

CLARKESWORLD

ISSUE 138



KIJ JOHNSON · JULIETTE WADE
E. LILY YU · IZZY WASSERSTEIN
XIU XINYU · KAGE BAKER · RICH LARSON

CLARKESWORLD

MARCH 2018 - ISSUE 138

FICTION

Tool-Using Mimics — <i>Kij Johnson</i>	1
The Persistence of Blood — <i>Juliette Wade</i>	7
Unplaces: An Atlas of Non-existence — <i>Izzy Wasserstein</i>	73
Farewell, Adam — <i>Xiu Xinyu</i>	78
The No-One Girl and the Flower of the Farther Shore — <i>E. Lily Yu</i> .	91
Are You Afflicted with Dragons? — <i>Kage Baker</i>	98
God Decay — <i>Rich Larson</i>	111

NON-FICTION

Aliens Among Us: Cephalopods in Science Fiction and Fantasy — <i>Carrie Sessarego</i>	122
Poetry, Philosophy, and Welsh: A Conversation with Jo Walton — <i>Chris Urie</i>	129
Another Word: Saving Throw Vs. Boredom: How RPGs Taught Me Storytelling — <i>Cat Rambo</i>	136
Editor's Desk: And the Winners are . . . — <i>Neil Clarke</i>	140
Jungleman (Cover Art) — <i>Arthur Haas</i>	144

Neil Clarke: Publisher/Editor-in-Chief

Sean Wallace: Editor

Kate Baker: Non-Fiction Editor/Podcast Director

Gardner Dozois: Reprint Editor

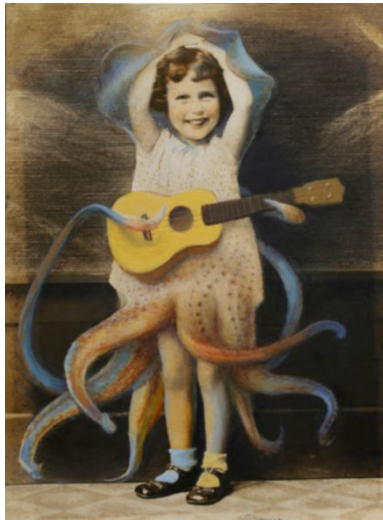
Clarkesworld Magazine (ISSN: 1937-7843) • Issue 138 • March 2018

© Clarkesworld Magazine, 2018.

www.clarkesworldmagazine.com

Tool-Using Mimics

KIJ JOHNSON



Art (“Ukulele Squid Girl”) by Laura Christensen.

The simplest explanation: Here is a picture. It is a girl, six? Seven? The 1930s, to guess by the pattern on the smocked dress she is wearing, the background of the dark studio. She is smiling and holding her hands above her head. She has short chestnut curls.

She also has a translucent membrane that cascades behind her head like a wedding veil, or a cuttlefish’s stabilizing fins. At the waist, she breaks into tentacles. Or is it her smock that ends like this? Two of the tentacles are playing an F chord on the ukulele at her waist. Two of them look like human legs, and wear Mary Jane shoes and mismatched socks. Or *are* they human legs? Pictures are so unreliable.

She smiles and smiles.

Here is a possibility.

The octopus raises her young; as with every species, the goal is to bring at least some of one's offspring to viability and the age at which they will in their own turn bear young. Her genes will move forward through time, like a soccer ball passed down the field toward the net.

This is her tried-and-true strategy, honed over millennia: She lays her teardrop eggs in jewel-like clusters, tucked into a crack formed of coral and her own purling flesh. They look like quivering tender pearls, but they are edible, and there are many predators and opportunists in the world. She cannot leave them for even a moment, though this means she must starve herself. As she waits to repel such devourers and destroyers of the young as they come too close, she tendrils her arms through the eggs, to keep them clean and oxygenated. They tremble in her delicate currents.

Her skin shreds from her before she dies, but by this time the infants have grown strong. They press through the eggs' thin ripping walls and scatter spiraling away, each pretty as a primrose, pretty as a star.

Many of the young die, but some live, grow, find concealments and craveries, develop strategies of their own. This, then, is her boldest daughter.

They are tool-using mimics, each with her own agenda. *This is my way. This is mine.* They hide them from you. They change colors to blend, to startle, to convey information. They contort their bodies and legs to feign the shapes of other creatures, fiercer or less edible. They hide in beer cans. They carry coconut shells—they can move at speed, even burdened like this—and when they are threatened, they curl tight and pull the shells close, like a clam.

Tool-using mimics. It is no surprise that some might become women.

Or perhaps this.

A woman who has always wanted a child walks along the beach. It is Florence, Oregon. It is 1932. She has been told by her brother-in-law that it is dangerous for a woman to walk alone, but who would attack her? She is of no account: awkward, unmoneyed, unyoung. The men in town know her family too well to assault her. If someone else does? She spent her youth ignoring the violate touch of secret enemies, and now her brother-in-law . . . This is why she walks alone.

There has been a storm so she is looking for the glass floats that appear sometimes from the strange and lovely Orient. Instead she finds an egg the size of her fingertip, with the teardrop shape and

unsettling color-shift of the pearl earrings her sister wears for evening parties; but it is soft, as though an artisan with puzzling goals has fashioned a tiny bag from the tanned skin of a mouse and filled it with—something. Through the egg's translucent skin, the lidless eyes are startling black.

She carries it cupped in her hands back to her brother-in-law's home, which froths with dark brocade and carved walnut ornamentation, like a coral reef shadowed by clouds, or sharks. In her high-ceilinged bedroom she places it in a washbasin that she fills with cold water and table salt. A hundred times a day, she runs the single egg through her fingers. She does not know how to describe the stubborn resilience of this tender flesh. At night when she is not alone, she takes her mind away to the single egg: its delicacy; its softness. *You beauty*, she whispers. *You clever beautiful little thing. I will protect you.*

The eyes watch everything: patient, already learning, already uncannily knowing. When intelligence is inhuman, there is no need for neonate time.

What is eventually born has her chestnut hair and her smile, which her sister has not seen since the wedding, and her brother-in-law has never seen, for all his secret visits to her room. When she is cast out (for an illegitimate cephalopod daughter is beyond the pale) she and her child emigrate to Australia. Perth. No one knows her there. She takes a widow's name and wears a ring she purchased from a pawn shop near the wharf in San Francisco.

No many-limbed father will claim this girl; no cold-fingered kinsman will touch her.

Or.

When the blue-and-gold damselfish come hunting, she has learned a trick. She conceals herself (*Just mud*, she whispers to the water; *there is nothing inside this hole in the ocean's floor*) and unfurls two tentacles, bands them yellow and black. They side-wind like a swimming sea snake, the venomous natural predator of damselfish. Such fish are bright as a Fabergé trinket; and when they flee, the ocean is for a moment engemmed, bejeweled.

She folds in her serpentine arms, turns them back to the color of holes, but it is not finished. It will never be finished. They will return—and if not them, then others. Eventually her eggs, or her young, or herself, will be killed. The ocean is cold in so many senses.

I cannot raise my daughters like this, she thinks.

It must be better above the water. How can it be worse?

Or.

Her husband has always been a fisherman, owner and captain of a small trawler called *The Sea Snake*. He will die in the ocean, sucked low by a storm he will not have predicted, ignoring the warning she gives each time he leaves: *you will walk out that door and you will fail to return*. They all do, eventually. His death-notice has been written in rime on his skin since before they met. How can she invest in such a man?

During his absences, she dreams. But not of him—nor (as another might) of his clean-limbed brother, who has his own boat and eyes brown as chestnuts; nor even of the baker who took over the ovens when his father died, who will never die shipwrecked, castaway, dragged down or drowning. Not even he, though she would not be the first to heat her hands at his oast in her husband's absence.

Her longings are secret, more complicated. When she wades into the cool water to collect kelp for salt-burning, she feels something envine her legs. Seaweed, she assumes: meristems and stipes given an illusion of intent, air-bladders plump as phalluses importuning her thighs. She cannot stop thinking of this. At night, she throws aside her quilt and shivers in darkness as she imagines tendrilling, trialing arms, a nibbling beak orgasm-sharp. But of course it was kelp. And the salt on her tongue when she wakes in the night? Tears or night-sweat. Dreams.

So how does she explain *this* when he returns—the swelling belly, after her husband has been gone so long, when the only hands that have touched her are her own and the sea's? He will never believe her, nor forgive her.

If he returns. She wades into the ocean and calls to the father, unsure he exists. When he spreads himself across the waves and looks up at her with one vast eye (the tip of a tentacle wrapping her ankle, an embrace as delicate as a finger-brush), she makes a deal. Her husband will fail to come home, and her daughter will not grow up trying to guess the difference between the tastes of tears, and sweat, and the sea.

And they pretend to be lionfish. To be venomous soles. To be fat, flat unfoundering flounder. Jellyfish. Yellow-banded sea snakes. Anemones. Brittle stars, mantis shrimp, nudibranchs, scallops, ambulant shells. Rays. What *can't* they do? They pass, and pass, and pass.

Touch them and at first they recoil then coil, enwrap and enrapture you. Their curious and unsettling overwise eyes are too close to their pursing sharp mouths.

Take them home to your three-bedroom ranch in Hopkinsville, and they unscrew all the lids, open the boxes, break the ornamental

seashells. They climb into transparent boxes, into resin grottos shaped like fairyland castles and ceramic skulls with bubbling eyes. They wait until they hear the garage-door opener and your car backing out, then slip through your filters and cross your carpeted floors to eat secretly your tropical fish. Sometimes they return to their salted tanks. Sometimes they vanish entirely.

They survive, and suffer. And thrive, until they don't. They pass, and pass through, pass by and pass on. You will never understand them.

Once upon a time there was a little girl that no one called Pearl. She did all things well: laughed, danced, thought, dreamt, played.

Someone took that photograph. The laughing little girl: someone said to her, *Don't you want to look nice for the picture? Then hold still while I comb your hair*, and, *Not that dress, darling; pick the pink one*, and *Okay, young lady, can you open your eyes a little wider?*, and *Stop squirming! You're ruining the pictures.*

Guess which variety of octopus she is based on. Guess which girl. Guess what she thinks, why the ukulele, why the smile. Whose daughter was she? Was she your grandmother? The picture is old enough, anyway. She will grow up outside your ken to be everything you love and fear.

Between 1933 and 1935, she was billed on the marquees of small-town theaters across the Dust Bowl as "Pearl: The Gem of the Ocean," but was known more informally as *that little freak-girl, with the tentacles. Can you imagine?* Her performance included singing and dancing, and a comedy routine with a immense black woman pretending to be her despairing Mammy, billed as Mississippi Beulah but in fact named Enid Johnson, from New York.

It always ended with a balletic swimming exhibition in a heavy-glassed tank filled with water: this, in towns where there had been no rain for a thousand days, where the youngest children had not known so much water existed in the world, except in photographs. And photographs lie.

The day after a show, the water was drained off and sold by the cup, but Pearl did not know this, already crossing the inland dust sea to the next dry town, drowsing against Enid's shoulder.

In time, her skin seamed, grew lines. How did they like her at fifteen? At thirty? The records do not tell us.

In the oceans, there is a population bloom. Climate change, overfishing: the water grows warmer, and being stripped of certain (highly edible)

predators by seines and traps and rising temperatures, the cephalopods step up, filling the gaps. They start to live longer, remember more. They make plans, think through how to optimize their happiness and success as a species.

Pearl was the first Cephalopod Ambassador to the Dry Lands. They did not realize that no one would listen to her. Eight is a very great age for a squid, though, as it happens, not for a human. Plus, she's a girl, and who knew *that* would make a difference?

But we do what they want, anyway. The warming oceans are filling with tentacles. We will be gone and for a time they will remain.

In one version of the world, Pearl goes back to the ocean. She started happy—wore flowers, danced, played ukulele—but that ends, as it always does. Sober adulthood is a hood she will not wear, so she shucks its tight folds, slides off the pier's end into the foaming coastal waters. The photo is all that is left.

Does she find a male who overlooks the deformities of feet and hair? Does she live to run her fingers through her own tear-shaped eggs? Does she die surrounded by the soft ripped shells of her sea-spangling daughters? Does she fit here any better than anywhere else?

The simplest explanation: The picture is a fake. Can you trust it? Emulsion, itself an unreliable material, carefully painted over with acrylics. The colors are a tap dance that conceals the underlying sepia tone lie. This tentacle-girl has never existed, but she is as real as anything else you have not seen with your own eyes, touched with your questioning fingers.

And even that. What do you know of your own daughter? Only what you think you know. She does her best playing when you are not there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kij Johnson is the author of several novels, including *The Fox Woman* and *Fudoki*, and a short story collection, *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*. She is a three-time winner of the Nebula Award, and has also won the Hugo, World Fantasy, Sturgeon, and Crawford Awards. In the past she has worked in publishing, edited cryptic crosswords, waitressed in a strip bar, identified Napa cabernets by winery and year while blindfolded, and climbed an occasional V-5. These days, she teaches at the University of Kansas, where she is associate director for the Center for the Study of Science Fiction.

The Persistence of Blood

JULIETTE WADE

Beneath her squirming two year old, beneath her rustling gown, Selemei could feel herself bleeding. It had started an hour ago. A subtle trickle of guilt—and, like a trickle of falling dust at the border of the city-caverns, it warned that the way forward was dangerous. Selemei squeezed Pelli tighter. Her daughter squeaked protest, so she released a little, nuzzled down between Pelli’s puffed curls, and inhaled the sweet scent of kalla oil where her hair parted. She risked a glance down the brass dinner table at her partner, Xeref.

Xeref sat deep in conversation with their elder son, the fingers of one pale hand buried in his silver hair, while their younger son listened raptly. Seeming to sense her glance, Xeref looked up, and his lips curved into a smile.

She knew those fingers, those lips. A lick of heat; the memory of pleasure—and then the fear struck her in the stomach, as unspeakable as the blood.

Oh, holy Heile in your mercy, preserve my health, keep my senses intact . . .

Selemei hid the tremors of her hands by rubbing them into Pelli’s back. With a giggle, Pelli started kissing her cheeks. Selemei managed to return a few kisses, then tried to pull away by looking up at the electric chandelier that hung from the vaulted ceiling.

Eight-year-old Aven tugged at her left hand, playing with the ruby drops dangling from her bracelet. “Can I wear your bracelet, Mother?”

Caught in the breath of doom, she couldn’t bear to make Aven frown. “Not now, but someday, all right?”

Aven circled her wrist with her thin fingers, golden like Selemei’s own, and sighed. “It’s so pretty.”

Not the word she would have used. The rubies looked like drops of blood. She had no doubt what Xeref had meant by them: *blood is precious*. When she'd first begun her bleeding, Mother had taught her the same. In this age of decline, the noble blood of the Grobal Race was not to be wasted.

Well, she hadn't wasted it! Seven pregnancies in twenty years of partnership with Xeref. Five live births, four of the children perfectly normal. And while Pelli's albinism might be recessive, it could do little harm here in the city-caverns. Their beautiful, brave Enzyel had just partnered into the Eighth Family to great acclaim. Meanwhile, however, the decline continued, and no success was ever enough—even success paid for in blood.

Another trickle made her want to scream.

"Off you go, now," she said instead, lowering Pelli's feet to the floor. The girl ran to her nurse-escort and patted the leg of his black silk suit. The escort frowned—his Imbati castemark tattoo furrowed between his brows.

"Pelli," Selemei scolded. "We don't touch the Imbati. Are you a big girl?"

"Big girl." Pelli lifted her white hands away and wrung them over her head contritely. "Big girl."

"And who are a big girl's hands for?"

"Pelli."

"Ask if you want your Verrid to hold you."

Pelli's lip trembled, but she managed, "My please?"

"Of course, young Mistress," the escort replied. He swooped her up in a swirl that turned the threatening tears into a cry of joy, and carried her from the dining room.

Selemei sighed. Pelli was so big now. Perhaps if she'd been smaller, more dependent on the breast, this doom could have been postponed. To Aven she said, "Time to get ready for bed, darling." Aven's escort caught her glance and passed it to other Imbati of the Household, who quickly withdrew. At last even her sons Brinx and Corrim came to kiss her and excused themselves to their shared rooms.

She had to speak now, while the blood could still protect her. She turned toward Xeref at the head of the table, but fear twined up into her throat.

Xeref gave her an uncertain smile.

Xeref's Imbati woman moved, noticeable now as she left her station behind his shoulder. Imbati Ustin—tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular with her hair in several long braids that looked almost white against her tailored blacks—easily pulled out one of the brass chairs that stood

empty between them. Xeref stood up, still smiling, and moved to the new seat. Then Selemei's own manservant, Grivi, pulled out the chair beside his.

Oh, to be close to him again!

She couldn't move.

If she got close, they would kiss—if they kissed, they would make love—if they made love, she would get pregnant again—and even if she managed not to lose the pregnancy, there would be labor, and pain—not just pain, but pain *like with Pelli*. The screaming. The blank darkness. She'd wake up feeling like someone had dismembered her, her left leg dead to the hip, and this time, maybe her right, too. Maybe this time she wouldn't regain her ability to walk. Or maybe this time she wouldn't wake up at all.

"Xeref, I can't," she blurted.

"Selemei?"

She stared down at her hands clutched in her lap, at the beautiful bracelet. The ruby drops looked dark in the shadow of the silk tablecloth. "I know blood is precious. I know my duty to the Race. But I just can't anymore."

The guilt sharpened when spoken aloud. She tried not to imagine what words might come from his mouth in reply. *Perverse—selfish—unworthy—*

Xeref cleared his throat. "Selemei?"

Something touched her shoulder—oh, mercy, that was his hand! Her whole body clenched in on itself, hardened. Her chest felt like a geode, unable to admit breath, crusted inside with fear.

Xeref pulled his hand away. "Oh, Selemei, my jewel, my life's partner, my blessed Maiden Eyn—I'm sorry."

She shook her head. Tried to breathe.

"Grivi," said Xeref, "is she all right?"

The Imbati made no answer.

She could hear Xeref stand, pace the length of the table, but if she tried to respond, she'd only moan, or scream. Abruptly, he left through the bronze door to the sitting room; she could hear him out there, murmuring to his Ustin.

"Mistress," Grivi said in his deep soft voice, "I have vowed to protect you."

Her Grivi had helped her more in her recoveries than anyone, but could she really ask him to protect her from Xeref? Was that even possible? Would it mean she could never kiss Xeref again, never feel his arms around her? Did she really want such protection?

She sipped a small breath. “I understand, Grivi, thank you.”

Then Xeref came in. Selemei snapped her jaw shut.

“My Selemei.” Xeref’s voice was husky, vibrating at the edge of control. He knelt beside her feet on the silk carpet.

Elinda help me. Surely he wouldn’t demand to have her while she still bled.

His breath grated. “I—Ustin said—you’ve—gnash it, Selemei, this is my fault!”

What? She frowned.

“It’s my fault. When Pelli was being born, I should have—I don’t know what I should have done. How could I listen to you scream and do nothing? I asked the doctors, but I only thought they would take away your pain, not that they’d—” He dragged a breath. “You went quiet so suddenly. I thought Mother Elinda had plucked your soul away, and my own heart too. And then when you woke damaged! And it was my fault!”

She whispered, “But you didn’t do anything . . .”

Xeref shook his head. He grasped her hand, his fingers pale against her golden skin, and lifted it until her bracelet sparkled in the light. “I didn’t give this to you because *blood* is precious, Selemei. I gave it to you because *your* blood is precious. *You* are precious. I don’t care what the Family Council says, the Race doesn’t deserve your life!”

She managed to look at him. His gray eyes, shining with emotion—his silver hair, falling to his shoulders. Age had given him creases around his eyes; as it had given him more substance, it had also granted him more dignity and determination. And more influence—he often reminded their boys that as the First Family’s representative on the cabinet, he had the Eminence’s ear.

Yet he would put her first.

“Xeref,” she whispered. “Thank you.” Her chest opened slowly. What would happen now? Was there a way forward over cracked uncertain stone?

Xeref leaned close to her cheek for a kiss that barely touched her—the same kind of careful innocence he’d used when they’d first become partners, to soften the age difference between them. He cleared his throat. “My Ustin tells me that in the last couple of months you’ve been missing your friend, Tamelera,” he said. When she frowned in bafflement at the change of subject, he added, “Garr’s partner, who moved away with him to Selimna?”

She couldn’t stop a smile at that. “Dear, I know who Tamelera is; I sent her a radiogram last week.”

Xeref chuckled nervously. “Of course you do.”

Selemei humored him. “Your Ustin deserves credit for turning her powers of observation to Ladies’ concerns. I do miss Tamelera. I could *talk* to her. We would play kuarjos together, and dareli, and we’d talk.”

Xeref laid a hand against his chest. “I could—would you like me, to talk to you?”

“Don’t we talk?”

A blush turned his pale cheeks pink. “Well, we do.”

Though never before about the terrible things—the *real* things. “Maybe you could tell me what you and Brinx were talking about?”

Xeref smiled. “You can be proud of him. He’s really getting to know the workings of the cabinet. Cousin Fedron likes working with him.”

“I saw how Corrim listens,” she said. “I’d say he already knows more than you expect him to.”

Xeref nodded. “I can’t believe he’s almost twelve.”

Selemei gulped. Corrim’s twelfth birthday would make him eligible for Heir Selection if the worst occurred. “Mercy of Heile,” she said, “is the Eminence Indal unwell?”

“Oh, no!” Xeref waved his hands. “I mean, he’s well, of course he is. I’m sorry. I scared you, and I didn’t mean to.” He sighed. “This wasn’t how I thought this should work.”

Selemei sighed, too. She and Tamelera had talked of anything, everything, deliberately avoiding any discussion of their duties to the Race. But when had she and Xeref last spoken of anything but family? She tried to think of something else; anything else. Her mind was as empty as an abandoned cave pocket. “I love you?”

“I love you, too. My Selemei.” He sounded awfully disappointed.

“Sir,” said Imbati Ustin, quietly behind his left shoulder. “I believe you enjoy a game of kuarjos?”

Now hope lit his eyes. “Selemei—shall we play?” He offered his arm.

She had been walking with more courage, recently, with less worry that her left hip might fail unexpectedly. She still stood slowly, and walked slowly, but it felt good not to have to grasp Xeref’s arm too hard. In the sitting room, someone—Ustin, most likely—had already moved the kuarjos set from its pedestal in the corner onto the slate-topped table between the couches. Selemei sat, arranged her silk skirts, and fell into anticipating potential moves for the long-haired warriors wrought in gold, who brandished antique weapons upon their posts at the grid intersections.

Xeref turned the marble board so she had the emerald-helmed warriors, and he the sapphire. He opened his hands to her. “You go first.”

She nodded. They played in silence, but when she executed her first entrapment, he glanced up at her.

“Have you always been this good at *kuarjos*? How is it we’ve never played before?”

She shrugged. “I played with Tamelera.” She took a deep breath. “Xeref, about—what we talked about—are you sure you won’t, or we won’t . . . ?”

“We won’t. I promise.”

“But what should I tell people, when they ask?”

“They’ll ask?” He sighed. “Of course they’ll ask. Say we’ve decided not to.”

She raised eyebrows at him. “They’ll blame me. And think I’ve insulted you. And that I’ve lost my mind.”

“Then say it’s just not working.”

“They’ll think I’m sick. The Family Council would investigate.”

“Then say it’s my fault.” He frowned, shaking his head. “Not that I’ve rejected you, but that my health is to blame.”

“*Your* health . . . you mean put your cabinet position at risk?”

At that moment, a wisp entered through the stone arches of the ceiling: a tiny golden spark of light that spiraled down between them, casting a burst of warrior-shadows, then disappearing through the marble game board and table and into the floor.

“Wysps are good luck,” Xeref said. “Maybe no one will ask you.”

Selemei sighed. “Let’s play.”

Nobody could be that lucky.

Selemei put her hands on her hips, feeling uncomfortably like her own mother. Before her on the bed, Pelli frowned stubbornly down at her own small, nightgown-clad body—a too-familiar defiance.

“Nap first, big girl,” Selemei said. “Your cousin’s party doesn’t even start for hours.”

“Mama party.”

“I’m not going. Your father will take you, with Corrim and Aven.”

Staying home was the only way to be safe from questions, though writing letters while her entire family helped celebrate a cousin’s confirmation seemed—*gnash it!*—well, unfair. She blew out a breath.

Pelli scowled.

Selemei sat beside her. “I love you, Pelli. I promise you can go out, just lie down a bit first.”

“Excuse me, Mistress?” Pelli’s Verrid said softly.

She waved him off. “I’ll take care of it. Please, take a break, Verrid.” The Imbati bowed stiffly and withdrew through a door hidden behind

a curtain. Her Grivi remained. When Selemei turned back to Pelli, her daughter's lip was trembling dangerously. "Pelli, it's all right, come here, I love you." She held the girl's head against her shoulder and rocked her. "Time for sleeping, just a bit of sleeping, nothing to do now, nothing, nothing, Mama's doing nothing, not going anywhere, nap time for Pelli, Mama loves her Pelli." She leaned over to deposit Pelli into bed, but Pelli clung, and Selemei had to catch herself with her elbow before she squished her accidentally. "Let go, big girl!"

Pelli squirmed and whined.

"Here, I'll lie down with you." It was difficult, because Pelli still wouldn't let go, and her left hip twinged as she shifted to straighten it, and her gown hitched up above her knees. She grunted, but she'd often told Grivi she'd rather manage such awkwardness without his help, at least when she was alone. "There." She kissed Pelli's warm cheek. "Sleepy Mama, sleepy Pelli."

Pelli sat up.

Selemei tightened her arm across her daughter's lap. "Lie down, Pelli."

"Pelli party!"

Gnash it! "You won't go to the party at *all*, if you don't *sleep*." Looking up at her from an awkward position on the bed did not convey authority, and her leg was aching, and she *didn't want help*. "Pelli, you will lie down right now because I told you so."

"No!"

"You are a little girl, and little girls do as they're told."

"Nooo!"

"Gnash it, I'm your mother and I know what's best for you. If you don't think of your health, you'll ruin your value to the Race!"

Pelli started bawling.

"Lie down!" Selemei heaved up on one elbow and pulled her down. Pelli thrashed. Her head hit Selemei in the cheekbone; her knee jabbed her in the stomach. *Gnash it, gnash it . . .* Grunting, Selemei struggled to grab the flailing limbs. Finally she managed to pin part of the bedsheet under her own body and wrap the rest of it over Pelli, to catch the hand that was hitting her in the head and tuck it under, to pin the sheet down with one hand on Pelli's other side. Pelli roared with rage. Panting, Selemei held her there until fatigue drained the note of anger from Pelli's cries, and she hiccupped to a stop.

Hitching breaths. But, finally, sleeping breaths.

Selemei carefully let go, even more carefully pulled her arm back.

Oww . . .

She collapsed facedown on the bed. Breathed, hard, aching everywhere. Her left leg twitched and twinged.

Why did I do that? I wasn't going to do that again. Not to Pelli. I should have let Verrid handle this, even if it was Imbati coddling.

She turned her head and touched her lips to Pelli's wet cheek; a hint of salt crept between them.

She's too much like me.

Selemei sighed her head back down on the bed, and closed her eyes. It was easier just to lie here, not to try to move, just to imagine herself sinking through the mattress toward the stone floor.

Curtains rustled, and a quiet change came to the air of the bedroom. A servant coming in, maybe Pelli's Verrid. A long silence pulled Selemei toward sleep.

Grivi whispered tensely, "We don't need your interference."

Another long silence followed, but Selemei was fully awake now.

Grivi whispered again. "Gentlemen's servants should stick to politics. They always think everything is their business. I'm charged to safeguard her health."

And a higher voice answered. "But her health *is* politics. You know that."

Ustin's voice? What was Ustin doing here without Xeref? She shouldn't let them talk about her in her presence, but she'd never heard servants speak like this, and it was so hard to move. To interrupt Grivi in the midst of more emotion than she'd ever heard an Imbati express aloud? It seemed cruel.

"I took the Mark in her name," Grivi said. "My vow of service binds us two, alone. Will you compromise that with your selfishness?"

"Such a question," Ustin said, her voice level, disapproving. "I don't know."

"You may be excused, Ustin," said Grivi.

A swish of curtains suggested Ustin was making a swift departure. Selemei carefully waited more than a minute, then shifted her head, and moaned as if she'd just awakened.

"Grivi . . . ?"

He helped her to turn over. She sneaked a glance at his face, his broad forehead illustrated with the manservant's lily crestmark, but he wore the same patient, agreeable expression as always.

It felt dishonest not to mention what she'd overheard. But she'd bumped up against Imbati secrets before, and heard that very same toneless *I don't know*—if she brought it up, she'd only mortify him to no purpose. Guilty, she lay on her back and stared at the ceiling vaults,

with Pelli's head tucked underneath her right arm. In her sleep, Pelli turned, and her face pressed into the side of Selemei's breast. Selemei fell into a doze, but woke again when a small warm hand found its sleepy way onto her belly. She patted it gently.

"Mama," Pelli murmured.

"Sweet Pelli. I'm glad you had a sleep."

Pelli wriggled herself into a ball, bottom in the air, then lifted her head and placed it beside her hand so all Selemei could see was the fuzz of orange hair. Maybe she could hear tummy gurgles in there.

"Am I your pillow, big girl?" Selemei asked.

"Baby tummy," said Pelli.

"Yes, you were in there once."

"Pelli sissy?" Pelli turned her head, pale eyes wide. "Baby more?"

Hurt, incredulity, indignation, flashed her skin hot. But it wasn't Pelli's fault. "No, no babies in there," Selemei answered. Slowly, she sat up and gathered Pelli onto her lap. "Now, how about we get dressed and go to your cousin's party?"

"Mama party!"

"Yes, I think we should all go together."

No place was safe from questions.

Even with the help of their Imbati, they were not among the first to arrive. The noise of chattering guests already filtered through their host's velvet curtains into the vestibule, where the First Houseman greeted them. No sooner had their arrival been announced when the six-year-old guest of honor burst through the curtain and barreled into Aven, Corrim, and Pelli, shouting,

"I'm real! I'm real I'm real I'm real!"

Selemei caught Aven with one hand before she could be entirely bowled over; with the other, she gripped tightly onto Imbati Grivi's supporting arm. "Gently, Pyaras."

"Of course you're real, young Pyaras," Xeref chuckled, and ruffled the little boy's dark hair. "Congratulations on your birthday."

"I'm real!" Pyaras' waving arm had an odd smudge of red on it.

"What are you saying?" asked Aven. "What's on your arm? Blood?"

"I'm not going to DIE like my mother!" Pyaras crowed. "I've been STAMPED! I'm real!"

"Pyras, will you cut it out!" said Corrim, trying to avoid being pummeled.

Pelli jumped up and down and joined in the shouting. "Real! Real! Real!"

“Go play,” said Selemei, and gave them a shove as the First Houseman pulled the curtain aside. “Corrim, if you want quiet, look for Tagaret and your older cousins in the private areas of the suite.” Pyaras and Pelli ran off together hand in hand; Corrim and Aven more slowly followed.

Selemei shot a glance of sympathy at Administrator Vull, Pyaras’ father, who stood waiting to greet them. “Sorry about that,” Vull said, flushed in embarrassment. “Our doctor has a sense of humor—she stamped Pyaras as well as the confirmation papers.”

“We’re just so glad to see him happy,” Selemei replied soothingly. “I’m sorry we missed the big announcement.”

“The Pelismara Society welcomes him,” said Xeref. “The Race will benefit greatly from his life and health.”

Vull’s face stilled a moment. He and his partner Lady Indelis had been seen as one of the Race’s great hopes until her death three years ago. Selemei sent thanks to Mother Elinda for placing her soul among the stars.

“Come, Vull,” said Xeref. “Let’s go further in—I see some people I’d like to talk to.”

Selemei squeezed her Grivi’s hand in preparation to walk in, but he rumbled, “Mistress, the public rooms are too crowded; visiting members of the Household have been invited into the servants’ Maze.”

She held tighter. “Not yet, Grivi, please. Help me to where I can sit.”
“Yes, Mistress.”

She could have walked the distance by herself, probably. But navigating among gentlemen, fast-moving children, and the wide skirts of ladies was much easier with Grivi’s support. He settled her into a spot on one of the sitting room’s purple couches, then withdrew behind a nearby curtain. He’d hear her through the service speakers if she called.

Half a breath later, a rustle of young ladies found her.

“Selemei, it’s been too long!” That was Lady Keir, who had often joined her for a game of cards with Tamelera. Her golden skin was flushed, and her dark eyes a little too bright, though Selemei had never known her to drink. “Are you—” she leaned forward confidentially, braids swinging around her face, “—*well*? I mean, any news?”

Selemei reached a hand toward her, and pretended the question was only an idle inquiry about her well-being. “No particular news, Keir. I’m quite well. And you?”

Keir giggled. “I’m well, I’m well. Such an auspicious day, you know, I wouldn’t have missed it . . .” Suddenly she seized Selemei’s hand, looking furtively around the room. “You must help me, I haven’t yet

managed to get pregnant—Erex is very patient about it, but I'm *dying* to, oh, just looking at the darling children, it makes me so jealous—”

“May Elinda bless you, dear,” Selemei said. “And may Heile keep you in health.”

“By the way, I suppose you've met my friends? They would love to have your blessing, too.”

Selemei did know the friends, who were only new to Keir because she'd partnered late, and moved from Third Family to First just this year. She squeezed all their hands and blessed them, though it hurt her heart. Keir was the oldest of the four, at twenty, and the only one without a history of pregnancy. None had yet borne a confirmed child.

“I can't believe this party,” one them muttered. “Pyaras is six! He's been healthy as an Arissen since the day he was born. It's showing off, that's what it is.”

Selemei looked over too late to see who had spoken, but she wasn't about to allow the guest of honor to be impugned by comparison to a Lower. “Don't you remember, Cousins, they had this party all planned three years ago?” she said. “When Lady Indelis miscarried?”

Her words created an instant of excruciating silence. Everyone knew how that had ended.

“I'm hungry,” Lady Keir announced suddenly. “Anyone want some of those delicious mushroom tarts?” She walked away quickly, the others fluttering and murmuring behind her.

Selemei sighed. Her temper wasn't steady today; maybe she should have stayed home. She stared at the purple piping at the edge of the couch, avoiding people's eyes.

“Selemei? My love?” A warm touch on her shoulder.

“Xeref!” She took the hand he offered, and stood with relief. “Are we leaving?”

Xeref frowned. “So soon? I wasn't thinking to, I admit, but I couldn't leave you looking so troubled.” His face was rueful. “Walk with me? I've been speaking with the First Family Council.”

“All right—let's not hurry.”

She felt quite steady on his arm, walking through the cast bronze door into the dining room. Most of the men had gathered here, standing about in jewel-colored velvet suits and raising celebratory glasses of sparkling yezel. She only recognized three. Their host, Vull, wore aquamarine, while Xeref's colleague from the cabinet, Fedron, wore emerald. The third man she recognized was Erex, Lady Keir's partner, who wore topaz. He had pale skin and clubbed fingertips, and kept his Imbati woman near him even when all the others had stepped out.

“Erex was just telling me he’s been promoted,” Xeref told her. “Arbiter of the First Family Council.”

“Congratulations,” said Selemei.

Erex bowed graciously. “A pleasure to see you, Lady. In fact, you are a paragon among us. All honor to your gifts to the Race.”

“Good to see you, Erex,” she said. “I believe the Arbiter position will benefit greatly from your kindness. You’re welcome to seek out my children anytime to see how they are doing.”

“Let’s not forget your organizational skills,” added Xeref. “It’s a heavy responsibility to monitor the health and continuance of the First Family. I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“To all our benefit,” Selemei agreed. “Is it too early to ask you, Arbiter, how you assess the prospects of the First Family’s next generation?”

Erex smiled. “Ah, in fact, not too early at all. I confirmed a new partnership arrangement just this morning. In fact, it’s doing quite well.” He blushed. “We’re all giving it our best efforts, aren’t we?”

Today, in this home, the platitude was insulting. “Indeed we are,” she said. “Though some of us are giving our *efforts*, while others are giving up our *health*, and others, like Lady Indelis, have given their *lives*.”

Vull looked stricken; Erex laid one hand on his chest, and Fedron exclaimed, “Lady!”

“Am I wrong?” she demanded. “For the good of a boy like Pyaras, at least, I imagine you could think of some way to protect our mothers better. Aren’t you all men of importance?”

“Lady, you have no idea how—” Fedron began, but Xeref grabbed his arm.

“Excuse me,” said Selemei. She turned away too quickly, and her left leg twinged. She shifted to her right. She stepped again, and the leg didn’t buckle, but suddenly she was wobbling and couldn’t seem to correct it. Worse, by now she was out the door where the only things to grab onto were random party guests. She hopped onto her right foot and managed to stop in an utterly undignified manner.

Out of nowhere a pair of hands steadied her—strong wiry hands, attached to arms in pale gray sleeves. A pale gray coat marked the Kartunnen caste. Selemei looked up and found she’d been rescued by the confirming doctor. The tall woman had painted her face, as only the Kartunnen did: she had black lines on her eyelids and light green on her lower lip. Her coat flared to her knees, and was finely embroidered with designs in the same light gray.

“Thank you, Kartunnen,” Selemei said.

“Please excuse my imposition, Lady.” But the Kartunnen didn’t immediately let go.

“I’m all right,” Selemei insisted. “I can stand.”

“Yes, Lady.” The doctor folded her arms, tapped her fingers, took a breath as if to speak, but let it out silently.

“Thank you for being here,” Selemei said. “You made Pyaras very happy with that stamp.”

“He’s worth the trip, Lady,” said the doctor. “I’d take six of him over anyone else here.” Her half-green smile pulled sideways. “Except maybe that poor desperate girl.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing really. If you’ll permit, Lady, I’d prefer to talk about you. Have you had therapy for that leg?”

She shouldn’t have been surprised. Kartunnen’s specialized education made them audacious. “Of course,” she explained. “My Grevi and I worked on it. He helped me immensely.”

The doctor nodded. “I believe you should consider finding a proper Kartunnen therapist. With respect, women’s Imbati receive quality medical training, but sometimes they can be . . . too close to you, to see things clearly.”

How should she respond to that? Was that presumption? For a doctor to speak that way of a Higher like Grevi? But what if she was right?

“How long has it been since your injury?” the doctor asked.

“Two years.”

The doctor lowered her voice. “Pardon, but if it were me, I’d try not to get pregnant until I’d had it looked at.”

Now, *that* was most definitely presumption. “Oh, it’s that simple, then, is it?” Selemei snapped.

People in the crowd around them turned to look. The doctor bowed formally, and spoke toward the floor. “My sincere apologies, Lady.”

The urge to have her thrown out lasted only a split second, replaced by perverse curiosity. *This doctor could answer questions.* Selemei gathered her composure and smiled, her heart pounding.

“Well, that’s all right, of course, doctor,” she said. “No trouble at all.”

Deliberately, Selemei looked away toward a wisp that had drifted in. The bright spark was no larger than her smallest fingernail, and moved aimlessly, caught in the wake of one person’s movement, then another’s, casting twinkles through the gathering. Younger children pointed and grinned at it, while the older ones mimicked the adults’ casual ignorance. Selemei waited until nearby conversations gradually resumed. The doctor still watched her warily, and threaded a strand

of red hair back behind one ear. When it seemed safe enough, Selemei stepped closer.

“Doctor,” she whispered. “Is it that simple? For—” she almost said *for Lowers*, but stopped herself. “For someone like you?”

The doctor gritted her teeth. “Will you have me punished, Lady?”

“Certainly not. May Mai strike me.”

“There are many ways, but here are three,” the doctor said, and counted on her long fingers. “One, exemerin. Two, ambnil. Three, swear off men.” Her eyes flitted briefly across the crowd, and she smirked. “Easier for some than for others.”

“Thank you, Kartunnen.”

“Everyone!” a voice shouted. A series of quick claps cut through the murmur of conversations. “Everyone, we have an announcement!”

Selemei turned. The men from the dining room were emerging, Vull and Xeref in the lead.

“I’d like to thank Vull for hosting us on such an auspicious occasion,” Xeref said. “A healthy boy joins us in the Pelismara Society with his proud father looking on. But in my heart, I can’t help but wonder, and perhaps you have, too, my cousins—how much more auspicious would this day be if Lady Indelis could be here?”

A sigh swayed the crowd; Vull nodded, pressing a fist over his mouth.

“Too many mothers give their lives in the name of the Race,” said Xeref. “The First Family could grow stronger and happier if they were still with us. That’s why Fedron and I will be bringing a new proposal to the Eminence, in the name of Lady Indelis. Our proposal will allow women whose lives have been endangered in childbirth to retire from their duties to the Race and dedicate themselves to the upbringing of their families. We appreciate your support.”

The crowd broke into murmurs—some shocked, but it seemed, some approving.

Xeref made his way to her side and took her arm. “Are you ready to go home, my love?”

“Yes, please!” Just look at the childlike mischief in his eyes . . . She managed to suppress a grin, but couldn’t help glancing at him, over and over. When they passed the wysp on their way into the private rooms to gather children and servants, it seemed similarly attracted by his energy; it swirled around and through his coattails, not drifting off until they’d left the party and started down the hall toward home. As soon as no one was looking, Selemei’s grin escaped to her face.

Me, legally retired? Ah, Xeref!

• • •

Of course, it was always challenging to get the children settled after the excitement of a party. Selemei kissed Corrim goodnight, fingering a lock of his hair. Now that he was eleven, he professed himself too old for such intimacies, but she'd get away with it as long as she was able. Such soft, soft curls—the perfect cross between Xeref's straight hair and her own.

“Mother?” Corrim turned his head, pulling the curl from her grasp. “Has Father made a lot of laws?”

She frowned. “I think so.”

“Which ones?”

“He's participated in votes for all of them. I'm not sure how many times he's proposed his own; you should ask him.”

“Do you think the Eminence Indal will like this new one?”

She should have known he'd hear; rumors were as swift and unquenchable as *wysp*-fire. “I hope so.”

“When is Brinx coming home?”

Selemei glanced to the other brass-framed bed, which the Household had perfectly arranged with sheets turned back for whenever her eldest returned from his evening with friends. “Late, sweet boy. Please don't wait up.”

Corrim grunted, but when she leaned down to him, accepted a kiss.

“Mistress?” came a disembodied voice from behind the servants' curtain. “Please, Mistress, if you would attend your daughter?”

Oh, no. I could have sworn Pelli was sleeping like a stone . . . “I'm on my way.”

Selemei walked on her Grivi's arm into the hallway, and together they hurried to the girls' room. He pulled open the heavy bronze door for her.

Mercy . . .

Pelli *was* sleeping like a stone, arms and legs flung wide, her covers tossed off and her pillow on the floor. The muffled sobs came from the other bed.

“Aven?” Selemei whispered.

Aven sat bolt upright, still sobbing, and reached for her with both hands. Selemei limped to her bed and sat down. Aven's hands clutched hard enough to hurt, and she wormed into Selemei's lap.

“Aven, my sweet Aven, what in the name of mercy?” Selemei murmured, stroking her back. “I'm here, everything's all right, I promise. What's wrong?”

Aven sobbed something into her shoulder.

“I don't understand.”

“Mama, you almost died!”

Mercy, indeed. She's so smart. For a second, it hurt to swallow. "My darling," she managed, "that was about Lady Indelis."

Aven pulled back and scowled, sobs turned to outrage. "No it wasn't."

"All right, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, you're right." She found Aven's hands and gave them a tug. "But I *didn't* die. By Elinda's forbearance I'm here now, sweet one, and I love you."

"It's not fair." Aven's arms lifted from her waist to drape over her shoulders, and the girl nuzzled into the crook of her neck. "Why do we have the decline anyway, when Lowers don't?"

"I don't know, love." Every parent faced this moment. Somehow it never got any easier, even after going through it with each of her older children. "I guess, we have to remember that each of us has our time. We can take good care of ourselves, but we don't get to choose. Some people are never born. Some are never confirmed, and live hidden. Some are here one day and gone the next. My mother used to tell me that Mother Elinda loves the Race the most of all the people of Varin, and puts us in special constellations."

"That makes no sense." Even her daughter's voice was frowning. "Mother Elinda puts souls *into* us, she doesn't just take them out. If she really loved us, she'd give us babies to end the decline, not kill us."

"Sweet one—"

"And how do we know the people who die are in the sky, anyway? It's the *sky*." She waved an arm toward the vaulted stone ceiling.

Selemei could feel all four levels of city and rock above. Only travelers, Venorai farmers, and Arissen firefighters ever saw the sky; it was a long way up to the gods her mother had wanted her to believe in.

"I suppose we don't know," she sighed. "But we do have Imbati and Kartunnen who care for our health. And if your father passes his law, then fewer of us will die."

Aven shook her head. "Mama . . ."

"Please, darling, don't worry. Come here." She pulled Aven in again, and leaned against her springy hair. Across the room, Pelli sneezed in her sleep and turned over, apparently unaware. Could they be saved? And what about her firstborn daughter, Enzyel, whose trials were already beginning?

A click came from the door latch; Selemei looked up. This was Xeref, sticking his head in. What did he want? She raised eyebrows at him.

Xeref didn't call for her, but came in and sat with them on the bed. She had no idea what he intended until he wrapped his arms around them both. After a moment's surprise, she relaxed into his shoulder. Aven, too, seemed comforted.

When at last Aven began to nod off, Selemei nudged Xeref until he stood, then returned her daughter's head to the pillow and tucked her in.

Xeref offered her a hand up. She took his arm, and walked with him slowly out the door.

In the hall, the light of the sconce fell across his features. Untouched by Aven's fear of death, he looked quite as delighted as he had at the party this afternoon. Her own excitement welled up again. She seized his hands between hers.

"Xeref, thank you," she said. "What this means to me—I can't—" She pressed his hands to her heart, and then to her lips. They unfolded warm and soft to cup her cheeks.

Xeref bent close to her. "I had to do it."

She turned her face up and kissed him. How could she not? His lips were so sweet, and it had been so long! His mouth opened into a whole world where they existed only for each other. She tried to put her body and soul into that sacred place, and only when she gulped a breath did she realize she was already undressing him in her mind, while he pressed against her, eager and proud with the desire that had never dimmed.

The desire that could kill her if it were fully satisfied.

She pushed him away, gasping.

"I—I'm sorry," he stammered. "I didn't mean to—"

"Go away," she cried. "By Sirin and Eyn, please!"

His face full of pain, Xeref staggered away and vanished into the master bedroom.

All the inner parts of her tugged after him, but Selemei did not follow.

Naturally, rumors about Xeref's proposal were everywhere. Selemei had discovered a new talent: extinguishing conversations faster than atmospheric lamps at nightfall. No question in her mind what the talk was about. However, she'd prefer to know how far the information had changed, and how those changes might reflect on the First Family.

There was only one possible course of action.

Any lady of intelligence developed tools for unlocking the truth. Today was a day to employ her favorites: soothe the spirit with tea, amuse the tongue with cakes, and tease the honesty out. The Household had already completed arrangements in the sitting room: white silk cloth over the slate-topped table, silver spoons, teacups of silver-rimmed glass. Considering the delicacy of the topic, Selemei had chosen to invite only one friend from the Ninth Family and one from the Eleventh, both Family allies. Now all she needed—

“Excuse the interruption, Mistress,” the First Houseman said, stepping from behind his curtain, “But your cousin, the Lady Keir, wishes to speak with you.”

“Now?” Selemei pressed a knuckle to her lips. *Should I turn her away? Or let her see preparations meant for others?* “I’ll come to her,” she decided.

On Grivi’s arm, she walked to the vestibule where she ducked around the edge of the velvet curtain. Keir stood waiting, twisting her golden hands even more tightly than the twists her Imbati woman had made in her hair.

“Cousin?” said Selemei. “Are you all right?”

“Is it really true?” Keir asked. “About what Xeref is planning?”

What had she heard? One hour later, it might have been easier to answer. “Only what he announced at Pyaras’ party.”

“But that’s awful.”

“Awful? What do you mean?”

Keir wrung her hands. “Well, do *you* think it’s fair? That we have to almost *die* before we can get out of it? And what does that even mean, ‘almost?’”

What? Get out of it before you’ve even started? Shock stole her ability to speak the words. A good thing, too, because behind that automatic protest loomed an intimate recognition as terrifying as a glimpse of sunlight. Selemei swallowed hard.

“Oh, Keir—cousin.” She took a deep breath. “How difficult it must have been to come to me with your thoughts. Thank you for trusting me.” She opened her arms, and Keir embraced her. Selemei resisted the urge to stroke her like a child. “I know how difficult this is. I can’t *imagine* what you’ve heard out there.”

Keir sighed, but unfortunately, didn’t give any hint of what she’d heard.

Selemei drew another steadying breath. “So, I’m thinking—today, in a few minutes, I’ll be speaking with some friends about this. If you’ve no prior commitments, then perhaps you would like to join us?”

“Oh!” Keir pulled back, dabbing her cheeks with her fingers. “I’d love to! Which friends? Do I look like I’ve been crying?”

“No, please, don’t worry about that. I’m expecting Lady Ryoe of the Ninth Family—she’s always been a great comfort to me during my recoveries—and you know Lady Lienne of the Eleventh Family from our games of dareli.”

“Does Lady Ryoe play?” Keir asked. “Since we’re missing a fourth?”

“Well, not today, all right? You may freshen up in my rooms as you like. The others will be here in a moment.”

Keir bustled off at once, but her long-haired manservant stayed behind.

“Imbati?”

“Your pardon, Lady,” the Imbati curtsied, inclining her tattooed forehead. “Your generosity in this invitation is much appreciated, but I must express concern.”

“About Keir?”

She leaned her head to one side. “My Mistress decided to visit you because she is deeply moved by this topic. I fear that in conversation she may become . . . impassioned, even in the presence of outsiders.”

And possibly risk Family secrets. Selemei nodded. “I understand. I’m already planning to tread carefully. I’ll protect her, I promise.” The servant bowed and followed her Mistress deeper into the suite.

Selemei sent her Grevi to the dining room to speak with the Household Keeper about how to accommodate an additional guest. He’d only just stepped away when the doorbell rang again. The First Houseman emerged from the vestibule, seeming perturbed to find her unattended.

“Is there a problem?” she asked.

“Mistress, your other guests have arrived, but they’ve brought a companion. Lady Teifi of the Second Family.”

Selemei frowned. This could not be coincidence, and it would be rude to confront the motive of an unexpected guest. If she pushed ahead in her own inquiries, was rockfall inevitable? To protect Keir, should she give up on her questions altogether?

“They are all welcome,” she said. She took a deep breath, weighing the words “tell,” “inform,” and “alert” for how far to mobilize the Household. Best to be cautious. “Please alert the Household to the change of plan.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Grevi returned swiftly, apologizing for his absence at a critical moment; Selemei reassured him and allowed him to escort her to her seat. She kept sharp eyes on her guests as they entered. Lady Ryoe wore a smile that sparkled like the ruby pins in her sandstone hair; she came close for a kiss on the cheek before she sat down in the chair at Selemei’s left hand. Lady Lienne’s walk was tight; so also her mouth, and her gray sheath gown; she whispered close to Selemei’s ear.

“My sister insisted.”

Selemei looked past her shoulder to Lady Teifi, who was taking a seat on the facing couch. She and Lienne did resemble each other, though Teifi’s long straight hair was sifted gray instead of pure black. Selemei kissed Lienne’s cheek.

“You’re both welcome. Please, have a seat. Our Household Keeper will be pleased to know that her tea cakes are held in such high regard.”

Under the watchful gaze of her younger sister, Teifi returned the smile, but the faint blue tinge of her lips matched a chill in her eyes. “I wouldn’t have missed them.”

Keir entered then, through the double doors from the back of the suite. She hesitated a moment at the sight of Lady Teifi, but there was only one chair left, at Selemei’s right. She took it, flashing a nervous smile. “I’m Selemei’s cousin, Keir. Had you already started talking about it?”

“Not at all,” Selemei said quickly. But when it came to proposing a less fraught topic of conversation, her mind whirled and came up blank.

Fortunately—showing impeccable timing—the Household Keeper appeared in her black silk dress, carrying the cakes. Her presentation was never the same twice; today she brought a sculpture of a fountain, five crystal spouts rising to different heights from a slate basin below. Atop each spout balanced a glass bowl delicate as a bubble, and inside each bowl lay a pearl-white cake garnished with a single red marshberry. Selemei herself could not help joining in the general sigh of admiration. Tea-pouring and the passing of cake bowls extended her reprieve, while the conversation turned to sweets, art, sweets as art, and where to find the most skilled Keepers. Selemei pressed her fork into the pliant surface of her cake, dared a bite. But every pause clutched at her, begging to be filled with harmless normality.

Here was a topic that might be harmless enough. “By the way, those are lovely hairpins you’re wearing today, Ryoe.”

Ryoe chuckled, licking berry juice from her lips. Her pale hand fluttered up to her hair. “Rubies are the gem of this year, Selemei. We’re all wearing them—even you.”

“Me?” Her own dress was sapphire blue, but then she remembered the bracelet on her wrist. Lienne wore rubies on the neckline of her dress, Teifi wore them in a band down the center of her bodice, and Keir wore them in a spiral brooch at her shoulder. Selemei’s confidence faltered.

We’re wearing blood. All of us.

She tried to cover her consternation with a sip of tea, but too soon; it burned her lip. Nothing could be harmless when the truth hid everywhere. She set down the cup.

“All right, I know what you’re all here for. You want to know about Xeref’s proposal, and I want to know what you’ve heard, and how you are thinking about it.” To protect Keir, she assumed her cousin’s argument like a cloak: “Personally, I don’t think it goes far enough.”

Keir sat straighter. “You don’t? But I thought you said—”

“What a thing to say!” Teifi cried.

Selemei smiled, carefully, and folded her hands on her lap so they wouldn’t shake. She could handle this; it wasn’t the first time she’d been the target of all eyes at once.

“I’m not afraid to say it,” she replied. “Xeref wants to prevent deaths like that of Lady Indelis. He thought the best way would be to allow ladies who had come close to death to retire from their duties. His intent is not to hasten the decline, but to allow ladies to raise their own children—and actually, also, to allow them more recovery time from birth injuries before they must consider pregnancy again.” That was a good idea! Sometimes she surprised herself.

“Birth injuries.” Lady Keir shuddered visibly. “Mercy of Heile.”

“I understand your fear, Keir,” Selemei said reassuringly. “That’s why it’s important to allow time for complete recovery. After all, a healthier mother will bear a healthier child.”

“It won’t work,” said Lady Ryoe. The reminder of blood glinted from her hair as she shook her head. “I mean, retirement sounds good, but who’s going to enforce it? We can’t send Arissen guards into bedrooms.”

“That’s true,” Selemei admitted.

“Then—forgive me—who is going to tell our gentlemen no?”

Selemei winced. Her heart wanted to protest, but how recently had she tasted this fear, despite how deeply she trusted Xeref? She almost looked over her shoulder at Grivi. “Well. We’ll just have to think of something, I imagine. The wording of the proposal hasn’t been finalized yet.”

“This is ridiculous,” Lienne muttered. “Lowers have children when they *want to*.”

“Lowers, ugh!” Teifi grunted. “There are plenty of *them*.”

Lienne’s pale cheeks flushed. “Having too many children is killing us, Teifi, and it *still* isn’t stopping the decline. If we’re all going to die anyway, do we have to be miserable while we’re doing it?”

“Lienne,” said Ryoe, “I had no idea you were so upset. Is something wrong?”

“What’s *wrong* is that you’re even considering this nonsense,” Teifi said. “Politics is gentlemen’s business.”

“But this is about *our lives*,” protested Keir.

“And it’s *our children* who stand to lose their mothers,” said Lienne.

“I can’t believe you, Sister,” Teifi hissed through her teeth. “That you’d associate yourself with selfish cats who would turn their backs on the future of the Race!”

“Teifi, stop!”

Selemei spoke measuredly into the shocked silence that followed. “I don’t believe it’s selfish to try to understand the impact of the rules that gentlemen impose on our lives. The fact is, the proposal in its current form was my partner’s idea, and it’s uninformed in many ways, and incomplete. This is why it’s so important for us to discuss it.”

“The Race requires a higher form of loyalty,” Teifi said. “These are the burdens of power.”

“Oh?” Selemei asked, clamping down on a surge of anger and forcing a smile. “And would you like to tell us about the number and health of your children, then? How your sacrifices have rewarded you with success?” She’d heard enough about her from conversations with Lienne and Tamelera to know that Teifi couldn’t answer that.

A muscle tightened in the older woman’s jaw.

Lienne threw a keen glance at her sister, and stood up. “Selemei, I’m so sorry, we’d better go.”

She took a deep breath. “Darling, what a shame.” She squeezed Lienne’s hand, trying to catch her eye. “Please let’s talk another time.”

Lienne and Teifi’s swift departure left the other guests in a fluster, and they soon excused themselves, also.

“Is there tea left?” Selemei sighed.

Imbati Grivi lifted the pot, nodded, and refreshed her now-cooled teacup. Selemei sighed, pressing its edge into her lower lip, inhaling the steam. In a way, the utter failure of her subtlety *had* taught her what was out there—fear, despair, thirst, fury, and lots and lots of arguing. Keir had come out unscathed, at least.

But her own satisfaction with Xeref’s proposal had not. Teifi demonstrated that any legislation of this nature would be strongly resisted; and Ryoë was correct that gentlemen would seize upon any excuse to dismiss restrictions on their behavior, even if it passed.

“Grivi,” she said, “how soon can we be ready to go out?”

“I know of nothing that would prevent us going now, Mistress.”

“I need to discuss this with Xeref. Our proposal needs some revisions.”

Once she had given herself permission to go to Xeref’s office—this was official legislative business, after all—her resolve outpaced her ability to walk there. Selemei left the suites wing and began to cross the central section, but her left hip twinged; she squeezed her Grivi’s hand for a pause. By the tall bronze doors of the Hall of the Eminence, she cast an eye about, but saw only Imbati child messengers flitting through, and Arissen guards, powerful and still in their orange uniforms. No one to care if she shook her leg a bit.

After a few seconds, she tested her weight on the foot. Workable. A bit more slowly, they crossed into the offices wing. Xeref's was the first door on the left.

All five young men in the front office stopped what they were doing as she walked in. One of them was her son, Brinx. He sprang up from the steel desk he'd been leaning on, and straightened the hem of his malachite-striped coat.

"Mother? Holy Sirin's luck!" he exclaimed, grinning. "Fedron sent me over here only ten minutes ago; we've been going over the minutes of the last Cabinet meeting. If you'd come five minutes earlier, I'd have been busy; five minutes later, and I'd have been back next door." He kissed her cheek. "Would you like to come see where I work?"

Selemei smiled. As a child, Brinx had told stories to her for hours—even conversed with the vaulted ceilings when no one else was available. These days, she was seldom the recipient of that bright attention.

"I'd love to, treasure, but I've come to see your father."

Brinx pulled a sober face. "Of course. Shall I take you in? I don't think he has another meeting for at least sixteen minutes."

"Yes, please."

Brinx resumed bubbling while she followed him to the inner door. "You're lucky that he's in there by himself right now. He's had all sorts of meetings today, and messengers—we've gotten five of them at least. Six, I think, actually. Yeah, six. It's because of the *stir*, of course. The one Father started when he announced his Indelis proposal. We've never been so busy—" He pushed the door open a crack. "Sir? Father, Mother's here."

"Selemei? Come in, come in!" Xeref came to her quickly; his blue eyes searched her with concern, but when she smiled at him, he brightened. She released Grivi's hand to take his.

"Everything's fine, dear," she said. "I need to talk to you about the proposal."

"I hope you're not worrying, Mother," said Brinx. "Our conversations are going well." He raised one finger. "Give them the respite, gentlemen. Think first of the health of your partner if you wish a healthy child, and the blood of the Race will grow stronger!"

"We don't vote for another week or so," Xeref explained. "This is the part where we sound people out and argue for the idea. Our most powerful argument is exactly what Brinx says, and people are responding well to it. I'm optimistic."

Hearing her earlier thought put so differently made her doubt any of these gentlemen were serious about real retirement. "Have you changed any part of the proposal?" she asked. "Added anything?"

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Well, have you talked with anyone about how to enforce it?”

“Mother, don’t worry,” said Brinx. “Kartunnen will do as they’re told.”

Kartunnen? She flashed him a look. “It’s not them I’m worried about, Brinx, it’s the gentlemen. No one will want to give up their chance to benefit the Race. They’ll cling to excuses.” The incredulity on his face forced her to search for examples that filled her with distaste. “No, she wasn’t injured enough; or, no, we had a good doctor so she wasn’t really in any danger.”

Brinx pursed his lips into the same wanting-to-protest moue that he always had as a child. She rolled her eyes and turned to her partner.

“You know they will, Xeref.”

Xeref looked at her in silence for a moment. “Yes,” he sighed. “I imagine they will. Should we specify that the doctor must have assessed the risk of death at greater than fifty percent?”

She shuddered. “Do Kartunnen do that? Isn’t that . . . heartless of them?”

“Not every time, I don’t imagine.”

“Fifty percent seems low,” put in Brinx. “Maybe it should be sixty.”

“Brinx,” said Xeref, “you might want to think carefully before you say something like that. I wrote the proposal for your mother.”

“Wasn’t it for Lady Indelis?” Brinx exclaimed, but his face fell quickly from puzzlement to shock. “Oh. Mother, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Selemei found his hand and squeezed it. “Well, you can see, can’t you, why we can’t have this be negotiable?”

“I see what you’re saying,” said Brinx. “The problem is, negotiation is exactly what this part of the process is for.”

“But, treasure, that’s what I’m doing right now. Negotiating it.” Selemei turned back to Xeref. “How many men do you know who would be willing to bargain the continuation of their families against their partners’ lives? How many are doing this already? Speaking over a doctor’s word in the name of ending the decline?” Xeref was too frustrating in his silence. “Xeref,” she insisted. “*You* know how easy it is to speak over a doctor’s word. How dangerous it is.”

“Father, did you—” Brinx began, but Xeref raised his hand and stopped him with a glance.

“Selemei, my jewel, you’re right. But no one will agree to give up such power to Kartunnen.”

“The power doesn’t need to be in the Kartunnen,” she explained, carefully restraining her tone. “Neither should it be; as Lowers, they lack final authority. Put this in the law itself. Make a list of risks, of

injuries, and how serious they are. Take it out of everyone's hands, as if it were the will of Elinda."

"Father, you'd still have to get the *list* from a Kartunnen," said Brinx.

"Brinx, I know how to get lists from Kartunnen," Xeref replied, and Brinx blushed. "Thank you, Selemei. I'll send my Ustin tomorrow morning."

"Come see my desk, Mother," said Brinx.

"I'm not finished, though," Selemei said. "There's another problem. A more serious one. A more *private* one."

"Which one?" Xeref asked.

She squirmed inside. Might this be easier to discuss if Brinx weren't here? Possibly, but saying 'rape' was awful, regardless. She dodged the word. "Well, we've talked about the will of Mother Elinda, but we haven't spoken about her partner."

"Father Varin?" Brinx raised his eyebrows. "Do you mean what punishment to levy for transgression? That's for the joint cabinet to decide."

She sighed. "Brinx, love, I'll lend you my copy of the Ancient Stories when your brother has finished reading it." Selemei opened her hands to Xeref, who was staring at her silently, with a wrinkle deepening over his nose. "Remember, Father Varin gnashes the wicked in his fiery teeth in atonement for his own transgressions." Still, no recognition in Xeref's eyes. "The transgressions that led Mother Elinda to *reject* him."

"Oh!" Xeref cried suddenly. "But that's . . . oh, that's—oh dear."

"Father, what?"

"But Selemei, would they really?"

What a question! She turned it around. "Perhaps you mean to ask whether gentlemen would really be willing to sacrifice their desires for their partners' safety? Some would—you would. But most gentlemen are not you. Must I speak with the ladies of the Pelismara Society to give you a number?"

Xeref ran one hand through his silver hair, uncomfortably.

"What are you talking about?" Brinx demanded.

"Master," said Imbati Ustin. "I can verify, by Imbati witness, three rapists among those First Family gentlemen known to me. If you wish it, I can investigate and expand my knowledge to assess the scope of the problem across the Pelismara Society. It could have a substantial impact on this proposal's implementation."

In the Imbati's icy voice, it felt terrifyingly real. Selemei swore. "Name of Mai, who?"

"I don't know, Mistress, I'm sorry."

Selemei gaped at her. For whom was she protecting that information? Would she tell Xeref if he asked?

Brinx, who had been spluttering, found words. "Father, you must reprimand your Ustin."

"You think so?" Xeref narrowed his eyes. "Why is that?"

"Accusing her betters of such a thing! I can't think of anything more presumptuous."

"Brinx," Xeref said slowly, "Please think what you're saying. Ustin has worked as my personal and political assistant and bodyguard for twelve years. In all that time she has never failed to safeguard me or my information, nor have I caught her in any inaccuracy. Her qualities are guaranteed by the certification of the Imbati Service Academy, just as your servant's are. And this information is quite relevant to our success."

Brinx flushed. "I know. I'm sorry, Father. And I do really want to help you pass this proposal."

"If this is uncomfortable for you, why don't you just let me talk with your mother? Fedron's got several people he's negotiating with, and I'm sure he'd appreciate your help right now."

"Yes, of course, Father. I'll see you at dinner."

It was quite common for a room to feel silent after Brinx stepped out of it, but this silence was one Selemei hesitated to step into. Her mind whirled in horror and suspicion of the men she knew. Xeref stared into the distance, dismay written deep into the lines of his face.

"This . . ." He sighed. "I don't know."

That was not what she'd expected him to say. "What don't you know?" she asked. "I had no idea this was such a huge problem. The question is, how do we address it?" She looked to his Ustin for support, but Ustin didn't speak. The manservant's mark arched across her pale forehead like the bars of a closed gate.

"No, Selemei," Xeref said. "We can't address it."

"Why not?"

He rubbed his forehead. "This is a legislative proposal, which will be discussed and voted on by the cabinet. We can't lose sight of that. Proposals with divided goals fail, even when their goals are entirely ordinary. And . . . I really don't want this one to fail."

Oh, gods, if it failed! She gulped a breath. "I need to sit down."

"I'm sorry, love," said Xeref. "By all means."

Griivi was swift to deliver one of the metal chairs that faced Xeref's desk; Selemei sat with relief and tried to gather her thoughts. This proposal no longer felt like it was about her, but about Ryoe, Lienne, and Keir—and about her own daughters. To fail would be a disaster.

But what if they succeeded, and the law were meaningless to those who most needed it?

“Ladies are vulnerable,” she said quietly.

“You’re right,” Xeref agreed. He took the other chair, which Ustin brought for him. “As Lady Indelis was vulnerable.”

“Or as I was,” she said. “In a medical center, helpless to the wishes of doctors and family.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not angry,” she assured him. “But some ladies are also vulnerable at home. And we can’t send Arissen into bedrooms to enforce this law.” The very idea was appalling.

“Imbati are already there,” Xeref mused. “But we don’t want to put such power in the Imbati, either.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Dear, it’s hardly a reasonable demand on them, even if we did.”

“True.”

Selemei ran her eyes about the office as if the answer might be hiding here somewhere, hanging among Xeref’s numerous certificates or tucked between the law books on his shelves.

“Wait,” she said, “even if we can’t do anything about the gentlemen, this proposal aims to prevent dangerous pregnancies. So, what about the medicines?” What had that Kartunnen mentioned at the party? Amb—something . . .

Xeref looked like she’d stuck him with a pin. “Those are illegal.”

“So? We’re proposing a new law, aren’t we?”

“A gentleman would never consent to compromise his fertility.”

“I would, if it meant I were never put at risk again.”

He blinked at her. “You would?”

“Isn’t that what we already decided?”

Xeref didn’t answer, but shook his head in consternation. Then, beside her left ear, Grivi rumbled in his throat.

“Yes, Grivi?”

“Mistress, you should be aware that contraceptive medications, when properly used, have no permanent effect on fertility.”

“Well. All right, then.”

“Even for Grobal?” Xeref asked.

“I know of no genetic contraindications, sir,” said Grivi.

“I’m just not sure anyone would agree to it. Could one really ask a man to waste his value to the Race?” Xeref frowned at the floor, and began cracking his knuckles, one after the other.

She realized, then. He was frightened. “Dear—what if we tried it?”

He twitched, and shook his head. “You’re suggesting—no. I could never ask my Ustin to procure something illegally.”

“Master,” said Ustin, “I can procure something for myself with perfect legality.”

That was it! Ustin was a woman, and would have done this before. Then all *she’d* have to do was get her hands on it, and then . . .

Selemei put her hand over Xeref’s and squeezed. “Think of it.”

The triangular white pill was small, almost indistinguishable from the marble of the bathroom counter. Selemei forced herself to see it, to confront it, to confront what she had to do. Grivi’s unwillingness to aid her in any aspect of the medication only magnified her sense of transgression. After seven days, it had become no easier.

I am not harming anyone. I’m doing this for Enzyel, for Aven, for Pelli—and for myself. The Kartunnen have deemed it safe. Imbati Ustin herself has used this. A Grobal is not so different from a Lower that it will affect me differently. It is not harming me.

It is not harming me.

She swept it up and swallowed it before she could lose her nerve.

That was it.

She chased it down with an extra glass of water just to be sure. Her body had been feeling a little different, but that could have been her mind’s suggestion. Stripped of the magic that younger women had always begged her to imbue them with, she felt . . .

Don’t say hollow. I’m more than that. I’ve already contributed five healthy children to the Race.

Her triumphs were written in her body, where no one could take them away. Pale ripples in the skin of her belly and hips proved she had received Elinda’s gift, that she could grow like the moon to nurture souls. Her breasts had earned their delicious softness with each precious suckling touch.

She raised her head and looked her reflection in the eye. *And now you’ve contributed to the content of a legislative proposal, so what do you think of that?*

A strange light crept over her face from beneath, turning its features unfamiliar. Selemei glanced down; a wisp had entered the room, and now turned circles beside her knee. She smiled at it.

The wisp understood. But she was going to do this anyway.

She raised both hands over her head, allowing Grivi to slip the sleeves of her silk robe over them. Then she closed the robe and took his hand to walk out to the bedroom where Xeref was waiting.

Xeref pushed up on one elbow at the sight of her. His worry-wrinkles were deeper than usual—he looked even more concerned than he had yesterday, if that was possible. She allowed Grivi to seat her on the edge of the bed; once Grivi vanished under his curtain, she took a deep breath.

“I’m all right, Xeref,” she said. And told her body silently, *you are all right; show him*. She pulled her legs up on the bed and beckoned. Xeref moved close to her side, and put his arm around her shoulders. His warmth, his stability, his soft silver hair faintly scented with perfume . . . simultaneous waves of nostalgia and longing crashed together inside her, brimming in her eyes and stealing her breath. She leaned into him.

“I’ve missed you so,” Xeref said.

All she could manage was a nod.

“It was harder to wait this time.”

Hardest to wait when that wait might never end. She nodded into the crook of his neck and shoulder. She could feel his soft-furred, warm skin against her side, against her breast. She reached for his arm and stroked it from elbow to fingers, found the outer edge of his hand and squeezed it as hard as she could.

“Xeref, I didn’t mean to push you away. I mean—I didn’t want you gone, I just was so scared to—”

The words brought back the reality of what they were attempting. She jerked back and found him staring at her in dismay. So he’d arrived at the very same thought. She blew out a breath between her lips. Carefully, carefully.

“We’re not doing this for politics. I—I’m not doing this for politics.” The words sounded false.

Xeref seemed to crumple in on himself. “Nobody could possibly agree to this,” he muttered. “Why did I ever make you—?”

“You didn’t *make* me; I convinced you. And Ustin helped me.”

He glanced toward the service curtain on his side of the bed, and heaved a sigh.

“Please don’t blame her,” Selemei said.

Xeref shook his head. “I don’t, really. She does her job well. Too well, some might say.”

“There’s no such thing as an Imbati who serves too well.” Selemei shrugged. “This is the only possible solution to our problem. And for her, this isn’t political; it’s normal.”

“We aren’t like them,” Xeref said sadly. “Fevers that kill Grobal scarcely touch them. Who’s to say you haven’t done something terrible with this medicine, and will never conceive a child again?”

“But I don’t want to conceive a child again.”

“Ha!” The laugh burst from him all at once, like a bark.

Her face burned. “Xeref, I thought we agreed!”

“No, Sirin and Eyn, I’m so sorry. We do; of course we do. It’s just, hearing you say it . . .” He rubbed his face with both hands. “I wish there were a way for this to be normal for us.”

“Passing the law would make it normal. Except we can’t pass the law until we try this. It’s normal for Lowerers . . .” A thought struck her suddenly. “What if we were Lowerers?”

“You’re not serious.”

Impetuously, she tossed her bathrobe back from her shoulders. “We’re both naked. Who’s to say we haven’t just set our marks aside? We could be Arissen—Residence guards, who’ve shed their castemark color.”

He raised his eyebrows skeptically. “I can’t imagine anything less romantic.”

“Not guards, then. What if we were Kartunnen? I’m a dancer.” She shimmied a little and ran her hands down the curve of her breasts and belly. “And you’re a . . .”

“Hm-mm.” That sound was still skeptical, but there was something of a chuckle hidden in it, too. “No; I can’t.”

She huffed at him. “Oh, come on. You’re . . . you’re my accompanist. And you play drums, with your feet!” She leaned over and shook one of his feet through the quilted silk. “And you play pipes of course, because you have such—” she found his hand “—marvelous—” she twined it in hers “—fingers.”

He gave her a real chuckle this time, one that awoke heat in her stomach. “You’re so beautiful. My Selemei.”

She placed three fingers over his mouth. “I can’t imagine who you’re talking about.”

“Someone . . .” He took a deep breath. “Uh, someone in a song.”

“That’s right, because we can sing, too.”

“And we paint ourselves every morning. Like this.” He licked one finger, and ran it over her lower lip.

Selemei pounced and caught the finger in her mouth. It didn’t stay long; Xeref’s mouth replaced it. Whenever her conflicting fears tried to rise up, she just kissed harder, and clutched him more tightly against her. Her leg twinged once, when he knelt between her knees, but she squirmed into a better position, and once he entered her she forgot everything but their ecstatic unity.

Xeref shifted beside her afterward, his panting gradually giving way to gentler breaths. Then he laughed. “Well. I know how to convince the cabinet to add medicine to our law.”

Selemei let out a sigh, and the weight in her mind floated away. “Sirin and Eyn,” she swore. “Part of me wants to do that ten times before morning. The other part of me is—a little tired.”

“Tired, my love? I’m sure if I can muster a bit more energy at my age, you can, too.” He stroked her face, her neck. His hand settled around her left breast. She stretched beneath his touch.

“Mm,” she said. “I didn’t say I couldn’t.” It troubled her, though, to be reminded of his sixty years. “Are we so old, Xeref?”

“I suppose we are. Does it matter?”

“I don’t know. I felt old, thinking of what it meant to retire. Thinking it would be the end. But I still wanted to.”

“Of course you did.”

“But now—maybe it doesn’t have to be.” She turned her head to look into his eyes. “If you can convince them, Xeref, it doesn’t have to be.”

“Do you know what else doesn’t have to end?” Xeref asked. His smile made her catch her breath.

Selemei breathed against his lips. “Tonight.”

“Let our law pass today,” Selemei murmured. “Sirin bring us luck to let it pass. Please, let it pass.” Her Grivi was in the midst of fastening the buttons at the back of her gown—she’d picked feldspar-gray today, to inspire herself with the steadiness of stone. Feeling nervous wouldn’t help. Only the cabinet representatives of the Great Families were allowed into the Cabinet room for the vote, but she was determined to go, even just to wait outside for the result.

“There you go, Mistress,” Grivi said.

“Thank you, Grivi.” She took his hand and they walked out across the private drawing room. Maybe this once, Xeref would let her walk there with him. Grivi pushed open the bronze double doors into the sitting room.

The sitting room was full of strange Imbati, all dressed in black, all marked with the crescent-cross tattoo of the Household. The vestibule curtain and the front door both stood open wide. Selemei shook her head, blinking.

“What’s going on?”

Two Imbati emerged from Xeref’s office, carrying something. It looked like a stretcher.

Wait, those were Xeref’s feet!

“Xeref!” she cried. “Gods, what happened?”

She half-hopped, half-ran to his side, fell to her knees and grasped his hand. Pressed her lips to it, but he didn’t respond.

“Please excuse us, Lady, we must get him to the Medical Center as quickly as possible.”

“Oh! Yes . . .” She released Xeref’s hand and scooted backward. The black-clad stretcher-bearers moved so fast that he was out the door in half a breath.

Selemei sat, panting. At last she reached up, found her Grivi’s hand, and tried to stand. Her left foot caught on the hem of her gown, but he caught her when she stumbled, freed the fabric, and helped her the rest of the way up.

Arriving on her feet, she found Xeref’s Ustin standing directly in front of her.

“Mistress,” Ustin said. “I was attending the Master’s preparations in his office. He summoned the First Houseman to send you a message, because he was concerned you would not be ready in time. Then he stood up and collapsed.”

“In my witness,” the First Houseman agreed.

“Heile have mercy,” Selemei whispered. “Let him reach the Medical Center in time. Elinda forbear.” She cast her eyes toward the front door, now shut; the sitting room, now empty of the Household emergency team. You would almost think nothing had happened.

And how could it have? If she stayed in this moment, unbreathing, unthinking, nothing would have happened.

Her body corrected her, of course; she gasped and shook herself. “I should go to him.”

“Mistress.”

The Imbati was still in front of her. She frowned. “What, Ustin?”

“The Master had no opportunity to record his vote for today’s Cabinet meeting.”

No opportunity to record his vote. She heard the sounds; missing emotional register, they resolved only slowly into meaning. Did that mean . . . their proposal might fail?

“It has to pass,” she murmured.

“With your permission, Mistress, I can escort you to the Cabinet room.”

She started to understand it. “So I can tell them. And then go to the Medical Center.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“All right, then, let’s go.”

The hallway was walkable. She had to take a brief stop on the spiral staircase to the second floor, Ustin above her, Grivi behind. She gripped tight to the cold iron rail, pressed her right hand against the central

stone column, and started up again. Ustin murmured to her as she emerged into the hall.

“You understand, Mistress, that because he didn’t record his vote, I could not deliver it.”

She nodded. “That’s why I’m doing it.”

Ustin hesitated a second, her lips pressed together, but then she resumed course into the central section of the Residence. Selemei kept walking. Grivi’s arm beneath hers was muscular and solid.

Since the Heir’s suite faced the front of the Residence, she’d always known the Cabinet chamber was down the hall toward the back of the building, but she hadn’t realized it was on the left side. The bronze door was engraved with the repeating insignia of the Grobal. There should have been people here, standing in the hall—cabinet members. Shouldn’t there?

“Where are they?” Selemei asked.

“I believe they have gone in, Mistress,” Ustin replied. “Please be aware, Grivi and I are not permitted into the room during the meeting. You are the only one who can represent the First Family.”

“Mistress,” Grivi objected, in a low growl.

“I’ll only be a moment, Grivi.”

She let herself through the door.

All talk in the windowless room stopped immediately. So many eyes, staring at her, and all of them belonged to men. The men sitting around the big brass table. The men in the heavy portraits staring down from the walls. She recognized the man at the head of the table—that had to be the Eminence Indal, because he had a noble nose, and wore the white and gold drape of office around his shoulders. Next to him, golden-skinned and curly-haired, sat the Heir Herin—everyone agreed how handsome the Heir was. The others were strangers . . . no, here was one more she knew. Fedron, her cousin in the First Family.

Fedron stood up. “Lady Selemei, what are you doing here?”

Her voice felt tiny, as if she spoke across a crevasse. “I’m representing the First Family. Xeref—” The ground beneath her shuddered; or it could have been her legs. She found a chair to hold onto. “Xeref collapsed. They took him to the Medical Center.”

“What?” cried Fedron. “When?”

She blinked at him. “Now. I came directly.”

Everyone started talking at once. Several of the men leapt up from their chairs; some of them seemed angry at each other. She quickly lost sight of the Eminence and the Heir behind a clump of worried cabinet members. The portraits still stared down from the walls, but Xeref

meant nothing to them. Only Cousin Fedron appeared to remember she was here.

“I’m so sorry, Cousin, you must be distraught.”

“I don’t have time for that. I need to be here for the vote,” she explained.

Fedron cast a sideways glance, maybe looking for one of the other men. “We can’t possibly vote now, under the circumstances. Perhaps when Xeref returns.”

“We can’t?”

“Are you unattended?”

She shook her head. “No, of course not. They’re waiting outside for us to vote. We should really vote.”

“Cousin, we can’t vote today,” Fedron said, with exaggerated patience. “The Eminence and several of the members have already left.”

“They have?” She looked around. It did seem emptier than a moment ago. The Eminence really was gone. That wasn’t how it was supposed to happen.

None of this was how it was supposed to happen. But now she had somewhere she needed to be. The Medical Center. Selemei took a deep breath and smoothed down her gray skirts. Cautiously, she turned back toward the engraved door and made her way through it.

In the hall, a few cabinet members were talking and arguing. Imbati Grevi and Imbati Ustin stood waiting for her. They looked all wrong—not calm at all. Grevi’s tattoo was furrowed, and he cast a gaze of anger at Ustin, whose face twitched in a battle to conceal some strong emotion. Ustin managed to master herself, but then cast a glance down the hall.

“Mistress—”

Grevi stepped between them. “Ustin, that’s enough!”

Startled by his ferocity, Selemei sought after the target of Ustin’s furtive glance. Someone was hurrying up the corridor toward them.

“Brinx?”

Her son’s handsome face was nearly unrecognizable—his eyes red, and his mouth twisted. “I can’t believe you, Mother!” he shouted. “Why didn’t you come find me, to tell me?! How could you come here at a time like this?”

Time shrank to a pinpoint. If he spoke again, she didn’t hear it. Why hadn’t she recognized the signs? Hadn’t she noticed how cold Xeref’s hand felt against her lips? Why had she never wondered why Ustin accompanied her here instead of staying with her master? Why had she not realized only disaster could make Imbati show emotion?

Now all the stones crashed together, and the bottom dropped out of the world.

This was obviously the funeral of an important man. The Voice of Elinda wore full priestly regalia, dark blue robes and a heavy silver moon-disc around her neck. She sang the service in a contralto of liquid grief. The Eminence Indal and the Heir were here, and every member of the cabinet, and nearly half the Pelismara Society, too, all crowded into the chapel on the Residence's second floor.

Selemei couldn't feel it. Her eyes and throat hurt, but no tears came.

All she could do was hold Aven's hand, and curl an arm around Corrim, who clung to her, muffling his sobs in her stomach. Pelli's Verrid had decided to take her for a walk when she started squirming; Brinx sat on the far side of his sister Enzyel and her Eighth Family partner because he wasn't speaking to anyone. Selemei leaned her head down against Corrim's curls, reversing the room in the corner of her eye.

A shinca tree trunk glowed silver in the back, casting eerie clarity across the gathering. Since shinca could not be removed, the stone wall would have been built around it long ago; and in this room, the ceiling had been designed with arches to look like its branches. *That* should have been the front of the room. It had been, once. She and Xeref had spoken vows to each other in the warm aura of the tree, invoking the blessed names of Sirin and Eyn. She'd imagined their partnership just as invulnerable—the illusions of a seventeen-year-old child.

"Mother," Aven whispered. "Mother."

Selemei lifted her head. The Voice of Elinda was walking toward them with arms outstretched. One golden hand held a box of precious wood; the other a basket of silver wire heaped with yellow mourning silk.

"Corrim," she murmured. "Let me stand. It's all right—please, just don't fall on the floor." He crumpled sideways, gulping back tears, and she managed to get up, though her left leg felt numb from sitting too long on the metal bench.

"May the wounds of grief become the gifts of remembrance," said the Voice.

Selemei took the box, and pulled a mourning scarf from the basket. "Thank you, Mother Elinda." The children were supposed to receive their scarves next, but actually Aven took three because Pelli was gone and Corrim wouldn't look up. While the Voice moved on to Enzyel and Brinx, Selemei helped Aven and Corrim get their scarves fastened around their arms, snug just below the elbow with the ends fluttering down.

Around her, other people began standing, but there was no hurry to go anywhere. She opened the glossy lid of the box. The sight of Xeref's name engraved on the crystal spirit globe inside brought such a tide of grief it nearly overwhelmed her, and she snapped it shut.

"Lady Selemei," said a man's voice, heavy with tears. "May Xeref take his place among the stars, and may Heile and Elinda continue to bless you and your family."

She looked up; it was Administrator Vull, holding young Pyaras by the hand. He offered her his other hand, and she took it.

"Thank you, Administrator."

"Cousin, please. Or just Vull. We have too much in common to insist on formality, don't we?"

Her breath hitched, and she closed her eyes to wrestle it back into control. "I suppose we do, Cousin."

Vull nudged his son, and Pyaras said with admirable sobriety, "I'm very very very very sorry." Then, impulsively, he hugged her.

Selemei stroked his head. "Thank you, Pyaras." The boy watched her over his shoulder as his father led him away.

There was a nudge at Selemei's elbow. She turned to find Imbati Ustin pressing a note into her hand. It read, *Do you wish to attend the next Cabinet meeting?*

She stared. "Ustin, now is really not a good time."

"Mistress," said Grivi. "I believe your daughter wishes to speak to you."

Selemei turned back and took Enzyel in her arms. The girl was taller than her, now, and still growing—oh, gods help her, that was Xeref's height, would she also inherit the defect that had led to his aneurysm?

"May Heile preserve you," she said, fervently against her daughter's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, Mother, I think I should be asking you that question."

"I—" Trying to answer that would release the flood. She shook her head. "I love you, Enzyel. I wish you could come for dinner sometimes."

"I'll be at the dinner tonight. I'll try to come by more. And—" Enzyel leaned so close Selemei was enveloped in her cloud of curls. Her daughter's sweet breath warmed her ear. "I've got good news."

Oh, sweet Elinda, no . . .

"I'm pregnant."

Selemei's hands fisted involuntarily. She tried to say *congratulations*, but fear had cramped her guts, and what came out sounded like a sob. She fought to control herself while Enzyel's gentle hand caressed the back of her neck. "You'll—" Selemei gulped another breath. "You'll

take care of yourself, won't you. Don't just rely on your Imbati. See a Kartunnen doctor at the Medical Center as well."

"I will, Mother, I promise."

Grivi murmured behind her, "Do you wish to retire, Mistress?"

Selemei nodded. She stepped carefully toward the aisle, holding Grivi's hand across the bench that had separated them. A man she didn't know stood half blocking her exit into the aisle, watching her.

"Excuse me," said Selemei.

"My condolences on your loss, Lady Selemei," the man said. "I'm Silvín of the Second Family."

"Thank you."

"But, let's face it, it could have been worse."

She could only blink at him.

"It could have been *you*. Think of the tragedy, if your great gift had been lost to the Race! You must give your Family Council my name when they suggest a new partnership for you."

Disgust knocked her back a step. Before the man uttered another word, Grivi appeared between them, looking directly into his face.

"You will excuse us, sir," he said, his deep growl all the more disturbing for its utter calm.

The man and his servant quickly backed off and vanished in the crowd rather than risk a physical confrontation. Grivi's shoulders rose once with a deep breath, and then he offered Selemei his hand again.

"Bless you, Grivi," she whispered.

"I am here to protect you, Mistress."

"Selemei! Cousin, are you all right?" That was Lady Keir, who hurried up and embraced her. "I saw what happened . . ."

She grimaced. "Fine enough."

Arbiter Erex caught up with his partner a moment later; he fanned his chest a little, breathing fast. "Cousin, I'm so sorry." He gestured to the compact Imbati woman behind him. "Please allow my Kuarmeí to help escort you home."

Selemei shook her head. "It's kind of you, but I'll be fine. I have Grivi and Ustin with me, and I'll have Verrid too, soon enough." She began walking toward the exit.

"If you're sure," Erex said. "That was disgraceful behavior. In fact, my Kuarmeí got his name; we'll be reporting him to his Family Council. Rest assured, you won't have to consider tunnel-hounds like him when the time comes. Someone like Administrator Vull would be a much better match."

Selemei almost stumbled. She gritted her teeth and clung to Grivi to keep going. "Come, children," she said. "It's time to go home." She

would have run if she could. Her eyes burned, and she scarcely raised her eyes from the floor until they had collected Pelli and Verrid and were all the way downstairs, safe in their home vestibule, the front door shut and locked and the children dismissed to the care of the Household. “Where’s Ustin?”

The tall Imbati woman presented herself with a bow.

Selemei took a deep breath. “Imbati Ustin, I know you’ve been concerned about securing lodging while you’re considering new employment inquiries. Please feel welcome to stay in our Household.”

“Thank you, Mistress.”

“And in return, I’d like you to make certain I attend the next Cabinet meeting.”

They were playing *kuarjos*, or trying to. You had to do *something* once the cousins, friends, and well-wishers left—and it helped her ignore the piles of condolence gifts that filled their private drawing room. Selemei sat across from Aven, who occasionally hiccupped to hold back tears but still had grasped the rules pretty well. When Selemei picked up an emerald-helmed warrior, Pelli snatched it from her hand and ran away giggling.

Selemei only sighed, and Pelli slowed, falling into a droop.

“Pelli, big girl, may I have that back? Bring over your puzzle if you want to play. Bring it over here next to us.”

Pelli lifted the emerald-helmed warrior and stared at it.

Selemei turned her attention back to the board and pointed to a junction. “I’ll put it there, whenever Pelli brings it back.” She glanced over. “Please, baby.”

Aven moved one of her pieces forward on a left diagonal.

“Not there,” said Corrim. It was the first he’d spoken in hours. He draped himself over the back of the couch next to her. “She’ll get you in entrapment. Use the inverse move instead.”

Aven pulled a face at him. “Mother, what happens if a piece crosses the whole board?”

It walks right off into darkness, like at the edge of the city-caverns. Like at the end of the world. Like in my dreams. And then it has to keep going anyway. One breath, one step, in this place with no air and no light.

Pelli’s soft fingers were tickling her hands. Selemei took a breath, and stroked them, and found the golden warrior had been returned, wearing a hat of twisted white paper. “Thank you, big girl. All right, so, Aven. The game changes once a warrior is able to cross the board, because—”

The vestibule curtain swished open, revealing Imbati Ustin.

“Mistress.” Ustin bowed. “I apologize for the interruption. I’ve learned that an emergency Cabinet meeting has been called for tonight. If you wish to attend, we must hurry.”

Hurry? What should I do? Selemei stood, searching the space around her for reasons to feel prepared. *I should tell the children.* “Children, I’m going to step out for a few minutes. It won’t be long. Corrim, why don’t you take my place at kuarjos? Pelli—” She bent and kissed her. “I love you, big girl. Be back soon, all right?”

“Mama back,” Pelli answered.

Selemei searched the room again, but found only absence and grief. “Am I ready?” she asked.

Grivi offered his arm. “You are dressed for guests, Mistress. That will be perfectly appropriate.”

Ustin nodded. “I’ll brief you on our way.”

Selemei tried to project confidence on her way to the front door so as not to alarm the children. It would be all right. Fedron would be there. She wouldn’t be alone.

And she had to be there.

“Mistress,” said Ustin, walking behind her right shoulder. “We must have you seated in the Cabinet room before any of the other members arrive. Can you walk faster?”

“Oh, yes.” She’d been fighting the urge to run along the carpeted hall; all she needed to do was give in slightly. And hold tighter to Grivi’s hand. She skipped a little, taking extra hops on her right foot.

“There are two types of votes, Mistress,” said Ustin. “Procedural votes are the ones that allow cabinet business to continue. For those, simply follow your cousin Grobal Fedron’s lead.”

“All right.”

“There are two legislative votes scheduled, so far as I know, in addition to the Indelis proposal.”

“Two?” The carpet ended where the corridor gave into the Residence’s central section. Selemei misstepped. Pain stabbed down the back of her left leg. “Aah!”

She hung on Grivi’s arm. The pain had flashed and gone, but not gone completely; it echoed. She gritted her teeth. *This isn’t going to work. Why am I even trying?*

Elinda help me, how can I not?

“Mistress,” Grivi murmured, “May I carry you?”

She shook her head vigorously. “No, no. It’s already bad enough—if people saw us . . .” Catching a silent exchange of looks between Ustin and Grivi, she frowned, and then realized the problem. The Cabinet

chamber was upstairs. “How can I get upstairs, Ustin? I *have* to be there!”

“I have an idea,” Ustin replied. “Grivi, if you both would please meet me at the door of the Household Director’s office.” She loped off beneath the arch into the public foyers of the central section.

“Mistress,” said Grivi, slowly. “Can you walk?”

Hard to answer that question, but, “I will.” She managed it by focusing on the floor. Polished stone in one room, a carpet with geometric patterns in black and green. Ancient tile in the foyer before the Hall of the Eminence, worn to white mostly, but near the walls, still showing an intricate branching design in gold. Step by step.

The Imbati Household Director kept an office just beside the main front entrance; its bronze door was uncurtained because of the frequency of messengers, and today it stood open. Ustin returned to them as they drew nearer.

“I’ve spoken to Assistant Director Samirya,” she said, in a low voice. “We have permission. Let’s take her elbows.”

Grivi gave a reluctant-sounding grunt, but then Selemei found herself lifted a finger’s breadth from the floor and ushered at high speed toward the door. Just as they reached it, the two Imbati turned her sideways—and they went through.

Selemei gulped. This was not Grobal territory. On a tall metal stool sat a golden-skinned woman with straight hair pulled severely back from her crescent-cross Household tattoo. She looked up from an ordinator screen full of glowing green symbols, and regarded them with a fierce unwavering gaze.

“This once, Ustin,” she said.

Selemei was swept sideways again, and found herself in a tiny room with featureless metal walls, so close between Ustin and Grivi that they could not help but touch her. She clasped her hands together so as not to give offense in return.

The room lifted.

Selemei gasped. “An elevator?”

“It’s for messengers,” Grivi rumbled.

“And emergencies,” added Ustin. “I just hope we’ll be in time.”

Perhaps this brief respite had been just what she needed, because her leg took her weight better when she tested it. Here on the second floor, the open entrance of the elevator was covered with a curtain. Ustin stepped out, but swiftly ducked back in again.

“Gro—people in the hall, Grivi,” she said. “Let’s cross, while we still have Samirya’s permission.”

“Cross?” Selemei asked. She leaned on Grivi to enter the main hallway. Over there, beneath the arches, stood the cluster of men in question; strangers from other Families, with their Imbati. Even this far off, their raised voices sounded aggressive.

“Cabinet members, but they’re still attended,” said Ustin. “I’m guessing we have maybe three minutes before they go in.”

Again the two Imbati lifted her by the elbows, sweeping her across the hall, where Ustin lifted a curtain and let them through a door. Here the corridor was narrow and dim, and Grivi could only support her from behind. She tried to hurry, in spite of the risk. She didn’t belong here. What argument could Ustin possibly have used to justify allowing a Higher like her into the servants’ Maze?

Around a corner to the right was more light, through a series of windows on the left side. She gratefully used their stone sills to support herself, and then a door opened on her right.

She could feel eyes staring down at her as she entered—but they were only the painted eyes of dead Eminences. The room was empty.

Ustin and Grivi helped her ensconce herself in one of the tall-backed brass chairs. Xeref’s chair. It had none of his warmth or softness.

“Mistress.” Ustin pressed a paper into her hand. “These are the votes you will need to cast. The most important thing is, you must say you occupy this seat for the First Family.”

“I’m representing the First Family.”

“Mistress, if you will: I occupy this seat . . . ”

“I occupy this seat for the First—”

Click.

Ustin’s gaze snapped to the main door. Faster than the turning handle, she leapt to the Maze door and disappeared.

Selemei’s heart flipped; she tried to swallow it back into place and keep breathing. Three men walked in, conversing, then a fourth. The fifth man was first to notice her. He was broad-bodied, golden-skinned, and bald as a stone.

“Hello?” That single word filled the chamber. “What are you doing here?”

She thought of Imbati Ustin. “I occupy this seat for the First Family.”

Now the others saw her. “What?” “Who—wait, wasn’t she the lady who . . . ?” “Xeref’s partner?” “What in Varin’s name is she doing?”

“I occupy this seat for the First Family.”

“I’m sorry, Lady, you’re going to have to leave,” said the bald man.

She grabbed the lower edges of the chair, winding her fingers through gaps in the brass. “I occupy this seat for the First Family.”

They were talking about her, now, and more of them poured in every second. She couldn't see Fedron.

"Can we have her removed?" "But, I mean, the poor thing—" "This can't be serious." "She'll go soon enough."

"What's this?" asked the Eminence Indal. He leaned on a cane of rich dark wood. His manservant, a single figure in black silk against the jewel colors of the other men, murmured in his ear while they went to the head of the table. "What's this?" He sniffed through his noble nose and shifted his white and gold drape as he sat. And looked right at her.

Selemei lost her breath.

"No problem, your Eminence." The Heir waved his golden hand magnanimously. "She's just grieving, we can ignore her."

"But, cabinet business," objected a man with bulging eyes.

"Our main point of business is the empty seat." That was the bald man's resonant voice. "That is why Speaker Orn pressured us to convene this meeting at such short notice."

Selemei closed her fists tighter, until the brass hurt her fingers. "I occupy—"

Fedron burst in the door with a desperate look on his face.

"—this seat for the First Family."

Fedron gaped at her, panting. "Wh—Selemei? Cousin?"

Somehow his presence stopped the words up in her throat. She shoved them out. "I occupy. This seat. For the First Family."

Fedron deflated, and fell into the chair beside her. "Well, hand of Sirin . . ."

"We should just get started," someone said.

The Manservant to the Eminence struck reciting stance, his clear baritone cutting through any further murmurs of objection. "I call to order this meeting of the Pelismar Cabinet, and serve as a reminder of the Grobal Trust: giving to each according to need, the hand of the Grobal shall guide the eight cities of Varin."

"So noted," said a red-faced man sitting at the Eminence's right. "First order of business, acknowledgment and certification of the empty seat. Which *is* empty, in spite of appearances."

Selemei took a breath, but it was no use; hopeless certainty stole the words from her tongue. It was just as they'd said: they were ignoring her. While the men leaned forward to press buttons below the personal ordinator screens embedded in the table before them, her own screen—Xeref's screen—was dead.

Dead love, dead hopes.

The Manservant to the Eminence pulled a small device from his pocket, bowed, and intoned, “A unanimous vote is required to certify an empty seat. I count one vote in dissent. The seat remains occupied by the First Family.”

“Wait, now,” said the man with the bulging eyes. “Fourteen to one? Fedron, you’re not serious.”

Fedron folded his arms. “Does that seat look empty to you?”

Selemei looked at her cousin, but he didn’t meet her gaze.

The red-faced man beside the Eminence gave a noisy sigh. “The seat remains occupied in the presence of a *legitimate* substitute. Indal’s Jex, you’ll carry the cabinet’s petition to the Arbiter of the First Family Council to investigate the legitimacy of the substitute.”

The Manservant to the Eminence bowed. No animosity on his face, but Imbati only showed feelings when they meant to—unlike the other cabinet members, who scowled and scowled while Fedron continued to avoid looking at her. Only the bald man with the big voice held pity in his face. They all argued about one topic after another. It went on so long that Selemei’s fingers cramped around the curled brass of her chair; she had to extricate them painfully and rub them together in her lap. She combed through the men’s portentous words for the Indelis proposal, but in vain. The paper Ustin had given her proved useless, for the voting screen before her remained blank.

“Right,” declared the big-voiced man at last, “if there is no further business, the meeting shall adjourn.”

“Seconded.”

Selemei’s heart shrank; she didn’t dare protest into the silence that followed.

The Manservant to the Eminence bowed again, and intoned, “So it shall be. This meeting is adjourned.”

If the last two years hadn’t trained her to move slowly, she might have tried to run from the room. Selemei stood, and pushed back her chair, swallowing grief.

“That was some nerve,” said a man somewhere to her left. “Get back to your children.”

She dropped her gaze, but her cheeks blazed. She watched the placement of her feet, moving out from between the chairs.

“Lady—Selemei, is it?” When she looked up, the Heir was staring down at her. His face was young, handsome, chill as gold.

“Yes.”

“You realize we’ve given you a gift.” As he spoke, he stepped closer, looming over her.

She shook her head.

“Our *patience*, in the name of your bereavement. You know there are *other* ways to respond when someone disrupts cabinet business.”

Mai help her—would he lay hands on her? Selemei took a nervous step backward.

Her left leg collapsed. She grasped for the nearest chair, felt fingers slip on the unkind brass, knocked her elbow, and hit the floor, the chair nearly coming down on top of her. She sat, immobilized by pain and shame while the Heir walked away without a backward glance. Gulps of air kept her from sobbing but couldn't stop tears creeping onto her cheeks.

“Cousin?” Fedron crouched beside her. “Let me help you up.”

She nodded. Pretended this was just a room, not a room full of eyes and sneers. Gritting her teeth, she got her right leg under her. With Fedron's help, she managed to stand, and limp to the door where the manservants were waiting.

“Grivi,” she said the moment she saw him, “I'll need you to make an appointment with that doctor. The one who was at Vull's.”

Grivi interposed himself beneath her arm with a murmur of thanks for Fedron and a cutting glance for Ustin.

“Let me walk you home,” Fedron said.

She hadn't expected that. They moved slowly, at her limping pace. But a bigger surprise came in the spiral staircase, where Fedron allowed his manservant to pass him and turned to face her.

“I'm grateful to you, Cousin,” he said.

“What?” Grateful! Had she heard him right?

“Sure, you were misguided, but that was a big favor you tried to do for the Family. Someone overheard that we were inviting Garr back from Selimna to claim the seat at the next scheduled meeting, so they convened this one early. You know, to certify it empty before he could get here.”

She couldn't tell whether to be flattered or insulted, and ended up mostly confused. “Garr and Tamelera are coming back?”

Fedron rubbed his hand across his forehead. “Well, I'm afraid it's not so straightforward at this point.”

“What happened to the Indelis proposal?”

A strange expression flashed across his face. “Don't you worry about that.”

How many times had she been told not to worry? “I *do* worry about it, Cousin. That's why I was there.”

“Let me talk to Exex first, all right? And then we'll discuss it.”

We'd better. But she was too exhausted and hurt to argue. She needed Aven; she needed Pelli, and Corrim. Just to hold them, and cry, with no eyes watching.

Selemei screamed and woke. A nightmare, not of wandering in darkness this time, but of standing exposed in sunlight, under the judging eyes of Father Varin himself. She panted while her heart slowed, rubbing her coverlet to remind her hands of soft silk and reality. Her body came into focus.

Everything hurts.

Each bruise that woke to identify itself roused another horrible memory of the Cabinet meeting. She couldn't force those events into sense, no matter how many times she tried. She called, "Ustin?"

The Imbati woman didn't appear. But then, she probably wasn't expecting to be called, because . . . Selemei's throat closed. She looked away from the place where Xeref should have lain. Deliberately, she rearranged her pillows and pushed herself back to sit. Mercy, it hurt . . . but how much worse might it have been without Grivi's care? She tried again, though her voice quavered.

"Imbati Ustin, may I speak with you?"

Ustin emerged this time, so silently she might have come, wisp-like, straight through the wall. She wore a black silk dress that showed off her muscular shoulders, not the suit she had normally worn on duty. "Mistress?"

This was already all wrong. "I'm very sorry," Selemei said. "It's not fair of me to demand you call me Mistress now, is it?"

Ustin bowed; a single pale braid swung forward of her shoulder. "Lady Selemei."

Selemei inhaled what calm she could manage. "I went to the Cabinet meeting, but it went so badly—I wonder if I might discuss it with you." Ustin's sober silence felt like disapproval, though her face didn't change. "If you consent to advise me, I'll pay you for your time."

"I am willing, Lady," Ustin replied. "Unfortunately, I have a very incomplete picture of what happened, having been limited to what Grobal Fedron told us, and what I could overhear from other members leaving."

"Well . . . we can start with what Fedron said. He said the meeting was called in emergency because Garr and Tamelera were coming back from Selimna. How would *they* have anything to do with anything?"

"Lady, are you aware that the seat my Master held was at-large?"

The term wasn't entirely unfamiliar. "I'd heard that. It means he's—"

She gulped down a pang. “—he was, not the only First Family cabinet member.”

“Yes, Lady. Each of the twelve Great Families is assigned a single inalienable seat. Beyond that, only two seats remain. In those, any Family’s representative may sit.”

“But we happened to hold it.” She closed fists, remembering her fingers tangled in the chair. “And they wanted to declare it empty, but I was sitting in it.” Another piece fell into its slot. “*That’s* what Cousin Garr was supposed to do—sit in the seat so Fedron wouldn’t have to admit it was empty.”

“Lady,” Ustin said, “I’m sure you know that any competition among twelve Families for a single empty seat would be fierce.”

That was an understatement. Selemei nodded. “The cabinet rushed to meet so that Garr would come too late—and they would all have been itching to fight one another—but then I was there. They tried to pretend I wasn’t—except Fedron said I was. Why would he . . . ?” She patted down the question with both hands. “No, of *course* he would. He had to have been in a panic when he thought they’d outmaneuvered him.” That face he’d made, arriving in the seat beside her . . .

The corner of Ustin’s mouth twitched slightly upward. Selemei chose to interpret that as approval.

“But I still don’t see how any of this has anything to do with the Indelis proposal. I was *listening*. It was never even mentioned.”

A shadow of something strangely like sadness flitted across Ustin’s face. “Lady, no vote can occur if a proposal has no sponsor.”

The men didn’t care. Not even Fedron had sustained his sponsorship once tragedy struck. “I could have sponsored it, if I’d known,” she said. “I thought I was there to cast his vote. But that’s why you brought me, as a sponsor. Is it?”

Ustin didn’t immediately respond. Selemei braced herself for *I don’t know*, but then the Imbati answered, “Lady, you recall we were jointly involved in a conversation about the seriousness of the risks Grobal ladies face. I continue to share my Master’s belief in the proposal’s benefits for ladies and their children.”

For me. And for my children. Without a law to protect her, she’d have men approaching her constantly; and how could she refuse to entertain partnership arrangements that the Family Council might propose?

“I could still sponsor it,” she said. “Fedron *has* acknowledged me in the seat.” Only once the words were out did their shuddering import take shape. *To do that, I would have to claim to be a legitimate cabinet*

member. It perfectly explained Fedron's ambivalence. "The Family still wants Garr there."

Ustin nodded. "Lady, we can be certain of that. Grobal Garr is a man of influence, and was the First Family Council's choice of substitute. However, the Cabinet bylaws which allow a Family to provide a substitute imply that said substitute shall then fill the seat on a permanent basis."

"They imply . . . ? Gnash it, Ustin—that's why the Eminence is sending his man to the First Family Council. He thinks I've claimed the seat!"

Ustin's face remained impassive. "Technically, Lady, you have."

"And that's why Fedron wants to talk to Erex. Maybe I saved the seat, but I just delayed their problem! And then I fell down, and embarrassed myself in front of everyone . . ."

That seemed to startle Ustin. "Lady, you fell? I'm sorry."

The shame flooded back. Selemei pressed her hands to her face, shaking her head. "If I hadn't had to rush there—or if I'd just been holding onto something—"

"The Luck-bringer's hand is not always kind."

Her mother had often said so. Selemei instinctively raised her head for the traditional response. "But Blessed Sirin sees far, and does not explain his choices." She sighed. "That's why my Grivi will be taking me to the Medical Center today."

As if recognizing her need, Grivi stepped out from beneath his curtain and bowed respectfully.

"Good morning, Mistress. Allow me to dress you for your appointment?"

"Yes, thank you, Grivi. Ustin, you may be excused. Thank you for your help."

The Imbati woman bowed and withdrew.

"Mistress," Grivi said gruffly, "if you wish Ustin to advise you, perhaps you should inquire."

"But I did; I asked her in," Selemei said. "I did offer to pay her."

Grivi looked down at his hands silently for several seconds. At last he said, "Mistress, I believe you requested to see Doctor Kartunnen Wint, who confirmed Grobal Pyaras at his party?"

"Yes . . ."

"Please be aware that we'll have to go a little farther than the Medical Center for your appointment."

"Oh. All right." Vull kept a doctor outside the Medical Center? But perhaps Wint was worth it; she certainly had made an impression at the party.

After she was dressed and had eaten breakfast with the family, Selemei assured the children she'd be home soon—with extra kisses for Aven and Pelli—and she and Grivi walked across the gravel paths of the Residence gardens to the Conveyor's Hall. Selemei winced with every step. Thirty-seven should have been too young to walk like an old woman. It should have been too young to be widowed, too. Her former self dragged at her—the Selemei who had run and hidden behind that carefully tended hedge on her right, joined by a handsome man who gently kissed her amid the voluptuous scent of imported surface soil. It made her too conscious of the effort Grivi must be expending to keep her steady, to keep her moving. And conscious, too, of strange glances he cast toward her.

Was he unhappy?

She watched him. In the Conveyor's Hall, Grivi seated her in a chair by the stone wall. He left the green-carpeted reception zone, crossing the road that passed under the Hall's massive entrance arch and ended against the wall to her left. The zone beyond was crowded with vehicles of varying sizes; Grivi procured a one-passenger skimmer from the Household staff, and adjusted its control column to upright for a standing driver. Then he came and fetched her to it, slowing attentively at the spot where carpet met stone. He was always thoughtful—he didn't engage the skimmer's repulsion until she was fully settled. If he had some complaint, she couldn't detect it.

Driving felt quite normal. The skimmer hummed; the cool wind of their passage refreshed her; and outside the gate of the Residence grounds, broad circumferences busy with vehicles and colorful Lower pedestrians made a pleasant distraction. Grivi accelerated up a steep rampway of reinforced limestone that lifted them above slate roofs, and through the bore to the fourth level.

In this neighborhood, the cavern roof hung much lower. Grivi turned their skimmer into an outbound radius, and then into a circumference where the building façades formed a continuous wall on either side. The road ended against a melted limestone column as broad as a storefront. Above the roofs of the buildings, the slope of another level rampway was visible, passing up and behind the column's ancient mass. Grivi brought the skimmer to a stop. Its hum faded, and it sank to rest on the stone. The front wall of their destination had high oblong windows and bore chrome script identifying doctors Wint, Albar, and Sedmin. A bright globe lamp, green as the sphere of Heile, goddess of health, hung above glass front doors.

Selemei took Grivi's arm, passing a pair of wysps that drifted along the sidewalk, and entered through the glass doors that parted before them.

The crowd in the room within plunged into silence. Only a small boy with the castemark necklace of a Melumalai merchant continued to run in circles until he nearly tripped over Grivi's feet, then looked up and bawled in terror. His father rushed up, gaped helplessly at Selemei for a second, then turned to Grivi and blurted, "May your honorable service earn its just reward, Imbati, sir," before scooping the boy up and hiding behind a large group of thick-belted Venorai. The Venorai had the look of farmers—all were muscular, with striking sun-marked skin. One older man looked bright red, and a couple young women were covered with brown spots, and the rest were solid brown—they were all embracing each other, and she couldn't guess which one was here to see a doctor. Maybe the red one?

An inner door opened. Two Kartunnen men emerged: both wore green lip-paint and gray medical coats. The taller of them made a deferent approach to two Imbati mothers and their child; the shorter one came up to Selemei, and bowed.

"Lady Selemei, if you will please follow me." He made a second bow to Grivi, but did not greet him. He led the two of them back through the door, paused a moment to key a sequence on a wall panel, then took them down a long bare hall and opened a numbered door.

Doctor Kartunnen Wint stood in the room within. Selemei recognized her instantly, though this time the style of her gray coat was more functional. She had the same red hair, tied in a knot behind her head. She bowed. "My practice is honored by your patronage, Lady Selemei."

"Doctor Wint. I was surprised not to find you at the Medical Center," Selemei admitted. "Grivi, you may undress me now."

"Yes, Mistress." He began undoing her buttons.

"Lady, I did work at the Medical Center," Wint replied. "But after the death of Lady Indelis, I couldn't bear to stay. Administrator Vull nonetheless has maintained his family's relationship with me, for which I'm grateful."

"I'm sure. That was a terrible tragedy." That Vull would continue to bring his family to her spoke eloquently for the doctor's skills. Selemei pulled her hands out of her sleeves and raised them over her head.

"May I ask what brings you here, Lady?"

"My leg. I fell yesterday." Grivi lifted the gown off her; she lost the doctor for a moment behind layers of silk. When Selemei glimpsed her again, Wint still looked inquisitive. "Well, I stepped back on it, and fell. I'd been overusing it. Pushing through pain earlier in the day. And you said, at the party, that I should see a Kartunnen therapist."

Wint blushed, and glanced at Grivi. "I did, Lady."

“So.” She indicated her own body. “Please proceed.”

“Lady, would you consent to lie facedown on this table?”

“Of course.” With Grivi’s help, she climbed up to the padded surface. The slick material was cold on her right cheek, and all down her body.

“What kind of injury was this, Lady?”

“Birth injury.”

“All right, that’s what I thought. How far down your leg does the pain go? Does it go below your knee?”

“Yes.”

“Have you had any bowel problems or incontinence, Lady?”

“No, thank Heile.”

“Fever or weight loss?”

“No.”

“What forms of treatment or testing have you previously pursued, Lady?”

“Grivi, please tell her.”

While Grivi explained the tests and treatment she’d received in the Medical Center and the therapies thereafter, the doctor examined her back, rear, and legs. She pressed firmly, but did manage to avoid the bruises from the fall. Then she followed that up with some kind of pricking tool.

“Thank you, Imbati, sir,” Wint said, when Grivi had finished. “May your honorable service earn its just reward. Lady, can you please stand for me?”

Once she was standing, Wint asked her to lift her leg, straighten her knee, lift her big toe, and stand on her toes. It went decently. It was hard to know if she should hope to perform better or worse.

“Doctor,” Selemei asked, “what do you think? Can you fix it?”

The doctor pinched her own forehead with her thumb and forefinger. “I’m afraid it’s too early to say, Lady. I’d like to recommend a course of exercises, and request that you undergo further tests.”

Selemei’s mouth fell open in dismay. “But this is like starting over! I thought—” What *had* she thought? That Wint would have Heile’s hands, to heal with a touch? That if her leg could be fixed, it would change the past? Nothing would erase the sight of her fall from the cabinet members’ memories! Nothing could bring Xeref back!

The truth tried to drown her. Selemei gulped air, struggling to stay above it, and covered her face with both hands. It was dark in the space behind them, warm, and damp. She did not want to cry in front of the doctor.

Grivi said softly, “I’m here to protect you, Mistress.”

Selemei swallowed hard. “Doctor,” she managed, “I’d like to get dressed.”

“Of course, Lady.”

The layers of silk gave her a moment’s privacy; she could focus on her hands and her sleeves, and speak as if this were about someone else. “Of course you’d want tests, doctor; here I am walking in, and you don’t know me or my case. I’m sure Grivi could have the Medical Center send over what we’ve already done. I probably should resume therapy—probably never should have stopped, childish of me, really . . .”

“I’m sorry I can’t do more today, Lady,” the doctor said. “However, there may be one way to prevent falls while we pursue longer-term improvement. Might I suggest a cane?”

Selemei blinked at her for a few seconds. Then it occurred to her, “The Eminence Indal carries a cane.”

“Does he indeed, Lady?”

“He takes it into the Cabinet meetings.”

The doctor bowed. “Two doors down from here is a shop where you might be able to find something suitable.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll look, and I’ll get back to you.” Grivi had finished his work at just the right moment; she took his arm.

“Thank you, Lady. I’ll send you a report on what we’ve discussed, and a list of suggested actions.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Selemei walked on Grivi’s arm out through the main hall, hurrying through the waiting room so as to cause a minimum of disturbance to the Lowers there. It wasn’t difficult to find the shop Doctor Wint had suggested; it was staffed by Kartunnen and carried a variety of medical devices. None of the canes here were made of wood, but that only made sense—this was not a neighborhood which could support such high prices. There was a bin of black canes, but they seemed too Imbati; another bin held aluminum canes, but they seemed too Low. Selemei scanned a glass case of artist-designed canes intended for Kartunnen until she found a graceful one which did not use Heile’s green in its design.

“Purchase this one, if you would, Grivi.”

Grivi looked down at his hands, clasped before his waist, and said quietly, “Mistress? Must you purchase a cane?”

“Sorry?”

“I can accompany you at parties, if you wish. Even if the rooms are crowded.”

Oh, no. *That* was why he was unhappy. This morning she’d asked Ustin for advice before she even called for him. She’d asked Kartunnen

Wint for medical assistance that Grivi had always provided. And now, buying a cane meant she wouldn't need him for walking, either. For the first time, she understood what he'd said—'if you wish Ustin to advise you, perhaps you should inquire.' He didn't mean *ask*; he meant *write an employment inquiry*. That was uncharacteristic sharpness for him, but now that she thought about it, he must have been upset ever since that first day, when Ustin approached her during Pelli's nap.

"I'm sorry, Grivi," she said. "You serve me well, and always have. Please don't worry; ladies don't hire gentlemen's servants."

His shoulders rose and fell with a breath. "If I may presume, Mistress."

"Please."

"Ladies don't attend Cabinet meetings either."

"That was a disaster, Grivi."

"Mistress . . ."

"If you differ, Grivi, please tell me."

"You have now attended two meetings, Mistress, more than any other lady can say. In neither case did you flee. And your persistence has won you the provisional support of the First Family's cabinet member. Your intelligence is certainly a match to Master Xeref's, a long suspicion of mine that was confirmed when you spoke to Ustin this morning. If you are to continue in this, you will need her services more than mine. But I do wish to know one thing."

His honesty was sobering, almost frightening. She whispered, "What's that?"

"Is this your wish, Mistress?" Emotion colored his voice on that phrase, and he bowed his head. "I have vowed myself to your service, vowed to make your wishes my own. And if this is your wish, so let it be. But please be sure."

How could she answer, when she wasn't sure of anything anymore, even her next footstep? "Thank you, Grivi," she said. "I don't know. I wish—I just don't know."

Grivi bowed. "If you will excuse me a moment, I'll purchase the cane."

Of course she'd been summoned before the Arbiter of the First Family Council. Of course she had. The letter delivered by Erex's Kuarme had made her feel sick to her stomach; now she squeezed her fear into it with one sweaty hand, taking care not to hurt Grivi with the other as they walked. Selemei turned Ustin's excellent political advice over and over in her head, but there was no guarantee Erex would listen. Chances were, he'd scold her and send her home to grieve.

They reached the hallway. Erex's office was across from Fedron's; at her back, she could feel Xeref's office whispering of emptiness. She shivered, squeezed Grevi's hand, and knocked on the Arbiter's office door. The door swung silently inward.

"Lady Selemei," intoned Erex's Kuarme from behind the door.

"Come in, Cousin." Erex stood before his desk with fingers tented against his lips. He gestured to a cushioned chair. "Please, sit down."

Gnash it. Gnash all of it. She let herself be led to the seat, and seated in it. If she hadn't feared her leg might fail her, she might have preferred to face Erex nose to nose. On the other hand, his position of Family authority lent him more magnitude than his physical size. Selemei clasped her hand tightly around her left wrist; sharp rubies pressed into her skin.

My blood is precious. The Family doesn't deserve my life.

Erex leaned back on the front edge of his desk. "I've been thinking of you and your family in this difficult time," he said. "How have you been feeling?"

She didn't trust this kindness. "I'm coping."

"And how are the children?"

She almost told him. The boys were suffering most after the loss of their parent and mentor; Xeref had been less close to the older girls, so they were less affected; while Pelli was sad, but didn't truly understand. But this was a distraction, possibly even a trap. "As well as can be expected, given the circumstances."

Erex waited. Testing her with silence. Selemei stared at her hands, at a single sparkling ruby drop that had escaped her grip, and outlasted him.

Erex cleared his throat. "Cousin, I received a messenger from the Eminence Indal yesterday. Do you know what he came to ask me?"

She nodded, but kept her eyes on the sparkling ruby, as if it were a wisp that could give her good luck.

"In fact, I was shocked," Erex said. "Indal's Jex stayed for several minutes, to pressure me into providing an immediate answer. And I might have, if I hadn't already spoken to Fedron. He told me to wait."

Selemei spoke softly. "Cousin Fedron understands the bind the First Family is in."

"He does," Erex agreed automatically. Then he twitched, as if he'd suddenly awakened. "Do *you*?"

Selemei's heart banged inside her chest. She tried to keep her breath level, and hold Ustin's advice steady in her mind. "The bind the First Family is in," she said slowly. "Yes. I understand that the Family failed to deliver its chosen substitute to a critical meeting, and that if I hadn't been there, we would no longer have any claim to the seat. At the same

time, I realize it would be very difficult at this point for us to sue for permission to seat a second replacement.”

The Arbiter clearly hadn't expected her to answer. He seemed flustered for a second, but then resumed his scolding. “In fact, Selemei, we could be embroiled in the courts for years because of you.”

“Because of me?” she asked. “Not because the Family couldn't keep quiet about their plan to bring Cousin Garr back from Selimna?”

Erex frowned. “Who told you that?”

Ustin would have said, *I don't know*. “Isn't it public?” she asked. “Speaker Orn informed every member of the cabinet. If I hadn't attended the meeting, the Third and Fifth families would be using their connections to the Heir and the Eminence to bully their way into our seat right now.” She shifted with a deep breath, readying for a risk. “And actually, there's no need for any legal dispute.”

“That's where you're wrong, Cousin. Every Family has an interest in ousting us. They've wanted to see the First Family weakened for years.”

Her racing heart tried to leap out her throat, but she said it. “They can't do anything if I become the First Family's cabinet member.”

“You're not serious.”

Selemei released her wrist and leaned forward. “Cousin, let me try. It would keep us out of legal trouble. The others in the cabinet might let me stay, because they'll think the First Family *has* been weakened.” She couldn't help a bitter laugh. “Especially after I fell down in front of the Heir.”

Erex stared. For a moment she thought she had reached him, but then he shook his head.

“This isn't you talking, Cousin. You know the right things to say, but you must have learned them from someone else.”

Gnash it! She didn't speak the words aloud, but in her blood, anger burned with the heat of Father Varin. “I am being advised by Imbati Ustin,” she said. “In precisely the same way that you are advised by your Kuarme.”

Erex glanced at his manservant. Imbati Kuarme stood coiled and still, her face expressionless. “My Kuarme is a gentleman's servant,” Exer said. “So is Imbati Ustin.”

“By tradition. But there's no law saying she can't be mine. It would be quite simple for me to compose an inquiry.” And Grevi's earnestness had convinced her of one thing. “The Imbati Service Academy would witness the contract without objection.”

Erex started to reply, thought better of it, then circled behind his desk and leaned one hand on it, frowning. With the other, he started flipping through a stack of thick papers.

“You understand, I’m sure, that I represent the Family, and it’s my job to know what’s best for you,” he said. “I would expect you to know that promoting the Race must come before our personal desires. It’s clear you’re feeling much better, and I’m glad of that. In fact, you were always quick in recovery. We should take advantage of that, going forward.”

Now she recognized the papers, and felt Varin’s heat drain out of her. Gods have mercy—*those were partnership solicitations*. Elinda’s gentle breath raised hairs on her neck, cold as the space between stars.

This was an entirely different fight, one in which she stood alone. Xeref could no longer claim her. The law he’d written to protect her was powerless. Nothing Ustin had said was remotely relevant—indeed, how could it be? Even Grevi, who always swore to protect her, could do nothing here. He could only wait, and hope to keep her alive after she’d already been used.

Tears pricked in her eyes. She’d been here before: sitting in just such a chair, in another office a few doors down the hall. The Arbiter of the Fourth Family Council had smiled at her paternally, indifferent to her fear of eager and powerful older men. He’d told her what Exex told her own Enzyel not long ago—what he was telling her now: that she should be grateful at the prospect of a partnership that would sever her from her parents and every cousin she had ever trusted.

There was a difference, this time. Exex wasn’t sending her out. *He was trying to keep her in.*

“I still have a family, you know,” she said.

Exex made a small, tight grimace, not exactly a smile. “That won’t be a problem.”

Selemei closed both fists. “I’m afraid it will.”

“Please, Cousin. Let’s be serious. These men are—”

Selemei stood up. “Yes, let’s be serious. I have no partner in the First Family, and that means I’m not your cousin.”

“What?”

“I belong to the Fourth Family.”

Exex waved hands at her. “Selemei, you can’t mean that. Your children are First Family; surely you wouldn’t wish to be separated from them!”

“I don’t,” she agreed. “But I wouldn’t be. At least, not while the suit remained—embroiled, as you say—in the courts. I imagine that could take quite a long while. I’m thirty-seven now. So many things could happen while you waste your resources on a legal fight. I could lose my fertility. I could die. I could make public statements regarding the dealings of the First Family.”

To see him twitch gave her shameful pleasure.

“Or, you could set those papers aside, and write a letter to the Eminence Indal informing him that I am Xeref’s legitimate replacement.”

“Crown of Mai,” Erex swore. He sank back into his chair, shaking his head, but he did move the pile of papers to one side, and took up a pen and a blank sheet.

Selemei watched him write without moving. “Grivi,” she whispered. Grivi moved closer, though he kept a cautious distance from Erex’s Kuarme; he watched until Erex folded the paper and instructed Kuarme to deliver it, then returned to his station behind her shoulder.

When Kuarme had left the office, Erex sighed, “You’re right in one sense: it *would* save me a great deal of trouble. It won’t work, though. They’ll never let you keep it.”

Selemei stood up, straightened her skirts, and took Grivi’s arm. “I guess we’ll see.”

Selemei walked by herself. Place the cane at the same time as the left foot, shift weight, then step onto the right foot and move the cane forward. She’d worked her way up—from the private drawing room to the sitting room, then the bedroom and the dining room with its chairs, until she even tried walking around Pelli’s room. That proved quite the challenge, since Pelli loved the shiny cane, and danced around her making wild sounds of delight—and it gave her a confidence she hadn’t expected. Her second turn around the sitting room, however, felt like procrastination. Corrim and Aven would be home from school soon, and she had to face some uncomfortable conversations.

Would Brinx be angry if she interrupted his work? Would he hate her for trying to take Xeref’s place?

And how could she dismiss her Grivi, who had always stood by her, especially when she didn’t know if this would last?

Click-swish: the front door. It was still too early for the children. Unless someone was ill . . . she held her breath.

“Good afternoon, Master Brinx,” came the First Houseman’s voice.

“Brinx!” Selemei cried. “Is everything all right?”

Brinx walked in through the vestibule curtain with a strange look on his face. “Mother, Fedron just sent me home saying I needed to talk to you. He said there was some important news for the Family, but you had to be the one to tell me.”

“Oh, Brinx, treasure . . .” Adrenaline tingled through her spine, in her fingertips.

“What’s going on? Are you taking a partner?”

“No, treasure, it’s not that. It’s a bit more—unprecedented?”

He stared at her for a second. “Unprecedented? Is that why everyone’s acting so weird about this? Even Erex wouldn’t say a word, and I can always get him to say *something*.”

Selemei took the leap. “Treasure, I’m going to be taking your father’s seat in the Cabinet meeting this afternoon, representing the First Family.”

“What?”

“And Fedron and Erex will be supporting me.” *I hope.*

Brinx was rarely speechless, but this time she appeared to have overwhelmed him. His attempts to respond flashed wildly across his face, one after the other. *May Sirin grant that he not conclude in anger.*

“Please understand,” she said. “It’s for the Indelis proposal. Your father and I designed it . . .” The words touched the unhealed wound in her heart; her voice quavered. “I couldn’t bear to let Xeref’s last gift to us vanish without defending it.”

“Oh!” Brinx exclaimed, and his face melted. “Oh, Mother. I—yes, of course it’s for Father . . .” He came close, wrapping his arms around her without another word. Under her cheek, his chest heaved. His arms tightened, and he gave a ragged gasp. The grief he’d been trying to hide burst out, powerful as the river Endro beneath the city.

“My treasure,” she murmured. She closed her eyes and rubbed his back with her free hand, riding the river with him while he sobbed. When she opened them again, she discovered Aven and Corrim had come home without her noticing, and now stood by the vestibule curtain staring at them, perhaps in shock at seeing the eldest in tears. Selemei beckoned them into the embrace, and for a time they all held one another. Then she cleared her throat.

“Let’s hang the globe.”

Brinx released her slowly, and put his arm around Corrim. Aven took Selemei’s hand. They walked together through the double-doors into the private drawing room. Here, the moon-yellow of mourning was everywhere: scarves had been draped over couches and chairs, and though the gifts had been opened, the hundreds of yellow cards that had accompanied them still hung along the stone walls. In the days since the funeral, the Household had installed a wire that dangled from the stone vault of the ceiling in one corner. Someone had also clearly been listening behind the walls just now, because no sooner had they all entered than Imbati Ustin and Imbati Grivi emerged from the master bedroom. Ustin set up a stepladder beneath the wire, while Grivi brought the globe in its wooden box, and held it out to Selemei with a bow.

“Pelli?” Selemei called. “Can you come out, big girl?”

The door to the girls' rooms opened, and Pelli trotted out with her Verrid following behind her. "Mama?"

"We're going to hang the globe for your father," Selemei explained. "It's fragile and we're going to be very careful."

"Care-ful." Pelli trotted up, and patted Selemei's skirts as softly as she did her sleeping sister, laying her cheek against the silk. She then proceeded to do the same to Brinx's leg, and to Corrim and Aven.

Selemei opened the box that Grivi still held. She extracted the globe from its padded nest, careful to protect the hook and wire attachment dangling from the top. She lifted it to her lips and kissed the engraved glass twice—once for Enzyel, and once for herself. Then she passed it to Brinx for a kiss, and he passed it to Corrim; Aven took it for herself and then held it out for Pelli, with Imbati Verrid standing attentively by.

Pelli leaned her white cheek to it and whispered, "Cold . . ."

Aven brought it back, then, but Selemei shook her head. "Thank you, darling, but I can't use the ladder. Brinx, will you hang it?"

Brinx nodded. He climbed the three steps and reached up—the globe had to be hung higher than the carven cornices, or it would not appropriately represent a star—and attached the hook and wire. The element at the center of the globe lit: dimmer than a wysp, promising neither cheer nor fortune, only a solemn, enduring reminder.

"Thank you," said Selemei. She kissed them, eldest to youngest, each one so alive, so precious, so fragile. "I'm sorry, but I need to ask you to stay out of the sitting room for a few minutes. I have to go out at four, and I'd like to speak with Grivi and Ustin in private before I go."

The two servants walked out with her. Surely they knew what this was about; surely they could see how she dreaded it. She didn't sit down, but faced them with her back to Xeref's office door. Grivi was the broader of the two, his strength evident even through his formal manservant's suit; Ustin stood out for her height, the muscles of her arms hidden inside long black sleeves. The similarity of their bodyguard stances hid the fundamental differences in training that made this conversation necessary.

"You both know what I'm going to do," Selemei said. *You know it's crazy.* "I don't know if it will work."

Ustin nodded acknowledgment; Grivi remained motionless.

"I'm going to try one more time to represent the First Family on the Eminence's Cabinet." Saying it sent a rush of cold up behind her ears. "This time they won't be confused. I won't have any benefit of the doubt. If I make any errors, or even if I don't, they may vote me out. Therefore, I would like to request that Ustin act as my manservant, just for this afternoon."

“I am willing,” said Ustin. “Grivi?”

Grivi said nothing.

“I’m so sorry, Grivi,” said Selemei. “I don’t want to be unfair to you. You’ve always been faithful. You have kept me upright so many times—truthfully, you have kept me alive. But I have to try this.”

Grivi’s reply was barely more than a whisper. “Mistress, you witnessed my vow of service. Please understand how difficult it is for me to watch you put yourself in danger.”

“I do understand. But if I let you protect me now, I won’t be able to protect anyone else. This isn’t just for the sake of my own life, or even my daughters’ lives, but for all the ladies of the Race. I have to try to pass the Indelis proposal. This is my wish.”

Grivi bowed. “So let it be, then. May I be excused?”

“Yes. I’m really sorry.”

A good deal of her courage departed with him. *Just for this afternoon*, she’d said, but it still felt final; in good conscience she’d have to consent to release Grivi from his contract if he requested it, even if she failed. She walked slowly to the nearest couch and sat down, staring at the kuarjos-board without really seeing it. “I don’t know how to do this, Ustin. I’m not Xeref.”

“Mistress, let’s focus on today,” said Ustin. “You’re correct in your concern: it’s more than likely the cabinet will again attempt to declare the seat empty. Fedron supported you in the last vote, and I imagine he will support you again, but we can’t be certain he won’t have come under outside influence up to and including blackmail. For this, and for the Indelis proposal, you need to cultivate allies.”

“Fedron is it, though.” Selemei shook her head. “Unless he can bring allies of his own. I don’t know any of the others. Who is the bald man? The one with the big voice—he was kinder than most of them.”

“That is Cabinet Secretary Boros of the Second Family, Mistress. He had a cordial relationship with Master Xeref; they spoke often, and occasionally co-sponsored proposals. He would make an excellent ally. His good opinion is respected.”

“What am I supposed to do, though, invite him to tea?”

“I don’t believe there’s time for that just now, Mistress. We should be going, so we don’t have to hurry.”

“All right.”

Perhaps she’d practiced too much walking today. The way to the meeting felt interminable; the cane was awkward in the cramped spiral stairway. When she reached the top, Selemei realized how far they still had to go, and huffed in frustration.

“How did Xeref ever do this?”

“It’s true the walking was easier for him, Mistress. But you must remember, he didn’t do the job alone. He had four assistants.”

She couldn’t imagine having assistants. “And he had you.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

They passed the Heir’s suite—*merciful Heile, please don’t let the Heir come out and see me*—and entered the hallway. Several men stood not far ahead. Cabinet members. She was starting to recognize some of them.

“Tell me who they are, Ustin,” she whispered.

“You know Secretary Boros. Behind him is Amyel of the Ninth Family, one of Master Xeref’s allies. Beside him, Caredes of the Eighth Family . . .”

The men stiffened and grew quiet as they drew closer. Selemei held tighter to the handle of her cane, placed it more carefully, stepped in measured cadence with her head high. The door was just beyond them. She’d have to walk between Secretary Boros and Palimeyn of the Third Family. Palimeyn was leering at her, holding something in his hand—it looked like a glass, but he didn’t hold it like a drink. Still several steps away from them, she hesitated.

“Excuse me, gentlemen.”

“Good afternoon, Lady Selemei,” said Boros.

Palimeyn took a single step forward.

Ustin flashed past her, and for a split second, she thought she’d attacked Palimeyn. The Third Family man grunted and stumbled backwards. His manservant fainted toward Ustin, but then backed off also.

Selemei clung to her cane, her heart pounding.

Ustin returned. She’d taken the glass; Selemei didn’t like the look of its brownish contents. “My apologies, Lady.”

Boros looked between her and Palimeyn, frowning. “I think we should go in,” he said. “Lady Selemei, will you come with me?” He offered his elbow.

“Thank you,” she said, but placed both hands on her cane until his arm dropped. Then she followed him in, noticing that Ustin still blocked Palimeyn from approaching her. It was alarming—and felt worse because Ustin had to stay behind on the threshold. Selemei ignored the staring eyes of the ancient Eminences, refusing to rush just because so many men were coming in around her, and walked steadily to Xeref’s chair—*her* chair, Mai willing. Ignoring hissed insults, she leaned her cane against the table, carefully pulled the chair out, and sat down. She almost wound her hands in the chair again, but this time, folded

them in her lap. She tried to barricade her ears against the whispers, and waited for Fedron to take the seat beside her.

Just stay calm. Just stay.

Fedron was late. Well after the Heir and Eminence had already been seated, he backed in the door, harried by another man who must have been yelling at him for some time. She heard only, “. . . if you know what’s good for Varin and the Race!” before the man relented and went to his seat. She counted chairs—he was Fifth Family. Fedron grunted, and took the chair beside her with scarcely a glance in her direction.

“Let’s get started,” said red-faced Speaker Orn. The Manservant to the Eminence intoned his ceremonial speech; before the final words were fully out, the Fifth Family man stood up.

“First order of business must be the empty seat.”

Fedron grasped the edge of the table with one hand. “The seat is occupied; we already voted on this in the last session.”

“You’re pathetic, First Family,” the man retorted. “You fail to bring your substitute. You bring us—” He waved a hand at Selemei. “—this, instead. You’re still trying to cling to power after the battle is already lost. Well, no one’s laughing.” While he spoke, his gaze never left Palimeyn of the Third Family, as if everyone else were just the audience for an impending confrontation between them.

“I agree,” Palimeyn said. “Let’s vote on the empty seat.”

The Heir said softly, “Your Eminence?”

The Eminence sniffed through his noble nose. “I agree; we should vote.”

Selemei shivered. This was entrapment, carefully planned, *kuarjos*-pieces precisely placed. The Heir was Third Family, and the Eminence was Fifth. Those two families and their representatives would have spent the days since the last meeting wearing down the other cabinet members. How many had been harassing Fedron? How long would he endure this for the sake of a female cousin?

“Fine,” said Speaker Orn. “Cast your votes.”

She couldn’t watch them. These were men with years of history between them, layer upon layer of alliances and schemes, and here she’d been dropped into it blindfolded.

The Manservant to the Eminence examined his vote reporting device, and bowed. “A unanimous vote is required to certify an empty seat. I count six votes in dissent. The seat remains occupied by the First Family.”

Had she heard that right? *Six*? For a split second she glimpsed the *kuarjos*-pattern: herself, standing upon her post with Fedron beside her; Third and Fifth Families attempting to surround them, but behind

their backs, another, contrary configuration. Someone hadn't been paying attention to the rest of the board.

Fedron emitted a ridiculous sound, like a strangled giggle. He cleared his throat. "Well, I'm glad that's settled. Turn on her voting screen, please."

The square screen lit in front of her. An instant's flash of green, then black, with a green date indicator in the upper left corner. In the upper right corner, it read, *Xeref of the First Family*. Selemei stiffened, bracing for the wash of grief, but by Elinda's grace, she felt only warmth.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Selemei watched Fedron as they proceeded to business. His near eyebrow would rise, and he'd cast her a glance, then move his finger to the vote button. It wasn't difficult, though at times it was tricky to tell when a procedural vote had been called for. Slowly, her muscles unclenched. She tried to read the potential for allyship in the expressions on the men's faces, golden or pale; she counted chairs and identified the Fourth Family's cabinet member—he would be a cousin, and she should try to reach out to him, perhaps through his Lady.

Then the Seventh Family's member brought a proposal. She stared at him unabashedly, trying to remember every word he used: "Pursuant to our discussions, I move for a vote on the Selimnar Imports proposal." *Pursuant*, and *move*, those were the keys she needed. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

A wisp drifted into the room, impudently, through an ancient Eminence's face.

Let your luck come to me, wisp . . .

Fedron leaned toward her. "The First Family supports the Selimnar Imports proposal," he whispered.

Selemei nodded, and pressed the correct button. She waited for the Manservant to the Eminence to make his announcement of the vote result, and said it. Blood hummed in her ears; she hoped her voice wouldn't crack.

"Pursuant to our discussions, I move for a vote on the Indelis proposal. In memory of Xeref of the First Family."

Discomfort shifted through the men. Someone down the table to her left muttered, "Varin's teeth." But many faces fell solemn at mention of Xeref, and those men might support her. One of them was bald-headed Secretary Boros.

"I'll second," said Fedron.

On the screen in front of her, the words appeared: *Indelis proposal, brought by Xeref of the First Family*.

She pressed her button in support.

For you, love.

The Manservant to the Eminence bowed. “I count four votes in support, twelve in dissent. The measure is retired.”

Selemei sat, unable to breathe for several seconds. She wanted to scream, or run, but this was no longer blood in her veins—it was some awful distillation of grief and shame. The air tasted of dust.

Fedron nudged her. “Selemei. Next vote, support.”

These were someone else’s hands, fingers pressed to the table surface in front of her. No, they were hers, just impossible to move. *Next vote, support.* She forced one up, pressed the button. Made herself heartless, a machine to act at Fedron’s instructions, while passing seconds pulled her inexorably away from the moment when it should have gone right.

No rockfall could have crushed her heart more utterly than this failure. Selemei lay exhausted on her bed, feeling its beat inside her chest, wondering why it still persisted. She’d failed to save Enzyel and Keir from the duties that would inevitably tear their bodies apart; she’d failed to save Lienne from the draining obligation that had so embittered her sister. The Race’s decline ground on, loved ones were plucked away, and one day only Pyaras would remember his mother’s name.

“Mistress,” said Ustin quietly.

Selemei heaved a sigh. “What is it, Ustin?”

“If you permit me to hear what happened, I may be able to advise you.”

The suggestion was made mildly enough, but anger flashed inside her. Selemei pushed up on one elbow. “You’re always one step ahead, aren’t you?” she said. “Here I’ve been thinking you guess what I want before I do, but really, you planned this whole thing. Why would you push me? Was it so you could wield power by being close to a cabinet member?”

Ustin replied coolly. “I have served a cabinet member already for twelve years, Mistress. My Master cannot speak for me, but I believe he would vouch for the quality of my service. For more, you would have to contact the Service Academy. I am certain they could quickly find me other employment.”

Guilt quenched her anger. Of course the Service Academy would stand by Ustin’s certification. And naturally someone who had been privy to the First Family’s cabinet secrets would be a coveted prize for a new employer. Xeref had said *she does her job too well*. Even now, Selemei couldn’t see how serving well could be a flaw.

She sat up. “My fault,” she said. “I shouldn’t have accused you. I remember you saying you believed in the goals of the Indelis proposal.

I shouldn't be surprised that you'd want me to carry out Xeref's plan once he was gone."

Ustin's brows rose, arching her manservant's mark. "Mistress, I shall presume."

Selemei steeled herself. When Grevi had taken her in confidence, it had been shocking enough; but Ustin was a formidable weapon intended for gentlemen, her loyalty pledged to no one. "Please do."

"Mistress, the Indelis proposal was entirely your idea," Ustin said. "If you recall, I was not welcome at the confirmation party for your small cousin, but I stayed in the Maze and listened in case I was needed, and I heard what you said to the gentlemen of the First Family Council." She struck reciting stance, one hand held behind her back. "Some of us are giving our efforts, while others are giving up our health, and others, like Lady Indelis, have given their lives. I imagine you could think of some way to protect our mothers better. Aren't you all men of importance?"

"Mai's truth," Selemei whispered. She recognized every word, but in the Imbati's voice, they had changed from a frustrated outburst to a powerful demand. Her skin prickled.

"Especially after your act of courage in refusing further duties, your words struck Master Xeref deeply," said Ustin. "You are why he created the proposal, and why he named it for Lady Indelis. He may have put your idea into the proper language of legislation, but even then, you persisted until you approved of its terms, because you understood what would benefit the ladies of the Grobal in a way he did not."

Selemei shook her head, amazed. Intentionally or not, Ustin had just answered a question that she'd been unable to forget. "So, *that's* why you came in to find me while Pelli was sleeping. You wanted to talk to me about my courage."

Ustin looked her in the eye. "Courage is like a wisp," she said. "It moves through barriers."

"I'm sorry I couldn't move through this one," Selemei sighed. "The Indelis proposal has been retired."

"Retired," Ustin agreed solemnly, "with a vote of fourteen to one."

That wasn't right. Selemei frowned. "No; the vote was twelve to four."

Ustin's eyes widened. The corners of her mouth bent slightly upwards. But they didn't stop there; her lips parted over her teeth, and she was smiling—really, truly smiling. Selemei had only seen her Imbati nurse-escort smile once, after she'd gone to a public event at age five and been very, very good. Now, as then, it was puzzling and strangely exciting. Selemei got to her feet.

"Ustin, what is it?"

“Mistress, you won.”

“I don’t understand. Of course I didn’t.”

“Respectfully, Mistress, I differ.”

Selemei stared at her. “All right, Ustin, explain.”

Ustin inclined her head. “Mistress, you presented yourself before the cabinet. You claimed the at-large seat. You negotiated for and won the First Family’s support. You attended today’s meeting, even though Grobal Palimeyn tried to sabotage you. And in spite of cooperation between Third and Fifth families to stop you, you kept your seat and were permitted to vote.”

“Ustin, I have been nothing but humiliated. The Heir knocked me down at the last meeting. Palimeyn of the Third Family would have succeeded today if you hadn’t stopped him. My proposal failed miserably.”

“Mistress, a man who intended to stop a threat from a rival might hire an assassin. Grobal Palimeyn only intended to throw blood on you, to force you home to change your clothes.”

Her stomach lurched. “Heile have mercy.”

“I can only conclude that your fall was effective in convincing them that you do not pose a real threat. Your failure to pass the proposal today has no doubt sealed that impression. Their goal was to weaken the First Family; now they believe they have succeeded. But you managed to attract three allies with no effort at all, and now you sit among them, wielding a voice and a vote.” With the grace of long practice, Ustin got to her knees and bowed her tattooed forehead all the way to the floor. “Please, Lady. Accept my vow of service. I would be honored to continue to serve the First Family’s cabinet member.”

Selemei’s heart pounded. Suddenly, everything looked different. Yes, she’d sponsored a proposal that had been retired. It had felt like the end—but maybe it didn’t have to be.

With a voice and a vote, now she could negotiate laws over years. The next time she walked into a meeting, she need not be a machine. She could be a cabinet member the same way she was a mother: falling and standing up again, yet always persisting, nurturing the future.

“Thank you,” she said. “I accept.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juliette Wade combined a trip to the Gouffre de Padirac with her academic background in linguistics and anthropology to create the world of Varin, a grand experiment in speculative ethnography. She lives the Bay Area of Cali-

foria with her husband and two children, who support and inspire her. Her fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Analog*, and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. She runs the Dive into Worldbuilding video series and workshop at www.patreon.com/JulietteWade.

Unplaces: An Atlas of Non-existence

IZZY WASSERSTEIN

Excerpts from the First Edition, with handwritten marginalia. Recovered from the ruins of Kansas City. Part of the permanent exhibit of the Museum of Fascisms.

Section 1: Places that Never Were

Avalon: Island home of the legendary sword Excalibur, attested to in *Historia regum Britanniae*. A land which produces all good things, Avalon has been claimed to be synonymous with various historical places, including Glastonbury, England, and Avallon, Burgundy. Smythe and Bliss (2018) claim this island once existed, but it is more probable that it is symbolic of a general longing for a better land beyond one's own.

[Lya: I had this book on loan from the Spencer Library when the Messianic Army reached Lawrence. After OKC, I knew they'd soon burn the collection. My beloved books are all gone, along with my years of research on lost places. The only book I was able to save isn't even mine, and now I'm reduced to defacing it. Forgive me. I write these words out of hope that they will reach you, and out of faith that our words still matter.]

El Dorado: The "city of gold" legend evolved from older stories of a golden prince, and was whispered to European conquerors desperate for riches. There is no evidence of the city's existence, and the search for it certainly destroyed many other places, both real and once-real. As with many Unplaces, historical fact is obscured by conquerors eager to make their own history. In so doing they efface the past.

[When I was a student—just months ago, though it seems much longer—these entries were mostly of academic interest to me, I’m ashamed to admit. Now they mean something more each day. Who wouldn’t send the Conquistadors away on a hunt for gold, if they could? Last we heard, most of the world—even most of Europe—was free from the fascists. Maybe it’s just the Americas that are fucked. Maybe the places that lack our particular combination of Authoritarianism and apocalyptic faith will overcome.

I’d like to believe I’d never inflict this horror on someone else to save myself. But to see you again, Lya? All things are compromised—our world, our home, myself.]

Ersetu la târi: Attested to throughout ancient Mesopotamia as the land of the dead. One reached it by going through seven gates, and at each gate left behind an article of clothing, so that one arrived in the next life naked, a kind of un-birth. Szyborska (2020) argues that Ersetu la târi may have once existed, given widespread belief in it. If so, however, there can be no evidence of its existence, for its name translates to “earth of no return.”

[I want to leave Kansas City, to flee to someplace safer. But even if I was sure where to go, how would I get there? It’s not even safe to scavenge for food uptown.

I’m fortunate that the militias mostly stay out of the old downtown, the areas that were never redeveloped. They may catch me even here, but I am as careful as my desperation allows. I stay in old brick buildings, long-abandoned warehouses, with clear views and multiple exits. There’s been no wealth in these neighborhoods for generations, and the militias prefer to root out subversives in areas they can loot.

Nevertheless, at night every creak and groan of the old buildings fills me with dread. If I am found, if this book is lost, these forgotten spaces will be my Ersetu la târi.]

Kyöpelinvuori: From the Finnish for “ghost mountain,” a place haunted by dead women. Some scholars argue it once existed, either predating Christianity in the region, or perhaps coming into existence as local gods were displaced by the arrival of new ones. Linna (2021) argues that dead women haunt liminal spaces in every culture. They exist where they can, and those who are silenced in life often speak in death.

[Last night I dreamed I was a ghost, screaming because they’d found me at last. I woke fearing this book was my scream.]

Leng, Plateau of: Antarctic Plateau colonized by Elder Things in the works of H. P. Lovecraft. When cultists successfully raised R'lyeh from what had been an empty seabed, expeditions were mounted to see if Leng had also been brought into existence. No evidence was forthcoming. "Our horrors are closer to home," as Coates remarked.

[Lovecraft panicked over people of color, immigrants, imagined them as murderous or worse. He should've worried about a different kind of cultist. A bunch of white kids slaving over Lovecraft's statue brought R'lyeh back. I wonder how many of those kids march through the streets of North American cities now, in uniform? Having failed to end the world, have they settled for effacing it?

I found a radio last week, and there are pirate stations, rebel stations. They urge us to hold onto hope, but they don't report much good news. I do not know how to fight this evil. I write instead.]

Zerzura: "The Oasis of Little Birds," a white-walled city in the Sahara, guarded by giants. Attested to in Arabic texts since the 13th century CE, and possibly predating Herodotus. Farouk (2019) demonstrates that all extant references to the city are from foreigners, and that no local tales reference it. Thus the most likely origin of the Zerzura story is a combination of colonizers' fears and hallucinations. Note that modern European interest in the city predates Imaginary Anthropology and so is unlikely to have made Zerzura real.

[The militias swept the area today; I braced myself in the frames of the wall between floors, and managed to escape. This time.

Fires spread across the skyline. I grow more desperate to leave. There is nowhere to go. I'd hoped, in saving this book, to find some insight that might help me, some way out, even if it is into unreality. Nothing.]

Section 2: Places that Once Existed

Azeb: From the Hebrew for "leave behind, forsake, abandon." Shown by Lee (2020) to be the place where lost objects gathered. Some have argued that it is synonymous with various cities of the dead, but loss and death have never been equivalent. Many documented methods of entering Azeb exist, though few exits have been found. There have been no verified reports of accessible entrances since at least 2017. It is likely, though not certain, that Azeb itself is forever lost to us.

[I had a friend who went searching for Azeb. Never heard from her again. I knew ways in, of course: what scholar of lost things wouldn't?

Yesterday I tried to open a path, using the reflection of a full moon on still water, my own blood, and the second most valuable thing I own: a pair of dry socks. The way is closed. Seems I'll meet my fate here, Lya, less than a mile from the last place it was safe for us to walk holding hands.]

Cimmeria: The first triumph of Imaginary Anthropology (Goss, 2014), now lost due to conflict in the region and active condemnation of the discipline by foreign-backed warlords (may this book keep Cimmeria's memory alive, though this author was unable to keep it from joining the other Unplaces. Some nights, she can still smell the bazaar).

[I'm crying as I write this. Cimmeria's lost forever, and we never walked its streets. So much has been lost, and now even history is being erased. Then they'll make a new past, written in blood and marches and violent slogans and there will be nothing left.]

Penglai: Once a mountain on an island in the eastern Bohai Sea, attested by some sources to be home to the Immortals. Penglai was a land of abundance, with fruit that could cure any disease. Demonstrated by Kusano (2017) to have once existed, it was lost no later than the 2nd century BCE, when Qin Shi Huang dispatched expeditions seeking the elixir of life that failed to locate it.

[Lying awake last night, listening to gunfire in the distance, I wondered about the last person to set foot on Penglai. Did they know the paradise on which they walked would soon be gone forever? Did they treasure its memory? When they died, did Penglai die with them? I'm trying to hold on, Lya, but I feel everything slipping away.]

Tlön: A parallel world to Earth, probably first brought into existence in the 19th century CE. Known to be definitively real by 1940 CE. In Tlön, only those things exist which are observed, and there is no deity to do the observing. For reasons which are still debated, this world was lost to us, apparently forever, with the use of the Bomb over Hiroshima.

[In Tlön, a ruin might disappear from existence if there was not, say, a fox or a disinterested snake to observe it. The past is only as secure as our memory of it.

When they find me, or I starve, or die in a fire, will this book survive? Will it serve as a memory? Or will everything that I remember die with me?

I hope you got out, Lya. I hope that "out" is a place that still exists. If you did, remember. Remember. I'll do the same. It's all that is left to me. Goodbye, goodbye.]

[I thought I couldn't go on. I thought I was done with words. Then you appeared to me—a dream, a vision, a fevered hallucination?—and whispered in my ear that this book is incomplete. You were right. And so, as the sun rises over the burned-out city, I add a new entry:

Places that Might Yet Be:

Matsa: From the Hebrew “to find, to attain,” Matsa waits for those who reject utopias, who believe we are doomed if we allow the mistakes of the past to overtake us. Matsa will be a place and a journey. We make it real only by seeking it out.

In Matsa, we will not forgive the fascists. We will light flames for the dead, and we will train ourselves against forgetting. When they try to burn our books, to make our places into Unplaces, we will, each of us, carry the past with us.

If you find this book, make Matsa real. I will await you.

Yours Always,
Hannah]

The Museum thanks Dr. Lya Carew for the generous gift of this book. Dr. Carew asks that those wishing to honor the memory of Hannah Leibowitz make donations to the Free Lawrence Library's Matsa reconstructive history project.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Izzy Wasserstein teaches writing and literature at a midwestern university, and writes poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming from *Pseudopod*, *GlitterShip*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. She shares a home with her spouse and their animal companions. She's a graduate of Clarion West and likes to slowly run long distances.

Farewell, Adam

XIU XINYU TRANSLATED BY BLAKE STONE-BANKS

1. Me

After stopping my medication for just a week, I passed the test with ease.

It wasn't too much trouble. My parents never cared what I was up to. My friends probably thought I was already dead. Doctor Liu was upset but knew me well enough to know I hadn't made the decision out of selfishness, whether for my own dream of the spotlight or financial gain.

The recruitment notice had said they were searching for five "sensitive and fragile" people. Many signed up. Young fans looking to play a part in the behind-the-scenes life of a pop star were sifted out. The down-and-out, lured by a generous payday, took practice tests in hopes that the real test would classify them among the "sensitive and fragile."

I had no need for practice. A glance at my obviously depressed state told them all they needed to know.

Physical exam. Contract. Informed consent. NDA . . . It took half a month to clear the bureaucratic hurdles, but that was immaterial in the face of the decade I signed up for in that vast building. I was escorted in by employees wearing black uniforms and faces as serious as a funeral.

I bathed, changed clothes, and bid farewell to my former life. It had been a long time since I had said goodbye to anyone.

"Goodbye," the last employee said as he stepped toward the door.

"Actually, one small question." My voice sounded brittle. It had been a while since I had spoken. "Why is he called Adam? Don't we believe Nvwa made the first men?"

It was a stupid question. I said a lot of stupid things when depressed.

The employee just stared back as though uncertain he should waste his breath on such a dull question. His hand gripped the door handle,

released it, then gripped it again. Perhaps he tolerated my question because he realized I was indeed “sensitive and fragile” and “stupid.”

“The reason’s simple. When Nvwa made the first men from yellow clay, she gave them no names.” He left and shut the door.

No name. Just like me and the other ninety-nine.

The device I wore looked like headphones. It was designed to look familiar, so that we would feel more at ease toward everything about to happen.

“Close your eyes,” said a voice. I wondered if there was anything alive behind it.

As I lay on the bed, I made sure the machine delivering my nourishment was functioning correctly. I shot one last glance over that barren place I had inhabited so long, the physical world.

I clenched my eyes shut.

It was night. So, with the four “sensitive and fragile” others, I slipped into Adam’s dream.

2. Adam

At this moment, I’m thinking of Tchaikovsky, that restless sublimity that pervades his work. Heard. Glimpsed. Tasted. All senses colliding, intertwining. But as they say, truth once born can only wither.

I dip brush to pigment, fill the canvas with saturated colors, searching for a new center, a new symmetry to the work. Sometimes I think it’s already enough. These moments are enough. These moments are eternal. But then I realize I still have so long to live.

They call me an idol. Not that I need to be careful about maintaining my image. There are no skills that need practicing. Singing, dancing, performing, sketching, painting, replicating the world. Already, my command of these arts is unparalleled. Among all singers and painters, they say I’m the most extraordinary. As I must be. After all, I have a one-hundred-person team consulting on my every movement.

Five more newcomers have just integrated. I didn’t feel their entry into the one-hundred-person team. At least everything still feels natural enough, which is good. It means they’ve been absorbed into the greater will, absorbed into *Adam*. In turn, Adam has been absorbed into my own subconscious.

So far, I’ve been able to separate my emotions from Adam’s. In the face of his rabid fans, I just don’t care, and that makes Adam upset.

People like to see Adam upset. The uncanny, beautiful breed of fresh-faced pop stars is too much for the masses. More and more, people are drawn to the defects in his character. They believe defects are more real. Don't they know nothing is real?

At the evening's art auction, fans are still gathering, all wearing matching rescue worker uniforms, waving shiny placards. All young girls. When they catch my eye, their excitement becomes palpable. Faces blush. I turn and methodically wave. They're cute, much younger than me—especially if I add the years of the rest of the one-hundred team when calculating my age. I already feel old despite the expanse of years still ahead of me.

One fan in the front sensually pulls at her collar and blows me a kiss. Her skin is porcelain, breasts full, the very portrait of Salome. Sublime, yet with a solemn foreboding about her. I shut my eyes so I can imagine returning her kiss, then open to fix on her again in the light.

Then *he* saunters, late like always but always turning up. This is my seventeenth encounter with him. Considering the popularity and price of admission to my events, it's obvious he has time and money.

I want to smile.

But I shouldn't. How could I have such a stupid idea?

Or perhaps, it's Adam who wants to smile? The elaborate system of inputs and algorithms through which we control him is just another system . . . but I sense it growing its own personality. It becomes upset, suppressed, oversensitive, even suspicious.

His cold face winks at me with deliberate slowness. It's as though he's communicating in some indecipherable code. Perhaps one of the one-hundred-person team in the control system should be able to decipher his code. Or perhaps not. But I know there is something wrong, some foreboding I cannot name, as though I have just glimpsed the darkest cloud in the bluest sky. Torrential rains blacken the horizon, always.

I shift my attention toward the ecstatic fans in the back. But no matter what I try, I can't force *him* from my sight. He doesn't participate in the auction, just stares the whole time at me. So halfway through the evening's auction, I walk out.

In the night's dream, I am again in boundless water. I have suggested to the company that they research how to control my dreams, but it seems they haven't found a solution. They tell me it's just a stress response stemming from the contact between my subconscious and Adam's body. They have no idea when the dreams will stop.

I dream of the water, slowly rising, always. The flood is without end. So many times have I been inundated, pulled under, only to open my eyes on nothingness.

3. Me

They let five of us celibates in. They required we be celibate at the time of our selection and ideally afraid of women. Of course, they did this because his dopamine levels were abnormal and it was so difficult to stabilize Adam's emotions. Recently, Adam had almost fallen in love. Among the one-hundred-person team, about sixty of us were still in our early twenties. Even celibate, we were a pack of hormonal animals.

They would never allow Adam to love or marry. After all, his obsessed fans were mostly girls. They wanted the girls to dream of filling that gap in his life, dream of comforting his "sensitive and fragile" soul. That was how fanaticism thrived.

Adam became irritable, gloomy. At these times, fifteen of our most "sensitive and fragile" people would take over seventy percent control rights in order to make Adam's sadness appear more real.

Adam never cried, though when I was alone, I would sometimes cry at night. I didn't know why. I suppose crying made me feel a little better, but in the long run "a little better" doesn't help. Perhaps the reason Adam never cried was that the other ninety-nine believed it too embarrassing for a man to cry.

No women had joined us. At least not then.

I'd been inside for more than three months already, but it was still weird to look in the mirror. In it, I saw a handsome face, a face *too* handsome. It was precisely this handsomeness that had made Adam courageous enough ten years earlier to enter the media's limelight and to be cast across every type of platform. It was this handsomeness that made the entertainment companies pay huge sums of money to sign contracts with his parents. It was this handsomeness that made him, at the age of fifteen, surrender his body to this puppet life, in which meaning could only be found in cascades of staged encounters and disguises constructed for lusting fans.

Because the company's questionnaire was so exhaustive, its predictions were generally accurate. The algorithm evolved Adam into the most worshipped of idols. To be honest, I empathized with him, but more than that, I was jealous. Adam was the cynosure.

I hated eggs. It wasn't just the taste. I was also allergic. Unfortunately, the other ninety-nine didn't have this problem. So Adam every morning had to eat eggs. And every morning, I had to endure that disgusting taste.

Ten years. I had to persist here for a full ten years.

When I emerged, I would be thirty-five years old, crow's feet at the corners of my eyes, white hairs behind my temples. But I would have money, a lot of money, more than enough money. I would be able to hire a great voice teacher, afford sessions in the finest recording studios, perhaps even hold a few small concerts of my own.

So I waited.

4. Adam

I am in the boundless water again.

When I wake, my eyes fix on the ceiling. I remain motionless for a long while. In these moments of waking from a long dream, the ceiling reminds me of the shimmering sea.

The 8 AM alarm rings. I shut it off, roll over, and see if I can't get back to sleep. I'm supposed to do a talk show at ten, but decide to skip. My assistant will understand. He knows I haven't been sleeping well.

I roll back into sleep, but the dream is changed.

It is no longer a soundless, flavorless, senseless thing. There is a long, drawn-out hum permeating the water, like a whale song or the whistle of an ocean liner. Or rather the snoring of such monsters, whether biological or steel. I have never lived by the sea. But as I dream of these mist-shrouded waters, they become more like the waters of the deep sea, blue and green. I hear the indistinct murmur of waves, sporadic cries of seabirds. Is something alive waiting beneath me in the depths?

Water flows in, flows out. And I wait.

With the exception of my strange dreams, other aspects of my life are progressing more smoothly. The new album is more successful than anyone imagined. That cute head of the fan club continues to pen her love letters to me. She's quite an interesting girl actually.

A boy who I saved from drowning ten years ago has just tested into a top-name university. We agree to meet on Friday evening so I can treat him to a congratulatory dinner.

When we meet, the dinner proceeds normally at first, but then a

young boy in a school uniform shows up. His uniform looks absurd next to the crowd's evening wear. The boy ogles me, steps closer.

There will always be crazy fans willing to do anything to track me down. A few no doubt will succeed, like flies hopping back and forth that won't be swatted away. They wear me down.

I step back and wait for my bodyguards to drive the boy away. He's escorted out without incident, without speaking, without screaming "Adam, I love you." But all the time, he's looking at me in this strange way. It's hard for me to pinpoint how I know that look in his eyes. But something in his eyes wrenches me.

When he's gone, the crowd calms, returns to normal. It's then I notice my assistant is staring at me too.

"He look familiar?" my assistant asks. "The boy's father is a member of the one-hundred-person team, a middle school teacher who signed up to earn money for the boy's education. His son misses him. His son has always wanted to see you. He thought to see you would be like seeing his own father."

They must always know the intimate details of my followers. Without a doubt, this is what guarantees my safety. I nod, think back on the child's eyes. My face feels hot, my heart cold. I tremble as though an electric current passes through me. The hairs on my body stand on end as though the air has suddenly grown chill. I feel strange, almost ill.

I kneel then on the ground, cover my face, cry. It is the only time I can remember crying. But that doesn't matter, the people will like to watch me cry.

5. Me

It became increasingly difficult to tell myself from Adam.

Perhaps that was a hazard of the job. In the first few years, when Adam was sleeping, we would often take short breaks. We could leave our rooms, walk the halls, sit in the lounge, and stare at each other in silence. After a while, we might eat something, watch a movie or crack a few jokes.

We almost never speak of our former lives. It was only those hired with the responsibility of "cheerful conversation"—mostly C-list actors and former journalists—who gossiped about their experiences. Of course, no one actually cared about their experiences. Adam was the only one that mattered. Adam, young and handsome, sought after. It was only through this system that any of us would have a chance to

experience something like that great life of Adam's. We were the mud Nvwa had flung, unrecognizable, still evolving from the primal chaos. Only Adam had been given a name.

During the third year inside, there was one small change. As part of the system's optimizations, it was requested we bind ourselves even more deeply to Adam. Our daily cycles of work and rest all had to synchronize with Adam's. Even our dreams had to become his dreams. We had to become him each and every moment. The assistant didn't tell this to our faces, just forwarded on a twenty-five-page addendum to our contracts defining the new rules. We had only a few minutes to read and confirm we would continue to participate.

I saw no other choice, so I lost myself entirely. Adam lost himself entirely.

And the charade of "we" became our truth.

They optimized the algorithm, modulating the one-hundred-person team to make Adam more stable. To use an ancient Chinese phrase, they were searching for the *zhongyong*, the golden mean. Even if they integrated those with more intense personalities, the output should be the same: a golden mean of anxiety, a golden mean of melancholy, a golden mean of ecstasy.

"Not good enough," was the company's only response.

No one can be loved forever, but the new algorithm did offer some protections. It wouldn't make Adam do anything too extreme, too stupid. Still the company was right. For an idol, it was "not good enough." Far from good enough.

At Adam's last exhibition, someone splashed one of his works with paint.

The world's love comes in limited quantities. The more love there was for Adam, the less love there was for others. The perpetrator was someone with a heartache, and the girl who had caused his yearning happened to be a member of Adam's fan club. It went down like this: after a cry of alarm, after the chaos, while everyone was waiting to see Adam's reaction, Adam just began to laugh in embarrassment. The reaction was even worse than no reaction. Embarrassment, laughter . . . as though Adam were just an ordinary person.

For three straight weeks, Adam's popularity metrics declined. The company began work on a dynamic weighting mechanism for the algorithm. The objective was to optimize Adam's reactions to make them more distinctive. It was decided that in certain conditions, the system would shift control to the optimal person among the one-hundred-person team who would then act for Adam.

I wasn't sure how well the new algorithm worked for Adam, but I got used to it and liked it. On a few mornings upon waking from some strange dream, when Adam would walk absentmindedly into the kitchen to select his breakfast, the system would select me from among the most "sensitive and fragile." I was able to stop him from eating eggs.

These small victories brought me some happiness. Perhaps they even made Adam happy. Perhaps we were even gradually becoming each other. I do not know.

6. Adam

It's a hot day, the day of the awards ceremony.

After some time away, I should be delighted and excited. At least, I shouldn't feel like this, so strangely anxious. Perhaps, there's an issue with the algorithm or the hundred-person team. My assistant reminds me that the algorithm has never had a significant issue. This only increases my irritation.

I'm twenty-six years old. A truly talented artist would have published a memoir by this age. But I've been too busy being chased by fans, being cheered on by the bright-eyed crowd to do the next meaningless thing and grab the next meaningless award.

But of course I have to participate in the charade. My assistant reminds me I have already signed the contract, signed on for thirty years. The money will bring my dear mother and father a true fortune. They already have a second child. They delight in watching my performances and showing off my success.

I take a deep breath as I prepare for the stage, where I will soon receive the Best Vocal Artist Award. I'm not even sure what "best vocal artist" is supposed to mean, but if that's what people say I am, then—

Then I see *him* again.

The one from the performance. The one from the auction. The one from the opening ceremony. That familiar face that always shows up. His appearance is more gaunt, but his clothing is even more exquisite. This new look makes his figure even more imposing, makes me think of Beethoven.

I'm overwhelmed. I flash a smile, but he doesn't smile back.

"What are you looking at?" my assistant asks. I just shake my head.

I never expected things would develop to this point. As I go to accept the award, he pulls out a pistol, aims it at my chest, shoots . . . I fly backwards.

Fortunately, the paranoid Adam insisted on a bulletproof vest. As I look toward my would-be killer, I see no expression on the man's face, yet in it I still recognize grief. His face may still be young, but there is white hair behind the temples. From some angles, he looks so familiar. From some angles, he looks just like me.

My assistant wraps me in a thick blanket. "That guy was your childhood friend," he says. "You're successful. He's poor, a failure. He's jealous and thinks he can extort—"

"He wants to kill me," I interrupt.

Showing no hint of fear, my assistant pats me on the back. It's as though he'd known long ago everything that would happen. "Yes, because we ignored his attempt at extortion," he says. "Anyway, he won't get close to you again."

I know the attempted murder will win us tomorrow's headlines.

I stare through the distant door to the commotion outside as the man is escorted into a police car. The light from outside stings as I peer into its glare. In the flickering light, instead of a cold and steeled killer, a tired man stoops, shrugs. His silhouette reminds me of an old man. He still seems familiar, but now just slightly. Since connecting into Adam, so much information has flooded my mind, such a dazzling life since the age of fifteen, if only a few vague shards of memory before that age. Even the memory of jumping into the water to save the child is a blur. The company doesn't care about the past. It only cares about the future. So must I.

It's possible the man didn't want to actually kill me. It's possible he only wanted to grab my attention. It's possible he only wanted to make me remember, to return to that childhood we had spent together. We were friends once—*friends*, what a weird word.

"Can I give him some money?" I ask. "Anonymously?"

My assistant takes a deep breath. "And then make it seem like the company confirms it hired a killer to wound you as some publicity stunt? Adam, are you really this dumb?" My assistant looks sad. Most of the time, he's a mindless workaholic and won't even tell me his name, says it would be unprofessional. But when things fall apart, he treats me like an older brother would. He reaches to fix my hair. For a moment, I feel this is real.

7. Me

The whole dorm couldn't sleep, though I was no longer sure what it meant to be asleep or awake anymore. When Adam slept, I wandered

his dreams, not that there was anything there. Only boundless water that would sooner or later pull us under.

8. Adam

“Have you decided yet?” my assistant asks. From his tone, I can tell he’s losing his patience. After all, the banquet is almost over, and he’s already urged me seven times.

I nod, sip from my glass of wine. After I refuse to take the stage, everyone starts whispering. But even if I spoke to them, none of these people could decipher the dreams that torture me. There is no cipher, only the boundless water.

“I’ll tell them you’re drunk, but get it straight. Any contract violation will cost us dearly,” my assistant says. “If we cut out, earnings from all concerts during the first half will be gone, but I guess you’ve been needing your vacation. Just push off the shows and take a few weeks in your painting studio. You need a break.”

I look at him, patiently wait for him to continue his little explanation. He knows what kind of explanation I’m waiting to hear.

“There’s nothing for you to do now,” my assistant says. “Just get out of here. You have no right to change the one-hundred-person team. That was decided by the company. We agreed to that long ago.”

“No, not necessarily,” I say. “I could cancel the contract altogether.”

“Cancel the contract?” my assistant says. “You want that?”

“I can leave Adam and cancel the contract. Push the rest out . . .” It takes strenuous effort to pull these words from my mouth, like pulling heavy stones from wet pockets.

This might be the bravest moment of my life. The sad thing is I don’t know if the courage comes from me or from Adam.

My assistant stares back astonished. “So you forgot again, didn’t you, Adam?” He shakes his head, mutters as though talking to himself. “Yep, you forgot. You always forget the most important things. They say it’s too painful for you to remember. But listen, you can never leave Adam. You can’t leave because you are Adam. You are the will of the hundred. You are the body, that limp, paralyzed body. I can’t believe you really forgot again.”

My head droops. A few of my fingers bend absently, as though trying to grasp at the void. I remember something, say, “But I saved the child . . .”

“Right, you saved him, but the water still drowned him too.” My assistant laughs. “A lot of people were disappointed. His older brother

wanted to take the body back, to lay him to rest, but we had signed an agreement with the parents and there was nothing to be done about the contract.”

I hear the sound of waterfalls. I hear the sound of torrential rains. Something is calling from the distance. Once the one hundred rivers flow east into the sea, how will they return to the west? We are the countless drops of water that form the sea. Nothing can separate us, except perhaps death.

I flash a smile at my assistant. I raise my wine glass, down it. I glance downstairs. Up here in the penthouse, the banquet hall is crowded with faces and noise. Below, all is quiet, vacant. From up here, the pool below is a perfect strip of blue. The soft waves will not be soft again, I think.

In the end, water will conquer all.

9. Me

I plummeted into the water.

Adam plummeted into water.

We plummeted into water.

I wasn't the first to pull off the “headphones.”

Upon waking, light was blurred. Sound muddled. My first thought was there must have been a malfunction.

I realized I was not in that small room quiet as the grave. Over the years we had spent inside Adam, the whole building layout had changed.

It was crowded now. Well over one hundred shabby cots were placed right up against each other, leaving only narrow paths between them. I heard the creak of bed boards, the scuff of hard shoes on tile floors, human whispers.

Old Doctor Liu was seated at my bedside. I could tell there was something he wanted to say.

I blinked and became aware the noise had stopped. Suddenly there was no one else around. It seemed like everyone else had woken and left. When Adam died, the contract had been automatically annulled.

“I told you that if you stopped taking your medication, you might die,” Doctor Liu said. “Seventy percent of it was your own choice. They wanted me to come and talk to you.”

He tried to smile, an embarrassed smile, a sorry-but-no-cure-for-what-you've-got smile.

“The decision was made by the algorithm.” I heard my voice trembling. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“No.” Doctor Liu brought a hand to his chin. “They want me to ask . . . if you would allow your identity to serve as a prototype for a new idol.” There was an equivocation in his voice, as though he were waiting for me to grasp something. Finally he said, “After all, you’ve become the new cynosure.”

In that last moment as Adam, it had been me in control, me who killed him. Just as there had been no shortage of people who wanted to kill Adam, there would be no shortage of people who wanted to avenge his death. His fans would want me dead.

My expression made my thoughts obvious. Doctor Liu added, “They will fully guarantee your safety.”

“But I’m not some paralyzed body like Adam. I have my own will and—”

“Of course, they will respect your will. The new team will just help carry out your will even better. Didn’t you tell me once you liked to sing? They will make you the greatest singer.”

“A singer, me?” I heard myself retort. The last few years were a disintegrating hallucination, like the draining of a vast pool. The universe spun round the drain of my mind, until all that was left was hollow grief. I thought on Adam’s fall, that eternal fall, like an island slipping beneath boundless water.

Only in that moment did I realize he was really dead.

Our friend. Our enemy. Our idol.

Farewell, Adam.

Originally published in Chinese in *Science Fiction World*, January 2018.

Translated and published in partnership with Storycom.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xiu Xinyu was born in Qingdao, China, in 1993 but don't for a moment imagine her favorite beer springs from there. Now based in Beijing, Xinyu divides her time between the philosophy department of Tsinghua University and the realms of speculative fiction. She has published more than fifteen SF stories, including the collection *Death by the Night of Glory*.

The No-One Girl and the Flower of the Farther Shore

E. LILY YU

Once there grew, in the dust and mud of a village in China, a girl who had only her grandmother to love, and then her grandmother died and was buried and she had no one at all. With no money to patch up the walls and lay new tiles on the roof, the small, smoky home that the two of them had shared slumped around her in the rain, and the little garden ran to nettle and thorn.

In the months that followed, the girl crept and gnawed and spat and caught small birds with her hands, like an animal. The garden gave her wild gourds and bitter greens to eat. The woods gave her kindling and dry cowpats where cows had been tethered to graze. Sometimes her neighbors brought her scraps, for pity.

Sometimes they shied stones at her.

Except when she visited her grandmother's grave, the no-one girl rarely spoke. She cast her eyes low and bit her lip, and the villagers shrugged and said, well, that was the way of wild things. But anyone who saw her squatting beside the grave, knobby elbows over knobby knees, mumbling and rambling, would have thought her mad.

There she told her grandmother the changing of the seasons, and the birds she caught and the colors of their feathers, and the weather, and her wishes, small and large, as she had done when her grandmother was alive.

For many years now, at the mid-autumn festival, the village official offered a silver pin in the shape of an acorn and a gold brooch molded into a willow leaf as a prize for the most beautiful thing made in the village that year. Each year, the villagers presented embroidered cardboard and painted tin and silk cords knotted into dragons, and

one man or woman, glowing with pride, bore the pin and willow leaf home. The no-one girl had seen these prizes from afar, on the breast of the tailor, or the carpenter, or the firework-maker, and thought them very rich and fine.

“If I won them,” she said to her grandmother’s grave, as the wind carried to her the music and laughter of the festival, “I would touch them and taste them and eat their loveliness with my eyes. I would wear them for an hour to feel the weight of gold and silver, and then I would sell the gold brooch for enough flour for a year, then the silver pin for salt and vinegar and spices. But when I bring the little purple wildflowers without names, and the brown mushrooms from the wood, they laugh at me.”

Her grandmother’s grave, mounded high and sparkling with tinsel, kept its own counsel, but the grass that grew thinly on it seemed to sway in sympathy.

That night, after the revelers were all asleep, the first rain of autumn scoured the village. Rain sang on roofs and fences and pattered through trees. The no-one girl shivered and dreamed of a white bird that circled her head, dropped a seed, and flew away into the dark.

When she awoke, she went to her grandmother’s grave. From the mound sprang a single red flower like a firework, a flower the girl had never seen before, yet recognized, for late at night her grandmother had combed the girl’s long black hair and told her about the flower of the farther shore, which only grows where there has been death, and leads the dead wherever they must go. It had bloomed in the village where her grandmother had been born, a long way away, and there had been a deep sadness in her grandmother’s voice as she described it, working the comb through the knots in the girl’s hair.

Now the flower of the farther shore had come to her. The girl clapped her hands at the exquisite beauty of it. She dug down to the bulb with her fingers and planted it in the garden among the wild gourds.

All that autumn and winter she tended the flower. After the petals faded and fell, slender leaves speared up, glowing with life and green throughout the cold winter. She fed the flower her secrets, burying them one by one, and watered it with drops of her blood, red as the flower had been, because there was no death in the garden, and the flower, her grandmother had said, needed death to live.

“Grow, grandmother’s flower,” she whispered to it at night. “Bloom, flower of the farther shore.”

Leaves and then snow covered the path to her grandmother’s grave, for the girl had ceased her visits, certain, as if it had been whispered to

her, that her grandmother was gone. All her words and care were for her flower, whose leaves seemed to bend toward her, listening.

Spring came, and the earth thawed. While everything else budded and sprouted and broke open, shouting life, the leaves of the strange plant browned and crumbled. But the girl continued to tend the bare patch, which she ringed with stones, as lovingly as one might a child.

These were easier days, after the winter's illnesses and privations. Bark ran soft with sap, and weeds were still tender and sweet. Though the girl was never not hungry, she was not starved.

Now and then the villagers looked over her wall or shouted through the gate to see if she was still alive, partly for kindness and partly because her land and home would be reassigned if she died. When they spied her chattering at her patch of earth, they stopped and stared.

"Eh, what's that?"

"What are you growing there, girl?"

"A flower of the farther shore," she replied. They laughed and rattled sticks against the gate. One or two tossed stones at her, but only halfheartedly, so they pattered down among the wild gourds instead of stinging her arms.

Summer meant fat pigeons, and the tiny, tender muscles of leaping mice caught when she poured creek water down their holes, and the odd spray of wildflowers, yellow and pink and white, dotting the muddy banks of the ditch. Summers she roamed far and free, up hills and down fields, idly pulling an ear of wheat or barley and chewing the sweet green kernels inside. Hawks hovered, dove, and killed. Cows swung their sleepy heads sideways at her and pissed pale yellow streams.

Every night she returned to the bare ring of stones, told it what she'd seen, and pricked her arm until it bled. The red drops ran in a fine line down her wrist and dripped from her fingertips to the thirsting earth. She was careful not to waste a drop.

At the equinox, or so said the flimsy almanac nailed to the door, the flower of the farther shore arose like a ghost in the night. It spread its curling red crown to greet the no-one girl when she unlatched the door and stepped outside. The girl gathered its petals together in her hands to smell their fragile fragrance, stroked its long green stalk, kissed its stamens until her mouth was gold with pollen, and spent the whole day sitting beside her flower, crowing and marveling.

Those who looked over the wall made various noises of astonishment.

"What a beautiful flower!"

"Ah, what a sweet smell!"

"How odd that someone like you should have grown such a thing."

They drank its colors with their eyes and its odors with their noses, just as the no-name girl did, and she did not begrudge them one bit.

The butcher's son came too, and looked long.

"Aren't you my treasure?" the girl said, paying him no mind. "Oh, but I will surely win the gold brooch and silver pin this year because of you."

And the butcher's son said nothing but went quietly away.

In the night, the girl turned in her sleep, as though a soft thump and rustle reached her ears. She twitched and flung a hand out, as if somewhere in the garden, metal clinked against stone.

Morning came, the morning of the festival, and the flower was gone.

"Stolen!" the girl cried. "Stolen, oh stolen!" She sifted the loose dirt in the hole where the flower had grown, but there was nothing, not a fragment of root, not a crumb of hope.

She beat the ground with her fists, then pulled her hair with her dirty fingers, but there was no help for it. The flower had been stolen, the pin and brooch would be given to another, and there was nothing she could do.

Aching for justice, and rubbing her eyes with her knuckles, she hurried to the street of shops, where on an ordinary day beaded strings clacked in doorways and baskets of fish were sold from bicycles. Today, colored lanterns bobbed over low tables tied with ribbons. Throughout the day, people brought their beautiful things here, to be guarded by the village official when he was not deep in his cups, and by his more watchful wife when he was.

The no-one girl would have pulled his sleeve and cried for help, except that the butcher's son was just at that moment presenting his entry: a flower in a pickle jar. It was her flower, the no-one girl saw, her stolen flower of the farther shore, but the petals had been painted white and gold, and cut raggedly, and the stamens trimmed short. To her eyes that had known its crimson wholeness, it was ugly as a wound.

When the butcher's son saw her, he turned red and glanced away.

"What's this?" the official said, tapping the end of his pen against the jar. "I've never seen its like."

"A flower I grew in the yard, where the soil is wet from the animals we slaughter. I sent off for the seed in the mail."

"It may be an unusual species, but these are common enough colors," the official said. "And—faugh—it stinks like cheap perfume. Well, set it among the rest, and we'll see." Then he turned to the girl with a smile as big as sunflowers and said, "Now, what did you bring us this year? A pretty stone? A snail?"

The truth filled her mouth with bitterness, almost choking her, and her blood ran hot and cold. But she looked into the official's wine-red

face, and at the butcher's son in his clean blue shirt, smelling of cooked meat, and knew she would not be believed, no, not the wild girl with no one, who talked and laughed to herself. The villagers who passed by had seen a red flower with a curling crown, not this gold-and-white pretender. Moreover, as she knew, there was often a ready stone in their hands.

"Nothing?" the official said. She shook her head, teeth clamped together. "Well, get along with you, then. Go and enjoy the festival."

The girl turned and ran, blind with her loss, blundering through the smoke of firecrackers and knots of people eating white moon cakes. The men and women she knocked against opened their mouths to scold, but seeing who it was, laughed and shook their heads.

Once she was home, the gate banged open and closed, the door unlocked and flung shut, did she allow the poor truth to leave her lips.

"Ah, why did he have to mutilate my flower?" she cried. "If only he had simply stolen it and called it his! For it to become a painted lie! For its scent to be drowned in his mother's perfume! Oh, I wish I had eaten the thing!"

She curled up and sobbed until her nose went numb. For it was not the loss of the flower alone that wounded her, but the sudden revelation that the world and its pins and brooches had been made for such as the butcher's boy and not for one like herself.

A cold rain fell that night. It fell on the revelers whose faces turned orange and blue in the light of the paper lanterns, who whooped and ran or staggered home through the rain; fell on the fan-maker as she was accepting the silver acorn and willow-leaf brooch, who quickly tucked her prize fan into her jacket; fell on the butcher's son carrying his flower home, who turned his face upward to catch raindrops on his tongue; and it fell on the muddy girl sitting in her yard, staring at the hole where the flower had been.

The rain fell and fell, and the garden slicked to mud. Raindrops boiled on the girl's shoulders. Rain streamed down the tangles of her hair.

Then—as if the world had heard the unspoken wish on her tongue, the one wish she had not told her grandmother or fed to the flower, for only now did it put out its leaves—the girl began to disappear.

She grew transparent, like sugar, then smaller, ever smaller and smoother, melting and running into the wet earth with the rain.

The last sound she made, before her lips blurred, was a sigh.

As she sank, she expanded. What had been the no-one girl mixed with volcanic ash and ant eggs and ancient bones, leafmold and roots

both thick as a man's waist and fine as hair. She sank until she touched the enormous basalt pillars buried deep beneath the soil, forgetful of the fire that made them, and deeper still.

And she understood, as she opened, as she poured forth and flowed, that though the no-one girl had appeared to eat and mumble and live alone, in truth she was part of everything, the over and the under, briefly divided from it, as a seed falls from a seedhead, but now returned. Her bones were basalt, her teeth trees, her belly full of mineral riches. She looked out from every leaf and every stone. There was her poor painted flower in the butcher's yard, cast aside to wither; but it did not matter now. She had ten thousand flowers in her, tens of thousands, and the wind for her hair.

The villagers searched for the no-one girl, when they noticed the silence in her yard, but not for long. She was wild, after all, and everyone knew that wild things lived and died in their own way, or climbed into truck beds and rode to the city to vanish, and it was no use holding them. At any rate, they had their own concerns, their own sick parents and delinquent children and debts run up by liquor and gambling, and when winter came ravening, its breath all knives, they went home to their houses to grapple with their private disasters.

One morning in spring, as icicles wept themselves to nothingness, the butcher's son stopped by the empty house, frowning. He scaled the stone wall, at some cost to his trousers; tried the warped door, which stuttered open; and rapped his knuckles against the sagging beams, listening for rot.

By the time summer softened the village, the old garden, cleared of rocks and nettles, put forth long pale melon vines and sweet swellings, yellow and green.

Soon the ripe melons were picked and split and eaten. Then it was autumn. The first cold rain covered the village. In its wake, red flowers sprang up, sudden and strange: flowers as brilliant as firecrackers, slender-stalked and leafless, growing so densely that when the wind murmured in them they moved like a sea.

The butcher's son picked armfuls of them, as many as he could carry, and went to the fan-maker's home, flushing as bright as the flowers that he thrust forward when she came to the gate. Children bent to breathe their sweetness, then plucked them to play at wands, or taunt the goats until they ate them. But it did not matter how many they gathered; always, there were more.

All around, above, below, the everything girl laughed with spotless joy.

Autumn after autumn the flowers filled the village, spilling outward for miles, until it was known to all as the village of the farther shore,

and the old name drifted down into the uncertain recollections of the village elders, along with the story of the no-one girl.

Once the butcher's son and the fan-maker were married, they moved into the empty house and yard that the butcher's son had, over long months, cleaned and repaired. For their wedding he gave her a necklace and earrings of gold, heavy and soft.

The two of them lived happily and unhappily, as people are wont to do, falling out of love and into irritation and then back into fondness; having children, beating them, and scraping together the fees for school; growing old and blind and fretful, and moving about the yard with canes.

After they both died, their eldest child came home from the city to sort through their belongings, putting aside what could be sold, what might be wanted, and what was worthless. As she folded clothes and untied boxes, stirring up decades of dust, she tossed onto the midden, as things unworthy of keeping, an acorn snapped off its pin, the silver paint flaking, and a willow-leaf brooch with gilt peeling from the brass.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E. Lily Yu received the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2012 and the Gar LaSalle Storyteller Award in 2017. Her stories have appeared in venues from *McSweeney's* to *F&SF*, including seven best-of-the-year anthologies, and been finalists for the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards. Recent work appears in *Hazlitt* and *Tor.com*.

Are You Afflicted with Dragons?

KAGE BAKER

There must have been a dozen of the damned things up there.

Smith walked backwards across the hotel's garden, glaring up at the roofline. The little community on the roof went right on with its busy social life, preening, squabbling over fish heads, defecating, spreading stubby wings in the morning sunlight, entirely unaware of Smith's hostile scrutiny.

As he continued backward, Smith walked into the low fence around the vegetable patch. He staggered, tottered, and lurched backward, landing with a crash among the demon-melon frames. Instantly, a dozen tiny reptilian heads turned; a dozen tiny reptilian necks craned over the roof's edge. The dragons regarded Smith with bright fascinated eyes. Smith growled at them helplessly as he flailed there, and they went into tiny reptilian gales of piping laughter.

Disgusted, Smith got to his feet and dusted himself off. Mrs. Smith, who had been having a quiet smoke by the back door, peered at him.

"Did you hurt yourself, Smith?"

"We have to do something about *those*," said Smith, jerking a thumb at the dragons. "They're getting to be a nuisance."

"And possibly a liability," said Mrs. Smith. "Lady What's-her-name, the one with that pink palace above Cable Steps, had dinner on the terrace last night with a party of friends. I'd just sent Mr. Crucible out with the Pike Terrine when one of these little devils on the roof flies down, bold as you please, and lights on the lady's plate. She screamed and then for a moment everyone was amused, you know, and one or two of them even said the horrible little creature was cute. Then it jumped up on her shoulder and started worrying at her earring.

"Fortunately Crucible had the presence of mind to come after it with the gravel rake, and it flew away before it could do Milady any harm,

but she wasn't pleased at all. I had to give them free pudding all around and two complimentary bottles of Black Gabekrian."

Smith winced. "That's expensive."

"Not as expensive as Milady's bullies coming down here and burning the hotel over our heads. What if the little beast had managed to pull out her earring and then flown off with it, Smith?"

"That'd finish us, all right." Smith rubbed his chin. "I'd better go see if I can buy some poison at Leadbeater's."

"Why don't we simply call in an exterminator?" Mrs. Smith puffed smoke.

"No! They charge a duke's ransom. Leadbeater's got something, he swears it does the job or your money back."

Mrs. Smith looked doubtful. "But there was this fellow in the marketplace only the other day, had a splendid pitch. 'Are you afflicted with DRAGONS?' he shouted. Stood up on the steps of Rakut's monument, you know, and gave this speech about his secret guaranteed methods. Produced a list of testimonials as long as your arm, all from grateful customers whose premises he'd ridded of wyrmin."

Smith grunted. "And he'd charge a duke's ransom and turn out to be a charlatan."

Mrs. Smith shrugged. "Have it your way, then. Just don't put it off any longer, or we'll be facing a lawsuit at the very least."

Leadbeater's & Son's was an old and respected firm, three dusty floors' worth of ironmongery with a bar in the cellar. Great numbers of the city's population of males of a certain age disappeared through its doors for long hours at a time; some of them practically lived there. Smith was by no means immune to its enchantment.

Regardless of what he needed, Smith generally began with climbing up to the third floor to stare at Bluesteel's Patented Improved Spring-driven Harvester, a gleaming mystery of wheels, gears, blades, leather straps, and upholstery, wherein a man might ride at his leisure while simultaneously cutting down five acres of wheat. Mr. Bluesteel had assembled it there for the first Mr. Leadbeater, long years since, and there it sat still, because it was so big no one had been able to get it down the stairs and the only other option was taking off the roof and hoisting it out with a crane.

Smith had a long satisfying gawk at it, and then continued on his usual progress: down to the second floor to browse among the Small Iron Goods, to see whether there were any hinges, bolts, screws, or nails he needed, or whether there might be anything new and stylish

in the way of drawer pulls or doorknobs. Down, then, to the ground floor, where he idled wistfully among the tools in luxuriant profusion, from the bins full of cheap hammers to the really expensive patent wonders locked behind glass. At last, sadly (for he could not admit to himself that he really needed a clockwork reciprocating saw that could cut through iron bars with its special diamond-dust attachment), Smith wandered back through the barrels of paint and varnish to the Compounds area, where young Mr. Leadbeater sat behind the counter doing sums on a wax tablet.

“Leadbeater’s son,” said Smith by way of greeting.

“Smith-from-the-hotel,” replied young Leadbeater, for there were a lot of Smiths in Sales-by-the-Sea. He stuck his stylus behind his ear and stood. “How may I serve? Roofing pitch? Pipe sealant? Drain cleaner?”

“What have you got for dragons?”

“Ah! We have an excellent remedy.” Young Leadbeater gestured for Smith to follow him and went sidling back between the rows of bins. “Tinplate’s Celebrated Gettemol! Very cleverly conceived. Here we are.” He raised the lid on a bin. It was full of tiny pellets in a riot of brilliant colors.

“It looks delicious,” said Smith.

“That’s what your wyrmin will think,” said young Leadbeater. “They’ll see this and they’ll leave off hunting fish, see? They’ll fill their craws with it and, tchac! It’ll kill them dead. How bad is your infestation?”

“There’s a whole damned colony of them on the roof,” said Smith.

“*Well.* You’ll want a week’s worth—I can sell you a couple of buckets to carry it in—and for that kind of volume we throw in a statue of Cliba and the Cliba Prayer, put a shrine where the dragons can see it and keeps ’em from coming back, very efficacious—and then of course you’ll need new roofing and gutters once you’ve cleaned your dragon colony out—”

“What for?”

“Because if you’ve got that many of them on your roof, ten to one they’ve been prying up the leading to hide things under it, and once their droppings get underneath on your roof beams, they eat right through, and you don’t want that, trust me. Highly corrosive droppings, dragons. Just about impossible to get the stink out of plaster, too. Had them long?”

“There’d always been a couple,” said Smith. “We’re at the damned seaside, right? You expect them. But in the last month or two we’ve got some kind of wyrmin rookery up there.”

“Yes. I daresay it’s the weather. Lot of people coming in with the same trouble. Well, let me fetch you a pair of good big buckets . . .”

“Yes, but no roofing stuff just yet, all right?” Smith followed him over to the Containers section. “I’ll wait until I get up there and see how bad it is. And what do I do with it? Just scatter it around? We’ve got a baby at our place, and I wouldn’t want him picking it up and eating it.”

“Not at all. You’ve got a big tree on your grounds, haven’t you? Just hang the buckets in the tree branches. Neat and tidy. They’re naturally curious, see? They’ll fly down to eat it, and then all you’ll need to do is call the umbrella-makers,” said young Leadbeater, with a grin.

“What for?” Smith was mystified until he remembered the commercial uses for dragon wings. “Oh! Right. Will they come and collect the dead ones for us?”

“Usually. You can get a good price for them, too.” Young Leadbeater winked.

Smith trudged home with two gallon buckets of Tinsplate’s Celebrated Gettemol, and the little statue of Cliba—a minor god of banishments—with its prayer on a slip of paper, in his pocket. He set a ladder against the trunk of the big canopy-pine and, climbing the ladder, went up himself to hang the buckets where they would be clearly visible. While up there, he peered across at his roof, but saw no gaping holes evident. Whistling, he climbed back down and spent the rest of the afternoon in the work shed making a shrine for Cliba out of an old winejar.

Next morning, Smith was carrying a case of pickles up from the hotel’s cellar when he heard Mrs. Smith calling him, with thunder in her voice. He emerged to find her clutching her grandchild.

“What?”

“Perhaps you’d better go and see what Baby found when I took him outdoors for his sunbath,” she said grimly. Smith, expecting a dead dragon, sighed and trudged off to the garden, followed closely by Mrs. Smith. When he stepped through the back door, he beheld the garden and back terrace scattered with thousands of rainbow-colored pellets.

“And guess what Baby went straight for, when I set him down? *‘Yum yum, look at all this candy!’*” said Mrs. Smith.

“Gods below!” Smith looked up into the tree and saw the two empty pails swinging on one end of gnawed-through cord. Five or six dragons perched along the branch above it, watching Smith with what looked like malicious glee in their little slit-pupiled eyes. As Smith stared, they defecated in unison and flew back to the hotel’s roof.

“I trust you’ll have Mr. Crucible sweep it up immediately,” said Mrs. Smith with icy hauteur.

“Damned right I will,” said Smith. “And then I’m taking it back to Leadbeater’s and demanding a refund.”

“And what’ll you do then?”

Smith rubbed the back of his neck, scowling. “Go ask a priest for intercession?”

“A fat lot of good that’ll do! What self-respecting god gets rid of household pests, Smith? No, go and do what we ought to have done in the first place and hire a professional. There’s that fellow in the marketplace. ‘Are you afflicted with DRAGONS?’ and all that. A big fellow in oilskins. One-eyed.”

After a brief unpleasant interview with the Leadbeaters father and son, Smith walked out of their emporium counting his money. He put his wallet away, and, sighing, looked around. He spotted the column of Duke Rakut’s monument, two streets away.

“May as well,” Smith muttered to himself. Picking his way between fishnets spread out for mending, he made his way over to the marketplace in Rakut Square.

Approaching the monument, Smith saw only a skinny youth seated on its steps, next to a handcart loaded with empty cages. The youth, who had a rather bruised and melancholy look to him, was feeding shrimp to a fat little dragon perched on his shoulder. The dragon ate greedily. The youth watched it with a mother’s tender regard.

“Is there a man hereabouts says he can get rid of those?” Smith inquired, staring at the dragon. He had never seen a tame one before.

“That’d b-be my m-m-master,” said the youth, not meeting Smith’s eyes.

“Well, where is he?”

By way of answer, the youth pointed at the wine shop across the way.

“Back soon?”

The youth nodded. Smith sat down on the steps to wait. The dragon climbed bat-like down to the youth’s knee and squeaked at Smith. It ducked its head and shook its wings, which resembled fine red leather, at him.

“What’s it doing?”

“Sh-she’s begging you for t-t-treats,” said the youth.

“Huh.” Smith scratched his head. “Smart dragon.” The youth nodded. The dragon waited expectantly for treats, and, when none were forthcoming from Smith, it squealed angrily at him and clambered back up the front of the youth’s tunic, where it settled down to groom itself, now and then casting an indignant glance at Smith.

A man emerged from the wine shop. Smith, watching him as he walked across the square, saw that he was big, wore a curious long coat made of oilskin, and had one eye. A leather patch hid where the other had been. The man was red-faced and genial-looking, even more so than might be accounted for by having just emerged from a wine shop.

“C-c-customer, Master,” said the youth. The man rubbed his hands together, grinning at Smith.

“Are you, sir? Are you afflicted with—”

“Dragons, yes, I am. What’re your rates like?”

“I will completely eradicate your dragons for absolutely free!” the man told him. His voice was a hoarse bawl. He grabbed Smith’s hand in his gauntleted own and shook it heartily.

“Free! What’s the catch?”

“No catch, my friend. Etterin Crankhandle, at your service. And let me tell you what those services include! No appointment necessary. I will personally come to your premises and arrange for on-site removal of any and all dragons infesting your property. All wyrmin are humanely trapped—no dangerous poisons or other chemical preparations used. I will then conduct a complete and thorough examination of your roof, shed, or outbuildings, and remove any nests or caches and repair any damage I find such as loose leading, tiles, or slates. I, of course, reserve the right to any contents of said nests or caches. Your roof, shed, or outbuildings will then be sprayed with my Miracle Wyrmin Repellent, guaranteed to prevent any reinfestation for a full year. All absolutely free. Interested?”

“I wish I’d run into you before I spent a fortune on that Gettemol crap,” said Smith, panting as he helped Crankhandle and his assistant push their cart up the street. Crankhandle laughed and shook his head.

“Ah, sir, if I had a gold crown for every time I’d heard someone say that, I’d be a wealthy man!”

“You ought to charge something, then,” said Smith, leaning away from the dragon on the youth’s shoulder, as it stuck its neck out and nipped at him.

“Oh, no,” said Crankhandle. “The dragons themselves are payment enough. And in any case, you wouldn’t have found me there before last month. I’m new here.”

“A traveler, then?”

“I am, sir. Have to be. When I clear wyrmin out of a town, they don’t come back. Pretty soon business dries up, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it would. Here we are,” said Smith, opening the garden gate. They wheeled the cart in over the lawn and parked it under the

canopy-pine. As Crankhandle's assistant scrambled to slide chocks under the wheels, Crankhandle turned and peered up at the roof. The dragons looked down at him. Crankhandle grinned wide. Smith saw that his teeth had been capped with gold.

"There you are! Uncle's come with treats, my little darlings. Oh, yes he has."

Smith went indoors, got a beer, and came back out to watch as the youth unloaded all the cages from the cart. He set them up in a row and opened each one. His master, meanwhile, opened a panel in the floor of the cart, and, from a recess, brought out an iron strongbox. When he opened it, Smith glimpsed a dense greenish stuff, looking like damp compressed sawdust. Crankhandle broke off a cake of it and went to each of the cages, baiting each cage with bits of the cake. The dragon on his assistant's shoulder turned its head and watched jealously. It began to squeak, doing the same head-bobbing and wing-fluttering routine it had gone through at Smith.

"Here you are, little sweeting," said Crankhandle, holding out a morsel of the stuff. The little dragon snapped at it avidly and gobbled it down. "That's the way. Now! Arvin, send her up there."

The youth Arvin took the dragon in both his hands. He kissed the top of her head—she tried to bite him—and tossed her up in the air toward the roof. She unfolded her wings and flew to the roofline, landing among the other dragons there. They hissed at her, but only for a moment; presumably, they had caught the scent of the cake on her jaws, for they suddenly mobbed her, biting her in their excitement, snapping at crumbs. She squawked and fled, jumping off the edge and flapping back down to Arvin's waiting hands. He clutched her to himself and dodged behind the open cages, holding her against his chest protectively as the other dragons came winging after her.

But the whole flock—and Smith saw now there were a lot more than a dozen, more like twenty—pulled up and wheeled in midair as they noticed the bait. For a moment there was a confusion of beating wings, loud as spattering rain on rock, and then each dragon had zipped into one of the cages and was ravenously eating the green cake. Crankhandle stepped forward and slammed the cages shut, one after another. Arvin stepped around to help him, as his dragon scrambled back on his shoulder.

"And it's done," said Crankhandle, beating his gauntlets together. Arvin's dragon peeped and begged. "And here's your reward, good girl!" Crankhandle added, going to the strongbox and taking out a last bit of

cake. He handed it to Arvin to feed to her and then put the strongbox back in its compartment, shutting the panel.

“Damn,” said Smith. Crankhandle swung round to him, grinning, and held up an index finger.

“But wait! I have not completed my comprehensive removal! Arvin, get the ladder.”

“Yes, Master,” said Arvin, as the dragon screamed in temper and bit him because the last of the cake was gone. He dabbed absentmindedly at the blood streaming from his ear and went to pull an extendable ladder from the side of the cart.

Crankhandle loaded a basket with tools, and, slinging it on his back, climbed the ladder one-handed, while Smith steadied the ladder for him and Arvin loaded the cages back on the cart. Arvin sustained a number of other bites doing this, amid tremendous racket, because the dragon flock was in a group rage and hurling themselves against the bars; but Arvin kept working and only paused to tie a couple of bandages on his wounds before throwing netting over the cart’s top to fasten everything down.

“I’ve got it figured out,” said Smith, who had wandered over to watch the dragons once Crankhandle was safely on the roof. “He sells the little bastards to the umbrella-makers, doesn’t he?”

Arvin shot him a pained look. “N-n-n-n-n-no!” he said reproachfully. “He l-lets them g-go. G-goes inland a l-long way and r-releases them. G-gone for w-weeks sometimes.”

“Aha,” said Smith. “Yes, of course.”

Crankhandle was up on the roof a long while, scraping and clunking and hammering. Mrs. Smith came out to see what was going on, and, on learning, was very pleased indeed with Smith, so much so that she went back indoors to prepare his favorite fried eel for dinner.

Having repaired the leads, removed the nests, and dug dragon shit out of all the raingutters, Crankhandle came back down the ladder at last, looking smug.

“Very nice haul,” he said, slinging the basket down and pulling a tank with a spraying-rig from under the cart. Smith got up and looked in the basket. He glimpsed something bright glinting among the ruin of nests and flat sun-dried dragon corpses.

“There’s something gold in here—” Smith reached for it, but Crankhandle whirled around with the tank in his hands.

“Ah-ah-ah! That’s my perquisite, sir. ‘Contents of said nests or caches,’ I said, didn’t I? Anything I found up there’s *mine*, see? Or I can just let

the little dears loose again, and I shouldn't think you'd want that, not with the spiteful mood they're in."

"All right, all right," said Smith, but he brushed aside the rubbish for a better look anyway. His jaw dropped. In the bottom of the basket was a clutch of gold crown-pieces, a gold anklet, a silver bracelet set with moonstones, a length of gold chain, three gold signet rings, the brass mouthpiece from a trumpet, assorted earrings . . .

"Wait a minute." Smith grabbed out a gold stickpin, a skull with ruby eyes. "This is mine! Went missing from my washstand!"

"Mine now, mate," said Crankhandle, shaking his head. "Those were my terms. Wyrmin steal bright metal; everybody knows that. Anyplace they nest, there's going to be a hoard. Now you know how I can afford to do this free of charge."

"Well yes, but . . ." Smith turned the stickpin in his fingers. "Come on. This was a gift. A gift from a demon-lord, if you want to know, and I wouldn't want to offend him by losing it. Can't I keep just this pin? Trade you for it."

"Such as what?" Crankhandle was busy fastening the tank's harness on his back.

"Lady of the house is a gourmet cook. Seriously, the Grandview's restaurant rated five cups in the city guide. Exclusive, understand? All the lords and ladies are regulars here, so you can imagine the wine cellar's stocked with nothing but the best. We'll give you the finest table and serve you the finest meal you'll ever eat in your life, eh? And whatever you like to drink, as much as you can hold!"

"Really?" Crankhandle's eye gleamed. "Right, then; you get the table ready. I'm just going up to finish the job. I warn you, I've got a good appetite."

He wasn't joking. Crankhandle set his elbows on the table and worked his way through a whole moorfowl stuffed with rice and ground peas, a crown roast of venison with a blackberry-red wine reduction sauce, golden fried saffron crab cakes, two glasses of apricot liqueur, and a quart and a half of porter. Smith played the companionable host and took his dinner of fried eel at the table with his guest, watching in awe as the man ate and drank. He took it on himself to have some fried eel sent out to Arvin as well, marooned in the garden keeping watch over the cages.

Refilling Crankhandle's glass, Smith inquired: "How did you get into this line of business, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Ha-ha!" Crankhandle belched, grinned, and placed a slightly unsteady

finger beside his nose. “That’s the story, isn’t it? What’s for pudding? Got any fruitcake?”

Smith waved down one of the waiters and told him to bring out a fruitcake.

“How’d I get into my line of business. Well. Always interested in dragons, from the time I was a kid. I grew up back in the grainlands, see, way inland. Way upriver. And the dragons, you know, they’re bigger there—twice the size of these little buggers. I remember standing on the tail of my father’s cart and watching ’em cruise across the sky, just gliding, you know, on these scarlet wings. Most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my life. Ah!”

The waiter brought the fruitcake to the table. It was dark, solid, drenched in liquor, heavy as a couple of bricks, and covered in molten sugar, and the mere sight of it was enough to give Smith indigestion. The waiter deftly set out a plate and took up his cake knife, poised to serve. “How big a slice would Sir like?”

“Leave the whole thing,” said Crankhandle, a bit testily. The waiter looked sidelong at Smith, who nodded. The waiter set the fruitcake on the table and left. Crankhandle seized the knife and, a little unsteadily, sawed out a slice. Gloating, he held it up to the candle, so the light shone through the red and amber and green fruit. “Look at that! Looks like jewels. Looks like a dragon’s trove. Nothing about them isn’t beautiful, dragons.” He stuffed the slice of cake in his mouth and cut himself another.

“So anyway—I wanted to know everything about ’em, growing up. Asked everybody in my village what they knew about dragons. Nobody knew much. Used to watch the dragons dive in the river for fish. Found out the sorts of things they like to eat when they can’t get fish, found out what they physic themselves with when they’re ill, that sort of thing.

“And then, one time, I followed one back to the cliffs where it nested and climbed up there to have a look, and that was when I found its hoard. All this gold! Nobody in my village had any, you can be sure. I reached in and grabbed this goblet with rubies on it—got my arm bitten pretty badly too—and carried it home.

“The schoolmaster had a look at it and said it was *old*. Come out of some old king’s tomb somewhere, he said. The mayor said it likely had a curse on it and he confiscated it, to keep the curse off me, he said, but he was a greedy bastard and I knew he wanted it for himself. Pour me some more of that apricot stuff, eh?”

Smith obliged him. Crankhandle grinned craftily, took a mouthful of liqueur, and leaned quickly toward the candle. He swallowed, belched. The candle flame shot out sideways for a second, a jet of fire.

“Is that how dragons do it?” said Smith.

“No. See, that’s a popular misconception about dragons, that they breathe fire. I’m here to tell you they don’t, and I’d know. Been studying ’em my whole life. I know more about dragons than anybody else in the world, now.” Crankhandle cut himself a huge slab of cake, took half of it in one bite, and chewed thoughtfully.

“Such as?”

“Such as, they’re smart. They can learn things. I learned to train ’em. Mind you, it isn’t easy—” Crankhandle pointed at the patch covering his eye socket—“because they’re willful, and temperamental, and quick. You have to want them more than an eye, or a fingertip, or an earlobe. The boy’s learning that. The other thing is, you can only really train wyrmin to do better what they already want to do anyway.” He reached for the knife to cut the last quarter of fruitcake into eighths, changed his mind, and simply picked up the whole wedge and bit into it.

“Well. So I learned all there was to know about dragons, see? Discovered a secret, and I didn’t learn it from any priests or mages either, I worked it out for myself. There’s something dragons need in their diets—and I’m not telling you what it is, but it’s either animal, vegetable, or mineral, ha ha—and if they don’t get it, they don’t grow. That’s why they’re so puny, here by the sea. Lots of fish, but no Mystery Ingredient. So I worked out a special food formula for dragons, right? A little of this, a little of that, a lot of the Mystery Ingredient, and that’s my bait.

“Not even the boy knows the recipe. I make it up myself, in a locked room. And the little bastards love it! Can’t get enough of it. Have to be careful doling it out to them, because they do get bigger when they eat it, and you can spend a fortune on cages. But oh, how they come to the bait!”

“So . . . you travel around with this stuff, cleaning out wyrmin colonies, and collecting all the gold they’ve stolen and hoarded,” said Smith. “You must have earned a fortune by now! But if it’s that dangerous, why don’t you retire?”

“Haven’t made enough yet,” said Crankhandle, pouring himself some more liqueur. “I’m saving it up. You might say I’ve got a hoard of my own. Besides, this isn’t where the real money is!”

“Oh no?”

“No indeed. Rings and pins and bracelets . . . ha. That’s the petty stuff the little ones bring in. They’re not strong enough to lift anything bigger. You don’t get a real payoff until you’ve got the big ones troving for you.”

“Troving?”

“Going out looking for gold. It’s instinctive. The big dragons where I grew up, they could tell where there was old gold. Tombs, mounds, other dragons’ hoards. You should see *their* nests! I told you how I got this, didn’t I?” He rolled up his oilskin sleeve to reveal a brawny arm, tattooed with swirling patterns, and a distinct U-shape of white scarred toothmarks.

“You did. Stealing a cup.”

“Right, well, I learned that what you do is, you get ‘em when they’re little enough to be easily managed, and you *train* ‘em, see? You get ‘em used to you. You get ‘em so they believe they’d better do what you want ‘em to do, to get those lovely wyrmin treats. And then you feed ‘em so they get of a bigness to raid tombs and such, and you take ‘em back into the inlands where the old places are and you let ‘em go.

“Then it’s just a matter of making a chart of where they build their nests and going around every now and then to see what they’ve collected for you. They remember *me*, old Uncle Treats, and I dump out a great sack of special formula for ‘em, and while they’re busy gobbling it down, I can take what I like out of the hoard. Works every time!”

“You ought to be stinking rich pretty soon, all the same,” said Smith in awe. “Going to retire and pass your secret on to the boy?”

Crankhandle made a face. He drained his glass and shook his head. “No. He’s a bit of a fool, really. Good enough for pulling the cart, but he’s too soft for the work. He *loves* dragons, like they were people. And, you know, you really can’t love, in this business.” He reached for the emptied bottle and tilted it, sticking his tongue up the neck to get the last drops.

“You’re a lot like a dragon, yourself,” said Smith.

Crankhandle belched and grinned, and his gold teeth glinted in the candlelight. “Why, thank you,” he said.

That night, Smith put his stickpin away in a drawer. It had occurred to him that there was another thing Crankhandle might have trained his wyrmin to do, and that was to fly through open windows and rob houses. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered whether the sudden infestation at the Grandview had happened entirely by chance.

But the dragons did not return, at least. When next Milady from the pink palace stopped in as one of a party ordering lunch on the terrace, she asked, with an unpleasant smile, whether she was likely to be attacked by an animal again. Smith assured her that all the dragons had been exterminated, which seemed to please her.

• • •

Six months later, Smith had business down in Rakut Square. He glanced at the base of the monument as he walked by, and saw no cart. He thought to himself that Crankhandle must have moved on to another city.

He was a little surprised, therefore, as he walked back toward the Grandview, to find the boy Arvin mending a fishing net. The little dragon was still perched on his shoulder, sleepily basking in the sunlight. She opened one slit-pupiled eye to regard Smith and then closed it, dismissing him as not worth her attention.

“Hello!” said Smith. “Where’s your master these days?”

Arvin looked up at him. He shook his head sadly. “Dead,” he replied.

“Dead! How?”

“He t-told you about the b-bait we used, how it m-makes dragons bigger?”

“Right, he did.”

“It makes them s-smarter, too.”

Originally published in *The Dragon Book*,
edited by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

One of the most prolific new writers to appear in the late '90s, the late **Kage Baker** made her first sale in 1997, with “Noble Mold,” the first of her long sequence of sly and compelling stories of the adventures and misadventures of the time-traveling agents of the Company. Her Company novels include, *In the Garden of Iden*, *Sky Coyote*, *Mendoza in Hollywood*, *The Graveyard Game*, *The Life of the World to Come*, *The Machine’s Child*, *Sons of Heaven*, and *Not Less Than Gods*. Her other books include fantasy novels *The Anvil of the World*, *The House of the Stag*, and *The Bird on the River*, science fiction novel *The Empress of Mars*, YA novel *The Hotel Under the Sand*, and *Or Else My Lady Keeps the Key*, about some of the real pirates of the Caribbean. Her many stories were collected in *Black Projects*, *White Knights*, *Mother Aegypt and Other Stories*, *The Children of the Company*, *Dark Mondays*, and *Gods and Pawns*. Her posthumously published books include *Neil Gwynne’s Scarlet Spy*, *Neil Gwynne’s On Land and Sea* (with Kathleen Barholomew), and a collection, *In the Company of Thieves*. Baker died, tragically young, in 2010.

God Decay

RICH LARSON

There was new biomod ivy on the buildings, a ruddy green designed for long winters, but other than that the campus quad looked the same as it did a decade back. Ostap walked the honeycomb paving with his hands in his pockets, head and shoulders above the scurrying students. They were starting to ping him as he passed, raking after his social profile until he could feel the accumulated electronic gaze like static. Ostap had everything shielded, as was his agent's policy, but that didn't stop them from recognizing his pale face, buzzed head, watery blue eyes.

A few North Korean transfers, who'd been in the midst of mocapping a rabbit, started shrieking as they caught sight of him. The game was up. Ostap flashed his crooked grin, the most-recognized smile in athletics and possibly the world, and by the time he was at the Old Sciences building he had a full flock. The students were mostly discreet with their recording, not wanting to seem too eager for celebspotting points, but Ostap could tell they were waiting for something as he walked up the concrete wheelchair ramp.

"Accra 2036," he said, linking his fingers for the Olympic rings. "We're taking it all, right?"

Ostap let one massive palm drift along the rail, then flipped himself up and inverted to walk it on his hands. The flock cheered him all the way up the rail and applauded when he stuck the twisting dismount. Ostap gave them a quick bow, then turned through the doors and into the hall. The sudden hushed quiet made him feel like he was in a cathedral.

Bioscientist-now-professor Dr. Alyce Woodard had a new office, but Ostap had expected that. He'd never grown attached to the old one, not when their few visits there were so engulfed by the days and nights in

the labs, in temperature-controlled corridors and stark white rooms where the fluorescents scoured away shadows and secrets.

What Ostap hadn't expected was how old Alyce had become. Her spine had a desk-chair curvature as she got up and crossed the floor, pausing the wallscreen with a wave of her hand. Her body fat sagged, her eyes were bagged. Ostap remembered her beautiful, and awful, an angel's face floating above him with cold marble eyes and checklist questions. But that was before a long succession of tanned bodies and perfect teeth, and maybe she'd never been at all.

"O," Alyce said, thin arms around his midsection just briefly. "Thanks for coming short notice."

"It's good to see you," Ostap said. "Good to come back." But it wasn't; he felt like he was twenty-three again, stick-thin, draped boneless in a wheelchair.

"Training for Accra, now, huh?" Alyce scratched at her elbow. "And a citizen, this time around. I just saw the new ads, they're still using that clip from the 2028 Games . . ." She waved the wallscreen to play, and Ostap saw himself loping out onto the track, blinking in the sunlight, fins of plastic and composite gleaming off his back and shoulders. It was the 7.9 seconds that had put the name Ostap Kerensky into every smartfeed, his events plastered on billboards and replayed ad nauseam on phones and tablets.

"The dash," Ostap said. "They really don't get tired of it."

"Eight years on, you'd think they would," Alyce said. Her smile was terse, but she watched, too. A cyclopean Pole, six foot five, noded spine, and long muscled limbs. No warm-up, no ritual. On the gunshot he came off the blocks like a Higgs boson.

"The tracking camera fucking lost him," Alyce quoted, because the commentators had long since been censored out. "It really fucking lost him."

"That was some year," Ostap said, trying to read her, but the new lines on her face made it harder, not easier.

She flicked the wallscreen to mute. "I saw the feed of that promotion you did in Peru, too." Alyce was looking up and down him. "Exhibition match, or something? With that football club?"

"They're hoping to open up the league to biomods next season, yeah."

"Oh." Her face was blank.

"The underground stuff is killing their ratings," Ostap explained, to be explaining. "Nobody wants to watch pure sport any more. You know how it is. Blood doping, steroids, carbon blades, and now biomods: that's what gets specs. I was talking to the—"

“O.” Alyce clenched, unclenched her teeth.

“Yeah?” Ostap’s voice was quieter than he wanted it.

“Do you remember when we stopped doing the scans together? It was about five years back.”

Ostap remembered. He’d been on the new suborbital from Dubai to LAX, struggling to fit the scanner membranes over all of his nodes with the seat reclined and Dr. Woodard chatting in his ear. He’d just climbed a high-rise, one of those sponsored publicity stunts, like the company who wanted him to run the Tour de France on foot. That offer was still sitting in the backlog waiting for a green light.

He’d been tired.

“I want to see you,” he’d said. “It’s been too long.”

“I’m sick of the cams, O,” she’d said. “You bring them like fucking flies. Just talk to me.”

So he had, about the dark-haired girls in barely-shirts and tight cigarette jeans, the cosmetically-perfected lips and tits, the girls who’d mobbed him at the airport. They all would have killed for a night of his time.

“You’re welcome,” Alyce had said, when he was finished. “Still.”

“I’m sending the scan,” Ostap had said, because he had nothing else she wanted. He’d sent it before the suborbital peaked and the conversation crackled away, and after that, the conversations stopped.

“I remember,” Ostap said now, unsmiling. “We set it up to automate.”

Alyce moved to sit back against the desk, her hands veiny on the wood. “You look fine,” she said sadly. “You don’t even look thirty-three.” Ostap watched her mouth tightening.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“The augs are asking too much, O.” Alyce put a finger to her ribs. “The stress on your central nervous system, your organs. It’s been increasing. They’re all on their way out. Heart first, I’d think.” She was not wincing, not looking away. “Two more years is the projected max.”

Ostap felt the nodes like he hadn’t since the surgeries, felt the pulse of them deep in flesh. He felt the composite wrapping his spine, the membranes skimming under his skin, the fish-scale vents on his back and shoulders and neck. He felt the thrumming power, but now like a venom sack set to burst.

“Shit,” he said. “Shit.”

“I’m sorry,” Alyce said. “Have you experienced anything?”

“Don’t think so.” But it was hard to tell, now, hard to tell when his heart was skipping from blowing doxy rails, from adrenal rush, from

a woman with the biomod fetish exploring every micrometer of his visible augs. The Superman was supposed to be invulnerable.

“You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know,” Ostap snapped. “How am I supposed to fucking know, Dr. Woodard?” He hadn’t meant to call her that, but it came out on its own, like she was still the blue fairy in his ear whispering him through operation after operation as they flayed his nerves bare. She didn’t know he still dreamed about the final surgery, the sounds of scraping bone and machine.

“I’m sorry, O.”

Hell, the kind Hieronymus Bosch would have painted, eighteen excruciating hours of laser-guided scalpels and winches and needles. Under for some of it, locally anaesthetized for the rest. Needles in his skin and breathing tubes speared down his throat. He’d thought that had been price enough.

“How long have you known for?” Ostap finally asked.

“That it was a possibility, since the start. That it was happening?” Alyce paused. “A long time.” She folded her arms and it made her look small. “Should I have told you?”

“No,” Ostap said, but he wasn’t sure. The slogan for the 2036 Games was looping endlessly across the wallscreen. Legends are made in America.

“Okay.”

Ostap put his hand up to his skull. “So why now?” he asked. “Why are you telling me now?”

The game in Peru, when he’d struck a volley out of the air for the first time and buried it back-corner, like he’d done it all his life, quick-synch nerves of his leg loaded with new muscle memories. On the bench it had gone numb for just a second, from his knee down.

“This fucking doctorate student got into my web-cache,” Alyce said. “I don’t know how, I thought it was all airtight. She found the records. The story’s going to break in a couple hours.”

“Alright,” Ostap said. “Alright.”

“Sorry, O.”

“What happens now?” Ostap asked.

Alyce gave a helpless shrug. “There are tests,” she said. “There are possibilities. Options. I’ve still got full access to the biolabs.”

Ostap left the office without saying goodbye. Digital maps to expensive hotels were already scrawling over his retinas, reminding him of their impeccable service, their luxury suites. He’d thought he would be here for a few days, maybe, a few days to catch up after so many years. He’d

imagined walking with her on the steep, rough river trails and catching her if she slipped.

Outside there was a student who wanted to speak Polish with him, whose shirt scrolled a list of Ostap's world records down his back. Ostap mumbled a few words, shook his sweat-slick hand. Others were clutching fake memorabilia and raving about things he barely remembered doing. A few girls were fluffing fingers through sun-blond hair, casually rolling waistbands lower on their hips, pursing their lips, and trying to figure out bedroom eyes.

He went past them all like a zombie, and walked all the way to the university bus station before he remembered he'd ordered an autocab.

Twenty minutes later Ostap pushed into the lobby through a crush of mobbers, the ones who'd used complex algorithms to predict his preferred hotel, and there he had the privilege of watching the story break in real time. The alert blinked yellow onto their retinas, vibrated tablets or phones for the migraine-prone and slow adopters, and small worlds turned upside down one by one. It shuddered through the jerseys and 3D-print face masks and groping hands like a wave. Ostap would have been reading it himself if he hadn't put up a datablock.

Silence and exclamations of disbelief started flickering back and forth like a light switch.

"Your finger here, sir," said the shell-shocked concierge, holding out the pad for a signature. He had enough presence of mind to pretend it didn't work, necessitating a fresh pad and leaving him with a small slice of Ostap Kerensky's genetic material to slip into his pocket. Ostap knew all about that trick, but he didn't give a cheerful wink or offer a hangnail. Not this time.

The whisper-silent elevator took him to the very top, and when the wallscreens in his suite flicked on to greet him, the story was everywhere. He told them to mute, but he still watched. Pictures of Alyce skittered around the room, her mouth in a deep frown, and Ostap could tell from the selection that the current spin was villain, deceiver. He saw footage of himself zipping into a custom wet suit, rubbing petroleum jelly over his hands and cheekbones, flashing the cams a thumbs up before he waded into the water to set the new English Channel record.

Back to the 2028 Games again, when Ostap took the world by storm. 100 meter, 200 meter. High-jump. Still enough in the tank for decathlon. Bolt's records were gone, Sterling's record was shattered. Ostap watched it all flash by in sound bites, his story condensed for anyone living under a particularly large rock.

An incredibly promising young athlete, all but scouted from the womb, left crippled by a three-car collision when the driving AI in a cab glitched. A brilliant developer, born and bred for MIT, spearheading a team designing the most comprehensively integrated body augmentation the world had ever seen.

They'd found each other across the ocean, and it was so fucking perfect.

The sky was growing dark and the clips were starting to recycle when Alyce buzzed in his ear. He could barely hear her, even with voice ID.

"They were waiting at my fucking house," she said, and then the next part got swallowed.

"They're here, too," Ostap said. He'd seen it on the screen, the termite swarm of reporters and spectators milling the base of the hotel.

"So am I," she said. "Want to let me up before they crucify me?"

Ostap crossed to the balcony, palmed the glass door open. It looked like a party. People were all slammed up against each other, twisting and turning for better angles, cams flashing pop-pop-pop in the dark, hot white, miniature supernovas. He couldn't see Alyce struggling through the crowd from her cab, not at this height, but he could tell where she was by the ripples. She'd barely made it five meters.

He called the hotel security detail to go bring her in, and ten minutes later she slumped through the door, hair tendrilled with static across her face. She held up a bottle of Cannonball and sloshed it pointedly with a quarter of a smile.

"Probably safer here than anywhere else," she said, while Ostap retrieved two glasses from the designer coffee table.

"Probably, yeah. They're going to be burning cars soon."

"You left before I could explain everything." Alyce handed the bottle over. Ostap pushed the cork with his fingertip until it plopped out and splashed down, bobbing in the wine like a buoy. She poured.

"I thought maybe you called me for something else," Ostap said. He kept his eyes off the bed.

"People only call Superman when there's trouble, O." Alyce took a slug of the wine and swished it in her mouth. Swallowed. "They never call him to say everything's great, you should come visit."

"They should," Ostap said. "They used to. We used to just visit."

"If you want to call it that," Alyce said, but there was a flush in the tips of her ears that wasn't from the wine. She handed him the other glass.

"The first time we fucked was one week after I learned to walk. To the day." Ostap tried to laugh. "Did you know that? I mean, what kind of Oedipal shit is that?"

Twitching his toes in the recovery room had been euphoria, standing on his own two feet, Elysium. As soon as he was cleared, he'd spent every second he could with the harness, tottering on a treadmill as his new nerves carved channels of motion and memory. One night Dr. Woodard had stayed with him, to show him where else his new nerves led.

"It wasn't on my calendar," Alyce said. "It just happened."

And it had been over quickly, a confusion of sweat and heat that had nothing methodical, nothing logical about it. She hadn't nodded thoughtfully or dashed notes on her tablet afterward.

"Nasty, brutish, and short," was what she'd said, but smiling, wriggling back into her jeans. She'd put her hands around Ostap's hips, where scars were still tender.

"I've had dreams about you," Ostap had replied, but in Polish, so she wouldn't know.

"Maybe I'm just a narcissist," Alyce said now, to her wine glass. "Maybe Michelangelo wanted Il David."

"You should have just let me find out on the fucking net," Ostap said.

"Should I leave?" Alyce asked.

She sat on the hotel bed, rumpling crisp white sheets, and Ostap sat on the floor with his head leaned back against its foot. The wine was clinging in his dry mouth.

The last time he'd been in this city, every day had been stronger and faster and smoother. The augs had been synchronizing, the protein pumps sculpting muscles layer by layer. His new size had had him ducking under doorways and cramming into cars. They'd flown a redeye back to Warsaw for the final stretch of treatments, for last calibrations and probes and to finally see his mother and father. He hadn't been in Boston since.

"My parents," Ostap said. "I'm going to have to tell them."

"Where are they now?" Alyce asked.

"La Rochelle. Moved them there a few years ago." He tipped his head back. "They always wanted to holiday there. I think they're happy."

"That's good," Alyce said. "When you're old you deserve to be happy. You've put up with enough shit."

You're old, Ostap wanted to say. He wanted to ask her if she was happy.

"Maybe they are, maybe they're not," he said instead. "I'm wrong about that. Sometimes. I mean, I thought you and me were happy."

"We were," Alyce said. "Because we were riding a whirlwind, O. You know, the parties and the galas and the fashion consultants and booking agents. All those interviews. Hell, I even wore a dress."

“I remember,” Ostap said. He’d worn a tailored suit, slashed in such a way as to display the nodes along his spine, and in a matter of weeks everyone wore them that way. “Movie stars and moguls,” he said. “That night in Chicago.”

“Rome, Dubai, New York.” Alyce shrugged. “They blend.”

“Chicago, when the Superman thing was just taking off,” Ostap pressed, because it was important somehow, important that she remember that one drunken night in Chicago they’d spent roving through the city in an autocab, searching for a phone booth. There were none left, so they’d ended up tinting the windows instead.

“We had a good run,” Alyce said. “And that year. Well. I’ll always remember that year.”

They were quiet for a moment, listening to what sounded like a full riot outside, hoarse screaming and one looping police siren. Ostap had turned the wallscreens off, but he could guess what was happening. He could guess that his net implant would be overloaded with calls, messages, demands when he lifted the block.

“What are they saying?” he finally asked. “I blocked the feed.”

“All the classics.” Alyce moved the dregs of her glass in a slow circle, tipping it just so. “Neo-reactionists flaring up all over. Abomination. Playing God. Things like that.”

“Playing Frankenstein,” Ostap said, and felt a dull triumph when her face went red.

“Yeah. All those.”

“It won’t change anything,” he said, then, when she looked at him shrewdly: “It won’t stop biomods. Developers will still be going after full integration.” He paused. “Maybe they’ll look at safer designs. Learn from your mistake.”

“Safety isn’t even in the equation when they’ve already killed a dozen candidates under Beijing. But they’re still only seeing success with the partial augs.” She reached for the bottle on the nightstand. “We were lucky with you, O. You might be the first, best. Last.”

“Do you remember the last time we talked face to face?” Ostap asked. “After your symposium.”

“Why are we talking about all this, O?”

“Because I always thought there would be time later.”

“There will be,” Alyce said. “I told you. There are options.”

“I’m grabbing some air,” Ostap said. He got up and walked to the wide window. He thought about two years as his hands found the cool glass, thought about two winging orbits of the planet around its sun. The door slid open and he stepped out onto the balcony, feeling stucco under

his bare feet. The night air was cool and flapped at his clothes, slipped over his buzzed skull. The cityscape lights were like fractured stars.

The last time they'd spoken face-to-face, she'd pushed his lips off her neck and tightened her scarf.

"It cheapens our accomplishment," she'd explained. "People are saying things, O. Finally built a better vibrator. They said that." Her face had been red and angry in the dark.

"I don't give a shit," he'd said.

"Frankenstein didn't make the monster so he could put his dick in it."

Ostap had had nothing to say to that, even though every part of Alyce shrank, apologetic and ashamed, a heartbeat after. He still didn't.

Someone had floated up a cam on a helium sack, drifting level with the balcony, and now it started to whirr and flash. Ostap looked down and saw its laser light playing across his chest, tracking every twitch like a sniper's scope. He thought of hurling his empty glass with perfect velocity, smashing it against the cam to rain tiny fragments down into the street. They would love that.

The carmine dot skittered across his arm, up his neck. Ostap went back inside, sliding the door shut behind him.

The wine was nearly gone when Ostap came back in. Alyce had left just a sliver in the bottom of the bottle, as she'd always done, to avoid the feeling she was drinking too much. She had her arms crossed, pacing back and forth with just a hint of unsteadiness.

"Like I said, if we shut everything down right now, if we power down your augs and get you to the labs, your chances are good," she was saying. "We can figure out what can be removed. What can't. We'll get you on dialysis, an arti-heart . . ."

"You came and sat with me in recovery," Ostap said. "After every surgery. You always smelled like, uh, like hand sanitizer."

"You said I had coffee breath," Alyce said, stopping.

"That too, yeah. Black coffee and hand sanitizer." Ostap paused. "After the last surgery, you showed me those Michelangelo paintings. Hellenic ideals, you talked about. All those trapezoids and abdomens."

"Anatomically impossible, of course," Alyce said. "All those opposing muscles groups flexing simultaneously. But beautiful"

Ostap remembered how she'd dug further through the images, blowing up Grecian statues on the wall. A wasteland of cracked marble, mythological figures missing limbs, noses, genitals. She'd plucked at her throat with one finger, and murmured that it was too bad, how even gods decayed.

“You never asked me about the accident,” Ostap said, taking the wine bottle by the neck. “Not once in all these years.”

Alyce shook her head.

“Why?” Ostap asked, starting to pour, millimeter precise. “You’re a doctor. I know you’ve seen GBS before. You knew the spinal damage wasn’t trauma.”

“I’ve seen it,” Alyce agreed. “Yours looked early. Probably all but from birth, right?”

“Why?” Ostap repeated. “You had other candidates. Plenty of candidates. You had to know those tapes were doctored. That the accident story was bullshit.”

“I guess I wanted to make something from nothing.”

Ostap’s fingers tightened and a crack squealed through the bottle. Two droplets squeezed out and bloomed red on the carpet. He set the wine bottle down, delicate. “How God did it?” he asked.

“How God happened,” Alyce said. “We might have had better results with another candidate. We’ll never know. But you were perfect, O. You wanted it. No matter what happened.”

Ostap realized the wine was blurring her, smoothing the lines in her face, making her look almost how she did before.

“Thank you,” he said, because the only time he’d said it to her he was translating for his silver-haired father, who’d been sobbing too hard for software to understand.

“Whatever you decide.” She put her hand flat against his ribs, where organs ready to crumble did their work under skin so thin, no composite casing. He looked at her lined mouth. Graying hair. He looked at the hand on his flesh, their two bodies contrasted.

“It was anatomically impossible,” he said.

“But beautiful.”

Ostap undid the block and his head was a sudden deluge, blinking messages and interview probes and priority tags. He raked through the backlog of business. Mountain races, a suborbital parachute drop, a biomod boxing league, Accra promotions.

He gave nothing but green lights.

Originally published in *Upgraded*, edited by Neil Clarke.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rich Larson was born in Galmi, Niger, has studied in Rhode Island and worked in the south of Spain, and now lives in Ottawa, Canada. His work appears in

numerous Year's Best anthologies and has been translated into Chinese, Vietnamese, Polish, Czech, French and Italian. He was the most prolific author of short science fiction in 2015, 2016 and possibly 2017 as well. His debut novel, *Annex*, comes out from Orbit Books in July 2018, and his debut collection, *Tomorrow Factory*, follows in October 2018 from Talos Press.

Aliens Among Us: Cephalopods in Science Fiction and Fantasy

CARRIE SESSAREGO

In 2015, the news briefly and erroneously lit up with the announcement that science had revealed that octopuses are actually aliens. The misunderstanding stemmed from a quote from *Nature*:

“It’s the first sequenced genome from something like an alien,” jokes neurobiologist Clifton Ragsdale of the University of Chicago in Illinois, who co-led the genetic analysis of the California two-spot octopus (*Octopus bimaculoides*).

There’s an awfully big difference between something being “like an alien” and actually being an alien. However, it is certainly true that octopuses and other cephalopods, while being indisputably from Earth, are bizarre in their behavior, biology, and thought processing. Since people first took to the sea, cephalopods have been used to signal the mystery of the sea and the strangeness of space.

In Which We Meet The Cephalopod

Cephalopods are members of the Cephalopoda class in the Mollusca phylum. They include nautilus, cuttlefish, octopus, and squid. They have blue, copper-based blood. They keep most of their neurons in their arms and their esophagi run right through the centers of their brains. They see with their eyes and breathe with their gills, but they also taste, see,

and breathe with their skin. They can control every sucker on their arms independently and they have three hearts. In short, cephalopods are fascinating, mysterious, and weird, and they challenge our assumptions about biology, intelligence, and consciousness.

Cephalopod-type monsters are staples of legends and of monster-based horror and fantasy. Often these monsters are the result of human hubris and mad science. For instance, in *It Came From Beneath The Sea* (1955), the giant octopus is a result of atom bomb testing. In *Sharktopus* (2010), scientists genetically engineer a creature that is half octopus (the half with the tentacles) and half shark (the half with the teeth). Their plan is to steer it with a remote control. This plan is, of course, flawed.

In other stories, the tentacled monster exists without explanation. It represents how little we know of the sea, and how foolhardy we are to venture on and in it. This is perhaps best represented by the legend of kraken, and by the giant squid in both the novel *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Beneath the Sea* (1870) and its 1954 film adaptation.

Release the Kraken!

The legend of the kraken is an old one, coming from the coasts of Norway, Greenland, and Iceland. Early versions described something like a giant crab, or giant whale, or serpent. Eventually these descriptions coalesced into something more like a giant octopus or squid, so large that it could crush sailing ships in its tentacles. It was said that kraken spent most of their time on the seafloor. They attracted beavies of fish that fed on their nutrient-rich waste, so a daring ship would have good fishing if they fished over the spot where a kraken lay sleeping. However, periodically the kraken would rise, and ships could be consumed, capsized, crushed, or sucked under by the whirlpool of the kraken's descent.

The kraken appears in some of the earliest literature from the West. In the Old Icelandic saga *Örvar-Oddr* from the 13th century, the heroes describe a kraken-like creature:

It is the nature of this creature to swallow men and ships, and even whales and everything else within reach. It stays submerged for days, then rears its head and nostrils above surface and stays that way at least until the change of tide.

In 1250, an anonymous Greenlandic author described the kraken, believing that because it is so large there must only be two in all the

world. Carl Linnaeus classified kraken as cephalopods in 1735 and gave the species the name *Microcosmus marinus*. Future descriptions of the beast described it having spikes at the ends of its tentacles. The idea that something could rise from what had seemed to be placid waters and destroy a ship, leaving no trace, fascinated and continues to fascinate sailors, artists, and authors.

These days, it's generally accepted that there's no such thing as a kraken. However, there is definitely such a thing as a giant squid, which is almost as mysterious. Because giant squid live in deep waters, they were rarely seen.

It wasn't until 2012 that one was filmed in its deep sea habitat. Like other cephalopods, giant squid (*Architeuthis dux*) and colossal squid (*Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni*) have blue, copper-based blood. They have eight arms as well as two long feeding tentacles with which they can grab prey more than thirty feet away. Their tongues (technically, their radula, which are located in their razor-sharp beak) are coated with tiny teeth. Each tentacle contains a large, sharp, hook, like a cat claw from Hell. Some scientists believe that colossal squid, which live near Antarctica, could reach a total length of sixty-six feet.

Jules Verne knew most of this when he wrote *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. In fact, his characters discuss it for several pages, along with their skepticism that giant squid could really be so large, which is why it's very startling when the first tentacle slaps up against the *Nautilus*' window. The ensuing battle between the crew of the *Nautilus* and the squid becomes a nightmarish scene of ink and blood. In the book, the squid (plural) cause everyone, even the gentle professor, to hack and stab and slash in an almost mindless bid for survival. "We were no longer in control of ourselves," says the narrator, and by the end of the fight, Captain Nemo is "red with blood."

Despite Nemo's claim that he is "not a civilized man," the *Nautilus* is a bastion of civilization, replete with fine dining, art, and the pursuit of knowledge. It takes a giant squid to strip away all pretensions, loyalties and animosities, and refinements. The human characters cannot reason with the squid, manipulate the squid, or ignore them. The squid serve as a metaphorically alien presence.

Martians and Mythos

This brings us to the second kind of monster cephalopod story: that of aliens from outer space. The most famous example shows up in 1897,

in *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells. In this book, the Martians that invade Earth are described as having “Gorgon groups of tentacles.” The Martians, who can’t move comfortably in Earth’s gravity, proceed to build machines that they can sit in and pilot. These machines have “long, flexible, glittering tentacles” that are capable of plucking humans from the ground.

These aliens are not humanoid or bipedal in either their organic or their mechanical forms. They also lack all interest in communication with humans. Humans are a food source for the Martians, rather like chickens. The Martians’ fate (death by bacteria) reinforces their unearthly origins. They are alien on a scope that the Greys (described by Wells in *The First Men on the Moon* and later a staple of abduction stories) and the bipedal humanoids of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* cannot approach.

H. P. Lovecraft carried the concept of something unknown and unknowable further in the short story “Call of Cthulhu”, published in 1928. Cthulhu, a god from space who has settled on our planet, is supposed to be so utterly alien, so completely beyond our ken, that all who behold him either die or go insane. Like the kraken, he sleeps on the seafloor (in his underwater city, R’lyeh) and causes vast destruction when he wakes and rises to the surface. He is indescribable, but the narrator of “Call of Cthulhu” describes a statue of him as:

A monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind.

A cornerstone of Lovecraft’s horror is the concept that if we probe too deeply into the unknown, we will discover a cosmos filled with beings to whom humans are completely irrelevant. The lives of these beings play out on such a huge scale of time and space that the span of a human lifetime means nothing to them. Humans cannot process the sight of these beings, or their insignificance before them, and the humans inevitably go mad from the sight and the realization of their insignificance.

Cthulhu is such a popular character largely because his appearance is described. Many of the other gods and monsters in Lovecraft aren’t described at all, or they are described as things like “an evil cloud-like entity” and so forth. Artists who interpret the Lovecraft mythos (including works written by Lovecraft as well as works by those inspired by him) often include tentacles in their interpretations because the

tentacles signal “absolutely positively not human” in place of other descriptors.

In the movies, cephalopods have been a staple of horror, fantasy, and science fiction, showing up in everything from 1977’s monster movie *Tentacles*, to the fantasy epic *The Fellowship of The Ring* (both the book, published in 1954, and the film, released in 2001). Examples of modern cephalopod-type aliens include the Daleks from *Doctor Who*, and the alien that poor Elizabeth Shaw has to remove from her own abdomen in *Prometheus* (2012).

Some tentacled aliens are adorable and relatable, such as the baby “Squid” in 1997’s *Men in Black*, or the friendly Thermians from 1999’s *Galaxy Quest*. Usually, however, cephalopod-type monsters in fantasy and in science fiction represent something that is utterly non-human, can’t or won’t be communicated with, and can kill a person in many horrible ways. It seems that everything is scarier and weirder with tentacles.

Making Contact with Aliens and Octopuses

In 2016’s *Arrival*, the aliens are benevolent, and they want to talk to us, but their language is radically different from ours. The linguists in the film call the aliens “heptapods.” Like cephalopods, they have long arms and round or cone-shaped heads, but they have seven limbs instead of eight. This adds to their “alien” quality since very few species of animals on earth have seven limbs. Even the so-called seven-armed octopus (*Haliphron atlanticus*) actually has eight arms.

In *Arrival*, the aliens’ heptaradial symmetry mirrors their written language, which consists of variations of circles that they draw by squirting ink that closely resembles octopus ink. By using a being based on radial as opposed to bilateral symmetry, the filmmakers not only emphasize their physical differences from humans but also their cognitive differences. For the heptapods, language and time are nonlinear. They conceptualize the world in a completely different way than humans do, with a cyclical sense of time.

If heptapods see the world in terms of cycles, how do octopuses see the world? Of all the cephalopod species, octopuses have been the most closely studied in terms of intelligence. They are curious in captivity and in the wild. They recognize and remember individual people even if all of the people wear lab coats, and they seem to prefer some people over others. They can solve problems like how to open a screw-top jar and how to escape from a seemingly escape-proof tank. They can figure

out how to open a childproof cap. They use tools both in and out of captivity, and they play. In general they lead solitary lives, but in two places on the ocean's floor they are known to live in close proximity to each other with nearly constant social interaction.

Cephalopods are especially hard to understand because their organs, including their brains, aren't set up at all like ours. What is it like to see through your skin? Does each arm, which is packed with sensory cells and neurons and which reacts to stimuli for more than an hour after being severed from the main body, have its own, completely separate perception of the world? Or do octopuses somehow compile the perceptions of the arms into one big picture, or do they experience a little of both? When they change color in a manner that doesn't serve as camouflage, are they deliberately trying to communicate, or is it an involuntary thing, or some of both?

When we look at other mammals, or birds, we can often make some reasonable assumptions about what they think and how they think and why. Their brains are not so different from our own. We have a great deal to learn about mammalian and avian behavior, but we start off with the same basics. Cephalopods might as well be aliens—perceiving the world in a way we can't grasp even if they could try to explain it to us.

When I was a kid, I happened to wander into the family room where my family was watching *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954) just as the squid attacked the *Nautilus*. I don't believe I've ever experienced anything like the jolt of utter wrongness I felt at the sight of the squid's beak. I felt, right down to my shaking bones, that beaks belong on birds, not squid. The action of the scene was scary. The sight of that snapping beak, however, was horrifying. One might say that I had a Lovecraftian reaction to that beak.

And yet, real cephalopods undeniably have beaks. This is only one of the many things about them that seems, to humans, to be utterly alien. That otherworldly quality is what makes them so perfectly suited for speculative fiction. The grabbing tentacles are perfect for horror. The mysterious quality of the ocean depths lends itself to fantasy. The sense of unknowable intelligence and a divergent evolutionary path lends itself to science fiction. Cephalopods aren't actually aliens, but they're close enough for now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Sessarego is the resident geek reviewer for *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books*, where she wrangles science fiction, fantasy romance, comics, movies, and

non-fiction. Carrie's first book, *Pride, Prejudice, and Popcorn: TV and Film Adaptations of Pride and Prejudice, Wuthering Heights, and Jane Eyre*, was released in 2014. Her work has been published in *Interfictions Online*, *Pop Matters: After the Avengers*, *The WisCon Chronicles Vol. 9*, *Invisible 3*, and two volumes of *Speculative Fiction: The Year's Best Online Reviews, Essays And Commentary*. She spends her time wrangling her husband, daughter, dog, and three cats.

Poetry, Philosophy, and Welsh: A Conversation with Jo Walton

CHRIS URIE



Words are a kind of music. Writers who listen know this better than most. The crescendo of action gets punctuated by silence making both all the more palpable. The proper combination of words swirl through a reader's mind forming characters and stories as varied as the depths of the imagination. A poet knows the musical value of words.

In the introduction of her new collection, Jo Walton writes how she feels like more of a poet than a short fiction author. In her collection, it's evident that the poet informs the short fiction author and vice versa. From familiar trappings of fairytale fantasy to the most rock solid of hard science fiction, the fiction collected in *Starlings* showcases the depth and breadth of her storytelling and poetry.

Jo Walton is a fiction author and poet. She has won the John W. Campbell, World Fantasy, Mythopoeic, Nebula, and Hugo Awards. Her newest collection *Starlings* was published by Tachyon January 23rd.

In your introduction for Starlings, you talk about not so much being a short story writer, but more of a poet. Can you elaborate on this?

Poetry is often my natural response to things. And it feels odd and uncomfortable to say that, it feels pretentious and fake, because culturally we often class poetry as “high culture” in a way that makes saying that feel like making a claim about all kinds of things that have nothing to do with actual poetry. I have always written poetry, I’ve always read poetry. Sometimes poetry is easier for me than actually talking. When John M. Ford died—he was a friend, and he was a writer I admired, and his death was very sudden and shocking—I wrote a sestina in which the end words were the last words of titles of his books. And that sounds like a very abstract distanced thing, but I did it in the early hours of the morning with tears running down my face and that was my grief response, my raw response. (It’s in my NESFA collection *Sibyls and Spaceships* and it’s on my website if you want to read it.) I have a poem bio in the *Starlings* collection that says a poem is much easier than writing a short bio listing your accomplishments, and for me that’s true.

Whereas short fiction, though I read it, has never come naturally. I almost never have an idea and think it’s a short story idea. I’ll have an idea and think it’s a novel idea. I’ll want to say something and it’ll come out as poetry. But short stories are almost always a deliberate effort, an exercise in form. So, this collection collects all the short things I’ve written over almost twenty years, and it’s barely enough for a book, we had to put a play and some poetry in too.

And on the topic of poetry, who would be one poet you feel influenced you most throughout your short fiction?

I can’t answer that with one. I think the answer is T. S. Eliot, and Tolkien, and Auden, and the Romantics especially Keats. T. S. Eliot and Tolkien were contemporaries, though we don’t think of them that way.

Voice and tone play an important role in this collection. What comes first when writing, the voice or the plot?

Voice every time. Voice—or what I call “mode,” which is voice plus a bunch of related things, is what I need before I can write anything. I can have all the plot in the world and without the right voice it’s just a handful of vacuum.

Do you ever know beforehand if an idea will be a poem or a piece of short fiction? Do you simply write and see what form it takes?

Because I start with voice, I always know if something’s poetry or prose. I sometimes simply write when I have no idea of world or plot or anything, to see if a character with a voice will lead me to those things. I have a friend, Yves Meynard, who is bilingual and is a published writer in both English and French. And he says that when he has a story idea, the idea itself will be in one language or the other, from the first conception of the story he knows which language he’ll write it in. Similarly, I’ll know the mode right away. The long poem in *Starlings* “Not in this Town” is a version of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* and I had the idea for it after I’d seen a production of it. The idea included the meter. I was walking from the theater to the metro and I thought “I’ll write a version of it set in the US in rhyming couplets in a sort of ballad meter” and because it would be long and it would be a lot of work, and because there’s no demand for something like that, I didn’t actually write it for a couple of years. (I wrote it after I had set up my Patreon, because that felt like there was a demand and it was worth it.) But before I’d written a word of it I knew what mode it would be. The acorn was there, predicting the oak. I’ve had that with novels too.

What struck me about your most recent collection was the sheer variety of voices. Do you ever find inspiration for characters in your life or do you pull completely from your imagination?

Life sometimes, definitely. The character with Alzheimer’s who talks to real aliens in “Unreliable Witness” started from my Aunt Jane. But as you write a character they become more themselves and less whatever you started from.

*In *The Just City* you tackle a lot of philosophy and in particular the work of Plato. What was it that first interested you about Plato?*

I read Mary Renault's *The Last of the Wine* and *The Mask of Apollo* and I wanted more Plato, so I read Plato. What continued to interest me in Plato was the whiplash effect where I'll be reading him and I can go from "this is silly and wrong" to "YES" in one paragraph. I find that very productive.

How is writing for a role-playing game different than writing something like a short story or novel?

So, when you write stuff for RPGs it's like all the things you need for a story without writing the story, because the GM will be bringing the plot and the players will be bringing the characters, and you're giving them the rest of it, the universe (the background) and the way the universe works (the rules) and minor characters and so on.

RPG writing combines a lot of the skills of tech writing with a lot of the skills of fiction writing, and it's paid a fraction of what you get for writing either of the others, so it's pretty amazing anyone does it at all.

Actually, running a game is a whole lot like writing a novel, except that you can't go back and change anything and the characters are more self-propelled. But if I'm running a game, I don't normally write down anything, except the names of places and minor characters so I'll remember them for next time. I just do it all out of my head.

History permeates a lot of your work. What is it about looking to the past that inspires you?

It attracts me in exactly the same way SF does, it's interesting different human societies, full of people having interesting adventures, and changing the world. History is fascinating. And it never runs out. Even if I lived for centuries, there would still be cultures and periods I know only the sketchiest thing about, because there's just so much. It's great. I read a lot of biographies and nonfiction history, sometimes as research, and sometimes when it's just for fun it ends up being research in the end anyway.

Since you've extensively reviewed a number of novels retrospectively, how do you think time tends to effect perception of a novel?

When a novel is read in a time and place very different from the one it was written for, the reader's experience is very different from the experience the writer was expecting. When I read *Tale of Genji*, a lot of

things Murasaki took for granted are very strange to me, for instance the way marriage works and the way ghosts work. There's a gap that isn't the gap she was expecting because she wasn't thinking about a reader from seven hundred years in the future reading in translation. If that gap gets big enough, something can be incomprehensible, it's not just that you can't experience it as the original reader would, you can't get into it at all, you can't understand why anything is happening. I'm not the reader Tolstoy imagined either, but I didn't need footnotes for *War and Peace*, whereas I really did for *Tale of Genji*. I loved *Tale of Genji*, but I'm sure I only experienced a fraction of what Murasaki expected the reader to perceive. Novels are written in their time for readers of their time, but we're going to read them in our own time and bring our own worlds and selves to them. We can't stop being who we are. If I read an American SF book from the fifties and women just exist as prizes, I sigh, I can't unsee that about it, but I don't judge it the same way as if I read an American SF book written now where that's the case. But that's still very close in time and culture to us. When I look at the women in *Tale of Genji* I'm having a much more difficult time.

Reading through the poetry on your website, I noticed a common theme of death. What are your thoughts on writing as a therapeutic way of dealing with loss?

Death. Yes. There's a lot of it about. And we, as a society, don't have good ways of dealing with it. Modern medicine is very good, and most of us no longer lose siblings and parents when we're young. It happens, it happened to me, but it's unusual, whereas in earlier centuries it would have been normal. And because we don't get familiar with real death early, many people who are not religious are just flummoxed when they have to face it—their own death, and the death of people they care about. They have no way of responding. Culturally we're in denial about death, we have turned Halloween into a sexy joke instead of a ritual of dealing with death, many people manage to live for decades without death coming close to them, and then when it does, they just don't know how to cope. People sometimes turn to religious ways of coping out of desperation, just because religion gives some kind of response you can have. But unless you actually believe in souls and afterlives and etc., that's also very unsatisfactory when you're grieving.

In my poetry that deals with death, especially in my Death Sucks sonnets I try to make a secular humanist space for it, an acknowledgement of how much it sucks and a way of coping. In one I say,

I've got no comfort. Life goes on, it's tough,
And new people get born—is that enough?

In another,

Go hug your friends, and sing, or paint, or write,
Now while we may, against impatient night.

These are responses people can honestly have to death, much more honest than briefly pretending to believe in God. They seem to work, too. People have used these sonnets in funerals, quoted them in obituaries, and I quite often get email from people who find them valuable.

As for therapeutic writing—transmuting something to art isn't easy. It can be comforting, because it's making something, and making something, anything, a poem, a cake, a tea tin, is an act against entropy and is inherently cheering. And there's this thought of maybe it can help somebody else. There's a thing in one of my Petrarch sonnets,

Oh hear, my friends, the dead, the lost, and you,
The living who may read these words and know
One day about some other thing, that Jo
Was here and felt the same and it was true.

I have often had that moment of recognition of something somebody else has said in art, and I love the thought that I can encapsulate things usefully. But in my experience, often writing that is done as therapy is too raw. You need some distance for that act of transmutation to work.

What other projects do you have in the works?

I've recently finished a fantasy novel about Savonarola called *Lent* which should be coming out from Tor at the end of this year or the beginning of 2019. I've been describing it as "Savonarola Groundhog Day." It's about Savonarola in Florence between the years 1492 and 1498. It's the most historical novel I've ever written, almost all the characters are historically real people.

What is the one piece of writing advice that has always stuck with you?

In Rumer Godden's autobiography, she said when she had small children she went to bed when they did and got up in the very early morning before them, to write before they were up, so that the writing got the best part of her, rather than trying to write tired in the evening after they were asleep. This was very useful to me when my son was small. I wrote my first three novels largely before 8 AM.

What is your favorite saying in Welsh?

I feel like I ought to quote something really profound but I can't think of anything. My most frequent saying in Welsh is "Ach y fi" which means "yuck" only much stronger. My favorite hilarious thing is that the colloquial Welsh for "how are you doing?" sounds exactly the same as the dumpling served in dim sum "shumai" so whenever I am at dim sum and the carts are going round and the people are calling out "Shumai!" I always want to respond that I'm fine and how are they? Every time!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Urie is a writer and editor from Ocean City, NJ. He has written and published everything from city food guide articles to critical essays on video game level design. He currently lives in Philadelphia with an ever expanding collection of books and a small black rabbit that has an attitude problem.

Another Word: Saving Throw Vs. Boredom: How RPGs Taught Me Storytelling

CAT RAMBO

Last year I returned to one of my old loves. I'd put it aside for a while: things were busy, there was never time, it took so much energy from writing efforts. And then a friend asked about it and, well . . .

I speak of tabletop role-playing games, and the empress of them all, *Dungeons & Dragons*. Thanks to a local bookstore, I started playing the game back when I was twelve when hadn't appeared on public radar yet. In fact, my first RPG wasn't even D&D, but a storytelling variant using Tarot cards that one of the bookstore owners, Ken, had invented. My character was Arren of Dörmark, a once-sheltered princess thrust out into the world in search of adventure in order to save her country. I remember those games so well; I could hardly wait each week to come back to the story.

Throughout middle school, high school, and well into college I kept haunting that bookstore, which ended up supplying the majority of my social life. A few years ago, I went back for their anniversary celebration and ran into many of my fellows. It was like a high school reunion, but one full of people that you really enjoyed.

While we talked a lot about what we'd done since then, there was a certain amount of backtracking and telling stories of epic games, encounters and incidents that we hadn't forgotten. It brought back the fact that I'd walked through high school full of stories, not just the ones that I was reading every day in the form of my avid consumption of F&SF, but ones that I was deeply involved in, ones that preoccupied

my days, ones that I could hardly wait to return to. It's no small wonder that I'd be creating them later in life!

As time passed, other stories would compete with the ones springing from *Dungeons & Dragons*. Most of the D&D campaigns I played in didn't really have stories: we were the prototypical murder hobos, going from innocent monster encampment to innocent monster encampment, laying waste to everything in our path. I remember one gamemaster whose campaign was simply based on whatever he was reading at the time; among the people our group ran into were Doc Savage, Elric of Melniboné, and Gandalf.

But as D&D became more popular, variations appeared, like *Monster! Monster!* in which one ran a monster rather than an adventurer, *Toon*, where you played a cartoon character in an equally cartoon universe, *Traveller* for the space adventurer, or even *Bunnies & Burrows*, which rode the coattails of the novel *Watership Down's* success. Many of those characters would pop up again much later in the fiction I wrote, like Ms. Liberty (a superhero for a *Champions* campaign) and The Dark (an assassin from the *Rolemaster* system).

I would be a very different person nowadays if I hadn't participated in all those stories. I wouldn't be as good at roles like leader, diplomat, or problem solver, because I got a chance to learn those skills in a way that made the lessons stick. And in retrospect, I can see how I explored aspects of my personality and life through characters, particularly the superheroes I ran in an extended campaign that spanned much of my time in college, including Ms. Liberty and her superhero group, The Furies.

When I moved away from home in order to go to graduate school in writing at Johns Hopkins, I also moved away from the bookstore that had been the nexus of all my gaming. I lost touch with gaming buddies and since I was married to a non-gamer at the time, all of that fell away. Being a geek at that point was not acceptable in the way that it is nowadays and while Hopkins brought in the odd SF writer now and again, they seemed ready to sneer at genre as quickly as the rest of them. I loved Tom Disch and getting a chance to talk with him, but when I put a superhero novel based on The Furies in front of him, he read it, folded his arms and frowned at me, asking, "Why bother with a book about comic books?" Having read Alan Moore's *Watchmen* two years earlier issue by issue as it appeared, I was pretty sure it was worth bothering about, but it would take a decade or so to prove me right.

That disapproval and other incidents combined with the lack of fellow gamers moved me away from gaming for a decade. The Internet and

the appearance of MUDs wooed me back, years later though, after I'd read a piece in *The Village Voice* about this strange virtual realm called LambdaMOO. LambdaMOO was a portal and, wandering through the net, I ended up in and built numerous areas for a DIKU named DarkCastle MUD, but eventually found another home in Armageddon MUD, which was a constant stream of narratives both major and minor, utterly addictive and always there.

Armageddon's lure was its strong story. The first such game where role-play was required, rather than suggested, it was a consistent source of collaboration on stories of desperation, scarcity, and struggle in a world where magic was present but so scarce that it was terrifying. I ran a character there who lasted for years, participating in multiple plotlines. That was what hooked me.

That collaborative part, where one person throws out a story thread, another runs with it, and yet another contributes a counter thread, then another is the thing that makes a game so much fun. It's one of those marvelous experiences in life where the whole is so much greater than the whole of the parts, as though the act of combination enabled it to grow geometrically.

We humans love stories. We love seeing other lives, other worlds, other possibilities. Playing a cooperative game is another form of storytelling, whether you are the person running the game, or one of the people controlling a character. No author can ever create something so full that there is no room for what the reader brings; at best we supply the sticks and branches from which they build a splendid backdrop.

Tabletop games give us a chance to participate in a way that is, I think, like no other. Right now, the game I'm running has players that are geographically diverse, but I know those voices now, could pick them out of a crowd, and I know part of their secret hearts: the stalwart paladin, the reckless monk, the shy kenku, and the bard who isn't sure where he belongs in this world.

These stories may sometimes even be more immersive than fiction when they let us play out pieces of ourselves in a way the real world may not afford. And storytelling with such games can tell us something about how the person perceives themselves as well as how they work with others.

Some people want to be heroes, others supporting characters who still have their own story arc. Some people have consistent pieces; I know with one friend that, no matter what kind of character he's running, will always shoot first and ask questions later. Others will think deeply about the character to the point where sometimes they make play difficult

for themselves, not allowing a character to do something that would advantage them because “that’s just not what they would do.”

Authors have a similar phenomenon sometimes, where you try to move a character in one direction and then you find it heading solidly in a direction you didn’t expect or want. This is less due to any supernatural power inherent in the text than in the fact that more than your conscious mind goes into creating a character. You know on an unconscious level what a character would or wouldn’t do, even when you don’t realize it.

To act as though games cannot speak to human experience as deeply as a piece of fiction is to deny one of the richest sources of fiction, the act of play. Of pretend. The thing we do, over and over, perhaps because we’re bored, or at a loss, but sometimes because story comes to us as naturally and without thinking as breathing.

I came back to D&D because a friend wanted someone to run a series of pre-written modules. We’re on version 5E now, but the shape of things overall is still the same. And even using those precreated chunks, I find myself spinning the background story that ties them all together, the world in which everything takes place, along with the elements I’ve chosen to interject—an overarching plotline that led to the dwarvish secret police waking them up in the middle of the night to interrogate them, last time the party stopped at an inn between adventures.

I’m looking forward to watching that plotline unfold, and I’m also anticipating that it will change in weird and wonderful ways as they get their own hands into the storyline. We’ll be telling the story together, and the glory of that is that who knows what will happen. All I know is that I will love it the same way I’ve loved the stories that have come in such a shape before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cat Rambo lives, writes, and edits from atop a hill in the Pacific Northwest. Her most recent book is *Altered America: Steampunk Stories* (Plunkett Press, 2017). Information about her online school, The Rambo Academy for Wayward Writers, along with links to many of her 200+ story publications can be found at her website. Her two most notable achievements of 2017 so far are a shark cage dive and starting her second term as the President of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America.

Editor's Desk: And the Winner is . . .

NEIL CLARKE

As February came to an end, so did the second round of our annual reader's poll. In the first round, our readers chose five finalists from our 2017 issues in two categories: best cover art and best short story. To recap, these were the finalists:

Best Story

- "A Series of Steaks" by Vina Jie-Min Prasad (January)
- "Waiting Out the End of the World in Patty's Place Cafe" by Naomi Kritzer (March)
- "An Account of the Sky Whales" by A Que (June)
- "The Secret Life of Bots" by Suzanne Palmer (September)
- "Who Won the Battle of Arisia Mons?" by Sue Burke (November)

Best Cover Art

- Waste Pickers by Gabriel Bjork Stiernstrom (January)
- Jungle Deep by Sergei Sarichev (March)
- Sea Change by Matt Dixon (June)
- Homecoming 2 by Jonas De Ro (November)
- Eistibus, Angel of Divination by Peter Mohrbacher (December)

Right out of the gate, the two winning works took the lead, holding it all the way to the end. By no means was this a runaway victory, however. The other finalists ran neck-in-neck, often only a few votes behind the leaders. While there can only be one winner, the other finalists should be quite proud of the support they received.

Winner - Best Cover Art - Sea Change by Matt Dixon



Matt says:

“It’s delightful to learn that ‘Sea Change’ has been chosen at the favourite *Clarkesworld* cover of 2017. What makes a Reader’s Poll result special is the readers. Trying to build a narrative into my robot pieces is part of what brings me back to the work again and again, for that image to attract the approval of people who love stories is very rewarding indeed. Thank you!” Those of you who like Matt’s work might be interested to know that he is currently running a Kickstarter campaign for his latest robot art book, *Transmissions 4*. I have the first three volumes and have already made a pledge to get the fourth one. Highly recommended. You can check out the campaign here: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1619265419/transmissions-4-robot-art-book-by-matt-dixon>

Winner - Best Story - “A Series of Steaks” by Vina Jie-Min Prasad

Vina says:

“Thank you to everyone who voted for ‘A Series of Steaks’ in the poll—this was my first submission to a speculative fiction magazine, and I’m very happy to see that it’s got so much love!” Last month, it was also revealed that Vina’s story is a finalist for the Nebula Award for Best Short Story. That’s on top of three year’s best anthology appearances and making the *Locus* Recommended Reading List. Congratulations Vina!

While we’re celebrating, there’s one other 2017 story that has received an award nomination. “The Stone Weta” by Octavia Cade is 2018 Finalist Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Short Story. Well done!

The nomination phase for the Hugo Awards has opened, so I’d like to remind everyone that we are still not eligible for Best Semiprozine. While we graduated from that category several years ago, there are still some people who think we’re eligible and nominate anyway. Instead, I strongly urge you to check semiprozine.org to find other qualified publications to nominate in that category.

Since there isn’t a best professional magazine category, your next best alternative is in the Best Editor (short form) category. I’ve been a finalist in that category on five previous occasions and each time has meant something special to me. I might be 0-5, but damn, I’ve been in some amazing company. Quite the honor.

Also, if you’d like to nominate any of our stories or artists, we’ve put together a handy list of our 2017 stories sorted by the appropriate categories at <http://neil-clarke.com/clarkesworld-in-2017-hugo-award-eligibility/>. (The novella, novelette, and short story categories are determined by word count, so figuring that out can be a hassle for readers sometimes.)

Thank you to everyone who participated in our reader’s poll and/or nominated stories or art for any honor. The short fiction community is stronger for those efforts and it means so much to those of us working in this field. There’s no shortage of negativity these days, so even the smallest sign of appreciation goes a long way!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil Clarke is the editor of *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Forever Magazine*, and *Upgraded*; owner of Wyrms Publishing; and a five-time Hugo Award Nominee for Best Editor (short form). His latest anthologies are *Galactic Empires* and *More Human Than Human*. His next anthology, *The Best Science Fiction of the Year: Volume Three*, is scheduled for publication in April 2018. He currently lives in NJ with his wife and two sons.

Cover Art: Jungleman

ARTHUR HAAS



Arthur Haas (1969) is a concept artist from Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He specializes in environment design and concept art for the entertainment industry and has a passion for science fiction. Arthur works as a freelance artist for major Hollywood film studios and international book publishers.