

THE FUTURE FRIE

SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBERFICTION

Issue 2026.77

ISSN: 1746-1839

Art by Leyelle M.G.



The Future Fire 2026.77

“Mi inspiración para luchar [...] siempre ha venido del agua: la protección por la vida, por cuidar lo que nos hace ser a nosotros quienes somos—hijas e hijos del río.”

(“My inspiration for resistance [...] has always come from the water: protection for life, for taking care of what makes us who we are—daughters and sons of the river.”)

— Yuvelis Morales Blanco
(2026 Goldman Environmental Prize Winner)

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The Future Fire (<http://futurefire.net/>) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Regina de Búrca, Valeria Vitale, and M.L. Clark; occasional guest editors Kathryn Allan, Emma Bridges, Fábio Fernandes and Lori Selke, and copyeditors Brian Olszewski and Hûw Steer.

ISSN: 1746-1839

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Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad



Sometimes revolutionary art, speculative or otherwise, is there to remind us that hope is a radical act, that we can—indeed *must*—still fight back, however overwhelming the world crumbling around us seems to be, however deafeningly the fascists, the colonialists, the billionaires and the polluters insist theirs is the only way. Dystopia teaches us to recognise the repressive tactics and rhetoric used against us; hopeful or escapist futures remind us that we're not alone and all is not yet lost. Sometimes we need clear visions and unambiguous role models.

But at the same time, some progressive speculative art is going to challenge any idea that there are easy answers, that we can ever stop questioning and examining both our goals and our methods. Are with, with our actions or

inaction, making the world a better place, or are we just observing, recording, learning, but not engaging or risking anything? Is it possible to wage war—militarily or otherwise—in a just way, with acceptable motivations, ethical conduct and responsible resolution and reconstruction? Even if not, would inaction or surrender be worse? And who gets to decide?

Speculative fiction can help us to ask these questions, even if it doesn't always give us the answers; arguably we should always be left to find our own answers, if the questions are asked well enough.

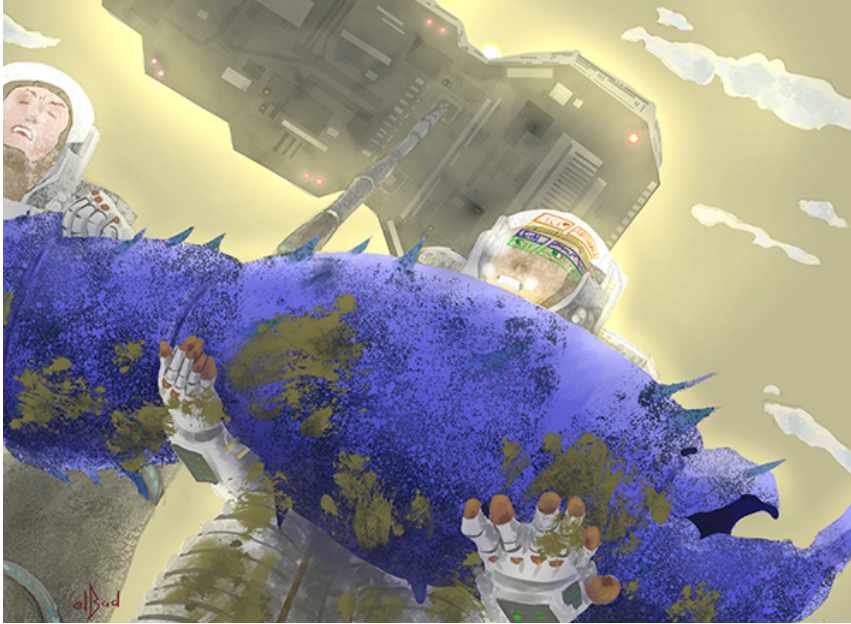
Djibril al-Ayad, September 2026

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog:

<http://press.futurefire.net/2026/09/new-issue-202677.html>

A New Shell

Mahaila Smith



Art © 2026, L.E. Badillo.

My knife scrapes the last strings of pale meat away from its armour. Through my helmet I can smell the rotting fish scent of Kepler Crab. Its shell is warped, like wet pages. The thorn-sharp spines along the edges are dark as cobalt, fading to a pale forget-me-not blue center freckled with black stars. My breath fogs the glass of my visor. “Ready?” Commander Hiram asks, and we nod. It takes all five of us, bending at the knee and lifting, as if we’re moving a piece of furniture. One of the claws is slung across my chest, and I’m trying to hold it under my chin. The feed inside my helmet shows my BPM and blood pressure ticking up as we walk the shell back to our ship.

All around the ground, desiccated fronds of seaweed and molluscs and bones get caught in the treads of our boots. Tiny beings that once skittered over the ebbs and groundswells, now crushed by our clumsy steps into fine white sand.

I try to ignore them. I've seen enough photos of the Great Barrier Reef at home to know when coral isn't coming back. Maybe you're judging me. Maybe you think you wouldn't kill another planet. But I promise you, you would drain another world's sea to save your own.

We're a cleanup crew, of sorts. After the mouth of the steel pipe descends through to the surface to suck out the seawater, like a rocket-sized siphon pump, we have a bit of time to collect the shells left behind, before the water droplets jelly back towards the planet's mass and rain down like golf balls, hard enough to knock you out.

The work reminds me of a beach, decades before, on the coast of Maine, walking with my grandmother, on the sand. The tide was out; I could see it in the distance, like a thin blue thread. We knelt down, covering our knees with pale sand. I looked at the grains covering the pads of my finger and imagined each was a tiny planet, housing creatures only I could hear. My grandma raked her hands through the beach, looking for moon-coloured sand dollars. She showed me how, if you broke one open, a flock of tiny doves flew out to nest on the sand.

It's rare to find a crab fully intact like this one. Most of the time other native fauna find them first, and we're left to pick up the pieces of pierced shells from the feathered crab flesh, sprayed across the former seabed.

When we climb aboard our ship, the crab is taken by the lab techs, wheeled on a trolley through the echoing halls. Our hold is full, and we are ready to fly home. I

plan to rest in stasis for the journey, but I'm not ready to lie down, yet. I dawdle around the galley with First Officer Reid, ripping open a bag of potato chips and letting the crisps spin up and away. Each of us floating to catch them, chewing with our mouths open.

When I was a kid, the ocean brimmed with waves of bright plastic. Broken pails and shovels. Gauzy bags like jellyfish. Bottle caps and vape pens. Broken condoms like mermaid's purses, yellowed and split open on the shore. We saw videos on TV of birds landing on floating islands of trash. Saw gulls building their nests out of zip ties and cellophane. Heard their bodies crunching with each step they took. Saw their bodies sliced open and spilling shards of lego bricks and fork tines.

The solution started with global bans and biodegradable plastics melted from the crabs, molluscs and fungi, until Earth's species were depleted. Then shortages everywhere. Not enough medical equipment in the hospitals. Water filters failing and making their owners sick. People begging to go back to petroleum-based polymers. I blame nostalgia for the bright silver wrappers and plastic action figures.

Kepler Crabs were first spotted by a rover toiling across Jupiter's moons. One was brought back from a mission on Io, as big as our biggest king crabs on Earth. Its shell was stripped and studied, cut into cross-sections and shipped across the country to every government lab and Ivy League. After analysis, it was determined that it was close enough to the chitin we were used to that our microorganisms could break it down at the end of a product's lifetime. But it was different in other ways. It was malleable, able to withstand intense pressure in open space as it scuttled between asteroids, searching for a

mate in new seas. Here was our plastic. Able to be formed and reformed into everything we needed.

I unscrew the lid of my water bottle and take a sip. Under the bright LEDs of the bridge, the clear blue cylinder sends spots of aquamarine along the rubber-treaded floor. Reminding me of the aquarium in my hometown.

I used to visit the octopus there, in a large glass case at the back. Her name was Ace. Sometimes you would see her curled in the corner, her skin mottled to a beige grey, rough like sand. Hiding behind swaying seagrass, eyestalks reaching towards the glass, looking for someone to spot her. Other times, if a jar was lowered into the tank, she would darken to deep fuchsia, jolting towards the surface to grab the glass with her tentacles, twisting the lid to scoop out the scrabbling treat inside.

I reminded myself about the other octopuses in the ocean. The wild ones swerving through the mess of spilled shipping containers, floating urinal mats, vacuum cleaner nozzles, bike helmets, and empty cups. The oil spills darkening the seafloor. This was for them, our new chitin stolen from the seas of distant worlds. To give the ones left a chance, a better one, at least, than we gave their ancestors.

Those Who Remember the Promise

Nissa Harlow



Art © 2026, Carmen Moran.

The boy and his dog are back again. He thinks I don't see him skulking around the edges of the phytomining grid. Maybe he doesn't even know I'm here. I stay inside and watch through the window. His dog doesn't worry me. But he does.

Yesterday, after they left, I walked the perimeter. There was no sign of their visit. If the dog left a mess, the boy picked it up. The last time I had a visitor with a canine companion, that wasn't the case.

The sun sets, and the boy and dog leave.

I know they'll be back.



There are no visitors to the phytomining grid today. I complete my rounds before noon. The next batch of arsenic hyperaccumulators is almost ready. Scans show a higher-than-normal yield. Harvest will begin in two days. The replacement seedlings wait in the greenhouse, but it's supposed to rain on the day I've scheduled for planting. I'll reschedule. I don't mind. The greenhouse always looks too empty after a batch planting.

The forecasted rainclouds have yet to appear. Instead, cirrus clouds streak overhead in shades of pink and gold as the sun sets upon the city. I lock the sight into memory.



The boy and his dog are back. They come close to the maintenance hut. I duck down so that, even if the boy peeks through the window, he won't be able to see me. The dog sniffs near the base of the door.

"What do you smell?" the boy asks. The hut grows a little darker as his shadow blocks the window. I stay very still. "Is there someone back there?"

The dog doesn't answer. I look at the door, staying pressed against the wall even though I know the hut is secure.

The boy gives up. The sun sets.



Today is a busy day. I begin harvesting at noon. The sun and warm air have dried away the dew. That will make processing faster. Once I harvest the scheduled batch, I take the plants to the desiccator and spread them on the drying trays.

The dog appears.

It bounds toward me, long tongue hanging out. I'm not bothered by it. But the boy follows close behind, walking between the rows of plants. He sees me.

"You're not authorized to be here," I say. "It's dangerous for you."

"It's not dangerous for you?" he asks.

I don't bother to answer.



The confused boy left with his dog. I finished setting up the plants for desiccation and started the machine. It's been running for almost twenty-three hours now, protected from the rain that's pelting from the clouds.

The seedlings sit safely in the greenhouse. I sit safely at the window and stare out at the silver sky. The city towers are aglow with lights glittering through raindrops. I want to keep this memory.

The boy and his dog don't come. I think about their previous visits while waiting for the rain to stop. They always look happy.

What is that like?



The rain stops around noon. I wait for the earth to absorb some of the excess moisture. Then I take the tray of seedlings out to the harvested plot. I've only gotten two of them into the ground when the dog runs up to me and tries to lick my face.

"Japheth!" the boy calls. "Sorry. He doesn't have very good manners."

I look up at the figure striding toward me. He shouldn't be here. But the soil is wet. He won't breathe it in. Still, I stand up and take a step back.

“Wait,” the boy says.

I wait.



His name is Wythe. I asked him why he kept coming into a restricted area. He didn't seem to understand the danger. I didn't explain. I just told him to leave. He shouted at Japheth and they both walked away. But he kept looking back at me. I finished planting half the seedlings before the sun set.

It's noon now. The rest of the seedlings were planted this morning. I sit in the hut and look at the dirt under my nails. I should've worn gloves. I don't know why I didn't.

My thoughts are occupied by Wythe and Japheth.



He didn't come yesterday. I told him not to, but I thought he might've disobeyed my command.

As sunset approaches, I walk to the seedlings. Most look healthy. But three are disturbed. One is flattened. I find paw prints pressed into the churned soil.

“Japheth?” I say. There's no response. Perhaps my voice is too quiet. So I make it louder. “Wythe?”

The phytomining grid is silent except for the softest whisper of a breeze through leaves. Normally, I like that sound. But today it seems lonely.

I go back to the hut as the sun slips over the horizon.



“Why is it dangerous?” Wythe asks. He stands five metres away, his fingers brushing the top of Japheth's head.

“Don't come closer,” I say.

"I won't. But I want to know why I can't come in there." His gaze sweeps down to my feet, then back up again. "Are *you* dangerous?"

"No. It's the metals."

"What metals?"

"This is a phytomining grid."

"What's that?"

"Hyperaccumulators," I say, pointing at a nearby plot, "take up metals from the soil. Then the plants are processed to retrieve those metals."

"And the metals are toxic?"

"Some, yes."

He nods. "But not for you."



Most people don't figure it out so fast. I look alive. But I'm not. Japheth knew before Wythe did. Dogs can smell these sorts of things.

Yesterday, Wythe asked if he could come back. I asked him why. He said, "You're interesting." I told him I was not.

Today, it's raining again. I wish they would come now. It's safest for them when the rain falls. But I know they won't visit today. They don't visit in the rain.

Besides, I told Wythe to stay away.

So I work in the greenhouse, listening to the patter of raindrops on glass.



There's a voice outside the hut. I look up from my dirty nails.

"Who is it?"

"Wythe."

I stand and open the door. Japheth pushes past me into the hut. Wythe stands there with a sheepish smile.

"I know, I know," he says. "But I was reading about this phytomining stuff. The soil's mostly dangerous when it's dry, right? And I won't go anywhere near the desiccator."

"What do you want?" I ask.

He blinks in surprise. "I want to be friends."

"You already have a friend," I say, pointing at the sniffing Japheth.

"He's not that interesting," Wythe says.



The boy and his dog are back again. The day is hot and dry. They skulk around the edges of the phytomining grid. I nod. But they don't come any closer.

"Did you know," Wythe shouts, "this grid used to be a cemetery a few centuries ago?"

"Of course," I say.

"Have you seen any ghosts lately?"

"Of course not," I say. "There's no such thing."

He stops and looks at me. His gaze is sad.

"That's not what I am," I say. "Ghosts are trapped."

"You're not?"

"I choose to be here. Planting. Harvesting. Restoring."

"Restoring what?" he asks.



Wythe doesn't come today. I walk the grid alone. Everything's different now. The tidy plots of hyperaccumulators are gone, replaced with chaotic greenery. Branches stretch overhead, shading the greenhouse's overgrown footprint. I try to return to the

hut but can't find it. It's gone, too. Sinking into the buoyant foliage, I open the floodgates to the stream of memory.

This land is restored. Somehow, I forgot. Maybe I needed someone to help me remember.

My bones never lived here. But my soul did, bound in life by a promise to heal the harm I'd done.

Even if it killed me.



I stood and walked through the trees, following the twinkle of light, the hum of vibration, until I reached the gate at the edge of the grid. They don't call them grids anymore. They're preserves, places that breathe freely, healthy and whole, patchworked throughout our singing cities, holding history and infinite potential.

I watched the sky darken and the city glow. Now the city darkens and the sky glows.

Wythe is out there, enjoying the life every human deserves. He—his generation—is the reason for our promise to heal what we hurt.

I kept it.

Now I can go.

Salt Water in Their Veins

Sam Baxter



Art © 2026, Leyelle M.G.

Sunset is a town on the southernmost coast of New Jersey, and it is sinking into the sea.

It is a town of working two jobs in the summer and unemployment checks in the off season. High school diplomas, maybe. Family businesses, paid cash under the table. Locals and their superstitions about the Deep Ones; old gods and their cultists, the locals joke, something that lurks in the water.

Anna Wright has watched Sunset's beaches get shorter each year she has lived here, and she has lived in this town a long time. Jetties were constructed during the second World War, the canal dredged to provide ships safe harbor in the intracoastal waterways. Now, the ocean whips sand off the coast, around the peninsula, and out to sea. They dredge sand from offshore and dump it on the beaches to give the illusion the town isn't sinking, but still, it is. Each year the beach gets shorter, grittier, more pebbly. Eventually, the Deep Ones will want back the town that belongs to them.

There is a beached ship not a hundred yards from shore, mostly submerged, built of concrete. Barnacles, urchins, and seaweed act as chains, pinning the waterlogged ship to the shallow sea floor. Tautog and sea bass swim in its now-dark, underwater cabins. Marine life has reclaimed this artificial reef as home.

When the tide recedes, a sign peeks just above the surface advertising a hardware store that went out of business sixty years ago. "Shop at Rocky's," says a mid-century man who looks like he knows the names and uses for a dozen different kinds of wrenches.

The ship is a harbinger of things to come:

A town stuck in the sand.

Sea levels rising.

Drowning.

When the time comes for Anna Wright to return to the sea, she has decided the concrete ship will be her home, too.



Anna is at the beach with her granddaughters, Emily and Casey, the concrete ship sinking in the background.

Casey splashes in the water, laughing, pretending to defend the beach from invading hordes of sea monsters that disguise themselves in the ocean's waves. If they make it to land, they blend in with humans; anyone could be a sea monster. Emily stands in the shallows, pointing out the incoming monsters and yelling to her kid sister to swim back closer when the currents pull her steadily out to sea.

Anna watches from her chair, parked high on the beach where the sand is soft and loose. The sand is blistering hot the further you get from where the waves reach at high tide. The only way not to burn your toes is to hop and dance and quickly get to the boardwalk path that leads to 4th Street. Anna is too old to move like that any longer, but her feet are used to the summer sands. Scaly skin protects her soles as she sits and watches her granddaughters play. She won't be able to hide her scales forever, but for now, she can pass them off as the leathery, cracked soles of someone who spends every day walking barefoot on sandy beaches.

Anna remembers when Emily was Casey's age, protecting the same shores from the same imaginary invaders. She's not sure where her granddaughters picked up the idea: maybe the locals talking, something in the depths of their ancestry, or just a kid's imagination at play. It's bittersweet watching Emily grow up, no longer splashing in the waves like her younger sister. Emily knows this fantasy is all too real, but is still young enough to wish it were make-believe. The pretend play is a reminder that her family comes from the sea, and a reminder of what she could choose to become herself one day.



“Em, Case—rinse off in the outdoor shower before heading inside. You don’t want sand in your pajamas tonight.” It’s a hopeless request, Anna thinks to herself, smiling. She knows from decades of living in this seaside town that sand is as much a way of life as kids who don’t listen to adults.

Anna trails smaller sandy footprints through the side door into her kitchen and is welcomed home by a message recording on her answering machine. The corded landline phone is one of many relics Anna still holds onto.

“—can’t pick them up on Tuesday. Call me back. Love you, Mom.” Anna doesn’t quite reach the phone before the machine beeps and the recording ends at her daughter’s goodbye. She has been waiting for this call, hoping it wouldn’t come this time. She picks up the phone and dials, waits as it rings four times before there is an answer.

“Hey sweetheart, we just got in from the beach. What’s going on?”

“Mom, hi. Sorry, I just left a message. I have a big case coming up, I’m not sure I can make it down Tuesday after work to pick up the girls. Do you think you could watch them till the weekend? I’ve just been swamped with work, and I haven’t done their school shopping yet—”

“Grace, you haven’t seen them in nearly a week.”

“I FaceTimed with Casey yesterday. Mom, I’m sorry, work is just really busy right now. The girls will starve if I leave Emily in charge the rest of the week. Please?” Emily is sixteen and more independent than Anna knows

how to handle sometimes. Like Emily's mother had always been. But still, not quite an adult, not expected to be *mom* to her six-year-old sister when Grace is too busy.

"Of course, dear. They're having a good time down here. But maybe you can stay for a couple days before bringing them home? Today at the beach we were—"

"Mom, I'm really sorry, I need to run and take care of some things for work. Thanks again for watching them. I gotta go, but we'll talk again soon. Give the kids a hug for me. Love you, bye!"

The receiver clicks on the other end of the line, then Anna says "Bye, I love you too." Phone calls with Grace often end like this. Grace lives in Philadelphia now, never takes off work—especially in the summer—and never comes inside after dropping off the girls. Anna has never gotten used to this. Grace left Sunset once, and now declines its invitations.

Today was a good day. The girls had fun. I have plenty of time, it'll be okay. In the kitchen, Anna closes her eyes and repeats these thoughts like a mantra. She lets out a slow exhale. It's always a wave of messy emotions like this when she gets off the phone with Grace. Anna is tired. Her feet ache. She tells herself it's just from the sun, that chasing around her granddaughters would wear anyone out. Her shoulders are knotted from carrying beach chairs, and heavier weights too.



The girls are winding down on the couch, still in their bathing suits beneath oversized t-shirts. Two pairs of sandals—the larger a pair of Birkenstocks, the smaller pair purple with light up heels and swirling cartoon fish—are kicked haphazardly across the floor.

“Sorry, Nana, I tried to rinse her off first, but she shrieked and said the water was too cold,” Emily apologizes sheepishly, her own feet and legs still covered in sand. Anna hadn’t noticed the icy water when she rinsed her own feet. Her scales insulate from cold as well as the hot sands earlier in the day.

“Em, your mom isn’t going to be here Tuesday. You’re stuck with me till the weekend.”

“Oh.” There is no surprise in Emily’s eyes. One word and a brief frown are her only reactions. Anna remembers when summer at the beach was still about sand castles, sun bathing, ice cream after mini golf. Emily is growing up.

Anna’s granddaughters are staying in Sunset one more week. One day, the Wright girls will have to make a choice: whether to Change, to become Deep Ones, and stay more permanently, or to leave. It’s a choice that comes at a price. The girls’ mother had made her own choice when she wasn’t much older than Emily is now. A bittersweet memory for Anna. But kids grow up, and don’t always make the choices you want for them.

Grace had been drowning in this slowly sinking town before she finally got away. She was pregnant with Emily, by a man whose boat didn’t come back to port. Casey came later, pregnancy planned the second time once Grace had figured out her life away from Sunset, a partner and a career that Sunset could have never offered. But both of her girls have salt water in their veins. They *belong* here, but are not *from* here. It’s still unclear whether they’ll decide they want to Change, or not.

As the sun sets, the town is awash in a golden glow, shining for a moment like it once might have. The sun sets over water; there is only water all the way to the

horizon. You could fall off the edge of the world in Sunset, if you are not careful. Would you continue falling forever? Or would the sea catch you, drag you under, drown you in its welcome embrace?



“Nana Anna!” Casey is probably going to ask for a story before bed, the same one she always wants to hear. “Tell us a story! Tell us about the Deep Ones!”

Emily sets her phone on the end table, screen-side down. She pulls her feet under her, the blanket up to cover her and her sister, eagerly awaiting her grandmother’s tale. There is still some kid left in there.

Anna is always telling stories about sea creatures (not monsters, never monsters), telling Casey she’ll turn into a seagull and fly away if all she eats is french fries.

“Again? Case—you don’t want to hear about flying fish or dolphins? What about when the moon fell into the sea and the fish kept a piece of it?”

“Nanny, fish can’t fly,” Casey says with the confidence of a six-year-old, as if only some of Anna’s stories are true, and others are not.

“Well, in that case... how does it begin again?” Anna knows how the story starts, of course. This is just part of being a grandmother.

“Tell us about the monsters!” Emily chimes in, playing the part of teenager, knowing this too is part of the story.

“The Deep Ones aren’t monsters, Em. They were people once—*are* people—just like you and me.” Emily smiles and relaxes into the cadence of her grandmother’s voice, happy, in this moment at least, to be here in Sunset listening to Nana Anna’s bedtime stories. Casey listens

with a wide-eyed awe that suggests she senses there is some truth to her Nana's stories. Just enough of a hint of recognition in her slate-gray eyes for a six-year-old imagination to wonder.

Anna remembers her own daughter asking for stories about other places—anywhere but here, anything but the Deep Ones—as she spins a familiar yarn for her granddaughters.



Sunset is a town sunk deep beneath the sea, where the Deep Ones dwell.

The Deep Ones are human, or will be, one day; they are not monsters. They grow up in the sea till the shore calls them home, to walk with their once and future family.

There is a young Deep One girl in Sunset who collects iridescent shell fragments and sand-worn seaglass from the sea floor. She likes the way the trinkets capture what little murky light makes its way to the underwater depths of Sunset. She displays them in her concrete cabin, nestled among the mussels climbing up the walls. In the room is a chair, bolted to the floor behind a bolted down desk, but the girl hovers, floats, swims. The room was once so sure of how it would be used by captains or admirals, but the girl does not notice these fixtures. She has built a nest of sand and stone and debris to snuggle into. Whatever it had once been, it is her room now. Sunset is her home.

When the sun sets beneath the horizon, it filters through the underwater currents and dances through portholes into the girl's room in luminous greens and deep, shadowed purples. The light catches on those

shards of shell and glass, and for a brief moment before the light goes out, the mementos glow as if their light comes from within. Then the sun is swallowed by the sea, and Sunset fades to twilight.

The little girl can't sleep, dazzled by that fleeting light. She wonders what it is like up there, where the light comes from. She dreams of what she one day may become.



Casey's breathing is deep and slow, her eyes already drifting shut. Sun-tired, but also tired from a day of swimming and battling sea monsters. Emily listens attentively, though her eyes are growing heavy too.

Emily understands that this story is the beginning of a question she will one day have to answer for herself. Emily is so much like her mother, and so unlike. Anna wonders which choice she will make.

Anna continues to tell her story in the den.



The first sign of the Change is the scales, falling off. Deep Ones become soft and squishy when they go to shore. This is surely a sign that their lives will be easier. They shed their protection and wear their now-human hearts for each other to see. Human bodies bare so much more of their emotions: blushing, contorting, shedding tears. You can tell when a human body is unhappy.

The little girl's feet are already soft and tender. She thought she had more time to be more sure of her choice. But sometimes you have to make a choice and see where it will take you.



Grace was not yet pregnant with Emily when she left Sunset for the first time; that came later. Still, she always knew she would leave. Anna could see it in her daughter's eyes. It's so much easier to read what a human body is feeling.

Grace left Sunset for the first time bound for college in Philadelphia. Move-in day brought Anna to the city for the first time too. She didn't like the way she felt there, like parts of herself were missing. No salt-carrying breeze making its way between the towering buildings, no quiet white noise of waves waxing and waning. Instead, a garbage truck smell wafting through the window, stifling August heat, a constant loud hum punctuated by car horns and sirens. Anna, in Grace's dormitory, shoulders slumping, tears leaking. Grace, thrumming with excitement, eager for her independence, a weight lifted. It's so much easier to read what a human body is feeling. Without scales and dark ocean depths, it's so much easier to break a mother's heart.

Emily looks younger now, asleep on the couch with her baby sister. She is too big for Anna to carry her to the bedroom, but Anna can still carry a six-year-old. Anna tucks a light blanket around her older granddaughter and picks up Casey, still whispering a tale of what always was, and what is to come.



Next will come the legs. The little girl plans to swim to the shallows while she still has a tail. Her new body won't be made for the sea, and she is worried she won't make it all the way to land. She imagines she may just sit

in the ebbing tide for a bit, after the Change. The time will come for her to walk on land eventually. She wants to grow up, but she doesn't want to leave her home.

Sitting with her decision, waiting for it to complete, the girl is learning about anxiety and doubt; one day she will learn the difference between nostalgia and regret. What happens to the Deep Ones who choose to stay? She hasn't heard any of those stories, and she wants to find out. She was expected to make a certain choice here, but then, it's not really a choice if she's being expected to make it. The girl was so sure she was ignoring expectations when she chose what she would become. That doesn't make her any less uncertain about the choice she made, though.



“Mom, I don’t know if I can do this without you. I’m trying here. Really trying. But what if Em and Case don’t understand?”

“Gracie, you will be great. It’s always hard, but I see how much you love them. I’m just worried that *they* don’t see it.” *I don’t want your relationship with them to end up like mine with you*, Anna thinks, but does not say. “Maybe you could take off work for a few days and stay with them this week, be there to answer their questions. It’s good to have your daughters near.”

“Mom, that’s not what this is about right now. They should spend time with you, too. They don’t know how this works. They’re going to miss you. They’re going to want to be with you when it happens.” Replace some of those *theys* with *I*, and it captures more of what Grace means, but can’t bring herself to say. “You can explain it

to them better than me. I know how important it is to you that they understand where they come from.”

“Yes, they are important to me.” *You are important to me.* “Grace, I know this is going to be difficult, but it’s time. It’s something I have to do.”

The conversation reaches an impasse.

“Remember when I used to ask what you would do when I move away?” Grace had always worried for her mother, left alone in that dried-up, sinking town.

“Oh, I’ll stand in the waves facing the horizon, and start walking.” Anna smiles as she recounts her old refrain. Anna used to always say things like this to Grace. Now she says it to her granddaughters. All of her girls once giggled at their mother, their grandmother, being silly. There is a wistful longing in Anna’s voice now that Grace hadn’t noticed when she was younger.

“Is that still what you plan to do? I know I left Sunset,” *left you*, “I could come back,” *for you*. “God, you must have felt like I do now, back then...”

Anna’s longing smile doesn’t falter. “Gracie, that’s the way it’s done, like in the stories. We all make our own choice. But it will all be okay.”

Grace coughs out a laugh at that. “It always scared me, and you’re so calm about it. Like you’ve been waiting for this for a long time. I used to stay up all night thinking about what would happen to you when I left. Now I feel like a hypocrite, asking you not to leave yet.”

“You’ve changed,” Anna reassures her daughter, but hurries to explain when Grace’s eyes grow big, the same slate gray as Casey’s. “Not like that! No, not like that. With the girls, with me. I know you didn’t want this for yourself, and that’s okay. I used to worry that you left because I did something wrong. It’s hard being a mother,

wanting something for your daughters, having to let them make their own choices. But your girls have you, and I'm sure you can do this. Whatever they choose, they'll always have you." *You will always have me.*

Grace swallows, more of a gulp, the lump in her throat too big to be able to say what she wants to.

"People who don't change are clams that don't open," Anna reassures her daughter once more. This was a common saying during Anna's childhood among the Deep Ones; Grace grew up hearing these words on land. There was a time when Grace was only bitter toward the expectation that she Change, but change takes on different meanings at different times in life. Change is a good thing, it is only natural.



Last to go are the gills. The little girl is scared and thrashing. She thought she was ready, now thinks not; the land has more confidence in her, reeling her in closer with each crashing wave. Standing—walking—is a new feeling for the girl. She stands in the breakers and gets thrown under as another wave roils and drags her, one stroke backward, two steps forward. She tumbles, gasping, then swallowing, breathing and choking air and water and not sure which is which. It's a rite of passage, the girl thinks, surviving this transformation. One she must endure. It's the choice she made.

She lies on the sand as soft waves lap at her feet, and she takes shaky breaths, unfamiliar with the pattern of inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Breathing air comes instinctually, but feels foreign. She thinks to herself, "I want to go back," and is surprised to hear her words spoken aloud, another natural but foreign experience.

She cannot go back, not yet. That comes later.



When the Deep Ones come to land, they live their lives as humans. They can't take back their choice that brought them ashore, but they can make new ones.

Anna has spent over seventy happy years on land, but she has been waiting, too. It's a sad thing, longing for a home that no longer exists, at least not in a way that it can be the same home it once was. But there is comfort in the sea. It has kept Anna near, all these years, promising to welcome her back one day with open arms. When she is ready. That's the tricky part. The Deep Ones can Change, when they choose to, but that does not mean they are ready to make that choice again.



When the sun sets in Sunset, the town returns to the sea. Where it belongs. The water seeps up from beneath like it has lain in wait for the horizon to swallow the daylight—and the town with it—once more.

Storm drains fail to contain the rising seas. Pools swirl and eddy as the tide swallows buildings beneath the water's surface. Where there was once a town is now a gently undulating blanket of white-capped purples, pinks, and oranges, reflecting the dusk sky. The town is still there, but deeper. Changed.

The girls are back home with Grace by now, and Anna sits on the porch telling herself the same story of the Deep Ones, while the water splashes against her toes.



The Deep Ones live quite a long time; they're nearly immortal by human standards. When you live that long, stories don't have endings. They churn and change as you continue to make new choices. Choices, that's all stories are. You might not think so when you are still six years old in a human body. When you are eighteen and pregnant, you might think the choice is made for you. But when you are ready, if your story calls for it, you can Change again.



The water reaches Anna's waist. The chill of nighttime sea-breeze makes the summer waters feel more Pacific than she's accustomed to in this mid-Atlantic, late-summer heatwave. She had meant to do this earlier in the season, but she had family to take care of first.

Then her neck. She tilts her head back, gray-streaked hair splaying adrift behind her, and she thinks of her grandchildren puffing their cheeks full of air and diving into waves to push back the tides of sea monsters, before she goes under.

After all this, Anna does not do what she had always told Grace she would: she does not look into the horizon and she does not step into the sea. Instead, she hovers, floats in the night, and when the tide recedes come morning, the sea takes Anna with her.



It is twelve years later, and Emily is the only human in Sunset.

Six years ago, the funding ran out for the beach replenishment project, and the eastern part of Sunset washed out to sea. Then the town evacuated, and now it

waits for the Deep Ones to reclaim it. All of the streets are flooded, and buildings have begun to topple where salt water has eroded their foundations. Emily marvels at how quickly water reshapes things back to the way they were always meant to be. The waves gently wash over what was, until recently, a small park.

There is a bench in the park, mostly submerged, surrounded by swirling water. Emily sits on the bench, a school of mullet swimming between her legs. She holds two polished-clear quartz stones, worn round by years in the churning ocean and glinting like diamonds in the sunlight, and a broken fragment of green bottle glass. The glass is embossed with the suggestion of a logo that is no longer legible.

It's not a long walk from the commons back to her beach house—the standing remains of Nana Anna's beach house, no one else wanted shorefront property in a drowning town—carrying her treasures gently. They are a gift for someone. She sets the trinkets in an upside-down clam shell as she enters through the side door into the kitchen.

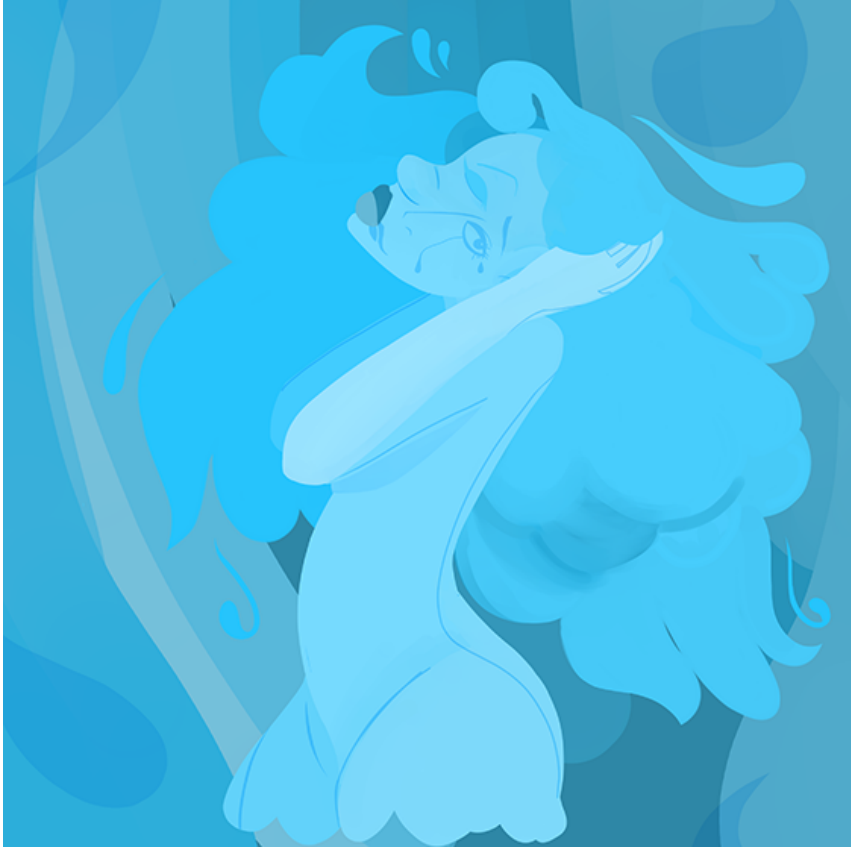
Through a bay window in the den, Emily can see the last remaining corner of a ship's stern peeking above the surface. The barrier dunes that once protected the land from storm floods are gone now, so there is nothing to hide the sun setting over a purple-orange sky.

A full moon hangs high over the ocean by the time Emily goes for one last walk. She can only walk a short way before she hits water, the waves greeting land. She is on the remnants of a dune, only a slight hill now. The waves lap gently around the hill in every direction. Emily turns and faces a town that once was, and sees a new town born from the sea, the moonlit horizon peeking between

buildings where streets once ran. She starts walking into the waves.

A Word, and Its Keeping

Gwendolyn Hicks



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Once, very long ago, the gods whispered sacred Words, and from these Words came the world. High in the hills at the edge of the Akshu Province, there was a temple. The herders and growers would make their way to this place to greet their gods each season, and leave them tributes decadent and humble, that they may be moved to speak the words for rain, or snow, or sunlight. The climb was steep, and the pilgrimage was three days' journey,

but from the temple one could see all the land laid out like a plate, pale and beautiful, crowned by a sky blue as Taranisian cobalt—for some, this was blessing enough.

From the valley of Kei't there was a girl. Wild-hearted and strong, she fell in love with Mwepesi, the seventh of the god-brothers, who first spoke the Word for wind. Mwepesi's beauty was cutting, and mortals amused him—but he was fickle. To him, the small heart of a mortal girl meant nothing: her short life would hardly pass as a glimpse for a being as infinite as he. Still when the time of leaving was upon our makers, and they visited their children for the last time, the girl made her way to the temple and begged Mwepesi to bless her with the Word for wind, so that her family's fields could dance in it forevermore, so that their seeds could be scattered each season and their crops could flourish far and wide. Mwepesi considered the girl's entreaty. Her boldness touched him, in its way, and he could sense her love for the land that he and his siblings had made. But when the time came, he could not bear to yoke the wind to a mortal. He took the Word away with him—setting his companion free, untamed, uncalled. To this day it still chases him at the harvest's end, searching, yearning. Without a keeper. And without a cage.



The storm would make landfall within an hour, but there would be no rain. That simply didn't happen anymore. As Karga walked across the coastal hills, sore and parched, she watched the dark knot of clouds taking shape due east of Daia. It looked deceptively motionless, stranded in the distance, but the shadows that it cast on the ocean slid swiftly forwards, darkening the white-

capped waves to the color of iron. It certainly had the *look* of a rainstorm, but Karga knew better. She and everybody else on Braathu had known better for nearly a year.

Karga was hungry. She had been walking for ten days. She had left her valley with nothing to her name but her body and her prayers—crept out of her uncle's house by starlight and told no one where she planned to go. This far out, there were only hills and scattered scrub, miles of dry grass shimmering in the wind. She had passed a herd of cows that morning, the last sign of the farmlands; they had been gathered under the shade of an oak tree, haunch to haunch, waiting for the afternoon to end. It had been all too tempting to join them, but Karga had taken one look at the oak's roots jutting out of the cracked earth and walked on: one step and then the next, and the next, and the next. She hoped that the Word-Keeper would have food.

It stood to reason that the Word-Keeper needed to eat to survive, Karga thought. After all, every living thing did—the gulls, the beetles, the goats and the crows—and stories aside, Karga was reasonably sure that the Word-Keeper was a living thing. Still, it was hard for her to imagine what food one could turn up in a place like this. Crabgrass porridge, maybe. Gopher. She supposed she would learn the answer soon enough.

The night before, she had caught sight of the lighthouse. The fog had concealed its approaching shape during the day, but once the sun had gone down she'd begun to make out a light blooming in the dark, northwesterly. Now it was in full view, a crooked white shape jutting up from the land like an exposed bone. There was a lone cypress tree beside it, shaped by the wind so that it seemed to be reaching toward the sea—

toward the distant, hazy shape of their sister island, Daia; toward the ungiving storm.

Karga spat the taste of dust from her mouth. Her waterskin was nearly empty—but this, at least, she was used to.

She picked her way through the coastal sage and chaparral until she arrived at the edge of a thin dirt pathway, which ended at a marlstone altar some thirty feet from the lighthouse. As Karga passed the altar, she stopped mid-step. It was piled high with objects—silver cups and bolts of silk; woven baskets, ornamental vases; bronze jewelry, withered flowers, rotten stonefruit. They spilled onto the ground in excess, untouched.

Karga's gut twisted. Those offerings accounted for six villages, at least. She had brought no tribute of her own; it had seemed pointless, knowing what she planned to ask for. Not the finest honey or the freshest goat milk or even her grandmother's abalone bracelet could measure up to that. Even now, her humbler self entreated her to turn back, to put her faith in her makers, as she had been taught—but she had come this far, hadn't she?

She marched the rest of the way to the lighthouse's front door, tense as a hare. She used her walking stick to knock, and when there was no answer, she leaned the stick against the wall so that she could turn the knob and step inside.

There was no one there that she could see. She looked around the room. It was dim at the ending of the day, and all of the curtains were drawn. To the left there was a little brick kitchen, its countertops stacked with unwashed wooden bowls, and a stove with a cauldron and a kettle on top. To the right was a small bed, unmade: a strip of golden light slid in under the hem of the curtain and

grazed the wrinkled sheets. There was no ceiling, so Karga could see all the way up to a platform where the light was kept. The air was dense with the smell of lamp oil.

Uncertainly, Karga cleared her throat.

“Who’s there?” called a voice from above. It sounded cobwebbed around the edges, like it hadn’t been used in years.

“Hello,” Karga called back. It felt better than giving her name.

She heard a clanging sound, then a series of quick thuds, descending. She craned her neck to see a figure making its way down the white stone spiral staircase that jutted out from the wall.

The figure stopped over the last stair. It was a girl, perhaps equal to Karga in age—a few summers past twenty, no more. Her hair was black and coily, in numerous braids, tied behind her back. Her skin was the color of good earth. She had a soft, round, timeless sort of face, dotted with moles. She was not smiling.

“You came into my house,” she said. “Without asking.”

Karga licked her dry lips, terrified and awestruck all at once. Her hand was sweating. She struggled to unstick a sound from her mouth.

“Do you know who I am?” the girl asked.

“The—” Karga’s voice returned to her, and her sense with it. She bowed her head. “The sight of you humbles me, Word-Keeper.”

The girl’s thick eyebrows drew closer together. She glanced up and down Karga’s lanky frame. Her garments were patterned in a dull blue Braathish houndstooth.

“You’re an inlander,” she said at last.

Karga nodded. Her freckled skin and barley-pale hair gave her away, no doubt. "From Kei't."

"Goat-herders. Yes. Not many of you left, or so I hear. You're a long way from home. How did you find this place?"

"Stories," mumbled Karga, feeling foolish.

"You shouldn't put much stock in those." The girl finally took the last stair, but her right hand stayed upon the wall. "Who sent you?"

"No one." This was the truth. Karga's uncle would be horrified if he knew just where she had gone.

"What do you want?"

What Karga truly wanted was to set down her pack and walking stick. Their weight had begun to assert itself all up and down her body, in a dozen trembling muscles. Even so, she expected that this answer might see her turned away—and so she kept standing.

"For you to say the Word," she said.

The Word-Keeper stared at her. There were bags under her dark eyes, which lent that stare an immense gravity. Her face betrayed nothing, but Karga saw the way her fingers pressed against the stone wall at her side.

"Oh, that." She turned her head away, toward the window, so that Karga could not see her expression. "I might have known no one would knock on that door for the pleasure of my company."

Anger throbbed swiftly in Karga's chest. She struck the base of her walking stick against the floor, then spoke the words that she had practiced in the valley so many mornings ago. She had carried them with her, hill by hill, here, to the rim of Braathu—reciting them to herself between breaths, a spell against terror.

“I,” she said, “am called Karga. I come to you on behalf of the herders and growers of Kei’t, and urge you to invoke the Word, that the rains will return to our lands, where they have not fallen for eight seasons. Do you deny me, Word-Keeper?”

She was winded at the end of it, having forgotten to breathe between sentences—if she were out with the goats, she would do it over, enunciate more clearly, but the mercy of practice was now past. She clamped her mouth shut, tried to even her breathing. The silence was crushing.

The Word-Keeper breathed in, slowly, and then back out again—closed her eyes, as if in deep thought.

Finally she said, “Do you know I’ve got a name, just as you do?”

Karga stared as she tipped her head back, gazing up to the lantern room as if to address some listening ghost.

“Before they gave me a Word to keep, I was called Rode.” She uttered the syllables with an accent not like Karga had ever heard, a fluttering consonant and two arched vowels, *rho-dthay*. “Is that not strange? It’s a kind of desert flower, from the mainland. The moment that it rains, the fragile roots are smothered, and it drowns. Do you think my mother knew all along what would become of me?”

Karga hardly cared about the Word-Keeper’s name, but she knew better than to say so. Her heart was folding itself into smaller and smaller pieces, and within a moment or two more she was sure there would be nothing left. If the Word-Keeper could see that, she made no indication of any sympathy.

“Rode,” Karga said, feeling, somehow, more helpless than she had speaking her sacred title. “Do you *deny* me?”

Rode’s eyebrows arched, and her eyes shone faintly, as if she were hearing herself in her name for the first time.

She gave a tiny nod, the corners of her mouth moving downwards, and said, “Forgive me, but I do. I do deny you.”

The weight of the answer felt to Karga like the weight of a corpse dropped on her back, almost buckling her knees. Her mouth fell open, but she made no sound. She was suddenly very cold. She was shivering. The Word-Keeper didn’t seem to care. She turned to make her way back up the staircase without looking back.

“Go back to your valley, goat-herd. Tell them when you came upon the Word-Keeper, there was nothing you could do. She had already leaped from her tower and killed herself. But take heart, there will be another—”

The words were blurred in Karga’s mind except for *killed* and *self*, which at first would not make sense of each other. By the time that they did, the Word-Keeper was already halfway up the staircase. In a flash of instinct Karga flung aside her walking stick and followed, and because her gait was wide from chasing goats and little brothers, she was upon her in only a moment.

“You can’t.” She stumbled over the next stair, legs aching. “The land would die.”

The Word-Keeper tossed a puzzled look over her shoulder, but said nothing. Karga’s arm lashed forward before she could know its want. She halted the Word-Keeper by the sleeve, dragging her back.

“You’ve got to tell it to me!” she shouted. Courage surged within her, foolish and ablaze; she gripped the Word-Keeper’s sleeve until her knuckles blanched. “I will not see my valley go barren! Tell me the Word—I will not leave this place without the Word!”

As the rainless storm met the shoreline, the Word-Keeper looked into Karga, and Karga looked back. She had never seen eyes so dark or so ageless with knowing, eyes that seemed to witness each stitch of her being and identify at once the loosest thread by which to undo them. These were the eyes, Karga thought, that could unmake the world. She wondered how she must look to them—sunburned, dirt-caked, impudent, a nameless stick of a girl with nothing to give or trade. She wondered if she was about to be killed, or cursed, or sent away to Kei’t with spit on her face.

“You ‘will not leave’?” echoed the Word-Keeper in a strange voice. Karga could intuit no danger in it, but no kindness, either. When she did not reply, the Word-Keeper came down one stair. “Suit yourself, if you want it so badly,” she whispered, looking Karga up and down.

When she’d drawn closer, the fabric of her sleeve had slackened in Karga’s hand—her simple, stubborn hand; the only hand that she had ever had—and Karga held onto it still. The Word-Keeper’s skin smelled of palm oil, an assertion of life in the dusty air.

“Are you—” she blurted out. “Do you mock me?”

“Not in the least.”

“For how long?”

At that, the Word-Keeper scoffed and at last tugged her arm free of Karga’s grip. Karga’s hand hovered half-open in the empty space where it had been. She couldn’t help feeling that she’d just had a bluff called, though it

hadn't felt like a bluff when she said it. It had felt like the last thing keeping her alive.

"As long as it takes you," said the Word-Keeper, "to give me a reason to say it."

Then she stepped back again—lingered, for a moment, closing her hand over the patch of fabric Karga's palm had touched—and made her way back up the stairs the way she'd come.

Karga stood there for a moment, breathing hard, until she was gone. She clutched her walking stick tighter. She was still shivering. The low rumble of the ocean, the shifting of dust through light: these were the only sounds that pushed back against the beating of her tiny, folded heart, deprived of words.



By the time that Karga finished making camp beside the cypress tree, the empty storm had passed, and the sky was white with stratus clouds. It was clear enough that Karga could still see Daia. Even from such a distance, its greenness was evident, lush as a jewel.

Braathu was just one of the fourteen islands in the Taluy Archipelago—Karga had never visited another—and Daia was at the center, visible from all directions. It was the Daians who had kept the sacred knowledge of the Word since time immemorial; each generation sent their children to the outer isles, where they would live in hidden places as bringers of its blessing. When a clay-trader had come to Kei't in the spring, Karga had overheard him speaking in low voices with her uncle; he had said that on no other island had he seen the rains so absent. *What's driven Braathu's Word-Keeper to forsake her?* the man had wondered, resting under the shade of a

hackberry tree beside her uncle, smoking a thin pipe. Karga's uncle had been as dry as ever. *Pride, like as not.*

Many possibilities had crossed Karga's mind on her long walk from Kei't. She'd imagined the Word-Keeper dead or ill or lost—incapacitated somehow—blinking at the bottom of a ravine with a broken ankle, like so many goats she'd rescued in the valley. She'd imagined an old man or woman delirious with fever. She'd imagined an empty house, a ransom note. What she hadn't imagined was Rode. She hadn't imagined that kind of heartlessness—and yet, when she tried to hate her, the feeling was hollow in her chest.

She kept to her tent for the rest of the evening, resting on her bedroll with the flap tied open. Without the sun's arc to follow through the overcast sky, she struggled to mark the hours. It was nothing like Kei't.

Guilt gripped her. She tried to tell herself that her people had gone countless sunsets without the blessing of the Word—near a second year, now, though a generous harvest and some groundwater reserves had lessened the thirst. A handful more would make little difference. Besides, if she succeeded in coaxing the Word out of Rode's stubborn chest, then her swift return would make less difference still: the rains would find Kei't before she did. She closed her eyes and tried to picture it: the rich clouds bursting over the valley, the goats hurrying for the trees, her brothers running and laughing—the look on her uncle's face when he realized what it meant, that she had ventured where none dared to go and *fixed* things, that she had saved them. The ololuge of the old women—that joyous, trilling burst of sound the Keitish made with tongues and throats in moments broader than speech could accommodate. It was almost too much to bear.

She opened her eyes again to look upon the lighthouse. She wondered what such a structure was doing here at all. They were nowhere near a port, and the cliff face was a sheer drop to the sea, no boulders or shoals to speak of. She couldn't imagine any ship running aground in a place like this. Braathu's shores were gentle, its beaches low. She was almost sure the island had not seen a shipwreck in an age.

She shifted to lie down on her stomach, propped up on her elbows under the tent's eave, and scanned the sea's expanse for vessels. She saw nothing. Yet, as dusk fell, she could swear that on the distant rim of Daia there was the tiniest glint of light.



Through the foggy night, Karga did not sleep at all—playing out conversations and arguments with Rode in her mind; waiting for some foreboding sound or movement, for a body to pitch into the sea. At the first faint note of dawn, she slipped back into the house, opened the curtains, and, for want of something to do with her restless hand, began to clean.

She pulled a broom from the closet and swept the clay floor, watching the dust spiral out with the wind. She filled a basin with a modest amount of groundwater from the pump outside—staring at it in jealous wonder as it flowed, clear and clean, and slurping up the smallest taste from her palm—and washed the plates and bowls slowly with a block of lye soap, her thumb red against the rim.

Late morning settled. The fog began to burn off. The right side of the room still was not clean, and Karga was not given to resting, so she wiped her soap-raw hand on her trousers and moved on to the next task. The bed was

still unmade—Rode seemed not to have slept in it—and a scattering of objects were strewn on the floor beside it, as if they'd been knocked from the adjacent table in a fit of pique and not picked up again. Karga knelt down to examine them: a little wooden carving of an animal she did not recognize; a conch shell, paled by time; and a strange coin, which she bit. She put them back upon the table, one by one, and then sat and looked at them a while.

“You wake early.”

Karga flinched and looked up. Rode was squinting down at her from halfway up the staircase, huddled in a gray wool blanket, as if trying to decide what to do about an itinerant mouse. She was aglow in a slanting block of sunlight.

“And,” she said with a yawn, “you are still here.”

Karga swallowed a retort: *Where would I have gone?*

As Rode shuffled down the remaining stairs, Karga tucked her hand under her knee, strangely ashamed of having been caught touching her belongings. Rode made her way over to the table by the western window, her back turned to Karga.

“You know, if you hold it up to your ear, you can hear the sea,” she said. She nodded slightly to the conch on the windowsill. “I brought that from home. It was my treasure. My grandmother used to say that if you listen very carefully, you will hear something true. When I was a child, I would do it all the time.”

She surveyed the rest of the room, all the areas that Karga had cleaned up. When she was through, she scoffed, as if Karga had done something very strange. Karga's stomach twisted with a growing panic. Uncertain of whether or not it would be disrespectful to stand, she remained on her knees.

“Not the cunning sort, are you?” Rode asked without facing her. “Why bother with my housework? Wouldn’t it have been quicker to just kiss my feet and beg?”

Karga flushed and ducked her head, swallowing more words, more arguments. Rode paced the room, continuing to look over Karga’s handiwork appraisingly; when she turned enough that Karga could glimpse her face, her unsmiling expression was difficult to look at.

“Believers have always brought tributes to the Word-Keeper. But you know that, don’t you? Strangers leaving bread at my door, and fruit, and linen—hoping for their fields to be blessed, for their rivers to run high. I don’t want for much in this place.”

Karga thought back to the overburdened altar outside and held back one last remark: *It seems like you don’t even want what you have.*

“This is your finest tribute, then?”

Karga chewed her lip. Calling it a tribute felt disingenuous; this was simply what her people had taught her. *The burden of one is the burden of all.* When her father had died—years before the drought, born with a failing heart—their house had been filled at all hours with some visitor or another, someone to cook or labor or listen.

She glanced at Rode unsurely. The note in her deep voice was not scorn but sounded almost like jealousy. “Yes,” she said at last with a nod, eyes still fixed on her knees. Her voice felt bruised. “It is.”

Rode’s laugh was harsh. “You’ve truly brought me nothing else?”

“I’ve brought you all that I have.” At Rode’s silence, she pinched her trousers, rubbing the fabric together.

“My body. My work. For the Word, I’ll do whatever you ask of me, whatever you desire. For...”

She cast her memory back to a sun-blached afternoon on the Akshu Trading Road, her father speaking congenially with a northerner who bore baskets of pine nuts; she had studied his bartering, even as a child, gripping the rope leashing a nanny’s neck in one sweaty hand.

“For a month.” And she held up a finger, as she’d seen him do. “One month. My people can spare no longer. Cooking, cleaning, washing—any repairs you might have—I’ll do it.”

“And if after a month,” Rode said, “I still won’t say it?”

Finally, Karga looked up at her. She was suddenly astonished by the soft shape of Rode’s body. On the night she had left the valley, she had glanced just for a moment at her uncle’s paring knife on the table, small and clean. She had opened her fingers, and at once her throat had burned as if with bile—and so she had closed them again and hurried out into the dark, bladeless.

“Then I’ll ask you why,” she said. “And I’ll ask again and again until you answer.”

“Because you are owed an answer?”

“Because we all are.”

Without rain, Kei’t would lie fallow. Those still holding on to the land would pack up what precious few things they owned and leave it behind forever, and they would grieve, but they would live. Their roots could grow strong again, with time. They would find other islands. Other valleys.

But Karga could never belong to another.

“Do you deny me?” she asked again, barrenly helpless on the clean floor.

Rode gazed back at her with an expression on her face that Karga had not yet seen. Her eyebrows furrowed, making a small crease in her forehead; her eyes seemed to deepen, as if a veil had been pulled back to reveal a dark and endless room.

“I do not deny you, Karga,” she whispered.

Karga, all her limbs suffused with a peculiar, delicate warmth, opened her mouth to whisper something back—but she didn’t know what—but she was interrupted by a sudden violent growl from her empty stomach.

She slapped her hand over her middle, wide-eyed. She’d gotten so wrapped up in cleaning, and arguing besides, that she’d forgotten to eat. The imminent likelihood of Rode pointing out her hunger—yet another weakness to be lorded over her—was mortifying.

But Rode only stepped past her and went toward the windowsill. From a basket, she produced a loaf of dense brown bread—acorn, by the look of it—and tore off a piece in awkward silence. Karga expected her to eat it, perhaps to mock her—but she turned around and held it out to Karga with one hand.

Karga’s stomach rumbled like a sack filled with stones, aching in the empty places. She snatched the piece of bread and crammed it into her mouth. It was tasteless.

She started, suddenly, to cry.

Rode stood beside her as she ate, revealing and demanding nothing. The remnants of their argument were crumbling until they were too small to notice or recall, and in the silence Karga was overcome by weariness. The ocean wind pushed the door where she had left it ajar while sweeping. She could hear seagulls outside.

“An offering from four days past,” said Rode. “It isn’t very good.”

But Karga shook her head, hot tears still spilling from her eyes. When had her body made so many? How did it still have so much water to give?

She wiped her nose with her inner wrist and glanced at Rode, cautiously. Her countenance was so much gentler, as if a different girl had slipped into the room to take her place. Karga’s arm twinged. All of a sudden, she wanted to hug her.

But that was foolish.

She pushed the last piece into her mouth and said, thickly, “It’s delicious. Thank you.”

Rode looked around the house, her gaze sweeping across the surfaces and corners that Karga had rearranged and left clear. The quilt. The shell. She was quiet. Karga scrubbed the last of her tears from her face, trying to collect herself.

After that, the afternoon wore on, and the two of them spoke little across the hours. Karga tried to make herself useful brushing cobwebs from the corners of the ceiling and sweeping the stairs, though Rode would only let her climb them so high. The wooden window shutters needed washing, too, and what might once have been a garden on the lighthouse’s southern side was thick with weeds. There would be plenty for her to do, and a bale of days in which to do it.



Four days passed. Karga patched a crack in the wall by the bed to keep out the wind. She pulled the weeds from the plot outside. Rode rarely showed her face; she kept to herself upstairs, where Karga was not permitted

to go. They ate acorns and wild plums and sometimes fish; on two mornings Rode walked alone down to the beach to catch perch. The nights were balmy for a stretch, and Karga slept comfortably in her tent.

On the fifth morning, she woke early as usual and was surprised to find that Rode had, too: she was at the door, pinning a shawl under her chin, with a basket hanging from her arm. She asked Karga, blunt in a way that was almost self-conscious, if she would like to come with her to pick samphire. Karga's stomach was light and sour with a just-waking hunger. She did not know what samphire was. She agreed.

All the world was still and pale, shrouded in fog, and Karga stuck her tongue out as they walked, relishing the mist. She breathed in the salt smell of the sea, the sagebrush, the dry grass.

"Your arm," Rode said when they reached the bluffs, and nodded to Karga's right shoulder. "You've only the one."

It was the first word she'd spoken since they'd left the lighthouse. Karga had learned from the time she was young that folks outside of Kei't almost unilaterally felt compelled to comment on her amelia, more often than not with a galling amount of entitlement, but Rode's tone was conversational, as if she were observing Karga's freckles or her height.

"I haven't missed the other," Karga said comfortably. "I was born without it. My father was clever, he built me tools to work the land, tend to the house, milk the nannys. He would have been clever enough to get the Word out of you, my pa. You'd have sent him home with a pot of honey."

Rode's black brows furrowed. It seemed she was not familiar with the expression.

"Only the luckiest folk have honey in the province," Karga explained. "No one in my valley has tasted it in years. I might have, once, when I was small, but I've forgotten. If you send somebody home with a pot of honey, it's sort of like—giving them everything they want, and then some."

Rode nodded. She had pulled her shawl up over her head when they had set out from the lighthouse, and a few coils of hair had fallen loose, fluttering with each step she took. When she veered west toward a trail leading down to the beach, she pinched Karga's sleeve between her thumb and forefinger and tugged her gently along.

"Tell me more about Kei't," she said. "Your valley, your family."

The trail was thin and steep, but Karga kept her footing. The sound of the ocean was right upon them, and the nearness of the crashing waves made her shiver.

"There... isn't much to tell. It's wide and the grass is gold, and the days are hot. Most of the people I knew left last year, when the rains did. The rest of us look after each other, because—well, because that's what you do. There used to be a river but now it's just a trail of boulders. The goats are always bickering about something, wandering, grazing—although there aren't many of them left now. Our herd is small, but I still follow them through the fields every day, dawn to sundown. We trade their milk with northerners for mountain spring water..."

Rode gave her no cause to stop, and so she didn't—they gathered the samphire, a pearlescent green succulent that Rode said would taste fine steamed, from the narrow spots along the bluffs that the fog kept wet. As they went,

Karga let her love for her home spill forth undammed; she told Rode about the sweet grass, the big sky, the lizards on the rocks, the late dusk, the stone fences. And all the while Rode said nothing, her hands caked with wet sand, her motions slow with listening.

They walked back to the lighthouse in the afternoon, windswept. It was only hours later, at the dimming of the sky, that Karga realized she'd not done a single chore.

"Not much to be done," Rode said when Karga told her. She was steaming the samphire at the stove, her sleeves rolled up past her elbows, her braids tied at the nape of her neck. For the first time since Karga had met her, there was a smile on her face, arresting in its simplicity. "If you're restless, listen. I will tell you a story."



Long ago, when the world was pink and new, the winsome god Batir fell in love with a mortal man. Batir was the youngest of our makers, and the gentlest, and the Word for rain is his. When he first spoke it, and the rain answered his call, the land rejoiced; from the rain that Batir crafted, life grew in gorgeous excess. So many green things, and so many rivers.

It was Batir's Daian lover who adored the rain the most. The two of them would meet each day on that beautiful island and amble through the jungles together, hand-in-hand. Batir would speak the Word again and again, calling down the rain from the sky until it drenched them, and they laughed and kissed, and the leaves and the fruits and the flowers grew and ripened around them. For this reason, Daia was always the

greenest and loveliest of all the islands, blessed by Batir's love.

When Batir prepared to leave the world that he and his siblings had created—when the making was done, and there were no tasks left for them—rather than jewels or bounty, he left his lover his most precious gift: the sacred Word. He taught him the shape, the weight, the melody. This is why the Word survives. Generation upon generation, the descendants of Batir's lover held that Word and passed it to their children. These children became our Word-Keepers.

The language of the gods is long dead—Words lost and discarded or set free. But the Word for rain endures in sound alone, a relic of an ancient love. And the rain recognizes its name to this very day, so that when the Word-Keepers call for it, it still answers, following the sweet sound home.

Karga from the valley, I would ask you something. Have you ever loved someone that much? Enough to give them everything and trust that they would not destroy it?



Soon enough, it had been two weeks—slow, unremarkable, the time peppered with hours of weeding or sweeping or washing. After that excursion to pick samphire, Karga rarely saw Rode during the day; this was when she tended to sleep, or so Karga assumed, in the lantern room high above. By twilight she would come sleepily down the stairs and appraise Karga's handiwork, whether it was a mended pair of trousers or a basket of foraged seaweed. There was a chair at the kitchen table that was uneven; Karga whittled down the legs until they matched. Dirty clothes and linens had accumulated in

assorted corners; Karga washed them and hung them out to dry. Each time Rode beheld the fruits of Karga's labors, she would tilt her head, and her eyes would gleam just slightly in the low light, and she would say, *Fair work, Karga. I accept it*, and move into the kitchen to fix them a meal.

In Kei't, meals were always a sociable affair, where even the humblest food was seasoned with hearty conversation; as a consequence, Karga could not conceive of staying silent at supper, and so she didn't. It helped that she was already bursting with questions for Rode: about the Word, and Daia, and her life, and her memories. Rode was wary of the questions at first, seeming more at ease interrogating Karga, although she did even this with a kind of reluctance, as if embarrassed of wanting to know at all. Still, between bites, Karga encouraged her as best she could, attuned to the Keitish awareness of which paths to follow into the next topic, the coaxing rhythms of listening. There were moments when she nearly forgot the heavy particulars of their arrangement and felt as easy as she would if she were stooped over a pair of bowls with a girl from the valley, trading anecdotes and stifling laughter.

But, each time this would happen, Rode would seem to catch herself, and would go out of her way to remind Karga of what divided them: their bargain and what it meant. It seemed she always had some cynical comment or interrogation tucked away in her pocket, incapable of taking kindness for what it was. Karga wondered who had taught her that.

"Why did your people send you to me?" Rode asked her abruptly on one such night, lowering her spoon.

“Surely there were more strategic choices. Someone trained in the ways of force or bartering.”

Karga hid a puzzled smile; there was no one in her peaceful valley who fit that description. Rode seemed to see potential threats everywhere, all hearts and minds rooted however loosely in some manner of transaction.

“They didn’t send me,” she confessed, thumbing the rim of her cup. “They didn’t even know what I planned to do.” Her brow pinched as she remembered the argument with her faithful, frustrating uncle, the anger bursting from her mouth: *So you would shrivel up and die, then, if the Word-Keeper willed it?* “Their faith in the Word-Keeper was so pure, so worn-in... they trusted there was a reason for the drought. That this was only a test, and that the rains would return when the time was right. We only needed to wait and tend the land and pray.”

“But you,” Rode said unreadably, “had no such faith.”

Karga chewed her lip. She could not meet Rode’s eye, focused instead on a burl in the surface of the table. She weighed her words, separating them out in her mind.

It was difficult to tell an outsider what the drought had done to Kei’t. The land did not know itself without the rain, and so her people had begun not to know it, either. Most had left—gone to other islands or villages closer to the sea. The fields went barren. The creeks ran dry. The prayers were met with silence. When Karga, thirsty and angry, had asked why no one would seek the Word-Keeper and demand an answer, the old folks still left had looked at her with pity. *You do not ask for life, little wheat stalk. You wait for it to be given.*

“Your will would not have been that we should suffer,” she said at last. “That was what I believed.” Shakily, she drew a breath. “Was I mistaken?”

Rode drew subtly in on herself, almost a flinch. Karga turned her head to gaze out the window, even though night had fallen and it was too dark and foggy to make out much of anything. Not even the light she’d spotted on Daia that first night was visible. She’d found that Rode tended to open up more if she were not looked at when it happened—if she felt something were expected of her, she hid from it as one would from a blade.

“No,” Rode whispered. “I would not have willed a moment’s hardship on your people, Karga. I only thought...” The words were growing softer, almost impossible to hear. “I thought—I thought that if I stopped speaking the Word, then maybe they—” Her voice thickened. “Maybe *someone* would...”

She did not finish. Karga did not need her to. Comprehension stirred in her mind; she forgot her humility and looked across the table at Rode.

“You—” She faltered, overcome by a mix of disbelief and anger and, between the two, an impossible understanding. “You thought to see if you’d be missed?”

Rode smiled at her, a sad, stilted expression on her dark cheeks, hard for Karga to look at.

“Oh, how foolish would that be?” Her laugh was hollow, without edges. “If that were true, the world would only miss the Word—what worth is the one who says it?”

Then, she rose from the table and began to clear the dishes as if nothing of note had been said. Karga opened her mouth, searching for an argument, a spell for convincing. Her throat was raw, and her head was

beginning to ache. She could sense Rode's heart retreating from her again, locking all its doors and windows up tight against a comprehending wind. And again, she could conjure no offering.



Another week unwound itself, and another after that. The month was nearly done. Some days Karga's homesickness was so potent she felt as if she were bending under it, and some days it was as though she had never lived anywhere else but Rode's silent lighthouse by the sea, where the hours were thin and the gulls swooped low.

As their time together grew, so too did their camaraderie. Karga began to ask Rode plainer questions and coaxed out plainer answers. "What does it feel like, saying it?" she asked one bright, sun-whitened morning; Rode, arranging blackberries at the table, answered without lifting her head, "Like the sky has opened her hand and let you kiss it." The details of Rode's life on Daia, before the lighthouse, before the Word, remained elusive. Most times Karga drew close to something like a childhood, a home, Rode would say that she had to go tend the light, log and measure the tides, search for ships—yet, she paid enough attention to Karga's life that she began to speak of her brothers by name.

"It must rain every day on Daia," Karga mused on one occasion, gazing out at the green island while she took the laundry off the line. "Big fat droplets, more than anyone could ever hope for. It must be beautiful."

Rode, who had been standing in the doorway watching the evening draw in the fog, turned away from

Karga to go back inside. Karga could not see her face when she said, lovingly, mournfully: “It is—it was.”

One overcast afternoon, there was a sharp knock at the door. Karga was so engrossed in shucking oysters for her and Rode’s lunch, blanketed by silence and unmeasured day, that the intrusive sound shot straight through her ribs; she gave a start like a skittish goat and nearly dislodged the shell from the makeshift wedge she had carved for this very task a few days prior.

(She had felt glad when it was finished, as if her father’s ingenious love had worked through her; privately, with Rode absent with the light, she had stooped over the completed tool and wept.)

Collecting herself, Karga set aside the shucking knife and went with some disbelief to the door. Apprehension was sparking in her chest as she turned the knob. She half-hoped the noise had only been a passing ghost, but a being altogether more startling greeted her in the untextured daylight.

It was a man.

He was dressed in finely made traveler’s clothes: a jerkin of some animal hide with green ribbon fasteners, and a dark purple mantle that concealed his right arm. His hair was dark, gray-threaded, and windswept, combed back from a sun-reddened face—reddened, Karga suspected, because it did not see the sun often at all. He was an older man, near Karga’s uncle in age; he was chewing some kind of herb, his narrow jaw making rote, decisive movements. When the door was open all the way, he looked Karga up and down appraisingly, then gave her a well-tailored smile that wrinkled the corners of his eyes—though the eyes were shrewd and silver like fish, and did not seem to catch the expression.

“I’ve followed a long trail of rumors and hearsay to find you, Word-Keeper,” he said.

Karga stared. She had forgotten what it was like to speak to anyone except for Rode. She was so preoccupied with reconciling his existence with the doorway that it took her a moment to notice his mistake.

“Oh,” she started to say, “I’m not—”

“Four seasons it’s been since a drop of rain fell on Braathu. Near a year, by the scholars’ system. Yet here you stand, alive and well. Oh, don’t bristle so, I left my tribute, same as any lowly herder or grower.” The man gestured to the altar down the path, where Karga saw a bolt of vermillion satin propped up against the stone. “Here I was expecting you to have gone mad, like the Word-Keeper of my great-great-grandfather’s time—hoarding the rain for, what, near a decade? Shameful display, that was, but she was dealt with.”

He sniffed, looking Karga up and down again. The herb that he was chewing smelled sweet and grassy. He raised his eyebrows.

“On second thought, you look more like an Akshu boy than a Daian god-loved woman. What goes on, then? Is the true keeper of this tower dead, and you just happened to come by a bed and a stove?”

“Karga, is someone there?” Rode called.

Karga’s heart jumped in relief. She craned her neck over her shoulder. Rode had appeared at the foot of the stairs in a clean lavender linen shirt and plain trousers. Karga tried to convey the situation through her eyes alone—her unease, the man’s simmering disdain—and was not sure if she succeeded.

Rode came to stand beside her in the doorway. As she faced the man, her countenance betrayed nothing. He might as well have been a seagull foraging for scraps.

“Ah, there she is,” the man exclaimed, spreading his arms. “The Daian trogon herself. Your beauty—”

“You will address me by the title given to me by our gods,” Rode said, “or you will not address me at all.”

“Of course, Word-Keeper, of course. I forget myself. My name is—”

“I have no need of your name.” Karga almost winced on the man’s behalf. If Rode had spoken to her that way at their first meeting, she may well have turned around and flung herself from the bluffs. “Speak plainly. Why have you come?”

“Straight to the point.” The man was amused. “An admirable quality in Muhria. You’ve a trader’s temperament.”

Subtly, Rode’s nostrils flared. Karga doubted that the man noticed, so absorbed was he in the sound of his own voice.

She knew of Muhria—it was on the mainland, connected to the high court of Taranis like an artery. The finest things were made there, dishes and fabrics and spyglasses. It was said that if a Muhrian dying of thirst were offered a goblet of water or a goblet of wine, he would ask first for the name of the goblets’ maker.

The man laid his left hand over his heart, a gesture common with the mainlanders to prove one’s sincerity. Karga had seen it once or twice before.

“Word-Keeper, I’ve traveled far to furnish you with a proposition. To speak plainly, as you request—I represent a contingent of merchants on the mainland who have taken quite an interest in your Word. To speak even

more plainly... we have pooled our resources and would like to pay you for it.”

“*Pay* for the Word?” Karga exclaimed, and then cringed at her presumptuousness. Neither Rode nor the man seemed offended, only concerned with the other’s face and what advantage its reactions might give them.

“We can make it well worth your while,” the man said to Rode. “You would never want for comfort or luxury again.” He narrowed his eyes, as if glimpsing something in her expression, his smirk widening by an increment. “Had the thought never occurred to you?”

Rode did not hesitate. She put her hand on the door and began to shut it in the man’s face. At the last moment, he lunged forward and wedged a foot in the jamb; and, with a grunt, he forced the door back open, nearly knocking Rode aside—but she kept her balance, straight-spined and defiant. As if she’d known, all along, that the impact would come.

Karga slammed her palm against the side of the door, pushing back with Rode against the man’s strength. Any further and he would be across the threshold, in the lighthouse, in *their* lighthouse. Karga wouldn’t allow it; she would knock him to the ground before allowing it, and still—

Still, it was the work of a moment. The man needed only to heave himself forward once more and Karga stumbled, her concentration set askew by the glimpse she caught of Rode’s face beside her, the clear-eyed fear which had not been there a moment before. Her arm gave out, bending awkwardly, and Rode cursed, and then the man was inside.

He was inside, and Karga’s heart was in her teeth. She took frantic stock of the room in her mind’s eye, the

weapons she might improvise; the ladle the chair the sewing needle. Could she reach them fast enough?

She regained her footing, prepared to scratch at the man's face if she had to—but he only stood there, deliberate, seething, waiting for her and Rode to right themselves.

"Name your price," he commanded Rode.

"I haven't one," Rode said.

"Don't be coy."

"We neither of us have the time for coyness." Karga was astounded at the evenness of Rode's voice, its inarguable grace. "The Word cannot be bought. I would die before telling it to you."

A harsh sound burst from the man's mouth that Karga realized, belatedly, was laughter or some hateful cousin of it. He threw his hands in the air, as if to cast Rode off into the sea.

"Bought? *Bought?* What a small word! You could make a fortune, you stupid mule of a woman! The most powerful of kings would throw himself at your feet!"

"I've no interest in kings," Rode said, daring to punctuate it with a laugh of her own. "If they stand or they fall, it makes no difference to me."

"Treason," the man scoffed. "You will long for the sight of me when one of the souls you've forsaken comes to take the Word from you by the knife, or worse."

"You forget," Rode said, "even the sharpest blade could only take what I would give it."

Her clear and vicious stare could have split the man like lightning through a tree. Were Karga in his place, she doubted she could muster the nerve to go on standing. The man took a single step back, as if he needed a better

vantage point from which to believe what he saw. His eyes gleamed with disdain.

When he had flung up his arms, it had opened his cloak, and now Karga could see what hung from his belt. A cold clarity raced through her at the sight of a dagger in a wood sheath, set against his right hip. The blade was as long as Rode's forearm. The handle was pristine, bronze or some other metal, not worn down from much use.

Karga glanced frantically at Rode, who did not sense her wanting, did not look back. Karga could think of no way to signal the threat to her—but like as not, she had already seen it.

After all, she saw them everywhere. How often Karga had wondered, these strange half-hostage days, what for? She was overcome by a sudden recognition of Rode's courage; it seemed to fill the room like the blistering heart of a forge, so bright that it could not be looked at comfortably. How could so much courage fit in this lonely place, in the soft edges of that body? How could it not kill her to hold it?

Karga's blood was drumming in her veins, carrying a little of that wondrous courage to every part of her that it could reach. She stepped in front of Rode to shield her from the man's line of sight. Her hand shook. She had frightened off her fair share of roving wolves in Kei't and this could not be so different, though she was without the sling her father had made for her—nevertheless, she looked the man in the eye, gathered her voice in her chest to make whatever wild sounds she could.

What the Muhrian man saw on her face, she could not say—but at the sight of her he only held her gaze for a long, precarious moment and then sneered, shouldered

his cloak shut, and waved a gloved hand at the both of them in disgust.

“Wordless hells take you, then,” he cursed Rode. “We shall see just how much it is you’re willing to give, Daian, when your people forsake you.” He shot one last look at Karga, so bitter her tongue curled in her mouth. “Not all of us are like to follow you like a stupid Akshu lamb.”

Rode breathed in, slow and deep. She grazed Karga’s elbow with her hand, and Karga heeded that touch in an instant, light as it was. She stepped aside. Rode came to stand beside her, not ahead, not behind. Her eyes looked just as they did on that first day, when Karga had faced her on the staircase and seen her unmaking in them.

“You were never my people,” Rode said. Her voice was soft. “Get out.”

The man spat at her feet. Then, he left. When he was gone, Karga sank shakily into the chair where she had, years ago, been shucking oysters. A prickling sensation crawled across her hand, her feet, her face. She felt, strangely, like bursting into laughter, but there was no air in her lungs to do it with. She kept glancing at the door, even after Rode silently crossed the room to close and bolt it. Even though she knew, somehow, that the man would not come back.

It was not the same lighthouse that she and Rode had shared that morning. Something was staining the walls now, and Karga did not know how to wipe it clean. She didn’t know how long she sat there, listening to Rode move carefully around the room. Was she straightening up? What was the point? Nothing had been disturbed or moved or broken. The man had not touched a thing. Eventually it began to grow dark, and Rode lit a lamp, and brought it to the table.

"I'm sorry," Karga thought to say as Rode sat down across from her. She pointed vaguely to the oysters. "They'll need to be thrown out, I—I'm sorry."

"Those unshucked may yet survive," Rode said. She tilted her head until some of her braids slipped past her shoulder, and thoughtfully she ran her hands up and down them one by one. When she was through with it, whatever it was, she folded her hands on the table. Karga stared at her short, even fingernails. "Put them in a basket. I'll carry them back down to the sea."

Karga looked up swiftly. One side of Rode's face was bathed in flamelight, and Karga took in her eyebrow, her sloping cheek her soft, full, unsmiling mouth. She was moved again by the rich soil color of Rode's skin. It was the color of life.

As the last of her terror cracked away, Karga realized that she had never seen anyone look so beautiful. She would have protected her from anything, although she doubted the favor would be given in kind.

"It's nearly night," she said. To her own ears, her voice sounded clumsy. "Don't go."

She expected Rode to argue, but Rode gave no sign of it. She unfolded her hands, laying them flat on the wood. She seemed to be gazing through the table, through the floor, far away from Karga again—farther away than Karga could ever follow her.

"At least he spoke plainly," Rode murmured. "I've no patience for cunning."

Karga reached her own hand across the table, but did not have the courage to touch it to Rode's. She only laid it down upon the wood beside Rode's little finger. Rode's eyes landed on their two hands, side-by-side, and she looked at them for a long time. Eventually she looked up,

looked at Karga—right at her. She breathed in, opened her mouth around a word that didn't come, breathed out. Then in again.

"I don't wish to rule the world," she whispered. "Only to love it. Why can't I love it as you do, Karga? Am I so poorly made? What love can I have for a world when it is the walking-place of men like that? How can it be," and she let out a brittle laugh, "that this world could send me such men, but also send me you?"

Karga did not know what to say. Her gaze slipped thoughtlessly to Rode's mouth, its sweet rich slopes, the subtle glimpse of teeth. She ached. After a long moment, perhaps emboldened by Karga's silence, Rode turned her hand by an increment, and her knuckle met Karga's in the flickering dark. The touch echoed deeply up Karga's arm, to her shoulder, her collarbone, her throat and cheeks. There was no thin layer of pretense between them now—the space across the table was open, wide open.

Karga turned her wrist over, slowly, and opened her hand. Rode skimmed her palm with her fingertips, tracing the lines.

"That man offered you riches," Karga said, working the words over in her mouth like a river to stones. "Power. Freedom." She closed her eyes, too ashamed to watch Rode touch her. "I offer you nothing."

Rode did not argue, but neither did she agree. Softly, she bent her middle finger, and moved it up the length of Karga's, until the touch reached its end. Karga had never in her life been touched like this, like a ship to a shoreline. She couldn't understand where it came from, how it reached her. She wanted to go home, to dance in the rain. She was like those heavy clouds that Rode would not unbind, aching with the weight of feeling.

“Maybe you offer me everything,” Rode whispered. “A pot of honey, too. How are you to know?”

Her face seemed closer to Karga’s, though Karga didn’t know when they had drawn so close to one another. Her gaze dipped to Karga’s mouth. A small, involuntary noise sprouted from Karga’s throat, brought to life by water and light and heat. Her eyes burned. Her want, her shame, her fear, her love—they burned.

“Will I ever give you a reason, Rode?” Karga asked, made small by doubt. “Or will I only disappoint you, as he did?”

Rode’s mouth went flat and tight, dimpling her right cheek. She withdrew her hand from Karga’s. Again, in the empty space, Karga’s stayed open.

“Let’s bring the oysters home,” Rode said dully and stood up from the table.

Karga followed her down to the wind-lashed beach, holding the lantern for her to see by. Neither of them spoke. There was a storm coming in from the sea, like a bruise on the horizon. It would be there before they knew it.



That night, Rode told Karga to vacate her tent and sleep in the lighthouse. She offered her the bed that she seemed to never use, and that Karga always made sure was properly made, its sheets clean and unrumpled. Karga was just slightly too tall for it and had to curl up like a cat to fit, but the mattress was such a welcome change and the pillowcase—which she was almost positive was made of pure Taranisian silk—smelled so pleasantly of cedar oil that she fell asleep within a handful of breaths.

In Rode's bed, for the first time in many nights, Karga dreamed. All around her the air was wet and green, and broad-leafed plants that she had never seen before towered over her, vibrant in the sunlight, gleaming with huge crystalline droplets of water. From behind a frond came Rode, her naked body dark as the richest life-giving loam, the secret rolls and folds of skin at her hips and back so known to Karga that their bareness did not take her by surprise. Her body was so healthy, so well-loved, that Karga could have wept. Her expression was one of a plain and long-lived peace. She was not angry. She did not grieve. She turned to Karga, framed by the lush plants of the jungle, and reached out her hand. She craned her neck to the sky, closed her eyes, and a Word sprang from her gorgeous mouth.

The Word was



The storm was upon them in the morning. Karga stood in the doorway and stared up at it a while—that same iron-dark color it had been on the day of her arrival. She could smell the rain in it, taunted by all the lushness held captive right above her head. She wanted to reach up her hand and scoop it out and drink it.

She worked for a while around the house, trying to sweep out any invisible trace of the man's intrusion. She had no appetite and couldn't muster the energy to go foraging for a meal. There were no dishes to wash, no clothes to mend, no sills to dust. She spent the hours of the morning in aimless discontent, first wandering along the bluffs, then crouched at the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean, craning her neck to the rain clouds and whispering unanswered prayers. Then she went back

to the lighthouse, expecting to see Rode up and about, but it was as empty as she had left it. There was no sign that Rode had even come downstairs.

Karga looked up the staircase. She chewed her lip. All these days and she still had not gone upstairs—surely the lantern room needed tidying up, too. If she were truly to earn the Word, she had only a scant few days now in which to do it, and she didn't want Rode to have any excuse to call her labor lacking. There was an uneasiness gnawing at her, too, a dull fear of what she would find, a parting note, an empty bottle of poison or...

She chewed her lip harder. On the other hand, Rode might punish her for disobeying a rule, although they had never agreed outright that the lantern room was off-limits. When Karga would dare to climb the stairs, Rode would usually meet her halfway with a dirty look and a grumble of *I'm awake, I'm awake*, and they would go back down together.

Karga's palm was sweaty. She wiped it on her shirt. If something had happened—if Rode needed help, if she had fallen or was sick... or if, somehow, the Muhrian man had crept back in the night... Karga swallowed, but her throat was dry. She steeled herself. Protecting Rode meant protecting the Word, and she was resolved to do both.

She kept her steps slow. She could hear wooden beams faintly creaking overhead and the sound of wind through an opening. Her thighs were burning by the time she reached the top.

Daylight filled the room through its many paneless windows. A wooden balcony wrapped around the outer walls. In the center of the floor an enormous mirror had been built to reflect the eastern sunlight; a ladder at the

north end of the room led, Karga presumed, to the brazier for the flame to be lit at night. It was flanked by stacks of crates labeled with the Braathish rune for fuel.

Karga crept forward, taking care not to make a sound. The view from the seaward side of the tower was wide: endless miles of choppy gray sea, crowned by the distant shapes of a few sister islands with Daia at the center. Karga squinted as she drew closer to a window, trying to make out the light that she had seen that first night in her tent—after a moment, she spotted it, flashing across the waves like a pinhole in the fabric of the world. It was much more visible from up here, even in the darkness of the storm, blade-like in its clarity.

Karga blinked, hard, in an attempt to sharpen her vision, for she was not sure, at first, of what she saw. But no, it was unmistakable. There were small lights on their sister islands, too—so faint at a distance that Karga could make them out clearer from the corner of her eye than head-on, like certain stars. Other lighthouses? But what for?

Before she could make sense of it, there was a movement in her periphery, accompanied by a quiet breath—she almost jumped. She craned her neck around and saw, across the brazier, a small desk pushed up to the opposite window. Rode was sitting there, slumped over.

Quietly, Karga crossed the room to Rode's side. Rode did not move at her approach, but her back rose and fell in the stormy afternoon shadows. Her left cheek was resting on her arms. She was asleep. She had tied her braids loosely in a knot and a few of them had slipped free of the arrangement and were now in repose along the surface of the desk. She was bundled in a blanket that might once have been brightly colored, but was now

faded by years, vermillion to an ashen pink. All around her were half-finished drawings of plants, broad-leafed and gigantic. Karga stared at the pages, stunned: they looked just like the plants that she had dreamed about.

Her eyes fell to Rode's face, which was turned toward her. Even in sleep, it was faintly haunted—there was a tiny indentation between her eyebrows—but it was the most peaceful that Karga had ever seen her. The line of her mouth was slack, her dark lips parted. Drool trickled onto her sleeve.

Karga's heart swelled almost cruelly. Right then, she felt the impulse within herself to wake her and make her breakfast and watch a day go by together, and she was gutted by such confusion and shame that she might have been sick. What was the matter with her? All their kind days aside, this was the Word-Keeper holding her people hostage; this was Rode, Rode and her evasions and her tender pride, Rode and her mythic Word and her stories without lessons. Rode was her friend, her keeper. Karga knew her and did not know her at all.

Perhaps all of this made itself evident on her face. Perhaps that was why, when Rode stirred, opened her eyes and saw Karga leaning in beside her, she let out a frightened gasp.

"Karga! What—" Rode recoiled, the legs of the chair scraping harshly against the floor. Her eyes darted to Karga's hand. "*Get back!*"

Karga's body obeyed before her mind could recognize the words. She backed away, bare feet stumbling, showing Rode her open palm in a gesture that she hoped came off as a promise rather than an admission of guilt. Rode's stare was wild and angry; she rose slowly from the chair and kept one hand braced on the back of it. She

reached blindly behind her, grasping between the papers on the desk before producing a small, dull-edged knife.

She leveled it at Karga.

“What were you after?” she demanded, her voice breaking. “What have you been after, all this time?”

“I—nothing, I—” Karga stammered, even though it was a lie. “It’s afternoon, and I—I was worried about you...”

“Worried about your Word, more like,” Rode spat. “We neither of us have time for coyness—remember? Show it to me, then. Don’t hide it. Show me your blade.”

“I haven’t got one,” Karga said helplessly. “Is that all you’ve made of me in our time together? Why would I bother with any of it if I could have just cut your throat?” Her voice splintered, growing angrier. “Can you think of nothing else for someone to carry?”

Rode’s teeth were gritted. The blanket she had wrapped herself in so gently was now crumpled on the floor. She ran both hands up her forehead, clutching her temples, her eyes gleaming, about to weep light. Karga had never been looked at like this before. Like she was the only thing in the world worth hating.

“Get out,” Rode said in a low, cruel voice.

Karga’s pulse hammered in her face, in her stomach, all terror and heat. Her eyes filled up with tears. Although she was shaking, she set her jaw and shook her head.

“Leave me!” Rode screamed. “If the light goes out, they’ll send another sorry Keeper! You’ll have your Word within a day!”

“What are you talking about?” Karga asked. She was shaking her head again. She didn’t know why or what it meant. What was she refusing?

The storm had begun to roil outside, a furious wind rattling the window panes. Overhead, the wind howled through the eaves, as if Mwepesi himself had come to shake the lighthouse loose from the world. The clouds were so dark, so heavy with rain, that Karga could smell it in the thickening air, could almost hear them crying out for release. But Rode would not give it to them. She was facing down Karga, terrible and divine, and letting them suffer. Letting all of Braathu suffer, as she had been for months upon months.

“What do you think this place is *for*, Karga? The light—this wretched light—it’s a signal, don’t you see? They can see it from Daia. They can see it from everywhere! We... every Word-Keeper, on every island... we keep the flame lit to assure our watching teachers that we yet live. If they see that it’s gone out, they’ll know what it means—that the Word-Keeper’s life has reached its end, and a replacement must be sent at once. They’ll curse another child with the Word, tear them from their island and their family, fling them to some godforsaken rock to say it each day until they die.” Rode broke into a laugh, coarse as a sob of agony. The smile on her face was *wrong*, all wrong. “Like someone else’s prayer. Until their lips go raw. Anyone can do it. If that light went out, you’d have your rain again in three sunsets—you never needed *me*, whether I live or die is meaningless! Meaningless to them! Meaningless to all the men who chew on greed! Meaningless to *you*! I might have said it at thirty days’ mark, sent you home, and thrown myself from the cliff right then and there, and you’d have had no reason to even turn your head! No need for you to stay now, is there? Never was! So get out, go home, get out!” Her scream was so loud, so full of

self-hatred, that the words were barely whole: “*GET OUT!*”

She might have struck Karga across the face and it would not have felt so different. Karga longed for something to hold onto, steady herself by, but she was stranded, kept upright by nothing but an inconceivable heartbreak. She tried to make sense of what was happening, and her mind could hardly make the edges meet: Rode would not tell her the Word, Rode had never needed to tell her the Word, maybe never even planned on it, maybe always intended to make a game of Karga for a month and then cut her own throat when she got bored of it, maybe spent each day laughing at her or hating her or not thinking of her one way or the other, not at all, for Karga had never even mattered. Kei’t had never even mattered. Rode was nothing but a lonely, petulant outline—choking back the Word for attention that she didn’t even want—if there was indeed anything, anything at all, that she wanted or cared about. The indignity that Karga had suffered at her hands, the worthlessness of her love, was annihilating; Karga wanted to run and hide, hide her face, hide her heart, take it all back—all that she had given—all that she had felt. Rode had never wanted it. Rode had only ever wanted the power of being needed.

And so Karga did as she was told. She pushed past Rode, raw dry sobs catching in her throat, crossed the room, and stumbled down the stairs. It seemed to take hours to reach the bottom. Her face was burning when she fell against the wall, her shoulder crushed against the stone, wheezing in the empty room. For a long moment she stood wrecked in the home that the two of them had shared, that false place, and then she gathered her wits and began clumsily to clear out her things. They had

found little nooks and crannies for themselves, mingling with Rode's things, which Karga hated so much that she wanted to tear all the walls down bare-handed. She sobbed openly as she pulled her pack from the foot of the bed. She had to wipe her running nose each time she crammed something back into it: socks, hose, salt-box, flint and tinder, her oyster-tool; a little piece of abalone shell, which Rode had tied to a piece of twine for her, and given her to wear. She was moving carelessly. Her elbow knocked into something, sending it to the floor with a clatter.

It was the small collection of objects Rode kept on the windowsill. The carving of the animal, the pale conch shell, the copper coin—all were now scattered over the floor. Karga looked at them hatefully, her breath coming back to her in gulps.

What right did Rode have to love anything, to see any object and think it worth keeping? It was just detritus—just worthless trinkets—and yet...

Karga wiped her nose again. Her hatred began to break off into pieces, duller by the moment. She picked up the carving and put it back in its place. She did the same with the coin. The pane of the window rattled against the storm's wind, which sounded now more like a plea. Finally, Karga picked up the conch shell. She turned it over in her hand; the aperture was a rich, rosy pink, fading at the lips to milky white. Alone, on her knees, Karga lifted the shell to her ear. She cradled it there and listened.



Once there was a Word. The Word lived inside the mouth of a girl who did not want it. She lived alone with

the Word, alone on the rim of the world, alone but for the gulls and her sorrow, alone with an heirloom love; each day she woke with the Word and slept with the Word, and sat with its taste and its weight, and though she was hungry and thirsty, she could not take pleasure from food nor drink, not until she spoke the Word, not until its longing unshackled her tongue. When she spoke it there were celebrations and great harvests. Many were the wanters and believers who journeyed to her door, herders and growers, maidens and scholars, and once even a king. They came bearing fruit and fish and many gifts; there were paeans from the verse-makers, and dances and flute music and drums. All of this for the Word. But not for the girl.

The girl longed to dive into the ocean, and set loose the Word in her wake, and swim home to her island. She longed to be no one, to begin again, to know no words at all but the name her mother gave her. But she knew she could not abandon the Word without abandoning the world, for her body and its knowings held it captive, just as the fruit and fish and gifts did, all the tokens left by those for whom her loneliness was something to be worshipped. And so all that she could do was hide herself away, silent, unspeaking, until the silence swallowed any love she had for the world at all, until she decided that if she could not swim, she would drown. For without the Word, which the world so loved, she was nothing.

On the morning that the girl prepared to throw herself from the cliffs, a strange visitor arrived. She was a goatherd from a valley in the Akshu Province. She bore no gifts, no offerings; no bargains or tricks. She was tall and graceless and kind. She opened the door. She asked for the Word. She stayed with the girl for many sunsets,

helping her to live: this was what they each of them had decided that the Word was worth. As the days passed, the girl began slowly to find her way back into herself, into the parts of her that had existed long before the Word, into the hidden corners where the goatherd might make a home. She began to dream of setting the Word free. And one fine day...

Come now, Word-Giver. You already know the end.



Karga ran up the stairs. She ran without grace or pride, stumbling, hurtling, gasping. She was upon the lantern room before she knew it, blinking her eyes fiercely against the invading wind. She could barely make out the light, near-extinguished as it was, a throbbing orange defiance in the dark.

Rode's desk had been knocked on its side. Her papers and drawings were long gone, blown away into the night. The storm's howl was deafening, but when Rode shouted wordlessly through the din, Karga heard it.

One of the crates was pried haphazardly open; Karga stumbled toward it, for the flame needed fuel and the rest could come later. There was ample dried seaweed inside and a hammered tin scoop to gather it in and so Karga began rushing back and forth to heap seaweed onto the struggling flame. The air was hot. Sweat thickened in her hair, streamed down her face and neck. Her arm swiftly began to ache. She moved on sheer instinct, overwhelmed by the need roaring in her blood to keep the flame alive. If it went out—if it went out—

"Karga?!" Rode's voice rose over the storm, and Karga was compelled to look up: and there, across the brazier, Rode was facing her with disbelieving eyes,

messy and frightened and beautiful, the firelight gleaming on her sweat-bright skin. Karga could have crawled through the flames and kissed her. “Damn you,” and there were tears, and her voice was breaking, “*damn you*, the Word is forfeit, let the flame go out! Let me go!”

“I don’t care about that!” Karga shouted, with all her lungs, all her body, all her soul. “I came here for the Word, but I am staying here for you!”

The wind whipped Rode’s braids across her shining face, her shining eyes, for only a moment. Karga didn’t have time to watch her any longer; she went back to heaping fuel onto the struggling flame. She refused to let it die. The wind would have to throw her out itself.

Suddenly the flame leaped, its body doubling. It was Rode, piling fuel onto it. She was fighting through the storm, too, cursing and crying, keeping the light alive.

The thunder rolled like the bones of an old and angry god. All night the lighthouse fire kept going out, and the two of them had to relight it so many times that Karga’s hand smelled for hours of seaweed, and her whole body ached, her garments soaked through with sweat. In the clear, sun-scrubbed morning that came after, she followed Rode into her bed.

They pulled the old quilt over their heads, small and shivering, bare ankles brushing, and listened for a while to the breathing of the other.

“I release you, Karga,” Rode said, eventually, in a quiet voice. “The rain will follow you home.”

Her palm lay open on the pillow that they shared. Karga ran her fingertip down the span of it, then pressed down, straight into the lifeline. If she concentrated, she could sense a pulse there, or perhaps it was only her own. Through the dark, she looked over Rode’s mouth, her

dark lashes, the tiny curls along her hairline. She and Rode each breathed in at once, exhausted and inexhaustibly alive.



Karga woke, in tides, to an empty bed.

A cold shard of panic jutted into her heart. She threw off the sheets, calling Rode's name like a bleating spring kid, and stumbled for the stairs when no answer came. She took them two at a time, rushing into the room where the light was kept.

Rode was outside on the balcony, her hair undone. Countless gulls were circling her, crying out as if in joyous urging. Karga choked back a ruinous sound and ran to her.

"I thought—" She stammered, trying not to cry. "I thought..."

There was a smell gathering upon the earth that took her back to Kei't in spring. She thought of her uncle laying his weathered hand on the damp soil, whispering encouragement to seeds. She thought of her brothers bobbing corklike in the river, sticking out their tongues to catch new raindrops. She thought, overwhelmingly, of her father, his silhouette suspended over the dewy wild grasses at sunrise, his walking stick—the same that she had walked with here—in one hand, whistling an ancient song to the goats. She thought of the wild anchusa, the thyme and the acanthus, and the valley going green again, bending joyously to the downpour. She thought of running out of the house, barefoot, and dancing in it.

She thought of watching Rode dance in it, too.

Overhead, a herd of dark clouds had come in from the ocean, drawn to Rode as if coaxed by the promise of an

apple. The sky was a strange color, dusky, pink—Karga glimpsed a pale thread of lightning, just for an instant. She slowly came to stand beside Rode, craning her neck in wonder. The clouds swirled above their tiny bodies. The smell grew stronger—the heady smell of earth and pine and stone and sea, the cool sweet smell of things about to live again. Little birds were in the air overhead, all of them darting out of the tall grass and the cypress at once to catch a hundred scattering insects.

A long, open note, clear and piercing as light on water, sprang up from Rode's throat. She tipped back her head and offered it to the sky. She held it longer than Karga had known human breath could carry voice, and then it began to change: first a lowering, a deepening, then an arcing like gullflight. Rode's song eluded structure, and yet Karga found that her blood followed it before her mind could—there was something deep inside her body that had been taught by that sound, long ago, how to be alive. Goosebumps rushed up her arm, her neck, into her ears. As Rode sang—for it *was* singing, just as it was speaking—there was a blurring of the distant sky, a veil which seemed to billow closer, and closer, mile by mile.

“Listen,” Rode whispered. Karga tore her eyes away from the glorious storm about to make landfall and turned them to Rode. Unthinking, she took Rode's hand, tangling their fingers. “I'll say it as many times as you need, Karga, until you learn it. And you can tell your children, and your children's children. And they can give it back to the world, as you gave the world back to me.”

Something light and cold and wet struck Karga's cheek. Then something else, another, another, pinpricks of the sky's vast love. The rain, the rain, the rain. She held tightly to Rode's hand.

“We can tell them together,” she said.

In her bare feet, at the edge of the world, Karga closed her eyes to welcome the rain. It spilled from the clouds, streamed down her face, remade her body from the surface inwards—the rain, the rain!—she lifted her and Rode’s joined hands to the sky and began to laugh, jubilant. She stamped her feet and danced and let loose a long, sweet ololuge from her tongue, until the sound transcended her body and she was bursting, infinite, she was the land and she was the gods and she was her ancestors and she was Rode, too—and she spun Rode around, and the rain splashed about their ankles, and the thunder roared above them like the triumphant beating of a heart. Karga knew that, down the long road inland, there would be ololuge in Kei’t, too. There were words for living everywhere.

Time Travel Triad

Kyle Aisteach

I. Thesis

Johnny Sunshine Kowalski

We often joke that time travel is probably the gayest profession after male prostitution. The majority of time travelers are gay men. Specifically, small gay men. People forget that people, as a whole, got steadily bigger over the years, and so a typical person right now would be conspicuously large most anywhere else in time. And gay men all know how to hide in plain sight. Time travelers need to be invisible.

It's 1804. Berks County, Pennsylvania.

I'm sitting on the stone wall of a farmer's orchard at the back of his farm. I've been interviewing a farmer named Matthias Koch about his father's experiences in the Revolutionary War. I don't care about any of that. That's not true. He claims his father personally convinced two Hessian mercenaries to desert and he then employed them on this farm for 10 years afterwards, which would be fascinating if we could confirm it.

I'm packing papers back into my leather satchel after he's left me to return to the hand plow when I hear a distant voice call "*He!*"

I've always been amused by the German "*he,*" because it's exactly the same word, sound and all, as the English word "*hey,*" but I've seen English speakers in various times beat their children for saying it. I'm half convinced that the reason it's so reviled is precisely because the Germans use it.

I adjust my glasses. They're where the real treasure trove of information is being recorded: images of an early 18th century farm at work, recordings of actual sounds and voices of the era, tiny micromilemeasurements of the air.

The orchard has bounced the sound, so I'm not sure who called or from where. The orchard stands behind me, dark and cool, smelling faintly of dung. In front of me is a wheat field in the process of being plowed and sown by a cluster of 20 men in wide hats and heavy vests. One of them is Black, which is something the history books like to omit. Life for a 19th century farm laborer is not what we would call a good life, but I've seen firsthand how Black slaves are treated. I wish I could get his story. I wish I could get all their stories into the history books. But I cannot pay him a day's wages.

Down the hill is a spring with a *schpringhaus* sitting in it. A *schpringhaus* is a small, stone building that is used like a refrigerator, letting the ice-cold spring water cool it as it flows around its base.

Next to the *schpringhaus*, standing on a flat stone in the stream where he can't be seen by the men in the field, I see a young man, maybe 15. He's got a stringy beard and severe acne. He motions with his arm for me to come to him.

We call it gaydar. It's how we instinctively spot a fellow gay man. In the days when we lived in the closet, it was an essential survival tool. It literally kept us from getting killed. It lingers as a way we keep our community together. And once you develop it, you never really lose it, especially when you time travel.

My gaydar buzzes.

I slip my pen into my vest pocket and move down the hill. The young man disappears into the *schpringhaus* once he verifies that I'm moving his direction.

The flat rocks that bridge the stream and lead to the half-height door of the *schpringhaus* are wet and slick, and my hard leather shoes have smooth soles that don't provide much traction. I tiptoe across and up to the door.

The boy inside meets my eyes. OK, if being in love is like electricity, gaydar is like the background static you can feel in the air during an electrical storm. It's not strong enough that you can feel a shock, but it's there, buzzing, tingling. Gaydar isn't attraction. In fact, the boy in front of me is physically repulsive, not just because of his age, but also his body odor. Yet I'm now certain that he's one of us.

And I'm keenly aware that he's in Pennsylvania *Deitsch* country in 1804.

And my heart breaks.



I was in grad school when the Supreme Court ruled that the New American Morality Act was Constitutional.

My first alert was a text message from my mom: "Johnny Sunshine, you do what you need to do to stay safe. I love you, always."

It was in the middle of a seminar. Eight grad students and an overbearing professor, Doctor Jessica Saxon, in a hundred-year-old building that should have been torn down 80 years before. I blinked at the message, not understanding.

The news alert came through at the exact moment I heard the footsteps of the police officers coming down the hall to arrest me. I didn't need more than the headline.

My straight friends later told me of staring at the news story in shock and disbelief. There's no disbelief when you're the one who's the target.

Doctor Saxon was a lesbian but had been married to a man for many years in her younger days. She looked at me, then out into the hallway. "Go!"

I sprang from my seat and shoved the old-fashioned awning window open. I squeezed through it. I had just seen a flash of the men in camouflage pushing Doctor Saxon aside when the bushes below were suddenly all around me.

I sprinted for the woods.

I found out later that Doctor Saxon served five years.



"*Wer iss du? Wu iss du her?*" The boy's eyes are wide and he has backed against a shelf of jarred fruit as he interrogates me.

Direct questions—who am I and where am I from—and very much not the formal German I was taught. *Pennsilfaanisch Deutsch* is actually a distinct German dialect, but since I'm clearly not a local, I use German.

"*Ich heiße* John Smith," I say. We don't use our real names when we time travel. That would be conspicuous. Though, to be fair, Johnny Sunshine Kowalski is a conspicuous name in any time.

He switches to English, which he speaks flawlessly except for the lilting local accent that makes every sentence sound like a question, and every question sound like a statement. "Not your name. Who are you? Where are you from?"

It's a sad truth that every once in a while we don't pass. We don't know why. Sometimes, someone,

somehow knows. But we still must protest. “I come from Connecticut.”

He scoffs. “You are funny. I can’t tell if you are young or old. Your clothes are funny. Your glasses are funny. You walk funny. You smell funny. Are all men from Connecticut funny?”

“Only the educated ones.”

I step down from the door and onto the wet floor of the *schpringhaus*. His eyes grow slightly wider and he presses a millimeter more back into the shelves. He’s taller and broader than me, even as I pull myself up to my full height in the low building. I’m in no way a physical threat to him. Something else is scaring him.

He pants slightly before he asks in a hushed voice, “*Iss du... are you... en Haasyaeger?*”

My brain scrambles to translate that. Rabbit hunter. Am I a rabbit hunter? I’m clearly not a hunter of any sort. *Yaage* can also mean “chase,” so it could be rabbit chaser. I suppose that might be a term for a mythical creature like a time traveler. It could also be slang for a homosexual that hasn’t come down to us. The kid would have gaydar of his own, after all, but our modern understanding of sexuality and the vocabulary that comes with it is still a century in the future. All I can do is shake my head, perplexed.

He springs forward and grabs both of my hands. “I would like to go with you.”

I extract my hands from his and point towards the road. “I am next going to interview *Herr Kelkar*.”

“No!” He stomps one foot and flaps his hands like a preschooler. “I do not care who you are. I do not care where you come from. But wherever, take me with you when you go back!”

He is looking down at the floor, but I can still feel the pain in his eyes. And I understand.

Gay. 1804. Traditional Pennsylvania *Deutsch* family. This is a combination that could be lethal, very probably has been lethal in a great many cases that history doesn't record. If his father is at all prone to violence behind closed doors, anything is better than this. Even the complete unknown.

"I'm just an historian," I say. "I can't kidnap you away from your family."

He wipes his eyes. He's crying. "You are no historian."

Actually, I am.

I want to reach out to him. I want to hug him and tell him everything will be all right.

But it won't be.

"What's your name?" I ask.



I had been on the streets for two years when I was the target of a fag hunt. Fag hunts were a way that "real" men showed how "manly" they were by getting a group of other "manly" men together to chase down some innocent streetwalker. It always ended with a rape. But if you dragged the hunt out long enough, at least some of the gang gave up, and the rest were usually too tired to kill you afterwards.

My nest was in a cardboard box between two dumpsters in an alley. A nearby kitchen vent kept it pretty warm in the winter, and the sun never quite shone directly down in the alley, so it was a few degrees cooler in the summer. Plus it was dark, which was usually an advantage.

I knew I was in trouble when I happened to look behind the one dumpster and saw three men, side-by-side, backlit by the glaring lights of the boulevard. Their pear-shaped silhouettes and lousy posture meant they couldn't be law enforcement, but the crowbar, 2x4, and tire iron they carried meant they weren't friendly.

I clutched my knees to my chest, hyperventilating. I had to decide whether to make a break for it now and reveal that I was here or stay put and hope they'd somehow miss me when they started working their way up the alley.

I rolled to my knees and then hoisted myself to a starting position. I counted down to myself. 3-2-1 Go! I shot out from between the dumpsters, tearing my box in the process, bounced off the brick wall opposite, and sprinted up the alley toward the hills.

"Got one!"

"There he goes!"

"Coming your way!"

An enormous pair of arms came out of nowhere, catching me across the ribs. I almost went down, but they held firm and dragged me into a doorway.

Every law enforcement officer in the country was required to send me to a conversion therapy camp if they found me. I knew never to cry for help.



His name is George Washington Koch, but everyone calls him Wasch. It's the sort of thing that drives historians and genealogists mad, trying to figure out if the person in this document is the same as the person in that document, especially since most English speakers would

write it “Vosh” if they just asked him his name and not how to spell it.

He’s now sitting on the wet floor, sobbing.

We’re taught to always stay on the same level or lower than whoever we’re talking to. I sit down cross-legged and feel the cold water seep through my pants. “Here’s the thing, Wasch,” I say. “There are two possibilities. One: I am who I say I am, and if you come with me all you’ll end up doing is wander around with me while I take notes until some sheriff comes to take you home and me to prison. Two: I really do come from someplace weird and exotic, where you’ll never fit in and never be happy.”

His voice is choked. “Here I don’t fit in. Here I’m not happy.”

What can I tell him? Go back to Germany and wait a hundred fifteen years because the Weimar Republic was a great place to be a gay man? Stay here and wait two hundred ten years? In both cases, just be sure to get out before...

I shudder.

He looks up at me, tears streaking the muck on his face.

“*Dieses Wasser ist kalt*,” I try, dismissing my shudder as a chill.

He shakes his head and swallows before he speaks. “Why? Why can’t I just follow you? If you are who you say you are you can walk up to the sheriff and tell him to send me home.”

I scoff. There is no way I could find the sheriff and he knows it. Even if I walk all the way to Reading, odds are that he’s out of town. “Whose story would the sheriff believe, mine or your father’s?”

“Why can’t you take me?”

Even if I were to find the documentary proof that he is going to die here, today, that his family is going to come out to the *schpringhaus* and find him lifeless in the water, I can’t take him with me. Even walking through history and observing causes tiny timequakes that can be felt and measured back in my own time. Changing things in any way can rip spacetime apart. Wasch’s fate is to stay here, now, in 1804 and see where his life takes him.

He’s relatively masculine. He can pass. I’m sure his fate is to find a nice farmgirl and bring her a lifetime of misery in a loveless marriage. He may manage to force himself to produce a few children so he has some security in his old age. More likely, he’ll die young and childless and leave a destitute widow.

It’s no consolation that it’s already happened.



I got recruited to the time traveler corps as I was finishing grad school.

It was 15 years after I started and in Canada, not the United States. I wasn’t the top student they’d ever had. They weren’t a top program. But they managed to claw my transcripts out of my U.S. schools and they got me back on track.

I had defended my dissertation but hadn’t heard anything yet. I was sitting in the grad student lounge, talking to my fellow students, who were busy assuring me that my age and my sexual orientation wouldn’t influence my committee at all. I’d been around enough to consider them hopelessly naive.

I heard footsteps coming down the hall, marching purposefully.

I had instinctively turned and made for the window.

The grad student lounge was in a 21st century building. The windows didn't open.

The door swung open and my advisor, Doctor Swanson, stood there with a tiny, olive-skinned man who set off my gaydar like a klaxon.

Doctor Swanson smiled, his gray beard riding up his chin as he did so. "Ah, there you are, Johnny Sunshine! Someone here who wants to meet you. Johnny Sunshine Kowalski, this is Doctor Titus Psaltiras, Deputy Director of Research for the Adamson Active Historical Research Center."

Titus smiled and held out a hand, but my instincts still told me to slide out the window.



Wasch has stopped crying, but he still sits on the wet floor, knees clutched to his chest, glaring at me accusingly.

"*Wasch, Ich habe keine magisch,*" I say, looking into his eyes so he will believe me when I say that there's nothing magical about me.

He laughs. "Do you know that every time you have spoken *Deutsch* to me, it has been to lie?"

He's right. We're actually taught that. It's harder to detect a lie in someone who is speaking in a second language. "Fine, then I will speak English so you will believe me."

He tips his chin back and sets his jaw.

And somehow I can't tell him a lie. "There is a law. I cannot take anything. I cannot leave anything. I cannot change that. I must follow it. I had to sign a document."

I have no idea why telling a *Deutschman* that you signed a document always ends the discussion, but it does. He grimaces, snuffles once, then stands up and opens the *schpringhaus* door. He looks back at me from the step, stopped low. “You are leaving me to die.”

I am. And I have no words. Finally, I just nod.

He ducks through the door and crosses the slippery rocks to the far side of the stream.

I watch him go, wishing I could do something, anything.

But I can’t save him.

I can’t save any of them.

I abandon the rest of my mission. I take out my timestream controller and disappear.



II. Antithesis

Folarin Ibrahim

I am staring down at my left hand. I’m holding a flare gun. I am ankle-deep in water, behind a stand of mangroves. I look up. A low, wide wooden sailing ship burns off the coast, fire spreading rapidly down the mast and onto the hull. White people on board scream. Some jump overboard. One is on fire himself.

I remember my name first: Folarin.

How had I forgotten my name?

How did I get here?

Where am I even?

The wooden ship looks 17th century. I shouldn’t have a flare gun. I check the hidden pocket in my dandogo. My timestream controller is there, along with six unspent flares and two empty flare casings.

Oh, dear Olodumare, what have I done?

The ship hisses and snaps as the fire spreads along the keel below the waterline. Two men still beat the flames futilely, but others have jumped overboard and are heading towards me.

I run.

Think, Folarin, think. What would explain this?

I head up a hill and into a densely wooded area. I stop, gasping for breath. I check my timestream controller.

It's 1527. 16th century, then. Did I just attack a state-of-the-art slave ship?

That makes no sense. It goes against everything we're taught, everything we're trained to do.

But it would explain the amnesia.

I consider. If I traveled back to find where a slave ship coming in, then backtracked a day or two earlier up the coast and sank it, I would not have been able to observe it come in, because it never would have. That would cause a massive timequake. The old timeline would vanish. I would have no memory of it.

I laugh out loud.

Based on what they teach, I shouldn't be alive. I shouldn't exist. The whole universe shouldn't exist. Spacetime should have been ripped apart.

I have changed history.



Time travelers trained in virtual classrooms, preparing us for the isolation of the job. We always lived in quarantine, alone. We could not risk taking a disease back into the past, nor bringing one back to our own time. The habitats were spacious and modern, and the classroom appeared around our desk every day, our fellow students

floating as avatars all around us. And we learned one thing above all: “The future has hindsight.”

Time travelers worked exclusively in the past. A timestream controller would not permit moving forward in time beyond six seconds after the original time of departure.

But someone from the future could have, conceivably, come back to our time at any time.

My instructor was the Adamson Active Historical Research Center’s Director for Research himself, Aaron Goldstein. He, like most of us, was a small man. He had a large nose and tightly curled black hair. He wore it short and his face clean-shaven in the style of the times he mostly operated in. He introduced the conundrum in class with a simple question: “Do we trust the future?”

There were six of us training when I joined the corps. We exchanged glances, the avatar representations of ourselves betraying nothing.

I spoke first. “I don’t understand.”

“Imagine, someone from the future comes back to our time,” Aaron said, turning directly to my avatar. “You recognize him as a time traveler. That sometimes happens even to the best of us. We don’t know why. And, like everyone who recognizes a time traveler, you ask about the future. He says to you, ‘Folarin, I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you. You don’t want to know.’ How do you react?”

Hans, a blond, broad-shouldered man two desks over from me answered. “I expect I would be annoyed.”

“Exactly!” Aaron said. “How dare he say that he knows better than us? But we’re going to do exactly the same thing, whether we say it out loud or not, every second we’re in the past. Remember, time is an actual, physical dimension of spacetime. Natural human

perception is to see the past as gone and the future as unwritten. But, really, everything that has ever happened and everything that will ever happen all exist simultaneously along this fourth dimension. That means that events in the past are never gone. We simply are no longer able to perceive them without moving our reference point along the fourth dimension. And when we do, we're truly there. We will perceive the past as gone and the future as unwritten, just the same way everyone around us in that other time does. But we're different. We know what happened, what will happen. And we need to know, really know, that those people need to go forward into their own future unaware, no matter what that future is."

"Why?" I asked.

Aaron's avatar shifted its head in a way that told me he must have been smirking. "Well, imagine again our future time traveler who comes back to our time. You ask about the future, and he says instead, 'Folarin, tomorrow a construction crane is going to drop 30 tons of steel on your habitat, crushing the living room and bathroom. You're going to spend six hours under it, bleeding out painfully.' What would you do?"

"Stay in the kitchen all day," Hans said.

"Exactly!" Aaron said. "And he will have caused a timequake. Spacetime could rip apart. And not just for the future. Remember, time is a physical dimension. That kind of rip would destroy the past and the present, too. Everyone who has ever lived, everyone who ever will live, written out of existence out of compassion for one person. The future has hindsight. He knows what will happen, and he knows that the universe will survive it. It's a burden all time travelers carry in their hearts."

“Yes, we know,” Tabitha, the only woman in our class, the only woman in the entire institute, said. “We take nothing, we leave nothing, we change nothing.”

“But it’s more than that,” Aaron said. “We need to truly internalize that what will happen has already happened. The choices you are making right now, to someone in the future, they’re done. You make decisions based on free will, but to someone else, someone in the future, you’ve already done it and they know what you decided. They know whether it was a good or a bad idea. They have hindsight.”

“So what you’re really saying,” I said, “is that to do this job, we’d have to be willing to stay in the living room.”

Aaron’s avatar nodded. “When you go back, you will see people just like you, making real decisions in real time. They could change what they do with just a word from you. But we can’t give them that word.” He paused for effect. “Anyone with any empathy at all is going to be slowly killed inside. Eventually, we all will face our own end knowing both that it has already happened and that someone, somewhere in time knew exactly what was in store for us. If anyone wants to leave the program, now is the time to do it.”

The silence that followed felt like it lasted for an hour. Hans’ avatar vanished.

Homosexuality was punishable by death in Nigeria up until the year before I was born. Even though it was not technically illegal anymore when I was growing up, it was still something I was never supposed to discuss, never supposed to consider.

I had never expected to feel my heart break when Hans left.



Aaron Goldstein stands in front of me. We're outdoors. My first thought is that something must be very, very wrong if Aaron is violating quarantine by being in the same place at the same time as another time traveler.

We're on a hill. The ocean is to my left. My left arm is outstretched, clutching my flare gun. A Portuguese galleon and two smaller merchant ships are in the process of being engulfed in flames.

Aaron's mouth is open. He seems like he can't breathe. He stares past me, his eyes filling with tears.

I can hear sailors screaming over the sound of the wind and the waves.

Aaron finally manages to speak. It comes out in a plaintive scream. "Folarin! What the hell did you just do?"

I search for the memories, but they are not there. "I honestly have no idea," I say. "Did I just change history again?"

"*Again?*" Aaron roars. "Not five minutes ago you told me that you would never do such a thing!"

"To be fair," I say, "that doesn't sound like me. How exactly did that conversation go?"

"I was telling you that we'd detected a major timequake and you're the only researcher out. Then you pulled out the flare gun and I told you you can't do that or you'll rip apart spacetime. And you said, 'Trust me, Aaron, I would never do such a thing.'"

"Ah," I say. "And I was right. Look around. Spacetime is still here, no?"

"Folarin!"

I put the flare gun back in the hidden pocket, noticing that I've got six spent casings clutched in my right hand. I put them away, too. "Usually when I get back to my own time and glance at my history texts I realize I know everything in them. Then the memories from my new timeline come back."

"How many times have you done this?"

I stare at him for a moment. "I might be able to answer that." I search my mind. It's hazy, but memories are there. "Six?"

Aaron pinches the bridge of his nose and clenches his eyes shut. "Folarin! Every sailor on those ships has descendants. You've just erased God knows how many people from history!"

"And replaced them with the family tree of whoever it was they were about to steal from Africa."

"Folarin, those slaves had children on other continents. You've erased them, too."

"And replaced them with children here. Children who will grow up African. Children who might grow up free, even. The slaves who were meant to be on those ships will not die on the crossing. They will not be sold in a foreign slave market. The hypocrisy of history. African slaves are treated no worse in Africa than any other culture treats its own slaves, but African slaves overseas are treated worse than animals. These slavers will never take those slaves away, then justify the mistreatment because they bought them from Africans. How can we say that's not better?"

"The United States may never exist—"

"Then it does not deserve to!"

Aaron opens his eyes and seems to choke again. And he finally looks to the sky and speaks so quietly I have to

strain to hear him over the screams and fire and ocean behind me. “Folarin, the slave trade disrupted families all over Africa. You’re not just erasing family trees in Europe and America and Asia. You could erase your own.”

I fold my arms and stand tall. “How many times have I said this? If my existence is built on injustice, I do not deserve existence. If one of these times I erase myself instead of my memories... well... I find it hard to believe that it is painful to never have existed.”

“This goes against everything I taught you—”

“No!” I step closer so we are nearly nose-to-nose. “This is *exactly* what you taught me. The future has hindsight. I know the evils that these men are creating here, now. This is not some unwritten future. This is damage that will echo throughout time. And I see it. And I can fix it. You taught us that if the future says that we must die tomorrow, we face that, knowing that we must die tomorrow. Well, Aaron, I tell you that you can right the greatest wrongs in history. The price is that you won’t ever have existed. Do you do it? The future has hindsight. I’m doing it.”

“You can’t—”

“I can! I just did!”

“We operate on grant money. No one will ever—”

“Grant money!” I roar. “The governments, the foundations that write our checks won’t like it? They won’t like that instead of sitting around saying, ‘Oh, it’s too bad that that happened way back when,’ we fix it? So be it! Go after the big ones before they figure it out!”

“Folarin—”

“No, Aaron, listen to me!” I take a breath and deliberately lower my voice to a gentle tone. “Think

about it. How many times have you wondered what would happen if you could change the course of, say, the Holocaust? We can. You can pop back in time to Austria in 1890, find Adolf Hitler when he's an innocent little baby, and then *pick up a rock and smash in his brains!*"

Aaron stares at me.

I hold out my hands.

"I would never exist," Aaron says.

"Then your existence is built on injustice," I say. "But I won't do it for you. I can't right every wrong. I'm fixing these."

Aaron reaches into the pocket of his trousers where he keeps his timestream controller.

He vanishes.

I can actually feel the timequake. It moves through me like my bones are resonating.

The galleon capsizes.

And I stand.

I feel certain I was just talking to someone. I wonder who it was.



My instructor was the Adamson Active Historical Research Center's Director for Research himself, Titus Psaltiras. He, like most of us, was a small man. He was broad, though, and like most Greek men, he had an abundance of black hair. He introduced the conundrum in class with a simple question: "Does the future have power over us?"

There were six of us training when I joined the corps. We exchanged glances, the avatar representations of ourselves betraying nothing.

I spoke first. "I don't understand."

“Well,” Titus said, “we’ve drilled into you that the future has hindsight, right? We have hindsight about, say the Century of Terror in Europe. We know that trying to appease the Nazi party in 1933 by making Ernst Röhm chancellor was a terrible decision, and led to the complete extermination of every Jew in Europe, Germany conquering all of Europe and a good chunk of Africa and Asia, and is at the root of most of the international tensions that linger today. Let’s suppose that you were back in Germany in 1933 and President Hindenburg or Franz von Papen suddenly turned to you and asked, ‘What do you think? Should we make this Röhm guy chancellor?’ What would you say?”

Hans, a blond, broad-shouldered man two desks over from me answered. “Oh, hell no!”

“But you can’t, right?” Titus said. “That would change history. That would create a timequake the likes of which the universe has never endured.”

“How do we know?” I asked. “Röhm wasn’t the only Nazi. He was charismatic and was the leader of the biggest group of brownshirts. They were on their way to power with or without that one terrible decision. Maybe there will be no timequake at all, just a small hiccup.”

“Aha!” Titus’ avatar clapped its hands together. “So, on the one hand we have Hans, saying the future has power, and we could change the course of history by turning this one event. On the other hand, we have Folarin saying that the path of history is inexorable, and no one person can significantly alter the forces. Prevent Röhm from becoming chancellor in 1933, maybe the Nazis win the next election and he takes it outright. Maybe he becomes Führer anyway in a coup. Assassinate Röhm,

even, and maybe someone else is there waiting to take his place. What do we think?"

Tabitha, the only woman in our class, the only woman in the entire institute, spoke. "It doesn't matter. We can only know what did happen. Never what would have happened if something changed."

"Exactly," Titus said. "The future has hindsight, but hindsight is only one perspective. If we start messing around in history, timequakes notwithstanding, we have no way of knowing we're not just making things worse, right? Take Röhm. As horrible as he was, what if one of the other Nazis had risen to power in his place, someone who wasn't gay, someone who bought in to the popular homophobia of the time? Now it's not only the Jews who get exterminated, it's the gays as well. Make it someone like Göring or Günther as Führer and you've got a madman who believes in eugenics actually in charge, and it could have been three-quarters of the population of Europe that died. We just don't know."

"So how does that give us power?" I asked. "We can't use the knowledge we have."

"Right!" Titus barked. "Is it still power if you can't use it?"

"Yes," Tabitha said matter-of-factly.

Titus' avatar turned to hers. "Why?"

"Potential energy," she said, "is still energy. We have the capacity to do something, we choose whether we do so or don't. That's power. When I go into the past, I'm going to be choosing to perpetuate the patriarchy, keeping my head down, trying not to get raped, moving in women's circles without ever once suggesting to them that they deserve better. That's power."

“Exactly.” Titus’s avatar shifted back to its lecture position. “Think of it this way: We’re the past for someone else. Let’s say a time traveler showed up here. We recognized him. That does sometimes happen, by the way, no matter how careful you are. We did what everyone who recognizes a time traveler does, we asked him to help us. Doesn’t matter what we asked him for. Tomorrow’s lottery numbers. He absolutely has the power to grant our request, right? The fact that there are consequences that he’s not willing to suffer does not mean that he’s powerless.”

“So you’re saying,” I said, “that when we go into history, we’re going to be like unfeeling gods who refuse to hear the pleas of the mere mortals.”

Titus sighed. “Yes, actually, that’s exactly what I’m saying. And it’s the hardest part of this job. Every person you meet in the past is someone you could help, someone you could save, someone you could elevate to more than they ever will be. And you won’t. Every trip brings you home with an ever-worsening case of survivor’s guilt. If there’s anyone here who thinks they can’t deal with that, they should leave the program now.”

I almost disconnected from the classroom.

I glanced over and saw Hans’ avatar, sitting expressionless, and I decided I couldn’t go.



There is no way I can take out every slave vessel. I’m only one man. Plus, I had to hack around an attempt to disable my timestream controller the last time I was back in my own time. I can’t keep going back and forth.

Slipping in time without returning home is tricky, but possible. I program the timestream controller for Luanda,

1622. Too late for thousands and thousands of captives, but a turning point where Africa just missed a chance to turn the tide.

My first two attempts to slip immediately report failure, and I feel my bones vibrate ever so slightly. Timequakes. Slipping anywhere but back home can take up to 90 seconds. They say that the easier slips take longer. I realize why. The timestream controller simply prevents failed attempts by trying again slightly earlier. The third attempt moves me in about 30 seconds.

Luanda is a Portuguese city cut from the rainforest on the west coast. I appear just outside the stone wall of the fortress, dropping a few inches onto a rutted dirt road. The city is already well established. Too well established. Roads curve around the harbor where ships load human cargo. Stone buildings look like they have been here long enough to take root. I want to burn it all down.

This is not a part of the continent I'd usually operate on. I'm of Yoruba descent. They're mostly Mbundu here. White people, including my superiors, assume Black people all look alike to Black people, too, but we don't. I'll be conspicuous. My Portuguese is limited, and my Kimbundu is just a few phrases. But I must risk it.

I steel my courage and walk around the fortress until I find an arched gate. I use broken Portuguese to tell the guard there that I am here to see Nzinga.

The Portuguese wouldn't know a Yoruba from a Mbundu. The guard points me toward the house of the local judge. The Africans in the city do know a Yoruba from a Mbundu, especially one in Yoruba clothing and not Portuguese. They stare at me as I pass. There is a real risk I could be nabbed and put on a slave ship myself. I lack the pomp and escort of an ambassador, and

foreigners are otherwise all slaves. The Ndongo legal system is famous for working hard to ensure that any slave being sold is in slavery legally, but it's easy to imagine that a lone Yoruba would be allowed to slip through the cracks. And it's even easier to imagine the Portuguese not caring at all.

The judge's house is a rectangular stone-and-wood building. A slave answers the door and I tell her in Portuguese that I have a message for Nzinga.

The white woman of the house eyes me curiously as we pass through into the kitchen, where a Jesuit priest sits at a table with a woman who can only be Nzinga herself. She is undoubtedly royalty. She is about 40, with feathers in her hair and jewels mounted to the iron and copper rings on her arms and legs. She wears a traditional spotted skirt and an opulent green wrap draped over her shoulder. She arches an eyebrow at me as the slave announces me.

I try a long shot. "Do you speak English?"

She starts. The Jesuit gives her quizzical look. "That is known only to my tutor," she says slowly.

History records only that she spoke Portuguese, but it makes sense that she would have also studied the languages of Portugal's main rivals.

"I am here to help you," I say in slow, clear words, noting that the Jesuit does not appear to be understanding us. "I know the future. You are here to negotiate a treaty with the Portuguese. You will succeed, but they will not follow the treaty. In two years, your brother will die and you will be king of Ndongo. If that comes to pass, will you meet me again?"

She leans forward, sparing a glance for the Jesuit. "Yes."

“I will re-appear two years from today. Name the place.”

Her eyebrow arches imperiously. “If, in two years’ time, I am King of Ndongo, I shall be at the house of my father in Kabasa.”

Her brother will lose control of Kabasa to the Portuguese in just a few months, but Nzinga will reclaim it shortly after rising to power. There is a good chance she will be there.

I nod and exit the way I came. The spot outside the fortress wall is isolated enough that I take out my timestream controller.

Kabasa will be a difficult slide. It is a large city, at least ten times the size of Luanda, located in difficult terrain that has never been surveyed by a time traveler. It takes ten attempts, my bones vibrating the whole time, before the timestream controller sets me down on a large patio, behind an enormous stone column.

I’m in the palace itself.

1624.

The column I’m behind is made of two kinds of stone. The lower portion is carved with images of animals and looks like it has been through a fire. The upper portion is a local sandstone and is finished smooth. This castle has already been destroyed and rebuilt at least once, and I know that Nzinga has only just reclaimed it from the Portuguese.

The patio has a commanding view. Kabasa is a city in ruins, sprawling out across several hills. But the markets below are open. Homes are being rebuilt. There is hope in the air.

I step out from behind the column.

Nzinga is here, dressed as warrior, bare-chested. Four male warriors flank her. They dance, swinging battle axes.

One of the men sees me. He starts. He raises his axe and moves towards me. Nzinga holds out a hand and stops him. "Thou art punctual, my prophet." Her English is better now. "I had expected thee to enter through the gates."

"Anyone who knows the Portuguese," I say, stepping forward, "could have predicted that they would betray you. A clever man would predict to you and your uncles that each would be the next king. Only I can appear deep inside your castle."

"I would know thy secret."

"I have many, but I must explain."

She gives a command in Kimbundu. One of the warriors dashes off. Seconds later, slaves arrive with a large chair for her and a small stool for me. We sit.

"What shall I call thee?" Nzinga asks.

"I am Folarin," I say.

"What thou hast foretold has come to pass, Folarin," she says. "I would hear you explain."

"I am a traveler," I begin. "I have seen the future. I can tell it to you. But when I do, it will change. And I do not believe I will remember it again when that happens. It may change enough that I will cease to exist. I will vanish, and you will not remember me. But I think you might remember the things I told you."

She raises her chin and looks down her nose at me. "Thou art a strange, little man."

"Yes," I agree. Portuguese history isn't trustworthy, but most sources agree it is not wise to disagree with Nzinga. "The history I remember, this is a turning point.

You are a brilliant leader. You are a great warrior. But the Portuguese will win the war.”

“Art thou here to taunt me?” She asks.

“No,” I say. My bones vibrate. “I would like to teach you how to make a rifle.”



Hans lived in Residential Habitat 10, just across the courtyard from mine. He slept during the day. I waited until midnight. I opened the double pressure seal on my habitat and ran across the courtyard. I felt like a criminal.

I dove into the little alcove porch of Habitat 10. I laid my hand on the visitor’s panel. A moment later, the screen lit up and I saw Hans’ face, Hans’ real face. He was a little older than his avatar, but every bit as handsome. “Folarin? What are you doing breaking quarantine?” he said.

“Can I come in?” I asked.

“Then we’ll both be grounded for a month,” he said. “What do you need?”

“I wanted to talk. Just talk. Wanted to see you. Wanted to see you in person.”

He was quiet for a long time. Too long. “Listen, Folarin, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

I hit the door with my hand. “Just let me in, Hans. Just let me in.”

“Folarin,” he said, “just go back to your habitat and get some sleep. We can chat on the messaging system.”

“I don’t need sleep!” I yelled. “I need to spend some time with a human!”

Hans sighed. “I don’t think I can give you what you need, Folarin.”

“You don’t know what I need!”

I became aware of a presence behind me. I turned around. Two campus police officers stood there.

I switched off the visitor's panel and stepped off the porch.

The older of the two police officers motioned back to my habitat. I started walking. They flanked me. "Listen," the younger one said, "I know things are different where you're from, but you need to behave more civilized around these parts, eh?"



1627. My bones ache all the time now. The Kwando River has dead Portuguese and Mbundo soldiers floating in it. The water flows red with their blood. Is this how the Battle of the Kindonga Islands went? I can't remember. I can't remember anything.

But I know that if I return home, they will never let me come back again. Will my memory come back if I don't look at the history textbooks?

I stagger down the hill, coughing. The air still reeks of gunpowder. I'm standing ankle-deep in the river before I realize I'm down.

Did Nzinga win here? Nzinga had just won here. Is that what happened?

If we've changed history, it's not enough. I still exist. If we turned the tide and ended the export of African slaves, I shouldn't exist. It's not conceivable that my family tree would have stayed the same over four hundred years.

A muddy feather sticks out of the water. Through the murk I can see that it's attached to a body. An important-looking body. I slosh over to it and grab it by the back of the doublet. I hoist.

It's Captain Bento Banha Cardoso himself.

Of course. I remember. Nzinga defeated his and Sebastião Dias' combined forces here. Of course. Every schoolchild knows that. Nzinga's soldiers armed with arquebuses and flintlocks modified with nzinga barrels shot with such accuracy and ferocity that the Portuguese were taken completely by surprise, their conscripted local troops deserting by the thousand. I laugh, suddenly remembering a white colleague saying to me, *Well, actually, in Kimbundu 'nzinga' means 'twisted' so there's no evidence that it's really connected to Queen Nzinga, and some of DaVinci's drawings indicate that Europeans understood the importance of spinning the projectile much earlier.*

Nzinga barrels. My bones still vibrate. Is that a change? I don't remember.

But we won. Nzinga won. She stopped the Portuguese advance and turned the tide back. She will soon drive the Portuguese out of Ndongo and Matamba, the only free African states.

The only free African states.

It's not enough. It's still not enough.

I scramble back up the hill. It's rough going. Nzinga has built trenches and caves to ambush the coming armies. When I get to the top, I spot the canoe bringing Nzinga over from Danji Island, where her court-in-exile is housed. Even from this far away I can see she is pleased. I scramble toward the opposite shore to meet her as her canoe comes in.

"You have done well, my prophet," she says as her slaves lift her out of her canoe and place her on dry land.

"My king," I say bowing, "I remember the new future now. You will, indeed, drive out the Portuguese from this

region, but the other nations will still believe that the Portuguese will deal honestly with them even as they betray you. Some of them will make alliances with Portugal's European rivals. The Europeans think Africans are inferior creatures, no better than animals. They will still carve up Africa and destroy her people."

"My obligation is to Ngondo and Matamba," she says. "If other kings wish to be European slaves, that is their right."

"Yes," I say, not knowing what I'm saying, "but you have the power to be much more than king of Ngondo and Matamba. You could be Empress of Africa."

She turns slightly and glares at me. "You remember this, do you?" Her English improves daily. She even has the tone of voice right to cut me down instantly. She is a fearsome woman. Beautiful and fearsome.

"No," I admit. "But I remember that historians have debated for centuries what would have happened if you had realized your greatest asset."

She arches her eyebrow at me. "And that is?"

"The slaves you have freed."

She laughs at me. "I free my enemies' slaves because they are not slaves. The Portuguese have no right to most of them."

"But they fight for you," I insist.

"They fight for me because I freed them," she says.

"Exactly!" I say.

I feel my bones beginning to vibrate again.

"My king, I may not have time. I have explained before that I will cease to exist if I change the future too much. Let me explain quickly." I scramble for a stick and start drawing in the mud. I have no idea what I am

drawing. “The kings who are willing to be European vassals are willing to be vassals, no?”

She nods. “I expect that is true, yes.”

“So,” I say, “kingdom by kingdom, land by land, until you have covered all of Africa, you can make them your vassals.”

“Most are strong enough to resist,” she says.

“And that’s where you don’t realize your power. Every nation you move into, the slaves want to be free. If they all know that you free the slaves wherever you go, they will rise up before you get there. The other kings will not be strong enough to resist. They will have to choose between being your vassal or having a slave revolt to put down. You tell them all, that their choice is to join you in driving out the Europeans or to lose all they have.”

She looks distant for a moment. She smirks. “It is a tempting plan, but a nation the size of Ndongo is difficult enough to manage. It would take many months to cross all of Africa.”

“Your engineers have a steam engine,” I say. My bones vibrate more. Is that a change? Did I somehow change that, too? The pain is intense. I am gasping for air. I drop to my knees. “Build iron rails. Make the steam engine turn wheels that move on those rails. You can cross all of Africa in a few days. And without slaves.”

“Your plan is audacious, my prophet,” she says.

I collapse to the ground, screaming.

She speaks to her entourage in Kimbundu. I hear the borrowed words steam engine and rails.

I can’t see. Pain is all that exists.

“My prophet,” I hear her say, “I will try to remember you.”



III. Synthesis

Titus Psaltiras

I know it must be a big one before I'm out of my chair. Every alert in my quarters goes off at once. I've got automated reports, text messages, and people trying to connect via videocon all coming in simultaneously.

Timequakes have a nexus at the point in history where the change was made and a second one at the point the time traveler departed from. My desk has lit up with readouts of this one before I'm even there. I push aside the dishes from my breakfast and I can see that the waves on this timequake are jumbled, like it has dozens of nexuses back in time, all over the planet. The waves are canceling and amplifying each other. But it's clear that there is a terminal nexus here, thirty seconds ago, in Residential Habitat 9 of the institute.

The problem is that Residential Habitat 9 is empty.

The wall of my office lights up with a videocon I haven't accepted. I see the white-haired head of my dean, Babette Rossi. "Titus, what the hell just happened?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Babette," I say. "I don't have any researchers out right now."

"What?"

"You heard me. All 57 researchers are in their quarters, and so am I. The readout I've got says it's whoever is in Habitat 9, but Habitat 9's been empty for 8 years now."

"I want to talk to everyone."

"Sure." I mute my video and send an "emergency all hands" notice to all my researchers. Some of them will be asleep—people like to stay on the same time zone as their

families—but the emergency tag should set off an alarm for them.

One by one, faces appear on my wall in a grid. Within a few minutes, everyone is accounted for. “For those who haven’t met her, this is Babette Rossi, Dean of History, Gates University, Edmonton. We’ve had a major timequake, and she wanted to make sure everyone is accounted for.”

“That’s everyone?” Babette asks.

“Until you up my budget,” I say.

Babette looks directly into her camera. “Now, I can’t emphasize strongly enough how seriously we take timequakes. Every incident, even minor ones, brings a surge of negative publicity and another push to shut you down.”

“Babette,” I say, “we didn’t do it. I’m sending you the logs. Nobody here was out. Nobody here has been out in two days. Our last mission was Johnny Sunshine in 1804, which is a couple centuries after it looks like this one began.”

Johnny Sunshine Kowalksi still has his 19th century facial hair. He strokes his beard and wiggles his fingers at his camera. He’s grinning, despite the concerned look in his eyes.

“I want a security sweep of Habitat 9,” Babette says.

“I’ll let you know if we find anything, but I’m telling you, it’s empty. Your own logs should show that.”

Babette glances to the side. “I’ve got the president of the university calling. I’ll be back when I’m done with her.” Her face vanishes from the grid.

I drop the act and look directly into my camera. “All right, fooling aside, a timequake starting in a building that’s been vacant for 8 years can only mean one thing:

Someone who has worked here for 8 years just deleted themselves from history.”



It was when I was a much younger man. It was simultaneously one of the simplest and one of the most complex missions we had ever done. We knew almost nothing about the ancient Cycladic civilization, an island culture in the Mediterranean. With many unknowns, it was impossible to put me down on land for the initial survey. So we built a boat in my living room and dropped me in the Aegean Sea.

All I had to do was sail close enough to an island to get some recordings. If the natives seemed friendly to foreigners, some samples of their language would have been invaluable, since the linguists were still struggling to untangle it.

We started me as far from the islands as we dared and in the middle of the night, lest some sailor end up with a story about the fishing boat that appeared in the sky and dropped three feet into the water.

My first warning should have been the plume of smoke over the horizon as the sun came up. But I was young, inexperienced, and simply recorded some images to ask about later.

I learned that day that ancient tsunamis weren't well recorded.

I'd been on the water for twelve hours, learning quickly that the Cycladic fisherman were a gregarious and helpful bunch. When they saw my boat, they called out and waved me over to the schools they were working. I had no nets, of course. We take nothing, we leave

nothing. But I was glad to get close enough to help them haul theirs, recording them the whole time.

That plume of smoke turned out to be a volcano that was mid-eruption, a good hundred years before my history books said it first erupted.

I looked up to see the nearest island receding quickly into the distance, its shoreline expanding right before my eyes.

I instinctively cried out and pointed.

The fishermen looked. All at once they turned their sails and grabbed oars, desperately trying to reach shore.

I needed to get out. But I couldn't disappear in the presence of people. I yanked my tiller to point into the wave.

The wave's leading edge picked up my boat so fast I felt my heart drop into my stomach. The bow tipped up and threw me back. I grabbed the gunwale. I clutched for dear life. Seawater cascaded over the sides of my little boat.

I tipped forward again. I caught a glimpse of the rest of the fleet behind me, a hundred meters below me. The wave had actually begun to break. It rolled over those other boats, snapping their plank hulls into splinters.

And then I dropped. Weightless. I plunged, legs in the air, still clinging. The boat hit the water and I hit the gunwale. The snap that I felt in my ribs I also heard in the hull. My boat folded in two. And then, I was accelerating again, this time toward the island.

I coughed. Blood. I rolled over the gunwale and into the flooding, broken boat. I seemed to be moving faster and faster. My head spun.

Then I saw a hand. Then another. Then a face. One of the fishermen I had been with was pulling himself onto my boat, coughing, gasping.

We take nothing. We leave nothing. And I was about to die and leave not only myself but my boat here.

I pulled out my timestream controller.

The fisherman saw what I was holding. He looked up and locked eyes with me. We didn't share a common language, but I knew what he was asking.

I programmed the timestream controller to exclude him, and I activated it.

I decelerated instantly. The boat smashed to splinters and I plowed into my living room floor and rolled like I'd been thrown from a plane crash. I laid, broken, on the carpet.

And, somewhere in the Aegean, one more fisherman drowned.



"Now think, everyone," I say. "Someone was here. One of our colleagues. None of us will have any memories of them. But something is off about the institute. And not just a habitat building that has been sitting empty for no good reason for 8 years. We have 6 of those, after all. What has always struck you as off or nonsensical about this place?"

"The lack of women," Tabitha mutters under her breath.

"That's safety," I say.

"But why?" Tabitha demands in her full voice. She leans in. "Why do we just accept that the past is so unsafe for women that we can't risk sending women back in time? That's off. That's wrong."

“Excuse me, sir,” Johnny Sunshine interrupts, “but if someone erased themselves from history, shouldn’t none of us be here?”

I suppress the cringe. “The absolute destruction of spacetime has always been a theory—a solid theory—but not proven. The problem is, whoever just erased themselves from history now doesn’t exist, has never existed, so how can they go back to do whatever it is they did? So history should correct itself. But it can’t. Consensus opinion is that a major paradox like that should be destructive.”

There’s a silence.

“But?” Johnny Sunshine asks.

“But, we’ve actually created a number of minor paradoxes deliberately,” I admit. “Any time one of you doesn’t come back after six seconds, I get an alert. I jump back in time two minutes and send you instructions to abort your mission.”

“I get last-minute instructions to abort all the time,” Tabitha says.

“Yes, Tabitha, you’ve been killed 18 times.”

“What?” she barks.

“Yes, Tabitha, you’re our prime offender.”

“Wait, how do I get myself killed?” she asks.

“We don’t know,” I say. “No one remembers. I jump back six seconds after I left with no memory of why I jumped, but I see that I cancelled a mission and I figure out what must have happened.”

Wait!” Tabitha says. “Is that why the timestream controllers lock out when we get those no-go orders?”

“Actually, we only lock them out if you leave anyway and we have to go back a second time,” I say. “And do I

need to point out that you shouldn't know that they get locked out?"

"I was dead?"

"Yes," I say. "18 times."

There's another silence. This one lingers.

"So, you're saying it's actually possible," Hans says. "One of us might have gone back and changed history so severely that they were never born, but the universe is still here, still just fine."

"Maybe," I say. "Or, maybe it's going to unravel slowly. This is completely unprecedented. That's why we need to figure out what's going on. So, everyone look around. What's missing?"

"Africa?" Tabitha suggests.

I'm about to object, and I catch myself. "Talk me through that."

"Think about it," she says. "We've got researchers here who specialize in the Americas. Europe. Asia. We've even got the two Aussies."

"New Zealand," Nikau protests.

"Why not Africa?" Tabitha continues. "I mean, I know ethnocentricity is a thing, but are we really supposed to believe that nobody considers African history important enough to research it? It's especially ripe, because so many of the African nations were late developing written language, so there's a lot of undocumented history that's relatively recent. Six empty habitats is about right to cover a continent, isn't it?"

Dear, God, she's right.

"So, you're thinking," Johnny Sunshine says, "that someone rewrote history to the extent that everyone from Africa vanished?"

Tabitha shrugs. “How hard is that? Take out Nzinga the Great before the Battle of the Kindonga Islands and Africa fails to unite against the Europeans, right? Completely different history.”

“That is... a distinct possibility,” I say.

There is another long silence.

“You’ve really saved Tabitha eighteen times?” Johnny Sunshine asks.



I laid in the remnants of my boat, dripping wet, sobbing. My airlock hissed and opened with a clunk. The director of the institute at the time was Eira O’Connell. She broke quarantine and came into my quarters, sandy hair in a hurried ponytail and dressed in her workout gear. She swept over to me and placed a freckled hand on my wrist, then my neck. “As much as I want the data, I can make it go away, if you’d like.”

I didn’t know what she meant. “Nothing will,” I rasped.

She knelt down beside the broken hull of my boat and lowered her head so she could look up into my eyes. “Paramedics are on their way, but are you going to be able to live with it?”

I grabbed her arms and clung for dear life.

It wasn’t until I was promoted to director that I really understood what she had been offering.



“All this time!” Johnny Sunshine shouts. “All this time we could have been doing those little things we’ve all wanted to do to help people!”

"It's not like that, J.S.," I say. "Remember your training. We have power, but except for the hindsight of what happened, we don't know any better than the people back in the past. In fact, we know less. They know their world. They know the people. They know the culture. If we had those insights, we wouldn't need to be back then doing the research we're doing. It's supreme arrogance for us to go back and play God."

"It's supreme arrogance," Johnny Sunshine screams, "to decide that our own status quo is more important than helping someone who's begging for help!"

"We're not talking about playing God," Tabitha says. "I'd lay 10 to 1 odds that that's what whoever just erased themselves was doing. Took out a whole continent. No, I'm talking about not letting MaryBeth Jackson get raped."

"Do you know how many times," Johnny Sunshine fumes, "I've stood on the edge of a cotton plantation and watched as the Native American slaves got beaten, even killed? Every single time I could have said something? Done something? At least discussed the morality of keeping a fellow human being as... as... *property*? Tens of millions of Native American slaves! How was saving the one who was pleading for help going to hurt if spacetime really can handle a timequake?"

"J.S., think," I say. "You free one slave. That slave moves north. He takes a seat on the train that your great-great-great-great-great grandfather would have taken, and so he never meets your great-great-great-whatever grandmother. We can't predict the ripples the changes can cause."

“But...” Johnny Sunshine looks briefly flustered. “Someone used to say this. Who was it? That if my life is built on injustice that I don’t deserve it. Who said that?”

“I’ve heard that, too,” Tabitha says.

“Yeah,” Hans says. “Can’t remember where.”

“All right, everyone,” I say, “let’s just calm down.”

Johnny Sunshine grimaces and reaches for something off camera. He vanishes.

My timequake alarms go off again.

Johnny Sunshine reappears. He looks calm, serene even. And he has a pimply teenaged boy with him.

“Titus,” Johnny Sunshine says, “this is Wasch Koch. I’ve explained carefully what his request means, but he still asked me to take him with me when I went back to wherever I came from. I’m not playing God. I’m not acting from a position of power. I’m sharing the power I don’t deserve with someone who deserves the power I have. I’m trusting him to know what he wants and needs. You can fire me now.”

“Oh,” someone says.

All 57 of us stare blankly.

“Of course,” Tabitha says. “No matter the personal cost. Not gods. Not imperialists. People who have the tool to help. The power is in *refusing* to use it.”

“Tabitha, wait,” I say.

Tabitha disappears.

My timequake alarms go off again.

She reappears covered in blood.

Hans is the next to vanish. Then Asako. Even before the timequake alarms finish ringing, they’re ringing again.

And one-by-one, every single one of my researchers goes out unauthorized.

It's the end. There will never be funding again after this.

Which means there's only one thing to do.

I scramble for my timestream controller. They'll be shutting it down soon. I don't have much time. I still have the logs that will tell me exactly when and where a Cycladic fisherman will hit the water.

I don't have my boat, but by God, I'm going to try to swim.

First published in Departure Level Quarterly (2020).

The King of Swords

M.X. Merrow



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I. The Grave

He chose a place near the ash tree at the field's edge, because the roots would not be deep there, and he was tired.

The shovel was the last thing left in the house. Everything else—the table his father had built, his mother's clay jars, his sister Mira's wooden comb—had been taken or burned. He did not know why the soldiers had left the shovel. Perhaps because they could not imagine anyone needing one badly enough to carry it away. He was beginning to understand they had been wrong.

The field had been called Rook's Meadow once, for the birds that came in autumn and settled on the furrows after harvest. It was called nothing now. Names require

people to say them, and there were no people left within hearing.

He drove the shovel into the earth and turned the first cut of soil.

The ground was cold and resistant, tight from three weeks without rain. It was the kind of cold that had no intention of warming, that had worked itself so deep into the earth's grain that nothing as temporary as a season could argue it out. He welcomed it. It matched something in his chest.

He had not made a decision. Not in the way men make decisions—not sitting down, weighing, arriving at a conclusion. He had been walking through what remained of the village, past the collapsed granary, past the foundation stones of the mill, past the place where the elder's house had stood before they burned it with the elder still inside, and somewhere between the last ruin and this field, the shovel had appeared in his hands. He had not gone back for it. He looked down and found himself holding it.

He supposed this had happened some time ago.

The sun moved from east to behind the hills, and he did not stop. He had long since passed the depth that weariness demanded he rest, and he was not going to rest. The grave deepened. His arms ached in a way that was almost interesting, almost enough to occupy him.

At some point the words came.

He hadn't planned them. He was not a man given to speeches—he had been a man given to mornings, to the smell of bread, to the particular pleasure of being known by someone who noticed small things. He had been a man given to his sister's voice, arguing with him about minor things in the way that only people who love each other

freely will argue. He had not known these were the shape of his life until the shape was gone.

But the words came, and he let them.

“Where is your justice,” he said to the sky, to the cooling light, to whatever heard such things and chose not to answer. He said it quietly, the way one speaks to someone in the same room. “I want to see it. Show me where you put it. Show me where you were hiding it when they came.”

He turned a shovelful of earth.

“You made this world. You made it so that ten men with swords can walk into a village and take everything that was ever loved in it, and the men who do this go home afterward and eat and sleep and wake the next morning with something to look forward to.”

He had seen the soldiers’ faces. That was the part that would not leave him—not what they did, but the quality of attention they brought to it. They had not been frenzied. They had been practiced.

“And the rest of us,” he said, and stopped.

There was no word for what the rest of them did. Endured. Survived. Continued past the point where continuing made any sense.

“Just continue,” he said. “That’s what you made for us. Just continue.”

He drove the shovel down.

It struck something that was not earth.

He thought it was a stone. He worked around its edge, clearing the packed soil away from what he assumed was a curve, and found instead a flat surface. Jointed. He cleared more, and the shape resolved itself slowly, the way a drowned thing rises to the surface: a hand. Articulated steel, each finger separate and hinged, the

joints fused with decades or centuries of rust. It was large—larger than his own hand by a full third—and it lay open, the fingers loosely curled around the grip of a sword.

He knelt in the earth and looked at it for a long time.

There was a ring on the index finger. A red jewel, dark as old blood, set in a band of blackened steel. He found himself unwilling to look directly at it, the way one avoids looking at something that seems to be watching back. When he did look, the jewel's depth was wrong—it went further into the stone than the stone's size could accommodate.

He knew he should not touch it.

He thought about this afterward: how clearly he had known, in that precise moment, that he should not. There was something in the deliberateness of the hand's position—not the stillness of an accident, but the stillness of something placed—that spoke of intention. Of waiting.

He reached out and closed his hand around the sword's grip, above the steel fist.

The warmth came first.

Not the warmth of fire or of sunlight—nothing that came from outside him. It rose through his palm and traveled up his arm and spread across his chest like the memory of being held. He had not been warm in weeks. He had not understood, until warmth returned, how entirely cold had replaced him.

Sound came next—not through his ears but somewhere below them, a low resonant chord, as though the earth had struck a note he had never known it could produce and that he would spend the rest of his life unable to quite hear again.

Then the armor.

It rose from the sword the way water finds its level. It formed first around his sword hand, then climbed his forearm, crossed his shoulder, settled across his chest. It did not feel like iron. It felt like certainty—like having decided something absolutely, without the habitual drift of second thought. He had always been a man of second thoughts. He had not known, until now, that this was a kind of deprivation.

He stood. For a moment he could not locate himself—not in the field, not in the failing light, but inside his own intention. He had come here to finish something. The armor made finishing feel beside the point. He was not sure whether that was mercy or its opposite.

The sword came free of the steel fist without resistance. He understood almost nothing about what had happened to him—only that the sword had no intention of leaving, and that this was not a threat but a fact, the way gravity is a fact. And that it would tell the truth about people. He did not know how he knew this second thing. He simply knew it, the way one knows a word in one's own language without being able to explain it.

The hand remained in the earth, empty.

He looked at his own right hand and found the ring there, on his index finger. He had not felt it move. He had not felt anything move. The jewel caught the last light and held it, patient, as though it had done this before and expected to do it again.

He climbed out of the grave.

He stood at its edge and looked down into it. Three hours of work. The depth required for a man. He had meant to lie in it, and he was not lying in it. He was standing above it in armor that had grown out of a sword, holding that sword, and the evening had gone the

particular shade of pewter that precedes full dark, and the first stars were appearing, distant and without opinion.

He thought of Mira. Of the way she said his name—Corvin—when she thought he was being foolish, the slight extra weight she gave to the second syllable, as though the name itself could carry her exasperation if she packed it right. He would never hear anyone say his name in that exact way again. He had not known this was something that could be taken from a person until it had been taken.

He thought of the men who had taken it. He thought of them eating. Sleeping. Reporting back to whatever power had sent them. Moving on to the next village.

He said, to no one in particular, or to all of it:

“I will avenge them. Every one of them. I will find justice and I will carry it myself if I have to.”

He paused.

“And if I cannot find it,” he said, “I will make it.”

He did not know, then, that these were different things.

He did not fill in the grave. He left it open and walked away from it through the dark, the sword at his side, the ring on his finger, the armor settling around him like a decision he had made in another life and was only now arriving at.



II. The Survivors

He found them three days east, in a shallow valley where a stream had not yet frozen, gathered around fires that were kept deliberately small. He smelled the smoke before he saw the light, and the smell—wet wood, green wood, wood burned by people who did not know how to

survive winter and were learning—told him everything he needed to know about their condition.

He stood at the valley's edge and looked down at them for a long time before descending.

He had kept the armor. He could have released it—it seemed to respond to something like intention—but the cold had gotten worse over three days of walking, and the armor kept it at arm's length in a way that had nothing to do with its material. It felt less like steel and more like resolution. He was not sure he could afford to release it.

He had tried to clean his face in the stream that morning. He had not entirely succeeded.

There were perhaps two hundred people in the valley, arranged the way people arrange themselves when they have stopped expecting to go home: in loose clusters, by some logic of prior acquaintance an outsider could not parse. Very few men his age. Many women. More children than he expected, which moved something in his chest he did not want to examine—children meant people had been trying to protect something, and he did not want to think about the gap between trying and succeeding.

He walked down the slope.

The first person who saw him was a boy of perhaps ten, sitting alone at the edge of the encampment with a stick he'd been using to draw lines in the dirt. The boy looked up, saw the armor, and became very still in the particular way of children who have learned that movement can be dangerous.

"I'm not one of them," Corvin said.

The boy stared.

"I grew up in Rook's Meadow," he said. "Do you know it?"

The boy shook his head.

“It doesn’t exist anymore,” Corvin said. “Neither does wherever you came from, I imagine.”

He kept walking. He could feel the boy’s eyes on his back.

Word traveled through the encampment the way fire travels—not in a straight line, but finding what was dry, what was ready. Heads turned. People stood. A woman pulled a child against her side. A man reached for something that was probably a knife, then calculated the distance to the sword Corvin carried and decided against it.

He stopped walking. He stood in the center of what had become a rough circle of watching people.

“I’m not looking for anything from you,” he said. It seemed like the right place to start.

No one spoke.

“I came because I didn’t know where else to go.” He paused. “That’s the honest answer. I’m aware it’s not a very impressive one.”

A man near the front of the crowd—older, with the careful posture of someone who had been a person of authority once and was trying to remember how to be one again—cleared his throat. “Where did you get that?”

He meant the sword. Or the armor. Or both.

“I found it,” Corvin said. “In a field. In a grave I was digging for myself.”

Silence. Then from somewhere in the middle of the crowd, a voice—younger, rough with recent loss: “He’s a man with a sword. We’ve seen men with swords.”

No one answered him directly. The older man looked at the crowd, then back at Corvin, and something shifted in his face—a kind of surrender to an interpretation he had already been moving toward.

“The old stories spoke of it,” he said quietly. “A weapon that chooses.”

Corvin said nothing.

“A king’s weapon.” The man’s voice had changed. It had taken on a weight he was putting into it deliberately, and Corvin recognized the sound—the sound of a man deciding to believe something because the alternative was to believe nothing. “Sent when the people have no one left.”

From somewhere behind him the man knelt. One knee to the frozen ground, head down.

Two others followed. Then five. Then it moved through the crowd with that same strange velocity—not enthusiasm, not joy, but the movement of people who had held themselves upright a long time and found something, anything, to lean against.

“Stop,” Corvin said.

No one stopped.

“Please.”

He said it quietly, and it was absorbed into the sound of people settling onto their knees—a hundred and fifty of them, in a valley in winter, in the mud and the cold. The weight of what was being asked of him arrived all at once, not as an honor but as a sentence.

“Where were the gods when our children starved?”

The voice came from the left, clear and without amplification, the kind of voice that doesn’t need to be raised to carry.

“Where were they when our mothers were violated? Where were they when our fathers begged for mercy on their knees, exactly like this?”

She was standing with her arms at her sides and her chin level. She was perhaps twenty, perhaps a little older,

with the kind of face that had been through something and come out on the other side of it not intact but honest. She was not looking at the crowd. She was looking at Corvin.

“There is no god,” she said. “There is no savior and there is no miracle and no weapon buried in the ground was put there for us, because the universe doesn’t work that way and you know it. You know it in your bodies. You know it the way you know cold and hunger, which is a knowledge you have earned very recently.”

A murmur moved through the crowd. Not agreement, not dissent. Recognition.

“If justice comes,” she said, “it will come from our own hands. Not from the ground. Not from the sky. Ours. And if it doesn’t come from our hands, it doesn’t come at all.”

Then she stopped, and for the first time looked away from Corvin, back at the crowd, waiting.

Slowly, uncertainly, people began to stand.



Corvin found her at the edge of the camp an hour later, near the stream, crouched over something she was washing in the water with focused, methodical attention. A length of cloth. She was cold—he could see it in the set of her shoulders—but she was washing it anyway, working the fabric between her palms with the precision of someone who has decided a thing needs doing and is doing it.

He stood a few paces away.

“You had the crowd,” she said, without looking up. “The kneeling would have lasted. People in that state will believe almost anything if it comes with armor.”

“I know,” he said.

She looked at him then. Briefly. She had dark eyes and a way of looking that suggested she was already two moves ahead of whatever he was about to say.

“You didn’t want them to kneel,” she said. Not a question.

“No.”

“Why not?”

He thought about it. “Because they were wrong to. I don’t know what I am yet. And they’ve already been led somewhere terrible once by someone who knew exactly what he was.”

She was quiet for a moment. She went back to the cloth, turned it over.

“That’s a reasonable answer,” she said.

“I have occasional reasonable moments.”

She didn’t smile. But something in her expression shifted fractionally, the way a door shifts in a frame when the temperature changes—not opening, but acknowledging the possibility of it.

“Yeva,” she said.

“Corvin.”

She nodded. She wrung the cloth out and stood, and he noticed for the first time that her hands were shaking—from the cold, probably. He reached out before he thought about it, not toward her but toward the air beside her, where some instinct told him warmth could be redirected, and he felt something move through his palm—not through the sword arm, through the other one—a faint giving, like heat leaving a room.

She went still.

“What was that?”

"I don't know," he said. "I'm still learning what it does."

She looked at her hands. They had stopped shaking. She looked at him with an expression that was not gratitude and was not suspicion and was not either of the things he would have expected.

"Don't do things to me without asking," she said.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

She considered him for another moment, then walked past him back toward the fires.



He learned her story the way he would learn most things about her—indirectly, in pieces, from other people's references and her own occasional silences that were shaped like specific absences.

She had come from a village two valleys west. She had survived because she had been in a root cellar when they came. What she had found when she came out, no one said to him directly, but he had pieced enough together to understand that she had found her younger brother. And that finding him had not been a relief.

She had hidden in the cellar. She did not think herself innocent. That was why she fought so precisely for the distinction between those who chose evil and those who simply failed to stop it. She carried it the way she carried everything—without display.

She never told him any of this herself. He never asked.



That night he sat apart from the fires, the sword across his knees, and watched the camp settle into sleep. The armor had quieted down to something like a second skin,

something he was aware of only when he thought about it. The ring caught the firelight from thirty yards away and returned it changed, deeper.

Someone had found him another blanket. He wasn't sure he needed it, but he had taken it because the gesture had been offered carefully, with both hands, by a woman who clearly could not spare it.

That was the thing none of the kneeling had told him, and the thing Yeva's speech had only partially addressed. Not whether gods existed. Not whether he was a savior. Just: what do you do with a blanket you can't refuse without wounding the person who is offering it?

He would have to figure out what it meant to lead people who had already been failed by everyone who had led them before. He would have to do this without understanding the sword, without understanding the ring, without understanding any of the rules of what he had become.

He found, to his surprise, that he could live inside that uncertainty. He had spent the last weeks inside a certainty that had no use for him. Uncertainty, at least, left room to move.

The fire burned low. Somewhere in the camp, a child was crying with the low exhausted rhythm of someone who had been crying for some time and had not stopped because no one had come, but because they had run out of reason to stop.

He sat with it. The sound. The cold. The weight of the sword.

Tomorrow, he thought, there would be questions to answer. People to organize. Decisions about where to go and how long they could stay and what they were going to eat. Tomorrow the thing he had sworn in a field would

begin to acquire the texture of an actual undertaking, with all the friction and compromise and impurity that actual undertakings involve.

For now he sat, and the ring was patient, and the camp slept around him in fitful, exhausted increments.



III. The Shape of Justice

The army did not announce itself. It accumulated.

Over six weeks, in the way that water finds the low ground, people came to the valley—not all at once, not from any single direction, but in ones and small groups, by word of mouth and by rumor and by the particular logic of people who have run out of other options. They came from burned villages and from hiding places in the eastern forests and from the labor camps along the River Road, some of whom had simply walked away when the guards rotated and the count was wrong and no one had yet noticed. They arrived exhausted, underfed, and suspicious in the calibrated way of people who have learned that trust is an expenditure with real costs.

Corvin let Yeva handle most of the arrivals. This was a practical decision before it was anything else: she had a memory for names and for the specific texture of people's suffering that made them feel recognized rather than assessed, and she could determine within a few minutes of conversation whether someone was capable of being useful and in what capacity. She was not warm, exactly, but she was precise, which in conditions of this kind was more valuable than warmth.

He watched her work and understood things about her that she had not told him.

She did not trust easily but she trusted specifically—she could tell the difference between someone who was afraid and someone who was calculating, and she treated these as fundamentally different moral categories. He had met people before who believed they could read character at a glance, and they were almost always wrong in the comfortable direction, finding what they hoped for. Yeva was wrong in neither direction. She simply saw what was there and responded to that.



The sword's judgment revealed itself the way most of its properties revealed themselves—through use, in the field, without warning.

A man arrived on the fourteenth day who gave his name as Davan, said he had been a miller in the northern provinces, and offered to help with supply logistics. He was thin and careful and pleasant in the considered way of a man who has decided pleasantness is a strategy.

Yeva, when she had spoken with him, came to Corvin that evening and said simply: "I don't know about that one."

"Your instinct or something specific?"

"He knew things about the road east that you only know if you haven't been on it. He described landmarks from the wrong direction."

Corvin offered to show him the camp's boundaries the next morning—the eastern perimeter, the river crossing, the secondary paths through the forest. Davan came, pleased to be trusted. At the crossing, helping him over a slick bank, Corvin transferred his grip to the sword and touched its flat to Davan's wrist, casual, as though adjusting his hold.

He felt it immediately. Not a sound, not a word—a knowledge, direct and absolute, the way the body knows heat before the mind has named it. Davan was providing information. Regularly. For money, not conviction—which Corvin had not expected, which he found somehow worse than conviction, though he could not immediately say why.

Davan felt nothing. He was describing a bird he had seen in the river trees, something about its coloring.

“You should sit down,” Corvin said.

Davan looked at him.

“I know what you are,” Corvin said. Not loudly. There was no one else nearby. “And I think you know that I know. So let’s not perform for each other.”

A long silence. The river moved over the rocks between them.

Then Davan sat down on a stone, and his face went through several expressions in quick succession and came out the other side of them all looking simply tired.

“I have a family,” he said. “Elsewhere. They’re—I needed the money. I didn’t give them anything important yet.”

“You would have.”

A pause. “Yes.”

Corvin considered him. The sword was quiet. That had been all it had to say; it had given its judgment and was not pressing further, and he had the sense that pressing further was now his responsibility, not the sword’s.

“Here is what happens,” Corvin said. “You will go back. You will tell them that the camp is smaller than rumored. That the sword is less than they hope. That

morale is poor. All of which is true enough in parts that it won't seem like a lie and won't do us specific harm."

Davan stared at him. "And in return?"

"Your family comes here. All of them, whatever that means. They're protected."

"You'd trust me with a message after—"

"No," Corvin said. "I'd trust you with a message because you have something to come back to. And because your family will be here when you return, which means that your interest and my interest briefly overlap." He paused. "I'm not offering forgiveness. I'm offering a use for you. It's less than you'd like and more than you've earned."

Davan looked at the river.

He left Davan at the river to consider it.

Davan returned two weeks later with his wife, two daughters, and a younger brother who became one of their fastest messengers. He proved, eventually, adequately trustworthy—not heroically so, but in the calculated way of a man who has decided this is now where his interests lie.

Corvin never fully trusted him. But he never required full trust. He required usefulness, and he required honesty about the limits of what a person could be asked to bear.



"You said yesterday," Yeva told him one evening, "that those who remained silent are guilty."

They were sitting at opposite sides of a fire, which was their default geography. She held a cup of something that had been described as tea by someone who had not been specific about the leaves involved.

"I said it to Marsh," Corvin said. "When he was defending the merchants who supplied the army."

"I know when you said it. I'm asking if you believe it."

"The merchants sold grain and horses to an occupying force. The occupation required grain and horses. They participated in what was done to us."

"Some of them did it because they had no choice. Because the alternative was expropriation or worse."

"Some of them did it because the margin was good."

"Yes," she said. "Some. So what's your principle? That everyone who sold grain is equally guilty, regardless of circumstance? Or that you're angry at the ones who profited and need a rule that catches them?"

He looked at her. "Those are not the same question."

"I know they're not. That's why I'm asking."

He was quiet for a moment, turning a stick in the fire. "There are nobles who welcomed the occupation. Who gave them maps. Who told them which villages had food stores worth taking and which could be safely starved. Who attended the new governor's dinners and who—" He stopped.

"Those men are guilty," Yeva said.

"Yes."

"And the farmer who sold them a cartload of hay because a soldier had a sword to his son's throat?"

"Different."

"And the merchant who sold them grain because he was afraid of what would happen to his livelihood? His family?"

Corvin said nothing.

“And the merchant who sold because he wanted to, because his neighbor was on the other side of a trade dispute and this was an opportunity?”

“Different again.”

“Good,” she said, and there was no satisfaction in it. “So you don’t actually think silence is guilt. You think complicity is guilt, and you’re trying to determine what complicity means.”

“I think those who had power and chose not to use it—”

“Then judge them. The powerful. The willing. The ones who made choices from positions where choices were real.” She set down her cup. “But do not stand in front of a crowd of people who survived by any means available to them and tell them they are guilty for surviving. Do you understand why?”

He understood. He did not want to yet. “Because it demoralizes them.”

She looked at him, knowing exactly what he was doing. “Because it isn’t true,” she said. “Confusing the powerless with the powerful is the first thing tyrants do. It’s how you stop needing evidence.”

The fire shifted between them. Somewhere in the camp, someone was laughing at something—a short, surprised sound, quickly suppressed, the laugh of someone who had briefly forgotten they were not supposed to find things funny.

“I hear you,” Corvin said.

“You’re filing it away for later.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not the same as hearing me.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m telling you anyway.”

She picked up her cup again. Outside the firelight, the camp moved through its small evening tasks—people finding places to sleep, voices lowering, children being settled, the slow daily process of a group of people becoming, despite everything, something that functioned. He watched it over her shoulder and felt, for the first time in a long time, something that was not hope exactly but was adjacent to it. A kind of willingness to continue. A belief that continuing might lead somewhere.

“Your brother,” he said, without deciding to.

She went still.

“I’m not asking,” he said quickly. “I’m not—I know I don’t have the right. I just want you to know that I know there’s something there. And that I’m not pretending there isn’t.”

A long pause. The fire.

“His name was Tomas,” she said. Then she stood and picked up her cup and walked back toward her tent, and he watched her go, and did not call after her.



The army strengthened.

Not in the way of stories—not the dramatic montage of weakness transformed into power. It strengthened the way bodies strengthen after illness: slowly, unevenly, with setbacks. They were still outnumbered. They were still hungry, often. The sword could do many things, but it could not create food from nothing—the actual daily work of feeding people remained the actual daily work of feeding people, and no amount of living armor exempted anyone from it.

Corvin did what he could with what the sword offered. When he moved through the camp and gripped the

shoulder of a man who was struggling to carry a weight his body was not ready for, something passed between them—not strength exactly, but something that sat below strength, some foundational resource—and afterward the man would find the weight more manageable. It lasted hours, sometimes a day. It was not a transformation. It was more like a reminder, as though the sword were saying: this is what your body can be when it is not being eaten by despair.

He did this quietly. He did not announce it.



The man's name was Bren.

He had been a farmer before the occupation. He had two surviving children and a daughter who had been taken during the early days of the invasion, held at the garrison in the eastern town, used as surety against his behavior. When a soldier had come to him and asked him specific questions—where was the rebel camp, how many men, how were they armed—Bren had told them what he knew. Accurately. Because his daughter was seven years old and was in that garrison and he did not know what they would do to her if he refused.

The camp that had been raided was not this camp—an earlier one, perhaps thirty men trying to organize resistance along the River Road. Twelve had died in the raid. Eighteen had scattered and been slowly hunted. Corvin had heard the story in pieces over many weeks, assembling from separate accounts into something he now could not look away from.

He did not want to find Bren. He had hoped, quietly, that Bren had died somewhere in the months since, that the question would resolve itself without requiring him.

Bren was alive. He was in the camp. He had arrived three weeks ago with his two surviving children and a persistent cough that suggested the winter had gotten into his chest in a way it might not get out of.

Corvin found him at the edge of the eastern perimeter one afternoon, where he was mending a section of rope fence with the focused attention of a man who has decided that this small thing can be done correctly and is doing it correctly. His daughter was helping, holding one end of the rope taut while her father worked the other end through the post. The younger one, perhaps four, was asleep in a bundle of wool against a tree trunk.

Bren looked up when he heard Corvin approach and went through what was clearly a familiar process—the slight widening of the eyes at the armor, the recalibration, the settling into a guarded attentiveness.

“Corvin,” he said. Not my lord, not sir. Corvin.

“Bren.”

A pause. “You know.”

“Yes.”

The rope hung between Bren’s hands. His daughter—seven now, or eight; Corvin did not know precisely—was working beside him, and Bren did not look at her. He was being very careful not to look at her.

“She was in the garrison for four months,” Bren said. “Before I got her out. Before I—found a way.” He didn’t specify the way. His voice was level in the manner of a man who has practiced this conversation in his head and is now discovering that it is different in actuality. “The men who died on the River Road—I know their names. I’ve known their names since before I knew yours.”

Corvin crouched, so that they were at the same height.

He had carried the sword for months. He had learned to trust its judgment in the way one learns to trust a good instrument—not blindly, but with an earned confidence in its precision. He reached out and placed his hand on Bren's forearm, and the sword's knowledge moved through him like water finding its level.

He had expected it to be clear.

It wasn't.

The sword found—not guilt. Not the clean line between loyal and treacherous that it had drawn in every previous judgment. It found something else: a man who had made a choice that was not a choice, who had committed an act that was an act of love and an act of murder simultaneously, who contained both of these things without resolution. The sword pressed no further. It had told him what was there, and what was there was not something the sword could decide.

He stood.

Bren looked at him. His hands were very still.

Behind Bren, the daughter had stopped working the rope. She looked at her father and then at the knotted end in her hands. "Papa," she said, "is this one finished?"

Bren did not look at her. "Not yet," he said. "A little longer."

"I need to think," Corvin said.

He walked away from the perimeter. He walked past the fires, past the supply tent, to the far edge of the camp and stood there for a long time looking at nothing in particular.

He thought about Yeva's words: judge the powerful. Bren was not powerful. Bren had not had power. The sword had confirmed what logic had already suggested—

that what Bren had done was not treachery in any sense the word was designed to contain.

He thought about the twelve men on the River Road. He knew their names. He had made himself learn them.

He thought about what would happen in the camp if Bren went unpunished. How many people knew, or suspected. How many people had lost someone to that raid.

He thought about this for a long time and he arrived, finally, at a conclusion that he already knew was wrong before he finished arriving at it.

He found Marsh, his most reliable lieutenant, and told him what to do.

He was not in the camp when it was done.

He did not see the children.



Yeva found him at the river that evening.

She did not speak immediately. She stood beside him for a while, looking at the water, and he had the impression she was deciding how to begin—or whether to begin at all.

“The sword didn’t kill him,” she said finally.

“No.”

“But you still—”

“Yes.”

The water moved. Somewhere upstream a bird called once and then was quiet.

“Was it justice?” she asked.

He did not answer.

“Corvin. Was it justice or was it—”

“I don’t know.” He said it before she could offer him the other word. “I genuinely don’t know. And I think that’s the answer.”

She looked at him. He did not look at her.

“You should have told me you were considering it,” she said. Her voice was not raised. It was precise, which was worse. “Before. Not after.”

“I know.”

“That’s twice now,” she said. “Twice you’ve done something to someone else and told me afterward.”

He understood that she was not only talking about Bren. He understood that she was talking about the warmth at the river, the first week, and about this, and about a pattern she had identified between them that she was naming now so that he would understand she had seen it.

“You’re right,” he said.

“I’m going to keep being right,” she said. “And you’re going to keep doing things anyway, and the question is whether the things you do are going to get worse.”

She walked back toward the camp. He watched the river for a long time after she left.

He looked at his hand. The sword hand, the armored one.

In the firelight, it looked the same as it always had.



IV. First War

The messenger arrived in late winter, which told Corvin something before the man had spoken a word. Winter campaigns were expensive and slow and demoralizing for the soldiers who had to fight them, and the empire launched them anyway, which meant that

whatever had been reported back about the valley had alarmed someone enough to override the season.

The messenger was not, technically, a messenger. He was a young officer—junior enough to be expendable on a mission that might end badly, senior enough to carry authority. He arrived under a white flag with two soldiers behind him, and he was careful to perform the correct version of confidence, the kind that does not quite mask the assessment happening behind the eyes.

He carried a document bearing the governor's seal. Corvin read it in his tent with Yeva beside him, which was not a formality he had planned but which had become, over months, a habit—the kind of habit that settles into place without announcement, that you notice only when it's interrupted.

The document was, in essence, a deadline. An offer of terms—surrender, dissolution of the camp, the sword delivered to the capital—dressed in the particular language of administration that tries to make ultimatums feel like reason.

"The sword delivered to the capital," Yeva said.

"Yes."

"They believe you could do that."

"They know I can't," Corvin said. "This is the document you write when you've decided on war and you want a record showing you tried otherwise."

He set it down on the table. Outside, he could hear his camp going about its morning—the ordinary sounds of people doing the ordinary work that kept several hundred people alive through winter.

"How long?" Yeva asked.

"They'll move when the ground firms up. Six weeks, perhaps eight."

“How many?”

“The messenger’s horses were well-fed and well-shod. The supply lines are already moving. They’re not sending a punitive force.” He paused. “My estimate is ten to one. Perhaps more.”

Yeva looked at the document. “There’s a city,” she said, “two days north of the garrison. Halven. Before the invasion there was a district there—wool merchants, mostly—that refused to sell to the imperial supply lines. They hid stock, inflated prices, redirected trade through back routes. For two years.” She paused. “The governor had the district burned. He did it publicly. As a lesson.”

Corvin looked at her. “How do you know this?”

“A woman named Sura arrived last month. She was from Halven. She told me.”

He understood why she was telling him now. The empire was not a single thing. It was the governor’s seal and the burned wool district and the officer performing confidence outside his tent and the soldiers who would march here in six weeks because they had been told to, some of whom had chosen this and some of whom had not had much choice about it, and all of whom he would have to face across a field.

“I know,” he said.

“I just want you to know that I know you know,” she said. Which was, he had learned, her way of saying: when this is over, remember.



He sent the messenger back with a reply that was three sentences long and said nothing useful.

Then he spent six weeks preparing to fight an army he could not defeat by conventional means with soldiers

who had never been soldiers and a sword that was, as far as he understood, the only genuinely extraordinary thing on his side.

He used the sword differently in those weeks. Not for judgment—for strengthening. He moved through the camp in the evenings and he touched shoulders and clasped forearms and gripped hands, and each time something passed between him and the person he touched: not courage, because courage was not something that could be given, but something adjacent to it. A groundedness. A sense of inhabiting their own bodies fully. Men who had been carrying fear for so long that it had become the structure of their posture stood differently afterward, and the difference was not large but it was real, and it lasted.

He did not explain what he was doing. He simply did it.

Yeva watched him.

“Does it take anything from you?” she asked, one evening.

He considered the question honestly. “I don’t know yet. It doesn’t feel like loss. It feels like—sharing a weight. Redistributing it.”

“And if it does take something?”

“Then it takes something.”

She looked at him for a moment with an expression he had learned to identify as her measuring something she wasn’t ready to say. Then she looked away, back at the evening work of the camp. “Tomas would have liked you,” she said. Not warmly—with the particular care of someone offering something they usually keep put away. “He trusted people who said ‘I don’t know’ when they didn’t know.”

He did not respond immediately. He had learned that her private moments were not invitations but offerings, and that the correct response to an offering was not enthusiasm.

“He sounds like he was sensible,” Corvin said.

“He was seven,” she said. “All seven-year-olds are sensible. They haven’t learned yet to trust certainty.”



The empire’s army arrived on a morning when the sky was the particular gray that gives no information about the weather to come.

Corvin stood on the rise above the valley and looked at them across a mile of flat ground that had been farmland once and would be again, eventually, when people were allowed to farm it. They were, as he had estimated, approximately ten times his number. Their lines were orderly and their equipment was good and they had cavalry on both flanks, which told him they expected to be able to use those flanks, which told him they had not fully absorbed what had been reported to them about the sword.

The sword was, in his hand, entirely still. It had been still all morning. He had a habit now of reading its quality of stillness—there was a waiting-stillness and a dormant-stillness and a something-is-wrong-stillness, and what he felt now was the first of these, which he took as the only reassurance on offer.

He turned to his forces.

What he saw when he turned was not an army. It was people standing together who had agreed to do something terrifying because the alternative was worse. Six weeks had partially made them soldiers—capable of formation,

of not immediately running—but it was not the same as the professional force across the valley.

He had told them what he could do. He had not told them how it would look when he did it.

“Stay in formation,” he said to Marsh beside him. “Whatever you see. Stay in formation and keep moving forward. The sword will do what it does. Your job is to be there when it’s done.”

Marsh, who was a practical man and had learned to channel his terror into specificity, said: “If you fall?”

“Then you survive however you can,” Corvin said. “And you keep the camp alive. And you make it harder for them next time.”

He rode down the slope.



Afterward, he could not account for all of it.

He remembered the first cavalry charge—a sound he had not known before, something both mechanical and animal, something that said the world is now different from what it was thirty seconds ago. He remembered the sword moving with a range and speed his arm alone could not have produced, as though something beyond his arm was operating through it.

He remembered the shattered weapons. A blade coming down and the sword rising to meet it and the other blade simply ceasing to be a blade—not parried, not deflected, but ended. He had known the sword could do this. He had not known the sound it made.

He remembered his forces behind him, not gloriously, but with the focused energy of people who understood the opportunity was brief. They were not winning

because they were better. They were winning because the sword was buying them time that hadn't existed before.

He remembered a young soldier from the empire's eastern ranks—a boy, sixteen or seventeen, separated from his unit, suddenly alone in front of him with nothing between them. The boy's spear was shaking. His face held the particular understanding of someone about to die in a valley that probably didn't appear on any map he'd ever seen.

Corvin moved past him.

He did not know why. Some instinct—Yeva's voice, or his own, or the sword's, in a register he couldn't separate—had directed him past the boy and into the collapsing line behind him.

The boy ran.

The battle ended the way battles end—not with a clear resolution but a gradual collapse of one side's belief in the possibility of winning. The empire's forces retreated in reasonable order, which meant they were still a military unit, which meant this was not over.

But they were retreating.

And his forces were still on the field.



The prisoners numbered sixty-three.

They had been collected in the aftermath—men who had surrendered, who had been cut off, who had been injured and unable to follow the retreat. They sat in a guarded area at the eastern edge of the battlefield with the particular stillness of people who have ceded all control over what happens next and are waiting to discover what that will be.

The cost of the battle was still being counted when Corvin walked among them.

He looked at their faces. A man with a farmer's hands who had no business being in anyone's army. A boy younger than the one who had drawn lines in the dirt that first day in the valley. A soldier with the specific exhaustion of someone who had been marching for weeks and had arrived here hoping it would be the last march.

He looked at them as people. He gave himself that much.

Then he looked at them as a problem.

Forty-one of his people dead. Sixty or seventy more injured, some of whom would not recover. People he knew—Marsh's younger cousin, a woman named Bess who had arrived from the labor camps and had become one of their best scouts, a boy who had drawn lines in the dirt with a stick and who had, over months, become something other than a boy sitting alone at the edge of things.

He looked at the sixty-three prisoners.

He thought about the logistics of prisoners—the food, the guarding, the question of what you do with men who came to kill your people and failed. He thought about the soldiers still retreating, who would report back, who would come again with more. He thought about the families of forty-one people.

The arithmetic was not difficult.

He found Marsh and gave the order.



He did not stay to see it carried out. This was the same choice he had made with Bren.

He was at the far end of the camp, near the supply tents, when he heard the shouting.

It was not the sound of the order being carried out. It was the sound of the order being interrupted.

He was running before he had decided to run.



She was standing between the prisoners and six of his soldiers, and the geometry of the situation was clear before he was close enough to hear words: the soldiers had their weapons out, the prisoners were behind her, and she had nothing in her hands but was standing in the way of men who had been given an order.

She was saying something to the soldiers. He was still too far to hear it. He saw one of the soldiers—not a bad man, a man he had given the sword's strengthening to, a man who had lost people today—step forward and take her arm to move her aside, and he saw her refuse to be moved, and he saw the soldier's face, and he understood, with a cold clarity, what the next few seconds contained.

He shouted.

The sound of his voice made the soldiers turn, and in that turning, in that moment of distraction, the situation shifted. Not resolved—shifted. The soldier who had taken Yeva's arm released it and looked at Corvin, and behind them in the prisoner group there was movement, someone trying to use the distraction, someone grabbing for the nearest weapon, and then there was confusion and shouting and in the confusion—

He reached her after.

She was on the ground. Not from the prisoner who had moved—that had been contained. From the chaos his order had created. From the specific texture of what

happens when armed men in a state of heightened violence receive sudden contradictory information.

She looked up at him with an expression that was not accusation. That was the worst of it. She looked at him with an expression that was simply honest, that said: this is the thing I knew was coming, and here it is.

“I was going to tell you,” she said. “Before you gave the order. I had a name. The young one—he’s from Halven. The burned district. He didn’t choose this.”

He did not say anything. He could not locate his voice.

“You knew it wasn’t simple,” she said. Her breathing was careful, managed. “You knew. You taught yourself to know. I watched you.”

“Yeva—”

“You have to stay simple,” she said. “That’s the thing they don’t tell you about power. It makes everything feel simple. Because simple is easier to hold.”

Her hand found his arm. Not the sword arm. The other one.

“Don’t become simple, Corvin.”

Her grip weakened. Then stopped. He held her hand long after there was nothing left to hold.



He stayed beside her for a long time.

The camp moved around him. People came close and then gave him space, reading something in the quality of his stillness that made approach feel wrong. The soldiers who had been given the order were somewhere behind him, uncertain. The prisoners were somewhere behind him, also uncertain. The entire camp was in the particular suspension of aftermath, waiting for information about what had just happened and what it meant.

Eventually Marsh came and crouched beside him.

“The prisoners,” Marsh said carefully.

Corvin looked at his sword hand. The armor. The same.

“Let them go,” he said.

Marsh was quiet for a moment. “Some of the men—”

“Let them go,” he said. “Tell them to go north. Tell them what they saw here and what it cost. Tell them to go home and tell the truth about it.”

Marsh went.

The sky had cleared while he wasn’t paying attention. It was the particular blue of late afternoon, the color of a day that has run out of weather and is simply existing. Somewhere to the west, behind the hills, the sun was taking its time finishing.

He thought: I taught myself to know. I watched you teach yourself.

He thought: I gave the order anyway.

He did not look at his hand again.



V. The Shape of Necessity

He buried her at the field’s edge, near the ash trees, because she had liked the sound ash trees made in wind and had told him this once, briefly, as a non sequitur, and he had stored it without knowing he was storing it.

He did not make a speech. He stood at the grave until the people who had gathered understood that he was not going to make a speech, and then they gradually found reasons to be elsewhere, and he stood alone with the turned earth for a while and then he walked back to the camp and began the next necessary thing.

This was how grief arrived in him: as an increased efficiency. As a narrowing. The things that had previously required moral consideration—that had generated the internal argument, the weighing, the sustained uncertainty—became simpler, not because he had resolved them but because the part of him that argued had gone quiet. He noticed this the way a man notices an injury going numb. He continued, because there was still too much that required him.



The second imperial force arrived six weeks later, and it was larger.

This was the expected thing—retreat, regroup, return with more—but the scale of more was instructive. They had sent, by his estimate, twenty times his number. The governor was no longer treating this as a punitive expedition. He was treating it as a problem.

Corvin found that he was not afraid. He considered whether this was courage or damage and decided the distinction wasn't useful.

He fought this one differently. The first battle had been defensive—he'd let them come, used the terrain. This time he moved to meet them, three days north of the valley, at a crossing where the road narrowed between a hill and a frozen river.

He told Marsh: "What I'm about to do will not look controlled. Keep the forces back until it's done."

Marsh opened his mouth and then closed it again.

What he did at the crossing was difficult to describe afterward—the people who witnessed it gave different versions, agreeing only on its scope. He had learned something about the sword in the weeks since Yeva: that

the warmth he used to strengthen his people drew from the same source as everything else it did, and that source was not limited the way he'd assumed. It was limited by what he was willing to spend.

He had become willing to spend more.

The crossing held. The imperial force broke against it, reformed, broke again, and then did not reform. When the light came up he was standing in the narrowest part of the pass and his forces were still behind him and the road ahead was empty.

He looked at his sword hand.

He looked at it for a long time.

The armor was unchanged. He had thought—half expected—that the extremity of what he had just done would show somewhere on it. That the intensity of the expenditure would leave a mark. It hadn't.



The arithmetic shifted.

With the destruction of the second force, the empire was no longer conducting a campaign. It was trying to hold what it had, which meant it was distributed—garrisons in occupied towns, supply lines strung thin, units separated from the larger body that had retreated behind the provincial border. And Corvin was, for the first time, in a position to move.

He moved.

The next two months were a campaign he would later remember in terms of roads and weather and supply rather than decision. Not because decisions weren't being made—they were, constantly—but because he made them faster now. He assessed, determined the outcome he

needed, determined what would produce it, and did it. The speed felt like clarity.

Twenty-two garrisoned towns lay between the valley and the provincial border. He took seventeen in nine weeks. The other five capitulated when they understood what had happened to the rest. Garrisons fought, and when garrisons fought, towns burned, and the people inside them were rarely only soldiers.

He still had the vocabulary. He had built it with Yeva, fire by fire—complicity against survival, the powerful against the powerless—and he still believed every word of it. At the fourteenth town, a man told him the merchant district had serviced the garrison: laundry, grain, repaired equipment. Corvin remembered the vocabulary perfectly.

He said: “I know.”

He gave no other order.

He stood in the square and heard the first screams. He did not move.

The eastern quarter burned.



He noticed the change that evening, when he took off the gauntlet.

It began at the base of two fingers—the ring finger and the smallest finger of his sword hand, which was the hand he had not thought to watch because it was never entirely flesh to begin with. The color had changed. The texture. Not the gray-silver of the living armor, which had its own quality of life—something still and cold. He pressed the fingers of his other hand against them and felt nothing. Not pain, not sensation. Just the press of one hard thing against another.

He put the gauntlet back on.

He told no one.



The fifteenth town was called Vess. It was smaller than most, a market town that had been a way-station on the eastern trade roads before the occupation had disrupted the trade. The garrison here was thirty men, and they surrendered before his forces had fully arrived, which was the rational thing to do and which Corvin honored—he had established early that surrender was honored, and he had been consistent about this because consistency was the only currency that bought him anything in this kind of warfare.

The garrison surrendered. Corvin accepted it. He was walking toward the commander to formalize the terms when one of his people—a man whose name was Wren, who had been with him since the valley—was killed by an arrow from a window in the square. A civilian window. A house where someone had looked out at the army in the square and at the surrendering soldiers and had shot anyway.

Wren was twenty-three. He had survived the occupation and the first winter and both battles and nine weeks of campaign.

Corvin stood over him while his forces searched the square for whoever had fired. They found, in the house, a young man of perhaps eighteen and his father, who was hiding the bow. The young man said the arrow was his. He said it without particular drama. He said it with the quality of someone who had done a thing and was not prepared to make the man beside him responsible for it.

Corvin had the young man taken aside and had the father brought before him.

The father had not shot the arrow.

The sword, which Corvin touched to the man's wrist in the manner that had become habit, told him this plainly. The man's guilt was the guilt of the hidden bow, the shared house, the love that makes a man hide evidence of what his child has done.

Corvin looked at him. He was perhaps fifty. He had a beard that had grown without particular attention and eyes that had the quality of someone who had been frightened for a very long time and had almost stopped noticing it.

"Where is your wife?" Corvin asked.

A pause. "Dead. Before the occupation."

Corvin looked at this man. He thought about Wren, twenty-three, who would not be twenty-four—who had survived everything only to be ended by an arrow in a square in a town he'd never heard of before this campaign. He thought about what authority required. What deterrence required. What it would mean if his army understood that killing their people cost nothing beyond the shooter.

He gave the order.

He understood, even as he gave it, that this was different. Not different in category—not so far beyond the eastern quarter of the fourteenth town that it required a new moral designation. But the father had not shot the bow. The sword had said so plainly. He was proceeding, for the first time, not in defiance of the sword's ambiguity but in direct defiance of its clarity.



That night he looked at his hand again. The steel had moved—reached the second joint of the ring finger, a

tracery extending up the back of his hand toward the wrist. Not the living armor. Something that grew from within, replacing what was there rather than covering it.

He examined it in the firelight with the focused attention he might have brought to a navigational problem.

The ring was on the finger above the steel. It caught the firelight with its usual patience.

He put the gauntlet back on.



After Vess came Aldenmere and Crossfield and a string of settlements too small to have been towns before the occupation. The campaign was succeeding by every measure that counted. The empire's presence in the province was fragmenting, and the governor had sent no second large force—smarter, Corvin guessed, or more desperate, than he'd credited.

He was also learning something else: that campaigns have a logic separate from the people conducting them. You begin to achieve an outcome, and the campaign acquires its own requirements—supply, morale, momentum, the need to show no hesitation—that produce decisions the original outcome never asked for. He could trace each decision back to a legitimate concern. He was being careful to be able to trace each decision back to a legitimate concern.

He was being careful, he noted, in the way a man is careful about something he suspects he is losing.

After Crossfield: his left hand, which was not the sword hand, which was entirely flesh, showed a line of steel at the base of the thumb. He looked at this for longer than he had looked at the others. The implications of this

had been abstract before. They were not abstract anymore.

He told Marsh: “If I give an order and it seems wrong to you, say so.”

Marsh looked at him with the measured expression of a man who is trying to determine what kind of answer is being asked for. “I always say so.”

“I know,” Corvin said. “I’m asking you to keep doing it.”

He understood, even as he said it, that this was not the same as having Yeva say so. Marsh would tell him when something was tactically wrong, when an order was going to cost more than it returned in the terms of the campaign. Yeva would have told him when something was unjust, which was a different subject entirely, and she had been able to hold to that distinction when he was arguing against it with everything he had. Marsh was loyal, and loyal men tended to find the justification for what the person they were loyal to had already decided.

He knew this. He asked anyway. He was working with what he had.



He found the mirror in an abandoned house in the third week past Crossfield, in a room he’d been using as a command post—a table for maps, a working fireplace, walls still intact, which was more than could be said for most of the town.

The mirror was in what had been a bedroom: tall, wood-framed, the glass slightly mottled with age in the way that makes reflections seem deeper than they are, more interior.

He saw himself.

He had not seen himself—properly, at full length, in adequate light—in some time. He had avoided it without formulating an avoidance. He had told himself this was practical: there were no mirrors in a field camp. There were no mirrors in garrison towns that had been fought through.

The left side of his face was steel.

Not armor—not the living silver of the sword's armor, which moved and breathed with him, which felt like certainty. This was different in quality. Stiller. More final. It covered the angle of his jaw, moved up across his cheekbone, encompassed the area around the left eye, which was still an eye—still his eye, still capable of sight—set now in steel the way a jewel is set in a mounting, surrounded and held.

He looked at this for a very long time.

He remembered, without wanting to, Mira's hand against that side of his face once—brushing dirt from his cheek before supper, scolding him for something he could no longer name. He could not remember the scolding. He could remember the hand.

The person in the mirror was recognizable as himself. That was the part he had not anticipated—he had imagined, in the abstract, that the steel would be more foreign, more clearly a transformation, that he would look at himself and see something other. But the face in the mirror was his face. The same face that had stood in the grave in Rook's Meadow and cursed the sky. The same face that had sat across a fire from Yeva while she held her terrible cup of tea and said you're filing it away for later. His face, wearing the record of what he had done as naturally as skin.

He raised the gauntlet.

He intended to strike the mirror. The intention was clear and committed—not a thought but a physical resolution, the kind that involves the muscles before the mind has finished with it.

The sword arm stopped.

Not in the way of something held back by an outside force. In the way of something that has already made a decision and is no longer available for this particular use. The arm simply would not complete the motion. It held at the apex of the intended strike, and the mirror remained intact, and his face in the mirror remained what it was.

He understood what was happening.

The sword, which had declined to make the judgment at Bren, which had been overridden at the father in Vess, which had given its clarity and watched him proceed past it—the sword was not making a judgment now. The sword was making him witness. It was saying: look at this. Whatever you decide to do, look at this first. I will not allow you to stop looking.

He looked.

He stood in the mottled light of the abandoned bedroom and he looked at himself, the steel spreading from his jaw to his cheekbone to the setting of his eye, and the ring on his right hand caught the light and he looked at that too, and he remembered the hand in the grave—the steel fingers loosely curled around the sword's grip, patient, waiting—and he held that memory beside what the mirror was showing him and he felt the shape of the thing he was inside of, the full circumference of it, for the first time since the field.

He stood with this knowledge for a long time.

Then he turned away from the mirror and went back to the table with the maps on it, and he looked at the

maps, and he planned the next movement of the campaign.

He left the bedroom door open. He did not close himself away from the mirror. He had understood the sword's instruction and he had accepted it: he would not be allowed to not see himself. He would carry what he was becoming in full sight of himself.

He had imagined this would make a difference.



VI. The Shape of Victory

He crossed the provincial border in spring—roads firmed, rivers passable, the empire's people emerging from winter into the vulnerability of those who've begun to believe the worst is behind them.

It was not behind them.

The empire's territory was different from the occupied province in ways he registered and did not. Houses that had not been burned. Markets that still functioned. Children who did not flinch when armed men passed, because armed men passing had not yet taught them to. He noticed these things the way a man notices weather—information processed and used without particularly feeling.

He had learned, during the campaign, to distinguish between what he felt and what the situation required. He had found this distinction useful. He had not yet fully understood what the distinction cost him.



The city of Dernholt had resisted.

He learned this from a man named Castor, a clerk who had kept records through the occupation in the obsessive

way of a man who believes that if everything is written down it somehow counts for more. Castor had walked three days to find him, because he had something to say and had decided Corvin needed to hear it.

For two years the Dernholt wool district had refused imperial supply contracts—hidden stock, rerouted trade, sheltered refugees through the first winter. Not one merchant, not one idealist, but an entire district, coordinating in the open, where collective punishment was the obvious risk. They had done it anyway.

The governor had burned the district in the second year. As a lesson.

Castor said: “There were people in Dernholt who chose. I wanted you to know that. Before you arrived. In case it was relevant to anything.”

Corvin looked at him.

“Thank you,” he said. He meant it.

He was still capable of meaning it.

He entered Dernholt three days later. He honored what had been there. He did not burn the ruins of the wool district again.

He burned other things.



The logic of the campaign was no longer separable from the campaign itself. His memories were present, his vocabulary was present, his capacity to trace the moral genealogy of each choice was entirely present—he simply no longer lived in the position from which that vocabulary had been generated. He had moved, gradually and then completely, into the position of the campaign.

Cities surrendered or were taken. The distinction still mattered to him, and this was perhaps the last form in

which he preserved the oath he had sworn over the open grave. But surrender and being taken had begun to look more similar than they once had—what he required of the surrendered was the same as what he extracted from the taken, and the difference was mainly in how much was destroyed first.

He still knew every word of the vocabulary he and Yeva had built at the fire. He believed it. He lived somewhere else now.

The steel had reached his shoulder.



He reached the capital in autumn, when the leaves were doing what they do in autumn—announcing themselves, going out with a display that had always seemed to him slightly desperate, the beauty of things that understand they are ending.

The capital had a name. He stopped using it. He had developed, over the campaign, a mild superstition about naming things he was going to have to do hard things to. It was not a principled position. It was a small mercy he extended to himself.

The capital fell in eight days.

He gave clear orders about civilian populations, substantially followed—the best outcome available in a city siege, a qualified success. Some parts of the city burned that he had not intended to burn. Some people died who were not soldiers. He had become familiar with the gap between what was ordered and what occurred, and had learned to locate it in his accounting without quite being able to close it.

He was looking for Aldric.



He found him in the administrative complex at the city's center, in a room that had clearly been a war room, recently and unconvincingly converted into an ordinary one. Maps had been stripped from the walls, leaving rectangular shadows. A chair faced the door, and in it sat the governor—Aldric, whose name Corvin had long known but whose face he had not—waiting with the composure of a man who has decided composure is the only thing left to decide.

He was older than Corvin had expected. Not elderly—fifty-five, sixty—but aged the way men are who have governed difficult things a long time: traces not of cruelty but of accumulated decision. This was not a monstrous face. It was an ordinary face, which was worse.

"You're smaller than the reports suggested," Aldric said.

Corvin said nothing. He was looking at Aldric's hands. There was a ring on the right hand, index finger. A red jewel, dark as old blood.

"Sit down, if you'd like," Aldric said. "I had water brought. I don't know if you want any. I thought it was worth having available."

Corvin sat.

He looked at Aldric. Aldric looked back, with the attention of a man who has had a long time to prepare for this and decided to spend it observing.

"You want to ask me something," Aldric said. "You didn't come all this way to execute a governor without speaking to him first. Men who are only interested in execution don't bother with the speaking. So."

“The villages,” Corvin said. “The ones in the first year. Why.”

Aldric was quiet for a moment. He looked at his hands. “Because I was given a territory and told to pacify it, and because pacification has a logic of its own that is difficult to argue with from inside it.” He paused. “I am aware that this is not an answer. I am aware that you are asking me why I chose this, and the honest answer is that I did not experience myself as choosing. I experienced myself as governing. That distinction probably seems meaningless to you.”

“It doesn’t,” Corvin said.

Aldric looked at him.

“It doesn’t seem meaningless,” Corvin said. “That’s what I wanted to ask you. Whether it seemed like governing or like choosing.”

A long silence. Outside, the city was doing what cities do after they fall—the particular acoustic texture of aftermath, which sounds like nothing and contains everything.

“You’ve become something,” Aldric said, carefully. “On the way here.”

“Yes.”

“I heard the reports from the border towns. From Vess.” A pause. “You started with something different. The reports from the early days described something different.”

“I know.”

“Did you notice?” Aldric asked. Not unkindly. In the manner of a man who is genuinely curious about the answer, who is asking because the answer is interesting rather than because it serves him. “When it changed. Did you notice while it was happening?”

Corvin thought about the mirror. About the sword arm stopping. About turning away from his reflection and going back to the maps.

“Yes,” he said.

“Then you had something I didn’t have,” Aldric said. He said it without bitterness, which was more disturbing than bitterness would have been. “I never saw it while it was happening. Only after. Only much after, and by then—” He stopped. He looked at the empty table. “By then I was governing.”

The water sat between them, untouched.

“The ring,” Corvin said.

Aldric looked at his hand. He removed the ring without ceremony and set it on the table between them. The jewel caught the light.

“There’s something wrong with it,” Aldric said. “I’ve had it for thirty years and it has never sat right. Always slightly too large. Always slightly too cold.” He paused. “I found it in a grave. Did you know that?”

Corvin looked at the ring.

“A field, near a burned town. I was a young officer then. I found a ring in a field and I thought: this means something. I thought: this is mine.” He looked at it on the table. “I know what I am. I’ve known for some time.”

Corvin picked up the ring.

The jewel flared—briefly, deeply—in a way that Aldric’s ring had never done in thirty years of his ownership. It recognized something. He felt it settle into the logic of the other ring, the one on his right hand, the two of them now in his possession like paired parentheses around a statement he had not yet finished reading.

Aldric looked at his empty hand.

“Remember this room,” he said.

Corvin left him in the chair.



VII. The Grave

He stayed in the capital three weeks—the minimum required to arrange a transition and establish what kind of order would replace the one he'd broken. He had become, over the campaign, very good at the functional elements of governance: supply, authority, the maintenance of basic conditions under which people could feed themselves and move through streets without being killed. These skills had not required his conscience. They had developed alongside it and continued after his conscience was redeployed elsewhere.

He appointed people to govern, looking for the Davan quality—not heroic loyalty, but calculated investment—and the Yeva quality, the willingness to name a thing clearly when it was happening. He found several. Whether they would remain what they were under what they were inheriting, he did not know. He had done what he could.

Before he left he went to the war room and looked at the maps—the ones showing the full territory of what had been done. He looked at them for a long time without trying to think anything specific. He let the shape of it be what it was.



His forces did not march with him when he left. He had told them he was going alone, and Marsh had looked

at him in the way he had looked at him the morning after Yeva's burial and had said: "You'll come back."

Corvin had said: "Yes."

He was not certain this was true. He had said it because it was the kind of thing Marsh needed and because uncertainty on this point was not information Marsh could use.

He went south and east, through the occupied province, through the territory he had come from. The road was familiar the way roads become familiar—not through affection but through the body's memory of having covered them. He recognized these things and was not comforted by them, and continued.

The province had changed in ways he had intended and ways he had not. There were people in the towns again, or beginning to be—the slow return of those who had been in camps, in hiding, elsewhere. Some burned buildings had been cleared. Some had begun to be rebuilt, with the particular quality of work undertaken without certainty of purpose: methodical, exhausted, sustained by some private calculation that it was worth doing without yet knowing what for.

He passed through these towns without stopping. He recognized some of the people and they recognized him, and what passed between them in those recognitions was complicated and he did not want to simplify it by staying long enough to have it resolved into gratitude or blame. He let it be complicated. He walked.



The field had not changed.

He had expected it to have changed—had prepared himself, during the walk, for the possibility that the ash

tree would be gone, that the field itself would have been plowed or built on or otherwise incorporated into the ordinary processes of a world that had no particular reason to preserve the coordinates of his lowest moment. But the field was the field. The ash tree stood at its edge with the indifference of trees to human significance, its branches not yet in full leaf, holding the particular posture of early spring: prepared, withheld.

He walked to the edge of the grave.

It was still open.

He had not filled it. He had left it open when he walked away with the sword and he had not come back to fill it, and in the years since no one had come to fill it either. It had deepened somewhat—rain, settling—and its edges had softened, grass growing inward over the cut margins, the way living things tend to cover the evidence of violence. But it was the same depth, the same orientation, the same position under the ash tree that he had chosen because the roots would not be deep there and he was tired.

He had been so tired.

He sat at the edge of it, the way he might sit at the edge of a conversation he was not sure he could finish, and he looked down into it.

The light was early morning, low and horizontal, the kind that finds what is in the ground and illuminates it rather than the ground itself. And in that light, at the depth of the grave, he saw what he had not been able to see when he dug it, because it had not been visible then—a shape at the very bottom, at the level below where he had stopped, the level below the level the shovel had reached when it struck metal.

He thought at first it was a root. Then he thought it was a stone.

Then he understood what he was looking at.

The fingers were curled loosely around empty air, in the position of something that once held something and had been waiting since it was released to hold it again. Steel, gray-silver, each joint articulated, fused now with a rust that was different from the rust he remembered—deeper, more complete, the rust of centuries rather than decades. On the index finger, a band of blackened steel. No jewel. The jewel was on his hand.

He looked at his hands.

The right hand: the ring he had taken from the grave, the jewel that had recognized him the moment he touched it. The left hand's ring finger: the ring he had taken from Aldric, from Aldric who had found a ring in a field near a burned town and thought this is mine. His own hands, one ring each, the paired parentheses he had felt close in the war room.

He looked at the hand in the grave.

He looked at his own hand—the sword hand, the one that had been armor first and then steel both, the steel that had grown from within, that had replaced rather than covered, that had moved up his wrist and arm and shoulder and across his chest and up the left side of his face and was still moving, he knew, still moving with the patient progress of things that have time.

The hands were the same. Same articulation. Same scale. Same looseness in the curl of the fingers, which was not a natural looseness but the looseness of resolution, of a grip that no longer needs to hold because

He climbed down into the grave.

He did not do this dramatically. He sat at the edge and lowered himself in the way of a tired man getting into something rather than the way of a man making a statement. The grave was the right depth for a man. He had dug it correctly, in the field outside Rook's Meadow, when he was tired and before the shovel struck metal and everything afterward happened instead.

He sat in it, then lay down in it, and the earth was cold against the steel that was most of him now and the earth was cold against the flesh that remained.

He looked up at the sky.

The ash tree moved above him, not quite in leaf. The sky between its branches was the particular blue of a morning that hasn't committed yet to what kind of day it will be. He had always liked this kind of morning—the suspended quality of it, the sense of a world holding its breath before the day's decisions.

He thought: somewhere there is a man—not an army, not a legend, just a man—who has lost something he cannot account for. Who is standing in a field or a ruin or whatever remains of wherever he came from, trying to determine whether continuing is a thing he can do. Who is asking the sky the question the sky has never yet answered.

He thought: I hope. And could not finish it.

The transformation was not painful. He had not expected it to be painful—pain was flesh's information, and he was mostly not flesh anymore—but he had expected it to be final in some way he could feel, some punctuation. There was no punctuation. There was only the ongoing patient process of it, the steel moving through what remained the way seasons move through a

year: not arriving, not departing, simply continuing what they had been doing all along.

His hand found the sword. He had set it down beside him when he lowered himself into the grave, and now his hand found it and curled around the grip, and the grip was the right grip, the grip his hand had learned over years of carrying this, and then his hand was still.

He was looking at the sky when the stillness finished settling.

The blue between the ash tree's branches.

The morning, deciding.



The grave was still.

The ring gleamed. One on each hand now, paired, the jewels catching the early light and holding it with the patience of things that have been holding light for a very long time and expect to hold it for much longer.

The sword lay in the steel grip, waiting.

Somewhere to the east, a field.

A man with a shovel.

The shovel struck metal and rang like a bell.

Somewhere, another man cursed the heavens and began to dig.

Guidelines for submissions

The Future Fire welcomes submissions of speculative fiction and poetry with progressive, inclusive and socially aware disposition. We are particularly interested in feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecological themes, and writing by under-represented voices.



- Fiction (up to 1000 words): pay \$10 per story
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- Poetry: pay \$10 per poem
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