

Children of Another Sky

a novel by
Kevin Jared Hosein



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CHILDREN OF ANOTHER SKY

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“Hope” is the thing with feathers —
 That perches in the soul —
And sings the tune without the words —
 And never stops — at all —

Emily Dickinson.

Kevin Jared Hosein

BURG

1

DR. LAVENDER AND HER DAUGHTER

It was the day before the Ex. Sess-16, the most difficult exam in the Burg.

No one had ever passed. Not even Dr. Lavender had come close to passing, and she was the smartest person I knew. I always considered myself fortunate to have her as my overseer. Rion, my twin brother, also had an overseer.

Overseers were different from Luminaries. Luminaries were prominent within their spheres, or Charters, and were obligated to mentor new graduates. I wasn't a graduate—I was years away from that. No, overseers were assigned to a distinct few who were exempted from the early stages of communal education. This was done in special cases, such as physical disability, emotional instability (perhaps due to an untimely death), or for children who showed *incomparable promise*.

So, which was it for me and my brother?

We weren't sure. As much as we believed ourselves to show incomparable promise, the fact was that we had only one parent to depend on. Our father was dead—Mom said it was accidental. This happened before me and Rion was born.

Ollie, our sister, however remembered hearing the news. She sat us down and told us how it happened. My father was part of a team of four, dispatched to a research laboratory over Grand Lake Ishmael, to investigate a cyanobacteria colony that could be harnessed as a biofuel. Due to a malfunction, however, the team's diving-bell experienced a decompression equal to seven atmospheres in a fraction of a second.

To put it simply, everyone who was in the chamber at that time expanded until they exploded.

In the Burg, there were no records of the dead. The only exceptions were cases archived for reference and research. And even in such cases, the dead was always simply referred to as *the casualties*. All materials used exclusively by the dead would be sent for recycling and reprocessing. However, the family had the choice of keeping one thing, a physical reminder that they could display in their homes—a shirt, a dress, a shoe, a ring, a book. They called these tokens.

For some unknown reason, my mother never kept a token for my father. All I had left of him was the case

log of the accident, its last line etched into my memory,
Further loss of life will certainly be prevented by modification of the interlocking mechanism, so as to reassure its continued functionality.

Rion's proneness to ill-health was also a factor in the decision to assign us overseers, I'm sure. Despite being twins, our immune systems varied wildly. I've never been indisposed in my life, though I have had close calls. I never complained. Rion and I never got along, however, and we never worked or studied together.

There was only one line in the syllabus associated with the Ex. Sess-16, which read, **LOOK AND DESPAIR!**

That was it—core and supplement.

Everyone but me laughed it off as a practical joke. Dr. Lavender had stressed to me that it was always crucial to keep in mind the nature of practical jokes—as actions designed to humiliate their victims by highlighting their shortcomings.

Dr. Lavender had told me, "Odyssey, you're probably one of the only people taking this exam seriously."

"Why treat it like a joke?" I'd asked.

She'd said, "If the status quo is failure, then success becomes the punchline."

I'd said, "Then maybe I'll be a walking punchline."

Dr. Lavender smiled. "You'll be more than that."

A few years back, when I was about twelve, I was introduced to four overseers: Dr. Calliope, who smelled like wood bark; Dr. Florentine, who smelled like boiling ricegrain; and Dr. Sand, who smelled like pill beetles.

And Dr. Lavender. The moment I walked into Dr. Lavender's office and straightaway smelled the honey on her, I knew she was the one for me. Her scent relaxed me. Perhaps what helped was knowing honey to be one of the few organic materials that refuses to putrefy.

At our session before the Ex. Sess-16, just as every session, Dr. Lavender made that same finger-fluttering gesture for me to lie on her couch—the long, velvety blue divan that sat in vivid contrast against everything else in the room. The small room was lined with khaki-green wallpaper and carpeted with wool patterned with iodine-yellow zig-zags, like fallen leaves rearranged into a maze. The room itself reminded me of a sun-dried coppice.

As I lied down, Dr. Lavender positioned herself in her big burnt-umber armchair. She set the tunebox to *Strings: Passive*, but even with the soft melody playing, she couldn't hide her look of worry. She stopped herself twice before speaking, "It's nice outside today. Would you prefer to go outside for this session?"

"Up to the hill?"

She cocked her head to the side. “The hill? Sure, the hill is nice.”

We then walked to the park on Ember Hill, so named for the rings of orange freesias that peppered the grass, resembling circlets of fire held between the swaying green. The walk only took five minutes. I wondered two things as we sat under one of the pergolas at the hilltop—why the change in scenery that day, and why not more often?

An Exodus lorry wheeled along the road below us. They always made so much more noise than regular cargo lorries. I always thought the clanking metal was a reminder—a warning. I could only imagine the Trespassers inside, their bodies jerking back and forth, their brains rattling from the din.

“They’re early today,” Dr. Lavender said.

“Wouldn’t make much of a difference once they get to the Outsides,” I said.

“Have pity on their folks.”

The Ex. Sess-16 was the only exam that the populace was permitted to fail. And thus, it was the only exam that didn’t ensure a seat in the lorries, to be part and parcel of the Exodus.

The Exodus had one purpose—to escort Trespassers out of the Burg and into the middle of the vast, bleak, windswept stretches that spanned the Outsides. Tres-

passers were citizens prone to making parallax and syntax errors. They often misinterpreted elementary material.

Vector quantities for scalar quantities.

Ionic bonds for covalent bonds.

Anion for cation.

Sine for cosine.

DNA for RNA.

In short, the Trespassers were the people who couldn't, for the life of them, *find the value of x*.

Incompetence was an offense in the Burg. Once deemed a Trespasser by the Directors of the Board, claiming residence there became illegal. So, they would leave behind their resources, their folks and any sliver of hope of returning.

The Exodus was an instrument of fear, we were all aware. However, we were also mindful that it was an instrument of advancement. The continued progression within the Burg was a corollary of the unforgiving protocols associated with the Exodus. If one couldn't spell; if one couldn't do calculus; shirked any required duty; committed a grievous offense against another; or clamoured against the existence of the Exodus, one would be led to join the Exodus.

Most folks allowed themselves to be led rather than forced.

This was the purpose of the annual examination we all had to take—the Exodus Assessment, or the Ex. Sess. The Ex. Sess' difficulty was cumulative with each successive year, but one only had to take it until one was sixteen. The Ex. Sess-16 was different from the others. While the others had been difficult—some of them of migraine-inducing mathematical and logical intricacy—this one was hailed as impossible.

The Ex. Sess-16 was one page, with one printed sentence stating one problem. The words *Exodus Assessment Level 16* weren't even printed on the sheet.

The request was always to write an account. Who, or what about? We would only find out on the day itself. We would have never heard about the subjects prior, and never again after that. No periodical within the Lexicon and Omnibus contained the key words, events, names or movements mentioned.

Some of the sample topics in my work-kit of assignments from Dr. Lavender were:

- Write an account of a man referred to as Tricky Dick. In your story, incorporate the term "Watergate".
- Write an account of the rivalry of two scientists, T. Edison and N. Tesla.

- Write an account of a man with the initials P.P. In your account, include the term, “Khmer Rouge”.

I asked Dr. Lavender, “Did you ever know any Trespassers?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes on the lorry still. “A few—most of them from when I was young.”

“Communal classmates?”

She nodded again. “There’s no place here for those who can’t follow their Charter. You know the deal, Odyssey. It’s as simple as that.”

She coughed into her fist. We watched as the lorries drove past the first gates. She then said to me, “How’s everything today?”

I contemplated my morning activities. I woke up without smelling blood—an affliction that had interested Dr. Lavender for longer than I cared to remember, because it always bored me having to discuss the differing intensities and frequencies of the smell. My urine was dilute, given that I had to increase my water intake for the month; my blood vessels experienced vasodilation of endogenous nature, more than usual; there was no purulence in my sputum; I had mild irritation in my oesophagus; there was slight distension in my descending colon, but could have been due to a recent buildup

of intestinal flora. And well, I had a very frustrating hangnail.

I have never gotten sick, I said, but many times, I used to wake up and feel as if I were dying. Even though Dr. Lavender relished these medical details, I decided to skip forth to when I was in the bloodflower garden, sifting through my killing jar for new mites. Mites always interested me, not only because of their sheer population numbers and extensive variation, but due to their formidable traits.

Certain midges could survive for days in liquid nitrogen. Moon moths had the ability to detect a reproductive mate from several kilometers away. Some woodmite mounds in the backwoods extended as high as some trees, with shafts and complex ventilation systems that no other organism could rival. The hexagonal lattices of bees' honeycombs were implemented into our very own architecture.

In short, mites trumped humans in every way except two—physical size and lifespan. So there I was, sifting their carcasses out of my killing jar. Such resilience bested by a thin layer of soda-lime glass and a few drops of ethyl acetate.

In the Burg, your aptitude and fervour in a field of study contributed to the Board's selection of your Char-

ter. I was determined to get into the Entomology Charter, the study of these intriguing, six-legged creatures.

“I opened the killing jar,” I told Dr. Lavender, “and the dratted thing leapt right out! It was still alive, still drowning in ethyl acetate.”

Dr. Lavender grinned. “Which mite was this?”

“It looked like the spang beetles I see in the park. *Melolontha hippocastani*. I see them from time to time. They’re strange and so elusive. They look like they’re made of some titanium alloy. They never die. If only I had potassium cyanide instead of ethyl—”

Dr. Lavender clicked her tongue. “For the last time, no potassium cyanide for you, Odyssey.” She chuckled. “So, where did it go?”

“It leapt right through the vent and into the bathroom.”

“You didn’t retrieve it?”

“Ollie was in the bathroom. I didn’t want to disturb her. She seemed distraught.”

“Distraught? How?”

“She was crying.”

Dr. Lavender turned to me, her long copper-hued curls bobbing over her ears. She asked, “Do you have any idea why?”

I said, “I retrieved the beetle after, though.”

"We'll discuss the beetle after. Do you know why Ollie was crying?"

"All I heard is that she's having a hard time accepting things."

"Accepting what?"

"I don't know. That's what I heard her tell my mother. She never discussed it with me."

Dr. Lavender leaned back on the bench. She asked, "What else did you hear?"

"They spent a long time talking in the bedroom."

"Whose bedroom?"

"Ollie's."

She gave me a look of concern. "This conversation was private?"

"I don't consider it private if it's about me."

She pursed her lips. Her cheeks always looked slightly sunken when she was uneasy, as if she was gnawing on them. I imagined the pinks of her gums meshing between her teeth in between the questions.
"Did you hear what was being said?"

"Just heard my name being mentioned," I replied.
"Mine and Rion's."

Dr. Lavender leaned in closer. "Anything specific?"

I shrugged. "Something about the Ex. Sess-16. Ollie sounded worried."

“Where was your brother when this happened?” she asked.

“He wasn’t home.”

“What happened after?”

“Mom came to me and told me Ollie needed to have a word with me.”

“What happened after that?”

“Ollie began to cry when she saw me. Mom told Ollie that our life was too good for her to be having outbursts like that.”

“Mm-hmm. What else happened?”

“Ollie wanted to plan an outing for me and Rion. She was angry that Mom disagreed to it.”

Dr. Lavender leaned in close. “Why’s that?”

“Why’d Mom disagree?”

“No, why the sudden plan to have an outing for you and your brother?”

“Because tomorrow’s the Ex. Sess-16, and she thought we were being overworked.”

“Your mother fully disagreed with this outing?”

“She said it was best that the outing be postponed.”

“Until when? Did she say?”

“Tomorrow, after the exam.”

“Ollie didn’t think this was reasonable?”

“She said that tomorrow will be too late.”

Dr. Lavender looked me straight in the eye. “Too late for what?”

“I was curious about that myself.”

“So, she didn’t say?”

“No. She left the room, and wouldn’t respond to me whenever I asked.”

Dr. Lavender shrugged. “Perhaps she didn’t want to have a surprise spoiled?”

“Then it shouldn’t be so bad. I can’t handle surprises.”

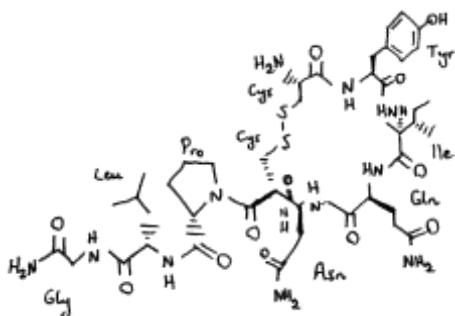
She nodded, chuckling. “Me too. I dread surprises.”

So, yes, this was definitely not the session to let Dr. Lavender know that her daughter and I were physically intimate.

She and her daughter, Lise, shared the same honey aroma. However, other than their genetic fragrance, Dr. Lavender and her daughter had very little in common. The first time I had seen Lise was in the waiting room outside of Dr. Lavender’s office, four years previous. She told me that the waiting room was the best place for her studies. I remembered the books—her areas of interest. Microbiology, polymer chemistry, macromolecular bioscience, gravimetric and qualitative analysis. She had them in a pile next to her. She chewed on toffee strings as she penned diagrams into her Omnibus display.

One day, I sat next to her. She spoke to me, “Doc has developed quite an interest in you.” Her eyes remained in her Omnibus as she finished sketching the structure of a molecule. She said, “You’re keeping her busy at home. She has no time to bother me anymore. So, I like you already.”

She asked for my bus-ID. When I checked my Omnibus later that night, there was a message from her. A diagram of an oxytocin molecule, the hormone associated with lactation, uterine contraction, cognitive function and the one that catalysed the whole mess—sexual arousal.



Sometimes, I had to spend the night at Dr. Lavender’s house. I didn’t mind, because Lise kept me company. She would come into the guest room. Sometimes, I wouldn’t see her come in. I would just wake up and

see her standing over me with no clothes on. "The door's locked," she would tell me. "Doc's asleep."

Every time I recall this, I just remember the moonlight reflecting off her skin as she stood, scraping her toes against the rug before she crawled under the covers with me.

"Put your arms around me," she'd say. I'd do it, even though her skin was always cold. We seldom said anything to each other. Intercoursing without the proper documents was considered vulgar and an offense, and we respected that. There were alternative ways to experience orgasmic sensation, however, and we engaged in those. After, we would kiss until we were out of breath. Soft, quick pecks rising into a crescendo of long, breathy exchanges that slowed and faltered as she slipped into sleep—her lips still touching mine, still sticky with dried saliva.

I, however, would always had trouble getting back to sleep.

I'd just lie in bed for the remainder of the night hours, listening to the trilling of the mites. They'd congregate along the skylight above me, fluttering from star to star, sometimes forming patterns between them.

The morning would come, the light inching through the ceiling. I'd close my eyes and pretend to be asleep, as Lise shuffled out of bed. She would always try to be

quiet, but I would still always hear her feet alighting on the carpeted floor. Not a thud. Just a pat, but a strong pat. Each footstep, I'd hear.

She had a sunken crescent-shaped dent on her right bottom cheek. It was soft and spongy, right at the apex of the curve. I'd thumb it while we kissed. While she exited my room, her back facing me, I'd turn to watch her. This was the only opportunity to catch a proper glance at it.



It became a habit for Lise—the sneaking, the kissing, the touching. I think she slept her best whenever I was there.

It occurred to me to confess the entire affair to Dr. Lavender. What always prevented me was my inability to ascertain the consequences. The worst case would be

that I would be assigned another overseer—one that didn't smell like honey, one that didn't have an attractive daughter.

When the session was over, Dr. Lavender nudged her nose with her stylus. She kept staring into the distance, a pensive look on her face. She got up from the bench and motioned for me to do the same. She drew in a deep breath and looked a little sad for a moment. "How do you feel about tomorrow?"

"Confident."

"Pass or fail, it'll be over soon. It'll be like it never happened." She held my hand and we walked down the hill together.

After the visit with Dr. Lavender, I went with Ollie and Mom to get Rion. Rion's overseer was Dr. Calliope. Every two weeks, we were scheduled to visit our overseers, but on different days. On that one day, for the first time, we had simultaneous visits.

Rion was uncomfortable knowing I was in the lobby. I knew this because he made requests to Dr. Calliope to have me escorted out of the building—a request that had been a dozen times denied.

Rion and I looked the same—we had the same height, the same dark complexion, the same pointed nose and the same bone structure. Nevertheless, we were so different in tone and expression that none of

our acquaintances had difficulty distinguishing us. Rion was the one known to throw tantrums, just as a scapegrace suckling would. He banged tables, slammed doors and stamped up and down the stairs. He shouted in small rooms just to hear his own rage echo from the walls.

I was more like Ollie, calm and reserved most of the time. She was twenty and had just gotten done with her Charter in Geometric Modelling at the Polytechnic. I remember when I was a young boy, we used to sit on our lawn at night and talk about parametric equations, kinematics, piecewise polynomial and rational methods. She enjoyed drafting prototiles and tessellations in her free time. Attempting to reproduce her creations here would appear as an insult to her talent and faculty.

Truthwise, I understood nothing of which she spoke. At the time, I didn't know the difference between the x- and y-axis, and much less be able to distinguish a spline from a curvature, a dodecagon from a dodecahedron. I just liked hearing her talk. I liked to hear her prattle off the jargon.

She knew I didn't understand, but she liked orally reiterating what she learnt. She explained to me how she had immersed herself in the Charter so much that she couldn't help but see shapes pen themselves into

the night sky. Sometimes we would play a game where I would name an object such as *heartplum* or *shield beetle* and she would use her finger to trace them out for me in the sky, connecting star to star to star.

We grew apart as we got older, especially during the period that she stayed for days at a time at the Polytechnic. Ollie had gradually withdrawn from the family. She stopped making eye contact with me. Each greeting was a strained breath. When I asked her about her new algorithms, she'd just reply, "You wouldn't understand them."

So in the waiting room at Dr. Calliope's, Ollie asked me to draw something for her—a childhood memory about her—I didn't protest. I did it right away.



At dinnertime, I found out that she had asked Rion to do the same thing, but Rion hadn't bothered.

Ollie turned to Rion and asked him, "Why didn't you do yours?"

"It was trivial." He snatched my drawing from Ollie and tried hard to restrain a laugh. He turned to her. "If *this* is what you consider acceptable, I'm glad I didn't waste my time."

Mom glared at him. "Must we do this tonight?"

"Odyssey, do you know what I'd draw for you?" he asked.

"Don't answer that, Odie." Ollie shot a look at me.

"I'd draw nothing," Rion said.

"I don't object to that," Ollie said, "because then Odie wouldn't have anything to remember you by. I see no loss."

Rion squinted. He looked at Mom and was going to reply, but Ollie cut him off, "There is little empathy for that individual who is always missing but seldom missed, Orion."

Rion's fork clinked against his plate. He looked down at his huskgrain and took a breath. I stifled a laugh,

Rion shook his head and excused himself from the table, only muttering to Mom, "I have to study."

When dinner was finished, we went to our rooms. I took out my Omnibus and set my tunebox to *Wind: Calming*. “Are you ready for tomorrow, Odie?” Mom asked me, sliding my door ajar.

“For the Ex. Sess?” I said. “I think so.”

There was a long pause. Then she said, “Can I come in?” and opened the door before I had a chance to answer. I put my Omnibus down and sat cross-legged on the bed. She sat on the edge and rested her hand on my toes. Her face drooped. Her eyes were misty and swollen, as if she had just got finished crying.

I told her, “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Mom strained a smile. “I know. I just want to talk —

”

“What was your topic?” I asked.

“What topic?”

“For your Ex. Sess-16.”

She paused. She moved her hand away from my foot. “I, um, I never wrote it,” she said.

“Never wrote it?”

“I, um, I was a special case.”

“How?”

“I’ll tell you another day. Okay?”

I said, “I didn’t know there were special cases.”

She laughed, then turned to me and rubbed my knee. She said, “Well, we’re here and not the Outsidess, right?”

“I can’t imagine life on the Outsidess.”

“Then don’t. We all work too hard to even foster a dreadsome thought about the Outsidess.”

“I’ll pass that exam,” I told her.

Later that night, I asked Ollie what her topic was for her Ex. Sess-16. She recalled it, word for word:

Write an account of an emaciated man who people referred to as Bapu, but whose name had the initials M.G. In it, you must reference the word “India”.

“What did you write about?” I asked.

She sighed. “I wrote about a man named Maddox Gaunt who starved after being confined by a cave-in.”

“What’s an india?”

She stood silent and shrugged. She twisted her mouth and looked at the floor. I regretted asking. She just said, “You’ll have your chance tomorrow. It’s just a stupid exam. It means nothing. When it’s over, you won’t have to think about it anymore.”

I just stood nodding, biting my lip. I told her, “Pass or fail, it’ll be over soon.”

2
E.P.

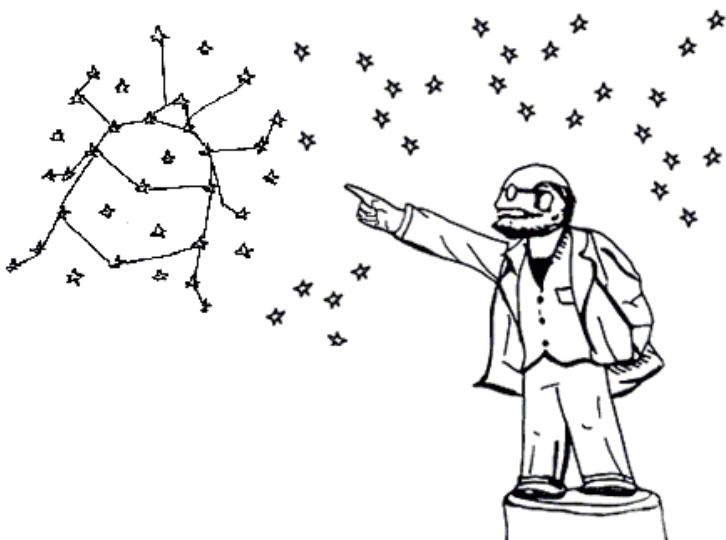
The Ex. Sess-16 was held at noon at the Polytechnic. I was slated to write it at the Evaluation Hall in the Faculty of Light. I had to climb two spiral staircases in order to get there. Dr. Lavender always organized the papers for my evaluations and lesson plans, so she insisted on being there with me that day. She said that she would sit in the lobby and wait until the exam was over.

I observed the other candidates there. I had expected more people to be here, but there were only fourteen candidates. Triplet girls, each one wearing a ribbon of different colour. A boy twiddling his thumbs. A boy and a girl leaning against a far wall, chattering and laughing. A girl clicking her heels against another wall. Two boys and a girl sitting, biting their fingernails. Two girls talking to an adult—probably their overseer—who was taking turns patting them on their backs.

Rion.

And me.

To my left was a huge glass pane where I could see the rest of the Faculty of Light. The lawn and hedges were trimmed. The foliage had been swept up early that morning. A stainless steel statue of a bearded man stood at the centre of a small courtyard, beside a broken drinking fountain. His coat, frozen in a billowing motion, managed to give the statue an impression of composure—a figure unfelled by the constant beating of the wind. He was pointing to the clouds. I couldn't help but picture the statue at night, pointing to the stars.



I wanted to know who the man was. I was all of a sudden worried that the exam question would be about him.

I walked towards the window and noticed there was a small plaque welded onto the pedestal upon which the statue stood. I wanted to hurry downstairs to read it but I knew I didn't have time. I'd do it after the Ex. Sess-16 was finished, before I meet Dr. Lavender in the lobby, I told myself.

Dr. Lavender came to me at the window and caressed my back. "Are you nervous, *Odyssey*?" she asked, her lips curling into a frail smile.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. No reason to hide anything now.

"Whatever happens today," she told me, "you'll still be something notable. It's best that you believe that. You know why? Because it's true."

"Is that why you take so many notes about me? Because I am notable?" I quipped.

She laughed and scratched the back of my neck.

The door opened and the leading supervisor stepped out. Everyone turned to look at her. I took in a deep breath. The rustling sound of Dr. Lavender's palm brushing against the back of my shirt ceased. Everyone fell into a deep, tense hush. The silence that now

loomed over us seemed heavy and dry. The leading supervisor wore a white coat and had her dark hair cut into a bob. She held a tablet against her bosom.

She introduced herself as Supervisor Boon. Dr. Lavender tapped her heels. She seemed much more nervous than I was. She held onto my arm tightly, her nails sinking into my skin. I felt as if she wanted to grab me and haul me down the stairs.

I pulled my arm away. We exchanged a glance before she turned away. Just as she did, I noticed the pitter-patter of rain against the tall windows. A cold mist had fogged up the glass and I had to squint to see the statue. I told Dr. Lavender, "You should go."

Dr. Lavender wiped her eyes and said, "Just make sure to *listen*, okay?"

"I will."

"Really *listen*."

Supervisor Boon requested that we form a queue.

"You should go," I told Dr. Lavender.

She nodded and began walking away. She turned back to look at me before she set foot into the stairwell. Then she ran back to me and put her arms around me, and kissed me on the cheek. She opened her mouth to say something, but then the supervisor rallied us to the room. Dr. Lavender gave me a weak shove and then briskly walked away.

Supervisor Boon made sure we were all seated and comfortable at our stations. She kept stressing about how much quietness was required for the exam, even though she was the only one not being quiet. We were all too nervous to even breathe loudly. She walked up and down the aisles. Her shoes clicked against the cold floor. The room was small, wider than it was long, and the walls were white. I looked up at the ceiling and counted the fluorescent lights.

A great, new surge of anxiety jolted me. All of a sudden, I wondered how Supervisor Boon would look without her shoes, without her white coat and without everything she wore beneath it. Perhaps this was a defense mechanism.

As Supervisor Boon went over the exam rules, I could only picture her naked.

She walked by me, her hip brushing against my wrist. She was still reading the exam rules. I looked at her bottom, forming a neat, steep bow against the back of her white coat. I wondered if she had a crescent-shaped dent on it. A sink of spongy scar tissue I could play with while I was writing the exam.

But I knew I needed to stop thinking these things. One of the invigilators placed a folder on my desk. We were instructed not to open it until asked. Its contents were three sheets of paper. Two blue-lined sheets, each

with a box at the top, which was to be filled in with our candidate numbers. And the question paper. On the question paper was one line, in small black text. It read:

Write an account told from the perspective of a man with the initials E.P., who penned a work called Heart-break Hotel.

My heart began to beat quickly. I looked around the room. Some of the other candidates had already started writing. I hadn't even picked up my stylus. I felt as if there was a hot metal ball in my stomach. As I re-read the sentence over and over, the more my head throbbed as if it was being zapped with a high current. I heard a tiny buzzing sound.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples, trying to conjure up the first words of my account. Sometimes when I closed my eyes, I saw little purple blots and stars. This time, they were swirling around like dissipating foam on steaming milk tea.

Who was this man? Who was E.P.?

The purple blots kept swimming, sinking and rising back up again. I even felt as if I could have reached my hand into my own eyelids and pull the purple dots back up to the surface as they sank. I began to feel dizzy.

Slowly, a face began to form amongst the dots. It was an outline—not distinctly human. I don't know how else to describe it except as a chalk drawing on a smooth, dark wall. It was mouthing words to me. And even though I couldn't hear anything it was saying, I understood.

Dr. Lavender's voice echoed in my head. *Just listen, okay?*

"Odyssey," the face said, "pick up your stylus and place the blunt end in your mouth."

I did as it said. The face disappeared for a few seconds and then re-emerged. It then said to me, "Close your eyes and concentrate on the dots."

Tiny smudges began to appear adjacent to the face as it spoke. They began to coagulate, like white drops of water drifting towards each other.



I don't know how else to describe it. The smudges began to take the form of a man. He had black hair and sleepy eyes. He was dressed in a white suit, the front of it patterned with a bird of three-coloured plumes.

His name came to me. It came to me, as if I had known it since my conception. I knew it as how I knew how to curl my toes.

Or to swallow saliva.

Or to twist a doorknob.

His name was Elvis Presley. E.P. was Elvis Presley.

Elvis Presley was a tunesmith and one of the songs he had written was called *Heartbreak Hotel*. I concentrated on it and my belly pains subsided. The shrill buzzing in my head faded. Even when I had my eyes open, I

could see the chalk face mouthing words. It told me what to write. And so I began my essay:

As I sit here on my throne, I recall past incidents of my life. They feel similar to sharp fragments now, like shards of a broken bathroom mirror that each reflect my withering face. I would risk having my skin sliced open if I were to touch them. I believe I have come to the end and, just as I had sung in one of my best known ballads, I echo, "I walk a lonely street." This was from Heartbreak Hotel, which was written by a high school teacher after she read about a suicide in the newspaper. The line I just echoed was the sole sentence in the suicide letter.

I was supposed to have a brother. I was supposed to be a twin. His name would have been Jesse Presley. However, I was the only one who survived. I wonder sometimes what Jesse would be now. Would he had a good life? Would he be able to eat at his favourite places? My parents didn't. We were poor when I was young.

I wanted to be the greatest tunesmith in the land. I wanted to be a king. This is what they call me now: The King. I am a fortunate King but alas, I am not a happy King. "Elvis Presley," Priscilla used to tell me, "you're no longer the tender man I fell in love with."

I met Priscilla Beaulieu at a party when she was fourteen years old but that didn't stop me from falling in love with

her. Priscilla wasn't supposed to be attending parties at such an early age and her parents became angry with her. They weren't fond of me either. They told her that she couldn't see me again. I promised her parents that she would never be home late again.

Our relationship continued for years but I had many affairs. I loved her but I could not lust for her. After many years, she too began having an affair with a man I knew. His name was Mike Stone. I broke everything in the room when she told me she wanted to leave me to be with him. One night, on stage, I believed Mike Stone had sent four people to kill me. I had a friend named Red West who asked me if I wanted Mike Stone dead. I said, "Aw hell, let's just leave it for now."

With my mother dead and Priscilla gone, I've come to the end of this lonely street. I've walked all I could. Now, I can sit and think about everything. Leave the King to sit on his throne. He's tired and he needs to retire for the night.

Then I drew his face as it appeared in my mind.



As soon as I was done, I raised my hand and an invigilator came to me. She fastened my pages together with a small paperclip and showed me to the exit.

3

S C U P P E R E D

It was still raining outside but I didn't care about getting wet. I hurried through the downpour to the courtyard and stopped at the statue of the man pointing to the clouds.

Even though the effects of weathering had undone some of the polish, and cracked off tiny fragments along the underside of his robe, I could tell the statue was hand-crafted. This was reserved for people of importance. I knelt beside the pedestal and read the engravement on the plaque:

DR. AAMON FAUST

Faculty of Light, Professor Emeritus

Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect
light;

I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

I was soaked. I turned to see a group of Polytechnic students sheltering beneath an awning. They all looked at me as I hustled to the lobby. Dr. Lavender already had her eyes on the door as I barged in. When she stood, her legs trembled. I didn't know why she was so nervous. She wasn't the one writing the dratted Ex. Sess-16.

I told her that I wanted to sit for a little while. She asked a lady for a towel to dry me off with. While she ruffled my hair with the towel, she said, "I often wondered who he was too."

"You studied in this Faculty?"

"For a short while. I can tell you a great deal about the stars. See, stars are so far away that their light takes a long time to reach our eyes. The light could still be arriving to our eyes while the star could long be dead. So, when you look up at the sky at night, you are seeing things that are not there anymore."

"But we can still see them?"

She slung the towel around her shoulder. "I think stars are the only things that cannot be there anymore and yet can still be seen."

"How would you know which ones are still there?"

"I don't think it matters."

Dr. Lavender thumbed my cheek and put her palm on my neck and then my forehead. "How are you?" she asked, her tone serious again.

"I'm good. Nervous for my results."

"You don't feel sick? Headache? Nausea?"

"No. I don't think so. Still nervous from the exam."

Dr. Lavender suggested that I stay the night and return home the following morning. Even though I would've liked to go home, I could tell that it had been a harrowing time for her, and she preferred being with me for the afternoon. She took me out for sorbet that evening. I had the sweetnut flavour. Dr. Lavender didn't eat any. It wasn't often I was treated to sweets.

When we got home, she recommended that I go to bed. I expected Lise to wake me up in the middle of the night. And so she did, but this time, she kept her clothes on. She knelt at my bedside and traced a finger around my kneecap. She whispered, "I think you're in danger."

"Danger?"

"I think you have to go," she said.

"I don't understand."

She sighed and crept closer to me and rested her palm on my calf. I felt her breathing against my wrist. She held my hand and said, "Something bad's going to

happen to you.” She looked away. “I don’t know what, but—”

She stopped herself. Her eyes were puffy and red. “Lise, you’re panicking for no reason,” I said, inching towards her to kiss her cheek.

She backed away, but didn’t let go of my hand. She squeezed my palm in hers and said, “We have to get you out of here *tonight*.”

“What do you mean? Why?” I brushed some of her hair away from her eyes.

“I’m so sorry.” She was crying now, squashing her words together. “I overheard my mother. They’re infected, Odie. That’s what she said. They’re being scrapped, *scuppered*—”

She let go of my hand and pressed her nose against the edge of the bed. “Lise, Lise, Lise,” I said, getting up. “You’re not making any sense. Scuppered?”

“She was talking to somebody on the cam,” she said, her lips still buried against the bedsheets, “She was saying that six of the candidates today were infected. They died after the exam.”

“Infected with what?”

Lise stopped sobbing and raised her head from the bedsheets, leaving behind two soggy cheek-shaped stains. I held onto her. I didn’t want to let go. “We have to go,” she urged. “Odyssey, we have to go.”

“Go where?”

She looked at me, her eyes still hot and red. “Something bad is going to happen. *We have to go.*” She tugged my arm.

I pulled my arm back. “*Go where?*”

“I don’t know. We’ll hide at the Bethel.”

“The Bethel? Lise, you’re not serious—”

“—Just until we figure out what to do.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about, but the desperation in her face made me go along with it. I got ready to change my clothes. I sat up on the bed and unbuttoned my night-shirt.

She pried herself off of me and kneeled upright on the carpet, watching me. Her palm was half-open, extended to me. A small cleft began to form between her drying lips.

“*We have no time. Keep your dratted clothes on, Odie,*” she said.

And just as she spoke, Dr. Lavender opened the door. I expected Lise to turn her head but all she did was shut her eyes and bite her lip.

Dr. Lavender pouted. Her body was stiff. Her mouth twisted, and she pushed her teeth together so hard that I thought they would crack. I had never seen her that way. She kept yelling, “*What did you say?*” At first, I thought she was yelling at me. I fell backwards,

scrambled on the floor and scuttled up to the bed. I hid under the sheets.

Dr. Lavender slapped Lise.

Slap! "You read my files?"

Slap! "What did you tell him!"

Slap! "Tell me!"

Slap! "*Tell me what you told him!*"

My eyes grew hot. I clutched the bedsheet and balled up the ends in my fists. She was shouting so loudly that her voice began to strain with each word. Each pointed syllable flew out as a scratchy hiss. She wasn't giving Lise any chance to explain, any chance to open her mouth.

"Stop hitting her!" I cried out. "Please stop!"

I peeked through the sheets. Lise was on the ground with her head hidden between her curved elbows, her wrists crossed and quivering.

Dr. Lavender's hands were shaking.

It was only then I noticed the sweat beading on her chest, pasting her night-gown against her breasts. I felt astonishing shame, seeing Dr. Lavender in such an inelegant manner. "Please, please, Dr. Lavender, she said nothing!" I said.

Dr. Lavender glared at Lise. She asked her, "What did you hear, Elise?" She was calmer and less scary now.

“Enough for me to question your nature.” Lise was breathing hard, seething with anger.

Dr. Lavender rubbed her palm against her face. She pinched her forehead and exhaled deeply. “Elise, you’re being hasty about what you—”

“—Has *Dr. Lavender* ever told you her first name?” Lise began, in a low growl.

“Elise—”

Lise spoke as she got up from the floor, “She didn’t want to get too attached to you. So she never wanted you calling her by her first name. It’s *Luna*.”

“Elise, stop—”

“*Luna Lavender*. Call her by her *name*.”

“You can’t call me by that name, *Odyssey*.”

I nodded. “*Dr. Lavender*—”

Lise gritted her teeth. “Tell him what’s going to happen.”

Dr. Lavender said nothing. Lise darted out of the bedroom, knocking over a vestibule stand. The vase on it landed on the floor, its splinters strewn across a puddle of water and dying petals. Dr. Lavender chased after her and cut her feet on the floor. I got out from under the sheets. I grabbed the sheet and spread it over the vase fragments.

Lise ran back to the vestibule with several folders in her hand. Dr. Lavender tried to grab them from her, but she began tossing them around the room.

I looked at the papers. Some of them were being soaked in the vase water. Dr. Lavender picked them up before I could. She clutched them against her chest, hiding her protruding nipples. Before she did, I saw my drawing—the one I'd done for the Ex. Sess-16, and then I saw a big red tick next to it.

And all I could say was, "I passed?"

Lise stood with her mouth wide open. "Odie, forget—"

"It is not finalized yet, *Odyssey*," Dr. Lavender said. "But by tomorrow, chances are that, yes, it will be the first year that someone managed to pass the Ex. Sess-16."

"Somebody else passed?" I asked, my breaths short and sporadic.

"We don't know yet," Dr. Lavender said, picking up the last page. "In a few days, we'll be sure." She began slotting the papers back into the folders. She rubbed her forehead again after.

"A few days?" I asked. "Why so long?"

Lise leaned against the wall and her back slid down slowly until her bottom was on the floor. She looked at her ankles and said, "Mother, tell him—"

But Dr. Lavender ignored her. "Finalising takes a while," she said, still breathing hard.

I looked at Lise, trying in vain to get a word in. So, I asked, "Who was infected?"

Dr. Lavender looked at Lise, a weary glint in her eye. She spoke, trying to calm herself down, "Elise has a distorted view of the information she came across."

Lise thumbed her ankle bone and sighed.

Dr. Lavender continued, "She shouldn't be speaking aloud of matters she doesn't know of." She then turned to Lise, narrowing her eyes. "I hope she hasn't ruined this incredible moment for you."

4
CRAZES

Dr. Lavender was given orders from the Board that I stay with her until one of their officials, Dr. Shiver, looked over each candidate's paper. I wanted to call Ol-lie and tell her about the results, but Dr. Lavender urged me not to be hasty.

It was then I wondered why they were unsure about the final tally. What if they reread my essay just to find it riddled with errors? If that was the case, the Ex. Sess-16 would have played itself out as the cruel practical joke everyone said it was. I would become the ultimate punch-line.

To get my mind off things, Dr. Lavender took me back to Ember Hill. She had gotten a book about entomology, but I couldn't concentrate on reading. "Are you worried?" she asked me. "Is it about last night?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"Elise was hasty. She *knows* she is not supposed to interfere with my—"

"—*Scuppered*? What did she mean by that?"

Dr. Lavender rubbed her eyes and pinched the ridge of her nose. “The jargon employed during communication between overseers and the Board are unlike the technical and esoteric terminologies associated with other interfaces. In fact, our agreements and exchanges of ideas are in a code that could be mistaken for insensitive, callous colloquialisms.”

“Why such a complicated system?”

“It’s just the selected code. It’s designed to confuse sneaks and interlopers.”

“Like Lise?”

“Precisely, in this case—just like Elise.”

“What is *scuppered* code for?”

“Only overseers and the Board are privy to that kind of information, *Odyssey*.” She then picked up the entomology book and began flipping through it.

Look ahead, I heard a voice say.

“What?” I said.

Dr. Lavender looked at me. “Pardon me, *Odyssey*?”

It spoke again, *Look to your right. Upper right.*

I did as it said. I first thought it was a mite batting its wings against the wind, but this was farther away. A black speck moved, from beyond the reach of the Burg, along a steady horizontal path.

“What is that?” Dr. Lavender whispered.

I thought it was a broken-off airfoil from a LoftyGen at first. It moved, casting an elliptical shadow over the roads and buildings, emitting a low-frequency hum that got louder and louder. Autos and lorries slowed. People got out of their houses, casting their eyes towards the looming mass. It almost seemed as if Ember Hill was edging closer to the flying object, crawling towards it. I got up, fixing my gaze on it.

I gritted my teeth, almost biting my tongue.

“Odyssey,” Dr. Lavender whimpered. “We have to go. Odyssey, come on.”

I knew what was going to happen before it happened. Perhaps we all did.

I can only explain it like this—The sky ruptured. The sky ruptured and, for a moment, the clouds parted like the bubbling froth of spearmint tea. The sky rent open a circular window of grey. It was like steam or fog being wiped from a glass pane, before quickly being obscured again.

Like a wound being healed.

A bright light shot out from the object.

I didn’t hear the explosion until a few seconds later.

Dr. Lavender sprung up and clinched me against her bosom. She squeezed me tighter as we watched the burning mass plummet, shooting out a trail of fire during its diagonal descent.

People scattered, scampering away from its shadow.

It finally crashed along the western slope of Fresco Hill. From where we stood, the burst of flames looked no bigger than the orange freesias at our feet.

Dr. Lavender kept repeating, “We have to go. Come on, come on.” Dr. Lavender and I raced to her auto and she sped to the crash site. She held my hand as we waded through the harrowsome clamour of voices. I couldn’t see the wreckage yet. There were too many people. Leading up to it was a line of dead, broken trees; some of them still ablaze, smoke spiralling around jagged hummocks of metal.

The wreckage appeared to be some kind of vessel, as big as my room and shaped like a giant pill beetle. It was flipped on its side, exposing a band of lights underneath, some of them broken, like chipped teeth between a clenched jaw.

I looked at Dr. Lavender. She squinted her eyes at the smoke. “What is it?” I asked.

She hesitated and ultimately said nothing.

A hatch hung open in the vessel. I squeezed Dr. Lavender’s hand. And she squeezed mine. People crowded in front of us. No wardens had arrived yet.

A gust of wind blew the hot smoke towards us.

The vessel let out a sharp hiss. The crowd grew quiet, save for a few whispers. Everyone took a step back as a whistle of steam escaped from a vent along its side.

I turned to Dr. Lavender and whispered, “Did it come from the Outsides?” As I finished my question, another gale cut through the crowd and blew the smoke across the other side of the hill.

A crew of wardens soon arrived. They always wore large greatcoats. There were three types of wardens, represented by the colours of their coats.

Wardens in green greatcoats played the role of human searchlights for Trespassers who refused to be *led* into the Exodus. All citizens were obligated provide assistance to any green warden upon request.

Wardens in blue greatcoats were tasked to safeguard entities of interest; people, buildings, research materials and apparatus.

And wardens in red greatcoats were deployed in response to an emergency.

The ones that had arrived wore red greatcoats.

They stretched their arms out, calling for our silence and cooperation. Soon after, some blue wardens arrived and surrounded the vessel. Even from the base of the hill, we could still see what was happening. The red wardens clambered up the toppled metal and slinked into the opened hatch.

A faint banging and some muffled shouts rebounded from the metal and into the still air. Two more red wardens climbed into the hatch while another hung onto the hatch's rim and peered down.

Everyone was quiet now. The rustling of clothing crackled behind me as people leaned in closer just to get a peek of what was in the hatch. I looked again at the line of dead, broken trees. The trail of fire had mostly been extinguished by the wind, but not before cleanly shaving two clean traces along the hill.

The red wardens looked as if they were about to hoist something out of the vessel—something heavy. This was when the blue wardens began to clear the crowd. “Go back to your daily routines. Check the reports later,” they said through their mics.

“What is that thing?” a man asked.

“Tell us what it is!” another demanded.

“Move on, or join the Exodus!” one of the red wardens shouted from the distance.

The crowd dissipated after that.

Lise came in my room later that night—clothes on. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it. “Doc’s asleep,” she said.

“Lise, I don’t think—”

“We should go in the sitting room.”

“Won’t we get in trouble?”

She shook her head. I followed her to the sitting room. She sat, cross-legged on the settee. She held her palm up and stopped me from sitting next to her, so I sat on a stool facing her. Her eyes lingered constantly on the stairs behind me. She said, “I caused a panic last night. For that, I apologise. I should have—”

“Dr. Lavender explained the situation to me already.”

She finally looked at me. “She did?”

I shrugged. “You misinterpreted what you read.”

She clicked her tongue and sighed. “I know what I read.”

“Callous colloquialisms.”

“Is that what she said?” I could hear the exasperation building in her tone.

I shrugged. “I believe it. To me, it makes sense.”

She bit her lower lip and gave me a coy smile. She looked calmer all of a sudden. “So, you and Doc went to see the wreckage, huh?”

“We were there when it crashed.”

“They closed the area off before I could see it. I heard there were people inside. They’re calling them the *Skyfolk*. There were nine of them.”

“How do you know this?”

“That’s what the wardens are saying. When they hoisted the *Skyfolk* out of the vessel, some of them

were missing limbs. One of them was missing his head. They collected all the body parts and zipped them up in bags.”

“Are you sure they said that?”

“It’s what I heard. But I don’t know. I want to check it out. Do you want to come with me?”

“When?”

She leaned forward. “Now.”

I winced. “I thought you said they closed the area off?”

“I know a way to see it.”

“Is it safe?”

“I’m not staying long.” She got up from the couch. “I want to see it before it’s gone. You know by morning it will be like nothing happened, right?”

“Shouldn’t we tell Dr. Lavender about this?”

She shook her head. “Are you coming, or not?”

Lise started Dr. Lavender’s auto and I sat in the passenger seat. We drove to Fresco Hill and she parked near a dank alleyway, between two vacant buildings. Notices had been stamped on both their doors in bright, bold letters: INSECURE STRUCTURE. The row of bioluminescent treelamps ended here, as did the road. The road itself led to the row of barricades along the base of the hill. Clusters of blue wardens mulled behind them.

Lise beckoned me to follow her. I trailed behind her as she ran into the alleyway and hopped on top of an old wooden crate. She propped herself up to a rusted metal ladder alongside a building, and then pulled me up.

Once we were got to the top of the building, we sat with our backs to a parapet. Chips of light blue paint stuck to our elbows. I ran my fingers along the frayed grooves of an old coil of rope that hung along the parapet. There was a metal door a few steps away from us.

Lise held my hand. We turned around and looked over to a section of the hill that was illuminated by a duo of small floodlights, erected on temporary metallic posts. At the centerpiece was the wreckage. Its hatch was still open.

A red warden, donning a flame-retardant anorak over his greatcoat, strapped a flamethrower to his back. A steady stream of fire spouted from its nozzle and into the wreckage's open hatch. Another red warden spewed the flame along the perimeter of the wreckage, heating its shell until it glowed white.

Beyond the fires and the lights was darkness.

The yellow streaks of light imprinted its soft, diffused glow on Lise's face, and reflected off her eyes. Her lips parted, curling into a smile. At that moment,

she looked just like her mother. Her body shook as she restrained a chuckle.

“Where do you think it came from?” she asked.

“It came from the clouds. Ripped a hole straight through the sky.”

“Do you think it came from the Outsides?”

“There’s nothing out there.” I shook my head.
“Nothing like that.”

Her eyes widened. She spoke as if in a daze, “You know what I heard? That there are animals out there bigger than our houses. Can you believe that? There might be more out there than we think.” She then turned to me and asked, “You ever think it’s better out there?”

“Out where?”

She looked at me. “The Outsides.” Then, before I could respond, she said, “Can’t be worse than in here. Sometimes, I sit on the hills and watch the lorries go, rattling back and forth the roads. Do you watch them too?”

I nodded.

She took a deep breath and looked at the lights on the hill. “Sometimes I wish I could be in one of them when they drive past the gates.”

“Are you crazy? There’s nothing out there, though. Just stretches of dying land.”

She laughed. “Crazy? Call me a dratted Trespasser then.” She shook her head, locking her gaze on the lights still. “I’ve studied polymer architecture for years now. Their application, their synthesis and their properties—viscoelasticity, bonding, phase behaviour and, most of all, their endurance. Polymers are very, very strong. But over time—due to shifts in pressure, temperature and time—they get these lines. Small fissures. You’ve noticed them, I’m sure.”

“Cracks?”

She shook her head. “They aren’t cracks. You can see them but you can’t feel them. They just look like cracks. The polymer can still withstand the same load. There isn’t much real deformation. The defects are just visual, amplified by the light. They’re just the *illusion* of cracks. Do you know what they’re called?”

I shrugged.

“Crazes. And if I’m crazy, Odie, that’s just the light playing tricks on you. That’s just the illusion of cracks.” She bent down and picked up a rock, about half the size of her fist. She then got up. “I’m otherwise in total control of my faculties.”

She spun and hurled the rock at a cluster of wardens.

When I turned to look at her, she had already slid down the ladder.

Kevin Jared Hosein

I heard the auto start and she was gone, leaving me cornered as a crew of blue wardens rushed to scale the building, shouting instructions and threats at me.

I had nowhere to go. I had no choice but to obey.
I lied, belly down, and waited for them.

5

THE GRAND LOGRO
OF TOM SCULLION

They threw me into the holding cage at the nearest Warden District. They asked me who my accomplice was, why I was trespassing, and what I had seen. The questions kept coming, but I had no answers.

I sat at the edge of the bench against the wall and tried to ignore the other man in there. He was persistent in getting my attention but I pretended not to hear him. He kept saying, “Junior, you busy? Junior, junior.”

The light bulb above us was situated next to a wall vent. The night wind kept blowing through, swaying it left and right. I had heard that sometimes they’d put a tiny assortment of bells near the vent called a *tinkerbell*, which would ring every time the wind blew so whoever was in the holding cage would be deprived of sleep. However, they reserved the tinkerbell for only serious offenders. There was none that night.

I finally decided to respond to the man. I figured that I could just ignore him mid-conversation if the topic got unpleasant. “What do you want?” I asked him, forcing myself to sound brash.

He scurried up to the bench and sat next to me. He sat so close to me that I felt his breath against my earlobe when he spoke. “What’s your name? What’s your name, junior? I’ll tell you mine. I’m Tom Scullion.” The pitch of his voice faltered. Only when I turned to look at him, I got a proper look at his clothes. His trousers were in tatters and his jacket was caked with mud.

“I don’t want to tell you my name.”

“Have it your way,” he said, “but I would’ve liked to call you something other than *junior*. Why’re you in here, junior?”

“Trespassing,” I said.

“You’re a Trespasser?”

I hesitated, but finally said, “No. I overstepped my boundaries.”

“What boundaries?”

“The crash site.”

“*The Skyfolk*? You were there?”

I didn’t reply.

He scratched his chin. He then asked, “Why were you there?”

It was only then I realized he looked familiar. I'd seen him before, I was certain. But I wasn't sure where. Maybe he was a face in the crowd gathered at Fresco Hill.

I responded, "Why not?"

He laughed. "Nine dead," he said. "Where do you think those nine people came from?"

"They were inside the comet."

"They were, yes. But *where* did the comet come from, I wonder? Hmm?"

I sat upright. "We'll hear the reports in the morning."

He shook his head. "Don't listen to the reports. They're going to say that it was a failed experiment in aerodynamics from the Faculty of Air. It was perhaps a hovering cargo carrier, they'll say. Or perhaps a floating land surveillance mechanism. I don't know. I can only surmise, yep."

"So, what was it then?"

"We don't know yet."

"Where did it come from?"

"We don't know yet."

"What *do* you know?"

"The comet did not mean to crash into Fresco Hill. It was meant to go somewhere else."

I clicked my tongue and rolled my eyes. “You don’t say?”

“I’m building up to something here, can’t you see?” He slapped my knee, causing me to jerk backward. “I know where it was supposed to go.”

“And where’s that?”

He made a sucking sound against his teeth. “You won’t believe me.” He bent over to scratch his leg. “I don’t think they wanted to go *anywhere* that people would be.”

I repeated, “And *where’s* that?”

He looked at me. His eyes widened and he stopped scratching his leg. He sat upright, asking me, “You ever been to the Mire Grounds, junior?”

“No.”

“Not many people go to the Mire Grounds. Just trees with big roots and scaly hoppers and flies. Just slimes and swamp water and swamp gas. It’s a hub for biogas. But it’s *filthy* in there. As soon as you step foot in there, your boots become encrusted with mud. There’s a woman who chose to live in the Mire Grounds, though. Somalia Castor. She ran a boat tour—”

I laughed and shook my head. “Are you saying the Skyfolk were interested in a boat tour, Mr. Scullion?”

He replied, ignoring my tone of mockery, “I don’t think anybody has ever been interested in a boat tour in the Mire Grounds. There’s nothing there. As I said, who would pay to ride around in a boat to see slime and inhale swamp gas? That Somalia Castor had muscular arms, though, from paddling that boat every day.”

“Paddling where?”

“No one wanted the boat tour. That doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t still go in the boat with Somalia Castor.”

“Why would they then?”

“She was as filthy as the Mire Grounds itself, perhaps birthed right from the slime and suckled from the teats of the marsh ewes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Her boat tour package started off as just a boat tour. But when she noticed nobody wanted a boat tour, she decided to offer another service to the package.” He paused. “It is apropos that it would take place in a location as polluted and grubby as the Mire Grounds.”

“What service?”

He sighed. “You don’t a dratted clue about what I’m talking about, do you?”

I pursed my lips.

He then said, “Men wouldn’t swoop down from the sky just to see Somalia Castor. She wasn’t *that* good.”

He then quickly admitted, "I'm a red warden. I had to report to the crash site."

I said, "I don't believe you. Where's your great-coat?"

"It's been destroyed," he said.

"How?"

"We had to kill the larvae. The eggs."

"Eggs?"

"See, that comet brought something else with it. Nine dead, yes, but thousands more alive. Eggs, thousands of eggs, some already hatched into larvae."

"What kind of larvae?"

"Ones that I've never seen before. It's not a recorded species. There was a sealed container attached underneath. There were two small panels that could open. When we pried them out, we found the larvae. Thousands and thousands of larvae. When we searched further, we found a note and a picture."

"What did the note say say?"

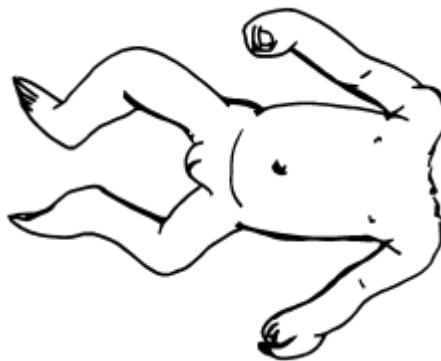
He said, "*A dirus.*"

I asked, "A what?"

He shrugged. "None of us are sure either."

"How do you know it was for Somalia Castor?"

"The picture." He handed me a copy of it.



I swallowed hard as I studied it. "What is it?"
"Proof that it's related to her. And proof for motive."

My voice cracked. "How is it proof? Motive for what?"

He snatched the picture from me and said, "Some wardens were told to haul the container to one of the biosafety labs at the outskirts. Then we were told to leave our greatcoats."

"Why?" I said.

"To torch them."

"To get the eggs off," I said.

"To get the eggs off," he repeated.

I bit my fingernails. "Somalia Castor should be brought in and questioned then."

He swallowed hard. "That, friend, is now outside the realm of possibility."

“Why?”

“Because I killed her this evening.” He faced the wall and placed his palms against the grime. He rubbed the crown of his head against the bricks and I could see his mouth twist into a smirk.

I paused, giving him a look of disbelief. “No, you didn’t.”

He cocked his head. “You don’t believe me?”

“There’s no tinkerbell above us.”

He shook his head and laughed. “They do that only for those who are *suspected* of an offense. It rings all night long, startling them so they can’t sleep. Making their minds chaotic. Making them *want* to tell the truth to get out of the cage.”

“So?”

“I am not a suspect. I admitted it to the wardens just as I’ve admitted it to you. I’ve killed, junior. No clanking of bells is necessary for me. I am at ease. I am allowed to sleep and, by tomorrow, I’ll likely never see the Burg again.” He sat down, ruffled his hair and added, “They’ll never believe me, but I am also a deliverer. A silent, unsung deliverer.”

My eyebrows raised. “How are you a deliverer?”

He explained. He’d made his way to the Mire Grounds that evening, right after he was ordered to burn his uniform. He put on his boots, thick trousers

and jacket. He picked up his stun baton—the standard model issued to all wardens.

He trudged through the muddy ground until he arrived at the bayou. On the bayou, wooden bridges had been erected to connect the muddy, shrub-covered hammocks. *Castor's Boat Tours* was only a five-minute trek. It was a round hut made out of stout-stem bark fastened together with double-braided ropes and wire mesh. At the back of the hut was a small dugout pirogue secured to a jetty that was only accessible through the hut's back door.

Somalia Castor was the sole employee of Castor's Boat Tours. She did not dress as other women we knew, he said. He described her bizarre apparel. That day, she was wearing a yellow dress patterned with black mandalas, a pair of glass hoop earrings, a spiral metal coil along her neck, and a bright red headband.

I tried to picture this quaint-sounding woman.



He said, “She was different—just looked different. It makes sense if you actually knew who she was, but not many people did. No man here ever saw a woman dress in that manner. They wanted to see it themselves. That sold *many* boat rides.”

Somalia lived alone, without electricity or telecommunications. She had a barrel of lantern oil she kept alongside a table littered with candles and incense. She spent her time in her hut, lost in her thoughts, painting pictures of strange houses shaped like trees. But this time, she was sitting at her doorstep. “As if she were expecting a delivery,” he said.

He paid her for a boat ride. She told him she was tired and was hesitant, but reconsidered after he offered to double the payment. Truthwise, she probably

just wanted to get rid of him as fast as she could, he claimed. She led him to the jetty. They got on the boat and she untied the rope.

As she paddled the boat along the mire, he told me he could've seen the lights from the Burg through the thickets, even though it was so far away. He saw them as an unbroken horizontal line of white and yellow along the flat landscape. He said that they could have been ghostlights, though—tiny spontaneous combustions of swamp gas that extinguished with the slightest breeze.

He sat on a seat near the rudder. She stood up on the boat, one foot planted on the bottom and the other propped on the yoke, with her dress sleeves rolled up. She rowed with graceful, fluid arm movements, he described. A lantern dangled from the keel, and another from the front hull.

The bayou became slimmer as they rowed. There was a desolate spot where she stopped and hitched the boat to a piece of stout-stem bark jutting out from the bank. She tied a firm knot and they sat together, side by side, as the boat bobbed on the thick swamp water. Two long ferns brushed against the starboard, making a swooshing sound as the boat moved.

He looked at her and asked, “So, you heard about the crash?”

She looked off in the distance and let out a sigh. She rubbed her forehead. She leaned against him and put her head on his shoulder. A desperate move to distract him, he claimed.

He repeated the question.

She nodded and muttered, “Ten people dead.”

“Ten?” he asked.

“So it goes,” she said.

She then pulled her dress over her head, climbed onto his lap and straddled him. Serpentine stripes of dark purple ink ran down the sides of her torso with large complex mandalas around her breasts. He grabbed onto her hips and planted kisses on his neck. He tightened his grip on her flesh, sinking his nails into it.

“Ten?” he muttered again.

She shushed him. A twisted, shrunken reflection of his quivering lips glimmered on the metal coil around her neck.

“Ten?”

She looked at him. “What’s the matter?”

“We only found nine.”

Upon realising her blunder, her eyes widened. She swung her arm and her fist connected against his temple. In a quick reflex, he propped his stun baton right against her bare chest.

As the electricity surged through her body, she let out a sharp wheeze and shoved him hard. She punched him, hitting him in his eye.

He clapped his hands against his eye and yelled out. Then she hit him again, sending him right overboard. "She had strong arms," he reminded me.

The waters at the Mire Grounds were not meant for swimming. They were inhabited by snapperfish. The bayou itself was the snapperfish's supper plate. By the time he climbed back into the boat, they had chomped at his feet, leaving bloody gashes along his ankles, ripping the base of his trousers.

She fell to her knees, grabbing her chest and struggling to breathe. It was then, with a quick heel to her ribs, that she toppled over the edge of the boat. The fish all scrambled to her body, nipping away chunks of flesh and bone, ruffling clouds of dust in the turbid water. He dropped to his knees and grabbed the boat's port edge with a couple of shaky fingers, watching the snapperfish nip her eyes from their orbits and suck the meat right form her bones, leaving behind only glass, cloth and metal.



I just listened to his account, picturing the details, trying not to comment on any of it. What bothered me the most was that it was an account of a killing told as if it were a heroish feat, a righteous act that would ripple into the good fortunes and futures of others—a *grand logro*.

From what I'd gathered, I'd known a grand logro to be a selfless act of benevolence. The best deed on the worst of days. Jumping into an electrical generator while it is malfunctioning; innoculating one's self with an unknown vaccine; pushing a child out of the way of an oncoming auto.

But Tom Scullion had it mixed up. He didn't do a single good thing. He committed a grave offense on a gravely bad day and was calling it a grand logro.

The bayou's route made a complete circle to return to Castor's Boat Tours. There was no other route. He had no choice but to sit on the boat and return to the hut. And when he did, he saw that another man was waiting at the steps, impatiently waving at the glow of the lanterns as the boat was coming in. "The bones followed me all the dратted way back too," Tom said.

As he paddled the boat nearer and nearer to the hut, he wondered how he was going to explain the situation to this man. He could only see his silhouette because it was so dark, and nobody was there to pour the oil in the lanterns at the shop.

Somalia's yellow dress had drifted ahead of the boat and was already lodged against a bank near the hut. As the boat approached the jetty, Tom hopped onto it. He went back into the hut. As he was about to leave, he noticed something on the table. "Pictures," he told me. "A baby. Mutilated. Had the arms and legs exchanged, sewn together. Headless baby with its own face buried into its own crotch. She'd kept the pictures. She'd kept them all."

"Kept them all? Where did she get them?"

He ignored my question. He pocketed the pictures and exited the hut. Tom bowed his head at the man and hurried past him. He couldn't afford to be seen.

"Where is she?" the man asked him. He raised his voice again, "*Where is she?*"

Tom picked up his pace, but the man took chase after him. The man put his arm on Tom's shoulder and spun him around. He had seen Tom's face. Tom, in a noiseless panic, raised the stun baton against the man's neck. He told him, "Just hold still." It bewildered Tom how receptive the man was to his command.

"He died almost straightaway," he said.

He then dragged the body into the hut and covered the man's face with the mud-caked yellow dress.

"I took the pictures to the Warden District and told them what I did," he said. "I am a murderer, but I am also a red warden. I killed an innocent man and I deserve to be punished for that."

He said the words as if he were just repeating what someone else had said to him. But then he quickly shifted away from his sombre tone. "Don't you get it, though? There was a tenth person aboard that vessel. But only nine bodies. So, where did number ten go?"

"Maybe she made a mistake."

"I don't believe that, junior. By the time the wardens got to Fresco Hill, the hatch was already open. I first suggested that something opened it from the inside and escaped. The others keep claiming that it was due to the sheer impact. They're wrong."

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“Why do they have all these greatcoats running around then, hmm? They’re looking for the tenth.” He took a deep breath. “They won’t admit it. They don’t want to cause a panic.”

I said nothing.

Then he asked, “So, junior, you busy? Now that you’ve heard everything, could you do me a favour?”

I shook my head. “I have my own issues.”

He put his palm on my shoulder. I flinched and stepped back. He said, “You have to tell someone what I told you. You have to tell someone who can get things done. Who do you know can get things done?”

“Dr. Lavender.”

“Is this *Dr. Lavender* a warden?”

“No.”

“Tell Dr. Lavender what happened.”

At that same time, I heard her voice. I thought I was imagining it at first but then I heard the door open. She was arguing, “You put *my* student—a junior—in there with a man who murdered two people? Do I have to write you up? I want the names of the two wardens who brought him in!”

“I’m sorry, doctor,” the warden beside her was saying.

“You’ll be sorry if my student isn’t out of that cage now.”

The warden cranked the lever to lower the holding cage.

The holding cage slowly descended. Dr. Lavender looked up at me as it did. The chain links supporting the holding cage made a rusty clinking sound. Tom and I had to press our feet down on the floor to stabilize ourselves as the cage rattled from side to side. Before the holding cage touched the ground, Tom said to me, “You’re perhaps the last person I’ll ever talk to. I’m happy I met you.”

I didn’t say anything. I just couldn’t wait to leave.

The warden fiddled with the keys and opened the holding cage door. Dr. Lavender grabbed my hand. I expected her to ask me questions about how I felt being in there, but I was instead met with bitter silence.

We got into her auto and she strapped me into the passenger seat. As she began to drive, I began to apologise. “I’m sorry I—”

“An official from the Board is coming to see you tomorrow,” she cut me off. “She knows about tonight. So, don’t lie to her.”

“Am I in trouble with—”

“Don’t you dare lie to that woman, Odyssey.”

6

THE THING WITH FEATHERS

The official from the Board arrived at noon and introduced herself as Dr. Shiver. A technician accompanied her. They both wore bleached-white lab coats. Dr. Lavender served them sweetnut tea and we all convened in the sitting room. The technician set up a small camera, wedged on the table by a small iron pinch clamp. The feed from the signal was being sent to a palm-sized monitor that he kept in his grasp.

I sat opposite to Dr. Shiver and Dr. Lavender sat close to me. She set a tablet down next to her tea. She had short hair and a pointy nose that twitched sometimes when she breathed. She had a wide mouth and when she spoke, I could see all her teeth.

“Is the feed clear?” she asked the technician.

He nodded.

“Keep your eye on the camera,” she told me. Then she asked, “What is your name?” Her voice was smoother than Dr. Lavender’s.

“My name is Odyssey Dove.”

“And do you go by any byname?”

“Odie.”

She scribbled in her tablet. “Who refers to you as Odie the most in your house? And who refers to you as Odie the least?”

“My mother calls me Odie the most. My brother, Rion, never calls me by name. Any name.”

She scribbled again. Before she was finished, she said, “Tell me more about your brother, Orion.”

This was when I knew she already knew the answers to the questions she was asking me. Why would an official from the board squander time on redundancy? I kept my eye on the aperture of the camera and tried not to preoccupy myself with any veiled purpose behind the questions.

I said, “We are twins.”

“What does he think about you?”

I shrugged. “I am nobody to him—a pest—perpetual unwelcome visitor.”

“Is there anything in particular your brother does that you do not like?”

“When I was little, he used to come into my room and pull my hair. Also, he cut my hair with a knife while I was asleep.”

“Why did he do this?”

“So we would look different.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, scribbling. She looked at me and said, “Tell me what other people think of you.”

“I am not sure what other people think of me.”

“Do you wish you received a communal education?”

“I’ve enjoyed working with Dr. Lavender.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“No, I do not wish that.”

“Mm-hmm.” She scribbled. “Do you remember any of the overseers you spoke to before Dr. Lavender?”

“Dr. Calliope, Dr. Florentine and Dr. Sand.”

“How many sessions did you have with each one?”

“One each.”

She turned to the technician, who pursed his lips and gave her a small nod. “Mm-hmm.” She scratched her head with her stylus. Then she looked me right in the eyes and said, “Tell me about the man you came to know as Tom Scullion.”

I hesitated. I looked at the technician and then the camera pointed at me. “Tom Scullion,” I said, “was a man I met and spoke to last night.”

“Under what circumstances?”

“We were in a holding cage together.”

She prodded the stylus against her chin. She asked, “Tell me why you were put in the holding cage.”

I said, “Overstepping my boundaries—to the crash site.”

“One of the wardens noted that you assaulted them.”

I looked at Dr. Lavender. I swallowed hard. I said, “I threw a rock at them.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I wanted to distract them.”

“Distract them? Were you aware that this is an offense?”

I bowed my head. “I was foolish.”

Dr. Shiver flashed a smile. “Ironic, considering the circumstances of me being here. My concern right now is neither your action nor the consequence of that action. What concerns me is the chance encounter that occurred during that consequence. Tell me, Odyssey, why was Tom Scullion put in the holding cage?”

“He killed two people.”

“Did he speak to you about this in detail?”

“Yes.”

“The murdered people—were their names Somalia Castor and Timor Litz?

“I don't know.”

Dr. Shiver raised her eyebrows. She turned to the technician. He shook his head slowly. “Did Tom Scullion not mention these names to you?” she asked, leaning forward.

“I know he murdered a man who came for the boat tour. I don't know if his name was Timor Litz or not.”

“Mm-hmm.” She scribbled. “Did Tom Scullion tell you his occupation before they put him in the cage?”

“He said he was a red warden.”

“Did he mention anything about earlier that evening?”

“He said he was at Fresco Hill when the comet crashed. He was part of the rescue crew.”

“Did he tell you what he saw in the crashed vessel?”

“Yes.”

“What did he see?”

“Nine dead bodies.”

“What else?”

“He said that there was a container filled with eggs and mites that had to be taken to a biosafety lab.”

“Were the murders related to these eggs and mites?”

“He said he thought they were meant to be delivered to Somalia Castor.”

"Did he say why he thought this?"

"He showed me a picture."

She narrowed her eyes. "A picture of what?"

I looked at the camera. "A decapitated baby."

She paused. "What do you know of this picture?"

"That Somalia Castor's home had more of them."

"Why did Tom Scullion kill Somalia Castor?"

"He never elaborated on it."

She went back to writing. "Why did he kill Timor Litz?"

"I don't know who that is. You didn't confirm if he was the other man or not."

"Yes, he is."

I shrugged. "Tom Scullion's motives were unclear. He must have panicked. He didn't want to be identified."

Dr. Shiver edged her seat closer to mine. It made a sharp screeching sound. "While you were with him, did you think Tom Scullion would kill you?"

"No."

She asked, "Why?"

I told her, "Because I have no connection to the mites."

"Neither did Timor Litz."

"That's different. He panicked. Maybe it was his panic twin."

“Panic twin?”

Ollie had come up with the concept of a panic twin. When someone panicked, she'd told me, they'd do things that was outside the norm. Using this logic, it could be said that everyone had a *panic twin* assembled within their muscles and neurones. Of course, she'd invented this concept as a practical joke when I was a little boy. She made me believe our mother thought it was a viable excuse. It never worked, but the silly notion had amused me so much that it stuck with me ever since.

I did, however, believe people weren't really themselves when they panicked—that there was a panic twin, in the vaguest sense, residing within the synapses and neurotransmitters along the spinal cord. It knew how to render the body powerless to a series of electrical impulses and somatic reflex arcs—all while the rest of the brain observed in utter helplessness and shock.

“There is no such thing as a panic twin, *Odyssey*,” Dr. Lavender said. “If someone panics and commits an offense, the blame cannot be placed on—”

Dr. Shiver lifted her palm to Dr. Lavender and stopped her from continuing. Dr. Lavender pursed her lips.

We all have panic twins. I have one. Dr. Lavender had one.

Tom Scullion had one.

“Why didn’t you believe this panic twin would emerge from Tom Scullion when you were around?”

“I think the more people talk, the less they panic. And Tom Scullion was talking non-stop.”

“Mm-hmm?”

“It’s the moments of silence in between that can be the worst.”

Dr. Shiver nodded. “Are you nervous now?”

“Yes,” I replied. Dr. Lavender was shaking her head.

Dr. Shiver continued, “Did Tom Scullion tell you anything strange?”

“Tom Scullion told me many strange things. He talked for a long time, for almost the entire time I was in the cage.”

Dr. Shiver scribbled. She asked, “Do you believe everything Tom Scullion told you to be truth?”

“I’d wondered if Tom Scullion, himself, believed everything *he* said to be truth.”

Dr. Shiver smiled. She turned to Dr. Lavender and told her, “I like this boy.” She turned back to me and said, “Tom Scullion was not a well person, Odyssey. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes.” Then I asked, “Why are you using the past tense?”

“Tom Scullion is dead.” At the moment she said that, the only thing I could think of was how interesting it was that when one spoke of someone who was dead, one felt inclined to use the present tense to say that they are dead, but the past tense to say something else about them. It reminded me of the permanence of death. A dead person has no personality or characteristics. A dead person can neither be well nor unwell. They can neither be happy nor sad. They can only be dead, and will be dead for all of the future.

“How did he die?” I asked.

Dr. Shiver coughed. She said, “Tom—”

Dr. Lavender interrupted, “Well, sometimes when people are unwell and realize that they can no longer be well, they choose to be—”

“Dead,” I said, “because the dead can neither be well nor unwell. They can neither be happy nor sad.”

Dr. Shiver bit the tip of her stylus and said, “Yes. That is right. Tom Scullion was not well. Because of this, Tom Scullion may have said many things that might have been untrue or exaggerated. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe that Tom Scullion exaggerated some of the things he said?”

“It’s likely.”

Dr. Shiver smiled. “I’m going to ask you a few questions. They will seem strange at first—well, they are all strange. So, you have to bear with me. Concentrate before you answer.”

“Is this a test?”

She shook her head. “It’s just a series of questions—non-sequiturs, if I may—that we use as a limbic evaluation.”

Dr. Lavender added, “It’s just designed to see what comes to mind. It’s best to close your eyes and form them into images before you speak them aloud.”

Dr. Shiver asked, “Are you ready?”

“I don’t understand how—”

Then she began, “A man, draped in white, sits crosslegged in the middle of the street. People are watching him. Beside him is a white flask. Why are they watching him?”

I looked at Dr. Lavender. She placed her hand on the back of my neck and told me, “Close your eyes. Just say what comes to mind.”

I closed my eyes. Then, the image formed. Chalk outlines, then texture. Then colour. “He’s on fire,” I said, swallowing hard. “The man is burning. He set himself on fire.”

“Are you ready for the next question?” Dr. Shiver asked.

“Did I get it correct?”

“There is no right answer, Odyssey. It isn’t a test.”

Dr. Lavender said, “Just take your time.”

Dr. Shiver asked the second question, “There’s a man who calls himself Double-Oh-Seven, who likes a particular drink called a *martini*. But he likes it a specific way. Which way is that?”

“I’ve never heard of a martini.”

She replied abruptly, “Neither have I.”

I concentrated. A flurry of voices spoke, but there was one phrase that was clearer than the others. Looping itself over and over. “Shaken, not stirred,” I said.

Dr. Shiver eyed the technician. He nodded at her. She then turned back to me and asked, “What is the thing with feathers?”

I froze for a moment. “Dr. Shiver, I—”

She cut me off, speaking quickly, “What is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all?” She then slid me her tablet and stylus. “Write it.”

I wrote on the tablet, “HOPE.”

She examined it. Every curve of each letter. She handed me back the page. “Write it again.”

And I wrote it again.

She took the page and then told me, “Finish this line. *Instant her circling wand the goddess waves...*”

I took a deep breath. “*To hogs... transforms them... and the sty... receives.*”

She said, “*No more was seen the human form divine.*”

“*Head, face, and members... bristle into... swine.*”

She looked at the technician again, who nodded again, keeping his eye on the feed. She smiled at me. “That’s it,” she said, putting her tablet down. “How do you feel?”

I opened my eyes. I saw Lise lingering behind the wall of the vestibule. “I don’t understand what any of it means,” I said.

“Do you have a headache? Dizziness? Nausea?”

“No. But I’m confused. Was I correct? The words came to my mind. I don’t—”

Dr. Shiver cut me off, “It was just a survey, Odyssey. It’s just for the records.”

“So, I wasn’t correct?”

She said, “Congratulations on being the first person to pass the Ex. Sess-16, Odyssey.”

I didn’t feel excited. I was still too confused. I just managed to stammer out a half-hearted, “T-Thank you.”

I looked at Dr. Lavender. She nodded at me. Dr. Lavender steeped her fingers and kept her eyes on the cups of tea, still full, getting cold. She looked like she

was trying to find the right words to say. But she never did.

"I think we're done here," Dr. Shiver told the technician. He began dismantling the camera. She then turned to me, "What do you like to eat, Odyssey?"

"Is this still the survey?"

She smiled. "No."

"I like sorbet."

"Do you want to go to the sorbet shop?"

"I had sorbet just a few days ago."

"Mother, you're not letting them do this, are you?"

Lise said, emerging from the corner of the doorway.

We all turned to her. She stood, shaky and weary, devoid of the confidence I always knew her to possess. She balled up her fists, rubbing her nails against the insides of her palms.

Dr. Shiver muttered, "Is there some kind of problem here, Dr. Lavender?"

Dr. Lavender raised her chin. She eyed Lise. She spoke in a cold, careful pace, "My daughter's hastiness gets the better of her on some days."

Lise inched towards us. She kept her eyes on me. "Don't go with them." Her voice cracked.

Dr. Lavender tapped her feet, her legs jittering. She said to Dr. Shiver, "I'll take care of it." She got up and went over to Lise and grabbed her arm.

Lise shoved her away, and she almost tripped over a footstool.

Dr. Shiver rubbed the bottom of her palm against her forehead and sighed. She turned to the technician and tipped her chin at Lise. The technician nodded and, without question, went over to Lise.

He said to her, "Stay there." His tone was gruff, but I could tell that he wasn't a gruff person.

"Elise, don't be foolish," Dr. Lavender said.

Lise gritted her teeth and tapped her fingers over her knuckles, tracing an arc along the floor with her foot. "Don't move!" the technician grunted.

Lise grabbed the teacup and smashed it against his head.

I jumped out of the chair, knocking over the other cup of tea. Dr. Shiver's bit her lip, her eyes widening.

Lise shouted, "Go, *Odyssey!* Run!"

I looked at Dr. Lavender, whose lips were quivering, her skin flushed. She stood, stiff. She raised a trembling finger to me and pointed outside, mouthing, "Go."

And I didn't even think about it. I bolted out of the house and ran into the street. I didn't even look back to see if anyone was chasing me. Or if Lise was there. I didn't look back until I came to the hill where the Bethel stood.

When I got to the top of the hill, I tripped. I fell face-first. I looked up at the Bethel, upon a rise along a long sandy trail that swerved up the hill. Beside it was a rustling backwood. The Bethel was a long abandoned, dilapidated edifice, tall and shadowy. Broken lanterns still dangled from the entrance, their oil burnt out years ago. All that was left behind was the dregs of callous soot. The pillars were crumbling, cracked like the snapped bones of a giantsman.

The windows had seemed to have not only been long shattered but had seemed to dissolve into the night air. Or maybe they had been pilfered. Either way, no trace of glass was found anywhere near the openings that were now rectangular holes in the walls. Two tattered flags still whipped from the spires. The third flag had since long blown away, leaving one vulgar spire disrobed.

No one knew how old the Bethel was, or what it was used for. There had been markings on it, long faded. Despite that, the fragments of lettering left behind was engraved with care, so they must have meant something to somebody at some point in time.

Inside the Bethel was dark, and even though there were better hiding places there, I didn't want to stay in the dark for too long. The cloisters that surrounded an overgrown courtyard were brighter, so I went there.

The courtyard, however, was muddy so I stayed out of it.

I hid near an alcove, near some stairs. I waited there for a few hours with no company but my memories of the day, trying to make sense of what had just transpired. It was late evening before I knew it. I'm not sure if I'd fallen asleep at some point, but I knew time had passed quicker than I expected. It made me uncomfortable. I imagined that from the entrance of the Bethel, the Burg looked like a procession of illuminated walls and electric steel.

That calmed me.

It was then I heard a voice. "I found you."

It was Rion. He looked frail, almost anaemic. His skin was pale and moist, his hair pasted over his sweaty forehead. His eyes were sunken, and he looked older. He hobbled towards me, each pained step sucking more and more life from him.

"How did you find me?"

He sighed. "Doesn't matter. I'm here now. I need to sit."

I slinked out from the alcove and stood beside Rion at the cloisters. We sat between a stone arch, my back against one end and Rion's against the other.

I didn't know what to say. He began coughing and groaning. I turned my neck to him. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Dizzy," Rion told me, his voice raspy now. He cleared his throat.

"Did they do anything to you?"

He ignored me. "If you don't mind," he said, sitting up cross-legged against the arch, "what was the correct answer to the Ex. Sess-16? Who was E.P.?"

"Elvis Presley. A tunesmith."

"Huh." He scratched under his arm and shrugged. "That test is nonsense. I don't know why they haven't struck it from the Charter. It's impossible—"

"I proved that it's no longer impossible."

"Yeah, well. Good for you." He turned his nose up and folded his arms. "But I've never understood what the Ex. Sess-16 was trying to test. There's no skill or logic involved. It's only by sheer luck that you can pass. Someone, somewhere at some time had to guess the right answer at some point."

"I didn't guess."

"How did you know then?"

"I just knew. I closed my eyes and it was told to me." I didn't want to tell him about the chalk face or the purple swirls because I knew he would laugh at me.

Rion laughed or scoffed at anything he had never experienced or knew nothing about.

He rubbed his hand against the foot of the arch and said, “It was *told* to you? Why wasn’t it *told* to me? Or anybody else? Nothing was *told* to you. Don’t glorify it. You guessed.”

I snapped at him, “Well, would it make you happy if I told you I guessed the answer?”

He didn’t answer. He turned his head in such a way that the moonlight through the cloister arches curved along his left eye down to his chin. It looked as if he was crying a pallid beam of moonlight. It was tempting to reach out and touch his face even though I knew it was just the light.

He groaned. He whispered with a weak, hoarse tone, “I feel dizzy.”

I turned to him. “What’s the matter?”

He collapsed to his side, hitting his temple on the ground. I scuttled to him and shook his shoulders. “Orion,” I pleaded. “Orion!” I grabbed him and turned his face to me. His eyes were blood-red. He opened his mouth and it bled like a new, gaping wound.

I screamed. And then I found myself on the floor also.

I was alone. My heart pounded.

I’d sleepsighted the whole conversation.

I sat up, rubbing my forehead.

At the same time, a shadow moved across the courtyard. I scrambled back to the alcove and peered out. My heart was still racing.

The shadow stood in the middle of the courtyard, facing me. It knew I was there. I stayed silent as it approached me, emerging from the shrubs behind a limestone bust. As it stepped into the light, the figure came into view. It was a man, tall and slim. He had bronze skin and short black hair that was almost unrecognisable in the shade. His tight brown tunic was embroidered with argyles.

He reached to his hip and produced a slender knife. I expected him to attack me but he stuck the blade into the mud. It stood slanted, glowing dimly. He bowed and spoke my name, "Odyssey." His voice was calm and deep, like Dr. Lavender's. "Y'comin', sprat?"

I stayed where I was.

The man beckoned again, "Y'gon' come with me if y'care 'bout the truth." Then he said, "Nothin' frightly here. Me, I am Carver the Brawn." A chill flowed through the cloisters and into the garden. Some dried leaves fluttered across his shoes.

"Stay away," I said, my voice reduced to a pathetic quiver.

The man stepped towards me. “No,” I finally spoke. “Don’t come any closer.”

The man took another step forward. I took another step back. “See, we’s goin’ now,” the man said. He held up his palms to me and said, “We ain’t got the time.”

“I said, stay away!” I hissed. I reached to another stone arch behind me and grabbed a fistful of dirt.

He approached me slowly until he came to the only structure that was separating us, the cloister railing.

He hitched one leg over it. As he was going to put the other over, I dashed up to him and flung the dirt at him.

Then I ran through the cloisters until I ended up back in the main part of the Bethel. I stood in the middle of the nave, flanked by rotted wooden benches. The moonlight poured in like spotlight beams from clefts along the fissured roof. Speckles of dust wafted within them. I skidded along the wet floor. The fibres had long begun to unravel along the mats that were lain across the aisles.

The doors were closed and as much as I rattled them, they wouldn’t open. I felt as how I’d felt during the Ex. Sess-16, as if a hot metal ball was sitting in my stomach.

A vicious gale outside activated the corroded iron bell above the altar. The gong drifted back and forth.

Water leaked from the ceiling. I could have heard it going sploosh-sploosh. A broken clock that looked as it should have been on one of the walls was leaning against one of the altar corners.

I ran up to the clock and crouched behind it.

I saw the man standing in the aisle under a beam of moonlight. He had his knife in his hand, the edge of the blade crusted with sludge. The margins of the room were lined with busts and statues, weathered and warped by age and air. Hot moisture had seeped into them and dismantled them, searing off their limbs one by one. They grasped blades against their chests with the tips pointing at the ground.

I was so busy looking at the other statues that I hadn't noticed the one behind me. Its heavy stone blade was pointing down on the top of my head.

My heel knocked against its ankle.

The sculpture's legs began to buckle, crumpling with a quiet rumble that even I hadn't noticed. But the man did. His eyes shot over to my direction.

He charged towards the broken clock and pushed it aside.

And with one arm, he shoved me aside just as, the stone blade disconnected from the statue's hold. It came crashing into the ground. The rest of the stone giant came plummeting after it.

Kevin Jared Hosein

The man pulled me away from wreckage.

And all I could remember was seeing the dust rising up from the crushed rubble. I remember feeling as if I were rising up with it. Rising all the way to the ceiling.

That was when I blacked out.

Children of Another Sky

MESA

7

WONDERCHILD

I couldn't see, but I could hear the heavy thrum of the rain. I felt a palm on my neck, holding my head up. It was hard to breathe at first. Every strained breath of this stale, unfamiliar air scratched my throat. I was on the ground, my back drenched with mud.

A voice spoke. "Got to construin' we was goners back there." I recognized the voice immediately as the man's—the deep twang of it. "Jus' for a while."

The man brushed his palm over my forehead. "Y'can hear me, yeah? I say-so already, I'm Carver Cane."

"Carver the Brawn," I mumbled, nodding. My head ached. I opened my eyes but I could only see blurry shapes, as if I was peeking through thick frosted glass. I had no urge to run away. Or maybe I was just too disoriented to feel anything but some kind of peaceful acceptance of the moment.

"That name come from the village. Was face-down with a cat twice the sizin' as me. And my pa whisper to me. Y'be Carver the Brawn, or Carver the Prawn? I skin that cat good." I saved your skins, y'know, sprat," he then told me. "Them goons, they's knifin' up to bleed you dry. Cut open the skins. So it was told."

"Cut me open?" I clasped a pinchful of flesh on my belly. "What are you talking about? My family wouldn't let that happen."

"Y'dratted family was the ones who was 'bout to let that happen," Carver said. I could hear his shoes brushing against the ground.

"They wouldn't."

"Y ain't know a thing, eh? I think y'got a lot to know still—'bout where y'really come from. We be there soon."

"Where are we?"

"Y'dunno?"

"I'm not sure."

"We's at the Outsides, sprat."

I thought I would've shrieked, but the surprise came as a slow burn in my chest. We were *never* supposed to leave the Burg. Those who left never returned. So we were taught. It hadn't hit me yet that I would never be able to see my family again. Or Dr. Lavender.

Or Lise. I would have screamed my head off if those thoughts had hit me right away.

He patted my forehead. "Me, I's from the Out-sides," he said. "And so's you."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "I'm from the Burg."

"Y'come from here."

I shook my head. "Why should I believe you Skyfolk?"

"Skyfolk, hmm," Carver mused. "So that what they's calling us?"

"I have a question," I said, opening my eyes so he could see that I was serious. My vision was still frosted. "Why did you bring those eggs with you? Those mites?"

"What y'mouthin'? Mites? Eggs?"

"The mites were in a container attached to your ship. You were headed for the Mire Grounds."

He narrowed his eyes. "How'd y'know where we's headed?"

"How come you never got there?"

He was quiet for a moment. He muttered, "That ain't important now." He then said, "And we ain't load nothin' onto that ship but our own skins. Look. We was dropped orders to get to the Burg and bring back the *Wonderchild* project."

"Orders?"

“So it was told.”

“Told? Wonderchild project?”

“You,” he said, straight. “*You* the Wonderchild project.”

“Project? I’m not a project,” I said.

“Y’tryna say they deem you’s a person? Y’ain’t no person. Y’was never a person and, after today, y’was never goin’ to be treated like one. No. You’s a marked jackrabbit ready to be shaved n’skewered.”

“I am *not* a project. I am a *person*. I have a family.”

He rested his palm on my shoulder. “But everythin’ ‘bout you, every meal ever fed to you, every worry that ever got to keepin’ you up at night, every mud puddle that you ever stepped in, is kept’n a record by the one who goes by the name *Lavender*.”

I held my head. “Ollie wouldn’t have let any of this happen. Ollie would’ve told me.”

“Ollie?” He paused. “*Oleander*, y’mean?” The way he said her name was strange, as if rolling the word off his tongue could acidify the mouth. “We was friends, y’know.”

“Who?”

“Me and Oleander.”

“That isn’t possible.”

He said, "I known Oleander up until she was a sprat. I was a sprat too. That was when she moved into the Burg with Oona—your ma."

I twisted my mouth. "Now I know you're lying. Nobody gets into the Burg like that. If you leave the Burg, you never return."

"Ain't so. Y'think that go for everybody?" Carver rolled up his sleeves and pinched his blade with his index and thumb. "When they was plannin' *Wonderchild*, they'd come long to the Outsides lookin' for women. Women bearin' young'n. They come to make deals with them."

"What deals?"

"To get a chance to live in the Burg, sprat. Who gon' turn that down? Under certain risks, y'understand? Still, who gon' turn that down?"

"Risks? What risks?"

"That their young'n might become deformed. Had to be able to handle them pills and 'bots. Birthin' might even kill the young'n, and the mama. And that even if they babes was born fit n'fast, they'd be taken away from them in the end."

He then looked at me and added, "Every other face you seen that day for that test? They ain't no more."

"No more?"

"Dead. Don't know who done it or how they done it, but you's the lucky one. Y'still here, ain't you?"

"How do you know all this?"

"It was told."

"What do you mean, *it was told?* Told by who?"

"Show you when we get back. Ain't gon' make sense now."

I didn't have a reason to believe Carver. But I felt like I would be a fool not to corroborate his words with what had transpired with Dr. Shiver. His words jolted my memory back to the day of the exam. The three girls with the red ribbons. The boy twiddling his thumbs. The girl clicking her heels against another wall. The children sitting quietly, watching the clock.

They were all dead by now.

They were all raised as I was. Even though I had never interacted with any of them before that day, I felt a bloodcurdling sadness. I realized we had each shared a past similar to the next and we could have become friends. We could have gone to the sorbet parlour together after the exam. But now, I would never find out what flavours they would have gotten. I would never be able to laugh and learn with them. I would never be their friend.

We were connected. I wished I had said something to them, or eavesdropped their conversations. More

than anything, I wanted to go back to that moment Lise tossed the manila folder, scattering the documents on the floor. I wanted to scoop the papers up, lock myself in the bedroom and absorb every dreadsome detail. The profiles of each candidate. Those thirteen candidates. The scuppered thirteen.

I felt regret for being the sole remaining candidate, still intact, still respiring, all systems still going. For being the undisputed champion of the Ex. Sess-16.

At that moment, things fell into place; Mom and Ollie's growing detachment to me over the years; their ambiguous discussions during the last days; Ollie's plan for a final outing.

Carver wiped my watery eyes with the bottom flaps of his shirt. My vision cleared up after some time and I saw that we were inside of a small cave. A large, grey tree trunk barricaded the edge of the entrance. Hundreds of years old and hollowed out by age and a thousand platoons of hungry woodmites. The rain fell and the stormy winds swayed some trees in the distance.

I turned to Carver. Parts of his shirt were ripped and stained with blood. His arms were lined with cuts as well. A tourniquet, fashioned from his shirt, was tied around his right arm. I looked at my own arms and feet. I was unharmed, but my body ached—probably whiplash.

I said to him, “So you knew my family?”

“Oona and Oleander. Known ‘em at a time, yes. Lived in the village up ‘til the *Attuning*.” He paused and then explained, “The Attuning was what I just told you ‘bout, when they gather-up the women from the villages and rode ‘em to the Burg. Oona was the first to go from Mesa.”

“Mesa?”

“The village. Where I come from. And where we’s going.” He looked at the rain. He continued, “I remember everyone in Mesa was angry when they come givin’ Oona the talk-talk-talk and she say *naw, not-a-humbug*. Was perfidy. It was ‘gainst *everything* we be toilin’ for. They took hold of her, reel her in. Not that she was the only one who ever get that itching to go—just had good good timing.”

I said, “The Burg isn’t a bad place.”

He turned to me. “Y’need see it from where we see it, sprat.”

“Then why would your people want to go there?”

“Deep down, the lot of us wish we’s born there. They get to thinkin’ the livin’s good there.”

“Do you wish you were born there?”

“Naw. I’s brung-up to hate the Burg and hate everyone in it.”

“I am from the Burg, Carver. Do you hate me?”

"I ain't got a reason to hate you," he said. He scratched his head, revealing another bruise near his left ear. "I ain't wasting my day on hatin' you. But I ain't gon' get to promisin' that no one else in the village won't."

I cocked my head to the side. "I didn't even know people lived here. Except—"

"Trespassers. People o' the Exodus, mm-hmm," Carver said. "We's all the descendants of *your* Trespassers. What you got to thinkin'? That we's wander 'bout the fields 'til we drop dead? That we haul ourselves off them cliffs?"

"So you were with the Exodus?"

"Naw. My folks way down the line was. Only first set foot into the Burg a few days ago."

"How did you get those cuts?"

"Y'think 'scaping the Burg's a prawn's work?" He straightened his back. "Even worse when havin' to tote a sleepy sprat over y'shoulder the entire time."

"I was out cold through that entire thing?"

"Broke your skins with this." He laughed, showing me a small dart. "Lost them wardens in the greenery. Then hopped a lorry on the way out. Nobody don't care much to bother with the folk in the lorries, so we was safe there."

"How do you know so much about the Burg? How did you find your way around?"

"For a bunch o' Trespassers, we sure outsmarted you Burgfolk. Was like plannin' a hunt, but for a tiresome breadth o' time."

"How long?"

"More than half m'own life." He grinned. "When they came to take them three women from the village."

"My mother and who else?"

He began telling me about Indigo Gant. Indigo the Sound. Indigo Gant was the second woman from Mesa who agreed to the Attuning. But her decision wasn't met with the furor of my mother's. Indigo Gant had a plan. She had one of the villagers impregnate her just to have the opportunity. She was willing to put her life and her unborn at stake. The plan was that, after arriving and setting up residence in the Burg, she would spend all her time there learning about it—its ways, its people, infrastructure and events. She would then have to figure out a means to relay this information back to Mesa.

Nobody was certain that it would work. There was heavy risk, but they would have gone any length, from how Carver spoke.

Indigo Gant, during her sixteen years within the Burg, walked its entire span, in all cardinal directions,

tracing maps of every district on sketching paper. On the maps, she reproduced every street, shop, tower and landmark. She even noted key events that occurred at each location. I was astounded by her patience. Carver reminded me that she was, indeed, Indigo the Sound. Indigo of Sound Mind.

Carver knew that every fortnight, a gathering of horticultural enthusiasts gathered at the edge of Frond Square to exchange seeds and scions. He knew that a cycle race took place from Ivory Pass to Solstice Avenue on the third week of every month. He knew that the Chemical Storage Unit at the Polytechnic had had three Class D fires within the past five years.

Indigo Gant uncovered blueprints of the Burg's water and sewage systems from a works archive. Since she wasn't allowed to rent them or even remove them from the room, she quickly replicated them onto her tablet.

Before the Attuning, Mesa was aware that there were several conduits connecting to the Burg's waste disposal system from the coast. Also, along the shore, a few miles from Mesa, was the Burg's desalination plant.

The plant, Carver described, was shut tight and appeared to be operated by remote control instead of human workers. However, while the plant was protected by a soundproof dome, the pipes were left exposed un-

derwater. These pipes connected to the Burg's sewage system.

Indigo Gant figured that she could place her maps and notes about the Burg into plastic jars and send them along the drain pipes. They would then emerge near the desalination plant, which was along the same coastline at the edge of Mesa.

However, she couldn't risk putting any of the maps into the jar on the first run. So, she instead placed a note, saying,

"Just 'fore nightfall, light a bonfire in Mesa pass. – I.G."

From the top of Quercus Mount, she could send a fluttercam to take pictures of the far distance. The resolution was high enough. She'd be able to see rising smoke from the pass—just a thin rising line of grey. That'd be enough for her to know the documents were received. Quercus Mount was miles away from Indigo's residence, though. She sat there for four hours a day, from two hours before to two hours after nightfall, her kneecaps against her belly, peering up at the fluttercam, periodically checking its pictures for the bonfire smoke—hoping to see that grey line.

But there was none.

Something was wrong. They weren't getting the information. She reviewed the blueprints and noticed that there were gratings between the conduits, where the jars could have become lodged and lost. She studied the blueprints again. There had been one pipe that was used, she discovered, that didn't have a grate. It was used only for the disposal of agricultural chemicals into the lifeless watery expanse of the Deep Grey. Furrows flanking rows of ploughed dirt connected to ravines, and these ravines flowed into this conduit. But again, this was all located near sequestered, closed-off farmland.

If she sneaked in and was caught, she and her son would be made an example of, she knew. All deals would be off. She would immediately become a Trespasser.

It was a risk, but it was necessary. At night, she made her move. She crawled on the ground, dragging her chest across the mud until she saw a ravine. She tossed the plastic jar in and made her way out. The jar contained the same note as before.

Two days later, just before nightfall, the fluttercam snapped a picture of the grey lines.



As soon as she saw this, she rushed home, gathered the rest of her notes and letters into the other jars and dropped them into the ravines.

"How'd the people at Mesa find it? How'd they know?" I asked. It would be up to chance, incredible chance that somebody would find it—chance that it would emerge unbroken and unsoiled, luck that a villager would stumble across it in time, chance that the plan was still in people's minds after so many years. It didn't make sense to me.

All Carver said to it was, "We trust the tides." A strange response, but I didn't question it.

"My mother was involved with this?"

"When Oona set up herself in the Burg, she come to be one of *them*. Mesa bled right outta her. So we let 'em have her."

Though she was still alive, a stele was erected for Indigo Gant. I didn't even know what a stele was until Carver mentioned it. I didn't even know what a grave-stone was, much less a grave. All deceased bodies in the Burg were placed in a furnace and their ashes were blended together and used as fertilizer. Most of the time, we didn't bother with recording the dead. As the adage went, *The dead stay dead and makes way for life.*

So while Indigo Gant's stele stood polished atop a small hill near the village plaza, Oona was a name mentioned with scorn, the two syllables twisting mouths and turning up noses. It was her punishment for choosing to live a life severed from Mesa, blanketing herself with the Burg's glass and steel. She would've done nothing to imperil that chance at being able to walk the streets of the Burg. And moreover, to imperil Ollie's chances.

When the rain stopped, we started on our way to Mesa. I didn't have a choice but to follow Carver. We had to cross the grassy field to get there. Carver referred to the field as *the Fenlands*. The bedrock laid close to the top soil, making it soggy and soft. A meander twisted along the expanse of the plain, and the field

was also lined with trenches and narrow gullies, all connected by several rickety bridges.

Carver pointed to a mountain in the distance and said, "Up there, we find the pass. We aim for there. On the other side is the cliffs." He looked at me, "Mesa's layin' on the other side, slopin' down to the Deep Grey."

"That's a long walk."

"Don't start mouthin' now. You ain't got a choice."

I nodded, and we set off. I kicked a snail, my foot swiping it into a gully by accident. I watched it float away. The water in the gullies was turbid and brown, flowing and bubbling with puffs of muck. There were more snails assembled along the sodden embankments.

I looked at the sky, waiting for the clouds to part. But they never seemed to. It stayed grey as bone. Grey as smoke, the mountains like piles of ash under it.

Then something moved in the mountains.

Wings, perhaps, but it could have just been the trees.

I saw it move again. Whatever it was, it was a jarring sight because I shouldn't have been able to see any creature from that far distance. Carver noticed me looking. He told me, "Don't look."

"Why?" I asked.

"Just leave that bird be. Y'gon' blight us by even lookin' at it, y'hear?"

I looked one last time. "That thing is *a bird*?"

"That there's Great Wing," he said. "Started callin' it that 'fore we seen that the dratted thing's so big that it fights itself to fly. That ain't mean it can't fly, sprat, but—"

"How big is that thing?" I said, my eyes widening.

"Big and greedy enough to yack a forest, I can tell you that. Ain't never seen no bird that feast on leaves and trees." It was then I noticed the clearing along the mountain slope—that patch of baldness along the green.

"That bird ate those trees?"

"Ate and shat."

"Is it omnivorous?"

"Omni-wuh?"

"Does it eat animals too?"

"Ain't a usual thing, but its guts ain't picky, can tell you that. Found that out the hard way. It ain't gon' bother hunt y'down if you as far as we is, but if y'gettin' too close to it..."

"It won't swoop down on us?"

"Told you, the dratted thing's too heavy to fly, sprat. But I ain't gon' roll my life under it, y'hear? So,

don't look at it," he said. "Don't talk 'bout it. Don't ask 'bout it. Just keep on the path. Makes life better."

So we did.

"She fit in well there? She set in good?" Carver asked, his eyes still toward the mountain pass as we walked.

"Who?"

"Your sister."

Blades of grass crunched beneath our mud-caked feet. I told him, "I think so."

"Mm."

"She's smart. She likes being smart."

"Mm." Carver frowned a little. "She coulda been set in her smarts just as good as in Mesa."

"Does Mesa have a Polytechnic?"

Carver snorted and shook his head.

I was going to tell him that she liked being at the Polytechnic all the time, but I knew it wouldn't do him any good. So I changed the topic. I asked, "Was there anyone else who joined the Attuning from Mesa?"

"I said there's three. Your ma, Indigo," Carver pursed his lips. He hesitated to say the last name. "Last one was Somalia Castor."

I nodded and wiped my face in an attempt to hide my amazed expression. I resisted asking anything else. We kept on the path until something caught Carver's

attention. He looked at his soles and told me to look at mine. I hadn't paid much mind to the crunching sound we made as we walked. I thought it was just dried grass until I looked down and saw that it was little white fragments—chips of bone.

"Woodsmen," Carver said.

"Woodsmen?"

He pulled my sleeve. "Woodsmen's near. We gotta pick up our feet."

8

THE WOODSMEN

Right before the mountain pass, the thickets got denser. I felt as if something was watching us through them. I looked up at the light peeking out from the recesses of the dreary haze of clouds. The light was behind us now. The overcast shadows draped the thickets and the mountain. The closer we drew to them, the less I could hear the wind. I remember thinking that I was glad that we were getting farther away from Great Wing.

One final bridge separated the thickets and the pass. It was the longest one. It seemed to shudder just from the draft slithering along the mountain pass. The ropes that were fastened along the edges were nearly chewed away by woodmites. The ropes had been attached to twin trees at both sides of the chasm that the bridge connected. Spindly vines that encircled the tree latched onto the rope, making the last salvation for support that the bridge had.

I couldn't trust it.

Carver did, however. "Bridge here's safe," he told me. "Tell you, been crossing it my whole life. Better to cross here than go all the way 'round." Grabbing the edges, his arms outstretched, his fingernails scraping against the rotting wood, he made the first step onto the wobbly boards.

I followed him with a limp gait, struggling to grip the boards with my shoe heels. A gust of cold wind spouted up from the chasm and shook the bridge.

I closed my eyes.

The rapids below us raged.

I tried not to look down but I could picture it. Water cutting across rocks. Rocks that were sharp like jagged teeth. A murky white foam gurgling along the irrepressible current. Cold winds racing parallel to the rapids, ricocheting upwards from time to time.

Carver nudged the back of my shin with his kneecap everytime I slowed my pace.

I took small breaths. Whispy, hushed, arrhythmic.

I dared not talk, or even grunt.

My breaths could swell into giant flurries of breeze that would send this bridge crashing down, was my paranoid thought. When two beetles flew past me, their tiny wings were flapping so swiftly that they formed

transparent arcs. I feared even a force as small as that could unravel the rickety suspension of this bridge.

But my silence didn't last for long. I bent down to touch my toes. "*We're going to fall,*" I said, with grim confidence. I cupped my kneecaps with my palms and circled my thumbs against them.

Carver prodded my bottom with his toes. "Just keep walking," he said. "We near-near. Just think it. Just think 'bout being there."

I didn't budge.

He hissed, "We take too long, they gon' see us."

I stopped rubbing my kneecap and turned to him. "Who?"

He said, "No time. Walk, walk. Keep on, keep on." The quiet grimness in his voice made my pores raise. If he'd said it with panicked hastiness, my feeble legs wouldn't have been wobbling as much. "Get up," he said, a desperate itch growing in his throat now. "Get up. Keep on. *Keep on.*"

He prodded his toes against my rear again. I still didn't budge. My body wouldn't obey. He kicked me forward and I fell, my palms landing on the bridge boards, snapping one of them.

I crawled, holding back from spewing out the ball of acid in my stomach.

We were almost at the end of the bridge. I'd been so occupied with listening to my own breaths that I hadn't noticed the trio of savages lined up behind us. They were near-naked, skin undulating along protruding ribs, knobs of bone waiting to burst from the joints. Even though I'd only managed a glimpse, the only clothes they wore were belt-like ropes tightened around their waists. They swung large wooden cudgels at us.

One of them slipped, crying out a final horrendous growl as he plummeted.

Each echo paralyzed me.

The other two screeched at us. I turned to look at them—all I saw were their mouths. Scurvied gums and scum-stained teeth. Bruised lips looking as if they were being chewed off by ants. Mucus stains and dried blood above their lips.

"Shake the bridge," Carver said. "Side to side. Now, now, *now!*" He began wiggling his arms on the ropes. I had no choice—I tried to keep the rhythm with him.

The two savages screeched again.

One slipped and fell into the chasm.

The other hung from the side of the bridge, one hand on a board, the other grasping his cudgel. "Swing! Swing 'im off! Swing 'im off!" Carver cried out.

The savage prodded the cudgel at our feet. I turned to him, and he looked at me. I kicked my heel against

his hand, and he slipped. His gaze didn't leave mine as he fell. His expression didn't change—as if dying meant nothing.

Then the bridge snapped.

Carver called out, "Grab the rope!" So I did. I grabbed it so tightly that my hands burned.

A coil of wind whipped up from the chasm.

The shabby boards below us fluttered side to side the air as the wind arced us forward against the cliff. The bridge was now a ladder.

Carver was right beneath me. I didn't want to look down but I heard his distressed groans. I closed my eyes, held on tight and waited for it to stop. Carver stammered, "Y-You good? Just hold tight."

We began to climb. Whenever the bridge started to bob, we stopped, allowing it to come to rest again. We climbed to the cliff, where a helix of lianas twirled around an old tree. Carver pressed his back against the bark, slumping on its buttress roots and rubbed his heels against a clump of dried leaves. I sat on the ground and clasped my knees against my belly. We both gazed across the chasm to the other half of the bridge, still knocking against the other side of the overhang. "Wasn't part o' the plan," Carver said, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Crossing this bridge his whole life, huh? I wanted to comment on that but I was less witty about the situation. Still out of breath, I said, "You need to explain."

"Woodsmen." He took a breath. "Children of Trespassers long ago. Them who said they ain't followin' the rest. Live for nothin', nay, live to kill, eat and shat."

"They wanted to eat us?"

"You gotta calm y'self."

I took a deep breath. "Aren't there other things to eat?"

He chuckled and shrugged. "Don't matter to the woodsmen. Once bellies rumblin', they gon' eat. You be boiled-n'-blistered and them woodsmen still gon' hunt you down. That be their livin'—ain't much no being o' flesh-n'-bone could sway that." He got on his feet and brushed the leaves off his pants. "Mesa's just 'round the mountain pass. Ain't no woodsmen 'round there, sprat."

I pouted. "Maybe *you're* a woodsman. Just one who wears clothes and speaks before he bites."

"Y'reckon that?" he asked. "Y'reckon we gon' just dip you into the boilpot instead o' gobblin' y'up raw? Ain't matter—y'ain't stayin' here and runnin' the risk of meetin' with 'nother horde of them woodsmen now? Y'smarter than that."

I just shook my head as we set off along the pass.

Along the way, we met upon a large patch of wood-ash and charred lumber, long spent and burnt. I remembered the story of Indigo Gant. What had been a blazing brushfire to the people here was just a thin, grey line to her.

9

NOTES BEYOND THE DEEP GREY

The mountain pass led right up to two tall bolted wooden gates. It was near dark by the time we arrived.

Flanking the gates were two crooked watchtowers, with two men per post. They saw us from the distance, and pulled a gate lever open. The gates were controlled by two cogs, smithed from some olden ore and already beginning to oxidize. There was no village behind the gates, just the continuing trail. I had a passing thought that I was going to be eaten, as Carver had joked before.

Two men alighted from the watchtower. There were no ladders. They just used deep, carved grooves along the scaffolding as rungs. One of them asked Carver, "This 'ere really him?" His eyes never left me.

Carver nodded. The men escorted us through the rest of the trail. It was a shorter walk than I had imagined. Mesa was built along the descending slope of the mountain pass. The houses lined the slanted incline straight up to the flattened top of a precipice and back

down again, along a descent that led to the coast and seashore.

When we approached Mesa, a crowd came to welcome us. Some of them were chattering breathlessly, and some of them were silent in awe. And they all smelled of salt. The men were bareback, wearing only big brown and black trousers that billowed with the breeze. The women wore white cloths that were speckled with dirt. They all huddled around to see me.

As their faces hovered closer and closer, I kept focusing on their noses. I had the notion that they were all sniffing me—sniffing me like how rodents sniffed food. Their mumbles intersected each other so much that I couldn't drag out a single coherent sentence. Truthwise, I didn't want to listen. I didn't even want to look at them.

They were different with Carver, however. I noticed the way people cleared the path and backed away as he marched through them. Smiles faded. Conversations stopped. He shot glances at everyone as if his line of sight could electrically charge the air around them. The winds seemed to circumvent him. The greyflies never flitted near his clothes. Moreover, he seemed to be aware of these things.

Some of the houses in Mesa were made of wood, and some were thatch huts. The biggest ones were dif-

ferent. They were made from bent trees and thick russet cloth, stretched to the ground and pegged down by heavy wedges, tethered with thick ropes.



I wanted to ask Carver about these big house-trees, but I couldn't manage to get a word in between the murmurs. He hoisted his arms to silence everyone. The noise stopped immediately and they turned to him. "Prepare a rest-spot. It ain't been a straight journeyin', even had to brave the woodsmen," he told them. Soon after, a woman led me into one of the big house-trees. The air inside was warm and musty. There was a tiny opening at the top, where the cloths converged. The

ground inside was covered with cloths and rugs, though some of the dirt and rocks swept through the crevices where they overlapped. Instead of a door, there were two flaps that separated the inside from the out.

The woman put me to lie on a cot, which was just a thick cloth padded with compacted hay.

When she left, a girl's thin arm reached through one of the flaps. She entered and smiled at me. She looked about Ollie's age. Her black hair was tied into a long braid. Along the braid were several small blue flowers. Her dress was patterned with argyles and frills. She knelt beside the bed and said, "Y'look shook-up." Her voice was slow and soft. She held my hand and strummed the inner crook of my elbow. She then said, "Me, I'm Elm the Sharp. Elm Cane."

"You're related to Carver?" I asked.

"Carver, aye, he my brother." She changed the topic, "Y;set in good? Ain't nothin' better than a canvasa for you, no humbug." She smiled.

"Canvasa?"

"Aye, you in one." She told me that the women in the village would plant four poplar saplings in a circle. While growing, strings would be fastened to the developing barks to bend them together to form two arches. Then branches, cloths and animal hides would be sewn

together and stretched to complete the structure. She pointed to the flapping apex and said that the hole was used to let in the sinking cool night air. "By nightfall, is cool-cool in here," she said.

She dipped a bristly black rag in a bucket before dabbing it along my temples. She wrung it, letting the water leak onto a tray before dipping it again. Her elbow brushed against my ribs. The moist rag wasn't of much help to comfort me, but I didn't want to tell her.

She dabbed my hands with the rag and scrubbed the dirt off my fingers. She told me, "My other brother, he was on that Ark."

"Ark?"

"That fly Carver into the Burg."

"You call it the Ark?"

She shrugged. "*The Tides* been callin' it the Ark."

I looked at her. "The Tides?"

"The Tides been livin' way 'cross the Deep Grey."

"How do they communicate with you?"

"Bottles wash on the shore. Bottles with notes in 'em."

"Notes? What do they say?"

Elm hung the rag on the rim of the bucket and pulled a wooden box out from behind the bed. She produced a dirty plastic bottle. She used a hairclip to

pull a parched sheet out of the bottleneck. She gave it to me. It read,

Dear Villagers,

Keep near the coast. In the morn, expect the Ark on your shores. Rally the ten. The Ark flies, just as birds do, and fly into the Burg, it shall. There is a boy, the child of Oona Dove, the champion child of the Attuning—he is the Wonderchild. Find the boy known as ODYSSEY DOVE. Hurry. When you do, be patient. Be patient with him. Soon, it will be over and it will seem like the dry-times never happened. So it is told.

The Tides.

I scanned my name over and over in the letter, my eyes shifting left and right until they ached. Then I looked at the signature. *The Tides*. How did a person from beyond the Deep Grey know my name—know my mother's name?

I looked up and peered at the flapping apex once again. It looked like a winking eye with a grey cataract. Elm took the letter from me and replaced it in the bottle. She said, "The Tides, it know things 'bout Mesa too. Sometimes we ain't sure how it could, but it ain't never bring harm. Whatever it is, it have a sensin' that none

else is borned with. And if it been usin' that sensin' for good, it must be a good person, y'reckon?"

I said, "I don't know what to make of this."

She placed her palm on my belly and smiled. "It rattle our bones some. But if it been good for this long and it wantin' you to be here, then it can only be good that you's here now."

"Can I speak with the Tides?" If this was the reason I was taken away from the Burg and brought to these people, I wanted to know why.

She shook her head. "We ain't never talk-back to the Tides. Tried bottles, tried sailin' out, but our boats'd manytime jus' have to turn 'round. We ain't never even known how far out it is." She pressed her palm against my belly now. "One morn, we just say that it ain't matter none. The Tides, it ain't cause grief. It want us to live, float us food during the dry-times. Manytime known when a storm was comin'—floated us warnin' after warnin'."

I turned to my side and squirmed a little.

"Even when we reckon it was wrong," Elm said, "it was right. It always known what was right."

I said, "So if it sent a letter saying that you should go to the Burg to get Odyssey Dove—"

"Then we go to the Burg to get Odyssey Dove," Elm said, nodding.

"Would you mind getting off my belly?" I asked, pushing her palm off. "It hurts when I feel nervous."

She raised her head. "What known for calmin' you?"

"I don't know."

She looked at me, furrowing her brow for a second. Her lips separated and she drew a breath between them. She said, "Your skins is hot. You must be feelin' for a wash."

I let out a quiet sigh. It didn't occur to me to turn down the offer. She told me to get up and pointed to an alabaster basin between two wooden shelves. A smoothed plank of wood was lain against the rim and acted as a backrest. The water was clear and I could see mucky deposits at its base as I stared down.

She took my shirt off, and then my pants. I made no effort to stop her. I didn't even flinch. When I stood naked before her, I felt strangely unashamed. Perhaps I was just disconnected from myself.

As I put my feet in the basin, my pores raised. The water was lukewarm. It swished over my calves. She then beckoned for me to lean against the backrest, so I did. She peered down at me, her eyes looking larger and brighter than before.

She raised her chin and pulled her dress over her head.

She folded the clothes and placed them on the shelf. Her skin was a glossy brown. She had ink mandalas tattooed around her breasts, curling down and seguing into tiny paisleys at the sides of her navel. She was so thin that her spine formed a boa of faded patterns, each vertebra imagined as a snakeskin stripe. Bands of wrinkled folds lined the skin along her neck.

She dipped her legs into the basin and submerged her waist and navel into the water. The water ebbed over her breasts. She asked, “The water’s good?”

I nodded.

She crept closer to me and rested her palm on my shoulder. She said, “Tell me ‘bout the Burg. Tell me ‘bout machines.”

“Which one?”

“Any one.”

“We have, uh, transmitters. Many transmitters.”

“Tell me ‘bout the transmitter machine then.”

“Um, transmitters can send data—messages—from one place to another. Images... pictures. Sounds. Um, we could talk to each other from afar. That’s just the basic function of it.”

She reclined and looked up at the ceiling. “I ain’t never blame your ma for what she done. The Burg, it sound nice.”

“You knew my mother?”

"Everyone known your ma—even if they ain't never cross her path. They ain't too fond o' your sister, either. But they let her off."

"What do you mean?"

"Eh, she wasn't even a sprat. Edgin' six. She ain't known nothin'. Wanted to see what's out there, y'know? Can't help but be that way as a sucklin'. Can't blame nobody for wantin' a livin' in the Burg. Maybe she heard 'bout one of them transmittin' machines. When the new Trespassers come 'round, they never shut up 'bout them machines. Always cryin', goin' on and on. Kinda the reason we ain't like Trespassers passin' through Mesa."

She hugged her knees tightly against her chest. She continued, "We was all a bundlin'. Carver, Oleander and me. But Carver was bundled closest to her. He don't speak 'bout her much now."

"What was she like?"

"Long ago, when the elders'd stand in the square and talk-talk-talk of the Burg, she'd be gazin' off into the distance. 'Yond the crag, her eyes'd fly, as if they could cross the distances of the fields she known nothin' of."

She cradled her chin on her kneecap and looked at me, her top lip protruding, her eyes deep and wistful. She put her foot on my thigh and caressed it with her

toes. She said, "After the Attuning, Carver ain't talk to people much. I remember runnin' with him to the cliffs to peek at the shadow of the caravan as it went totterin' over the Fenlands."

“Caravan?”

"Them Burgfolk come in caravans 'round that time." She then cleared her throat and continued, "Carver, he went missin' in the night. We sent all the men, all the hunters out. But my brother was gone-gone. He turn up on his own, three morns later, shudderin'-n'-shakin', shat his pants. Half-dead by the time he collapsed near them village gates."

“Where did he go?”

"He ain't never got to tellin' us what happened. He ain't want nobody to know he tried to talk all the way to the Burg, sucklin' that he was. His shoes was crusted with mud. He got to drinkin' that gully water 'til he was shattin' it out. He known he would die if he kept goin'. He ain't prior brush the idea of death—but he known it when it hooked his throat."

"We was young," she then said. "Led by guts. Your sister to the Burg. My brother to your sister. But just like how young'ns is, he bundled with others. And she bundled with others. I ain't like your sister, but I let her off for that. But I ain't lettin' her off now."

"I don't understand."

"Your sister known what them Burgfolk was gon' do." She reclined again. "She known, when the time come, she ain't never gon' see you again. She just never get to tellin' you. She couldn't tell you. Y'was gon' be scuppered, just as the rest of them. Just as your own brother."

"How do you know all this? How do you know about my brother?"

"The Tides."

"How? I don't understand. *How?*"

"Nobody understand how. The how ain't matter. Plaintalk is that your brother's dead. Your mother and sister gave you up. Gave you to them 'fore you was borned. That was the trade."

I hissed, "Nobody gave me up!"

She said, "They got to keepin' words from you. They was goin' to have you took away. They allowed your brother to die. They was gon' to have you splayed out on a table. They ain't never tell you. And all you have left now, *Odyssey...*" She crawled so close to me that her lips were almost touching mine. "...is *us.*"

Her puckered lips hovered close to mine. My eyes shifted to the beads of water on her arms. My toes curled. She then gave me a smile and got out of the water. I looked at her body as she fetched some cloths to

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dry herself off. I wondered if Carver had told her to do this.

10

VELA, WHO CARRIES THE FIRE

Later that evening, Elm gave me some new clothes—a fringed buckskin tunic, a pair of tanned leather boots and some leggings. The material was coarse and itchy. I yearned for polyester and acrylic fibres. The boots were the only parts of the attire that were comfortable—their insides were lined with soft fur. It tickled under my feet with each step I took.

When I went back outside, it was already dark. A sheet of mottled grey hid the stars. I couldn't see a single one. This was when I began to wonder if the people there had ever seen one—if they knew they existed. It was darker than anything I had ever witnessed. It was odd. Even during the daytime, we could've seen the constellations in the Burg. I'd gotten so accustomed to the treelamps too. All of the Burg's signs used to radiate with the hues of neons and phosphors. Mesa's were basic carvings on wood bark and granite.

To my surprise, Mesa was bustling with activity. The village was a procession of blurred silhouettes—shapes morphing across the dimming light, as if this were a colony of shadow people. Though I couldn't see their faces, I knew everyone held their gaze at me for at least a moment or two as I walked past.

In the Burg, around the approach of nightfall, the streets were emptying. People had to go home so that the ALPS, Automated Litter Purge System, could clear the streets and parks of non-biodegradables and recyclables. It wasn't an offense to be out after nightfall, but it was frowned upon.

I felt strangely free to be out in the night here. Several scaffolding fixtures had been erected in the distance. The sound of hammers pounding was interspersed with the men's grunts as they hoisted the beams with fibres and vines. The women in their sandals climbed the ladders and hung what looked like giant bloodflower decorations along twines that sloped from one roof to another across the village.

"They preparin' the dancin'."

"Dancing? For what?" I asked.

"You," she said. Her eyes were dark and glittery under the dusk.

I was confused. But I didn't ask anything. Elm asked me to walk with her. I looked at the cords and adorn-

ments being swayed and swirled by the cold high wind. A column of dust whirled up a couple stretches with it, before dissipating between two men barging through it. Several children ran past me, chasing each other with sticks and twigs. A woman scolded them from afar.

Amongst all the movements and blurs, one shadow stood still, leaning against a tree. It appeared as a dark brown tattoo on its drying bark—one of a tall, stout man. His arm curved and his fingers hovered over his lips, and it was only after I saw the thinning haze piping from the shade did I realize he was smoking snuffweed.

As we walked closer to the tree, the man's face became apparent. His face was smooth, like a little boy's, and he only had a ragged tuft of hair at the top of his scalp. He was bareback and though he was stout, his sides didn't sag as other people of his stature. His skin, though coated with dirt and grime, curved without fault or fold along the sides of his belly. He wore his trousers just above the flab of his paunch.

His eyes followed me as I walked past. I tried not to look at him. He pouted and blew a thin smoky serpent in my direction before twisting his lower lip into a scowl. When Elm noticed my discomfort, she nudged me, whispering, "Don't let 'em scare you."

I waited until we were a couple stretches away from the tree. Then I whispered to her, “Who is that?”

“Sambor,” she told me. “They call ‘im Sam. Sam the Hale. He the head carpenter of Mesa.”

She was quiet the rest of the way and it was only until the walkway merged into the descent, she told me who she was carrying me to see—a woman named Vela Mu. “Vela Mu is who bears the fire of Mesa right now.” The wind blew from behind us, constant but gentle.

The crags formed two high walls at each side of us, making the track a hallway down to the coast. A large gate and pair of watchtowers, similar to the ones at the village entrance, stood at the end of the walkway. The gate was already open and I could see the sea waters slushing up and down the sand. It smelled like vinegar down there. Greyflies flitted along the rock crevices, and moths fanned their wings on the weeds that slithered out from the salt.

I looked up at the sky. The clouds were flimsy, like smoked snuffweed. It looked like a parchment burnt in some smoldering furnace. The sky never looked so frail before—not from the Burg—frail as if it could be torn apart like a piece of wet-rotted fabric.

Gazing upon the Deep Grey—that great empty lifeless stretch—filled me with an emotion I can only describe as hopelessness. It was sadness that no tears

could quell. There was nothing that could soothe it. The waves slushed and slushed again, sounding like a thousand callused heels rubbing together. The water was slow and thick, like a spoiled broth.

As we approached the coast, I saw a woman facing the horizon. I assumed this to be Vela Mu. Here, it was almost indistinct. The land and water was just a separation of greys—a foggy gradient. She stood with her palms behind her waist, her fingers cupped around her wrist. She was tall and slim and her hair was so short that I could see the back of her neck. Her buckskin dress draped her body down to her ankles. The shoulders were patterned with red argyles and stripes.

When I stepped foot on the sand, my boots landed on a twig, drawing a soft crackle. Vela turned around and opened her arms. She looked as if she was as old as my mother. She even had the same wrinkles at the outside edges of her eyes. She spoke, her voice soaring over the slushing of the waves, “Welcome home, Odie.”

Odie.

Other days, I would have had a bad reaction to a stranger calling me Odie. But I felt safe this time. When she said it a second time, “Come to me, Odie,” I exhaled deeply, feeling as if I breathed out the sadness I was experiencing. And I wanted to do it. I wanted to

walk into her arms and let her hold me against her chest. I wanted her tall figure to hunch over mine.

As she held me, she planted a kiss on my forehead and said, “You safe here now. Nothin’ in here can harm you.” I turned around and saw Elm sitting on a dead log leaning against a boulder. She was picking at her feet.

As I turned my gaze to the horizon, I thought about Elm’s conversation about the Tides and the bottle notes. The Tides wanted me here in Mesa—on this coast, in the arms of this woman. I thought about that as I rubbed my cheek against her bosom, revelling in this aura of security. This feeling, it was *qualial*. That’s the term we used to describe feelings like that in the Burg, feelings that were difficult to explain to oneself, and thus difficult to explain to others.

I recalled Elm’s voice as she told me, “Even when we reckon it was wrong, it was right. It always known what was right.”

She’d said it with such regretful repose, as if it was the only way she could explain it, as if there were no other words she could use to convey it. And as I try to explain here the way I felt on the seashore, my embrace tightening along Vela’s back, I do it with that same regretful repose. I cannot explain it. The more I think about it here, the more I don’t want to explain it.

Vela looked down at me. She said that she wanted to show me something. She turned to Elm and motioned for her to wait. She then led me up the coast, through an arch of weathered beach rock. The layer of shore sand was thinner there, until it was just a few scratchy specks strewn across fertile clumps of soft soil. Flat stone tablets were embedded into the soil, with yellow flowers lining their edges. The tablets were lain out in rows and columns, though not equally spaced, which bothered me for a moment. I counted them all—there were forty-two tablets.

Vela stroked my hair as the sea breeze rustled hers. “Here, we bury the dead,” she said, “and we chisel the stone to remember their names.”

“We didn’t do that in the Burg,” I said.

“I know. Y’burn your dead. No markings for the dead. *The dead stay dead.*” She then turned to me, “This never make you feel sad?”

“*The dead stay dead and makes way for life.* That’s the whole saying. Why would it make me feel sad?”

“Because once you dead, nobody who never known you would know your name.”

“Names mean nothing. There are so many names. Forty-two names on these stones, and I didn’t know any of them. If my name was on a stone, why would anyone need to see it?”

She asked, "Y'want your name to be remembered after you gone?"

"I wouldn't want it read by those who didn't know me."

Vela cupped the back of my neck and sighed. "Y'saying none of these names would mean nothin' to you?"

I curled my toes in my boots. "These names are just words to me," I said. I then recalled the statue at the Faculty of Light—the man pointing to the sky. At the same time, Vela then pointed to a tablet in the middle of the turf. She told me to read it. I walked towards it and brushed some leaves off the stone before I could recognize the words.



"This y'father, Odie."

"No, it's not. My father exploded." I wasn't aware of how ridiculous my statement sounded at the time.

Vela laughed. "Someone been playin' a practical joke on you. Y'veen tricked."

I paused. "He was a Trespasser?" I muttered.

"Aye."

"He died here?"

"Aye."

"What was he like?" I asked Vela, scrambling for any crumb of description of the man. She said that he was a lanky man who roamed the village bareback at most times, and that he had a greying beard that he cut with a heated knife.

"Why didn't he come with us during the Attuning? Was he still alive?"

"Aye, he was, he was," she said. She kept her eyes on the gravestone. "Y'can't ever tell much 'bout Marquis and what he thought 'bout the Burg. He was a Trespasser since early, barely a sprat."

"You too? You are a Trespasser?"

She shook her head. "Borned-n'-bred in Mesa. Y'ain't never gon' find a leader here in Mesa that got wrunged outta the Burg. Gotta be borned-n'-bred here. Ain't no food or cots for Trespassers—just ain't have it."

"How'd he die?"

"I ain't gon' tell you the whole yarnin' thing now," she said, "as hungry as y're are to taste y'own true self."

“Then why am I here?”

“You’s here ‘cause we need you.”

“The Tides?”

“Aye. But not everybody’s the same way. I ain’t readyin’ to say they barin’ fangs at you ‘cause they want to bite you. They’s just want to scare you. But they scared theyselves, y’know.” She directed my gaze to an overhang perched near the sea. There was one figure standing akimbo atop it. It was Sambor.

Vela said to me, “Sam ain’t agree with y’being ‘ere. Plaintalk, he’s the only one who’s fangs y’gotta be lookin’ out for. He and his followin’. The man struck a fear in them so deep that once he lay the first bite, their flurry of teeth is to follow.” She laughed. “But once I’m here, he ain’t gon’ do that.”

I turned to look at his silhouette again. He had his arms folded now, as if he realized we were talking about him. The mist moved behind him. Vela continued, “Your ma—though she ain’t never live nowhere else but Mesa, she always got to talkin’ ‘bout how she known there’s another place for her, far ‘ways. A place sleepsighted durin’ a fever, where the nights lit up like the morn and the wind smell like flowers.”

“I wouldn’t say that’s true about the Burg.”

Vela laughed. “That’s what y’father say.”

“Are you going to tell me how he died?” I asked.

She paused. "I ain't want to talk 'bout that yet. I want you form y'own thoughts of him 'fore we get into that."

"Why'd you bring me here then?"

"I needed you to understand y'place here—in Mesa."

I looked at the cliff again. Sambor was gone.

"Let's head back," she said, brushing some salt off my sleeves.

Back at the village, they had been preparing for what Vela called the Tide Dance. The scaffolding, the flower decorations hanging from the linking wires, the children running around, that was what that was all about. Wooden pinwheels had been tacked onto houses and wooden scallops now, whirling non-stop with the late evening breeze.

A podium had been erected in the middle of the square, and a group sat cross-legged, chatting and fiddling with their reed flutes. Tunesmiths, I gathered. I'd never seen anything like that before. Back in the Burg, we just relied on tuneboxes for our melodies. There had never been any Charter for human tunesmiths—never had a need for it. Everything was produced from algorithms outputted through vocaloids and synthesizers.

Even though I was surrounded by the smell of potages and honey-covered sweetnuts, the sound of

laughter and reed flutes and bright colours at every turn, I felt a deep melancholy. I felt as if my internal organs were shrinking, like my brain was a dollop of mud held together by spider fibres. And my stomach was a burlap sack filled with gravel. My bones felt weighted, as if they held swampwater, and if I were a tern gull, I would fall beakfirst into the water's crest and my drowned body would bloat and rot on the lagoon brine.

Seeing everyone else happy made me feel as if something was wrong with me. Everyone looked at me, ran past me, directed their eyes at me, chatted about me—but didn't say a word to me. It was as if they weren't allowed to. I didn't want to stick around. I wasn't used to this sort of sadness—the type of sadness that felt as if it could extend from my mind and cause the land to sink into the Deep Grey.

I wandered off to a hill beside one of the canvasas. There was a burrow behind it, no wider than my shoulders. Someone called out to me from inside. They said, “Aye. Wonderchild. Aye, c'mere.” The voice of a little boy.

I approached the burrow with slow cautious steps. I half-expected a giant scorpion to come scuttling out of it. I placed my palms and knees on the dirt and peered inside, still keeping some distance. Just in case scorpion stingers would emerge to stab at my eyes. I saw the

outline of a face swallowed in the darkness. "Why are you in there?" I asked him, creeping closer to the burrow.

"More cramped out there," he said, "with all them runnin', askin' you to do this and that. Waste o' food out there, yeah?"

"Waste of food?"

"All for you, y'know. I ain't comin' out. I ain't gon' take part in wastin' food. My ma ain't gon' let me. Me, I's just hidin' from the others. They ain't gon' ask you to do nothin', though. You the Wonderchild. Y'got it good. They ain't in no place to talk to you."

"What does that mean?"

"I hear what y'could do. Y'can move things with y'mind, can't ya—"

"No. I don't know—"

"Y'ven killed them woodsmen. Made that bridge go tumble-tumble. Heard 'bout that."

"The ropes snapped."

The boy laughed. "Aye, if y'get angry with us here, y'gonna crumble the mountain? Y'can tilt the mountain and all of us come tumble-tumblin' down."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bah," the boy scoffed. "Y'know the truth, y'just won't say. Why else they gon' through all that to bring

you back here, yeah? Y'don't look so tough. There's somethin' more behind them skins-n'-bones."

"Someone's lying to you."

"The Burg want you. Mesa want you. Nobody want somethin' for no reason. If I's you, I'd burn everythin' to the ground. Ain't trust nobody. That's what my ma says."

"You don't understand. I can't do any of these things."

"Somethin' bad gon' happen soon. Sam the Hale, he say you doomin' us all by steppin' foot here. Only a wait-n'-a-whistle and that's it for us."

I had nothing to say to that.

The boy laughed at my silence, his voice fading now. "Might as well happen that way. That's what some folk say. The land's dyin'. Might as well die with it."

"What do you mean, the land's dying?"

He said nothing else after that. I waited for any type of response. No laughs. No scoffs. He was gone. I headed back to the village square, where the tunesmiths had already started. Some of the flutes were blown from the end and some were blown along the sides. A quartet of little girls sung at the front of the podium, their palms clapped together, their small buckskin dresses flutter-

ing with the wind. A few glowing lanterns hanging from wooden poles lit paths around the village.

To the right was a giant clay cauldron suspended from a wooden beam over a fire. A man turned a lever that swung the cauldron along the fire while another tossed chopped herbs into it. It belched out a cloud of peppery steam.

Vela tugged at me from behind and sat me down on a stool, where three girls wearing feathered laurels danced around me. Elm and Carver sat on a tree stump and sipped from clay bowls. They exchanged glances from time to time but didn't speak.

Elm glanced over at me and snickered at my look of confusion as the girls' feet swivelled around me. I kept recoiling, thinking I would get hit by their flailing arms as they circled me. I brought my kneecaps up against my stomach. My head pulsated. I told Vela I was thirsty and she brought me a jug of water. I drank the whole thing. It didn't quench my thirst, but I didn't want to ask for another.

The girls kissed my face and laughed. The cauldron bobbed back and forth. I sneezed from the high smell of pepper. Vela wiped my nose with a bristly cloth. The flutes playing another melody. I had to strain to hear it because my head ached so much.

Elm came to me and brushed her palm against my cheek. She was about to say something, but a strained yell from the village entrance cut her off. Two men came running through the square.

“Fire in the sky! Fire in the sky! The Thunderbird’s a-comin’!” one of them shouted with his palm cupped over his mouth. Another followed him, banging on a large drum.

Elm gasped, her nails running down my cheek
The reed flutes stopped. The singers went quiet.
Carver dropped the cup he was sipping from and reached to unsheathe his blade.

“The Thunderbird’s a-comin’! Fire in the sky!” the man kept calling.

I looked up, but there was no fire.

Then a fork of lightning shot across the sky, each tine piercing the grey haze. It wasn’t ordinary lightning, though. It bent into curves and parabolas, and there was no accompanying thunder. Or even rain. In the dark sky, a black mist wafted over the mountain and the village.

For a while, I tried to convince myself that it was all part of the ritual, that this was somehow normal and part of the plan. But Vela’s expression shattered that thought. The creases along her nose deepened as her steely eyes remained fixed on the mist.

A powerful gust of wind parted the mist and dove across the village grounds, throwing several people on their backs, knocking over the food from the tables. I fell too, just as the plates smashed against the ground.

A winged figure emerged from the mist. It was an automaton, I think, with a metal helmet adorn with wings at its temples. Its silver body glimmered as its metallic white wings spread out from its back.

I scuttled into the burrow. I entered foot-first and crawled backwards into it. From there, I could have still seen the village square, the cauldron, the podium. I kept my eyes on Vela's feet as they braced for another windy impact. Sambor did the same.

I couldn't see the sky from this angle. But I could tell that the automaton was descending. The villagers stepped back. The automaton's feet never touched the ground.

It spoke in a deep, rumbling voice, "*WHERE IS THE BOY.*"

The villagers said nothing. It spoke again, flapping its wings, "*THE BOY FROM THE BURG.*" Its voice was loud and had a smooth mechanical resonance. Artificial and amplified, as if through a bullhorn.

Vela looked around. She said, "Ain't no boy here!"

Sambor said, "Ain't right to do this, Bird!"

"*WHERE IS HE.*"

"Ain't no Burg boy come 'round here," Vela said.

"*THE BOY IS NEAR.*"

Sambor shot a glance at Vela. The automaton turned to him and said, "*TELL ME WHERE HE IS, OR I WILL BURN YOUR HOUSES.*"

"Told ya, he ain't here!" Vela retorted.

"*I WAS TOLD —*"

"You was told wrong!"

Sambor added, "You oughta leave now, Bird!"

"*ENOUGH.*"

The Thunderbird screeched and a bolt struck a nearby canvasa. A sharp cracking boom shot through the air, and tails of fire dragged along the branches. Burning flakes of cloth with fiery driblets rained over the villagers as they screamed and crouched to avoid the scatter.

Even Sambor fell over, his palms clasping the nape of his neck. But Vela remained still, her feet still sturdy against the ground.

"*YOU MUST COOPERATE.*"

I felt as if someone was wringing my brain like a wet rag—wringing it dry over a sink. I told myself that all I had to do was come out of the burrow and I could prevent another this from happening. With all this talk of power that I didn't have, I knew that I at least had the power to stop Mesa from being turned to ash. I

could make it stop. All I had to do was crawl out and show my face—that was it. But then I asked myself, Were these strangers' huts more valuable than my flesh?

The automaton twirled his rod and the hairs on my arm stood up. I shut my eyes.

Another bolt penetrated the mist around it, and blew another house to pieces.

A plank zipped out of the explosion and hit a woman in her torso.

She lied on the ground, bleeding. But nobody budged.

A child wailed, reaching his arm out at the woman. He scraped the ground, getting sand and stone under his nails.

"THE BOY, OR ANOTHER BURNS."

"You aim to destroy our homes for somethin' that ain't known to you?" Vela asked, her voice breaking.

"HAVE IT YOUR WAY." The child hauled a rock at it and hit its visor. Caught by surprise, the automaton flapped its wings and a white flash blinded everybody. I could only hear a sharp sizzle and the child's gurgling scream before it was severed into silence.

When the light subsided, there was a scorched corpse where the wailing child was, the sand and stone still beneath his nails. Rings of smoke rose from his

charred tunic. The woman lied bleeding still, but she was struck conscious, crying in agony.

Sambor was in shock. I was too far away to see Vela's expression. The burning child was only a few stretches away from her. I imagined it; her eyes glazed and sunken, her bottom lip trembling, her face moist and pallid. She said nothing this time. No bold words, no retorts. But she still stood upright while the others cowered between their elbows.

The automaton was silent, fixed on the child.

Just as Sambor was about to speak, Vela sprung up and yelled, "*You dratted thing. Burn me next!*"

She ran to the automaton with a blade. She leapt, aiming for the rod out of his hands.

There was another white flash just as their bodies connected.

But there was no scream this time.

She didn't make a sound when the bolt hit her. She didn't even fall.

The bolt blasted the automaton backwards. It lied on the ground, shaking its head.

Vela dropped to her knees, her burning body twitching and arching. Her neck twisted back and her jaw opened, a mouthful of flamelets weaving along her tongue. The fires swept over her clothes and her stiffened body fell to the side.

The automaton got up. Some of its parts had fallen off, blown off by the bolt. Its shaky hand reached for the broken rod. It turned its head to look at the rest of the villagers.

Its helmet was dented.

"*STUPID,*" it said, the machinery in its frame sputtering before taking off and vanishing, leaving the blaze behind.

The two burning canvasas let out a slow puckering sound, each of them wheezing black smoke into the dark sky. I imagined the blaze reflected against everyone's faces, sweat draping anger and confusion.

Sambor was the first to get up. He trudged over to Vela's burning body and prodded her neck with his foot. At the same time, men rushed to the burning canvasas and loosened the tethers that kept the cloth stretched against the branches. They yanked and seized the burning cloths, and stamped on them. They beat the flames off the tree with rugs and hides.

As this went on, the woman that was lain bleeding on the ground rolled over to the dead child and reached out to cradle him. She held him tightly against her chest, even though traces of fire still lined his back. She cried out, "The Burg boy ain't got no cause to save us! *Sam was right, he gon' to let us die!*"

By then, a small crowd had gathered around Vela's body. The woman's cry got their attention. Sambor raised his arms and shouted, "Told you this'd happen! Where's the boy now? He bring this!"

"*He bring this!*" the bleeding woman cried out.

Sambor said, "We been takin' up in things that shoulda had nothin' to do with us!"

Carver, emerging from another crowd of people, said to the villagers, "Vela took up in what she did—she believe. All happenin' here just shows how much we need the boy."

Sambor said, "And where's the boy now? Where is the Wonderchild, this deliverer you folk been preachin' 'bout for the past thousand morns?"

I knew I had to come out of hiding. I had to force my cramping feet out. I was glad no one saw me crawl out when I did.

Most of my life, I didn't want people thinking I was a milksop. But there I was, a true milksop with dead leaves in my hair, dirt on my pants and a shudder in my limbs. As I stumbled into the crowd, I almost got knocked down by two men. Sambor spotted me before Carver did. He pointed at me and said, "The deliverer delivers 'imself. Eh, Carver?"

The villagers all turned to me. The girls who were kissing me, the tunesmiths, the ladies in their best

dresses, the men in their best hemp tunics. A sudden breeze whipped a flock of ashes between me and them. The lanterns swayed and creaked with the wind.

Elm looked on, leaning against one of the supports of her canvasa.

Carver stood to my right. He said to the villagers, "Trust in the Tides, as we always did. We ain't never been led stray. Vela known that. You ought not mistake what happened—"

"*What happened?*" Sambor scoffed. He stood to my left and put a heavy hand on my shoulder. One of the dangling lanterns lit up half his face—his bulbous nose and shrivelled lips. He continued, "Young Carver, *what happened* was that we been makin' a good livin' for ourselves and the young 'uns here. It was good until this talk of a deliverer slithered into our thoughts. Ain't nothin' more we need in Mesa. There only been a dratted few of us here hungerin' for more. Hungerin' for some blinded *s spite*." He turned his chin up at Carver. "Spite that sent nine men to doom."

A woman from the crowd said, "We been trustin' in the Tides, but the Tides couldn't save them men."

Carver took a deep breath. He said, "Sure by now y'veen getting' to know that our land is dyin'. The land, it ain't no good for crops no more. Harder and harder

to get anythin' that's worth a dratted snuff outta the soil no more. The beasts, the fowls, the fish, they gone."

Sambor said, "And somehow this boy, this Wonderchild, this Wanderin' Child—" he squeezed my shoulder, "—he know how to set this right? He know how to bring the land back and draw in the hunt?"

"Maybe the boy, he make good bait!" a man shouted from the crowd.

Another shouted, "Yeah, we been through dry-times 'fore!"

People were still gathering, pouring in from their huts and from around the corners. I couldn't bear to see them all looking at me, so I kept my gaze fixed downwards. "And what helped us through the dry-times?" Carver said. "Ain't it not the Tides? Who give us crop and meat. All of you, y'forget once your bellies full?"

Sambor bowed his head. His hand drifted down to my back. Carver continued, "Ain't in me to know how the Tides goes 'bout doing its deeds, or why. We'd all be dead in the dirt otherwise. Any folk here wanna head outta Mesa and sink their teeth on their brother's flesh can be off right now and join 'em woodsmen."

Sambor said, "You seekin' to threaten these people?"

Carver turned to him. "Are *you*?"

"What if the Thunderbird swoop back lookin' for the boy?" a woman from the crowd asked.

Carver said, "We be ready for the Bird next time."

Sambor said, "We gave this madness a turn. Been more than too long since this crooked thing started. Now we have a dead sucklin'. Vela is eead. Now, y'tell us to give your shoddy arrows and stones a chance 'gainst his lightning bolts, Cane? Y'aim to take us for scapes and fools." He turned to the crowd, "We give up the boy next time. Only take one of us to speak when the time is right."

"I'll speak," a woman from the crowd said. She stepped forward. She looked to be about Vela's age. She was tall and had dark brown skin and wore a tunic like the men. Long pink scars ran along her lean muscular arms. Her clumpy black hair was tied back into a feathery puff. She said, "One of my sons, he died 'board that dratted Ark. Ain't never gon' have no grave here in Mesa for him. My boy, along with eight others. Y'know what it's like to bear, then have 'im die for nothin', Sam?"

Sambor turned to the woman, cradling her charred son. He said, "Ain't a feelin' known to me. I ain't got no young 'uns, Yemen Sol. You oughta know that."

Yemen said, "It ain't a feelin' known to me either, Sam, 'cause we aim to finish what we start. My boy

ain't die for nothin'." She then turned to the other villagers and said, "I was firebearer 'fore Vela. Now, with her gone, I just have one thing to say."

She strolled behind me. Carver and Sambor drifted away from my side as she did. She placed both her hands on my shoulder. I had only noticed then that she was so tall, she could've pressed her chin on my scalp. She cast a long, hard gaze on the villagers and said, "The boy stays. I am 'fore you now. And none of you ain't gon' turn your backs on me or anyone that fought and died for the sake o' Mesa."

Sambor said to the villagers, "This boy, he ain't aimin' to be the way he is. But the boy is a living blight. They had all o' you. For all this time, they clasped your nostrils and rallied you forward with this foul plan." He then said to Yemen, "Y'wait and see, Sol. Y'aim to be our firebearer and all, rightly so, but y'better hope y'keep that fire burnin' bright enough for all o' us." He turned to the villagers and directed their eyes at Vela's corpse. "Or we'll be in for more days as this in the comin' m—"

"One day, there ain't gon' be no more *morns* in Mesa, you old scape," Carver interrupted. "This what I been tryin' to say."

The bleeding woman, still kneeling beside her charred child, said, "Not with that Bird flittin' bout."

"Ain't nothin' for us neither way," another added.

The woman shot back, "None, but we barter a li'l more time for us by riddin' ourselves of the boy."

Yemen said to her, "I have a dead boy too, Alys—"

"Aye, but your son wanted to die!" Alys shot back, getting up.

Yemen said, "The boy stays. Y'hear me?"

Alys said, walking towards her, "Y'ven get the right boy? How y'know this is 'im?"

Yemen shook her head. "Y'jabbering now, Alys? I know 'cause your son is dead. 'Cause Vela is dead. The Burg ain't aimin' to send that death machine here otherwise."

"The boy can tear that Bird to shreds, can't he?" a young boy asked, pointing at me.

Another boy said, "Aye. The Tides say so."

Sambor said, "That's pure claptrap. The Tides been known to twist plaintalk."

"Rip somethin'!" the first boy said.

I looked at my shadow. I kept shaking my head as the two boys kept going on and on.

Rip somethin'! Shred it up! Tear it in half!

Yemen clenched my shoulders. She exclaimed, "Enough!" The two boys shut up straightaway. She then said, "I trust in the Tides more than I trust the plaintalk

jabber and dungtalk from some folk in this village, Sam."

"I want to see 'im tear something in half," Alys said. She then looked at me. "Go 'head. Y'worth eleven dead? Show us."

I stepped back against Yemen's bosom. Alys kept on, "Do it. Show us. We waitin'."

She then leapt forth, pouncing on me. Her nails left three bloody lines on my cheek.

I fell backward and yelped.

Elm bounded from the crowd and sprung on Alys. The scuffle lasted a few seconds, with Elm hooking her legs around Alys's neck.

Sambor's hands balled into fists.

"Don't harm 'er!" Yemen cried out.

Carver came to my aid. He dabbed the scrape marks with a cloth.

I had never been attacked before. Never had blood leak down my skin other than from the maze of thorns in the bloodflower garden. I expected everyone to start shouting, but the noise was quelled faster than it began.

"Take her home," Yemen told two men.

Elm, though hesitant, loosened her leg-grip on Alys.

Alys rubbed her neck and coughed, hacking up a long line of mucus. The men hoisted her up by her shoulders and walked her back to her hut, being careful

not to step on the charred child. Sambor went with them.

Elm came to my side. She took over for Carver, wiping the blood off my cheeks and jaw. Carver said to the villagers, "Go home. We ain't risk makin' this day any more blightsome. Go home."

The villagers began to disperse. A few nodded, others shook their heads and others spat on the dirt. I looked at the flower decorations as they marched back to their homes. The pinwheels hissed as they cut through the wind. When the square was empty, Yemen said to Elm, "Clean 'im up."

Elm took me back to the canvasa. She sat me on a stool and dipped a rag in a bowl of water. She wiped the rest of the stained blood from my face and wrung the rag dry into the water. I wanted to tell her that I couldn't tear things in half. I opened my mouth and almost said it, but relented at the last moment. Instead, I said, "I'm not sure what's going on."

Elm shook her head. She said, "Mesa ain't know what's good for 'em." She wrung the rag again. "Ain't exactly the welcome y'expected, I know."

"Am I safe?" I asked.

She smiled. She dabbed my forehead with the rag. "You have hunters on your side. That's all y'gotta know 'bout bein' safe."

"You're a hunter too?"

"Borned-n'-breded." She wrung the rag for the last time. She then laid me on a small cot and sat on a stool facing it.

Carver entered at the same time. He was saying, "That grimy Sambor ain't finished. He got half the village rilin' up."

Elm turned to him. "Right now?"

Carver paced around. "In his house. Got a gatherin' of the carpenters and cauldroners hecklin', goin' on 'bout Vela and that child." He opened a small basket and took out a sweet potato, and bit into the raw starchy tuber. He then said, "The boy good? Patch 'im up? That madwoman coulda took his eyes out."

Elm said, "She ain't no madwoman but she ain't in no right mind. Who would be? She's aimin' to do anythin' now that her own young un's gone. Got hit with a plank to the chest, ribs probably broke, could imagine the pain."

Carver was still pacing. He said, after taking another bite, "Broke ribs, y'say? Pain? She in there, soakin' up Sam's jabber."

"That old clod," Elm said, gritting her teeth. "He been waitin' for this day. He wants this to fall through."

"We should leave? Take the boy with us?" Carver looked at me.

Elm shook her head. "Folk are hasty, but they ain't no woodsmen. Just a whole lot of talk and no wallop. Easier to whack the odd flailin' madman than outrun a horde o' woodsmen, aye?"

Carver finished the sweet potato. He said, "We're headin' out now."

"Where you off to?" Elm asked.

"We layin' Vela's body down. Some boys already got to diggin' the hole. Hunters gotta go help 'em."

Elm got up. "I'm comin'."

"You stay. Ain't know what Sambor could pull off."

"Y'know Sam and those folks just piping with hot steam, Carver."

"Hot steam still burns, Elm," Carver said. "Best y'stay here."

Elm nodded. When Carver left, I'd started planning my escape. Elm sat at a table. She grabbed a small blade and used it to whittle down pieces of wood. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. I listened to the chafing of the wood as she shaved the sharp edges, waiting for her to get drowsy and drop her guard.

11

THE BEAST THAT CHASES YOU

When Elm stopped whittling, she put her head down on the table. I lied and listened to the sounds of the night, distant doleful bayings—things I'd never heard before in the Burg. I turned to my side, trying my best not to rustle the blankets on the cot. I looked at Elm. I couldn't tell if she was asleep.

So, I considered the scenarios. It was dark. I could sneak out. Even if Elm noticed me, I could make a run for it. They weren't going to hurt me. Only a slice of the village wouldn't allow me to leave, and they were all at Vela's burial. The only ones left in the village were the ones who wouldn't stop me. There was no better time, I thought. Elm would stumble out of the house and ask the villagers if they'd seen me, but they would all shake their heads and keep quiet even if they did.

I climbed out of cot—one foot and then the other. I kept my eyes on Elm the whole time. If she asked anything, I would tell her that I wanted some water. I'd

barely eaten, aside from a half a tuber of crimroot and what I believed to be a roasted tail. It was the first time I'd ever eaten another animal. In the Burg, our diets were mostly starches, legumes and mineral shakes and supplements. Eating meat went against protocol and was always viewed as vulgar. But I was so hungry that I didn't care about vulgarity. I gobbled it right up.

What had been left of the communal feast was dished out in small bushels before they could be pecked at and picked up by the birds.

As I made it outside, one of the streamers flapped away with the wind and nearly hit my face. Specks of ash still twisted in the breeze. The air still smelled high of smoke and burnt lumber. Most of the lanterns had been blown out and even though there were a few people lurking about, nobody bothered to rekindle them.

I walked away from the house, scared to be noticed even though I knew I was just a shadow to these people—just as they were a shadow to me. Only one lantern had still been lit along the stretch. People were gathered along the doorway of the house it illuminated. I didn't get close to it because I already knew whose house it was. Sambor's voice bellowed and spilled outside in a deep muffle. I didn't want to hear what he was saying. I didn't even want to surmise.

As far as I knew, there were two exits in the village. The first was from where I'd come, through the giant guarded wooden doors. The second was along the sandy slope that descended to the Deep Grey. Both were well-guarded and gated.

I kept my distance from the villagers, though I could tell when they turned their heads to me. I made it to the descent but then noticed something that I hadn't before—another slope that led down to a ledge. It was brighter here. The moonlight reflected off tiny crystals on the ground. A sweep of glowflies glided in a semi-circle along the ridge. Some settled on the rocks.

The crucial thing was that there were no guards.

When I approached it, however, I lost hope for a moment. A rocky chasm lied below, with a rapid emptying into the Deep Grey. On the other end of the ledge was another cliff, obscured by a line of trees. It was only when I stared down at the rapid that I realized I had no plan.

What choices did I have?

I could continue, and get lost in the shadows, where I could get disembowelled by a horde of woodsmen. If I trekked back to the Fenlands and tried to settle somewhere else, I could get eaten by Great Wing or whatever other beasts roamed the Outsidess. If I made it as far back to the Burg, I couldn't predict what would hap-

pen. But I knew I wasn't getting anywhere if I didn't stop being a milksop.

I had to stop thinking and start moving.

I pressed my back against the rock wall and sidled across the ledge. I tried not to look down. I just followed the glowflies. The sound of the rapid in the chasm rumbled upwards with the cold wind.

I stopped for a moment. I looked up at the night sky, which was still shrouded by the thick grey fog. The moon was just a haze of white powder. I imagined behind the miasma were the shapes and constellations from my childhood moments with Ollie. I pictured the stars materialising through the grey. I still hadn't gotten accustomed to not seeing them, and couldn't fathom growing up not knowing they were there. I wondered how many in the Burg knew that on the other side of their bulwarks and ramparts were men, women and children not just of another land, but of another sky.

When I got to the other side, the same pattern of crystals was lain out there. It was darker there. Dim filaments of light shot through the interstices of the trees. I tried to stay in areas where the light filtered through, despite the direction the path took me.

I tried to avoid the dead leaves under my boots, but they littered the entire forest floor. The soil was dry and

split into fissures. The clovers and thistles that managed to spout from the cracks were withering.

The light reflected off two rows of thick stalks that formed parallel partitions. Some of them were broken off halfway. As my eyes zipped between both rows, I saw holes carved into some of them. Blue lights flashed in some of them. I approached them. Were they ghostlights? Was there an illusion within those filtering streaks of light? Or was it just my mind?

I decided to sit there—right there on the soil. The lights reappeared on the stalks. I examined the stalks again and noticed that there were tiny machines fitted inside of them—speakers of some kind. The stalks vibrated at low frequencies, but I couldn't hear any sound. They resembled the speakers that the researchers from the Mammalogy Charter used back in the Burg. They used them to study infrasonic perception and migratory responses from animals.

What were they doing here—and why? It was at this point I seriously considered that I was in the middle of a sleepsighted stupor. That my body was still back in that cot.

I kept walking until my feet sank into a tall mound of mud—at least, that was what I thought it was. When I tried to remove my foot from it, my boot dislodged. I left the boot there and kept walking until I came to a

glade with a hill beside it. An opening in the canopy there allowed a large disk of light to shine onto it. I stopped because of a loud groan that was sounding from the hill.

I tiptoed closer to it, and then recoiled. It moved.

The hill *moved*. I managed to keep quiet.

The hill was rising—rising and falling.

It was breathing.

It was *alive*. And lucky for me, it was asleep.

Any bravery that was in my veins quickly bled right out of my body at that point. I began taking stepping back, very slowly stepping back. I wasn't even afraid of the hill-beast taking a bite into me. I was afraid of it swallowing me whole—being trapped inside its gut with nothing to do but wait for its acid to digest my skin and melt my bones. *That* was how big it was.

I kept backing away until I was out of the light. Never had I been so reassured to be in darkness. I followed the illuminated pattern of specks on the forest floor back to the ledge that led me there.

The farther I got from it, the more I doubted my sight. I wondered if my mind had manifested the whole spectacle. The glade wasn't well-lit. I wondered if the light falling on the hill could render and animate it in such a way. I wasn't prepared to go back to be sure.

A milksop, I'd prefer to be than supper for the *hill-beast*,
if it indeed was real.



Finding my way back around the ledge wasn't as bad as before. When the wind whipped up, I reminded myself that there was no way the hill-beast could fit on the ridge. I noticed a figure waiting for me on the other side of the ledge. When I came close to it, I saw that it was Alys.

I didn't say anything. I tried to hurry past her.

She told me, "Just lemme say somethin' to you." She pulled my sleeve. As the wind whipped up again, a flight of glowflies circled past her face.

I pulled away. "Let me go."

She grabbed me by my collar and spun me around so that my back was facing the chasm. I was two steps

away from it. She hissed, “*My son is dead!* And you will, ACK!—”

—She was cut off by the long wooden arrow through her neck. A plume of blood sprayed over my hair. Her face was frozen in shock. Her nails dug into my collarbone until her grasp on me slipped.

Then another figure leapt out from behind her, grabbing my hand and pulling me away.

“Hand slipped.”

It was Elm.

“Hand slipped,” she kept repeating.

Alys’s hands were clasped around her own neck, prodding at the arrow. She stumbled forward.

Just as she was about to fall into the chasm, Elm dropped her bow and grabbed her.

They both fell to the ground, near the ledge.

Alys let out a shrill gurgle. She climbed on top of Elm and balled her fists together. “Alys, stop!” Elm cried out.

I pulled Alys off of her. Elm scrambled to get up. A cold wind lashed up from the chasm.

Elm grabbed her bow and said, “My hand slipped, Alys!”

At that time, a few villagers had gathered at the top of the slope. I recognized the one at the front immedi-

ately as Sambor. I wondered if he'd been there the whole time.

"Go! Go get 'em!" he ordered two villagers, who came skating down to the scuffle.

One grabbed Elm and the other supported Alys on the crook of his shoulder. "Go help 'er!" Sambor ordered a third, who helped get Alys back to the village.

Elm looked at me. She was breathing hard. The villager holding onto her prodded her to go to Sambor. Nobody had to force her. "The boy has to come too," he said, so I followed.

We went back to the centre of the village square, where the tunesmith podium still stood. He dragged Elm onto the podium and stood beside her. I stood behind them. The villagers gathered before us. Others were rushing to tend to Alys. "This here gal," he began. "Y'see her? Y'aim to say somethin' 'gainst Elm the Sharp? I hope not, lest you want an arrow through y'neck!"

"My hand slipped! I was aimin' for the arm!"

Sambor laughed. "And do tell us why you'd shoot our Alys in the arm? Our Alys, who lost her own just earlier today. Our Alys, who has no kin 'cause to you and those with you."

Elm began to shudder. "She was goin' to throw the boy *off the cliff!*"

"So be it, then!" a woman cried out.

Sambor stroked his chin. He said to the villagers, "They want to hunt you just like they hunt the beasts. They shoot arrows into y'throat to drown out y'voice with blood—"

"Shut up, Sam," a rough voice from the crowd cut him off. A middle-aged man with an eyepatch stepped forth. All eyes were on him. Elm's shuddering stopped.

Sambor twisted his mouth. "Y'have things to say, Java?"

"Y'wheeded that poor woman into doing your foul deeds, you old clod," Java said, pointing at him. "Y'oughta be ashamed. Your words aim to bring nothin' but fear and blood tonight. If it's anyone who needin' an arrow in their throat, Sam, it's you."

"I *wheedled* her, Java?"

Java turned to the other villagers. "No ma should have to bury her own. All that hurt's bound to be moulded into blind rage." He looked at Sambor again. "Y'used that woman as your arrow, Sam. Y'aimed her right at that boy." He spat on the ground.

Sambor puffed his chest up. "That boy's a blight—"

"The boy's not aimin' to harm us," Java cut him off. "Neither is Elm. Leave 'em be."

"The cauldroner thinks what Elm did was right, fellow people!" Sambor exclaimed, throwing his arms up.

"The cauldroner," Java said, "only thinks 'bout one thing, Sam. And that is that our food is runnin' dry. Y'ever scoured for herbs, Sam? They ain't nowhere to be found no more. Go look. Right now. Dig in this dyin' soil of ours. Find 'em for me. Find one for me that's worth a snifflin' snuff."

The crowd shuffled around. Java continued, "I like bein' a cauldroner, Sam, just as you like bein' a carpenter. I like bein' a cauldroner because I like food. And I'm the first one to know that we're runnin' out of it, plaintalk. Crops won't grow, the fish is no good, the beasts is gone. Great Wing's already feedin' off this carcass of a forest."

Sambor stood, arms to waist. "Mesa will go up in flames if that boy stay here."

"Y'work too hard to scare these people, Sam."

"They don't need me to scare 'em, Java." He looked at the crowd. "Y'fix your faces, put up all these things, cook the last of our food—and for what? For this blight?" He pointed at me.

Java said, "We ain't got a choice. Sure y'aware of the other choice? To do what the others do on the other side o' the mount?"

"We ain't gon' do that. Y'trying to make me out to be like one of them damn woodsmen."

"I ain't even talkin' 'bout no woodsmen, Sam. The other villages started doin' it. Take in the new Trespassers, wash 'em, give 'em a cot. And at night, reap 'em as dinner! You seen it, Sam? Bodies hangin' upside-down along a vine stretched from home to home in the heat, strung up like dryin' cloth. Lads-n'-lasses chasin' each other under them. People lickin' their lips as they rend them, limb from limb and dump them into the cauldron. That's what y'want for Mesa, Sam?"

Sambor got red. He said, "Maybe we'll get to that now that the food is gone! The boy goes on the plate first—y'want an arm or a leg? The Burg keep churning them out, y'know!"

"Y'spouting jabber now, Sam," another man from the crowd said.

A low grumble rippled along the crowd. "Go to sleep, Sam," another man said. "We all need to sleep it off."

Java held his hand up to the villagers. "He's supposed to save the land, Sam. Some folk here been sprats n' sucklings since talk of this started. And now he's here. I trust in the Tides."

"We ain't got a choice, Sam," a man said. The people began to disperse.

Sambor started, "But the girl—"

"Let Yemen handle her," a woman said.

The crowd disbanded with muffled nattering, dispersing back into their huts and houses. Java smirked, a glint of victory in his eye. Sambor looked at me and Elm. “This ain’t over,” he said. He then turned to Java and said, “My boys and I ain’t doin’ a lick of work until this blight been wheeled outta Mesa.”

Java kept on smirking. He said, “That ain’t sound like the words o’ someone who cares about the order of this village, Sam.”

Elm took my hand and we rushed off the podium. “Where are we going?” I asked her.

We headed to the house where they kept Alys. She was asleep. A strip of brown cloth was wrapped around her neck, concealing the puncture. An older woman knelt at her side and wrung water on her forehead. Elm stepped through the doorway and the older woman turned around. She scowled and went back to tending to Alys. “I ain’t think y’should be here,” the woman said.

Elm said, “When she wake up, tell her for me. Tell her I’m sorry—”

The older woman said, “She been hearin’ it all evenin’, right up ‘til we shovelled dirt on her boy. Y’think she need to hear it one more time?”

Elm shook her head. She stood, watching for a moment. She said nothing else.

Yemen and the rest of the hunters returned about an hour afterwards. Elm broke down crying while explaining what happened with Alys, but Yemen did little to console her. Carver took her back to their house.

A night had never felt so long in my life. It was hard to believe that just two days prior, I was in the Burg, in Dr. Lavender's guest bedroom. Yemen insisted I stay with her that night. So they took me from one itchy cot to another.

Yemen sat on a chair facing my bed, so she could keep watch on me for the rest of the night. "Not sleepy?" she asked me.

I shook my head. She pursed her lips. "Ain't blame you," she said, chuckling. "I think I'll have to wait a few days 'til I can sleep again."

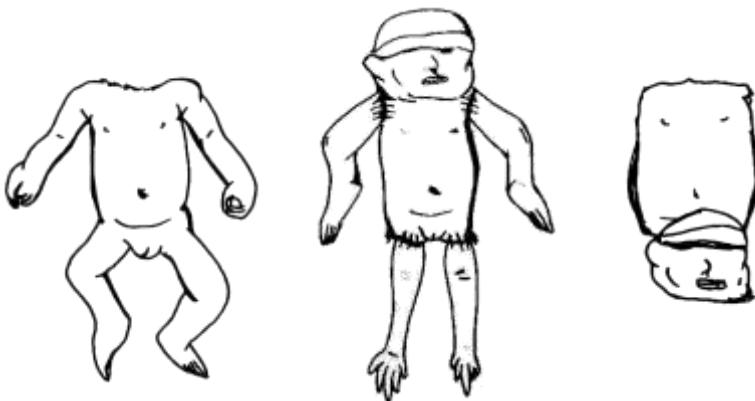
I asked her, "Is it fine if I walk around?"

Yemen nodded. I got up from the bed and began walking the circular perimeter of the canvasa. One part of it had been sectioned off by drapes. I pulled them open to reveal a boy, about my age, lying in bed. His listless gaze was fixed on me. Yemen told me, "That's Leef, my own boy."

I waved at him. He just looked at me until I closed the drapes.

"He ain't been talkin' since he hear his brother died in the Ark," Yemen said.

A small stack of pictures on Yemen's table caught my attention. But when I saw them, I wished I didn't. There were three photographs, each one of a maimed baby.



The first one—the same one that Tom Scullion had kept with him—showed the baby lying on its back with its head cut off.

The second one, the head was there but the arms and legs had exchanged places, as if severed and reattached that way.

The last one, all the baby's limbs had been lopped off. The head had been cut off and placed on its crotch, facing me.

It was only upon looking at the last one that I noticed all three were the same baby. Its face had that same asymmetrical nose and cleft lip. My hands began to shake so much that I dropped the pictures.

"There was more," Yemen said, picking up the pictures. I recoiled as she reached to touch my arm. She said, "I keep 'em so I could keep mind o' what the Burg think of us."

"The Burg did this?" My voice came out as a hoarse whisper.

Yemen nodded. "This was the sucklin' of one of the mothers who moved in there for the Attuning."

"Somalia Castor," I muttered.

Yemen furrowed her brow. "Mmm. Carver tell you then?"

"Why would the Burg do this?"

"Poor thing died 'fore its time. The Burg folk took a believin' that Somalia kill her own child so they wouldn't be able to do their tests. Of what use is a Re-oriented mama with no child?"

"Why didn't they send her back to Mesa?"

Yemen leafed through the photographs before putting them back on the table. She said, "'Cause that'd be too easy. They move her to the swamp, told her to make her livin' there. She was doin' well 'til strange men started nailin' them pictures to the door."

I had to sit down. I traced my toes against the ground. I didn't even want to look at her when I asked her, "Why?"

"Why? 'Cause that is what they think of us."

"But we don't think these things."

Yemen knelt before me and held my hand. "They near burnt the village down. You seen it for y'self."

I shot up from the chair, almost knocking Yemen back. I was shaking still. "That *thing* didn't come from the Burg!"

Yemen nodded. She led me back to the cot. She pulled up the chair, sat beside me and stroked my forehead. She began talking, "We have a sayin', passed down from them 'fore us."

"What is it?"

"The thing y'have to know 'bout the beast that chases you." She leaned forward. "Don't have to be quicker than the beast. Y'just have to be quicker than the others runnin' from it."

"What does that mean?"

"The beast ain't gon' eat us all. At least, not at the same time." She folded her arms. I didn't even try to make sense of it at the time. I didn't want to talk anymore. I turned to face away from her, closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. By the time I actually did fall asleep, Yemen had never left my side.

12

THE FINAL MOMENTS
OF MARQUIS DOVE

When I heard the birds, I knew morning had come. Yemen got up from her chair. I listened to her speaking with Leef, but I didn't hear much of what she said. About two minutes later, she was gone. I wanted to wait a little longer before getting up, but I fell asleep again.

I woke up a few hours later. I wandered around the house. I shifted the drapes to peek into Leef's room, but he wasn't there. I was hungry, so I rummaged through some of the bushels that were stacked against a corner. There wasn't much else but fruits. I gobbled up two heartplums and swiped a handful of sweetnuts.

I wanted to leave the house, but anything seemed liable to happen out there—an arrow through the throat, a knife through the gut, a bolt through the brain. I wasn't exaggerating. *Anything* was possible in this

place. Perhaps that was what made everyone in Mesa so uneasy. There weren't any savages in the Burg. Everyone went about their business and were content most of the time. Truthwise, we were safe and we knew it. We didn't have to keep on the constant watchguard for hostile automatons. We didn't have to worry about food shortages and droughts. Hill-beasts and giant avians weren't even sleepsighted on the worst nights.

I remember I'd once asked Mom, "Why do the Trespassers have to leave the Burg?"

"What could be done?" she'd told me. "They were born in the wrong place. They have to go where they belong."

"Do they become savages when they leave?"

I remember the thoughtful pause she had. She then said, her tone drifting, "They were always savages, Odie."

Everyone, including me, believed it to be fair, because we were dealing with savages. But now I know that they weren't—not all of them.

I had to be brave, so I decided to go outside.

The villagers were still pulling down the decorations—adornments for a feast that never happened. Women were offloading goods from the panniers attached to the sides of a horse's harness. The women folded their skirts to form bowls to carry the fruits, and

poured them into boxes. The rider on the horse didn't look pleased. The horse itself was impatient, kicking up dirt as if it were ready to gallop away. I overheard the man say, "Ain't know how many more times I could do this. Our village ain't got much food left."

A woman said to him, "This is what you do. There's mouths to feed 'round this mount. We's depend on you."

The rider looked to the village square. There, a group of men toiled at dismantling the podium. Pin-wheels and flowers were still littered across the grounds. The rider asked, "Them folks there, they ain't carpenters. Why ain't the carpenters takin' down the stands?"

"Carpenters held to their word. They ain't done a lick of work for the morn," the woman said.

The rider shook his head. "So y'tellin' me your own folk won't pull their own skins 'round and we gotta be riskin' gettin' swallowed up everytime we come out to feed you like you a bundle of sucklings? That it?"

"By noon, they gon' behave."

"Send 'em to us. We'll season 'em up good, boil 'em with chives, plaintalk."

The woman backed away. The man laughed and said, "I jest. Our folk ain't gon' that route. What worries

me is that by ‘morrow, I ain’t sure if I’ll be jestin’ like that.”

I walked through the village. People noticed me, but acted like they didn’t. They said nothing to me. I imagined they were told to leave me alone, or perhaps they did so on their own accord. In a way, I felt bad, but also relieved. I didn’t want any of them talking to me. Some of them wasted their morning puffing away on smokeweed, and licking at the salty resin on their lips.

A splatter of pasty ash remained on the spot where the dead child had been. Women swept the cinders away with brooms fashioned from bounded, dried thistle-stalks. When I walked past them, they went quiet. I marched the length of the village. At one corner, a dead end, was a steep wall of rock, uneven and hard. The soil there was damp and peaty—covered in leaves from the strip of trees lining the cliff above. A sole hut was built against the rock wall. Just like the ground around it, it was cloaked with fallen leaves.

A young boy stooped on the ground, parting a flap of torn fabric swathing the outer wall of the hut. He was peeping through the flap. I observed him for a minute or two, before making my presence obvious. When he noticed me watching, he pressed his finger against his lips and gestured for me to come over. He was grinning non-stop.

I went over to him. It was only then I saw he was wall-eyed. He whispered to me, "This a rare one." He then grabbed my collar and prodded my face against the open flap.

A naked, corpulent woman shifted her weight back and forth in a small room. It looked as if the room had been sectioned off from the rest of the hut, bordered by black cloths. I couldn't see her face. I could only see halfway up to her breasts. They were large and lumpy. A jagged whorl of auburn pubic hair curled up to her protruding abdomen.

The boy said, "That's Gaspara the Still—a mad-mad bitch."

I didn't take my eyes off the woman. "Ease up, Wonderchild," he said. "Don't get to blowin' no steam in there." He then pushed me away, saying, "Don't hog the view." He peeped through the flap again. As he did, he whispered, "Y'got 'em powers, right?" he turned to me. "Aye?"

"I don't know—"

"Rip things up, aye? With your mind. So they been sayin'."

"I suppose—"

"How 'bout rippin' up hides? Girls' hides?" the boy said, smirking. "While they wearin' 'em? Rip 'em right off their skins. Think y'can do that?"

"I'm not a savage," I said.

He went back to peeping.

I told him, "One day, they'll catch you."

He turned to me and cocked his head. "Y'gonna tell on me, eh?" He shoved me. "Y'ain't worth snuff. I'll kick y'teeth in."

Elm flew into my mind. The image of her, baring everything, sitting opposite me in the bath. And I shoved him back.

My muscles felt stiff—clenched. I shut my eyes tight and gritted my teeth, suddenly borne down by a headache. I didn't even know I did it until after it happened. I'd swung my fist against his cheek and hauled him to the ground.

A trio of birds fluttered from the trees, cawing to the sky.

I looked at my fist. The skin had grazed off two of my knuckles. I stood over him as he rubbed his jaw, a dazed sheen in his eyes, a wobble in his neck. He had tears on his cheeks, but he wasn't crying. His face contorted with rage. I'm certain mine had too. I had never hit anyone before. Had never felt the need to—not even with Rion. The shame I was feeling—I wasn't even sure if it was shame—it overpowered me. If I couldn't figure out where an emotion stemmed from, I blamed my pan-

ic twin. It wasn't me. And that's what slipped out of the mouth as the boy glared up at me: "*It wasn't me!*"

The boy lunged at me.

He threw me down. We both skidded across the mud. I shut my eyes tight. I could feel the pummelling fists on my belly, my chest, my face. He grunted with each swing. My teeth clenched until I swore they would crack.

The next feeling I got I could only describe as heat rising from my wrists to my fingers, as if a fire was about to burst through them. The rest of my body tingled and tensed, as if on the verge of orgasmic sensation. But it wasn't as incapacitating as one.

It was pleasure blended with power.

I cried out and the boy flew backwards—several metres. I heard his body hit the wall. He kicked the dust upwards. A woman stood between us. I didn't recognize her face, but I recognized the full, podgy shape of her body. It was the woman we'd been spying on, now fully clothed.

The boy sprung up, pointing at me. His lips trembled but he couldn't find the words.

Then he ran away.

The woman watched as he disappeared down the slope.

She helped me up and patted the dust off my clothes. "Come," she told me. "Let's get y'cleaned." The woman linked her arm around the crook of my elbow and led me in the hut. I squinted as the pain shot up my arm. My fingers still had that burning feeling in them. My legs bucked and my chest felt heavy, as if invisible weight were strapped to my ribs.

She put me to sit on a makeshift bench, crafted from a plank of wood nailed to two small crates. Beside the bench was a basin of murky water. She asked me, "No-body ain't watchin' over you?"

"I don't know."

"Leef ain't keepin' watch?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

"Strange how y'ended up here on my doorstep. I wanted to talk to you." She then walked over to a table holding an array of small bushels. She opened one containing some leaves and began grinding them with a mortar and pestle. She turned to me. Her eyes crinkled as she smiled. "This here's the best tea," she said.

"Thanks," I said, though I wasn't feeling for tea. My head ached. It was hot and damp. My shirt was already sticking to my chest. My first thought was to lie on the bench, but I just leaned forward, rocking back and forth. I noticed a stack of yarn doilies on another table,

and a row of rugs hanging across a string above me. Some of them had been unfinished—half-woven.

As she ground the leaves, she spoke, “Name’s Gaspara.” She turned to me.

“I didn’t mean to hit him,” I said, still preoccupied with the fight.

“Good that you did. That sprat deserve a good lickin’,” she said.

I shook my head. I had meant to tell her about what we’d been doing, but I changed my mind. I felt guilty, so guilty that I wanted to cry. I had to fight to keep it back—though, I can’t remember a situation where I was ever successful at that. This time, it was no different. I hid my face as the tears streamed down. I held my breath to prevent my epiglottis from bobbing up and down.

Gaspara picked up a small amphora that had been resting by her feet. She tipped it and poured some water into a metal pan. She opened a tiny tinderbox, and produced a piece of flint and a curved rod of firesteel. I’d only read about these materials in my *Omnibus*—never had seen them up close. Phosphorous matches had made them obsolete, before oxi-thermal pins made those obsolete.

The apparatus piqued my interest, nevertheless. To say the least, it distracted me from crying. I wiped my

eyes and watched her strike the flint against the curved steel, and ignite the spark. She struck it again and a flamelet began to form, slowly moving over the base of the pan.

I turned away when she glanced at me, hoping she wouldn't see how red my eyes were. "Y'look just like Marquis," she told me.

I immediately recalled the name from the stele. I asked her, "You knew my father?" My voice was raspy.

She nodded. "Marquis and Oona."

"What was he like?"

She raised the pan a little over the fire, swishing the water back and forth. She said, "He pace the entire up-n'-down of the village bareback, blood stainin' his skins."

I sat up. "Blood?"

She said, "He slice the hides off the hunt—had blood on 'im all morn. We call him Marquis the Red. Used 'em to make boots and buckskins, them hides."

I asked, "So, he was a tailor?"

"Tailor?" She furrowed her brow. "Ain't know what they call it where you come from, but here we call it a hidesman."

"Hidesman. So, my father was a hidesman."

"He was good at it," she said, "but didn't like it much. Found it tiresome. Lookin' into the dead eyes of beasts took 'way the bright from his."

"I can't even imagine it."

"Had deep eyes, so dark and gorgin' that they looked bruised. He had an affliction. Anytime he blink, was like sand was brushin' over his eyes."

"Granulated eyelids," I said.

"That what it call?" A thin film of steam rose from the pan. She set it on the table and patted the fire with a dark cloth until it was out. She poured the water in a cup with the ground tea leaves. She sat beside me on the makeshift bench and set the cup on a stand to my side. "Let it cool," she said.

"Why did he stay here?" I asked her. "Why didn't he go with her?"

"Why would he?"

"I don't understand."

"Marquis and Oona—well, they wasn't nice to each other. Whole village could hear 'em argue, but we's all convinced she swung at him all the time 'cause she had nothin' else to do. They wasn't always that ways. Was as if somethin' swept over her one morn. Like a mite burrowed into her brain in the dark hours and changed her."

"Changed her, how?"

"When she was bearin' you, she 'came tired of everything. She lashed all that on Marquis. 'Came tired of him always smellin' like beast carcass. Hated the hardness of his hands. He couldn't even touch her. Hated 'em—what you call that affliction?"

"Granulated eyelids—"

"Hated 'em granulated eyelids."

I asked, "Did my father feel the same way?"

She shifted closer to me, until our shoulders were touching. She said, "When them people from the Burg came talk-talk-talkin' up a storm 'bout this Attuning, there's nobody wearin' a bigger grinnin' than your mama. Marquis was a Trespasser. Came here when he was a sucklin', y'know."

"Why didn't he go back then?"

"Ain't matter at this point. He set 'imself to stay. Don't matter if it was by some dratted code or care to the village or just some strength he struck up on a whim. Everyone sided with Marquis. And he took pride in this. The Burg man who didn't care 'bout going back to the Burg. Nobody thought much of Marquis the Red "fore that."

"How did he die?" I asked, after some hesitation.

"Woke up, walked past the bridge, stood on the edge o' one of the cliffs past the trees. Then he leapt

and fell into the Grey. Found his stone pendant and his boots washed up at the coast. But never his body."

Before I could say anything, she added, "Some of us ain't even believe he's dead. Some believe Marquis 'came one with *the Tides*.' She shook her head. Then she told me, "Tea's getting' cold."

I looked at the cup. The dark green slivers of leaves swirled slowly in the tea, turning it ruddy-brown. I said, "Maybe later. My stomach aches—"

"The tea helps with that," she said, reaching around me for the cup. She held it in front of me, puckered her lips and blew a light puff of steam under my nose. It had a bitter aroma, and made me feel even more ill. She prodded the rim of the cup against my chin, but I nudged it away with my jaw, almost spilling it over my clothes.

She set the cup next to her. She took my hand and led me to her bed. She propped me up on the bed and sat behind me, so that my back was leaning against her bosom and her legs were pressed parallel to mine. She rubbed the ball of my shoulders and worked her fingers to my collarbone and back.

I began to get that same feeling I had with Vela. That qualial sentiment. I relaxed. I felt almost as if I were falling—more like drifting, like a pollen grain along a high breeze, or a fresh leaf down a tributary, in

total equilibrium. I pictured it. Was the leaf moving, or was it suspended in a world that repositioned and rearranged itself around it?

Her voice sounded out, bringing me out of the reverie. She asked, “What’s different ‘tween here and the Burg?”

“We have a type of pin,” I said, closing my eyes. “Recycles the oxygen, spontaneously combusts it using a solar capacitor. Those are for the small fires. We have furnaces and fusion tanks for the bigger fires.”

“Wish we had those,” she said. “Heard of them. Always thought it would make lighting that bonfire a lot less work.”

“Bonfire?” I asked. “Like the one—”

“I know you heard ‘bout her,” she said, cutting me off. “Indigo was my sister.” I opened my eyes and turned to look at her. It was the past tense that caught my attention. I knew Indigo’s fate right away. “Turn ‘round,” she said, positioning my neck forward. She rubbed my shoulders again, but I couldn’t slip back into my reverie.

The river in my mind had sprouted rocks and driftwood, and I was crashing into each one.

“What happened to her?” I asked.

She got up from the bed. She got on her knees and dragged out an old wooden box from under the bed.

She took out a plastic bottle that I recognized immediately as *Jolly Cola*, a carbonated beverage from the Burg. Part of the label had been torn off.

A sheet of paper was folded and fitted inside.



She held the bottle against her chest, saying, "Mesa wasn't the same without Indigo. But she known what she was doin'."

She handed me the bottle. I twisted the cap open. I hesitated to take the paper out. Gaspara sat behind me, holding me against her chest again. "I want you to read it," she told me.

My fingers trembled as I pinched the edge of the sheet. I took it out and unfolded it slowly. I began reading,

G,

I go to a place known as the Bethel anytime I have to make my plans. I spent the afternoon there today. I'd set myself to write this letter there, but I had gotten so carried away by my thoughts. My clothes were drenched with sweat. The Bethel is the only place in the Burg where I feel comfortable.

The smell reminds me of Mesa. It reminds me of the Out-sides. It is as if this huge building was plucked from our mountains and planted here. I occupy most of my time with the engravings on the walls. I can't understand them. There were drawings of mothers and babies suspended from their arms.

There was a stillness there that reminds me of the back-woods. I remember the joy I used to get as a child looking at the crops in the morning, and looking at the flowerbuds to see if they had bloomed. Do you remember when the villagers would strain the juice from the bark of the tree by the river basin? It was the worst, most bitter drink I ever had, but I miss it. I miss all the worst things about Mesa.

This brings me to a very hard fact. My time has come, I believe. It is hard for me to accept. This may be my last day — I'm not sure. I wish I could be certain of my final hour — or

my final minute. I was foolish to not realize that Oona had been following me for the past week. And I was even more foolish to go to her house and try to bargain with her. She'll reveal what I am and they'll reward her.

I don't want to die among these people, G. I regret

A rope tightened around my neck. I dropped the note and grabbed the rope.

I flailed my arms and kicked my feet in the air. All the blood rushed to my eyes, making them feel like they would burst open. Gaspara grunted behind me in between her laboured breaths. I let out a shrill wheeze.

I bent my neck forward and then thrust it back, hitting her chin.

She jerked backwards, rattling the bed. Her grip loosened a little.

I did it again, knocking her off the bed.

She held the rope as she fell, pulling me down with her.

She strained to double-wrap another coil around my neck. She tugged the ends of the rope, squeezing the coil until I thought my neck would break.

I dragged my heels against the floor, hammering my fists against her big thighs.

My nails ran down her leg, leaving three red streaks. But she kept her grip.

I hacked, feeling a ball of vomit stuck at my throat. I focused on the edges of the ropes, her reddening hands, her protruding knuckles.

I felt the fire at my fingers.

She cried out, her squeal cutting through the air.

Her skin on her knuckles ripped open and the bones came apart. She dropped the rope. I heard her bones crack—just as a mite's skeleton would sound when crunched beneath a boot.

A section of the roof collapsed, and the light seeped in.

I elbowed her belly and leapt out of her grasp.

She lied on her side—that sobbing mass of flesh. That messy assortment of bones.

I stood over her, still feeling the fire at my fingers.

I raised my hands and cried out until I felt my voice could gash my throat open. At the same time, someone kicked the front door open. Sambor stood outside, eyeing me as two men hauled me to the village square.

They tied to a tall wooden pole. They hooked my arms around it, my wrists straining to touch, and fastened them together with twine. Sambor lashed me twice on my leg with a long leather cord while I struggled. The wounds stung in the heat. Sweat dripped into my burning eyes.

Sambor approached me, wiping the sweat off his brow. He then rubbed his moist fist against my cheek, and said to me, "Y'lucky I ain't settin' burning rocks to y'feet. Perhaps we could play some tunes today and watch y'feet try to dance a way to the top of this pole."

Even though my wrists were bound, I managed to wriggle my fingers, desperately trying to draw the fire that had protected me from before. If I could break bones, then what was stopping me from snapping this rope, from splitting this pole in two?

But I couldn't draw the fire out. Not by will, it seemed.

I couldn't explain it, but perhaps the hunters were right. Perhaps the Tides was right. I had something in me—a power I didn't know how to yield. As much as I clenched my fists or stiffened my fingers, the fire refused to ignite.

The villagers began to walk away. Java shook his head and trudged away with them. They all went back to their routines. The carpenters went back to lazing in their rattan chairs and hammocks. The women went back to their houses. The children chased each other with twigs and branches whittled to look like staffs. A group of women fiddled with their instruments, plucking a tune; it sounded like *Strings: Passive*.

Sambor stood with his arms folded. He grinned, the flushed pink of his jowls edging up to his ears.

I tried to keep my mind occupied, and my thoughts distant from the swelling heat and the constant strain on my arms. My eyes burned with each blink, so I kept them closed. I wondered if this was how my father's granulated eyelids felt. I imagined his red-eyed gaze. I imagined my mother as if I hadn't known her. She was always stern, but never somber. I recalled the odd mornings where she woke up dazed—when she'd wander around the kitchen doing nothing in particular, heating and re-heating the water in the kettle just to see the steam.

I imagined that gloomy side of her as a reflection in my father's eyes—a perpetual glint of loss. I wondered if that was how she woke up everyday in Mesa. I wondered what he did to console her. Did he grind leaves and brew tea? Did he hum to her? Did he produce strings and pluck tunes for her?

I looked at a canvasa to the left. A rope looped down from a protruding branch of the house. A wooden board was attached to it and fashioned into a swing. A young girl swayed back and forth, back and forth. She was smiling until her eyes crossed mine. She then averted her gaze to the grey sky. Behind the canvasa, I saw two men were trying to beat a wasp's nest down

from the gable of a hut in the distance. A woman looked on, calling out directions to them.

I imagined I was my father, watching these things. I imagined this was after my mother had already left with the Attuning. What had tempted him to jump into the Deep Grey?

Did he regret not going—did he feel as if he'd taken a stance that, in the end, meant nothing? Was he in my position, bound to a place he wanted no part of?

I imagined that he would shut his eyes with every whack of the wasp's nest, and they would burn upon reopening. *Maybe I'll swim*, he thought. Maybe there was some mass of fertile land beyond the Deep Grey. And maybe he'd made it there. Maybe he was indeed part of the Tides. And he had sent those notes—and one of those notes was a request to bring me back here.

I cut off my wild ruminations there. I realized I was letting myself get too carried away with incongruous feelings.

Yemen and the hunters arrived just before dark. She dropped her rucksack and rushed over to me. She was breathing hard, her face red and sweaty, a filigree of veins emerging along her brow. “*Who done this?*” she demanded.

Sambor stuck out his chest. Still with his arms folded, he said, “The boy pounced ‘pon Gaspara. Broked ‘er hands. Shattered all bones ‘long her wrists.”

Elm and Carver arrived right after. A trio of other hunters kept their distance at the back. Yemen said, “Madtalk, Sam! Ain’t no good sensin’ to think he’d do—”

“He is a blight to us,” he hissed.

Yemen propped my chin up. She ran her fingertips across the rope burns along my neck. She turned to Sambor. “Y’did this to ‘im, Sam?”

I tried to utter Gaspara’s name, but the words couldn’t come out.

“Untie him, Sam,” Yemen said. “That’s orders.”

“Orders, Yemen?”

“Orders is orders, Sam.”

Sambor scoffed. “Of what use is the orders if they brung us to this?”

Yemen kicked up dust as she walked up to Sambor, each . I was so focused on her scowl and her gait that I hadn’t even noticed that my bindings had long been undone. Carver had untied me. Sambor dropped his arms as Yemen came up to him.

She hit him in the nose.

He stood straight for a moment and then bowed his head as the pain shot to his eyes. Yemen winced and

blew on her palm. She looked upon the gathering crowd, but said nothing at first. When she spotted Leef in the crowd, she shot to him and grabbed his collar. She dragged him back to the tall wooden pole, where I still stood. She pointed at me and asked Leef, "Why y'let this happen?"

Before he could answer, she slapped him and threw him down. She went for his collar again. Elm dropped the sack she had slung around her shoulder, a small pile of dead jackrabbits spilling out. She ran to Leef's side and helped him up. She turned to Yemen and said, "Ain't no sensin' to salt more on this."

Leef propped himself up with one trembling hand, the other arm crooked over his eyes. Yemen lowered her fists. We all stood still, watching to see what she would do. She kneeled and started putting the dead jackrabbits back in the bag. When she was about to replace the last one, she held it up by the nape of its neck for the villagers to see. The animal's fur was flour-white with splotches of mud on its torso and feet, its loose hide sagging, its face crumpled.

"See this 'un?" she said. "Have it." She then flung it towards them. They gasped and shifted out of the way. The jackrabbit fell on the ground. "Was already dead when we found it."

Kevin Jared Hosein



13
HANDEL'S GRAVE

The hunters sat in a quiet circle inside Yemen's house, growing more restless by the minute. Everytime there was a knock on the door, they all sprung from their seats as Yemen ran to answer. The messenger from the beach never had much to say. A shake of the head indicated that the Tides hadn't made contact yet. There was no instruction, no order, and this fed the building unease in the room.

The hunters were a type accustomed to blood, not boredom.

While I sat with them in the room, I wondered if this was the first time one of them had put an arrow through a villager's throat. I began to see them as automatons, almost. They were windings of muscle tissue and veins. Each vein on Carver's legs as slim as the edge of an axe. The bouquet of blood vessels in Elm's unblinking eyes showed a biological history of resolve

and vigilance. I could see right through Yemen's ribs and the heart caged within it—a bloody fist rapping against rungs of tapering bone.

I was as tense as they were. In between the prolonged silences I heard mutterings from the hunters in the other rooms.

"Jackrabbits ain't gon' last," one would say.

"Gotta head back out 'morrow," the other would reply.

These lines were repeated, sometimes word for word. I wondered if they did this just to break the silence, or to distract themselves from the futility of the wait. I couldn't fathom it—waiting for the wind to whisper a secret to me, or to heed directives from a force I couldn't see.

The men grumbled about the soggy peat in the woods and their muddied boots. The others nodded in regard to their complaints. The night went on like this until Leef emerged from his room. He poked his head through the drapes that separated his room from ours, and said, "This here a waste o' time. We ain't got nothin' comin'—"

Yemen rose from her seat, cutting him off, "Jackrabbits ain't gon' feed this village for long. We need to go back out 'morrow—see if we can nab some hogs."

Leef said, "Hogs is smarter than we think. They already left this place. They ain't sittin' waitin' for the Tides to come in. They know it's done for."

Yemen looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Y'll be coming with us no matter what y'think, Leef Sol."

"Who's stayin' to keep watch on the boy then?" Carver asked. "Y'know we can't leave him here alone."

Yemen replied without hesitation, "He's comin' with us."

The hunters all turned to her, as did I. One of them said, "The boy'll slow us down out there."

Yemen edged closer to me. "He under my care. He's comin' with us."

Another hunter said, shaking her head, "Ain't worth the salt, Yemen."

"What ain't worth the salt," she replied, "is leavin' him here with one o' two of you. I can put an arrow 'tween the eyes of a woodsman—jus' like that." She snapped her fingers. "Woodsmen ain't have nothin'. But I ain't puttin' no arrow in one of my own villagers when the ruckus gets rumblin', y'hear me?"

Elm bowed her head.

Yemen continued, "Any of y'willing to do that? Y'gonna put y'self in there—where it come down to li-

nin' down your sights at a mama o' two, or the folks' best cauldroner?"

The hunters all lowered their heads. Yemen folded her arms. "Then we all see what I see. We live and die in Mesa, this cluster o' houses all 'long this slope and flat. 'Yond that, the woodland and the rapid we washed in since we's young. 'Yond, the Deep Grey, the barren water. Live and die here, though the trees topplin' theyselves. The only beasts left is the old jackrabbits, one step away from death—so frail and weak that they surrender 'pon sight."

Leef started, "We know this already—"

Yemen snapped, "Then why you makin' me say it over and over and over again?"

Leef bowed his head. Nobody said much after that. I looked at their throats rising and vibrating from time to time as if they were about to say something, but not even the sporadic, repetitive banter from before. Later in the night, they let time pass as they played a game, moving stones and seeds across pits dug into a wooden board.

I slipped into a stupor that night, drifting in and out of a dazed vision. At first, I thought I was paralyzed, but then I realized that there was some outer force binding me—ot a twine or a net, but some sort of elastic membrane that contracted and relaxed.

I was lying on my side in the vision, just as I'd been lying in bed. Everytime I breathed, a slick line of mucus shifted in and out of my nostrils. There were muffled shouts and growls, but they weren't louder than my own breathing and heartbeat. I grabbed a rope of tissue emerging from my navel. I tugged on it harder and harder until the membrane collapsed on top of me.

That was when I woke up.

The next morning, none of the hunters dared say anything to Yemen. They skinned, broiled and ate jackrabbit. They tore meat and said nothing. I didn't enjoy it, but I had to partake. I was still not used to meat. The hunters communicated with grunts and nods while stocking their rucksacks with arrows, nets, ropes and woundwrap. They strapped leather water-flasks to their belts.

Yemen came to my side. Her eyes reflected her short temper and, because of the way her lips wrinkled, I expected her to let out a snarl. Instead, she said in a quiet breath, "Just stay close."

When we left the house, there had already been a gathering at the square. All eyes fell upon us. The hunters paid them no mind. They always strode like nothing could touch them. Stone knocked against hide and leather with each step of the unit. There were seven of us. Yemen kept me in front of her as we marched. We

were flanked by Carver and Elm, and followed by Leef. Two other hunters, a man and a woman, led the way. I never learned their names because the hunters seldom addressed each other by name, as if identity didn't matter to them.

When we got past the village gates and made our path into the woods, I had already lost my sense of direction. We crossed two forks along the trail. In the distance, the mountains formed a steep incline that was stippled with early morning mist. We walked parallel to a gully that I reckoned was once a stream, but now had been reduced to a meager trickle.

The mites trilled at us as we beat our way through the bushes. The foliage crunched beneath our boots. The soil was dry and cracked. Even small catchments of water from the rain and dew looked as if they were evaporating before my eyes. The barks of the trees had splices of grey. The teethmarks of beasts still lingered on them. The forest canopy swayed with each passing breeze, the ebb of leaves grumbling like the crest of the Deep Grey. The two hunters in front of us swung their blades, cutting a fresh path for us.

We stopped to rest at a narrow ravine. Elm and Carver dipped their feet in the water while Leef strayed behind a coppice. Yemen and I sat on the edge of a felled log that spanned the width of the ravine. She un-

ties the sash that held the flask to her belt. She propped me upright and prodded the flask against my lips. She then took a sip from it too. She fixated on the line of felled trees up ahead. “You said those trees toppled themselves?” I asked her.

“Woodsmen got to doin’ this.” But it didn’t look like any man could’ve done that. It looked more akin to the work of a tempest than an axe. Some of the trees had been rent and split. Some of them had been stripped bare of their branches and leaves. Mites had taken up residence in the shredded, hollowed recesses of the bark. Yemen kept her feet up to keep them from crawling on her boots. I did the same.

I saw the same type of stalks I’d seen the previous night. These didn’t have the face outlines on them, however. I hadn’t forgotten about the hill-beast. Back in the Burg, I would’ve prattled about a sight like that to everybody. But here, the words couldn’t form—not even the simple ones. I’d been pulled into some sort of verbal stasis since the Thunderbird attack. Gaspara drew me out of it, only to thrust me deeper back into it.

I was an infant again, observing my surroundings, letting time pass without measurement. Objects blurred together, and facial features blended and contorted. I was toted by this one and that one to this place and that place. The more I considered my situation, the more I

withdrew from it. The more details of this story I pieced together, the less I understood. The more I learned, the less I knew. Even now, I am astonished at the details I've been able to recall during this time.

Yemen batted a small mite from her cheek. The sharpness in her eyes had been replaced by a wistful sheen. She took solace in watching her son as he collected berries in a small satchel. During this moment, I tried to huff out some words. I'm sure, from the outside, it must've resembled asthmatic bronchospasms. There was nothing I could say to the people here that would matter, it seemed. This was moreso for the few that cared about me—or I should say, my presence.

"Not a jackrabbit in sight," Elm said, coming up to us. "Not even a dead one."

Yemen said, "They's around, holed up somewhere. I ain't doubtin' that."

Elm squatted beside me and picked a mite dangling from my temple. "We're gon' go take a stroll," Elm said to Yemen as she her hand on my knee.

She waited for the nod from Yemen before grabbing my wrist. Her grip was firm, almost desperate. I went with her. We parted the bushes and followed a path that led to a glade. The air circulated there, whistling through the wavering recesses between the leaves. It

was cooler than any other part of the woods. The darkening sky peeked through the canopy here.

A drizzle had begun.

On the glade floor, two dried branches crossed over each other, fastened by a knot of thin rope, to form a triangle at the centre of the glade.



Elm said, "This here's Handel's grave. Lain to rest under the light." I didn't understand what she'd meant by that. Her eyes were deeper and darker than the first time we met. Her hair, left uncombed since the night before, was now in tangles and corkscrews. She sat cross-legged, facing the triangle. "There's somethin' we need to put in mind," she said. Until she turned her

neck to me, I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or to the crisscrossed branches.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

She said, "Maybe we's meant to die off. Y'get to a point where y'had to ponder that?"

I shook my head. A high wind swooped down on the glade and swept some leaves across my feet. Elm sighed. "Folk ain't meant to ask theyselves that kinda thing. Shouldn't have to."

She crunched a leaf in her palm. "Kept a wild hog once. I brung it back from this here wood. But it wasn't mine—was the village's, y'could say. Brung joy everytime it come scamperin' 'cross the grounds, fat as it was. Stupid thing, it refused to eat anything but sweetplums. We'd other crops at that time, but we couldn't do anythin' to make the dratted hog eat them. Just wasn't trained for it. Then our sweetplum trees died."

She looked around. "Y'could find one o' two here or there in this wood." She got up and paced the glade, as if searching for one. She continued, "When we brung the sweetplums from 'round here, the hog stopped eatin' those too. Stupid thing only wanted the ones that grown on the village soil. Starved itself 'cause of this, wasted itself away. Each day, fat and flesh jus' melted from bone."

She stopped pacing and leaned her forehead against a tree. "Tried everythin'. Stupid thing brung back up everything we shoved down its gullet. The village fell into a rut. The hog, once somethin' rich, somethin' good in our lives, was killin' us just as it was killin' itself. It tumble over on its side when it walked—the thing couldn't keep itself up no more, couldn't keep its eyes open. I brung it here and put an arrow through its head."

She pointed to the crisscrossed branches. "Buried it right 'ere. Our poor, stupid Handel. Maybe some of us is meant to die off, is what I think when I come 'ere. Maybe it ain't worth the salt to try, if the land's already set on starvin' itself to death."

I walked to the grave and cleared a circle of crumpled leaves with my feet. Elm and I sat close to it. She put her arm around my neck and I leaned my head against her shoulder. She scratched the back of my neck, just around my hairline. I turned my neck, so that my nose nozzleled the line of muscle that ran up her neck to her ear. I listened to her breathing. Every other second, a sigh jerked out, as if was trapped in her throat, like a small hiccup. My insides filled with tickling heat. She turned to look at me.

Then I kissed her.

Both our eyes remained open. It was still drizzling. Faint thunder sounded in the distance. Our lips stayed bound, glued together before she pulled herself off. She leaned back against one hand, and wiped her mouth with the other. I wasn't sure if she was shocked or disgusted.

Then yelling shot from the ravine, followed by loud crashes. "Somethin's goin' down. C'mon," she said as she bolted back to the ravine.

I trailed behind her, trying not to trip.

Another crash sounded just as the ravine came into sight. A tree fell and lodged itself between two others. It had been broken halfway, just like the others. I had been so preoccupied with the tree that it was only when I was a stone's throw away from the commotion that I realized...

...the hill-beast was real.

And it was right there, thrashing in the middle of the glade.

I'd never seen a beast like this.

One that had claws almost as long as my arms.

One with a mouth wider than my shoulders.

One that loomed over a human like a boot over a mite.



Three arrows pierced its right front leg, but did little to slow its rampage.

As another struck its chest, it thrust its body upwards, flailing its giant paws at a tree. The force was enough to knock its boughs loose, but not to rip through the bark. Its abdomen was covered with muck-caked fur, so matted and stiff that it acted as a layer of breast-plated armour.

The hunters scattered and realigned in a radial formation, firing arrows at its torso, only to have them bounce off.

Yemen produced another arrow from the quiver strapped to her back.

She scuttled up an incline next to the felled tree that was stuck between two others.

Halfway up, she fired the arrow.

It lodged in the beast's nose. It thrashed against the ground.

Yemen latched onto a bough and shot another arrow from her vantage point.

Carver called out to Elm, "Warn everybody! Get 'em to the cove! Get the boy outta 'ere!"

Elm nodded. She tugged on my arm, and I followed her as she beat the bushes with a blade, clearing a path.

I tripped on a knotted weed.

I couldn't keep up with her. She picked me up and hitched me onto her back. I hugged her neck while she held my ankles. Her tangles of hair whipped against my face as she ran.

When we got back to the gates, I hopped off. She yelled to the guards, "Beast in the woods! Beast in the woods!" One of the guards slid down the tower. She explained, in hustled breaths, what was happening.

One of them stayed behind and looked out for the hunters. The other followed us to the village.

Elm came running, shouting, “To the cove! To the cove!”

Some of the villagers caught on immediately, picking up their children and racing to rally the message. Others retaliated with furious demands for explanation. The carpenters stood akimbo, refusing to budge until they knew exactly what was going on. All Elm and the guard told them, “Anybody who ain’t in the cove gon’ be meat!”

“You go with ‘em!” she then urged me, but I wasn’t going there with them.

Sambor banged on all the doors, scouring every house to ensure that there was no one left behind. A cloud of dust hovered over the scampering villagers. He checked inside the canvasas for any stragglers.

By the time everyone was gone, the second watchtower guard came running. The hunters trailed behind him. All except one.

“Where’s Yemen?” Elm asked.

Amidst the wordless panting and wheezing, there was no answer. The guard said, “The gate’s shut. That thing can rip through bark, but them gates—they stronger than any old tree—”

An arrow zipped past him, stopping him mid-sentence. It flew past my cheek, cutting through it, breaking the skin. If I had been standing any closer, it could've gone right through my nose. Everyone turned to look for the bow that fired it.

"I'm... gonna... end... this." It was Leef, smeared with blood, spluttering out the words between jerky breaths. He had his bow drawn, aimed right at me.

Carver leapt in front of me.

Leef said, "Carver, get outta the way. He needs to die."

Carver kept his hand on the dagger attached to his belt. He approached Leef, his cautious steps in time with the wind. "Leef, this ain't gon' change nothin' that happen."

"We gotta get to the cove!" Elm shouted.

Sambor came to the scene. He kept his distance and didn't say anything at first. Carver said again, "Put the bow down, Leef."

Leef shook his head. "You ain't no firebearer. We ain't got no 'bearer now. *Move, Carver!*"

I kept still. Leef closed one eye and took aim. Carver muttered to me, "You move with me."

Sambor asked, "Leef, what blight this boy brung 'pon us?"

Leef began to pace in a curve. Carver kept with him, and I kept with Carver. Leef's fingers trembled as he gripped his arrow. Carver's fingers wiggled with impatience over the dagger. "I ain't want to have to do this, Leef."

Leef gritted his teeth. "*I have* to do it."

Elm called out again, "We gotta get to the cove!"

Leef shot his arrow—

—and Carver threw his dagger.

He jumped left, and so did I. The arrow flew past us.

The dagger lodged into Leef's arm. Leef grabbed his arm and winced. He dropped his bow.

Carver ran up to him and kicked the bow aside. He disarmed him, yanking free a small blade that Leef kept in his belt. "We gotta get to the cove," he told Leef.

We hurtled down the slope. As we did, a loud crashing sounded in the distance behind us. "That thing's big 'nough to rip down the gates, Carver?" one of the guards asked.

Carver nodded, the horror setting in his eyes as if he just realized this himself.

We made it to the shore. The guard yanked the lever and dashed under the gate as it fell shut. The cogs made a sharp, scraping sound. "That'll hold it," the guard said.

“Scuttler’s Cove, now!” Elm said, pointing me to a small arching opening that lay ahead, where the mountain curled around the coast. It resembled a mouth, with the stretched tongue of sand and beaten rock leading up to it.

The hill-beast wouldn’t be able to fit in there.

Elm grabbed my arm. Carver faced the closed gate. Elm called out to him, but he didn’t respond.

“Go to the cove,” she told me. But I stayed with them.

“Carver, we gotta go now!” she said.

A half dozen other hunters came up to where we were. “We gon’ fight?” a hunter asked.

“It ain’t stoppin’ otherwise,” Carver said, his back still turned to us.

Elm threw her arms up. “Y’gone *mad*?”

Leef said nothing. Sambor wasn’t taking any chances. He’d already scampered off to the cove.

“I follow Carver,” another hunter said. They drew their bows and knives.

The waves crashed behind us.

The rain came down suddenly. Thunder rippled across the hammering downpour. I kept listening out for the din of the gates being smashed open. The waters from the Deep Grey crashed into the weathered pedes-

tals and rock arches extending from the slope, the foam spattering on us.

A heavy crash sounded from behind the gate. Splinters flew our way. Carver turned to Elm and shouted, “Take the boy to the cove!”

The hunters readied themselves, blades in hand, bows aligned, eyes trained on the gate as it smacked forward again, in time with another peal of thunder. Another swarm of splinters flew past, cutting through the rain.

Elm bit her knuckle. “You can’t—”

“Now, Elm!”

Elm, Leef and I ran the stretch of the coast until the cove came into sight. A lantern burned inside, but I saw nothing else. We didn’t look back, but the bashing against the gate behind us was loud and sharp. The most terrifying part of this whole thing for me was realizing that anything was possible. Any behemoth, any monstrosity could appear from nowhere. The ground could split beneath us and a tongue could whip us down into an abyss.

A ridiculous notion, I knew, but why discard such a thought? Anything was possible, after all. One’s outlook changes once one breaks down their entire being into mere bones, and the flesh that can be torn from it.

The villagers huddled against the walls of the cove. I could hear a collective sigh as we ran in. Whether it was a sigh of relief or frustration—I couldn't tell. An arc of water slushed through the wide entrance, where Elm remained on the lookout for Carver. The wild breeze swept the rain against her face.

Torches had been held upright by soot-covered wooden poles. Only three had been lit. A group of men busied themselves with the flint, trying to ignite the forth and fifth.

Parts of the ground had been lined with wet-rotted rugs. A few crates were arranged to act as chairs and beds, which made me wonder how long and how often the villagefolk were willing to spend in here. Two of the crates were left open. They were filled with bushels of honey. Another was filled with vegetables, long putrefied. Sambor sat on the crates, grabbing at his knees.

The villagers laid Leef down and tied a piece of cloth around the stab-wound on his arm.

A woman then asked us, "Great Wing's come?"

"Not Great Wing," one of the hunters said, "but dreadsome just the same."

Sambor asked, "A beast of the wood?"

The hunter nodded and took a deep breath. "Ain't never seen nothin' like it."

Leef yelled out, "*Dratted thing kill my ma!*"

Everyone's eyes shot to the hunters. The men dropped their flint. Women stopped wiping their children's foreheads.

Sambor's eyes lit up. He sputtered, "Yemen? Yemen's dead?" I don't know if anyone else had caught on to it, but there was an impatient tinge of anticipation in his voice.

Our gloomy silence was followed by the growing gasps of the villagers. Leef grasped his arm, squinting in pain. "We had to leave 'er there." That was all he had left to say.

"I told all of you 'bout this," Sambor said, opening his arms and then gesturing to me. "Two 'bearers gone since *he* cross paths with us. And the rest of us ain't gon' be alive for long when this beast of his show up 'ere."

Elm faced him, her nostrils flaring. She balled her fists up. Sambor noticed and laughed. "Y'willin' to turn on y'own to save that boy? Y'willin' to d—"

"It's comin'!" a man cried out from behind us. He pointed a shaky finger to the coast. The hill-beast came barrelling up the coast, swiping up large chunks of sand beneath it. Carver and three other hunters were right in front of it, kicking up chunks of damp sand behind them as they ran.

I couldn't tell apart the roars of the thunder from the beast's.

"Run! Run!" Elm yelled. "It's right behind you!"

They leapt over a rock and a fallen log, and dove through the entrance. The hill-beast was only a stone's throw away now.

Sambor yelled, "*Everyone, get back!*"

The hill-beast smashed its head into the entrance of the cove. We felt the impulse surge through the ground. A blast of air extinguished the three torches. The reverberation of the loud crash vibrated the walls until I thought they would shatter.

The hill-beast roared, ejecting thick chunks of saliva and mucus, each hair bristling with rage.

I recoiled, hitting my head against a wooden stand. My ears were ringing. I felt as if a blood vessel had burst in my head.

All sounds from then were drowned out by a low thrumming, as if my head was being shoved underwater—as if my head was about to overflow with blood.

The hill-beast thrashed against the rocks.

It wasn't long until it got tired, struggling to keep up with its own breaths.

"The beast wants the boy!" Sambor exclaimed during this hiatus, taking a slow turn towards the villagers. "Feed 'im to the beast!" I assumed that was what he'd

said. I couldn't hear him through the ringing, but his lips were unmistakable.

The villagers would've done anything at that point, and Carver knew it.

All reason was gone.

I suppose they'd all realized the same thing I'd realized just a few moments earlier—that anything was possible. There wasn't any bond between action and consequence anymore. I recalled Sambor's words. They were ideal. They were the right words to make them believe this: *Of what use is the orders if they brought us to this?*

Carver jumped in front of me before anyone else could. He stretched out his arms, fingers splayed. He backed me against a wall. A line of ants marched in a curve over my head. The villagers gathered in front of Carver.

The cavern was dark, but I could still see their grimaces.

I could still see Sambor's wide grin.

One of the men flung something—
—and it hit Carver in his temple.

The projectile then fell to the ground, rolling to my feet. It was a large gourd.

The man ran up and picked it up, his fingers spanning its entire rim.

The man hit Carver again in his temple with it.
And again and again and again.
Until I could hear flesh squish against bone, even
through the ringing.

Elm dropped to her knees and screamed.
I fell to my knees. And then collapsed beside
Carver.

Carver's eyelids twitched. Drops of blood ran down
his cheek to his earlobe. The gourd lied tilted on its side
beside his mouth. The smell was inimitable—a slow,
slimy line of honey dribbling from its rim, mixing with
grime and blood.

Blood enclosed in globs of gold.

A restless barrage of legs shifted around us. Elm
pressed her nose against the ground. When she lifted
her head, her mouth contorted as she yelled her brother's name. She couldn't muster up the strength to get
back up.

A hand grabbed my collar and hoisted me up, just
like how Yemen held the jackrabbit.

Soon, there were four men holding me, their arms
like hooks on my torso. They squeezed and wrung me
as if I were an old washcloth. I turned to the hill-beast.
It was snapping at the air, grinding pieces of rocks be-
tween its teeth.

The men kept their distance from it. They held onto me tight. They swung me back, then forth, then back and forth again.

I screamed and, for a second, the waters in my head parted and my voice rent through the splitting crest. For a moment, I heard the cheers of women, the mad squealing of children—and the bellowing laughter of Sambor.

Another grating growl shot from the hill-beast's throat.

Then the men let go.

The next thing I could remember was being pushed through darkness, hanging almost upside-down, suspended obliquely. Something was crushing my legs. I clawed around. The walls were slippery as if slicked with grease. They retracted as my palms pressed against them.

The air was sharp, dense and foul. Each breath cut right down my lungs. The only thing I heard behind the dissipating remnants of the tinnitus was my own pulse—my own blood gushing in and out of my heart. A squeezing force, a peristaltic wave, ran up my waist, causing my body to descend a little more. I thrust my palms forward as if I were diving.

My fingers splashed around in a small pool. And it was only then I realized I was face-down in a puddle of acid—hydrochloric acid—stomach acid.

I tried to push myself back up, kicking as hard as I could. The walls rumbled violently, a wave of contractions vibrating along my hips. I felt as if my body was being rolled into a ball, bones and tendons crunching in swift ripping movements as they folded and snapped. I would be a leaking, dripping ball—a bolus of bone and muscle.

I clenched my teeth and bit my tongue until it bled.

All the blood rushed to my brain. I felt the fire in my fingers. My hands were exploding in slow-motion. I clutched a handful of tissue and felt the fire surge from my fingertips and ripple the membranes enclosing me.

I heard a dying echo: *PULS-2, PULS-2, PULS-2...*

Then I saw white. It was dead silent.

The white dissolved after a few seconds, revealing the crowd before me, standing just a few steps away from me. They were bathed in blood, as I was. Chunks of muscle, strings of intestine, splinters of bone were scattered around me, spread radial on the sand and coast like a paintsplatter. The blood twisted like ribbons as it merged with the water.

The hill-beast's head was sideways on the water, bobbing and floating away. Its snout was still moving—

slowing down in a weak, chomping gesture. The rain poured into its mouth.

As soon as I got up, the ground started to shake. I collapsed again. The mass of rock above the coast crumbled, spouting jets of dust from the crevices that forked down its length. I backed away, kicking, dragging my bottom against the bloodsoaked sand.

“It’s gonna fall!” someone cried out. At first, I thought they had just mouthed the words. It was then I realized I couldn’t hear anything. I couldn’t even hear the rain.

People began to bolt out of the cove. A cold wind blew against the blood on my skin. A boulder dislodged from the mountain and fell, crushing a man.

A group of villagers retreated as this happened, pushing each other back, screaming.

The shaking intensified, tossing throngs of people on their backs and against the walls. They crawled, cracking their nails against the rock. They tugged at each other’s clothes trying to push ahead. A few of them got to safety.

A web of cracks began to form around the arched entrance. The ones left inside knew what was going to happen. I locked eyes with a little girl running in my direction.

Kevin Jared Hosein

I kept my eyes right on her until the front of the cove collapsed and buried her.

I could see the waves slushing back and forth, but I couldn't hear a sound. But I knew when the rumbling stopped, the screaming stopped.

Children of Another Sky

AXIS MUNDI

14

THE FLOOD

All other memory after that remains as floating fragments, like levitating jigsaws, circling and weaving over each other, never colliding at the right angles—colours and shapes swirling together in the pouring rain. I remember the figures as they hobbled through the dusty rubble. I can't recall how many.

I couldn't count. I didn't want to count.

Elm was one of them, busily clawing at the rocks. First the big ones, and then the small ones. The rest sat on the shore, letting the water wash the blood off their toes. They watched the beast's head bob up and down as it drifted farther and farther away, its mouth open as if it were paralyzed in the middle of a laugh.

I opened my mouth to call out to Elm. I'm not sure if the words came out, but she didn't turn around. I started to walk away. A few times, I turned to look at her. I knew I wouldn't see her again. At one moment, she turned to me. I waved, but she didn't respond. As I neared the stretch with the stone steles, I took my tunic off. They

hadn't been as bloodied as I thought they'd been. I rinsed it in the water. When I wrung it dry, tiny pearls of salt clung to the fibres. I scrubbed off the blood from my skin with the sand on my palms.

I kneeled and closed my eyes. I dipped my head into the water a little longer than I needed to. I held my breath until I felt my chest tighten. Then I brought my head back up and drew a deep breath. It was then I realized my hearing was returning.

When I opened my eyes, I saw them—closing in on me, each armed with a spear or axe, arranged in a semi-circle like sharpened teeth along a mandible. I rubbed the salt from my eyes and looked at them. I recognized who they were immediately.

Woodsmen.

They kept their distance from me. We remained there, me naked in front of them my knees sinking into the mud, their hands fastened to their weapons. My fingers lingered in the water, the skin beginning to crinkle. I looked at the black clouds in the sky.

At that moment, I cared little about whether I would live or die. I didn't weep for the people of Mesa, but I had no place to go. It was this feeling of indifference that caused me to stand up without fear. I peeled my tunic off

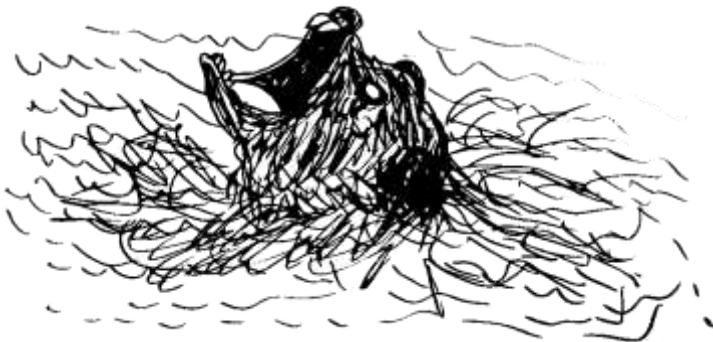
the sand and put them back on. The woodsmen focused their spears on me, but did little else.

I didn't fear them as much I feared myself—as much I feared that fire in my fingers. It only happened when I was in danger, and both times, it seemed to conjure itself up, as if emerging from some vacuum within me. I didn't believe it was me. I'd read about fungi that could control the brains of some mites. I don't believe it was that either, but perhaps it was along that line. Perhaps I was host to some symbiotic force that could instigate avalanches and explode beasts. Symbiotic, mutualistic, because both times it swayed me from death.

It couldn't allow me to die.

I didn't know what else to call it, so when I thought about it, I always thought of it as my *panic twin*.

When I was finished putting on my clothes, I walked straight past the woodsmen. They dropped their weapons as I did. I stopped and turned to them. They knelt before me. Some of their mouths were open as if to speak to me, but they never did. I wondered if they *could* speak, or if they simply refused to—or dared not to. Behind them, I could see the hill-beast's head still drifting towards the horizon.



I stayed there for a while, peering out in the distance. There was more out there, I thought. There were more people, more villages. I wondered how big was this land—how far the Deep Grey extended. Even with these questions in my mind, there was only one place I needed to go—back to the Burg. Even though it scared me, I needed to see my mother. Even the thought of crossing eyes with her made my heart race. I believed I would always regret it if I didn't.

I began my way back. One of the woodsmen followed me. I signalled for him to walk beside me instead of behind. As I made my way up the slope back to Mesa, I encountered more woodsmen. As I walked past, the one beside me gestured to them by crossing his arm over the handle of his axe. Whatever they were doing before,

whether it was banging their cudgels against the cauldron, rummaging through the bushels or dancing around the canvasas, all sound and movement stopped when they saw me.

They didn't kneel or toss down their weapons like the others had, but to draw silence from such savages was enough for me to know that I didn't have to worry about them. This was just a thin stroke of luck, considering the plethora of other beasts that could hike up from the depths of the earth, or swoop down from the sky.

The woodsman accompanied me back to the broken bridge, near the bonfire pile. While there, he gazed down at the chasm, where the bridge still dangled and clattered against the cliff. He stroked a knotted reed that was tied around his left wrist. His eyes were smeared with a deep black dye, patterned in circles that crossed over each other. This made the whites of his eyes even more apparent. I observed them for a moment. They were reddening, as if on the verge of tears.

He looked at me. I didn't know if he'd understand my words, so I pointed in the direction I would go. He nodded and responded by pointing the way back to Mesa. As I made my way through a thicket that would curve back to the path to the Fenlands, he patted my shoulder and knelt before me. He reached his palm upwards. I stood, silent for a while before grabbing it. He then sprung up and hurried back to the village.

It wasn't long until I was back in the Fenlands. It was difficult to tell the passing of time by looking at the sky. The black rain clouds blocked out the light. It was dark as the early, early morn. Everything scintillated, as if tinged with a light sprinkle of golden dust. Thunder rumbled in the distance, but there was no lightning. The rain had begun to pour, lashing my skin and lacerating the soil. But I couldn't stop—I had to keep moving.

I had pretend conversations with my mother as I plodded along the single bare track. I tried to compile the questions in my head, and I imagined every stuttering reply to them. I wondered how she would react upon seeing me. Would she scream? Cry? Throw her arms around me? Come at me with a blade?

I looked at the path ahead of me. I knew I would come to a point where I would have to guess the paths—where Carver had carried me while I was passed out during the escape.

In addition, I had to do the impossible: I had to figure out a way to get *into* the Burg. I didn't even know what it looked like from the outside. I was curious to know. I didn't care about the logic of the situation. I just knew I had to confirm the truth. Perhaps my panic twin, if it did possess any other desire than to destroy, felt the same way. Had that osmosed into me?

I didn't admit it to myself at the time, but I know I was foolhardy enough to depend on my panic twin to get me through any obstacle.

I took note of my surroundings. To my left, a meander curled all the way back to the mountain. It was minutes away from overflowing. The meander was flanked by several eroded gullies that the water slushed through. Some of them were dug as deep as my own height.

A fork of lightning rent the sky, illuminating the landscape. I began to wonder how far I was from the Burg. The Burg was never subjected to harsh weather conditions like this. I wondered when the divide in the sky would begin—when the bright cerulean and night-time purple I was familiar with would begin to materialize behind the black clouds. When would the first star be visible?

In the Burg, the rain was always friendly, always essential. The rain played a crucial role in photosynthesis, the replenishment of the water table, the final arc of the hydrological cycle. But never a formidable force, never to cloak the path. Not like this—I couldn't see in the distance.

A heavy wind swept over me. I fell as I tripped over a tangle of fescue. I looked up at the sky. The clouds, drifting like large bubbles on the surface of tar, parted, leaving wispy trails that resembled the withered limbs of a rhododendron. The wind blew again, carrying a sharp cracking sound with it.

I got up and planted my feet firmly into the ground. A white speck appeared from the haze. It was getting closer and closer. I don't know why, but my first instinct was to reach out my arms towards it—as if I were catching a ball.

As the figure came into view, my body jolted to the side and I rolled on the ground.

It was the Thunderbird. And it had a new helmet.

It swept down in an arc and went up again, but this time hovered in mid-air, the miniature jets attached to its wing-like appendages keeping it in stasis.

"HALT," it said, casting a beam of light at me. The mechanical whirr of its voice gave me chills just like the first time I'd heard it back in Mesa. My eyes burned from the light, even when I shielded them with my arm.

The land was immersed in darkness. Only the mountains and nearby trees were outlined in gold. The Thunderbird's voice cut through the downpour, "*YOU NEED TO COME WITH ME, ODYSSEY DOVE.*"

It dimmed its spotlight, slimming the hot beam into a misty ray that tracked my jumpy movements. The meander began to overflow. The muddy water seeped across to the gullies and rising to my toes. The Thunderbird was hovering in the air, each rivet clean, each joint dry. It radiated a sphere of heat from its shell that seemed to vapourize the rain around it.

It shot the full beam on me again, “*TAKE IT EASY. DON’T MOVE.*” Even through the mechanized frequencies of its voice, I could sense the tension—the caution.

I realized the reason for its caution—it knew what I could do. I focused on the light shooting from its chest and felt my hands catch fire—that familiar fire. The light flickered. There was a hiss, a click and a whizz.

The spotlight cut off, and there was a crash. A bright light split the sky again, clearing a path in the clouds. It didn’t look like lightning. The muddy rainwater splashed up in thick pillars from the ground, and a shockwave sent the rest spattering outward. I flew with it and landed in one of the gullies.

As I clawed my way up the eroded sludge, the Thunderbird’s voice sounded, “*DON’T—*” and the rest was garbled trills. It began to swing and thrash from side to side, fighting to regain stability—stasis.

It fired the left jets.

Then the right jets.

It alternated between the two, blasting its body in curves and crisscrosses, the hanging tufts of smoke highlighting its haphazard path. Its body rotated and twisted in the darkness, as if suspended along an invisible rope. It shot out a squall of shrill gibberish again before discharging a laser that cut a swift parabola of grass under it.

Flamelets rose from the charred ground, burning as high as my ankles. I tripped over a burning tress of grass

as I dodged another laser. It surged into the distance, parallel to the ground, rousing a straight line of fire to the mountains.

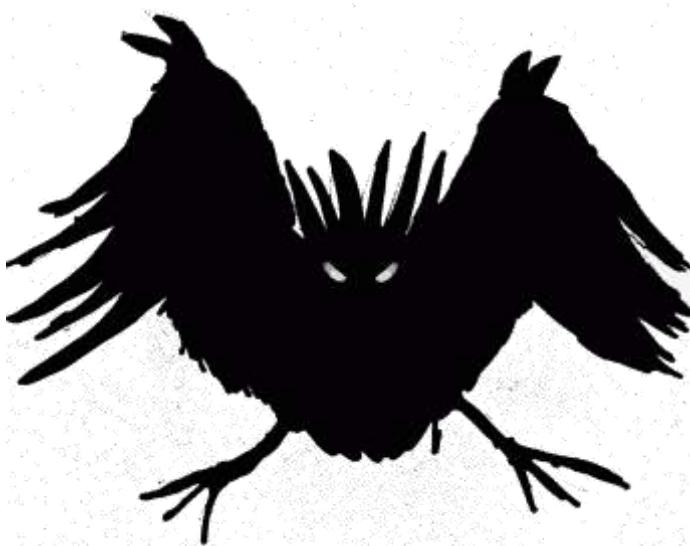
I ran in the direction of the fire, leaping over gullies and grass, water splashing beneath my shoes. I just kept my eyes on the fire—that kindled arrow of light that trailed in the darkness. There was no diverging, no lefts, no rights. And, most of all, no turning back.

But I was running to my demise.

Through the rain, through the crashes of thunder, through the beeps and boops of the malfunctioning shell of machinery bumbling behind me, I couldn't hear it. I couldn't hear the feathers rustling. I couldn't hear the caws, as shrill and as callous as they were. It was only when the lightning struck again and the sky went white, I saw its black outline against the sky—wings flabelliform, talons splayed, beak open—casting its immense shadow against the flooded plains.

I was running towards Great Wing.

I spun around and bolted in the opposite direction. I followed the fire. As I turned around, the lightning flashed again, tattooing a fleeting frame of the giant bird against the sky. The image vanished as soon as it appeared.



The lightning fractured the grumbling sky still, splintering the black clouds. I dared not turn around, but my mind's eye kept on the still image of the bird against the rupturing firmament. I pictured the image growing bigger and bigger with each successive spark. I could turn around and try to blast it, I thought—make it rain blood and feathers on the field.

But as soon as the idea came into my head, something grabbed me. I thought it was the talons at first, but it was the Thunderbird. It wrapped its arms around my chest from behind and fired its rockets in intermittent gusts. The rockets struggled to discharge. We barrelled along the field, bouncing up and down like a mechanical frog, leaving a zig-zag of steam and smoke behind us.

The ground shook. Great Wing couldn't sustain its flight, so now it was trampling the earth, its talons tus-sling with the mud and water. The earth rumbled each time it bashed its weight onto it. I turned to look at it. Its beak was an arm's length away from prodding our back-sides. It was only then I noticed its crest, radiating above its flashing eyes like spikes. It was also then I knew I couldn't outrun it.

But I realized I didn't have to.

With the next leap the Thunderbird took, I pushed my body downwards—squirming, squirming, squirming. The rain helped lubricate the movement. After three pushes, I slipped out of its grip and rolled to the side.

The Thunderbird stopped, ready to turn around and get me. Great Wing took this moment to snatch it up with its beak. The Thunderbird fired its rockets, trying to wres-tle out, but it was all in vain.

The spotlight flickered.

It sounded its garbled voice again, reaching out to me. The spotlight flickered again in long and short intervals. I realized it was a code, like a signal lamp message. But I couldn't interpret it.

Great Wing snapped its beak down and took flight, vanishing behind the black clouds, its evaporating image diminishing between the sporadic flashes of lightning.

Kevin Jared Hosein

15

THE HUMAN FORM DIVINE

I slept on a stony plinth beneath the overhang of a rock, where several tilted trees sheltered me from the rain. I was lucky to have found a podium higher than the floodwaters. I woke up several times during the night. I couldn't tell how far away it was from morning when the rain finally ceased. Most of the black clouds had scattered to the mountains. The moon diffused through the remaining shroud of smog. It was enough light for me to find my way around.

I was hungry. I scoured for berries, fruits, succulent stems, anything that could have quelled the pangs in my stomach. But my common sense took hold when I began to observe the shrivelling leaves and wilted stems—it wasn't wise to eat the fruits of deteriorating trees.

I also thought of eating the snails, but I digressed into just examining them.

I looked at the sky again and saw a tiny patch of purple in the distance. I wondered if it was best to travel in that direction at daybreak. Even if it wasn't the right way, I figured at least I'd get a glimpse of some colour in the sky again. Truthwise, there was no *right way* to go. I had lost everything. There was nobody I could trust, nowhere for me to go.

I even thought about just staying in the Fenlands and trying my luck with meals of snails, sleeping under rocks and washing myself in the gullies. Perhaps I could wander until I stumbled across another settlement and hope that what Java had said back in Mesa wasn't true—the tale about luring in new Trespassers to eat them. Those people, to me, were worse than the woodsmen. The woodsmen, at least, were honest about their savage nature.

My mind struck back to the lorries. All those lorries and all those people—a neverending food source! It was a quantifiable, dependable commodity. Maybe even a currency here at the Outsides. I stopped in my tracks. Did the Directors of the Board know what they were doing?

I empathized with my mother's decision then. Who wouldn't preserve their well-being and their children's well-being in the wake of such bleakness? Daily bleakness? It wasn't the right way. But, as I'd surmised before, there was no right way. I realized this and suddenly, I wasn't so nervous about confronting her.

Maybe, in the final moments, if she were there, she would have done what Dr. Lavender had done—told me to run. Run and save myself. Run, even though there was nowhere to run to. I felt a renewed sense of hope, even though there was no good discernable outcome for the situation. I couldn't even fashion a proper one from my imagination.

The best that I could do was see my mother and sister one last time. In the morning, I decided, I would continue in the direction of the purple patch. The closer I'd get to it, the more the colour would fill the firmament, I hoped. I curled up under the rock again and went to sleep.

When I woke up, three figures were standing over me. I wiped my eyes and squinted. One of them spoke. "Wake up, Odie." It sounded like Ollie.

I squinted again. It *was* Ollie. She nudged my shoulder. Was I caught in a reverie? I groaned, pushing her arm away. "Wake up!" she said, again.

"Should I jolt him?" A man's voice—this one unfamiliar.

"Just pick him up and put him in the backseat." I recognized this voice, however. I didn't know who it was until I saw her. It was Dr. Shiver.

I rubbed my eyes again and looked up. Seeing the morning sky was of little relief. There was nothing to re-

veal but unending grey. The water still lingered over the soil, making the field into a murky lake. It was only ankle-deep, however. "What's going on?" I grumbled. "Ollie?"

"Odie, we have to go. We'll explain on the way back."

"Back to the Burg?"

Dr. Shiver said, "Yes."

"How did you find me?"

Dr. Shiver was impatient. "We need to get going."

"Where?"

"Do I have to jolt him?" She spat out, grabbing my hand.

"No!" Ollie asserted, slapping her arm away. She then gently took my hand and led me up from the stone plinth. We walked back to a vehicle that had been parked just a few strides away. It was one of those all-terrain autos that had six wheels. I had never been in one before.

We all settled in. Ollie sat beside me at the back. The man and Dr. Shiver sat at the front, him at in the driver's seat and her in the passenger seat. The man switched on the ignition and began driving. Everyone was quiet at first, not knowing what to say, not knowing where to begin the story.

Finally, Dr. Shiver started. She told me, "You weren't the first person to pass the Ex. Sess-16."

I looked at Ollie. She nodded and added, "But you are the only person to pass the Ex. Sess-16 and survive the process of doing so."

“What process?”

Dr. Shiver said, “Explain how you knew who E.P. was.”

“I can’t. I just knew. It was told to me.”

“Told?” Dr. Shiver asked.

“Like I’d just received the thought.”

“And that’s what you are.” Dr. Shiver turned to face me. “You are a receiver—a receiver for transmissions. You, along with many others, were prototypes for a new approach to progress we are calling *biotelepathy*.”

“It’s like biotelemetry,” Ollie added. “It should be familiar to you.”

“Like when Dr. Lavender implanted the sensor in me, to monitor my heart rate and blood flow?”

Dr. Shiver said, “In fact, it’s how we could tell you were still alive and out here.” The vehicle hit a large bump, tossing her forward. “Easy! Easy! Take your time along those contusions!” she scolded the driver. She then turned to me and continued, “Biotelepathy is the ability to have the brain receive and read signals from a database of pre-loaded information.”

“Like the Lexicon and Omnibus?” I asked.

“And more,” she said. “E.P. was put in there. We sent the signal to everyone writing the Ex. Sess-16 that day in

your cohort. Everyone wrote about the correct person, but in their own style. It was incredible.”

“I can’t access the data by myself?”

Dr. Shiver shook her head. “We haven’t gotten to that point. Right now, you are only able to receive data. We couldn’t risk going further until we knew more.”

“Risk what?”

“Degeneration of the central nervous system, for one. We’re not sure why, but the signals cause degradation of the myelin protein along the neurone axons, akin to aminoacylase 2 deficiency.”

Ollie added, “What happens is those electrical impulses along your nerves begin to spill out.”

Dr. Shiver cut in, “From there, everything is affected. The handwriting is the first thing to go. We see some of our most gifted children’s penmanship reduced to cluttered scrawls. The rest of the motor functions deteriorate, severe cognitive disruption occurs, blindness, paralysis, seizures. It was as if they were being poisoned. *Infected.*”

“Is that what happened with—”

Dr. Shiver nodded. “Everyone except you. We didn’t let them suffer. We euthanize them once we notice the deterioration of the penmanship. They felt no pain.”

I turned to Ollie and asked, “And Rion?”

She bowed her head.

I swallowed hard. “How come it didn’t affect me?”

Dr. Shiver asked, "Do you know what a parasitic twin is? Or furthermore, do you know what an acardiac twin is?"

"Acardiac?—"

"In viviparous pregnancies, sometimes when twins develop in the womb, they become joined. One can survive by itself. This one is called the independent twin. The other gets attached to the independent one and feeds off of it. It does this even though it is a certainty that it would die. This is the parasitic twin."

"Odie, you were the parasitic twin," Ollie said, "and Rion was the independent."

Dr. Shiver continued, "You fed off of him. But you were a special type of parasite. You were an acardiac twin. Do you know what that means?"

I couldn't even speak.

She continued, "An acardiac twin is one that is born without any developed limbs, head. Or heart."

"So I was just a torso?" My voice came out as a whimper.

"You were just a torso drifting in a uterus, draining Orion of whatever life he held onto."

I said nothing. I tried to picture it. The more the image came into view, the more terrifying it was. To think that I was just a wilting protrusion, suspended in the amnion.

Just a suspended mass of flesh and cartilage without its own organs to engineer it.

The human form divine.

I asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

“We think that’s why it worked for you and no one else. Usually, we would terminate the acardiac twin as quickly as possible, but we were able to modify your DNA with little difficulty. There was something in your tissues that made the gene transfer work. In the end, it worked in the places where in vitro fertilisation had failed. That is the only assumption I have for it, but right now there isn’t enough data to prove that hypothesis yet.”

“How did you modify my DNA?” I asked.

“We let you grow a brain and heart, for one.” She laughed. “But the prime ingredient that is responsible is a gene from *Turritopsis dohrnii*. A gene we had thought impossible to splice into the human genome.”

“What is that? What species?”

“It’s a jellyfish, Odyssey. A jellyfish that is able to reverse the aging process of its cells. And that was the key issue. Aging. Myelin proteins deteriorate as one gets older. The signals were accelerating the aging process in certain cells—or at least, mimicking the effects of aging. The brain—frontotemporal degeneration. The hair follicles—premature alopecia. The quickened death of the red blood cells.”

“I don’t understand. My cells get younger?”

"No, no. It leaves them in a stasis. The gene suffices as a counterbalance to the physiological effects of the signals. You regenerate the cells that you've lost during the process." She paused and looked at Ollie. The vehicle hit a bump again, but she didn't scold the driver. She said, "And this brings me to the part we're hoping is true."

"You might be immune to disease, Odie," Ollie said, putting her hand on my leg. "All disease."

Dr. Shiver turned to me. "You've been injected with almost every disease—every pathogen—every agent of cytotoxicity we've kept in storage. Your immune response, your white blood cells... Odyssey, your blood, your lymph is such an efficient exterminator of disease that you won't even catch a fever when your body is swarming with viruses."

Ollie observed my expression of utter confusion. I was grinding my teeth. She rubbed my back. "I know this is a lot to bear, Odie."

The vehicle hit another bump.

I chewed on my fingernails. I looked at Ollie and Dr. Shiver and asked them straight, "I need to know what's going to happen to me."

Dr. Shiver said, "The situation right now, Odyssey, is knowing what's going to happen to the Burg."

"What's going to happen to it?"

Dr. Shiver dug into her bag and produced a glass bottle, similar to the killing jars I used while collecting mites. The specimen in the bottle was alive, however. It was a mite, as big as my thumb, with a proboscis almost the size of a sewing needle. White spots on its wings and bristles along its banded thorax, its translucent abdomen swollen with blood. I had never seen anything like it.



"This one is harmless now," she said.

"What is that?" I asked, observing it as it flitted back and forth in the bottle.

Ollie answered, "*Anopheles dirus*. That's the name given to it."

Dr. Shiver added, "It's one of the most resilient vectors we've ever come across. Even the eggs camouflage themselves."

It was then I remembered.

Anopheles dirus.

A. dirus.

Tom Scullion in the holding cage. Somalia Castor. The eggs. The larvae. The Ark. *Nine dead, but thousands more alive.* The wardens torched their greatcoats, so they could get the eggs off, get the mites off. They used flamethrowers. In the dead of night, they lit up Fresco Hill. Lines of fuel and fire, and the light reflecting off Lise's face. Blossoms of fire along the slopes. But they couldn't destroy all the eggs.

My head hurt as I tried to recall Tom Scullion's conversation. The murder of Somalia Castor. The container with the larvae. I leaned forward and hugged my knees. I rocked back and forth, trying in vain to subdue the overwhelming pain in my temples. I heard Ollie tell Dr. Shiver, "Give him a moment."

I shook my head. I said, still rocking, "The Burg is infested with these mites. And you need something from me to stop it."

"It's not difficult to stop the infestation," Dr. Shiver said. "Curfews, flamethrowers and pesticide bombs are all sufficient to allay the swarm in due time. The problem is the pathogen—the bacteria it carries. It is not just able to be transmitted via biological means, but also mechanical means."

“What does that mean? What’s the difference?”

Ollie said, “It doesn’t need to inject the pathogens into the bloodstream. It can deposit them on surfaces.”

“Fomites,” Dr. Shiver said.

“Fomites?” I asked.

She explained, “Those surfaces, those objects become havens for the bacteria. It is able to survive on a thin bio-film for hours, maybe even days at a time. Someone who has been infected doesn’t need to meet another person to infect them. They just need to lay their fingers on the same plate, the same table, the same drape, the same wall... and rub their eyes. That’s all it takes, and they’re dead at the end of the day.”

“The Burg’s in trouble, Odie,” Ollie said.

Dr. Shiver shot a look at her. She then turned back to me, a tired look manifesting in her eyes, and nodded. She then said, “You have the opportunity to save so many people. We have confidence that your immune system contains the key to destroying this pathogen. We’ve used lymphocytes we’d preserved from your blood tests. We think it might contain an adjuvant—a factor needed to boost the immunity of the infected. This is just our short-term plan.”

“Why don’t you just those blood samples then?”

“As I said, that’s just a short-term plan. We need more data, more samples—we need your cooperation for what we want to achieve in the long term.”

“What’s that?”

She said, trying to make her response sound grandiose, “Adoptive cell transfer. A DNA vaccination.” I gave her a look of doubt. She sighed and said, “*This is your grand logro, Odyssey.*”

Ollie then spat out, “Mother’s sick, Odie.”

I turned to her. Snippets of the pretend conversations and confessions I’d been running through my head for the past few days scrambled across my head, but I couldn’t move my tongue to say a word. Ollie rubbed my back. I looked out the window, at the terrain. The flood was subsiding.

I then turned back to Ollie. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you? You and Mom.”

Dr. Shiver was about to say something but Ollie stopped her. She put her finger on my chin and tilted my head up. “We couldn’t tell you. We couldn’t risk it.”

“And I was your entry pass into the Burg. Rion and I.”

“Yes, you were.”

“You knew we would die at sixteen.”

“Yes. I did.”

My eyes began to water. Hers did too. She then said, “Odie, did you think it was easy for me? Knowing that? Did you think it was easy for Mom? Dr. Lavender?”

“Where’s Dr. Lavender?” I shot out. “Lise?”

“They’re, uh—”

“You’ll see them when we get there,” Dr. Shiver said.

“Are they sick?” I asked.

“No.” Dr. Shiver then changed the topic, “Odyssey, you were part of a program that was ultimately for the good of the Burg, you must understand—”

“The Attuning,” I said, turning my eyes to her.

Ollie muttered, “You’ve been to Mesa.” She let out a deep sigh. “The Skyfolk, they were from Mesa.”

Dr. Shiver, “When *in vitro* failed, we first made deals with mothers from the Burg. However, due to the increasing number of deaths, we received orders from the Directors of the Board to stop using children from the Burg as test subjects. To prevent a backlash against the project.”

“Directors of the Board? You’re not one of them?”

“No. I am not. They communicate with us from their facility. They issue directives to us. They are the true catalysts of advancement in the Burg. And if they claimed using the unborn from the Outsidess was the best way to continue the project, then we would adhere to that.”

“What about the Exodus?”

“I don’t have to tell you the purpose of the Exodus, Odyssey. You already know. We want what is best for the Burg as a whole. So, we initiated the Attuning programme. It worked, for the most part. And now, we are so close, Odyssey. We are *so* close to losing it all, so close to all of our progress being erased.”

"But we're also so close to saving it," Ollie added. "Can you imagine what biotelepathy and this DNA vaccination would do for us? The future?"

I looked at the bottle again, the mite hovering to the top. Such resilience bested by a thin layer of soda-lime glass. I muttered, "Maybe we're meant to die off."

Dr. Shiver gave me a look of great consternation. The vehicle hit another bump. She snapped at the driver, "I told you to *take your time at those contusions!*"

The driver exclaimed, "Doc!"

Ollie screamed.

A garbled mechanical sound rang out from the front. We all turned to the front. There it was—still intact. The Thunderbird's metallic plumes spread broad, reflecting the sunlight in our eyes. It had survived. Somehow, it had survived.

It punched the windscreen, clawed right into the glass and ripped it out like the cellophane around a pack of biscuits. "Kill it!" Dr. Shiver cried out, kicking in her seat.

The driver stepped on the brakes and darted out of the vehicle. I had expected it to fly forward, but the Thunderbird maintained its grip on the vehicle hull. It didn't waste time on chasing the driver. It didn't even waste time on Dr. Shiver, who cringed against her seat and whimpered like a milksop.

It cleaved the top half of the vehicle and flung it in the distance. It stood, one foot on the passenger seat, right next to Dr. Shiver's head, and the other before my groin. I looked up at it and fell into a strange trance. A qualial aura of security. I didn't dare move. When Ollie muttered my name, "Odie. Odie," I dared not respond. From the corner of my eye, I could see her shuddering from the shock still.

The Thunderbird prodded my neck with its finger. I felt the sting. I felt the chemical enter the blood. Toxin, anaesthetic, depressant, whatever it was. The last thing I remember before passing out was seeing the broken, empty jar at my feet.

16
THE SPARK OF LIFE

I woke up, shackled to a desk, steel manacles snapped onto both my hands and feet. A thin metal band was fitted over my head. At the end of the room was a large machine that resembled an iron lung. It whirred like one too. Every few seconds, it let out a long hiss—puffs of white, cool air ballooning from its sides. It sat in stark contrast with the rest of the room, which retained the rustic aesthetic of the huts back in Mesa. The ground was just smoothed dirt, sometimes covered by old hides and cloths. The lone window in the room had no pane or frame and peeked into a clearing in a coppice. Greyflies flitted in and out. The vinegar smell that permeated through it was familiar—the Deep Grey was near.

The machine hissed again. I'd thought it was some sort of thermoregulator or refrigeration system until I noticed the man sitting next to it, laying his head against the

dome of glass that crowned the machine. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't asleep. He didn't look old but his beard already had patches of grey. He was bareback and lean, lined with muscle. A cord of white fume obscured his face. He breathed some of it in.

My eyes followed the white fume as it swept to the right side of the room. A brown tarp was stretched over another table that was covered with tools—some of them too advanced for such a place. A sabre saw, welding torch, impact driver, pneumatic torque wrench. How did he get these? I wondered.

I looked closer. I'd missed it at first, since most of it was hidden under the tarp. But a tiny metallic wing poked out from the side of the tarp. I recognized it immediately. It was one of the wing-like appendages from the Thunderbird's helmet.

With his forehead still on the glass, he turned his face to me, knowing I was awake. A large gash ran across his left eye. His left eye was missing, replaced with a visual prosthesis—a bionic eye with a meticulous series of microphotodiodes that only a Burg surgeon could have implanted.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. The only way I can describe his voice is like a satisfying folding and crinkling of paper. It was crisp and smooth. Perhaps I had gotten too accustomed to the villagers' harsh manners of speaking. He continued, "The metal band on your head is

a safety device. Safety for me, not you. A signal jammer. So you won't get to blasting me like before."

He got up and came over to me. "You must be hungry," he said, grabbing a bushel from the table I was shackled to. "These are good," he said, taking out two fruits and peeling them. I felt like I had no reason to distrust him, so when he fed them to me, I happily ate.

"I was like you," he began, as he fed me the berries. "From the Burg, I mean. For reasons I wish not to go into, about nine years ago, I became a Trespasser. When Manila, my mate at the time opposed that judgment, she became a Trespasser too. We'd heard about the fate of most Trespassers here—to end up as blood meals for the human mites that dominate the villages, so we opted to live by ourselves.

"We built this hut together. We planted trees. We ate birds and rodents—it was strange at first, but we became accustomed to the taste and the texture of meat. We survived well. We were in equilibrium with our environment. About two years in, we had a child. There was nothing peculiar about tending to a pregnant woman in a place like this. No, the strangest feeling was bringing my son into this realm and knowing I didn't have to fill out a single application for the approval to do so.

"We named him Delphinus, after the constellation. His byname was Fin. It was difficult for Manila and I to accept that Fin would never have the chances that we had. To attend the Polytechnic, to have dessert, to sit on the freesia-lined hills and bask by the pond and stroll under the Angsana trees. He would never even see a blue sky, or the constellation he was named after. In a way, Manila and I, like him, were newborns. We wondered if he would fare better in one of the villages. There were, after all, ones that lived and survived just like us. How long such amity could have lasted, though, was another matter.

"We handled ourselves well. We never talked about the Burg and we were glad he wasn't involved in their ridiculous traditions of slandering it. For five years, we got by. Instead of teaching Fin about polynomials, I taught him how to skin rodents and gut fish. He knew how to fashion a proper line and cast it into the watering hole. As time went by, however, the soil became infertile. The watering holes here couldn't sustain life anymore. They became filled with the murky sludge that plagued the Deep Grey. I figured it had somehow seeped into the water table, the aquifers, and spread to the coastal regions. Some plant species raged against their deficiencies and survived. Those are the ones you see here now. The rest have disappeared. When this happened, the animals also disappeared.

“Uprooting ourselves and moving away would have been uncomplicated, but hasty. The three of us had no qualms about it. For a village, however, it would have been devastating. All of a sudden, I was content with my decision to stay away from the villages. Fin and I went searching for new soil, new watering holes and rivers. We would be gone as soon as daybreak and return just before dark. I had to carry him on my back sometimes, but those times were rare. He was a strong boy.

“One day, we found a glade. The soil there was compact, but supported life. Abundant life. There was a stream, about a quarter of a kilometer away, bubbling with life as well. We decided to follow the stream and found that it joined with another much larger river, unhindered by the arrangement of rocks along its banks, to form a singular rapid. We followed it until we found ourselves standing on a platform.

“I held Fin’s hand as we stretched to peer down. The river had ended in a great, steep slope and poured water into a large basin below, where we saw a colony of fat hogs filling their bladders. Fin smiled and clapped his hands, knowing we had found our new home.

“We skated down the slope and near the watering hole. Fin was getting to be a sharp shot, so I gave him the bow I had made out of an old tree limb and hemp. He

fired an arrow and hit it right in the head. As they ran away, I got another one in the leg. I stuck the arrow through its temple after. At the same time, a loud crash sounded from beneath us. It wasn't enough to split the earth, but it knocked us both to the ground. It must've been just a tremor, I thought. Seismic activity. I ignored it. We lugged the meat back to our hut here. It was enough to feed us for three days.

"The next day, Fin and I went back to the glade. He was excited, eager to explore this place we were about to call our new home. He climbed the hills, marvelled at his reflection in the running waters, dug his nails into the rich soil. He even smelled the foliage. He was the first one down at the basin. Fin liked to swim. There weren't many uncontaminated water sources here near the Deep Grey. The Burg dumped all its waste into it, making it unfit for even washing clothes. Rivers were shallow—just mucky tributaries. Watering holes were his only refuge, but they were sparse. Nevertheless, he was capable. People like me and you, our confidence was always bolstered by the safety in our communal pools. He braved through mud and rocks, some as big as his head.

"There was a cavity at the base of the watering hole, large and visible through the weeds that sprung from the bed. Fin wanted to dive in, to see what was in there." He paused. He set the bowl down and faced the wall. He then repeated, "He wanted to see what was in there. He was so

impatient and so happy that I let him. I watched him go in. I watched his feet move up and down and then disappear."

"What happened to him?" These were the first words I'd said to the man.

"A cloud of red diffused through the cavity, fighting against the mud to come to the surface. Slow, like ink in water. I dove in and hit my face on a rock. It scraped right across my temple to my nose. It took my eye. I can't remember feeling the pain at the time. A force pushed me back and I hit the back of my head against a rock. This was when the pain began to really set in. I climbed out of the basin, holding my palm against my eye—what was left of it. Blood was leaking everywhere. I felt like I was going to faint, but I fought against it.

"I looked down at the basin and saw a giant, reptilian creature emerge from it. At first, I thought it was a croc—like the ones we had near the Mire Grounds. But they were never big like that."

"How big was it?"

"It was *big*. Almost as big as this room. And I often wondered how a creature as big as that could sustain itself and keep strong. It bore its teeth at me. A neverending row of blood-stained teeth. Fin was dead. I knew it. There was no reason to stay. I ran. I ran and ran.

Ran through the Fenlands with my hand over my bleeding eye. Ran until I ended up back here. I told Manila what'd happened. It was the worst day of our lives—worse than when we became Trespassers.

“The days were dark after that. Until something happened. We received a note in a bottle. Its message was simple. It read, *I'm sending you a new eye.*”

“The Tides,” I muttered.

“Yes. The Tides,” he said, giving me a cautious glance. “The next day, wrapped in cellophane was my new eye and instructions on how to install it into my orbit. It was a more advanced version of what we had in the Burg. No surgical dexterity was necessary. It was no more complicated than fitting a glove over my hand. The results were immediate. Manila was amazed by it. She had even jested that it might render her Charter obsolete, it being in Ophthalmology.

“She and I mused about who this Tides person was. But she spoke less and less as the weeks went by. Our conversations became brief and soon diminished into single syllables. Grunts and sounds. Mumbles and mutters. She burst into crying episodes whenever Fin was mentioned, or when she stumbled across an item of his. An item we hadn’t burnt or set adrift into the Deep Grey. She’d cry for hours at a time.”

“Why did you burn them?”

"It was her doing, not mine. She never said why she did, but I can infer why." He scratched his beard. "Another bottled note had washed up near the shore. There was a photograph of the giant creature in it. The note referred to it as *Great Scale*."

"Like Great Wing?"

"I suppose."

"What did the note say?"

"*You can make sure this never happens again.* I didn't know what it meant at first. I wouldn't even get Manila to comment on it. I wouldn't dare." He sat silent for a while before continuing, "The next day, two metal crates washed up on shore. One contained tools, like ones we had in the Burg. The other contained the framework of a machine. It was only when I dragged it back to the hut that I noticed it was a suit. My Charter was in Kinematics and Aerodynamics, so I already had an idea what each rivet, curve, and metallic plume was for. It was *astounding*."

"The Tides gave you the Thunderbird suit?"

"It wanted me to kill Great Scale."

"Did you?"

He twisted his mouth. "Its head is outside." He looked out the window. "The suit changed me. I flew back and forth the Fenlands, with no aim or destination. I soared to

the top of the highest cliffs and peered down. I wanted to cross the Deep Grey but I had to obey the one stipulation that came with the suit.”

“What was that?”

“*Don’t cross the Deep Grey.* As simple as that.”

“Nothing’s stopping you.”

“Well,” the man said, biting his top lip, “the Thunderbird requires special energy cells in order to work. Basic principle of thermodynamics, right? You can’t get something if you don’t put in something else.”

“Where did you get the cells?”

“From the Tides. I tried dismantling one of the cells to study its structure, but to no avail. Whoever or whatever the Tides was, it is aware of where I go and what I do. If I disobey, the Tides would cut off my supply, and the suit would just be another heap of scrap.”

“You never tried to go back to the Burg?”

“To do what? Get thrown out again? Get my suit taken away from me? The Burg isn’t home to me anymore.”

“Where’s Manila?”

“She’s right here.” He pointed to the machine. It hissed at the same time. “And this brings me to the reason why you are here and why I went through so much trouble to get you. One morning, about one year ago, I woke up and Manila wasn’t next to me. I found her outside, floating in the thickness of the Deep Grey. She’d tried to

drown herself. I put her on the bed. Her skin was as pale as a corpse. She wasn't breathing, but she had a pulse."

"Coma?"

"My Manila had fallen into a vegetative state," he said. "I wrestled with her, pounding every part of her body, but nothing could evoke a response. Then I heard a sound outside—a loud clang! I didn't want to leave her, but I had to see what it was." He pointed to the machine. "It was from the Tides. It preserves her tissues. Her hair is still there, long and jet black. Her skin hasn't had one wrinkle. But she's not alive. You, Odyssey Dove, are here so she can live."

"How? I can't—"

"I don't know either. But you hold the key to bringing her back from the dead."

"That's not possible. Brain death is death. *The dead stay dead and makes way for life.*" But then I recalled the conversation with Ollie and Dr. Shiver. The events that had transpired during the past few days blurred any boundary of impossibility.

I rattled the steel manacles in vain. I was stuck. I didn't know how to feel about any of this. I took a deep breath. I then told him, "This is madness. You can't honestly believe that. At this point—"

"I set a child on fire to arrive at this point!" He banged the table and flung the bushel against the wall. The machine hissed again. He closed his eyes, trying to calm himself. He then said, "You're going to see something that nobody here has ever seen."

"What's that?" I whimpered. I was still in shock from his outburst.

"You're going to see the Tides. Whoever or whatever it is. And it's going to give me what I need to bring my Manila back to life."

I didn't want to speak. There were so many statements at the tip of my tongue. I had to swallow them all. I wanted to ask about Ollie and Dr. Shiver. I wanted to say that there was a possibility Manila didn't want to be alive again. I wanted to know what the Tides wanted with me—what was the wording of its request. But I couldn't handle hearing any of it.

This whole ordeal might as well have been a very long stupor in the night. Maybe I was in bed, I thought, and I would wake up. Maybe it was still the night before the Ex. Sess-16. Could I manifest such preposterous scenarios in my sleep? Was it the stress? Was I having a nervous breakdown? I had considered the validity of this. I had considered the notion of walking right into Dr. Lavender's office the next day and telling her of these outlandish visions. And she would chuckle and scribble it down

and break them down into metaphors and quiz me on their significance.

The man didn't speak much after that. I figured I am the only person who he ever had the opportunity to tell his story to. He had to make himself a hero, somehow. For anyone to refute this would be heinous, to him. So I just shut up and waited out the time.

There was a loud mechanical hum from outside. He knew it was time. I did too. I wasn't going to fight him, but he still injected me with the anaesthetic. I didn't go to sleep right away. When he undid my manacles, he picked me up and held me as if I were a baby.

He stepped outside of his hut and onto the shores near the Deep Grey. There was a small, spherical metallic pod sitting in the water, anchored by four rods. It was the size of a crib. Its hatch was open. The man lowered me into the pod and shut the hatch. I heard the water slushing outside. As the pod doors closed, I focused on the giant reptilian skull outside, beside his hut. Its lower jaw was halfway buried into the sand between two trees. A bird had taken refuge in one of its orbits. It even kept its eggs there.

Kevin Jared Hosein



17
BLUE SKY

When I woke up, I was lying on a tuft of grass, beneath the smoldering burn of four floodlights. I shielded my eyes with my palm. Beside me was a long pad of rolled pitch, still fresh and smooth. The floodlights were unnecessary, as it was morning. Above them was a bright blue sky. A hefty breeze rustled some trees in the distance. The orange freesias along the contours of the field glistened with dew.

I was back in the Burg.

I stood up and dusted my pants off. I was near Muskgrass Park. There should have been a large water garden nearby. I ran my fingers through my hair and found that the metal band was still strapped around my head. I tried to pull it off, but it was futile.

I walked along the cobblestone pathway that circled around a spiked fence. Inside the fence should have been

an old Angsana tree, dense with green, mottled with yellow blooms. There was an Angsana tree, but this one was still young. It would be a while until the cobblestone would be carpeted with yellow.

It was also strange that the benches along the walkway were all empty. But not so strange when I recalled Dr. Shiver's conversation and the mite in the bottle. *Anopheles dirus*. Perhaps the people were all in their houses. Still, I expected to find red wardens pacing the streets, flamethrowers strapped to their backs. I expected the air to reek of carbamate pesticides.

I continued along the walkway until I came to the water garden in the pond that stood at the centerpiece of the park. The water garden was fashioned into a bowl, teeming with muskgrass, carp and all manners of gastropods. Something about it wasn't right. It still had the familiar bronze tinge and the moss coated the rocks that lined the rim of the pond, like wet green wool, as I'd remembered. But once again, I was the only one there to observe it. The park benches, arranged in a circle along the pond, were all empty. They looked like they had never been set on.

The water garden was a hub for many people. It retained a relaxing milieu, even when it was crowded. Ollie had brought me a few times. She laid her books on a bench while I cleared the moss of the rocks. I collected hoverflies and pond-skaters. Sometimes I just sat and watched the ecosystem manage itself. When the odd bit-

tern flew down from its tree, the carp would hide in the muskgrass, tangling themselves with it. The bitterns would still spot and eat them.

I sat on the rocks and peered into the water garden. I traced a circle along the water's crest. The carp scattered with the ripples. I grabbed a handful of muskgrass and, as I rolled it around my wrist, I felt that sadness again, the same sinking feeling I had experienced back in Mesa. Why was nobody here? Perhaps this was the dying effects of the anaesthetics—wandering through this lucid but barren, unfinished vision.

I lied down, letting the back of my head lay along the rocks, and I looked at the sky. My hair bobbed in the water. It was what I did to soothe myself as a child. I gave my hair a bath in the water garden. I was unconcerned with snails clinging to it or the carp nipping at it. I continued to be in awe with the sky. Even if it was manufactured from the delirium, it seemed so real. Almost tangible, like I could reach up, yank it down and smell it before letting it drift back up.

After a few minutes, I left the water garden and crossed the circular walkway with the Angsana tree, and into a residential area. Each step I took, I felt like I would fall right through the ground. I felt a gripe in my stomach—a pinch in my ribs. This all felt real. It couldn't be a

hallucination. But if it wasn't, I'd half-expected to hear *something* coming from inside the houses. The walls weren't sound-proof. People were always watching reports. Some left them playing while they studied. I know Ollie did. Documentary narration flowing from one room to another, trickling out into the lawn. I could hear talk of axioms and polynomials while I dug for beetles.

But here, only silence. I decided to peek into one of the houses. The lights were off. The appliances were all there. The upholstery was lain out. The drapes were drawn, but the windows were closed. I twisted the doorknob. It wasn't locked, but I dared not go inside. I knew my house was supposed to be just a few streets away. Each step I drew closer to it, I felt like my bones would melt.

This wasn't the Burg. Some of the treelamps were missing. In the distance, I couldn't see the clocktower, which always stood prominent against the undulating hills at the periphery of this residential zone. The road's texture wasn't the same. It was too smooth, too soft. The lawns were either too sparse or too feral. The topography didn't match. Even through the ambiguity and elusiveness of a hallucination, I could pinpoint these stark differences.

Still, I was curious about how my house looked. Frightened, yes, but that couldn't suppress my impulsion to go. When I got there, the house was the same. The angular slant of the rafters and roof sheathing, the positions

of the plumbing vents, the colours. I stood at the door, silent, fluttering my fingers against my hips.

I turned the doorknob. It didn't squeak or rattle. It was dark inside. The drapes were drawn. Filaments of light shot through the folds. The dust danced in them. I wanted to call out to my mother, but my tongue was frozen. What ended up coming out was just one syllable, "Ma!" that reverberated in the stillness.

I heard a sound from upstairs, like water splashing. Someone, or something, was in the house. I climbed the staircase, one step at a time. The picture frames that we had nailed to the walls were all there, except they didn't have pictures. I took a deep breath. With each step, I took another. This wasn't my house, I knew. It was just a shell of it. It was just an assortment of the correct shapes.

The water splashed again. It came from the bathroom.

I stood outside the door with my hand clenched over the doorknob. I closed my eyes. I balled up my other fist. I didn't know what was behind the door. The water splashed again. My heart pounded. I couldn't speak. I couldn't call out to whatever was on the other side.

I turned the knob—

—and I barged inside.

Behind the wafts and wisps of steam that saturated the room, was a giant lizard, as big as I was, lounging in the

bathtub. The window was open and the light was spilling in, reflecting off the beads of water along its scales. The water was spilling out from the sides. The lizard swished its tail along the rim of the tub. It kept one eye on me and the other at the sky.

It opened its mouth, and it spoke. Its voice was slick, but deep, somewhat like what one would imagine the voice of a lizard to sound like... if it could intonate words—if it could even vocalise. It said, “I think the blue in the sky is one of the most important things. It took a lot of work to create that effect, but it was crucial. People revered it as something celestial—not of this land. The light blue colour of the sky isn’t a hue that occurs often in the natural world. It’s rare.”

It climbed out of the tub. One webbed foot and then the other. It walked towards me. The dratted thing was bipedal! It continued, “Kingfishers, Ravenala seeds, corn-flowers, copper sulphate crystals. Not much else. If you don’t have these, you have to depend on watching the daytime sky. It represents what is distant and unattainable. You haven’t seen the Burg from outside, haven’t you?”

I was still clinging to the door frame. The shock hadn’t faded. Though I only shook my head at it, I was surprised I’d still managed a coherent response. It continued, “There’s a crown of blue over it. A disc of blue soaking in a thick, grey soup. It creates quite an ugly gradient. Grey

and blue. But that's because the two colours contrast in such an overt manner."

It paused and then laughed. It spat saliva as it did. It then said, "How rude of me. You must have so many questions."

I tried twice to speak, but without success. I then asked, "What are you?"

"Not that one. Any question but that one." I backed away from the door as it approached me. It then said, "I won't answer that, because that answer is not a constant. It's something that changes."

"Don't run," it said. It was standing before me now, its chin higher than my scalp. It raised its arm up to my forehead. "Just hold still." I didn't move. It traced its digits along the metal band.

I couldn't remember anything after that.

18
PERFECT LIGHT

I woke up with a smoldering lamp in my eyes. I tried to move but my body was being subdued. My vision was *scattered*. It was as if I was receiving multiple persons' optic nerve impulses. It was like a visual counterpart to radio interference, like staring into multiple mirrors angled at each other. One of the images in the visual jumble was myself staring back at me.

The lamp swung to the side and was replaced with a full-length mirror. I saw the lizard's reflection in it. I struggled to move, and so did the lizard. As my mouth twitched, so did the lizard's. I stopped moving. As did the lizard. I turned my neck. As did the lizard.

I blinked.

As did the lizard.

I heard the sound of my laughing. Then I saw myself laughing. But I wasn't laughing. My image grinned at me and said, "Any nausea?" My voice, but not coming from me.

“W-W-What happened to me?” I stammered. My voice came out in deep hisses, echoing in my head.

“It would better be understood if I told you what you are first. You are a cocktail of genes from many reptiles and mammals, homeotherms and poikilotherms, sequenced with care and precision. Your body is a chimera formed from many other chimeras. The reptilian alleles seem most dominant, just judging from morphology. But believe me, the biochemistry is much different. I inhabited this body because the human body ages and metabolizes at such a hurried rate, it became impractical to inhabit it decade after decade, century after century.”

“Century?”

“The chimera body allows me to live for up to three to four hundred years at a time, on average. I’ve almost perfected—”

“Three to four hundred years at a time?”

“The average human lifespan was inconvenient. Seventy to eighty years was incommodeous. And leaping from body to body was a chore.”

“Body to body?”

“Neural mapping. The chimera you now inhabit was engineered to have a brain compatible with a human’s. Compatible to be neuron-mapped. See, a person’s being is just data. His memories, emotions, ambitions and

knowledge can be uploaded and downloaded. But they must be stacked into the correct locations in the correct order. Like sorting the cans on the shelves at the grocery.”

“So, you... you...”

He smiled. “I uploaded your cans on my shelf. And my cans on your shelf. But there is a downside to this. Each time the cans are stacked, some of the cans get lost. I wonder how many I’ve lost? I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve done this.”

“How *old* are you?”

He laughed. “I don’t know. I’ve lost track of that too. Time is like a zephyr to me. It comes. It goes. I don’t think much about it. I can remember being a young boy, waiting for the school bell to ring. Felt like days at a time sometimes. Years pass like minutes now. It feels like, each day, I go to sleep and have to map myself onto a new chimera. I’m not even sure if what I’m remembering is real anymore. This is the reason why I had this body made.”

“Made?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard the news. Not only can this body regenerate, it can receive and transmit digital data. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to lose anymore of myself. I need a body that will always be alive. I cannot keep leaving fragments of myself behind in shells of beasts and reptiles. There is a core to every sentient life. Mawkish people called it a soul, and I’ll call it that too, at the risk of sounding maudlin myself.”

He then recited, “*Though my soul be set in darkness...*” I finished the line, “*...it will rise in perfect light.*”

We both remained silent for a while. I hadn’t even realized what I’d remembered it from. Back in the Polytechnic, the plaque on the statue of the man pointing at the stars. I muttered his name, “Aamon Faust.”

He nodded. “This is a special moment for me. I can truly absorb the moments where something new is happening. This is history. This is a true saga. Yes, I was once Aamon Faust, but that body grew feeble.”

“You built the Faculty of Light.”

“I built the *Burg!* But I didn’t enjoy being with people from the Burg. I didn’t say goodbye. I’m unhappy around them. I’d prefer watch over them.”

“What do you mean, you built the *Burg?*”

“With LUX’s help, yes. I oversee all activity in the Burg from here. With LUX’s help, of course.”

“LUX?”

A deep female voice echoed through the room, “Lead Executor Unit. LUX.”

I didn’t say anything. The female voice spoke again, “I am the key mainframe and central processing unit for Axis Mundi.”

“Axis Mundi?” I asked.

"You're in it. This is Axis Mundi," Aamon said. "This is the centre of the world. The world's command center."

"You should give him some perspective," LUX said.

Aamon unstrapped me and helped me down from the metal table. I couldn't balance myself at first. I fell down several times. Aamon held my hand and helped me across the room. He took me into a room marked SANCTUM.

The door slid open and LUX stated, "The Sanctum is a grazing and breeding ground for terrestrial and amphibious organisms. It spans 2,128 square kilometers and the majority of it supports edaphic life as well. Scattered within it are arboreal regions and shallow pond regions. It is a closed ecosystem that requires little external regulation.

"The effects of sunlight can be amplified by radiant generators, which produce 100,000 to 120,000 lumens per square meter. This, however, is only employed during periods of paucity due to the risks associated with prolonged radiation exposure. In a similar fashion, precipitation catchments have been built along the canopy membranes so that artificial rainfall can be generated in cases of drought."

Before me was a verdant field. The sunlight pierced through the transparent membrane that hung above us. If LUX hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have noticed it. Even when trying to pinpoint it, I couldn't tell how high up it was. The birds in the Sanctum must have adapted to flying at lower altitudes. I wasn't even sure if I was still inside the facility, or if this was a gigantic courtyard of sorts.

Two mole rats popped out from dirt holes at my feet. They looked up at me, wiggling their whiskers, before plunging back into the soil. When we came to a high bush, Aamon told me to slow down, lest I wanted to wake the serpents. There had been all manner of mites I had never seen before.

I followed Aamon to a drinking pool lined with reeds. A family of brown bovines drank, the fur on their chins sopping wet. Aamon stopped before them. "Stand back," he told me. He then pointed at them.

The earth shook and a gust of wind blasted me backwards. But I didn't fall. A fissure ran across the soil from the pool. The guts and blood splattered on the grass. On the flowers. And leaked into the water. Bones were lying everywhere. The bovines had exploded.

Aamon was in shock. Perhaps more than I was. He gazed at his hands like a child in wonder. His eyes were

as big and moist as a suckling's. He then pointed to a tree in the distance. A sharp cracking sound zipped through the air and the tree was quartered. The limbs blasted off, bathing it in a shower of burning leaves.

"I didn't think it would be this easy," he said to himself. He then spun around in a circle and exclaimed, "I want to try it on the ultravores, LUX!"

A buggy drove up to us from my right. It was near-silent. Its engine didn't even rumble. I didn't dare run away. Not in this body. Not when Aamon could explode me with a thought. The buggy drove itself across the field until we came to another building in the shape of a cylinder. Above its door was marked MENAGERIE.

LUX began, "The ultravores are raised here in the Menagerie. Ultravores are chimeras that have been engineered to produce the variant of a growth hormone from their pituitary glands. The original experiments had failed due to the various organ systems not maturing and developing in tandem. Though their metabolic rates have been lowered, their lifespans outside of Axis Mundi have been curtailed due to lack of nutrition. Considered an invasive species, they tend to displace the communities of the habitats they choose to dwell in. Their ecological

niches only serve as major disrupters for others."

There was no ceiling here either, just the same transparent membrane. There were two rows of giant bell jars lain parallel to each other, some as high and as wide as houses, with conduits leading to gas pumps and water tanks. I approached the first one and peered inside. This one was teeming with trees, some of them decaying. I looked closer.

Then something slammed into the glass from behind.
I fell back.

It was Great Wing. A smaller version. An infant, but it was still bigger than I was. It cocked its head at me, locking eyes with me, its pupils constricting. Its spiky, plumed crown was just beginning to form. Aamon must have been breeding these monstrosities here and then releasing them into the Outsides. For what purpose? Why would he do that?

"You've seen this one before too," he said, beckoning for me to come over. I peeked into the bell jar he was standing adjacent to. In it was a miniature arboreal ecosystem as well, but much more sparse compared to the other bell jar. At its centerpiece was the hill-beast, but again, an infant. A tube was vomiting bloody guts beside it—a chowder of carcasses of the same bovines Aamon

had exploded. After it was done slurping up the meat, it lapped up water from a nearby pool.

I asked him, "Why would you do this?"

He ignored me and skipped over to the final bell jar. This one was twice as high as the others and was the only one that had been concealed behind sealed doors. "I want you to see this," he told me. "I never expected it to grow like this. It is perhaps the most powerful organism to have lived. I wanted to release it into the ocean and see it rise up like *Godzilla*. You don't know *Godzilla*. This would've been your *Godzilla*. This is *Asmodeus*."

He then called out, "LUX, open the doors."

The doors began to slide open. At the same time, I asked, "What are you going to do?"

He gave me a coy look. "I've been working on this one for almost one hundred years," he said, "and today, I'm going to kill it."

"I do not recommend that," LUX said while the doors came to a halt. "PULS-1 may not be adequate for this objective. PULS-2 and PULS-3 have not finished recharging."

"Will it kill it?" Aamon asked, biting his nails.

LUX replied, "There is a greater chance of maiming it."

"Then proceed, LUX. Open the doors." Aamon was impatient.

As the doors resumed opening, the monstrosity behind it came into view. Its hard, bloated body was covered with thick, black scales. It had three heads, one more prominent than the others. The smaller heads looked as if they were glued onto its shoulders. They hadn't been attached to any neck-like appendage. They resembled those of turtles. One of them looked dead and had already begun to decompose. Its lower jaw flopped as it swung its torso from side to side, knocking against the doors. The head in the center was of a serpent, able to wriggle and stretch its elongated neck. Its back was saddled with a dome-like shell, lined with massive spines. Enormous thorns.

The doors were open now. It thrashed about, trying to stumble out of its jar. Aamon stood before it, his hands at his hips. I heard him say, "LUX, what's happening?"

"There is a delay from PULS-1."

He shouted out, "I have no time for—!"

The serpent head shot out at him and bit the upper half of his body. It swung him around until his pelvis disconnected from his spine.

A crackling, snapping sound resounded as the serpent's neck ruptured.

It fell to the floor with the upper half of Aamon still lodged in its mouth.

I ran for cover and watched as the creature slumped to its side, its only remaining head drawing its last breaths as Aamon's disconnected legs stopped twitching in the pools of blood.

The other ultravores were raving inside their bell jars, rustling the trees, pounding the ground, knocking against the glass. I remained with my tail swatched around my face. I could only glance at the gory aftermath two seconds at a time.

LUX then asked, "Should I initiate shutdown of Axis Mundi?"

I didn't know she was talking to me at first, until she addressed me by name the second time. I was confused. I replied, "Why are you asking me this?"

"You are the only organism left in this facility with the ability to make this decision. Therefore, you, by default, become the one to do so."

"Can't you do it yourself?"

"I am not allowed to." She then repeated the question, as if impatient for an answer, "Should I initiate shutdown of Axis Mundi?"

"Wait, wait." I was uneasy. "What would shutting it down do? What would happen to the animals outside?"

"The Sanctum requires minimum involvement. It is a closed ecosystem. However, given the precarious nature of the at-

mosphere outside, of which the Sanctum depends upon for sunlight and rainfall, shutdown may lead to unfavourable conditions for the flora and fauna within. Should I initiate shutdown of Axis Mundi?"

"I can't make that decision. I don't know what you do. This is happening too fast."

"I oversee all operations in —"

I stood up. "But what does that entail?"

"I oversee the progress in the Burg: maintaining its upkeep and food production; preservation and assortment of data; visual and audio surveillance; construction, repairs, mining and ore refining; and issuing any directives necessary to expedite social and technological progress."

"Directives? To the Board?"

"I am the Director of the Board."

"Which one?"

"I am all of them. I have been since its inception." Each word was in a different voice. Man, woman, high-pitched, deep, brash, soft-spoken. And then reverting back to the original, "I think you need some perspective before you make this deci-

sion. Allow me to take you to the Athenaeum. Please leave the Menagerie."

I walked out of the Menagerie and back into the Sanctum. The buggy was waiting for me. I got in and it started itself and began to drive along the grass. It was so tranquil out there. LUX's voice sounded from the radio, "You may ask me any question that would assist in you making your decision."

"I walked through another Burg before I ended up here. Was that your doing also?"

"I've constructed many Burgs, each one building on the database of its predecessor."

"Many Burgs," I mumbled. A pair of white-tailed deer grazed in the distance. "But why?"

"It was for his own gratification."

"Aamon Faust?"

"He prefers not to have a name while in this facility, so I refer to him by pronouns only." She continued, "Before the first Burg was built, he was alone for a long time. I helped him construct human bodies, but they served no purpose to him. He wanted to recreate his old society. He wasn't contented with the first few Burgs. Nevertheless, he was delighted to have company once more."

"Were we like this? Like a Sanctum? Like a zoo?"

“He had once referenced to one of the Burgs as his petri-dish.”

“But he sent all those people to the Outsides.”

“The protocols were written by him and delivered by me. However, we have never, ourselves, ordered anybody out of the Burg. The protocols were put into practice by the people there.”

“But what was it all for? All that work?”

“The continuation of society.”

“Leading up to me? So he could steal my body?”

“A body that could accomplish perfect regeneration of cells and biotelepathy were goals set by him. However, there was more planned. He was excited by the notion of biotelepathy, as it connected him to me. It would have allowed him to access any information from my database. He had also helped built Pulse Emitters, which orbit above us. A signal could be sent to them. It would then be able to translate coordinates from the signal and emit a focused, high-amplitude on those coordinates.”

“This is why we had that ability?”

"Yes. It was not a perfected technology, however."

"If this is what he wanted, why didn't he just build it here?"

"He could have. Given his recent lack of ambition, however, I believe he preferred others to do it for him. In his own words, he became jaded. He followed the stories of several individuals in the Burg, and outside of it. Long ago, he claimed to be inspired by the lives of others, and sought to link them to form what he referred to as a *saga*."

The buggy came to a stop. I hadn't even noticed the building before me. This one, like the Menagerie, was shaped like a cylinder but was larger. Above the door was a sign that read ATHENAEUM. As the doors slid open, LUX spoke, "The Athenaeum preserves both the digital and physical works of people throughout the ages. Along the spiralling shelves are the works, fiction and non-fiction, that document the ethos of the science and culture of the collective nations of the planet, as well as its physical landscape and musings of celestial bodies. They are preserved to serve as a reminder of the way the world was, and as a tool to imagine how it could have been, and could be."

The shelves were looming and neverending. I had never seen so many books. A smooth, red carpet stretched across the wide floor. The room was dim, but small lamps were placed along the walls that emanated golden light on the book spines. A series of staircases led to various floors. A big red recliner sat at the middle of the room, next to a desk and a large lamp.

LUX urged me to go into a door at the end of the room, marked THEATRE. The theatre was dark, only illuminated by the blank screen of white. Then, a woman appeared on screen. She spoke, in LUX's voice, "There is no better way for me to explain his intention but by showing you this."

I sat in one of the velvety chairs.

The screen faded into a small marble rolling along a groove. The marble hit a small wooden block, which then collapsed onto another. And another. And another. This then collided into a larger marble, which rolled along a wider groove until it fell onto a cup connected to a lever, which generated an anti-clockwise moment to activate a pulley. The pulley then poured water into a thimble sitting on another lever, just enough to generate a clockwise moment to trigger a catapult to launch another marble into another groove. This continued for several minutes, with inclined ramps, screws, pendulums, ball cradles, bal-

sa bridges, bottle rockets and self-siphining beads. I was engrossed by every swing, every turn, every action force, every reaction force.

In the end, the entire mechanism was to create a side-to-side motion of a handkerchief. To wipe a little boy's chin.

The screen then cut to black. I was even more confused now. When the woman reappeared, she asked, "Did you enjoy the video?"

"How does it explain anything?"

"Did you enjoy the video?"

"Yes, but how—"

"The device is known as a Rube-Goldberg machine, one of many. It is noted for being impractical, but entertaining. In the end, it accomplished what it wanted to do. Entertain. This is how he related to his saga. You were one part of the story."

"Are you saying all that happened was predestined?"

"Not predestined. Just primed. We prepared the Ark. We told Mesa to board it. However, we couldn't actually make them board it. That was their doing."

"Was the Ark crashing your doing?"

"It was not. The Ark was struck by a stray airfoil from one of the hovering wind generators. Remarkably, that cataclysm led to

Tom Scullion cutting short the story arc that was primed for Somalia Castor.”

“What was her story arc?”

“Somalia Castor, if she were alive, and if the Ark had reached its destination, would be able to exact revenge on the Burg for the atrocities committed to her and her child. Her child had died without warning one night. However, members of the Board, which had included Dr. Shiver, believed she had stifled her child to prevent it from being subjected to the end-agreement of the Attuning stipulation.”

“To raise her child and then have it die at sixteen?”

“Yes. They believe this was the motive. They didn’t deem her a Trespasser, however. They cut off her resources and took her home away from her, forcing her to live in the Mire Grounds. This backfired when men from the Burg were willing to copulate with her in exchange for goods. A few members of the Board, along with a rogue group of wardens, aimed to make an example out of her for the other mothers signed onto the Attuning. Under the guise of performing an au-

topsy on the child, they dissected the limbs and reattached them in various positions. They photographed each version of their work and had the photographs delivered to Somalia Castor as a means of castigation."

"But you said you're the Director of the Board. Why did you tell them to do this?"

"There was no such order. He would have never consented to something like this, which was why he believed she should be the one to release the *Plague* on them."

"The Plague?"

"The release of the *Anopheles dirus* into the Burg. The Plague was what he referred to it as. He had me engineer a strain of *A. dirus* for the sole purpose of annihilating the majority of the Burg. He didn't appreciate what they had become, he said. He became with bored and frustrated with them as they repeated the same mistakes as the last, becoming cruel and cold."

"But everything we worked for—"

"It was his wish to begin anew. That is all."

I held my head. "But why do it like this? There were so many things that you couldn't control."

"No plan had to succeed to keep the saga going. He considered that the beauty of the saga. In between the many failures, it always excited. He could've shut down the Burg with the push of a button, but it was not his wish. He wanted to give them a fighting chance."

"So, I was their fighting chance?"

"Yes. The Burg was warned numerous times of the Plague, decades ago. The Attuning began because of it. Mesa was told of the Wonderchild that would save them, before you were even born. The Thunderbird was informed about you, and if he couldn't retrieve you, his wife wouldn't be alive right now. Everyone had to fight for you. It would be fitting to say that you were everyone's fighting chance."

"That is insane."

"That is subjective."

"Wait, what about Indigo Gant, from Mesa? She went through all that trouble to obtain those layouts of the Burg."

"Indigo Gant was shot and killed during her first attempt to retrieve those layouts.

Her child was put under the care of an overseer."

"But, the letters."

"The letters were dictated by him, and produced and delivered by me. It was the only way to keep the story arc in Mesa on track, he claimed."

"But those letters had personal details."

"He was privy to some personal details. Without personal details, the saga would've meant very little."

"What will become of this saga now that he's dead?"

"It will be archived with the other sagas. The ones that he created, along with the ones from the eras before him."

"Like those books out there? Who wrote those books?"

"They were from his era and the eras before him."

I got up from my seat. I said, "I want to see them."

I spent hours going through as many books as I could. There was a world I knew nothing about. Plazas filled with more people than I thought possible. Images that my imagination could have never manifested. From what I'd seen, these people had been divided by culture, language and convictions. I saw them as one. As I flipped the pages, their faces stared back at me. Their portraits, their photographs, their memories.

It was at that moment I remembered my father's name on the stele. And all the other names. "LUX, do you have video recordings of these people?" I asked.

"A portion of their history has been put into video."

That day, I found myself lost in a blur—my eyes hooked onto reel after reel of memories and visions, most of absolute beauty and few of absolute despair. When LUX asked again if I should initiate shutdown of Axis Mundi, I shook my head.

I had to rebuild this world, somehow. But not in the vision I've seen in these books and videos. It has been fifty years I've been in Axis Mundi, so much more years than I'd lived in my previous body, and LUX and I are still trying to make the land and ocean inhabitable again. We haven't had much success. It is simpler to engineer an immortal being than to make the planet immortal, it seemed.

I had LUX euthanize the ultravores. I felt sad to see them die, even after knowing the havoc they were able to wreak. I won't lie. I cried for every one of them. Seeing the light go out of their big eyes still haunts me.

Sometimes I take a stroll into the unfinished Burg. It lies just a mile away from Axis Mundi. The Angsana tree has matured. I saunter across the carpet of shedded yel-

low along the cobblestone. The blue sky helps me regain my composure. If not that, then I go back to the movies and books by the old societies. I ponder about the older societies I never got to knew.

I try not to remember that everyone has died. Perhaps there is some wandering human I don't know about, but the way how the atmosphere is now—he is just a fly creeping through a pool of pesticide. The world has gotten much more worse than it had been. I, too, shall soon die.

Perhaps I'll make this world whole again. Sometimes I wake up thinking our calculations worked out. But maybe I'm just not smart enough to make it happen. Maybe it just wasn't supposed to happen. Not like this. It'll reset, I hope. A new wave of organisms that could adapt to the new world will surface one day.

After all, we're just stardust with life breathed into us.

I've instructed LUX not to initiate shutdown if I die. I told her to make it her top priority to preserve all of this information. I don't know if she'd be able to.

I've never forgotten that hope is the thing with feathers. But every day, in the afternoon, when I can't see that blue sky anymore, a crippling fear sets in. My fear is, I guess, for all of this to be lost.

I've retreated into the memories and works of these people for years. I've delved into the grand logros of oth-

ers, feeling envy that I'll likely never achieve mine. And I've written this book while in contemplation of that.

I continue to marvel at everything I don't know. I have everything before me. I have before me all the answers to questions I never asked. In the meantime, this book, my meagre offering in return for such wealth, is just an escaped breath set free onto a boundless breeze—once missing, but never missed. And yet so contented to join the towering bookshelves and the overflow of this database, this atmosphere.

If I don't succeed, then allow me to be forever amongst the whimpers, the laughter and the echoing voices of the unforgotten dead.