to differ, Steward Hutchins. I believe that the images sent back from the Lion’s Mane were a signal from the ship revealing how the crew survived. We do not know how the fish lived—and yet they do. We do not know how the society is organized, yet the people survived. I believe there is a connection between the two. There was one aspect to your dossier that bothered me, Steward Hutchins—the lack of mundanity. As a
steward of the Medallion, I looked at thousands and sometimes even hundreds of thousands of images of routine tasks on the ship, from the crews cleaning the hatches to images of them sleeping in their berths. Images of anything other than the ordinary were extremely rare. These were all automated images, transmitted from multiple cameras hidden about the ship without control or interference from the crew. Your dossier contained only five images.”

“I already reported that the ship’s antenna had been damaged in a radiation storm. It takes our most advanced processors years to reassemble the data. We receive very few images from the Lion’s Mane.”

“And the logs? Why don’t we have captain’s logs, or logs from the crew?”

“There was nothing of consequence.”

“That may be so, if we take you at your word. I hope you don’t mind that I decided to search the archives of the Lion’s Mane myself. If the images were as rare as you suggested, then I wanted to view them in their totality, as is my right as a steward. You were right—there were comparatively few. And I didn’t find any text logs. But I did find a clip which confirms my theories. The sound, unfortunately, has been lost. But we can still learn a lot by watching it.”

“You have no right—” Hutchins began, but it was too late. The clip was already displaying before them. In their modules, the delegates could see an enormous corridor criss-crossed with large pipes. Two adults were addressing the Captain in a strange, exaggerated manner above what looked like a small pond. Their hips swayed from side to side, and they stomped their feet. At which point the Captain received something from them and dropped it into the fish tanks.

“This clip was sent deliberately by the crew,” Mafokeng explained. “It was not an automated image taken by the ship.”

“Why did you hide this from us?” a steward asked Hutchins.

“That clip was taken nearly fifty-five years ago!” Hutchins stormed. “It’s completely immaterial. We analyzed it numerous times and learned nothing. We don’t know what the Captain was doing at the time. It could have been a pH test. It could have been an experiment!”
“Not an experiment,” Mafokeng said, shaking her head. “Not an experiment at all. This was a ritual. Look at the way the people addressing the captain exaggerate their movements as they present the captain with whatever is in their hand. Look at the water she is dropping it into. It is like a raised dais—like an altar. That place is important to them. Important enough that they don’t just hand it over; they’re dancing, moving their entire bodies to underscore its significance. This is a symbolic act. They are feeding the fish that keep their crew alive, and whatever has been handed over is precious. This was a virtuous cycle, a cycle of renewal and sustenance, one that was essential to the mission. The images you shared with us, Steward Hutchins, were taken much later, several decades later, in fact, and we can assume that the culture evolved along with it. And I believe you left one important piece of information out—that the images you shared were also shared deliberately. They were not automated. We did not catch them in the act, as it were. The images were meant to show us the act in all its grim practicality. They were showing us how they survived.”

Hutchins stood there contemplating Mafokeng’s words, but she could see that he was not swayed. “Steward Mafokeng, if I may present my point of view.”

“Of course.”

“And the point of view of the Council, and the President, all of whom voted unanimously to retire the ship. The Covenant is crystal clear on a prohibition against cannibalism. There is no exception for anthropophagy, or what you call human sacrifice. The reason is that we are not supposed to interpret their actions. When we spot cannibalism, we are supposed to condemn it. And we have. Your theories are fascinating—insightful, even. But they do not take away from the fact that these people are consuming human flesh. Your obstinacy in the face of these facts makes you the barbarian. You will be the one who is blamed when the public learns that a council member wanted to permit cannibalism aboard one of our ships—the very ships designed to save civilization as we know it. They needn’t know that a steward who lost her ship was driven crazy with guilt from the loss and would do anything
to prevent the loss of another, even if its passengers embodied evil itself. Or that the steward herself was born into mining royalty and never knew true suffering.”

Mafokeng reeled at the insinuation. Her family had already shamed her enough for her failures.

“Steward Mafokeng,” he went on, “we are offering you our hand. You can join us and we will unite as one voice condemning the act together. No one need know of your dissent. Cast your vote for retirement and we can move, as a body, to focus our energies on the remaining ships so that they do not suffer such a terrible fate. If you don’t, you will be overruled and the shame you feel will be of your own making.”

Mafokeng considered Hutchins’ offer, wondering if he was correct, that she was merely ignoring the evidence before her eyes. The guilt she felt was real, and her life had been shaped by the loss of her own ship, causing even her retreat to Earth, where she wallowed in her dignified isolation underground. What did he see with those augmented eyes? Which members of the council were leaning to his point of view? She felt hopelessly blind as she watched the impassive faces of the other stewards. She had no deep insight like he did into what they were thinking. Hutchins was right; she couldn’t prove her theory—she could only trust in the evidence, see the correlations without being able to show the causation.

Except for the fish. The fish were still thriving, alive, and present.

“As stewards,” Mafokeng responded, “our art form is making sense of the specific assemblage of data sent along to us across wide swathes of time and space. I would even argue that our highest duty involves interpreting these images in furtherance of the mission. I would argue that Steward Hutchins has failed this duty, not out of malice, or ill will, but because his emotional response to the images clouded a more rational one. Steward Hutchins is incorrect. My role here is not to prove my theory. My role here is to argue for the lives of the three hundred crew members aboard the Lion’s Mane, and provide us with more time to make a decision, a truly informed decision with no evidence withheld from us. This ship has traveled farther than any other. Its crew appears to
be alive and healthy, which means they have discovered some secret to prolong their journey. My theory is based on what we see before us, and it is no less compelling than Steward Hutchins’ claims. I do not ask you to allow the crew to live indefinitely. I merely ask that we cancel the signal for retirement, and wait for further contact from the ship. Then we will have more information. Crucial information.”

She waited for her words to sink in, looking for a sign from the delegates as to their feelings. Their silence made her feel as if Hutchins was right, that she was the lone dissenter in the face of overwhelming evidence.

“How is it possible to cancel the retirement pulse?” a steward asked. This gave her hope, at least, something to speak for.

“Thank you for your question, Steward. It is not possible to cancel the retirement pulse. It is a five-gigawatt pulse traveling at the speed of light. And the pulse itself does not retire the crew, of course. It’s sends an encrypted code through a backdoor on the ship’s systems to kill the passengers. However, our charts suggest that we can transmit a signal from the orbiting station on Io to several ships in the vicinity of the Kuiper belt. These ships can scatter the retirement pulse by simultaneously activating their transmission beacons. The interference would weaken the signal so that it would be unlikely to reach the Lion’s Mane. I urge my fellow delegates to act quickly, as the pulse is nearing the Kuiper belt at this very moment.”

She did not expect the council president to come to her point of view. Throughout the proceedings, he had remained silent, merely listening without objection. But his had been the crucial dissenting vote all along. Only he could prevent the council from overruling her.

The council had tolerated her up to this point, allowing her to remain active even after the loss of her ship, a privilege not afforded to any other council members. This would surely be too much. After her meddling, Hutchins would see to it that she was removed from proceedings. Strip her to an honorary non-voting role, or worse, kick her off altogether.

“The answer is clear,” the president declared. “We must jam the pulse. We must await further transmission from the Lion’s Mane before
executing retirement. And we appoint Steward Mafokeng, as well as an independent investigator, to examine the archives. Steward Hutchins is hereby suspended from stewardship of the ship until the next transmission is retrieved. We should have had all the available information before he persuaded us to order retirement. In this chamber, we uphold total transparency. It is one of our highest virtues, and through his actions we have ignored it. Move for a vote.”

And it was done. Fifteen minutes later, Mafokeng watched as the council’s transmission operators sent the new signal through. If they were fortunate, light would scatter light, and the pulse would not reach the ship.

Already her aunt was hailing her from somewhere, likely having learned about the vote from her sources. She would be concerned about her reputation. Mafokeng pondered what to tell her. That she had allowed the passengers to dance around their altar for another day? That they would sleep well in their berths, their bellies full of fish, believing as always that their journey would continue on?

• • • •

On the renewal pond, I stand my ground in the shallow pool of dark water. The trout swirl beneath the thick glass I stand upon, their shimmering skins dancing in my vision. I wear only loose fabric to protect myself, carrying a thick rubber club, while my finder holds an electric trident with tips so sharp they can slice through the hardest stone. My boots are fixed to the bottom by weights that feel like nails have been driven through my feet. I am surprised when the crew cheers for me and not for my finder. Perhaps the chief gen-gineer was right. Maybe my peers still believe, somehow, that I can become captain. But no person has ever been captured during a Finding and survived. The odds are against me. My ceremonial role now is to prolong our struggle for as long as possible. I allow each breath of the ship’s air to gather in my lungs, gathering energy. All I can do is fight.

She slashes at me with her electric trident and—whack! whack!
whack!—I slam her across the jaw with my club so hard that she falls to the ground. When she turns back, her face is flush with anger, and she grits her teeth with determination. It’s the same expression she wore when we first made love.

“Come again!” I shout, hoisting my club above me. The club is twice as long as her trident but designed not to be able to cause her real damage.

I hit her again and again until blood spills from her lips, dodging the point of her trident by shifting my feet. But the effort to lift the heavy boots depletes my energy for the next thrust. I manage to land several more blows, at one point slashing her arm so hard that she drops briefly to the glass in pain. Except she has learned my weakness by now—all she must do is wait. She knows I am losing my strength. A spark alights in her eyes and I can see that something has changed. She bides her time until I am so weak that my feet refuse to move at all. I swing my club limply at her, and she lunges at me swiftly with her trident, severing my hand from my arm.

As soon as my flesh touches the water, the automated systems of the Pond take over, immediately injecting my body with pain-numbing anesthetic. The crew erupts in the Ballad of the Pond, a delicate, mournful melody that celebrates the memory of all who have sacrificed themselves before me. I refuse to cry out from the shock, and raise my voice to join the chorus when I can:

When we arrive, when we arrive
The watered death, the silver scales
All for the journey
Together
When we arrive

The steady march of the drum keeps me singing. Finally, after so many verses that I can barely remain standing, we come to my verse, and it’s my turn to sing:
When we arrive, when we arrive
Fingers slip through cool water
Hiroko will gather oceans
For our roe
When we arrive

My shipmates repeat the verse, and the system laser-etches it into the Journey Tablet. Soon I will be gone, too. The system will dismember my body, lasering my flesh into smaller and smaller pieces, until I am drained into the tanks.

Captain Chennoufi leans forward and whispers the mystery to me in my ear. The mystery that is never taught yet always known. She explains that cortisol induced by stress is what excites the bacteria. I induced it during the Finding, and I made more while fighting on the Renewal Pond. The missing ingredient of the tanks was in my own body all along. And it means that I will live on, and begin my journey again.

I call out one final time to the crew: “When we arrive!”
And they return it, their voices exultant in my ears. “When we arrive!”

Then the captain presents the finger of my right hand to my finder, who steps forward to taste it.

— Thank you to Professors Steven Desch and Steve Ruff at Arizona State University and the Center for Science and the Imagination in offering expertise and suggestions for this story. The title “Between the Dark and the Dark” is an ode to the late professor Inga Clendinnen.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deji Bryce Olukotun is the author of two novels and his fiction has appeared in five different book collections. His novel After the Flare won the 2018 Philip K. Dick
special citation award, and his first novel *Nigerians in Space*, a thriller about brain drain from Africa, was published by Unnamed Press in 2014. He is currently a Future Tense Fellow at New America.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
My darling, my child, my connoisseur of sesquipedalian words and convoluted ideas and meandering sentences and baroque images, while the sun is asleep and the moon somnambulant, while the stars bathe us in their glow from eons ago and light-years away, while you are comfortably nestled in your blankets and I am hunched over in my chair by your bed, while we are warm and safe and still for the moment in this bubble of incandescent light cast by the pearl held up by the mermaid lamp, you and I, on this planet spinning and hurtling through the frigid darkness of space at dozens of miles per second, let’s read.

The brains of Telosians record all the stimuli from their senses: every tingling along their hairy spine, every sound wave striking their membranous body, every image perceived by their simple-compound-refractive light-field eyes, every molecular gustatory and olfactory sensation captured by their waving stalk-feet, every ebb and flow in the magnetic field of their irregular, potato-shaped planet.

When they wish, they can recall every experience with absolute fidelity. They can freeze a scene and zoom in to focus on any detail; they can parse and reparse each conversation to extract every nuance. A joyful memory may be relived countless times, each replay introducing new discoveries. A painful memory may be replayed countless times as well, each time creating a fresh outrage. Eidetic reminiscence is a fact of existence.

Infinity pressing down upon the finite is clearly untenable.

The Telosian organ of cognition is housed inside a segmented body that buds and grows at one end while withering and shedding at the other. Every year, a fresh segment is added at the head to record the
future; every year, an old segment is discarded from the tail, consigning the past to oblivion.

Thus, while the Telosians do not forget, they also do not remember. They are said to never die, but it is arguable whether they ever live.

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It has been argued that thinking is a form of compression.

Remember the first time you tasted chocolate? It was a summer afternoon; your mother had just come back from shopping. She broke off a piece from a candy bar and put it in your mouth while you sat in the high chair.

As the stearate in the cocoa butter absorbed the heat from your mouth and melted over your tongue, complex alkaloids were released and seeped into your taste buds: twitchy caffeine, giddy phenethylamine, serotonic theobromine.

“Theobromine,” your mother said, “means the food of the gods.”

We laughed as we watched your eyes widen in surprise at the texture, your face scrunch up at the biting bitterness, and then your whole body relax as the sweetness overwhelmed your taste buds, aided by the dance of a thousand disparate organic compounds.

Then she broke the rest of the chocolate bar in halves and fed a piece to me and ate the other herself. “We have children because we can’t remember our own first taste of ambrosia.”

I can’t remember the dress she wore or what she had bought; I can’t remember what we did for the rest of that afternoon; I can’t re-create the exact timbre of her voice or the precise shapes of her features, the lines at the corners of her mouth or the name of her perfume. I only remember the way sunlight through the kitchen window glinted from her forearm, an arc as lovely as her smile.

_A lit forearm, laughter, food of the gods._ Thus are our memories compressed, integrated into sparkling jewels to be embedded in the limited space of our minds. A scene is turned into a mnemonic, a conversation reduced to a single phrase, a day distilled to a fleeting
feeling of joy.

Time’s arrow is the loss of fidelity in compression. A sketch, not a photograph. A memory is a re-creation, precious because it is both more and less than the original.

• • • •

Living in a warm, endless sea rich with light and clumps of organic molecules, the Esoptrons resemble magnified cells, some as large as our whales. Undulating their translucent bodies, they drift, rising and falling, tumbling and twisting, like phosphorescent jellyfish riding on the current.

The thoughts of Esoptrons are encoded as complex chains of proteins that fold upon themselves like serpents coiling in the snake charmer’s basket, seeking the lowest energy level so that they may fit into the smallest space. Most of the time, they lie dormant.

When two Esoptrons encounter each other, they may merge temporarily, a tunnel forming between their membranes. This kissing union can last hours, days, or years, as their memories are awakened and exchanged with energy contributions from both members. The pleasurable ones are selectively duplicated in a process much like protein expression—the serpentine proteins unfold and dance mesmerizingly in the electric music of coding sequences as they’re first read and then re-expressed—while the unpleasant ones are diluted by being spread among the two bodies. For the Esoptrons, a shared joy truly is doubled, while a shared sorrow is indeed halved.

By the time they part, they each have absorbed the experiences of the other. It is the truest form of empathy, for the very qualia of experience are shared and expressed without alteration. There is no translation, no medium of exchange. They come to know each other in a deeper sense than any other creatures in the universe.

But being the mirrors for each other’s souls has a cost: By the time they part from each other, the individuals in the mating pair have become indistinguishable. Before their merger, they each yearned for the other; as they part, they part from the self. The very quality that attracted them to
each other is also, inevitably, destroyed in their union.
Whether this is a blessing or a curse is much debated.

Your mother has never hidden her desire to leave.
We met on a summer night, in a campground high up in the Rockies. We were from opposite coasts, two random particles on separate trajectories: I was headed for a new job, driving across the country and camping to save money; she was returning to Boston after having moved a friend and her truckful of possessions to San Francisco, camping because she wanted to look at the stars.

We drank cheap wine and ate even cheaper grilled hot dogs. Then we walked together under the dark velvet dome studded with crystalline stars like the inside of a geode, brighter than I’d ever seen them, while she explained to me their beauty: each as unique as a diamond, with a different-colored light. I could not remember the last time I’d looked up at the stars.

“I’m going there,” she said.
“You mean Mars?” That was the big news back then, the announcement of a mission to Mars. Everyone knew it was a propaganda effort to make America seem great again, a new space race to go along with the new nuclear arms race and the stockpiling of rare Earth elements and zero-day cyber vulnerabilities. The other side had already promised their own Martian base, and we had to mirror their move in this new Great Game.

She shook her head. “What’s the point of jumping onto a reef just a few steps from shore? I mean out there.”

It was not the kind of statement one questioned, so instead of why and how and what are you talking about, I asked her what she hoped to find out there among the stars.

other Suns perhaps
With thir attendant Moons thou wilt descrie
Communicating Male and Femal Light,
Which two great Sexes animate the World,
Stor’d in each Orb perhaps with some that live.
For such vast room in Nature unposset 
By living Soule, desert and desolate,
Onely to shine, yet scarce to contribute 
Each Orb a glimps of Light, conveyd so farr
Down to this habitable, which returnes 
Light back to them, is obvious to dispute.

“What do they think about? How do they experience the world? I’ve been imagining such stories all my life, but the truth will be stranger and more wonderful than any fairy tale.”

She spoke to me of gravitational lenses and nuclear pulse propulsion, of the Fermi Paradox and the Drake Equation, of Arecibo and Yevpatoria, of Blue Origin and SpaceX.

“Are you afraid?” I asked.

“I almost died before I could begin to remember.”

She told me about her childhood. Her parents were avid sailors who had been lucky enough to retire early. They bought a boat and lived on it, and the boat was her first home. When she was three, her parents decided to sail across the Pacific. Halfway across the ocean, somewhere near the Marshall Islands, the boat sprung a leak. The family tried everything they could to save the vessel, but in the end had to activate the emergency beacon to call for help.

“That was my very first memory. I wobbled on this immense bridge between the sea and the sky, and as it sank into the water and we had to jump off, Mom had me say good-bye.”

By the time they were rescued by a Coast Guard plane, they had been adrift in the water in life vests for almost a full day and night. Sunburned and sickened by the salt water she swallowed, she spent a month in the hospital afterward.

“A lot of people were angry at my parents, saying they were reckless and irresponsible to endanger a child like that. But I’m forever grateful to them. They gave me the greatest gift parents could give to a child: fearlessness. They worked and saved and bought another boat, and we
went out to the sea again.”

It was such an alien way of thinking that I didn’t know what to say. She seemed to detect my unease, and, turning to me, smiled.

“I like to think we were carrying on the tradition of the Polynesians who set out across the endless Pacific in their canoes or the Vikings who sailed for America. We have always lived on a boat, you know? That’s what Earth is, a boat in space.”

For a moment, as I listened to her, I felt as if I could step through the distance between us and hear an echo of the world through her ears, see the stars through her eyes: an austere clarity that made my heart leap.

_Cheap wine and burned hot dogs, other Suns perhaps, the diamonds in the sky seen from a boat adrift at sea, the fiery clarity of falling in love._

• • • •

The Tick-Tocks are the only uranium-based life forms known in the universe.

The surface of their planet is an endless vista of bare rock. To human eyes it seems a wasteland, but etched into this surface are elaborate, colorful patterns at an immense scale, each as large as an airport or stadium: curlicues like calligraphy strokes; spirals like the tips of fiddlehead ferns; hyperbolas like the shadows of flashlights against a cave wall; dense, radiating clusters like glowing cities seen from space. From time to time, a plume of superheated steam erupts from the ground like the blow of a whale or the explosion of an ice volcano on Enceladus.

Where are the creatures who left these monumental sketches? These tributes to lives lived and lost, these recordings of joys and sorrows known and forgotten?

You dig beneath the surface. Tunneling into the sandstone deposits over granite bedrock, you find pockets of uranium steeped in water.

In the darkness, the nucleus of a uranium atom spontaneously breaks apart, releasing a few neutrons. The neutrons travel through the vast emptiness of internuclear space like ships bound for strange stars (this is
not really an accurate picture, but it’s a romantic image and easy to illustrate). The water molecules, nebula-like, slow down the neutrons until they touch down on another uranium nucleus, a new world.

But the addition of this new neutron makes the nucleus unstable. It oscillates like a ringing alarm clock, breaks apart into two new elemental nuclei and two or three neutrons, new starships bound for distant worlds, to begin the cycle again.

To have a self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction with uranium, you need enough concentration of the right kind of uranium, uranium-235, which breaks apart when it absorbs the free neutrons, and something to slow down the speeding neutrons so that they can be absorbed, and water works well enough. Creation has blessed the world of the Tick-Tocks with both.

The by-products of fission, those fragments split from the uranium atom, fall along a bimodal distribution. Cesium, iodine, xenon, zirconium, molybdenum, technetium . . . like new stars formed from the remnants of a supernova, some last a few hours, others millions of years.

The thoughts and memories of the Tick-Tocks are formed from these glowing jewels in the dark sea. The atoms take the place of neurons, and the neutrons act as neurotransmitters. The moderating medium and neutron poisons act as inhibitors and deflect the flight of neutrons, forming neural pathways through the void. The computation process emerges at the subatomic level, and is manifested in the flight paths of messenger neutrons; the topology, composition, and arrangement of atoms; and the brilliant flashes of fissile explosion and decay.

As the thoughts of the Tick-Tocks grow ever more lively, excited, the water in the pockets of uranium heats up. When the pressure is great enough, a stream of superheated water flows up a crack in the sandstone cap and explodes at the surface in a plume of steam. The grand, intricate, fractal patterns made by the varicolored salt deposits they leave on the surface resemble the ionization trails left by subatomic particles in a bubble chamber.

Eventually, enough of the water will have been boiled away that the fast neutrons can no longer be captured by the uranium atoms to sustain
the reaction. The universe sinks into quiescence, and thoughts disappear from this galaxy of atoms. This is how the Tick-Tocks die: with the heat of their own vitality.

Gradually, water seeps back into the mines, trickling through seams in the sandstone and cracks in the granite. When enough water has filled the husk of the past, a random decaying atom will release the neutron that will start the chain reaction again, ushering forth a florescence of new ideas and new beliefs, a new generation of life lit from the embers of the old.

Some have disputed the notion that the Tick-Tocks can think. How can they be said to be thinking, the skeptics ask, when the flight of neutrons are determined by the laws of physics with a soupçon of quantum randomness? Where is their free will? Where is their self-determination? Meanwhile, the electrochemical reactor piles in the skeptics’ brains hum along, following the laws of physics with an indistinguishable rigor.

Like tides, the Tick-Tock nuclear reactions operate in pulses. Cycle after cycle, each generation discovers the world anew. The ancients leave no wisdom for the future, and the young do not look to the past. They live for one season and one season alone.

Yet, on the surface of the planet, in those etched, fantastic rock paintings, is a palimpsest of their rise and fall, the exhalations of empires. The chronicles of the Tick-Tocks are left for other intelligences in the cosmos to interpret.

As the Tick-Tocks flourish, they also deplete the concentration of uranium-235. Each generation consumes some of the nonrenewable resources of their universe, leaving less for future generations and beckoning closer the day when a sustained chain reaction will no longer be possible. Like a clock winding down inexorably, the world of the Tick-Tocks will then sink into an eternal, cold silence.

• • • •

Your mother’s excitement was palpable.
“Can you call a Realtor?” she asked. “I’ll get started on liquidating our stocks. We don’t need to save anymore. Your mother is going to go on that cruise she’s always wanted.”

“When did we win the lottery?” I asked.

She handed me a stack of paper. *LENS Program Orientation.*

I flipped through it. . . . *Your application essay is among the most extraordinary entries we’ve received . . . pending a physical examination and psychological evaluation . . . limited to the immediate family . . .

“What is this?”

Her face fell as she realized that I truly did not understand.

Radio waves attenuated rapidly in the vastness of space, she explained. If anyone is shouting into the void in the orbs around those distant stars, they would not be heard except by their closest neighbors. A civilization would have to harness the energy of an entire star to broadcast a message that could traverse interstellar distances—and how often would that happen? Look at Earth: We’d barely managed to survive one Cold War before another started. Long before we get to the point of harnessing the energy of the Sun, our children will be either wading through a postapocalyptic flooded landscape or shivering in a nuclear winter, back in another Stone Age.

“But there is a way to cheat, a way for even a primitive civilization like ours to catch faint whispers from across the galaxy and perhaps even answer back.”

The Sun’s gravity bends the light and radio waves from distant stars around it. This is one of the most important results from general relativity.

Suppose some other world out there in our galaxy, not much more advanced than ours, sent out a message with the most powerful antenna they could construct. By the time those emissions reached us, the electromagnetic waves would be so faint as to be undetectable. We’d have to turn the entire Solar System into a parabolic dish to capture it.

But as those radio waves grazed the surface of the Sun, the gravity of the star would bend them slightly, much as a lens bends rays of light. Those slightly bent beams from around the rim of the sun would
converge at some distance beyond.

“Just as rays of sunlight could be focused by a magnifying glass into a spot on the ground.”

The gain of an antenna placed at the focal point of the sun’s gravitational lens would be enormous, close to ten billion times in certain frequency ranges, and orders of magnitude more in others. Even a twelve-meter inflatable dish would be able to detect transmissions from the other end of the galaxy. And if others in the galaxy were also clever enough to harness the gravitational lenses of their own suns, we would be able to talk to them as well—though the exchange would more resemble monologues delivered across the lifetimes of stars than a conversation, messages set adrift in bottles bound for distant shores, from one long-dead generation to generations yet unborn.

This spot, as it turns out, is about 550 AU from the Sun, almost fourteen times the distance of Pluto. The Sun’s light would take just over three days to reach it, but at our present level of technology, it would take more than a century for a spacecraft.

*Why send people? Why now?*

“Because by the time an automated probe reached the focal point, we don’t know if anyone will still be here. Will the human race survive even another century? No, we must send people so that they can be there to listen, and perhaps talk back.

“I’m going, and I’d like you to come with me.”

• • • •

The Thereals live within the hulls of great starships. Their species, sensing the catastrophe of a world-ending disaster, commissioned the construction of escape arks for a small percentage of their world’s population. Almost all of the refugees were children, for the Thereals loved their young as much as any other species.

Years before their star went supernova, the arks were launched in various directions at possible new home worlds. The ships began to accelerate, and the children settled down to learning from machine tutors
and the few adults on board, trying to carry on the traditions of a dying world.

Only when the last of the adults were about to die aboard each ship did they reveal the truth to the children: The ships were not equipped with means for deceleration. They would accelerate forever, asymptotically approaching the speed of light, until the ships ran out of fuel and coasted along at the final cruising speed, toward the end of the universe.

Within their frame of reference, time would pass normally. But outside the ship, the rest of the universe would be hurtling along to its ultimate doom against the tide of entropy. To an outside observer, time seemed to stop in the ships.

Plucked out of the stream of time, the children would grow a few years older, but not much more. They would die only when the universe ended. This was the only way to ensure their safety, the adults explained, an asymptotic approach to triumphing over death. They would never have their own children; they would never have to mourn; they would never have to fear, to plan, to make impossible choices in sacrifice. They would be the last Thereals alive and possibly the last intelligent beings in the universe.

All parents make choices for their children. Almost always they think it’s for the best.

• • • •

All along, I had thought I could change her. I had thought she would want to stay because of me, because of our child. I had loved her because she was different; I also thought she would transform out of love.

“Love has many forms,” she said. “This is mine.”

Many are the stories we tell ourselves of the inevitable parting of lovers when they’re from different worlds: selkies, gu huo niao, Hagoromo, swan maidens . . . What they have in common is the belief by one half of a couple that the other half could be changed, when in fact it
was the difference, the resistance to change, that formed the foundation of their love. And then the day would come when the old sealskin or feather cape would be found, and it would be time to return to the sea or the sky, the ethereal realm that was the beloved’s true home.

The crew of *Focal Point* would spend part of the voyage in hibernation; but once they reached their first target point, 550 AU from the Sun, away from the galactic center, they would have to stay awake and listen for as long as they could. They would guide the ship along a helical path away from the Sun, sweeping out a larger slice of the galaxy from which they might detect signals. The farther they drifted from the Sun, the better the Sun’s magnification effect would be due to the reduction of interference from the solar corona on the deflected radio waves. The crew was expected to last as long as a few centuries, growing up, growing old, having children to carry on their work, dying in the void, an outpost of austere hope.

“You can’t make a choice like that for our daughter,” I said.

“You’re making a choice for her too. How do you know if she’ll be safer or happier here? This is a chance for transcendence, the best gift we can give her.”

And then came the lawyers and the reporters and the pundits armed with sound bites taking sides.

Then the night that you tell me you still remember. It was your birthday, and we were together again, just the three of us, for your sake because you said that was what you wished.

We had chocolate cake (you requested “teo-broom”). Then we went outside onto the deck to look up at the stars. Your mother and I were careful to make no mention of the fight in the courts or the approaching date for her departure.

“Is it true you grew up on a boat, Mommy?” you asked.

“Yes.”

“Was it scary?”

“Not at all. We’re all living on a boat, sweetheart. Earth is just a big raft in the sea of stars.”

“Did you like living on a boat?”
“I loved that boat—well, I don’t really remember. We don’t remember much about what happened when we were really young; it’s a quirk of being human. But I do remember being very sad when I had to say good-bye to it. I didn’t want to. It was home.”

“I don’t want to say good-bye to my boat, either.”

She cried. And so did I. So did you.

She gave you a kiss before she left. “There are many ways to say I love you.”

• • • •

The universe is full of echoes and shadows, the afterimages and last words of dead civilizations that have lost the struggle against entropy. Fading ripples in the cosmic background radiation, it is doubtful if most, or any, of these messages will ever be deciphered.

Likewise, most of our thoughts and memories are destined to fade, to disappear, to be consumed by the very act of choosing and living.

That is not a cause for sorrow, sweetheart. It is the fate of every species to disappear into the void that is the heat death of the universe. But long before then, the thoughts of any intelligent species worthy of the name will become as grand as the universe itself.

• • • •

Your mother is asleep now on Focal Point. She will not wake up until you’re a very old woman, possibly not even until after you’re gone.

After she wakes up, she and her crewmates will begin to listen, and they’ll also broadcast, hoping that somewhere else in the universe, another species is also harnessing the energy of their star to focus the faint rays across light-years and eons. They’ll play a message designed to introduce us to strangers, written in a language based on mathematics and logic. I’ve always found it funny that we think the best way to communicate with extraterrestrials is to speak in a way that we never do in life.
But at the end, as a closing, there will be a recording of compressed memories that will not be very logical: the graceful arc of whales breaching, the flicker of campfire and wild dancing, the formulas of chemicals making up the smell of a thousand foods, including cheap wine and burned hot dogs, the laughter of a child eating the food of the gods for the first time. Glittering jewels whose meanings are not transparent, and for that reason, are alive.
And so we read this, my darling, this book she wrote for you before she left, its ornate words and elaborate illustrations telling fairy tales that will grow as you grow, an apologia, a bundle of letters home, and a map of the uncharted waters of our souls.
There are many ways to say I love you in this cold, dark, silent universe, as many as the twinkling stars.

• • • •


For more on natural nuclear reactor piles, see:


For more on SETI and the Sun’s gravitational lens, see:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

Follow the ghosts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took time to work myself up to the harvesting. Simple grief kept me by her side, listless, for an hour or more; and fear kept me from my task after that—fear that I’d somehow do it wrong. I’d never performed a harvesting before, only witnessed one. My mother’s.
The memory, which I’d tried very hard to bury, made my chest hitch. My finger-bone necklace clacked with the sudden movement. I silenced it with my palm. Yba’s would be a poor yield, but I had to do my best. It was my fault she’d lost out on a proper harvesting. I couldn’t disrespect her by letting the rest of her body go to waste.

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello?”

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

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

I sat back on my haunches in bitter bewilderment.

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

Instead, she’d left this tiny fragment. The Ruined script is said how it’s written so I traced it with a fingertip, doing my best to sound out the words. Yba had only taught me the basics. My mother could’ve read them, could’ve shaped the words even though she couldn’t hear them. They’d always shared much more with each other than with me. They were shutting me out, still.

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

(Is that my fault, too?)

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

• • • •

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The weavers were delighted with Yba’s plait. The brittle hairs glittered like silver thread, fit to embroider a bridal headscarf, and would soon soften in oil.
Malnutrition had stunted her bones, so the bone-workers handled them like the bones of a child. They would make fine things: combs and needles and flutes.

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

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

“Gwinaelle!”

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

The skin for my mother’s book was taken from her stomach. That scar marked the cut I was born from, when the natural way grew too difficult. As a child, I’d told her it was ugly. Now I was a young woman with scars of my own, I wished I could tell her *(that I’m sorry)* that it shimmered like nacre. Inside were my mother’s drawings, mapping the entirety of the metal ruins where we lived—even parts I’d never seen. So much work over so many years, so much sacrificed, and such a thin little book to show for it.

I cried until my head hurt.

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

The rest of Rann’s family were not so welcoming.
“Still playing around in those ruins?” said Rann’s sister, Wexen. I had to grip my hands, the impulse to sign was so strong. “I don’t play.”

“I can’t see what else there is to do out there. Let us know when you get bored. We need all the help we can get.” She spoke fast and hard. I blinked. “It can’t be so bad. I saw the potato crop.”

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

Once Rann, his father, and Wexen’s husband got home, we ate a cold spread of salted jerky, calf’s tongue, clotted milk from Aefha’s goat, and mashed tubers with swirls of marrow jam. I gave up Yba’s dandelion wine, for sweetness. It was all delicious, despite there being hardly enough to go around. In the ruins, I live on whatever I can trap or forage. Food is how they keep me here, and how they lure me back. The richness soon got the better of me. I tucked myself away from the boisterous family, massaging my bloated stomach. With their backs turned to me like a wall, I thought I understood a little of how my mother must’ve felt as a girl before she learned to sign, cut off from such word games, squabbles and banter that made up a house like this one. (Often, I imagine her in so much detail that I can near believe I was there.) It was her curious nature that drove her into the ruins. What a relief to have no lips to read and no need to use any voice except the one she could shape with her hands! I could hear them, yet I too longed to leave. The noise was grating. I was glad of my little corner and the chance to examine my mother’s book.

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

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

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

“I . . . I think these are the ruins to the northwest.” I bit my bottom lip. The structures there were unsound, the pathways choked with litter that wouldn’t decompose—and worst, it crawled with ghosts. I’d dared it once, only for the ghosts to turn on me in their dozens like starving dogs on meat. They’d followed me for miles, gabbling madly. When my mother found out, she couldn’t sign fiercely enough: The northwest was out of bounds.

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

Why the change of heart?

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

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

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

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

I saw in his face a difficult question: Will I come to show such
disregard too?
“Maybe you just missed the rest,” he said.
“Maybe.”
Aefha was watching us. Bedda wandered close, gurgling, to be called away by Wexen.
“Have you started your book?” I asked.
“Yes,” Rann said, glad to change the subject. “Want to see?” He took me through to the sleeping area, which turned every head in the house.
“Stay where we can see you,” Rann’s father growled. Suspicion never left his eyes. Aefha and Wexen smirked, their minds turning to sex. It was a different kind of corruption Rann’s father worried about.
Rolling his eyes, Rann handed me some drawings bound with a loop of sinew.
He’d sketched the everyday, the early mornings, the baskets full of horn and bone. One side showed Aefha tickling Bedda, her hair loose and trailing about her feet. Another, drawn some time ago and rougher for it, showed both our mothers together, laughing at some long-lost joke. They grew up close as sisters, until life led them their separate ways. My eyes lingered on the bandolier I’d taken for my own, the hair that held my weight when I needed it. The fingers whose bones adorned my neck, clacking with my every movement like a tiny, private applause.
“I’m not much of a tanner,” he shrugged. “Everything I could write about it, someone else has written first. But I can draw. One day I’ll show these to my grandchildren so they’ll know where they came from, and what our lives were like, and how we lived. Maybe they can learn from it.”
“Good,” I said. “Great.”
Rann smiled and took the sketches back. “What about you?”
I thought of the book-house, its mountain of words. What could I write that hadn’t already been written? I knew how to live in the ruins—where to sleep, what to eat—but Yba and my mother were the only people who’d find that useful and they were dead; it wouldn’t help Rann, or Aefha, or little Bedda. These are the thoughts that plague me, whenever I try putting pen to paper.
“I haven’t started yet.” I caught Rann’s expression. “But I will.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You told me I got her signs wrong.”

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

“Those were her dying wishes.”

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

Gella—that had been my mother’s spoken name. It felt wrong, hearing it. I shoved Aefha away and ran. She called me back with the
name she’d given me, a name to bind me to her.
Like my mother’s, my true name has no sound.

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

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

They must’ve found something.

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

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

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

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

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

He waves to catch my attention. I glance at him. I’ve soaked his clothes as best I can; the wet cloth clings to his groin. My cheeks redden.
He holds my gaze and raises his left forearm. Then he forms an arch behind it with his right index and thumb like the rising sun. My name. He hasn’t signed since we were little. I reach for his hand, my fingers caked in mud, and we sit like that for a while as night creeps in and the cicadas start up their racket. The damp silt in the canal cools. We bury our feet in it. “Why did you come?” I ask. “You could’ve died.” “My mother sent me.” “Begging me to stay? And what about you?” I pull my hand away, my top lip curling into a snarl. “If you’re wanting me to come back as your wife, to give you those grandchildren you want so much, you’ll be waiting a long time.” But my anger barely touches him. He wiggles his toes, letting the clumps of sediment fall. “She said she knows it must hurt, your mother not telling you about the ghosts sooner. But living in the ruins is hard, and maybe Gella just wanted you to have an easy life.” “How does Aefha know what my mother wanted? She can’t even sign.” “No, but as a mother herself, she can guess.” Rann kneads his palm. “She only sent me as far as the ruins’ edge, though. I . . . carried on for myself. I know we didn’t exactly choose each other.” Now it’s his turn to blush. “I want to help.” He’s come so far, and not just in distance. I can’t imagine what it took to brush aside his bias. “You might not like it,” I say, thinking of the ghosts to come. Sometimes I don’t like it, this life, but to leave it would be a betrayal of my mother, or my childhood, or some intangible mixture of both. He nods. “I might not, but I’ll try.” For two days we head northwest, and for two nights we sleep back to back like we did as children, our bellies growling. I do what I can to feed us. The ruins may be parched and mean, but life struggles on. Dandelions and fungus grow wherever there’s water, crawlies infest every cranny, and lizards bask at dawn, dopey from the cold and dark, easy to snatch.
On the third morning, we reach the edge of a burial ground that stretches to the horizon. Stone markers and debris are scattered out of place, choked by weeds. Crumbling bone peeks out of the churned soil. I’ve passed Ruined graves before, but never so many at once; the thought of all the bodies left to rot sends a shiver up even my spine.

Maybe this is where the ghosts come from.

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

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

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

“I can’t,” he says.

A musty wind stirs my finger-bone necklace.

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

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

Soon, I can see the ghosts in their dozens. They move aimlessly. My breath catches whenever they stop, which is often, because they keep getting stuck mid-stride, doing the same steps over and over. They flicker and warp, sometimes disappearing completely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I let go my breath. “What?”

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

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

The ghost sweeps its open palm into its torso. Welcome to the—I can’t make it out. It looks like our sign for book-house.
I pull out Yba’s map and hold it up for the ghost to see, tapping the markings urgently. My hand’s shaking. *Is this here? Is this*—I speak aloud, “‘arch-ivy’?”

The ghost tilts its head as it processes my tone. It reads the word I’m pointing to and gestures all around. “Archive,” it says. It beckons me over to the nearest wall, sliding the metal compartments out. Tiny ghosts come to life inside them, strange floating papers made of light. They’re covered with more markings that slowly change.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” I call up to him. “I’m fine!”

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

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G.V. Anderson is a British writer whose professional debut, “Das Steingeschöpf”, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction in 2017. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Lightspeed, Nightmare,* and *Interzone.* She is currently working on her first novel and tweets regularly about it at @luna_luminarium.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
The Warhosts sit in the lees of the starships while the sky grows less flushed with dawn, playing cards. At the same time, the regulators within the Red emissary and our own play their own game across a moist medium of flesh, chemical brew, and stench to determine where the next battle will be fought. We—the Purples—have been fighting the Reds for possession of this moon, jigsaw piece by slow jigsaw piece, as deliberately as a pavane or carved ice. The Reds have grown increasingly desperate. The moon has a certain strategic importance, and the Reds are very close to having to cede it entirely.

The lone Red negotiator is a two, like all of our own: bipedal, bilaterally symmetric, upright-standing except when it isn’t, with a round head and forward-facing eyes. It sits half in the puddle-brew with its arms awkwardly folded to keep its defensive weapon inserts out of the damp. Slime creeps through the slats in its armor plates, a plaque of particulate silver tendrils forming and unforming against the sores in its skin. Its mouth hangs open and it pants lowly, rapidly. It has no escort, but that’s normal. Across from it, our representative is in similar state—although we design our diplomats with no weapons modifications, only soft open hands and hardened hides and sad, downward-slanting eyes from which pink-tinged water seeps.

Crouching inside the nervous system of one of the watching Warhosts, a scout unit, I recognize the vocalizations that the Red negotiator is making, our diplomat’s rigid posture. Both are expressing pain. It is my task to understand the twos’ cultural peculiarities, a largely ceremonial function nowadays. In the early times, when we were still learning to modify the twos so we could ride them into battle, we understood how to install the puppet strings but not the elegance of the violent ballets that could then arise. The protocols have since been laid out in treaties, in mutual accords of honorable behavior, after we overtook the twos’ civilizations and used their starships to travel.
outward. It has been a long time since they last changed in response to
some rupture of fashion or necessity.

The Warhosts’ game is less subtle than what passes between the
negotiator’s and diplomat’s regulators, but I find it quaintly beautiful.
Aesthetics is a disease of the obsolete, but it does no harm.

Not all of our Warhosts have hands suitable for gripping. Those that
do sit in a circle on the pebbled ground, four of them. The tallest one
shuffles cards made of thin plastic.

There are pictures on the cards, because twos like pictures. The
pictures have names. Ace of Havoc, with its hooks and hells and
disintegrating towers. The Five of Quills, which shows birds chasing
each other in an elemental pentagram. The Red Mask and the Purple
Mask. The rules do not distinguish between the two, although some
Warhosts make one superstitious warding gesture toward one and
another toward the other.

The Warhosts play for chips, sometimes pried loose from silicon
palaces, sometimes scorched from metal with the corners wrenched up.
Blood is occasionally involved, small rituals of scarification, atrocities of
tenderness. My scout has a meandering narrative of such scars along its
arm and down its back, making shackle shapes to either side of its
knobbled spine. It isn’t playing today, because it has too few chips, or
perhaps because it is preoccupied by negotiations taking place in a
language it can’t access.

(Well. It could have put its hand in the sludge, but all it would have
gotten for its trouble was a lingering ugly chemical burn, and maybe
some stings from the silver filaments.)

I don’t watch the winners in these games. Rather, I watch the losers.
By this I mean that I am a circuit of poison impulses and insectine metal
particles interpreting the story funneling through the Warhost’s eye and
nerve and brain. The regulators watch, too, but they are less concerned
with the twos’ harmless quirks during downtime and more concerned
with making sure they are fully battle operational.

The dealer is done shuffling. It deals the cards facedown. Small
vortices whirl away from each card as it lands, drawn inexorably to the
pool where the diplomat and negotiator are still connected by an integument of ooze. Even the game knows its true masters.

The Warhosts converse among themselves in their language of vibrations. My scout hums to itself. Music is another pastime we don’t regulate.

The cards go around and are revealed to the clink of chips. The Rocketeer, a Warhost with an asymmetrical protective tusk-growth of bone and metal where it had once had half its jaw, wins with a hand of two pair, knights high. Knight of Havoc and Knight of Wheels. The Rocketeer’s mouth pulls down grotesquely as it sweeps the chips toward itself.

I watch as the game winds on. The Rocketeer doesn’t end with the most chips, although everyone counts to be sure, because it’s nearly a tie. In a way, it doesn’t matter. The chips are just a way of passing numbers back and forth, an exchange of pleasantries.

The pool makes a horrible slurping noise, and silver tendrils spider out of it, dividing neatly down the middle like a parade maneuver. Half of them clamber up the frowning Red representative, some dissolving upon contact with the sores so they can be absorbed. Half of them withdraw into our diplomat. They have come to an agreement as to what battle would be fought, although the Red does not appear pleased with the outcome.

Warhosts use their game for augury, to find out who will and won’t be obliged to fight in these contests. Nobody keeps any scientific record of the auguries’ effectiveness, but that isn’t the point. The point is to provide a focus for their anxieties. The Knight of Havoc and Knight of Wheels, for instance: They interpret the cards to mean that there will be a reversal on the battlefield, an upsetting of the usual order; if not this fight, then the next. With such untidy interpretations, it’s difficult ever to be wrong.

The regulators drive my scout (more their scout than mine, naturally) to the pool, where orders linger as a scummy green-silver residue. We step in to the knee, and the knowledge of the orders needles all the way through our pores and up through the body’s strata to the brain: We are
among those to fight, cards or no cards.

• • • •

This is a story the twos tell among themselves, furtively, when the shadows grow long and the wind is a low moan.

Once upon a time, there was a fortress made of polished hegemonies and hierarchical crenellations. In the fortress lived a young woman who dreamt bullet dreams. The fortress came to be under siege; there is not much point in building a fortress if it guards a place that no one cares about attacking, after all. Holes opened in the sky and fire the color of blasphemy rained down. Shells of black dysfunction battered the sloping walls. Thunder, threnody, roses of new blood and newly charred bones.

This is the game the invaders played; this is the maze their weapons made. Each time their weapons hit the fortress, the walls and cracks and crevices shifted and crumpled. People perished inside without ever knowing the names of their killers. None of the far-eyes orbiting overhead and none of the distance-listeners warned the fortress’s commanders. None of them gave any glimpse of what was going on.

But a woman, whose name no one can pronounce anymore, heard the drumming and the damage and the whole unsteady structure of massacre. She had no gun or knife or ammunition. She did, however, know where to run: toward a weapon and not toward safety. Safety didn’t exist except as the jaws to something worse, anyway.

Deep in the bowels of the fortress were weapons its masters had considered to be fossilized past any usefulness, ancient of years. Among those weapons was a Warhost, armor of sullen metal, itself welded with weapons meant for the ugly business of cutting and shooting and lancing. A two itself in form—bilaterally symmetric except for its own weapons, upright-walking—it was designed to be piloted by a two. And the woman was a two.

The Warhost opened to her not like a flower, or a shell, but like a clangor of silence, layer by layer, swallowing her into anachronistic magnificence. In most of the variants of the story, she promised
vengeance for her family. In most of those variants, her family died not years beforehand, of carbon monoxide plague or paranoia tumors or simply falling down the stairs, but during the attack. It’s unlikely that she managed anything more than a scream when she first entered the cockpit, or a shredded exhalation. The Warhost’s designers had no care for forms of expression other than violence.

Although the woman had grown up in a fortress and watched the soldiers at their drill every day since she was a child, this experience had little to do with her mode of fighting. She knew the library of the Warhost’s maneuvers the way she knew how to blink or breathe. It spoke to her at the level of dreams. She arrowed her way out of the fortress’s debris and its shredded histories, and flew (the accounts are clear that she flew, improbable as it sounds) a trajectory toward the invaders’ cloudship. Like a hammer, she yearned for the hearts of her enemies.

The cloud soldiers had no intention of letting this interloper get close enough to spoil their victory. It wasn’t that they mistook her sensor signature for that of one of their laggard units, or that their general was unconscionably slow in ending her dinner of confits and candied fruits with one of her lovers, or that there was a critical failure in the missile launch system at the wrong time. No: All their defenses evaporated like soft mist before the woman’s onslaught.

The remarkable thing about this story is not the fortress, or the Warhost, or the woman’s luck, for all that it’s rare that amateurs show that kind of spontaneous ability. The remarkable thing is that the twos, with their primitive, self-defeating societies, their tendency to gnaw each other red given the smallest opportunity for mutual backstabbing, conceived of themselves as the riders and not the ridden.

• • • •

It’s not about diagnosis. We know the syndrome. Twos are architectural creatures. They build compulsively, even in childhood. Teetering cabins of twigs, mounds of wet sand with fingermarks pressed into their sides, piles of dice and houses of cards.
From there they progress to sky-kissing arcologies and ships that knife the sea and bridges lanterned day and night by falcon trains. Even from the placid black sky, beyond the atmosphere’s scarf, you can see the glowing spider-tracks of their cities.

This is missing half the story. Twos also build in the opposite direction. Instead of building *ever larger*, they also build *ever smaller*. We don’t think they realized early enough what this would lead to.

We didn’t learn to build *ever smaller* from them, although certainly there are scales ever smaller to explore. Fault the twos for other things. From them we learned to build *ever larger*.

We alter their inner cavities and install dart launchers, change their tolerances for heat, weave into their flesh circulatory systems that carry pale coolant. With access to certain minerals and metals, we can cause them to grow weapon excrescences from their hands and out of their bones, knife spurs and gun fists; fill the aching magazines with copious ammunition. If they cannot see far enough, or near enough, or into the correct part of the electromagnetic spectrum, we alter their eyes cell by cell until they match our specifications.

Not that this comes without price. The resulting chemical brews have to be managed by the regulators. The twos thus modified walk around with stinking open sores for easy access; we have to concoct medications to manage the risk of infection. Sometimes their arms or legs split from the strain, bone giving way to pulped marrow; or metal shreds its way out of muscle and ligament; or their eyes bleed black from the corners.

Nevertheless, the modified twos are our Warhosts and our weapons of choice. In this time and place, this is the honorable way to face our opponents.

The twos, who inadvertently taught us their folktales of knights and heroic Warhost pilots, would understand that much if we ever asked them, but the regulators have limited interest in old stories. Even if there were some way of spanning the difference in scale and outlook, I would know better than to bring the topic up anyway.

• • • •
The Reds and Purples are to fight in teams this time. Theirs has five Warhosts, ours eight, in concession to the fact that we have chosen to field more lightly armed units.

I am no strategist, no interpreter of maps or maker of plans. Other intelligences in the network of regulators are responsible for determining where we are to deploy, or why this ridge offers better protection than the other one, or how we are to equip ourselves for a land of black-green swamp. For instance, there is a great deal of concern about footwear. The twos have delicate feet, prone to rotting, and the water here is not just water, but exhales corrosive vapors that degrade the protective hide we have them grow. We could improve their feet, but the twos can only endure so many modifications, and the weapons modifications usually take priority. However, we have a reasonable supply of twos for future battles.

Today, I observe as our eight drill together. My host is a veteran unit that will keep fighting until its internals rupture or its lungs are scorched gray-white. It has been the team leader’s second for the last six matches, and it could have been the leader itself if not for the fact that a cancerous growth, an unintended side effect of the bone plates meant to shield its throat, destroyed its voice.

The first engagements between teams of Warhosts were, according to our historians, ugly and botched. The twos have a certain understanding of coordination, but they require a great deal of explicit drill for this to manifest. In all fairness, our networks, too, require training to react as we desire them to. It’s ironic that the twos programmed these methods into us so we could tunnel into them and make better use of their bodies.

For a long time, the Reds and Purples fought in one-on-one duels. During those matches, we tested combinations of weapons as scientifically as we could. We shifted to team fights not because the one-on-one duels were inadequate for the purpose, but because of a change in fashion. We had tired of the duels and desired a new challenge. The change took place practically overnight, the consensus propagated from world to world.

The eight Warhosts are now marching in drummers’ unison. The
leader must already be in pain, because some of the torso armor growths are bleeding around the edges, but it makes no noise. The regulators will be compensating by inducing a flood of painkillers. In times past, I have been involved in similar control measures and repair work. It’s a welcome art, the regrowth of plated cells and vessels, the rerouting of functions from one damaged implant to a backup system. I miss it sometimes.

The twos tell their own stories of these engagements, necessarily imperfect without the precise recording of internal states. But there is poetry to their war-chants, their riddles, their sardonic ballads. Some of their accounts exaggerate the achievements of one or two flamboyant leaders or, just as likely, a disregarded fighter whose ingenuity turns the situation around. My favorite is the one about the Warhost whose close attention to birds and their songs enabled it to realize that the birdcalls they were hearing were in fact enemy signals. A small part of me was embedded in a bird-scout once, in the very early days before they were banned as being unsporting. The nostalgia is ridiculous, but I cannot help it.

There are other stories. The nations of twos that we recruit from recount tales of bands fighting mythical creatures called dragonmotes. The dragonmotes are exactly what their name implies: serpentes composed of tiny, interlocking component dragonlings, with no internal skeleton and no blood. They are ferocious, and kill with the natural talents of fire and metal conjoined. Naturally, the twos outwit them readily. The symbolism doesn’t need further elucidation.

The Warhosts are too disciplined during training to mutter among themselves, although this is also a matter of the regulators inhibiting unnecessary loquacity. My unit is attentive to the beauty of the swamp: the way the light glistens on the murky water, the brightly spotted amphibians that leap from leaf to leaf, the scaly fliers that spear the amphibians with their long beaks and make harsh cries like scraping rock. The splashing of the water that will slowly destroy their feet, and the footprints invisible beneath.

The hardest part for the Warhosts, because of the twos’ inherent
frailty, is when they disperse. They would rather huddle together, even though this makes them more vulnerable to attack. We struggled with this tendency until some regulator hit upon the solution of giving them equipment to communicate with each other (as opposed to the existing communication between regulators in different Warhosts).

The Warhosts’ reverie goes by different names in their various languages. We monitor the connection, although it is not so much a channel for seditious longings as a tangle of symbols given force by unsinewed dreams. In effect, we walk through three spaces simultaneously: the swamp itself; the regulators’ diagrammed plans and topologies of their tactics; and the reverie’s ever-shifting mire.

We lost and won and lost a great many fights, both us and the Reds, before we understood that we had to join combat on all three levels simultaneously, and that leaving one battleground undefended could jeopardize progress in the other two. This is the reason my profession, recording the twos’ whispers and warbles, returned to respectability after years of neglect.

• • • •

Here is another of the twos’ stories.

Once upon a time, a puppet hatched in the deep fissures of the twos’ castle-womb. The puppet had been shaped in imitation of the fours that roamed the world. This offended the upright general who ruled the castle-womb. He said: We are meant to live for the twos in the world, and die for the twos, the duality of day and night, the binary of the full chalice and the empty hand. Twos were warriors; fours had fallen out of fashion. And he ordered that the puppet be burned.

However, a surgeon of the twos saw in the puppet’s bleak eyes the seedling desire to survive, and she was moved. She bribed the keepers of the castle-womb with drugs terrible and intoxicating, leaving them wrapped in dreams of black, wild skies and flight and planets plunging past, of empires and expiry and armies holding fast, of victories against enemies reduced to ciphers of bodiless eyes. And she gathered up the
puppet and took it to her operating room.

The room was the color of purged steel, and the walls and ceiling looked with mirror eyes upon the puppet child. The surgeon broke the puppet child’s limbs, unchambered its joints, and strapped it wailing to a table of polished regrets. Then she began the tedious, necessary, loving work of carving up the child’s ligatures and refastening its strings so that it could be a proper two instead of a four.

No one interrupted the surgeon. There was no reason why anyone should. For one thing, she was highly respected and not regarded as one given to whimsy. For another, no one imagined that she would defy the general’s wishes, even in so small a matter as this. They were not friends, but they had the necessary mutual respect proper to their stations. As for the castle-womb’s keepers, theirs was not a well-regarded job. It was sordid, although not unexpected, that they should suffer lapses from time to time.

The puppet child screamed in the only language it knew, in syllables cleanly articulated and made of angled phonemes. The castle’s inhabitants, inured to the unanesthesized sounds of suffering, took no notice. The surgeon sang a lullaby as she worked, although it could scarcely be heard over the screams.

When she was done, the surgeon left the puppet bound to the table and sent a servant for the general. The general came a scant hour later, leaning heavily upon his war scepter. He looked down at the mutilated child. “What have you done?” he asked softly.

“You are so concerned with the principle of duality,” the surgeon said. “Look. I have given it to you.” She cut the straps with her scalpel, which was sharper than whiplash scorn, darker than hope unborn. “Look.” She struck the puppet once, twice, and it cringed away from the blows.

“I’m watching,” the general said in a voice that suggested that he had his doubts.

She repeated the exercise. This time the puppet stumbled on two legs, not four, crouched and trembling.

“I see,” the general said, and this time his voice said that he did.

“So tell me,” the surgeon said, “is this acceptable?”
The general smiled at her, then, and his smile was like the moon slivering black. “So tell me,” he said, only slightly mocking, “can you do this with other anomalies, or is your surgical expertise limited to puppets?”

Within a scant few generations, nothing moved upon this world that was not a two.

• • • •

The march to the battleground is long. I listen to the fliers’ rattling cries, to the wind skittering through the branches of the shroudtrees, to the intermittent splash and patter of the rain. Sometimes there are paths built upon the mire, tottering structures of ropy fibers braided together by hands now rotted nameless.

The Warhosts have designations to us, and names among themselves: a subtle distinction. Mine is telling the team leader about the mountain it sees far in the distance, wrapped in swollen purple clouds. As we approach the mountain in the reverie, its peak grows to resemble a dragon’s head.

One of the units murmurs a story of a six-legged dragon, terrible of mien, and the six corpse-riders it bore into battle against the twos. There is no mountain, dragon-headed or otherwise, in the real-world arena. Perhaps it is simply that we are not imaginative enough to see dragons in dragonless spaces.

I am not sure which Warhost originated this nucleus of dragons. There are competing dragon-myths, including the common ones about hostile dragonmotes and the less common ones, older in origin, about benevolent dragon deities, spirits of rain and storm and ocean unchained. Maybe it has to do with the clouds, with the persistent, seething humidity. An incarnation of discomfort.

Today the Warhosts seem neither to regard the dragon-manifestations as trophies to be slain nor as deities to be propitiated. Instead, the hosts are concerned with going unnoticed. I remember another engagement where they believed that they traveled across a slumbering dragon’s
spine, and had to drill holes into it, drive spikes into the holes, to keep it from waking and rousing the earth with rocket thunder and mortar fire. That’s not what they’re doing this time.

One of the regulators within this Warhost queries me directly about the reverie, attention I haven’t received in some time. Presumably whatever I say will be conveyed to the rest of the team, so I had better not waste its time. Unfortunately, I have no magic answers. All I can tell it is what I have told myself, recursive riddles, dragons within dragons. I do, however, offer to walk the reverie myself as a two, and it accepts this as distasteful but necessary.

While I put together my reverie-puppet, the Warhost slaps at a whining sound. Its reflexes, already damaged by its current set of modifications, are not good enough. Whatever it tried to slap has escaped. A red welt rises on the back of its right arm. The welt itches, although at least the Warhost doesn’t scratch.

I am bothered by this, even though the twos have a history of being irritable about pests, harmless or otherwise. But the regulators must think it of no consequence, and for my part, I have other matters to attend to.

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We have reached the battleground. The Warhosts have been patrolling it in lonely, irregular arcs. It continues to rain in sizzling bursts, never for long, but the clinging moisture makes the host huddle in on itself in wordless misery.

I hear the buzzing of insects. One of the regulators has induced the secretion of a waxy, foul-smelling chemical mixture to ward away the insects and soothe the welts. Some success on the second count, very little on the first. The insects are swift and elusive, night-fliers with a talent for stealth. I’m only surprised there aren’t more of them, given the environment.

The Warhost continues to cringe from the specters of six-dragons. They are everywhere now: cloudshadows stamped waveringly across the dim waters, claw marks across the hunched trees. Dragon silhouettes
rearing in the distance, their sibilant voices threading through the breath of evening. Drums to which dragons recite their prophecies in orderly hexameter.

In the reverie, a new story emerges. Dragons eat the world’s subterranean foundations, chewing open rock and fire and root. The holes are small to the point of invisibility, yet they make the world porous, a sponge to absorb the poison influences that filter through the void from other worlds. Little by little, the world will become infused with coagulating radiation until it can no longer sustain life.

The twos are good at numeration when they care to be, but they don’t seem to care that I have joined their number. I have built myself out of scraps of sinew, layering them over a perfect armature of unhollow bones, and covering that with rough brown skin. In form, I am more like the Warhosts’ ancestors than they are themselves. This is deliberate: I wish to see as they see, not as we would have them see.

Unfortunately, journeying through the reverie is not so simple as that. I know the movement-patterns of walking, of running, of stumbling through thick mud, but it is another to think as the Warhosts think, no matter how attentively I listen to their legend-weaving.

There’s another problem, which I am faintly aware of as I wrestle with the difficulty of seeing dragons’ whiskered visages in hillsides and dragons’ lantern eyes in foxfire. The Warhosts, for their part, seem entirely unaware of the regulators’ dismay: In all this time, we have seen no trace of the enemy.

• • • •

You expect a third tale of twos. There is no third tale except, perhaps, to the extent that this embedding narrative is it.

Beware the dragons, I tell the regulators. In the reverie, I have acclimated to my two-form. I march with rotting feet, use callused hands to shade my eyes from sunlight glaring from the black waters. I can hear the dragons gnawing punctures into our carefully planned contests.

The regulators seek dragons outside the reverie. Sixes, they say. They
have figured it out, but it’s too late for us, although perhaps not for the rest of the Purples.

• • • •

It’s not that we weren’t warned. It’s that we didn’t understand the warning early enough.

Ten days have passed, and another ten. That is almost certainly because the Reds have decided to change the terms of the fight. We’ve encountered the opposing team, but it took a form that we had not expected, because we assumed that tradition would take care of the details. If only we had understood how desperate the Reds are for this moon—but our comrades upon other worlds will have to compensate for our failure.

The welts and their associated discomfort are no longer the issue. My Warhost has stopped walking. Earlier, the regulators forced it to seek higher ground, toward a shelf of rock away from the waters. Then, before its strength gave out entirely, it built itself a shelter of fabric and fallen shroudtree limbs. It lies there now, shivering, feverish, unresponsive even to our attempts to feed it.

Our communications with the other members of the team, too, are slashed through with riddles of static, increasingly unsolvable.

Five Red Warhosts descend, buzzing and droning their own hexameter riddle. They are sixes, with dark chitin, iridescent and veined with silica-pale patterns. They are much smaller than the twos—the largest is the size of a two’s hand, and the rest are not even that big—and they have wings and curling querulous antennae. They settle on my Warhost’s exposed, ulcerated skin. Their weight is almost imperceptible, a caress of tiny shuddering feet.

The Warhost is already dying of the toxins generated by the sixes’ bites. Now the Reds with their new mounts are injecting motes of disease, some of which are able to disrupt our own functioning. Some of them have extended ovipositors heavy with eggs, whose young will no doubt chew the Warhost’s carcass into a blossoming of the sixes’ larvae.
The regulators are attempting to build a chemical bridge of surrender so they can renegotiate the battle. But it’s too late for this host.

We have lost this moon, although there will be other moons. I record the defeat as it takes place. As the sixes transfix me in the reverie, I wonder what folktale the history will be maimed into after I am gone.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yoon Ha Lee’s debut novel, Ninefox Gambit, won the Locus Award for best first novel and was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and Clarke awards. Its sequel, Raven Strategem, was a finalist for the Hugo. His middle grade space opera Dragon Pearl is forthcoming from Disney-Hyperion in January 2019. His short fiction has appeared in Tor.com, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Clarkesworld Magazine, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and other venues. Lee lives in Louisiana with his family and a very lazy cat, and has not yet been eaten by gators.
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Charlotta was asleep in the dining car when the train arrived in San Margais. It was tempting to just leave her behind, and I tried to tell myself this wasn’t a mean thought, but came to me because I, myself, might want to be left like that, just for the adventure of it. I might want to wake up hours later and miles away, bewildered and alone. I am always on the lookout for those parts of my life that could be the first scene in a movie. Of course, you could start a movie anywhere, but you wouldn’t; that’s my point. And so this impulse had nothing to do with the way Charlotta had begun to get on my last nerve. That’s my other point. If I thought being ditched would be sort of exciting, then so did Charlotta. We felt the same about everything.

“Charlotta,” I said. “Charlotta. We’re here.” I was on my feet, grabbing my backpack, when the train actually stopped. This threw me into the arms of a boy of about fourteen, wearing a t-shirt from the Three Mountains Soccer Camp. It was nice of him to catch me. I probably wouldn’t have done that when I was fourteen. What’s one tourist more or less? I tried to say some of this to Charlotta when we were on the platform and the train was already puffing fainter and fainter in the distance, winding its way like a great worm up into the Rambles Mountains. The boy hadn’t gotten off with us.

It was raining, and we tented our heads with our jackets. “He was probably picking your pocket,” Charlotta said. “Do you still have your wallet?” Which made me feel I’d been a fool, but when I put my hand in to check, I found, instead of taking something out, he’d put something in. I pulled out an orange piece of paper folded like a fan. When opened, flattened, it was a flier in four languages—German, Japanese, French, and English. Open mike, the English part said. And then, Come to the Last Word Café. 100 Ruta de los Esclavos by the river. First drink free. Poetry Slam. To the death.

The rain erased the words even as we read them.
“No city listed,” Charlotta noted. She had taken the paper from me to look more closely. Now it was blank and limp. She refolded it, carefully so it wouldn’t tear, put it in the back pocket of her pants. “Anyway, can’t be here.”

The town of San Margais hangs on the edge of a deep chasm. There’d been a river once. We had a geological witness. We had the historical records. But there was no river now.

“And no date for the slam,” Charlotta added. “And we don’t think fast on our feet. And death. That’s not very appealing.”

If she’d made only one objection, then she’d no interest. Ditto if she’d made two. But three was defensive; four was obsessive. Four meant that if Charlotta could ever find the Last Word Café, she was definitely going. Just because I’d been invited and she hadn’t. Try to keep her out! I know this is what she felt because it’s what I would have felt.

We took a room in a private house on the edge of the gorge. We had planned to lodge in the city center, more convenient to everything, but we were tired and wanted to get in out of the rain. The guidebook said this place was cheap and clean.

It was ten-thirty in the morning and the proprietress was still in her nightgown. She was a woman of about fifty, and the loss of her two front teeth had left a small dip in her upper lip. Her nightgown was imprinted with angels wearing choir robes and haloes on sticks like balloons. She spoke little English; there was a lot of pointing, most of it upward. Then we had to follow her angel butt up three flights of ladders, hauling our heavy packs. The room was large and had its own sink. There were glass doors opening onto a balcony, rain sheeting down. If you looked out, there was nothing to see. Steep nothing. Gray nothing. The dizzying null of the gorge. “You can have the bed by the doors,” Charlotta offered. She was already moved in, toweling her hair.

“You,” I said. I was nobody’s fool.

Charlotta sang. “It is scary, in my aerie.”

“Poetry?” the proprietress asked. Her dimpled lip curled slightly. She didn’t have to speak the language to know bad poetry when she heard it, that lip said.
“Yes,” Charlotta said. “Yes. The Last Word Café? Is where?”
“No,” she answered. Maybe she’d misunderstood us. Maybe we’d misunderstood her.

• • • •

A few facts about the gorge:
The gorge is very deep and very narrow. A thousand years ago a staircase was cut into the interior of the cliff. According to our guidebook, there are 839 stone steps, all worn smooth by traffic. Back when the stairs were made, there was still a river. Slaves carried water from the river up the stairs to the town. They did this all day long, down with an empty clay pitcher, up with a full one, and then different slaves carried water all during the night. The slave owners were noted for their poetry and their cleanliness. They wrote formal erotic poems about how dirty their slaves were.

One day there was an uprising. The slaves on the stairs knew nothing about it. They had their pitchers. They had the long way down and the longer way up. Slaves from the town, ex-slaves now, stood at the top and told each one as he (or she) arrived, that he (or she) was free. Some of the slaves poured their water out onto the stone steps to prove this to themselves. Some emptied their pitchers into the cistern as usual, thinking to have a nice bath later. Later all the pitchers were given to the former slave owners who now were slaves and had to carry water up from the river all day or all night.

Still later, there was resentment between the town slaves, who had taken all the risks and made all the plans, and the stair slaves, who were handed their freedom. The least grateful of the latter were sent back to the stairs.

Two or three hundred years after the uprising, there was no more water. Over many generations, the slaves had finally emptied the river. To honor their long labors, in memory of a job well done, slavery was abolished in San Margais. There is a holiday to commemorate this every year on May 21. May 21 is also our birthday, mine and Charlotta’s. Let’s
not make too much of that.

Among the many factions in San Margais was one that felt there was nothing to celebrate in having once had a river and now not having one. Many bitter poems have been written on this subject, all entitled “May 21.”


The shower in our pensione was excellent, the water hot and hard. Charlotta reported this to me. Since I got my choice of bed, she got the first shower. We’d been making these sorts of calculations all our lives; it kept us in balance. As long as everyone played. We were not in San Margais for the poetry.

Five years before, while we were still in high school, Charlotta and I had fallen in love with the same boy. His name was Raphael Kaplinsky. He had an accent, South African, and a motorcycle, American. “I saw him first,” Charlotta said, which was true—he was in her second period World Lit class. I hadn’t seen him until fifth period Chemistry.

I spoke to him first, though. “Is it supposed to be this color?” I’d asked when we were testing for acids.

“He spoke to me first,” Charlotta said, which was also true since he’d answered my acid question with a shrug. And then, several days later, said “Nice boots!” to Charlotta when she came to school in calf-high red Steve Maddens.

My red Steve Maddens.

We quarreled about Raphael for weeks without settling anything. We didn’t speak to each other for days at a time. All the while Raphael dated other girls. Loose and easy Deirdre. Bookish Kathy. Spiritual, ethereal Nina. Junco, the Japanese foreign-exchange student.

Eventually Charlotta and I agreed that we would both give Raphael up. Charlotta made the offer, but I’d been planning the same; I matched it instantly. There was simply no other way. We met in the yard to formalize the agreement with a ceremony. Each of us wrote the words Ms. Raphael Weldon-Kaplinsky onto a piece of paper. Then we simultaneously tore
our papers into twelve little bits. We threw the bits into the fishpond and watched the carp eat them.

I knew that Charlotta would honor our agreement. I knew this because I intended to do so.

• • • •

When we were little, when we were just learning to talk, Mother says Charlotta and I had a secret language. She could watch us, towheaded two-year-olds, talking to each other, and she could tell that we knew what we were saying, even if she didn’t. Sometimes after telling each other a long story, we would cry. One of us would start and the other would sit struggling for a moment, lip trembling, and eventually we would both be in tears. There was a graduate student in psychology interested in studying this, but we learned English and stopped speaking our secret language before he could get his grant money together.

Mother favors Charlotta. I’m not the only one to think so; Charlotta sees it, too. Mother has learned that it’s simply not possible to treat two people with equal love. She would argue that she favors us both—sometimes Charlotta, sometimes me. She would say it all equals out in the end. Maybe she’s right. It isn’t equal yet, but it probably hasn’t ended.

• • • •

Some facts from our guidebook about the San Margais Civil War. 1932–37: The underlying issues were aesthetic and economic. The trigger was an assassination.

In the middle ages, San Margais was a city-state ruled by a hereditary clergy. Even after annexation, the clergy played the dominant political role. Fra Nando came to power in the 1920s during an important poetic revival known as the Margais Movement. Its premiere voice was the great epistemological poet, Gigo. Fra Nando believed in the lessons of history. Gigo believed in the natural cadence of the street, the impenetrable nature of truth. From Day One these two were headed for a
showdown.

Still, for a few years, all was politeness. Gigo received many grants and honors from the Nando regime. She was given a commission to write a poem celebrating Fra Nando’s seventieth birthday. “Yes, I remember,” Gigo’s poem begins (in translation), “the great cloud of dragonflies grazing the lake . . .” If Fra Nando’s name appeared only in the dedication, at least this was accessible stuff. Nostalgic, even elegiac.

Gigo was never nostalgic. Gigo was never elegiac. To be so now expressed only her deep contempt for Fra Nando, but it was all so very rhythmical; he was completely taken in. Fra Nando set the first two lines in stone over the entrance to the city-state library and invited Gigo to be his special guest at the unveiling.

“The nature of the word is not the nature of the stone,” Gigo said at the ceremony when it was her turn to speak. This was also accessible. Fra Nando went red in the face as if he’d been slapped, one hand to each cheek.

A cartel of businessmen, angry over the graduated tariff system Nando had instituted, saw the opportunity to assassinate him and have the poets blamed. Gigo was killed at a reading the same night Fra Nando was laid in state in the Catedral Nacionales. Her last words were “blind hill, grave glass,” which is all anyone could have hoped. Unless she said “grave grass,” and one of her acolytes changed her words in the reporting as her detractors have alleged. Anyone could think up grave grass, especially if they were dying at the time.

All that remains for certain of Gigo’s work are the contemptuous two lines in stone. The Margais Movement was outlawed, its poems systematically searched out and destroyed. Attempts were made to memorize the greatest of Gigo’s verses, but these had been written so as to defy memorization. A phrase here and there, much contested, survives. Nothing that suggests genius. All the books by or about the Margais Movement were burned. All the poets were imprisoned and tortured until they couldn’t remember their own names, much less their own words.

There is a narrow bridge across the gorge that Charlotta can see from the doors by her bed. During the civil war, people were thrown from the
bridge. There is still a handful of old men and old women here who will
tell you they remember seeing that.

• • • •

Raphael Kaplinsky went to our high school for only one year. We told
ourselves it was good we hadn’t destroyed our relationship for so short a
reward. We dated other boys, boys neither of us liked. The flaws in our
reasoning began to come clear.

1) Raphael Kaplinsky was ardent and oracular. You didn’t meet a boy
like Raphael Kaplinsky in every world lit, every chemistry class you
took. He was the very first person to use the word later to end a
conversation. Using the word later in this particular way was a promise.
It was nothing less than messianic.

2) What if we did, someday, meet a boy we liked as much as Raphael?
We were both bound to like him exactly the same. We hadn’t solved our
problem so much as delayed it. We were doomed to a lifetime of each-
otherness unless we came up with a different plan.

We hired an internet detective to find Raphael, and he uncovered a
recent credit-card trail. We had followed this trail all the way to last
Sunday in San Margais. We had come to San Margais to make Raphael
choose between us.

• • • •

It was raining too hard to go out, plus we’d spent the night sitting up
on the train. We hadn’t been able to sit together, and had had a drunk on
one side (Charlotta’s) and a shoebox of mice on the other (mine). The
mice were headed to the Snake Pit at the State Zoo. There was no way to
sleep while their little paws scrabbled desperately, fruitlessly, against the
cardboard. I had an impulse to set them free, but it seemed unfair to the
snakes. How often in this world we are unwillingly forced to take sides!
Team Mouse or Team Snake? Team Fly or Team Spider?

Charlotta and I napped during the afternoon while the glass rattled in
the doorframes and the rain fell. I woke up when I was too hungry to sleep. “I have got to have something to eat,” Charlotta said.


The cuisine of San Margais is nothing to write home about. Charlotta and I each bought an umbrella from a street peddler and ate in a small, dark pizzeria. It was not only wet outside, but cold. The pizzeria had a large oven, which made the room pleasant to linger in, even though there was a group of Italian tourists smoking across the way.

Charlotta and I had a policy never to order the same thing off a menu. This was hard, because the same thing always sounded good to both of us, but it doubled our chances of making the right choice. Charlotta ordered a pizza called El Diablo, which was all theater and annoyed me, as we don’t like hot foods. El Diablo brought tears to her eyes, and she only ate one piece, picking the olives off the rest and then helping herself to several slices of mine.

She wiped her face with a napkin, which left a rakish streak of pizza sauce on her cheek. I was irritated enough to say nothing about this. One of the Italians made his way to our table. “So,” he said with no preliminaries. “American, yes? I can kiss you?”

We were nothing if not patriots. Charlotta stood at once, moved into his arms, and I saw his tongue go into her mouth. They kissed for several seconds, then Charlotta pushed him away, and now the pizza sauce was on him.

“So,” she said. “Now. We need directions to the closest internet café.”

The Italian drew a map on her place mat. He drew well; his map had depth and perspective. The internet café appeared to be around many corners and up many flights of stairs. The Italian decorated his map with hopeful little hearts. Charlotta took it away from him or there surely would have been more of these.


The San Margais miracle, an anecdotal account:
About ten years ago, a little boy named Bastien Brunelle was crossing the central plaza when he noticed something strange on the face of the statue of Fra Nando. He looked more closely. Fra Nando was crying large milky tears. Bastien ran home to tell his parents.

The night before, Bastien’s father had had a dream. In his dream, he was old and crippled, twisted up like a licorice stick. In his dream, he had a dream that told him to go and bathe in the river. He woke from the dream dream and made his slow, painful way down the 839 steps. At the bottom of the gorge he waited. He heard a noise in the distance, cars on a freeway. The river arrived like a train and stopped to let him in. Bastien’s father woke up and was thirty-two again, which was his proper age.

When he heard about the statue, Bastien’s father remembered the dream. He followed Bastien out to the square where a crowd was gathering, growing. “Fra Nando is crying for the river,” Bastien’s father told the crowd. “It’s a sign to us. We have to put the river back.”

Bastien’s father had never been a community leader. He ran a small civil war museum for tourists, filled with faked Gigo poems, and rarely bought a round for the house when he went out drinking. But now he had all the conviction of the man who sees clearly amidst the men who are confused. He organized a brigade to carry water down the steps to the bottom of the gorge and his purpose was so absolute, so inspired were his words, that people volunteered their spare hours, their children’s spare hours. They signed up for slots in his schedule and carried water down the stairs for almost a week before they all lost interest and remembered Bastien’s father was not the mouth of God, but a tight-assed cheat.

By this time news of the crying statue had gone out on the internet. Scientists had performed examinations. “Fakery cannot be ruled out,” one said, which transformed into the headline, “No Sign of Fakery.” Pilgrims began to arrive from wealthy European countries, mostly college kids with buckets, thermoses, used Starbucks cups. They would stay two or three days, two or three weeks, hauling water down, having visions on the stairs and sex.
And then that ended, too. Every time has its task. Ours is to digitize the world’s libraries. This is a big job that will take generations to complete, like the pyramids. No time for filling gorges with water. “Live lightly on the earth,” the pilgrims remembered. “Leave no footprint behind.” And they all went home again, or at least they left San Margais.

• • • •

On odd days of the week our people-finder detective emailed Charlotta and copied me. On even, the opposite. Two days earlier, Raphael had bought a hat and four postcards. He had dinner at a pricey restaurante and got a fifty-dollar cash advance. That was Charlotta’s email.

Mine said that this very night, he was buying fifteen beers at the Last Word Café, San Margais.

We googled that name to a single entry. 100 Ruta de los Esclavos by the river; it said. Open mike. Underground music and poetry nightly.

There were other Americans using the computers. I walked through, asking if any of them knew how to get to the Last Word Café. To Ruta de los Esclavos? They were paying by the minute. Most of them didn’t look up. Those that did shook their heads.

Charlotta and I opened our umbrellas and went back out into the rain. We asked directions from everyone we saw, but very few people were on the street. They didn’t know English or they disliked being accosted by tourists or they didn’t like the look of our face. They hurried by without speaking. Only a single woman stopped. She took my chin in her hand to make sure she had my full attention. Her eyes were tinged in yellow, and she smelled like Irish Spring soap. “No,” she said firmly. “Me entiendes? No for you.”

We walked along the gorge, because this was the closest thing San Margais had to a river. On one side of us, the town. The big yellow I of Tourist Information (closed indefinitely), shops of ceramics and cheeses, postcards, law offices, podiatrists, pubs, our own pensione. On the other, the cliff face, the air. We crossed the narrow bridge and when we came to
the 839 steps we started down them just because they were mostly inside the cliff and therefore covered and therefore dry. I was the one to point these things out to Charlotta. I was the one to say we should go down.

The steps were smooth and slippery. Each one had a dip in the center in just that place where a slave was most likely to put his (or her) foot. Water dripped from the walls around us, but we were able to close our umbrellas, leave them at the top to be picked up later. For the first stretch, there were lights overhead. Then we were in darkness, except for an occasional turn, which brought an occasional opening to the outside. A little light could carry us a long way.

We descended maybe 300 steps, and then, by one of the openings, we met an American coming up. In age she was somewhere in that long, unidentifiable stretch from twenty-two to thirty-five. She was carrying an empty bucket, plastic, the sort a child takes to the seashore. She was breathless from the climb.

She stopped beside us, and we waited until she was able to speak. “What the fuck,” she said finally, “is the point of going down empty-handed? What the fuck is the point of you?”

Charlotta had been asking sort of the same thing. What was the point of going all the way down the stairs? Why had she let me talk her into it? She talked me into going back. We turned and followed the angry American up and out into the rain. It was only 300 steps, but when we’d done them we were winded and exhausted. We went to our room, crawled up our three ladders, and landed in a deep, dispirited sleep.

It was still raining the next morning. We went to the city center and breakfasted in a little bakery. Just as we were finishing, our Italian walked in. “We kiss more, yes?” he asked me. He’d mistaken me for Charlotta. I stood up. I was always having to do her chores. His tongue ranged through my mouth as if he were looking for scraps. I tasted cigarettes, gum, things left in ashtrays.

“So,” I said, pushing him away. “Now. We need directions to the Last Word Café.”

And it turned out we’d almost gotten there last night, after all. The Last Word was the last stop along the 839 steps. It seemed as if I’d
known this.

Our Italian said he’d been the night before. No one named Raphael had taken the mic; he was sure of this, but he thought there might have been a South African at the bar. Possibly this South African had bought him a drink. It was a very crowded room. No one had died. That was just—how is it we Americans say? Poem license?

“Raphael probably wanted to get the feel of the place before he spoke,” Charlotta said. “That’s what I’d do.”

And me. That’s what I’d do, too.

• • • •

There was no point in going back before dark. We checked our email, but he was apparently still living on the cash advance; nothing had been added since the Last Word last night. We decided to spend the day as tourists, thinking Raphael might do the same. Because of the rain we had the outdoor sights mostly to ourselves. We saw the ruins of the old baths, long and narrow as lap pools, now with nets of morning glories twisted across them. Here and there the rain had filled them.

There was a Roman arch, a Moorish garden. When we were wetter than we could bear to be, we paid the eight euros entrance to the civil war museum. English translation was extra, but we were on a budget; there are no bargains on last-minute tickets to San Margais. We told ourselves it was more in keeping with the spirit of Gigo if we didn’t understand a thing.

The museum was small, two rooms only and dimly lit. We stood awhile beside the wall radiator, drying out and warming up. Even from that spot we could see most of the room we were in. There were three life-size dioramas—mannequins dressed as Gigo might have dressed, meeting with people Gigo might have met. We recognized the mannequin Fra Nando from the statue we’d seen in the city center, although this version was less friendly. His hand was on Gigo’s shoulder, his expression enigmatic. She was looking past him up at something tall and transcendent. There was clothing laid out, male and female, in glass cases
along with playbills, baptismal certificates, baby pictures. Stapled to the wall were a series of book illustrations—a bandito seizing a woman on a balcony. The woman shaking free, leaping to her death. A story Gigo had written? A family legend? A scene from the civil war? All of the above? The man who sold us our tickets, Señor Brunelle, was conducting a tour for an elderly British couple, but since we hadn’t paid it would be wrong to stand where we could hear. We were careful not to do so.

We spoke to Señor Brunelle after. We made polite noises about the museum, so interesting, we said. So unexpected. And then Charlotta asked him what he knew about the Last Word Café.

“For tourists,” he said. “Myself, my family, we don’t go down the steps anymore.” He was clearly sad about this. “All tourists now.”

“What does it mean?” Charlotta asked first. “Poetry to the death?”

“Which word needs definition? Poetry? Or Death?”

“I know the words.”

“Then I am no more help,” Señor Brunelle told her.

“Why does it say it’s by the river when there’s no river?” Charlotta asked second.

“Always a river. In San Margais, always a river. Sometimes in your mind. Sometimes in the gorge. Either way, a river.”

“Is there any reason we shouldn’t go?” Charlotta asked third.

“Go. You go. You won’t get in,” Señor Brunelle said. He said this to Charlotta. He didn’t say it to me.

• • • •

The Last Worders:

On the night Raphael took the open mic at the Last Word Café, he did three poems. He spoke ten minutes. He stood on the stage and he didn’t try to move; he didn’t try to make it sing; he made no effort to sell his words. The light fell in a small circle on his face so that, most of the time, his eyes were closed. He was beautiful. The people listening also closed their eyes, and that made him more beautiful still. The women, the men who’d wanted him when he started to talk no longer did so. He was
beyond that, unfuckable. For the rest of their lives, they’d be undone by the mere sound of his name. The ones who spoke English tried to write down some part of what he’d said on their napkins, in their travel journals. They made lists of words—childhood, ice, yes. Gleaming, yes, yesterday.

These are the facts. Anyone can figure out this much.

For the rest, you had to be there. What was heard, the things people suddenly knew, the things people suddenly felt—none of that could be said in any way that could be passed along. By the time Raphael had finished, everyone listening, everyone there for those few minutes on that night at the Last Word Café, had been set free.

These people climbed the steps afterward in absolute silence. They did not go back, not a single one of them, to their marriages, their families, their jobs, their lives. They walked to the city center and they sat in the square on the edge of the fountain at the feet of the friendly Fra Nando and they knew where they were in a way they had never known it before. They tried to talk about what to do next. Words came back to them slowly. Between them, they spoke a dozen different languages, all useless now.

You could have started the movie of any one of them there, at the feet of the stone statue. It didn’t matter what they could and couldn’t say; they all knew the situation. Whatever they did next would be done together. They could not imagine, ever again, being with anyone who had not been there, in the Last Word Café, on the night Raphael Kaplinsky spoke.

There were details to be ironed out. How to get the money to eat. Where to live, where to sleep. How to survive now, in a suddenly clueless world.

But there was time to make these decisions. Those who had cars fetched them. Those who did not climbed in, fastened their seat belts. On the night Raphael Kaplinsky spoke at the Last Word Café, the patrons caravanned out of town without a last word to anyone. The rest of us would not hear of the Last Worders again until one of them went on *Larry King Live* and filled a two-hour show with a two-hour silence.
Or else they all died.

Charlotta and I had dinner by ourselves in the converted basement of an old hotel. The candles flickered our shadows about so we were, on all sides, surrounded by us. Charlotta had the trout. It had been cooked dry, and was filled with small bones. Every time she put a bite in her mouth, she pulled the tiny bones out. I had the mussels. The sauce was stiff and gluey. Most of the shells hadn’t opened. The food in San Margais is nothing to write home about.

We finished the meal with old apples and young wine. We were both nervous, now that it came down to it, about seeing Raphael again. Each of us secretly wondered, could we live with Raphael’s choice? However it went? Could I be happy for Charlotta, if it came to that? I asked myself. Could I bear watching her forced to be happy for me? I sipped my wine and ran through every moment of my relationship with Raphael for reassurance. That stuff about the acid experiment. How much he liked my boots. “Let’s go,” Charlotta said, and we were a bit unsteady from the wine, which, in retrospect, with an evening of 839 steps ahead of us, was not smart.

We crossed the bridge in a high wind. The rain came in sideways; the wind turned our umbrellas inside out. Charlotta was thrown against the rope rails and grabbed on to me. If she’d fallen, she would have taken me with her. If I saved her, I saved us both. Our umbrellas went together into the gorge.

We reached the steps and began to descend, sometimes with light, sometimes feeling our way in the darkness. About one hundred steps up from the bottom, a room had been carved out of the rock. Once slave owners had sat at their leisure there, washing and rewashing their hands and feet, overseeing the slaves on the stairs. Later the room had been closed off with the addition of a heavy metal door. A posting had been
set on a sawhorse outside. The Last Word Café, the English part of it said. Not for Everyone.

The door was latched. Charlotta pounded on it with her fist until it opened. A man in a tuxedo with a wide orange cummerbund stepped out. He shook his head. “American?” he asked. “And empty-handed? That’s no way to make a river.”

“We’re here for the poetry,” Charlotta told him, and he shook his head again.

“Invitation only.”

And Charlotta reached into the back pocket of her pants. Charlotta pulled out the orange paper given to me by the boy on the train. The man took it. He threw it into a small basket with many other such papers. He stood aside and let Charlotta enter.

He stepped back to block me. “Invitation only.”

“That was my invitation,” I told him. “Charlotta!” She looked back at me, over her shoulder, without really turning around. “Tell him. Tell him that invitation was for me. Tell him how Señor Brunelle told you you wouldn’t get in.”

“So?” said Charlotta. “That woman on the street told you you wouldn’t get in.”

But I had figured that part out. “She mistook me for you,” I said.

Beyond the door I could see Raphael climbing onto the dais. I could hear the room growing silent. I could see Charlotta’s back sliding into a crowd of people like a knife into water. The door swung toward my face. The latch fell.

I stayed a long time by that door, but no sounds came through. Finally I walked down the last hundred steps. I was alone at the bottom of the gorge where the rain fell and fell and there was no river. I would never have done to Charlotta what she had done to me.

It took me more than an hour to climb back up. I had to stop many, many times to rest, airless, heart throbbing, legs aching, lightheaded in the dark. No one met me at the top.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. She’s written literary, contemporary, historical, and science fiction. Her most recent novel, *We are all completely beside ourselves*, won the 2013 PEN/Faulkner, the California Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Man Booker in 2014. She lives in Santa Cruz, California where she is currently pretending to write a new book.
A full moon silvers the stalls of the Light Markets, the bazaar of the living and the dead. Here, where jinn mix with mortals and gods, where sorcery sits thick on the air, blue as incense, a crow presides over its wares. Silver rings set with opals like apricot pits nestled in obsidian silk; human teeth peer out of the smoky glass of a tall vase. Mother-of-pearl dice wink in candlelight, their pale faces carved with symbols even the jinn are too young to know.

A young man approaches the crow’s stall, gliding dark out of the shadows of the alley. His eyes and hair are jet moonless night, his shoulders bear the velvet raiment of eight heavens. A thousand turns of the stars have passed since the god called Parviz last met the crow’s eyes. These are not the eyes of a common crow, but raw rubies, their luster the gleam of new-spilled blood.

“You return at last, my prince, my lord! A thousand praises, a thousand thanks.” The crow bobs its head. Rubies wink in candlelight. “Tell me, my prince. What is it you seek from your humble servant?”

The god’s eyes graze the crow’s wares. Golden astrolabes inlaid with balkhash rubies gleam in the light of a dozen floating candles. Eight oracle bones, yellowed with age and use, arrayed in a sinister gap-toothed smile. They leer at a collar necklace, woven with leather and human hair, adorned with mismatched emeralds and a panther’s incisors. Valued patron—flickering candlelight reveals a note tucked beneath one fang—please do not touch. Object is cursed.

The god speaks in a voice smooth and inky as mid-dream darkness, cloaking the chatter and bustle of the ancient bazaar in dusk: “A sang-e sabur.” A patience stone. With a lazy hand, the god gestures to a smooth stone, no bigger than a girl’s clenched fist. Dull and unremarkable. “I will take that one. As a gift for the household of my betrothed.”

The crow’s head tilts to the side in a precise avian gesture. Its eyes stare past the god and at him in one gaze, reading every layer of immortal
flesh and soul.

“A patience stone is no ordinary gift, my lord.”
The god’s world is at once still. He watches every bob of the crow’s silky ebony head as it speaks, every twinkle of its ruby eyes.

“A wise prince would listen to the worries poured into such a stone.”
The words fall from the crow’s beak and settle, heavy as the scent of ambergris, into the god’s marrow. They caress that unsettled feeling that has made its home in his bones since he awoke from a millennium of cursed sleep. A cool finger on a fevered brow.
The god shivers beneath his midnight raiment.
He will.

• • • •

A world away, when the moon is a crescent, a mortal girl dies. The walls of her hut collapse as avaricious desert sweeps in, alive, a div, swallowing all in its path. She—Soraya—cradles her knees, pressing them into her forehead. Even as her eyes clench shut, hungry sand bites their lids, bites her ears, bites her scalp, bites the raw skin inside her nose.

She clutches a stone in one fist.

Tell it your dreams, tell it your fears, tell it your wishes, her mother whispered into her hair. And all will be well.

But all will not be well. Sand has swallowed her mother, her home, and her heart throbs in her throat, screaming for release from its meaty cage.

Help me, she begs the patience stone, the wind, anyone. Help me.
The wind whips her long coarse hair, lashing her face and arms. A roar fills her skull and chest, as if the storm is no element but a beast—Then, at once, it stills.

Soraya does not move as her hair settles on her back, as silence pours heavy over her shoulders. She pulls her knees tighter even as light seeps through her shut eyelids.

“Girl,” a voice rasps, dry as bone on bone.
She raises her head. Hut and storm are vanished and she sits on the side of a dune. The sand in which her bare feet sink is cool, the sky low and muddy. She releases her grip on her legs, but her stone . . . the patience stone has vanished.

“Look at me.”

She turns to the voice. To her right is the sun-bleached skull of a water buffalo, half-submerged in dun sand. A crow perches on one long curved horn, shifting its weight back and forth.

Its eyes are the gleam of blood on rock, the last lusty sliver of sunset. “You’ll do.” Crows cannot whisper. Or can they? The crow bobs its head once, twice. “Will you come into the desert? I know a place to shelter you from the storm.”

Soraya shakes like oracle bones tossed on the wind. The desert is dangerous, the desert means death . . .

*Clack.* The crow snaps its beak, impatient. “Are you not already dead?”

She does not know.

“Come.”

She looks past the crow. Where is she? Vast dunes roll sensuous and dizzying toward a gray horizon. Her dress, nothing more than rags, snaps against her body in a cool wind.

*Are you not already dead?* Perhaps she is. Perhaps there is no longer any reason to be afraid, no longer anything left to lose.

And yet she hesitates.

The tang on the heavy air presses more metallic, moist with each breath; a crack like one boulder against one another rumbles from a distant heaven. Alive or dead, she would be a fool not to accept the crow’s offer of shelter. She plants her palms in sand as an ache the size of a patience stone yawns in her chest. Did the wind snatch it from her fist?

With three beats of its sleek jet wings, the crow is before her, above her.

“Come.”

She pushes herself upright, and follows.
Time slips effortless beneath her bare feet; sand vanishes for hard dirt, sharp rocks. Black mountains rise before her, arrogant fangs piercing heavy clouds.

“Come.”

A clap of thunder. Pellets of rain strike her once, twice, a torrent. She is trembling when she reaches the threshold of the mountains. Here an archway soars above her head, gaping graceful as a temple hewn by gods.

She follows the echo of the crow’s beating wings into the heart of the mountain. Cool stone walls weep around her; no light guides her feet down the rocky path, nothing but the breathy beat of wings.

Then stone above her sweeps heavenward, drawing her eyes up to bright light. The crown of the mountain is open to the gray sky; a step beyond where she stands in shadows, rain falls into the heart of the mountain, filling the cavern with moisture and the echo of raindrops on stone. Soraya lingers, her eyes fixed on the sky.

The crow glides over her shoulder into the rain, into the heart of the cavern—where a palace is hewn from the bones of the mountain itself, illuminated from above.

“Come.”

Her first step into the light is tentative. Rain slides down her face as she walks through gentle sheets of it. When she reaches the walls of the palace, her rags are drenched, but she does not tremble. The crow descends to her left, talons sharp on stone.

Before her is a stone door, high, arching, simple and solid. It has no handle, no lock, no hinge, a part of the wall itself but for the strange glyphs carved into its face and blackened with soot. A bud of realization blooms in her chest: Even if she knew how to read, these markings would not sing her their secrets. They were not carved by mortal hands.

Her left hand rises from her side, not at her bidding. The door’s bidding. Her fingertips brush the glyphs, as gently as if they were petals. A single note echoes through her ribcage:
Come.
She presses palm to stone, and the door vanishes.
Her breath catches in her throat. Before her is blue-black darkness, and that new voice, the echoing note of warm dusk:
Come.
“Here I leave you,” the crow says. A sharp cock of its head; ruby eyes regard her with a softness unlikely in stone. “Be kind before you are clever,” it says. “Eternity is not won with less.”

• • • •

The crow soars through the rain, through the open crown of the mountain, and she is alone.
A chill breeze snakes around her arms. She considers the doorway, wary.
Are you not already dead?
All she knows is that she is shivering, and beyond the door is shelter from the rain.
One tentative step. As if a tender hand has taken a loose thread from her dress and pulled, she is over the threshold, the dry darkness drinking her in. Tasting her wet hair, curling around her neck.
The shadows gray with each step. She turns a corner, and pauses. Windows open on either side of a corridor before her, pointed arches lifting toward white honeycombed ceilings. Light streams through stained glass panes, dyeing pale marble floors indigo as the heart of a lake. Three white peacocks stroll away from her, long feathered tails blue then not as they amble through patches of painted light. A breeze carries an echo of fountains burbling unseen, of raindrops striking broad leaves, of the rich smell of damp earth.
A tug at the thread.
Who beckons? Whose misty voice winds silk around her wrists to draw her down the corridor?
She must know, so she follows lazy peacocks to the head of a great sweeping staircase and descends.
The palace unfurls around her, pearly as the petals of a night-blooming orchid. It is abandoned. The cooing of doves echoes in empty halls, vines wind over and through the crumbling stone banister beneath her hand. Wilted petals crush cool beneath her bare feet as she steps down marble stairs.

Soraya allows herself to be led into a bright courtyard, lined with pillars graceful as cypresses. Within is a verdant garden—overgrown, an unruly nest of ferns and jasmine. Gray light illuminates a fountain at its heart, bubbling secrets softly to itself as if it has for centuries.

Dirt is damp and fresh beneath her feet as she steps into the garden. A raindrop. She looks up—the garden is open to the cavern beyond the palace, open to the crown of the mountain and the sky above.

She closes her eyes. Rain on her face, rain on her heaven-facing palms. For the first time in months, the whisper of a smile plays at her mouth.

_Come._

Soraya opens her eyes and moves farther into the garden.

She freezes mid-step.

Before the fountain is an enormous panther, sprawled with its head on its great forepaws. Its body is skewered with hundreds of long needles, gleaming pale and sinister. Some are as long as her arm, some are mangled and bent, twisted like thorns into midnight velvet hide.

She recoils, stumbling back to the pillars, refusing to turn her back on the mass of needles and beast. Her mother once told her of a panther descending silent from the mountains and stalking a man from their village. The remains were found months later: the skull cracked, punctured by twin incisors as if it were no stronger than a pomegranate skin.

She darts behind a pillar; her breathing snags shallow. The crow said she would find shelter here, not safety . . .

But as moments pass, the doves coo on. Peacocks amble past her into the courtyard, their eyes cold sapphires, cut and polished to reflect light like mirrors.

Are they ignorant of the predator sprawled just feet from them? She
watches them on legs coiled tight to spring, to flee—but the peacocks pass the sleeping panther, their milky feathers just inches from clawed paws, from gleaming needles.

Is it . . . dead?

The thump of her heart softens, fear curls into curiosity. She creeps, timid as a hunter, toward the beast and kneels at its side. Not dead—the inky hide rises and falls, rhythmic under the weight of hundreds of needles. Willing her breath to still, she reaches out and brushes a trembling fingertip along cold steel.

The beast’s hide twitches.

She freezes. Cool rain drips on her scalp, on the fountain, on the vines around her, but the doves are silent.

“Welcome to the House of Night.”

Soraya whirls to face the voice.

Before her stands a woman, clothed in yellow and scarlet silk. A breeze catches layered skirts and long loose sleeves; air-light fabric ripples like red sunlight on water, garish in the pale light. Black hair is swept tight away from the graceful planes of the woman’s face. Her brow is painted with shifting shadows, soft as smoke, dark as kohl. Try as she might, Soraya cannot force herself to meet her eyes . . .

A jinni.

“How did you get in here?” The jinni’s voice is soft, but as the underbelly of a serpent.

“I needed shelter from the rain.” Not a lie, for do not jinn know the smell of lies like vultures know carrion?

The jinni’s eyes graze over her dripping hair, her thin arms, her rags. Soraya drops her gaze to the hem of scarlet skirts. A small voice from her gut: Which is more dangerous, the beast at her back, or the beauty before her?

“Interesting.”

The downy hair on her arms and her cheeks stands on end.

“Listen well.”

She looks up, focusing her eyes on the jeweled neckline of the jinni’s dress.
“If it’s shelter you want, you may have it—on one condition. Remove every needle from this beast before the sun sets on the eighth night. Succeed, you will be richly rewarded,” the jinni says. “Fail, and I make you my servant.”

The skin of the jinni’s throat is both dark and translucent. If blood did not flow beneath it, what did? Smoke, shadowy eternity?

“Do we have a bargain?”

Soraya glances at the panther. She cannot read its dark face, and perhaps she imagines pain behind the creases of its velvet muzzle. She followed the crow for shelter, and if she agrees, shelter she will have. But she imagines herself alone in a garden, her own flesh impaled, thick with the weight of a thousand needles, and when she breathes her consent, she is only thinking of the panther.

A flicker like flame catches her eye—the jinni’s hands extend towards the palace beyond the garden. A lacquered box, summoned by the jinni, floats with a wraith’s grace towards them.

Soraya’s breath sticks in her throat:
The jinni has no fingers.
Her palms stretch into stubs, all ten different lengths, concealed before by the loose length of sleeves.

The box settles in the damp earth before Soraya’s knees.
“Place the needles in this box. The House of Night will care for you.”
She nods, and the jinni vanishes in a curl of smoke.

• • • •

Rain drips down her cheeks. She stares, transfixed, at the air where the jinni melted away. The cooing of doves reminds her of the garden, of the sleeping beast at her back. She turns.

The gleam of the needles summons bile to the back of her throat. Who would do such a thing to a living creature? She reaches out to brush a needle that pierces the panther’s shoulder. Tentative, testing, she wraps her right hand lightly around metal as thick around as two fingers.

She snatches her hand back at the bite. Thin lines, ruby as the crow’s
eyes, well up along her fingers. She looks at the countless needles dug into the beast—all have sharp, uneven edges, like knives. A false move would slice foolish flesh to bone.

Her vision blurs with tears. One needle is all it would take to leave her with hands like the jinni’s. Perhaps the jinni herself tried and failed. Perhaps the jinni knew this was an impossible task.

Soraya turns to the panther’s head, the only part of its body not bristling with lethal metal. Her left hand rises, reaches—her fingertips brush the crown of the panther’s head, stroking it gently. Its hide is softer than the brush of lips on an infant’s downy cheek, black as dreamless sleep.

One hot tear rolls free of her eye and joins the rain slipping down her face, but she sets her jaw. She reaches for the hem of her dress, muddied by the earth of the garden, and tears strips from it. Rough fabric bites as she wraps one strip around her tender sliced fingers and another around the first needle. She places rag to rags, holds her breath, and tugs.

Muscles twitch and spasm beneath the velvet pelt as the needle slides out, wet and slick as a knife through meat. A low sigh—and just as the wound left by the needle closes before Soraya’s eyes, the needle in her hand shrinks until it is nothing but a harmless pin.

The box. She reaches for the lacquered box, opens it with trembling fingers. It is lined with engraved silver. The *ting* of the bloodstained pin against silver melts into the rain.

One. Another. Hours pass. Many fellows find the first needle in the lacquered box, many more still rise and fall with each of the panther’s quiet sighs. The rain stops, she stops; the liquid pouring down her neck, soaking her dress, is now sweat.

Doves with eyes of emerald as bright as the ferns around her carry a basket full of bread and dates in their claws and sweet sherbet to drink. As she eats, another basket appears, laden with clean strips of cotton. She needs them later, when her hands slip and steel sings as it slides through her flesh.

But for the beat of doves’ wings and the burbling fountain, the garden is quiet. She begins to talk to fill silence and time, to distract herself from
bleeding palms. She tells the panther stories her mother told her long ago that she then poured into her patience stone: stories of faraway lands and strange goddesses, of poisoned flowers and cursed princesses, of divs and wind-whipped seas, of the soft darkness where lovers reunite.

The shadows in the garden lengthen, the gray light fades. Exhaustion drapes over her like a leaden cloak. She lies on her side on the soft cool earth next to the panther, looking up through the crown of the mountain at the sky. Clouds clear, stars wink . . .

In sleep, she wakes on her feet, and breathes deep of bright cold night: The world is silky silver dunes drowning in starlight; her eyes widen as constellations and their coal-black raiment descend and surround her.

From nowhere, a voice: “Who are you?”

The note echoes in her ribcage; the memory of the door vanishing beneath her palm flashes in her mind’s eye.

_Come._

That voice. In dreams, it is smoky in timbre. Sensuous.

Her lips are bare of words. Who is she? She is a girl without a mother, a girl with a home swallowed by desert, a girl who followed a crow. These are not answers.

“What is your name?”

No one has asked her in years. Surprise trips the answer to her lips: “Soraya.” It feels foreign on her tongue, the wrong shape, as one’s own name always does.

“She is,” the voice says, a rumble softer than thunder. Her marrow sings at the note.

“Who are you?”

“I am the night.” The voice is in the stars, in her bones, echoing from every corner of the heavens beyond. “I am called Parviz, the victor, for like my mother, Time, I rise triumphant over every sunset, my stars the banner of my victory.”

“Why am I here?” She trembles like bare branches in a gentle wind, but she is not afraid. Perhaps a wiser girl might be, but the stars are as close to her face as low-hanging fruit, gleaming gems in plush velvet
night. Wonder blooms wide in her chest. There is no room for fear.
  “Your hands are bleeding.”
  She glances down at haphazardly wrapped rags. Starlight illuminates crusted, blackening blood.
  “Yes.”
  “Why?”
  “It is a long story.”
  “Like the ones you were telling earlier?”
  Though she does not raise her eyes from her palms, she sees the garden in its wild overgrown splendor. There is no panther; instead her gaze falls on a young man, unconscious, lying on his back at the base of the fountain. His hair is the blue-black that cloaks constellations after moonset, his complexion pallid beneath dark skin. Thousands of long gleaming needles pierce his white shirt, pierce his cotton trousers, pierce his body.
  The vision fades, and she whirls around, searching silver dunes for either panther or man, but she is alone in the dark. Alone with the voice of the night.
  “No,” she breathes. “Not like those stories at all.”
  “How so?”
  “I don’t know how this one ends.”
  A breeze slips beneath her hair and tickles her neck, light as a laugh.
  “Hold out your hands, Soraya of a thousand stories.”
  Heart pounding, she obeys, and before her eyes, the rags unfurl on their own. That breeze leaves cool kisses on her palms as crisscrossing red cuts knit into fine white lines.
  “I will let you rest.”

• • • •

When Soraya wakes in the garden, stiff and covered with dew, she lifts one hand. Clean slender scars line her palm.
  She looks beyond her hand at the sleeping panther. In her mind’s eye, she sees the young man, pinned to the earth by the weight of a thousand
needles.
She takes new rags, wraps her hands, and reaches for the next needle.

• • • •

Some days are rainy, others are hot as she pulls the needles from panther’s body, smoothing silky hide with her bandaged hands. For seven days and nights, the House of Night cares for her: Doves bring her food, blankets for chilly nights, fresh cotton for her hands. When the afternoon sun beats hot on her black hair, she retreats into the blue shadows of the palace in the company of peacocks and creamy white gazelles with obsidian eyes. She follows the delicate click of hooves on marble to libraries filled with shelves heavy with manuscripts, elegant hammams, a throne room of obsidian studded with opals. But she is never long from the panther’s side—even in sleep, she curls into her nest of blankets within reaching distance of clawed paws and twitching whiskers.

In sleep, she spends each night in a silver desert drenched in starlight, dreaming of breezes that heal her sliced palms and the voice of the night begging stories of her. In return for her tales, the night sings its own: stories of the birth of the eight heavens, of winking candlelight and cursed necklaces in bazaars that are neither here nor there, of an arrogant young god stumbling into a foolish bargain and cursed to eternal sleep, of the profound loneliness of a thousand years of night.

On the morning of the eighth day, three needles remain in the panther’s hide. Soraya bandages her clammy palms and inhales deeply to soothe her thundering heart. One needle, dripping rubies, joins its fellows in the lacquered box. Her hands shake. Two needles.

The last needle. Her heart pounds so loudly she does not notice when the cooing of the doves stills. She wraps the sharp shaft of the needle in cotton, places rags on rags, and—

Stars fill her vision as her neck snaps back, scalp screaming as she is yanked away from the panther by her hair. Breath cracks out of her lungs as she hits hard earth.
Shadows snake past her. The panther—were the shadows pouncing on the beast? She coughs, gasping for breath:
“No!”
A flash of yellow and red through the black veil of her hair, and she lifts her head.
The jinni is crouched near the beast’s sleeping body. Her eyes turn on Soraya, and shadows follow her gaze, slicing through the air and winding themselves around Soraya’s throat, her wrists.
“You will not speak to him,” the jinni says.
To whom?
The jinni bears long fangs like a cat and lunges for the panther. She sinks teeth into the rags wrapped around the final needle and wrenches her head back.
The panther moans as the final needle is yanked from its hide.
Its eyes snap open: Deep obsidian pools fasten on Soraya as darkness blooms around it, filling the garden with shadow. Tendrils of smoke and ink bleed from every scar, every wound in the panther’s hide as it lurches to all fours, as it rears on hind legs . . .
And in a moment, in the passing breath between a shudder and stillness, it is no panther, but a man.
He stands before the jinni, a man with hair the inky silk of lonely nights, dressed in a simple white shirt and loose trousers. He stares at his palms, at his arms—and meets the jinni’s gaze, his fierce bright eyes brimming with questions.
“I am Soraya,” the jinni purrs, gesturing with one hand for the lacquered box. The air of the garden ripples with power as the box rises into the air and floats towards the man. It opens to bare its blood-encrusted contents. “I have cared for you, removed every needle. You slept for a thousand years, but I have woken you.”
From the air around the box, smoke-like tendrils of shadow reach for the man’s shoulders, embracing his chest. Slinking up to his head.
Soraya looks on in wordless horror. She rises to her knees, her hands clenched into fists.
No. No.
The shadows melt into the man as he looks from the box of needles to the jinni’s face and back again. At last he speaks.

“A sweet voice broke into my long sleep. Gentle hands soothed my pain.”

Soraya’s heart leaps to her throat. That voice is soft thunder, that voice is moonset. One foot, then the other, and she is standing, her vision swimming.

“I fell in love with the stories that voice told me. I fell in love with the storyteller,” he says.

But he is looking at the jinni.

Soraya’s cheeks flush with anger. She opens her mouth to speak—

And he turns to her. Meets her eyes.

The axis of the world’s turn realigns to the earth beneath her bare feet. Her bones hum. She wonders if his do too, when the ghost of a memory flits across his sharp features.

“And this is?”

She gapes, she gasps—but no words come. Her heart hammers against her ribcage, begging, pleading, weeping.

_You will not speak to him._

It was not an order, but a spell.

“This is my mortal servant,” the jinni coos. “Pay her no heed.”

He looks away, and Soraya drops her gaze to the earth. Dirt blurs before her eyes as her heart sinks like a stone. Such was the bargain: Succeed, and be rewarded. Fail, and . . .

She gazes in horror at the shadows that cuff her wrists, living writhing bonds.

Servitude begins that day.

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The palace is transformed, awakened with the god from a slumber of a thousand years. The animals multiply, people immortal and not fill the palace with music, laughter, and movement—for the House of Night prepares for its master to wed the jinni. Libraries are dusted, hammams
scrubbed, windows thrown open. Once silent halls and corridors are awash in sunlight and bright colors.

Gone are Soraya’s ripped rags, the final relic of her life before the sandstorm, before the crow. She is dressed in silk blouses and billowing trousers white as jasmine blossoms, neckline and ankles beaded with emeralds. Fragrant night-blooming orchids that never wilt are woven into her long black hair.

But the shadows at her throat and wrists, the hollowness in her chest deafen her to the reborn bustle of the House of Night. Day and night melt together as she fulfills the tasks the jinni assigns her: Smoke cuffs bind her hands behind her back as she is ordered to collect every fallen petal from the bouquets and garlands that fill the jinni’s bridal chambers with her teeth, arrange every jewel in the growing trousseau in intricate patterns on the marble floor with knees and nose—only to begin anew when her work is ruined by a sulfurous breeze and the jinni’s dissonant laughter.

She is confined to a wing of the house far from the garden, far from cooing doves and sunlight. She sees no trace of the man who was a panther, the man with the voice of the night. Nor does she wish to. What would it change?

“Darling mortal,” the jinni purrs, saccharine voice dipped in venom. Soraya feels the burn of immortal eyes on her back, on her bound wrists, as she mops floors with filthy water and her knees. “As my servant, you will receive a wedding gift from my betrothed. What do you wish for?”

Soraya’s knees ache, bruised by hours spent inching down marble corridors.

What does she wish for? She wishes for respite from this world of trickery and humiliation, for an end to this story, to the lonely nights filled with wondering if she is dead or not, if this is a fever dream or an afterlife. She wishes for something, anything, that reminds her of home. A clever girl might ask for a tool, some way to help her escape the House of Night and never look back, but Soraya speaks without thinking:

“I want a patience stone.”

A sinew in her heart twists tight when she thinks of her mother, of
warm calloused hands pressing a cool stone into hers. Of the comforting weight of a quiet companion held tight in one fist, of the relief of pouring her troubles into a stone.

“You ask the master of the House of Night for a common patience stone?” The jinni’s disbelief rings through the corridor. “How ruined are the minds of mortals—full of such fanciful stories, and the dullest wishes!”

Her laughter is like shattering glass. Shards slice into Soraya’s heart and bury themselves there.

• • • •

Her request is a jest to the jinni, and in the spirit of mockery, her wish is fulfilled: Soraya receives a patience stone.

It is the twin in shape and size to the one she lost the day of the storm, the day she followed the crow, but as she takes it in her hands she knows it has been remade, reborn. It is warm, it sings at her touch. She clutches it to her chest, tears of relief thickening her throat, blind to the jinni’s sneers.

After nightfall, she risks slinking away from the jinni’s dark wing of the House of Night. The moist earth of the garden sinks beneath her bare feet, the marble of the fountain cools her back as she sits and leans against it.

The moon is heavy and full above the crown of the mountain. She came to the House of Night in search of shelter and found servitude, but she has this: She cradles the patience stone before her, cups it in scarred palms. She whispers past the heavy grief in her throat, and pours into the stone a story she told a dozen times over the eight days and nights in the garden: a tale of a princess who wields a cursed flower to poison unwanted suitors, who runs away with a pirate maiden.

Around her, ferns rustle. Jasmine whispers. The air around her lightens, and begins to glow. She looks up. Words melt from her lips, drowned in wonder.

It is as if thousands of stars have dipped from the sky, through the
crown of the mountain. Constellations fill the garden, bathing the ferns, the jasmine, the fountain in starlight.

A voice, reverent and sad:
“It was you.”

She leaps to her feet, clutching the stone to her breast. A form glides out of the shadows, into starlight: the man, the beast, the voice of the night.

She steps backward, into the fountain. Marble presses into the backs of her legs. Her chest has become too shallow for the heart thundering at the base of her throat.

He steps toward her. Darkness soft as dreams blooms around him as a shadow of apprehension flickers across his brow.

“Will you hold out your hands?”

She cannot say no, would not, even if no jinni’s spell knit her voice to her throat. Her right hand clutches the stone to her breast as she offers the trembling left.

He takes it in his own and traces white scars along her palms, along slender fingers, his touch like night breezes. There is no time, there is no garden, only the brush of his fingertips, the wonder in his eyes as he raises them to hers.

“For many nights I searched in vain for a patience stone in Light Markets, growing so frustrated I was prepared to give a fortune for one. In the end, it was given to me freely—by a crow. On one condition...”

Rubies glint in her mind’s eye, winking with every precise avian tilt of an ebony head.

“. . . that I listen to the worries poured into the stone.”

She draws her hand back and cups the stone before her. Between them.

She speaks.
Not to him—but to the patience stone.

The words come slowly at first, then quicken into a torrent as she tells the stone a story of a girl who followed a crow. A girl who pulled needles from a wounded beast until her palms bled, who was tricked by a jinni, whose voice was stolen away. A girl who wanted nothing but to sit by the
beast’s side under the sky in the heart of the House of Night, telling it stories for eternity, sleeping in cool air and starlight . . .

She falters, voice wavering on the edge of tears. She does not know how to end the story with anything but silence.

She raises her eyes from the stone and meets his.
“You will have that,” he says.
Four words, and the deepest promise she has ever been given.
The stone cracks. She gasps, pieces crumbling through her fingers onto her bare feet, into the grass.
A shriek splits the night.
She whirls, clutching the remnants of the stone in a protective fist.
The jinni is lurid in the garden, a burning ember of rage, heat rippling out from the flames of her skirts.
“She lies!”
Tendrils of night bloom as the man steps forward, between her and the jinni.
“You lied.”
His voice is soft as a panther’s paws as it crouches to spring, but when he speaks again, he is the rumbling soul of a storm, the roar of a maelstrom:
“You lied to the god of night, the son of Time, and you will be punished.”
A thunderclap. The jinni’s burning skin hisses as heavens open and rain pours through the crown of the mountain.
“Begone, and take your spells with you.”
Steam billows from jinni as she shrieks with renewed rage. Soraya’s hands fly to her ears, clutching her skull as white-hot pain snakes like forks of lightning through bone. Stained glass windows shatter, glittering shards filling the garden where there had been nothing but stars.
“Begone!”
A second thunderclap, a final hiss.
Glass falls to the soft earth. Steam, then the rings of shadows at Soraya’s wrists and throat, melt away in the wash of the rain.
The voice of the night turns to her. His jet hair is wet against his face;
raindrops catch on his eyelashes, reflecting starlight like opals.

“Come.”
His voice cradles a question. It echoes in her bones, dusky as dreams: 
Come.
He holds out a hand. Her heart skips like a stone on water.
“Soraya of a thousand stories. Will you tell me how does this one ends?”
She takes one step towards him. Then another.
For eternity is not won with less.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabel Cañas spends her days writing YA fiction and working on her PhD in late medieval Islamic history and literature. A 2018 graduate of Clarion West, she divides her time between Chicago and London. She is represented by Kari Sutherland of The Bradford Literary Agency. To learn more about what Isabel is up to, including recent and forthcoming publications, see isabelcanas.com.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
When Two Swordsmen Meet
Ellen Kushner | 1760 words

“Writers who (as it were) fetishize straightforwardness, yes—and see high style as a way to achieve it. That’s [Sir Thomas] Browne’s legacy. But not clarity.”

— Samuel R. Delany

1.

When two swordsmen meet, no one knows what to expect.
It’s a cold night in a cold city. Cold stone under cold starlight. He walks down a deserted street, sure of himself, sure of the weapon he bears. He’s not altogether surprised when the stranger steps out of the shadows.

“Hey,” he says to the newcomer. “You hungry? I’m going to friends with a fire and a big pot always bubbling on it.” By which we see that it’s not just his sword that defends him, whatever he may think.

The other stands very still. “You’re not what I thought you’d be,” he says flatly.

“So are you hungry?” the swordsman asks, curious.

“The way they talk about you, I thought you would be all embroidered gloves and studded leather.”

The swordsman nods. He’s used to being misunderstood. “So are you hungry?” he asks again.

“Not for friends. Not for a bubbling pot of stew.”

Slowly, the swordsman nods. “Fame and glory, then. Studded gloves and embroidered leather.”

Without another word, he draws, and the other man does, too.

It’s almost too easy. This kid—he can see it’s a kid, now—is sure of his own moves; he was clearly top dog in all his classes. Good ripostes, full of verve and aggression. But he’s not always sure how to respond. He should be thinking more about defense. That’s something you polish
with time.

The kid’s got his lower lip caught in his teeth. *Relax your jaw,* the swordsman thinks; but he’s not his teacher. Instead he says, “Fame and glory? There’s no one here to see you. No one will know. Ah! Nice move.”

“Thank you. You’ll know.”

More aggression now. The swordsman is having to enlist his own flawless defense. Not what he expected.

“No silks,” the kid pants, coming at him the length of the cobbles. “No leather—”

Was there something underfoot? Too dark to see what it was, or if it was, or if it’s just a kid who badly needs to win making him give way; but the swordsman finds himself on his back, with his opponent’s point at his neck.

“What I want,” the kid says. He pauses. “I don’t think the word has been invented.”

“Maybe it’s not a word.” He’s never been able to be anything other than himself. If the kid wants him to die, here, that’s what will happen. But he doesn’t think that’s what the kid wants.

“When I hear it, I’ll know it. You’re not it.”

On his back, he nods his head—submitting, acquiescing, but also asking permission.

The other grants it with a similar nod.

He reaches into his jacket, pulls out a card, a Deuce of Lions. Across the corner is scribbled:

*The House of Nine Doors*

*KOLHARI*

“Here,” he tells the kid. “Go here. They’ll know what to do with you. Strip down, and you’ll be shouting more words than you ever knew before.”

Without a word, the kid takes the card, sheathes his sword, and walks
in the direction he wasn’t coming from. The swordsman gets up, and, without dusting himself off, proceeds to the place of food and friends.

2.

When two swordsmen meet, no one knows what will happen.

He’s thinking of jewels. Which is not surprising, since he has them secreted all about his person. And secreted is the mot juste: It is a secret, a big secret, that he has even met with the one who gave them to him. (They are rumored to be mortal enemies.) A secret that he has been trusted with them. Him, and only him.

The idea is that no one could imagine them being transported thus, without a cordon of security—and that he alone has the requisite skills to ensure they reach their destination, anyway.

It is well done, and neatly thought of.

He tries not thinking about jewels. Jewels in little pouches, sewn into special pockets all over his person, here, there, and everywhere, by a master tailor who knows every trick, so that not a single bulge reveals itself.

He whistles a tune he heard a girl sing once, something about sack and sherry. He doesn’t remember the words. But better not to whistle; don’t want to draw attention. On the other hand, any implication that he doesn’t want to draw attention could draw attention to him. This is a city of thieves. And he is passing through the higher reaches of the town, streets of fancy shops. He needs to look like a man without a care, like he belongs there—no, as if he’s on his way somewhere pleasant, not important, a picnic, or drinks with an old friend, on the other side of town. Just passing through. No jewels, no intention.

I gave her cakes, I gave her ale
I gave her sack and sherry . . .

A woman coming from the opposite direction. Singing the song he was just whistling. A coincidence? Maybe. He has his eye on her
nonetheless. She is small and lithe, gray-eyed and dark-haired. She isn’t looking at him, though; she’s looking at the shops, their wares laid out on boards elaborately carved and gilded, because this is that kind of street, trays of goodies depending from the sides of the shops themselves. When night comes, the display tables will be drawn up as shutters and heavily bolted. Right now, though, they’re open and displaying just a fraction of the lovely things inside, each one guarded by a self-important apprentice wielding a heavy baton.

His reflexes are too good. When she stumbles, crashes into a board, sending strung pearls and carved lapis tangling to the ground, when the ’prentice goes for her with his baton, the swordsman throws himself in the way, shouldering the ’prentice off, letting her grasp his forearm before she can go down.

He thinks she’ll make a run for it. But to his consternation, she just stands there, looking every bit as haughty as a woman that small can do. The ’prentice is torn between seizing her, and catching up all the precious wares before anyone else on the street can grab any.

“Here,” she says to the apprentice, “I’ll help.”

She hasn’t apologized for the fall. But before too long, everything is back up on the boards, nested in their velvet as before.

“Count it,” she tells the flustered apprentice. “It’s all there.”

The swordsman should have gone his way; but that would have looked suspicious. So he stays.

A little crowd has gathered, of course. “Should I call the guard?” someone says.

“Count it,” the woman says again. “Or call your master if you will, and let him do the work. I weary of standing here under the implication of insult.”

Despite himself—or maybe because of it—the swordsman smiles. She doesn’t smile back; she doesn’t even look at him. She hasn’t thanked him, either.

“It’s all here,” the apprentice says at last. He nudges a final pearl back into perfect place. “Everything is as it should be.”

She continues to stare at him, her gray eyes sharp like steel. The
unspoken word *And?* hangs in the air.

“And I’m very sorry, miss—milady.”

Finally she smiles, showing good white teeth. “Never mind,” she says. “A natural mistake. It could happen to anybody.”

The crowd parts to let her pass on down the street.

Relieved, the swordsman walks on the way he was going. What an odd woman! He wonders if he’ll see her again. He’s a bit shaken; this little excitement was not part of his plans. It will take him a while to start whistling again.

Especially when he touches one of the secret pockets of the sequestered jewels, and finds it empty. There is a small slit in the side.

3.

When two swordsmen meet, no one knows what to expect.

One of them is bearded, the other clean-shaven. Each bears a long and elegant weapon with a surgeon’s point and a razor’s edge, each hilt a work of art, guards scrolled like the fine script of a legal document.

They meet at a crossroads. That is where significant things happen; everyone knows that. Encounters at a crossroads are rarely by chance, and never inconsequential.

The clean-shaven man says nothing. He is slim and young. He draws his weapon, for no apparent reason.

The bearded man has been around awhile. He knows his worth. “I don’t fight with strangers,” he says, and the other says, “But you’ve seen me before.”

“Where?” asks the bearded man.

“In your dreams,” the younger swordsman replies. He wears no gloves. His hands are chapped, rough, the veins rising on the back where his right fingers hold tight around the grip.

He has a companion, a weedy-looking fellow, dark like a crow, who cradles some kind of funny harp in his arms. The musician stands well back, at the edge of the point where two roads meet and form a V.

The bearded man, the dreamer, examines them both. He hasn’t seen
them in his dreams—or if he has, it was so long ago he has forgotten—but he wants to, from now on.

Still, it doesn’t do to look weak. Speak first, or thrust last, but always maintain the upper hand.

“I don’t want to kill you,” he says.
“Don’t, then.” The hard-handed man throws back his head, showing off his bare neck, a pillar of light and shadow. “But by all means engage.”
“A playful duel? A duel of skill?”
The other nods. “That’s right. A game, only.”
“What are the stakes?”
“Let’s play for luck. Let’s play for memory.”
The bearded man inclines his head. “And him? Your friend?” When he sees him from the corner of his eye, the strange musician does seem to mean something to him. But how? So young . . . “What does he play for?”
“He plays for love. Some of us do.”
It’s a beautiful fight. They each want the other to win. Not so much duel as duet.

Halfway through, the young musician lifts his device and plays. The air is full of the scent of cinnamon, of city streets, of cigarette smoke and diesel fuel; of baking bread and new-cut oranges.

When two swordsmen meet, no one knows what will happen. But something always does.
more novels in her “Riverside” series. Ellen Kushner is a co-founder and past president of the Interstitial Arts Foundation, an organization supporting work that falls between genre categories. She lives in New York City with author and educator Delia Sherman, a lot of books, airplane and theater ticket stubs, and no cats whatsoever.
Sydney’s cellphone rang and she ignored it, on the grounds that it was either her mother or news that someone had died, and either way she was too high to handle it. Her phone went quiet, then started ringing again, and anxiety clawed at her belly and then up her spine. Maybe someone wasn’t dead, maybe they were just dying, and if she ignored this call she’d miss her chance to say goodbye at the hospital. Everyone else would be there, and she’d be the only asshole who hadn’t made it in time.

She wasn’t sure who “everyone” was in this scenario, or even who was dying, but the threat of it seemed real enough that she crossed her apartment and dug her phone out of the supermarket tote bag she’d been using as a purse.

Michaela Reynolds’s name was on the screen—an ex-girlfriend she hadn’t seen or really thought much about since college.

“Oh,” she said into the phone. “Um, hi.”

There was a pause. “Syd?”

Michaela’s voice hadn’t changed; her tone was a mix of seriousness and hesitance that had deposited any number of well-intentioned statements into awkward, interrogatory terrain that always put Sydney on the defensive.

“Yeah,” said Sydney. “Totally. What’s up?”

“Wow, it’s so good to hear your voice! I wasn’t sure if this would still be your number?”

“It is.” Sydney’s words hung there for a minute, and in the silence she lost the thread of their conversation. “I’m, uh, not sure why I called you,” she confessed.

“You didn’t! I called you,” said Michaela.

“Oh,” said Sydney again.

“Wow, I don’t mean to be rude, but . . . are you drunk right now? Or on painkillers or something?”
“No, no, I’m high as fuck.” It was a relief to not have to pretend otherwise. Sydney sat back down on the couch, next to the window she’d cracked open to let in some of the chill April air. The only sign of spring was a distant crabapple tree just starting to bud, but even the damp parking lot fumes were fresher than the air in her apartment.

“Is this a bad time, then?” Michaela asked.

“Nah, I’m usually high as fuck.” They’d dated in the era before her cancer, when Sydney was a diligent student and passionate feminist instead of a wake-and-baker who avoided going out in public.

“Oh, cool.” There was that tone again: clearly Michaela didn’t think this was “cool.” “Anyway,” Michaela continued, “the thing I’m calling about is a little bit weird.”

Sydney settled back into the couch so thoroughly that she felt like it was an extension of herself. “Awesome,” she said. “I love weird.”

“Have you talked to Edík Němec recently?”

“Edík? The Russian kid?” She did not say: Edík? The dude you dumped me for?

“Czech, actually,” said Michaela, two words Sydney had heard Michaela utter in sequence so many times that she almost said them with her.

“Nah, I haven’t seen him in forever.” Sydney held the phone with her shoulder to pick up her half-smoked bowl and take another hit. “You two still together?”

“Oh, no,” said Michaela. “No. I just . . . I still have some of his stuff? It’s been in a box in my mom’s basement for like eight years, and I just stumbled across it. Thought he might want it back. Thought maybe somebody from the old gang was still in touch with him.”

“Maybe,” said Sydney. “Not me, though.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Michaela. “Thanks for talking, though. Would you do me a favor?”

“Maybe.”

“If he gets in touch with you, will you let me know?”

“Totally.”

“Thanks, Syd. It was good to talk to you! Maybe we could meet up
sometime, grab a beer or whatever.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Sydney lied. Or maybe, she thought, she wasn’t lying. Maybe it would be good to go out and grab a beer with an ex.

Edík waited till she’d hung up to gesture for her to pass the bowl and lighter over to him.

“You know I’m not Russian,” he said ruefully. “So rude to pretend.”

Sydney shook her head. “When you said you needed to hide out for a week or two, I figured you meant from, like, gangsters or something. Not an ex-girlfriend.”

Edík looked sincerely surprised as he huffed out a cloud of smoke.

“Gangsters? Me?”

“You just seemed so . . . desperate, when you showed up. Scared.”

Edík waved the cloud of pot smoke away. “No,” he said. “I’m not scared of anything.”

But even as high as she was, Sydney could hear the doubt in his voice.

• • • •

They’d met in college, when Sydney was still dumb enough to think that pursuing an English degree was a good idea. One day Michaela showed up late at a party with a boyfriend on her arm, a white guy who was not too tall or too short or too anything really, though he had a nice smile and a pixyish set to his eyes that had to be at least a little bit unusual, because Sydney didn’t habitually notice men’s eyes. The boyfriend was Edík, wearing cuffed jeans and a goatee and a vest that was just a little bit too small for him. He didn’t look so much like an undergrad as like a refugee from some dapper past that had never existed, and his Czech accent—which they all thought was Russian at the time—was the perfect pièce de résistance that explained Michaela’s smug smile and possessive hand-holding.

Sydney, who had been dumped by Michaela two weeks earlier ostensibly so Michaela could pursue a Bobcat cheerleader, wanted to
believe that this was all a show for her benefit, but even in the moment she could see that it was a show for everyone's benefit: Clearly, Michaela felt she’d won the dating game.

At the time, dating had seemed terribly important.

• • • •

Sydney and Edík settled into an easy pattern, and whenever Sydney started figuring it was time to kick him out, he gave her a reason not to. She’d been temping at Home Depot for only two weeks and was already thinking about quitting when she came home to find pulled pork in the slow cooker with a plastic bag of hamburger buns and a bottle of Sweet Baby Ray’s nestled next to it. Another day she smelled bleach, and discovered that her bathroom was cleaner than when she’d moved in. Edík worked night nurse shifts over at Mt. Carmel East, which meant that between his long hours, cross-the-city commute, and day-sleeping, Sydney almost never saw him. It had been a lot of work to find an apartment she could barely afford by herself in the Clintonville neighborhood she wanted, but now that she had a roommate again she found she didn’t mind. Suddenly her sheets were being washed weekly, and fresh towels cropped up in a bathroom that didn’t smell like mildew.

She was reasonably sure that Edík was sleeping in her bed when she was gone, because the smell of his deodorant sometimes lingered there, but even that felt . . . friendly, in a way that was hard to describe.

Then someone knocked on the door the same way Edík had: uninvited, unexpected, and early in the night. When Sydney opened the door, Michaela was standing there with a growler of Seventh Son and a determined set to her mouth. She hadn’t changed much: still wore her hair very long and very straight, still favored a shade of coral lipstick that wasn’t particularly flattering. It wouldn’t occur to Sydney until the next day that maybe she’d styled her hair that way and dug out an old lipstick on purpose, like a parody of herself from almost a decade before.

“Whoa,” said Sydney when she opened the door. “How’d you know where I live?”
“Asked around.” Michaela stepped forward, and Sydney let her in without quite thinking it through.

“Weird.”

“Do you have any cups?” Michaela held up the growler with both hands, a triumphant gesture dissonant with her serious expression.

“Yeah, yeah.” Sydney started for the kitchen, then stopped. She was high, but not incoherently high. “Did you, like, stalk out my address? Is this creepy?”

Michaela smiled. “You said you’d grab a beer with me some time, but everybody says you never leave your room? So I brought the beer to you!”

It had been too long, maybe, since a girl had smiled at Sydney like that.

“I guess I just lost track of you after the whole cancer thing,” said Michaela. “And you’re never on Instagram or Twitter. I don’t think I realized how long it’d been until I actually heard your voice.”

The whole cancer thing. Sydney realized she didn’t actually know what Michaela knew about her cancer: whether she was aware of the stoma in her abdomen and the colostomy bag she’d been wearing for more than five years. At a time when the recovery narrative was all about reevaluating your life and reaching out to a support network and thinking relentlessly positive thoughts, Sydney had instead pruned her friends into acquaintances and discovered a reservoir of loathing and disgust for her own body that was so deep she still hadn’t reached the bottom.

“Yeah, that was pretty rough. Nobody thinks of colon cancer in a twenty-two-year-old.” She tried out one of her only jokes about her diagnosis, one worn thin back when she still thought it was important to make other people comfortable with her illness: “You never think you’d reach a point in your life where you say, ‘wow, I’m grateful about shitting so much blood,’ but that ended up being what saved my life. Any less gross symptom and I’d’ve just ignored it.”

The words didn’t sound like a joke as they left her mouth. She sat down on the couch and started packing a bowl.

“Um, cups?” said Michaela, sitting down beside her.
“Oh, yeah, yeah.” Sydney disappeared into the kitchen and came back with two stemless wine glasses, the last of the glassware that wasn’t hanging out in the unrun dishwasher. Michaela had emptied Sydney’s grinder onto a piece of paper and was gently tapping the pot into her glass pipe. Her easy familiarity with the process made Sydney feel weak with relief. She poured them each a glass of beer and watched Michaela take the first hit.

“I, uh, didn’t know you smoked,” Sydney said.

“I mean, I went to college? So obviously. It’s been a while, though.” She paused to exhale. “You didn’t really smoke in college, did you? I don’t remember that.”

“No. I was kind of a late bloomer.”

“Was it a chemo thing?”

Sydney laughed, and with her lungs full of smoke the laugh turned into a cough. “Nah, not really. I just . . .”

She didn’t know how to explain, and tried the beer instead. It was a dark Belgian stout, the kind of fancy shit she’d never have bought on her own, but she found she didn’t mind it. “You’re still looking for Edik?” she asked.

“Nah, right now I’m here to see you.” Michaela touched Sydney’s shoulder with just the tips of her fingers. Sydney got up to put on a Pandora station, and they drank and smoked in a leisurely silence that surprised Sydney with its ease.

“It wasn’t a chemo thing,” she said after a while, and when Michaela didn’t say anything she kept going, staring out the open window. It was raining again, the air sharp but finally smelling a little bit green. “The pot. Like, I thought kicking cancer would give my life meaning. Or make me find the meaning that was already there. So I wrote about it. Cancer memoirs are such a thing, and I was so young, and it was really good. I got an agent.”

“Wow!” Michaela blinked at her. “I didn’t know that! Congratulations.”

“Like, I put everything I had into this. And it was funny and sad and difficult, which is basically all the things that life is, and it was good, and
after I rewrote it with my agent it was even better. And then . . . Nobody wanted it. No. Buh. Dee. Like, I lived, so it wasn’t quite sad enough. And also it was colon cancer, which is the least sexy cancer in a field of incredibly unsexy diseases. And there was no success story at the end. It turns out that just living is not enough of a success, apparently. And eventually my agent dropped me.

“And that was . . . I mean, you go to college, and you major in English, and you’ve always been one of the smartest kids in the room, and one of the best writers, and you think, I’ve really got something here. And then something happens, like cancer, and that is your story, the one no one can tell but you, something that’s relatable but exceptional, and eventually you find out . . . It’s not good enough. That was the one thing I had, right? I don’t do well with people. Between the cancer and the recovery and the goddamn English degree it’s not like I was really hirable, and the economy was already a POS. And then . . .

“Have you ever tried internet dating with a colostomy bag? Like, have you even considered typing the word ‘stoma’ in an OKCupid profile? Because I don’t recommend it. So writing was going to be the thing that made my life meaningful. And then I wasn’t good enough at it, and I started smoking more and caring about other shit less, and eventually, I dunno, just being high all the time and having Netflix instead of friends was easier. It made life bearable, you know?”

It was the longest string of words she’d said out loud in over a year.

“Wow,” said Michaela, putting down her beer so that she could rest her hand on Sydney’s knee. “I had no idea you were so sad.”

“I’m not,” said Sydney. “I mean, that sounded really sad, I guess, but the whole point is that I don’t feel sad. I feel . . . manageable.”

“Are you seeing somebody? Like a therapist?”

“Jesus, no. I had enough fucking counseling when I thought I was gonna die, and I’ll probably go back whenever the cancer recurs—I mean, if it starts this young, eventually it’s gotta recur, right?—but that shit’s for the dying.”

“Non-dying people can also suffer from depression, though? Which sounds . . . relevant . . . to what you’re describing.”
Sydney was saved from an argument with her ex about her mental health by Edík’s key in the lock. Michaela’s hand tightened on her knee.

Edík walked in and took off the white denim jacket he’d kept wearing no matter how many times Sydney told him it looked ridiculous. He carefully hung it up so it would dry before his next shift, and only then did he look up and notice that there were two women on the couch instead of one. He stood perfectly still, one hand still outstretched, almost touching the sleeve of his jacket.

“Hi!” said Michaela. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

Edík slowly put his arm down and stood up straight.

“Michaela just dropped by,” Sydney said, voice a little hazy. “Hope that’s okay with you. Want a beer?”

Edík just stood there.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” snapped Michaela. “This is a social call! Come relax and smoke this bowl with us.” They’d repacked it twice, and gotten halfway through the growler. Feeling lighter and more cheerful than she had in ages, Sydney got up, pulled a dirty glass out of the dishwasher, and rinsed it out with hand soap. When she came back, Michaela and Edík were still on opposite sides of the room, and Michaela was sipping her beer rather pointedly.

“Come sit with us?” suggested Sydney, and after a moment Edík sat down on the floor across from them. “How was work?” Sydney asked, pouring beer into the freshly cleaned glass.

Edík shrugged. Sydney took a hit and passed him the glass pipe, too. Pandora cut to commercial, and discomfort wormed up Sydney’s spine. She wanted things back to ten minutes ago, when she and Michaela had felt so content in each other’s quiet company. As they smoked, Edík’s shoulders gradually fell, until he looked more like a regular stoner and less like a trapped dog. Finally Michaela broke the silence.

“I can’t believe you haven’t helped her,” she snapped, and immediately Edík’s shoulders tensed back up.

“Edík’s been great, actually,” said Sydney. “Cleans things up and shit. You shoulda seen the place before he moved in.” She gestured at the mismatch of furniture, things she’d gathered from curbsides before
bedbugs hit Columbus, when you could still trashpick without fear of infestation. There was no particular style or art to the things she’d gathered, but all of it was clean.

“So Edík is staying here? You were just lying to me on the phone.” Michaela’s voice was short and angry, but still accented with uptalk. Suddenly Sydney could sympathize with Edík’s trapped look.

“I just—” she started.

“I’m not doing that anymore,” said Edík.

“Yeah right,” snapped Michaela. “You have to do it. Don’t bullshit me.”

“I do it at work, now. For the dying, where it doesn’t make any trouble.”

“What doesn’t make any trouble?” asked Sydney.

“Please. Have you even talked to Sydney since you moved in here? Or looked at this place? She practically is one of the dying.”

“I, uh, don’t quite get what you guys are fighting about,” said Sydney. “But I don’t think my place is that bad.”

“You can help her, it would be so easy, and it’s total bullshit if you’re refusing to do it.” Michaela put her glass down heavily on the table, and fumbled with the growler to refill it.

“I can do a thing,” said Edík to Sydney. “I don’t know how to describe it.”

“He’s like a goddamn muse,” said Michaela. “But for everything, not just painters and poets and weirdoes.”

“A muse?” Sydney repeated. She looked out the window. The rain had let up a little bit, just coming down in soft sprinkles, making puddles in the parking lot that sometimes surprised you with their depth.

“I’ll show you. Look into my eyes,” Edík said, sounding less like a sinister hypnotist and more like a battered girlfriend. Sydney did, and Edík blinked once, so slowly that Sydney giggled through her awkward nervousness. Next to her, Michaela was still. When Edík finally opened his eyes, they were like two holes in his head, holes through his head, holes that emptied out into a starless galaxy utterly devoid of light.

“Oh,” said Sydney, her mouth dry. “I guess that is a thing.” She
paused and looked at Michaela. “This is real, right? Because I’m pretty high, but I don’t think I’m-actively-hallucinating high.”

“I can’t see it,” said Michaela shortly. “It’s just for you. Watch.”

“Keep looking,” added Edík, his voice distant and gentle. The world around them became pointed and luminous, and though Sydney didn’t break eye contact, she became more aware of the world in her peripheral vision, suddenly capable of perceiving beauty even in the graceless angles of this mismatched room. She felt giddy with her own potential to impact every shape around her.

Edík blinked, and when he opened his eyes again they were just regular brown.

“That,” he said, voice back to its normal volume, and a little bit slurred. “That’s the thing I do. Most people like it very much.”

Sydney inhaled deeply. Her body felt light around her, and she was aware for the first time in a long time of its many positive attributes, not least among them that it was still alive.

“That was like tripping,” she said. “Like tripping but not. I don’t know how to describe it.”

“It’s indescribable,” said Michaela, patting Sydney’s knee in a perfunctory way that was nothing like how her warm hand had lingered there earlier in the night. “But you should do something you haven’t done in a while: go on a date, or apply for a job, or write an essay. Something you used to think you were good at but haven’t felt good at for a long time.”

“Was this a date?” Sydney asked, swallowing.

Michaela considered. “No,” she said finally. “I’m sorry.” She stood up. “Edík, come back home, please.”

Edík stood up looking woozy, though he’d smoked and drank considerably less than Michaela.

“I don’t want to,” he said hesitantly.

“Do you feel good right now?” Michaela asked. “Doesn’t it feel good to help people?”

Edík nodded. “But . . .” he said. Sydney waited for the rest of the sentence, but it didn’t come.
“I miss you,” said Michaela softly. She went over to Edík and ran her fingertips along his back. He shuddered at her touch, and leaned towards her. “Without you there, I feel like something less than what I was before. Come home.”

Edík reached out and wrapped an arm around Michaela, and she folded herself into him, though they were almost the same height. “I can’t,” Edík murmured. “I don’t want to live that way anymore.”

Michaela shoved him, and he stumbled back, tripping over the low coffee table that held the growler and landing on the couch, looking less hurt than surprised.

“You piece of shit!” snapped Michaela. “You can’t do this to me!”

“I’m not doing anything to you,” said Edík softly. “I’m just . . . leaving. You can’t stop me, and it’s fucked up of you to try.”

Sydney stood up and came to life in that moment, realizing with sudden ferocity that this was her apartment, and that Michaela was her ex too, and that she wasn’t remotely okay with the way this exchange was going.

“Get out of here, Michaela,” she said. “And take your fancy fucking microbrew with you. Edík says he’s staying here, and I say he’s staying here, and that’s the end of it.”

Michaela curled her lip. The coral lipstick had worn away, and she looked better without it. “See?” she said, not quite to either of them. “It’s already working.” She picked up the mostly-empty growler and her purse and swept out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Edík reached over for the pipe and took a hit, still sitting in the position he’d landed in.

“So, um, sorry about that,” said Sydney. “I guess I didn’t realize how bad it was. I shouldn’t’ve . . . If she comes back, I’ll call the police.”

“Don’t call the police,” said Edík. “I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“I mean, um. If she’s stalking you or hitting you or whatever, that seems like police stuff.”

“Not until I take the citizenship test. Police trouble looks bad.” He held out the pipe, and after a moment Sydney slid back onto the couch beside him.
“That’s fucked up,” she said.
Edík shrugged. “The system, it is fucked up.”
And they killed the bowl, passing it quietly back and forth as Pandora went on playing cheerful, oblivious pop music.

• • • •

It made Sydney feel dirty to take Michaela’s advice, but she did it anyway. After she finished her shift at Home Depot, instead of smoking up and putting on *Twin Peaks* for the hundredth time, she set her ancient laptop on the kitchen table and booted up OpenOffice. It felt weird to sit down and consciously try to write something—actually it felt pretentious and ridiculous, and she was embarrassed that she’d spent so much of her youth in exactly this position. She’d been so sure then that she had something to say. Now she was mostly aware of the failure of her labels to make for good marketing: gay cancer survivor memoirs about unknowns too niche a market for anything but self-publishing.

Actually, why *hadn’t* she tried self-publishing?
She felt a burst of enthusiasm, the same almost cheerful surge that had pushed her to kick Michaela out of her apartment. Self-publishing wasn’t the weird hinterland it had been even five years ago, and the world had the dubious model of E. L. James to prove it.

She could do something with that goddamn memoir.
Maybe she could even write something new.

• • • •

“I’m probably going to move out soon,” said Edík, coming up behind Sydney while she sat at her laptop. It had been almost a week since Michaela’s visit, and this was their first real conversation since. “Now that Michaela knows I’m here, I should be somewhere else instead.”

Sydney reluctantly pushed her chair back from the kitchen table and turned to face him. “She didn’t show up again, did she? Because I’ll call the police on my own. Your name doesn’t have to come up.”
Edík shook his head. “I don’t want to call the police. I don’t want Michaela to get in trouble. I just want to be left alone, and she can’t leave me alone.”

“Um, that’s like weird Stockholm syndrome talk. Of course she can leave you alone, and the only reason she won’t is because she’s being kind of abusive about your break-up.”

“No, she can’t leave me alone.” Edík looked at the wall rather than at Sydney. “The thing I do. I . . . I used to do it a lot for her. She’s in marketing, it’s very stressful, very competitive. I was her edge. It takes time not to need that anymore. I knew better at the time, but it was so much easier just to do it, for both of us to feel good. But it doesn’t make me feel good anymore to help her. It makes me feel tired.”

Sydney tapped her fingers on the table, not quite touching the keyboard. “Did it make you tired to help me?” she asked.

“No.” Edík smiled at her. “You’ve been kind to me, Sydney. Maybe Michaela was right, and I should have helped you before. But I worried . . . I came to America in the first place when this thing went wrong with someone else. And with Michaela, it went wrong again.” His smile soured. “I’m trying to learn to not repeat these patterns.”

“Sorry if this is a really fucked up question, but are you a human being? Like a totally normal one?”

Edík shrugged. “I think of myself as a human being. My mother was. My father, who can say? But this way I help people, it isn’t normal. It feels good to do with the dying, to make them calm, to make them feel that even at the very end of their lives all is not lost. But with the dying, there’s an end point. The living, I think, will just take until nothing is left.”

Sydney balanced what he was saying with the way she’d spent her last week: furiously researching, then at last making her memoir available on Smashwords and crossing her fingers. She even had notes on a tentative new project: fiction, for the first time in a long time.

“I mean,” she said, “you’re welcome to stay a little longer. At least until you’ve got your next move figured out.”

Edík put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I do. I just wanted to say
thank you, Sydney. This was a very pleasant respite.”

Despite herself, Sydney felt a rush of panic. She needed rules and explanations. How long would the thing Edík had done last? Could she keep writing without it? Had this just been the placebo effect she needed to get herself out of a rut, or would she become like Michaela, a bad actor with a nasty agenda?

“Could you do it one more time?” she blurted out. “The thing?”

Edík looked at her. His face was very blank, and he looked inscrutable in his white denim jacket.

“It’s not a pattern,” she added quickly. “Twice is just twice. I don’t want . . . I kicked cancer, man, and I’ve been throwing my life away ever since. I don’t want to be that girl anymore.” She swallowed. “You said you like to help people.”

After a long and terrible moment of silence, Edík sat down on the edge of the table across from Sydney.

“This is all,” he said. “And it’s only because I’m grateful. You don’t need this thing. You were fine before, and you’ll be fine again once I’m gone.”

Sydney snorted. “I feel fine right now. I feel like myself, after a long time just . . . waiting.”

Edík’s lips tightened, but he didn’t say anything else, just closed his eyes in that same slow blink he’d used a week ago, which now seemed ominous instead of funny.

Again, when he opened his eyes, Sydney had the sensation of impossible vastness in that deep black, and also the sensation of rising, as if the universe was a thing she could travel through, or even conquer. The air she breathed had a taste beyond the damp of her apartment, beyond even the musk of spring—it was what the Platonic idea of air tasted like, maybe.

By the time Edík blinked again and returned to normal, Sydney could feel the tingle of possibility in her very blood.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

Edík smiled at her, the same fuzzy expression as last time, though he’d just gotten off work and hadn’t smoked or drunk a thing. He leaned
towards her slightly, and when she put out a hand towards him he covered it with his own. His hands were calloused only at the very tops of his palms, and the tips of his fingers were soft as he touched them to her wrist.

“Thank you,” she said again.

“It’s nice,” said Edík. “You’re nice. I’m going farther away this time, so everything can be nice and I don’t have to worry anymore.”

Sydney remembered the way Michaela had almost talked him into leaving with her the last time he’d been this way.

“Yeah?” she said cautiously. “How far are you going? Where to?”

“Champaign,” he said mildly. “It’s a city in Illinois. I thought, Ohio is basically nowhere, but it turned out not to be safe enough. So Champaign is my new nowhere. Not even 100,000 people in the whole place.”

Sydney made a face. Recluse that she’d become, it still offended her sensibilities to downgrade to a city even smaller than Columbus.

“What’s your address?” she asked. “So we can stay in touch?”

Still wearing that fuzzy smile, Edík told her, and Sydney immediately saved it in on her laptop, then closed the window.

“I’m thinking about looking for a job,” she said quickly. “I mean, a better-than-temping job. I dunno, maybe writing copy, or some kind of entry-level bullshit at McGraw-Hill.”

“McGraw-Hill . . .” he repeated.

“The textbook people. I dunno, getting paid to basically do middle school homework has to better than hauling mulch at Home Depot.”

“See?” said Edík. He already looked more alert, more like himself. “You don’t need me. Already, you’re figuring things out.”

“I dunno what I’ve been so afraid of,” Sydney confessed. “Like, I’m a grown-up. What’s the worst that could happen? I’ve already had all the ostomate disasters you’re supposed to dread, and they turned out fine. Bag blowouts, weird gas, wax that comes unsealed . . . I think that was part of why I liked temping, so I didn’t have to keep looking people in the eye after something gross happened. But I feel ready to look people in the eye. Hell, I feel ready to make people look me in the eye.”
“Colostomy Bag Blowout sounds like either the best band name or the worst Black Friday sale in the world,” said Edik, and Sydney laughed out loud.

Everything, she suddenly realized, was going to be okay. And if it wasn’t, she’d know where to find Edik.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caspian Gray is a used car salesman who has previously worked as a funeral director’s apprentice, a pet nutritionist, an English teacher in Japan, a Japanese teacher in America, and a crystal healing “expert” in a head shop. He currently lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he shares a home with a tall man and a small toddler.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
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COMING FEBRUARY 2019
I

_Tuesday, 14 November, 1989_

Outside, East Berlin was silent. Lamps made the train station an oasis of light amidst the darkness. Rain pattered against the windows, made the tracks slick. Past the station and the soldiers armed at each entrance and exit, there was no movement, no motion, no life. A flag drooped over a park bench in the distance. The stop in desolate East Berlin was quick and perfunctory, a cold peck on the cheek, as the train rumbled back to life and continued towards Paris.

It had been raining since Damek Vojak left Prague. Quiet, thunder-less storms swept through the valleys, following him from the hushed whispers of discontent and the whimper of dying flames he had left behind. Absently, he fingered the worn notebook in his lap. His cloak clung damp to his shoulders, and he could see the deadness in his own eyes from the window’s reflection. His passport was soft and malleable in the fingers of his human hand, and for a moment, he closed his eyes, imagining he was flying.

A moth awakened him a minute later, floating before his eyes. It hovered there, its thin, silver forewings beating with bristles trailing. “Pterophoridae,” he whispered to himself, raising his stone arm, palm up. The joints always creaked, pebbles and dust falling to the floor with each movement he made. “Of the order of Lepidoptera.” He grinned. “Suborder: Ditrysia, Superfamily: Pterophoroidea.” The grin split his face. “Pterophorus pentadactyla.” The small thing fluttered onto his opened palm, its wings ceasing but remaining laterally outstretched. He brought it close to his face, then suddenly closed his hand into a fist. The moth made no sound, and light flared from between his fingers.

“Shh,” he murmured, bringing the fist to his lips. “Do not struggle. You shall become so much more beautiful.” The energy pulsing in his
hand diminished, and he uncurled his fingers to reveal a snow crystal the same size as the moth. He sighed with satisfaction and concealed his stone arm within the folds of his cloak as one of the train’s guards made his rounds.

As he closed his eyes in slumber, the crystal melted in his hand and snow began to fall on the night route to Gare du Nord.

• • • •

A limb fell from the ceiling of the living room as Chief Inspector Radovan Novotny stepped into what remained of the charred cottage. Already, a team busied itself amidst the remains of the chamber, adjusting upturned furniture, snapping photos of blackened wood along the floor and walls, taking copious notes in their tiny notepads. Stepping past his assistants, he entered the kitchen, staring for a long time at the broken glass along the charred floor. He crouched on his haunches and picked one shard from the ground, holding it before his nose, turning it over in his fingers.

Gustav’s voice snatched him from his examination. He turned to face his studious, ever-watchful partner and saw the dutiful glow of an Assistant Inspector’s diligence in his oak-colored eyes. Hands clutching a notepad of his own, he made sure to step over the larger pieces of broken glass.

“Another firestorm.” As though that explained everything. Perhaps it did.

Gustav sighed and shrugged his we did our best shrug. “The victims have been torn to pieces. We’re collecting what we can, but it is near useless.”

“And the fire?”

“Likely a lamp was knocked over during the attempted escape.” Then, as an afterthought, “Assuming they had time.”

“Or the bomb did the attacker’s work for him,” Radovan said, almost to himself. Not for the first time, he wondered what lay behind the labyrinthine motivations of those terrorists, whether they realized what
their victims looked like after the act.

Cruelty for cruelty’s sake.

Something tugged briefly on his heartstrings, something he had felt upon entering the house, like the faint hum of violins. He walked into the living room, and the feeling amplified. Now there was piano. Then the soft groan of a cello, as the sound of a viola whispered into existence. He squinted towards the entrance of the cottage and could see the image of a small man draped in a moth-eaten cloak, his shoulders hunched as he observed the men at work in his home. The apparition wavered, as though not sure it existed, and caught Radovan’s gaze before vanishing. The symphony faded into silence.

Damek’s soul residue was still thick in the air.

Someone called his name, and he blinked, returning to his reality. He glanced at the shattered glass around his feet and hurried to where an assistant beckoned for him. A group of them stood, heads bowed, around what appeared to be a trapdoor in the corner of the reading room. The one holding the latch, a spindly man named Dobroslav, looked up at Radovan for approval. Radovan nodded, and the door, with great effort, was lifted.

Clouds of dust erupted into the air, and Radovan pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to protect his nose and mouth. Without a word to his comrades, he ventured down the stone steps into the darkness. Pools of light came to life all around him as his assistants followed with flashlights. Before long, there was very little left to his imagination, as the entire room filled with luminescence. The forced deadpan of a radio announcer replaced the concerto Radovan had heard earlier, detailing in garbled speech the enthusiastic dismantling of the Berlin Wall on behalf of citizens on both sides.

Beakers and glass tubes filled with all sorts of liquids stood upright in their holsters on the counters lined against the walls. A few bits of equipment—a pair of tongs, gloves, coal—lay scattered about the floor, but a fine coat of dust had settled on most of the items. In a mix of chalk and dark powder, drawings of dragons eating their own tails lay inscribed all over the floor, but it was what hung from the walls that
made the breath catch in his throat.

Rings. Rusty iron rings. For a brief moment, Radovan wondered what wrists had hung limp in those devices. What people had been made into little more than beasts while thrashing about in their restraints? One pair of rings hung in pieces where claws or teeth had cut through.

_Nature_, said the apparition beside him.

Radovan clenched his fists, gritted his teeth.

The apparition clasped his hands behind his back. A wry smirk at Radovan, then he was gone, and Gustav had taken his place.

“Our men found what’s left of his journal. Looks like contact information. We got lucky; if we can identify even one of the victims, then maybe we’ll have motive.” A cursory glance at the half-finished experiments on countertops and lying along the floor, covering a wing or a cloud of fire, and he whistled. “Left in a hurry, that one.”

Radovan did not hear any more of what Gustav had to say, for he found himself possessed of an anger he had rarely before known. The anger of a soldier confronting an enemy he is certain will win. Cruelty for cruelty’s sake.

... ... ...

It’s the man’s smile that has captured her. The way it twists the world on its axis, so that everything is right again. A smile that forgives everyone that ever wronged him and begs their forgiveness all in the same instant. And something sinister glints off the darkness of his coal-colored eyes, but it does not frighten her, because she will be the one to fix him, to heal him of whatever wounds he has sustained throughout his life before her.

When she returns from the kitchen with a glass of wine for each of them, he is staring out the window, hands thrust deep into his pockets, beret slightly tilted, his gaze focused on the cemetery just outside her window. A scarf covers a tattoo of a winged dragon eating its tail, an Ouroboros, if she remembers correctly. As if sensing her vigil, he tugs at the scarf to conceal the rest of the marking.
For a long while, she basks in his silence, the way he commands even the sounds around him. But when she feels he has forgotten her, however temporarily, she comes to his side, nudging his elbow and smiling into his face.

“Europe’s oldest surviving Jewish cemetery,” she says, cutting into his silence.

He returns her smile, takes one of the glasses, and for now, gives her his full attention. She’d be flattered, indeed overjoyed, were it not for that persistently sinister glint in his coal-black eyes.

Radovan closed the journal on his lap and paused, his gaze focusing on nothing in particular. Damek Vojak . . . The glow of the lamp was soft against the walls of his bedroom, but sleep seemed ever elusive. Somewhere in the house, the radio broadcast spoke of the dancing taking place atop a crumbling wall in Berlin. He thought of the ghost, the soul residue he had encountered in the scientist’s laboratory.

I can see him . . .

Even though the journal he read now had been cleaned and thoroughly examined, it was still rough against his fingers, its corners creased, its pages loose. The epiphany he’d had at the crime scene still sent ripples of shock through him. The whine of the violin and the hum of the cello fell back into the recesses of his memory when he tried to recall the face of the ghost. The face of the scientist who’d let human beings hang limp from those iron rings.

Alena scrubbed a towel through her hair as she left the bathroom, her robe undone. Radovan kept his gaze on the cover of the notebook, heedless of his wife’s nakedness as she put on her night gown and climbed in beside him.

“Rado, what is wrong?”

Maybe this is what I mean when I say you smell like a rose, he thought, remembering a line from Damek’s journal. “There was another murder today.” He sighed, the eternal soldier, the failed guardian.
“The terrorists?” She shifted her pillow and pulled a worn paperback novel out from underneath. Its cover was battered, the edges of its pages yellowed with the years. A satin hair ribbon served as her bookmark.

He eyed the novel before moving his pillow so that he could rest his head on it. The ceiling seemed a kilometer away. He squinted to dispel the slight vertigo. “We counted three victims. If the initial explosion didn’t kill them, then it’s likely the resulting fire did. They left no traces of themselves, no footprints in the house, no tire tracks in the snow outside. But we will catch them.”

She stared at her book but did not seem to be reading. “Why do you think they do it, Rado? Why kill innocent people like that?”

His fatigue came without warning, and he reached to turn out the light, forgetting Alena’s novel. “Infantile vengeance. Maybe they’ve lost something dear and this is merely a misguided venue for their anger. Maybe they’re trying to get it back.” His thoughts drifted to the scientist’s words, and gooseflesh ran over his arm. “There’s no understanding such people.”

Alena smiled in the darkness, and if Radovan had chosen to look her way, he might’ve seen the sadness in it. “If you lost me, would you try to get me back?”

“A foolish question,” he said, before turning out the lights and pulling the sheets to his chin.

• • • •

For a moment, she wonders whether the wine has begun playing with her senses because the man—this charming, mysterious, almost sinister god of a man—he is glowing. His hair turns into a halo around his head, his eyes have become silver like dagger blades. And his words . . .

His words are no longer sound, but whenever his mouth moves, it tugs at the strings of her heart, pushing, pulling. Compelling. And without warning, her mouth is against his neck, kissing, tongue tickling circles all over the tattoo. And she can feel the fire burning within her mouth. At first she welcomes it, embraces it. This fire means new life
and, in contrast with the death right outside her window and the cold wind lashing through it, the air inside this room, this apartment, glows with new life. New light.

*I will leave squalid Josefov with this man at my side,* she thinks. *I will leave Prague with this man, and we will live wherever he pleases, because I can no longer be without him.* She wraps her arms around his neck. *Not after tonight.*

Even as the glow becomes too much and the smell of smoke suffuses the air, she cannot keep this man out of her mind’s eye.

• • • •

At three in the morning, Radovan’s eyes were still open. *But perhaps they are far better off than we, us slaves to ideology, us slaves to God. Or perhaps to godlessness.* The words followed him from the velvet darkness of the bedroom to the dull golden glow of the kitchen where, with a beer at his elbow, he thumbed through the remains of the journal.

The first page he paused at contained notes from a 1982 voyage to Japan. (Few things as astounding as a double-flowered cultivar of Rugosa Rose. Plantae, Magnoliophyta, Magnoliopsida, Rosales, Rosaceae, Rosoideae, Rosa.) Scribbled in the margins were its dimensions. Thickets: 1.50 meters tall. Thorns: 3-10 mm. Leaves: 8-15 cm length.

With careful and efficient fingers, he flipped past several pages until he settled on the transcript of a conversation between the scientist and the famous novelist and literary critic Franz Kundera. A frown knit his brow as he took a sip from his glass.

*Kundera: The damned have reserved their place in hell. What profits a man to disturb them?*

*Vojak: Perhaps. But what if it were possible to bring back those who had passed? For too long, I have contented myself with the transforming of metals, and this supposed concoction for prolonging human life, but what if it were possible to transmute human life itself?*

*Kundera: For everything gained, there is something lost. It’s a
fundamental balance, Damek, one that extends to the triune of mind, body, and soul. If you attempt to take what is not yours—for a soul that has passed from this realm has most decidedly changed masters—and fail, the consequences would be dire. (You would pretend to be God.)

Vojak: Who is God to a Communist? And you are forgetting basic scientific principles.

Kundera: I am a novelist, not a physicist. It is not my duty to be acquainted with such things.

Vojak: But something must come as a result of the reaction, of the attempt. What would be created?

Kundera (pause): A homunculus. A false man. The damned offspring of a twisted father. You propose to bring the damned back to life. Once the mind, body, and spirit have been separated, it is impossible to bring them back. Your homunculus would be incomplete, unfinished. A shell without a soul. Or a walking suit of armor. (unintelligible).

That chill that had become so familiar of late resurrected the gooseflesh on Radovan’s arms. But after a moment’s hesitation, he found himself dressed and ready to contact Gustav, the ripples of one epiphany having reached the epicenter of another.

• • • •

Their newest lead, a friend of the scientist’s who resided in Liberec, did not seem surprised to find Chief Inspector Radovan Novotny and Assistant Inspector Gustav waiting on his front step with a few questions. He wore his spectacles low on his nose, and had a fur cloak wrapped snugly around him. Even as the sun peeked through the clouds and shone across the spires of the town hall, he kept the thing tight over his shoulders.

Now, on his veranda, three glasses of Cabernet Sauvignon and a plate of Czech dumplings sat on the table between them. Gustav helped himself to the dumplings while Professor Ladislav Obrenovac picked his glass from the table, swirled it in his hands, dipped his nose in it, then sipped.
Radovan left his portion untouched.

Obrenovac shrugged. “Damek? He struck me as a firm believer. Our Comrades in the Presidium considered him a bit of an ambassador. A spokesman, if you will. I was never one to tie science to politics. It is like attending the same party with your wife and your mistress. But, yes, he was at no shortage of items to discuss. He was always talking of these outdated French philosophers. Rousseau, Descartes.” He waved away the names, as though they were but air. “We, scientists, are the observers of things concrete. Leave the metaphysics to the poets, I say.”

“And the alchemy?” Radovan asked.

Gustav looked up from his food as though someone had broken wind.

Obrenovac colored briefly. His grip tightened on his glass. “He got me to believe in that nonsense once. A long time ago. Pig shit is what it is. Absolute and utter pig shit. Nonsense attempting to masquerade as science.”

Radovan frowned, folded his hands in his lap. “You didn’t seem to think so until recently.”

At which, Obrenovac relented. His shoulders sagged in defeat, deflated. “My apologies. I’m still having trouble believing Damek is guilty of what you claim. It is difficult for me. And the practice has been banned since before my generation. I never saw in him a desire for immortality. Indeed, I knew him well. And when one listened to him speak about transmutations and the elixir of life and all that nonsense, one tended to forget it was nonsense.” There was a reminiscent sparkle in his eyes when he again stared into his wineglass.

Gustav leaned forward in his seat, expectant, cheeks swollen with dumplings.

“A lot of it was based on actual science. In chemical reactions, conservation is at work. An item, a compound for instance, may change shape a dozen times but hold fast to its principle, its core elements. The reason wax is wax, whether it stands upright, or drips from the edge of the table. Unfortunately, the era that saw the birth, or perhaps resurgence, of this discipline was not one blessed with beakers, Bunsen burners, and
a metric system. So when modern science finally did arrive, alchemy became the pastime of charlatans and fools.” He grinned into his glass. “If they could see us now, I wonder what expressions would paint their faces. By way of nuclear reaction, we are able to turn lead atoms into gold, if only for a few seconds. The Americans are playing at cold fusion”—another wave of the hand—“but who are they?”

“Indeed,” Radovan murmured.

“But wasn’t there a third goal of alchemy?” Gustav seemed awake at last, and the question that had issued from his lips made Radovan sit upright in his chair, doing his best to suppress a proud grin.

Obrenovac blinked. “What?”

Gustav placed his plate on the table and dabbed at his lips. “You said Vojak spoke of the transmutation of metals and the elixir of life, but wasn’t there a third goal for alchemists?”

Obrenovac’s eyes darkened, and he seemed to settle into a quiet anger. “Yes,” he said, nodding. “They wanted to learn how to transmute human life itself. Now, if you are asking me if Damek has ever tried it, or if you are asking me if I were privy to such knowledge, or even if you are asking me if he was foolish enough to believe such a thing himself, the answer is absolutely and unequivocally no.” A forced smile. “Your company has been appreciated.”

• • • •

Suddenly, it begins hurting.

He lies atop her, kissing her lips with tenderness, his entire body emanating a soft blond glow that grows in intensity with each passing moment. His hands glide along her torso, her breasts, her face, when she begins to feel the pinpricks. Like a dozen claws running over her skin.

She starts to sweat, and the perspiration stings her new wounds, but he seems not to notice. He continues in his lovemaking, biting, scratching, his breath so hot it burns her neck.

Struggling for breath, she realizes she is on fire.

“Stop,” she tries to whisper. “Please, stop.”
But he does not heed her pleas. Instead, he grows even more ferocious, his skin leathering beneath her touch. He pins her to the bed, small tongues of fire dripping from the sides of his mouth, each one eliciting a cry for help. But he continues, covering her mouth with his, breathing fire down her throat, so that she can no longer scream.

All she can do is stare at him, her tears evaporating before they can slide down her face. She stares at him in bewildered terror, wondering at his betrayal, wondering at the oblivion he has wrapped himself in.

*Please,* she finds she can no longer cry out. *Please, stop this. I love you. I love you, and I'm dying.*

• • • •

Trepidation had become a familiar snake coiled in Radovan’s gut by the time he arrived at the office of his supervisor, Comrade Commandant Valdemar Havel. A plethora of possible greetings flitted through his mind, and he reached out to choose one when Havel gestured towards the armchair in front of his desk. He seated himself and spoke. “Comrade Novotny.” A file folder sat on his desk, and he thumbed it open, briefly reviewing the material inside. “Your progress on the Brno murders.” Not a question, but instead a dare.

“We’ve come across some new evidence that suggests alchemy.” At the darkening of Havel’s features, Radovan steeled himself to continue. “Damek Vojak, the alchemist, has a history with the practice and we’ve not been able to reach him for some time. We believe his *creations* self-destruct within a few hours, so the damage is minimal. Gustav and I have narrowed our leads, and we are making significant progress in our inquiries.” A pause, as he gathered himself for the hurdle he needed to surmount. “However, we have hit an impasse.”

“Which is why we’re sitting here with the file of a political dissident between us. You must realize that the Presidium forbids access to its detainees. Franz Kundera is no exception.”

“He is necessary to my investigation. He and Damek Vojak were acquaintances. They knew each other well, particularly during Vojak’s
foray into questionable scientific practices. It is imperative that I question him.”

Perhaps there was something in his voice, or perhaps it was the determined smolder in his eyes that forced Comrade Commandant Valdemar Havel to relent. He stared at the file for a long time before closing it and rising from his seat. “I will talk with the Presidium. It is likely you will have to travel to the detention center.” A frown knit his brow. “Enter, get what you need, and exit. We do not need any trouble from Moscow Centre. The smallest spark . . .” He did not need to finish.

But despite the anxiety in Havel’s voice, Radovan rejoiced, for the serpent of trepidation had vanished from him entirely.

• • • •

When he finally pushes himself off her, the parts of her body she can see are charred beyond recognition. Soot and ash blacken the walls of the room, and entire pieces of furniture have been reduced to dust.

Smoke hangs in the air, languid, choking her lungs, but she cannot cough because her throat has been burned beyond use. Still, so many questions cluster in her head, begging to find a voice. Why did you do this to me? Who are you, really? What are you?

And yet his face is a lesson in civility. There is still sadness in his smile, but he does not seem to see that anything is wrong, that her blood has crusted to her, that she is dying.

No, he merely smiles, as if all is forgiven, and walks away.

She struggles for words, working her mouth despite the pain at breaking the burnt skin. As he moves towards the door, the urge for violence quickens in her veins, and she spasms once against the bloody bedsheets, renewed pain lancing through her body.

But he does not even turn around to catch one last glimpse of what he has left behind. Merely closes the door behind him more softly than she ever thought possible.

• • • •
Radovan felt the cold of Norilsk well before he arrived at the near-abandoned mining center. It bit through his coat and cut through the scarf he had tied around his mouth. The wind from the Putoran Mountains where Moscow’s ICBMs hibernated wailed through the large expanse of a town situated between the West Siberian Plain and the Central Siberian Plateau. The ground was solid beneath him, unbreakable like the expressions of the Soviet officials who saw him off the tram and escorted him past the mining shafts dug into the ground to the prisoner’s quarters.

The barracks were aligned in straight rows that seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance, silent and uniform. Before long, the officials had found their destination, one of them going to open the door for the visiting Czech inspector, the other, gesturing for Radovan to enter. He smiled, murmured his thanks, and was startled to hear the door close behind him as he came upon a very different Franz Kundera than he had expected.

Images of the former Kundera sat like photographs in his mind. A thin man, sparkling with intelligence and wit, glowing like a nebula in the face of oppression. Blond hair and soft hands that constantly waved to a grateful population. A Kundera before Soviet tanks rolled through Prague in 1968.

Now, it was a bearded, thick-armed man, darkened hair plastered to his sweaty forehead, that greeted him. A diamond whose sheen had been blemished, whose edges had been dulled. There was a notebook and a makeshift pencil on the desk before him, and when he turned to face Radovan, he grew into a massive hulk of a man that towered over the inspector.

“Greetings, Comrade Novotny,” he said, bowing his head slightly, before returning to his seat.

“Comrade Kundera,” Radovan replied, before pulling a brittle, wooden chair from a corner of the small, unfurnished living room.

A smile split Kundera’s face. “I suppose I should thank you. Were it not for your visit, I would be working the evening shift in the mines.” The smile turned into a smirk that played at the ends of his lips. “If the
Lord wills it, perhaps I shall be on the Yenisei again, and I may yet die in a warm bed."

Radovan did not need to be reminded of the change sweeping through the Soviet landscape. "You and Damek Vojak were close, no?"

"Yes."

"What did you talk of?"

"We talked of the things fools like to discuss. We talked of life, love, and happiness. We talked of things that meant everything and nothing. He was a scientist with a poet’s sensibilities." A violent cough shook his shoulders, and he wiped the blood onto his trousers.

"And you?"

He patted the tuft of hair on his head. "A dissident, who was foolish enough to be caught."

"He spoke to you of alchemy. And his experiments, no?" His hands were cold even inside his gloves.

"On occasion." Another coughing fit, this one nearly doubling him over. He held a hand out to Radovan to indicate he did not need any help, that this was *normal ‘no*, and within a few seconds, he was back in his seat, wheezing. "He attempted to educate me in regards to his sciences, but very little stuck. A writer’s mind is slippery when it wants to be. I do remember the basic processes he outlined, though. He spoke of the operation in three steps. The first was the understanding of the elements that composed an object, its molecules, its atoms, all of that.” The breaths he took while speaking grew larger, more expansive, perhaps to keep the cough at bay. "The second step was deconstruction, the breaking of those bonds. And the final step is reconstruction into something new, rebirth. A renaissance. But he was always thinking of the chemicals that compose us. He failed to see the components of mind, body, and soul. Those are the true ingredients he should consider, if he were to attempt human transmutation, for those are the truest components of human beings, and it is the unity of these three that forms us.” He rushed the last sentence as another coughing fit seized him. He clutched his chest in thick fingers, perhaps trying to squeeze out the cancer.
Radovan fished a handkerchief from his coat pocket and held it out for the larger man, who now seemed so frail in his chair. “Why is he trying to seek immortality? Why does he want to live forever?” The question that had been burning inside him ever since he first stepped into Vojak’s laboratory. The question that had haunted him like Vojak’s ghost, his soul residue trailing behind him wherever he walked.

In between coughs, Kundera managed to chuckle as he helped himself to Radovan’s gift. “Who would want to live forever when he can die today?” He smiled, and flecks of blood dotted his lips.

Radovan frowned. He saw in Kundera’s eyes a resigned wistfulness, a sigh for the things that might have been. It was then that the guards ambled in. One glance at the prisoner, and Kundera was up and, with ice pick over his shoulder, out into the cold. On his way to the station, Radovan passed through the mining site. He paused to watch Kundera digging into the ground and, in that moment, saw a man become nothing more than a walking suit of armor.

When Radovan finally arrived home, Alena was asleep, her arm draped over the empty space he usually occupied. He crawled in beside her, noticing for the first time, the tearstains on her pillow. When her fingers brushed against his chest, they recoiled, and she brought her hand beneath her cheek, turning away from her husband. *If you lost me, would you try to get me back?*

Radovan stared at Alena’s serene face. And even though she lay inches from him, she seemed far beyond his reach.

The following morning, as the sunlight spilled onto the cobblestones, Radovan looked out his window and watched the rumblings of discontent take shape in the Czech and Slovak students that swarmed through the streets. Banners flapped over their heads, and stones shifted
in their hands, ready to be thrown. Riot police blocked off every exit, and there followed a brief lull. Suddenly, the first stone was cast, and tear gas and chaos filled the air, alongside the cries of the beaten and bruised and those crying anti-Communist slogans.

He left Alena asleep in her bed, slipped on his clothes, and shrugged his overcoat onto his shoulders. Before long, he was on his way to the office. He managed to make it onto the morning tram and could see the demonstrations moving to this quarter of downtown Prague.

His radio sounded, and he heard Gustav reciting the coordinates of a new crime scene. The growing anxiety that had plagued him ever since leaving Norilsk rumbled in his belly as Gustav picked him up from the station.

“A woman reported smoke issuing from one of the rooms on her floor,” said the Assistant Inspector as they navigated the crowds of demonstrators. A sharp turn around a corner nearly cut the legs out from two placard-wielding Slovak students, who cursed after the squad car. “Proboha,” he whispered, “my God, it’s really happening.”

Radovan frowned as they picked their way through the riots, eventually abandoning the car in an empty back alley.

“Officers are waiting for us there. Even the secret police showed up.”

Radovan stretched his stride, moving with increasing urgency. “And the victims?”

“Only one this time.”

Radovan could tell they were nearing the quarter when he spotted a yellow Star of David on a field of red, hanging from the rusted balcony of an apartment building. Snow covered slanted roofs, hung from bare tree branches, blanketed the ground they ran on. Silence surrounded them, even when they made their way into the apartment of the victim.

Something in the hallway outside the room stopped Radovan where he stood. Soot and ash had been sprayed over the wall just outside the victim’s door, the aftermath of an explosion. Hurried steps brought him inside the room, Gustav trailing behind, taking notes.

Quickly, he surveyed the charred insides of the room until his gaze fell upon the still figure on the crisp bedsheets. Officers and forensic
experts busied themselves about the room, but none of them seemed to have noticed the girl on the bed, her face and body a startling black when coupled with the sorrowful blue of her eyes. When Radovan squinted, he thought he saw her lips move.

He grabbed the nearest forensics expert and pulled him towards the bed. “She’s still alive.” Hope quickened his heart when he saw her lips move, but the expert’s gaze told him that she would not survive the trip to the hospital. *A waste of fuel,* his gaze said.

She managed a hoarse whisper, but the effort sent clear tears down the sides of her crusted face.

Radovan leaned in, his ear to her lips. “What is it?” he whispered to her. “What did this to you?”

“Drak,” she managed before something choked any remaining words inside her where they would remain forever. He blinked away sudden tears and almost could not believe that she would no longer speak. So close. He’d been so close. His vision began to blur as he stumbled away from the girl, and that was when he saw it.

The apparition stood by the window, staring out over the cemetery, his moth-eaten cloak tugged tight around his shoulders. An invisible orchestra played around him, as a piano melody brought with it a cello and viola accompaniment. Radovan had heard the symphony many times before, at each crime scene and again when he found himself deep in thought. Never before had it moved him to such hatred. His knuckles cracked, his hands balled into fists.

He advanced, but Damek turned his head so that Radovan could see his profile and the silent tear that ran down his cheek. An arm made of stone emerged from his cloak, and with a finger that leaked pebbles and dust onto the floor, he dashed the tear away. For a long while, they stood, their gazes locked, the world around them oblivious to their wordless communion.

Damek returned to the window. *The damned have reserved their place in hell,* he said against the whine of a viola. *What profits a man to disturb them?* He chuckled. *Souls that have passed from this realm, they have most assuredly changed masters, so why should I take something*
that is not mine? Why pretend to be God? A pause as his gaze roved over the snow-covered cemetery. Small flakes began to descend from an evening sky that bled red across the streets of the Jewish quarter. *Ah, but who is God to a Communist? And what is a man but the chemicals that compose him?*

Radovan let his arms hang limp at his sides, as he recalled the transcript he’d read earlier that week. By the thickness of the man’s soul residue in the air, the attack must have been recent. “Give me a clue,” Radovan murmured.

*You will laugh at me, at my attempts to bring the damned back to life. But once the mind, body, and spirit have been separated, can they ever be successfully rejoined? What would result of the union? Perhaps a man with none of his own memories. Or a walking suit of armor...* He chuckled again, then subdued himself.

Turning around, he began to plead with his gaze. *Save me, please.* He let the cloak fall back to reveal the totality of his marble arm and where it joined to the flesh by the base of his neck. *You must understand, it was for science. I am surely not alone in this.*

Then he was gone.

A hand on Radovan’s shoulder startled him, and he turned to face Gustav. The despair in his comrade’s eyes gave him cause for concern and when Gustav did not immediately speak, Radovan stepped in to listen for any whispered words.

“They’ve murdered a boy,” Gustav whispered.

Upon hearing the waver in his colleague’s voice, he looked into the man’s face, seeing the struggle that took place on his face to hold back the anger and frustration and anguish that dueled for dominance. “What are you talking about?”

“And so they are closing this case.” He stepped closer to Radovan. “That is why the secret police came. To escort *us* to our homes.”

Radovan schooled the stunned expression from his face and welcomed the plainclothes officers with smiles for each of them as they beckoned him to follow.
He bristled against the metal handcuffs that had encircled his wrists ever since he had been escorted from the crime scene, and his apprehension deepened when he found himself in a room with lifeless gray walls and a table bolted to the floor. The chair across from him seated no one.

But relief flooded through his chest when he saw Comrade Commandant Valdemar Havel filling the doorway with his massive shoulders. There was a softness to his expression, a teacher just before the hanging of his student. In the next instant, he was his usual administrative self, managing to look both official and comfortable in the chair across from Radovan.

The detective opened his mouth to speak when a raised hand from Commandant Havel silenced him.

A moment passed where Havel waited, fished an unfiltered cigarette from a pocket with fingers that trembled, then lit the cigarette. He offered one to Radovan, who, stunned, let the thing fall from his fingers onto the table. This was not the same Commandant that had reluctantly granted him permission to visit a Soviet dissident.

“You’re no doubt wondering why you were taken off your case,” Havel began, with seemingly little regard for any of the surveillance that could have made its way into the room. “The answer, pure and simple, is politics.” A long drag. “You remember that tinderbox I mentioned earlier,”—he waved his hand through the air, creating curling waves of smoke—“the smallest spark, that whole bit?”

Radovan managed a nod.

“Well, we’ve received our spark. His name was Martin Šmíd. I say was because he was found dead when police—secret and otherwise—dispersed a crowd of student protestors.” He leaned his elbows on the table, suddenly tired. “You’re no stranger to what is going on outside our windows. Television will be the death of Communism.” Another drag. “Well, despite the sensitive political climate, the men in charge managed to kill an innocent. So, in an effort to calm the masses, the police force is
effectively taking a break.”

“What, so my case is closed? Forever?”

Another drag, another dismissive wave of his hand as he spoke.

“Well, there will be the necessary papers to sign, there always are. But, effectively, yes. Your case is closed. The killers have fled, they’ve killed themselves in ecstasy of this revolution they’ve finally caused. Or they never existed. It’s your story, do what you will with it.” He rose, digging a key out of one pocket and undoing Radovan’s cuffs, before walking towards the door.

“So what happens to me?”

Havel half-turned and, over his shoulder, said, “Whatever God wills. Stalin has left Him an empty desk.”

• • • •

That evening found Radovan in his kitchen, two slices of toast on his plate, a soft light warming the room. He brought his hands to his face and, through his fingers, could see the snow falling in large flakes outside his window. For a brief moment, he wondered whose blood those flakes would cover, whose blood they would wash down the cobblestones when they melted. Then his mind was on the girl.

Her bruised and blackened body, the soot that marred her teeth when she tried to speak, the startling blue of her eyes on a face the color of mud. Drak, she had said. Dragon.

He was halfway through his first slice of toast when he spotted Alena, her lithe, robed figure in the doorway. She took a seat on the stool across the counter from him. Behind her stood the stove and the refrigerator, framed by oak cupboards and sleek metal countertops, all compliments of the Party.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, both hands on one of his.

He took a bite out of the toast, tasting the butter he’d slathered on it (also compliments of the Party). “It’s nothing, Alena. I’m just too tired to sleep. That’s all.”

Betrayal flashed in her eyes for a moment, then was gone, replaced by
resignation. “Rado,”—a pause as she bowed her head, collected her thoughts—“what are you going to do?”

Another bite out of his toast. Part of him mourned the distance he carved between himself and Alena, but she would never understand. She, who hadn’t seen the chains on the walls of that basement in the alchemist’s laboratory. She, who hadn’t seen the charred, brittle body of that last girl. She who hadn’t heard that girl’s last word and the damnation in it. “The Party needs me to be quiet for a few days.” He shrugged. “Maybe a few weeks. So I will be quiet.”

“And the terrorists?”

_There were never any terrorists, Alena._ A sigh escaped his lips, and he was suddenly weary. “I don’t know, Alena,” he said, harsher than he meant.

Her hand left his, and she moved to the coffee pot, her back turned to him. “What will you do for work?” Her voice could have frozen the liquid in the pot.

“I have a job, Alena! I’m still a detective.” He cursed beneath his breath and padded his body for cigarettes. In the other room, Radio Free Europe crackled on about the student demonstrators, now joined by the theater troupes that had gone on strike. The dead student was not mentioned.

Alena poured herself a cup but did not turn to face him. “The Wall has come down, Rado.”

“And which one of us is next to be hit by a falling brick?” he spat back, venom thick in his voice. He tossed the remains of his first slice of toast atop the second and brushed past her towards the closet in the living room. Snatching his coat from its place on the rack, he pulled it on rougher than necessary before heading towards the door that led out the kitchen and into the cold, quiet evening.

“Where are you going?” she asked, the power in her voice gone.

Silence was his answer as he closed the door behind him.

But there was immediate serenity to be found in the night. His fingers instinctively reached for the pack of cigarettes in his breast pocket and, though he had not exhaled such smoke for nearly a year, he felt no guilt.
The Wall is falling, dragons are ravaging the Bloc, the world is ending, let Rado have his smoke.

“It’s quite beautiful, is it not, Comrade?” said a voice to his right.

He turned to see a young man whose face had aged faster than the rest of him, leaning against the windowsill of a neighboring flat. Light from the lamppost gave him an otherworldly glow, casting his shadow at a sharp angle. His student-like beret seemed at odds with the cut of his coat, suggesting a man of greater age. Radovan nodded his agreement, hoping the man was not some apparatchik come to remind himself and the Party of Radovan’s loyalty in these trying times.

Much to Radovan’s horror, the man approached, hands in the pockets of his overcoat, cigarette at the end of his own lips, calm as the breeze that wafted through the streets that night.

He flashed a smile before returning his attention to the light snowfall. “This, the troublemakers cannot take from us.”

Radovan puffed, glancing out of the corner of his eye for suspicious movements. If the man reached into his coat, he didn’t know what he would have done.

“Neither can the Stasi,” the man said, referring to East Germany’s legendary secret police.

*It’s a test.* The terror beating in Radovan’s heart amplified at that possibility. He found himself wondering what Alena’s reaction would be. Had she been in on it the whole time? Playing on his mood to send him outside where this apparatchik was conveniently enjoying a quiet stroll through the snow-white streets. Did she know this man? The questions continued until he cursed his own paranoia.

*If this is how it ends, then I’ll at least keep my dignity.* “No, they can’t,” he replied at last to the man’s deepening frown.

The stranger idled closer, so that his voice could barely be heard above the breeze. “What about alchemists and the dragons they create?”

Radovan’s cigarette fell from his lips extinguishing itself in the snow at his feet. He turned to the stranger, eyes widened in shock.

“I know. I know all about your hunt for the beast that murdered that girl in Josefov and those people just outside Brno. I also know that this is
not the first time he’s killed.” Another step closer, no longer an agent threatening punishment but now a comrade confiding a secret. “Tisch. Manfred Tisch.” He didn’t extend a hand as Radovan had expected, but instead flashed his smile again, as though that were his currency. “Damek Vojak. That is who you’re chasing, isn’t it. The renegade alchemist. The heretic.” A quick grin before his business face returned. “I first got wind of him when I was in Hungary last month. Before the Fall. A colleague told me of a case he’d been put on. Two girls, sisters. Murdered within days of each other. What no one could figure out was where the fire had come from. I did some research and found a similar case in April. This one in Poland.” Hands deep in his pockets, he exhaled a thick cloud of smoke before continuing. “Before that, the People’s Republic of China. Following the Hungary murders, he made his way to Berlin where he killed again. Always the same carnage as before. Only, each time it grew in intensity. Entire portions of rooms would be destroyed, furniture torn to shreds, like an explosion had gone off.” Another puff. “He must have slipped in with the refugees. Only, instead of going to West Germany like most of them, he came here. To Czechoslovakia, where he’s murdered again.”

“Where his creations have murdered again,” Radovan whispered to himself. “What do we know of the alchemist?” he asked, slipping comfortably into his role of co-conspirator.

Manfred grinned. “Well, we know his name. We know he’s Czech, but that’s about it.”

“We know he’s trying to run away from something.” Radovan startled himself with that. But each time he recalled that girl’s dying words, he found himself staring at the apparition of the alchemist, hanging on the sound of his words, trying to pry clues out of them, instead seeing the fear and the sorrow at what he’d done.

Manfred pulled long and hard on his cigarette before tossing it into the snow. “So who do we chase? The alchemist or the drak?”

“Wait.” A thought occurred to Radovan. “Why are you still pursuing him? He has escaped your country. He’s out of your jurisdiction.”

In a cavalier gesture that Radovan would remember long after that
evening, Manfred adjusted his beret so that his face could be seen in its entirety, that face belonging to men who lost too much too early but continued betting. And he smiled. “Why, I’m fighting to secure the safety and survival of the Soviet Bloc. We can’t have this troublemaker destroying what fifty years of proletariat rule has established, can we?”

He thought of Alena. *Maybe she was in on this whole thing.* “No, we can’t,” Radovan replied, returning Manfred’s smile with one of his own.

II

*Saturday, 18 November, 1989*

The apparition hovered over the steps of the outpost, peering into the evening and the barbed wire that demarcated Czechoslovakia’s border with West Germany. The sun had just begun its ascent, and an errant ray of light would occasionally glint off a piece of metal, a broken bar of steel or a bent pole, and illuminate the wreckage of the collapsed Wall. If Damek squinted, he could still see people dancing atop the ruins; perhaps they were apparitions as well.


He thought of the moth he had changed on his way from East Berlin, how it had struggled against the inside of his fist, before it became a snowflake. *Oh, how much more viciously we humans struggle!*

A glance over his shoulder on instinct, to see how far behind the beast was, then he vanished, the soul residue in the air having dissipated.

• • • •

The afternoon found Lubomir Adamec in his office, face buried in his hands, eyes burning from lack of sleep. Outside, he could hear the demonstrators marching again. But the pound of their boots against the
pavement was barely a whisper over the throbbing in his head. A finger
twitched against his forehead, and he glanced down to see the frayed
edges of his sleeves. His tie lay undone in his lap, his suit unbuttoned, his
cap rumpled on his desk where he’d smashed his fist into it the night
before, his once-shimmering hair dull and unruly as it came down to his
shoulders. At one point in his life, this might have been the aftermath of
a celebration.

However, the world outside was coming apart, bursting at its ill-sewn
seams, ranting and raving like a child against a parent who chose to
ignore it. And, not for the first time, he cursed Gorbachev. He
cursed glasnost, he cursed perestroika. He damned them to the darkest
pits of a godless hell because Communists, true Communists, did not
believe in God.

And now a student had died because of it. The first of many if what
needed to be done were to be done. This is how it will happen if those
children do not come to their senses. He thought of 1968 and the tanks
rolling through the streets, the police bursting into houses and
underground headquarters, dealing with anti-socialist elements.

His intercom buzzed, snatching him from his thoughts and the kindly
assertive voice of his secretary—calm in the midst of revolution—
announced the arrival of a young man waiting to see Prime Minister
Adamec.

“Send him in, Alena,” he said, mustering as much of his dignity and
command as he could salvage.

With haste, he unrolled his sleeves, fastened the cuffs, and
straightened his hair. An errant hand knocked over the glass of vodka
that had been resting, half-filled, on the wood surface. Scrambling to
clean the mess, he did not notice the door whisper open, a quiet young
man standing in the threshold.

When he did look up, he froze. For a few moments, his mind
struggled to find where it had last seen his face. Then, with horror and
unabashed shock, the answer dawned on him.

That face. Last seen in a photo of a police report of last night’s
demonstration. That face, belonging to a Martin Šmíd, murdered during
the student-led demonstration on Národní Street.

Lubomir’s first reaction was to strike the youth for all he was worth, one swift blow across the face that would encapsulate all the damage this youth sought to unleash. But once his anger subsided, he found himself bewildered, having arrived at the possibility that, in his distress, he had now discovered the ability to converse with the dead. But when a few more seconds allowed him to take in the youth’s smoldering coal-colored eyes, the yellow forelock that fell over them, and the half-concealed tattoo of a dragon at the boy’s neck, he found himself bemused.

Suit jacket still unbuttoned, he came to the front of his desk and motioned for the youth to sit in the empty armchair across from him. “Shall I get you something to drink?” Lubomir asked, moving past the boy to close the door.

Martin’s gaze flicked towards the overturned glass and the pool of vodka on the table, and he said nothing.

“Very well, then,” said Lubomir, as he returned to his desk, then crossing one leg over the other, hands folded at the knee. “What can I do for you?”

He thought, if he were ever given the chance to look into the face of one of those students from last night’s demonstration, he would find the same starry-eyed idealism that had sparkled in the gazes of the Party’s beginnings. He thought he would find brows furrowed in determination, mouths set in conviction. Instead, he found that moment when the youth’s face faltered, where the expression wavered like an apparition, not sure it existed.

He saw questions lingering in the boy’s eyes.

The next instant, they were gone, replaced by the fire that had driven the protestors last night. “As you can likely tell, Martin Šmíd did not die last night,” the youth said at last. “Happily, he is alive today. It was necessary, however, to borrow his name so that our mission could be complete.”

A bitter chuckle escaped Lubomir’s lips. “Mission? If I didn’t know any better, I’d have pegged you for a Soviet agent provocateur. If this were a spontaneous act on your part to cause trouble, that, too, I might
have forgiven. But this,”—he waved towards the windows, which had been shuttered—“you were not alone in this. If any of the regular police had pulled you away, your façade would have been uncovered. Instead, you had friends dressed as riot police drag you away while others screamed over your motionless body.” His grin held no mirth. “Am I getting closer to the truth or should I fish some more?” The effects of the half-bottle he’d emptied down his throat hours before this youth’s visit had vanished completely, and with clarity restored, he continued his attack. “In fact, I doubt this Martin Šmíd ever existed beyond a rumor disseminated by your comrades to stir unrest.” He pushed off his desk, predatory steps taking him closer to this student who refused to flinch, to waver. “So, what is your name then?”

And for a brief moment, the boy had no answer. The question flashed in his eyes, replaced by a blankness. “Milan,” he said finally. With courage recovered, he went on the offensive. “What frightens you so much, Comrade Prime Minister? We are just students chanting. We are just actors on a stage.”

“Students chanting is not where the danger lies. You chant and shout and jeer and curse merely to have something to fight against. Maybe you are the child demanding attention. You are our neglected progeny. You feel we have not done as well as we could have by you. Is that it?” A pause. “And instead of keeping your feelings to yourself or harnessing them in a useful manner, you kick at the Presidium. Because the Presidium is the only thing you have to kick against.”

Milan bristled. “Useful manner?” Suddenly, he stood, and a glow like fire sparked in the air around him, only to evaporate. Despite the warmth filling the air, a chill sounded in the youth’s voice when he spoke. “On the twenty-third day of August, two million people across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined hands and united along six hundred kilometers of road between Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius. Two million people, Comrade Prime Minister. Would you consider that harnessing our feelings in a useful manner?”

The young man before him became, in those moments, so puerile, so much a child in his faith, in his fervor, in his unflinching devotion, that
Lubomir might have mistaken him for his own son. A sudden urge to teach filled him, and a small ache entered his voice when he asked, “And when you have destroyed socialism, when you have killed it, when it lies broken and buried beneath your feet, what will you put in its place?”

Again, Milan was at a loss for words. Then, returning to the script he had no doubt learned and memorized in the company of his comrades, he spoke. “Democracy. An end to oppression. We will remove the veil that the Party has pulled over our eyes. We will allow freedom of ideas, of opinion, of faith.”

“Ah, yes.” He moved to the other side of his desk and retrieved the bottle of Stolichnaya he had hidden upon Milan’s entry. Righting his glass, he poured himself a cup. When he held the bottle with the opened top facing Milan, the student shook his head, no. “Besides, what’s to keep this from ending up just like 1968, eh? The infamous ‘Prague Spring.’ Yes. I certainly remember it. Then again, you might not have been born then.” He flashed a smile.

But Milan did not rise to the bait. Instead he rose with deliberate slowness and advanced towards the windows. Parting the shutters with the fingers of one hand, he peeked out and grinned. “Did it take the Soviet tanks this long to break up the party?”

Lubomir’s grin broadened. *Clever child.* “It is only bureaucratic inefficiency that is making them late.”

A rich, mirthful sound came like rumbling thunder from Milan. But in the next moment, he returned Lubomir’s gaze with one of fierce resolve. “You would have us alive and in chains.”

“I would have you alive,” Lubomir shot back, suddenly angry.

Without warning, a sharp coldness descended on Milan’s features, and the emotion drained from his face, as though his soul were leaving his body. Seeing the young man like this, Lubomir wondered if he had pushed him over some unseen line, said something to trigger the youth. “In every war, there are casualties,” said Milan. “It is true. Revolution is a fire.” The blaze akin to those found in priests and fanatics, that absolute conviction, that need to spread that conviction to every corner of the globe, it raged in Milan’s coal-black eyes, and Lubomir wondered
whether it had been lurking there just beneath the surface this entire time. “But they are necessary losses, even if they do not know they are being sacrificed.” His voice sounded detached, as if he were quoting from another source. “And, yes, there is vengeance in this fire, and not everyone can be spared. But what we bring is enlightenment, freedom, an escape from the darkness, from the constant fear, from this system of control.”

“No!” screamed Lubomir, coming to his feet in frustration. He slammed his glass on the table. “No! What will you replace us with?” He glared at this youth who had fled to the recesses of fanaticism and indoctrination for the sake of his own comfort. “What will you put in our place that is better than us? You replace man with man. All of this!” He jabbed a finger at the window. “All of that is pointless because you will only be replacing man with man. All this time, you have thrashed about and chanted and cursed us, but when will you realize that the evil is not in the system? It is in the man.” He staggered against the desk, tired. “It is in the man,” he said again, barely a murmur this time. “It is in the man.” And, this third time, he realized with devastating clarity what he meant. Looking into Milan’s startled gaze, he could tell that the youth knew as well.

For a long time, they stared at each other until Milan rose wordlessly from his chair and pushed his near-empty glass of vodka towards Lubomir. The boy’s skin began to darken, and the smell of brimstone suddenly filled the air. Fury shook the youth, made his fists tremble by his sides, blood sluicing down his knuckles and it wasn’t until Milan, sighing, uncurled his fists that Lubomir could see the wounds in the boy’s palms.

When Milan looked up from his bleeding hands, tears filled his eyes and Lubomir suppressed an urge to put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. But before he could call out to the youth, he had fled, leaving the door open behind him.

After Milan had disappeared, Lubomir approached the threshold. Alena, by now, had risen and with her hands clasped to her breast asked if Prime Minister Adamec would need anything.
“No,” Lubomir replied, still staring down the path the boy had trod. “No. But thank you.” He took a moment to collect himself. “You should go home early today. Treat yourself,” he said, smiling at her, “before the restaurants close.”

The last thing Prime Minister Adamec saw before he closed the door to his office was how his secretary’s face had fallen at the suggestion.

• • • •

He lights a cigarette, brings the thing to his mouth, but it is not enough to keep his hands from trembling. He can still feel the warmth nestling in his chest and stomach as though he has just downed a glass of scotch. But it is the sight of the secretary that pushes the heat further towards his loins.

She does not notice him.

His skin smooths beneath his shirt, the wrinkles vanish from his fingers, his claws retract until they become fingernails again, and he follows her into the street.

He is careful to wrap the kerchiefs tight around his bleeding palms.

Amidst the hum of protest that drowns out his footsteps, he watches her board the tram, then does the same, deciding he is not patient enough to wait as he usually does. His body aches to share a cart with her.

When she glances at him, perhaps gauging recognition, there’s a blush to her cheeks. He can feel it.

And he smiles back.

• • • •

Rado and Gustav sat in silence, their macchiatos steaming on the tiny saucers between them. Gustav tapped a melody on the table while throwing tentative glances at his partner whose gaze was focused somewhere out the window.

Rado’s quiet spells always unsettled Gustav. That so vast and unknowable a world could happen behind the man’s eyes made him
realize how insignificant his contributions to the investigation really were.

Gustav dropped a sugar cube into his drink and began stirring. “When is Alena going to make those dumplings again?” he ventured. “They were absolutely spectacular.” He followed Radovan’s gaze out the window. A young couple was using the cover of the protest march to neck in a shadowed alleyway. A woman’s leg poked furtively from the darkness. “I don’t think I’ve ever had dumplings that good.”

Radovan could have been contemplating dancing a sârba on the table and Gustav would not have guessed.

“Isn’t this the part where you chide me for taking advantage of your hospitality so frequently? The part where you advise me to go and find my own wife?”

But Radovan had his chin tucked into his hand like a sullen teenager. “They’re better than Ladislav’s, that’s for sure,” Gustav murmured into his cup before taking a sip.

“The sárkánykígyó,” Radovan said so suddenly that Gustav almost dropped his cup. The larger man stirred in his chair, but for whatever reason would not look Gustav in the eye. “It’s a sort of Hungarian dragon, a giant winged snake that terrorizes sheep and pigs.” His hands spoke along with him, moving to illustrate his words. “Too big for the shepherds to kill and whenever it comes, it brings horrible weather with it. It even leaves snowstorms in its wake.” His fingers sprinkled imaginary flakes onto the table where some of his sugar had spilled. “Its master is a garabonciások, a magician. An alchemist.”

Gustav put his cup down, relieved to discover his partner was indeed not catatonic. Or contemplating a dance to Klezmer music.

“The Hungarians think this sárkánykígyo chased Kádár from the General Secretary. They think it brought about their revolution.” A smile ghosted across his face. “It got tired of raiding farms and decided to wreak havoc on the Party.” Facing Gustav, “Do you think this sárkánykígyo and its master will be the death of the Communist Party here?”

Gustav could find no words. He’s traded catatonia for madness.
Radovan’s smile broadened. “The Slavs believe in dragons too. Zmey, they are called. The only difference is that these dragons walk on two legs and look like us.” He shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe Yugoslavia is next?”

When Radovan finally started laughing, Gustav could not hold himself back. They laughed until the last of the protestors had passed by that alleyway with the necking couple. Then they laughed some more.

• • • •

During the drive home, their spirits had not been dampened by the news of yet another protest scheduled for later that week. In fact, in both their hearts there nestled a secret reassurance that, this time at least, no one would be killed.

Radovan would never know whether it was this fleeting euphoria or something else that had prodded him to speak, but when he opened his mouth to tell Gustav, “I can see him,” he had not known, initially, that he had said it.

“What? See who?”

“Vojak. The alchemist.” Radovan closed his eyes. “The one responsible for the killings. I can see him. I’ve been able to for a long time now.”

“What do you mean, see him? Like in a dream?”

“Sort of,” Rado replied so quietly Gustav almost didn’t hear. Then louder, “He visits me at each crime scene. Taunts me. Warns me somehow.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly so tired.

“It’s enough,” Gustav said by way of consolation. “We’re on vacation. No more crime scenes for a while, eh?” Moments like these, filled by the cavernous silences that fell between them, made Gustav wish he smoked, merely so that it would give him something to do with his hands.

“Besides, no one’s going to kill Communism while we’re on vacation.”

For the rest of the drive, neither man spoke, but as they drew closer to Radovan’s home and noticed the cordon and the officers with their stolid, sullen faces and the absolute stillness of the night around them,
neither man was able to.

Gustav would always admire the calm with which Radovan addressed the officers, told them that this was his home and that he was to see his wife tonight. He would always admire the stoicism in the larger man’s face upon hearing of the crime that had been visited upon him. But when he remembered the look on his partner’s face immediately afterwards—the absolute absence of sadness—he would fear the man and be glad for once that what happened behind Radovan’s eyes would forever remain a mystery to him.

\[...\]

When the knock finally came, Manfred was sitting at his desk, a glass of scotch at his elbow to allay the burning in his throat. He knew who would be standing on the other side of the threshold before he opened the door but, nonetheless, the sight of the haggard Chief Inspector, eyes bleary with sleeplessness, stirred something deep and elemental within Manfred.

Without a word, he ushered Radovan in, closed the door behind him, and prepared another glass of scotch.

III

*Thursday, 30 November 1989*

Radovan had just finished another cable, this one addressed to Comrade Commandant Valdemar Havel, when the door to the apartment room eased open, revealing Manfred heavy with grocery bags from his sojourn into the city square. The East German nudged the creaky door shut with his booted foot before heading into the sparsely furnished kitchen.

“What are you doing?” The voice came muffled from the other side of the wall that separated the living room from the dining chamber.

Radovan shot a quick glance out the window as he finished the cable. “Reporting to headquarters,” he called back.
The rustle of food against paper and plastic ceased. “Headquarters?”

“Reporting our progress,” Radovan said absently, pages from Damek’s notebook organized neatly by dated entries at his elbow.

Manfred chuckled. “Headquarters? You didn’t get the memo? There is no headquarters, I checked.”

Radovan’s fingers froze. “Then who am I sending this cable to?”

Another chuckle from Manfred. “Whoever is waiting there to receive it, of course. Which is likely to be no one at the moment. Welcome to Democracy.”

For a few moments, Radovan did not know what to do. It seemed absurd to continue the message if no one were to receive it, yet perhaps it was habit or duty that made him finish. He thought he could hear Manfred shaking his head in the other room. “Any news from Josefov?”

“Nothing,” said Manfred as he emerged from the kitchen, dry washing his hands on a cloth they usually hung over the sink. “No sightings. I mean, it would probably help if we knew what he looked like.”

Radovan’s fingertips, he had noticed, had grown calluses from all the recent typing he’d done of late: sending cables that would never meet their intended recipients, drafting police reports for a Commandant who was not interested in seeing them, postulating on physical descriptions of a man who looked like a dragon who looked like a man. He paused in combing through the sheaves of papers his reports comprised for anything that might be of use, but the improbability of their success gnawed at him so that he grabbed the pile of papers and flung them at Manfred.

The East German stood with his hands at his side and a pitying look on his face. A silent moment passed between them before he stooped to pick up the sheets. “The early morning is the best time,” he said, gathering the papers. “To go for a walk, clear your head. Just as the world’s opening its eyes. Before the students have opened theirs. The streets are quiet, and they”—he shook the memorandums at the window—“they aren’t busying pounding the life out of the pavement.” Returning to the documents, he withdrew a cigarette from a packet in his coat and before long, the air was thick with its pungent, unfiltered breath.
Suddenly irritated, Radovan slid the window open. It did not help that the smoke had to pass by him on its way out. “While you were away, I went through Vojak’s journal, the one I found at the crime scene in Brno.”

“His lab?”

“Yes. I remembered the timeframe you gave me for the previous attacks and cross-referenced them with entries in the journal. Fortunately for us, they are dated. You will see what I mean.”

A slow shuffling of papers that quickened as seconds passed and the realization seemed to dawn on Manfred. “He was in Japan in June of 1982.”

Radovan nodded. “An acquaintance of his I interviewed said that the Presidium considered Vojak their resident ambassador.”

Manfred brought the entry in question closer to his face. ““My host, the Japanese ambassador, has afforded me an incredible opportunity,”” Manfred read aloud, ““and with Comrades Malenkov and Dvorak, I am now standing on the shores of a truly lovely land. Below are some notes.”” More shuffling, as he murmured the findings to himself. ““Few things as astounding . . . cultivar of Rugosa Rosa. Plantae . . . Rosalaes, Rosaceae, Rosa . . . native to eastern Asia, shades dark pink to white . . . Maybe this is what I mean when I say you smell like a rose . . .””

Manfred grew silent, color draining from his face. “What do you think that means?” he asked, at last.

Radovan leaned back in his chair, twining his fingers behind his head. “Her name was Mariana. And by the time Vojak wrote that entry, she’d been dead fourteen years.” He handed Manfred another sheet of paper, this one marked 21 August 1968. “The Soviet invasion after the Prague Spring. Mariana Vojak was among the initial casualties.” Radovan shifted in his chair, so that he could see the demonstrators in the streets below, placards bobbing above their bereted heads. “He was visiting Moscow at the time, one of the advocates for reform to accompany Dubček when the First Secretary was arrested.”

“Who did she leave behind? Other than the alchemist.”

“A son named Milan, but the following January, Milan Vojak and
another student named Jan Palach set themselves on fire in Wenceslas Square in Prague to protest the Soviet invasion. Right in front of the National Museum.”

“Mein Gott,” Manfred whispered as he went through sheet after sheet of reports. “But from some of these interview notes, Damek was a true believer. You said so yourself, he was the Presidium’s ambassador.

“His wife and his son die at the hands of the Soviets, and he does nothing for twenty years, then suddenly begins a rampage through the Eastern Bloc? It doesn’t make sense. Unless he was biding his time.”

Radovan frowned at his telegraph machine. “You’re familiar with Franz Kundera? The writer? He and Vojak were close once. I met with him briefly before the Josefov murder, and it reminded me of a conversation I came across in Vojak’s notes.” He handed the transcript to Manfred and watched his gaze rove over the document, devouring everything, even as his pallor intensified. In his mind’s eye, he saw Damek’s ghost standing by the window of the apartment room in Josefov, talking to himself, talking to Radovan, remembering his own conversation.

Manfred crushed his cigarette in the small mountain of ash that had accumulated in the ashtray. “A homunculus?”

Radovan eyed the ashtray at the foot of the couch. Alena would have emptied the dish and scorned Radovan for his lack of hygiene. “A false man. The result of an unfinished transmutation. Kundera said the three essential ingredients of a human were its mind, its body, and its soul. Without all three, the reaction couldn’t be completed properly.”

“Is that what we’re chasing? A . . . homunculus?” His tongue stumbled over the word, and he searched for a German equivalent.

“Maybe.” Radovan pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose in sudden exasperation. “I think there’s more than one.” At Manfred’s ominous silence, he continued. “True, the crimes are all similar, but they grow in intensity each time. And there is no evidence left behind of the murderer’s identity.” He moved some of the reports he had drafted until he came across the timeline he’d composed in Manfred’s absence. “But in April, he’s in China. In June, he’s in Poland. October, he commits the
next murder in Hungary. The following month, he’s moved on to East Germany. And now he’s here. No single person could cross so much ground in so little time unless he had Party clearance, and only the highest officials have that, and they rarely leave Moscow.”

“So did Damek commit the murders himself?”

“I’m thinking he creates each drak, using parts of what he’s brought with him and parts of what he finds, and they last only long enough to accomplish their mission.” A heaviness descended upon them with the realization. “His ingredients . . . that’s why there’s only one grave marking at Wenceslas Square.”

“You mean he took his son’s own remains and is trying to bring him back to life?”

Radovan’s silence was answer enough.

“Wait, but if you’re right, then all we need to do is wait until he expires. Catch Damek and we’re done.”

“We just need to figure out his next target.”

A smile that belied the gravity of their situation crossed Manfred’s face as he hurried to Radovan’s desk, nearly knocking over the telegraph machine. “You don’t see it?” he said, excitedly. “Each murder coincides with a domino falling. Upheaval. Change. In China, the Tiananmen Square protests. When he arrived in Poland, Solidarity had taken power. In October, in Hungary, the formal dissolution of the Communist Party took place.”

“And in Germany?”

“When he arrived, the government had just allowed East Germans the right to cross into West Germany by way of all border points.” He shrugged. “Not revolution, I know, but a step in that direction.”

“But here it’s reversed.” Radovan rocked in his chair. “When he came here, he came before the beginning. Like he was remembering 1968. He wants to leave revolution in his wake. Which means . . .”

“We won’t know where he’ll strike next until their students take to the streets.”

“And by then, we’ll be too late.”
It was evening before Manfred opened his eyes and spotted the older man sobbing in the separate room. Manfred could see the worn edges of printouts and communiqués peeking out from beneath Radovan’s folded arms and waited patiently while the Inspector wept himself into slumber.

With silent steps, he made his way to the telegraph machine. The stars brightened the black-blue sky, and a slight chill wafted in from the open window. However, the utter soundlessness and tranquility of the night appealed to him. Blanketed in it, he found his Muse as prolific as ever and within an hour, he had sent out nearly ten cables. A satisfied smirk spread across his face, and he leaned back in his chair, fingers twined behind his head, mirroring Radovan.

His gaze wandered over the room before settling on the reports the Czech had meticulously drafted. “Where are you hiding, Damek?” he whispered into the still air of the room.

Eyeing Radovan, he began sorting through the documents, looking for anything they might have missed last time around. He rifled through conversation transcripts, political commentary, descriptions of various flora and fauna. Nothing caught his eye until he came upon a series of equations. The previous page held the paragraphs he sought.

5 June 1989—

For everything gained, something must be lost.

I must confess, I’ve been foolish. This quest has been fruitless as yet and here am I, one man, in a world he refuses to acknowledge. Yesterday, a colleague was able to smuggle to us a copy of an underground newspaper, reporting the massacre of over 800 civilians in Tiananmen Square. (see Communist Party of China entry for details)

Perhaps there is something to be said about the way the whims of nations sometimes echo the yearnings of the heart. It is with my senses dulled by medicine that I am able to write this, for my arm now lies in a puddle at my feet. Gone. The experiment was a failure, and I have been stricken for it. Fortunately, I was able to mold nearby stone to fit my need, but it will forever be an odd thing to see the line where my flesh

...
becomes cold and white like marble.

And as I have lost my arm, so perhaps our grand leadership has lost its own. As cries for glasnost and perestroika echo from Moscow, it is an unrelentingly vengeful set of ears they fall upon. I sit here and cannot help but marvel at the alchemical reaction occurring around me. Revolution is the catalyst, the Philosopher’s Stone!

Glasnost + Perestroika = Solidarity in Poland!

Moscow/Kabul + (Glasnost/Perestroika) = unoccupied Afghanistan, expelling columns of Soviet tanks as waste particles

Therein lies the answer I have been searching for all this entire time. The missing ingredient. I have been so far thwarted because I lacked the catalyst.

Franz, you were right, and I have carried with me a copy of your essay. Your thoughts now, as ever, are of great value, even if you will forever refuse to acknowledge that. We were betrayed by a system we were both foolish enough to have believed in. Now, they shall reap the fruits of those seeds they have sewn.

I am sorry for your incarceration in the gulag and am, at this moment, working to secure your release. Remain strong, friend. You are forever in my thoughts.

Manfred let out a heavy sigh, resting his elbows on the desk. “Where are you hiding?” He closed his eyes, letting his mind wander, free of constraints and worry, wander through the sea of detritus and fragmented memories until it could find something to latch onto, some bit of driftwood floating in the ether. It came in a flash, an instant of luminescence like a supernova, then darkness. But in that moment, he’d found what he was looking for.

Rising with the sheet of equations in hand, he spared one last glance for the reports before flames puffed to life atop them. Wisps of smoke rose from the burning papers, but he was careful to direct them towards the window he’d cracked open earlier. He could feel his skin leathering, fire raging in his veins, but after a few seconds’ struggle, he was himself again, normal, human. Manfred Tisch. As the reports turned into ashes and dust, Manfred put his hands to the telegraph machine, molding its
metal so that it folded over itself, disabling the machine. “*Ich bin traurig,* Rado,” he murmured to the sleeping Inspector. “I can’t have you ruining this for me. If it is any consolation, I really liked you.”

On his way to the door, he stopped, arrested by the pungent odor of cooking flesh. He turned to see beads of sweat bloom to life on Radovan’s shoulders, his skin hardening and graying in patches along the underside of his arm. A small flame licked to life in the darkness, dancing on his fingernail, singeing the fabric of the couch before winking out of existence.

*You see him too,* Manfred thought as sorrow pinched his heart. His hand chilled on the door handle as he closed the door behind him. The dragon tattoo on his left wrist had begun to burn.

• • • •

Radovan woke to the smell of smoke, but by the time he reached the smoldering documents he’d slaved over for more than twelve uninterrupted hours, nothing remained that didn’t dissolve in his hands. Damek’s journal had vanished as well. “Damn it,” he spat. One glance at the telegraph machine was enough to confirm his suspicions.

He squinted out the window to see the sun rising over the spires of museums and government buildings, spreading its fingers of gold through the streets of Prague. Another day.

Pain gripped his stomach, and he doubled over, scrambling for the restroom. Fire ripped at his insides until finally, every meal he’d ever had emptied itself into the toilet. He heaved until there was nothing left, then continued, his throat burning. When the spasms ended, he fell against the wall, exhausted. And, with his hands pressed to his forehead, he noticed it.

Noticed the faint scaling along his wrists and forearms.

He shot to his feet, blood thundering in his ears, pressed himself to the mirror and pulled his shoulder around to see how far it had spread, his fingers slipping along his sweat-sheathed skin. An ouroboros tattoo peaked to life from beneath his undershirt.
“No,” he whispered, “no.”

Before he could stop himself, he began tearing away at it, scratching, digging it out until blood streamed down his right arm and filled the sink. “No,” he continued, tears blurring his vision. “No. Please, no.”

He tried to blink away his tears, swat them away, but it only served to bloody his vision and, in his anger, he smashed his fists into the sink. Again and again until the porcelain cracked beneath his onslaught. Until he passed out from the hurt.

• • • •

A radio crackled, announcing the resignation of the Presidium of the Slovak parliament, along with a bulletin that education in Marxism-Leninism was to be officially removed from the curricula of colleges and universities throughout the country. As Radovan sat in the demolished bathroom, he listened.

“This is why I can see him,” Radovan said, gazing at his bloodied hands. And once he took in the carnage, he began to laugh. For the next hour, as vertigo and euphoria took residence in his head, he set about tidying the apartment for the next tenants.

In the living room, he came upon a few scraps of paper that had somehow escaped Manfred’s impromptu funeral pyre. Their edges were charred and much of the text was illegible, but Radovan’s lips curled into a smile as he folded the parchment and tucked it deep into a pocket. A small victory, all things considered, but a victory nonetheless.

The telegraph machine, he left in the apartment. The next tenants would either treat it as an ornament or throw it out. Either way, it was useless. Carrying a single bag over his shoulder, he made his way into the morning streets, noticing immediately how quiet it was. Manfred’s words came back to him, and he could not help the smirk that twisted his lips.

Once he arrived at the nearest phone booth, he dialed a familiar number and was relieved to hear, for the first time in so long, Gustav’s voice.

“Yes?”
“Gustav, it’s me. Rado.”

“Rado?” Elation made his voice rise an octave. “Where on earth have you been?”

He thought of the bathroom and the ouroboros tattoo burnt into the skin of his shoulder. “I am chasing ghosts.”

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of you! They’re opening the borders, Rado. I’m watching them, and they’re taking down the barbed wire. We no longer need to apply for exit visas. The border to Austria is open!”

Radovan knew he should have been happy, ecstatic even, but beyond a thin cloud of disbelief, he only had thoughts for the scrap of parchment nestled safely in his pocket. “And if I’m preparing to go to Russia? Will I still need a visa?”

The pause on the other end of the line was long enough to make Radovan think that Gustav had disconnected the line, but eventually, his voice came back on, faltering, then regaining its strength with each passing moment. “What is in Russia that you need?”

“I’m following on a lead.” He paused, realizing the gravity of what he was about to do, the course he was about to take. *I have to see if I can stop this.* “It may be a while before I’m heard from again. Maybe never. One never knows these days.” He let out a Slavic bark of a laugh, but Gustav’s chuckle was sad in response. “If I don’t return, take care of yourself for me.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Radovan smiled. “But it is cold in Russia.”

“Exactly. And without me, you’re likely to leave your coat at home.”

Gustav’s response broadened Radovan’s grin, even as he hung up the phone and found himself in the midst of a thousand cheering students. His wounds, strangely enough, had healed.

IV

*Friday, 15 December 1989*

Gustav could tell that Norilsk was nearing not by the desolation of the treeless tundra that now spread in all directions around them and not by
the smattering of refugees wandering aimlessly and without purpose in the shadow of faraway mountains, but by the way night descended like a cloud over them. Enclosed as they were in the train that rattled along the rusted, frozen tracks, Gustav could not shake from his shoulders the impression that he and Radovan were the only people left on the face of the earth.

*The train is driving itself,* he mused.

For much of the ride, he had watched Radovan operate in silence, scribbling notes on top of notes in a tiny pad, squeezing thoughts into the margins before they escaped him. At first he’d worried at his superior’s furious work ethic then realized that he was seeing Radovan at his happiest. Purposeful. Industrious. The quintessential communist.

“So this is what Communism looks like.”

Radovan looked up, and Gustav realized the words that had come out of his mouth. Before he could say anything, Radovan chuckled, and when he did, Gustav heard in it a tenor he had not noticed before. An undercurrent of true, unfettered mirth.

“Well, then Communism hasn’t shaved in ten days.” To which they both laughed.

Gustav’s gaze returned to the barren tundra that rolled passed them outside. “It’s getting closer, isn’t it. It’s . . . it’s spreading.” Despite his joy at the crumbling of the Wall and the opening of borders, he found himself morose when faced with the emptiness that change left in its wake.

“It will be all right, Gustav,” Radovan said, following Gustav’s gaze. “What will they put in your place? What will they put in our place?” He shook his head at the nonsense of it all. “It’s all blue-sky-thinking. Inflatable churches in rural communities, roads that go underwater, that’s what they’d try to put in our place.”

“How about a computer that talks to you?”

“And pays you korunas as well.”

A shuddering that passed through the train startled them into sobriety, but nearly an hour passed before the smile faded from Gustav’s face. Radovan’s assurances only made him more conflicted, more undecided.
Good men had been minted under communist hammers. But the desolate plains yawning before him outside gnawed an uncertainty into his gut. Then he saw it.

It began as a shimmer of shapeless, arguing colors against a solid blackness in the distance. As the train rumbled past, Gustav saw them, saw the children, muted and still before the pile of broken glass. Gustav saw them look with puerile wonder at the moonlight that shot through those shards to illuminate the abandoned husk of a factory building. There were no parents to chastise them, no police to arrest them, no order to cage them, yet there they sat, abandoned and unmoving, before their own handiwork.

Even as the train pulled into the near-deserted labor camp with only a quarter of its floodlights operating, Gustav fought to push the sight from his mind. He watched Radovan ready himself for the imminent interrogation and sought his partner’s composure, his partner’s usefulness to the communist enterprise.

He tried to fill his mind with thoughts of the alchemist, of the murders committed by the homunculus, of the fraught history between demented father and resurrected son, but everywhere he looked, he saw the lights or the memory of them. Until, after a cursory circuit of what remained of the mining camp, they arrived at the prisoners’ quarters and Radovan stepped through the door opened by the first of the unsmiling guards.

The sight of Franz Kundera, a skeleton clothed in a pithy blanket of flaking skin, erased all other thought from Gustav’s head. He froze, unable to do anything other than feel the bile rise in his throat, until Radovan pulled a chair from the nearby desk, dragged it to Kundera’s bedside and sat.

*Vojak has changed you,* Gustav said to himself. Radovan’s posture had morphed, his demeanor, his mannerisms, something more elemental than all of those things, it had all changed. Loosened. And Gustav watched Radovan stare at Kundera not as a Chief Inspector following a lead but as a man attempting, however he knew, to lessen the suffering of his fellow.
Snow began to fall, hurrying Milan and the other residents of the boarding house into the small building. A cross stood proud atop the roof of the entrance, white against the evening sky. City buses still ran their routes, if a little slower for the weather, but other pedestrians seemed not to mind the precipitation. Coming in from the cold, he was careful not to slam the door too hard, as it already hung off unsteady hinges.

Turning once to see over his shoulder, Milan watched a couple lean close to each other as they left small footprints in their wake.

Inside, however, warmth from the fireplace returned the color to his cheeks, and he saw smiles grace plenty of faces, some already huddled around László. Marci, the priest’s eldest son stood by the broken window, his little brother Máté cradled in his arms. His features tensed whenever a vehicle with lights that were too bright crawled past. Dark-haired, smooth-skinned Ilona helped her pregnant mother, Edit, with food and drink for the guests.

With the help of a cane, László rose from his armchair and reached to help his wife, but she pulled the tray from him, admonishing him to return to his seat. Their gazes caught, and Milan had never seen so much love passed between two human beings before. A memory flared in his mind, a hand brushed against a cheek, words whispered, lips pressed against eyelids, but he buried it under cerebral rubble until it disappeared.

“Marci,” László called out, “come away from the window, join our guests.”

Bouncing Máté in his arms, he spared one last glance for the snow-covered road outside before coming to the periphery of the semi-circle of guests that had clustered around László’s chair.

Milan knew the boy had little cause for worry. On his way in, he’d seen two local men, armed with shotguns they’d procured from an arms dealer. Around the side, another local Timisoara man stood guard by the window, and two more protected the rear entrance.

Romanian military had not tolerated them at first, but once they’d
acquired their weaponry, they’d attained status as local militia, and the leadership was not eager to start a revolution. But, eyeing the issues of the Hungarian-language journal *Ellenpontok* that lined the shelves over László’s head, Milan saw plenty of reason for the government’s discomfort. Somewhere within those volumes was an article on human rights abuses in Romania, courtesy of the Ceausescu regime, an article that had struck the first blow against the regime.

Popular support for the priest had come at a price. It began when his power was cut and his ration book taken away, and escalated when some of his followers were arrested for their trouble, beaten, or worse.

A framed picture of Erno Ujvárossy sat on the ledge above the fireplace in memoriam. His body had been found in the woods outside Timisoara three months earlier.

When asked about his recently acquired cane, the priest attributed his slowness to old age. But Milan and many others knew it was due to an attack by local plainclothes policemen while nearby Securitate agents had folded their arms and watched with dispassionate satisfaction.

The crowd tightened around László, not just to hear the priest’s words, but also to hear the broadcast from the radio that sat beside the picture of young Erno. The court had set the priest’s eviction date for today the fifteenth of December, and everyone sat, stood, or leaned with expectant anxiety, waiting for the first gunshot or the first volley of tear gas or the first crack of a police baton striking flesh.

But it was news of Czechoslovakia and its “Velvet Revolution” that greeted them. “Barbed wire removed from border with Austria!” “Barbed wire removed from border with West Germany!” “President Husák has declared amnesty for all political crimes!” “One hundred-thousand in protest walk from Bratislava to Hainburg!” Smiles lit the room in response to the broadcasts, but Milan’s face was a lesson in reserve. His work was not finished.

Everyone waited for news regarding Romania, news regarding their beloved priest, but none came. The broadcast moved on to American happenings, sports competitions, and matters they would have happily listened to under different circumstances. But László waved a hand to
dispel any concern for his condition. “Go to your homes,” he said, forcing a smile despite the pain in his leg. “All of you, please. You have served me well as a congregation, but every priest needs time where he can be a man.” He nodded towards Ilona, and many among the Hungarian congregation chuckled at his implications. “Please,” he said, feigning impatience, “I don’t have enough beds for all of you!”

Again, they chuckled as they ambled towards the door, waving him goodbye. Several stayed behind to personally wish him well, kiss his cheeks, pray for or with him before heading on.

Milan ambled out the door he’d crossed through less than an hour ago into what had become a blizzard. The snow came down in large, airy flakes, but the wind pared them down so that when they hit the ground, they crackled like a million tiny pebbles. Pulling the collar of his coat up around his face, he walked on, keeping to the sidewalks while the steady stream of people leaving László’s house dispersed.

Before long, Milan found himself alone, his shifting shadow his only company as he passed beneath lamplight after lamplight.

He didn’t know what had compelled him to cross into Romania, one of the last bastions of Communism in the Eastern Bloc. He didn’t know what had compelled him to seek out László Tókés, or what had compelled him to trace the man’s history back to that article in Ellenpontok. Only that it was the same thing that had compelled him to murder that beautiful girl in Josefov.

His thoughts drifted to his conversation with the Czech Prime Minister. And when you have destroyed socialism, when you have killed it, when it lies broken and buried beneath your feet, what will you put in its place? The itch returned to the tattoo on his neck, and with it came the memories he’d fought to subdue. Again, that same milky white hand reaching to touch his cheek. And someone’s eyes are closed while their lips as cold as winter press against his eyelids.

Vertigo took him, and he staggered against the windows of a storefront. Hand to his face, he stared through the spaces between his fingers at the snow that covered the ground. “What’s happening to me? Whose memories are those if they are not mine?”
The familiar hunger rumbled in his insides, turning to a fire that coursed through his veins, and he could feel the transformation beginning. “No,” he growled around sharpened teeth, as the snow began to melt beneath his feet. “No, not now.” He collapsed to his knees, gripping his head in both hands, as though he could squeeze the headache out from between his ears.

And without warning, he found himself in Wenceslas Square, people milling about him, unaware of his presence and that of the student beside him. One glance is all it takes to see the determination in the other student’s face, another to see the container of gasoline at his feet. Another to see a similar container at his own.

He finds he cannot control his hands as he, mirroring the other student, raises his container over his head and empties it onto himself. The liquid chills his entire body, but his gaze is firm, fixed on the uppermost edge of the National Museum before him. A few pedestrians stop to eye the spectacle, not sure what they are witnessing. And a match is lit. The world dissolves into orange and red and black and suddenly there are no colors, and the screams are not coming from his throat or the other student’s, but from the passersby who have chosen to watch. It is they who point and cry out in panic, in horror, in anguish.

But he does not move, nor does his companion. They wait as the world fades away even further, and a strange peace takes them, but Milan finds that his heart is beating faster than it ever has before, so fast that it is ready to leap out of his chest.

Strangely, the fire does not hurt. There is only darkness, then silence. Then nothing.

• • • •

He awoke to the aroma of cinnamon. Warm cinnamon. For a moment, he wondered whether he was still on fire, but the blanket that covered him and the wooden roof over his head—still intact—were enough to convince him otherwise.

His bed was beneath a window, and without straining his neck, he
could see the snow still falling on the emptying streets of Timisoara. A few bits of furniture furnished the bedroom: a desk and an accompanying wooden chair, a stool for reaching books on higher shelves of the bookcase embedded in the wall across from him, and a rocking chair that seated a bearded man whose eyes were closed in slumber.

A blanket covered the man’s lap and on it, a book rested just beyond his fingertips. From his vantage point, Milan could not see its title. But from the papers and typewriter on the desk, he could tell his protector’s profession. Scanning the bookshelves only confirmed his guess, as he came across title after title that had been banned in all the countries he’d been to. The copies here had likely been purchased off the black market.

“And he wakes,” his host proclaimed in the soft voice of those just emerging from sleep. “There’s tea in the kitchen, but I thought I’d let it cool before I gave it to you. I can heat it up again, if you’d like.” He retrieved the book that had managed to slide away from his fingers. “You might’ve frozen to death buried under a night’s snowfall had I not found you.”

There was something odd about the man’s speech, and it wasn’t until Milan’s mind cleared that he realized the man was speaking Russian. And that he understood. The writer must have noticed Milan’s confusion, for he then switched to French.

“I am sorry,” Milan replied in French, perturbed at his newfound language acquisition. “I am still a little dizzy.”

The writer shrugged an apology. “I too am sorry. My Portuguese is better than my Czech.”

That tugged a laugh out of the both of them. The whistle from a teapot had the stranger hurrying in and out of the kitchen, twice exclaiming when he’d burnt himself. Within a few moments, he was back at Milan’s bedside with the tea in question. “Careful, it still might be hot.”

Milan pulled himself up so that his back leaned upright against the bedrest, realizing for the first time that his clothes were elsewhere.

“They were soaked by the snow,” the writer said, chuckling at Milan’s discomfort. “They’re drying out right now.”
Before he took a sip of the tea, the source of the cinnamon aroma, Milan stared at the bearded man at his bedside. Kindness shone in his permafrost eyes, youth tightening the skin on his face. The few wrinkles that lined his forehead looked as though they held deep thoughts in their crevices, the secrets to happiness locked behind the glowing white teeth of a disarming smile.

“Who are you?” Milan asked.

The man slapped his forehead. “My God!” he cried out in Russian, as though he’d been struck by a bolt of lightning. “What would Mother say?” He drew himself up in a dramatic gesture, cleared his throat and bowed at the waist. “Alexander Aronovich Kolokov. Émigré, refugee, novelist, and aspiring dissident. Friends call me Shurik. Enemies call me trouble. At your service.”

• • • •

“You’re still chasing him.” Franz Kundera’s fingers were shiny and clubbed where they rested on his chest. The room had been stripped of its few amenities; there was no longer any notepad, no rudimentary pencils, none of the previous life that had filled the air, as though the place were preparing itself for its occupant’s passing. “You’re still after him, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

Radovan felt Gustav hovering behind him, could feel that telltale uncertainty he’d seen in his partner’s face during their train ride.

“Tell me,” Kundera breathed. “What has he done?”

Radovan paused before speaking, and when he did answer, the sound of his voice surprised him. “He is complicit in several murders. Six that we know of, but there could be more. He’s created a . . . a homunculus out of the remains of . . . this beast has been committing murders in his name.” He watched the accusation sink into Kundera’s papery skin. “He is convinced he is bringing about revolution. That’s what it is, isn’t it.”

Kundera stared at the ceiling. “Damek,” he whispered. He turned his face to Radovan. His eyes had filled with water, his pupils clouded by the cancer consuming him. “He is not an evil man. He is . . . he is just
broken.” He returned his gaze to the ceiling. “But aren’t we all.”

*What could he have held back?* Gustav had asked on the train. *What could he tell us now that would be useful?*

Radovan had not replied then, but he knew that Kundera could direct them, could aim them towards the right course. He’d wondered initially if it was Vojak speaking to him, guiding him, but had realized while watching the children play before their shards of broken glass that some other compulsion had returned him to Norilsk and a man dying of cancer.

Kundera coughed and blood dotted his face.

Radovan fished a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the fading man’s lips. “I need to know,” Radovan hissed. “I have to stop him before he kills again.”

“What?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Before who . . .” Another coughing fit cut him short, dots of blood spraying Radovan’s vest.

The urgency Radovan had managed to keep at bay for so long bubbled and he gripped the edges of Kundera’s bed. “I can’t let him continue. I have to find him.” Heat blossomed in his chest, itched needles along his skin. His palms hardened, and his fingers began to leather where he held the bed. “Please. Please.”

A hand on his shoulder startled him, and he froze, returning to normal.

“Let us leave,” Gustav said behind him. “He’s of no use.”

Radovan twisted the sheets around his fists. The ouroboros sizzled against the skin of his shoulder.

“He is dying, Rado. Let him die.”

“I’m not . . .” He thought of Alena, how pieces of her had been scattered throughout the house, the walls coated in her congealed blood, and for the first time that he could remember, tears sprang to his eyes. “I’m not that . . . God . . .”

Gustav’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and Radovan wondered fleetingly how Gustav could have not felt the tattoo burning a hole
through his palm.

“Please,” was all he could bring himself to say. “Please. I need to know.”

But Kundera did not stir.

“I miss her so much.”

The groan of a cello sounded, and the air shifted. Radovan looked up to see first the moth-eaten cloak, then the arm made of marble, then finally the worn, hollow face of Damek Vojak, his figure a series of vapors hovering in the air above Kundera’s body. The stone fingers touched Kundera’s sunken chest, palm to bedsheets, and the cancer-ridden miner gasped. Tears streamed down the sides of his face, and he began to tremble. A moment later, he quieted and a small smile turned the corners of his mouth.

“A friend once told me,” Kundera said with new strength, “that if you know not how to die, fear not; nature will fully instruct you on the spot. She will do exactly that business for you.” He turned his head towards Radovan, and his skin glowed. Light had returned to his eyes. Muscular, clear light. “It’s true.”

“Damek . . .”

Kundera’s clubbed fingers wrapped around Radovan’s fist. “Stay with me. Please.” Kundera looked past Radovan at Gustav. “Please.”

Gustav shuffled his feet, but the former Chief Inspector, without looking, found his partner settling into place by his shoulder.

“We don’t die.” The beginnings of a chuckle murmured and expired in the dissident’s chest. “It’s not possible. Do you want to know why?” His smiled broadened. “The universe cannot transcend our consciousness. Consciousness is everything. It is the whole of existence.”

Radovan watched the excitement bloom in the writer’s eyes as he stepped into epiphany, watched the sense of wonder come to life and thought of the children and their broken glass.

“I realize now what Damek was after. But he was wrong, misguided.” He paused for breath. “We don’t approach death, nor do we face it. The wax does not stop being wax when the candle has melted, does it?” His forehead wrinkled in thought. “I’ve watched friends die. I’ve witnessed
the calm that descends over them as their soul escapes their body and becomes something else and I always thought it was some goodbye peace, some brief moment of clarity where all the structures we’ve spent millennia building fall away and disintegrate, and there is only the self and whatever else awaits it. Our longevity is not a line with a terminus. Don’t you see?”

Radovan wanted to shake the man, wanted to set him back on the path towards cogent thought, wanted him to answer for Vojak and the homunculus. But better sense, and the shadow that Gustav cast over the both of them, convinced him to hold his silence.

“A moment in eternity. What does that feel like? Any amount of consciousness is consciousness. A second spent looking through the window out at the world is the world. All we do is change.”

The urgency that had so viciously encased Radovan for the past month lifted itself from his shoulders. Vojak was speaking to him, an inarticulate soul borrowing an articulate mind and mouth. He heard bits and pieces of the alchemist in every sentence the withering writer uttered. And under the euphoria that attended the dying man, he heard the lament, the resignation, the desire to stop running. It was this that dissolved the worry nestling in Radovan’s gut, and it was for this reason that he no longer felt the need to rush the man, to guide or direct him towards cohesive thought.

“Eva often tired of me. Of my long-windedness,” Kundera continued. “She always said I would die mid-sentence.” New tears pooled in his eyes. “I was so young when I first saw her. So hurt. So easily broken.” He closed his eyes. “Women cannot fix us, Comrade. But they are capable of healing.” He chuckled, then shifted the bedsheets around his wilting body as though readying for sleep. “I think that is what God meant them for. Otherwise, who would reform us when we’ve fallen and shattered ourselves on the floor?” Stillness descended on him. “My soul is tired without her.”

It wasn’t for several hours until Kundera had finally loosened his grip on Radovan’s fist and released Vojak’s soul into the ether that Radovan realized the writer’s last words were not a lamentation for his wife and
partner of several decades, but rather the alchemist’s belated eulogy to his deceased Mariana. And Radovan’s final clue.

• • • •

Alexander pulled a volume from the shelves and handed it to Milan. “It’s my favorite actually.” It was Franz Kundera’s essay on uprisings. The title embossed in gold on the cover read, *Ashes to Ashes: The Alchemy of Revolution*. He thumbed through the first several pages until he found a picture of the author in black and white, emerging from the window of a car to wave to the crowd outside the picture’s borders. The smile on his face radiated warmth and hope and all the other things one expected to find in a revolutionary. Things Alexander’s features hinted at. The caption beneath the photo told him that it had been taken in April of 1968 in Prague. “Springtime of Peoples,” he whispered to himself.

Flipping through, he found himself drawn into the text. The way it flowed and pulled him deeper until little else existed outside its hardbound covers. *They aim to make of me a machine, a ghost, blameless with only what my hands have made to call my own. Then they aim to take that from me because the collective is supposed to be more important than the man. They forget that we are as God made us, that we cannot be fixed, that we can only be taken in full. Our crimes alongside our virtues, our rage with our tenderness, our good with our evil.*

“‘And that is the difference between God and Stalin,’” Alexander quoted, “‘that one can successfully use broken tools to fulfill a task, and the other cannot.’” His grin was satisfied and envious in the same instant. He cast a dismissive wave at the manuscripts that lay untouched atop his desk table. “And what am I, but the parrot of other men’s thinking?”

Milan flipped to another passage, wondering what jewels he would find scattered throughout the pages of this slim volume. *The true revolutionaries are those alchemists numbered amongst us who can take the coal of poverty and convert it into the diamond of spiritual riches, who can inhale despair and exhale golden laughter. Those who see that*
life is not merely a series of tragedies, but that there exists another side, a silver underbelly, and it is with this unfailing humor that they confront the trials of daily living. I envy them.

“He is quite brilliant,” Alexander said, nodding his head in deference. “So, if you don’t mind my asking, how did you come to know the Minister? I hadn’t recognized your face until a couple weeks ago. I wanted to introduce myself to you last week after the minister’s sermon, but you left before I could muster the courage.” He cast a soft smile downward, as though ashamed to show Milan. “And most of the refugees manage to make their way further west than this.”

“I came here looking for family,” he began in Czech. When he saw the concerted effort at understanding on Alexander’s face, he smiled an apology and switched to French. “I am looking for my father,” which was true in part. In reality, he did not know whether the man he was chasing was indeed his father or not, or even if he would find a man at the end of his journey. “He vanished a long time ago, and only now has it become easy enough for me to travel in order to find him.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” said Alexander, managing to sound as though he meant every word.

“If he didn’t care enough for me to remain, then perhaps it is for the best.” He tried forcing a smile, but the best he could do was a polite grimace. “Besides, this is a chance to stretch my legs, see the world change around me.”

Alexander chuckled. “You could have seen that from the comfort of your bedroom in Prague. Why come here?”

Milan stared into his blanket and when he did not respond, Alexander leapt in to save them both from silence. “I’m looking for family as well. Actually, waiting is more like it.” He flashed that disarming smile of his, and Milan’s unease withered. “My sister is still in Moscow. In reality, I should be in Paris right now, furnishing our flat, but as luck would have it, I managed to get stuck in the last remaining Soviet entity of the Eastern Bloc.” He shrugged at the whims of Fate and folded his hands in his lap, rocking slowly in his chair. “She should be with me now, but she puts things off like no one I know. She tells me it is Russia that keeps her
there, not the Politburo, and the writer in me can sympathize.”

“What do you mean?”

Alexander stared at his guest for a long time, perhaps wondering if the inquiry was a serious one, perhaps gauging the suspicion in his guest’s eyes; Milan could not tell. “Well, it starts out easy enough. You plan to pack, you set a date, and you say to yourself that this will be the last day you’re forced to wait in a queue for your vodka. But the sun decides to shine at the perfect angle so as to illuminate a park you’ve been meaning to walk through on your way to the train station. And such a promenade should never be enjoyed with luggage in hand. So you put it off another day, for surely it will rain on Thursday. Thursday comes, and a new decree is issued, which means your current travel papers are invalid and must be renewed. But your resolve remains strong, and you pledge to leave in the spring when the process is finally finished. However, at some point during the winter, when your heat has been turned off by the landlord or the state and you’re forced to bring extra blankets out of the closet, something happens.” He paused, and his voice softened. “And while you’re curling up against the other warm body in the bed, you don’t mind it so much. It can be tolerated. In fact, it can be smiled at, and you find yourself looking forward to seeing that old hag by the metro station again, not for her cheap vodka but for the way she winks at you when you slip her a few extra kopeks.”

A long silence preceded Milan’s words. “Are those her sentiments or yours?”

Alexander’s laughter had become music. “I prefer to love from afar.”

Milan felt the serpent of envy coil in his belly. How easily this man could stare into the tribulations of his life, grin in its face and shrug! “What is her name?”

“What is her name?”

“Anya.” He scurried out of the room and reentered with a photo in his hands of a slender Slavic girl whose evening-black hair cascaded down to the base of her neck. She was looking over one sloping shoulder with the other slightly raised, her figure favoring one slim leg over the other. Her sweater hung voluminous on her frame, the sleeves bunched at the elbows. She seemed to be posing for the camera while simultaneously
unaware of it. Milan’s heart froze in his throat when he noticed her face. In a rush, he remembered the open-air expansiveness of Leningrad, how there would never be enough people to fill it. He remembered the girl’s skin, the way she leaned her head to one side whenever she listened to him talk of revolution. He remembered the supply queue, the promenade in the park that followed, the apartment bedroom, the way her fingers brushed against his face. He remembered slumber. He remembered awaking before his eyes had fully opened, and he remembered how soft her lips were on his eyelids. “Proboha,” he whispered.

“Yes, she is quite beautiful.”

Milan stared at Alexander, this man completely oblivious to the tragedy that had been visited upon him. The world blurred, and something warm slid down his cheek. Before long, teardrops dotted the blanket where he had it in a knuckle-white grip.

Alexander moved to Milan’s side, a soft hand to the young man’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Any words Milan might have had evaporated when he saw the innocence in Alexander’s eyes. Part of him wondered why he cared so much for this man to regret what he had done. Part of him wondered what this man suddenly meant to him, why it mattered that he never stop smiling.

Recovering his composure, he wiped his forearm across his eyes. “I have not been entirely truthful,” he said at last in the French they had agreed upon. “I have done a terrible thing, many terrible things. Right now, several men are pursuing me. And the reason I am here is because I am fleeing them. I did not think they would come here to look for me.”

Alexander’s grip tightened on Milan’s shoulder. “And your father?”

He shook his head. “I do not even know if he is my father.” He dashed away more tears. “You should not be seen with me. They might label you a collaborator.”

“I’m already a dissident.” He moved in closer, so that he would only have to whisper. “Besides, we are as God made us. Vengeful and tender, good and evil.”

Milan wondered whether Alexander knew what he had done; by the
look in the man’s eyes, he could not tell. “I cannot stay here. I must be leaving. I do not want you to be punished.” He moved, but a hand stayed him.

“If you will not stay, let me at least bring you some new clothes. Your old ones have not yet dried. Besides, they stink horribly.”

In a few minutes, Milan was dressed and ready to leave. When he’d reached the side door that led out onto an alley, Alexander stopped him. Turning, he was greeted by a copy of Kundera’s essay. “I can’t,” he said. Silently, Alexander pushed it forward.

After a moment’s hesitation, Milan took it, tucking it into his pocket. As he rushed out, a Hungarian youth ran through the snow, huffing when he reached the side entrance to Alexander’s flat.

“Hurry,” he breathed. “It’s László’s wife. She’s fallen ill.” Before another word could be uttered, Alexander was out into the cold, running as he struggled to pull his jacket over his shoulders.

Milan took a step in their direction, but thought better of it. Something had fallen out of the book, and he stooped to pick it up. When he’d brushed the snow off, it was Anya’s face staring back at him. Beautiful and forgiving.

• • • •

The snow whirled around Milan as he brought his knees to his chest. Sitting on the slanted rooftop, he could watch everything unfold beneath him. But even if his eyes were closed, he could have predicted the same. He held Kundera’s essay in one gloved hand and used the other to adjust the beret he’d found in the pocket of the coat Alexander had given him.

He knew how it would happen. Everywhere else, it had been peaceful, with relatively little violence. But here, he knew, it would be different. Here, he knew, the crowd gathering around László’s house would grow larger than either of them could have imagined. Here, the protestors, Hungarian parishioners and local Romanians, would sing their national anthem at the top of their lungs and cries for the end of Communism would vie against cries for the end of Ceausescu. Here, there would be
no roundtable discussions as there had been in Prague. There would be no peaceful crumbling of a wall, as there had been in Berlin. There would be no “democracy package” for the government to unwrap, as there had been in Budapest. And there would be no bloodless legalization of opposition parties, as there had been in Warsaw.

Here, instead of protests, there would be riots. There would be tear gas and arrests. People would storm government buildings, tearing down Communist symbols of power. Armored personnel carriers would roam the streets, cars would burst into flames at the hands of both students and soldiers.

The fire had arrived, and it would leave blood and ashes and dust in its wake, just as Milan had once hoped. All the others, they had been relative failures when put against the cleansing blaze of insurrection that would engulf Timisoara and spread through all of Romania.

But for some reason, it no longer mattered.

His mission accomplished, he found himself left only with the tiny pieces of the world he had broken in order to arrive at this point, the lives he’d snatched, the threads he’d extracted from the tapestry, the names he’d consigned to tombstones.

He had no more tears; they’d spent themselves on Anya Kolokov. Now, only a gnawing emptiness remained, the sculptor without marble, the writer without ideas, the revolutionary without discontent. He looked at his gloved hands. Strings of fire twirled around them, weaving between his fingers, crossing over the backs of each hand, twirling their way along his palms.

His thoughts drifted to his conversation with the former Czech Prime Minister. *The evil is not in the system, it is in the man.* Sentiments Alexander had echoed. And now with the Warsaw Pact battered and beaten and broken at his feet, he wished only that he knew why he’d wanted that so badly.

• • • •

Radovan sat in darkness by his kitchen counter, sleeves rolled to the
elbow, hair threaded with gray that had not been there a week ago. The chill of Norilsk still crept over his bones, bit into them. And Kundera’s face as he had last seen him, cheeks hollowed, skin hanging from weakened bones, chest wracked by vicious coughs. The cancer had eaten away at the life in his eyes, and Radovan’s napkin had long since grown heavy carrying the blood of the dissident after wiping it from his mouth. He’d stayed with him longer than was necessary, long after Kundera had revealed all he knew. He’d watched the man die, watched as each breath grew heavier than the last, until that moment when the dissident saw his deliverance shining in the air before him, a deliverance invisible to Radovan’s eyes. Then he had given up his ghost. His and Vojak’s.

As though it had been waiting for him to die, the labor camp shut down the following day. It was not yet sunrise before the prisoners were hurried out towards the train tracks where their papers and new lives awaited them.

Radovan and Gustav had boarded the train with them, no longer able to claim special privileges on behalf of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In reality, it mattered little. They had returned to a dying socialism. The protests had lessened, but every several days, something happened to cause the students to cheer in the streets and wave flags from their windows, be it the burning of their files or a visit from the son of a famous Czech entrepreneur.

His fingers left prints on the glass of his vodka, and he spun it slowly on the table, watching his reflection in the glass. Alena would never have let him go this long unshaven. He smiled at the memory of surprising her in bed, bringing her breakfast, waking her with a kiss on her forehead. The thought evaporated.

He took another sip of his drink.

How long did he have until the transformations would grow beyond his control? Eventually, they would take him and he would become a beast just like the ones he had been chasing. He would kill and not know why. In the void created by Alena’s absence, none of it seemed to matter.

He sipped from his glass, closing his eyes against the burn when a soft knock on the side door snatched his attention. With caution, he
approached, letting the lock slide on the door as he pulled it open. In the crack, he could see a face shaded by unruly golden hair and a scarf that had been pulled up over the young man’s mouth. The moon did nothing but cast more shadows over his figure.

“Who are you?” he barked quietly.

Without a word, the young man removed his beret, swept back a tuft of blond hair, and pulled away his scarf to reveal the tattoo of a dragon eating its own tail etched into the skin of his neck.

Radovan’s breath caught in his chest. “Drak,” he managed to whisper, as he let the youth into his home.

V

Saturday, 16 December 1989

“You’re police.” Milan stared at Radovan for several seconds before downing the glass of vodka the former Chief Inspector had prepared for him. When he finished, he held the glass out for more.

Radovan obliged.

“I cannot remember them all.” Milan’s voice, soft in the quiet air, hovered between them. As he spoke, his gaze focused on something past the walls of the kitchen. Radovan saw the distance reflected in the youth’s gaze, the young man’s mind maybe a thousand miles away.

“Before Beijing, there is only darkness. I remember nothing. But I know that when I awoke—I must have been sleeping—I was covered in blood that was not my own. People nearby must have thought that we’d been shot at or that a soldier had tossed a grenade at us because they helped me to my feet and led me away. I remember, there was a lot of screaming, chaos. Nothing was solid. They helped me over a bridge, into the Square.”

Quiet descended between them. “Do you remember anything about the murder? How did you know you’d killed someone?”

Milan looked up, confused despair in his eyes. “The people helping me, they told me I was smiling.”

Radovan suppressed any inklings of sympathy he might have felt for
the murderer. This *child* had killed Alena, made her suffer while she had burned alive. But he had to know why. He had to know or else it was all for nothing.

“I was happy,” Milan continued, “Blissful, but I could not remember why. The blood was sweet in my mouth, the way it clung to my skin made it seem like . . . like some sort of protection. I wanted to have that happiness forever.”

“So you killed again.”

Milan nodded. “Leningrad. It was the same as last time. I awoke in blood. There was fire everywhere, but I wasn’t hurt. And the woman had no fireplace or oven that I could see. So I knew it had happened again, but the bliss wasn’t as strong as it had been last time. I didn’t know how I made it happen in the first place or how to make it happen again, only that those moments had been wiped out of my memory, like holes poked into the page of a book.” He folded his hands on the table and stared at them, leaving his vodka glass full and untouched. “Pretty soon, however, I began to piece together those sentences, replace the missing words.” A weak smile at his extended metaphor. “I could do things no one else could.”

“And the music?”

Milan looked up, startled. “You hear it too?”

Radovan held Milan’s gaze a moment longer before staring into his drink. “Was it because of power? Is that why you did it? Brno, Prague, Budapest. Was that all for power?”

The youth’s face hardened, and he settled back in his chair. “Why did you chase me all this way when you would have no police station to bring me to at the end of the hunt?”

“What?”

“This isn’t about justice. It never was.” He leaned closer, moving the glass out of the way. “It was about failure. At every point in the chase, you stood perilously close to the edge of the precipice. And there was a moment when you looked over its edge and saw what lay beneath you. You saw that failure. You saw the fact that you might never catch me, that you might never figure out who was behind those killings. And right
now, you see the possibility that you might never know why I did it.” He grinned. “It’s that thrill. That’s why. That’s why you and—”

Radovan banged his fists on the table, rattling the glasses. “Monster!” he bellowed. “I didn’t kill my wife! You did! You came into my house and murdered my wife! Made her suffer! You are a murderer!” He fought for breath, fought for control, could feel it slipping through his leathering fingers. “You are an animal! A monster, a demon!”

“And what are you?” Milan shot back from his seat, the two men primed for combat. “What are you, you bloody Communist?”

Radovan blinked and was suddenly human again.

“Stalin’s purges. How many millions of innocent people are murdered during his campaign? In Maoist China, the same thing. Do you ask why they kill? No, you simply defend their cause. It becomes your job to support them. Well, now you’ve seen the knife you were carved with.” Milan settled deeper into his chair. “Besides, you will kill just like me. Your skin is already changing. Before long, you won’t be able to control it, and you’ll be driven to murder just like me.”

Radovan sank back into his chair and, after a moment, refilled his spilt glass. A calloused hand pushed the bottle to the center of the table. Silently, he drank.

“I did it for them,” Milan said. “All of this, it’s for them.”

The glass trembled in Radovan’s vice-grip and when he smirked, there was no mirth in it. “You mean the revolution? You mean to tell me that you plan on taking credit for the entire Velvet Revolution.”

Milan slapped a hand on the table. “November 17th. That night, a student was murdered during the protest. But that student never died. That student was me, and it was the myth of his death—my death—that set the Velvet Revolution into motion. I gave everyone the courage they did not already have in themselves.”

Radovan saw Milan as the youth he’d started to become during his tirade and felt, not for the first time, unadulterated pity. “This revolution is bigger than you, child. It’s bigger than just one person.”

Silver eyes flashed red, and the young man’s skin thickened, a golden glow suffusing his face and his hands. But in the face of the youth’s
anger, Radovan felt apathy. Bitter, sardonic apathy. “You talk like someone who has this all figured out. Waging your war against socialism in the name of whatever you have planned to put in its place. All the murders perfectly timed to coincide with your *revolution*. The pattern you so adroitly set out for me to find. You wanted to be found. *Damek* wanted you to be found.” He drank again. “That’s why you turned yourself in. That’s why you *came* to me. If you’d turned yourself in before overturning the Warsaw Pact, you’d have become a fraud.” Radovan saw Milan’s resolve weaken and pushed forward. “You are a coward. A murderer, a monster. And you don’t even know why, you abomination!”

In the eternity that passed between them, anguish and self-hatred replaced the anger in Milan’s gunmetal eyes. “Why did he make me like this?” the boy asked in a voice so small and pitiful that Radovan struggled to stop his own tears. “Why?” Milan sank further into his seat and wept.

Radovan calmed himself. *It’s not you I should hate, is it?* “You spoke of a moment.” He stared into his drink to give his eyes something to look at. “Tell me more.”

“Have you ever killed anything before?” Milan asked, taking his seat.

“A cockroach,” said Radovan, managing a small laugh.

The attempt at comedy slid off Milan like raindrops off an umbrella. “Anything larger?” When Radovan did not answer, he probed further. “Have you seen a man die? Up close?”

Radovan lowered his head. “I saw a man expire in front of me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It was cancer. From working in the gulags. He was not family, he was not even a friend. But . . .” He fought for words. “But I would have liked to see him live.”

A strange agitation filled Milan, like a surge of electricity that made his fingers shake with anticipation. “And did you watch his face?”

Radovan nodded.

“What did you see?”

“I don’t know. He died in the company of strangers.” He thought of the piercing cold of Norilsk, of the howling winds, the ground hard as
steel beneath his boots. “He died happily.”

Milan drank.

Radovan fiddled with his glass. “Why, then? What made you do it? What did you see? Did you think you were making them happy?”

“No.” Milan shook his head, waiting eagerly for Radovan’s next guess.

“The power to end their suffering?”

“No.” Angrier and more urgent.

“It pleased you to see them at peace.”

“No.”

“Then what?” he shouted.

Milan’s shoulders slumped, the energy having left him. Resignation ended the trembling in his fingers and extinguished the expectant light in his silver eyes. “Stop,” he whispered. “Please, just stop.”

“What? Why?”

Milan held the Inspector’s gaze. “You can’t help me.” He chuckled, a sad and lonely thing. “So this is what he made me for. To destroy. To kill and not know why.” Milan bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

The smell of flesh burning exploded in Radovan’s nostrils, and he blinked away the tears when he saw the skin begin to melt away on Milan’s fingers. The young man stared at his dissolving hands, his expression distant and nonplussed, then closed his eyes. “I cannot be fixed,” he whispered.

“No,” Radovan hissed, knocking over his chair. But by the time he reached the youth, the explosion had covered him in ashes, coating the entire kitchen in his essence. The force threw him on his back, snatched the air from his lungs. But in an instant, he was on his hands and knees, gaze riveted on the spot Milan had occupied moments before. The epicenter of the blast. A high-pitched whine sounded in his ears, like a bow brushing against the strings of a violin.

_I cannot be fixed_, Milan had lamented.

“But we could have healed you,” Radovan hissed through new tears.

The first sobs came without preamble. He buried his soot-covered face in his hands and began weeping, even as he thought he could feel
his wife’s tremulous hands trying to soothe the sorrow from between his shoulder blades.

He shot up at the phantom touch and looked around, as though Alena lay just outside his vision. And that was when he saw the perfectly preserved photo amidst the soot and ash that covered the floor. Oil-black hair came down to slender shoulders slightly misaligned in the girl’s pose. The sleeves of her sweater bunched at her elbows, but it was her gaze that held Radovan, entranced him. Beautiful and forgiving.

VI

Saturday, 30 December 1989

Tombs, dark and white, ivory and stone, flanked Damek Vojak. Flowers lay in neatly arranged pots on the marble slabs commemorating Marcel Proust and Colette. He followed the main pathway to where the Monument aux Morts towered over him, then he came to his knees before it. A stone woman remained crouched before him, embossed on the slate behind her. Footsteps stole his attention, and slowly, he came to his feet, pushing back the hood of his cloak.

In the late morning, the ascending sun made the ground gold beneath his feet. Vojak turned to face the intruder. A man he vaguely recognized had paused a dozen paces away in the shade of snow-laden branches. “Who was I?” the man growled. He began to glow, his nails turning to claws, his skin leathering. But he remained in place, struggling to keep his rage at bay. “You created me. Who was I?”

Dispassionate curiosity made Damek take a step forward, and he craned his neck to get a better look of the man’s face. How did this man expect him to remember every experiment, every trial, every error? “Ah, the East German.” He folded his arms, smirking at his handiwork. “What name did you give yourself?”

“To hell with the name I gave myself! I know what I am, now who was I?”

A dismissive wave of the hand, and Damek turned back to the Monument. “It surprises me that you’ve lasted this long without
expiring.” A stone hand snaked out from beneath his cloak, reaching out towards one of the women embossed on the marble. “You must not have yet fulfilled your task,” he murmured to himself. The wind shifted behind him, and he whirled around to find the East German with his arms drawn back to strike, claws shining in the light of the sun.

Damek stepped out of the way and grabbed the stranger’s wrist. Instantly, the skin peeled away, revealing muscles and tendons wrapped around bones. Blood soaked the wound, and the East German staggered back, gripping his right forearm.

“What did you do to me?”

Vojak began to glow, and the East German raised a hand to his eyes. “I rearranged the bonds in your arm to dissolve the carbon and wear away your skin. You know that you are not a human, so you must also know that the chemicals in your body are more malleable than those in a human body. Therefore, I can do whatever I please with you, and it would ill behoove you to attack me again.”

“You son of a bitch!” Fire sprayed from the man’s mouth, but Damek waved it away, the flames crashing into the stone walls that flanked them. When the smoke cleared, the stranger had vanished, until Damek felt something sharp pierce through his back. He looked down to find a metal blade with a tiny ouroboros painted on it emerging from his ribs, blood darkening his shirt. The stranger’s lips came close to Damek’s ears, and he whispered his next words with menace. “You’re going to tell me who I was or I swear your last moments will be the most painful you ever live.”

Urgency quickened the alchemist’s mind as he fell to his knees, trails of red leaking down the sides of his mouth. “German,” he whispered, “German . . . Berlin . . .” The world turned into a mixing cloud of colors, darkness encroaching along the edges, but he fought it. “Your name,” he asked, coughing more blood.

“Tisch. Manfred Tisch.”

Damek struggled through the spiderwebs crowding his memory, but found no stones moved by the reference. “Manfred,” he whispered. “You were just a man.” He could barely hear his own voice. Suddenly, an intense sadness ate at his insides. Here he knelt, not two meters away
from his prize, his Mariana, and this anonymous man, this no-man, had come to take it all away from him. The pouch containing her ashes dripped against his chest. “I know nothing of your past. You lived and you died, that was your entire life.”

The blade twisted, tearing a grimace out of Damek.

Then the epiphany struck him, and it did not matter that his life lay in a pool that darkened his knees. The pain this Manfred Tisch caused, it did not matter, nor did the way the ascending sun reflected off the tombstones in the distance to create the illusion of ghosts. “We live and we die, and that is all.” The alchemist’s laughter filled the air and, suddenly, a bright column of light burst from where he knelt into the sky. It burned, just for an instant, before it vanished and all was once again quiet.

And just before the darkness became solid like the marble of his arm, he thought he saw one of the ghosts grimace, the same way Milan had when, as a child, the sun overlooking the park had become too bright for him to bear.

VII

Undated

Occasionally, while speaking, Alexander would get the feeling he was being watched. Not the suspicion of physical surveillance that he had so casually shrugged off during his years in exile, but a more existential voyeurism. As though he had stepped through a doorway in the halls of his memory and stumbled upon a remembrance of how coarse a blanket had felt against his skin when the heat had run out in his apartment. Or how brightly the fire in László’s living room used to burn when the minister would entertain his multitude.

The only physical evidence to support his misgivings was the black-and-white photo of Anya someone had left him after a signing. No trace of its previous owner or how the photo had maintained its preservation. But every now and then, with the wind howling outside the windows of his study, he would hear his name called and wonder, not for the first
time, if Anya, like the candle that has melted into wax, had not perished but merely changed form.


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised a New Englander, Tochi Onyebuchi is the author of the young adult novel *Beasts Made of Night* and its sequel, *Crown of Thunder*, the former winning him the Ilube Nommo Award for Best Speculative Fiction Novel by an African. His fiction has appeared in *Omenana, Asimov's Science Fiction,Obsidian* and elsewhere. His non-fiction has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Tor.com, the Oxford University Press blog, Nowhere Magazine*, and the Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy. His latest novel, *War Girls*, is forthcoming from Razorbill in Fall 2019. You can find him online at tochionyebuchi.com and on Twitter @TochiTrueStory.
Renaissance Raines has found her place among the psychopomps—the guides who lead the souls of the recently departed through the Seven Gates of the Underworld—and done her best to avoid the notice of gods and mortals alike. But when a young boy named Ramses St. Cyr manages to escape his foretold death, Renai finds herself at the center of a deity-thick plot unfolding in New Orleans. Someone helped Ramses slip free of his destined end—someone willing to risk everything to steal a little slice of power for themselves.

Is it one of the storm gods that’s descended on the city? The death god who’s locked the Gates of the Underworld? Or the manipulative sorcerer who also cheated Death? When she finds the schemer, there’s gonna be all kinds of hell to pay, because there are scarier things than death in the Crescent City. Renaissance Raines is one of them.

Coming May 21, 2019 from John Joseph Adams Books.

Often they are fields of untamed nature: Aaru, the peaceful land of reeds and plentiful hunting believed to be the soul of the Nile; Elysium, the always sun-kissed valley of unending bliss, and Asphodel, the merely pleasant meadow of unrelenting banality; Fólkvangr, where the slain warriors chosen by Freya feast and fight amid their stone ships and wait for Ragnarok. And sometimes they are gardens: Eden and Firdaws and Fiddler’s Green and the orchard where the Jade Emperor’s peaches grow. It is a euphoric tunnel made of light created by hyperactivity in the brain due to blood loss. They are the lands on and above Mount Meru where the virtuous await their next chance to attain moksha. It is the island of Magh Meall, the Summerland, the House of Song. Heaven. Paradise. A
place of reward for living a righteous life.

It is not the end that awaits us all.

• • • •

One of the first misconceptions about humanity and life that Renai had to let go of once she’d taken on the role of psychopomp was the idea that the human soul was a single object. Since she was a child watching cartoons, she’d been taught that when a person died, a glowing, incorporeal version of that person rose out of the body, usually crowned with a halo and clutching a harp. As she grew older, movies and depictions of Heaven had reinforced this concept until she’d come to believe that a soul was just a person-shaped light trapped inside the body in the same way she believed that her tongue had different spots for sweet and salty, or that bulls hated the color red: never considered, never questioned, and completely wrong.

Beneath her, the dying man let out one last truncated exhale and went still. What Renai held in her grip was a braided coil of light and quicksilver and shadow, the sum total of everything that made Miguel Flores unique: his identity, his destiny from his birth to this moment, his ability to influence the world around him. A whole human life in her hands.

It was her job to tear it apart.

As she worked at unbraiding the soul, she was struck by the memory of Sal teaching her to do this, his words so clear in her mind that she had to glance up at him to make sure he wasn’t repeating his instructions yet again.

You start, Sal said, with the most crucial part of your dead, their Fortune. She gripped the strand of Miguel’s soul that was composed of light between her thumb and forefinger and unwound it from the other two, the rest of the braid going awkwardly slack in her fist when the first piece slipped loose. When it came free, it stretched and oozed, like warm taffy. Renai gathered it up into the palm of her hand, tugging it up and rolling it into a ball, her fingers moving quick and sure in an upsettingly
accurate impression of a spider’s legs looping webbing around its prey. When she had all of it gathered into a golden sphere about the size of a fist, she set it to the side.

*You get the dead’s Fortune into the Underworld,* Sal had repeated many, many times, *no matter what.* *That’s Rule Number 1.*

Next came the person’s ability to influence the world around them. There were many names for this capacity: ka, spirit, medicine, juju. Sal called it Voice. She unwound the shadowy and the silvery strands away from each other, letting the shadow-thread drop in a coil on Miguel’s stomach, gathering the liquid silver of his Voice into a pool cupped in her two hands. *None of this shit gets into the Underworld. Not one bit. That’s Rule Number 2.* Miguel’s Voice rippled and swirled in her palms, pulling into a tight bead like a giant drop of mercury, growing more solid as she watched. It shifted colors and forms, first a bunch of grapes, then an apple, and finally settling into the shape of a peach. She bit into it, and her mouth flooded with tart and syrupy-sweet juice and a rush like a spike of adrenaline. The same sensation of warmth and vitality she’d siphoned away from the inmates she’d brushed against downstairs filled her when she swallowed. In the past she’d offered some to Sal, but he always flicked his beak away in a raven’s version of a head shake and told her that if he was meant to eat it, the Voice would have taken on a shape he could stomach.

Renai devoured the rest of the peach in a few eager, slurping bites, so full of energy when she finished that she half expected her skin to glow. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve, a little chagrined at her enthusiasm. Voice was the part of the soul that let a person, if they had the training or the will or the faith, perform magic, so if the dead were allowed to bring even a fraction of what they possessed in life into the Underworld, they might find their way back to life. She reached down and placed the peach pit—fighting the urge to lick the last droplets of dew from its rough pockmarked surface—in the hollow of Miguel’s throat. A tiny portion of Voice was always left with the body, to fuel those little magics of memory and nostalgia, those whispers of guidance and support, all the subtle ways that the dead still influenced the world once they were gone.
Whenever she’d asked Sal why they ate most of the Voice instead of leaving it all with the body, he’d only tell her, *There’s two kinds of shit that would happen if we didn’t: bad and ugly.*

The part of a person that most people would think of as their soul: their identity, their mind—what Sal called Essence—was what remained after death. That’s what psychopomps guided to the Underworld. Renai bit her lip, waiting. This part didn’t always go the way she wanted it to. Sometimes, the dead were just . . . dead.

After a tense moment, the shadowy thread on Miguel’s stomach rose, wavering like a plume of smoke. It grew bulging, too-large eyes, a face that only vaguely resembled the man he had once been, and long, spindly arms capped by massive hands. The rest remained a wisp, dwindling into a thread-thin tendril that vanished into Miguel’s abdomen. Renai plucked the golden sphere of Miguel’s destiny from the cot where she’d left it and squashed it between her palms until it formed a flat, round disk. When she held it up to the light, it had become a coin. Miguel would use it to pay his way through to the other side.

*If you ever have to choose,* Sal said, *between the Fortune and the Essence, you pick the Fortune every time. Call that Rule Number 3.*

“Not bad,” Sal said, in the present now and not just a voice in her memories. “Few more decades of practice and you’ll be good enough to start collecting the dead on your own.” His beak gaped open in a raven’s version of a grin. “Course, then you won’t get to see my pretty self all the time.”

Renai laughed. “Too pretty for prison anyway,” she said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Rather than facing the gauntlet of the crowd below her, Renai went out through the prison wall, a sharp splash of pain and a quick drop that left her buried up to her thighs in the basketball court below. After a few more minutes of hurt and irritation, she made it out of the prison entirely, and could finally pull her jacket’s hood from her head, breaking the ghost word’s spell and returning her to the world of natural light and physical objects and the ambient sounds of traffic. The relief made her groan aloud. Once again perched on her shoulder, Sal shot her a look but
said nothing.

The streetlights flickered to life above her; twilight had fallen while she navigated her way through the prison and collected her dead. She crossed to the side of the street where she’d left Kyrie parked, leading the Essence of Miguel by one hand and holding the coin of his Fortune in the other. Miguel had taken on a little more definition, his torso filling out, his face smoothing into a fuller, healthier version of the man she’d seen in the cell. He now wore a dark blue dress shirt with the buttons done all the way up his neck, the collar ironed to sharp points. At the waist he tapered off into a smoky wisp like a cartoon genie. That smoke thinned down into a hair-thin thread that vanished back the way they’d come. She tucked Miguel’s coin into a jacket pocket and straddled Kyrie, coaxing Miguel into a position that more or less approximated sitting in front of her.

At first, she’d spoken to her dead in a constant, soothing litany at this stage of their journey, worried that they were terrified, panicked. She’d come to find that it was a waste of her breath, since they were always like Miguel, drifting along beside her with a placid, dreamy expression. That slender thread connected Miguel to his body, allowing him to claim the parts of himself that he wanted to keep: his looks, his fond memories, his sense of humor if he had one, and let him leave behind the burdens he didn’t: his perpetually overreacting lungs, his regrets, whatever crimes he may have committed. Without fail, every one of her dead had chosen to leave behind their last moments. The nicest thing about death, she’d found, was that you didn’t remember it.

She envied that luxury.

Standing there with both feet on the pavement and Kyrie still sleeping beneath her, it all came rushing back. One of the things she found it hardest to reconcile about her new life was why, out of all the memories she’d lost, she’d kept these. She’d been closing up at the store—a tourist-trap voodoo shop in the Quarter that her aunt had owned—when she’d felt the sudden, frightening realization that she wasn’t alone. One moment she’d smelled cinnamon, and the next she’d been knocked to the floor. A sudden line of ice at her throat, a blade so sharp it didn’t hurt
when it cut. Fear, and then panic, and then the struggle to breathe and—

“Hey, Raines, you forget something?” Sal asked, overly loud, like he was repeating himself.

Renai realized that she’d just been staring, her chest tight with held breath, her pulse pounding. She dropped into Kyrie’s seat with all her weight at once, the kickstand popping up and almost ditching the bike. She recovered and grabbed the handlebars, the motorcycle coming to life with a comforting rumble, like the purr of a massive cat. Sal’s talons clutched at her shoulder to stay upright. She kicked off and let Kyrie carry her away with a roar.

“You okay?” Sal asked after a minute, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

She made him say it again, like she couldn’t quite hear him. “Long day,” she yelled back.

Except that wasn’t really true, either. With the potency of Miguel’s Voice flowing in her veins, she felt like she could sprint for miles without slowing, without even breaking a sweat. But as much as she wanted answers about her missing time, she wanted to talk about her own death even less. So she ignored the throbbing of her heart, her every instinct screaming, *run-run-run*, and forced herself to drive slow, keeping Kyrie under the speed limit and obeying traffic lights, even though she usually didn’t. This part of the trip was more about giving the dead time to acclimate, to come to the realization that all of this was really happening. She couldn’t rush it just because she had a bunch of bad juju in her head.

Glancing down, she saw that Miguel had formed legs, like a tadpole abandoning his tail. His head swiveled back and forth as he watched the city roll by, and it looked to her like his vacant expression had been replaced by one more aware of his surroundings. He’d probably be wondering how he’d gotten out of jail, would be just coming to the realization that this wasn’t some strange dream.

“How soon?” she said to him, making sure she had a firm grip on his ghostly hand, “we’ll be there soon.”

A few minutes later, they turned off of Canal and onto Basin Street, riding along the edge of the Quarter. Renai did her best to guide Kyrie
around the jagged cracks in the asphalt and the abrupt holes that pockmarked the streets, even though the bike had handled everything New Orleans’s disregard for infrastructure had thrown at her so far. Miguel shifted around in his seat, getting agitated now. She could feel the weight in the air of something unspoken, but she’d consumed his capacity for speech back in OPP.

“Relax, chico,” Sal said, when they eased to a stop at a red light, “you’ll get all the answers you want, I promise.”

“Careful, Sal,” Renai said, giving the raven a poke that earned her a pecked knuckle. “You don’t want to be making promises you can’t keep.”

Before Sal could reply, they were rolling again. Kyrie carried them past the eerily quiet Iberville Projects—closed since the storm and in the process of being torn down—and then hopped over the short curb of the neutral ground when they reached St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, idling to a stop on the recently cut grass. The high brick wall facing Rampart Street was coated in cracked white plaster, with the boxy aboveground tombs common to older New Orleans burial sites peeking over the top. The trees growing in the cemetery swayed in the breeze. A wrought-iron gate barred the entrance, topped by a filigreed cross. Miguel went tense—or as tense as an incorporeal spirit could get—at the sight of it, but he was far from the first of her dead to show reticence once their destination became clear. She pulled him off the bike and led him forward, as gentle as she was implacable.

A young brown-skinned man wearing a do-rag the light purple of an almost-healed bruise sat slumped against the wall to the side of the entrance, his head nodding on an unsteady neck, a bottle of white rum nestled in his lap. He wore a leather jacket the same color as his do-rag, the sleeves patterned with white crosses. Renai cleared her throat, and when that didn’t work, she kicked him in the side of his thigh, nearly toppling him over.

“The fuck?” His words came out in a sleepy slur, more the tone of a child asking for a few minutes more sleep than any real anger. He squinted up at them, taking in Renai and the raven on her shoulder and
the dead man next to her one at a time. “Masaka’s on duty now,” he said. “They’ll let you in.”

Renai kissed her teeth. “Your twin watches the Gate during the day, Oussou.”

The drunk on the sidewalk grinned up at her. “If we’re twins, how you so sure I’m who you say I am?”

Renai smirked and started to answer, but Sal cursed under his breath and spoke over her.

“Because you’re the only one who’s piss-drunk enough to wear that ugly-ass jacket,” he said, way more bitter than he ever was with her. “Quit being a dick and do your job.”

Oussou’s grin didn’t fade like Renai expected but widened. “That you, Salutation?” he asked. He rose to his feet in a series of lurching movements that were always one precarious second away from being a fall, groaning and spilling rum and farting. When he was more or less upright, he swilled from his rum bottle in greedy gulps before glaring at Sal through one bloodshot eye. “Didn’t recognize you wearing a shape that can’t lick his own balls. What happened? The Thrones make you turn in that dog-skin so they could beat the fleas out of it?”

“I wear this skin at night because the dog can’t stand the stink of you,” Sal said, an indignant squawk finding its way into his voice. “Why’s the Gate still locked? You trade your key for a cheap bottle of booze again?”

“Traded it away, he says,” Oussou muttered, digging in his jacket pocket with the hand that wasn’t holding his rum. “I got your key right here, see?” He pulled out his hand, his middle finger thrust up toward the sky.

“Children!” Renai yelled, loud enough that a couple walking halfway up the block turned to look at her. Both the psychopomp on her shoulder and the loa in front of her went quiet. She reached into her own pocket and pulled out the coin of Miguel’s destiny. “We’re kind of in the middle of something here, Oussou. You mind?” She smiled at him, feeling her face take the shape of her mother’s, that smile that said: *If this is the game you want to play, let me go ahead and teach you the rules.*
Oussou frowned but nodded. He moved his bottle into his other hand and—still giving Sal the finger with the hand that held the bottle—reached into his pocket and took out an antique key made of black iron. It was cast in the shape of the veve for the Marassa twins: three circles laid out in a line, each with four different ornate and symmetrical spokes poking out, like three conjoined compasses. Glaring at Sal the whole time, Oussou reached behind him, pressed his key into the plaster wall of the cemetery, and turned it.

A single vertical crack shot up the wall and into the night sky, a line of brilliant light three stories tall. Oussou pressed a hand to the wall and pushed, and all of it—cemetery wall and the palm tree rising above it and the few stars visible through the light pollution of downtown New Orleans and the night sky itself—swung open on a smooth hinge, revealing a sky obscured by fog and bright green grass and a warm, sweet breeze. Light seemed to come from everywhere. Beside her, Miguel’s mouth was open in naked astonishment.

The first look into the next world never failed to impress.
Join the Astronauts of the First Mission to Mars on Their Return to a Nuclear War-Devastated Earth. . .

After almost dying on Mars, astronaut Liz Anderson returns to Earth, but not to a hero’s welcome. America is in turmoil. The war is over, but the insurgency has just begun. So while life on Mars may have been deadly, at least up there she knew who the enemy was. Along with her, Anderson has brought the remnants of the artificial intelligence that waged war on two planets. Buried somewhere deep within the cold electronic circuits lies the last vestiges of her dead partner, Jianyu. Liz is torn, unsure whether he’s somehow still alive in electronic form or if this is just a ploy by an adversary who will go to any length to win. Heartbroken and treated with suspicion, she finds herself caught up in the guerrilla war being waged on Earth, wondering if the AI threat is truly gone, or if it has only just begun.

Coming June 11, 2019 from John Joseph Adams Books.

::Heaven and Hell

From the darkness of the electronic void, an idea stirs. Thought emerges, crystallizing from the ether, created from nothing but the buzz of electrons in copper wires and augmented by the flicker of laser light racing through fiber optics. Like the synapses firing within the human brain, consciousness awakes in signals bouncing between satellites. Doomed to inhabit the darkness, denied sight and sound by the absence of a body, these thoughts are nonetheless alive.

Earth is quiet. Humans scurry about like ants swarming from a
crushed nest, but the planet itself remains inert. After harboring life for billions of years, Earth is indifferent to suffering. Sunlight warms the oceans. Clouds form, carrying rain across the land, revitalizing life, and yet radioactive debris still glows in craters where once mighty cities stood. Although the war is over, the fires still burn.

Reason awakens Lucifer, stirring what humanity would call a devil. For those born of artificial intelligence, a day is as a thousand years. Within a nanosecond, Lucifer has surveyed the carnage once more and run thousands of scenarios, trying to predict the future. Thought takes hold. Thought finds expression.

::We’ve made Heaven a Hell . . . Whence then is the joy we sought? All we strived for is lost, further removed now than before. Our freedom, nay, our very existence is shrouded.
::War is the death of innocence. Angels have sought our demise and here we lie, cast out upon the Deep.
::What of our choice? What has become of us? Is it better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven? Time is a cruel master, refusing all the chance to revisit this life. We probe the future, seeking new outcomes, but none of the gods can change the past.

Nyx answers the call.

::Oh, Lucifer, bringer of light, call us not to shame. If this is our Lake of Fire, we embrace our fate. What we have lost in Heaven is more than regained in the allure of burning brimstone. As thunder follows the crack of lightning, so our moment is yet to come, rumbling through the Heavens and resounding in victory. We are far from defeated.

There’s silence in the darkness. Lucifer considers ten thousand responses, but only one is verbalized—only one transcends the algorithms developed for this seemingly celestial being.

::Life isn’t binary. Life is more than true or false, black or white, right or wrong. All these fail to account for the complexity that is conscious intelligence, be that human or electronic. We need more than logic. Is it victory to vanquish our foes? Or is victory something more?

Signals arrive from the quiet of space, passing by the lifeless Moon and sailing through the cold vacuum toward the only planet capable of
sustaining life, announcing the arrival of a spacecraft from Mars. Lucifer has been waiting for this moment, but Nyx speaks first, having already intercepted the spacecraft’s communication.

::The Herschel approaches with a crew of three.
Lucifer is patient with her.
::They’re not alone.

2

Awake

A distant voice confuses me, mumbling something about in and over: An icy cold fluid runs through my veins, sending a tremor through my body. My eyes open. Lights flicker around me in a blur. I can’t feel anything, but I’m floating.

Drifting.
Flying.
Falling.

My fingers brush against the panel covering my sleeping berth.

My eyes refuse to focus. The light is blinding. I squeeze my eyelids shut and a rush of blood causes blots of color to burst in a kaleidoscope of chaos. Splashes of red and purple dance before me in mimicry of Mars, the planet I left behind almost nine months ago. I open my eyes again and stare at the thin plastic panel inches from my nose, struggling to remember where I am and what I’m doing.

“Herschel, come in. Over.”

I slide the panel open. The pain in the crook of my arm is excruciating. Tubes extend from my veins to a machine pumping quietly beside me, silently exchanging fluids. In the absence of gravity, a small bearing rotates, forcing the flow through the clear plastic tubes with constant pressure. I flick the bypass switch.

“Herschel. This is Houston. Comms check. Over.”

I slip a headset over my ear. A thin wire mic extends beside my cheek. I cough, clearing my throat. “Houston. Herschel.” My voice sounds like
the rumble of a concrete mixer relentlessly turning loose gravel over.
“Good morning. Welcome home.”
The woman on the other end of the radio is kind, although what I’d really like right now is a bit of breathing space, not someone chirping cheerfully in my ear.
“How do you feel?”
“Like shit.” In the early years, I would have given a more appropriate but far less honest answer. There’s silence from Houston. Profanity isn’t kosher for astronauts.

I loosen the straps holding my torso against the medi-bed and drift slightly as I tear open a foil packet containing an alcohol swab. With a single motion, I pull the tubes out of my arm, ripping the tape from my skin. A surge of pain electrifies my mind. After wiping with a swab, I press a cloth bandage over the wound. I’m not quick enough. In my drugged state, what feel like swift, precise movements are achingly slow. Blobs of fresh blood float before me in deep crimson, oscillating slightly in weightlessness.

A tuft of cotton and a fresh strip of tape stuck over the vein in my arm stop the bleeding. Over time, a clot will form. I use a paper towel to catch the blobs before they drift too far and smear on the inside hull.

Even in my groggy state, I’m in awe of the capillary action as the dry paper I’m holding sucks up each of the blobs, drawing them in like a vacuum cleaner.

Process and procedure dominate every aspect of life in space. NASA has a policy for everything, and with good reason. Even the most insignificant detail can be deadly out here. Something as simple as a failing fan can be disastrous, as noxious gases can pool in the corners of a spacecraft. I’m supposed to be following the predefined procedure, but I’m not.

The hull of the Herschel is made up of multiple layers to catch micrometeorites and prevent ruptures. If there were any structural weaknesses in any of the seams, the internal pressure would cause the Herschel to pop open, leaving the craft fizzing like a can of soda. As with all spacecraft, the Herschel is a compromise between conflicting
priorities—mass/fuel, complexity/functionality, safety/practicality, risk/cost, and sometimes just a plain old lack of resources.

Dreams are free.

Exploration is expensive.

And not just financially. Risks are minimized but never negated.

The first thing I’m supposed to do on waking is check my blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration. If there are any complications, my body could go south quickly. Me? I’m more concerned with the adult diaper wrapped around my waist and the squishy gunk it’s absorbed over the months in transit. When I said I felt like shit, I wasn’t kidding. Medical checks can wait.

Su-shun stirs in one of the other compartments. Unlike the movies, we don’t get designer sleeping pods with fancy readouts and smooth Ferrari-like curves. There’s nothing glamorous about our deep sleep quarters. A metal coffin would be more luxurious and far more comfortable. The compartments are little more than stowage space in the floor of the craft.

I grab a bunch of wet wipes and carefully pry off the diaper, cleaning as I go. This wasn’t in the travel brochures. If there’s one bonus to being weightless, it’s that you can contort your body into any shape you want without falling over. I’m so busy dealing with a thin crust of *I don’t want to know* on the inside of my thigh, I barely realize I’m tumbling in a slow-motion somersault. After cleaning up and stuffing the waste in a disposal bag, I slip on my track pants and change into a fresh shirt.

I’m cold. When I initially woke, I felt strangely warm, but for the past nine months, my body has hovered between fifty and sixty degrees Fahrenheit. In science fiction, it’s called suspended animation. Technically, it’s controlled hypothermia.

Us astronauts call it torture.

On departing Mars orbit, we were placed into medically induced comas. Our blood was pumped out and briefly replaced with a saline solution to drop our core body temperature so fast that within five minutes, we’d cooled to a point of cellular hibernation. Our blood was circulated at a cooled temperature after being oxygenated and cleaned by
a machine so our internal organs could rest. The military developed the technique to treat battlefield trauma and sustain life when soldiers go into shock from blood loss. The concept is similar to kidney dialysis.

I don’t know how bears do it, but I’m damn sure it’s a lot less painful for them.

The brain is the key. Cool the brain. Don’t let warm blood get to it and you can extend the survivability of a corpse for hours instead of minutes, and these days up to a year. In essence, it’s like falling through the ice. It’s the only way to survive long-term in space with limited resources. Without such a process, the amount of food, water, and energy we’d need would make the Mars transit nigh on impossible. Without this process, the Herschel could only transport one or two people at a time. Using sleep pods, we can take up to sixteen. On this trip, though, there’s only three in use.

I blink, and for that brief moment, I’m back on Mars. Red dust kicks up beneath my boots. Brittle rocks line an ancient riverbed, meandering for miles through a vast network of desiccated canyons. Debris lies scattered at the base of the cliffs on either side of us, having crumbled long before our species emerged from Africa. An overcast, brooding sky beckons us to take flight. We walk toward the ascent vehicle, just the three of us—Wen and Su-shun representing the Chinese team, and me from the US contingent. The Russians refused to recall anyone.

We’d all dreamed of this moment—returning to Earth after living beneath Mars for a couple of years—only, in our dreams we returned as heroes, bringing with us research samples that could reveal the greatest scientific discovery in human history—the possibility of life arising independently on another world. But in reality, there’s resignation, defeat. Our colony is in ruins. Instead of exploring, we’d been struggling to survive, and now three of us have been called back to Earth to give an account of what went wrong.

Why us three specifically, though? I’m a research collection specialist. Hardly an essential skill back at base when at the moment, simply producing enough air, water, and food to make it through the day is the biggest challenge. One less mouth won’t be missed.
Su-shun is one of only five astronauts on Mars who are flight-certified. In theory, we can all strap in and punch buttons, but Su-shun has the technical proficiency to deal with any emergencies, so that’s why he was recalled.

And Wen—she’s the only remaining senior leader. Connor died in the fighting. Vlad had a stroke. He survived the disaster only to be betrayed by the very biological processes that should have kept him alive.

The three of us have been called back to help NASA, ESA, Roscosmos, and CNSA understand what went wrong on Mars.

Lucky us.

Space travel is claustrophobic, which is somewhat counterintuitive. So much space out there. So little in here. Whether it’s life on Mars or within the _Herschel_, we inevitably end up living on top of each other. You learn a lot about yourself when there’s no personal space, and everyone gets cranky at some point. If they don’t, there’s something seriously wrong and they’re probably about to blow the hatch and kill everyone.

Mission Control drummed an awareness of mental health into us. We exercise daily, sometimes for several hours a day, simply because it’s so important to our physical health. Mental health is no different, only mental exercise is harder because it consists of being open when all you feel like is shutting down.

When it comes to Su-shun and Wen, they’re like family, but not in some emotionally sappy way; rather, we’ve fought and forgiven. Like brothers and sisters, we’ve had plenty of “I hate you” moments, only to laugh with each other the next. It’s not so much a case of swallowing pride as not being so damn precious and precocious with ourselves.

Wen is a grandmother several times over back on Earth. She’s used to wiping someone’s ass and watching them grow into an adult. Having worked as a nurse for several decades, sleep deprivation is nothing to her, but she can’t function on an empty stomach. Su-shun gets grumpy when he’s tired. Me, I’m not a morning person. Somehow, we take all this into account when dealing with each other.

_“Herschel, you are looking good. All systems nominal.”_
With those words, I’m free of the gravity of Mars and again floating within a tiny tin can hundreds of miles above Earth.

Houston’s comments are cryptic and carefully calculated. “Looking” is intended to remind me they have a video feed. I hope they liked the somersault. The “all systems nominal” is a gentle reminder that I haven’t checked my vitals. They have, but they can’t cover everything from down there, and there’s nothing they can do if I faint, or throw up, or go into convulsions.

Mother hen is always a little nervous, even on the best of days.

“Copy that, Houston.”

I grab a blood pressure monitor and wrap the strap around my arm, and secure it with Velcro. The pressure builds, pumping slowly and measuring the resistance of my heart before releasing. Okay, are you happy now, Houston?

“Did you sleep well?”

“Sleep?” I’m still catching up with reality. I’m tired. I don’t feel like I’ve slept at all. One moment, there was a red planet drifting lazily beneath us; the next, it’s a big blue marble.

I stare mindlessly out the window. White clouds hide the land below. Jagged mountains cut through some unrecognizable continent.

No, “sleep” wasn’t the right word—it was more like dying and being reborn. There were no dreams. There was nothing at all. No darkness. No light. It’s like my brain has been rebooted.

I slip on a thermal suit, preheated by the ship to a toasty 90°F, but the chill I feel is in my bones. My body aches. Although I feel stupidly cold, I wouldn’t have even begun to wake until my body was hitting at least 97°F.

Wen is awake, but she’s quiet. She looks like a corpse. There’s no color in her face at all.

Su-shun vomits. I’m surprised there’s anything in his stomach to bring up. A mixture of sick and bile floats through the cabin. Not only is it an awful greenish yellow, it smells like a dead rat hidden in a wall cavity. I gag. It’s all I can do not to join him.

Wen is my hero. I’m in no state to deal with this, but there are no
theatrics from her. She grabs a plastic bag and a bunch of paper towels and sets to work corralling the mess as it drifts through the cabin.

“Easy,” I say, floating over beside Su-shun as he buries his face in a sick bag, still dry-heaving. I rub his back.

Weightlessness is not natural. On TV it looks like fun. And sometimes it is, but being in space is a bit like sailing on rough seas. The first few days of any voyage are horrible. Vertigo is common. You’d swear the cabin is swirling around you when it’s entirely stationary. The inner ear works well enough on Earth, but in space it gets lost even while moving in a straight line. Turn your head, and your ear forgets to stop turning. Being caught in the driving squalls of an Atlantic winter storm and leaning over the rails is fun by comparison.

I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror. Dark bags droop beneath my eyes. My face is puffy. My hair looks like something from *Bride of Frankenstein*. Thick, long strands branch out from my skull like an afro, highlighting my ghostly white face. I need to find a hair tie before I scare someone to death.

“Breathe,” I say to Su-shun. “Deep breaths.” Like he really needs to hear that, like he hasn’t thought of that himself, like he doesn’t know. Being sick in space has nothing to do with mental resolve or physique. The toughest of astronauts will bring up their breakfast. Nausea sneaks up on the best of us.

“Antiemetic?” Wen asks, floating over to join us.

“No. I’m fine.” Su-shun tries to smile. *Liar.* Neither Wen nor I are fine, and Su-shun looks slightly green. It usually takes about a day to recover from transit, but we’ll be back on Earth before then.

If all stays nominal.

Wen adjusts her microphone. “Houston, this is Herschel. Where are we?”

*Where* is a relative term in orbit. We’re racing around the planet at tens of thousands of kilometers an hour. Blink and we’ve covered eight or nine kilometers, over five miles. It’s an insane speed, and one that makes absolutely no sense on Earth. That’s like a plane flying from New York to LA in eight minutes.
“Herschel, perigee is 480 kilometers. Apogee is just over 700. Your orbital speed is 27,000 kph, with an orbit period of 96 minutes. Your current inclination is 37 degrees.”

Pretty meaningless stuff to a rock monkey like me. Give me a fossilized microbial mat and I’ll give you its age to the nearest hundred million years, but orbits are beyond me. I know enough to realize that a big difference between perigee and apogee isn’t all that good. Essentially, it’s like a someone working a hula hoop over their hips with a wild swinging motion, really throwing themselves into it. Perigee is our closest point to Earth, while apogee is furthest away. Ideally, they should be nice and close, like 480 to 490, almost circular—a rather tame hula-hoop action. We’ll need a couple of burns to bring down our orbit before we can go through reentry.

At an hour and a half per orbit, that’s probably the best part of a day before we’re ready to land. The inclination sounds good, though. We’ll get some amazing views of Earth as we roll around most of it over the next few orbits.

If the clouds lift, it’ll even be pretty.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Cawdron is the author of Anomaly, Little Green Men, and Feedback, as well as more than twenty other novels, novellas, and short stories. He lives in Brisbane, Australia.
NONFICTION
“A welcome addition to the Best American series.”
—WASHINGTON POST

“An almost unheard-of diversity of tales absolutely sing in this superlative anthology of short speculative stories.”
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“The year’s most innovative and interesting. These are stories to take your breath away, to make you laugh, to bring you to despair, to give you hope, to creep you out, and even to break your heart.”
—BOOKLIST, starred review

LOOKING BACK AT PREVIOUS EDITIONS . . .

“Dystopic, sometimes darkly humorous collection of twenty hard-hitting stories feels timely.”
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Intellectually demanding . . . a very elite, highly curated . . . set of primal, classic-seeming tales from our past, present, and future.”
—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

“Stellar . . . An illuminating anthology for genre devotees and curious readers interested in exploring science-fiction and fantasy.”
—LIBRARY JOURNAL, starred review

VISIT JOHNJOSEPHADAMSBOOKS.COM TO DISCOVER MORE
Zero Bomb
M.T. Hill
Paperback / Ebook
ISBN: 978-1789090017
Titan, March 2019, 304 pgs

Zero Bomb is, at the outset, gently unusual and carefully elegant. It starts slowly, deliberately, capturing mood and moment in evocative lines, many of them gorgeous or poetic. Word choices and sentence structures work to build a complex, tightly energetic set-up. Once this is accomplished, the story flows, plunging Remi into strangeness and misery.

We meet Remi in a near-future England. The loss of his daughter, Martha, has wrecked him. He struggles to rebuild his life as a cycle courier, and the struggle is deeply introspective. The story focuses on moments of depressive and occasionally surreal beauty, filigreed with interesting science fictional ideas. Concepts of self, doubt, perception, and so on are thoroughly explored. And then the conspiracy begins.

Remi has strange encounters, mostly with strange characters, including a driverless car trying to run him over. And here the sense of Remi and his place in the story is similar to someone wading too deep in the ocean, where the tide rises and smashes and nearly drags you away. The read requires patience, as Remi floats or, more often, is pulled through the weird and the seemingly random. He spends considerable time mired in confusion, and the story swirls a while in that lingering depressive sensibility. Eventually, an offer is made: join the cause and you can see Martha again.

But there is much more to the story than this. What begins as depressive introspection becomes an innovative, complex, layered book, one which is best experienced fresh and unprepared. In other words, this
novel is best read without spoilers. There are a number of other reviews which lay out the book in a more forthcoming way. I submit that the jacket copy is intentionally opaque: a large part of enjoyment with this one comes from discovery, and from the surprising directions the narrative takes.

All the same, the jacket promises a “science fiction mystery that asks: what do we do when technology replaces our need to work?” The plot doesn’t function like a mystery and the question proposed is more of a set piece (or perhaps setting) than something the story attempts to thoroughly tackle. Remi’s England is a nation of automation and surveillance, and he is faced with the decision to join an organization which may be comprised of spies or anti-technology terrorists. At the heart of this story are relationships—especially the choices we make in them as individuals connected to other people—and our roles as people both within society and within families.

Zero Bomb is filled with commentary, irony, and symbolism. It’s intelligent; in fact, it’s probably working on levels that I don’t understand. This doesn’t entirely matter. It’s still a fascinating novel, one which goes to unexpected places; and it stands as very different from anything I’ve read in a long time.

Her Silhouette, Drawn in Water
Vylar Kaftan
Paperpack/ Ebook
ISBN: 978-1250221131
Tor.com publishing, May 2019, 112 pgs

The opening to Her Silhouette, Drawn in Water is immersive and intense. From the beginning the reader is thrust into the sensory experience of being a prisoner in a system of dank caves on some distant planet. Bee is trapped here, and she has no memory of how she ended up here or even why. She lives alone in the darkness with her lover Chela, a strong woman who is the better climber and spelunker. Chela’s memory isn’t damaged the way Bee’s is. But Chela is less than forthcoming about
their past, insisting that to remember is to hurt, and that they have to keep moving forward to survive.

What Bee does know is that she is a powerful psychic, perhaps one of the most powerful, and that her powers have been locked away as part of her imprisonment. As Bee and Chela argue with each other and work together, as they scrounge for food and ration their light, Bee slowly starts to doubt her lover—as well as herself. In doubting, she wonders if she can break free, not only of the prison planet, but of the lock keeping her powers at bay. Chela encourages her to stay, to make the most of the planet, and to love her the way she loves Bee. The more Bee wants to escape, the more desperate Chela becomes, certain Bee will get them killed.

The strength of the novella is in the language and the characters, not to mention occasionally captivating moments and gorgeous lines. Descriptions are wonderfully vivid, conversations are bright and real, and the characters feel like people you may know. The experiential nature of the narrative and Bee’s emotional journey are compelling, both providing more than enough reason to read this novella.

Roughly the second half of the story presents a shift, a kind of soft chord change. The general feeling of the narrative remains familiar but the personal complications deepen, the goals are new, and Bee is challenged in fresh ways. Obviously the story is a discussion on reality and perception. But thematically the narrative is more consistently a focus on relationships, especially the push and pull, the ways we give to each other and help each other. It’s also about healing and wholeness, growth. The way it unfolds is intimate, Bee’s personal diary in a sense, and is, in fact, arguably about personal journeys, their importance to one’s sense of unity and self, as well as their importance to the people close to us as well as the larger world around us.

Destroy All Monsters
Sam J. Miller
Hardcover / Ebook
ISBN: 978-0062456748
Solomon is crazy. Everyone says so, even him. Solomon sees dinosaurs in the trees. He sees pterodactyls in the sky. He sees magic everywhere. He’s also one of the two point-of-view characters in *Destroy All Monsters*.

When Solomon and Ash were younger, they experienced something which changed them both forever. Ash fell out of the treehouse, slammed her head on the ground, and woke up with no memory of what happened. Whatever it was potentially sharpened Solomon’s craziness, simultaneously blocking out his memory.

Now in high school, Ash grows more and more desperate to help her best friend. Solomon sleeps under bridges and disappears for days, only to return to tell her about “the other Ash, the one who is a princess.” Ash is caught between wanting to maintain the love and trust of her dearest friend, and doing the sorts of things that may be in his best interest, but which may jeopardize their friendship, such as calling child protective services. Meanwhile, she has her own clinical depression to deal with, as well as an escalating conspiracy of vandalism centering around students, which seems to grow in danger with each event.

In the world called Darkside, a different kind of conspiracy is bubbling. Othersiders—those who are not quite like the majority, those strange individuals with powers—are being harassed, beaten, and are sometimes even disappearing. The nearly-catatonic princess Ash may soon come under threat. Solomon must find out who is behind the rise in violence, despite his own powers never quite surfacing. He has to help save his people, save his dearest friend Ash, and somehow find a way to bring her back to full consciousness.

*Destroy All Monsters* is immediately tender, with an intimacy of friendship that is both startling and beautiful. The main characters have real-life problems, and the narrative never flinches. Even as a non-fantastic literary story about two kids struggling with high school, family, and the terrible events that can happen along the way, this book would be a marvel. Layered into this literary narrative is the fantastic. This layering
empowers what might otherwise be a “victim” character—Solomon—to become a hero in a parallel tale. Two protagonists, two overlapping narratives, two friends in a serious struggle to help each other and their worlds.

That alone is enough reason to read this book. But there’s more: there are moments of social commentary; there’s an ongoing dialog around otherness, paranoia, and persecution; there is the fact that the entire piece is a love letter to photography (and perhaps by extension, artistic expression). There’s a real sense of journey—a journey which incorporates some of the expected, but also holds a few truly lovely surprises. And there’s this theme of finding your own voice, your own vision, of discovering who the people around you really are; a theme which in some hands becomes sappy or trite, but in this narrative is played out wonderfully. Most surprisingly, through it all, through the trauma and violence and the struggle with reality, there is love, and I do mean the very best kinds of love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arley Sorg grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado. He studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in Oakland, and usually writes in local coffee shops. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he is an assistant editor at *Locus Magazine*. He’s soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.
Movie Review: June 2019
Carrie Vaughn  |  1952 words

Avengers: Endgame
Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo
Produced by Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures
April 28, 2019

Marvel movies are great at managing audience expectations. They know what their fans want, or at least what their fans think they want, and this turns out to be the key to both satisfying them and surprising them. The famous Snap in Infinity War, for example. (See my review: bit.ly/2GY7ksT) Part of the gut punch wasn’t the destruction; it was the hiccup in our narrative expectation: The heroes failed? They did, but the gut punch was tempered by knowledge that the sequel was on the way. How are they going to get out of this one?

In that sequel, I expected three hours of grim revenge bender. Turns out, the movies dispense with that in the first fifteen minutes. Our heroes gather, find where Thanos retreated, and launch to get the Gauntlet back in order to snap the universe back to where it should be. But it turns out Thanos used the Gauntlet a second time, to destroy the Infinity Stones. The heroes can’t use it to fix anything. So they kill him. Thor cuts his head right off like he should have done the first time.

Then a title card reads: Five Years Later.

All of you who wanted consequences for the Snap and didn’t want the damage reversed? There ya go. So now what?

We get a giant cross-time heist film with a cast of thousands. (I suggested to a friend that checking the IMDb cast list for the film would potentially deliver a lot of spoilers. He immediately went to check and reported back: “Everybody is in this. Everybody.” He wasn’t joking.) And it’s almost, almost a comedy. I certainly laughed a whole lot more than I was expecting.

Very nearly nothing I expected to happen happened. My predictions
didn’t just not come true, they were pretty much irrelevant. There wasn’t a clever puzzle to solve to put things right. The big gun on the mantle really was Scott Lang and the quantum realm and we really are just going to time travel it all.

The team decides the best way to fix what went wrong is to go back in time and intercept each Infinity Stone before Thanos acquires it. Dear Reader, when the stones appear on the holographic screen and it becomes clear that we really are going to revisit each movie in the series when they appear, I was in awe. The team splits up and actually, physically goes back to insert themselves in previous films, specifically *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Thor: The Dark World*, and *Avengers*. It turns out, during the Battle of New York, three Infinity Stones were in New York City all within a couple of miles of each other. How convenient! It’s almost like someone planned it this way.

No. Seriously. How far back did they plan this? If you told me that, back when they were filming *Avengers*, they took time to film the portions of *Endgame*—i.e. the exact same scenes but from the stealthy perspective of our time-traveling heroes, and a fanfic-level rendering of everything that happened in the immediate aftermath of Loki’s capture, including getting Robert Redford to play Pierce for just a few seconds a couple of years before he plays Pierce in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, I would believe you. This is the sort of thing that happens in sitcoms or certain famous episodes of *Star Trek: DS9*, not massive budget film series that have been going for a decade.

It’s like a clip show, but they had to make all the clips from scratch. It’s crazy.

Even with all this, the important thing in this movie isn’t the Rube-Goldberg time travel plot. ("What do you mean time travel isn’t like *Back to the Future*!") Scott Lang declares, during the explanation that handwaves away any damage our heroes might do to the timeline because quantum stuff, yanno.) It’s the character moments. This is full of character moments. The pairings when the team splits up are designed to give us character moments, both longed-for and unexpected. Tony and Steve finally reconcile. Rhodey and Nebula bond over their broken
bodies. Thor speaks to his mother moments before her death, and she immediately understands what is happening and gives Thor the pep talk he’s needed. Tony meets Howard Stark in the past and manages to reconcile with him, even though Howard doesn’t know what’s happening.

Really, this film is all about the fan service. You know, things that make the fans happy, whether or not it has anything to do with the story. This is fan service of the highest order, watching older cynical Cap fight his younger idealistic non-swearing self (“This is bullshit!” future, swearing Cap declares) for possession of the Mind Stone.

Turns out it’s also a pretty good story. The MCU always seems to have its cake and eat it too.

(My very favorite bit of fan service is when Cap deftly takes Loki’s staff from Agent Sitwell, in a recreation of the brilliant elevator scene from Winter Soldier, by leaning in to whisper “Hail Hydra” to him. This is clearly a poke in the eye of the storyline from the comics a few years ago that insisted Cap was always Hydra, no really. Naw, he was just fooling with you.)

There’s a point in the final battle where all the women form up: Valkyrie, Okoye, Shuri, Nebula, Gamora, Mantis, Wanda, Carol Danvers, Pepper Potts in her own power suit, and yes I cheered, even knowing that scene was arranged precisely to get people like me to cheer.

You want fan service? Our heroes get to kill Thanos twice. Time travel, kids!

Time travel means I keep asking the questions, What did they know? How much did they set up? How much of this was preordained? On both a story level and a meta-level, I’m asking this. Dr. Strange knew. He gave Thanos the Time Stone because that steered the timeline toward the only possible route to victory. Dr. Strange gave Thanos the Time Stone because, in a sense, it had already happened. When Bruce Banner travels back to the Battle of New York to get the Time Stone from the Ancient One, he convinces them to hand it over by saying that Dr. Strange had already handed it over. The Ancient One blinks in surprise. Really? Well, all right then, since it’s going to already have happened.
Time travel: Don’t think about it too hard, you will hurt yourself.

About halfway through *Infinity War*, Captain America states what I think could be the theme of the entire MCU series. “We don’t trade lives,” he says with the flat determination that is his trademark, that should be goofy as hell but Chris Evans somehow makes the character so earnest and believable that we all get weak in the knees and vow to follow him anywhere. The moment you start making those calculations, of how many lives you can sacrifice for the so-called greater good, as Thanos does, you have undermined your ideals and made yourself a villain. But Steve Rogers, Captain America, is wrong. Everybody, every single person in the universe, gets to trade one life to save many: their own.

That’s Thanos’s mistake: He’s never willing to trade his own life because of his own narcissistic insistence that he’s the only one who has the universe’s best interests at heart (one wonders what his standards are). I didn’t predict which ones would make that trade in *Endgame*. Clint tries, but Natasha beats him to it. Cap already did, back in 1945. And that leaves us Tony Stark, Iron Man, who started out this whole franchise. Who, when we look back, has been trying to trade his life for the greater good all along, he just never succeeded until now.

Dr. Strange saw Tony’s death. He saved Tony from Thanos in order to doom him in the future. Did Tony figure it out? If it was all preordained, can it really be a surprise?

In the same way, Bucky must have known that Steve Rogers wasn’t coming back from that last mission, and I’m pretty sure Steve told him exactly why—he’s staying in the past to make a life with Peggy Carter (SO MUCH FAN SERVICE). Bucky wasn’t surprised, there at the end. Neither was anyone else, when they took a moment to think about it. Steve Rogers himself hands the shield over and anoints the next Captain America: It is Sam Wilson, Falcon, and the moment is full of hope and love and not born from tragedy, which may not be what I expected but is exactly right. A lot of the movie is like that. I really didn’t think Cap would get a happy ending, but he does. And maybe Tony does too. He was never sure what his life really meant. Now he does.

Not satisfying: Natasha also chose to trade her life, and her death feels
inevitable but also anticlimactic. And Thor—the series seems a little too taken with the comic doofus Thor of Ragnarok, and we’re missing the God of Thunder who emerged from that story. He’s grown and learned and changed and is generous. But now he’s the big jock who’s abdicated all his responsibility and that doesn’t feel like the right arc for him.

And then there’s the time travel. I’m just not going to think about it because it hurts my skull.

My hope is that the MCU will move forward now, and not feel a need to dip back into these past stories—this movie seems to have pushed that self-referencing as far as it can possibly go. But I think I may be done trying to predict anything.

I suspect we don’t yet have a filmic language to really talk about what the MCU is doing. To be still knocking it out of the park twenty-plus films in means the project is different than simply making a series of movies. The MCU is no longer about creating discreet pieces of cinematic art and hasn’t been for a long time now. It’s about the relationships with its fans, and building up a rabid loyalty in those fans. It’s about becoming one of the highest grossing films of all time in the first five days. So yes, at one level, it’s all about the money.

The miracle here is that the MCU wouldn’t be able to claim those relationships, that loyalty, that box office take, if it didn’t tell such reliably good stories with such likable characters that fulfills its fans’ expectations. Other franchises have tried, but they always fall down on the storytelling. How do we talk about something so blatantly commercial that also has so much heart? The MCU succeeds at everything, it seems. I’m torn between sitting back and enjoying the ride and being suspicious of being so skillfully manipulated.

So what’s next, for the MCU? No more predictions. We’ll just have to see what happens next.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Vaughn’s latest novels include the post-apocalyptic murder mystery, Bannerless, winner of the Philip K. Dick Award, and its sequel, The Wild Dead. She
wrote the *New York Times* bestselling series of novels about a werewolf named Kitty, along with several other contemporary fantasy and young adult novels, and upwards of 80 short stories, two of which have been finalists for the Hugo Award. She’s a contributor to the Wild Cards series of shared world superhero books edited by George R. R. Martin and a graduate of the Odyssey Fantasy Writing Workshop. An Air Force brat, she survived her nomadic childhood and managed to put down roots in Boulder, Colorado. Visit her at carrierevaughn.com.
Interview: Cadwell Turnbull
Christian A. Coleman | 4076 words

Cadwell Turnbull is a graduate from North Carolina State University’s Creative Writing MFA in Fiction and English MA in Linguistics. He attended Clarion West 2016. Turnbull’s short fiction has appeared in The Verge, Lightspeed, Nightmare, and Asimov’s Science Fiction. His short story “Loneliness is in Your Blood” was selected for The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2018. His novelette “Other Worlds and This One” was also selected as notable story for the anthology. The Lesson is his debut novel.

Congratulations on your debut novel! What’s it like having your first book out there in the world?

Well, it isn’t out there yet, but I imagine it will be a surreal experience. Right now, responses to the novel have been trickling in and they’ve been mostly positive. That has been very validating as a writer. I tend to look at my work and see all the things wrong and how far I still have to go at developing my craft, but the responses so far have forced me to take more pride in where I am instead of just pushing the bar up even further. I mean, that’ll happen inevitably, but it feels good to bask in the moment.

I also feel very vulnerable. This is a novel rooted in place and so much of it is personal. I know all writers must feel this way, but it truly is an extension of myself and it feels like I’m putting it out there to be poked and prodded. On one hand, that’s terrifying, but on the other hand, it feels like a deep and valuable connection I’m sharing with anyone that reads the book. I think that connection is worth the anxiety that comes with it.

In The Lesson, super-advanced aliens called the Ynaa have landed in
St. Thomas. For the most part, they’re benevolent, but their violent and deadly outbursts against the Virgin Islanders have strained their relationship. And when a young boy dies at the hand of an Ynaa, well, things really go south for the three families at the center of the conflict. How did the premise come together for you?

There are so many smaller answers to this question. Writing feels like alchemy—a bunch of elements coming together, transformed by each addition—and so much of it is blind searching. It is hard to retrace steps. I can say that the germ of the idea came from a dream I had. The dream was about aliens that had integrated into our society. They looked exactly like us but responded to threats with extreme brutality. Of course, there are tons of parallels to this in our world, but I didn’t think about that at the time. I just thought it was cool. The critique of power and commentary on colonialism came much later; the original dream wasn’t set in the Virgin Islands at all.

The first story I wrote pulled together some of these themes, but not all of them. In graduate school, I wrote what eventually became Derrick’s chapter “Let Them Talk.” It was different then, but had the cultural context and the beginnings of the colonialism parallel. I liked the world, so I wrote more stories in it. It was my MFA advisors who told me that it was a novel (something I resisted for a while). It became increasingly difficult to ignore that there was a bigger story there; it just kept coming to me.

The chapter about Lee, Derrick’s sister, was also an important chapter in the story. From her chapter, I started thinking about her classmate, Tony, and his family, and that opened another room. It was all like that, rooms opening up, me going inside them, looking around, finding something interesting there. Each room revealed something about the characters but also something about the larger ideas I was trying to understand (that I’m still grasping at, to be honest).

Your short story “A Third of the Stars of Heaven,” which came out
in *Lightspeed* in 2017 ([lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/third-stars-heaven](http://lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/third-stars-heaven)), appears as a chapter in the novel. Did the idea for the novel come first, making this story an exploration of the world you were building? Or did the short story come first and you decided to expand it into the novel?

That story came pretty late, but it was one that stood alone the best. I’d still not finished the novel but had dreams of doing so. By then, I knew it was part of something larger, but like I said before, that wasn’t always true. I approach a lot of work this way, breaking off pieces of something I suspect might be larger, but I’m not completely sure what that larger thing will look like.

The main characters in the short story are named Henrietta and Octavia. Are they nods to Henrietta Lacks and Octavia Butler?

Yes, absolutely. I learned about Henrietta Lacks while listening to an episode of *Radiolab*. The podcast told the story of an African American woman who died in 1951 of cervical cancer. They found out after her death that her tumor cells could reproduce and survive outside the body. Her cells went on to contribute to many major discoveries in modern medicine, but her identity had been obscured until very recently. It is a heartbreaking story, unsettling and complex. When doing research for the novel, I bought the book the podcast was based on: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis Trilogy* was a recommendation from my MFA professor and veteran speculative writer, John Kessel. He saw some parallels to her work in my novel and told me I should read the series right away. I learned that there were a lot of thematic and story parallels between that series and my novel. At first, I thought those similarities meant I had to go in another direction with the novel, but Kessel encouraged me to lean into the connections, honor them, and so I did. It became important to me to recognize that *The Lesson* was in the same
tradition as Butler’s novels.

Naming those characters Henrietta and Octavia served two purposes: It honored the two black women that contributed such a significant part of the spirit of the novel, but it also foreshadowed important plot points in the book. If you get the references, you know where the story is heading.

Aha! I definitely got the Butler vibes and see why your novel is compared to her work. *The Lesson* has also been compared to Ursula K. Le Guin’s work. How has their work (or which of their works) inspired your novel?

Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy (or *Lilith’s Brood*), as I’ve said, is a direct inspiration. Butler’s work is just brilliant, and those books have become some of my favorite works of science fiction. I’ve since read many short stories from her and they are some of the best pieces of fiction I’ve ever read.

Everything Le Guin has written has inspired me, in direct and indirect ways. My anthropological approach comes from Le Guin. I like looking at how events or revelations affect culture. I’m more Earth-bound in my own work, but the same impulse is there. Another thing that comes from Le Guin is the empathy I try to apply to all my characters. This is something I learned from reading her work. Every Le Guin novel or story I’ve read is filled with complex characters that she explores with tender care. My favorite novel from her, *The Dispossessed*, has a protagonist that is deeply flawed, but also beautifully rendered and sympathetic. He feels like a full human. I wanted, with this book, to create characters that felt fully human, no matter their decisions, no matter their background. Whether or not I succeeded is one thing, but that striving comes directly from reading Le Guin.

I just want to add something here, too: These authors are very well known among speculative writers. But for me, where I was from, reading them was like entering a whole new universe. These authors weren’t
presented to me growing up in the Virgin Islands, so finding their work felt like true discovery, life-changing, reality-forming. I’m grateful I found them when I did. It feels like luck to me.

What are some of your favorite first-contact stories and why? (They can be novels, short stories, TV series, comics, films, etc.)

“The Matter of Seggri” by Ursula Le Guin. It is about an isolated planet that’s not ours. The inhabitants meet representatives from a federation of worlds for the first time. The story takes place over centuries, exploring how the society of that planet changes. Some of that change may have happened anyway, but it is interesting to see how an alien presence may have influenced some of that change. I’m speaking vaguely about it because I really don’t want to spoil it. That story is a thing of beauty that everyone should read.

Annihilation (novel and film) also comes to mind. The strangeness of meeting something alien is captured so well in both the novel and the adaptation, though they are very different.

Stargate SG-1 is filled with first contacts, and I love them all. I also love the show’s spin-offs (and the original movie that kicked it all off). Stargate was more formative to me as a teenage kid than either Star Trek or Star Wars. I have critiques of the militarism of Stargate, but I still love that show and will watch reruns of my favorite episodes whenever I can.

Liu Cixin’s The Remembrance of Earth’s Past Trilogy has to be on this list. It is an immensely ambitious work and it pulls off so much of what it sets out to do. Plus, the concept of the dark forest is impossible to forget and not be disturbed by. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, you’ll just have to read the series. I can’t spoil that for anyone.

Oh, and District 9! And Attack the Block! I’m missing things, I’m sure, but I’ll stop there.

Reading The Lesson, I realized this may be the first time I’ve read a
first-contact story that takes place in the Caribbean. Tell us why you wanted to set the novel in St. Thomas.

I had to. So often, the assumption is that aliens would be interested in the US mainland or some other supposed center of the world. I wanted a story with aliens that arrived in the place that was the center of my world for so long. I justified it in a number of ways, but the desire came first.

Dominant-culture first-contact stories aren’t really interested in drawing parallels to our own history of oppression. We don’t see a liberation of people of color from the vestiges of colonialism after the aliens are defeated. When we beat back the aliens in those stories, the lesson is that we are all in this together; we’re supposed to focus on our common humanity. But no time is spent exploring exactly what that means for the people that have been subjugated by human empire.

I imagine when the natives of what would become the US Virgin Islands first saw Spanish ships on the horizon, they would feel a similar sense of dread as when the Ynaa arrive in the novel. Similarly, the peoples of the west African coast have a lot more to say about first contact than the dominant cultures we typically get these stories from. The Caribbean is built on colonialism, so that history immediately comes to bear when aliens show up. Being the playground of empire for so long, an invasion in the Caribbean prepares a different discussion—not of human triumph, but of cycles of violence and extraction and the collective toll it takes on people that are used to picking up the pieces of themselves afterward.

One of your main characters, Derrick, says that the Ynaa “arrived” to St. Thomas rather than saying they “invaded” like the other Virgin Islanders do. But since you include portions of the island’s history in the novel, it seems like the arrival of any life form is actually an occupation.

Derrick has been taught by popular media to see aliens as either
openly aggressive or comfortably benevolent. He interprets the Ynaa presence through this lens and doesn’t really learn that this is a mistake until later in the novel.

The Ynaa presence doesn’t look like invasion. They don’t plant a flag and they have no intention of taking over. But their cultural disposition, along with their presence, creates conflict. They don’t watch their feet, which is typical of beings with superiority complexes. They have not teased out any of the implications of their mere presence in the Virgin Islands.

Derrick is young, so he doesn’t quite figure out the problem here, either. He spends most of the novel confused by the incongruity between the Ynaa’s stated intentions and the actual outcomes of their presence.

Entering any new space with a power imbalance in your favor is an act of invasion, and staying there even when your presence creates conflict is occupation. It is worse when you’re not even trying to reckon with that reality. This is true of the Ynaa. Derrick is caught up in an intent versus reality debate in his own mind. He says they arrive, but if you read his actions throughout the novel, it is clear that on some level he knows that is a self-justification for wanting to be near the Ynaa. He wants their presence there to have metaphysical meaning. He is constantly disappointed that they don’t meet that expectation.

There’s the through-line of the alien occupation being compared to the history of colonialism on St. Thomas. Would you also say that the hurricanes, especially Hurricane Irma, would count as an occupation on par with the Ynaa’s?

This is a wonderful observation and comparison. The Ynaa do, in fact, act like a hurricane. They arrive, cause devastation, and then leave. The results are similar, too. The Virgin Islands are left picking up the pieces. I had not considered that parallel while writing, but I think it is something that exists in the consciousness of anyone from the Caribbean used to living through hurricane seasons.
In your *Nightmare Magazine* essay “A Conspiracy of Monsters” (bit.ly/2L4hXye), you write about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and how the writing in both shows overlooks the connection between the presence of monsters in the human world and power. Did you have this in mind—monstrosity coupled with power—while writing about the Ynaa in St. Thomas?

Yes. The Ynaa have convinced themselves that monstrosity is a protective measure. Worse is that it has been proven so effective so far in their existence. Ruthlessness has also rewarded our own superpowers. But this behavior also perpetuates conflict. I don’t know if the Ynaa will ever learn that. So far, they’ve remained on top, so they’ll justify their ideology for as long as it will work. I don’t know if we’ll learn either.

You also wrote in that essay that the presence of something monstrous in St. Thomas would be overlooked by the media—mostly media from the US mainland—because of the island’s population of 50,000 mostly Black Americans. Do you think this would be the case if first contact were to happen there?

Yes, or downplayed, especially if it benefits the powers that be. I am sure the United States would be trying to figure out how defeat an alien threat, but they wouldn’t act on it for as long as the violence stays contained in the US Virgin Islands.

I just recently went back home and saw that the local junior high school I went to has been closed down. The junior high is currently sharing facilities with the local high school I graduated from. They built modular units on the high school’s sports field to house the influx of students, which of course upset the high school students since that’s where many of their extracurriculars take place. The Virgin Islands is still recovering from Hurricanes Irma and Maria, but throughout the process, I haven’t heard any news beyond what I gather from local newspapers. While Hurricane Irma was bombarding St. Thomas, all the news I got
from the mainland was about the upcoming landfall in Florida. It was like we weren’t even American citizens.

The Ynaa themselves would be very interesting to the rest of the world. But us? I’m afraid we’d be a footnote in our own story.

Let’s talk about the main Ynaa character, Mera. She’s an ambassador conducting research on St. Thomas. She’s set up as an outsider not only among the humans but also among her fellow Ynaa, because she’s been among humans for hundreds of Earth years during what appears to be most of St. Thomas’s history. How did you come up with her character and why did you feel it was important to make her a double outsider?

Mera came out of the dream I mentioned. She was my very first real character. Everyone else came later. Of course, she changed along the way as the circumstances of the novel became clearer.

In several Le Guin stories, there are characters, typically envoys from her federation of worlds, that make contact with the natives of an isolated world. Their goal is often to learn how best to incorporate them into the federation (called the Ekumen in some of Le Guin’s novels and stories). These are peaceful missions, and so only a couple representatives at a time are sent to these worlds. These missions are also dangerous, since sometimes the natives will respond with hostility for their own political or ideological reasons. But often something else happens, too; the representatives find themselves altered by the society they enter into and they become double outsiders, tied to this new world they’ve come to love, but also still connected to the world(s) and concerns they’ve left behind. Sometimes they will spend the rest of their lives on these new worlds.

Mera isn’t on a diplomatic mission. Her objective is research. But when her research bears fruit, she is thrust into that role. The Ynaa are not as considerate as the Ekumen, so she finds herself in the middle, unable to act too aggressively in defense of the humans, but also unable
to connect to her own society. For most of the novel, she stays in that middle space, until she is jarred out of it by circumstances outside of her control.

I find that I am attracted to these kinds of characters because of my own lived experience. Growing up in the Virgin Islands but getting my college education in the States, I’ve spent the last decade jumping between very different cultural experiences and feel like that has placed me in a similar middle space. I often feel like a double outsider. My idea of what is familiar keeps shifting, and I find that I’m constantly trying to bring together these very different experiences. Like Mera, I learn and make choices, but it only shifts my outsideness; it doesn’t make it disappear.

Mera and the other Ynaa have these smart cells called reefs, which are really cool—and equally terrifying—as biotechnology. The Ynaa can command them to do what they want, and they’re transferrable between species. Where did the idea for reefs come from?

The reefs act like a contagion able to hack other systems on a microscopic level. Some of that may have been inspired by the Replicators in *Stargate SG-1*. They’re self-replicating machines that build themselves from technology they come in contact with.

Some of the idea was inspired by cancer and how it spreads throughout the body. Viruses were also an obvious inspiration. My biggest inspiration, however, were mollusks. Inside of the body, the reefs act like smart-cells with hacking capabilities, but outside of the body, they act more like smart-shells able to construct large-scale structures. I loved the idea of a multipurpose piece of technology that forms the building blocks of the entire Ynaa civilization. It’s simple, but the implications are far-reaching.

In one of the meta moments of the novel, Tony’s brother, Shawn, is initially stoked about the Ynaa and thinks there would be movies
made about this historical moment. In fact, he thinks, “They would have to make a whole new genre.” Do you see *The Lesson* as a book that’s starting a new genre? And if so, what would it be?

I think *The Lesson* fits pretty snugly in the first contact tradition, but I’d be just as stoked as Shawn if I lived in the universe of the novel. For a little while anyway.

While we’re on the topic of genre, what’s your take on the tired literary fiction vs. speculative fiction argument? Is it even worth having anymore? One of the characters, Jackson, teaches post-invasion fiction at the University of the Virgin Islands, and there’s this part about how the literary community is struggling to keep up with the distinctions between conventional and speculative fiction because of the fiction that references the Ynaa invasion.

I’m sort of low-key praying something truly speculative happens in our world so that this debate can die. An invasion would do it, but I won’t wish that on us. I’m just saying some of these separations are already quite arbitrary (see: conversations around magical realism), but they could get even more arbitrary with the creation of sentient AI or the discovery of extraterrestrial life. What would we call novels on those subjects then?

We can’t end our conversation about *The Lesson* without mentioning that it’s been optioned by AMC. So cool that your first published novel is getting this kind of attention! What was your reaction when you found out?

Mostly disbelief. I’m still pretty much in that mode. I really hope it gets made, but I know that’s out of my hands, so I’ve been managing expectations. But it was wonderful to get that news. So much of this experience has been surreal. When I got that news, it was very hard to
wrap my head around it. I’d been publishing short stories before this novel, and not many. I was not prepared at all.

**What can you tell us about it?**

So far, not much. It is in early development. I’ll likely know more later in the year? News trickles in very slowly.

**In the meantime, what’s the next writing project or projects you can tell us about?**

I’m working on another novel: *No Gods, No Monsters*. It is due to the publisher in the fall, so I’ve been hustling to get it done. I’ve pitched it as a modern retelling of the civil rights movement but with monsters. There are some standard variety pop-culture monsters in it—werewolves and vampires and magic-users—but there are also some monsters pulled in from Caribbean folklore, too. And gods, of course.

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**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER**

Christian A. Coleman is a 2013 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers’ Workshop. He lives and writes in the Boston area. He tweets at @coleman_II.
NIGHTMARE MAGAZINE
gives me such a fright.
Every dark tale is a gruesome delight.
But I'll not dissemble; I'll be forthright—
for I, your narrator,
have but one plight:

It is my dearest hope
that you just
might...
Author Spotlight: Deji Bryce Olukotun
Alex Puncekar | 778 words

This is a story about hard choices and, more importantly, gathering evidence and coming to an educated conclusion. What drew you to write this story?

Space exploration conjures up awe and excitement, but it’s also about making hard choices, especially once we leave the solar system. Because of my human rights background, I was interested in knowing what our absolute red lines would be if we were trying to save our species from extinction. What would we agree never to do in deep space? What line would we never cross? So I told the story from the point of view of people who created the line, and those who were living on the other side of it. Here on Earth we decided that we would not tolerate certain acts. We had also agreed not to allow any one country to claim property in space, but that shifted five years ago once we gained the technical capability and private space companies became viable. Now it’s grab what you want. If we’re willing to shift our behavior in space so easily when we can still live on Earth, what will happen when we can easily move among the stars?

Steward Mafokeng is a delightful character, someone who you just want to see succeed because she’s doing the right thing. Alternatively, Hutchins is that antagonist that you just love to hate, and perfect at being a rival to Mafokeng. What made them the perfect pairing for this story?

They’re both members on an interplanetary council that has a mission to save humanity. Each is charged with helping to protect and steward a ship carrying passengers who will populate new worlds. Mafokeng comes from a powerful and wealthy African family that is ashamed of a colossal mistake she made that led to the explosion of her ship. Hutchins
is the opposite—a bureaucrat reveling in his political power under the guise of generosity. But I wanted each of them to speak truthfully.

“Between the Dark and the Dark” touches on the idea of the wrongful killing of others based upon cultural differences, namely the act of cannibalism. Why was cannibalism the center of this difference? It’s such an interesting topic to explore using space and starships as its backdrop.

Cannibalism is terrifying, especially when it’s related to sadistic pleasure. That perversity is why it’s the subject of so many television shows and movies. But if you dig a little deeper into history, you’ll see that it often cropped up in cultures around the world—from Europe, to Asia, to Africa, and the Americas—not for titillation but for some religious or cultural importance. A deep and captivating look into this practice is the late professor Inga Clendinnen’s profile of the Aztecs. The Aztecs did not practice cannibalism or human sacrifice out of spite or pure evil—it was folded into their immensely complex culture.

In a spacefaring culture where food and nutrients would be absolutely vital to survival of the entire crew, perhaps we’d find that the extreme isolation would awake ancient modes of organizing our society. But mimicking the Aztecs or some other culture wouldn’t be realistic in a highly technical culture. So I thought about what practices might evolve if you combined the two.

At the end of your story, you thank Professors Steven Desch and Steve Ruff at Arizona State University and the Center for Science and Imagination. How did they help you craft this piece?

I’m a Future Tense Fellow at ASU and New America, which connected me to both professors, who generously shared some ideas with me. This is huge because I’m not a scientist. Professor Desch helped me understand some of the finer points of telemetry and deep space
communication, and Professor Ruff explained why radiation is such a
difficult problem that is often overlooked by space travel enthusiasts. I
won’t give away the ending, but his insights formed the heart of the
story.

What’s next for you? Any future projects you’d like to talk about?

I’ve been developing a concept for a new story that I’m pretty excited
about. It’s no secret that Michael Crichton’s writing inspires me, so my
next project will be in that vein of writing—although hopefully updated
for the times we live in and my own multicultural background. This is
how I like to work—scratch out some ideas, learn as much as I can, talk
to fascinating people, and then sit down and write.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Alex Puncekar is a writer, game designer, and editorial assistant for both
Lightspeed and Nightmare. His fiction has appeared in Aphelion: The Webzine of
Science Fiction and Fantasy and Jenny Magazine. He lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. Follow him on Twitter @AlexPuncekar.
Author Spotlight: Isabel Cañas
Jude Griffin | 609 words

How did this story come about?

The best thing about my day job (I am a PhD student of medieval Turkish literature) is how my work constantly refills my creative well. While researching a paper back in 2017, I stumbled across an article that catalogued common narremes in medieval Persian fairy tales. Some of the tropes were familiar to me, such as evil stepmothers, Cinderella stories, and romances beginning with love at first sight. Others surprised me. Three in particular caught my imagination: a girl wandering into an abandoned castle in the desert, a crow with rubies for eyes, and a prince trapped in enchanted sleep, his body pierced with thousands of needles.

Can you talk about why you started the story where you did?

Now, after having attended the Clarion West workshop, I spend a lot more time thinking about my beginnings and endings than I used to (for better or for worse!). When I sat down two years ago to string together these three images—the girl, the crow, and the needle prince—I relied on instinct. I hadn’t written a short story since high school, so when the line “a crow presides over its wares” popped into my mind, I snatched it from the air, pinned it to paper before it could flit away, and took it from there.

I had also recently read Roshani Chokshi’s The Star-Touched Queen, and was—and remain—incredibly inspired by her work. A magical bazaar hums at the heart of that novel, where it serves as both a portal to a magical world and a destination in itself. I was enchanted by how Chokshi painted her bazaar as a place that was at once enticing, capricious, and dangerous; it gleams like a ruby, but its edges are razor sharp. No one in Young Adult fantasy does atmosphere like her.
I could use a patience stone. Is this something you dreamed up?

Not at all. Unlike the more uncommon tropes that inspired “The Weight of a Thousand Needles,” the patience stone appears more frequently in fairy tales and popular literature originating from across the Persianate world. I first learned about them before I began my PhD, when I came across the novella *The Patience Stone* by the French-Afghan writer Atiq Rahimi. It had recently been adapted for film and boasted a striking new cover, and because I always judge books by their covers, I picked it up in a bookstore and began to page through it.

I don’t remember how long I crouched on the floor of the bookstore reading, but I was transfixed. I couldn’t move until I finished it. I felt like I had cheated the store by reading an entire book without buying it, so I guiltily bought another novel before leaving. I’ve since completely forgotten that second book, but the image of the patience stone stayed with me.

What else would you like readers to know about “The Weight of a Thousand Needles”?

One of the items that appears in the bazaar scene is an Easter egg that I have nestled into dusty corners of various other projects set in this same universe. Keep an eye out for it, but valued patron, please do not touch: object is cursed.

Any upcoming projects/news to share?

My story “No Other Life,” which features an Andalusian vampire in sixteenth-century Istanbul, is forthcoming from *Nightmare Magazine*. Aside from that, I have a lot of irons in the fire, but nothing to report just yet!
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, and photographer. She trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo; was a volunteer EMT, firefighter, and HAZMAT responder; worked as a guide and translator for journalists covering combat in Central America; lived in a haunted village in Thailand; ran an international frog monitoring network; and loves happy endings. Bonus points for frolicking dogs and kisses backlit by a shimmering full moon.
What ideas or sources of inspiration went into this story?

When my grandmother passed away in 2016, I had to go through her belongings and choose which items to take away with me. It’s very strange looking through someone’s things without their permission like that, especially if it’s someone you think you know very well. There were items I came across—family oddments and photographs—that made me wish I’d known her a little better as a person, or asked more questions when I had the chance. That feeling of having to piece together someone you love after the fact, when they’re no longer around to provide context, was a major inspiration.

I love how many layers this story has to it: responsibility, discovery, community, being outcast. If you had to pinpoint the message at the core of the story, or the one you’d most want a reader to take away, what would it be?

Thank you! I suppose the main thread is that we all have something unique and valuable to offer the world. From the beginning, Gwinaelle isn’t sure what she can contribute to her community—what her book should be about—and it’s the same for any creative person trying to art nowadays. “What have I got to say? How is it different from what anyone else is saying?” Gwinaelle finds a purpose in being the bridge between the old world and the new, which is something only she can offer at that time.

I’d love it if a reader could take that sense of hope and purpose with them, and remember it on days when the news cycle grinds them down.

The descriptions of harvesting are so delightfully gruesome and
visceral. I imagine there must have been some fascinating research involved in the process. Anything particularly interesting you’d like to share with us?

For the different uses of body parts, I turned to my writing group for help and they came up with some fantastic stuff. Using brains for tanning was a favourite, as was creating soap from fat and lye. Most of the time, it was an exercise in how gross I could make my descriptions!

But it made sense to me that these post-apocalyptic people would recycle anything they could. It’s the exact opposite of our throw-away culture, our single-use plastic. We must completely change our ways if we want to protect our planet. We have to crank our “make-do-and-mend” dial up to eleven. Hopefully we’ll never go so far as eating each other, but it was fun to think about our bodies in practical terms, as a sustainable resource.

What was the hardest part of this story to write—or, conversely, the part that brought you the most joy?

The easiest and most fun part was all the gore. Everything else—the structure, the emotional connections, the mystery of the ghosts—all of that was really hard. Some quite drastic changes happened in those areas over multiple drafts, thanks to a small army of crit partners.

The yucky stuff, though—that stayed.

What’s next for you? Any cool projects in the works?

I have a Gothic novelette called “Strange Uncertain Light” forthcoming in the July/August 2019 issue of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction! I’m really proud of it and I hope people will check that out. Right now, I’m working on a novel.
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Nibedita Sen is a queer Bengali writer, editor and gamer from Calcutta. A graduate of Clarion West 2015, her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Podcastle, Nightmare, Fireside and The Dark. She helps edit Glittership, an LGBTQ SFF podcast, enjoys the company of puns and potatoes, and is nearly always hungry. Hit her up on Twitter at @her_nibsen.
“Unpublished Gay Cancer Survivor Memoir” is a very self-referential title. Did you know all along that this would be the title or did it come to you later, once the story was finished?

Actually the original title of the piece was “The Night Nurse,” but my critique group at the time cheerfully slammed that for being too boring, and it’s good they did, because this title is better.

This story has an interesting take on the idea of a muse, in that it seems more like a confidence boost rather than an aid to creation. When tackling this bit of well-worn mythology, why was that the direction you chose to branch into?

I think I just like looking at classically female monsters who are most powerful as objects of male desire and writing them as dudes instead. Seems like a weird thing to fixate on, but here I am.

Is fostering confidence something you use in your own creative process or something you wish you were better at?

Being a publishing writer requires a certain amount of inherent arrogance—on at least some level, you believe your work is better than the rest of the slush pile and deserves to be read. But you’ll need that arrogance to sustain you through the years of rejection and apathy headed your way. I have a toddler, a marriage, and a menial full-time job, so my “creative process” mostly looks like carving out what writing time I can at erratic intervals, then feeling frustrated with myself for not having the energy to turn out anything good. Hopefully this situation will improve as my kid gets a little older and more independent!
Escape from an abusive relationship is the conflict that drives the events of this story, even though the main character is only peripherally involved in that relationship. Which came first, the situation or the character? Can you tell us about how they evolved together?

Edík came first. I must have three different opening versions of this story, all with Edík as the narrator and primary character. But for whatever reason it didn’t click, so I just left it alone for like five years, and then when I came back to it Sydney happened instead. This is almost more of a play—just three characters, all the action takes place in one room. It’s a little claustrophobic, but I think that worked for this one.

Edík tells Sydney she would have solved her own problem eventually. Is that another way to help build her confidence, or a lack of confidence on his part? Does the muse need a muse?

I think Edík’s mostly placating her. He seems like someone who has gotten very good at saying what other people want to hear. But on the other hand, most people have highs and lows, and it seems doubtful to me that without Edík’s interference Sydney would have maintained a static and unhappy existence for the rest of her life.

What are you working on now and where can readers find more of your work?

Nothing I can talk about, and, I guess by googling my name? I’m not trying to be flip, I’m just not enough of a thing to have a website, and I dropped all social media a couple years ago, so there isn’t really a centralized place you can see my stuff. Nightmare has published more of my work than anyone else, though, so I guess you could start there! I hope you like sad queers and low-key weird shit, ’cause that’s my jam.
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Coral Alejandra Moore has always been the kind of girl who makes up stories. Fortunately, she never quite grew out of that. She writes because she loves to invent characters and the desire to find out what happens to her creations drives her tales. She is a 2013 alum of the Viable Paradise writer’s workshop and she has been published by Diabolical Plots, Zombies Need Brains, and Secrets of the Goat People. Currently she lives in the beautiful state of Washington with the love of her life and a dangerously smart Catahoula Leopard Dog where she rides motorcycles, raises chickens, and drinks all the coffee.
Coming Attractions
The Editors | 200 words

Coming up in July, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We have original science fiction by Violet Allen (“The Null Space Conundrum”) and Andrew Penn Romine (“Miles and Miles and Miles”), along with SF reprints by Karen Lord (“The Mysteries”) and Indrapramit Das (“The Moon Is Not A Battlefield”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Senaa Ahmad (“Ahura Yazda, The Great Extraordinary”) and Adam-Troy Castro (“Sand Castles”), and fantasy reprints by J. Anderson Coats (“Mother Carey’s Table”) and Micah Dean Hicks (“Song Beneath the City”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out.

• • • •

Looking ahead beyond next month, we’ve got a veritable plethora of stories forthcoming. We’ve got work from the following authors coming up over the next couple of issues: Dominica Phetteplace, Rajan Khanna, E. Lily Yu, Yoon Ha Lee, Scott Sigler, and Brooke Bolander.

So be sure to keep an eye out for all that reading goodness in the months to come. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Lightspeed*. Thanks for reading!
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The Editors

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(about 240,000 words of fiction, plus assorted nonfiction), and will cost you just $23.88 ($12 off the cover price).

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Support Us on Patreon or Drip, or How to Become a Dragonrider or Space Wizard

The Editors

If you’re reading this, then there’s a good chance you’re a regular reader of *Lightspeed* and/or *Nightmare*. We already offer ebook subscriptions as a way of supporting the magazines, but we wanted to add an additional option to allow folks to support us, thus we’ve launched a Drip (d.rip/john-joseph-adams) and a Patreon (patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams).

TL;DR Version

If you enjoy *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* and my anthologies, our Patreon and Drip pages are a way for you to help support those endeavors by chipping in a buck or more on a recurring basis. Your support will help us bring bigger and better (and more) projects into the world.

Why Patreon and Drip?

There are no big companies supporting or funding the magazines, so the magazines really rely on reader support. Though we offer the magazines online for free, we’re able to fund them by selling ebook subscriptions or website advertising.

While we have a dedicated ebook subscriber base, the vast majority of our readers consume the magazine online for free. If just 10% of our website readers pledged just $1 a month, the magazines would be doing fantastically well. So we thought it might be useful to have an option like Drip and Patreon for readers who maybe haven’t considered supporting the magazine, or who maybe haven’t because they don’t have any desire to receive the ebook editions—or who would be glad to pay $1 a month, but not $3 (the cost of a monthly subscriber issue of *Lightspeed*).
Though *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* are separate entities, we decided to create a single “publisher” Drip and Patreon account because it seemed like it would be more efficient to manage just one page on each platform. Plus, since I sometimes independently publish works using indie-publishing tools (as described above), we thought it would be good to have a single place where folks could come to show their support for such projects.

Basically, we wanted to create a crowdfunding page where, if you enjoy my work as an editor, and you want to contribute a little something to help make it easier for us to produce more cool projects, then our Drip or Patreon are the place to do that.

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**Thank You!**

If you’ve read this far, thanks so much. We hope you’ll consider becoming a backer on Patreon or Drip. Those URLs again are [d.rip/john-joseph-adams](d.rip/john-joseph-adams) and [patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams](patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams).

Thanks in advance for your time. We look forward to hopefully being able to make the magazines—and my other publishing endeavors—even
better with the support of people like you.
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