

Cleveland Quixotic

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Cleveland Quixotic

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Summary

There are no more Napoleons.

That's what Jay Waringcrane thinks. No one person can change the world—certainly not him, a college dropout from suburban Cleveland. Bitter, cynical, and disillusioned, Jay wants only one thing: to go to a different world, a world where he is the protagonist.

Jay gets his opportunity when he meets a devil granting wishes in exchange for souls. One contract later and he's transported to Whitecrosse, a fantastic realm of knights, fairies, and monsters. Whitecrosse teeters on the brink of calamity; it's desperate for a hero, any hero, to shape its destiny. It's exactly what Jay asked for.

But nothing's so simple. The real world, the world Jay left behind, isn't keen on letting someone escape its ironclad logical order. And the embodiment of that order, Jay's uptight and meticulous sister Shannon, will do whatever it takes to drag Jay back home—even if she has to follow him to the gates of Hell.

Spirit of Eternal Negation

Hell was depressed—economically. Statement from Satan said there would be no cullings based on end-of-year quotas, so everyone knew there would absolutely be cullings based on end-of-year quotas. It was November.

Behind a cherry desk that looked older than it was, Perfidia Bal Berith—who looked much younger than she was—stared a hole through her office's front door. She pulled back the cuff of her pinstripe suit, checked her diamond wristwatch, and drummed her long nails on her desk.

Just as she thought *This guy better fucking show*, the door opened.

"Mr. Waringcrane!" she said, rising with courteous gesture and broad smile. Her hip bumped her desk; she stumbled slightly. (Tactical. People preferred to deal with devils they thought they could outwit.) "Perfidia Bal Berith, but call me Fidi. So glad ya made—Oh."

The guy slouching through her front door carried an aluminum baseball bat.

It took effort to suppress her immediate instinct to reach for her desk drawer, where she kept her best method for dealing with angry customers. But this guy had no reason to be angry with her (yet), unless he was a religious nut. He probably brought the bat for protection. Suggested he was serious about being here, not doing it as a prank, but also implied skittishness. She'd tread careful.

"Ah—don't worry," she said, inflection trembling to let him think he intimidated her. "You won't need that here."

"I know." Without another word he dragged a chair from in front of the desk and plopped into it.

Perfidia kept smiling. Tried to figure him out. He wore a brown baseball cap with a picture of an orange football helmet on it, pulled low over severe, sleep-deprived eyes. Expression otherwise unreadable. Blasé. Just a face. Like he was bored to be here—an atypical demeanor.

"Sports fan?" She gestured at the hat.

"No."

Was he nervous? Many people got nervous meeting devils—their bright red skin and sharp horns made an immediate impression, on top of their reputation. But nothing in how he thoughtlessly threw himself into his chair suggested it.

She learned about this guy from a contact at a local college. Jay Waringcrane. He attended classes for two days—then dropped out. Wasn't grades, health, or money, so maybe it was

something more, something deeper, something only she could help with. Among many other prospects, she sent him an advertisement, and in the past month, only he responded.

"Well. We gonna do this?" he said.

"Sure thing." Perfidia took her own seat behind the desk, unfolded a pair of reading glasses, and rifled through some papers as an excuse to formulate her strategy. "Jay Waringcrane. You don't strike me as a guy for ceremony, so why don't we get the crux of it right out there on the proverbial table." She knocked a fist against her desk and grinned. "What do you want most? The thing ya just can't live without?"

Desires. Dreams. Wishes. These were the wares all devils peddled one way or another. Things human nature craved but God's corrupted Earth denied them: Wealth, power, love, freedom. All devils required in exchange for these human cravings was Humanity. The soul, some called it, but Hell's official position was that the soul did not exist and no human went to Heaven upon death—merely a fairy tale God sprinkled for good behavior. But humans did have an essence, a *je ne sais quoi* that made them *human*. Usually Perfidia would explain this aloud, altering intonation and gesture to match her mark, but she suspected this guy, Jay Waringcrane, didn't give a shit. So she watched him with a smile and waited for his response, which took, unlike his previous terse statements, a long time coming. Jay heaved a half-breath, half-sigh, fiddled with the knob of his bat, and stared past her, out her office's broad window, at the decrepit post-industrial fringe dropping off into the turgid slop of Lake Erie, all under a dismal, sickly sky.

"I'm tired of this world," he said.

Perfidia nodded sagely. "Me too, lemme tell ya. Been saying to myself for centuries: Once I get enough in the bank, I'll skip town and head back to Hell. But I've been stuck in Cleveland since 1868." The truth of the statement was incidental to why she said it. In an instant she became the tired old veteran, an image of the desolate future that awaits all bright-eyed youth when they totter into the real world. A cautionary tale—something to nudge him the direction he already wanted to go.

"What exactly can you do," he said.

"Well, basically anything—"

"Your ad said you grant wishes. But you obviously can't grant *any* wish."

"What makes ya think that?" She spoke smilingly, but her eyes narrowed.

"If devils like you have been granting wishes since forever"—using the first thing approximating punctuation that wasn't an end stop since he entered—"then eventually someone would've wished to end world hunger. End war. But all that's still around."

"Oh, well, it's a bit of a technical explanation, would take a long time to—"

"Tell me. I don't mind."

"Hunger and war are fundamental laws of this world. Nobody can wish them away. But anything regarding personal enrichment, I can do that, no problem."

"I'm not interested in personal enrichment. And that didn't take a long time and wasn't very technical."

"Well, there's more to it than that, I shortened it to just the pertinent bits."

"Unshorten it. Tell me what is and isn't possible. What's a law and what's not. And why. Tell me *exactly* how these wishes work."

Before, Perfidia might have judged Jay Waringcrane as impatient. Many who came to her office were; desperation did that to a human. But this wasn't impatience, it was someone cutting through marketing fluff to demand the behind-the-scenes mechanics. Those people were tricky. Everyone fancied they could outsmart the devil, and the humiliating truth was sometimes they did. Perfidia had been humiliated before. Humiliated too much, more than any self-respecting devil ought to be, humiliated before she even got into the wish business in 1455. Never been humiliated by a human, though. Only heard stories of other, stupider devils who were. So she would not be humiliated now, not with that end-of-year quota looming, not at the worst possible time to suffer humiliation.

"Sorry, kind of a trade secret," she said.

"Then I'll leave."

"You don't look like you're gonna leave." It was true. He had settled deep into his chair.

"Because you're going to tell me."

Perfidia hated that he was right. Business was bad; she needed this guy. Needed his Humanity. Couldn't let him leave. Worse yet, couldn't let him see her stumble after him to stop him from leaving. She made the decision not to belabor the point.

"Fine then," she said with a lighthearted shrug, looking like she had nothing to hide, hiding the roiling of Pride in her heart. "Just cut me off when you've heard enough."

She cleared her throat and began:

"So the essence of being human is called Humanity. Capital-H. I'm not saying that in a literary sense: Humanity is measurable and quantifiable. The amount each human's got varies, but generally people with more Humanity make a bigger impact on the world. So for instance, Napoleon Bonaparte—you know Napoleon right?—Napoleon commands a country, conquers a continent, wages wars that impact millions. He's gonna have a lot of Humanity, let's say 10,000 Humanity for the sake of example. Compare that to a French peasant, same time period. Born on a farm, dies on a farm, goes nowhere his entire life except the nearest village. That guy might have, let's say, 1 Humanity. No human's got less than 1. Following?"

Although she paused to give him time to spit a quick yes or no, or even just nod, he only stared. His eyes barely showed under the brim of his football helmet hat.

"Wishes," Perfidia continued, "the kind I grant, don't happen out of the aether. Can't get something for nothing, that's a fundamental law. How it works is, I take your Humanity, use some of it to make your wish come true, and pocket the rest as a fee for my services. Because of that, the exact nature of your wish is limited by how much Humanity you have."

She paused again, this time hoping he'd ask how much Humanity *he* had, which would provide an excellent segue out of the explanation. (He had enough. Enough for her at least. Enough for her quota.) But he said nothing.

Next part was tricky. Perfidia needed to pick her examples carefully to avoid using something he actually wanted—that'd give him bargaining power. Did he look like a money guy? Money guys were common. But money guys didn't ask for specifics. She took an educated gamble.

"Wishes require more Humanity the more they change the world. Say you've got terminal cancer and wish to be cured. Easy. Zap some bad cells and presto change-o. Minimal impact on the world at large, 1 Humanity is more than enough to cover it. Now say instead you want a lot of money. Hundred million dollars. Well, to get a hundred million dollars I'd either have to steal the money from someone who already has it—bad idea—or make it myself, which requires fabricating a bunch of bills, altering national record-keeping systems to recognize those bills as real, plus other technical details like that. There's impact on the world, because I have to change stuff outside the domain of a single human. Might cost, say, 10 Humanity. Get it?"

(But she could do it cheaper by just giving someone winning lottery numbers so they won already legal money via an already legal method. That way she wasn't changing anything in the world, so the wish became cheap again—1 Humanity tops. Methods like that let her game the system and snag a higher profit margin for herself. She withheld him that info.)

Meanwhile Jay Waringcrane continued to stare. Perfidia maintained her loquacious fact-rattling, but his stoniness upped her anxiety. She wasn't normally anxious. She'd been around long enough, dealt with every type of human imaginable. But the quota. The end of the year. Damn the Seven Princes, damn their shitty policies! They overproduced new devils and now it bit everyone in the ass. Why did *she* have to suffer for it? Her, with almost six hundred years of high production?

"Most people seek only personal enrichment." Concealing her thoughts, she diminished into a more somber style. "Personal enrichment often means only personal impact. So most wishes don't cost much—relatively. Other wishes, like the ones you described, like ending world hunger or stopping all wars. Well. Hunger and conflict are fundamental laws of the world. Our oh-so-loving God, despite claims of flawless omnipotence, has somehow created a world flawed in its very design. Rectifying those flaws, that'd take all the Humanity in the entire world—even that may not be enough. Aaaaand that's the whole explanation, more or less. Now why don'tcha tell me what exactly you want and we can workshop a way to make it happen?"

What would she do if he shrugged, said all he wanted was to end world hunger, and left? What would she do if another month passed like the last? But outside she was calm. Meeting his level gaze, refusing to flinch.

He only looked at her.

"You can speak freely," she said. "I'm not a genie. I'm not gonna make the first thing you say your wish whether you want it or not. Devils work with contracts. Nothing's final till you sign a dotted line."

"I want," he said finally, "to leave this world."

"Travel the stars? See Jupiter, Venus, galaxies beyond this solar system? Doable. Totally doable, I can—"

"No." Jay fell silent. Fiddled with the knob of his baseball bat, which he balanced against his thigh like a cane. Perfidia reclaimed a modicum of calm. He *was* nervous about something. Something he wanted to say but couldn't. He wasn't a statue, he had qualms, quibbles, insecurities of his own, and when a human had those—all humans did—Perfidia could squeeze.

"No need to worry, Jay. I'm a professional, everything we discuss is strictly confidential. Doesn't leave this room."

Still Jay stared at the sour edge of Cleveland past her shoulder. Perfidia's office fell deathly quiet, devoid even of ambience, until the silence rested long enough for the outside to seep through: a distant plane roaring, a distant siren wailing, a gurgle in a buried pipe.

Finally, Jay spoke. "I want to go to a fantasy world."

Because she awaited eagerly—too eagerly—his response, upon hearing it and upon not immediately sorting it into one of the possibilities she expected from him, she repeated his last three words like a robot and felt foolish for doing so.

"Yes. A fantasy world. Swords and magic and crap like that." He hissed it, halfway under his breath, like he was loath to say it.

His explanation made everything click; it took Perfidia effort not to display her relief. A fantasy world. Swords and magic! After all his gruff statements about war and hunger and being sick of the world. She could laugh. Laugh in his stupid, human face. Here she thought he was going to ask something impossible.

Still, he held a few advantages on her. She rued having given that longwinded explanation of Humanity. Had she known beforehand, she could've abbreviated more of the particulars. A misstep, sure. Not a fatal one. Key was not letting him know exactly how much his wish was worth. If he did, he'd try to haggle the price. And she needed every drop of his Humanity.

"I totally get it. Makes perfect sense. Huge fan of fantasy myself," she lied. "Only natural for humans to dream of a world better than this imperfect one. A paradise where good triumphs over evil, where there's always a happily-ever-after. If you can't change this world, might as well make a new one, am I right?"

If she was right, Jay didn't let her know it.

She ended an awkward moment by clearing her throat. "Now, let's discuss the particulars. Creating a whole world, of course, isn't the easiest endeavor, but I *think* we can make it work —"

"I don't want paradise," Jay said.

"Henh?"

"If I wanted paradise, I wouldn't sell my soul for it. I'd do whatever the Bible says."

"Yes, well, actually, it's interesting but, there's no evidence to suggest that even the most virtuous Christian goes to Heaven when they die—"

"I want a worse world."

It was Perfidia's turn to fall silent. She blinked, uncomprehending.

"It doesn't have to be awful," he continued, gripping his baseball bat's handle tight. "But it needs to be *broken*."

"But why?" said Perfidia. "After what you said earlier—"

"It needs to be a world I can fix. A world I can change. Meaningfully change. A world where I matter. A world where I'm the protagonist."

"I see."

"In our world, who cares. Nobody can change anything. Every battle's been fought and won. Doesn't matter what I do. What anyone does. There are no more Napoleons."

"That why you dropped out of college?"

"I wasn't learning shit." He tapped his bat against the tile floor and a clear, bell-like peal rang out. "Why bother? To graduate and get a job as an accountant or something, like my sister? Work fifty years and die? Having done absolutely nothing? Fuck that."

"Understandable—perfectly understandable," Perfidia said. "It's true, mathematically you know. Thanks to the amount of people nowadays, it takes a person with much more Humanity to create a meaningful impact. Pretty unfair. So how's this. I put you in this fantasy world, make you king or something—"

"No. No. Don't just *make* me king." Jay leaned forward. His previous speech was the first time he displayed any real interest in the conversation; now he was undeniably hooked. "Make me earn it. I don't want it handed to me."

Then why come to someone who grants wishes, Perfidia wanted to retort. She held it in. Whatever annoying stipulations he desired—sure. Fine.

"I think I've got a perfect world in mind, then. Something you're gonna love. Unless, of course, there are specific fantastical elements you want. Dragons, elves, et cetera..."

He waved the back of his hand and sank back into his chair. "Surprise me." His period of interest was over. In fact, he clenched his jaw as if in annoyance for having said too much already. How funny. People like him, people who demanded to know specifics of how it all worked, usually made extremely particular wishes, every detail explicated in formal legalese allowing for no ambiguity of interpretation. The kind of people who specified they wanted a billion dollars *in USD*, thinking if they didn't a devil would hand them a billion Zimbabwean dollars instead. Devils got a terrible shake in human media, but the depiction of such faulty wishes rankled Perfidia's Pride. She might overcharge, yes. She might push people to make a decision more quickly than they liked, yes. But if they wished for something, she gave them that wish.

Nonetheless, his apathy aided her. She tapped her pile of papers with a quick whip of the spade-shaped barb on her tail. Immediately, what was once a few documents of basic information about her client transformed into the stringent typeface of a formal contract, ten pages long, the first nine a standard litany of disclaimers and stipulations. He had not, as she feared, attempted to haggle, so the exact amount to be paid was enshrined on Page 9, Box C.

"Here's your contract. I advise you read it thoroughly, but you won't find anything objectionable. The final page outlines the demands of your wish, and also has the place for you to sign."

She pushed the contract toward him, tone and manner casual, as though signing were no big deal. He pried it off the desk and read.

About halfway through, without indicating whether he was particularly pleased or displeased with anything, he said, "Your ad claimed satisfaction guaranteed."

"Right—Right!" Perfidia rose and leaned over the desk to point. "Our warranty is outlined on Page 7, Box A. At this time I can only offer a one month warranty, but you'll be able to read the terms and conditions—"

"What if I didn't pay you until one month from now."

"Er. Well. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that's not how it works," she said in her best corporate tech support voice. "We only accept payment up front, since it requires your Humanity to make your wish happen in the first place. If you're not satisfied with your wish, we provide a partial reimbursement as per the warranty."

The warranty, of course, was a joke. As the contract stated, satisfaction was defined by whether the wish was executed correctly. So if you wished for a billion dollars, received the billion dollars, and realized having a billion dollars didn't make you any happier, too bad so sad that was your problem, not the devil's. Jay Waringcrane's wish was a bit more subjective, sure, and he gave her enough stipulations that he could conceivably find some weaselly way to claim she failed her end of the bargain. Even then, though, he'd have to take the Hellevator and argue his case in devil court, which as one might expect was a tad biased.

This business of withholding payment until the warranty period eclipsed, though. She couldn't immediately see how it changed anything, but it made her suspicious. One month

placed her right before the end-of-year deadline. If even one thing went wrong, even temporarily—

"That's not true," Jay said.

"What?"

"You don't need *all* of my humanity," he said (she could tell he said it with a lowercase h). "Not to make the wish happen. You take some humanity for the wish and pocket the rest. I'll give you what you need up front. The rest I keep until a month from now."

He was, of course, correct. And she had, of course, been stupid to explain it earlier.

"Why does it matter?" said Perfidia. "If you successfully invoke the warranty, you'll get your Humanity back whether you paid up front or not."

"I don't trust your warranty."

"I assure you, our warranty is given in absolute good faith. Likewise, I intend to take every effort to provide your exact desire—"

"And I want to make sure you do."

"How does whether you pay up front or not change that? It's the same guarantee of satisfaction either way."

"If I pay up front and I'm not satisfied, you'll find some way to screw me. If I don't pay up front and I'm not satisfied..." His lips curled into a smile, the first trace of anything other than stone on his face the entire conversation. "Then I'll kill myself before you can collect. And you won't get a cent."

He said it with a nonchalance that suggested either he was completely full of it or dead fucking serious and Perfidia couldn't tell which. That was a lie. She was lying to herself again. She knew exactly how much this dead-eyed guy meant it.

"Dying doesn't make anything better for you," Perfidia pointed out dully, already foreseeing his next move.

"But it makes it a lot worse for you. Which incentivizes you to do it right. If you do it right, I'll want to stay there the rest of my life. If you do it right, you'll get what I owe you." He flipped the baseball bat around in his hand and pointed it over the desk at Perfidia's nose. "So just do it right."

"Sir," she said, polite as possible, your humble servant Perfidia Bal Berith, no offense intended, "you can pay up front, or you can leave my office." It pained her but. She would have to let him leave. Let him leave and hope after a few days stewing in this world that so sickened him he'd come crawling back. Ready to stoop to her every demand.

His careless, disinterested shrug instilled her with little confidence. "So I guess you really are trying to scam me."

"No! It's a matter of principle. Of security. You can't go to a restaurant, eat a meal, and say you'll pay in a month."

"Disingenuous. This isn't a meal. For a house you put money down and pay the rest in installments."

"You hate this world, Jay. You really want to turn your back on an opportunity like this? Nobody can do what I do, Jay. Nobody can give you what you want except me. I'm your only option."

"And you're so insistent on this point it makes me think I'm yours."

Despite his being completely correct, Perfidia refused to let him know it. "I'm insistent because it's policy."

"What if I paid up front but demanded a two month warranty."

Perfidia brightened. "That works." Obviously it opened her up to some risk, but no devil with half a brain ever lost a mark due to the warranty. "We can work with that. I'll give you an even longer one if you'd like."

But the glint in his eye chilled her. "So I was right. The warranty's useless."

"How—why would you think that?"

"When it comes to paying up front, that's policy. Nonnegotiable. But the warranty you're more than happy to change even though you first said you'd only give a month. So one of those things actually matters to you, and one doesn't. None of this is about policy. It's about what you need and when you need it."

"It's an issue of *security*. You already admitted how you could fuck me with this withholding payment scheme—"

"I wonder why you said a month." Jay rose, stopping Perfidia's heart. One moment he remained rooted in his seat, splayed out as though ready to take a nap—the next moment upright, with seemingly no intervening state of motion. The baseball bat went back to its spot, resting on his shoulder, as he turned toward the door. "So here's what. I'll go home and mull it over. You're right, I do hate this world. Hate living in it. But I can wait another month or two. How about I come back January—maybe February—and we talk again."

Fuck.

He fucking got her.

A few seconds after she realized he fucking got her she knew she should have said something, anything, any lie or bluff. Normally she could dissemble. Any devil could. But if she hadn't been so desperate. Hadn't been put in this position. Those fucking Seven Princes and their depression. A random human named Jay Waringcrane walked into her office and played it cooler than her—than her!—and now he got her.

She had one final card up her sleeve.

"Okay," she said, hanging her head wearily, expressing surrender in every fiber of her being. "Okay. You figured me out. Sit down. Sit back down."

For a moment he looked like he might keep walking. But he paused midstep, glanced back at her, and in one motion slid back into his chair. Not sunken though. He hunched forward, leaning against his baseball bat, as though he knew what remained would not take long.

"It's not about scamming you," Perfidia said. "I just have certain deadlines to meet and I wanted to be absolutely certain I got paid."

She gave him a chance to say something, but he didn't. Watching her under the brim of his hat.

"One month from now is December 20." She tapped the contract on the desk, already open to the page about payment, and the little black letters shuffled around to form a few amendments. "Creating a whole new world is a pretty significant undertaking, so I'm still gonna need three-quarters of your Humanity up front. The rest you can pay on December 20, assuming you're satisfied with the world I've given you."

"Liar."

At this point, she didn't want to even ask. But she did. "What do you mean?"

"You said how much a wish costs depends on how much it changes this world."

"And I'll be creating an entire world. That's a big change."

"It doesn't change *this* world at all. And if this new world counted the same as our world, no one person's humanity could pay for it. That's what you said."

Why bother arguing. It would only destroy her more utterly. She tapped the contract again, rearranged the words again—this time demanding only ten percent of his Humanity up front—and continued, explaining the rest of the contract in an empty tone, eventually handing it over for him to peruse at leisure, which he did.

No further negotiations. He didn't even quibble about the wording of the final page, which outlined the world in which he was to be "the protagonist," which even explicated that he was to be made to "earn" the right to change it. He didn't have to quibble, to make the language more exact, because it didn't matter. She must give him a world that satisfied him. Or else.

Jay Waringcrane, age 19, signed the contract.

With a pen—signing in blood merely a propagandistic bit of human whimsy, relegated to human media and to idiot devils who watched too much human media. Perfidia extended her hand over the desk to shake, which he expressed zero intention in matching, until she explained she needed physical contact to extract the ten percent Humanity agreed upon.

Slowly, taking his time, using the baseball bat for support, he lifted himself from the chair. Maintaining knifelike eye contact, he extended his hand and clasped hers.

A brief moment of intense heat and a flare of ruddy light manifested between their palms, but she couldn't even revel in how the heat crumpled his stony face into a genuine wince. She extracted only the ten percent; if she broke the terms of the contract too brazenly, not even a devil court in Hell would side with her. Of course, he didn't know that. But the look in his eye and the look that was surely in hers communicated it well enough.

The handshake ended.

"Return tomorrow. Same time," she muttered, devoid of any pep. "Your world will be ready then."

Despite a glimmer of disappointment in needing to wait, he turned for the door.

"Oh yeah. One last thing," she said. "Since you're leaving this world so suddenly, people may wonder where you went. I got connections with the local police, so I can stonewall any missing persons case, but is there anyone who'd have particular interest in tracking you down?"

He was already at the doorway. "Just Mother. But she's helpless."

"You mentioned a sister."

"She doesn't care."

"And your father?"

"He blew his head off with a shotgun when I was six."

"Sorry for your loss," Perfidia said, unable to suppress a slightly smug smile.

He smiled back, pointed his bat at her, and squeezed one eye into a wink. Then he vanished, and the door shuddered shut.

Perfidia Bal Berith sank. Into her chair, into herself. Wasn't her fault. Under normal conditions she'd have handled even someone like him. Did it a hundred, thousand times before. The ones who thought they were so smart were easiest to pretzel. He didn't even do anything that clever, she just bungled everything unforced. Mistake after mistake she recounted in multiplicative misery. Saying one thing, not saying another. This damn depression. The fucking Seven Princes. The cullings. This much stress, how was she supposed to bargain with a cool head?

Instantly she realized she could've won the argument in one strike if, when he said he would kill himself, she lied and said that wouldn't stop her from harvesting his Humanity. Didn't think, though. Didn't think. Didn't fucking think. Now too late.

Well. It wasn't a humiliation yet. She would get that Humanity, every single fleck of it. She didn't need to make a world at all—she already had one. His wish was not the first of its kind.

Nobody's was. Didn't even need the ten percent Humanity she took. John Coke, 1642, back when she still worked in England. She never forgot a deal. She'd use *his* world. And, regaining some confidence, she realized she knew exactly how to keep Jay Waringcrane alive for the next month.

The Same Place in a Worse World

The cemetery contained the corpses of twenty-seven former kings and queens of Whitecrosse, marked by statues in rough Romanesque style: stout cylindrical bodies and wide staring eyes. Arranged in two facing rows, each statue stood sentinel before a sharply gabled mausoleum, each mausoleum encrusted with depictions of its respective ruler's deeds. In bas-relief they rode again, atop staunchly striding stallions whose hooves crushed heaps of vanquished foes, vast armies or grim giants or dragons twined in awkward stillness. Twining too were the creeping strands of ivy that rose to blot these deific conquests under leafy bursts, entire walls swallowed, a subsummation of human history into an ever-insatiable maw.

Past the twenty-seven mausoleums the graveyard continued, but with only simple stone markers for princes and consorts, half-hidden amid a sea of frond and fern. The only place yet inviolate by the greenery was the grand cobblestone road that ran between the two rows of statues up to what in this world was known as the Door: an immutable stone archway that had not opened in nearly four hundred years.

Until, without warning, it opened.

It made no noise; only a translucent shimmer like the skin of a bubble in the empty space under the arch. A human stepped out and appeared in this world. Behind him the shimmer dispersed and the Door shut once more.

"Meh," said Jay Waringcrane.

Baseball bat on his shoulder, he tilted up the brim of his hat and took in the scene. The regal statues gave an overly serious high fantasy vibe, done infinity times before. Everything had been done infinity times before. High fantasy, low fantasy, any stratification in between, and every gimmick imaginable. Looking at this place, the distant mountains, the hilltop castle far to the west, Jay wondered if *any* world would've impressed him.

Maybe sending him to an unimpressive world was Perfidia's revenge for the day prior. What a garbage thought. Who was more likely to sabotage him: her or him? Despite her being a literal devil from literal hell, he knew the answer.

Someone sobbed somewhere.

But nobody alive seemed to be in the graveyard. Jay's eyes went to the biggest of the funereal statues, the closest to him, a king clasping sword and book. An inscription read:

HERE LIETH KING JOHN I

OUR DELIVERER

John. What an original name. Jay didn't give the statue a second glance as he started down the road in search of whoever was crying. His eyes flitted from statue to statue to mausoleum. Nobody. Then his shoe went *crunch*.

He looked down. Something like half of a rodent's body was there. Actually, it was the mangled lower half of a rodent-sized person, pencil thin legs inhumanly twisted.

From the body extended a trail of tiny bloody splashes that led to one of the middlemost statues, a tall queen imbued with holy blandness. Blood dribbled down the queen's side and from behind her shoulder a woman's face peeped, streaming slimy black tears.

Jay and the woman stared at each other. Still sobbing softly, the woman reached out two delicate hands to offer him something. The something was a small, squirming person.

"No thanks," said Jay.

Shyly, seeing her offering rejected, the woman broke eye contact, absentmindedly opened her mouth, and bit off the squirming thing's head.

The hard crunch of bone rose above the sobs until the woman swallowed. A heavy lump traveled down her emaciated throat. Then she opened her mouth wide and wailed:

"Charisma! Cha-ris-maaaaa!!!"

Her sharp voice sent a flock of birds fleeing a nearby tree. She interrupted her wailing by biting off part of the torso and resumed wailing while she chewed. Stringy bits danced from her lips.

The noise quickly became irritating. Jay rolled his head onto his non-batted shoulder, eyed the rest of the graveyard, and noticed a rustle in the open door of one of the mausoleums. Something staggered out soon after, a creature with large leathery wings, one wing tangled around its body. The untangled one snagged on the doorframe and the creature flopped to the ground with slapstick exaggeration. Rolling, sputtering vague curses, it tugged three times hard until the wing came undone, at which point it quickly clambered to its taloned feet.

Its other wing unraveled from around itself, revealing the body and face of a woman in a ragged white nun's habit, stained with grime and brown blood. Her face was identical to the woman behind the statue, except instead of sobbing she scowled.

"Stow it Charm you God-forsaken whore! Choke on your vomit and die already!"

"Charisma, O Charisma!" the wailing one wailed. "'Tis time, dearest sister, for the inexorable judgment of our so rotted and twisted souls. Nigh—Nigh, comes our well-earned plummet into the abyss, cast down by the God whose love we denied!" She bit again into the morsel in her hands, causing the slopping red remainder to slip through her fingers.

"Oh you greedy tramp, you're eating *again*? How many is that now? At this rate, there'll be none left for when—" Her eye, unnatural red, lanced toward the big stone archway from which Jay had come, and in so doing lanced Jay, although the only one of them who flinched was her.

She changed abruptly; the fury on her face dissolved into a strained mask of a smile. Clicking onto the road semi-wobbly due to her birdlike legs, she pantomimed a gesture of humble

supplication made macabre by one hand being a gigantic, furred, four-fingered claw. (The other was normal.)

"Guh—Greetings, great wayfarer hero! Please—accept my humblest—apologies, regarding the wretched state of my sister and I. We didn't expect you so soon. Archbishop Astrophicus is never wrong with his foresight, but sometimes he's vague on details."

"O, all is useless, all forever lost!" said the other. "Only humans may receive His benediction. Only humans may be saved! We, disqualified from being human, are disqualified from His love."

The stooping one cut a glare at her sister before continuing. "Anyway. I, Charisma, and my twin sister Charm, we—we extend to you—cordially—an invitation—Oh fuck it. I can't talk like this." She rose from her bowed posture, shrugging as though nobody had any right to expect better from her. "Archbishop Astrophicus, you know, he gave us some speech or whatnot to say, I tried to memorize it, I swear I did, but the words—" A flippant gesture of the clawed hand. "And Charm's worthless as you plainly see. So here's the short of it: the archbishop demands to speak to you. We'll take you to him—at the monastery, of course. That's where he is." She jabbed her good hand toward the mountains in the distance. "We can fly quick as—quick as, well, quick as a horse. Quick as a horse runs I mean, except flying. You know."

Her gruesome eyes gazed at Jay expectantly. Her wings extended and gave one tepid flap, demonstrating her capacity for flight.

A cloud passed overhead, briefly plunging the cemetery into shadow.

"No," Jay said.

Charisma's face scrunched. "Oh, hellfire and damnation! Charm you, you, you...!—Sir. Sir great hero, please. I humbly beg of you. Allow us to take you to the monastery. Astrophicus is wiser than any in all Whitecrosse—a word from him's worth its weight in gold."

"No," said Jay.

Credit for grotesqueness. Partial credit—he'd seen worse in even basic dark fantasy. But if these obviously shady sisters expected him to trust them they were stupider than they looked. Besides, if he wanted to talk to an authority figure and be told what to do, he could've stayed home. Getting involved in this world's Christianity-but-the-names-are-changed religion sounded especially unappetizing.

"You're sure," said Charisma.

Jay nodded.

"Nothing I can say? Nothing at all?"

Jay didn't even bother to nod. He just stood there. He would've started walking away if they weren't in his path.

A rasp rose from deep within Charisma's chest, traveling up her throat until it expelled as a bilious puff. Her talons clenched against the cobblestone, streaking broad gouges, and she rolled her red eyes toward her sister. "Well! Fine mess you've got us in you brainless floozy, you irrevocable dunderhead. This is your fault Charm, your fucking fault! If you were a better lookout! Gave us a chance to make a real first impression! And what have you to say for yourself, you dotty bitch?"

"Pray forgive me, dear sister. Forgive this wretched lump of inutile flesh and sinew. Forgive me in the stead of our Lord, who cannot." And more on that theme, while she rubbed her face against the shoulder of her statue so that her black tears ran alongside the blood and mixed into a viscous mire.

"Enough of that!" Charisma said. "You ate all the faeries, so I'm relying on you, got it? Focus. If he won't come with us willingly—well! You know our orders!"

A cloud passed. For an instant, all was shadow, dark enough to swallow the forms of the sisters. Except their eyes. And both sets, turned straight toward him, gleamed equally red and hungry.

Just as Jay expected. He gripped his baseball bat with both hands and when the cloud moved away Charisma was on him, clearing the entire span of the cemetery in moments, three limbs' worth of curved talons bared.

He swung, from shoulder height, only for the aluminum bat to clink between the spread claws on Charisma's monstrous arm. That kept her arm from striking, but she hopped up and scabbled her legs like a chicken, an attack he backpedaled to avoid but could not keep from cutting deep into his thigh. An instant gush of warm blood flowed down his pant leg, while the pain itself stung in oddly localized intensity.

That pain snapped him out of boredom. Not just the boredom of the moment, which weighed heavy during the belabored wailing and swearing of the sisters, but a much longer boredom, one traveling seemingly uninterrupted as long as he remembered, even though he remembered times he was not bored—but because the memories themselves had become boring, the moments they signified retroactively turned boring in tandem.

Charisma screeched something in his face, a cackle half avian: "KCHH-HH-HH-HH!" And Jay whipped out his good leg between the swiping arcs of her talons and kicked her in the stomach hard enough to stagger her. His hurt leg transformed into agonizing stone and he knew if he attempted a kick like that again it'd give out and drop him. He had to remain rooted to the spot.

But now his stance had switched, his uninjured leg leading. That meant if he swung it would come from the opposite direction as before. Last time the bat went toward her monster arm, so—

"KCHH-HH-HH-HH," Charisma cackled again, swiping for his stomach.

He swung. Weaker than usual, but now into the direction of her normal hand. She couldn't stop it. Wasn't quick enough to try. His bat plowed into the side of her head with a sharp,

clean, and unfathomably satisfying *plonk*.

Her intense red eyes went dull and she lurched an awkward direction slowly, suspended. Her wings beat the dead air and her talons clutched at nothing.

Before she hit the ground he drew back and slammed her head again. The second hit failed to satisfy because she was drifting away from it, but Charisma dropped like a lump. Jay tried to adjust his position, nearly fell due to the nonresponse from his right leg, and steadied himself on his left. He brought his bat down a third time; her entire body spasmed and went still. A pool of blood formed around her, although Jay noted clinically that most came from his sliced leg.

He raised the bat again, but faintness made him lower it. Out of his clear, precise, and immediate thoughts, all centered on his next move in this life-or-death struggle, blankness spread. The fleeting moment of exhilaration drained out of him and the straight line of zero resumed. Was this it? Adrenaline? Nothing more? Charisma's claws skritch the stone and a partial moan shuddered out of her. Her eyes squeezed shut as her wings curled around herself. All motions appeared involuntary, the throes of a dead insect.

Jay leaned on his bat like a cane and swallowed a deep breath. The entire fight consumed thirty seconds. No—ten at most. And finally, from behind her statue, Charm emerged.

She did not move quickly, like her sister. She stalked forward, careful not to topple on the bird legs she seemed unused to using. From her back spread wings—not batlike, but broad and feathery, each feather once white, now yellowed or browned. A trail of blood and black tears followed her every step. Dangling around her hip were three small metal cages, which clinked and tinkled as her ponderous movements knocked them against one another.

All but one cage was empty. It contained a little person like the ones Charm had devoured, who squeaked in a tiny voice that managed to carry: "Hey! Hey hero! Help me will ya? I'll help you too! I'll—"

But the rest drowned under Charm's moan: "O my dear sister Charisma! O, what a deserved fate for us both, to die today at the hands of this Godsent hero! How could we, wretches, inhuman and bereft, possibly contend against one still enveloped within a skein of divinity? O, O! Though it be a hopeless endeavor, I shall nonetheless display to him my impious arts. Thus shall he know my wickedness, and be not pricked by conscience when he slays me justly."

On one hand, Jay didn't appreciate her longwinded spiel, because he was losing blood fast. On the other, it gave him time to think. The fairy thing in the cage provided an obvious angle—it must have magic to help him—but the obviousness insulted him. Perfidia—did she plan this? Did she predict he'd decline the sisters' offer, that they'd fight, and that his only chance hinged on breaking out the fairy? Did she not have any faith in him to do it himself? But he was fucking bleeding to death. He lacked the luxury to care.

Charm unraveled a long tongue that slurped the blood on her chin, while Jay pushed off the ground with his bat and hurtled hopping on one leg at a mad tilt straight for her. One shot. If he lost his balance he'd flop to the ground and die. Charm was doing something, muttering,

her words fading in and out of his perception: "*In my Father's house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you.*" The tears flowing from her eyes transformed into two harsh sprays of black liquid that whipped out like tendrils, poised to gore him.

He lacked maneuverability. But the time it took her to perform this attack gave him the head start he needed. His forward momentum built as he leaned forward and staggered with increasingly desperate hops; he'd already cleared most of the distance. Even if the tears shot straight through him like high-pressure jets he'd have to keep moving. Mentally, he braced for unfathomable pain.

Instead, the tendrils wrapped around him. Held him. Caressed him.

The graveyard, statues, sky—all turned milk white. Warmth glowed. Pain vanished, all fear and unease. He realized, the thought jarring in its reversal of what he'd thought only moments before, that he was perfectly, utterly safe. That nobody would, or even could, hurt him. That all loved him. Charm regarded him with a motherly smile. Radiance replaced raggedness—her wings, an angel's.

"There, there." Charm's voice lacked any shrillness whatsoever. Like song, minus meter. "You need no longer worry. You are elect, dear hero. God's love imbues your very aura—I feel it."

Her tears rocked him gently back and forth. He swayed on weightless legs, devoid of any sensation of his feet touching the ground.

"You—you *do* like it, don't you?" Her hands wrung together and she could not meet his gaze. "It makes you... happy, yes? I know my abilities are meager. I could not even hope to imitate the blessings of your God-graced world, no. But... if I could see you smile... even for a moment... then my damnation was a worthwhile price to pay for this witchcraft. O Lord, I seek not forgiveness. I know I have been sacrilegious. But I only ever wanted them to smile."

Honeyed scent rose around him. No sense left unattended. Every component a wash of pure pleasure, but pleasure devoid of guilt, pleasure imbued with another sense, a sixth sense, a moral sense. It was not simply joy to feel this pleasure, but *correct*. One's proper reward for virtue, and though Jay dimly understood himself to be not a virtuous person, when he tried to conjure counterexamples in his stickily saccharine brain he recalled only moments of kindness, moments of care and love. This world—this world he inhabited within the embrace of Charm's sorrow—was paradise in the true definition, not merely freedom from external misery, but freedom from misery self-inflicted. Doubt diminished into nothing. Logic decomposed and broke into pieces with frayed edges, erasing it of the power of its exactitude. Any components of self, dissolving...

"Now, great hero," she said, "will you remain within my paradise?"

Paradise.

Paradise.

"No," said Jay.

As soon as Charm blinked and the thick cords of black tears dropped and splattered the floor, his rational component instantly resurfaced and he understood his decision to be one hundred percent correct. He'd obviously been manipulated by Charm's magic—simple illusion. But in *that* world, there was only sensuality. Reason was prohibited from playing a part. Therefore, submerged in simple, guiltless pleasure, he made his decision with what, in retrospect, he considered only seventy-five percent confidence. Some doubt existed. Something about that world provided—solace.

But Jay Waringcrane did not want to live in paradise. He knew that at least for certain. He wanted to *create* paradise.

Tears no longer streaked Charm's face, her eyes so dry and red they looked skinned. Yet a genuine, depthless tragedy crept along her features. She clasped and crushed her hands together.

"Was it... not good enough?"

"It was good," said Jay.

He approached her, limping. Unlike her sister, both her hands were normal, but the talons on her feet served as adequate enough weapons. Nonetheless, she made zero effort to defend herself as he raised his bat with one hand and swung it into her head. She fell immediately and stopped moving.

Jay considered a few more hits to make sure she stayed down, but something in him resisted. Maybe faintness from loss of blood. Urgency departed as the world once more dropped into silence. His hurt leg no longer supported him. He sat beside Charm's body and panted heavily.

A cloud passed overhead.

Into this tranquility a tiny voice erupted: "Wow! Whoa! What a wallop! You sure showed em, hero!"

Fairy. In the cage on Charm's hip. The cage lay at an awkward angle, and the fairy itself contorted its body to avoid touching the metal bars that enclosed it.

"And here I thought you'd definitely need my help! So whaddya say? How about letting me free?"

"Why," said Jay.

"Cuz that cut on your leg looks reeeeeeal ugly, and I can cure it!"

Compelling argument. Jay leaned or fell over, fumblingly undid a latch on the cage door, and let out the fairy, prepared for all sorts of horseshit to ensue.

It ensued. The fairy burst skyward in a puff of noxious dust that sent Jay straining and coughing and streaming tears. It descended back to face level, gripped the brim of his hat, and hung from it to look him in the eye. He'd described the fairies Charm ate as rodent-sized

people, and that was still true, but this one looked more like a large insect than a small mammal. Dark compound eyes, two twitching antennae, and dragonfly wings composed of incandescent scales, from which more dust puffed intermittently until he sneezed the fairy away from him.

Frenetic spasms reoriented the spiraling fairy in midair, where it settled to a hover maintained by thrumming its wings like a hummingbird. It wore no clothes. It also lacked visible genitalia, so Jay could only guess at its gender, if it had one. Its body, slender, bristled with silvery filaments that lent it a general fuzzy look.

"Wow! I like this hat!"

Wooziness crept in. "Heal me already."

"Right right right! Sorry got distracted. Stupendous hat though! Okay anyway."

The fairy zipped in a circle over his thigh and expelled a rainbow powder puff that stung sharply. But as the dust settled, the sting settled too. And when the dust cleared, not only did he no longer have a wound, but the bloodstains were gone and even the gash in his jeans was repaired.

"Nifty magic, huh? Impressed?" The fairy dropped cross-legged onto his knee. "Wait—wait wait! I forgot to introduce myself! I am—"

It sprung back up, cartwheeled in midair, revolved like a ballerina, and ended with each limb spread amid a brief firework of multicolored dust.

"Olliebollen—Faerie of Rejuvenation! Ta da~"

Jay ignored the theatrics and attempted to stand. He succeeded effortlessly; no pain remained. He shouldered his baseball bat, stepped over Charm's body, and proceeded down the road.

"Heyeyey wait!" Olliebollen said. "Where are you going? We gotta talk!"

"I let you out. You healed me. Fair exchange. You can leave now."

"Buhbuhbut!"

A gate marking the end of the cemetery neared. Upon approach, Jay peered through the open door of the last mausoleum, the one Charisma had bumbled out of. The tomb inside had been desecrated, smashed to pieces.

Olliebollen zoomed into Jay's line of sight. "Look! Hero! You're new to this world. You know nothing about it! But I've got lots of knowledge. For instance!" It wagged a tiny finger. "Didja know those gross wicked twins back there aren't dead yet? It's true! Telling what's dead from what's alive is something a Faerie of Rejuvenation's gotta be able to do. So let's give em a few more thwacks. Let's not stop till we see their brains. Yeah!"

Jay glanced over his shoulder. Charm remained completely limp, but Charisma—despite having taken more hits—slowly, uncertainly started to rise, bracing her wings for leverage.

Her bloodied head lifted and her glare stretched across the graveyard to meet him.

The strength she mustered gave out and she flopped to the floor.

"They deserve to die, so better make sure. Don't want em back for revenge later!"

Charisma nearly killed him and Charm ate those fairies (fairies *apparently* being sentient), so morally it made sense to finish them off. But Jay remembered that sad look Charm gave him before she fell and realized he lacked the feeling for it. Lacked feeling for much of anything now that the fight ended.

"Plus! Plusplusplus, they serve the wicked and apostate Archbishop Astrophicus! Ooh, so scary! He and his twisted women commit all sorts a vile, heinous, loathsome deeds. Know what they'da done if you followed em to their monastery? Slit your throat as a blood sacrifice, that's for sure!" Olliebollen pantomimed slicing open its own neck with a carving knife, flopping its tongue for effect.

"According to you." Jay lifted a rusty latch on the graveyard's gate and pushed it open; it squealed. The road stretched before him, leading toward a distant castle town atop a hill.

"Not just according to me! They've even done bad stuff to humans. For instance, they kidnapped the princess of Whitecrosse! You're in a country called Whitecrosse by the way. Just one of the undeniably helpful tidbits of knowledge you stand to gain if you listen to Olliebollen!"

Jay already knew the place was called Whitecrosse; Charisma mentioned it before the fight. "You're biased because they ate your friends."

"Oh, those weren't my friends. Didn't even know em!" But Olliebollen ceased flitting back and forth. Its shiny eyes went vacant. "I guess though... they *could* have been my friends. But now they can't. They're gone now. There's nobody left..."

It suddenly brought both of its hands hard against the sides of its face. After an audible clap, it lurched back into its frantic animation, like a machine restarting after a jam.

"Except you! You're left, hero! And we're gonna be spectacular companions!"

"No."

"Now go back and smash those ugly twins' heads in!"

"No."

For a moment, Olliebollen's jolly demeanor faded. But having already lost control once, it managed to shake off the dip with a shrug. "Fine! They'll be back to hunt you down later, so you'll have to kill em then anyway."

Of course they'd come back. But under no circumstances was Jay about to do something this annoying fairy told him. After all, wasn't it so convenient? He would've died of his

wound—or at least been crippled—if there didn't just so happen to be a fairy with healing magic nearby. What a lucky coincidence.

Except he knew better.

Perfidia put the thing there. Of course she did. She needed him alive, at least for a month. And Jay had to admit, Perfidia pulled a clever move. One he wasn't immediately able to counter, even after sniffing it out. His first fight, against basic enemies, left him crippled; worse surely awaited. Perfidia had sent a clear signal: Without a healer, you're dead.

Until he figured out another way to cure his wounds, he needed Olliebollen. He didn't know how much Olliebollen was under Perfidia's direct influence, but either way, it meant she maintained some degree of control over his actions.

Maybe Perfidia was more than a chatty idiot after all. But no way was that the last word. Jay decided to let Olliebollen tag along—for the time being.

The fairy continued to talk while he thought, a droning voice from which surfaced occasional clear snippets—babble about archbishops, princesses, and wicked acts. Jay tuned it out and took a last look at the graveyard. Charisma remained shuddering on the ground, trying and unable to rise. Charm, however, was still as death.

No—wait. Charm lay still, yes, but something had changed: Her eyes were open. And though she made no effort to move, those eyes stared directly at him. Tearless—blank.

The statues of kings and queens kept vigil upon the cemetery and its denizens. A cloud passed, all went dark save two tiny red dots peering, and Jay broke the stare to start down the road.

"Now let's head to the mountains and save Princess Mayfair from the evil archbishop!" said Olliebollen as soon as the graveyard was behind him.

"No."

"No?! Where else would you even go?"

"There." He pointed his bat west, the direction the road curved. A castle town stood atop a hill in the distance. Nothing about the castle caught his particular interest, but if Olliebollen wanted him to go somewhere, he assumed that was where Perfidia wanted him to go. So he'd go anywhere else.

"The capital? It's pointless right now. The action's in the archbishop's monastery!"

"Those twins also wanted me to go to the monastery," said Jay. "You saw what happened to them."

The threat made no dent in Olliebollen's oppressive energy. "They wanted you there so they could sacrifice you in a Satanic ritual. I want you there so you can slay evildoers and rescue the princess. Your first step toward becoming a hero who can change the world!"

"Illusion of choice," Jay muttered.

"Huh?"

Many routes, all leading the same place. The twins, Olliebollen, pointing to the monastery. A sickly suspicion told him he'd wind up there despite his own will: Illusion of choice. But why bother explaining to this mindless instrument of fate?

"Why should I care about saving this princess," he said.

"Cuz! Cuz, uh—cuz it's the right thing to do!"

"Maybe she deserves it," said Jay.

"Uhhhhh?"

"Either way, I'll find the 'right thing to do' for myself."

Olliebollen paused its ceaseless dialogue long enough to ponder. Then it clapped its tiny hands and expelled a pinkish puff from its fluttering wings.

"I get it!"

"Do you."

"Yeah! You wanna beat your own path, not the path someone else laid out for you!"

Against expectations, that line accurately summarized his feelings. Jay refused to reward the effort with even a nod of recognition. He continued forward, looking forward, at the distant castle town. The road undulated over meadows swallowed by wildflowers, rippling fields of every cheery color imaginable, and some colors not so cheery. Small crystal lakes dotted the landscape. The whole world seemed to fan out around him.

"But then," Olliebollen said, "why follow this road? After all, it was laid out by someone else. Literally! Hundreds of years ago, right after King John died, with the express purpose of moving the next prophesied hero from the Door to Whitecrosse. So by walking along this road, you're bowing to the will of that intention, aren't you?"

"I'm not talking about literal paths."

"From my perspective you are! I'm a faerie, see? I live—uh, lived—in a forest. No roads, no paths at all! I go where I please, when I please. So your insistence on following this one tiny strip instead of going, I dunno, that way"—a finger jabbed a random direction—"or that way"—another—"makes no sense to me unless you're specifically trying to do what some other humans *want* you to do."

This argument reached heights of inanity Jay had only seen on social media. He rejoined with a tried-and-true method of debate: "You're obnoxious."

It worked. Olliebollen went into a tizzy, sputtered in midair, did a loop-de-loop, tugged its antennae, and aimed a finger at Jay's face. "And maybe I think *you're* obnoxious! Ever thinka that, hero? I've tried to be sooooo nice and you barely even talk to me. Just no, no, no—nothing but no! And you won't ask me a single question either! I've seen donkeys less incurious. You're from another world and you don't wanna know *anything* about this one? Anything at all?"

Despite everything, the outburst came as a relief. Honestly, Olliebollen's constant smiling demeanor unnerved him far worse than the grotesque twins. Like an automaton, a sprite programmed to only ever help. A constant reminder of the devil behind the curtain, a set of shiny strings wound around his wrists to tug him one way or another. Now he knew Olliebollen felt a wider slate of emotions—and that meant he could tug back.

"Alright. I'll ask a question."

"Really? You'll really ask? And not some mean question like 'Why are you so annoying' or 'Why won't you go away'?" Despite Olliebollen's obvious excitement, it eyed him suspiciously. It had a right to.

"Why do *you* care about this princess? What's in it for you?"

"That's mean! Why can't Olliebollen just be your altruistic guide? Keeping you on the straight and narrow path to being a hero!"

"Nobody's altruistic."

"I'm not gonna answer a mean question!"

"I won't go to the monastery if you don't tell me." (He also didn't plan to go if it did tell him.)

"Yeah and I told you already! It's about doing the right thing!"

It turned up its nose, crossed its arms, and harrumphed. Jay didn't buy it. Even if Perfidia told it to help him, Olliebollen must have a motivation for doing so. Something it wanted, either from him or her. If from her, then who cared. But if Olliebollen wanted something from *him*, he needed to be wary.

He'd find out sooner or later. For now, Olliebollen made clear that questions along that track were nonstarters, so he decided to ask a "nice" question instead. "You mentioned this archbishop wanted to perform a Satanic ritual. So is there a Satan in this fantasy world?" Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense for it to use the word. Unless it learned it from a certain devil telling it what to do behind the scenes.

But instead of becoming evasive or quickly rattling off a lie with a smile, like Jay expected, Olliebollen folded up its little legs and gripped its face with both hands, blushing brightly. "Ohh! Ohhhhh! So you *do* remember the things I say! You're not so bad after all, hero." The moment passed and Olliebollen reverted to business mode. "Anyway, of course Satan doesn't exist! Only stupid humans think that. He's in their Bible, though, and they do all sorts a crazy things cuz of their Bible."

"Bible?" Jay knew innumerable fantasy stories that shamelessly cribbed elements of Christianity. A common enough cliché that he thought nothing of the supposedly evil guy in the mountains being an archbishop. But the Bible eclipsed the specificity threshold. "Like, the Christian Bible? The one with Jesus Christ?"

"Yeah that one!"

"The people in this world practice a religion called Christianity."

"The humans at least. Look there. Seeseese!"

Olliebollen pointed. Up and toward the northern mountains, dry snowless peaks that glowed bright under the noonday sun. Charisma pointed the same direction before, but Jay never so much as glanced. Now he squinted. The glare of the sun necessitated focus, but after a few seconds he saw it. At this distance it looked tiny, but it must have been fifty feet tall or more, rising from the summit of one of the peaks. Visible for miles in every direction.

A giant white cross. Whitecrosse.

"That's their symbol," Olliebollen explained. "But you already knew that, didn't you? After all, when the last hero came through the Door four hundred years ago, he brought with him a Bible too!"

For the first time since entering this world, Jay was unable to reconcile what he saw with what he expected. He stared, completely perplexed, even as Olliebollen flitted around him with a proud—and smug—expression. Jay could only wonder: What kind of world did that devil send him to, exactly?

Old Dints of Deepe Wounds

Jay Waringcrane, originating from a world of cars, received a crash course in how long it took to actually walk anywhere. It took a long fucking time.

Whenever he stopped to rest Olliebollen would say, "Looks like a job for the Faerie of Rejuvenation," sprinkle pixie dust, and banish fatigue and muscle soreness. When Jay's stomach grumbled, more dust, and gone went all hunger—absent the satisfaction of actually eating. Only threats of extreme violence prevented Olliebollen from attempting to rectify his need to use the restroom.

In the interim periods, Olliebollen begged Jay to ask more questions. He didn't, so it asked its own: Who was the last hero to appear through the Door? What did he do? How did he do it? Who did the statues in the graveyard depict? Who were the members of the Whitecrosse royal family? Where were the other human nations? Where did fairies live? How many fairy courts were there? Which court was Olliebollen from? Who was the biggest enemy of the fairies? What made Archbishop Astrophicus so evil?

Irrelevant trivia or, at best, things he could worry about later. What he needed, if he wanted to transform this world into paradise, was power.

He asked: "How do I use magic."

The question knocked Olliebollen off its rhythm. Out of its incessant chatter it spoke only a single word, an uncertain repetition: "Magic?"

"Yes, magic. It clearly exists in this world. How do I use it."

"Um, wwell..." The voice trailed into nothing.

Even pending an answer, the question was worth it if only for the moment of silence it bought him. But eventually Olliebollen cobbled together an answer: "Oh yeah, of course! If you have a magic relic, you can use that relic's magic!"

"Where do I find a relic."

"I, uh..." Olliebollen squished two forefingers together and shifted a glance at the horizon. "I dunno! There aren't a whole lotta relics. They're definitely not lying around any old place!"

"Liar."

"I would never lie!"

"Then how do I use the magic you use."

Olliebollen winced. "Uh, ah, hm, it's kinda, you see—you can't. Humans are, um, fundamentally incompatible with *that* type of magic. It can be used to do stuff *to* them, but

they can't—they can't use it themselves. Yeah!"

"That twin used magic."

"And she wasn't human was she! Was she?!" Olliebollen whirled on Jay, machine-gun jabbing fingertips in his face. The fairy always zipped haphazardly, but now an uncontrolled edge crept in, something untamed; its beady eyes twitched glances all over, at his face, his bat, his shoes, like it expected him to suddenly strike. After it became clear Jay intended to do nothing but continue to walk down the road at the same brisk pace, Olliebollen settled to its usual freneticism. "Why don'tcha ask more about relics? I can tell you anything: how many there are, when they first appeared, who used them—"

"But not where they are."

"Er. No. Not that."

"Then relics don't matter right now. But the magic you use—"

"Look! Don't poke around that sorta thing, okay! It's not for humans, okay? Okay?"

"If I go to the monastery and beat this Astrophicus guy will you tell me."

The offer got Olliebollen to settle down and stroke its chin in dubious contemplation, but only for a moment. It soon reaffirmed its resolve and snapped: "I—I already told you humans can't do it! Everything I say is true! So stop asking!"

Interesting. It would've been easy for Olliebollen to say yes, tempt Jay to do the monastery quest, and afterward lie or withhold info despite its earlier promises. Jay wouldn't have fallen for it, but Olliebollen was apparently too guileless to try. Unlike with Perfidia, though, Jay lacked leverage to force it to talk. Maybe if he asked enough asinine personal questions like it seemed desperate to answer and pieced together what it really wanted from him—but even the thought was exhausting.

Instead he asked, "How much farther to the city."

Olliebollen sulked and said nothing.

Later, when twilight struck and a wan glow glazed the fluttering wildflowers, something emerged out of the unending meadow: a simple wooden building beside the road. The distant castle city had moved no closer from its position on the horizon.

Olliebollen stuck its tongue at him. "Bet you'll just keep walking huh! Won't even think to stop at the inn. An inn at night? That's like someone *telling* me to go there. Can't have that! Nope!"

"Shut up." Jay supposed the building wasn't too suspicious. In a carless world, inns made most sense a day's walk from the nearest village. Not that the graveyard constituted a village. But as the burial ground of kings it must possess enough ceremonial and/or historical importance to receive the occasional official or tourist.

He reached the inn when all went dark, even the last dregs of sunlight that briefly wreathed the white cross on the mountaintop in religious awe. Although the day passed without a single stretch of anything even approximating weather, suddenly a careful wind arose, and the waves of wildflowers whistled, and the tops of trees shook. Jay wrapped his fur-lined corduroy jacket around himself and turned up its collar. He placed a hand to keep down his hat and wondered if this weather intended to ensure he slept at the inn tonight. He wondered just how much control Perfidia exerted over the world. He wondered if he would drive himself insane imagining Perfidia's hand behind everything.

Because of the darkness he got only a poor glimpse of the inn itself. It consisted of two buildings adjacent one another: the main building with a high arched roof, and a long flat stable beside it. No lights, candle or otherwise, in any window. Jay bumped against a wall and fumbled for a door when suddenly he went still.

"Hear that?" he asked Olliebollen.

Frozen, they pressed to the wall and listened. But the sound didn't come from inside. In the stable a horse snorted; that wasn't it either. What Jay heard carried on the wind, traveling with wisps and loose leaves.

"Music!" said Olliebollen.

Jay never liked music. He only listened to video game soundtracks, and only occasionally. He preferred silence. But as the first sign of sentient life in hours the plaintive notes attracted a general interest.

"Careful," Olliebollen said. "We're near the forest of Flanz-le-Flore. That's faerie woods! So watch out—A sweet song might be a lure cast for wayfarers like yourself, hero."

Jay carefully rounded the inn's perimeter and stopped against its north wall, facing where the light of stars outlined ghostly treetops against a dark blue sky. The music came from that direction, and now that he moved closer, he detected the solemn sound of a woman's voice, singing words either unintelligible or un-English.

Immediately Olliebollen went rigid. Its fingers tightened like pincers against the fabric of the breast pocket it rode in. Its breath came as a hard, seething pulse against his chest. "Oh," it said. "Oh. Oh I see. Yes. I see—so they've already come this far. They're already here. Excellent—Excellent!"

It used that tone once before, in the graveyard.

"The twins," Jay said.

"Them? Those insignificant specks?" Olliebollen loosed a monosyllabic laugh. "Nonsense. That *thing* singing beyond those trees—that's something far worse. Far, far worse! Unadulterated, unconscionable, undeniable, every other ugly 'un' there is! Liquid villainy oozing out the pores of this world's anguished flesh. The essence of evil—its very soul!"

It began to quiver. Faster than something so small should've been able to. Jay half-expected it to explode, which would leave a huge mess in his pocket.

"Calm down."

"Yes, oh yes—The blood shall flow in rivers. Go, hero, go! Charge onward and—and—and crush it—clobber it—squeeze your thumbs into that so sweetly seeming singing throat—peel back its strips of meat and witness the dark taint of its interior—annihilate it so not even the slightest most insignificant speck remains! And kill it too, of course."

"I don't even know what it is."

"It's evil! What more do you need? You're a hero, and a hero's someone who vanquishes evil. Now go—gogogogogo!"

Olliebollen flew out of his pocket and bounced on his hat, kicking with surprising force given its virtually nonexistent weight until Jay couldn't see anymore due to the brim being pushed down over his eyes. Well past his tolerance limit for this fuckery, he balled one hand into a fist, noted the timing of the rapid jumps, and punched the underside of the brim at the exact moment Olliebollen came down. The whole hat popped up and Olliebollen howled, sailing skyward.

"If you don't calm down and shut up," Jay said, fixing his hat as Olliebollen floated back to eye level, "whatever it is will hear us coming and ambush us. Then it'll be a lot harder to kill it, won't it?"

The words took time to sink in, but eventually Olliebollen caught the logic. It wheezed a deep breath, clapped its hands against its face three times, and said: "R, right! Totally right, hero! Gotta keep our wits about us. That kinda thinking is why you're the hero. Yeah!" The cheeriness couldn't be more strained.

"Just hide inside my pocket and say nothing. Let me handle it unless I need you to heal me."

"Right!" A sharp salute. "Rightrightright!"

Doubtful of Olliebollen's level of compliance but too annoyed to waste more time caring, Jay half-walked, half-slid ankle-deep in flowers down an incline toward the cluster of trees where the music originated. Low-lying branches covered in springy nettles brushed against him and he beat them back with his bat, not caring to muffle his approach (despite what he told Olliebollen about ambushes) as the music grew louder. The words were definitely not English. The song sounded sorrowful; a quiet, nostalgic sorrow.

He pushed through a final barrier of branches and emerged into a clearing ringed by tall trees. Starlight, unobstructed, shone upon the surface of a pool, where long ripples rolled out dragging snatches of white with them. In the center of the ripples, in the center of the pool, stood a figure.

"Careful!" Olliebollen hissed from inside the jacket pocket. "That's not the one. To your right."

Jay's eyes flitted. A second figure, more conspicuously positioned but somehow less prominent, reclined with thin long legs dangling over the side of a boulder half-buried in the shore. Cloaked and hooded, they played an instrument Jay decided based on the movement of a thin bow was a violin. They were the one who sang, too.

Then the first figure, standing thigh-deep in the water, drew Jay's attention again. The figure was nude. And, as it turned to face Jay, unquestionably male.

The music stopped. Not abruptly. It came to a natural end, its final note swallowed within the shimmering trees.

"Superb," said the man, walking from the center to the shore, rising with white-shining water washing off his physique. "One of Mother's lovestruck knights stuck it in his silly skull to try and haul me back to the castle. Alone! Good sir, you've come upon me at an excellent time. Go on, draw whichever weapon you brought. You're about to be bested by a man naked as the day he was born."

"Ignore him. Kill the other one. Now!" said Olliebollen. Jay tapped his pocket with a fist to shut it up. At least it spoke quietly enough only he heard.

"I'm not from the castle," he said to the man.

"Aha! Then a highwayman, terrorizing innocent pilgrims."

"What pilgrims." The road had been abandoned for miles.

The guy exited the water, went to a bundle of clothes tucked against a stone, and without bothering to dry himself started pulling on some pants, undermining his previous boast about nakedness. He spoke in a stage whisper: "Come now, work with me here. Give me a reason to brawl." He cocked a thumb at the hooded figure on the rock. "Can't you see I've a lady to impress?"

Said "lady" struck a match that briefly flared, lit a long pipe, and puffed.

Jay understood the character in front of him immediately. A classic archetype, one inescapable both in and out of fiction: The Douchebag. Buoyant, airy, empty. Like the guys Jay's sister brought home nights when Mother went out working, guys in polos with white visors, guys who employed "dude" and "bro" as standard punctuation. Guys vapid and substanceless well past reasonable expectations for the average human being.

"It'll be fun, my man. We'll give each other a few bruises to wince about in the morning. A dash of conflict to dispense our excess choler."

Jay remembered one guy, one Friday night, when he was thirteen. He wandered out of his room for a snack to find Shannon and the guy on the couch watching the most outrageous horror film. Amid horrific screams as a roomful of people were massacred by a lawnmower, the guy jumped up, called Jay "little buddy," and tried to get him to wrestle. The guy was on the wrestling team and five years older and Jay didn't have the option to say no. In seconds he

was on the ground as part of a demonstration on the many ways to pin a person—a human pretzel. And Shannon, his sister, laughed.

"Or—you're not *afraid*, my man?" the current guy said. "Not given to cowardice are you?"

This time, Jay had a baseball bat.

"Not *him*," Olliebollen said. "The other one. The other one!"

The other one expressed zero interest in anything other than her pipe, and Jay already assumed Olliebollen's claims of execrable wickedness were trumped up past sound logic. This other guy, though—This other guy, Jay wouldn't mind knocking around. To use Olliebollen's words, it felt like the "right thing to do." It was too rare he felt that way not to act.

So during another appeal to Jay's machismo, Jay struck.

He swung the bat, his first instinct to go for the head, but since he didn't actually want to kill the guy he redirected for the ribs instead, assuming serious damage there Olliebollen could heal if necessary. The hesitation cost him. Before his bat got close the guy caught it and yanked hard to reel Jay into a gut punch. The hollow, nauseous pain made Jay regret delaying even a moment, so he didn't delay again and immediately brought up a knee aimed for the guy's crotch. He struck a thick thigh instead, but hard enough to knock the guy off balance, which Jay took advantage of by throwing his entire body forward and plowing them both into the sand.

They scrabbled. The bat went flying. Olliebollen yelped and tried to claw out of the pocket but got pinched between their bodies, the other guy's still wet, as they tumbled and rolled and kicked until Jay was on his back and the guy on top trying to pin him.

Arms pinned, legs pinned, the guy bigger and stronger and somehow so fast—fuck. But Jay refused to submit. Optionless, he flung his face forward to headbutt, except he still wore his shitty Cleveland Browns hat so the brim rammed the bridge of the guy's nose and the guy reeled back roaring, creating an opening. The lady on the rock started to play again, high-intensity spasms of the violin bow that accompanied Jay forcing every ounce of strength into his lower body to heave upward. His legs went up, the guy went up, the guy went over. Sand sprayed and some sprayed into Jay's face and he coughed sputtering but even blind, even breathless he hurled himself at a similarly blind and breathless guy and waved his fists like a windmill.

One fist clipped the guy in the face and the guy flung a fist back and Jay discovered immediately his opponent punched a lot harder than he did. He staggered, left eye sparking, hat spiraling into oblivion, red heat rising in a heavy head. No time to mull over the hurt. He screamed something wild and threw everything into a single maniac charge.

He got two steps when a sweeping foot took out his legs and he hit the sand hard. The guy got on top of him instantly. Jay tried to ram with his head—hatless he might do serious damage to them both—but the guy foresaw it and pressed a shoulder against his temple. Got

a hold on one arm and pinned the other with weight alone. Jay kicked his feet, but ineffectually.

The guy lacked even the courtesy to smash Jay's face in. He went only for the pin, holding Jay down despite Jay's inert rage. Caving a skull wouldn't *impress the lady*, apparently. Too brutal. Not date night material.

"Hit me you pussy," Jay shouted. "Hit me you fucking bitch."

No hits came. The pin tightened.

The music stopped.

Eventually, Jay realized he lacked any options save settling down. Uncorking his skull and letting the hate seep out, leaving himself only a biting sense of shame. Why? Why did he do it? Brute strength was all these assholes had. Why play into it? If he'd turned away instead of fighting, the guy would've looked like a dipshit. Instead Jay gave him exactly what he wanted. Stupid. So fucking stupid.

When he fell completely still the guy laughed, a boisterous good-natured laugh that made Jay want to spit in his face. (His face was not in spitting range.) "Now that—*that* was something. Hwoo! Came at me like a tiger." He clapped Jay's chest. "Anywho, now that we've had the *real* introduction, I suppose we can swap names and all that dry affair. You've received the great honor of having your ass beat by none other than—eh? The devil's this?"

Jay felt the guy's hand push between their bodies, against Jay's jacket, and fish out something squeaking and squirming.

"Ohnonono," Olliebollen said.

"A—faerie? A faerie! Sansaime, a faerie's gotten in this good man's pocket."

Instantly the hooded woman from the rock was there. No sound whatsoever. She simply manifested kneeling beside them as she plucked Olliebollen away and handled its tiny body with long dexterous fingers. Even up close, nothing appeared out of her large hood above the tip of her nose.

"H—hero!" said Olliebollen. "Hero please! You have to kill her. You have to kill her now! Please!" Apparently it was oblivious to Jay's current position.

The woman, Sansaime, turned Olliebollen over and upside-down before pressing her nose forward and sniffing up a smattering of dust. Sniff, sniff. *Sniffffff*. More twisting, turning, handling. Olliebollen spouting pleas all the while.

Sansaime's mouth scrunched into a frown. She sniffed again and frowned again. With extreme reluctance, she pried away the pipe wedged between her lips, lifted Olliebollen to her mouth—for a fraction of a second Jay expected another geeking—and dragged her tongue up the length of Olliebollen's body. "Ah—angh," Olliebollen groaned. Sansaime juggled the taste, tapping quickly and wetly between her lips.

"Wish I hadn't smoked beforehand." Her voice rasped so deeply Jay figured she should've avoided smoking for another reason. "But I'm certain this faerie's not from Flanz-le-Flore."

"Impossible," said the guy. "There's no other court east of Whitecrosse. I'm afraid that pipe truly has torn your senses to tatters, Sansy my girl." The way he said "my girl" crinkled Jay's soul.

"Even with my tongue ripped out my throat I'd know," said Sansaime. "She's from the west. *Far west.*"

"Hero. Hero please. If you won't kill her, say something. Anything. Tell them we're friends. Please."

"Far west, the lady insists, and so I must bow to her judgment," said the guy. "Tell me then, is this particular sprite a most potent facilitator of sorcery?"

Sansaime tilted her head left, then right. "She's"—Jay felt her gaze settle on him—"nothing special."

"Hero, I—Nothing special? NOTHING SPECIAL?! So you're not just a stinking cunt like the rest of your barbarous kind, you've got rocks in your head! Well, I'll let you know. My name is Olliebollen Pandelirium—that's right! Pandelirium, let that name crash upon you—and I am the Faerie of Rejuvenation—"

"Nothing special," Sansaime repeated with more certainty. "Worth a couple quid—if the buyer's right."

"Still!" The guy patted Jay's shoulder. "My good man, you're lucky I found that thing. Must've snuck into your pocket while you were traveling. Bold little demon, striking right out on the road like that. Usually they keep to the woods."

Sansaime tugged Olliebollen's limbs to make it jerk as though dancing. Well, Sansaime called Olliebollen a she, so maybe it was a she. Sansaime also mentioned quid, which Jay vaguely recognized as English money. Given this world had Christianity, real world currency didn't surprise him, but he would've better understood how much she meant if she said "gold coins" instead.

"The fairy's worth something?" Jay asked.

Olliebollen ceased sputtering ire, processed what he said, and screeched even more frantically than before. "Oh, oh hero, hero please, please, don't, please don't, I know we haven't gotten off on the best start to our friendship, but please, you don't know what she'll do —"

"Worth something *for me*," Sansaime said. Suspiciously. "I caught it after all."

"I caught it actually," said the guy.

"But you've not much need of money, do you now Mack?"

"It's mine," said Jay. "But I might be willing to sell it."

"Hero. Hero. She'll kill me hero. She'll KILL ME, do you understand? Please. Oh please."

Two of Sansaime's fingers stroked Olliebollen's belly gently, like stroking a cat, and Olliebollen quieted in response. "It crept into your pocket to bewitch you while you slept," Sansaime said. "To lead you to its fae friends and use you for, hanhh, impious purposes let's say. Ought to pay *me* for saving you."

"I wasn't... wasn't gonna do anything bad to the hero. I was helping him... Hero, tell her... Nngh—! Ah..."

"You know, Hero is quite the odd name," the Mack guy cut in. Without warning he rolled off Jay and started doing snow angels in the sand. Jay's anger during their brawl remained as only a trace memory, so he didn't even hurl himself at Mack like he planned when he first got pinned. Although he did take one look at his juvenile antics and sympathize with the earlier Jay who irrationally attacked him.

Jay pushed himself off the ground and rubbed his neck. "You really plan to kill her?"

"Indeed," said Sansaime. "Fae blood, fae bones, fae organs, all potent and essential aids for practitioners of arcane arts. Need the right buyer though. You don't know the buyers. In fact, you'd probably blunder into the exact wrong sort and get yourself burnt at the stake for witchcraft. So she's worthless to you, hm?"

Oh. In one moment everything clicked. No wonder Charm ate those fairies before their fight. And no wonder Olliebollen got so dodgy when he asked how to cast magic. It wasn't that humans couldn't do it. It was that they needed fairy parts to help them.

"Twenty quid," he said.

"Hero. Hero, hero oh please. Oh please hero."

"You don't know the preparation process either," said Sansaime. "Not so simple as hawking the whole little tit at market. Proper faerie takes a delicate hand. First, you pin it—alive mind you, for freshness—to a board by both wings. Then you make an incision *here*—" Her fingernail demonstrated the location and Olliebollen whimpered. "And so on. You'd only butcher it."

"Twenty," said Jay.

"Tah! What fool carries that much. Plus she's hardly worth half ten."

"May we please cease the money talk," said Mack. "I know of no more banal subject."

"Stow it Mack," said Sansaime. "Five's all I'll offer."

In truth, Jay lacked any intention of selling Olliebollen. Sure, she annoyed him. And she probably acted as Perfidia's agent. But her healing was too valuable, and if her parts would

help him cast magic—Actually, he decided he'd rather not eat Olliebollen, that sounded disgusting.

However, he did want to know what Olliebollen was actually worth. And whether Perfidia would intercede on her behalf in some obvious way. Mainly, though, he just liked to expose liars.

Sansaime was lowballing him. Definitely. First, she said Olliebollen was from far away. Far away meant rare, rare meant expensive. Second, she paused before initially claiming Olliebollen was "nothing special." Obvious tell. Last, while she appraised Olliebollen at only a couple quid before, she now subtly raised the amount to five. Olliebollen herself was confident she was worth more, and while she might be biased, she did heal Jay perfectly.

To reach the truth, he needed to—

"Oh for Christ!" With a hup, Mack hefted himself out of the sand and groaned to the sky. "I cannot bear another minute. I'll pay. Twenty you said?"

Of course. For a moment Jay had started to get interested in what information he might be able to squeeze out of a protracted negotiation with Sansaime. Couldn't have that! Mr. Douchebag, apparently swimming in cash—because of course—couldn't simply sit disinterested by. He had to make everything about him, so here he was to dispense frivolous amounts of British money that probably wasn't even worth the same as real British money due to weird inflationary crap—

Jay was getting riled up again. Thinking about pointless shit while he imagined pummeling Mack with his bat. He decided to learn from past errors and calm down. Telling himself to calm down didn't calm him down, but it did stop him from acting.

"Hero—Hero, please," said Olliebollen. "Please. I don't want to die. I didn't do anything to deserve to die... Did I?"

Under the starlight, Olliebollen's white fur shimmered and her dark eyes pleaded pathetically. Jay could only stomach a few seconds before he held out a hand to stop Mack crawling to the rest of his clothes. "I changed my mind. She's not for sale." He spoke with a hiss, although something did satisfy him about the absolute adoration that lit up in Olliebollen's eyes.

"I told you," Sansaime said. "She's not yours to sell. I caught her, I—"

"And I told you," said Mack. "I caught her. If my good man wants her back—Give her back."

His voice retained its brainless, douchebaggish timbre. Yet all that douchebaggish energy condensed into a single sharp line that manifested within the final end stop of his statement to shoot out like the hand of god and stop the conversation dead. Authority. That such a voice could convey authority at all stunned Jay almost as much as the voice's intended effect, but nonetheless he sat as dumbfounded as Sansaime.

The moment cracked when out of the silence Mack devolved into something more easygoing: "Aw come now Sansy. We've a higher purpose here than coin anyway. Remember?"

"Sansy," whose expression existed in a perpetual state of unreadability due to her hood, clutched Olliebollen motionless a moment more. Then, with neither sigh nor any other signal, she opened her hands and let Olliebollen zip back to Jay.

During that time, Mack pulled on a shirt and gathered other vague bundles. He leaned over and offered something to Jay, which after some incomprehension Jay realized was his shitty Browns hat. He snatched it away, shook out some sand, and tugged it onto his head.

"Thank you thank you thank you, oh thank you thank you," Olliebollen said into his shoulder. Her body was one harsh and numbing vibration.

Would Perfidia have really let her die? Maybe she judged Olliebollen a negative influence on Jay's satisfaction. Gave him the chance to ditch her for good. Or maybe she knew he knew he needed Olliebollen too much to actually go through with it. Maybe she set up this situation to twist the shiv.

"Next time you'll kill her," Olliebollen whispered, before crawling into his pocket.

"Praise GOD that's finished," said Mack. "Now let's return to the inn and converse on subjects that don't make me so desirous of death. And we'll eat while we're at it, what say you?"

Sansaime shrugged, needing no expression to convey passive-aggressiveness. Her face remained riveted to Jay. Or to his pocket. Watching very carefully.

Jay only grimaced inwardly that he'd probably have to spend the night with these people.

Collecting the rest of their assorted things (for Jay, just his bat), they headed the direction of the inn. When they reached the edge of the clearing, Mack snapped his fingers and turned on his barefoot heel to face them. "Right! Forgot to properly introduce myself. Good Sir Hero, you stand in the presence of the one, the only, Makepeace John Gaheris Coke, Prince of Whitecrosse."

Flourish. Courtly half-bow. Pause for response. Clearly the title intended to impress. To flabbergast. It didn't. Jay said, "Oh."

"And perhaps," Mack or Prince Makepeace continued, his tone elevated to parodic pomposity, "the good sir would be so kind as to state his name and whence he comes?"

"Sure," said Jay. "I'm Jay Waringcrane. From Earth."

In a satisfying if petty piece of vengeance, Prince Makepeace turned out the one flabbergasted.

Amorous Birds of Prey

In the inn, a skinned and disemboweled corpse dangled from the ceiling. Prince Makepeace pulled it down, hefted it over his shoulder, and carried it to the kitchen—Deer, he explained. Caught and dressed prior to his grand plan for a pre-meal swim to "loosen the stomach." Now he had to cook in the dark.

He did so, deftly, lighting the stove with aplomb while he hummed the song Sansaime played from the dining room. As the meat roasted, Makepeace alone spoke, slick shallow statements, stuff like "Pleasant little inn huh?" and "Too bad no horseradish to go with this." Only after he lugged to the table a big plate of venison, only after he sat so that in the flickering candlelight Jay saw he had a face nothing like his voice—sharp and pensive and even to Jay undeniably pretty, as befit a storybook prince—only then did Makepeace broach the subject of Jay Waringcrane.

"So," hewing a slab and plopping it onto Jay's plate, "I'm a natural skeptic. Disinclined to believe fables. But your clothes are nothing anyone from this world wears, which lends credence to your claim."

They sat, the three of them, one to a side. Sansaime refused to remove her hood. No longer concerned about taste, she flared her pipe as Makepeace doled her portion, and in that flare Jay noticed she had dark skin and many scars. Her gaze remained riveted to his pocket, within which Olliebollen either seethed or shivered.

"Earth, though—God's great dominion." Makepeace filled his own plate and leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling while shadows stretched across his fair face. "So you're from England." He shoved forward and narrowed his eyes. "Or are you French?"

"I'm from the United States. Cleveland." Jay tapped the Browns logo on his hat.

"Old King John never mentioned a 'United States' in his memoirs."

Jay remembered the statue of King John in the graveyard. OUR DELIVERER. Olliebollen mentioned a John too; said they built the road after he died. With the purpose of moving the *next* hero from the gate to the city. The first hero having come with a Bible. Which meant—

"This John was the first hero who came through the gate."

"The Door, we call it the Door." Makepeace tore at his venison with fork and knife, paused, and motioned for Jay to eat too. Jay lacked even the faintest trace of hunger thanks to Olliebollen's magic, but he acquiesced for sake of taste and discovered to his disappointment the venison tasted good. Better than the microwavable junk he usually ate, so low bar. "But yes. John Coke, my oh-so-vaunted ancestor. Appeared four hundred years ago, ish. My tutor battered the damnable year into my skull. 1642—I think. Sansy, you know if that's right?"

Sansaime puffed smoke and cut her venison.

"In 1776, part of England broke off and became its own country," said Jay. "That's the United States."

An unconcerned nod. "Well praise God you're not French."

Jay didn't feel like talking more about Earth. "You must be trying to rescue the princess. Your sister, I guess."

"Ah, so you heard about that."

"All I've heard since coming here is about your sister and the archbishop who kidnapped her."

"Yes, rather irritating affair for me too, my good man. I take it you're not eager to involve yourself."

"No," said Jay.

Makepeace nodded, as though this were all quite reasonable, but Jay guessed what would happen next: Yet another entreaty for Jay to rescue the princess. Rescue the princess, rescue the princess. Everyone in this world wanted him to do it, the most template of fantasy quests. Perfidia created the world and when she thought "what should I have him do?" her mind went to that archetypal plotline because she was a thousand-year-old devil and knew nothing even slightly more modern. And now, because of Jay's dogged determination to instead go to the castle, she hurled one impetus after another to follow the story she crafted.

As he thought: Illusion of choice.

But Makepeace finished his mouthful and said: "In that case, let me handle my sister. Familial duty and all—far below your stature. I recommend instead you go to the castle."

For a period of what felt like five minutes but was probably five seconds Jay stared. On the sixth he blinked and comprehend.

"The castle." He cleared his throat of a shred of meat trapped there. "You want me to go to the castle. To Whitecrosse."

"Right. Were I a smarter sort I'd give some smiling reason, but I'll be honest, for I'm no good at subtlety. Mother—the queen—needs you. Needs someone, anyone. Needs a hero. The kingdom's collapsing."

He paused, rubbed the back of his head sheepishly as though he expected someone to interrupt him, and when nobody did continued:

"None of it's Mother's fault mind you. She's a good woman, I suppose. Even if we've never seen eye to eye. Even if she's never cared for me. But forget the family drama. The issue is she's more like me than like Mayfair—my sister that is—and the kingdom needs someone like Mayfair now. Someone smart. I get the feeling you're a smart one, Jay Waringcrane." He winked, then grew serious again. "War would better serve Mother and me than this blasted muddle of politics rotting everything from inside. Archbishop Astrophicus is the least of it, truly, just a dodderer who dipped his face too deep into powers he ought not have. He and

those poor women he twisted have plagued these lands for months, but they're mere nuisances. Were. Until they had to overstep, kidnap Mayfair, and steal that relic."

Another pause, even more self-conscious than the last, even more strongly concealed behind a broad grin. Out of the speech Jay honed on one detail. Nobody mentioned a stolen relic before. But before Jay could ask about it, Makepeace continued:

"The true threat's the nobility of course. Always the damnable nobility. Eating away, nibbling, biting. They want Mother to be their figurehead and do all they can to make it so. And the people are angry, the church as you may expect is a rancid mess, the archbishop's bloody cult spreads like a disease, and I hear whispers the young king of California's lost his mind or never had one to begin with. His sister's sane, but in some ways that's worse. Have I touched the heart of it, Sansy?"

"I know no politics," said Sansaime, her smoke a veil, pungent in the cramped quarters, "save those of the fae. And only that out of professional necessity."

("Ribbons," Olliebollen muttered.)

Jay thought: *California?* Given they already established this world knew nothing of the United States, it must've been coincidence.

Makepeace expelled an arduous sigh. He leaned over the table and cradled his eyes in one hand. "This must all sound like a bother to you. For me it's a migraine. What can I do? I've no mind for these matters. I know how to fight. To fight, to kill, and maybe I could rouse a few men to fight beside me. No more. Mayfair's the logical one. The one who reads and speaks well. The one who knows law, astrology, religion, the like. The one with a mind for, shall we say, 'The Greater Good.' Yet *I'm* heir to the throne."

He tossed his hand, glancing a rap against the tabletop with part of a knuckle. But he managed a slight smile, a laugh, and a shrug, as if to say what can you do? The room fell silent. Makepeace ate vigorously as he waited for someone else to contribute.

Sansaime spoke first: "Was it wise to tell all that, Mack."

"Oh what's it matter, I'm not at court, I can say what I want. He's from another world, he's not a spy for Lord Such-and-Such—or worse, Mother."

"He's not the only one listening."

"The faerie? Who fucking cares Sansaime, only you. Only you care about those buzzing little beetles."

"You'll care tomorrow. In Flanz-le-Flore's woods." Sansaime settled back into her chair, picked up her violin (she had finished her meat, although Jay never noticed her take a bite), and played a melody, signaling her exit from the conversation.

Jay and Makepeace leaned over their murdered plates to consider the last remnants of a slain deer. "You mentioned a stolen relic," said Jay.

"Oh—does that interest you?"

Obviously. But Jay saw no reason to say it aloud.

Makepeace twiddled his fork. "Well, it's only a bauble to me. Although the court astrologers got into quite the hubbub over it." It sounded like an Olliebollen-esque evasion, but Makepeace spoke so casually and guilelessly, and seemed so emptyheaded in general, that Jay figured he might actually be telling the truth.

Jay pressed. "What does it do."

"The relic?" Makepeace's face assumed an expression of utter vacancy as he searched and searched and finally shrugged. "I dare say, my man, I've quite forgotten! You'd have to ask Mayfair; her mind's a catalog for that sort of trivium. I'll sleep on it and see if I can't recall by morn, before you leave."

Another interval of silence passed.

The spell broke with a broad grin from Makepeace. "Anywho! Apologies for ensnaring you in my troubles, good sir. Simple hope on my part; the last man through the Door performed deeds one might describe as almighty. Perhaps you're cut from the same cloth."

"Maybe," said Jay.

"Sometimes one simply becomes so overwhelmed it bubbles over. It's why I'm helpless at politics. Though"—he tilted forward to pull Jay into confidentiality, his smile magnitudes more wolfish—"I've found such lapses in decorum popular with certain ladies." He winked.

Shut the fuck up, Jay decided not to say.

Makepeace shoveled the last of his venison into his mouth and stood. Still chewing, marring his prettiness via blackhole table manners, he said: "Well! Big day tomorrow. Sansaime and I must trudge through that damnable wood, and you'll have a hard walk yourself if you seek to reach the castle before nightfall. So let's get our shuteye, yes?"

—

Testament to this world's emptiness that they went the whole dinner and nobody felt compelled to explain why the inn was abandoned. Jay lay on his back in one bed of six in a long room, the only bed with sheets and the only bed occupied (Makepeace and Sansaime having decided to sleep elsewhere). He bored his gaze into a blackened ceiling, able in prolonged silence to finally reflect.

God. Why was he here. Or anywhere. What did he hope to accomplish. What in this world could even make him happy.

Now the way to Whitecrosse stood open to him. Makepeace gave him his blessing and even confirmed the castle was only a day away, ending the uncertainty of its perpetual place on the horizon. What was more, the castle had things for him to do. Political intrigue, infighting nobles, a corrupt church. All of this meant Perfidia no longer kept him on rails, if she even did to begin with, if that wasn't just him perpetually second-guessing everything.

He got what he wanted, but it was like Olliebollen satiating his hunger with magic: he didn't feel bad, but he felt nothing else, either. Even the thought of Perfidia scrambling to come up with a new plot after he rejected the first barely made him smirk. Like the fight with the twins, a few seconds of pleasure gave way to even greater hollowness. He didn't, he realized, actually care about going to the castle. He'd simply not wanted to do what he thought Perfidia wanted him to do.

What *did* he want to do?

The answer came easily enough, like rote: Change the world. Make it better. Create a paradise.

Keeping that in mind, he could tamp down the empty malcontent floating cold in his heart. He simply had to ask himself which route better helped him attain that purpose. The castle was the obvious answer. It immediately put him in position to make maneuvers toward stitching up a kingdom Makepeace claimed was falling apart. It'd been easy to convince Makepeace he was a hero from another world, so even if Jay showed up penniless (or quidless) he'd have a foot in the door.

On the other hand. Putting aside the stolen relic, which he decided not to worry about until he knew what it actually did, Makepeace's description of his sister was surprising. Ever since Olliebollen first told him about the captured princess, Jay envisioned a stereotypical damsel-in-distress, a worthless socialite good for little more than a cutesy thanks and a chaste kiss. But Makepeace said the princess was the smart one of the family. Limpwristed attempts to imbue distressed damsels with positive qualities as a nod to gender equality were as tired as the cliché they sought to subvert, but Jay could respect intelligence (as long as it wasn't too full of itself, like Jay's own sister). Pragmatically, if he intended to make political maneuvers in the capital, having a well-positioned and *competent* ally opened avenues he otherwise lacked.

Furthermore, two possibilities existed if Jay went to the castle and let Makepeace rescue the princess alone. If Makepeace failed, then Jay would have to explain to a potentially distraught or wrathful queen why he didn't help when he had the chance. If Makepeace succeeded, then the princess herself might become a thorn in his side, assuming she was as sharp as Makepeace claimed.

Plus, Makepeace would receive a hero's adulation for his bravado. Jay imagined him: Waltzing into the castle, arms spread wide to throngs of cheering townspeople, downplaying his accomplishments as "no big deal" in his douchebag voice, winking at the ladies. The image burned. Was that the real reason Makepeace told Jay to go to the castle first? So he could garner the glory alone?

Jay caught himself gnawing a thumbnail and forced his hand under the covers to stop. Either way. If Jay intended to leverage his status as a "hero from another world," he couldn't have another hero stealing his hype.

The issue was, were these logical arguments potent enough to compensate for the fact that, if he went to rescue the princess, he'd have to suffer that useless tool as his companion—

Someone cried out.

Jay hefted himself onto his elbows. Beside him, atop a half-dresser, his hat tilted and Olliebollen peeped out. Her silvery fur exuded the faintest light, enough for out of total darkness the contours of the room's dimensions to manifest murkily. They looked first at each other, then at the wall, behind which another cry pealed. And a third.

A woman's voice. Olliebollen literally lit up upon recognition, casting the room a brackish white. Her voice chattered gleefully: "He's hurting her."

Sansaime cried out again—and again. If not for the complete lack of alternative suspects Jay might have thought it was someone else, given how little of her smoker's rasp imbued the sounds only mildly muffled by the inn's thin walls.

"Nngh, ah—oh—Eeah! Mack—Mack!"

Jay sagged back into his bed. The dumpy pillow did its best to absorb him, but he could only sink so far. He rubbed his face with both hands and expelled a long, laborious groan that caused his blanket to flutter.

"He's not hurting her."

"Hyeh?" said Olliebollen. "But—buhbuhbut—She's screaming!"

"How old are you."

"Three," Olliebollen said proudly.

"That explains it."

He stared at the unseen ceiling, tracing the outlines of half-formed rafters. This, too, he remembered from those Friday nights when Shannon brought a boyfriend home. Bunching his pillow over his ears did little. Those moans found a way to seep into every silence, no matter how deathly.

I've found such lapses in decorum popular with certain ladies. Wink! Should've staved his head in when he had the chance.

"You don't know what you're talking about. He's definitely hurting her. Definitely. Oh yeah!" Olliebollen wrapped her arms around herself and swayed on her knees. At uncommon intervals her wings spasmed and her antennae twitched and the intensity of her light ebbed and flowed. Jay wished to sink into an inviolable silence where these degenerates could not follow.

But Olliebollen landed on his forehead and bounced up and down. "Heyheyhey! Come on! Let's go help, hero! Let's take your bat and join in. Yeah!"

"No. Stop. Get off me. Jesus fuck."

"We'll—pound her and—smash her and—break her and—" Each pause accentuated by another bounce. "Make her scream and—make her beg and—and—andandand—" She finally got off Jay's forehead and flopped onto the pillow beside him, rolling and spewing her noxious dust everywhere. "I'll heal her. Right! I'll heal her so you can do it again. You and him. All night long. Until her mind is a puddle of mush. Until she *wants* it that way!"

Over the wall, Sansaime moaned again. "I think she already wants it that way," Jay muttered in disgust.

Olliebollen gripped the pillowcase tight to herself and throbbed. "Ugh! If you won't join in, I'll go watch by myself!"

"No you won't." Then, mainly to stop her from going—even though it was the first time she offered to leave him alone since they met—he asked: "Why do you even hate her so much? Because she kills fairies? You weren't this persistent about the twins."

The distraction worked. Olliebollen stilled, releasing the pillowcase and falling into a kneeling position. "You want to know that?" she said sluggishly, turning her shiny black eyes toward him. To humor her, Jay nodded, and she immediately perked into her chipper, here's-a-shitton-of-extraneous-info demeanor. "That's simple! She's an elf."

"An elf."

"Right! She wears that hood so nobody can tell, but she can't hide from Olliebollen. Nope, no sir! I know because she sang that song in their ugly, degraded elfin language. Just like their ugly, degraded elfin race! Elves used to be fae, but they broke the rules so all the kings and queens of all the fae courts got together in a big council and said they couldn't be fae anymore. So they lost their animus, and their bodies degenerated, and now they look more like humans than faeries now. Yeah!"

She rattled the details rapid-fire, so fast that only after a brief pause at the end did Jay get the opportunity to wonder how skewed this account was. But Olliebollen wasn't done.

"The fae forgot about elves for a long long time. So long we used to think they were just—heh, heheheh—just faerie tales! Then one day out of nowhere, they showed up to my court, far to west. A lot of them. And they—and they—"

A hiccup. Olliebollen retained her smile, but as her eyes blanked it became dull and lifeless. Absentmindedly she gripped one antenna and twisted it in her fist.

"There were four thousand, four hundred, and forty-four faeries in my court," Olliebollen finally said, speaking with slow and careful precision. "The elves killed four thousand, four hundred, and forty-three. So it's quite obvious why I hate them in particular over all the other evil things in this world!"

"And Sansaime was one of the elves who attacked your court?"

Olliebollen shrugged, as though this question were immaterial. "Birds of a feather flock together."

At the same time, across the wall, events reached a climax. A final, protracted, piglike gasp out of Sansaime—then stillness. The brutality ceased.

In its wake, quiet enough that it could only be heard because Olliebollen finally shut up, sobbing began. Strained sobbing, like whoever did it was trying as hard as they could not to—a sharp contrast from the twin in the graveyard.

Olliebollen beamed at Jay. "See? I told you he was hurting her."

But as soon as she said that another sound joined the sobbing. A man's voice, murmuring reassuring words. Nothing passed distinctly through the wall, which didn't matter because Makepeace lacked anything of substance to say. Platitudes: "It's okay," "it's alright," et cetera. "I'm here for you." Jay imagined him stroking her hair as she turned away from him, then decided he would rather imagine nothing at all.

Imagining nothing was difficult. After the crying and the cooing stopped, after even Olliebollen gave up listening and crawled back under his hat, Jay remained staring at the unseen ceiling, drifting through thoughts about why he was here, and where he should go next, and why he should do it. Dimly, he remembered his deal with Perfidia. One day done. Twenty-nine until she came collecting. Would he be satisfied by then?

—

Bad sleep put him in a bad mood as he emerged from the inn the next morning, hand clenched on a stiff neck while Olliebollen—apparently unable to cast her fancy fatigue-erasing magic on herself—drowsed in his pocket. He found Sansaime, cloak and all, stooped in the stable holding a bucket of oats in front of two stupid-looking horses who champed and snorted and did not eat. Her pipe stood rigid between her teeth, unlit.

"Go on already. It's not poison." But the horses stared insensate. "Long ride today if we're unlucky, and it's bad to count on luck when fae are involved."

The sound of Sansaime's voice roused Olliebollen and she twisted in the pocket until she poked her head out. But when she saw the same cloaked figure as the night prior, unmaimed, she scowled and dipped back inside. Jay would have to ask her to heal the crick in his neck later.

"Where's your boyfriend," Jay said to Sansaime, punctuating with a yawn.

By the end of the yawn Sansaime was on him, her cloak fluttering against his jacket, and the tip of something sharp prodding his stomach. Even face-to-face, even in the bright dawn

light, her hood obscured most of her face, although Jay got a close enough look to tell that the scars crawling along her chin were neither burns nor cuts.

"You say something?" Her breath heavy with ash.

"Go on, stab him!" Olliebollen poked out again like a prairie dog. "Do it! Won't matter at all. You're up against a Faerie of Rejuvenation, y'know!"

Sansaime didn't even glance at her. The weight of her stare remained on Jay. "I'd slit you nave to chops so fast you'd be dead before the slice even stopped. Let's see her heal *that*."

A swollen claim. Even with a blade to his stomach Jay found it difficult to take Sansaime seriously. He scrutinized her, trying to pierce the veil of her hood, trying to detect elfin features in what little was visible. Nothing.

She took his silence either for acquiescence or recognition of her futility, retracted the blade, and sharply returned to the horses. As she walked away, a long arm shot out and indicated with a leather glove the direction to the castle, golden in the morning glow.

"We've no extra horses lying about for you, so you'll have to walk. Should be no more'n a day, though you may arrive after sundown. Mack'll give you a note or seal or somesuch to present to the guards. He's washing at the pool now."

She seemed to rue talking so much, and made a show of busying herself with the horses, adjusting their bridles and straps while nudging the bucket with her boot to draw their attention to it.

"Shouldn't there be people only a day from the castle," said Jay. "Farms. Villages. Something more than an abandoned inn."

"Nobody wants to live so close to fae woods even in the best of times. And with the archbishop's mischief hereabouts, the few who did cleared out for greener pastures."

Olliebollen pounded a flimsy fist against Jay's chest. "Hey! You coulda asked *me* that! The hag doesn't know a thing. She didn't even explain how all the best farmland is west of the castle anyway—Hmph."

Jay didn't care about the minutiae of crop distribution in the kingdom. He cared about why people did what they did. Casually, he asked Sansaime: "If it's that rough out here, why risk your neck to help the prince. Money?"

Whatever horse goofery Sansaime was doing, she stopped. Her face turned partway toward him and her pipe shifted from one corner of her mouth to the other.

"Aye," she said.

She was lying.

Her hesitation proved it clear enough—she made an identical pause right before she tried to lowball him on Olliebollen's worth the night prior. But he expected her to lie before he even

asked, mainly because after hearing her activities the night before he thought he knew the true answer and still felt mean enough to prod her on it. What surprised Jay was how calmly she lied. No discomfiture whatsoever.

If love—or lust—were her true motive, she should've reacted with emotion. Previously, an innocuous comment about her relationship with Makepeace caused her to draw her blade. Now she attempted to cover it up with perfect stolidity. What changed? It wasn't consistent behavior. And it wasn't like concealing it made sense. Jay already knew, and had told her as much.

Maybe Sansaime felt ashamed of previous outburst and tried better to control herself. Or maybe Jay got the tell wrong and money really was her motivation. Maybe she hesitated for an unrelated reason, a momentary lapse in thought.

But Jay wasn't sure. He wondered if Sansaime hid something other than her face.

He tried to engineer another question to subtly probe further, couldn't think of one quickly, and went with his favorite maneuver. "Liar," he said. "He's not paying you anything, is he."

She tensed. He tensed too. His grip tightened on his bat. For a moment he thought she might actually attack him, but this time dispassionately, businesslike, without boasts beforehand. The moment broke when a ghost of a smile traced her lips.

"Maybe there's something to this hero talk after all."

Even now she could play everything off if she went with the love excuse, Jay figured. But her pride wouldn't let her. Exactly like his sister Shannon: Business and pleasure do not mingle.

She said instead: "As Mack told you, Mayfair wasn't the only thing that went missing. A relic disappeared too. To my best customers, that relic's worth a thousandfold more than the princess's life."

It fit; Sansaime had mentioned her business was selling magical stuff. But that explanation still meant money was the motive. Then why did she—

"Wanna learn more about relics?" said Olliebollen. "I can tell you all about em, yepyepyep! Where they come from, how many there are, why they're so rare, anything really! As a faerie, I obviously know more about magic than that hag, so be sure to ask me instead of her!"

The intrusion came at the worst possible time. Jay had been on the precipice of a thought, but his mind tumbled within a waterfall of Olliebollen's exuberance and whatever he intended to scrutinize was lost.

"Then tell me: What does this particular relic do," he asked, hoping to redirect the topic somewhere that might reinstitute his thought. "The stolen one."

"Uhhhhh," said Olliebollen.

"It's supposed," said Sansaime, carelessly, like she didn't fully believe a rumor she was going to spread anyway, "to raise the dead."

Whatever thought he lost no longer mattered.

"Raise the dead?" Jay repeated.

"Oh, so it's that one huh?" said Olliebollen. "Right, I know all about it! Ahem—*The Staff of Lazarus!* It was used by this evil wizard until King John and his knights slew the wizard in a great battle. But then, being a dumb human, John said, 'This power is reserved solely for Christ!' and sealed the staff in a vault under Whitecrosse Castle, where it stayed until—now! Strange though! I thought only those with royal blood could open the vault, so how'd it get stolen? I wonder!"

For once, finally, Jay did not respond with annoyance or impatience to Olliebollen's overload of information. For once his focus remained like a laser upon every word she spoke, both pertinent and extraneous. It didn't even bother him that Olliebollen had clearly known the castle contained relics despite her previously telling him she didn't know where any were. None of that mattered. What mattered was the Staff of Lazarus, with the power to raise the dead. The power reserved solely for Christ.

If Jay wanted to create paradise, he needed that power.

The scales of decrepitude fell from his eyes and something deep inside shifted and rumbled. Giddiness, actual giddiness rose between the fissures, he wanted to smile broadly, to laugh, to ask Olliebollen and Sansaime for more information and stand there for hours learning it, because something truly sparked inside him, something that wasn't simply a moment's fleeting adrenaline, something akin to that magic he felt so long ago when he played his first RPG and felt transported to another world, a world where what he did actually mattered, where his actions raised kingdoms and toppled empires and left him tantamount to a god in power and prestige.

But before he could ask more, thick footsteps crunched through leaves and Makepeace waltzed up the hill bellowing a big obnoxious good morning. Whatever washing he'd done failed to unmake his hair from its carefully-arranged tousle of locks and curls.

"Well now! Looks like you two've been getting on swimmingly," Makepeace said, looking from Jay to Sansaime. "Lovely day for a ride. Suppose I won't be singing that tune by day's end though, eh?"

Jay's exhilaration plummeted. His thoughts lost their bloom and his face resolved into a mask of general displeasure. He said nothing, even as Makepeace nudged him in the ribs with an affable douchebag smile.

"Anywho, my good man! I slept on it, and it turns out I *do* remember what the stolen relic does. It—"

"Yeah we know! We were just talking about it! The Staff of Lazarus!" Olliebollen blurted. "Didja know that sow right there plans to steal and sell it off and that's the real reason she's guiding you to the monastery?"

Makepeace stared at the tiny, dusty fairy as she fluttered out of Jay's pocket and perched on the brim of his hat. He turned. "That true, Sansy?"

"Could be," said Sansaime.

"See! She admits it! Kill her. Kill her now!"

But Makepeace only laughed and shook his head and let his loose locks toss about him. He clapped Sansaime on the shoulder and tried to clap Jay too. Jay stepped back to avoid it, but Makepeace's reach extended faster than Jay expected and he wound up jostled anyway. "Fae are cruel and soulless little cunts, aren't they?" he said, like he was telling a joke. Then he straightened and managed a moment of sharpness, a moment of authority—the same type with which he cut short Jay and Sansaime's bartering the night before. "Look. I've my business, and Sansaime has hers. Far as I'm concerned, as long as Mayfair's brought home, the staff can go to Hell. It's worthless languishing in the family vault anyway."

"But! Buhbuhbut—"

"Shut up," said Jay. He had watched Sansaime carefully after Olliebollen told the prince her secret. Waiting for her to show discomposure, aggression, anything. Not a flicker. Sure, her hood helped her, but she was an emotional woman when she wanted. Did she know all along he wouldn't care? Maybe. But Jay remembered his previous thought, the one he lost before Olliebollen started talking about the Staff of Lazarus:

Sansaime was still concealing something. She hadn't told the whole story by half. She threw out the staff as a plausible diversion, something to sate suspicions. Whatever her true objective was, she was willing to make herself look like a thief to conceal it.

It didn't matter, though. Jay figured regardless of her main goal she wouldn't mind stealing the staff as a bonus if the opportunity arose. And that made her Jay's competition—because he was going to take the staff first.

"I'm coming with you," Jay said, cutting off some inane remark of Makepeace's.

"Hm? What was that? You'll have to speak up."

But Sansaime heard him, and the straight line of her mouth tightened even before Jay repeated himself word-for-word.

"Coming with us," Makepeace said.

"Yes. To save your sister."

"Well! My good man—"

"He can't," said Sansaime.

"Yeah!" Olliebollen added. "What is this?! I've been telling you to save the princess this whole time and it was just: No, no, no! Why won't you do it when *I* ask but you will when, when, when—"

"Flanz-le-Flore's dire enough." Sansaime remained cold, rational. "But if he's what he claims, a hero from another world, the fae'll want him. Want him bad. And they'll do anything to ensure they get him. That's not to mention his little friend, from the far west. They'll see her as an intruder. Fae politics are a mire from which none escape unscathed."

"You'd say that, you ugly elf! But maybe if your degenerate race didn't force our hand you'd still be fae yourself. Hm?!"

"If you let him come, Mack, I can't in good conscience guide you. Not worth the risk."

"As if you have a conscience, you rotten lowlife murderer!"

The whole time Makepeace contemplated and considered, making pensive nods that fit his features if not his brainpower as he stroked a clean-shaven chin. Finally, he broke his stare into the Whitecrosse countryside and said: "If you won't guide me, Sansy, the faerie can. Faerie, you know the way through the forest, right?"

Olliebollen whirled straight out of her latest slew of insults and beamed proudly from Jay's shoulder, onto which she had fallen during her apoplexy. "Oh do I ever! Enchanted forests are my favorite terrain. I'll cut a path that takes half as long as whatever route *she* knows—"

"You're bluffing Mack," said Sansaime. "You wouldn't trust a faerie to lace your boots. They're Hellspawn."

"I'll trust whoever I must if it'll get me to Mayfair."

"It's much more dangerous with them. You don't want to run afoul of the court of Flanz-le-Flore, Mack. You do not! Their queen's a fickle temptress, an eater of men. Her devil magic puts that runt in the pocket to shame."

"Hey!" said Olliebollen, but Jay shushed her.

"A hero from Earth's worth putting one's faith in," said Makepeace. "Flanz-le-Flore never stopped King John, did it?"

"That fool is no King John, Mack, if King John did even half the things you claim."

"I don't believe in much," said Makepeace, "but I believe in John Coke, and I believe in the world he came from. Flanz-le-Flore is not what concerns me most, Sansaime. What awaits us in the monastery is, and for *that*—a hero is the most valuable thing you can have."

A change took over Sansaime, a sudden and irrevocable violence. Rising straight, looming, she jutted at Makepeace with the intensity of rock wall immobile for generations put to immediate motion by the act of an earthquake. But Jay doubted she even considered drawing a weapon—not against *him*. "You'd betray me. Betray me would you?"

"It's not about you, Sansy. Not about you at all."

"I thought—I thought the two of us—What are you thinking, Mack. What are you doing."

It was as though Makepeace didn't notice her. He noticed nothing. He stared straight ahead, past the stable, past the hillside of ruined wildflowers, past the forest that fanned broadly, at the mountains, and at the white cross blazing. An imperious eye. A conqueror's gaze—A Napoleon. No matter how tall Sansaime stood he was taller. And he only said: "I'll do what needs to be done."

That was the end. Sansaime lacked any more words, and she whipped away, scowling. She must have expected Makepeace to side with her. Why else would she have admitted even the partial truth of the relic? She expected Jay to be sent packing before the hour was up. But that wasn't why she was mad. No. When it came to her professional secrets, whatever they were, she exhibited no emotion no matter how close anyone touched to the subject. The emotion came from elsewhere.

"Told you he hurt her," Olliebollen whispered. A tint of smugness—but mostly a knowing gravity.

Only in the ensuing silence did Jay realize how strange it was that Makepeace told him to go to the castle the night before but agreed so readily, without protest, to his decision to go to the monastery instead. A thought came: Could Makepeace have wanted him to go to the monastery the whole time? Could what he said the night prior have been reverse psychology? Had he pretended not to remember what the relic did so he could spring it on Jay right before he left and push Jay into an impulse decision?

No way, Jay wanted to conclude. Makepeace was a moron. No way could he have known Jay would never do what Makepeace asked him, would automatically be inclined to do the opposite. No way. Right?

Nobody spoke much after that. They gathered their things, Makepeace and Sansaime mounted their horses, and with Jay walking behind them and Olliebollen on his shoulder, the small party embarked toward the forest of Flanz-le-Flore: Adventurers on a righteous quest.

None of them noticed the lone tree up on a hill off from the inn. A broad, leafy tree, casting long shade in the early angular light. Nor did they notice the two figures in nun habits nestled within its branches, although those figures had been watching them intently for some time. As the party disappeared into the forest, the figures stretched their wings—one's like a bat, one's like a bird—and followed silently behind.

Goodly Creatures

The forest of Flanz-le-Flore burst brightly, bristling awake to new friends who plodded along a padded-down path, ecstatic of their cautious careful intrusion, overflowing mirth from the thorny throats of flowers. One tree, a giant—although every tree was now expanding—opened wide its mouth to bellow raucous laughter and thick sap spittle. Red leaves emerged from orange emerged from yellow. A hollow log spread across a brook whistled: "How d'ye do! How d'ye do! How d'ye do!" and the sentiment echoed along the vast, teeming canopy, within the songs of unseen birds. All existed in aimless, restless, delusional animation.

Into the chorus cut Sansaime: "Keep to the road." She led, stooped over her dour roan horse, and had been muttering about the dangers of letting Jay and Olliebollen tag along ever since they entered. "Keep to the road, but don't trust it. It may've been made by man, but for the right price they can tempt it to their side for a time."

Makepeace, who in contrast to Sansaime's earthy cloak wore over his armor bright and patterned fabrics, checkerboards and fleurs-de-lis, and as such blended much better into the environs, tilted his head back toward Jay and gave his trademark wink. "Incredible time these faeries seem to have, eh?" he said. Jay forbore the company, thoughts occupied by the Staff of Lazarus as he trained his eyes on the sane image that was the backside of Makepeace's horse.

The final and tiniest member of their company waved her arms merrily at every passing tree, log, vine, shrub, flower, bird, squirrel, and leaf, repeating back to them their jubilant how-d'ye-dos. Every so often she managed enough space to first breathe and then babble some tidbit of information about enchanted woods, but the trivia broke into fragments as some new piece of foliage sprouted beside the path to speak its first words in greeting to her.

No other fairies appeared. Unless they were the colored orbs, drifting, that either lurked deep in the woods or were seared onto the surface of Jay's eyeballs.

He squeezed his eyes shut to try and crush out the lightshow and instantly walked into the horse's ass, saved only by the brim of his hat eating the brunt of the impact. The horse itself gave no shits and stood statuesque. Makepeace and Sansaime took in what lay ahead:

A spiderweb.

It stretched across the path, strung from one tree to another, its wispy strands bunched tight to form a full wall barring passage. The forest around it was dead. An abrupt transition changed the landscape from bright and cheerful to black and solemn, where ancient moss-covered trunks disappeared into a sea of dark leaves.

No how-d'ye-dos. No whistles, no songs. Only a syrup silence, dense, imbued in the air itself, which smelled of long-dead decrepitude, when there is nothing left to decompose. Jay readjusted his hat and, fighting through tightening lungs in response to this grimy air, brought his gaze from the spiderweb to the forest beyond it and finally over his shoulder at where

they came from. Everything was dark leaves and half-shadowed wood, and the road dropped out of vision a few feet back.

"That's not supposed to be there!" Olliebollen said of the web.

"No shit," said Jay.

"So much for the warm welcome," said Makepeace. "Fae are a fickle sort, huh?"

But Sansaime shook her head. "That's not fae doing."

"I already said that!" Olliebollen shouted, despite being wrong. Then quickly, as though trying to get it out before someone else did first: "It's gotta be the work of the archbishop's twisted women!"

Immediately, the strands of the spiderweb shifted, rearranged. Parts came together in long, interconnected clumps to spell the word: HI.

"Hello there, my good lady!" Makepeace replied, doffing a hat sort of like a tricorn, but with a big red feather sticking out of it.

The spiderweb shifted again, not spelling a word this time, but forming a woman's face, drawn with surprising artfulness—three-quarters perspective and as much depth as white lines on white background allowed. The face blushed and looked away bashfully, then a jagged series of lines scratched it out and words, some misspelled, replaced it:

WE WERE CENT TO STOPP YOU SORRY

From her mouth Sansaime deftly plucked her pipe and tucked it within her cloak. In the span of that motion, out of the corner of her mouth, she said only barely loud enough to carry and even then seemingly underwater in the oppressive aura of the forest: "Behind."

Makepeace and Jay glanced as inconspicuously as possible. Perched side-by-side on a high branch in a gnarled tree, visible in this darkness only due to the once-white color of their nun's habits, were the winged twins from the cemetery. Charisma scowling, Charm streaked by black tears.

"Toldja you shoul'da killed em," Olliebollen said.

Maybe. But Jay beat the twins before, and now he had help. The issue was whoever made the spiderweb, what she could do. And if they brought anyone else.

The web changed: GIVE UP NOW AND WE WONT HURT NOBODDY PROMISS

Makepeace exchanged a potent glance with Sansaime and reached onto his back to grab the lance and shield strapped there. The red shield was emblazoned with—what else—a white cross. Sansaime's hands slinked into the folds of her cloak.

WE ONLY WANT THE HERO, said the web. Then it scratched out the words and reproduced an image of the bashful woman from before, this time with her head bowed and

her hands pressed together in prayer. GOD LOVES YOU, it wrote under the image.

"You won't be getting the hero," said Makepeace. "And you won't stop me from bringing Mayfair home."

Nothing happened for a long time. The image of the woman weaved in web continued to pray solemnly. But strand by strand the image fell away, dissolving more than breaking apart, until only the following words replaced it:

THEN I AM SORRY FOR WHAT WE MUST DO.

A rumbling began. The horses noticed it first, stamping and shifting restlessly, kept from more only by the steadiness of their riders. Jay adopted a ready stance. He faced the spiderweb, but angled his body so that with only a quick slant of his eyes he could check the twins. Neither moved from their branch. The sad one gnawed mindlessly on her own hand.

"Where's it coming from Sansaime," said Makepeace. The rumbling now felt like a constant pulse along the ground. But it seemed to come from everywhere. Makepeace's horse whinnied fearfully.

Sansaime remained a motionless obelisk within the dark. Her head inclined one direction, then the other. Building and building the rumble rose, stronger and stronger, and she suddenly whipped a gleaming sliver of steel from her cloak and shouted:

"There."

It shocked Jay that whatever had been rumbling toward them was so close, because he heard nothing, no snapping branches, no cascade of leaves, until the thing burst between the nearest layer of black trees, twice Jay's height at least, looming over even the riders, a massive five-fingered claw raised.

A bear. Shaggy, its fur a filthy bleached white streaked with worse colors, tatters of a nun's habit running down its belly. But it was also a human, a hulk of a human, revealed only through its narrower and more human proportions, and the human head that lolled awkwardly on its broad and muscular shoulders. The head of a woman, with long and matted hair, and a vacant gaze.

Its claw came down. Faster than any of them, even Sansaime, were prepared to react to. The head of Sansaime's horse disappeared. The rest of the horse remained standing, its legs twitching and buckling, but the head was no longer there. An arc of bright red blood splattered the grass.

Sansaime was also no longer there, as the decapitated horse finally dropped. Her body bounced against the ground, twisted, and rolled to a stop at the base of a tree. She dropped her dagger, which wound up embedded in the center of the blood splatter.

"Hyaa—Hyaa!" Makepeace shouted as he spurred his rearing and horrified mount into an immediate charge while Jay remained rooted in place. Only the striking grandeur of the figure Makepeace cut tore Jay's eyes away from the gore displayed before him. Trapped in

the silence of this space, where even the bear-woman's roar emerged only as a muted and even reserved exhalation, the superfluous components of Makepeace stripped away and he became nothing more than the image of a fantasy prince, adorned with both beauty and power.

The bear's other claw swept and Makepeace leaned hard on his horse and the horse darted sharply to the side so that the clawtips only raked ineffectually against Makepeace's shield. His spear lashed out like lightning and drove deep into the bear's shoulder. The bear loosed another quiet roar while its oddly delicate facial features contorted into a clay engraving of pain and anger, but Makepeace's own winsome grin faded the instant he realized that despite the deepness of his strike he hadn't felled the beast outright. He managed to only just barely raise his shield in time to block the brunt of an immediate swipe and even blocking it the force unseated him and launched him between the trees.

As Makepeace hit the ground and rolled, his horse toppled over, thrashing all limbs in an arachnid tangle to right itself and flee—in Jay's direction. Big and dark the horse loomed over him, its legs a maniacal churn of dirt and leaves, and Jay only managed to stumble far enough aside that the horse clipped him instead of trampling him outright. He span, his legs operated like a machine beyond his comprehension, and he only stopped when the solid bark of a tree stopped him. Once again his hat protected him from slamming his face.

Recovering, Jay gripped the tree for stability and turned to see the bear staring straight at him.

It heaved laborious breaths, its long arms dangling all the way to the ground so that its bloody claws rested amid clumps of dry leaves. Something in its eyes belied disbelief, a stupid animal incomprehension, as it took its first slow, lumbering step toward him. One claw reached up, ripped the spear out of its shoulder, and snapped it in half with only a clenching of the fingers.

Faced with this behemoth, Jay suddenly felt like his aluminum baseball bat was not the impressive weapon he once thought it was. What would even his strongest swing do except sink into the deep fur and fat of a creature that big? A few thwacks to the skull might work—but the thing was so tall reaching it was out of the question. The wound on its shoulder bubbled bright blood. Maybe a hit there?

His eyes darted to the rest of the scene. Charm and Charisma remained motionless, watching like vultures. Sansaime had still not moved. Makepeace did move, and he reached for the hilt of a sword sheathed on his hip, eyes trained on the back of the bear. But the sword only made it halfway out. The bear hadn't launched him to just anywhere—it launched him directly at the wall of webbing, and many strands already stuck to his gallantly rugged hair. The rest of the strands started moving, started attaching themselves to his armor, wrapping around his arms to bind them, preventing him from drawing his weapon as he was quickly enveloped.

That left Sansaime's fallen dagger, which might as well have been on another planet given how far away it was, and the broken spear at the bear's foot. Jay's mind whirred. Swaying the tip of his baseball bat back and forth in some vain hope it might keep the bear hypnotized long enough for him to strategize, he whispered to Olliebollen: "Can you fix that spear?"

"Huh?"

"When you healed me at the cemetery, you also repaired my clothes. So can you fix broken things?"

"Of course! I'm the Faerie of Rejuvenation, after all. I—"

"How close do all the pieces need to be for you to put them together?"

"Huh? Never thought about that. Guess it doesn't matter!"

Jay whipped around the tree, putting it between him and the bear, and that sudden motion prompted the bear to emerge from its stupor and charge. All he needed was to get onto the other side of the bear and grab the broken spear. The bear was probably stupid—it would almost certainly try to round the tree the same direction he initially went behind it. So if he moved the other direction—

The tree exploded. Jay had been in the process of turning, and he got to watch as the trunk, too thick for him to have touched his fingertips together if he reached around it, ripped in half. Jagged, long wooden chips rose in a sandstorm around him as he felt himself hefted bodily off the ground, into the air, into a few low-lying branches, and down to the ground.

Out of the stultified silence finally arose a vast rustling as the top half of the broken tree came crashing through the canopy and hit the floor.

Okay. So the bear did not need to worry about such insignificant considerations as "which side of the tree to go around." Jay decided to note that for the future, except when he tried to lift himself off the ground, his body refused to cooperate. He glanced down and saw his chest transformed into a mess of jagged red slashes and blood-drenched bits of jacket stuffing.

He attempted to draw a breath and couldn't, and that was when he realized the pain. His head fell back and his hands gripped the air he could not draw into his lungs. Onto his hooked fingers, the fairy Olliebollen descended.

"Now! I want you to think about this moment very very carefully, hero."

Jay gaped, choking, gurgling blood. Elsewhere, another voice picked up, one that wasn't speaking to him. The voice of one of the twins—the angry one, Charisma. Like a blur: "Pluxie you ignorant dullard! You big, brainless brute! I told you *not* to kill that one, didn't I? We need him alive!"

"Nnnnngh... sorry..." said the bear.

Dust flicked into Jay's eye, redirecting his attention to Olliebollen.

"Hero! Remember this moment, okay? Remember it the next time you even *think* about selling me off. Got it? GOT IT YOU BASTARD? Don't you ever do anything like that to me ever, ever, EVER again!"

Jay tried to nod. As Charisma continued to batter Pluxie the bear with invective, the sad twin—Charm—dropped down with its tear-stricken eyes focused on him. Or focused on Olliebollen. And Olliebollen didn't notice, wrapped as she was in sanctimony.

"You're doing this whole thing wrong anyway," Charisma said. "You, Pluxie, oughtta be fighting the prince. We can *kill* the prince. Lalum needs to be the one down here fighting the hero—she can tie him up without hurting him. Why've I even gotta explain this to you blocks of wood!"

"I hope you've learned a valuable lesson hero! And I hope next time you'll say 'thank you' in face of my overwhelming generosity and love!" said Olliebollen, sprinkling pixie dust the moment Charm bolted forward with speed unfitting her demeanor and snatched the fairy in both hands.

As Olliebollen squeaked, Charm's mouth unhinged into a broad blackness out of which pointed teeth and dripping saliva gleamed. But the dust settled and Jay felt the wounds on his chest heal and he rose up swinging his bat as hard as he could into Charm's elbow. The metal struck the bend, the exact worst place to bang yourself: the funny bone.

Charm released Olliebollen reflexively and backpedaled in a silent wail of agony. Jay rushed forward, swinging again, but even if Charm occupied herself by gripping and rubbing her hurt spot, her wings remained free enough to beat the stagnant air and push herself off the ground and out of Jay's reach, trailing loose feathers and grimy black tears behind as she retreated to the safety of the higher branches.

Fine with Jay. He had worse to worry about. That bear-woman, Pluxie—even hitting him through a tree she did enough damage to mortally wound him. If she ever struck him directly, he'd wind up like Sansaime's horse: dead instantly. No chance of Olliebollen healing him. He needed to avoid that above all else.

Ignoring Olliebollen's effusive praise for saving her, he bent into a sprinter's stance and ran. Charisma remained flapping around Pluxie's head, shouting and confusing her, and that gave Jay a chance. The broken halves of the spear were his focus.

Pluxie turned her vacant gaze. She was tracking him. The moment Charisma quit buzzing around her she was ready to charge. But she wasn't the only threat. As Jay closed on the spear at full sprint he glanced at Makepeace struggling within a mass of webbing, hoisted up so that his feet scraped faintly at the ground. And clutched higher up, to one of the trees, Jay saw her, or part of her at least—a few long spindly spider legs. The one Charisma called Lalum. Letting her get her web around him was nearly as bad as being killed in one hit by the bear, in terms of what Olliebollen could do about it.

Charisma screeched: "Lalum. LALUM! You milksop! Stop him. Stop him now!"

The spider legs scuttled but Jay had already cleared the distance. He slid onto his side and seized the pointy half of the broken spear. Olliebollen flitted toward it trailing dust but Jay spat a sharp "No" to stop her as he rammed the spearpoint into the bark of the nearest tree. It stuck there, the broken shaft quivering, as he picked up the other half and pulled himself to his feet.

Even with the complete spear he couldn't do a thing against Pluxie. Makepeace only annoyed her with a thrust backed by the full momentum of a horse's charge, after all. But if this worked...

He ran away from the part of the spear embedded in the tree. Now that Charisma turned her ire onto Lalum, Pluxie again lumbered toward him, only slightly more hesitant than before. Charisma told her not to kill him, and while Jay doubted for a moment she possessed the intelligence or even physical capability to intentionally follow that order, she did move slower. That made the difference as he dove away from her sweeping lunge, rolled to his feet, held out the broken half of the shaft, and shouted to Olliebollen: "Now!"

Colored dust dropped quick. Pluxie's lunge placed her exactly where Jay had been only moments before—directly between the tree and Jay's current position. Directly between the two halves of the spear.

Olliebollen said it didn't matter how close the pieces were to put them back together. As the dust sparkled on the splinters of the shaft, Jay thought: she better be right.

The shaft left his hand. Not, as he had envisioned in his head, like a rocket, shooting to reattach to its other half. It drifted through the air at a ponderous pace, as though suspended by wires. But when it touched Pluxie's side, it did not stop moving. It did not slow down. It kept going, straight through hundreds of pounds of thick animal fat and muscle and bone, at the exact speed it traveled through air.

It took for the shaft to be half buried for Pluxie to realize; when she swept her claw it already disappeared inside her. Howling, full bulk bristling, Pluxie rolled against the ground, writhing and clenching claws to dredge up chunks of fleshy soil. Her twisting motions reoriented her in relation to the other half of the spear struck to the tree, but the shaft did not care. It moved utterly straight and true and exited out of her gut full red with blood to reattach to its other half. It carried with it strands of gristle and integument, gooey pieces of Pluxie.

The entry and exit wounds were narrow compared to Pluxie's bulk. Didn't matter. Nothing could withstand that kind of internal damage. Jay felt his fingers trembling. Felt inside him spreading something, a surge, an emotion, and without warning even to himself he clenched one hand into a fist and pumped it, elbow bent acutely. "YES!" he shouted like a knife to the dead air. "YES, YES, FUCKING YES!"

"You did it. You really did it!" Olliebollen danced and cheered too. "I never woulda thought of a plan like that in a million billion trillion years!"

"Great show Jay!" yelled Makepeace from his bundle of webbing. "Now why don't you cut me out of this mess so I might give you a fine clap on the back?"

Jay nodded and was already halfway to Sansaime's fallen dagger by the time he had a chance to wonder why he so blindly followed that order. He already took down the main threat. With Olliebollen's healing he could handle the small fry alone. The thought bounced like a single bitter pang against the enormity of his elation. He realized as he wrenched the dagger out of the ground and turned to see Charm and Charisma both stalking to intercept him that he was grinning broadly, so broadly it hurt. What was this? Adrenaline again? A fleeting thing?

Something he'd forget by the time his internal chemistry rebalanced itself? Or was this it, what he wanted, the feeling of mattering, the feeling of being the hero?

It was like Charm and Charisma weren't there. They were, but they didn't matter. Charisma stood turned so that she held her monstrous claw in front of her and kept her ordinary arm behind. That she did this in response to how he beat her in the cemetery didn't even register—Jay targeted her first. He swung his bat and she caught it and he kept plowing forward and drove Sansaime's dagger at her throat. At the last moment Charisma tensed her shoulder and caught the blade just under her collarbone and it hardly mattered. Twirling, ripping out the blade and leaving her to dangle in bloody suspended animation, he wrenched his bat from her grasp and swung it in one uninterrupted motion into Charm's spine. He didn't care that the movement took him into one of her wings and he received a mouthful of feathers, he spat them out and kept running without even looking as the sisters fell.

Only one more stood in front of him. The spider, Lalum, rendered insignificantly tiny beside Pluxie's still-writhing body as she wrangled with several silvery strings in an attempt to stitch up the wounds. Like the others, she was an abominable combination of human and animal: bottom half a bulbous spider abdomen with eight needlelike limbs, upper half a human torso, dressed in a nun's habit notably more clean and intact than those of her companions. Around her waist hung two of the same small cages Charm wore, one empty and one with a sad-looking fairy that sat with its legs folded in abject surrender.

But what struck Jay, strong enough to momentarily bump him out of the obscene high pervading every facet of his being, was her mouth. A series of crosswise stitches of her own white webbing stitched it shut. Somehow, that hadn't stopped her from devouring half the fairy in her hand; blood burred between the stitches.

Jay lifted the bat high and held the dagger ready. She would attempt to stop him with the webbing, that seemed to be her main ability, but since she was eating a fairy he also had to watch out for some kind of magic. If he cut through the web quick with the dagger and came down with a single blow to the head—

Lalum loosed a muffled yelp, scampered over Pluxie's body, and disappeared out of his sight.

Problem solved. Jay reached Makepeace and hacked at the webbing with Sansaime's dagger, not caring if he cut too deep—Olliebollen could clear any scratches. Jay thought spiderwebs were supposed to be stronger than steel, but the dagger cleaved through the thick bundle like cotton, squealing with resistance only when Jay dragged the blade too far and struck Makepeace's shield, which had gotten bundled with the rest of him.

It didn't take long until the threads that remained couldn't shoulder the burden of those severed and Makepeace tumbled out into a kneeling position. He rose and immediately grabbed Jay by the shoulder, jostling him with warm feeling, a warm smile, nothing save genuine happiness at what Jay managed to do. He said something, the actual words played no more distinctly than a buzz, but they didn't matter. Somehow, Jay discovered himself smiling back, grabbing Makepeace's shoulder in return, a moment of mutual celebration uncomplicated by any doubts or cynical thoughts—sheer, unfettered triumph.

"I did it," Jay said.

"Indeed you did my good, good man," said Makepeace. "Now what say you we clean up these—*Back!*"

The congratulatory hand on Jay's shoulder became a deathgrip that tugged Jay with such force that he stumbled behind Makepeace the same moment Makepeace hefted his shield and the full brunt of Pluxie's power hit it.

Jay could only think, as he and Makepeace skidded back—what the hell? Pluxie rose to her full height and her eyes shone crimson even as her head became shadowed in the forest canopy. The wound on her shoulder when Makepeace speared her, and the wounds on her side and stomach where the broken shaft entered and exited—all were sealed by white stitches. But that shouldn't matter. Sealing the wounds wouldn't do a thing for the obliterated internal organs. At best it would slow the bleeding.

Did Pluxie concentrate all her remaining strength into one final, rage-induced lunge? But that didn't fit the way she reared up now, already prepared to attack again, as though she wasn't inhibited at all. Lalum's thread—could she—

"Oh! I get it," Olliebollen said cheerfully. "That gross spider girl can heal too. (Just not as good as me of course.)"

Of course. (Lalum herself, barely visible behind Pluxie, slinked away covering her face the moment Olliebollen called her gross.) It completely slipped Jay's mind that her magic might be something like that. Fuck! Why didn't he go on the offensive when he first brought down the bear? Why did he run for the dagger to free Makepeace? If he attacked first, he could've won the fight against the three and made sure they stayed down.

His goodwill depleted in an instant. He didn't even give a shit that Makepeace raised his shield and blocked another berserker swing from Pluxie's enormous claws. That oaf, that smiling piece of shit, unable to think for a second what made the most tactical sense, concerned only with breaking free himself so he could steal the glory. And Jay went along with it, duped by positive feeling, the moment he let his guard down for one fucking second!

He didn't have time to berate himself. So far Makepeace managed to, almost absurdly, keep the bear from breaking through the meager defense of his shield, even though he had to grip the shield steady with both hands and brace his legs against the ground and even then got pushed back a full foot with each strike. It didn't seem like such an ordinary-sized shield should've been able to block attacks from a monster that took down entire trees, but Jay didn't question that either—he focused on the opportunity in front of him.

His hand dropped the dagger and went for the sword sheathed on Makepeace's hip. The moment it gripped the hilt, though, a single piercing word from Makepeace stopped him: "No."

Stopped him only for a moment. He refused to blindly obey what Makepeace told him. He tugged and the blade began to slither from its sheath.

"I SAID NO."

Makepeace released one hand from his shield to bat Jay's hand from his sword. At the same moment Pluxie struck again and this time, without the full resistance of every bit of his musculature behind it, Makepeace's defense broke. He rocketed backward, into Jay, and the both of them together soared through the air in a howling glob until they struck shatteringly hard the first thing that rose to stop them: a tree.

By the time they bounced off and hit the ground Jay already knew he had at least seven broken bones, or at least searing pain speared him in seven distinct locations. He landed with Makepeace sprawled on top of him, and so his eyes were riveted to Makepeace's arm, which existed in three pieces, tethered only by single sinewy strands of tendon.

"Don't give up! You can do it!" Olliebollen pixie dusted them back to perfect condition as they rolled away from each other and only stopped themselves from furiously demanding to know what the fuck the other was doing thanks to the omnipresent tremble caused by Pluxie's thrashing as she plowed through trees after them.

The trees she destroyed wound up getting in her way as their big bushy tops collapsed all around her. That slowed her down enough for Makepeace to leap to his feet, pull a small silver chime from around his neck, and blow the sharpest and loudest whistle Jay had ever heard.

Nothing happened.

Pluxie kept bulldozing forward. Trees cascaded but her red eyes remained rooted upon them, and her claws flashed with razor sharpness as the distance closed. Still Makepeace refused to reach for his sheathed sword and Jay shouted: "Why?!"

"It's not the bear we're fighting," Makepeace said.

At that moment, as Pluxie burst through the final layer of trees and hurtled unimpeded toward them, something rushed from the side. Primed by Makepeace's last comment, Jay raised his bat, but it wasn't Charm or Charisma or even Lalum charging them, it was Makepeace's big black horse, which in a single deft and semicircular arc Makepeace managed to mount while seizing Jay by his jacket collar and hoisting him aboard. If "aboard" was how you referred to being on a horse.

Didn't matter. Instantly they were galloping away, Makepeace shouting "Hyaa!" as he leaned over the pommel of his saddle, Jay with no option but to wrap his arms around Makepeace's waist and hold on, his bat awkwardly lodged against Makepeace's chest.

Then he realized Olliebollen didn't make it onto the horse with them.

He looked over his shoulder to try and spot her receding into the distance but only the gigantic form of Pluxie swelled in his view, barreling behind them without losing an inch of ground despite the full tilt gallop of Makepeace's horse. No—it was gaining ground. The horse couldn't run fast enough, not with two people riding it.

Jay noticed something else about Pluxie from his new vantage. Above her shone three silvery strings, stretching from her back into the trees like marionette strings. Lalum's

webbing—although Lalum herself was nowhere to be found. For several sheer seconds Jay stared dumbfounded until everything snapped cleanly into place and every confusion resolved at once. Lalum didn't heal Pluxie. She was maneuvering her body with webs. Pluxie still roared, but everything else, her running, her rearing, her swiping of claws—that was Lalum's doing.

Which was why Makepeace refused to attack Pluxie with the sword. Even if he finished the bear cleanly with a single stroke, that wouldn't stop the claws from retaliating—in fact, it would leave him open, because he needed to lower his shield to attack. The idea of running away, then, possessed a certain degree of intelligence.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Jay *guessed* he could give Makepeace credit for that.

Partial credit. Were the strings manipulating Pluxie ruled by physical reality, it would've been smart to escape her range entirely. But three strings, no matter how tough, couldn't have moved Pluxie with such perfect finesse. As they galloped farther and farther away and Pluxie kept gradually gaining, Jay knew that what Lalum was doing could not possibly operate under such logical rules. All they were doing was slowly running out of time.

The landscape of the forest shifted, the air became damper and Jay felt cold pricks of condensation while watching Pluxie claw ever closer. The trees grew sparse, replaced by big fluorescent mushrooms and sheets of mossy ivy that dangled and drifted. The solid clop-clop of the horse's hooves turned to a mushier, wetter noise. Where once was only impenetrable darkness rose a pale aura conducted along rising white mist, and although Makepeace shouted, "Hold on! I have a plan," Jay hardly cared, mired as he was in mental invective, toward stupid Makepeace who gambled everything on running away and separated them from their healer, toward stupid himself for not noticing Lalum's strings earlier, toward this whole stupid farce of a fight—the ghost of his previous triumph just that, a ghost—and in the midst of these and more thoughts far too clear for his liking they jumped.

In that suspended moment, with the whole bundle of Jay's insides hefted up into his ribcage via the odd intersection of multiple forces of movement, the bitter and biting thoughts ceased. Jay watched the mist that rose beneath them and the sea of shiny wet mud that underpinned it, mud so thin it seemed to slosh. Then, Makepeace was no longer in front of him. Jay's arms wrapped around nothing and he pitched forward as he watched Makepeace disappear upward, dangling from a thick hanging vine as his other hand finally reached for the hilt of his sword.

Everything ended before the horse—and Jay—hit the ground.

Pluxie, at Lalum's beck, continued close enough behind that Jay felt her hot snorting breath brush the hairs poking out from under his hat. But Makepeace was now above her, and it took only a single slash, a slash Jay heard more than saw, to sever all three of Lalum's strands.

The horse landed, awkwardly amid a bramble of broken branches, and tossed Jay off. He flipped through the air, through a bundle of hanging ivy that slapped and then slowed him, until a bulbously withered tree stopped him, but thankfully not fatally or even bone-breakingly so. In fact, he wasn't even scratched. But he rolled over, braced against the knobby roots at the base of the tree, and expelled an exhausted and strangely relieved puff of pent-up breath as he watched Pluxie lie within the mud.

She was not dead, still, but without the strings her movements became arduous as the mud seeped into her white fur and billowed up all around her. Limbs dragged wretched. The great body swelled without managing any meaningful change and even that exertion wrenched from Pluxie an agonized cry, no longer describable as a roar, a jagged thing that brought up with it chunks of her devastated interior. Her head lolled and her eyes, a fading sheen, peered tearfully toward Jay as he sat and watched, aware more and more of the full and haggard breaths that filled and then depleted his chest.

Her body slowly sank. A bubbling rose about her as the liquid mud shifted into a quicksand pit, but even still she retained her stagnant slowness, her sense of suspended animation. Jay couldn't stop watching, even after a much sharper and more lively sound of pain from Makepeace's horse not far away, even after Makepeace himself slid down a vine and landed with a lot of clanking metal.

"Where's that faerie friend of yours? My horse's leg is broken. That thing can heal horses yes? Not simply people?"

Only the shoulders, one arm, and head of the bear remained now, the rest more quickly subsumed into the mud than Jay would've expected given the torpor of its movements.

Pluxie said: "Help..."

Makepeace turned his head toward her, glanced at Jay, and sighed. "If your faerie was here we could help her too I suppose."

"Help *her*?"

"Help... me..." Pluxie whispered, straining its neck with the last of its strength to keep above the swamp. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... Lord Jesus... Oh, Lord Jesus...!"

Then Pluxie's head vanished into the mud. Other than a few bubbles, not a thing remained on the surface.

That broke the thread. Jay gripped the side of the tree and pulled himself up. Messing up the fight left him feeling like shit already, and he didn't care for the implication of what Makepeace said, as though there was something to feel about letting Pluxie die. A pointless, meaningless moral quibble dredged out of the dirt. "Why would we help that thing? She tried to kill us."

"Do you think those girls look like monsters by choice? They're victims too. Victims of the archbishop." Makepeace stroked his horse's snout, calming it, a gesture unnecessary because it was already oddly calm despite its devastated foreleg. "Well. It doesn't matter now, does it. She's dead." He fired off a sign of the cross toward the now placid spot where Pluxie's gigantic body had been. "God rest that poor girl's soul."

In no universe would Jay be tricked into sentimentality for a slain monster. Yes, in an ideal world nobody would ever have to die, and he didn't intend to kill anyone more than he had to—he let those fucking harpies live in the graveyard, hadn't he? He felt sorry enough for them

to do that, hadn't he?—but that bear needed only one clean swipe to erase their entire torsos. He'd needed to hit it, and hit it hard. Why was Makepeace trying to guilt him?

"If you really care I can bring her back with the Staff of Lazarus when I get it," Jay said.

Makepeace stared at him, a surprised expression on his face. "Jay—"

"Anyway, you don't seem to care that the 'poor girl' probably killed your girlfriend."

"Who?" Makepeace's surprise transformed into an instant of genuine confusion before he realized. "Oh, that. Sansy's fine—most likely."

Unbelievable. First Makepeace tried to guilt trip and then he talked about Sansaime like that, Jay didn't know what to say. It wasn't like Jay cared about Sansaime either but the hypocrisy floored him, emblemized by that dopey doofus expression on Makepeace's immaculately punchworthy face. Jay advanced, not sure what he intended to do, a roiling glut of pissed-offness and shame and embarrassment all merging together, that stupid bear-woman pleading as she sank into the mud and him fucking up the fight and—and Jay didn't do anything. He stood there, breathing heavily.

Makepeace's befuddlement broke into a smile. "Jay. Jay, my good man. I meant no offense. Truth be told, I care not one whit what happens to these wretched women. If you ask me, they're all better off dead, the state they've fallen to."

"Then why did you say—"

"To be polite," Makepeace said simply.

Jay tried to parse what exactly that meant but found his thoughts muddled. He realized that for some reason he'd gotten emotional over basically nothing and he didn't know why. He scratched under his chin, where one day's worth of stubble scratched back.

"My sister, Mayfair," Makepeace said to fill the void, "she's quite the bleeding heart in regards to such somber affairs as life and death. Always seeking some way to find for us all salvation. Didn't I say yesterday you reminded me of her? I thought I might look rather callous if I didn't extend at least a token gesture of mercy."

What exactly had Jay ever done to give Makepeace the impression he'd care about something like that? All Makepeace ever saw Jay do was try to pawn Olliebollen to a fairy organ harvester. Even if Jay did call off the deal the moment it had a chance to actually materialize. Shit.

Because Jay still wasn't talking, Makepeace shrugged. "Maybe you're more similar to me than I thought."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Makepeace's hands went up in a humble, almost mock supplication that did nothing to supplicate. "Nothing. I simply talk too much for my own good. I do have a penchant for

getting myself into bloody noses. Forget all that, if I truly wanted to be polite I ought to have started with this: Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving my life of course! I was a great big buffoon and got myself stuck in a web right away, but you kept your head and pulled off some truly impressive maneuvers. Were it not for you, those women would've gotten the better of me and Sansy both. For that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

No irony. No smirk. No quip as garnish, only that full stop, and even melancholy etched into those features, so at odds with the oppressively jovial douchebag Jay had taken Makepeace for from the start.

Embarrassing. Not for Makepeace—for Jay. Because now Jay felt like the worse person. That must've been Makepeace's whole point in apologizing. To jam the knife deep. Not to mention, reminding Jay of what he did right only made him remember more what he did wrong. When the failures blot out the victories like that, why bother trying?

Anyway, continued aggression would only make him look even more foolish, so his anger oozed out instantly, leaving only the sensation of labored breathing in its gradual return to normalcy. He shifted his glance slightly to avoid staring Makepeace back in the eye.

"Thanks. You saved me too. I guess."

Silence. Makepeace didn't seem fully satisfied by the response—he must've expected Jay to lash out so he could maintain the superior position—but he made no attempt to erase the moment with a joke. They both stood there, a few feet from where the corpse of a poor girl lay buried in virulent mud.

The moment persisted until a shaft of light sheared through the trees and landed between them. They both looked up as from the light descended a spiral of butterflies, wings arrayed in rainbow patterns, butterflies who as Jay tilted the brim of his hat and squinted understood not to be butterflies at all, but fairies. Hundreds and hundreds of fairies.

"Welcome, esteemed guests!" the fairies spoke in chorus, their multitudinous voice one singular and harmonic chime. "Welcome, to where love blossoms in eternal spring! Welcome, to where all is mirth and concord! Welcome, to where those who wander never wish to leave! Welcome—welcome—welcome, to the court of Flanz-le-Flore!"

"Ah," said Makepeace cheerily, "now we're truly fucked."

Trickery, Stage Machinery

One world's components cascaded, so smoothly oiled that sleekness alone might entertain if not novelty, but otherwise this microcosmic piece of clockwork meant nothing to the much greater world it inhabited, a world of grids and matrices, a world of tables and integers, a world of taxes and revenue. The switches flipped. Here the parts grated, here they scraped with metal shrieks, but never did they fail, and their lack in presentation they compensated via the inexorable pull of their order.

That order led to a one-story house in a Cleveland suburb, a house with three bedrooms and two baths (one bedroom having for the past five years operated as a fitness room), a house ostensibly owned by Avery Fenster Waringcrane, 42-year-old widow and mother of two, although if you asked her to produce the property deed she would've become blank in the eyes.

Avery gripped her scalp through the pretty red hair she failed to pass to either of her children and demonstrated that blank-eyed expression now, lips barely moving as she muttered: "I failed."

"You haven't *failed*, Mother," said Shannon Waringcrane, 24, elder of the aforementioned children. "Try to be less ridiculous."

Shannon received the text as she pulled into the parking complex for work that morning: "OMG! Your brother is missing. Come ASAP!!!" Of course, Shannon couldn't simply skip work, and knowing her worthless brother he probably wasn't missing at all, so she ignored the message until she finished for the day, the last before the Thanksgiving holiday. When she finally trekked across the city with her coworker and boyfriend, Dalt, she found Mother's house dark, freezing, and fusty with alcohol. A bottle of vermouth, three-quarters empty, languished on the kitchen counter.

"I've been such a bad mom." Mother's shellshocked expression devolved into a disconsolate sob. "I've been so bad to you and Jay."

"You haven't been *bad*. Now tell me what happened already."

In such a worthless state they found Mother and in such a worthless state Mother remained, insensible to Shannon's demands for information. Dalt, generally irrelevant, wandered off to the side and admired a shelf of photographs of the Waringcrane family.

"I tried to be good. I really tried. But it was so hard after your father went away. I tried my best though, you know that right Shan-bear? You know I've always tried, right?"

Shannon grunted at the infantile nickname. Worse than a child, begging for approbation—How utterly risible. Unfortunately, Shannon couldn't laugh. She'd already confirmed Jay was nowhere inside the house, a feat previously thought impossible, so she needed answers.

"When was the last time you saw him, Mother. Mother. Listen to me."

She snapped her fingers in Mother's face until Mother blinked and gawked openmouthed at the hand and managed, barely, upon three more repetitions of the question, to respond:

"I don't—I don't remember!" Immediately segueing into a fresh bout of tears. Miserable. Even in the dimness Mother's red hair shone, and Shannon's thoughts went to the mirror of her own apartment, where she uncovered a single long gray strand running from the absolute peak of her head.

After significant cajoling, including an endless slew of more specific questions ("Did you see him today? Did you see him yesterday? What were you doing?" Et cetera), Shannon managed to extract a rough timeline. Mother last saw Jay the previous morning—Tuesday, November 21—eating breakfast before she left to buy groceries. In lieu of any chronological precision from Mother, Shannon fished the grocery store receipt from the recycling bin and placed this encounter between 10 and 11 AM, which from Shannon's recollection was unusually early for Jay to be awake. Mother didn't see Jay afterward, but for the rest of yesterday she assumed he was where he always was, locked in his room playing computer games. The next day—Wednesday, November 22, also known as today—Mother fell into a tizzy because she misplaced her car keys and knocked on Jay's door to ask if he knew where they were, but he didn't answer. After an hour of searching she found the keys and knocked again to tell him she found them; still no answer.

The next part of the story became an ordeal all its own. A premonition of catastrophe had gripped Mother as she stared at that silent door. She recalled, in superfluous detail after her sparse account of dates and times, the clamminess that crept from her fingertips, the palpitations of her heart, the rapidity of her breathing as she reached for the doorknob. The retelling came amid sporadic pauses to sob, pauses that sometimes lasted several minutes, as she attempted to intimate—without being able to say—what she expected to find waiting in Jay's room, something perhaps similar to the state in which she and Shannon discovered Dad all those years ago. But when the door flew open nothing so dramatic greeted her. Jay was simply missing.

At one point during this brutal tug-of-war, Dalt accidentally knocked over a framed photo of Shannon at age eleven, which of course rendered Mother useless for the next fifteen minutes as Dalt fumbled around the closet for a broom and swept up the shards as best he could. Shannon hated that photo anyway; she had braces.

When it all finally ended, Shannon asked: "Did you call the police."

"Hh—huh?"

"The police, Mother. Did you call them."

"Don't, don't you have to be missing for twenty-four hours first...?"

"That's a myth, Mother. Besides, you last saw him over a day ago anyway."

"I guess that's right..."

Shannon didn't want to call the police. Jay probably left somewhere without saying; he'd be back before dark. Maybe for the first time in his life he made a friend, a little nerd friend to play video games with, and he went to their house for a playdate. Maybe he finally reached the emotional maturity of a Kindergartener, with all the sense of one too. The only wrinkle with the theory was that Jay left his phone behind. But who knew why he did anything? Absolute worthlessness.

"Oh Shan-bear, what if he's been kidnapped? What if somebody broke in while I was at the grocery store—"

"Broke in? Broke in. Mother. Mother, please."

"What if he—what if he—like your father—"

If Jay fucking killed himself Shannon would go down to Hell personally and kill him again. Mother already lived through that shit once, even if Shannon personally thought her father deserved it.

"He doesn't have the spine," Shannon said, which didn't console Mother as much as expected.

Out of nowhere swooped Dalt. "Yo Mrs. Dub," he said, his workplace-mandated tie now untied and limp around his neck, "you don't gotta worry about a thing. It's all gonna be totally fine. Your son's just having a fun time around town and forgot to tell you, one-hundred-percent guarantee. I did that shit every weekend when I was his age. Dad kicked my ass for it too."

Something about his cadence, his tone, his sedately masculine voice—something about it finally managed to soothe Mother in a way Shannon utterly failed to do for the past hour. It took no further persuading; after saying "Thank you, Dalton, you're so kind," Mother became placid at once, sitting quietly as Shannon and Dalt moved to the kitchen to confer.

"So you think your little bro's just hanging out somewhere?" Dalt asked.

Shannon crossed her arms and gripped her chin tight between thumb and forefinger. "I have a hard time believing in a crisis, at least."

"He's technically been missing since yesterday though."

"Maybe. Maybe he was in his room yesterday and only left this morning."

"So we call the cops or what?"

On one hand, police tromping around the house asking questions might spiral Mother into hysterics. On the other, a full scale manhunt would be exactly what Jay deserved for being a useless mooch who lacked the basic courtesy to tell Mother where he was going. Besides, calling the police was the proper process.

She removed her phone from the pocket of her trim blue blazer and hit the digits: 9-1-1.

"911 what is your emergency."

"Yes," said Shannon with a tilt of her head and one hand on her hip. "I'd like to report a missing person."

From there, everything proceeded efficiently. The dispatcher, a bored-sounding woman with an indiscernible accent, asked a sleight of ordinary questions: Full name (both of the missing person and the person calling—and Shannon had to spell out "Waringcrane" three times to get it through), date of birth, where and when they were last seen, et cetera. Shannon relayed the information she collected from Mother in stiff, formal, impersonal tones, at times shooting Dalt a look whenever the dispatcher put her on hold, which happened more often than Shannon expected.

Then it ended. The dispatcher said: "Alright, I'll file a missing persons report for Mr. Jay Waringcrane. Thank you."

"That's it?" said Shannon. "You're not going to send someone down here to check out his room or something?" Frankly, if they didn't come it'd relieve her of mother-assuaging duties, but she assumed it was an unavoidable part of the process.

Another long wait. Dalt leaned in, trying to hear, and Shannon flicked at him to make him back up.

Finally a new voice came on the line, sharper and male. "Mrs. Waringcrane."

"Miss."

"Miss Waringcrane. Do I understand correctly that you're reporting your brother, Jay Waringcrane, missing?"

"That's what I told the dispatcher. Who are you?"

Brief pause. "Miss Waringcrane. Rest assured, we'll be filing a missing persons report on your behalf."

Shannon threw up a wild shrug. "Yes, the dispatcher said so. Who are you? Aren't you going to send someone down here?"

"Miss Waringcrane—"

"You don't have to say my name every time."

"Miss Waringcrane, at this time, we don't believe that to be necessary—"

"Why not?"

"Miss Waringcrane."

Shannon turned her head away from the phone and expelled an exasperated gasp. She composed herself over Dalt's repeated silent questioning and returned to the phone. "Yes?"

"Miss Waringcrane, given the details you've provided, we don't believe there's a need to send an officer to your house."

"You still haven't told me why."

"It's procedure. Based on your report there are no signs of foul play. You yourself mentioned you believe your brother left voluntarily. Now we'll still put up a bulletin. But if we find him and it turns out he did in fact leave of his own volition, we have no obligation to report his whereabouts to you."

For a few moments, Shannon stared in silent disbelief, her eyes focused on the open bottle on the counter, with a glass beside it still smeared with the last drops of vermouth. "*That's* procedure?"

"Given the nature of your particular report, yes. Your brother doesn't meet the criteria for what we call an *expedited* search. He's not in need of medical attention, he's not mentally impaired, and he wasn't abducted or kidnapped. Those criteria in mind, we'll do what we can with the resources we have available."

It took everything for Shannon not to call the man a useless piece of shit right then and there. Only respect for the institution of the police held her back—respect for the institution, not the fallible individuals operating within it. She was no expert on missing persons procedure but she could smell, *smell* the veneer of botchery underlying this entire conversation, the shoddy craftsmanship and the distinctly bumbling whiff that imbued every lazy government payroll stiff unconcerned with upholding the proper way of doing things. She didn't know exactly how, but something wasn't right here. Something. Yet the man spoke with so much confidence. He didn't sound like a bumblefuck, despite the smell. Was it not simple laziness? The concept of willful incompetence defied comprehension. Nonetheless, she lacked the institutional knowhow to challenge the criteria he stated. Shannon Waringcrane was a tiny but integral piece of the much broader machine of the world, crafted to minute specialization. Had the question revolved around tax codes, she could've eviscerated him. But policework lay beyond her narrow scope. She lacked even the most basic ammunition to fire, no matter how strongly she intuited an error.

"Don't worry, Miss Waringcrane," the man said. "If your brother wants to be found, we'll find him."

The call ended.

Amid a bevy of now vocal questions from Dalt, Shannon remained mindful of Mother and calmly walked out of the kitchen, through the entryway living room, out the front door, to Dalt's monstrous SUV, and into the driver's seat. She shut the door behind her, leaving Dalt gesticulating wildly outside, and she screamed.

When she finished screaming she exited, patted down her blazer, and expelled a deep breath.

"What the fuck happened Shannon?"

"I've filed a missing persons report."

"So they're sending someone down here?"

She calmly and precisely explained what the policeman told her: Jay's case didn't meet criteria for such "expedited" metrics of searching.

"Wow." Dalt pocketed his hands and took in the breadth of the suburban culdesac. "Didn't know it worked that way."

And Shannon was already on her phone, already looking it up, already typing into the search engine: "What happens if police think a missing person left voluntarily?" And amazingly, the results supported what the policeman said. The police would investigate, but not in an "expedited" fashion. And if they found the person and the person didn't want to be found, they wouldn't reveal his location. Utter nonsense! Even if it was all proper procedure, the police sure assessed Jay's case quickly, based on only basic details. More importantly, someone shouldn't simply be *allowed* to disappear like that. Someone shouldn't be able to say "No" to the logical order of the world and abandon it entirely.

"I mean, it makes sense." Dalt's attention wandered up, to the murky, cloudless sky. "I bet most people who go missing do it on purpose. You don't know how many times I wanted to run away from home growing up. I guess if you're a kid they don't let you do it, but your brother's nineteen now. Why can't he leave if he wants?"

Shannon, for a brief but intense moment, wanted to seize his loose necktie and wind it tight around his throat. But the moment passed. Or turned inward, not at herself, but at the mental image of her brother, her utterly worthless brother.

Jay's entire life Mother made excuses for him. When he did the bare minimum and barely scraped through middle and high school, it was always: "Oh, he's simply not challenged enough. Oh, he's simply having trouble adjusting to the way school works." Never a word of admonishment, never even a suggestion that Jay should have to actually try, should actually exhibit effort to earn his place in this world. Shannon earned it. Never once in her life had she not earned it. Valedictorian. Mock trial. Varsity track and field. She went to a good state college—summa cum laude. She got a career at a prestigious government institution, paid her own rent, became self-sufficient immediately upon graduation. She did every possible thing right, every possible thing the way it was *supposed* to be done.

Yet Mother floated in a world all her own, a world insensible to these objective metrics of value. No matter what Shannon showed up to say, no matter how great an accolade she achieved, it was: "Oh, that's so nice, dear."

Oh, that's so nice, dear.

Oh, that's so nice, dear.

Oh, that's so nice, dear.

And Jay was "so nice" too. And Jay was a "dear" too. No matter how brazenly he failed. No matter how—

Dalt's arms wrapped around her from behind. They held her steady as he pressed his lips to the nape of her neck. "It's okay," he said in that reassuring voice of his, "it's going to be okay, Shannon."

He didn't understand why she was upset, but she let him reassure her anyway. It was *his* value, after all. But the moment his wandering hands got an inch too frisky, she broke away with a single tug and started back toward the house. "Well, I suppose that's that."

Dalt dogged her with pleading puppy eyes, but when he got the message from her rigid body language he acquiesced with a sigh. "You're right though, dick move from your brother. Doesn't he know tomorrow's Thanksgiving? Terrible timing."

Right. Shannon couldn't wait to suffer through an entire turkey dinner listening to Mother bewail the absence of a son who couldn't give less of a shit about her.

"You know though," Dalt continued as they reentered the house, "we could do a little investigating of our own."

"What do you mean."

"Your brother left his phone behind, right? If we cracked his passcode I bet we'd find some clues about where he went. It's not like he had a car right? He must've left *some* kind of trail."

"We're not police, Dalt. Or hackers."

But all of a sudden Dalt was excited, more excited even than when he'd been pawing her body. "Think about it. My Dad got locked out of his phone once and we were able to get the code still. It was easy even."

"Shannon? Dalton? Is everything okay?" Mother said from the other room.

"Everything's great Mrs. Dub. We just got an idea." Now he tugged Shannon's sleeve, dragging her toward Jay's room. "Come on come on."

Dalt donning his detective cap, making himself more important than he was, but what could Shannon do except humor him? She preferred to purge this stupid Jay episode from her mind, let him realize the only world he really wanted was his bedroom, wait for him to slink back as voluntarily as he fled, and then chew his head off. But once Dalt got a dumb idea into his head he couldn't be stopped.

Jay's room turned out not to be the rancid maelstrom she expected. Instead of a feral animal's den, strewn with torn and eclectic bedding and half-eaten foodstuffs, she entered a place barren and empty. But not neat. The bed wasn't made as much as vaguely smoothed over, almost as if when he last rolled out of it the whole thing managed to, by pure chance, shuffle into a semblance of order. No posters on the walls, the floor unvacuumed but devoid of clutter. On a desk sat the two thousand dollar "gaming computer" Mother unadvisedly purchased for him as a high school graduation gift. If one looked more carefully (as Shannon always did), one might notice crammed under the bed and in the half-open closet the hidden disaster accumulated over the course of nineteen years, toys and games originating from

every point of Jay's short life, infancy to adolescence. Building blocks, Candyland, toy racecars, footballs, baseball gloves, Legos, Pokemon, a stuffed giraffe, green army men—boy's things, things purchased for a boy by parents incapable of perceiving a personality within their child beyond the static default of his gender; much as they had for her. But unlike Shannon, Jay lacked the drive to even toss out these single-use knickknacks and build his own self, and so the surface placidity of the room bristled underneath with so many rejected offerings.

The phone was on the bed, the one outward piece of haphazardness, left as though tossed there. Dalt grabbed it immediately and confirmed the lock screen that prevented entry without a 4-digit code.

"I assume your mom tried stuff like birthdays and all that."

"She probably tried nothing."

"Doesn't matter anyway. Here's how I did it with my dad." Dalt fell into Jay's swivel desk chair and banged the spacebar with a sharp finger, turning off the screensaver and showing a desktop background swarmed by program shortcuts for about five hundred video games, with names that included words like "Tale" and "Legend" and "Quest." "The trick is, if you've got an email account associated with your phone, you can actually send yourself a recovery code. Let's see if he's signed in."

Dalt opened a web browser and went to Gmail and sure enough, Jay was already signed into his account. An unconscionable lapse of security, but Jay of course couldn't care less about that, given he never left the room anyway.

Switching between Jay's phone and computer, Dalt tapped a few buttons and clacked a few keys. A new email appeared in Jay's inbox. Dalt opened it, tapped Jay's phone while reading, and held the phone up for Shannon to see. With a voice he probably thought was cool but only made him sound like a doofus, he said: "*I'm in.*"

"Don't get any ideas. You're no hacker, my brother merely has zero concept of account security. Or maybe he didn't care." Probably he didn't care. Which aggravated her much more.

"Now let's see who he was talking to." Dalt glanced through the last few text messages. "Hm! It appears your brother was talking to nobody."

"No surprise."

"However!" Dalt held the word for dramatic flair even as Shannon folded her arms and tapped her foot, clear signs that he willfully ignored. "I bet absolutely anything we'll find what we need if we check the history of his map app. You said he never leaves the house right? If he went somewhere, he would've needed to look up how to get there. Lemme just open the app... go to the timeline... and BOOM."

He leapt up, rattling the chair, shoving the phone nearly into her face to display a blue-and-orange line snaking its way across a map of Cleveland. "He only used this app once in the

past month. When did he use it, you might ask? Monday. The day before the last time your mom saw him. Coincidence, my dear Shannon? I think not!"

"You embarrass me when you talk like that."

And because he already knew he embarrassed her, he did it again. "Chalk one up for the Daltster! Modern day Sherlock Holmes. Ace fucking detective, that's right!" Big sheepish grin on a smugly confident face. Shannon focused on the app's route. It led from their current location to an address in downtown Cleveland, close to the lakeside. The route zigged and zagged, and the directions listed beside it indicated several sources of public transportation. Tapping the destination brought up basic information and a picture of the exterior: A dumpy, unassuming downtown office building.

"So let's go check it out yeah?" said Dalt. The correct thing to do would be to call the police again and provide this new information to the case. But Dalt read her mind and responded, in his own Daltish way: "Come *onnnnn* Shannon, the police were giving you the reacharound, they don't fucking care. We can handle this ourselves and be back in time for dinner. Easy."

"The entire point of authorities is that they understand their business better than us. Which is why we should rely on them—"

"I *am* an authority, Shannon! If nothing else, tracking people down is what I do. I mean, your brother isn't evading taxes like the guys I'm used to, but it's the same fucking thing. Come on Shannon. I can *do* this."

Despite her previous protest, Shannon had already been considering. It still struck her as vigilantism. But when her eyes settled on Jay's bed, at the junk shoved under it, she realized maybe this was in fact something she had to do, that no police officer could manage. The police might know detective work, but they didn't know Jay. Nobody really did, not even Shannon. Certainly not Mother. But of all humanity, Shannon knew him better than any other. Knew exactly his utter lack of worth and purpose in this world. Knew exactly the need to drag him back into the machine kicking and screaming if need be. The police thought it was okay for someone to simply disappear. Only Shannon, it seemed, knew better. And that made this her job. Her role.

"Fine," she said, a single sharp exhalation more breath than word. Dalt bellowed a boyish whoop, seized her by the shoulders, and danced her rigid body away, only stopping to tell Mother they'd be back soon. Mother, sedate, waved tiredly from the couch, eyes glazed.

As they got in Dalt's SUV, Shannon stared at the route on Jay's phone and wondered: Where the Hell did Jay go exactly?

—

Into a worse world Jay Waringcrane tumbled.

A thousand fairies cycloned around him, chirping and singing, their previous choral sense devolving into cacophonous blare. Out of the mixture individual forms sometimes surfaced and what surprised Jay most, a distinct fact onto which he could anchor himself among the pandemonium, was that the fairies did not look much like Olliebollen. In fact, most looked nothing like her. Some were gnat-like, some the size of children, some with insect features and some with human, some nude and some swaddled in clothes stitched of leaves or flowers, some with mushroom caps, some in gossamer gowns. Some were stumpy and fat, more like gnomes or hobgoblins, with warts on their faces. Some lacked wings altogether and flew on the backs of birds or insects. No pattern or theme unified the mass, not even something as simple as "elegance." In fact, in this frenzy, even the fairest or most serene of them produced not one ounce of poise.

While many zoomed up to boop Jay's nose or dance upon the brim of his hat, they remained far more cautious in approaching Makepeace, who kept a tight hand gripped on Jay's shoulder. Jay thought he understood the distinction: Makepeace wore metal armor, and the fairies didn't seem to like metal. Jay held up his bat in front of him and that also slowed the fairies' approach, but they found ways to flit past his flimsy guard and bug him nonetheless.

And whatever Jay did didn't matter. He and Makepeace—and Makepeace's horse—were floating, carried by some unseen but steady pull toward an unknown destination. The court, the fairies kept babbling: the court of Flanz-le-Flore.

"Say as little as possible," Makepeace whispered. "Show no emotion."

Easy, thought Jay.

The mass deposited them onto ground that rose up out of nowhere. Jay and Makepeace wobbled and grabbed onto the other to keep from falling (the horse remained stolid despite its broken leg) as the tornado of fairies dispersed into smaller and looser whirlwinds, stragglers dropping onto the floor to toddle this way or that and others gripping long and luminescent boughs of trees thatched into a roof over their heads. Light shone through in spotlights; the scene before them—literally a scene, given it looked like a theater—glittered.

A wooden circle served as the stage and onto it various fairies plopped, rolling and tossing in strange and almost parodic assortments of "formal wear"—shinier daisies than the rest. They cleared their throats and puffed their chests and unraveled papyrus scrolls and when they spoke their breath blew dandelion seeds that floated up and fluttered in the light. In scattered voices, they said—

"Gentleman and gentleman and horse!"

"We present to you!"

"On this fine autumn day!"

"In our lush and wondrous wood!"

"A moment of purest bliss and pleasure!"

"Tasted by no human in centuries!"

"Behold, dear friends:"

"Our frolicsome and festive Queen Flanz-le-Flore!"

The fairies on the floor and in the trees and fluttering back and forth all rose a raucous cheer. Makepeace's grip on Jay's shoulder tightened to the point of pain, as if he expected Jay to do something foolish and wanted to warn him off it, even though Jay planned nothing whatsoever. Onto the stage descended a throne of gnarled sticks, some budding bright red leaves.

Seated on the throne was a woman who might have been human. She looked only slightly shorter than one, and was proportioned like one, and had a human face, and human hair, albeit in shades of green—her skin slightly tinted green too. A flower crown adorned her head. Instead of clothes, something like henna covered her arms and legs and torso, the designs as varied as the court over which she presided, entire whimsical and rustic tales in tattoo: a bard on a rock fluting to deer, a shepherd sleeping while a wolf stalked his sheep, a lovesick girl baring a dagger at her breast. Antithetical to the rest of her nearly nude appearance, though, the queen wore two beat-up brown boots a size too large for her.

Her wide eyes swallowed Jay and Makepeace in expectation. But Makepeace said not to talk, so Jay didn't, and they wound up waiting a long time in silence before the queen said:

"I am Queen Flanz-le-Flore of the Court of Flanz-le-Flore!"

Jay and Makepeace continued not to speak.

The queen scratched the fur of a badger sleeping in her lap. Her eyes somehow grew wider, and Jay became aware that her gaze was trained specifically on him.

"And you are the hero from another world!"

More silence. Many of the fairies watching became bored and started fooling around. Two on the stage whipped out sticks and began a fencing duel. Everyone else on the stage except the queen moved into a circle around the pair and cheered them on, and eventually, Flanz-le-Flore herself broke her stare to watch the mock swordfight. She even applauded the "winner," briefly waking her badger who yawned and went back to sleep.

Jay tried to communicate "This is stupid" to Makepeace with just a look. Makepeace nodded in agreement. Finally, breaking his own stricture, Makepeace relinquished Jay's shoulder, stepped forward, and said, "Now that introductions are over, how about my good man and I head along our merry way?"

The comment snapped Flanz-le-Flore's attention to them. "What was that? Oh yes, go ahead, ta-ta." She shooed them as she glanced back at a second mock swordfight, this time between the previous winner and what appeared to be an ordinary dormouse who only scampered away. But a moment later she jerked back and jabbed a finger at them. "No! Wait. Wait, wait,

wait. I had something so very important to tell you, hero. What was it again?" She glanced around her court. "Can anyone tell me what it was?"

A dumpy type fairy fluttered on comically undersized wings to whisper in her ear. She nodded, as though in only partial understanding, before finally grasping it. "Oh, yes. Right. So very right."

Her eyes drifted to the swordfight, which the mouse had won, and which now entered the third round: mouse versus sparrow, but this was apparently less interesting than the previous bouts, because her eyes snapped back and she said:

"You, hero, shall become my husband!"

"Fuck no," said Jay.

"Attendants, adorn the groom."

"I said no," said Jay, as a group of fairies approached carrying a crown and a ring, as though they'd been waiting for this exact moment all along. He waved his bat at them and they held back.

Makepeace stepped forward, extended a graceful and courteous gesture toward Flanz-le-Flore, donning his most princely smile and doffing his tricorn hat. "O beauteous queen of fae, neighbor and even sometime friend to my kingdom, the good hero has experienced much difficulty of late, and is in no proper state of mind to consider such serious matters of the heart. Would it be not prudent to allow him first to rest and reflect on your offer, so that your marriage might be one made in love's true embrace, rather than—"

He got no further, because Flanz-le-Flore snapped her fingers and Makepeace's head became a donkey's. The rest of the speech emerged as pneumatic braying, accordion-like.

The entire court erupted in laughter at the ass in princely armor, laughing and pointing and tumbling out of their trees and floating to the ground like feathers. The attendants attempting to crown Jay laughed, Flanz-le-Flore laughed, the dueling mouse and sparrow laughed, and Jay realized he was laughing too. He couldn't help it. Makepeace slowly realized his changed state. His inset eyes flickered alarm as his hands reached to pat his elongated snout and he brayed frantic dismay. But then Makepeace's brief moment of alarm passed. The braying changed from panic to laughter, as though he were in on the joke and not its butt, and he followed it with a bow and a folksy style of tapdancing made only slightly ungainly by the armor he wore. The ungainliness added to its comic mode. Soon the fairies were cheering as he danced. A troupe whistling on blades of grass set music to the clippity-clop of his boots and the synchronized clapping of a thousand tiny hands beat a pulse across the court. All eyes remained riveted to him, all except the horse, who only looked wherever it wanted, and Jay, who couldn't fucking stand it.

Makepeace varied the motions of his dance, seemingly becoming unbalanced as his big ass head weaved to and fro, culminating at the song's crescendo in a grossly overexaggerated slip that cartwheeled him to a kneeling position, arms spread to signal applause, which came in droves.

God damn that man.

"How surprising," said Flanz-le-Flore. "It may have taken four hundred years, but the seed of John Coke finally learned the meaning of humor. Well done, so very well done indeed!" As if in reward for his efforts, she snapped her fingers and Makepeace's head returned to normal. To focus on anything other than his resentment, Jay wondered if transformation was Flanz-le-Flore's unique magical ability, like how Olliebollen's was healing. Maybe as a fairy queen, Flanz-le-Flore could perform more than a single trick.

The court devolved into a loose gathering of chatter, many fairies swirling around Makepeace to sing him words of praise that he returned with his own debonair gestures that left them swirling away blushing. Jay wanted to mention that Makepeace was more than willing to let his girlfriend vivisect the lot of them, but even if they believed him that kind of petty theatrics would only make the situation worse. So much for "say as little as possible," "show no emotion," huh Makepeace?

Only after her long arms ringed around his shoulders and her body pressed against his from behind did Jay realize Flanz-le-Flore had left her throne in the hubbub. "Why so glum, my future husband? If you like, I can turn your friend back into an ass."

"He's not my friend. Get off me."

"Do you believe Flanz-le-Flore, Faerie of Transmogrification, isn't a meet enough wife for you? Is she not enchanting enough? Is that why you reject me, hero?"

He still held his bat. He only needed to snap it back to bean her in the face, and even if the hit was weak it'd be worth it to test what metal actually did to a fairy. Instead he remained rigid as a statue. "Why not marry *him* instead."

A quizzical hum tickled his ear. "The prince of Whitecrosse? But he's nothing, he's a sieve full of sand. Compared to a hero from the land of God, he's a, hm, an insignificance."

Even if he didn't hit her, he wanted to at least shake her off. Her hands pressed against his chest, while the rest of her floated behind him. But he felt like any movement at all, even the most brusque, would somehow be too intimate, and that absolutely revolted him to the concept of motion at all. "Everyone keeps calling me a hero. But I've done jack dick so far. I hate empty flattery."

"It doesn't matter what you've done. It's what you will do. I can feel it inside you, hero. Something no human in this world has—at least not to any substantial degree. But you, yes, oh very much so, I feel it. An essence. A power. *Humanity*."

All of Jay's grousing thoughts dispersed in an instance. "Humanity," he said. An image of Perfidia flashed in his mind. Her longwinded spiel. But it had to be a coincidence, the word had other definitions. "Are you saying Makepeace over there isn't human."

"He's a husk," Flanz-le-Flore whispered, drawing closer to him, the curves of her body pressing against his back. "They all are, the humans of this world—he's better off than most,

if only barely. But they're all husks. Drained dry of that essence. Empty of their God's love. All of them—save you. In you there's true power, power that can shape a world like this."

Pulled into a private existence within a seething crowd, Jay detected in her voice a faint ethereal echo. No longer did her words possess the aimless boredom from when she sat on the throne; this was no mere whimsy. But he couldn't believe what she was saying. She really was talking about Humanity, with a capital H.

"I know a fairy who said you guys don't believe in God."

"Oh yes, that—companion of yours." Flanz-le-Flore's fingers tightened on Jay's shoulders. "Olliebollen Pandelirium. We know all about him. He—"

"He?"

Flanz-le-Flore hesitated. "Okay I don't actually know if Ollie's a he or a she. But that's insignificant. They're one to watch out for. He, or she, or tweedle-deedle-dee, is in communion with beings beyond our ken." She paused, drifted into a new thought. "As for believing in God, well—belief has nothing to do with it. Those attuned to the ways of this world know with certainty: **There is no God here.** This land was created by no deity; merely a Master. But through that Door, perhaps..."

Her sibilant voice trailed off. Jay might've dismissed her rambling as inane pseudo-philosophy if he didn't know for a fact the hard reality underpinning it. A land created by no deity. Could Flanz-le-Flore know about *Perfidia*? Did *Perfidia* know Flanz-le-Flore knew about *Perfidia*? The question of how much *Perfidia* controlled this world came to him before, but now it took on a nature more than simply second-guessing everything that happened to him.

"Why does any of this matter to you," he said.

"Because what you have inside you, your Humanity, is a power no animus in this world, nor any relic either, can replicate: a power to change fate's predetermined course. Only you can shatter the fetters of this world's Master. Only you—*hero*."

No trace of her previous boredom remained. Her voice became intense; unshakeable in its presence. Despite the flurry of fairy activity that continued around them she and Jay seemed to coexist in a space of their own. Flanz-le-Flore possessed a scent, a pheromone, one he became cognizant of at that moment, mixed within the plying tones of her voice and the soft sensuality of her fingertips divided from his body only by the thinnest fabric of his jacket. But he withstood these sensory pleasures once before already, when Charm used her magic. He remained like stone now, his eyes set dead on the vague mush of color ahead of him. It was easier this time; her touch mostly just sickened him, and he wanted nothing more than for her to let go.

"But you are weak, hero, in other ways," Flanz-le-Flore continued, pressing her face against his cheek, chilling him with her complete lack of body heat. "You are frail. You are slow. Thus the mechanisms this world's Master put in place have dominion over you. Is it not so? A

beast's claws can still slay you. A man's sword can still spill your bowels. Force controls your actions. So you need a greater force if you wish to wrest control."

It was true. The threat of death was why he agreed to let Olliebollen stay, even though he suspected s/he worked for Perfidia. And the need for power of his own was why he agreed to go to the monastery, to take the relic that revived the dead.

"So become my husband, hero," Flanz-le-Flore whispered. "Join yourself in union with me and partake freely of the power I possess, both the power of my animus and the power of the court I command. And I shall become a whetstone upon which you may hone that Humanity inside you to a blade sharp enough to strike open this very world, to reign over it completely, to conquer even its devilish Master. Is that not a lovely offer, hero, a very lovely offer indeed?"

By now her entire body was coiled around him like a snake. One thigh shifted against his hip, one hand slithered along his side, and her green hair in plantlike strands brushed against his shoulders and made his neck itch. But despite the severe feminine authority she attempted to muster against him, despite the creeping paralysis within himself from such close contact, Jay could only feel sorry for her. Because really, he'd only been waiting for her to say her piece and shut up.

"No," he said.

He said it with less difficulty than he said it to the twins, or to Olliebollen, or to anyone else when they asked him to do something. Frankly, he didn't even need to think very hard, or logic anything out. If it was true what Flanz-le-Flore said about the people of this world being husks, puppets to the string of the "Master" Perfidia Bal Berith, then—

"You're only a husk yourself."

From his current position, a full swing of his bat would never reach someone so entwined with him. But he brought back his bat anyway, aiming only to jab the smooth circle of metal that served as its knob against the hand skittering fingers spiderlike across his chest.

She was quicker than he expected and even with the element of surprise she fluttered off him before the knob even came close. He whipped around, knowing that if she could transform him into something useless with a snap of her fingers he needed to attack hard and fast to stop her, but she danced out of his range, trailing an elegant arabesque of pixie dust in her wake as the clamor of her court shifted and Jay found himself suddenly within a wide-open circle.

Shit, he thought, but Flanz-le-Flore did not snap her fingers, nor did her fairies perform any magic either. Instead, now at a safe distance, she spread her arms wide and spoke again:

"Then fill me, hero! Fill my husk of a body with your Humanity. Make me more than nothing and I shall repay you with all the art of my soul! With my power it can be done—as Faerie of Transmogrification, I can make one thing into another, I need only know what the other thing is! You must let me know you, you very much must!"

"I can't trust you any more than the fairy I already have," said Jay, "but at least that one doesn't want me to marry her."

"You are a fool, hero. A fool! I am not the only one who seeks what you contain inside yourself, but I am the only one among them magnanimous and just. Do you think that cruel archbishop and his degenerated whores will offer you this type of union? Those *predators* stalk my woods and hunt my brethren, seeking only to devour them and digest their animus for themselves! They shall do the same to you—feast on your flesh and blood, eviscerate your corpse of all you contain! But I, Flanz-le-Flore, I—"

Someone stepped in front of Jay. It was Makepeace.

"If my good man Jay doesn't want to marry you, then shouldn't you ease up a little? Nobody likes a suitor who reeks of desperation."

He glanced over his shoulder to give Jay a look and Jay preemptively scowled expecting that look to be a wink. It wasn't. It was a look of absolute seriousness, a look that conveyed simply: *Be careful*.

Flanz-le-Flore gazed down at them. She floated several feet above the ground, and although she possessed translucent wings they did not beat at all, frozen in utter stillness.

"Hm. Very well. I shall 'ease up.' But I request in return only that the two of you relax in turn. Yes, relax. Relax!"

Instantly she relaxed, dropping from the sky and into her throne, which several fairies maneuvered beneath her moments before she fell. She landed with her arms spread, smiled sleepily, and yawned.

"Relax," she repeated. "Relax. You are my valued guests, and shall be treated with absolute hospitality. After your battle earlier against those contemptible women, you must be exhausted. Allow my subjects to see you to your room. Oh, and your rather interesting horse as well—we'll be sure to take care of it. That's a special horse, you know."

Everyone looked at the horse, which looked back.

"It's just a horse," said Jay.

"Not at all," said Flanz-le-Flore. "Something about it is different from all other horses. Something about it is *breaking the rules*. Not to mention your recklessness has left it in such a tragic state."

The horse snorted. It held its broken leg up off the ground, but appeared to experience no pain. Flanz-le-Flore motioned to some of her fairies, who swarmed around the horse and lifted it off the ground with the same phantom force that brought them here. Slowly, it rose and drifted away, giving Makepeace one final, forlorn look before it vanished between the trees and mushrooms.

"Anyway," said Makepeace, "my horse notwithstanding, we were hoping to go on our way —"

"Nonsense, oh what utter nonsense. I'd be a terrible host if I let such tired young travelers charge into the great dangers of the world beyond unprepared. But, young prince of Whitecrosse, if you absolutely positively *needed* to leave, I might allow it if your dear friend was willing to accede to my most gracious offer..."

Of course. Jay watched Makepeace for any change in expression that might indicate what he thought of that deal. But Makepeace's face didn't flicker.

Flanz-le-Flore leaned her cheek against one fist and tapped her foot. After an interval of silence, she yawned. "Very well. Take the time to mull over what I said while you wait in your room. Now out of my sight—Such activity leaves me drowsy."

She kicked one of her beat up old boots and hit something near the base of her throne. Instantly the ground under their feet disappeared. Down they both fell through a dark passage, out of Flanz-le-Flore's theater and into the "room" she'd most generously prepared for them.

Form Specifications Rather Than Formal

Jay Waringcrane was an ungrateful sack of shit.

Did he have the minutest, most insignificant inkling how much work went into the operation of even a miniature world like Whitecrosse? How many moving parts must be maintained to operate in an even slightly cohesive way? How often a guiding hand needed to push one thing or another into their proper place to prevent the whole machine combusting? No. No consideration given. He doubted everything, ran off in his own direction, forced an even more frantic scramble to get him back on course. It was only Day 2.

Perfidia Bal Berith's office stood as testament to the nightmare. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling stacked tomes and scrolls that contained the key details of Whitecrosse. By reusing an older world, Perfidia saved herself a lot of initial trouble and a little Humanity, but the downsides became apparent quickly. None of this crap was computerized. The Perfidia of 1642, younger and more eager to please, ignorant of future human technological advancement, had happily operated in the antiquated medium of parchment and quill pen. The Perfidia of 2017, upon fishing all this junk out of storage, only slumped her shoulders in despair.

Nonetheless she got to work. As she expected, the world of Whitecrosse more-or-less remained unchanged since Coke's time. There'd been births and deaths, strife and conflict, disease and hunger, but no real political, social, or technological advancement. This immutability turned out to be a problem, though. For starters, everyone in the world spoke in Shakespearean English: lots of thee, thou, prithe, and so on. Such vernacular would make the world unlivable to a modern teenager, so Perfidia updated it to a more contemporary style. But when she did that, she realized everyone started to use slang that wouldn't feel suitably fantastical or medieval to a 2017 ear, so she had to adjust again, trying to find a mode that *sounded* old without actually *being* old.

By the time she solved the language issue (way too much time wasted), she needed to figure out something for Jay to actually *do*. This took even more work. She sorted through her papers, picked out a principal cast, engineered a problem, and prepared to spring it on Jay the moment he passed through the Door. She was still penning the finishing touches when he returned to her office ready to go, and she hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, but everything was close enough that she'd have time to prepare the rest on the fly.

It started perfectly fine. He distrusted the harpy sisters like she expected, he beat them even easier than she expected, and he didn't even kill them off which meant she could reuse them instead of having to create new enemies for later. But he smelled a rat with Olliebollen and Perfidia was willing to admit maybe that was her fault, she didn't operate with as much subtlety as she could've—blame her tight deadline—and everything quickly went off the rails. Jay didn't want to rescue the princess. Perfidia couldn't believe it. John Coke never needed a compelling reason to rescue a princess, or slay a dragon, or wage a war against an evil army. In fact Perfidia remembered having the easiest of easy times with Coke, she only needed to chuck another monster his way and that kept him entertained, no mental effort whatsoever.

Through a lot of cleverness on her part, moving some planned events around and adjusting a few details, she finally got Jay to go to the monastery. Then everything really went to shit.

He's gone! Olliebollen said to her. The fairy's words appeared on the long piece of parchment sprawled over Perfidia's desk, the ink fading into existence line by line. *The hero is gone! What do I do what do I do?!*

Perfidia hooked the fingers of one hand around her forehead and imagined how lovely it'd be to crumple her frontal lobe into wastebin trash so she wouldn't have to think about this shit anymore. Her pen scratched:

Go after him.

Buhbuhbut that stupid human prince took him on his horse! They're already so far away! They'll go straight to Flanz-le-Flore, and she's way stronger than me!

Calm down. Your animus is favorable against hers—defensively at least.

It wasn't actually. But on another scroll, one describing the causes and effects of various magical properties within the world, Perfidia quickly scribbled: *The Faerie of Rejuvenation can rejuvenate transmogrified objects to their original form.* It at least kind of made logical sense.

Really though, Perfidia didn't need Olliebollen to tell her how fucked everything was. It all started with the fight in the forest, when Charm and Charisma and their new friends attacked Jay and company. Because Jay wasted so much time beforehand giving Perfidia the will-he-or-won't-he runaround she hadn't had so much time to thoroughly sketch out the terms of the encounter and it quickly went off the rails. Early in the fight, she presented Jay with two viable options: He could try to heal the wounded Sansaime or he could try to cut Makepeace free from the spiderweb with Sansaime's dagger. Both options would've worked, but Jay—of fucking *course*—did something Perfidia didn't expect and tried to kill Pluxie himself in some batshit scheme that involved repairing the two halves of Makepeace's spear with Pluxie in the middle. Jay. Jay my boy. Why in a million years would you ever, ever think something so stupid would work? But Perfidia lived to please, and thus in the same scroll where she just gave Olliebollen a way to counteract Flanz-le-Flore's animus she'd written: *A rejuvenated object will not yield to anything in the way of its reconstruction.*

She reveled in how genuinely happy with himself Jay was when his harebrained scheme worked. Maybe he doubted everything about this world, doubted even his own emotions, but he seemed to have confidence enough in his intelligence. Perfidia tucked that tidbit away for later use.

All good, right? Well it would've been, but Jay *then* went to cut Makepeace free. This gave Lalum time to use her animus on Pluxie—significantly earlier than Perfidia planned—which meant the entire rhythm of the fight was broken, and while she tried to figure out how to bail Jay out of his self-inflicted mess Makepeace got it into his dumbass head to ride away with Jay on the horse, which would've been all fine and dandy except somehow in the confusion Olliebollen didn't wind up on the horse with them.

Perfidia wanted to scream. Even the simplest moments contained so many complexities that something invariably slipped her attention. John Coke never had this problem. She gave John Coke the relics so he could just cheat his way out of anything, and he was perfectly content to do so. But nooooo, Jay Waringcrane needed to "earn" everything, didn't want it just handed to him! Jay Waringcrane could suck her fucking dick.

On the other page, Olliebollen went on the fritz. Sobbing, wailing, panic, oh boohoo. Idiot fairy didn't know how good it had it. It wasn't going to be culled for underproduction if it screwed this up.

Deep breath. Perfidia told herself: Remember the Humanity. Twenty-nine more days and every juicy bit of it was hers. Twenty-nine days was nothing. Blink of the eye. It could be done.

First she checked a third scroll to see how Jay was doing. He and Makepeace continued to ride away from Pluxie on Makepeace's horse. The current biggest danger was Jay, who probably never rode a horse in his life, falling off and breaking his neck, so Perfidia surreptitiously wrote the following property into Makepeace's horse: *Anyone who falls off this horse will be miraculously unharmed*. This property made zero sense in the context of the rest of the world, but she assumed people would not fall off the horse enough times to notice a pattern, and she could get rid of it later regardless.

Next she needed some way for them to actually beat Pluxie. Pluxie was near death already, so mainly they needed to sever Lalum's strings, which would render her helpless. Easy. Couple vines, a swamp, an idea whispered into Makepeace's ear—something the egotistical dunce would certainly mistake as his own thought—no problem. It would've been best if Perfidia gave the glory to Jay instead, but Jay already got to stroke his dick over the spear shaft plan and she didn't want to think any harder than she already had.

Okay. Problem one solved. Problem two was what Olliebollen mentioned: Having ridden so far from the road, Jay and Makepeace would almost certainly run afoul of Flanz-le-Flore, the fairy queen of the forest. Honestly Perfidia had planned (or let's say hoped) they would stay on the road the whole time and dodge Flanz-le-Flore altogether, mainly because in the midst of figuring out everything regarding Archbishop Astrophicus and Princess Mayfair and Olliebollen's elves and later the Staff of Lazarus Perfidia never got the chance to look too deeply at Flanz-le-Flore. She was an old fay, a creature who existed in the time of John Coke, unslain by his hand solely because Good King John had a soft spot for the ladies (as long as they put out for him). Ostensibly, though, she'd want Jay for the same reason the archbishop did, which meant she wouldn't try to kill him. Very deliberately Perfidia made sure none of these enemies wanted Jay dead. To confirm, all Perfidia needed to do was fish the page about her out of the stacks and—

Olliebollen's screaming transformed into an unbroken stream of the letter A that quickly swallowed an entire scroll. Unleashing her most exasperated groan yet Perfidia cut the fairy off with her pen:

Calm down.

I don't know what to do, Master! You told me to never leave the hero's side and now he's gone, what do I do, what do I do? You have to tell me, Master!

Munching the feathery end of her quill, Perfidia thought for five seconds. *Go back to Sansaime. Heal her. She can track them down and deal with Flanz-le-Flore too, as long as you protect her.*

An interval of silence followed.

Well, it was always silent, because the words only appeared on paper. Stillness. That was the word, stillness.

Olliebollen said: *Do I HAVE to?*

Yes you have to! I'm telling you to do it, so do it!

Unfortunately, Perfidia did not see the scroll light up with text describing Olliebollen's immediate and unquestioning attempt to follow Perfidia's orders.

Is there a way I could save the hero and also let that ugly bitch die?

No.

If I heal her she'll just try to kill me anyway!

No she won't. She's not an idiot like you. She'll work with you if it's the best way to save Makepeace—which it is.

Still a sullen nothingness from Olliebollen's direction. Perfidia drummed her fingers.

Look, Perfidia wrote. Think of it this way. You want to exterminate all of the elves. That's a lot of elves. You'll need someone powerful to do that: The hero. To save the hero, you need Sansaime. So you have two choices: Let this elf die, fail to save the hero, and let all the other elves in the world live. Or save this elf, save the hero, and eventually kill all the elves, including this one. I may need to double-check my math, but I think "all" is more than "one."

Another pause. Finally, Olliebollen said: *The hero never even listens to me. How do I know he'll kill the elves?*

He will. Perfidia was well aware he might not. *Now listen to me and do what I say. Got it?*

Ugh. Fine. Fine! said Olliebollen, and finally the fairy flitted off to do Perfidia's bidding.

Another fire extinguished, but the problem with problems was how two more always cropped up by the time you fixed one. She quickly returned to the page depicting Jay and Makepeace on the horse to check if that situation was playing out the way she anticipated. Luckily, it seemed—

Someone pounded a fist on her office door.

Perfidia jolted. Her whole desk shook; from her antique inkwell three black drops flitted onto Olliebollen's scroll, thankfully in a location that didn't disrupt Olliebollen's current activities, which were appearing at a halting, but active, pace. Over the piles and heaps of papers Perfidia stared, at the dull office door half-hidden behind the corpus of Whitecrosse.

Who could it be? Perfidia had no appointments, not today, not for the next month. Nobody visited her otherwise.

Another knock. Even harder.

Poor timing all things considered, but Perfidia wondered. Someone who came to her without an appointment—they might be desperate, in need of something simple and fast. Money. Money people often came with that kind of urgency, and money people were quickest and easiest to convince to sign a contract.

Her eyes slanted to watch as Makepeace sliced the strings puppeteering Fluxie while Jay landed unharmed after being bucked from the horse. Olliebollen meanwhile snuck past Lalum and the twins (Lalum being doubly distracted controlling Fluxie's body and stitching up Charisma's knife wound) and fluttered above Sansaime, expelling after a too-healthy pause a puff of healing magic. So everything, for the moment, operated smoothly.

Someone stood behind that door, someone with Humanity, someone who might render her need to wrangle Jay's tomfoolery null. She could at the very least take five or ten minutes to assess what they wanted, give it to them if it was easy, or pencil them in for a later appointment if it wasn't.

Perfidia chipped off the tiniest fraction of the partial Humanity she got from Jay Waringcrane, a fraction of a fraction of a percent, and used that power to make the piles of parchment vanish for a few minutes. Instantly her office resumed its ordinary tidy look, a homely cherry desk and a few shelves of tasteful technical books.

"Please come in," she said.

Her heart leapt when the door opened and not one but two people walked into her office. And it thudded, hard, like a big glowing rock against her ribcage, when she sensed their combined Humanity, Humanity that might satisfy not just her current quota but take a big bite out of next year's too. Then it all came to a cold dead standstill when she took one look at their faces and knew immediately one of them was Jay Waringcrane's older sister.

It was her eyes—dark and sunken, raccoon-like—and her expression—sheer and sour—that gave it away. Otherwise she lacked his ramshackle demeanor, his eerily languid motions that could snap to rigidity in an unexpected instant. In a trim, professional navy blue skirt suit she possessed the exact kind of businesslike poise Perfidia herself tried to exude, but none of the forced clumsiness. All with her was an empire of economics. Clacking on heels she came to a stop midway into the office, shifted her weight, and placed a hand on one cocked hip as she levied her gaze downward to force Perfidia deep into the seat of her chair. Her partner, a broad-shouldered hulk of a man standing at least six foot seven, looked like her bodyguard despite the informal looseness of the tie around his neck.

"So what are you," the sister said, devoid of all heat, "some sort of demon?"

"Devil," Perfidia corrected, clearing her throat afterward. "My name's Perfidia Bal Berith, but you can call me Fidi. Would ya like to take a seat, Miss—"

"We'll cut the crap. My name is Shannon Waringcrane and this is my associate, Scott Dalton Swaino II. We're looking for my brother, Jay Waringcrane." Her wrist flicked, and seemingly out of her cuff like a magic trick she produced a small photograph of Mr. Exalted Hero himself wearing a high school graduation cap and looking like he'd rather be dead. "Have you seen him."

Perfidia leaned forward. Squinted, returned back to her seat to retrieve her reading glasses from their case. Putting them on, she leaned forward again, blinked a couple times, and shook her head. "Nope. Never."

A perfectly-executed lie, none of the previous anxiety that marred her interview with Jay two days prior. Perfidia didn't need to do much to handle this situation. As long as she gave absolutely nothing away, they lacked any power over her, no matter how much they suspected.

Shannon scrutinized her, seeking flaws where there were none. One heel clicked as she half-turned toward her "associate" and conferred with him in low tones. Perfidia kept her hands on her desk and twiddled her thumbs. Had these two already contacted the police? That should've been the end of it. Especially a woman like this, a woman of facts and figures. Did she not trust the police to do their job? Normally these types put utmost faith into any kind of authority, seeing in it the same power they saw in themselves. Or was Shannon one of those types who believed more in herself than even the towering edifices of her society?

It wasn't Shannon who moved next. It was the big guy, Scott Dalton Swaino (the Second), who frankly Perfidia hadn't expected to speak at all. He held in front of him an ID card.

The card was the one thing in this world Perfidia Bal Berith hoped never to see.

United States Department of the Treasury. Internal Revenue Service. *This is to certify that Scott Dalton Swaino II whose signature and picture appear below is duly commissioned as: Internal Revenue Officer.*

Soon after, Shannon quickly flicked out her own badge as though she only did so as a reluctant favor. Keeping deathly from her face to her shoulders, Perfidia slowly snaked one hand under her desk to the small drawer where she kept her last resort.

Why bother? Jay had said. *To graduate and get a job as an accountant or something, like my sister?*

He said accountant. He hadn't said IRS. Jay you bumblefuck, you didn't mention the important little factoid that your sister worked for the I-R-fucking-S, kind of fucking important you absolute sack of filth.

"So yeah, we're with the IRS," Scott Dalton Swaino II said, a big booming bass voice that fit his big body to a T. "Cleveland branch."

"I suspect you may be somewhat unfamiliar with the standard operating procedure of the IRS, Miss Bal Berith," said Shannon. "While it is somewhat unorthodox for the IRS to meet you in person without sending you written warning ahead of time, given the severity and length of your suspected tax noncompliance we felt justified in a more direct approach. As a revenue agent, my job is to conduct audits to assess tax liability. I'm a member of the Small Business and Self-Employed division, so your case falls under my jurisdiction, and what I'm seeing here is quite concerning, Miss Bal Berith. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

She spoke in the dry, disinterested tone Perfidia knew well: the tone authority took when it no longer needed to impress or wow its subjects into submission, when it possessed full confidence of the power it held over those beneath it. Like she considered Perfidia chattel, or an insect even, something too insignificant to waste breath on if not for the general respect given to formality and the proper process of things.

But Perfidia could not allow injured Pride to even enter the picture. She had to think and focus, even though that disastrous sense of fear kept creeping and crawling higher up her spine.

Ignoring Perfidia's pause, Shannon continued.

"Now, am I correct in assuming that you are the sole proprietor of your business?"

What Perfidia had to remember, what she had to tell herself despite the panic, was that, IRS agent or not, Shannon Waringcrane did not come here, now, because of taxes. The tax shit was fluff, or a trap, or something.

"I wanna speak to a lawyer," Perfidia said.

"Allow me to stress that currently, your case is not a criminal investigation. Neither Mr. Swaino nor I are affiliated with law enforcement."

"I requested a lawyer."

A glint spread in Shannon's eye and the twitch of a smile spread and Perfidia got the same sickly feeling from her botched talk with Jay. These two were more alike than Perfidia cared for. "Miss Bal Berith, while your case is not *currently* a criminal investigation, it easily can become one. The line between negligence and fraud is quite narrow. You of course have a right to an attorney, but at any time I can refer your case to the CID—Criminal Investigation Division. I doubt you want that, Miss Bal Berith. On the other hand, if you can answer my questions to my satisfaction right now, there will be no need for any further action. Do you understand what I'm saying, Miss Bal Berith?"

Perfidia understood. And she assumed the only question Shannon truly wanted answered was the one she opened with: Where was Jay Waringcrane.

None of it mattered if the tax talk was just a bluff. "You still haven't told me what you think I did wrong."

"Miss Bal Berith," said Shannon, "when was the last time you filed Form 1040 or Form 1040-SR?"

"I don't know, I don't have these form names memorized, that's why I want to talk to an attorney."

"Let me simplify it then. When was the last time you filed *any* tax form?"

If Shannon let her call a lawyer, let her buy time and figure out exactly what documents she needed, she might be able to use Jay's Humanity to falsify them. Might. Because she only had a small fraction of his Humanity, and if Shannon actually dug into the records Perfidia would need to falsify many, many documents. Actually, Perfidia already knew she couldn't possibly falsify all the documents she needed with so little Humanity. She operated her business for over one hundred and fifty years in this country and never filed a tax return once.

"I file one every year."

"Only one form?" Shannon and Swaino said in extremely curious unison.

"I mean, my accountant files it. I don't know the specifics of how many forms there are."

"Miss Bal Berith, lying to us will only make the case toward willful malfeasance more clear. Let me remind you that negligence—meaning an accidental or unintentional mistake—carries only a monetary penalty on your tax bill, whereas fraud—knowingly violating a legal duty—means jail time. You should endeavor to be truthful when making claims we can easily disprove."

It cut. Cut bad. Because Perfidia knew Shannon hadn't walked into this office with an airtight tax case against her. How could she? Jay went missing only one day prior. There was no time. But Shannon operated from the onset with utter confidence in herself. Why? Because in the mind of someone like her, someone fully engaged within this world's machinery, a shady character like a devil *must* be cheating on their taxes, somehow. Those who are bad do bad things, those who are good do good things. No exceptions. And in this case, she just so happened to be right.

"Look," said Perfidia. "My company doesn't make any money. *I* don't make any money."

"Doesn't exempt you from filing," said Swaino.

"Furthermore," said Shannon, "Miss Bal Berith, you wear an expensive suit and a diamond wristwatch. You operate your business out of prime real estate in downtown Cleveland. How do you afford all this if you're not, as you claim, receiving any income? Even if what you say is true, I'm starting to see perfectly reasonable grounds for the CID to get involved."

"I," said Perfidia, "I receive gifts."

"Gifts? Oh, excellent!" Shannon's professionalism cracked into a ghost of a smile and Perfidia flinched. "Gifts in excess of \$10,000 annually—which I'm certain constitutes your office rent, if not that rather flashy Rolex—must be reported to the IRS by the person who gave them. Why don't you tell us who gifted these things to you so we can check their records to confirm?"

"Uh—Um."

"I wonder, Miss Bal Berith. Truly. If we look deeper into the money you're spending, what would we find? Where, I wonder, did the money *really* come from?"

Shannon's face shone bright under the tasteful fixtures of Perfidia's office. That face was daring her: *Go on. Make up any excuse. Call a lawyer even. The gaze of the IRS is that of a gorgon. You'll be dust by the time we're done with you, one way or another.*

She'd backed Perfidia into a corner.

That was her mistake.

Perfidia's fingers gripped the underside of her drawer and slowly maneuvered it open bit by bit. Shannon operated in a world of order, where even criminals adhered to some baseline of law. To an extent, Perfidia did too. But underpinning Perfidia's world, underpinning that black maw humans once named with such awe and terror—that world called Hell—was a chaos mankind wished to never see again.

Congratulations, Shannon Waringcrane. You outmaneuvered a devil, just like your brother. But unlike your brother, this devil didn't need something from you—no matter how much Humanity you had. So the devil had no reason to sit here and smile. No reason to take your oh-so-elevated attitude, your mechanical sense of superiority, your clipped clean professional bitch shtick. No reason for the devil to stew in her Pride. No reason for the devil to eat another acid defeat.

Her hand wrenched open the drawer that she'd already half-opened and her other hand shot inside to seize the revolver kept there. This was Perfidia's chaos. To any lowlife crook on the streets it probably looked more like order than chaos. But to the Shannon Waringcranes of the world, the bureaucrats and pencil pushers, this small chrome object was anathema to the entire organized world they inhabited. One simply cannot resort to brute violence! One simply cannot murder! There are laws! Well, see what all those human laws mean, see what all your tax forms matter against the chaos of Hell!

Perfidia wanted to watch those sunken sleep-deprived eyes so smugly stoic in their sense of authority change, twitch, snap out of that banal righteousness and exhibit for a moment the true bestial fear of the base organism hidden beneath the heaped layers of tidy society. To Perfidia's now twice-wounded Pride, no sight could provide more satisfaction, and so rising from her seat she flourished the gun with the same theatrical aplomb she typically reserved only for her slavish at-your-service act, just to savor the final flash of life those eyes would ever make before a bullet traveled at unfathomable velocity between them—

A force hefted Perfidia from halfway standing to in the air to on her back. Her head clapped against the hard tile floor. Her thoughts flew out of her alongside the single harsh exhalation ripped from her chest and before she even remembered the gun her fingers were horrifically pried apart and it flicked out of her grasp. That was the least of her concerns. The next moment a fist made of solid brick rammed into her solar plexus and her body involuntarily spasmed an agonized shudder.

Scott Dalton Swaino II was on top of her, his bulk eclipsing the light above to transform him into the looming surface of a moon before her dazed and watery vision. He loosed a wolflike howl:

"FUCK YEAH!" And another: "FUCK YEAH BITCH!"

How had he—how had he—

"That's right bitch! That's fucking RIGHT! That's Buckeye ball for you! That's how we fucking did it in 2012 bitch! UNDEFEATED!"

He rose, standing over her, pounding both pectoral muscles with a barrel drumming motion of his fists, lifting one foot high to bring it down with a seismic clap inches next to her head before leaning over and screaming directly into her face:

"Four fucking sacks on the season bitch. That's fourteenth highest in the best division in college football! BIG TEN BABY! OHIO FUCKING STATE BABY! I STILL FUCKING GOT IT BITCH! I coulda gone pro bitch. I coulda gone fucking pro and you wanted to fuck with me? WITH ME?"

Oh god. He was going to maul her face off chimpanzee-style.

But he drew back, gesticulating one tree-sized arm to Shannon. "I once sacked Kirk Cousins. Kirk FUCKING Cousins. And this bitch thought she could get the draw on ME? I am a god. I am a deity. I am fucking DIONYSUS HIMSELF."

"I believe Hermes would be more fitting." Shannon picked up the revolver and handled it with utmost delicacy as she carefully returned it to the open drawer of Perfidia's desk.

"Hermes Ares Hercules I don't give a shit. I plowed that bitch into the GRAVE. I destroyed her. I fucking ANNIHILATED her."

As the rattle in Perfidia's brain subsided coherent thought reconstituted and she realized what happened, the exact series of events that divided her drawing the gun from her supine on the floor. She blinked away the dancing brutish shadow of Scott Dalton Swaino II and wondered at her error as he bellowed on: "Kirk Cousins! Kirk Cousins, I was on that skinny bitch's ass faster than—" Pride. Pride, the error of them all. Oh well. Was it blind luck that Shannon happened to bring with her an accomplished takedown artist or was it something else, some sort of compensation for weakness, a willful magnetism to the disorderly within Shannon Waringcrane's ordered world?

Swaino, erratic collection of whizzing gaseous molecules on infinite rebound through the narrow confines of the office, now cared only for himself; even Shannon dropped out of the imperial breadth of his aggrandizement. By chance he stepped and his foot appeared not far from Perfidia's waist. Shannon had stupidly closed the drawer with the gun in it and left herself unarmed, and both of them in ignorance believed a devil needed the weapons of man to rend flesh. While Perfidia remained where he threw her, the lithe tangle of her tail slowly unraveled, baring the barb at its tip as it curved like a snake, poised to gore—

"Dalt," said Shannon.

Without even looking Swaino brought his foot down and crushed Perfidia's tail into the tile, grinding with his heel until she screamed and bent up double.

"Now get off your grandstand and keep her down," said Shannon, and after having spent the past minute acting like an ape Swaino at once transformed into a dog and did exactly as master asked.

Needless to say, he gave her zero leeway, even rolling her over so he could fold her arms behind her back and keep a better eye on her tail in a maneuver she could only assume he learned from watching Hollywood actors pretend to be cops on TV.

Shannon's heels clacked across the tile before she crouched with two hands tastefully holding down her skirt beside Perfidia's face. Her legs were smooth and young and pretty and Perfidia despised her, despised her even worse than her idiot guard dog, because at least he only overpowered her with a brute physical prowess Perfidia never professed to possess. It was Shannon, though, whose simple presence revolted her, who would've driven Perfidia even in this compromised position to spit in her face if Shannon wasn't smart enough to keep her face out of spitting range. Maybe with luck Perfidia could get a good globule on an ankle.

No. Perfidia Bal Berith you stupid idiot get your head on straight and focus, now was not the time for petty displays like that. The situation was bad but it wasn't over. She still had some Humanity from Jay. Not much. Not enough to do anything crazy. The cost of using Humanity ramped up when a human saw directly the changes you made to the machinery of the world—they were never supposed to see the gears in action.

And Perfidia, cooling off, realized that even if they took their eyes off her and she manifested a weapon and killed them, she might still be in trouble. She had friends in the police department, sure. But murder was the type of serious offense that couldn't always be swept under the rug, especially not when it was committed brazenly in one's own office. Previously, blinded by Pride, Perfidia hadn't considered that even a successful kill would cost Humanity to clean up. Then what was her move? She had tools. Options. If she acted like a maniac she'd only get the tables turned on her again, and at that point she might as well not even wait for the cullings, she might as well just stick that revolver in her mouth and blast her brains to kingdom come.

"Well, Miss Bal Berith," said Shannon, "I guess after that stunt you pulled we can dispense with the smoke-and-mirrors."

What could Perfidia do? There had to be something. Use your fucking brain. Be smarter than these stupid, easily manipulated humans. Shannon—and Swaino—must have a weakness. Play on that. Give them what they want until they were watching nothing but the prize you held before them—that was when you made your move.

"Now, if you don't want your life ruined financially and otherwise," Shannon said, "you'll tell me where my brother is."

The idea blossomed instantly. It had risks. She needed Jay to remain alive on his own, without her guiding hand, for at least the next few hours. But neither Flanz-le-Flore nor the archbishop wanted him dead, so that shouldn't be a problem. Emphasis on shouldn't. A risk she needed to eat, though, because this idea was her best option otherwise.

"Fine"—Perfidia putting on the best face of wounded Pride any had ever worn—"Fine. I'll tell you. No, I won't just tell you—I'll *show* you where he is."

Everything's Dead But the Tree

Such a sad and lonely little twig! Only the length of a needle, and as thin too. What story did it tell? How came it to be here, on the ground at the feet of giants, their big chunky stalks rising up into a black sky of their own devising? This was no place for such small things, that's for sure. It must've once been part of something bigger, an offshoot of a branch overburdened with excessive bounty, sprouting too many leaves to support, bushels that made it sag into a dour frown until one day the weight became too much and the branch came crashing down. And so the branch was separate from its whole, but that was alright, because the branch still had its family of leaves to keep it company, and all of them could be here so happy together in the mutual inevitability of their doom. What is horror when you have each other? This is the meaning of peace, an understanding that surpasses disparate parts.

"Jesus! Christ! Lalum you thoughtless croaker, what in the name of *God* are you doing? Are you stitching me together or ripping me apart?!"

But alas, the story of our fallen branch didn't end there, as we know via the benefit of dramatic irony, for now we see only a twig, and no branch, and must listen with bated(?) breath to the bard as he or she relates its tragic tale. Perhaps it was a deer, nibbling at the still-vibrant leaves so typically out of reach, or perhaps a carnivore whose paw thoughtlessly trod upon it; but the branch shattered, and its unity, its component parts—let us say, four thousand four hundred forty-four of them—divided, and now all that remained of what once was whole, and what before breathed together with the much greater Tree of Life, now all that remained was this teensy tiny itty bitty twig.

"O sister of mine, damned as we are in tandem, still your needless thrashing! See you not the fruitlessness of such struggle? If it is God's judgment that we suffer, then suffer we must; and in His wisdom He has devised our pains so that our raging against them only multiplies His tortures."

The twig bent, much as its branch once did, but not as recompense for its own gross multiplication. Two hands bent it, and bent it until it snapped in two clean pieces, even tinier divisions of its progenitor, and then those hands tossed one piece to one side and one piece to the other side of the head of the unconscious elf.

"The only thing 'multiplying tortures' is you Charm. Keep at it and see I don't make Lalum stitch *your* mouth shut too, birdbrain!"

Over this elf hovered Olliebollen Pandelirium, barely larger than a twig itself, as it considered the snapped halves. A little fairy dust and those two halves would come together to their modest whole. They would come together regardless of what was between them, they would come together in the midst of this elf's brain, swirling and twisting and churning and making that brain all holey and gooey and gross, causing that poor brain to leak out the elf's ears and nose and mouth, and rendering that elf unquestionably, irrevocably DEAD.

DEAD things don't come back to life. They're gone forever. That was the rule, and only something that broke the rules could change it. Olliebollen followed the rules.

For Olliebollen, those rules were simple:

1. Heal the sick!
2. Make hurt things whole again!
3. Ease all pain and suffering!

Simple, simple, simple, but when Olliebollen watched its siblings slaughtered oh so infuriatingly limited. Impotent, able only to sob as brothers and sisters chose of all their number Olliebollen alone to save, each of them willing to fling their bodies in the path of relentless genocide to pave the narrowest route to escape, a route only the smallest of their kind could tread. Olliebollen could do nothing then. Nothing at all.

Now, thanks to the hero, Olliebollen had a new rule. That was the power of a hero. A hero could break the rules of this world. Once the rules were broken, things that once were became something else. Olliebollen was now something else. Olliebollen could do more than simply cure. Olliebollen could now kill.

Yet.

Yet there was another power. A power that determined not what could be done, but what *may* be done: The Master of this world.

Killing, at least this wretch, at least this time, was prohibited. And in imitation of Master's voice, the Master having gone quiet since her last commandment, Olliebollen whipped its haphazard self into order: Don't kill. Don't do it. Look away. Look at anything else. Don't think about it. You know all the logic and even though faeries and logic are something at odds with one another (rules notwithstanding) you have bigger goals than this and you need to work toward them. Turn your head. Yes, good. Just like that.

Across the clearing, clustered around the road and not far from Sansaime's headless horse (Sansaime's head Sansaime's head Sansaime's—) the archbishop's three twisted women congregated. An ugly sight, although not as ugly as Sansaime, so Olliebollen focused on them, narrowed its eyes until the dark edges of the forest blurred. The spider, Lalum, threaded silver webbing through the knife wound on the angry twin's shoulder. Olliebollen tried to remember the name of the angry twin. Tried to focus fully on that purposeless mental search to crowd out other thoughts budding and blossoming, cutely comforting thoughts of Sansaime's death.

Lalum was doing something, and both twins were watching. Between her hands she strung a thick pattern of web and on it were words Olliebollen really really had to strain to read from so far away, and while straining to read these words that didn't matter managed in some faraway compartment of a mind only recently requiring compartments to muster the will to emit healing dust on Sansaime's body, and not on the snapped twig-bits beside her.

The words written in Lalum's web read—

Not like Olliebollen knew how to read! Wahaha!

"Whaddya mean Lalum?" said the angry twin, suddenly less angry after she read the words Olliebollen could not. "Pluxie got cut off? What's that mean? You mean your strings got cut?"

"Alas, our poor sister Pluxie, sister in suffering if not in blood! Severed from Lalum's mooring just as we have all been severed from God's benison—"

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up, it's not the time Charm!"

By that time the elf began to stir. And the disassociated components of Olliebollen's mind, the snapped offshoots separated as a point of necessity if they wished to act against the will of their whole, all of them came back together now that the deed was done. Olliebollen turned to gaze upon the eyes of that hideous reprobate as they finally opened.

"Where—" Then, jolting: "Mack!"

"Quiet that disgusting voice of yours this instant." Olliebollen descended to only a hair's breadth above Sansaime's chest, too repulsed to actually make contact, suppressing the need to gag on her elfin stench. "If you wanted to help the prince, you shouldn't have taken a nap in the middle of battle." Shrug! Just to hammer home how much of a stupid useless fuckup someone would have to be to *do* something like that!

Sansaime stared, bestial in her brute stupidity. Due to the force that originally knocked her unconscious, her hood had fallen around her shoulders, and finally her full and horrific face was revealed, even more disturbing than the jeering blood-soaked faces of the elves who visited the court of Pandelirium. Discoloration infested it, so without close scrutiny or the careful eye of a healer it'd be impossible to tell what color her skin was even supposed to be, piebald between dark and light. The light patches were enormous scars of some kind, really so tragic, to have one's natural form so corrupted even beyond the ordinary corruption of her ken. So tragic Olliebollen could only help but crack a big broad smile at the pathetic specimen before her.

"Where"—Sansaime shifting her gaze past Olliebollen at the three women likewise corrupted from their natural form—"where'd he go."

"Beg me and I'll tell you."

The last traces of post-awakening daze ebbed off Sansaime's grotesque visage. Her dull mud-colored eyes hardened and Olliebollen could more-or-less guess her thoughts.

"Nuh-uh-uh!" Olliebollen cautioned with a wagging finger. "I've set up a trap. One sprinkle of my dust and you'll be dead forever. So you better—"

Sansaime sat up. Olliebollen flitted back in time to avoid any sudden attack—there was none—but immediately realized that because Sansaime moved her head, the broken twig would no longer reattach inside her brain. Oops.

Even more annoyingly, Sansaime didn't seem to believe Olliebollen's threat for an instant. She focused solely on the three women on the road, who were too tangled in their own conversation to notice the movement in their periphery. Flicking a hand to gesture Olliebollen away, Sansaime replaced her hood and with careful and gradual movements slid herself into a crouched position.

"Hey! Heyeyey! You can't ignore me like that! I'm the only one who knows the prince's whereabouts. *Hey!*"

An almost nonexistent rustle of Sansaime's cloak gave a fraction of a second's warning. Olliebollen managed to move, but only fast enough. The needle, which would've passed through an eyeball, fwipped instead just past Olliebollen's face, close enough that the corrosive heat of its metal tingled the filaments on its cheek several seconds afterward. Olliebollen's heart stopped. That needle had been tossed both with killing intent and casual annoyance. Sansaime didn't even bother to look if she nailed her target; she crept toward the three monstrous nuns.

Lying Master! She said Sansaime was reasonable! Then what was that? Olliebollen really could've died. Really, really could've, and Sansaime didn't even *think* about it! To her it was like swatting a bug! Olliebollen couldn't even stick a tongue out to taunt her for missing because she didn't look!

Twisty, turny went Olliebollen's insides, an impossible-to-parse glut of anger fear hate and all that good stuff. The attempt at murder, okay! Sure! Olliebollen was used to that by now! But the utter lack of respect! Why did nobody ever want to hear what Olliebollen had to say? What was the point of being so smart if everyone else, even the hero, committed themselves to ignorance?

Whatever. Let's do it your way, idiot elf. What astounding plan have you concocted in your tiny brain—your brain, mind you, free of sticks only thanks to Olliebollen's preternatural self-restraint? Ah yes, I see, so you're creeping toward the archbishop's women, drawing a knife, this is a smart move and not one completely irrelevant to the task at hand, which is rescuing the hero (and the prince) from Flanz-le-Flore's clutches!

Lalum saw Sansaime before the other two, albeit only when Sansaime had already cleared half the distance to their group. With her mouth stitched shut, she resorted to frantic gestures to grab the twins' attention, gestures that only caused them to look more closely at Lalum and not at the cloaked assailant who, upon being spotted, burst into a run with the glint of a second dagger shining in her other hand.

At the last possible moment, at the exact time the barely-perceptible ruffle of Sansaime's cloak indicated the tension of her arms as she prepared to strike, Lalum extended her own hands and silver strands sprung from her fingertips to latch onto Charm and Charisma's heads.

What happened next happened very very fast, so fast only a truly detail-oriented observer (such as, let's say, Olliebollen Pandelirium) could've comprehended exactly what they witnessed. Charm and Charisma, who previously didn't even know Sansaime was coming, whipped around in perfect unison and raised a talon each to catch one of Sansaime's daggers

mid-slash. The *tink* of metal striking bone made Olliebollen's fur bristle in psychosomatic sympathy but by the time Olliebollen overcame the shiver Sansaime had already swiped three, four, even five more times in rapid succession, each time deflected by the twins' frantic defensive motions.

The twins never moved anywhere near that fast before. Olliebollen knew for a fact! Neither at the graveyard nor during the fight with the bear only a few minutes earlier. (The sad one was especially slow.) But now not only were they quick, they were skillful, and they danced with an elegance and grace unbefitting their degeneration into subhuman monstrosities.

Ace observer Olliebollen Pandelirium knew what was what, though. Moving closer to the action, secure in the mutual distraction of all the fae's various archnemeses with one another, the truth wafted as a pungent scent emanating from perhaps the most visually odious of the whole gallery of rogues; the spider, Lalum. (Visually odious less for aesthetic purposes—that'd be Sansaime of course—but moral, the spider being fastidiously clean as though she believed she could, somehow, render her innate form less deplorable by such ministrations.) The scent of death! Carried even in the thick, oppressive air of an enchanted wood seeping the evil it absorbed from their runoff, carried straight to Olliebollen's nose from Lalum's breath. The cages on Lalum's hip only confirmed the suspicion: Lalum had devoured a faerie and drawn upon her animus.

Earlier, Olliebollen guessed Lalum's animus involved healing, but guess that was wrong. Oh well! More pressingly, while this front row seat to a bout between people Olliebollen would love to see die sparked some excitement, right now Olliebollen needed to focus on saving the hero.

"Heyeyey!" Olliebollen shouted into the whirlwind of attacks and parries, ready to swerve if necessary. "Hey idiot elf! These fools have nothing to do with it. The hero—and your prince—blundered right into Flanz-le-Flore's court. They're definitely in her hands now." And because nobody noticed, Olliebollen cupped its hands and repeated: "Flanz-le-Flore—They've gone to *Flanz-le-Flore!*"

Sansaime danced back and at first it looked like merely another pirouette in this oddly ballet-like battle but she put distance between her and the marionetted twins and stayed put with her daggers bared. The twins, on the defensive most of the fight anyway, didn't take advantage of the lull to attack, if they even had the ability to. Lalum herself had used the twins as a shield while she scuttled behind the nearest tree, but her lines continued to connect her to her impromptu living weapons.

"Is that true," said Sansaime.

"Yes! Of course! I never lie—"

"It's not you I'm asking, faerie." She pointed her daggers at the twins. "Speak."

"Why should we tell you, huh?" said Charisma. "Right after you tried to slit us open, to boot! Think we're daft, elf-woman? Well, my sister and the spider are, but I'm sure not."

"Tell me what you know. Or die. You're alive thanks to that spider's trick. But she needs fae blood for it, no? How long d'you think she can keep it up?"

Charisma tilted her head onto her shoulder, which seemed to be the extent of her range of motion while strung by Lalum's thread. "Eh, we've plenty of faeries. Lalum doesn't gobble em all down at once like my nincompoop sister here. You may not run on animus, elf-woman, but you've only got so much stamina."

True! Sansaime, although steadfast and standing firm, was breathing more heavily than normal after a few minutes of lightning-quick strikes. Whereas the twins, who hadn't moved via their own physical exertion, looked fresh as flowers. Olliebollen's magic could replenish Sansaime's stamina, but doing that would require Olliebollen to barf out all its guts in disgust first, so good luck.

However—Olliebollen knew something good, and knowing something good and not saying it was really hard to do. "The spider's only got one more faerie! It's true, I saw it! Two cages on her hip, and she ate one already. They've only a few more minutes at best!"

"Well now." Sansaime levied a knowing smile at Charisma.

"So you'll trust the faerie now, will ya?" Charisma said. "Who's to say he isn't baiting you into a fight you can't win?"

"Oh please! I coulda killed her myself while she was knocked out but instead I magnanimously—"

"Shut up," Sansaime and Charisma said in unison, and Olliebollen tossed up its—or his, according to Charisma—arms in frustration.

"It's no matter of trust," Sansaime said after everyone collectively decided to forget Olliebollen existed again. "I'm not blind am I? I saw your spider's cages before she scampered away. Now, I only need one of you alive to learn what I need. Keep bluffing, and I'll have your sister's innards out on the ground. Like the thought of that?"

"No more fitting end could I imagine than—" Charm began, quickly cut off by a terse command from Charisma, and she sank into an unhappy silence with which Olliebollen could commiserate, loath as he(?) was to experience any slight sympathy toward these butchers.

After an interval of quiet, while Charisma made all matter of scowls but said nothing substantive, Sansaime said: "Look. There's no reason we need to fight beyond lack of trust, now is there? The lot of you, we've coexisted before. We both use this wood as our hunting ground. It's only the hero you want, no?"

A slow, sidelong glance from Charisma to Charm and then Charisma to Lalum. "Aye," said Charisma. "The archbishop needs him."

"Well, you can have the bastard. My interest lies only in royal blood."

"What!" said Olliebollen. Nobody even looked at him though. "What!" Still nothing.

"If Mack and the hero have truly fallen into Flanz-le-Flore's grubby little clutches," said Sansaime, "then I propose a deal. We put our respective talents together to snatch them both back. You take the hero, I take the prince. Mack might not be happy about it, but—" She hesitated. "But I know what's in his best interest."

"You sound real sure," said Charisma.

"Have you a better option? Or think you can simply waltz into Flanz-le-Flore's court yourselves and haul the hero out?"

Olliebollen could *not* believe it. Absolutely. Positively. The Master claimed Sansaime would be practical when it came to rescuing the prince, but this defied belief. Worse yet—worse yet! Charisma glanced back at Lalum, and Lalum peeked out from her tree and signaled something, and now Charisma was looking like she wasn't so opposed to this plan either! Unreal. Didn't they hate each other? Didn't they just try to kill each other? Why couldn't they get back to that! Why couldn't they open each other up and spoon all their blood and guts until they were as limp and DEAD as that headless horse on the ground! Well, it didn't matter. Olliebollen was drawing the line. He—or she—or it refused to allow this gaggle of wickedness to conspire against the hero.

Contacting the Master for advice might've been prudent, but the Master told Olliebollen to never ever speak to her when in the presence of others. So Olliebollen acted on its own, fluttering its wings and zooming into the empty span between Sansaime and the twins.

"No! No, no, no! I say no! You're not supposed to work *together*, that's not the way it's *supposed* to happen! Idiot elf, it's the two of *us* who are supposed to work together, and it really took a lot of willpower for me to even say that, so the least you could do is give me the simple courtesy to *listen to what I have to say!* Huh? Think ya could manage that? Huh, huh?"

Entire body quaking to the point that even seeing straight became impossible, every word spilling out in increasingly heightened frenzy, Olliebollen jittered glances between Sansaime and the twins, although the twins weren't even addressed. But they could listen too, they could all listen, Olliebollen was sick of being ignored and disregarded. And this time, finally, Olliebollen wasn't being ignored. Every recipient of its ire watched with careful consideration.

"So we can eat this one, right?" said Charisma. Her sister took a moment out of her ceaseless sobbing to salivate at the sight.

"Oh sure! Just gonna try and eat me, huh?" Olliebollen extended its arms wide. "Sure! But you'd be really super dumb to do that, y'know! Wanna know why? Huh? Wanna? I bet you don't. I bet you don't even care what I have to say about Flanz-le-Flore and her animus and how to beat it, do ya? Nope. Why care about things like that! Criminals, the lot of you, base and bestial brigands, too concerned about how to divvy the earnings to think how you're gonna earn it in the first place! You think the four of you even got a chance against old Flanz-le-Flore? Huh?"

"Bah!" Charisma tried to move, probably just to flap her hand in dismissal, and was barred from the act by Lalum's strings. "You're fae yourself. Only a trickster, and inclined to protect your kind. We all know how to hunt, we don't need your help."

"I want to eat it," said Charm.

Olliebollen whirled on Sansaime. "Don't tell me you don't know! Flanz-le-Flore isn't just any faerie! She's the Faerie of Transmogrification, and all she has to do is snap her fingers and poof! You're a pumpkin. Poof! You're a squirrel. Poof! You're a boot. How d'ya plan to handle that, huh? Huh!"

It took a lot of faith in the Master to stand here and speak like this. A lot of faith the Master knew what was right. Any moment any of them might attack, assuming Lalum hungered as much for fae flesh as the twins. The humans had faith in their God, but the fae knew this world much better than the humans, spoke to the trees and the birds and the bittiest insects. They knew, if not by name, if not by voice, at least by presence what truly ruled this world. Please. Oh please, everything good and natural, oh please let the Master know what she was talking about. Because Olliebollen was real exposed here and the prolonged silence from particularly Sansaime was turning pent-up anger into anxiousness.

"You know where I stand," Olliebollen said, directly to Sansaime. "You know who I'm loyal to."

"Do I," said Sansaime.

"I can," said Olliebollen, "rejuvenate things that have been transmogrified."

"Can you," said Sansaime.

"Without me, you don't stand a chance. And if you're willing to work with them"—thumb cocked over the shoulder—"you can work with me."

"Can I," said Sansaime.

Olliebollen wanted to scream and a lesser Olliebollen would've screamed but this Olliebollen was the best possible Olliebollen. "You know what I want. And if you really don't care about *the thing I want* one way or another you have no reason not to let me try for it."

Rather than another inane comment, Sansaime said nothing. Said nothing long enough for Olliebollen to glance back at the twins and their naked gluttonous stares.

It came down to Sansaime. The elf. The fae hunter. But really, it came down to the Master. Sansaime would act how the Master said she would. And if she didn't, the Master could make her. So it all came down to the Master.

The really scary thing was that after the Master told Olliebollen what to do to save the hero, Olliebollen stopped feeling the Master's presence.

Sansaime only stared, that ruinous mottled face mostly invisible. Knives still drawn. Under that cloak the same type of silky sinuous body, the exact identical genetic mold, of those that

annihilated Olliebollen's court. And only a few minutes ago, Olliebollen could've killed her.

The tip of one of Sansaime's blades twitched. Olliebollen tensed.

But it was only a twitch. Several seconds later, Sansaime retracted both daggers into the folds of her cloak.

"We move," she said, already walking away, "all of us."

Olliebollen glanced again at the twins, saw the lines of the strings slacken, and sped to the other side of Sansaime, who once more gave zero thought to Olliebollen's presence. The twins, finally free of their bonds—and thankfully with Olliebollen too far away for them to attack on impulse—pressed their heads close and whispered, and looked back at Lalum and signaled something, and receiving a signal in response, they followed Sansaime toward the court of Flanz-le-Flore. Nonetheless, Olliebollen never stopped glancing over its shoulder.

—

The Faerie of Transmogrification transmogrified for Jay and Makepeace a lavish cell. It resembled the set of a Hollywood period piece, some English country manor's garden, flawless except for the actors the cinematographer sadly had to allow into the shot. Movies Jay's mother dragged him to until he developed enough sense of self to say "No," movies she forgot she'd seen when they played again on TV and that she watched a full second time before remembering.

Jay didn't bother dwelling on the flowers, the trees, the trellises, the little winding creek with its quaint curved bridge, all of which he figured Flanz-le-Flore put especial care into designing with some brilliant aesthetic purpose and all of which didn't matter. He focused on the wall that penned them in: tall, sheer stone. He and Makepeace quickly rounded it, patting its surface, searching for any weakness or dent, and found absolutely nothing. Not even a gate sealed shut. If Flanz-le-Flore wanted to let them out, she'd transmogrify an exit.

So Jay and Makepeace said, sure. Let's scale the wall. The garden had enough vines to make a rope. They didn't really believe it'd be possible because it was so obvious, but what surprised them was *how* it wasn't possible. The wall didn't actually end, in a normal way. At first glance it looked like it did; it didn't even seem that tall. But that was because it reached a ceiling. What they first assumed was a pleasant blue sky with clouds and warm sunlight was a ceiling, painted and illuminated with expert technique to imitate the sky flawlessly. That was when Jay stopped thinking of movie sets and started thinking of video game levels, with fixed boundaries and skyboxes.

Makepeace tried to liven the mood with quips that Jay ignored. After trying everything they could think of, including whacking the wall with the baseball bat, they went to the octagonal gazebo and sat in its ornate wooden chairs and snacked from a basket of fruit Flanz-le-Flore so generously provided them.

Makepeace plucked a berry from a bunch and tossed it into his mouth. "Suppose Sansy'll come for us sooner or later."

Jay said nothing.

"My bet's on sooner."

Jay said nothing.

"She prowls these woods often, captures stragglers from the court to sell. All extralegal of course. But she knows her business, which is why I brought her on this little excursion. So worry not, my good sir. Although—rather amusing that old Flanz-le-Flore offered to let me free if I got you to marry her, hm?"

Jay sat hunched forward drilling his eyes into some random patch of garden thinking about what Flanz-le-Flore told him about this world, how everyone in it was a husk, a facsimile, wondering if all he was doing here was playing a video game with a slightly more realistic coat of paint, just another of the endless collection of RPGs cluttering his computer desktop back home. Thinking how there'd been moments, pinprick little points where he managed to escape his own head and *believe* in the world, how those points were only as broad as the head of a pin.

"Oh well." Makepeace sampled some grapes. "Not the worst gaol I've been in."

"How does the prince wind up in jail," Jay said. Just to interact. Just to try something, just to try and overcome his self-inflicted barriers and believe, even if he knew he never could.

"Great question," said Makepeace. "Perhaps the prince is a lout. Perhaps he's a delinquent little shit who gallivants incognito through the city at night, getting up to all sorts of mischief. Sometimes in the guise of an rapsallion he thumbs his nose at the guards on purpose, simply to do so."

Jay went back to saying nothing, unimpressed by the too-cutely-delivered speech.

Makepeace wiped juice from his chin. "Allow me to ask you a question then."

"About what. France?"

A noxious laugh. "No, no. You must forgive how abhorrently I treated you when we first met, I was understandably surprised by the appearance of a traveler from Earth. But I'm interested. My great-great-however-many-greats-granddad John was a crusader. A man enflamed with holy spirit and pure faith in the divine right of kings. You—and do not take this as an insult my man—you don't quite seem cut of the same cloth, so to speak. You don't seem to have his, shall we say, spirit."

He chewed. Jay waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, said: "So what's the question."

It took Makepeace several seconds more to swallow, hovering a hand over his lips as though to signal patience while he finished the fruit. When he did, he still took his time, tilting his

pretty face hither and thither before finishing with a half-shrug of one shoulder. "Why, Jay Waringcrane, are you here?"

"To create paradise." Mechanical, thoughtless, easy.

"Paradise." Makepeace cast a wistful glance at the serenely beautiful garden, where the carefully curated foliage shone colorful with a panoply of technicolor fruit the choicest specimens of which he now devoured. "The Earthly Paradise—the Garden of Eden. Where, we are told, our forebears engendered our Fall and led us headlong into sin and death. That paradise?"

"I meant paradise more generically."

"Ah." Makepeace reached for another fruit, an apple—how cloyingly symbolic!—but let his hand rest on it. "A noble goal, my good man. We could use a paradise, never having known one in *this* world, much as we've never known an Egypt, or an Israel, or a Rome."

They did, however, know a California—apparently. But Jay said nothing and let Makepeace continue.

"It's easy." Another pause, another moment of contemplation as Makepeace plucked the apple and tossed it between his hands. "For one to feel—oh what's the right word—it's easy to feel *remote* from the Bible, here. It's easy to read the stories in that great big dusty book and think: Where is this? Who are these people? What does this have to do with me, with Whitecrosse?"

"As if I've ever seen Israel or Rome. I doubt John Coke did either." But the thought nagged, Flanz-le-Flore speaking to him, words stated with especial emphasis: *There is no God here*. And Jay supposed it was true. God didn't make this world. Perfidia Bal Berith did. "This place is closer to God than Cleveland at least."

"Do you know why Archbishop Astrophicus broke from the church? Why he corrupted those nuns and fled to a monastery in the mountains?"

"Honestly, I haven't thought about this Astrophicus guy once. Villains who don't actually show up until the end are the worst. There's no reason to care."

"Oh." Makepeace kept doing everything with the apple except bite it. It span like a top on the back of his hand before it dropped and he caught it inches from the floor. "Well then. I suppose it's not worth talking about."

They stopped talking. Makepeace finally bit into the apple.

He chewed, swallowed.

He bit into the apple again.

Crunch. Crunch. Gulp.

He bit into the apple again.

"Fine," said Jay, "tell me about this fucking guy."

And Makepeace grinned and still chewing immediately launched right into it: "Archbishop Astrophicus! Second in the Church of Whitecrosse only to my dear mum. A learned man, a graybeard drowning in his own treatises theological and astrological and anti-logical. And, it goes without saying, an absolute bore. I've suffered no worse agony than those dreary ceremonial occasions when I was forced to listen to him prattle.

"But unbeknownst to us all, Astrophicus wasn't satisfied with the knowledge given to man by Godly means. In secret he dabbled in darker arts, fae arts, no doubt a frequent customer of Sansy's, arts he mastered to probe deeper into this world's true nature. He experimented first on women like those we had the fortune of meeting in the forest, nuns mainly—orphans or former whores with nowhere else to turn, the kinds of poor girls none ever keep a close eye on and none ever miss. I doubt those girls even knew what they were doing at first. Perhaps he fed them lies about God and whatnot. Then their bodies started to change and, well—perhaps so too their minds. That was exactly what the dour old archbishop wanted. So he extended his experiments to himself."

"This is a long story," said Jay.

"It's a good story. Telling a good story requires time to flesh out the details, don't you know my man? John Coke's exploits would be rather dull if one simply said 'He conquered the Saracens of California and slew all the dragons, The End.'" Makepeace added a chuckle as though it were all a good-natured joke but Jay thought he understood the guy enough by now to know the comment rankled him. Maybe Makepeace demonstrated intelligence sometimes, but he was still the same guy as all those boyfriends of Shannon's, desperate only to reify his own importance.

Jay was tired of it. He stood up, rising above Makepeace, and Makepeace had sunken into too languid a recline to immediately stand up afterward without making it look awkward. "At least Olliebollen talks fast when she wastes my time with her explanations," Jay said.

"Do you care about anything, my good man? Anything at all? Your utter disinterest makes me wonder why exactly you even *want* to 'create paradise.' It certainly doesn't seem to be out of overwhelming charitable feeling for humanity."

Humanity. Jay walked out from under the gazebo, into the artificial sunlight, bat on his shoulder as he looked around in aimless pursuit of a potential exit he failed to consider before. He refused to be churned through such sanctimony, but while his initial plan was to ignore Makepeace altogether and force him to either shut up or pathetically dog Jay's heels looking like a whiny bitch, he got a better idea.

"And what about you, Prince Charming? What do you care about? What about Sansaime. You didn't give a shit after that bear got to her. Just fuck her and toss her in the trash, huh?"

Makepeace's chair scraped as he rose. "Sansy and I, we—It's not like we're particularly close or anything—No. You understand nothing about it."

"I understand you. I understood you before I even met you." A husk, Flanz-le-Flore called him, more right than she knew. "What about this altruistic drive of yours to save your sister? How much do you really care about her—I wonder. You only care about the glory, isn't that right. About making yourself the main character."

"Jay, my man, my good man. You shouldn't speak of matters about which you know absolutely nothing."

"Is that so?" Jay reached the picturesque bridge crossing the picturesque brook and turned to see Makepeace sidwinding behind with his arms spread and smile spread further. "Then tell me. Why are you on this adventure basically by yourself? It's the princess who's missing. Why isn't there an army of soldiers behind you? Why when I first met you did you think I was one of your mother's knights, sent to bring you home? Easy. You ran off on your lonesome ahead of everyone else to win glory. It's not about your sister, it's about you."

"Ah! Ah, the great hero believes he understands it all. What unparalleled arrogance. Ignorant of the political situation in Whitecrosse, unaware that perhaps certain powerful players may find it convenient for the most intelligent member of the royal family to disappear, and have thus stonewalled her rescue—"

"Your mother's the queen, what the fuck is stopping her from ordering a whole company of knights to march on the monastery? Hm?"

"Said powerful players perhaps even spreading particularly nasty rumors, rumors that Mayfair wasn't kidnapped at all—"

"I can only conclude your mother doesn't give a shit about her."

Jay said it just to piss Makepeace off, because he liked watching that pleasant smile twist, those elegant and pretty features crease, that douchebag composure crumple into raw, naked, furious aggression. But although Makepeace had advanced steadily with each of his fragmentary attempts to refute Jay's points, he suddenly stopped. His arms fell to his sides. His head lolled and a vast sigh escaped him as his eyes tilted to the replica sky.

"Well," he said, "that's certainly true."

Jay said nothing.

"Jay, do you have a mother? A sister? Any family at all?"

"I do."

"I want to know. Why you left them."

"What?"

"John Coke loved to speak of his life. He wrote an extensive memoir enshrined in our library; it's the only book I've read more than once. The only book I've read that I wasn't made to read. He came to this world because his was being torn apart. He was forced to watch as his country descended into civil war, a war to depose the king he'd served his whole life. He was

forced to stand by, disgusted, as his own son warred against that king. It was that disgust that drove him here, to reconstruct the Earthly realm he proved powerless to change on his own. He disowned and abandoned his family to become a knight, a crusader, a king in his own right. So I want to know: Does your family disgust you, Jay Waringcrane. Do they disgust you enough that you'd abandon them to play at hero in another world?"

Jay said nothing.

Jay didn't have to say anything. Makepeace grinned again, but it was not an empty grin, a good-natured one, it was narrow and lacking teeth. "Then perhaps," he said, "perhaps you and I aren't all that different, Jay Waringcrane."

"Oh yeah, sure."

"Let me tell you something then, and we can see if it changes your mind. I truly do, in spite of myself, have a noble purpose for this quest to save my sister. But it's not out of familial piety, you can be certain of that my good sir. It's out of respect to the nation that John Coke built, respect for the monarchical institution he defended so ardently. I'm here to drag Mayfair back—whether she wants it or not—simply so when Mother finally wastes away into nothing there's another Coke to sit on the throne and waste away in her place. One who isn't me."

The garden was growing. The grass curling, the leaves spreading, the fruit overripening. The gazebo split from its piqued roof a second story, the trellises rose in an overpowering grid pattern, and from somewhere distant the sound of singing chimed, a thousand voices all so tiny and all so far away but unified in enough harmony to skitter as an electric pulse up the sheer stone walls.

"I saw what that accursed chair did to my mother. I know of no better person to suffer that same fate than Mayfair. But me? I'm gone. Away from there, never to return. I shall become nothing more than a roaming knight errant. A fellow with a sword and shield and horse—I do hope Flanz-le-Flore returns my horse—who goes where he sees fit, fights knaves and dragons and giants and what-all-else, rescues a damsel or a village here and there, and finally dies young and handsome after picking a fight just a smidge beyond his capability. A beautiful, romantic death. Farewell order, farewell rule. Only myself, free from the will of the world enforced upon me. Free at last to will, love, and die as I wish. Understand me, my good man? I believe you do. Yes. I believe you do indeed."

The ripe fruits fell and in time lapse rotted as more fruits took their place on branches and vines sagging beneath the weight. The singing deepened into a space-pervading choir as the light of the sky turned from blue to glorious rainbow.

Makepeace's gaze was the one Jay knew well. His sheer, steadfast, unflinching look that sliced through whatever stood before his eyes. A look that might make you think he really could cut through the will of the world itself and carve his own path. But it was just a look.

"I tried to go about this in a subtle, more roundabout way," Makepeace continued, "but my man! You've thwarted me at every turn. As you can hear the singing, I imagine our capricious captor is on her way to visit us. We may not get another chance to speak at length before we reach the monastery, which is why I've no choice but to tell you this now."

"Why," said Jay, "does it matter. Why should I care?" Except he did care. For some reason, unknown to him, he cared. He'd gotten Makepeace wrong. He was no mere douchebag. He was far worse.

He really *was* similar to Jay.

"Because you need to know," said Makepeace, quickly now, because the singing reached a fever pitch and the lights in the garden a frenzy of kaleidoscopic color, "that when you reach the monastery, the archbishop will try to tell you things. You cannot listen to what he says. Not if you want what you truly want in this world: Freedom from the rule of others. You can believe me because I understand what you want, because what you want is what I want as well. No matter what the archbishop says, no matter what Mayfair herself says—she may speak too, she is an excellent speaker, but you cannot listen—no matter what, you must bring Mayfair home to Whitecrosse, do you understand? Do you? Tell me now you do. Tell me!"

"Last time," Jay said, "you tricked me. You told me to go to the castle when you wanted me to come with you. Maybe you're pulling the same trick again."

"Come now, my good man." The ceiling ripped open overhead. "That sort of trick can only ever work once."

And from the rip descended Flanz-le-Flore, contributing her own soprano voice to the chorus that enveloped her. Unlike before, she wore clothes. She wore a Cleveland Browns hat, a corduroy jacket, and jeans, and waved around a wooden baseball bat like a baton. Only her beat-up boots remained the same as before.

Her song ended in a cough. She scratched her throat, coughed again, and expelled a dry breath of exasperation. "Bother! It's been rather too long since last I sang. Rather too long indeed. Oh well. Hero, I've given you ample time to consider your choices. You'll make your decision now. You'll marry me, yes, very much so!"

Jay decided to forgo his typical blunt "No" and instead ask what possessed her to imitate his clothing almost exactly (almost; her version of his jacket lacked a zipper). He didn't get the chance. Suddenly, one of the walls of the garden came crashing down, no longer stone but instead a cascade of sticks and leaves.

A small but high-pitched voice shouted from behind where the wall once was, its owner lost in the dusty plume that rose from the clattering branches: "You won't lay a single finger on the hero, Faerie of Transmogrification!"

Jay didn't need to see to know who it was. Instead of looking, he tilted his head toward the shattered imitation sky and sighed. How lunatic was this world that he was actually relieved to hear Olliebollen Pandelirium?

Then, out of the plume, two figures lunged—Charm and Charisma, the twins. Jay, expecting anything else, scrambled to raise his bat, but the figures swept past him, leaving only a few fluttering feathers to buffet his face. They weren't attacking him. They were attacking Flanz-le-Flore.

The fight began.

The Same Wrong Even More Ruthlessly

Flanz-le-Flore snapped her fingers. Charisma turned into a pumpkin. Flanz-le-Flore snapped her fingers. Charm turned into a squirrel.

That should've been the end of it, considering neither a pumpkin nor a squirrel were capable of flying through the air with the same speed and maneuverability. Flanz-le-Flore even turned her gaze and squinted toward the dust plume from which Olliebollen's voice came, holding unsnapped fingers at the ready. But Charisma the pumpkin, instead of hurtling into the ground as fast as gravity would force it, decided that being a pumpkin wasn't enough to stop it. In refutation of all known laws of physics it diverted its path at a sheer angle upward—directly into Flanz-le-Flore's face.

Flanz-le-Flore's head jerked back and her imitation of the Cleveland Browns hat spiraled upward as the pumpkin pulled back and plowed into her stomach. At the same time, Charm the squirrel caught up to her sister and latched onto Flanz-le-Flore's shin, where it immediately drove its thick nutcracking incisors and drew a bright globule of amber-colored blood.

Flanz-le-Flore snapped her fingers. The hat, reaching the apex of its upward movement, transformed into a sharp wooden spear that Flanz-le-Flore seized with her other hand and jabbed at the pumpkin as it attempted a third hit. Based on trajectory and momentum the pumpkin ought to have impaled itself deep onto the spear, but the same physics-defying force yanked it back at the last moment so the tip only dragged against the thick gourd shell and spilled a small splattering of innards onto the grass.

That was when Jay noticed the silvery strings spanning from the pumpkin and the squirrel to Olliebollen's dust cloud. That was also when Jay sprung to action.

Two options: Flee or fight, and faster than the possibility of logically processing the better he chose fight. He made it one step toward Flanz-le-Flore with his metal bat raised when her bruised and battered face turned toward him and a single snap transmogrified him into—something.

Something small. His bat, his jacket, and his jeans—everything on his body that contained even some metal—plummeted to the ground around him, suddenly gigantic, while his vantage became that of an insect peering up through towering blades of grass. But he wasn't an insect. His nose, twitching, stood out in front of his eyes, spilling long whiskers. His hands were pink furless paws. And when he turned his head and saw his long tail, he recognized himself: a rat.

Jay wondered how exactly he could maintain human-level cognizance given the significant differences in physical structure between human and rodent brains, then decided he had better things to wonder about.

In the battle of titans above him, the wounded pumpkin was reeled back by the silver strings while Flanz-le-Flore turned her attention on the squirrel sucking the blood of her ankle and

jabbed at it with the spear. Like the pumpkin, the squirrel jerked back with seemingly no physical impetus, while from its beady squirrel eyes spilled black tears that transformed into whipping tendrils. Even coming from a squirrel, Jay recognized Charm's fake paradise magic attack. Of course—Charm just gulped down a dose of Flanz-le-Flore's blood. Flanz-le-Flore was unsurprised by this development; a snap and Charm the squirrel became Charm the... small spiky ball. A sea urchin. A creature with no eyes. The tendrils tears, poised to wrap around Flanz-le-Flore's ankles, no longer possessed a source and splattered useless to the ground.

Makepeace finally entered the picture. He lifted his shield to cover his face while his other hand drew his sword. One snap, one instant, and that hand turned into a hoof. It fumbled against the sword's hilt, capable of holding nothing, and the sword dropped like Charm's tears.

But nothing else about Makepeace changed. If Flanz-le-Flore couldn't change Makepeace's nonmetal head behind his metal shield, then line of sight must be a factor.

Great to know! Better to know before Jay got himself turned into a rat, because as it stood he didn't have anything to do.

Makepeace meanwhile didn't give a shit about one hand being a hoof because he charged Flanz-le-Flore with his shield as potent a weapon against her as the sword. Flanz-le-Flore held out her hand in posture to snap, her bright eyes scanning with electronic speed every inch of what Makepeace presented to her for a weakness, saw none, and unaware or uncaring that Charm the sea urchin stabbed her boot elevated into the skybox as though drawn by strings of her own until she eluded Makepeace's reach.

"Jay, get out of here!" Makepeace shouted, until Flanz-le-Flore got high enough to see over his shield and snapped his head into—what else—an ass head. Then all Makepeace said was EE-AH, EE-AH.

Risen above, bathed in light of her own invention, Flanz-le-Flore spread her arms wide, kicked the sea urchin off her foot, and hurled her spear like a javelin at Makepeace. His shield was already in position to block it, but Flanz-le-Flore snapped midflight and the spear became a boulder that bulldozed Makepeace backward, over the creek, into a dense tangle of weeds as his body flipped and turned.

The back of her hand wiped the blood from her upper lip as her gaze settled on Jay. Fight having failed, Jay decided to listen to Makepeace's advice and scampered the opposite direction.

Flanz-le-Flore's voice followed him:

"Intrude upon *my* court, *my* kingdom, *my* sanctuary? Wound *my* body? Befoulers of yourselves and all you touch; traitors to your respective races! Flanz-le-Flore is a just and benevolent queen, so for the sake of this world I'll, hm yes, I'll turn you into compost for this garden's flowers!"

The speech may have intimidated more if her voice wasn't phlegmatic with nose blood. Far more threatening was the sound of several snapped fingers in rapid succession.

"Bring me their heads, my very dear and beloved subjects. Do leave only the hero alive."

Out of the sky dropped objects. The objects, Jay's poorly-perspectived rat vision soon realized, were once Flanz-le-Flore's fairies and were now animals. A snarling wolf landed near the rosebushes, a bull and a unicorn in a row of topiaries. The gazebo exploded as an elephant came crashing through its roof and what remained teetered on a few stilt-sized supports. A tiger, then a lion, then a cheetah landed as a trio. A hawk swooped overhead, a hippopotamus thrashed in the creek and decimated the quaint wooden bridge, a giraffe showed up lacking any particular violent capabilities unless the idea was to instill vertigo in anyone who craned their neck to see its head rubbing the ceiling. A bear almost pathetic in appearance compared to Pluxie reared up and roared and once the whole spectrum of charismatic megafauna known to Middle Ages Europe had manifested out of thin air Flanz-le-Flore gave up on creativity and started, with hallucinatory speed, to snap her remaining followers into wasps, lots and lots and lots of wasps that filled the air with a fur-bristling buzz.

In front of Jay dropped an ordinary housecat, calico. Jade eyes with black slits for pupils stared him down. Compared to his rat self, it towered as tall as a house, and a dim fact heard somewhere rattled in the back of his rat brain: pound-for-pound the deadliest killer in the world. The most dangerous and widespread invasive species on Earth. Genocider of rodents and small birds to drop as gifts at the foot of their owner's bed.

Faced with this behemoth, Jay had ample reason for terror. But Jay once had a cat as a kid. Mushroom the cat. He saw her try to jump from the couch to the shelf, smack face-first into the wall, and flop to the floor. Cats were stupid. If these cats had the brains of fairies, they were even stupider.

The calico pounced. Stupid it may be, slow it was not. Jay darted left, right, left and right and left and right as the forepaws battered all around him, the frantic type of dance a cat probably won sooner or later with a rat, so he decided to do something the cat would *not* expect, which was leap with all the energy his back legs could muster and whap his paws into the cat's nose.

All of the cat's dumb face squished back into itself and its eyes squeezed shut. Obviously Jay did no meaningful damage, but that moment of stunned surprise gave him a window to bolt. Between the tall grass he sprinted, four limbs in perfect harmony like he lived his whole life in this body, back the direction he came from, where Flanz-le-Flore hovered in the sky rapid snapping more of her followers into wasps while Makepeace waved his shield wildly at the hippopotamus who for all its rotundity dared not take another step toward the gleaming metal.

Jay tried to look over his shoulder to see whether the cat had recovered and if so how close behind it was but he immediately realized his head lacked the same range of motion as a human's. Instead he focused on his goal in front of him, the parts left behind when he first transformed: his jacket, jeans, and baseball bat.

Even without sight, he could sense the cat racing directly behind him, the calamitous patter of its paws against the soil, the shuffling of hundreds of blades of grass as they made way for its gargantuan body. Rat instincts pumped adrenaline into him as he pushed his unfamiliar musculature to its limit, faster, faster, and in the span of one second from when he started he was there.

He dove into the base of his jacket and burrowed inside, creeping under the long cool seam that contained the zipper certain in a few more milliseconds he'd feel the paw of the cat come down, shredding retractable claws through the fabric to dice him. Which had to be another instinctual rat thing, since he logically knew not only was the cat not supposed to kill him but also that it shouldn't want to get too close to the jacket's metal zipper. Sure enough, when the paws came down upon his snug, cozy, dark hideaway, they landed to the sides of him, patting instead of slashing: trepidatious. Jay would've breathed a sigh of relief if that was a thing rats did.

Instead he sat in his burrow, useless.

Outside, insanity raged. Animal howls encompassing fully disparate taxonomies mingled with erratic proclamations from Flanz-le-Flore, the growing whirr of a hundred wasps, and—increasingly—odd fleshy squelches Jay couldn't fathom the origin of.

Meanwhile Jay was a rat. He realized keeping himself safe from the cat didn't even matter. If he remained cooped up here unmoving, it served Flanz-le-Flore just as well as if the cat caught him by the scruff of the neck. Essentially, being here removed him from the fight, rendered him without purpose, his fate to be decided by the actions of various others irrespective of himself. Yet again he regaled Perfidia with a (mental) shrug of exasperation, wondering if this exciting turn of events was intended to satisfy him.

There was no Perfidia to respond. Only this black, furry jacket interior. And he remained there, a rat, railing at nothing, railing at Perfidia Bal Berith, a glorified used car salesman he already outsmarted. Didn't Flanz-le-Flore tell him? Everyone here was a husk, Makepeace, Sansaime, Olliebollen, Flanz-le-Flore herself. Only *he* had Humanity, only he possessed the power to change the world, and that was exactly what he asked for wasn't it? Exactly. Or maybe Perfidia made Flanz-le-Flore say that to—Jesus fucking Christ what was he doing? Becoming a rat really did morph his brain because apparently he lost all object permanence and believed just because he couldn't see anything there was nothing to do but sink into his own ridiculous logical self-destruction, like if there wasn't someone else to destroy he had no choice but to turn his weapons on himself.

His enemy lurked not a few inches away from him, peering intently at the slight bulge his tiny rat body made in the jacket. It purred softly, it pressed its paws to prevent him from escaping from either side. That cat was something he could outsmart. That cat was an especial sort of dumb; the kind that couldn't even learn from past mistakes.

Jay jumped up. This time he took with him the jacket under which he hid, including the metal zipper, and brought that zipper straight into the cat's face.

Expecting a yowl, he received a sizzle. It started soft, lost amid the animal cries, and for a few seconds Jay remained within the burrow of his jacket thinking that the brief point of

contact between the zipper and the cat's face wasn't enough to do any serious damage regardless of what effects metal had on fairies. But the sizzle continued, it grew louder, more intense. Jay scurried to the neck of his jacket and poked his head out cautiously to watch what happened next.

A charcoal line, like a grill mark, spread vertically up the cat's face. It seared its chin and nose. Scent of burning fur overwhelmed the fruit and flowers and only when the sizzling streak spread to split apart the skin and drop thick strands of blood the consistency of broth did the cat-fairy comprehend its suffering and loose the yowl Jay expected. Skull shone through, white bone bleached without a trace of blood as the liquid transformed to steam and the edges of the wound cauterized.

Past the cat Jay also discovered the source of the horrific squelching noises he heard previously. Many of Flanz-le-Flore's animals lay slumped or writhing, stuck by shiny little needles that caught the gleam of the sunlight above, their howls morphing from animalistic to those of souls in Hell as the flesh dissolved where the pins stuck and the pins slowly slid deeper inside their liquefying bone. Towering within a plume of Olliebollen's pixie dust, Sansaime stood, her head tilted down so her hood covered her entirely, her hands spread with more of the shiny pins balanced on her fingertips. Jay wasn't sure if it was Olliebollen's dust, the complete concealment of skin, or some property of the cloak that prevented Flanz-le-Flore from transmogrifying her. Didn't matter. A bear, a wolf, a lioness rushed at her in a coordinated attack and with only the slightest motions she sent her pins into their faces, which promptly began to bubble.

"Such foul brutish beasts, rather foul indeed if I do say so myself," Flanz-le-Flore said over the growing graveyard of corpses. "You there, swarm that one together, she hasn't enough metal in the world to overcome you if you only strike at once. Probably."

She spoke to the swarm of wasps, who buzzed around Makepeace's ass head as he waved his shield wildly, and gave a taut imperial fling of her arm, the fingers still snapping to add to the multitude. The wasps obeyed immediately, leaving the bloated and miserable-looking donkey head and whipping in a corkscrew toward Sansaime.

Jay didn't get to see what happened next because the cat came back. Its face was splitting apart at the middle, its eyes becoming unloosened within their sockets, but in singleminded determination it kept to its goal. A paw raised with gleaming claws bared and this time it didn't seem to mind if it destroyed itself slashing at the zipper as long as it got to him.

His bat was lying nearby. He dove at it, his full weight rammed the handle at the same time the cat swiped. It wasn't anywhere near the force of a swing, but he managed to hit the handle hard enough to make the bat lazily revolve on its central point. The cat, already mid-lunge, its vision clearly fucked up, only realized at the last possible moment. Instead of bringing its claws down on Jay, it shot out all four limbs to catch itself. Its feline reflexes managed the feat, but it wasn't able to recover quick enough to stop the bat from gently spinning into one of its forepaws, rendering said forepaw a red melting mass in a matter of moments.

Jay lacked any moment of exultation because something immediately seized him from behind. The long claws of a talon gripped him as he twisted his body as much as he could and discovered he'd been snatched by Charisma, reverted into her normal state as she sped

through the air. They traveled toward the cloud of dust that enveloped Sansaime, where the horde of wasps was charging. The front of the horde, as soon as it touched the cloud, immediately morphed back into the same eclectic collection of fairies Jay encountered in Flanz-le-Flore's court. Suddenly without stingers—and much bigger targets—Sansaime was making short work of them with her knife, even though they often flopped to the floor already regenerating from the effects of Olliebollen's magic.

Flanz-le-Flore snapped and Charisma became a snail, which lacked hands to hold Jay or his bat, but intuiting how little time she had left she'd already thrown him instants prior. His spastic rat body flailed in the air until another hand reach out and caught him and he found himself staring into the bloodshot and bleary eyes of Charm, who hovered over Olliebollen's cloud.

Immediately Flanz-le-Flore snapped again but Jay was already leaving Charm's hands before she poofed into a sunflower. Charisma caught him, back to normal after passing through the pixie dust.

The twins were playing hot potato with him. And it was working. He wasn't even getting his own chance to go through Olliebollen's dust. He remained a rat.

He and Charisma landed to the side of the spider girl, Lalum, and Charm—after a quick detransformative dip through the dust herself—soon joined. Lalum hunched amid a tangle of large tree roots, hidden safely behind the cloud of dust, and although Flanz-le-Flore continued to snap, it wasn't any of them who transformed.

"I got the hero!" Charisma said. "Let's scam while the rest are distracted."

Jay opened his mouth and drove his incisors into her clawed finger. With a yelp she let go, but before he even hit the floor a bundle of webbing wrapped around him and pulled him straight into the open door of the one of the cages Lalum kept around her waist.

"Rat bastard! Biting me like that, what's even the point? I hope I tasted awful you nasty brat, I hope I—"

"Heyeyey! I see you! Yeah! I see you trying to steal the hero!"

Olliebollen. She twinkled in the darkness of the forest landscape they'd entered the moment they left the artificial garden. A background of dust shimmered behind her while Flanz-le-Flore urged in desperate tones her forces onward into an increasing symphony of fleshy curdling. Olliebollen was shaking back and forth at speeds Jay only saw during her psychopathic fits, but she lacked that same wrath in her eyes. She was shaking fast to expel as much dust as possible.

Please, Jay wanted to squeak at her, but knew from Makepeace's braying that vocal chords didn't receive the same stability as brainpower post-transformation. Please just sprinkle some damn dust on me and make me *human* again. He was tired of being a rat.

For once, Olliebollen seemed to have the right idea. She fluttered toward him in a spastic zigzag, but Charm clipped into her path, hands spread and fingers twitching in preparation to

snatch her.

What happened next, Jay didn't see. Lalum dropped the threads that controlled the twins and scuttled to make her escape with Jay in tow.

Her eight legs moved fast but she paused frequently, glancing hither and thither, her hands gripping her shoulders. The world around them changed, a change aided by the darkness that made boundaries between things unclear. What at one moment was an open wooded area with tree trunks rising became within a few skittery spans a twisting castle corridor, the floor a green-black checkerboard and the walls stone brick and mortar, adorned by lavish tapestries and paintings of Flanz-le-Flore in costumes ranging from dresses made solely of flowers to a dirty and boyish pants and blouse that much better fit her worn boots. The boots were the only constant among the portraits, Flanz-le-Flore's hair and even skin tone shifting to better match any given ensemble.

Then the corridor ended and they emerged into a pastoral scene brightly-lit with no sign of forest canopy, only a sky strewn by picturesque clouds. Fauns piped to adoring nymphs in rapt attention, the sound of rustic music rendered subterranean by its immense echo. Lalum paused, her body jittering so hard it shook Jay's cage, and she held up her palms to shield her face from either the sun or the woodland amalgams who turned without ceasing their music to deliver invitations in some foreign tongue that she join their idylls.

Lalum panicked, picked a direction, and sprinted as fast as her awkward body allowed. She squeezed herself in a crevice between two large rocks and remained wedged there, breathing heavily and sending fitful stares at the narrow sliver of light above.

She worked threads between her hands and held her hands where Jay could see. The threads read:

DO YOU NOUGH THE WHAY OUT?

Nough? Oh—know. Weird way to misspell it.

"Squeak squeak," Jay squeaked, which was rat for "The same way you came in dumbass."

The faces of fauns and nymphs emerged in the light above and Lalum squeaked too before burying her face her hands. Makepeace said the monstrous women were once ordinary girls tricked by the archbishop. That in mind Jay could only feel sorry for Lalum. He remembered Pluxie, begging for help as she drowned in the mud...

He blotted his mind so he remembered nothing and tried to focus on escape no matter how improbable. It didn't matter. Above, amid the giggling faces, another face slowly drifted into view, and it was not giggling. Flanz-le-Flore.

"Oh dear. Have you gotten lost? I do apologize. I've made my court a labyrinth, haven't I? What a silly thing to do."

Snap. The first rock forming the crevice became sand. Snap. The second rock became water. The sand and the water splashed into Lalum and became mud, ruining her habit and causing

her needlepoint limbs to slip and slide as Flanz-le-Flore's followers thronged her, uttering a low chant.

Only once Lalum whipped her head around and exhausted all other options did she hold up her hands and show Flanz-le-Flore a message:

DONT KILL ME THEY MADE ME DO IT IM SORRY

Accompanied by a doodle of Lalum's face with big pleading eyes and hands clasped to either pray or beg. GOD LOVES YOU ALL, the words shifted to read.

Flanz-le-Flore smiled back, a soft and reassuring smile, and then snapped her fingers and turned one of the fauns into a wolf. Another snap, another wolf, and another, and in a matter of seconds a ring of snarling muzzles surrounded them. Even still Lalum continued to nod her head along to Flanz-le-Flore's pleasant smile, grasping onto the slightest hope that smile presented, until the wolves tightened their approach, hemming her in, and the wayward scuttling motions of her legs took her only closer to yet another set of jagged teeth.

At last she realized and pulled the two metal cages from her hip to wave around wildly as her only weapon to protect herself. Jay slapped against the bars as she swung at the first wolf who leapt, missed entirely, and released the cage once the jaw clamped around her arm. Another wolf crunched down on one of her legs, and a third wolf, a fourth, a fifth, Lalum through her strained sealed lips screaming.

Jay's cage bounced, rolled, came to a stop so Jay could watch as a flurry of waving tails surrounded an increasingly less-visible Lalum, Lalum attempting to coat her own face and throat with thick wads of string, although Jay knew from experience her string didn't defend too well against anything sharp. Then a snap—and he was no longer a rat.

The webbing and the cage that confined his rat body burst around him as he sat on the floor, finally a full-fledged human again.

"There we go," said Flanz-le-Flore over the rips and tears of her brethren, "this is a form that much better suits you. Do bring the hero his clothes, my attendants."

A clutch of fluttering fairies dropped two articles of clothing in front of him: His jacket and his jeans. Jay glanced down and realized he was wearing only his t-shirt and boxers (and hat), which made sense but was frankly embarrassing.

"Your friends have done their absolute best," Flanz-le-Flore continued, floating down to him, extending her hands to him, "but they only serve to annoy me."

A splatter of blood and a severed spider leg flopped not far from Jay's clothes. He glanced at the seething mass of fur under which there was no longer any sign of Lalum, nor any screams, and with his head tilted low to hide his eyes under his hat grimaced.

"I'll kill them all, you know." Her arms remained spread, and Jay watched her hands carefully. "They cannot escape from my court as long as I am its queen. So if you wish to end

this needless bloodshed now, you know what you need to do, yes? It's rather very simple, very simple indeed. Simply submit to me, become my husband!"

A heave and the wolves were pushed back as Lalum, now mostly sealed within a cocoon of her own bloody silk, managed to raise her head and gurgle something deep in her throat. She stitched words onto the threads that covered her face: HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME, each successive HELP ME increasingly disheveled and unreadable if not for the context of repetition. Jay suspected the only reason Lalum hadn't been completely eviscerated yet was so Flanz-le-Flore could use her life as a bargaining chip. Which indicated a total lack of understanding about Jay and what he wanted.

Nonetheless, he said: "Okay." He paused, looked again at Flanz-le-Flore's hands, and said it louder: "Okay—okay. Sure. Whatever you say."

"Oh! I knew you'd come around eventually, hero." Flanz-le-Flore nodded to the wolves and they backed away from their prey. The mass that was Lalum flopped to its side, leaking blood, totally motionless. "Fear not, I shall be a dutiful wife to you. How could I not? I've sampled all other entertainments in my time. But I've never made of myself a helpmeet. Of course, we shall know physical pleasures together too, oh yes I rather suspect we will."

Right. Physical pleasures. Flanz-le-Flore liked to get touchy-feely, he knew that from their talk before. In reciprocation, Jay reached his arms to her, matching the gesture she made as she drifted slowly closer.

"Yes." Jay said. "Yes. Right. We will."

Their hands met. He threaded his fingers within hers and stared her in the eye. A romantic gesture of two soon-to-be newlyweds. At least that was how Flanz-le-Flore saw it, her head at a slight loll as her lips parted into a coy sigh.

Jay clenched both his hands and bent back her wrists.

Flanz-le-Flore must've thought he was harmless disarmed of his metal bat. She must've thought she had him in a corner. Even when he had his bat earlier, she hadn't been afraid of getting close to him, wrapping her arms around him. After all, wasn't it her who told him he was weak, too weak to survive this world without help?

"Don't underestimate me," he said.

Small hands. Small, brittle bones that splintered as he put all possible force into his grip. She screamed and her face became something awful, something pained and imploring and for a moment he wanted to stop but knew he couldn't, felt her thumbs—the only fingers he didn't have in his grip—try to strike against his wrists as though that'd somehow conjure the snap needed to render him inert again. He crumpled his hands into balled fists, her hands trapped inside, and through the pulsing of tendons felt her fingers snap.

The wolves rushed forward to rip him apart but he relinquished Flanz-le-Flore's ruined hands and wrapped his arms around her head and shouted: "Get back or I kill her, it'll only take a moment!" Of course he had no idea how to snap a neck like action heroes did in movies, if

that was even possible or just Hollywood artifice, but the wolves bought it—for the time being. They backed up, crouching low, snarling.

Flanz-le-Flore held up her hands and the fingers on each dangled bent and twisted. A sob rose in her throat and tears rolled down the sides of her face. "Why? Hero, why? Why!"

When Jay glanced over his shoulder the wolves behind him had advanced an inch and when he glanced back the wolves in front had advanced too. How long until they got bold enough to risk an attack?

"I truly wished to love you," Flanz-le-Flore moaned. "To serve you, hero. To be your adoring helpmeet. To live if even for a little within the glow of your Humanity..."

Did this place even have an exit? It looked like rollicking hills under blue sky in every direction. Somewhere walls must exist, convincing illusions to simulate endless terrain. Where?

Then, out of one of those walls, Makepeace appeared.

No longer an ass, shield in one hand and sword in the other, he manifested fully formed from the blue, swung his head around until he spotted Jay. Sansaime appeared behind him. No sign of Olliebollen or the twins.

"Jay! Your bat!"

Makepeace drew back his arm and threw Jay's baseball bat. The throw couldn't have been more accurate despite the awkward distribution of weight, a perfect parabolic arc—a football pass.

Jay tossed Flanz-le-Flore aside and caught the bat to immediately slam it into the first wolf that lunged at him. The bat might as well have been a sword, it ate into the wolf's side and left it reeling and rolling with an exposed ribcage steaming the smell of charred flesh. Wildly he whipped the bat behind him expecting an attack from his blind spot and barely missed a wolf that danced back to keep out of his range. A third wolf fell, seemingly for no reason, until four burning spots appeared where small metal pins stuck out, and then Makepeace and Sansaime were there.

With his real sword, Makepeace cleanly decapitated a wolf and waved the sizzling bloody blade at two others. The remaining wolves lost any thought for attack. They formed a living wall between them and Flanz-le-Flore, whose motionless wings carried her across the plain in full flight. Makepeace hurled himself at the wall slashing and slamming his shield and both types of attack were equally devastating as the wolves came apart in pieces. Sansaime plunged through the gaps that opened between them and sprinted full speed in pursuit of Flanz-le-Flore with a dagger bared. Jay, meanwhile, standing in his underwear, suddenly felt like a rat again.

Whatever, he told himself. He won the fight. If Flanz-le-Flore had fingers, currently, things would look much different. This—was just cleanup.

"After her, Jay," Makepeace said as he chopped through the last wolf whole and willing enough to stand in his way. Jay scooped up his jacket and pants and followed as Flanz-le-Flore disappeared into a blue spot in the sky and Sansaime clambered up the sheer face of empty air to cartwheel in after her. Makepeace disappeared next, and Jay, after nearly smacking against the blue-painted wall, took one last look at the absolute carnage left on the pastoral landscape—full swaths of grass running red, steam rising from all the burning skin, pieces of dismembered animals, and the motionless cocoon that contained Lalum—and followed.

He entered a theater. Rows of benches in a fan pattern around a central stage bordered by velvet curtains. Compared to the bright sunny scene of the previous room almost everything here was drenched in shadow. Only the stage itself had any light, a cone that streamed onto it from above, and in the center of the cone the same seat of sticks and leaves that was Flanz-le-Flore's throne. Actually, as he stumbled past the first few rows of seats, he thought the layout of this room matched Flanz-le-Flore's throne room, with only the benches added and the lighting changed and a few curtains strung up to conceal walls that weren't walls but large and leafy trees. He wondered if this actually was Flanz-le-Flore's throne room, with only the aesthetics changed. And with an empty, desolate quiet.

It didn't matter. Flanz-le-Flore, despite trailing blood and holding her ruined hands uselessly in front of her, drifted with maintained ethereal elegance toward the stage while Sansaime hurried after her.

There was nothing obstructing the stage and Sansaime's cloak ruffled as with barely any perceptible motion she flung several small pins at Flanz-le-Flore. The pins went directly through her thin translucent wings and Flanz-le-Flore dropped onto the stage in front of her throne with a strangled cry. Her ugly worn boots kicked at the wooden surface as she pulled herself onto the chair and struggled to turn around.

"You'd," she said, her breath heaving, her hair a clumpy mass, "you'd kill a queen of the fae? You'd kill me?"

Sansaime climbed onto the stage. Out of her cloak appeared Olliebollen, who floated to the side. "Uh, hey, yeah! Maybe we shouldn't, you know, *kill* her. Right? There's no need to do that, right? We can just leave now. I know the way out." She looked straight at Jay. "Hero, there's no need for more killing, right?"

"Kill me, elf," said Flanz-le-Flore, "and my court goes extinct. Where will your income come from then, you cursed daughter of cannibals? Do you think you were merely clever when you crept around my forest before, capturing choice morsels among my friends and family to sell to those humans in the castle? I allowed it. My court and that castle have existed together for hundreds of years, and there have always been ones like you. I allowed it! I allowed it, in the name of peace and stability. And for that peace this is how you repay me?"

Sansaime approached slowly, while Makepeace stopped between the first row of benches and Jay trudged up behind him. Jay wasn't sure if Sansaime was taking her time to consider Flanz-le-Flore's appeal, or simply being cautious.

"If I let you live," said Sansaime, "then next time I come here, you kill me. Your kind's vindictive like no other."

"Come on Sansy, let's get it over with," said Makepeace.

"Very good then." Flanz-le-Flore leaned her head back against the top of her throne. "Listen to your master, since you've become such a good dog for him, such a wonderful little dog. Go on, kill me. But know that if you seek to repair the scars that cover your body, little girl, it will not be human power that makes that happen."

That last sentence made Sansaime pause and the instant the pause occurred Flanz-le-Flore kicked her boot and snapped one of the sticks at the base of her throne. No, it wasn't a stick, it only looked like one, and it didn't snap. It was a lever. A trapdoor dropped under Sansaime.

Sansaime tried to lunge but nothing was under her feet. She caught the edge of the trapdoor as she fell and her body swung hard and she lost her grip and disappeared into the hole.

Makepeace leaped onto the stage and rushed with his sword but Flanz-le-Flore kicked another subtle lever and from above came crashing a giant crescent moon. It wasn't a real moon, it was painted onto wood and suspended by rope, but it took up half the stage and landed directly on Makepeace.

"Olliebollen Pandelirium!" Flanz-le-Flore shrieked. "Heal me now. Side with your own kind over those who would rather see you dead. Heal me and I shall vouch for your royal bloodline when the fae next meet to discuss the fate of your court!"

Apparently Flanz-le-Flore knew what to say to people because Olliebollen remained motionless in midair, not even doing her normal fidgeting as she gawked at Flanz-le-Flore and at the groaning form of Makepeace pinned under the giant moon.

Which left only one useful person. Jay Waringcrane. As he climbed onto the stage Flanz-le-Flore already had her boot raised to hit another lever. He didn't give her a chance. He threw his bat and it clanked against the base of the throne, forcing Flanz-le-Flore to tuck her legs up onto the seat as he rushed toward her, stooped, and snatched his ricocheting bat. He swung it the only way he knew: hard.

The bat connected with her head before he had time to think about it and by the time he did half her face including one eyeball was already melting, running down off her skull like her flesh had only been paint. He reeled back from the sight and she launched off the throne and wrapped her arms around him, pushing her grotesque face closer to him, opening a jaw where one cheek was no more than a few gooey sinews and saying: "We could've been so happy. We could've been—" But then her tongue flowed between the shattered gaps in her teeth and her voice degenerated into a gurgle.

Her body weighed next to nothing and her grasp immediately weakened. Jay whirled, forced her away from him, and dropped her into the open trapdoor.

She plummeted into the dark and disappeared.

Jay staggered back, let go of his bat, and fell into a sitting position on her throne. He glanced down; on his black t-shirt a smear of Flanz-le-Flore's face remained.

Dear god.

Makepeace heaved the moon off him and rose, nursing an ugly-looking wound to the back of his head that was hard to care about given Olliebollen could heal it. Olliebollen, however, stared at the trapdoor as though shellshocked.

"Maybe," she said, "maybe we shouldn't have done that..."

A hand shot out of the trapdoor and Jay jolted, horrified in expectation of the disintegrating zombie of Flanz-le-Flore to rear her horrible head, but it was Sansaime who climbed up instead.

Sansaime glanced around the stage. "A body dropped past me. Her, I assume."

Her.

Makepeace passed the throne, holding the back of his head with one hand. His other landed on Jay's shoulder. "You did what you had to, Jay. Just like with that bear. Now let's get moving before more of her court shows up. Would you kindly tell your faerie to patch up this bloody spot on my crown?"

Jay gripped the sides of the throne. He didn't—he didn't know why Makepeace thought it was necessary to reassure him. He didn't need it. He only needed a moment to rest after running around and fighting for so long. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his cheeks. He was doing what he needed to do. To be a conqueror. As though Napoleon hadn't gotten thousands killed, millions.

"You dropped your clothes, my man." Makepeace indicated Jay's jacket and jeans at the edge of the stage.

In his underwear, Jay sat on the throne, taking only a moment to rest before he would continue forward, continue doing what he needed to change this world. To make a difference to this world.

And Then! Upotte!

In a dark place, there was a horse.

It had not been in this dark place very long but already it—or he, because it was a male horse—was happy to be here. The place was comfortable, secure, quiet, with hay piled up to the side and water in a trough.

The horse was happy. Or almost happy. The horse had a broken leg.

The broken leg hurt. It hurt to walk, although the horse found that by lifting the broken leg and walking on the three unbroken legs he could move just fine if he wanted to eat some hay or drink some water. He would like his leg to not be broken but he was a horse and was used to things not always going his way.

The horse decided he might want some more hay because he last ate hay five minutes ago. He shifted around on his three mobile legs and lowered his neck to eat and that's when his ears twitched.

He heard something. In this dark and quiet place, he heard something.

It didn't sound like a predator, at least none of the ones instinctual to him. It didn't smell like a predator either, although it did have a smell he didn't care for. Burnt. No smoke, and no light of flames, so he wasn't particularly concerned, but he remained alert as the sound drew closer, slowly. It sounded like a scrape. Like something dragging itself across the ground on its belly. It groaned with each scrape.

The sound became a rhythmic pattern. The pattern broke only so often, followed usually by heavy breathing. After a minute of this pattern, the horse grew used to it. No immediate threat. He bent down and ate more hay.

Into what small light there was scraped a skull.

The horse paused mid-bite.

The skull scraped forward again. It was actually only half a skull. The rest had a face. The horse resumed eating.

The half-skull, half-face reached out its arms. Its palms pressed against the ground because the digits on each hand were mangled in all sorts of directions.

As the horse ate, the ruined thing lifted its arms and wrapped them around his neck. The horse wasn't worried. The touch was kind. It was reassuring. It was friendly. More friendly even than his master, the human boy who wore such heavy armor. This thing didn't seem heavy, at least. It was small for a human, although it was human-shaped.

The hands caressed. The horse liked the feeling. It distracted him from the hurt of his own broken leg.

Then the thing lifted its face to the horse's ear. It whispered something the horse couldn't understand, something that didn't sound like the human speech his master used, a whistle pressed through the parsed lips of the half-face that still had them.

What the words were, if even words at all, didn't matter. In those whistling notes the horse heard something delicate, something unlike the gruesome thing that uttered them. The horse understood. He stopped eating. Careful of his broken leg, he lowered himself to a lying position.

The half-melted creature, with extreme effort, crawled onto his back.

Then, it fell off.

—

Perfidia Bal Berith took Shannon and Dalt to the parking garage under her office. In her own personal parking space, past her Porsche (another extravagance unaccounted for by her claimed lack of income), was a large stone archway.

The archway spanned the entire space and even intruded on adjacent spaces, which annoyed at least one of Perfidia's neighbors, because someone had left a taped note to one leg of the arch that read: PLEASE MOVE THIS. Perfidia pointed to the note, laughed in a way that suggested an invitation for Shannon and Dalt to laugh too, and when she received no response took the note and crammed it into her pocket.

"So this is, supposedly, a portal to another world," said Shannon.

"Yeah. Yeah. Obviously don't take my word for it. Lemme move my car and I'll open it up for you."

"Give me the keys. I'll move it," said Shannon.

After Perfidia spent several minutes carefully explaining Shannon what she described as particular quirks of the Porsche, Shannon backed up, drove to the side, and parked without incident. Dalt kept close to Perfidia the whole time. They'd tied Perfidia's sharp tail with a zip tie and it looked like a bound extension cord bouncing against her back. Who knew if she'd pull another stunt. She wouldn't as long as Dalt kept patting her shoulder with his massive hand.

Once the Porsche was out of the way, Perfidia took her keys, sorted through them, and pulled a large one off the ring that had a classic, old-fashioned look. Not a modern key with its mathematical jagged edge but the kind of key that belongs in fantasy castles. If this portal went where Perfidia claimed it did, Shannon supposed it appropriate.

Under watchful eyes, Perfidia toed her way to the arch, hand raised in a nonthreatening gesture, beaming a foolish smile. She tapped a segment of the arch, caused a compartment to open, and revealed a keyhole.

"Now what you see me do may challenge your notions of what's possible in this world—"

"Do it," said Shannon.

Perfidia shrugged, shoved the key into the hole, and turned. "Voila!"

The space under the arch bubbled a translucent shimmer. Not opaque enough to block the industrial parking lot wall behind it with its pipes and brutalist lettering, but it was hard to write off as merely a trick of the light. Hard, but not impossible.

"A cute trick, Miss Bal Berith. However, you'll need to—"

"Holy shit," said Dalt. "Christ, she really did it."

"Dalt, shut up and let me do the talking. Miss Bal Berith, this doesn't prove your outlandish claims of another world."

"Oh totally. Totally right Shannon. And skepticism's perfectly understandable, this world's got rules and all that, I know how it is—believe me. But if you want your proof all you gotta do is step inside. Your brother went through there."

"Well then let's take a looksee," said Dalt.

"Dalt, do not take another step," said Shannon. "Do you even think, Sherlock? She *says* it's a portal. Perhaps that surface—I don't know—liquefies whatever touches it. We're not dealing with an honest person here, Dalt."

Dalt shot her a look. A look Shannon cared little for, a look she knew well from the ghosts of boyfriends past, a look she hadn't—until now—seen on Dalt. The look of condescension. The look of "I know best." It was an easy look for certain men to wear, men used to being unchallenged, at the prime of their game physically and mentally, men self-confident and self-assured, the kind of men Shannon preferred, even if they came with the rather annoying drawback of extending that condescension to her.

She braced herself for him to open his mouth and say something of absolute idiocy that would soon get her shouting—she'd certainly been there before. Instead he shrugged.

"Alright, let's see if that's true."

He seized Perfidia by the collar and before Perfidia could even protest lifted her up and shoved her head into the portal. The head disappeared, although the rest of the body thrashed in Dalt's grasp. For several seconds he held her there. Then, he yanked her back.

"Oh come on!" said a Perfidia still possessed of a head. "If you wanted me to demonstrate you could just ask. I'm more than willing to help, y'know."

"There ya go," said Dalt. "Not a liquefaction surface or whatever. Reading science fiction lately Shannon? That'd be new."

"When faced with the unknown," said Shannon, "with something unaccountable by known rules, the first thing you must do is establish new rules. Empiric testing is how you do that. Now, say it really is a portal. We still don't know if it goes where she claims it does. It could take us straight to Hell, for instance. Let's find a stick or a string or something, tie one of our phones to the end, set it to record, and—"

Dalt shoved his head into the portal.

"Dalt. Dalt, Dalt!" Shannon rushed to him and pulled him back. "Dalt, what the fuck are you thinking?"

"Empiric testing." Dalt grinned, looking awfully pleased with himself, and Shannon could've punched him if she wasn't certain her fist would bounce harmlessly off his body. "And guess what I saw? A big graveyard. Full of statues of kings or knights or something. Swords and horses. Exactly like Bal Berith said—a fantasy world. A fantasy world, Shannon."

Shannon glared. Like her hypothetical fist, the glare bounced off him; he glowed exultant. Quickly, before he could do something even stupider, she went to the arch, turned the key to deactivate the portal, and put the key into her pocket. Although Perfidia kept a close eye on where she put the key, Shannon didn't worry about her. Dalt's expression ballooned her annoyance—until she realized he wasn't proud about him being correct and her being incorrect, but something else entirely.

"You understand what this means, Shannon? I mean, this isn't just anything we've got here. This is a real, bona fide portal to another world. Another freaking *world*, yo."

"Yes, another world my brother has blundered into."

Giddily, Dalt fanned his arms to the sky. "This is huge, Shannon. Monolithic even. It's so huge I had to say it was monolithic instead of just really, really huge. This changes things, for like, for *humanity*. This discovery could *revolutionize mankind*."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Perfidia. "This is about Jay Waringcrane, nothing else."

"No. No. Shannon, you can't—I mean obviously we're still gonna go in there and get your brother. But Shannon, you have to realize. I know you haven't seen it yet, but—Shannon why not stick your head in there, I swear. Just look at it."

"That's not the arrangement here. Shannon, you're smart, gimme a hand." Perfidia sent Shannon a can-you-believe-this-guy look that Shannon ignored.

"Dalt, what are you talking about," said Shannon.

Dalt gripped his tie and rubbed the back of his neck with it. He shook his head, staring at the open portal. "There's mountains there. Huge fertile-looking fields. I saw a lake. We're talking

resources, Shannon. Natural resources. We work for the US government Shannon, don't you think America has a right to know about this?"

Natural resources. Mining, agriculture, water. That was the grand idea that got Dalt so excited all of a sudden, and Shannon could only attempt to smile sadly (it probably looked like a frown) and shake her head. "Dalt. This is above your level of expertise. We stick to what we know—"

"Dammit Shannon!"

Dalt slammed his palm against the stone surface of the arch. A thunderous clap erupted, one that echoed in the subterranean enclosure of the parking garage, so loud it surprised even Dalt and he flinched. But he recovered quickly and threw up his hands in exasperation.

"Why do you gotta put me down like that Shannon? Why do you gotta say it's over my head. I get enough of that shit from my dad, I don't need it from you. Why are you such an idiot Dalt, why are you always fucking up Dalt? Huh? Is that what you think I am? Just some moron? I know I'm not a *genius* like you Shannon but I, but I have"—he paused, fumbled his tongue, gesticulated for the right word—"I have *sense* Shannon. Enough to know this is big. This is the kind of big that'd shut my dad up once and for all if he saw it. This is pioneer shit Shannon, never-before-seen-by-man shit. This will put our name in *lights* Shannon, in lights. This is *glory*. The kind I never thought I'd see again."

His impromptu speech tapered off and he looked from her to Perfidia. Sudden self-consciousness crept over his face and his hands fell to his sides.

"Ya know, if it's glory you're after, I can give it to you with just a signature on a dotted line —"

"Shut the fuck up," said Shannon. Then, having expunged her venom on a more appropriate target, she was able to turn to her partner and say more softly: "First, we bring back my brother. After that we discuss any potential next steps. That's the plan that makes the most sense right now."

Her comforting words failed to comfort. They never did, Shannon didn't even know why she tried. But if Dalt didn't look exactly pleased, at least he was able to regroup. "I guess that's workable."

"Great!" said Perfidia. "So why don't we get to it. Let's head through the portal and I'll lead you to where Jay went—"

"But we are gonna do one thing my way," said Dalt. "And I think, Shannon, you'll agree with me here. This devil bitch? She's obviously planning to lead us into a trap or get us eaten by a, by a dragon or something."

"A reasonable assumption," said Shannon, "but she can't do anything too drastic, because she'll be in danger too."

Dalt shook his head. He considered the portal, or rather the archway that spanned Perfidia's parking space. He extended his hands, as though measuring the archway's size with his mind. "To be safe—you're fine with being safe right Shannon?—To be safe, let's increase our security. We can make ourselves safer with one quick phone call."

"What, the police? They already don't care about Jay." Besides, the more Shannon thought about her 911 call and how suspiciously they dismissed Jay's case, the more she wondered if Perfidia might have strings tied around the local law enforcement.

"Not the police." Dalt reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He paused, dramatically, way too long, to the point that Shannon thought he expected her to guess. Maybe he did. When she said nothing, with a sly smile he revealed it: "We call Wendell."

"Who?" said Shannon.

—

It turned out Shannon had met Wendell Noh six or seven times before. He was Dalt's best friend. To her credit, she recognized him when she saw him. He was standing on the curb in front of his flat suburban house, chewing a toothpick, wearing a rumpled beige coat with gigantic rimless glasses. He kicked a clump of dirt between his feet and didn't look up until after Dalt parked and burst out of the door with a gregarious "Yo what's up bro?"

As Shannon undid her seatbelt, Perfidia—who sat hidden within the cavernous back half of the SUV—said: "So not to rush you or anything. But your brother could be in danger right now. You really wanna waste time like this?"

That let Shannon know it was absolutely fine to waste some time. Not that she enjoyed wasting time in general. She got the sinking suspicion Dalt only wanted to bring his friend in on their little adventure to outvote Shannon 2-to-1 if it came to it, but at the same time, more muscle made it easier to keep close watch on Perfidia.

Speaking of. "Get out," Shannon said.

Perfidia had sunken so low in her seat that she looked about to fall off. She gritted her teeth and tilted her head. "Get out? Do you not realize what I look like? It's one thing for customers to see me in my office like this, but if I go walking around outside—"

"Then change your appearance."

"I can't just—"

"I read *Paradise Lost* for a GE in college, I know what you can do."

Perfidia leaned forward and whispered, as though she didn't want someone to hear: "There's a cost to stuff like that."

"Pay it. We're not leaving you here alone. Do it or I call Dalt back to get you out by force."

A labored exhalation. "You know Shannon, there's a simpler way of doing this. Bringing your brother back I mean. You've got a lotta Humanity. And we can talk about what Humanity means and you can ask me any question you want but what I'm willing to offer is in exchange for only a third—a quarter of that Humanity, I'll bring your brother back, no questions asked. Easy, like snapping my fingers. And sure you don't trust me. I get it. But you'd trust a contract right? We put it in writing, notarized, all the works, you can read through every word and change whatever you don't like. Then I just shake your hand and it's done and you don't even notice a change, ever. I'm only gonna offer this once."

"You can bring my brother back with a snap of your fingers?"

"No I can't, not unless you sign with me, because I need your Humanity to make it happen. Now if you want we can—"

"Change your appearance and get out of the car."

They finally exited the vehicle after Perfidia made Shannon close her eyes for a second—a second Shannon spent with her hand gripping the key to the portal in her pocket—and transformed into an ordinary human version of herself, no horns or red skin or barb tail or yellow sclera. Still a redhead though, like Mother, of course. Dalt and Wendell remained puttering on the curb, Dalt strongarming the conversion which lined up with what Shannon remembered of Wendell during the various occasions she met him.

"Shannon," Wendell said with a nod, gnawing his toothpick.

"Wendell," Shannon said back. She didn't introduce Perfidia and Wendell didn't ask.

"As I was saying." Dalt spread his arms wide. "We discovered this portal. To a fantasy world. Not exactly sure what's in it yet but it's probably got all kinds of insane shit, goblins and orcs or whatever, like *Lord of the Rings*. Remember those fucking movies? That shit kicked ass, yo."

"Mm," said Wendell.

"But then we got this problem. Because of course I'm not like a knight or anything, I don't have a sword. So if an orc shows up and starts doing orc shit in front of me, what am I supposed to do? That's when I figured I'd get you in on this. I mean, you've got that collection of yours and all."

Wendell's eyes, riveted to the cracked asphalt of a culdesac road, showed nothing at all. Maybe he thought Dalt was pulling a prank.

The front door of Wendell's house opened. A narrow woman in an apron stood in it.

"Wendell! Wendell, you aren't smoking out there are you?"

Without looking, without any urgency whatsoever, Wendell removed the toothpick from his mouth and held it up for her to see.

Dalt waved at the woman. "Hey Da-rae. How's it hanging? You met my girlfriend Shannon yet?"

His question offered an invitation to join the curbside party but the woman remained standing in the door. She lifted onto tiptoe and squinted, as though she couldn't tell Dalt was Dalt by his general bearlike shape. "Wendell! Wendell this is not a good time for friends you know! Wendell!"

"I know, Da-rae," Wendell intoned.

"You are not making a good impression on my parents Wendell!"

"I'm sorry, Da-rae."

Da-rae shouted something that started "This is" that transformed into a mangle when the ear-piercing shriek of a baby cut from inside the house. After a moment's hesitation, Da-rae waved her hands in exasperation at Wendell's back before retreating inside and slamming the door behind her.

Outside, on this suburban street, under an overcast sky, all was quiet save the slight shuffle of tree leaves in the gentle breeze.

"So uh," said Dalt, "guess it's a bad time. I know tomorrow's Thanksgiving..."

"Nah." Wendell stuck his toothpick back in his mouth, shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, and slouched back toward the house. "Lemme show you what I got."

He led them up a station wagon-infested driveway, to a wooden side gate with a rusty latch and then a corridor of trash cans and a small dog that ran up yapping particularly at Perfidia.

"Ah, wow, dogs." Perfidia shook a pinstripe pant leg and wagged the dog latched to it by the teeth. "Love dogs. Wow."

Wendell stopped only to pry the dog away and then held it in his arms like a baby, rocking it a few times before plopping it back down and nudging it in the ass to go yap somewhere else. He flicked out a ring of keys and opened a side door embedded between hard water-stained windows.

Through a cramped laundry room they filed into the house proper, abuzz with the sounds of baby sobs, Korean conversation, and a television show also in Korean. Soon a kitchen timer went off and added to the amalgam of noise and the baby screeched louder to compete.

They wandered down a corridor where a giant framed wedding photo of Wendell and Da-rae at what Shannon immediately recognized as the Shaker Heights Country Club jockeyed for wall space with a gigantic cross covered by a gnarled and bloodied Jesus.

An old man stooped over a cane wandered into the end of the hallway, stopped and noticed Wendell, and pointed to him while saying something rapidly in Korean, to which Wendell responded with a vague statement also in Korean as he shepherded his guests into a third bedroom repurposed into storage.

This storage room, laden with the musky odor of yellowed paper, was an exercise in organized chaos. Wendell shut the door behind them and there was barely enough room for them all to stand, especially Dalt. They tiptoed across the room, gray in the gray light that filtered through the curtains, feet searching and then coming down upon sparse patches of carpet amid geometrically-arranged clear plastic boxes that nonetheless encompassed nearly everything.

Shannon's astute eyes caught the distinct layout of a 1095-C form in one box, a W-2 form, several other tax-related documents collated into folders with neat labels, such fastidiousness expected of a fellow accountant (Wendell working freelance; Shannon remembered dimly Dalt once telling her Wendell was the one who recommended him to the IRS), although Shannon personally kept such documents under lock and key in a secure safe. Other boxes, though, deviated from financials: textbooks, photo albums, linens, porcelain collectibles, silverware, chinaware, Christmas decorations. One large plastic container held a record player and a music box. Another contained a bowtie-sporting teddy bear that looked quarantined within its translucent confines. There were framed photos, framed landscape paintings, a stuffed deer head with a wall mount whose antlers necessitated the plastic lid to rest at a tilt atop them. Most of it looked ancient, although Wendell went to college with Dalt and was ostensibly around the same age.

A photo, on the wall instead of in the box, showed Wendell posing with what might have been the same deer whose severed head was now in storage. Wendell knelt in an orange vest and a camouflage hat with a rifle in one hand while his other shoulder propped up part of the deer's corpse. He wore the same expression as he did in his wedding photo. The same expression he wore now as he made viscous progress across the room to the two tall and broad safes that took up an entire wall.

"As I was saying," said Dalt, although he hadn't spoken the entire walk until the door to the storage room was safely closed and the wailing baby and Korean TV drama and blaring kitchen alarm became a muted muffle, "Shannon's little brother's only got a day's head start on us and by all indications he's going by foot. So we expect to drive in there, catch up in a few hours, and be back before bedtime. We really just wanna make sure we got protection just in case, you dig bro? Shooting at orcs or dragons or whatever."

"Mm." Wendell swung his keys around his finger in a lazy, languid loop. Then the keyring plopped into his palm and he stuck the exact right key into the first safe and opened it.

Inside was an arsenal. Too many guns all clean and polished for Shannon to count quickly; she estimated between twenty and thirty. Wendell pulled one, a rifle, from the rack.

"Henry All-Weather Lever Action 45-70. Side load, extended rail for optic mounting, good in bad weather." He pulled a lever at the bottom of the gun, opened the... chamber (Shannon didn't know about guns), confirmed there were no bullets in the gun, and handed it to Dalt.

"Holy shit." Dalt handled the rifle reverentially. "Nice fucking gun bro."

"We being maybe a little extreme here?" said Perfidia. "This isn't a world that's meant to know about guns, guys."

Wendell already had the next gun out. "Mossberg 590 Tactical Pump-Action Shotgun. Eight-plus-one round capacity, dual extractors, adjustable rear sight. Military. Good if you have to shoot"—he blandly glanced at some of the faces—"orcs."

"Right on," said Dalt.

After confirming the shotgun was unloaded, he handed it to Dalt while taking back and replacing the rifle in the gun safe. "For handguns we got a selection. Smith & Wesson 629 with .44 Magnum, if you like your sidearms as heavy as your real arms—Not recommended. I prefer the Glock 17 right here, that's seventeen rounds normally, but I got an extended mag that's thirty-three if you think you need it. Plus it's lightweight, low recoil, only thing you lose is power. But power's what the rifles are for. I got three of the 17s. Now for the women, if you want something especially lightweight, there's the SIG P365, I try to get Da-rae to carry one but she—"

"The women won't be handling any guns," said Shannon.

"More-or-less what Da-rae says too." Wendell put down the tiny pistol he'd picked up with a trace of disappointment.

"Jesus Wendell this is super," said Dalt. "Like, dude, we're not gonna run into any trouble with cannons like these. Jesus I almost wish we do run into something just to see them in action. Bet you didn't think of *that*, didja Miss Bal Berith?"

He shot a smug look at Perfidia and Perfidia struggled not to make obvious how much she stewed. Which made Shannon wonder if seeming to stew was putting on an act or not, because Shannon herself could easily have reacted with a face of stone and she always assumed anything she could do anyone else could do.

"I haven't even started really," Wendell said with tax accountant enthusiasm, snowballing slowly out of the depths of Hell, detectable only in the increased pace of the staccato delivery. "Here we got an M1 Garand, here a Faxon Ion. The crown jewel of course I keep in the other safe."

The other safe was narrower than the first, to the point that it looked more like an appendix than a distinct entity. Shannon checked her watch. The gun talk was starting to drag, especially since she doubted Dalt understood the distinctions between all these makes and models any better than her.

The rifle Wendell removed from the second safe looked mostly like the other rifles he showed them, although its wooden stock gave it a more old-fashioned look. It was also nearly as tall as Wendell himself and he hefted it with slight unevenness due to its weight.

"I understand," Wendell said, the boredom dissolving out of his tone if not his pace, his high-resolution eyes widening behind his big glasses, "I knocked the .44 Magnum earlier for being impractical, and what I'm holding here has so much kick it'll dislocate your shoulder after four or five shots, but if you want power there's no substitute. This is the .700 Nitro Express. Elephant rifle."

"You shoot a lot of elephants?" Shannon said.

Wendell, rather than respond, turned his attention solely to Dalt, as if eradicating Shannon from his mind. "You mentioned dragons. If there's a gun a man can carry that'll take down a dragon, it's this."

He shouldered the rifle, slid open an adjacent closet door, and removed from a perfect grid stack of similar boxes a box that he opened to reveal bullets. The bullet he removed from the box was longer and thicker than his index finger as he held it up to show. "You don't get a bigger round. Just one of these costs one hundred dollars. Thousand grain soft point—"

The door to the storage room opened and everyone wheeled around to face Da-rae in the doorway with a somewhat-pacified baby in one arm. "Wendell!" she said, followed by a string in Korean.

Wendell dropped the gigantic round back into the ammo box, although he kept the rifle shouldered. "My friends wanted to see my collection, Da-rae," he said in English. "I'm showing it to them."

Da-rae's eyes shifted from face to face. Dalt waved, Perfidia tried to grin, Shannon remained steadfast with her arms crossed and one foot tapping.

"That's very nice Wendell, but my parents—"

"Your parents' opinion of me isn't going to change over this, Da-rae." Wendell's voice fell back to its ordinary ordinariness, dry and desiccated. "Speaking of which, I'm going to be stepping out of the house for a few hours. I'll be back before"—he glanced to Dalt for time, Dalt waved his hands in complete lack of expression, and Wendell understood him anyway—"before midnight."

"Midnight? Wendell, tomorrow is Thanksgiving!"

"And I'll be here tomorrow Da-rae. My friend Dalt has a little issue and he needs my help."

Da-rae bounced the baby to keep it satisfied. "Wendell, can we talk in private for a second? And put that gun away!"

Rather than put it away, Wendell cracked it open to confirm it was empty and handed it to Dalt to hold. He shrugged, motioned for Shannon and Perfidia to move out of the way, and toed his way across the room to Da-rae before they both disappeared into the bedroom on the other side of the hall. Immediately after the door closed behind them, Da-rae started shouting.

They stood awkwardly trying not to listen before Shannon flicked her wrist at Dalt to pull his attention away from the elephant gun and said: "What was he saying? He won't be back until midnight? He's coming too?"

"Well yeah of course. What'd you expect Shannon? He's not gonna lend us his guns and let us drive across town with them. I don't even think that's legal. Of course it's not legal actually."

"I guarantee you won't need a gun that big," said Perfidia. "All the dragons in that world got killed by the last guy who went there. It's a dragon-free zone."

"Which means there are totally dragons there and we totally need to be ready to defend ourselves," said Dalt. "Look. Shannon. Wendell has all these guns and knows how to use him. I've been to the shooting range with him, he's a crack shot."

"We already expect Perfidia will trick us somehow—"

"Exactly why we need him."

"We'll be putting him in danger Dalt."

"Why do you think he wants to come Shannon?"

"Dalt, this isn't some fun adventure for you and your buddy to go on. This is serious. We have a serious mission."

"And don't I look serious right now?" Dalt said, cracking the biggest and broadest grin he possibly could, seemingly unaware he was even doing it.

The bedroom door opened. Da-rae, cradling her baby, hurried down the hall averting her face from them before she vanished. Wendell, hands in his pocket, toothpick jutting from his lips, meandered back to the entrance of the storage room.

"So," he said, "let's load up."

—

They returned to the parking garage under Perfidia's office with the following items:

- Dalt's 2016 Land Rover Range Rover
- Wendell's 2014 Jeep Wrangler
- Five rifles (including the elephant gun), four handguns, and twelve boxes of ammunition
- A cooler filled with bottled water and sports drinks (Shannon vetoed any beer)
- A cooler filled with deli sandwiches from the local grocery
- Various snacks
- Two large red cans of extra gasoline
- An extra tire for each vehicle
- Two walkie-talkies for inter-vehicle communication
- A first aid kit
- Two powerful flashlights with extra batteries
- A combat knife (from Wendell's collection of course)
- A hatchet
- A tent

- A megaphone, in case they needed to yell at Jay loudly

Wendell kept most of these things on hand so it didn't take too long to gather it together, but after driving around town all afternoon the sun had already started to set. But Shannon figured Jay couldn't be more than twenty or thirty miles away—no more than an hour's drive. The true issue was whether Perfidia directed them to him or to somewhere else entirely, but to make sure she harbored absolutely no delusions about escape Dalt and Wendell zip-tied her wrists and ankles before pushing her into the backseat of the Range Rover and slamming the door shut.

"Where we're going," Dalt told Perfidia, "there's no police. There's no law. There's no regulation. We have all the power. Think about that before you try something stupid."

"Of course. Of course. I'd never dream of it. You got me once, I learned my lesson, we're gonna do this by the book from here on out."

Shannon doubted that. But for Shannon's misgivings about bringing Wendell along, Perfidia had not looked at the second vehicle and the cold-blooded Korean and his giant rifles with particular enthusiasm. If Perfidia had any plans, his inclusion threw a wrench into them one way or another.

After Shannon stuck the key into the arch, activated the portal, and took the key out to pocket it, when she was walking back to Dalt's SUV, her phone rang. By reflex she checked it and by the time she realized who was calling it was too late to simply ignore.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Shan-bear? Oh Shan-bear, what's happening? It's been hours since you left. Have you found Jay yet?"

"We know where he is." Shannon kept her voice calm but authoritative. She attempted to exude control over the situation in a way even Mother would register. "We're driving to pick him up now. It should only be a couple more hours."

"Oh, oh my God, a couple *more* hours? How far away is he? Where did he go? Shan-bear, you have to tell me."

Wendell and Dalt leaned out their respective windows, watching her. Instead of a toothpick, in Wendell's mouth flared a cigarette.

"I'll tell you later, Mother. Everything's under control."

"At least tell me where you're going. Shan-bear I'm scared. I'm scared to be in this house alone right now. You're not—you're not going to disappear too are you?"

"Mother. Mother. Calm down Mother. You're being paranoid." Shannon looked up at the pipes running along the ceiling and prayed for whatever concrete box structure comprised this parking garage to break up the cell signal. "Everything will be fine. Jay—"

"Is he involved in something illegal? Oh Shan-bear. Oh no."

"He's not involved in anything illegal. Everything's fine."

"You have to tell me where he is. You have to. You said a couple of hours. Where could he possibly have gone that's a couple hours away? Oh. Oh, oh, oh."

While submerged in Mother's moans Shannon responded to Dalt's upraised arm with a look. "Mother. Trust me. Everything will be fine."

"I need to know something. Anything. You won't disappear too will you Shan-bear? Will you?"

"Of course I won't disappear. I'm not like Jay. I'm the responsible one, remember? I'm the one who's never done a bad thing in my life. Remember?"

A pause. Static. Shannon thought maybe the call really did drop. But then:

"If you're responsible," said Mother, "then tell me exactly where you're going. Jay didn't. You have to."

It was Shannon's turn to fall silent. She stared blankly at a sign that said 14 FT until she realized the length of her pause and shook herself back together.

"Alright," said Shannon.

Immediately she decided to tell her Mother a fake address, a fake place—Columbus, she'd say he went down to Columbus, that'd explain the length of the drive—but then the full meaning of Mother's words hit her. Jay didn't tell her where he went. Shannon had to be responsible where Jay was not.

She said the address of Perfidia's office building.

"What was that?" said Mother.

Shannon said it again.

"Is that—is that downtown? But he—you said—a couple hours?"

"That's right. We'll be back before midnight," said Shannon. "Don't come here yourself. Trust me. I told you where I am, so trust me."

"Oh, Shan-bear..."

"Mother. I will bring Jay back. I promise you that. I promise you, he'll be home for Thanksgiving."

For several seconds Mother said nothing. Then:

"I love you, Shannon."

"I—I—Goodbye, Mother. I'll see you soon."

Shannon hung up.

"Ready?" asked Dalt.

Ready. Shannon pocketed her phone and climbed into the SUV. Dalt switched gears and the SUV rolled forward, slowly inching until it touched the portal.

Shannon, Dalt, Wendell, and Perfidia Bal Berith entered another world.

The Mountains Played Catch

Jay, Makepeace, Sansaime, and Olliebollen Pandelirium exited the forest.

Mountains rose before them, craggy, barren. Slabs of rock and gravel, a few leafless trees jutting from crevices. A sky grown bleak. Rain soon, Sansaime spat between clenched teeth while they rested at the base of the zigzag path that led up the foremost slope to the monastery.

The monastery. Atop the sheer summit, as though an organic outgrowth of the mountain, a wall of gray brick culminated in a pair of structures, one short and one tall, both with peaked roofs and Christian crosses. Backdropped by the stormy skies it hardly seemed real, in some ways more fantastical than even the most absurd sights of Flanz-le-Flore's forest, a Disney castle, where a wicked witch boiled her brew of frogs and apples. No sign of life stirring, but a sense that someone somewhere watched.

As they dined on supplies despite Olliebollen's protest that her magic made eating unneeded, Makepeace leaned back on a rock and stretched his arms as though yawning. "See that, my good man?"

"I see the monastery."

"Not that. Over there—Look."

Makepeace pointed at a smaller peak, more like a foothill, not far from them. Atop it, the giant white cross visible from the Door. It really was about fifty feet tall.

"Seen that before too."

"Not the cross itself. At the base."

At first it looked like part of the mountaintop, a gray mound of stony outcroppings, but Jay scrutinized and it became clear that curled around the base of the cross was the body of what could only be described as a dragon, with hard ridges for scales, wings fallen flat against its body, and eyes sealed shut. Even after seeing it, Jay couldn't tell if it was a real dragon or an artistic facsimile carved out of stone.

"That, my good man," said Makepeace, "is the dread lizard Devereux."

"Dead lizard Devereux more like," said Sansaime, unsmilingly, as she focused all energy on her pipe.

"Slain by none other than my forebear, John Coke. Now Devereux—"

"Devereux used to rule over these mountains!" Olliebollen poked her head out of Jay's pocket. "He acquired an unfathomably gigantic treasure horde by making the people of Whitecrosse and the faeries of Flanz-le-Flore pay fealty to him. Or else he'd burn them all

with his fiery breath! But the hero John Coke worked with Queen Flanz-le-Flore to trick and then defeat him in a huge battle. Afterward John Coke ordered the construction of the monastery and the cross. As a token of gratitude, Flanz-le-Flore allowed him to also build the road through her forest."

She spoke quickly and shrilly, making sure Makepeace didn't interject. When she finished Makepeace finally got a word edgewise: "I'd have told the tale with a touch more grandeur."

"It'd be bones if it died four hundred years ago," said Jay.

"Not even worms would feast on the corpse of a dragon," said Makepeace. Which made no sense. Jay looked to Olliebollen for a more accurate explanation but Olliebollen only beamed proudly in wake of her successfully-delivered exposition.

By the time Jay decided it didn't matter Sansaime dashed the ashes out of her pipe and tucked it into her cloak, motioning the others to rise. "Best we finished before dark or rain, whichever's first."

With a huff Makepeace climbed upright and started on the road toward the monastery. Jay followed. Thanks to Olliebollen's magic no trace of the previous battle remained, inside or out. Only one fight left in these waning moments of the second day: the monastery Perfidia and all her witting and unwitting minions hyped up since he set foot in this world. Here he was, despite his best efforts, dogging the heels of others to assist them in their goals, tempted to it by the promise of some Staff of Lazarus that felt more and more unreal, something that couldn't really exist, something that everyone was collectively lying to him about because they all wanted him at the monastery and didn't know how else to make him go there. The idea of reviving Pluxie, Lalum, or Flanz-le-Flore felt impossible, undoable, although on a rational level he understood this self-erected roadblock to be a byproduct of something akin to guilt, something he'd be better off ignoring altogether. He needed only to remember his goals. Nothing more.

Nothing more. Thinking it made it real again, both the staff and his goals, and that fleeting flicker of guilt transformed into pride. Why not? Pluxie, Lalum, Flanz-le-Flore—those were challenges he overcame. They were necessary sacrifices on his road to becoming what they kept calling him, a hero. They were the conquered.

"As for our plan once we get inside," Makepeace said, "I believe our best course of action—"

"I make the plan," said Jay.

Makepeace and Sansaime glanced back at him; Sansaime quickly returned her gaze to the front, while Makepeace kept looking. "What was that, my good man? Believe I didn't quite catch it."

"I make the plan. Not you."

An affable smile. A good-natured shake of the head. Condescension. "That's a fine enough sentiment, my man, but—"

"I'm the hero. I'm the one who beat the archbishop's women and I'm the one who beat Flanz-le-Flore." He remembered the brittle feeling of her fingers snapping in his grasp and shoved his hands into his pockets. "You two were knocked out or tied up or dropped down a pit each time. Sometimes you even got in the way. So I'm in charge now."

Makepeace's smile dwindled. Jay thought, yeah, that's right. That's right asshole. Jay was onto him, it took some time because Jay underestimated him but he knew now, Makepeace wanted to use Jay the same way Flanz-le-Flore and the archbishop did. Faux friendliness, reverse psychology, telling him wistful stories about a dream to roam the world as a knight errant, all simply strings that sought to make Jay dance one way or another. No more. Jay was in charge now. Anyone who wanted to help him was welcome to, but they were going to answer to him.

"What's your plan then, hm," Sansaime said. "Of all of us, even the faerie I figure, only I know what the monastery looks like on the inside."

"It'll be dangerous," said Makepeace. "The archbishop has at least thirty more twisted women waiting for us. Sansy certainly knows a side gate somewhere or a weak patch of wall we can sneak through to give them a great big surprise. Let her take the lead."

Jay shook his head. "The archbishop has foresight."

"He does?" Sansaime looked at Makepeace.

"Jay, how do you know that?" Makepeace's eye fell on the pocket that contained Olliebollen.

He knew because the twins told him. A long time ago, in the cemetery. Charisma mentioned it casually, offhand, and at the time Jay placed zero importance on the detail. Now, in sudden clarity of mind, Jay remembered it.

"Well, only limited foresight anyway," Makepeace said. "Quite limited. Not as though he's omniscient."

Limited was right. Limited by Perfidia. She wanted Jay to fight someone right away, so she told Astrophicus he was coming. But only a day before Jay actually showed up—because Perfidia herself only knew that far ahead of time. If the archbishop needed the hero so badly, why'd he only send the twins to the Door? Because it was more than a day's trek on foot. Only the twins, who could fly, were quick enough to make it in time.

So how come, with an extra day of preparation and even less distance to cover, he only sent Pluxie and Lalum to reinforce the twins in the forest?

He tapped his pocket to make Olliebollen surface. "Question for you."

"Really?!"

"When we fought the fairies in Flanz-le-Flore's court, none used magic except Flanz-le-Flore herself. Why?"

"Easy! There's two reasons. First, faeries aren't a bloodthirsty and wicked race like humans or especially elves, so very few of them have magic that's for fighting. Most faeries have powers that help flowers bloom or birds sing prettily or turtles flip over after they fall on their backs or—"

"And the archbishop's women, who eat fairies to use magic, are the same, aren't they," said Jay. "Of the four we've fought so far, only half of them used magic at all."

"Wait, I didn't get to say the second reason—"

"So it's like this. The archbishop has known we're coming the whole time. If he has thirty of these nuns at his disposal, why has he only sent four to stop us?"

A rhetorical pause. Nobody answered within two seconds, so he answered himself:

"Because most of those nuns aren't any good at fighting. They're poor orphans turned into monsters with magic powers that don't matter even if they can use them. Maybe there are some more like the twins who have sharp claws or teeth, but it's nothing I need to worry about as long as I have my healer."

Huffing now from the steep climb, Jay's speech came more fragmented than he wanted, punctuated by ragged exhalations. As a group, they rounded the last zigzag and the ground evened out. There was the monastery, no longer above, only straight ahead. Upon a distant peak lightning flashed; the roar of thunder split the silence seconds later. Precarious barely began to describe the monastery. It seemed if a single boulder stirred the entire structure would collapse.

"You don't need to be good at fighting to set a trap," said Sansaime, as they stopped to regard the endpoint of their journey. "Front gate's the best place to set one."

But she said without certainty, because she knew what Jay knew. "If the archbishop has foresight it doesn't matter which way we go in." And the front gate was on relatively solid ground. Jay didn't want to imagine what treacherous path of jagged rocks suspended above a thousand-foot fall led to the "side gate."

Besides, Sansaime was Jay's enemy here as much as the archbishop. That's right, Sansy. Don't think Jay forgot. She wanted the Staff of Lazarus too and she had the advantage of knowing the monastery's layout. Jay needed to throw her off her plan as much as possible, keep her close, not give her the chance to slip away and get a head start.

So without another word, Jay took the lead toward the front gate. Two tall and arched wooden doors rose before him, fortified by metal strips that ran horizontal to bind the long planks into a cohesive whole. Lightning flashed again and the monastery in a single instant became a black surface exuding a bright halo of light; the instant passed, the thunder rumbled. Jay cupped a hand around his pocket and pushed Olliebollen's head down with his thumb. If they sprung a trap, he needed to ensure it didn't catch her too.

One push and the giant doors creaked open on half-rusted hinges. No lock. But then again, the archbishop wanted him to come here anyway. Jay readied his bat in case something

lunged but nothing was there and the doors opened onto a courtyard of dead grass. A cobblestone path split to lead to the monastery's two buildings: One, a chapel, and the other—larger—a building-block mass of geometric shapes arranged around a central cylindrical tower. If Jay needed to guess, he'd guess the staff (and Princess Mayfair) were in the room at the top of that tower, where a single small window set deep in the bricks exuded an orange glow crisscrossed by decorative bars. The most dramatic and easily-defended location.

Lightning once more. As the thunder subsided the sound of a solemn hymn emerged from the chapel. Its doors opened; two rows of figures exited in meticulous procession, their darkened figures rendered a semblance of uniform by hoods and habits. Under their clothing, though, they possessed all varieties of warped and animalistic elements: claws, extra limbs, scuttling legs, long snouts, ragged fur. They sang, brusque but concordant:

*How wondrous is
The prescience of the divine Heart
That foreknew every creature!
For when God gazed
Into the face of Humanity whom He formed,
He beheld all His works,
In that same human-form, entire.
How wondrous is the informing breath
That awoke mankind in this way!*

A single figure led the procession, stopping at the fork where the path split, and the two rows behind her stopped as well. Lightning; for an instant their faces lit up, and the foremost one had the face of an insect, green and triangular with bulbous eyes. Out of the habit sleeves emerged two scythe-like arms, pressed in the form of prayer. A mantis. As far as Jay could tell in the brief flash, the rest of her body was humanoid.

"Well now, leader?" Makepeace gave Jay a good-natured nudge Jay would've returned with a glare if he was willing to look away from the nuns. "What's the plan? Shall we ready for battle?"

"If they intended to fight they'd try a different approach." Although Jay wasn't sure what to expect. The neat orderliness in which they came seemed incompatible with a trap, but the lack of seeming subterfuge only made Jay suspect subterfuge the more.

It started to rain. A drizzle—for now.

The mantis woman stepped forward. She retained the same meticulous pace until she stopped fifteen feet away, distant enough that nobody could suspect her of aggression. No cages around her waist, no sign she recently devoured a fairy.

"Welcome." Her voice high-pitched, but otherwise human, despite the sound emerging from twitching mandibles. "At long last you have reached the Monastery of King John. Archbishop Astrophicus has anticipated your arrival. I am Theovora. I shall act as the archbishop's voice."

"He doesn't want to talk to us himself?" said Jay.

"He does. Please follow me."

Theovora bowed her head and, maintaining her prayerful stance, walked down the path to the main building of the monastery. The other women remained where they stood.

Jay shook his head as raindrops pattered his hat and shoulders. "I don't care what the archbishop has to say. Why don't you tell us where the princess is. And the relic."

Theovora stopped and turned where she stood, or rather rotated her body to face them, because her legs seemed capable of moving only with rigid forward steps.

"Princess Mayfair and the Staff of Lazarus are where you expect: the main tower. The archbishop is on the way."

That was all the explanation she deigned to give. She rotated back and continued walking as robotically as she spoke.

Jay shifted his gaze between Theovora and the two rows of women still standing in the same place. He almost glanced over his shoulder to exchange a glance with Makepeace, something he understood the instant he stopped himself as a need for approval. Unnecessary. Worse than unnecessary, and he felt Makepeace's gaze on the nape of his neck as though Makepeace was waiting with a broad grin for Jay to give him that glance and relinquish his newfound authority. A paranoid thought seized Jay that Makepeace was only humoring him, letting him pretend to be the hero, that this was part of his plan. His manipulation. Somehow. Jay trashed those thoughts, every time he had them it only ceded his own agency.

It wasn't like Jay planned to stand outside in the rain all night anyway. Without another moment of contemplation he set off after Theovora. The other two followed.

By the time Theovora opened the doors of the main building, Jay and his party were only a few feet behind. The two rows of women started marching again, slow as before, following, and Jay told himself that if this was a trap it was a particularly stupid one, that if they wanted to fight they should've just fought already. Theovora led them inside. Jay came out of the rain taking off his hat and flicking the loose beads off it; he looked up and stopped because in the tall, octagonal, dome-topped chamber before him was a giant plant.

Its roots, which drilled into the elaborate tiled flooring, coalesced into seven and then three and then one columnar stalk that—almost unnatural in its greenness, a tropical green, lighter than lime—curved and angled until it erupted into a huge pink flower that butted against the ceiling. It lacked soil, lacked even light other than whatever filtered through the stained-glass scenes of Christ performing various miracles that covered each wall of the chamber; walking on water, water into wine, resurrection of Lazarus, resurrection of himself. Altogether it

looked like a cheap Photoshop, a copy-paste of a plant from some Amazonian rainforest into the ruminative, ceremonious interior of a medieval cathedral. Beside the roots, one scowling and one sobbing, were the twins, who at this point Jay wasn't surprised to see, given slinking away alive seemed to be the only thing they were good at. They said nothing and made no attempt at movement and by this point proved no threat whatsoever even if they did intend to attack. Currently attack seemed unlikely. Although their ability to display only one emotion apiece made them surprisingly unreadable.

Theovora's shoes clacked along the tile until she reached the plant and rotated to face the party. Jay stopped when she did, as did the two rows of nuns, some of them still in the intensifying rain which set a constant tattoo across the roof.

"Please," said Theovora, "pay your respects to Archbishop Astrophicus."

Jay's eyes traveled from one end of the room to the other. Nobody present except them and the monster nuns.

He pressed his hand over his eyes, clenched tight the bridge of his nose, and expelled a balloon-deflating amount of air.

"Don't tell me he's the fucking plant."

Nobody said anything.

"Don't tell me this whole time you've been coming after me because of a fucking plant."

"Astro... ficus," Olliebollen whispered.

Jay strode forward, holding his arms out, letting his baseball bat dangle by the knob between two fingers, gazing skyward at the dome over the archbishop's big flowery head, drawn onto which were starry constellations that Jay's limited astronomical knowhow could only guess belonged to which world. "This is the stupidest thing yet you know," he said to that fake sky, the fake "Master" maybe watching beyond it, "this is the stupidest thing yet and two hours ago I was a rat. Are you even trying? What is it? Writer's block? You've resorted to ad libs?"

If Perfidia heard, she gave no sign. Dark stars, untwinkling, matched his gaze and that was all; the stained glass Jesuses turned phantasmic white for a split second, outlines enveloping utter lacks of color, and that was all. The thunder groaned. The rain pattered.

"Whatever." He let his arms fall. "I'm taking the princess and the staff now. You nuns go home. It's a plant. You're getting yourselves killed over a plant."

"Please wait, hero," said Theovora. "The archbishop wishes to speak to you."

Husks. Husks, husks, husks. Jay started walking again, eyes set on the doorway behind the "archbishop," where a stairway curved upward. He stopped only when one of the giant plant's roots detached from the ground and burrowed into the back of Theovora's mantid head.

Her bulbous eyes went blank. The pupils rolled in random directions, came to transfixion. The rest of her body slumped, supported only by the root, and then the twins who came to her

sides to hold her up by each of her scythe-like arms. Her mandibles twitched, a voice emerged:

"Jay... Waringcrane."

"No," said Jay Waringcrane. "No."

"At long last... you arrive. I am... Archbishop Astrophicus... or so they say."

"No."

"Long have I... foretold your arrival... to our Godless world."

Jay turned on his heel. "Fuck it. I'm leaving. It's too stupid."

"What do you mean, leaving?" Makepeace attempted a chuckle but moved forward sternly. "Need I remind you, we're here to rescue Mayfair, my good man."

"It is your body, hero... your soul... that is the only way... to our salvation."

"Rescue Mayfair yourself. Look at this place. Look at these things." Jay's hand indicated Theovora and the twins, indicated the rows of onlookers in the doorway. "They're nothing. There's no threat. I don't care. It's not worth it. Go get your sister yourself and take her back to your castle."

Olliebollen flew out of his pocket and into his face. "Heyeyey wait! Wait just one second hero! You can't go back. We need you. *I* need you, hero! You can't even open the Door by yourself anyway!"

"That's right." Makepeace's good nature bled dry, his face went pale, he shook his head and moved into Jay's path. "That's right. The Door cannot be opened. You're not leaving this world. Jay. This is simply—impulsiveness—simply an imbalance of your humors, my good man, a momentary lapse in judgment, temporary madness. You're not seriously considering what you're saying."

Was he seriously considering it? The momentary irritation that gripped him weakened. His logical mind thought: Why turn back now? When he was so close? Was the talking plant really worse than what he saw in Flanz-le-Flore's court? Something compounding maybe. He left the forest gritting his teeth darkly, and now Perfidia hit him with this farce... Or was it self-sabotage. The way he had to suppress the urge to look back after he wrested leadership from Makepeace. Something inherently repulsing, like an inverted magnet, about his goals. The Staff of Lazarus was here. He wanted it, didn't he? What else would he want?

"We can... use your soul..." said the Archbishop via Theovora. "We can... use it to craft a key... a key to open the Door... You can go home, hero. You can take us with you..."

"Don't listen to that!" Olliebollen screamed. "Don't listen to that, they can't do that, that's impossible, that Door won't open! It won't! Only the Master can open it! I know. I know for certain!" By the end she was screaming less at Jay and more at the blank face of the mantis.

"Aha! Temporary madness. I wager it's one of these twisted women. Their animus, yes. A nasty power to inflict temporary madness. They seek to lower your judgment, my good man, until you agree to their absurd demand to trade your soul for a key home. Only explanation. Apologies Jay, but I'll have to prevent you from acting under such manipulation. You must rescue my sister—no other solution."

Makepeace kept darting into Jay's path and Jay laughed a single laugh at him. He knew he wouldn't actually leave, especially wouldn't go home. That'd be stupid. Stupider than the plant was stupid. He just—he didn't know what he wanted to do, every option was stupid, an inertia caused by a perfect balance of forces pushing against him from every direction, paralysis, he deactivated like a robot and slumped his shoulders. Was he putting on these dramatics because of Perfidia's braindead creative decisions, or was he conjuring a Perfidia in his own head perpetually?

Besides. If he thought about it, he could think Perfidia even into his potential decision to leave. Flanz-le-Flore and the archbishop both wanted his Humanity. Why would Perfidia make them want that, or even let them know what that was? Because Perfidia's contract prevented her from *taking* his Humanity, but if he gave it willingly to her husk-like puppets, well—an easy win for her. Nobody wanted him dead, they just wanted him drained. So unless he decided to kill himself after all, he had no choice but to move forward, to keep himself intact, to give her the middle finger.

Not having a choice was what really killed him.

He never should've agreed to come to the monastery, he should've stuck to the castle, he should've forced Perfidia to design a story around his desires instead of following her pre-laid path no matter what treasures she promised. Fine. She tricked him, used Makepeace to play on his emotions and got a victory. Alright, fine, he admitted defeat on this point, but it was only a point.

He cut short his impetuous temper tantrum. He'd see this monastery subplot to the end no matter how loudly she laughed in his face, sure. Then, once he had the staff, it was back to doing what he wanted, when he wanted, a simple "no" to whoever told him otherwise. Can we do that, Jay? Can we follow this rudimentary plan?

Breathing under control, body under control, he sent a dismissive wave at Makepeace as though to say "Whatever" and turned back toward the plant. He wanted to be the protagonist, he told himself. He wanted to conquer this world and make it paradise. He wanted the Staff of Lazarus. They were his wants, not hers, not anyone else's. He led the way.

He remembered the feeling of brittle finger bones snapping and curled his hands into tight fists.

"Please... young hero," said the plant's parasitic host. "It would not only... benefit yourself. It would help... all the people of this world. They are separated from God. None of us feel His warmth. You must allow us... passage to your world, your God-made world. Only there can our souls be made whole..."

"I'm not going back," Jay said.

Olliebollen squealed a sigh of relief and sank back into his pocket. Makepeace tried to play things cool, but gave Jay a too-friendly jostle of the shoulder.

Theovora spoke again in her strained and pause-laden voice, but Jay stopped listening. He looked around, at Olliebollen and Makepeace, at the nuns behind him, and then back at Theovora and the twins. Something was wrong.

A pit formed in his stomach.

Sansaime was gone.

Jay rushed forward. The twins twitched as though they expected him to attack but since they were busy holding Theovora they didn't fully react until he was past them, past the plant, running into the stairwell and stomping up the steps three, four steps at a time. His boots echoed in the drafty spiral upward as he placed a hand on the rough-hewn stone to balance himself on his precarious ascent, only vaguely aware of the metal tromp of Makepeace behind him yelling some affable but semi-concerned exclamation because it apparently took him longer to realize his girlfriend made a run for the money than it took Jay.

Finally the stairs ended and he spilled into a corridor lined by elaborate carved arches onto the pillars of which were sculpted stocky figures reminiscent of the ones that infested the cemetery, these ostensibly with a more religious bent although Jay wasted no time deciphering their parables. At the end of the corridor he saw her, a wisp of her, a greenish cloak fluttering around a corner, and propelling himself from his half-crouched position with hands and legs alike he rose into a sprint.

Ten seconds of sheer sprinting and he reached the bend and skidded into it, slowing just enough to hit the wall softly so he could rebound and tear along a stretch spanned by a tapestry upon which John Coke manifested exuding a halo and vanquishing foes that were mostly human but also included the dragon Devereux. The intermittent windows stared out onto the dark and rain-drenched courtyard, and at a slant he saw the tower, the apex of the monastery, ahead. A small staircase, so narrow it seemed impossible to fit through without turning sideways, led from the end of the hall to an unseen above but he heard wood splintering above and metal creaking and finally by the time he reached them a large shattering crack.

"Don't bother Sansaime," Jay shouted, halfway out of breath, as he ascended at a more plodding pace than before. "There's no other way back down from the tower." He realized he didn't know that for sure. He realized Sansaime might be able to rappel out a window, nimble as she was, and abscond with the staff in a way Jay truly couldn't follow. He wheezed, Olliebollen finally made herself useful and sputtered dust that eased the ache of his lungs and legs, and with Makepeace rounding behind him sputtering a series of "what's going on?" Jay rushed up the stairs and through the broken door and into a study choked with stacks of tomes and papers.

Choked because many of the stacks had fallen over or were in the process of falling over, cascading in torrents of crinkling parchment, spewing dust undisturbed for decades and blasting Jay with a whiff of decay he turned to cough out. Sansaime was mired in the papers, trudging through them as they rose to her waist as though wading through a river. Her hood

fell off exposing a blotched and discolored face, her cheek even gashed open by what Jay could only imagine was a paper cut as another stalagmite of learning came down upon her. Beyond the wreckage, at the end of the cramped room, stood a girl who could not have been older than fourteen.

She was remarkably "pretty," the kind of perfect prettiness of an actress or a painting, a prettiness that matched that of her brother. Short blonde hair and blue eyes, a flawless and intelligently-lined face, but everything else about her a cataclysm of Puritanical modesty, a skin-devouring black dress strewn with ruffles of fabric culminating in a chokingly tight collar that clasped tight to her thin neck. She clutched to her chest a staff, white as bone, with a blue orb at its top—what could only be the Staff of Lazarus.

"Mayfair!" said Makepeace as he waded into the room behind Jay, caring significantly less about what pages he trampled. "Come now, Sansy, back off, there's no point to this is there?"

Jay was of Makepeace's mind, it seemed impossible that anything of relevance could happen here. Sansaime took her shot to sneak off and steal the staff—she blew it. But the faces of the women in front of him made him pause. Utter terror on Princess Mayfair, terror almost hidden within her preternatural prettiness. And Sansaime, digging forward desperate, was streaming tears from her eyes.

Hadn't Sansaime been hiding something else?

"I'm sorry," Sansaime said. "I'm sorry Mack. I am. I hoped you wouldn't have to see it."

"Sansy, what are you saying?"

Nothing happened. Everyone in the room stood suspended in waves of paper. Jay lifted one leg with elephantine slowness and brought it down equally carefully. Makepeace dredged a line in his wake.

The one who spoke next was Princess Mayfair. Her voice was, despite her terrified features, calm. Serene even, a voice in a dream. She said: "Do you not already know, Makepeace? Do you not know what this woman was sent to do?"

Makepeace stopped. His eyes went wide as the words sunk in. A rabid yell escaped him as he plunged forward with a hand extended toward Sansaime.

Sansaime watched him tumble toward her. Her ugly face glistened in the dim brown light of the candelabra above. Lightning flashed, the chamber went white, and when the white subsided her arm was extended toward Mayfair, the gloved hand at the end quivering. In Mayfair's throat, a thrown dagger was embedded.

Leon's Picking Them Off

The two vehicles followed a mostly flat road through mostly flat country for most of an hour, at which point they reached a juncture beside a modest farmhouse. Perfidia said to take the north fork, which led into the woods. Shannon assumed that meant Jay definitely took the west fork, which led to the castle, until Wendell discovered horse tracks headed north.

"Just remember," Shannon told Perfidia, "if we run into trouble, it's trouble for you too."

"Don't believe me if ya want, but he went into the woods, what else can I say?"

The SUV made careful progress along a narrow forest path while the jeep followed.

"Amazing." Dalt leaned over the wheel and pushed his view up at the towering trees. "Just amazing. There really is a whole other world out here. I mean Jesus Shannon. Can you imagine the headlines? If we told the news about this place?"

Dalt back on that track. Shannon, however, was frankly unimpressed by this so-called "fantasy world." Certainly, it possessed standard topological features one might find in most habitable corners of the world—mountains, farmland, fresh water—but she detected none of the novelty that had Dalt so giddy. Only facsimile of the real world, uninspired facsimile at that. What exactly compelled her brother to escape here? If he wanted grandeur he'd find more of it in most of the United States of America's sixty-three national parks. The forest through which they currently trawled looked no different than Cuyahoga Valley, where the Waringcrane family camped summers prior to the suicide. For mountains there were the Appalachians or the Rockies, and if he wanted a castle there was San Simeon or, if truly desperate, Europe.

Shannon never understood the draw of such places, but they existed within the real world for a purpose, careful pieces of cultivated fantasy rendered accessible on vacation days for—she supposed—the purpose of escaping perceived monotony. The same reason a pulpy paperback romance between a knight and his lady existed (such romances, admittedly, Shannon perused on occasion). Escapism. A small wish of something other than the thing one had. But emphasis on the word *small*; three hundred pages, a weekend in the back of a camper. An oiling of the small parts that comprised the machine. That was how the world operated. That was how it continued to progress. If everyone acted like her brother, gorged themselves so full on the fantasy they grew sick of it, needed stronger and stronger doses to function, then the mechanism fell apart.

"I mean, not only would we be famous Shannon, we'd be rich too. We could sell off the lumber rights, the fishing rights, the hunting rights, the farming rights—we'd own the land of course—the mineral rights, I mean fuck the place is huge Shannon. We could build cities and name them after us. Daltonville. Shannontown. I mean obviously we're gonna find your brother first, but think about it Shannon. Seriously, think about it."

"Given the portal to this world is located in the United States," said Shannon, "ostensibly the distribution of those rights is under the jurisdiction of the United States government."

Dalt waved a hand. "Well, we'd make money off it one way or another. That's not the point. We're changing the world here Shannon. Literally. They're gonna have to reprint all those Rand McNally maps after this."

"The real world hasn't changed. If they mapped *this* world, it would be an entirely separate map."

"Nah. Nah. They'd do it like, like, you know how with maps of America, you have the contiguous states, and then they'll put little boxes in the corner that have Hawaii and Alaska. It'd be like that. You have Earth as the main part of the map, and then this place, uh—what's this place called again?"

"Whitecrosse," Perfidia offered drily.

"Then you have Whitecrosse in a box in the corner."

"By the way," said Perfidia, "you guys are gonna wanna stop soonish—"

"You're wrong," said Shannon. "It's not as though they have a box now that shows a map of Mars, after all. They are two different worlds. They are separate. You wouldn't map them on the same map."

"No Shannon, I'm pretty sure *you're* wrong." Dalt took both hands off the wheel to gesticulate, although what his motion meant Shannon lacked the slightest clue. "You said yourself this place would be under US jurisdiction. Part of the country. How do you have a map showing the US and not include it then?"

"Guys—"

"The United States planted a flag on the Moon and we don't include that in our maps, Dalt."

"We don't *own* the Moon, Shannon. You know that, you just don't want to admit I'm right."

"Guys..."

"When was the last time you saw a map of the United States that included the Northern Marianas Islands? We own those, but they're not on our maps."

"Yeah yeah Shannon I get it, you're the smart one, I'm just the meathead, just the linebacker, so that means you always gotta be right. I get it."

Shannon scrunched her face in legitimate confusion. "Where's this coming from? I just happen to be right this time, that's all."

"Right, sure, okay Shannon. I just so happen to have never been right about anything in my entire life unless I agree with you."

"That's absolutely not true."

"Name one example then. Tell me one time I was right and you were wrong."

"Guys," said Perfidia, "if you wanna torture me just do it the old-fashioned way and ram metal spikes into my flesh. I'd prefer that."

"Shut up," Dalt and Shannon said together. Although Shannon found the interruption welcome, since she couldn't on hand think up a response to Dalt's request.

Dalt refused to drop it though. "You can't say a single time even though just a few hours ago I was right about hacking your brother's phone and you were wrong. Just a few hours ago, and you already removed it from your mind—"

"I never said you were wrong. I only said it would be better to let the police handle it."

"You said I couldn't hack it and I did."

"I said you weren't a hacker, Dalt, there's a difference. And you're *not* a hacker. Jay leaving his computer unlocked doesn't make you a hacker."

"*That's* how you found me?" said Perfidia. "I'm gonna wring that kid's throat I swear."

"This is ridiculous Shannon and we're getting off topic anyway. The point is this world is a discovery. It's a *discovery* and we're making it, and for some reason you're not happy. Just like my fucking dad, I can't believe it. I get into Ohio State, oh it's only a sports scholarship. I go undefeated, oh you only made first string because the other guy got injured. I get a job at the IRS, oh you're only the hired muscle. I can never win! I can never be good enough!"

Shannon prepared to fire back some choice words about how typical it was for men to act this way, to feel threatened and inferior if they weren't some absolute Napoleonic paragon of the human race, because truly she'd seen this behavior from so many past boyfriends that it nauseated her. But the tail end of his rant, the mention of his father, made her shut her mouth.

"I'll ask Wendell," said Dalt. "I'll get Wendell in on this, he'll be the tiebreaker. I'll ask him about the maps." He plucked the walkie-talkie from one of the twenty clips infesting the dashboard and pressed the button with a chirrup. "Brutus 1 to Brutus 2, this is Brutus 1 to Brutus 2 over."

"We don't need Wendell. Look Dalt, forget what I said—"

The walkie-talkie fizzled: "What."

"Got a bit of a theoretical question we're gonna need you to weigh in on. Regarding maps—"

"LOOK OUT!" Perfidia shrieked.

Dalt slammed the brakes. The SUV's tread bit into mud and they skidded at a slight angle as Dalt twisted the wheel to keep from plowing directly into the white barrier spread across the road. Only thanks to the excessive quality of his automobile did they avoid collision.

A few moments of labored breathing. Shannon placed a hand to her heart and felt its heavy beat return to normal over a period of ten seconds as the rain sneaking through the canopy made a metallic din along the roof. "Christ, Dalt."

"That's the thrill of adventure for you," Dalt said after a nervous chuckle. She returned it with a glare.

The walkie-talkie came to life and Wendell, stopping without trouble in the jeep behind them, asked: "Everything okay?"

"Yeah it's fine. Almost hit something." Dalt pressed his face to the windshield to see through the growing tableau of droplets. "The fuck is that anyway?"

It appeared to be a white wall. Under scrutiny, its holistic surface developed a cloth or cottony texture, and rather than a wall it turned out to be some kind of giant sheet spread between two trees. Something Dalt's Land Rover would've plowed through without trouble.

Shannon wheeled on Perfidia. "You know what it is."

"I swear I didn't know it'd be there. Honest. I'd put my hand on my heart if I could move my hand." A jangle of zip-tied wrists.

Dalt rubbed the inside of the windshield to remove a layer of fog. "Seems like there's some kinda words on there. A picture, even."

"I didn't ask if you knew it'd be there, I asked you to tell us what it is. You know that at least. Don't lie to me."

"Okay fine, it's a spiderweb. Happy?"

"Had to be a big spider to make that," said Dalt, and he said it with a growing excitement for which Shannon cared little, an excitement that led to him reaching for the shotgun stored in the slot beside his seat. "Brutus 2 we might have a bogey on our hands, over."

"No Dalt," said Shannon, "we have no bogeys. Just drive around it, there's room. There's plenty of room."

The walkie-talkie burst a spray of static. "Stay in the car I'll handle it."

"Y'know, the girl who made the web is harmless, trust me. She's a total pushover. Shy too. If you try to find her you'll spook her." Perfidia adjusted her position in her seat and only made it look more awkward. "Glad we stopped though, this is about where Jay left the road. He went to Flanz-le-Flore's court which isn't far from here. The trees get denser though, so you'll need to move on foot... Yeah, yeah, perfect, just like that."

Dalt's door opened and Dalt squeezed through, carting the shotgun and apathetic to the rain that immediately glistened his hair.

"Dalt, if the devil is telling us it's harmless and we need to go out on foot, it's certainly harmful and we do not need to go out on foot. Dalt. Dalt. Oh my God."

There he went, toting the shotgun like he knew how to use it. (Shannon couldn't believe Wendell lent it to him, she'd said to just give Dalt a pistol, but did they listen to her? Of course not.) Shannon tried to nab Wendell's attention by gesturing through the back window.

Perfidia, in the backseat, seemed to think Shannon was gesturing at her and responded with a comically wide-eyed and ironical expression, a stock face a sitcom scene stealer might wear once an episode: *Why you askin' me?*

Eventually the door to Wendell's jeep opened. Shannon felt the situation become significantly more secure, but she still climbed over the front seat partition and leaned out the open door to yell at Dalt to stop wandering. Her gaze drifted and she looked again at the giant web, no longer obscured by a rain-drenched windshield, and made out the words Dalt mentioned:

PLEAS O GOD I AM SO SORRY

IT HERTS IT HERTS BAD

HELP ME GOD OR ANY ONE

JESUS WEAPED JOHN 11:35

Organized, haphazardly, around a web-string drawing of a young woman in a nun's habit being crucified and leaking white teardrops of blood from the places of the stigmata. Melodramatic, Shannon thought. Abhorrent spelling, too. Apparently spiders in this world possessed intelligence, but only to a limited extent.

The thought gestated that she should yell at Dalt some more but as she attempted to turn this thought into action a blast invaded her skull. She clapped her palms to her ears but it was too late, the sound was already a deafening ring in her eardrums, and with wincing delay she looked only fast enough to see wood chips spraying off the bark of a tree before splattering the ground. Dalt stood with the shotgun raised, smoke rising.

"Shit fuck," Perfidia sputtered, doubled over and flinching herself but unable to shield her pointy devil ears due to her binds.

"Dalton put that fucking gun down right now!" Shannon overcorrected to account for the numbness of all auditory sensation in the wake of the shotgun blast and wound up howling so hard it strained her vocal chords. "Dalton I swear to God!"

Wendell meandered into view, rifle perched lackadaisical on his shoulder. "See something?"

"You fucking bet bro. Big ass spider. Scuttled right behind that tree. It's still there for sure."

The rifle remained on Wendell's shoulder. He wore a clear plastic poncho over his rumpled jacket. "Well. Guess you scared it."

"Could we not just go around murdering the first thing we see?" said Perfidia. "Come on guys."

Wendell tapped Dalt on the shoulder and motioned him to return to the car, which Dalt started to do but immediately stopped when a stretch of spiderweb extended from the tree to its lowest branch and communicated the words:

PLEASE DONT KILL ME IM HERT

HELP ME

"I told you! I told you it was there bro. Come out you creepy spider thing. Seriously guys you gotta see it. Huge!"

"If someone's there," said Wendell to the tree, "then come out. We won't shoot if you come in peace." He placed a hand on the barrel of Dalt's gun and lowered it.

After a pause, the web changed to read:

I DONT WANT TO GO OUT

I DONT WANT YOU TO LOOKE AT ME!!!

"Can't help you if you don't come out," said Wendell.

In the long stillness that ensued, as though the spider were considering this conundrum, Shannon got an idea. "Ask it about Jay." She leaned over the front seat, cupped her hands over her mouth, and yelled: "Hey! Have you seen Jay Waringcrane? Jay. Waringcrane. My brother."

What the fuck was she doing. Talking to a spider. This world was beyond delusion. The web rearranged:

THE HERO?

Then it changed again, drawing a picture. A picture of a young man holding a baseball bat, wearing a jacket and a hat with, incredibly, a highly accurate rendition of the Cleveland Browns logo.

"He's certainly no hero," said Shannon, "but that's him."

HE SAVED MY LYFE...

Well how quaint. Jay had gone from doing absolutely nothing to saving giant sentient spiders. Shannon supposed that counted as an improvement.

Dalt, who only seconds before had wanted nothing more than a target to pump full of lead, rushed to the back of the SUV, opened the trunk, and came back with a fistful of Doritos bags. "Hey. Hey! We'll give ya some food if you tell us where Jay went."

"Dalt, spiders don't eat Doritos. They suck the organs out of insects."

The web shifted again. YOU ARE HEROS TOO. YOU CAME TO HELP HIM.

"Correct," said Shannon. "He needs serious help."

HE WENT TO THE

The webs lingered on that partial phrase several seconds, then shifted around, not quite making a word, undoing, trying again, finally coming up with:

MANASTARRY

"Manastarry?" said Dalt.

"Monastery," said Shannon. She turned to Perfidia. "Where's this monastery?"

Perfidia gave a look of explosive disbelief. "What? You're just gonna trust this spider? I'm telling you, Jay went into the woods. He—"

"Monastery. Where."

"Blah! Just follow the road."

Sure enough, when Shannon looked back, the web also read: FOLLOW THE ROAD.

At Shannon's nod, Dalt tossed three Doritos bags to the tree. Slowly, uncertainly, a gigantic spider leg extended from around the trunk. Once nothing happened, no shotgun blast, the leg speared the bags and dragged them behind the tree in rapid succession. The sound of foil ripping soon mingled with the patter of rain.

They left the spider to feast, receiving a parting GOD BE WITH YOU for their trouble. Car doors slammed shut, engines started, and with Perfidia shifting even more uncomfortably in her seat—or so Shannon imagined—they proceeded toward their new destination. Shannon spent the next fifteen minutes of the drive chewing Dalt out for firing the gun, a scolding to which he could only respond: "Didn't we bring them to fire them?"

—

Makepeace John Gaheris Coke, Prince of Whitecrosse, heir to the throne, owner of titles he never bothered to remember, destined to become King John the Whateverth and lose even the name that rendered him distinct, cut via regnal mold into a pale imitation of that man he both admired and limped away from, watched his sister slump down the wall with a dagger in her throat and quite unbecoming to that interminable list of birthright achievements could not help but smile. A smile made all the more wicked by the misery burned into Sansaime's dear features. Oh that repulsive face! So wisely hidden away, revealed not even in the throes of lust, a deed done in darkness, twofold wretchedness bleeding out of each body to smear the other.

What could she possibly be so anguished about? She knew nothing of Mayfair; knowing her could only eliminate the possibility of tears. Or was it Makepeace himself she wept for, her bare face twisted his way? Labored she under some delusion that he possessed an ounce of familial feeling?

Her hand whipped out. Three silvery needles quick as lightning flew and Jay caught them with the back of his hand. The needles had been aimed for his pocket. For the faerie.

Makepeace supposed, perhaps, Sansaime cried for herself. For she must know she would not escape this tower alive. Regardless of how Makepeace felt about his sister, he *did* need the little brat alive. Who else would take his place on the throne? He'd fled before; it was easy to escape. Difficult to stay escaped. The world itself was a prison, a land of few nations, few cities, few people. Always at his back were his mother's champions, loyal knights, men enamored of her unearned charms, and always—no matter what—they dragged him back.

They dragged him back so many times, under so many circumstances, after he fled so far, after he rode horseback (he'd miss that poor horse) day and night and day and night again and wound up in some far-flung corner that could not rightfully be called anywhere, places nobody would ever think to look, and yet as though some heavenly force compelled them the champions appeared. By the seventh time, when Makepeace was fifteen, old enough to know how to cover his trail, how to leave no trace, how to disappear completely—and he did it successfully by then innumerable times within the confines of Whitecrosse's white walls, gallivants with thieves and whores—by then Makepeace knew it was no mere matter of skill or luck, that there was something else in this world, some mechanism, some trickery or stage machinery, that foisted toward him the crown he had no choice but to accept.

It was, simply, fate. The fate of every cursed descendent of John Coke the Original. Makepeace checked the annals. Four hundred years and the crown passed solely to direct descendants. Never was the line extinguished, never was a king or queen without valid issue, never did the genealogy need resort to some forgotten cousin or half-brother to maintain the name if not, in part and parcel, the blood. Then he checked the annals of California, over which Whitecrosse reigned suzerain, and which rumors abound claimed its royal family also descended from John Coke, albeit not as a byproduct of his legal marriage. One found the same story: four hundred years, an unbroken direct line. (A stronger line, actually, once one factored all the incest.) What were the odds?

Their world existed in stasis. Change was impossible. Sons became their fathers. Makepeace John Gaheris Coke would sit upon the throne.

And the words of the archbishop's cult rang true: **In this world, there is no God.**

There were only heroes. As a stroke of brilliant luck, as Makepeace embarked on a quest to drag Mayfair home under the vain hope she might somehow take his place so he could slip between the chains to die on his own terms, he found a hero.

Jay Waringcrane.

Who lunged forward and hurled his body shoulder-first into Makepeace's latest conquest, an attack Sansaime might ordinarily have been able to avoid but couldn't due to the morass of papers flooding the room, a kind of ridiculous convenience that only a hero could muster.

"Heal the princess!" he shouted at his faerie.

Makepeace supposed he better help. Only a hero could change this world, after all. Only a hero could buy Makepeace his freedom. For the hero to take Makepeace's place as king, he needed a princess to marry. Oh, what a match made in heaven! The little bitch in her tower and her knight in a brown jacket to save her.

One swing of Makepeace's blade chopped through the cascade of pages before him and he clanked forward while Jay staggered back nursing a thick spurt of blood from his palm. Sansaime, another dagger out and glittering a bead of blood on its tip, flicked her gaze from Jay to Makepeace to—what she seemed to care about most—the faerie, who flew to Mayfair and attempted to remove the dagger by tugging with four limbs against the wooden handle. Jay slid between the faerie and Sansaime to block further attack with his body, a bold strategy but one Makepeace could not especially fault given any wound would be restored instantaneously.

Sansaime considered her position one moment, and then threw off her cloak at Jay's face. He beat it down with his club and the moment the club went down Sansaime was there going for the jugular and stopped only by the full brunt of Makepeace's shield ramming her from the side. She cracked against a dusty shelf which rocked and sent books and a flickering lamp cascading around her. Rather infuriatingly the debris got in the way as Makepeace swung his blade for her head, hoping to finish her off quickly given how much of a nuisance she could be.

The lamp landed and shattered and at once it started: An orange tail rising from the ancient pages. Such excellent kindling, these dry tomes. Oh dear.

"Hero! I can't get the dagger out!" the faerie shrieked. Mayfair's head jerked as the beastly thing pulled and pulled. "I can't heal her if there's still something in her! Hurry!"

Jay hesitated; Makepeace nodded at him, and with a glare—although one not, Makepeace imagined, as severe as most already levied in their short period of acquaintance—Jay turned and slid to Mayfair's side. Makepeace extended his shield and made himself as broad as possible, walling Sansaime into the corner as the fire grew from a flicker to a streak.

"Now now Sansy, you've made quite the blunder," Makepeace said, assuming this slight delay would lend Jay enough time. "Whoever hired you might've been better served sending an actual assassin and not a glorified hunter, don't you think?"

"Idiot," Sansaime said. "Time is on my side."

In a way she was right, because half the room was now aflame, and the smoke choked all, and the fires rose up the shelves into bright columns. Alas. But Makepeace checked over his shoulder and saw Jay helping—or rather hoisting—a shaken but healed Mayfair to her feet, and grabbing with the same hand that held his club the Staff of Lazarus, while the faerie urged them to start moving: They needed to go NOWNOWNOW (many more nows appended). The glance lasted a fraction of a second and yet it was an error; Sansaime took that moment's distraction to pounce.

She whirled at him, blade in each hand (even with her cloak gone she somehow produced these blades from all over). That was quite alright, Makepeace didn't mind, the poor girl for

all her speed lacked any chance. He might be slow, but he was rather difficult to kill.

His shield moved to cover his face. She would expect that, of course, his face being his obvious weakness, and so she would attack low. She would believe she knew his armor well enough. She would believe she could stab between the plates. Makepeace knew she believed this and with a single strong jerk brought his shield straight down. If Jay could predict her moves and block accordingly, then Makepeace, who knew the silly girl as much as any man could know a woman, might as well have lived inside of her head.

In a turn of immediate irony, hoisted by one's own petard you might say (not that Makepeace knew what a petard was, he simply for some reason knew that phrase, despite not remembering where exactly he heard it), the sharp point at the bottom of Makepeace's shield drove not into Sansaime's unprotected neck or skull, but only into paper. Sansaime did not attempt to strike low. She was, in fact, flying through the air, having clambered up a shelf to dive down at him from on high, both daggers aimed at his head.

Well, rather unfortunate.

Makepeace still held his sword and started the laborious process of swinging it but knew already it was much too late.

Hm. Seeing those daggers coming down at him, though, Makepeace didn't feel much in the way of fear, or horror, or whatever other things one might feel at the thought of their own mortality. Not, the way Jay did, because he anticipated the faerie would cure him; Jay and the faerie had already escaped the inferno of a room with Mayfair. No, Makepeace knew Sansaime would finish him, but in that knowledge only a certain solace crept.

He accomplished it, after all. Jay left with Mayfair in his arms. Together they would escape to the castle and together they would take Makepeace's place. If that were to be the end—well—

Their eyes met. One single, sheer stare. A look of authority. No words spoken, only the look.

Sansaime, eyes red with tears already, dragged her face away and dropped her daggers.

Rather than plunge steel into his skull, she fell harmlessly as though she expected him to sweep her up in an embrace. She was right to expect it because it was what he did.

All was flames around them. A solid wall of fire blocked the exit, and the fire was now nipping at Makepeace's legs, heating his armor, searing his skin. Sansaime held him; he held her. She sobbed into his chest. She whispered: "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Maybe it was, though. What a romantic death, no? Reduced to cinders with one's lover in their arms. Mutual immolation so that their ashes might mingle into one inextricable mound of dust.

Makepeace brought the hilt of his sword hard against the back of her head. She slumped against his shoulder, unconscious, and he pushed her off him. Her body flopped against the empty shelf next to them.

Could he still burst through the flames and charge out the exit? His eyes ran with water from the smoke; he struggled to breathe. No. By now the fire would've spread further anyway. Then where—Aha. He glimpsed exactly how to make his daring escape.

Not a moment to spare. Yet he spared one, despite himself, unsure why he did so; he glanced at Sansaime. Rather tragic the poor girl was so enamored with him. But she was not his first conquest and would not, given his devil's luck, be his last. Oh well. Poor girl. Poor girl.

His jaw clenched. A thick bead of sweat burst and rolled down the furrow of his eyebrow. Poor girl, he thought. Poor girl. Then, for some reason divorced entirely from logic, reason, and good sense, he scooped her up and hoisted her onto his shoulder.

—

Jay dragged Mayfair down the hall as fast as he could, but for no discernible reason she swayed, staggered, became off-balanced at every possible moment, with a blank-eyed look and hands that kept grabbing at her throat. The fire crackled behind them and smoke belched out the stairway. Under their feet was carpet and on the walls were tapestries and Jay figured in a few minutes this place would be an inferno too. They needed to move faster.

"Come on. Get over it, you're fine now. Even if you did die we'd bring you back with the staff."

"We'll bring back everyone!" Olliebollen attached herself to the bulbous orb at the end of the staff, four limbs wrapped around it as she nuzzled her face against its opaquely mirrored surface. "We'll bring back my court. All of them! They'll all come back!"

If only Jay knew how to use it. But his focus now was escape. Makepeace didn't seem to be coming after them and that meant Jay was on his own. At the end of the hall ahead, blocking the only exit he knew, was a gaggle of nuns.

Keeping Mayfair under one arm, he brandished his bat before the nuns even grew close enough to distinctly make out which particular animals they were halfway transformed into. Some kind of bird, some kind of lizard. Didn't matter. "Bad fire back there. You wanna stop this whole place from burning, you better stop it fast. Now out of my way!"

They didn't move out of his way. They just stood there, maybe ten or twenty of them, they were like fucking zebras the way their nun habits made them blend into one indistinct mass.

He shook the staff to get Olliebollen off it, expecting he might need her soon. Mayfair gripped Jay closer, but her eyes stopped looking at nothing and started looking at the shiny fairy, as though seeing it for the first time. A burst of heat hit his back, a fireball bubbled out the tower stairway.

"See that?" he shouted at the nuns. "You have bigger things to worry about. Deal with that, don't worry about me!" Step-by-step he advanced as much as Mayfair allowed. The corridor filled with smoke. "I SAID MOVE!"

"Hero," the nuns said, not all at the same time, nor exactly staggered, an overlapping echo made awkward by the diverse range of voices from angelic to wretched. One added: "We need you, hero. You're the only one who can save us."

"The power of your soul can make us human again."

"We were never human! That's what the archbishop said. Your soul can make human those that aren't!"

"You can take us to the other world. You can let us feel the warmth of God's love."

"The princess knows, aye. Don't you, Your Royal Highness?"

Mayfair blinked away from tracing Olliebollen's erratic movements. "I..."

She clung even more tightly to Jay. For her slight stature she possessed a tight grip, to the point she felt like a gigantic human-sized tumor metastasizing on his side. Obnoxious—or intentional? Whose side was Mayfair on?

Fuck it.

Jay drove Mayfair hard into the stone wall to their side. In the tightened grunt of pain that exited her mouth her hold loosened. Jay threw her off and in the same movement spinning he brought his bat into the head of the first nun. There was already a second and a third and he dropped the Staff of Lazarus to two-hand the bat like a whirlwind into the narrow corridor swinging and swinging and not caring who or where he hit. They needed him alive, he understood now, because they needed his Humanity, and as Perfidia said—when he died he lost it. Maybe not even the staff could bring that back. Despite their claws and fangs and quills they cut only into his limbs, trying to hold him still, and through all of it the bright puff of Olliebollen's magic revitalized him instantly, and the hard metal baseball bat broke bone.

When he couldn't swing he kicked, when he couldn't kick he hurled himself bodily at the next nun and bowled her over. They were just women, just "poor girls" as Makepeace said, orphans and whores, nothing. They rolled to the corners heaving and crying and holding the hurt spots and by the time he took down five the rest scooted back.

"Come on!" Jay shouted. "Come on, do any of you really think you matter to me? I killed Flanz-le-Flore." His fingers tightened on the neck of the bat, fingers brittle shattering in his grasp. "I killed that bear—Pluxie. What will any of you do to me? I'm the hero. I'm the hero!"

"He's the hero," Olliebollen added sagely.

The nuns grabbed their fallen sisters and dragged them away. The crackle of fire grew, the heat a constant deluge of sweat down his face and neck, the collar of his jacket a dry and jagged scrape against his skin.

"Now back off. Do something about that fire, you idiots. Live a fucking life. This is your home, isn't it?"

Wide eyes watched him unblinking.

When he stepped back slowly, watching them in case they still tried something stupid, he found Mayfair clutching the Staff of Lazarus and yanked hard to pry it from her, nearly making her lose her balance in the process. "You get a grip too. I'm sick of carrying you everywhere. Let's go."

He motioned Olliebollen into his pocket and made due with pulling Mayfair by the wrist when she still dragged her feet.

They wound between the rows of nuns cleaved to the walls. Nobody attacked.

More nuns ran from the stairwell. But they were carrying buckets of water, and they didn't give Jay a glance. Jay passed a window and through it the tower where Mayfair had been shone bright and orange against the dark sky, flames whipping in lines along exposed roofbeams faster than the intense rainfall could suffocate. Across the slanted shingles, bounding, a figure cut a gallant silhouette, face a black mask until a bright flash of lightning revealed his magnificent form: Prince Makepeace. Sansaime slumped over his shoulder. Well, Jay hadn't expected the man to die here anyway.

Another squadron of nuns fluttered past and at their tail was Charisma, barking orders while carrying one bucket in her normal hand and two in her monstrous one, an arrangement that caused water to slosh out with each step.

"Move it, you insipid tubs of lard! Hustle, dithering wenches! The fire must go out. The archbishop demands it!" Passing Jay, one knifing glare and a hiss: "Don't think we're finished with *you*, hero. Don't think you'll get away so easy! I'll be coming after you personally once this is dealt with. Got it?"

Didn't they know when to give up? Jay kept moving, around a bend and down a staircase, to where the smoke no longer choked his lungs.

"We're gonna make it," said Olliebollen. "I can't believe it. After everything! You really came through, hero. You really did it! It's amazing! You'll—you'll remember I helped you, right? I was only ever helpful to you. It's me, Olliebollen, your faithful helper! You'll remember, right? Right? You'll help make me whole again won't you? All my friends and family?"

He was too busy to talk navigating awkward uneven stairs, premodern architectural techniques lacking rigid uniformity, while also pulling Mayfair behind him. "Whatever," he muttered absentmindedly.

"It's like it's like it's like it's finally becoming *real*, I wasn't sure before, I tried my best but I had suspicions, now maybe you really are the hero, just maybe? Just maybe you can put everything right. Turn a tiny twig back into a giant tree. Arbiters of all life!"

"What are you babbling about."

He shoved himself and Mayfair against the wall to let something squidlike shamle by with more than two buckets gripped in more than two tentacle appendages. Afterward he gave a sharp jerk to keep Mayfair moving and they exited the stairwell into the archbishop's star-domed chamber, empty save for a few oddly-spaced figures: Charm, Theovora, and of course the giant plant, all still and muted and every sign of activity from somewhere distant: distant fire, distant shouts, distant thunder, and distant smell of smoke.

Charm only stared at Jay, trailing black tears without sobs. Theovora, unsupported, sat slumped on her knees, the archbishop's tendrils still implanted into the back of her head.

Jay and Mayfair's footsteps echoed. If the fire spread, Jay realized, the archbishop would surely burn. Did they let him in so easily hoping to trap him when he tried to exit, only for the bad luck of the fire to reorient their priorities?

"I thought you could see the future," he said (to Theovora, not the plant).

Theovora looked deactivated. Jay didn't expect a response, but when he crossed the dome and entered the final stretch of corridor, one came:

"I have seen... salvation."

Jay glanced back. "What?"

"Everything... has changed. I see now... this world... these people... they shall be saved."

On her knees, Theovora spoke emptily. No cognition of the meaning of her words. They were only words. Mayfair, whose attention had wandered aimless the entire escape, suddenly stared intently.

"Everything..." Theovora said. "Everything is better than I could have ever imagined..."

"Come on." Jay wrenched Mayfair's wrist. No point in hearing more.

The downpour pattered him as across the courtyard he moved with efficient strides. Was he imagining Mayfair no longer dragging her feet? Her shellshock wearing off, or a response to the archbishop's words? If the secret behind the archbishop's foresight was Perfidia feeding him info, then—He tried not to get lost in it. He glanced back to search for Makepeace but nothing appeared except orange flame among the stonework, an inferno belching black clouds into a sky already black-clouded. The only nun in the entire courtyard was Charm, who followed for some reason, keeping her distance.

Makepeace would catch up later. Why did Jay need him anyway? The front gates were unbarred, no token attempt to impede him. He couldn't worry. What other choice did he have but to leave? He had the Staff of Lazarus and the princess of Whitecrosse. He'd won. With Olliebollen puffing him up, maybe he even enjoyed that success. At the very least, he was now arbiter of life and death in this world. Could do something with that. Make something out of that. Become something.

A hero. Yeah. Maybe. Someone who mattered. Someone with power. He walked out of the monastery with everything he wanted, without a scratch on him, and left it in flames at his back. What had Olliebollen babbled about? Making the world whole again? Yeah. Jay thought, yeah.

First, he'd go back to the faerie court. Revive Lalum, and Flanz-le-Flore too. Then—

He passed through the gates and started down the road that sloped toward the forest and stopped. Whatever thought was in his head stopped being there. He blinked. He rubbed his eyes. What came up the trail had to be—anything other than what it was. Illusion. Conjured by the smoke, incessant rainfall, fairy magic—anything.

"No," he said.

Olliebollen looked. Mayfair looked. Charm, peeping from the gates, looked. They all looked.

"No."

"I dunno what that is," said Olliebollen. "So odd! I should know what everything is, but I don't know *that!*"

"No."

Coming up the path were two cars. Two modern cars. An SUV and a jeep. Their high-powered LED headlights cast him and Olliebollen and Mayfair in a ghostly white glow, a glow as powerful as lightning. The cars screeched to a halt. The passenger door of the SUV opened and Jay's sister, Shannon Waringcrane, stepped out.

Mayfair

Shannon opened a black umbrella in the same motion she emerged out the SUV, adroitly shielding herself from every possible raindrop, although she could do nothing about the slowly thickening mud of the mountain path. On the whole her outfit looked like the nuns: dour and modest. Before she even spoke Jay felt pinned by the billion-lumen floodlights pouring out of the SUV. Pinned by the unreality of the situation, the most fantastical thing yet seen in this fantastical world.

Flash of lightning; the giant cross shone at Shannon's back, the dead dragon coiled at its base.

"Get in the car," Shannon said calmly.

The driver's side door of the SUV opened and a man squeezed out, barely able to compress himself through the frame, one gigantic leg followed by another followed by the gargantuan cage of his body. He came with no umbrella.

"Well, well, well. The little buddy himself. The man of the moment. Mr. Jay Waringcrane."

Jay had never seen this man before but knew instantly he was Shannon's boyfriend. Behind the SUV, a vividly orange jeep sat placid and disinterested. Who it contained Jay couldn't fathom.

"Wait, don't tell me!" said Olliebollen. "These aren't heroes too, are they? Buhbuhbut—that makes no sense. No sense at all!"

"Jay, you'll get in the car now," said Shannon.

Mayfair gripped Jay tighter. She said nothing, seemed incapable of speech. Yet when Jay glanced down at her, she was—not exactly watching—something more intense, *observing*, the pupils of her eyes flitting spasmodically, as though deconstructing and analyzing every minute detail of the alien contraptions and alien humans posed before her.

"Yo!" said Shannon's hulk. "The little buddy's got himself a little girlfriend! I dunno Shannon. Let's not cockblock the man—"

One singular glare bifurcated the light, the rain, the vehicle, and the man. "Only I speak, Dalt," Shannon said. (To which Dalt, tongueless, could only raise both hands in supplication.) To Jay: "I ask politely for the final time. You will get in the car."

"What's a car? Is that a car? That's so interesting!" said Olliebollen. "It's like a carriage without any horses. Care-riage, car-riage. Hm! Does that mean a car-riage is composed of a car—the thing you ride in—and a riage—the horse?"

For a moment the brightly dancing flitting flying powder-puff-expelling thing drew Shannon's attention, and then Shannon reached the conclusion it was not a thing that should exist and thus she refused to acknowledge its existence. Her eyes went back to Jay. "Staying

silent, I see. Inactivity has always been your only strength. Rest assured I'll have much to say on the ride home. But I'd rather not stand in the rain. Dalt, seize my brother."

Dalt shambled forward, lifting his shoulders into a convivial shrug as if to say, "Sorry little buddy," speech forbidden by the continual glare of his girlfriend. Jay saw him coming, saw his unstoppably red Ohio State shirt under a camouflage jacket, and the moment he stepped in the headlights and his front became blackened by the aura at his back he transmogrified as if by Flanz-le-Flore's magic into every boyfriend past, every ineffable douchebag, every Makepeace John Gaheris Coke.

Jay thought: *This time I have a baseball bat.*

He remembered the last time he thought that. What would this boyfriend be? Another wrestler? A football star. Shannon had her type.

Still Jay thought, why not. He glanced over his shoulder at the monastery, enveloped in pillars of flame, and Charm in the gateway watching him. He considered the bargain he made with Perfidia Bal Berith: To make him satisfied. Had she? Was this world satisfactory? He followed Perfidia's plan and went to the monastery. Rescued the princess, got the staff. Everything he wanted and everything she wanted for him. For a moment striding out of the monastery he did really feel like a hero. Maybe same as everything else: only a moment.

Nah. Fuck that. A hero, Olliebollen called him. In the face of his sister, he still believed it. But he had to be wary. One wrestling pin and Olliebollen became worthless.

"Fine. I'll go."

Jay lowered his bat and approached the SUV, a process made difficult by Mayfair's clinging. Olliebollen flitted to the fore.

"I don't get it. Go where? Now that you've overcome the archbishop at the monastery, your next destination should probably, uh, probably be Castle Whitecrosse! Yeah! Is that where you're going?"

"Going home," Dalt said. "Home to beautiful Cleveland, Ohio, in the United States of America. Bye-bye to this place, at least for him."

Olliebollen blanked. A remnant of a giddy smile creased her little mouth, but the eyes were empty. "Cleveland..." she said. "Ohio."

"The other world," said Mayfair.

"The real world," said Shannon. "Where he belongs." She didn't question Jay's quick acquiescence. Of course she wouldn't. Jay knew Shannon. Knew how Shannon thought, knew particularly what Shannon thought of Jay. No secret. She told him whenever she saw him. Lazy, lacking drive, lacking ambition. Useless! Nonproductive! A vestigial part, a component whose mere existence leached the efficiency of the greater whole.

Great. Underestimate him.

"You'll take me too, won't you?" said Mayfair. "You'll take me to the other world?"

"Of course not. Get off my brother. Jay, she's too young for you anyway."

Mayfair relinquished Jay and became stately instantaneously. "Oh, my apologies. I failed to introduce myself. My name is Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke. I am the princess of Whitecrosse—"

"Don't care. You're nothing. You're not real. You don't exist."

"I beseech you most humbly. I was kidnapped by the malodorous folk who live within that monastery. Your brother, at great peril to himself, rescued me. Please do not let his efforts be in vain. Take me with you."

Shannon stared down—she stood a foot taller—at Mayfair, utterly contemptuous. Words manifested just beyond her lips, she did not say them, she turned sharply on one heel as though the matter were settled by her previous statement.

But Dalt demurred. "We can take her at least as far as that inn we saw can't we? It's on the way after all. Plenty a room in the truck too."

Yes. Good. If they stopped the car right on the outskirts of the forest... Jay visualized a plan. They let Mayfair out, Jay runs. Into the woods. With Olliebollen's rejuvenation he could theoretically sprint forever without tiring, and in the woods they couldn't pursue easily via car. Shannon would never give up once she set her mind on something, but at least it'd buy him time for a more long-term solution. He refused to go back to Cleveland. Back to that empty, nothing life.

The door to the jeep opened and a bored-looking Asian guy in a translucent poncho emerged. Gigantic glasses immediately fogged in the rain. At the same time, Jay reached the SUV, opened the back door, and threw up his hands in exasperation.

"Should've fucking known. You're behind this."

Perfidia Bal Berith threw up her hands too. They were zip-tied at the wrists. "Oh yeah? Really? This look like I wanted any of this? That *brute* your sister's got on a leash, he kicked the shit outta me. I didn't have a choice. But look." She leaned over, checked out the door to ensure Shannon was preoccupied with Dalt (they argued about Mayfair), and whispered: "I can fix this, all of this, real quick. We're both in a bind so I'll give you a special offer, how bout it? Your full Humanity right now—you already pledged it to me anyway—and I make them go home, they forget all about you."

If Jay forked over his Humanity outside of their contract, he fully expected Perfidia to take the money and run. "Not interested."

"Oh no." Shannon clip-clopped (or given the mud, squelched) over. "Oh no you don't. *You* do not speak to my brother. Jay, you'll ride with Wendell in the jeep." She thought about it, added: "I'll ride with you. Dalt, you can handle Bal Berith by yourself."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa Shannon. We were talking about the little girl, remember? You can't just—you can't just bulldoze me like that. I say we take the girl—Mayfair right? Wendell. Wendell! We can take this girl right? Just to that inn we saw."

The Asian guy, smoking a cigarette, drifted his gaze from the flaming monastery to Dalt.
"Why not."

"There you go Shannon, you're outvoted. Two to one. Girl—Mayfair. We'll take you."

"Oh, I'm so glad." Mayfair fluttered her eyelashes like a cartoon character.

"It's not a vote, Dalt. I'm the leader of this operation and my word is final."

"Oh, you're the *leader* now? News to me Shannon. The cars belong to me and Wendell. We decide who rides in them."

Perfidia hissed: "Just touch my hands Jay. Quick—now!"

Shannon bodied into her line of sight. "*Go to the jeep, Jay. Or I'll make Dalt escort you. Dalt. Dalt listen. We're not—we can't—it's not even an option Dalt!*"

"There's no logical reason!" Rainwater ran down Dalt's big red face. "We already have the fucking devil on board, what's one more weirdo! No offense Mayfair. You seem nice."

Courtly half-bow of the head. (Mayfair was also soaked, but in a more orderly way.) "No offense taken, Sir... Dalt, was it?"

"Scott Dalton Swaino II actually, but you can call me Dalt. Or Dalton. Either works. People call my dad Scott."

"Unbelievable!" Shannon grabbed Jay's arm and dragged him away from a desperately grasping Perfidia.

"Come on Shannon, we're not gonna take her all the way back to Cleveland, I'm not stupid. We'll just drive her away from—whatever this is." Dalt indicated the monastery.

"Oh, but I truly would like to see your world. It would be such a delight. Please may I come?" Mayfair looked from Dalt to Wendell. Wendell gave only a single shake of the head no. For a moment, Mayfair's features became perceptibly more stony, then loosened. "Oh well. I suppose that is for the best."

Jay didn't trust that acquiescence one instant. He knew because he was also falsely acquiescing.

Olliebollen, mired in rickety silence for the past few minutes, jabbed a finger to point into Dalt's SUV. "You—you're the Master. You're the Master, aren't you."

"W, why would ya think that?" said Perfidia.

"She's the Master," said Jay. "She's the one who sent me here at least."

"Her?" said Mayfair.

"Completely irrelevant. Jay, move!" Shannon tugged hard and Jay's feet dragged through the mud. He responded by wrenching his arm away from her.

"I said I'd go already Shannon, calm down."

"Calm down? Oh. Oh yes. Calm down Shannon. Be *reasonable* Shannon. As if I'm not the only person present with the slightest *shred* of reason. You abandon Mother, don't even tell her where you're going—"

"Oh don't act like you care about that. Don't act like you give a shit about what Mother thinks."

"She was inconsolable, Jay. And I had to deal with it!"

"Right, that's why you care. You had to deal with it."

"Of all the naked hypocrisy—"

"Shannon," said Dalt.

"That you could think it a viable option to *respond* to me rather than take the tongue-lashing you deserve—"

"Shannon!"

"What Dalt?!"

"Come on babe. Let's just get outta here."

Shannon went quiet. She stood there, shielded by her umbrella, having moved to the midpoint between the two vehicles, Jay beside her, Mayfair remaining within Jay's orbit, Olliebollen staring into the SUV at Perfidia, and Dalt beyond that. Wendell retreated back inside his jeep.

The rain came down, and maybe it was Jay's imagination, but the fire in the monastery burned less bright, and the frantic shouts of the nuns organizing their firefighting efforts quieted, so the scene became nothing more than the patter of rain; no thunder either. Along with the water came down ashes, black clumps breaking.

Into this tranquility intruded none other than Makepeace John Gaheris Coke. "Hallo, what'd I miss?"

All eyes went to him. On his shoulder he carried the unconscious form of Sansaime. He sauntered down the path, a shining gleam on the surface of his armor, char marks on his colorful livery that only contributed to a gallant image—the way they could only do in a Hollywood movie.

When nobody spoke, he continued: "Met one of those twins running back into the monastery. You whack her with that bat again Jay my good man?"

Charm. She was missing. Something she saw or heard she felt the need to report. Jay knew what. Same thing that caused Olliebollen to blank, that caused Mayfair to shift tactics and start to speak: The hero was going home.

Whatever tactics Mayfair employed ceased; her pliant courteousness leached away in the rainwater, leaving a certain red rawness. "You didn't kill her. An assassin sent by enemies of all that is righteous and correct in this world, and you refused to kill her. No—you even saved her. I understood you to be a philanderer, but I failed to realize your unseemly impulses would cloud even the most basic sense of judgment and reason."

Under the umbrella, Shannon gawked at her.

"What can I say," said Makepeace, "I'm a piece of shit."

Dalt, who finally half-reentered his SUV, fanned a hand at Shannon and for some reason directed the question toward her: "Who's this chucklefuck?"

A mirror, Jay thought.

"An irrelevance," Shannon said. "Let's go already! Move!"

She tried to grab Jay again, Jay didn't let her, he started walking on his own, Mayfair creeping close and Olliebollen roused from her permanent stare at Perfidia to zip over with her fibrous strands of fur tipped by beaded droplets that shook off with every erratic motion. Makepeace said, "Wait now. Aren't I owed an explanation? Jay, you didn't listen to anything my silly sister said did you now? I warned you she's not to be trusted on certain matters. What has she said?"

"She didn't say anything," Jay muttered. "Give him a ride too, he's with me."

"Not to be trusted. He says *I'm* not to be trusted." Mayfair spat the words under her breath darkly, a twitch in her fingers, then shook off some water and reverted to a previous pleasant demeanor as she turned sharply and cut Makepeace out of her view.

Shannon was unwilling to entertain more ridiculousness. She ignored Makepeace entirely, she refused to respond to Jay's request to let him ride, and as she exited Dalt's orbit and opened the back door of Wendell's jeep this allowed Dalt free reign to make decisions on his own so the last Jay heard before he came in out of the downpour was Dalt offering Makepeace to let "the lady"—Sansaime—rest in the back of the SUV, although Jay wondered how Makepeace would react once he saw Perfidia there as well. Maybe he wouldn't react at all, he didn't strike Jay as devout.

Didn't matter. Wendell's jeep fit three in the back and Jay made sure to move over so that he was at one end, Shannon at the other, and Mayfair wound up squished in the middle. He did this so that when they let Mayfair out Jay would have to get out too, to let her pass. Then he'd run. Couldn't have worked more perfectly—Dalt in the other car too. Dalt was the problem

and the farther away he was the better. This other guy, Wendell, clearly not a Shannon boyfriend type, barely seemed cognizant of or interested in the drama that raged outside, didn't even look at Jay or the others cramming into the back of his car and only muttered a dry, truncated "mess up my upholstery" out the corner of a cigarette-smoking mouth as the doors shut and he started the jeep and set about the process of a twenty-point turn to revolve it so it could head down the trail.

"Christ Wendell, put that thing out," said Shannon.

Wendell did not put the cigarette out. Did not acknowledge Shannon at all. All he did was turn his hands over the wheel, shift to reverse, turn the wheel, shift to drive, turn the wheel, repeat. The jeep inched back and forth, a senseless wriggle, while the three of them sat in the back. Four of them, actually. Olliebollen had managed to slip inside too. She hovered too close to Jay for comfort, mixing her sugary sweet dust with the cigarette smoke. Jay balanced his bat against his thigh and shoved the Staff of Lazarus into the pouch on the back of the passenger seat in front of him, next to an atlas titled *Wilderness Areas of Ohio 2012 Edition*.

Back and forth, back and forth. Inch by inch the jeep revolved. Through the wiper-whipping windshield the giant cross and the dragon drifted detached in the dark air.

"Thank you so very much for allowing me to ride with you, Lady Shannon," Mayfair said. "Are you absolutely certain you wouldn't allow me to accompany you back to your world—"

"Shut up."

"How about you, Sir Wendell? I—"

"I said shut up," said Shannon.

"It might be in your best interest to allow me this one minor request."

"I'm already 'allowing a request' by letting you exist in my sphere at all." But Shannon reverted to a semblance of calm, smoothing down her jacket, her closed umbrella in the same position relative her as the bat to Jay. "Now let me speak." She cleared her throat. She began her lecture.

"This is the final straw, Jay. I'm sorry but it is time for an intervention in your waste of a life. We live in a world of endless cornucopia, a world free from fear and hunger, but that world was earned at a price, and the price is the cooperation and contribution of every human soul who calls that world home. You have dwelt in fantasy long enough, Jay. You have entertained delusions and our helpless Mother has allowed you to entertain them long past the point you ought to have been demanded to grow up. I was eleven years old when I had to grow up."

She stared forward, at the back of Wendell's seat, Wendell still spinning the wheel, shifting the gear, spinning the wheel, shifting the gear.

"I was like you then. I didn't take things seriously. I played around and all I wanted was to play around. For a child, that's normal. But children grow up, Jay. You are nineteen years old. You have to get a life. You have to learn to support yourself. Have you ever read the novel

Don Quixote, Jay? Of course not. You read nothing. But I, among other pursuits, have endeavored to familiarize myself with the basics of our common culture, and so I perused a few excerpts. You are Don Quixote, a man so enamored of stories that he wants nothing except to be in one. As far as I'm concerned, *Don Quixote* is the greatest novel humankind ever produced: It exposes the frivolity of the entire medium. Don't you dare open your mouth. You don't get to speak right now. I do. Shut up and let me speak. You need to wake up, Quixote. Our world is windmills, not giants. It's industry. It's economy. It's production. You think otherwise only because the goodwill of your family has insulated you from this truth. You have lived in a cocoon your entire life. A cocoon."

A cocoon. Falling over, bloody, torn at by a ring of wolves.

"You persist in a state of suspended growth, Jay. A perpetual child. It's not your fault. I feel some empathy for your plight, having once been you, having been in your situation. Mother never pushed you. She never pushed me. The only reason I got pushed was because at eleven I saw our dad's blasted-open head and his brains smeared all over the wall and I could never be a child again after that. You were lucky. You were at daycare. You saw nothing, maybe you would've been too young then anyway. But I saw it Jay, and that was the impetus for me. You never had an impetus, a reason. Parents are supposed to shape their children and our Mother was cruel, she never shaped anything, she never forbade anything, she only ever said it was okay. You had a cruel Mother. But it's time to wake up, Jay. If dad's headless corpse isn't there for you, then I have to be. I will."

Her voice trailed and Jay looked past Mayfair—idle, inoperative—at Shannon, surprised by the direction this lecture turned, surprised by the trembling spreading along Shannon's hands balanced on her knees, surprised in the void as her last words dispersed in this cramped space that to Shannon must seem empty and devoid of life because she refused to recognize the lives within it.

"I will make you into something, Jay."

In that void Jay supposed he was expected to speak. The jeep righted itself and began a slow forward rumbling down the mountain trail. But Jay had nothing to say, nothing against this bare and almost bestial evocation of a dead father he never remembered, a funeral on a windy day when a six-year-old version of himself spread his arms wide in the cemetery and said "Look Mother, I'm a sail!" as his jacket fluttered all across him.

In that void it was not Jay who spoke.

"Jay is something."

It was Olliebollen.

"Jay is something. Jay is a hero. He is. I've seen it. I've watched him fight monsters, I've seen him risk his own life. He's set his mind on things and done them. He can command life and death now. Yeah! He can. He'll bring back my court. He'll revive them all. And he'll wreak vengeance on our enemies. Nothing will stop him. The Master maybe helped him before, but for the past six hours the Master hasn't been here. She's been tied up in the back of your 'car,'

I guess! So he did everything by himself. Flanz-le-Flore, the monastery, all by himself. You understand? He's not nothing, he's not worthless. He's saving this world!"

Shannon stared ahead as though not a word was spoken.

"This is your final warning, I am afraid," said Mayfair. "I must go to your world. The salvation of this one depends on it."

Jay stared ahead, thinking: I'm a sail! I'm a sail! The wind is gonna blow me away! Bye-bye Mother, bye-bye Shannon, bye-bye everyone! Bye-bye Daddy!

"LOOK AT ME," Olliebollen shrieked. She buzzed at the edge of Jay's periphery, brightly dancing. "LOOK AT ME, LISTEN TO ME. YOU WON'T TAKE HIM. YOU WON'T. YOU WON'T."

"I apologize," said Mayfair. "I warned you all."

Olliebollen extended her arm straight at Shannon's placid face. "YOU WON'T TAKE HIM. YOU WON'T TAKE THE HERO. YOU WON'T. YOU CAN HEAR ME. DON'T ACT LIKE YOU CAN'T. YOU CAN HEAR ME. YOU WON'T TAKE THE HERO! HE'S GONNA MAKE ME WHOLE AGAIN. HE'S GONNA MAKE ME WHOLE!"

Mayfair's mouth dropped open. A row of immaculate teeth shone. She brought her head forward and bit down on Olliebollen's outstretched arm.

One tug of her head and the arm ripped off and sparkling blood burst from the stump as Olliebollen reared back screaming through the space between the front seats until she smacked against the windshield spurting blood in a fan and Wendell said, "What the fuck?" Shannon and Jay turned in unison at the girl sitting between them, Shannon's horrified face a mirror of Jay's, a stupor broken only seconds later when the pieces fell together and it all made sense:

The animus.

He seized his bat and when he tried to swing it bounced worthlessly against the confines of the jeep and by then it was too late. Mayfair's horrible crunch-crunch chewing ended in a gulp as blood ran down her chin. She flung out her arms and a bright blast of light emitted from her body.

The whole jeep became nothing but a single white blare, neither line nor distinction made, only a sonic coil of shouts and the crackle of a walkie-talkie somewhere going: "Wendell? Wendell the fuck's going on you got the sun in your car!"

As quick as it came the sun subsided, although the white sear remained on the surface of their throbbing eyeballs, pupils rotoscoping wildly in brutal adjustment rendering parceled and echoey an image of Mayfair outstretching her arm between the front seats and pointing at or past the shrieking bleeding Olliebollen rolling against the windshield, pointing at the giant white cross still aglow with the remaining luster of that light, and in her hand she gripped the Staff of Lazarus.

She did not point at Olliebollen. She did not point at the cross.

She pointed at the dragon.

"I am the resurrection," she screeched in her pleasantly courteous voice, "and the life! Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die! Devereux, come forth!"

A tremor rocked the ground. The slopes reverberated with its force; rocks dislodged and rolled, some small, some larger, a boulder bounding from above and smashing not far ahead to bounce and roll into a rain-faded abyss. A jagged crack slashed through the giant white cross, another, and then the cross creaked and came down in a crumbling mess, the crossbeam crashing, belching a forceful geyser of dust.

Everything inside the jeep fell silent—except Olliebollen's shrieks subsumed into the earthquake—as at the base of what remained of the cross uncoiling came a creature of prehistory, of nonhistory, although cultures across the world collectively and unconsciously cobbled their own iterations in seeming isolation, a Jungian nightmare from which humanity had tried to awake or perhaps its most perfect daydream. What did Don Quixote think about dragons. Into the black sky unfolded black wings curving downward as though to grip and tear off the peak on which the dragon dwelled.

Two yellow eyes cracked open. Cracked open and stared straight at them. Nostrils flared orange; twin pillars of smoke rose against the rainfall.

The walkie-talkie crackled. "Everything all right?"

Jay flung his arms around Mayfair, first failing to pry the staff from her, then kicking open the door and simply dragging her bodily and flinging her onto the mud. He grabbed his bat, he stood over her, he drew back to swing with only her pitiless or even pitying gaze piercing him before Shannon yelled:

"Jay what the fuck are you doing?!"

He paused and in that pause glanced over his shoulder at the boom-boom-boom thundering streaking over the valley as the big black yellow-eyed monstrosity bounded over the slopes at them. At him.

Shannon was stumbling across the backseat in a crawl poised to topple out as she reached for Jay. Wendell slammed the gas and the jeep lurched forward out of the dragon's path, not fast enough to avoid the dangling wing that clipped across the roof and sent the jeep spinning as Shannon's scream peeled from inside.

That left only the dragon itself before Jay. Jaw wide to reveal a jagged line of fangs, harsh blast of hot sulfuric smell. Jay toppled to his knees and did the only thing he could think—he grabbed Mayfair, hefted her tiny body, and held her squirming before him. She called it back. It wouldn't hurt her. If he held her, it couldn't hurt him.

In the jeep Shannon tried to comprehend the shape of the thing peering down at her brother and could not. It was too black in too black a night, an obscure outline where the rain

splattered its hard surface. It was a null in her view, an emptiness, and yet straight through her heart it lanced a fear she never felt before. The jeep's windows were shattered where the wing struck it and glass shards bounced on the cushion, cutting her palms and knees. "What the fuck, what the fuck, Wendell what the fuck," the walkie-talkie was saying. Dalt was saying. Wendell in the front seat was lifting a hand to the side of his head where blood ran from small bits of glass embedded there. He gripped his forehead, he shifted the gear into park. He opened the driver's side door. Shannon didn't understand. They needed to leave. To leave now. But he was unbuckling his seatbelt, slow and methodical in his motions, ignoring the shrieking insectoid thing writhing on the dashboard with one arm gone.

"Wendell. Wendell what are you doing."

Wendell unclipped the walkie-talkie from a hook inside the jeep and clipped it to a strap on his shoulder. "What I came to do," he said.

He stepped into the rain. His hat shielded his glasses from the worst of the droplets. Unfortunately impossible to stop the fogging. Damn prescriptions. He kept wiping the lenses as he felt his way along the side of the jeep until he reached the back. His hand found the latch and he pulled and the back swung open. In the trunk was his gun, in its case, beside its can of ammunition: .700 Nitro Express.

Holland & Holland. London clothier and gunmaker. Founded 1835, still possessed of a certain Victorianism: propriety beyond sound business sense. They made big guns for sportsmen of big game, elephant rifles, and their caliber went up to .600, largest in the world at the time. Except in 1975 they sold their last .600 and certified they would never make another. To ensure that final one's value as a collector's item.

It was an American, a Beverly Hills magnate, a man emerging from that Sargasso Sea of culture—one William Feldstein—who came to Holland & Holland in 1985 and demanded they build for him a .600, a request they flatly refused on account of their previous certification. That final one would be their last. They gave their word—British propriety. Social order even over economic. The British way. Manners and fairness.

So Feldstein, trampler over all, said: "Make me a .700."

It was fictitious. Imaginary. A dream only. A gun birthed out the split skull of Hollywood. A fantasy rifle. It was what Wendell Noh removed from its case and held in his hands, cold metal kept perfectly clean, as he took the first hundred dollar, thousand grain bullet from its ammo box.

But even the most fantastical of guns can exist only in reality. An ingenious device of too many small and particular parts, a machine where every element is designed to slot together toward a singular purpose. This was no fiction no matter the outrageousness of its caliber. The creature crawling before him was fiction. Wendell Noh initiated the process.

- He snapped open the double-barreled rifle.
- He fed the first thousand grain soft point into the right barrel.
- He removed a second thousand grain soft point from the ammo box.
- He fed the second thousand grain soft point into the left barrel.

- He snapped the rifle closed.
- He disengaged the safety.

He already wore earplugs. They did well to drown out the nonsense everyone was speaking. Problem was his damn glasses. Blind without them though.

Fogged or not, his target hard to miss. There it was. A "dragon." Just as Dalt said. Dalt had his Kirk Cousins, so Wendell had his dragon. They always said Wendell was the more successful one. Dalt's dad did at least. Da-rae too. College friends. One an academic and one on sports scholarship. Well don't worry. They said that. Don't worry, he's at his peak now. He can't play football forever. Then what will he do.

But Dalt had his Kirk Cousins.

Wendell Noh aimed at the dragon.

The crack came out like thunder except somehow louder than the actual thunder, the actual earthquake that shook them prior, a crack loud enough to buckle Jay's knees and lurch the dragon's head to the side as the whizzing chunk of metal blasted through thick scale into the throat's flesh.

Black ooze instead of blood seeped through the wound as the dragon insensible to pain turned its head toward Wendell within a rising plume of gunsmoke. Jay knew he needed to act now, without hesitation. He wrapped his hands around Mayfair's throat, small and delicate, and squeezed.

"Oh damn it all to Hell!"

Makepeace. He was sprinting from the other vehicle, across the barren stretch of pathway, his gait made ridiculous by his heavy shield and sword.

"What's killing her supposed to do Jay? What's the point of—"

Another crack of thunder rocketed the air as the dragon staggered again with a dully incensed roar gurgling out the hole in its throat while Wendell slowly walking sideways snapped his gun open and removed one then another gigantic spent cartridge still spilling smoke. The golden cylinders fell heavy against the ground.

Jay stared into the face of the young girl, pretty and blue-eyed, and his hands loosened, and she fell from his grasp to slump inert into mud, first onto her knees and then onto her side.

He thought: Wait. If I kill her I can just bring her back anyway. He thought afterward: Does that staff revive or does it only reanimate—

Makepeace dove in front of him and raised the shield as the dragon's tail lashed out. The sweep lifted Makepeace and Jay off the ground, into the air, and back into the mud. Jay's knees slashed on rocks while his arms went up to protect his head. Meanwhile Mayfair was already getting up and scurrying to the legs of her dragon and Jay realized he got fucking duped, he should've snapped her neck and what was Makepeace trying to do here anyway?

But Makepeace, hoisting himself to his feet with his shield as support, wasn't even looking at Jay.

He was, like Wendell, looking at the dragon. Seeing in its black form reflected the image of John Coke the original, John Coke who slew every dragon so that not a single one was left alive in this world for any others to test their mettle. Wasn't this the dream, old Makepeace? The fantasy entertained nights reading that dusty old memoir, the knight in shining armor facing the wicked wyrm? All those years trying to escape the castle, to live a dream like this, and now here it reared up live and well before him. Well then! Best not waste the opportunity, hm? In the modern era a man only gets one chance at greatness, if at all. One shot at glory! Let us sally forth or die a romantically bloody death, hm?

Across the way, out the side of the jeep, that lovely woman Makepeace assumed was Jay's sister was screeching. "Jay, Jay, get in the car Jay!" Screeching it straight through the dragon like it didn't exist. Jay looked down at his torn-up knees and shouted back:

"Shannon. Shannon! Make sure that fairy doesn't die! We're gonna need her. She can heal! Shannon!"

Oh, that dreaded faerie. A nauseating bother. Wounds ought to remain open and bloody, badges of battle won or lost. If death is to come, it must come fantastically, not a pale sleep in an old man's rest bed. The faerie ruined everything. Crush the little pest to jelly.

Crushing it in his mind, Makepeace charged the dragon.

Everything, all of this, Dalt watched through the window of the Land Rover. Shannon's in trouble, he thought. He kept thinking it. She's in trouble, she's in danger. Words tumbling out every crevice of his brain. He could see her, screaming from the side of the jeep, dwarfed under the wing of the dragon. But that was all Dalt could do: think. He remained rooted to his seat, hands gripping the steering wheel. Watching it like a movie, the wiper-whipping windshield his somewhat crackled screen. Watching Wendell winding sideways step-by-step away from the orange jeep snapping his Nitro Express closed as he lifted, took aim, and seared open the sky with another crack corresponding to a brilliant black chunk of the creature's broad shoulder blasting away. The black dragon bellowed a roar and in its throat built a hot orange light with a strained set of veins as it opened wide its maw and Wendell lowered his gun and ran before a great gluttonous belch of flame sprayed out in a cone.

Wendell!

Dalt jerked upright. His hand left the steering wheel and reached to the passenger seat where the tactical shotgun rested. He grabbed it, held it uselessly unsure what exactly he intended to do, remembered the walkie-talkie, screamed into it:

"Wendell!"

While everything on the downward incline off the path between the cars burned, sparse shrubs and bushes gone up in an instant while the dragon whirled around and drove its piercing gaze onto the knightly guy with the shield who in the brief time he spent depositing the unconscious girl into the Land Rover introduced himself as Makepeace John Something

Coke, or Mack for short. But which of those burning clumps on the ground was Wendell? Dalt couldn't keep watching. He held the shotgun. Had to—do something—

"I'm fine," Wendell said over the walkie-talkie. "Don't distract me."

The clear shimmer of his poncho emerged from behind a boulder, a sleeve flickering flame swiftly patted out as he scampered toward a less-burning bit of cover. That was a relief and the relief broke Dalt's rapt attention. He remembered the devil girl.

"What do you know?!" He wheeled on her, aimed the shotgun over the prone form of the unconscious elf at Perfidia Bal Berith's nose. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, I've been here the whole time! Calm down, calm down and point that somewhere else!" Perfidia screamed, eyes fixated on the barrel, but Dalt wasn't listening. Out the back window of the Land Rover the path rose up to the gates of that big burning building atop the mountain and down the path were streaming like ants women in white nun habits.

Somehow he still couldn't move out of his seat. Inactive. Useless. His dad saying it over and over: "Useless, useless! This sports crap's got no point. Extracurriculars are just that, Scottie. Extra. It's good to have one or two to show you're well-rounded, but you're making it your whole life. What will you do after college, huh? Piss poor grade point average and probably cerebral trauma to boot. Humph!" And his mom: "At least he's applying himself to something." "Applying yourself to something worthless is the same as applying yourself to nothing at all!"

Dalt opened the door and shoved himself into the rain with the shotgun on his shoulder, thinking: It wasn't worthless. Undefeated at Ohio State. That *meant* something. It had to. That stadium thousands full of howling fans and you say it meant *nothing*? He sacked Kirk Cousins. NFL quarterback. Redskins. Pro Bowler. Dalt could've gone pro. He could've made it mean something—if only you believed!

"Ladies, ladies," he shouted at the approaching nuns. "Ladies it's not safe. Ladies you gotta go home."

It was something. It wasn't what he should be doing. He needed to fight that dragon the way everyone else was, the way a fourth hard crack made him flinch and duck and dart his eyes over his shoulder to see another chunk of the creature blown away, black gore striking the road and sizzling. He turned back to the nuns. He could keep them out of it, that was something. "You ladies gotta go—"

He stopped. They weren't ladies. They were monsters.

Ugly bodies, half-human, half-animal. Claws, fur, feathers, scales, wings, teeth. Somewhere between ten and twenty total. Rabid eyes. Coming to kill them!

The Mossberg 590 Tactical Pump-Action Shotgun contained nine rounds.

Dalt pumped the shotgun, raised it, and fired into the torso of the dead-eyed reptilian at the fore of the pack. The body jerked, dropped while Dalt pumped the shotgun, adjusted his aim,

and blasted away something with curved tusks and bristled fur. A spurt of bloody chunks slapped the beaked face of the monster behind it and by that point either the sound or the effect registered because in a panic the creatures backpedaled frantically to get away.

With each pump he expelled a spent and smoking shell and readied to fire anew. Into the back of a fleeing rhinoceros. Into a thing with webbed frog fingers. A unified shriek pealed under the clap of the fifth shot that clipped an eight-legged crab's claw and sailed through to lurch back the head of a human torso on a centipede's body. The sixth shot finished off the crab.

That left three and by then the crowd had cleared. Last traces scampering behind rocks, ledges, or even around the other side of the Land Rover. Six bodies lay strewn before him. The frog still twitched, the reptile tried to crawl. He considered wiping out the reptile but conserved his ammo. Eyes peeped out at him, someone was bawling tears, another someone screamed, but it was all lost in a smorgasbord of sound that rendered everything utterly alien and remote, a dragon roaring somewhere, a violent eruption of Wendell's elephant rifle, yelling, a bland buzz in Dalt's own head as he tried to remember how many times he fired and could think only: One, two, three, four. No that's—One, two, three—Wait did I—

"In the form of thunder and lightning He delivers His judgment upon us damned unruly souls," a rattling voice said clearly out of the confusion, "for now all is come undone, and the symbol of His salvation shattered and fallen, and these are surely now the end times, the apocalypse foretold of John. Revelation! The Book of Revelation! Oh, uohhhhh!"

Some sort of sobbing thing clutched to a rock, rising with its feathery wings spreading. Red eyes squirting black tears and two of its fellow nun creatures holding its legs and trying to pull it back into cover, but it heard saw and felt nothing in its transformation to some sort of Antichrist's angel, dark and inverted and unholy.

Dalt pumped the shotgun and aimed and the moment he pulled the trigger the harpy snapped her wings shut around her. The scattershot sent feathers flying and the harpy staggered back into the arms of the two attendants bleeding but not dead—

Then something flickered in his periphery and he revolved his body to face the thing scrambling over the top of the Land Rover and darting at him with a talon shining in what light remained. For a moment Dalt saw its face and failed to understand, because it was the same face of the crying harpy he just shot.

He pumped the shotgun but before he could aim the claws dragged deep into the flesh of his forearm, skin peeled back with the consistency of cottage cheese. The shotgun hurtled out of his hand as he yowled in pain and before he could even react to this unfamiliar hurt the harpy lashed out legs each tipped with claws and drove them into his hips. He felt the talons strike bone and with an oddly graceful twirl toppled to the mud.

"Charm. Charm dammit! Are you okay? Charm?" The harpy that cut him forgot about him the moment he fell and turned to her twin sister. Charm swayed, blood dripping from her wings, supported by two other nuns, but lifted a delicate hand skyward and nodded.

"Aye. I yet live upon this wretched sphere. O Charisma, have you slain that man? In refutation of His hallowed Sixth Commandment? It is our duty to most meekly turn the other

cheek—"

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up Charm! I saved your worthless life didn't I? Am I not worthy of at least the slightest praise for that? Is it always such doom and gloom? Not a single word of love? I have done so much for you Charm, I have committed sins not even that awful book of yours knows of, and it was all for you! Where do you think that bread came from? Before we came here? Where? Hm? Hm Charm? So I don't want to hear it! I don't want to hear your proclamations of damnation. I did what this cruel world gave me no choice but to do!"

Dalt rolled, groaned. His blood pooled around him. His blood. Oh god. Was he dying? No. Couldn't be. Not this way. Not here. This was supposed to be—he imagined it, the vehicles rolling through that gate, the men in uniform and hardhats unfolding blueprints against mountain vistas, extraction, logistics, industry and prosperity, that was supposed to be his future, a future of worth and meaning, a future to make them all proud... all of them...

His eyes shut.

November 17, 2012. Chilly night in Madison. Overtime. They're at the brink after the Badgers come back in the second half to tie it. They need to stop Wisconsin in their tracks to give the offense the chance to win. Urban Meyer's there, coach is there. "We have a saying here in Ohio," he tells them as they're about to take the field, "A team that refuses to be beat, won't be beat. Somehow, someway."

Somehow, someway. That was it. That was the moment. They never lost, not that year. They were a team that refused to be beat.

Dalt's eyes opened.

Ahead of him was the fallen shotgun and past that the dragon expelling another blast of hot fire, ripping open more of its throat in the process as the flames burst out the holes Wendell had shot, not seeming to care that dangling from its neck was a black and semi-liquid mass, while that young man in armor and bright colors brought his sword down on the dragon's tail and cut deep. Who was that young man? He looked so gallant, so fair. Although the dragon sagged under the weight of Wendell's gunfire, Wendell himself receded into nowhere, lost among the rain and darkness. That young man, Makepeace, though. He shone brightly—a hero. Dalt wanted to be a hero.

He reached out.

Seized the fallen shotgun.

Rolled over.

And fired.

Fired into the back of the one named Charisma, currently midsentence: "I only ever wanted you to be—" No more.

The full brunt of the shot erupted out her front, flecks of blood glistening in the rain, a staggered and senseless gasp. She stumbled forward, scraped her clawed hand against the Land Rover for support, and slumped to her knees. Head bowed. Exerting all effort, ignoring all pain, Dalt roared and rose. His guts weren't slopping out of him yet at least. He pumped the shotgun for its final shot.

"Charisma!" Charm shrieked. "Charisma, Charisma, Charisma!"

Charisma turned to grip the side of the Land Rover with both hands, and then slid slowly down in an arc, leaving a bloody smear behind, until she hit the mud face first and did not move again.

Charm's eyes turned toward him and Dalt now was an electric thing, an entity without a body, lacking sluggishness, slowness, even thought as with automatic precision he pointed the shotgun at her.

When he fired she was already dragging one of the other nuns in front of her. The final shot went into the screaming flailing form that Charm cast aside the moment it served its purpose as her shield and that was fine because Dalt didn't need the shotgun anyway, he was linebacker for the undefeated 2012 Ohio State team robbed of a postseason by asinine NCAA sanctions, robbed of the reward they reaped, just as Dalt's dad put his foot down and said "You will not go pro, this is the end for you," and somehow it became the end. It would never be the end.

Memory encircled him. He tossed the shotgun aside and charged as she charged him and his reach exceeded hers as he wrapped his arms around her waist and plowed her into the side of the Land Rover. She bounced off with a metal sound before he grabbed her head and drove it into his knee. He was the tank. He was the bulldozer. He was the truck driving through that gate to visit this world. Charm pingponged off him and revolved before falling. Three more nuns emerged from their hiding spaces to attack now that the gun was gone. Without pause Dalt hefted one skyward and slammed it onto the ground, then he seized the next by the neck and burrowed his fist into its face, delicate bone structure shattering, a second punch to seal the deal.

Charm, on the ground, threw out a clawed foot and severed his Achilles tendon, a fact he didn't recognize until his uncooperating legs dropped him to kneeling, a fact that didn't stop him from seizing the third nun running backward at him because long porcupine spines covered her back and, insensible to the needles impaling his palms, threw her down to gore one of the other nuns. He threw himself onto the unprotected front of the porcupine girl and used his skull as a battering ram to smash her jaw off its hinges.

Kirk Cousins. Kirk Cousins! An apex. A peak! He'd reach those heights again. He'd reach them now. He could not be stopped. His will and his body would overpower all!

That left only Charm, wings full of holes and bloody feathers floating. "Kirk! Cousins," he shouted, a shout that made perfect sense to him as she rolled on her back and scabbled her legs, but he didn't care when her claws cut his flesh while he crawled on top of her, reaching for her throat to choke the life out, watching his own blood splatter her white habit as his

fingers closed and he squeezed, but the squeeze was not as strong as he expected, he couldn't feel the neck crumpling within his grasp. When he tried to breathe he could not.

A wheeze escaped him. So much of his blood pooling down on her, washing away the streaks of black tears from a face consumed solely by fury.

Awareness returned to Scott Dalton Swaino II that he was dying.

That was okay though. The awareness returned not with fear, not with regret. He saw in the eyes under him the answer. Those eyes would never forget him. Those eyes witnessed all that he did, and leaving one witness he left—

A legacy.

Strength failed him. His body gave out.

And that was Perfidia Bal Berith's opportunity.

God! It was not common for her to say His name (in vain or otherwise) but given her situation, given this whole current shitterfuck, she thought she deserved at least a mental exclamation. Her initial plan, based on her then-accurate knowledge that Jay got captured by Flanz-le-Flore, was simple. She'd lead them into the forest, lead them right to where Jay was—exactly as they asked!—and let Flanzzy snap-snap-snap her fingers to turn her captors into harmless critters regardless of what guns they brought. Then Perfidia would be free to make her escape, of course.

That didn't happen. Lalum, nearly dead, told them Jay somehow escaped Flanz-le-Flore's court. Did it without Perfidia's guiding hand! What the fuck were the odds? She started to sweat then. But she still had something in her back pocket. An encounter she planned ahead of time, a climactic finale to this first arc of his journey. The dragon Devereux's corpse, the Staff of Lazarus, Mayfair, all of it part of her construction. If Jay followed her script by reaching the monastery, maybe he followed it the rest of the way. Barring some hiccups it seemed he had and halleluiah for that. Halleluiah.

Everything else was shrewdness on her part. She knew Jay wouldn't sign some quick contract with her, but telling him made Shannon move him—and Mayfair—to the other car, which kept Perfidia out of direct danger when the dragon got to rampaging. Smart of her, touch of luck too, but what devil didn't have luck? (About time Perfidia got hers.) Now Dalt was dead and no eyes were on her.

She expended a smidge of Humanity to cut the restraints on her ankles and wrists. She'd worry about her tail later. With these expenditures and the appearance-changing one she made at Wendell's house she still had just enough Humanity to fashion a new key for the Door—assuming she couldn't steal the existing one off Shannon first.

Climbing over Sansaime—still unconscious, another boon—she briefly considered the viability of driving the Land Rover to safety. But the mountain trail was narrow and Devereux clogged most of it. The jeep, though, was on the other side of Devereux. Wendell and Makepeace were distracted by the dragon, no sign of Jay or Shannon, but Perfidia could

handle them. Especially with the sidearm Dalt had stupidly left in the cupholder between the front seats.

She kicked off her heels, peeled off her nylons, and ran barefoot into the rain. Her soles slapped the mud as she made rickety progress along the edge of the slope trying to circumnavigate the dragon fully. One toe sliced on a jagged rock; she bit her tongue to stifle a hiss. Didn't matter. Intentionally or not by focusing on the dragon's throat Wendell disabled its ability to breathe fire effectively and that meant it lacked long-range options even if Mayfair wanted to direct its attention to her. Plus it had to stay put to defend Mayfair from Makepeace—where was Jay?—and that left nothing but open if rugged ground ahead, the bright orange jeep a glowing beacon of safety—

She heard footsteps pounding behind her. Her neck bristled fear. Pursued? By whom? There were no other nuns. Charm? With her wounds she'd be down, this thing was fast, what the fuck it was fast, horrified she turned her head and with amazement saw the thing chasing her was, it was—Swaino?

Scott Dalton Swaino II. Six foot something barreling down on her without a wound on him and her first thought as she lifted the handgun was that Olliebollen somehow got to him—which didn't make sense, Swaino was *dead*, she sensed not an ounce of Humanity on him—and her second thought, after she tugged the trigger and nothing happened because the safety was on, was complete and utter panic.

When his hand seized her and she was beyond fighting back she saw over her shoulder it wasn't solely Swaino, the nuns were rising too, and realized exactly what was happening. Only too late, only too late.

In the jeep, Shannon had ducked down with her hands over her head the moment the dragon breathed its first spurt of flame and she only looked up, only returned to awareness of the world around her, when a fist pounded the door and Jay started screaming: "The fairy dammit! You gotta save the fucking fairy!"

His face bled in the water-stained window until he wrenched open the door. "The fairy! Help it!"

Spasmic jabbing points directed her attention to the writhing bleeding thing on Wendell's dash, a thing arching its spine and screaming at the top of its lungs and expelling puff after puff of pixie dust that did nothing but make Shannon resist the urge to sneeze. Then her eyes saw the key still in the ignition, and the open road before them, and she galvanized into action as she climbed into the front seat.

"Jay, we're getting out of here. Don't worry about Dalt and Wendell, they have guns, they can handle themselves." Or rather, they got exactly what they wanted.

But Jay wasn't there, he wasn't in the backseat, he moved to the back of the jeep which remained open from when Wendell retrieved his rifle.

"Jay! Get in the fucking car!"

"Is there any more ammo?" Jay hefted a box of bullets for her to see. "You didn't bring only one tin did you?"

"What are you talking about? What does that matter? Get in!"

"Where's the rest of the ammo?"

"It's in the other car!"

"Other car."

"Does it matter? Dalt and Wendell have it handled—*Get in!*"

Jay wasn't listening. He jostled the junk, picked up a bright red can of gas, and shook it.

"JAY!"

He glanced up. A look of utter disgust crossed his features. He screamed: "This isn't your fucking world Shannon it's mine and if you don't listen to me you're not gonna fucking *live* got it? Now do something about the fucking fairy!"

Ridiculous. Ridiculous! What was he doing, what was he doing, but Shannon had no way to make him listen, hands jittering and mind racing, and a groan escaped as she turned her attention to his "fairy," allowing this "fairy" to really exist in her mind, one arm a stump pumping blood as she leaned forward and hovered her hands over it. Whatever it was, whether real or not, it was in total agony, oh fucking Christ!

She pinched the stump between her thumb and forefinger and the fairy jerked spasmodically and screeched to such an abominable degree that it pealed over the sudden spate of shotgun blasts ripping the sky from the direction of Dalt's car. Shannon checked over her shoulder, couldn't see Dalt or anything except the dragon, looked back at the fairy to see anything else. Shannon's fingers were now drenched in weird, sweet-smelling blood, applying pressure didn't seem to work. She checked around in case she might find, she didn't know, a bit of string or something to make a tourniquet (ridiculous! Ridiculous! A tourniquet for a bug!) and saw instead the still-flaring butt of Wendell's most recent cigarette, spat out before he exited into the rain.

Another groan. She knew what she had to do. She didn't want to do it, but now that the fairy's blood was on her hands she couldn't pretend it wasn't real. And if it was real she had to "do the right thing."

She plucked the cigarette carefully, held the fairy's stump steady, and pressed the burning edge to it. Steam and screams and the smell of charred candy battered her face and she turned away squinting and suppressed the urge to vomit.

Finally it was done. As the cigarette fell away what remained was a cauterized bead and while it looked horrific at least no more blood was spurting. The fairy's screams stopped too, it fell still and silent, and for a moment Shannon thought—oh no I killed the poor thing—but then she saw its chest heaving exhalations and realized it must have passed out from the pain.

She did it. She saved it! Not bad, she thought. Not bad at all!

"Okay, I stopped the bleeding. Now let's—Jay!"

Jay opened the passenger door and plopped down the box of Wendell's rifle ammo and the gas can. "I need you to carry these. We're going to the other car and I need my hands free to fight."

"Jay. Please. Please, let's get out of here."

"Out of here?" Jay's eyes under the brim of his hat were harder than Shannon ever saw them, harder than she thought possible on her room-bound brother. "Are you stupid?"

"What? Stupid? You're calling *me* stupid? I'm suggesting the most sensible—"

"Look at that dragon!" He pointed. "It's standing still, it's not trying to kill us all, you know why? It's playing defense for Mayfair. It's following her orders, and right now her orders are to protect her. But she made perfectly clear what she really wants. To make it back to our world. If she gets Perfidia she can do that. Then—"

"Perfidia doesn't matter, I have the key, you think I'd let Perfidia keep the key?" Shannon took the key out of her pocket and showed him.

"That's even worse. Because now if we flee she's gonna get on that dragon and chase us. That thing flies, I don't care how fast this jeep goes it'll fly over the forest and get there before us. We have to deal with that thing now, Shannon. While we've got Makepeace and Wendell distracting it. Listen! Help me or I do it without you anyway!"

How much, Shannon thought, how much of that oh-so-reasonable explanation was true, and how much was the same drive to fight that consumed all these idiots, how much would a dragon even with those advantages be able to outrace a modern vehicle capable of pushing a hundred, a hundred twenty? Even if a gamble, how much more of a gamble compared to whatever insanity Jay was planning?

She couldn't leave without Jay though. As she thought about it, she figured she shouldn't leave with Dalt or Wendell either, no matter how confident they seemed. She knew Dalt. Maybe not Wendell, but Dalt. He tried too much.

Heaving a deep breath, she nodded. "Okay."

"The fairy's not dead right? Put her in your pocket."

"Jay. She's gravely injured, she needs to rest where it's warm at least, taking her into the rain —"

"If we get hurt she can heal us. That's life or death." He muttered: "Can't she heal herself..."

Whatever. Shannon carefully scooped the unconscious fairy in her hands and tucked her into her safest and most spacious inner pocket. She couldn't believe she was doing this as she

picked up the gas can and the ammo box—both heavier than she expected—and climbed into the rain while Jay swiftly dove into the backseat and grabbed her umbrella.

Jay led the way onto the rain-drenched mountain road, Shannon at a totter behind him. Crazy, she kept thinking, crazy, a mantra that made it make sense, a way of positioning herself within the madhouse around her: things irrational and absurd, a dragon with its four legs positioned to shield the Mayfair girl beneath them, a man in armor with a sword and shield squaring off against its open jaw and wild eyes, and running toward them was—it was Dalt, carrying what appeared to be Perfidia Bal Berith on his shoulder.

"Dalt! Thank fuck," said Shannon. "Help me with Jay will you? We need to—Dalt? Dalt?"

Dalt just kept walking, passing Jay and Shannon without a word, without even a glance, on a direct route to the jeep they just left. Perfidia was motionless.

"Dalt! Dalt?"

"He's fine," said Jay. "You said he had it handled, didn't you?"

Why would none of them listen to her? What stupid idea did Dalt have in his head? She stumbled on a rock and slid and cut her shin and swore as the rain pelted her, swooping in a heavy wind set to blow her right off the mountainside, and even that horror was preferable to the giant lizard to her right...

"Charisma," a woman on the ground ahead wailed. "Charisma where are you going? Charisma! Charisma!" The woman had large feathery wings and was bleeding and Jay paid her no attention as he squared off with the baseball bat and umbrella against a porcupine in nun's clothes. Shannon refused to look at that, she stared instead at the woman on the ground, at least composed of a little dignity as she reached an arm toward her identical twin soaring into the air, a twin with bat wings who didn't even look back (the same way Dalt didn't look back) as she tilted her aerial angle and divebombed toward—

Wendell, back to a rock, rubbed his shoulder and winced. The kick on the .700 after six shots was killing him. He had to grit his teeth and bear it though, that was the methodology of the professional, no matter what he could not admit fallibility to even himself. A gun was an equation, the man who operated the gun an equation too and only a more complex one. He pried out the two spent casings and with wet shaking fingers loaded two more. Two more. His shots were ripping that dragon to shreds despite its size, his shots were doing the kind of damage only his fantasy caliber could wreak. He'd incapacitated the throat and both forelimbs which eliminated its ability to both breathe fire and move quickly which meant at range he had every advantage and all the wounded beast could do was sit there and die.

(But it wasn't moving even before he took out the limb joints. It remained still despite demonstrating on its initial charge it could move agilely on this precarious terrain. It also still had its wings. Why not move? What was it defending? Its young? Did Wendell miss a juvenile somewhere?)

Two more shots. If he needed two more after, then two more. Man was an equation. A sheet of facts and figures. Pain did not signify a solution, only the approaching—not the reaching

—of a limit, an exponential curve upward as it infinitely neared a straight vertical line.

Aching, cut from the rocks he dove over, singed on his jacket, Wendell Noh wheeled out of cover and aimed his rifle.

Instantly from the dark a giant bat dropped at him. In less than a second he processed that fact, redirected his aim, and fired.

Wendell screamed as the butt of the rifle plowed back into his shoulder and everything in that vicinity went a dangerous sort of numb, a weak numb, a numb that caused the heavy rifle to droop with his mind uncertain he could ever raise it again. Still it was enough. Imperfect angle but he blasted away one of the bat's arms at the elbow and the force of impact knocked it off its trajectory so that it smashed headfirst into the rocks five feet in front of him.

Gingerly he backed up and with the hand he could still feel slung the elephant rifle over his shoulder. Panting, rainwater running down his face and his damn glasses so fogged—spectacular he made the shot visibility as it was, utter spectacle—but who was here to see it?—he reached to his hip and pulled out the Glock 17 (bullet point switch to sidearm safety off etc.) unsure if it would do anything against the dragon but it would at least cover him on his way back to the jeep—

The bat woman got up. Shakily he pointed the handgun while without worrying about pain, without worrying about the complete loss of one of its arms (the other sporting a lethal-looking claw), it charged at a sprint.

Stance unsteady, one arm flung out in front of him, Wendell rapidly emptied the clip into the triangle of the upper torso and only after the first six shots realized it wasn't stopping at all and by the time he lowered to try and take out the kneecaps its claw dug its digits into his chest.

Next the bat woman beat her wings and Wendell's feet left the ground. Up—up—airborne. Going to drop him—into the ravine. No hesitation. No sense for his numb arm. He flung both hands around the bat's neck and both legs around its waist and latched on the moment before it let go. A wild scream unrecognized as his own escaped as all strength, all will within his body went into his arms, a death grip desperate as his head tilted back and a chasm of gnashing teeth yawned below.

His hat hurtled into oblivion as the bat creature spiraled in midair.

Had to hold on. Focused on "Had to hold on" his scream desisted. No sound save whoosh of wind and patter of rain. Had to hold on. Here, in the open air, came a kind of solace. Had to hold on.

Had to hold on.

Had to hold on.

The jagged rocks disappeared. Bright bushy trees replaced them. Still spinning, still silent in this dervish dance, Wendell and the other crashed into the forest.

One more out of the picture.

This place once so full of people had dwindled into a sparser stage. For a time only a few sounds splattered the pathway: a plunk of a baseball bat against bone, a swish of a sword, and of course the omnipresent rain. All would be over soon.

The elimination of Wendell meant Mayfair essentially won. Wendell's unexpectedly powerful weapon was their sole collective advantage over her. Who else could harm the dragon Devereux? Her brother and his toy blade? To be certain, the fool was the spitting image of that ancestral Coke who slew Devereux in centuries past, but *he* did so with relics her brother did not currently possess. The blade was a mortal blade; only the shield allowed him any particular relevance.

Those nuns had done well. Pitiful measure of her own wretchedness that Mayfair could think no happier words for them, several dead and several more currently dying (dying being, again wretchedly, a far less useful state than dead). Half of her told herself: They lacked souls. The other half: It was for their souls she was fighting.

Dalt had a soul. His death was certainly, incontrovertibly a sin, although it was no sin of Mayfair for she had not contributed to or designed his death; her nuns, living then, acted of their own volition, and it was no sin—not one writ in the Bible, at least—to prosper from a death in which you had no hand. Yet Christ himself railed against the letter of his Father's own moral law; He rejected those Pharisees, such learned scholars, who abused that letter to their own ends. He knew what was and was not sin. Yet how was man to know if His Word was unclear? Was one simply to assume that if one *felt* something was a sin, then it was so? Take then the opposite supposition: Were those lunatics who knew not what they did to be forgiven? Luke 23:24—Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

It made sense, given Genesis, that those with more knowledge were cursed to more sin.

Still, she had not, herself, killed. Nor those she resurrected by the relic's power, who were beholden to her will. With Wendell gone, it was time to depart.

Devereux, no longer defending her from attacks on both sides, lifted his wings and redirected his stance to bear his face toward her brother. The vile lizard's legs and throat were destroyed, its movement staggered, but even so, what would her brother be able to do against it?

From under the dragon she walked, into the rain—she was already soaked—still tasting the faerie's blood on her lips. Ahead Dalt stood beside the open door of the bright orange "car," holding it for her. Jay Waringcrane and his sister had been kind enough to vacate it. That considered, and the Master secured in the backseat, no further impediments remained. The "car," piloted by Dalt, would take her to the Door swiftly. The Master would then open the Door for her, one way or another.

"Mayfair!"

The voice whistled through the wind.

"Mayfair!"

The voice belonged to her brother.

She ought not turn. She ought not. He lacked further relevance. He brought the hero to her and thus served his function. Let him return to his world, with that elf slut of his and all the other sluts with whom he enjoyed sullyng his body; Mayfair would not prevent him from that. Devereux need not kill, not on her command, only prevent them from following her until it was too late for them to prevent her aims. If she felt any malice toward him, this ridiculous older brother of hers, shirker of responsibility, flouter of God and duty alike, if she felt any malice at all—let that malice manifest in her consigning him to his due fate: King of Whitecrosse, regent seated upon the throne that, vampire-like, drained the lifeforce from their mother.

Mayfair turned her head and past the coiled form of Devereux he stood shining, glowing with a light that did not exist from any terrestrial source—Makepeace John Gaheris Coke. Beyond him Jay and his sister moved toward the other vehicle. If they followed her in it, it would be trouble, but Devereux prevented all such motion.

That final thought was willful distraction; once consumed, she lacked any other reason not to direct her eyes back toward Makepeace.

Very well. Go on. Excoriate her. She was well aware of her sins; she acted not for her own salvation, after all. But Mayfair supposed as a final token of familial jurisprudence to allow him a final chance to cast righteous stones.

"You can't escape!" he shouted.

No, she thought. She could not.

"There's no way out. None at all! Have I not tried every direction, Mayfair? It doesn't matter how far you run. The road always bends toward Whitecrosse. Always!"

"Their presence has changed everything," Mayfair said simply, soullessly, words liquid in their drip-drop motion from her mouth. "Into our closed world has entered an external life..."

He knew that too. He attached himself to the hero, after all. They all knew it. Why else had the archbishop's cult, so heretical, spread so fast among even those he did not poison with fae blood? (Mayfair herself now having sipped that sweet-yet-foul substance. How would it change her? Or had she already changed.)

"You'll never escape!" Makepeace yelled. "Never, Mayfair! I refuse to allow it. If I'm doomed to die exactly as I am, so are you!"

Unconcerned by the threat of the dragon, he ran at her.

Makepeace John Gaheris Coke. He ran. At his back, Jay and his sister were doing something around the large vehicle where Sansaime rested. Jay said a snatch: "—and bring those ammo

boxes here—" Nonsense, of course. Irrelevant, at least.

Before him, by the smaller vehicle, Mayfair stood. Oh what foolish schemes we weave. Everything had gone exactly right, exactly as plotted, and yet it still fell apart. The hero rescued Mayfair, she clung to his body as he exited the monastery, a beautiful storybook tale of a charming knight and the fair lady he saved, standard seeds set to blossom into pure and good romance; then, Makepeace had hoped, once Jay Waringcrane was bound in holy matrimony to the royal lineage, none would deny him the crown of Whitecrosse, nor would any fail to willfully overlook rotten Prince Mack in favor of a far better king. Thus Makepeace would be free, severed from the sanguine bond that moored him to that wretched castle. Finis.

A complication arose. Only a complication. He told himself so, and partially believed it. Thwart Mayfair's ambition to abscond via the Door and she would employ her next best plan to bring herself closer to that God she loved: the hero. Things might be more difficult to smooth over on Jay's side, but men rarely let reason get in the way of romance anyway; Mayfair was quite a pretty sort and growing prettier year by year. Yes. Mere complication. Makepeace need only catch up to her, slay her dragon if need be, and put an end to her foolishness. To become for her what his mother's lovestruck knights were to him: Harbinger of despair, envoy of inseverable strands. To bring her back and so free him. To make her suffer the way he did.

All that stood between him and that modicum of solace was the dread lizard Devereux. It peered with red eyes, its throat a mess of charred gore, its forelimbs stiff and slow. Easy to out-manuever. His armor clanked as he ran under the imposing shape of its black form.

A thrill shuddered through him.

"Pointless," Mayfair said. "Please cease. There is no reason for me to hurt you, Makepeace."

Pointless? Nonsense. No, as Makepeace ran, as the dragon towered over him, as the thrill built, he realized: This—this moment, this scene—was what he truly longed for, more than anything else, more than any complex plot. This was a *tale*. This was romance, this was chivalry. Knight versus dragon. Dark storm and fire, warriors and wicked witches, savory ingredients combined into one spectacular soup. He gripped his sword and shield tight, he was breathless, his muscles ached and his lungs crackled with the heat and smoke he inhaled at the monastery. A tale, yes. One he would never find again search as he may his entire life. Whether free or enchained to that throne, this was a moment to cherish, a moment that meant more than the ramifications of victory or defeat. *This* was his moment of freedom. This was what he fled Whitecrosse to find, wasn't it? A page torn from the memoir of John Coke, souls transmigrated, echoes of a distant past revitalized for his sole pleasure.

None mattered save this. No. Not the hero, not the faerie, not his mother. *This was what he came for.*

A voice at his back called out: "Mack!" He knew the voice. Sansaime. Finally awoken.

That was the final ingredient: Hero rushing toward an insurmountable foe, his lady's heart stopped in terror. Ah, Sansy. You weren't so bad.

One problem, however. The dragon wasn't doing anything. Not fighting. It simply tried to get in his way while Mayfair climbed into the carriage or car or whatever they called it. How dreadfully dull! Makepeace couldn't have that.

He shifted his step and like a dart angled himself at Mayfair.

The dragon's wing lowered to bar his way and he slashed through the fine leathery skin with a single swipe and barreled through. The large man Dalt or somesuch was emerging from the driver's seat to interfere but he was too big and cumbersome, too slow, and Mayfair knew it too. Makepeace's sword pointed straight at her and her cool composure shattered. He wondered what expression he wore to put the fear of death so sharply inside her, but every muscle on his face was tensed to point of pain so he possessed some slight notion. Now do something! Do it Mayfair! No more making him play around with the dragon's tail or wing, bring him a real threat, a real climax!

The dragon swept its head and struck him from behind. The titanic shifting of its massive body gave him warning nonetheless and with a great big grin he wheeled to defend with his shield. But the turn was awkward, the mud so thick around his ankles, and his momentum already directed another way, so his block was glancing and the strange strike unbalanced him. Somewhat irrelevant, because it gave Makepeace the advantage of bringing the dragon's ruined neck closer to him. Yes, reptile, you were the true target all along, and that man who ravaged your throat with his lightning rod opened the perfect access to your brain.

Stumbling, finding himself bleeding with an odd and muted sting, his feet pattered a dance and he brought his sword into the throat and upward to the brain.

(Pointless! her voice echoed.)

The dragon shoved its head sideways, propelling Makepeace with it, and rammed him against the solid trunk of its left leg. Something inside Makepeace crunched, or rather a lot of somethings, and the air inside him left, leaving a jagged seam running up each side.

When the head moved away and no longer pinned him to the leg Makepeace fell. He continued to grip his sword and shield—refused to let go—but his body plunged him to one knee. Only one knee. The shield dug into the mud as he willed himself upright. Not nearly enough to stop Makepeace John Gaheris Coke, no. Not nearly enough to stop a true hero.

"Mack!"

Sansaime. She was out in the rain, on her side, trying to rise, shifting and vomiting. Sorry Sansy, must still be feeling that slight little bump on the head. Looked like Jay had pushed her out of the car, he was doing something. Some scheme or plan, he always seemed to have one, and they always worked out. Somehow.

Blood ran down Makepeace's face. It was alright. He could keep going. He struck the dragon deep but the angle—not sure enough. Not deep enough. Not yet the brain. Sickly pink mound of wrinkled flesh. Didn't matter whether the thing were alive or simply reanimated, without the brain—without the brain.

A knight errant, wandering the land, free from obligation save to that of chivalry and good deeds. Village to village doffing a hat to the maidens, savior against creatures of the forest and men of the sword, deflowerer, deflowerer.

"Mack! Mack!"

Until one day he picked the wrong fight and died with a dagger in his gut. And his lady sobbed for him. Bloody death, young death, death full of life, how so very romantic.

Mayfair stared at him, frozen, face pale, eyes wide, hand clutched to her chest. He widened his iron-tasting grin for her. She moved closer, as if she wanted to help him. Help him. Oh Mayfair, oh dear sister, help him? Still so young, still so unaware of the world for all your learning.

As she neared he raised his sword and swung at her.

The dragon's claw came down. Slowly, almost gingerly, but for its size enough. Makepeace flattened into the mud and it seeped up to embrace him and anything inside him unbroken broke. A flick and the claw sent him rolling, bouncing, dancing as his sword (but not his shield) finally left his hand and shattered. Bouncing, he saw the big Dalt fellow seize Mayfair from behind and drag her thrashing into the car.

Makepeace rolled to a stop. The pain became clear, but he minded not. He stared at the sky as the rain plunged onto his face. Sansaime swirled into view, bile dribbling from her chin. Not quite the perfect picture, but they always tidied things up in stories didn't they? Never mentioning the guts and vomit and piss and shit, no.

He opened his mouth to laugh but no sound came out. And Jay shouted: "Now!"

The contraption was simple. Jay stacked eleven of the twelve cans of ammunition in the front seat of the SUV. Then he doused the car's interior with gasoline, especially the ammo. It smelled sharp and he had to turn his face away. Some of the gasoline got on his bare hands and more seeped into his clothes but he figured Olliebollen could handle that later. Makepeace got hurt by the dragon, Sansaime was dragging him through the mud back toward the car, and that was more urgent. He directed to Shannon with concise gestures to emphasize his point: "Wake the fairy, have her heal him. Do it now, or he'll die. Go!"

Shannon had finally moved past the point of arguing with him on every point. With only a trace of annoyance she tiptoed toward Makepeace. Credit to the douchebag, but he actually did something of use, stalling the dragon by himself long enough for Jay to rig this death machine. Maybe the man was worth something after all.

Behind the dragon, Dalt shoved a mortified-looking Mayfair into the jeep and slammed the door shut before climbing into the driver's seat. The jeep rumbled to life and rolled down the road soon after. Perfidia was inside, unconscious. Not controlling the situation, Jay thought. Not pulling any secret strings. This was him and nobody else and for the first time he could be sure of that, truly sure.

Jay took out the lighter he filched from Wendell's jeep. It took several snaps to light, he had to keep it away from his gasoline-drenched palms. The moment the fire appeared he tossed the lighter into the passenger seat and pushed the twelfth and heaviest ammo box onto the car's accelerator.

He flung himself backward; the car shot forward. The flame shot through the interior, flaring in the SUV's many windows, and only after a few seconds did Jay realize his sleeve was on fire too. He crammed it into the mud to snuff it and watched. Twelve cans of ammo, thousands of bullets. Cars on fire didn't explode, that was a Hollywood myth, Jay knew that from internet videos. But bullets exploded. They were designed to explode.

The dragon watched as the SUV rumbled toward it. With its legs in shambles it moved too slow to evade, not that it even attempted. It stood exactly where it was, blocking the path while Wendell's jeep disappeared around a bend. That was fine. The dragon was Jay's target, and it was a hard target to miss. The SUV, with nobody gripping the steering wheel, veered to the side, glanced off the dragon's chest, and smashed into the cliff face. That was close enough. Flames spilled out every window. Inside those bullets got hotter and hotter.

Jay waited.

The dragon waited.

The bullets went off.

Not, as Jay expected, in a giant explosion. They popped, like firecrackers. Pop, pop, pop. Pop. Popopopop. They popped fast, there were more and more pops, but they were just pops. No whizzing pieces of metal flying a thousand miles per hour in every direction, no catastrophic blast to eradicate half the dragon's body and immolate the rest. Pop, pop, pop.

[Wendell, if present, could've explained. You see, what causes bullets to travel with so much speed wasn't the gunpowder's ignition, but actually the pressure caused by the tightness and length of the gun barrel. Without this pressure, the explosive force dispersed mostly harmlessly the moment the projectile came out of the case.]

Pop.

The SUV, its accelerator weighted down, still tried to plow forward. It dug into the muddy slope of the cliff. Gigantic, built to haul, to offroad, all four wheels churning, it trudged deeper, deeper. Chunks of mud came off and collapsed in rivers of rainwater. Boulders shifted and creaked. Dalt's SUV dredged a clean swath and then—

The cliff collapsed.

An avalanche came down upon the dragon, which only then twisted to escape but was too hobbled to move with any speed. Its wings beat a singular time before a whole slice of mountaintop—and with it much of the monastery wall that stood atop—dropped as one inexorable weight.

A roar shook the sky as the mountain swallowed up most of the dragon. What remained—a stretched neck and an upraised maw, half of a wing—was swept to the side, off the trail, down the sheer angle of the slope to the ravine below. The SUV resurfaced a moment only to spill its lightning-bright headlights skyward before it disappeared for good.

And so too did the dragon Devereux, its final roar a swirling and dwindling echo as it dropped and was lost.

Jay, seated with his hands splayed for support, watched the landslide until the main surge went still, then continued to watch as part of the monastery wall still standing crumbled and a few more large stones fell with a weightless-seeming thwack into the huge mound of mud that remained.

Then, other than the occasional cascade of dust, all went still. All except the rain. All except the moans from Charm off to the side and the frantic cries from Sansaime somewhere else.

Jay got up. Mud and gas covered him. He wasn't sure how much he liked what just happened. He supposed it meant he won. It wasn't the way he intended, though. It didn't feel like his own, more of the provenance of fate, and he almost blamed the success on Perfidia until he remembered he couldn't.

On the ground, Makepeace was lying. A bloody mess. One arm bent, one leg jutting bone, red pools under four distinct areas, armor crinkled as though made of paper. He was still breathing, though, whispering something to Sansaime, who curled over him.

"Shannon I told you," Jay said, "wake up the fairy and heal him."

Shannon's face, etched with disgust, turned toward him. "Yeah? Well, she won't wake up. Don't blame her either, she lost an arm and most of her blood. Maybe she won't ever wake up."

She held Olliebollen in one hand and shielded her from the rain with the other. No more than a lump of fur. When she twitched Jay thought about how dead bugs still twitch.

Jay thought: Ah.

"No Mack, no," Sansaime said. "No, wait, I didn't want this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your sister. I just had to—what they promised me was—no, no, it doesn't matter. This isn't how it's supposed to be Mack. What about those things you told me? Remember? We were going to leave the kingdom together. What about that, Mack? We would travel the world together, living free, remember you said that to me? That night in the inn, Mack. Remember? Mack. Mack?"

Gloved hands gripped Mack's collar and shook him. Rainwater ran off the face. Jay tried to seize Olliebollen from Shannon and shake her awake, flick her, but Shannon made a protective gesture and Jay yelled at her that she didn't know what she was doing, she never knew half as much as she thought.

But Jay knew. Olliebollen wasn't waking up. Not now. Not fast enough.

Makepeace wore a smile. His eyes shut until Sansaime slapped him hard enough to make him open them a moment, and then he shut them again. His lips moved. Sansaime leaned close and Jay found himself leaning close too. The lips moved again:

"...scape..."

All went still.

Sansaime let out a repugnant sob and pressed her forehead to his chest. Jay blinked. He didn't understand. He looked from the body to what remained of the battlefield, corpses and wreckage and fire and rain. Everyone gone.

Everyone except his sister. "Great. Absolutely great," Shannon said. "Dalt ditched us and you blew up—*blew up*—the other car. Great! You really are the most colossal fuckup, aren't you?"

Jay lacked anything to say in response.

Welcome to Another Devilish Level

The cemetery, at night, under heavy downpour, was haunted. Between statues and mausoleums they wandered: ghouls, specters, revenants, wights, all watching with wide white eyes on such a terrible night as this. Unluckily for them, their prey came encased in a cage of glass and steel. When the jeep's headlights wheeled off the main road and swept the cemetery, those wicked phantoms reverted as though by finger-snap to what they truly were: stone outcroppings, gnarled vines, small creatures creeping to keep dry under the eaves.

In the passenger seat, Princess Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke stooped unladylike, hands pressed to the bulbous orb atop the Staff of Lazarus, chin resting on the back of her hands. During the ninety-minute ride from the monastery, she'd said nothing. Now, when the jeep stopped in front of the Door, she blinked away endless mental coils and spoke tonelessly: "Wake the devil."

Without acknowledgement, Dalt completed the last few maneuvers to turn off the jeep, opened his door, exited, opened the back door, and dragged the devil into the rain.

Thus Perfidia Bal Berith awoke. Gradually she emerged, loosing a groan, trying and failing to rub the aching spot on the back of her head (wrists once more bound), until realization gripped her and she jerked with a start that brought her nowhere within Dalt's grasp.

"Oh fuck, oh shit."

"Refrain from vulgarity, please," said Mayfair, still in the passenger seat. "Or lose your lying tongue."

Halfway into another senseless utterance Perfidia received a fun treat: five of Dalt's beefman fingers cramming into her mouth to grip her tongue with clear intention to yank. That quieted her quickly.

"Now behave, please."

Perfidia nodded. The fingers withdrew and she shifted her jaw back and forth to readjust, wanting to spit too but figuring that would probably go poorly.

"Good," said Mayfair. "Now please open the Door."

A few blinks and the situation became comprehensible: Door, jeep, scattered fragments of memory. Right. Dalt died and Perfidia ran. Dalt got back up and—he must've knocked her out. The Staff of Lazarus. Mayfair reanimated him. Now he did whatever she commanded.

Perfidia suppressed the urge to cackle like a lunatic. Unfair. Simply unfair. What'd she do to deserve this? Be a devil? She was *born* a devil, no choice in the matter, unlike those first generation fallen angels who made a conscious decision to rebel. Or was it simply the sin of idiocy. Playing things bad from the start—

She cut those thoughts short. Playing bad before didn't mandate playing bad now. Strategize! Unlike the Waringcranes, Perfidia knew Mayfair inside and out. After all, the princess was critical to the story she constructed for Jay. If Perfidia could outwit anyone, it was her—one lacking even the singular Humanity required to qualify as human.

Nobody else was in the jeep. If Mayfair killed Jay, Shannon, or Wendell, they'd be zombies too. But Mayfair wouldn't *want* to kill them. Right. It existed right there on her character sheet back in the office: Pious (until pursuit of her goals forced her to abandon her morals). She'd be especially loath to sin against people from "the real world"—while they were alive, at least, Perfidia thought with a glance at Dalt.

How did this help? Jay and the others, if alive, still had the second car. The SUV. They possessed no warm feelings toward Perfidia, yeah, but they'd recognize her pragmatic value. Surely. At least, they'd come for Dalt. Right—right.

So the play was stall. Stall until they arrived.

"The door," said Perfidia, slowly, as though only groggily half-awake. "The car door...? But it's already open?"

"The Door to the other world," Mayfair said. With patience. Not like someone pursued. But Perfidia knew she was suppressing herself. To Mayfair, going from Whitecrosse to a world God actually made was like ascending straight to Heaven. Mayfair wanted that Door open. Wanted it badly. Any semblance else was façade. Perfidia couldn't let that calm, patient demeanor get in her head.

It got in her head. Even if Jay et al. were alive, even if they had the SUV, their pursuit hinged on defeating the dragon in their way. Fuck. The dragon. Great going Perfidia. Great fucking going with that one! When she banged out Jay's plot—having only a day to do so, remember—she thought to herself: He needs a big, climactic fight. A fight with what? Well, when you think fantasy, you think dragons. Kids still like dragons right? Problem was John Coke in 1642 went on a genocidal anti-dragon bender and massacred literally every dragon in Whitecrosse (to be fair there were only a handful). Whatever. Perfidia could whip up some new dragon for Jay, she'd say it was just hibernating the past half-millennium. Or maybe one of the nuns got corrupted into a dragon?

When Jay first refused to go to the monastery, she drew on the only aspect of the world in which he'd shown any interest—relic magic—and pulled some truly contortionist maneuvering to deploy the Staff of Lazarus as a final temptation. (Seriously, retroactively making Mayfair steal the staff was an ordeal. Perfidia could change a lot about Whitecrosse, but it was nigh impossible to contradict established facts. Luckily, the extreme haste in which she wrote the Mayfair-in-the-monastery plot left many details incomplete—and thus possible to alter.) Then she remembered Coke actually killed one of his dragons near the monastery. Everything clicked. With glee—with fucking *glee!*—she set up her planned final encounter, oh yes so clever. What a clever little devil.

The encounter, as visualized, went like so:

1. Jay flees the monastery with Mayfair and the staff.

2. Because Mayfair keeps close to him, it only requires a brief distraction (nuns, Makepeace, Olliebollen, etc.) for her to grab the staff and use it.
3. Devereux arises.
4. Devereux prioritizes protecting Mayfair. (It has to—Jay almost certainly realizes she's in control.)
5. This strategy limits Devereux's movement; Devereux relies on its flame breath, which Makepeace blocks with his shield.
6. It becomes clear Jay cannot hurt Devereux himself. Resourceful fellow he is, he scans his surroundings in search of a solution.
7. Jay discovers that part of the nearby monastery—the part directly above the dragon, how lucky!—is perched upon a particularly unstable cliff of mud made even less stable by the pouring rain. A few good baseball bat thwacks could bring it down...
8. Defended by Makepeace, Jay runs to the cliff and causes the landslide that sweeps Devereux into oblivion. Victory!

Even with the tax commandos' interference, the first few steps occurred exactly as planned. (In fact, Shannon and friends provided Step 2's distraction.) Likewise, the crumbling cliff and its propensity for a big sweeping mudslide remained. What was uncertain was Jay Waringcrane. Her encounter relied on predicting his behavior, something she thought she could do when she designed the encounter. Then the Pluxie snafu happened.

Would Jay notice the crumbling wall? Or would he be a dense dunderfuck and try to do things his own stupider way?

If he failed to kill the dragon, he wouldn't be riding to the cemetery anytime soon to save her.

After the long pause it took Perfidia to think these things, she finally replied to Mayfair. "Oh. The Door to the other world. Right." Still speaking slowly, but not too slowly, not wanting Mayfair to catch on.

Mayfair caught on. "Nobody is on their way to rescue you, devil. Not that humans created by God would bother to aid a sinful creature such as yourself. They had you tied up, after all. They see you as I do: a thing to be used—carefully—and discarded. Now, please dispense with the feigned ignorance and open the Door."

Behind them, the rain-drenched road—long and flat, without obstructions—remained dark. In such sheer night, the Land Rover's powerful headlights would be visible for miles. But there was nothing. Nothing at all.

Stalling wasn't working. Then what was the play? There had to be a play. Twisting the truth? *I don't have the key, Shannon does. We have to go back for Shannon.* If Mayfair believed that, though, what stopped her from killing Perfidia right then and there? Even Mayfair's when-convenient moral obligation didn't extend to a devil from literal Hell. A thing to be used and discarded, after all. Without a use, Perfidia lacked a life.

Okay. Okay. Then open the Door. Right? Sure Mayfair was an aberration and her introduction into the real world would ping God's radar that something was wrong, but God was only omnipotent when He felt like it, good odds something so slight would slip His notice.

Meanwhile, in the real world Mayfair would be a fish out of water, the sights and sounds and technology disorienting her. It might give Perfidia some kind of advantage. Might.

But if Perfidia opened the Door, if she fulfilled her use, Mayfair would kill her immediately.

"If you want me to open the Door," Perfidia said, "you gotta sign a contract."

Dalt seized Perfidia's index finger and bent it back until it snapped. "No," said Mayfair, over a chorus of Perfidia's screams.

Having expected some such response, Perfidia was able to wince her way back to coherence. "Hear me out. Hear me out. If you're gonna kill me whether I open the Door or not I've got no incentive to do it. I'd rather die spiting you—that's the devil way. I need assurance that if I do what you want I walk away alive." Fuck it'd been too long since she felt pain this bad. Few hundred years ago, when she was working her old job in Hell, her pain tolerance had been much higher. She tried to muster that past Perfidia to grit her teeth.

"If my intention were to slay you either way," said Mayfair, "I'd have done so already and commanded you to open the Door with my staff."

"It takes Humanity to open the Door. Kill me and that Humanity goes poof in an instant, even if you use the staff. You already know that—or at least suspected it. It's the real reason you haven't killed me. But if I open the Door, you will. You can't lie to me, Mayfair. I'm the Master after all. I know your nature exactly."

The passenger door opened, which Perfidia took as a good sign, even as Mayfair rounded the jeep and stood before her with pitiless eyes, her half-dried hair in yellowish clumps that did little to hamper the innate prettiness of all descendants of the original Princess Tivania with whom John Coke sired the Whitecrosse royal lineage.

"Then I shall cease tiresome pretense, devil. Allow me to elucidate your situation: You die today. Your options are between a quick death and one of brutal physical torture."

Dalt seized a second finger and snapped it and Perfidia shrieked.

"The Whitecrosse royal family has, over many years, learned the best ways to deal with heretics and dissidents." Same expression, same toneless voice. "Above all, the status quo needed to be maintained in this world, did it not? So it was only natural. I have accessed the library under the castle. I have read of our most insidious techniques, I have seen the diagrams. Regrettably at present I lack our more creative tools, but Sir Dalton shall suffice, I do believe."

"Do it!" Perfidia laughed. Had to laugh. Had to put everything into this performance. Could not show fear. "I'm spawn of Hell, kiddo. Born in a lake of fire. I've suffered agonies you'd faint to think of. Jay will make it here on foot before you break me—"

"Tooth extraction. Nail extraction. The flaying of skin, segment by segment." Right, right. Perfidia heard it all before. Her unimpressed face prompted Mayfair to try harder: "I am certain we can use the power of this 'car' to create some sort of rack..."

"Sure, go ahead. Rip me in half. Then where are you? Stuck on this side of the Door. Look kiddo. Sign the contract with me. You're currently at subhuman levels of Humanity, you're not recognized by God, you can't sin—the same way a dog or cat can't sin. So you got nothing to worry about dealing with a devil. We fill out the contract. Very simple terms. I let you through the Door, you let me free—alive and unharmed." She glanced at her fingers and amended: "No further harm. Yeah sorry Little Miss Pious you'll have to let the devil go, but I don't see how you got any other option. Go ahead with the tooth pulling and nail extracting and whatnot, but I know you won't kill me unless I open the Door and I won't open the Door until I know you won't kill me. So without it in writing we're at loggerheads aren't we?"

Ignore that letting Mayfair through the Door was a bad idea in any other circumstance. Perfidia would deal with that particular trouble later, assuming she pulled this off. Her spiel gave Mayfair pause for thought, expression softened as though the rain eroded it. Mayfair might be an uppity little priss but she was also fourteen and fourteen-year-olds were invariably idiotic.

"I could have you raped," Mayfair muttered.

"Raped! Raped! That's in the Coke family's great big book of tortures too?"

An honest-to-fuck blush forced Mayfair to turn her face away. Perfidia had to laugh, had to laugh because she couldn't let Mayfair know what she stumbled upon. "And you'd watch, huh? Sure you'd like that. How religiously devoted of you. Rape me. You even know how sex works kiddo? Had that talk with your mom yet? Course not, she fucking hates you, but—"

"Shut up!"

Good. Good. "I mean hey if ya wanna get off I'll render that service free. Before I went into the whole fantasy-world-making business I was a succubus y'know? Been a few centuries but I still have all the tricks, and as I mentioned before you are currently in a blessed immune-from-sin state of existence." Had to hit back aggressively. Had to make Mayfair recoil in cringing terror from the whole rape thing. There was Pride again, her old friend, bubbling bubbling bubbling, Pride her precious darling. "I mean think about it kiddo. You really wanna go through that Door anyway? You can have anything you want in this world and at the end of it when you die it's just over, kaput, nothing. No pain, nothing. Nothing to fear in nothing. Come on kiddo, whaddya say. Let Perfidia Bal Berith take care of ya—"

Thankfully, before Perfidia could gag on the wretched words she was spewing, Mayfair made Dalt break another finger to shut her up. Perfidia obliged with a slightly-exaggerated scream.

"Quiet, silence, cease your devilish wiles!" More on that subject. Mayfair tromped in a circle, jerking her arms in operatic motions before pawing at her face to wipe off all the water. Still just a kid. Still only fourteen. Easy mark.

"Okay, if you don't like that, just sign the contract. We'll keep it nice and simple, no legalese, you'll understand every word and know you're not getting f—not getting screwed. Good deal right?"

Mayfair quit tromping, slumped her shoulders in oh-so-readable expression of defeat. Perfidia kept up her snaggletooth smile, exuded the self-confidence that suckered humans since time immemorial into schemes and scams, that common feeling of the insecure: "This person knows what they're doing. How can it go wrong?" You were insecure, weren't you Mayfair. That's right. So stiff and formal, such a proper and elegant tongue—but what's that underneath? Your mother never cared for your precocity, hated it even. She isolated you, and you helped, believing you liked the isolation, thinking your own thoughts, but there was something underneath, wasn't there? You hated your wild and carefree brother—for his lack of decorum, you claimed to yourself—but there was something underneath: You wished you were more like him. Deep down you did. Especially one particular aspect, that's right. His easy manner with other people, his winning ability to capture hearts and keep them close. Maybe not the hearts of the nobility, but those of the common people—and of the opposite sex. Right. Exactly right, Perfidia remembered now. Your forebear Tivania passed down another genetic trait, didn't she? A trait Perfidia gave her. A trait to keep John Coke sated: Lust, lowliest of the seven cardinal sins, least offensive in God's eye and so the most pathetic. Simple carnal loneliness—craving for others.

Only a little more. Perfidia would cut through those defenses. The pathetic defenses of a pathetic little girl.

But unpathetically, bone-chillingly, Mayfair lifted a face of stone and eyes that gleamed.

"There's another key."

"Eh?"

"Of course there's another key. They tied you up. They didn't trust you. They wouldn't rely on you as their only way out. One of them has a key." Mayfair paused, thought for one second. "Shannon has the key. It would be her with the key."

"There's no other key," Perfidia said simply, still wearing a smile, hoping her face didn't flicker or that if it did Mayfair was too enmeshed in her own thought processes to notice. "I'm the Master. That doesn't change if they put me in cuffs, okay? I control the Door."

"There's another key," Mayfair said. "I ought to have realized sooner."

"You'll feel real stupid if you kill me, drive back to Shannon, and find there's no key."

Mayfair stared at Perfidia. Long and hard.

"You will open the Door," she said, "or you will die, devil."

"Then you'd have nothing. You'd be trapped. Your loss!"

"Even if there is no other key, there's the other method. The original plan. We capture one of the heroes from the real world. The archbishop can extract their Humanity and fashion a key —"

"Won't work. Astrophicus can't actually do that. I only made him think he could to kickstart the plot." This was, incidentally, true. (As if Perfidia would ever give these guys an actual way to escape into the real world.) Being true, though, wouldn't make Mayfair believe it.

"You have ten seconds," Mayfair said. "Nine."

"I swear there's no other key, there's no other method, do you seriously think—"

"Eight. Seven. Six."

"You won't. You won't do it, I know. I know you!"

"Five. Four. Three."

Opening the Door was not the end. "Okay! Okay. Okay! I'll do it. I can't do it—I can't do it with this gorilla holding me!"

Mayfair ceased counting. Her face returned to an empty mask, an intelligent blankness. Damn though, Perfidia knew she was a person who could feel pity, knew she wasn't an emotionless robot. It wasn't in her character. Wasn't Perfidia pitiable? Wasn't she more pitiable than anyone else in this world right now? Zealotry. Insipid since the dawn of time.

Nonetheless Dalt relinquished her. He hovered close, and before Perfidia got a chance to collect herself a harsh shove sent her staggering toward the Door.

Shoulda called Mayfair's bluff. Shoulda done it. It could've been a bluff. It definitely could've been.

Anticipating being unable to reclaim the key from Shannon, Perfidia saved in her back pocket just enough of Jay's Humanity to open the Door. The whole other-world gambit had the benefit of costing essentially zero Humanity to create and maintain, but there was one small point of contact with the real world that necessitated expenditure, and that involved the Door. In Jay's case, reusing a world cut even this cost, but that was only because she kept the original hardware all these years. A new key had to be paid for.

Dalt remained behind her as she walked toward the Door. Specifically, he stayed between Perfidia and Mayfair, as though shielding the latter from the former. A smart move on Mayfair's part—given what Mayfair knew. She'd witnessed Wendell and Dalt firing their guns and knew what real-world tech could do. But Mayfair didn't know that keeping a closer personal eye on Perfidia would limit options for how she used Humanity. Dalt was, despite moving around, dead. He did not count as human. Mayfair, despite possessing less than one Humanity, *kind of* counted as a human, and that made all the difference. Dalt watching Perfidia didn't stop her from using Humanity openly; Mayfair watching did. As Perfidia approached the Door, she made sure to let Dalt's huge frame block Mayfair's line of sight.

Question was, what *were* the options? Dalt was faster than her. Stronger than her. And since he was a reanimated corpse, getting the drop with a Humanity-manifested gun wouldn't stop him. Plus, if she used Humanity for anything except opening the Door, then she'd be stranded even if she did kill Mayfair. She'd need to crawl back to Shannon. What then?

No. Perfidia had an idea. A risky idea, but an idea. She knew Mayfair. Knowing someone wasn't only about knowing their weaknesses or insecurities. There was another angle.

"So," she said as she stopped before the Door's arch, "you're gonna wanna know how I do it, right? How I control Whitecrosse I mean."

Silence.

"After all, you're not doing this just for yourself, are you? You wanna make Whitecrosse better. To save the poor damned non-souls who call it home, to bring them to paradise. How do ya plan to do that? Think they'd all just follow you into the real world if you asked nicely? Please."

Perfidia extended her bound hands and tapped a panel on the arch. It opened. She took Dalt not hassling her despite the length of her spiel as a sign Mayfair was listening.

"You wanna be the Master. Don't ya. If you were the Master, you could change anything you want. You could give them all Humanity. Plus anything else you wanna change about the world. And I can show you how. I can't do it dead—that's the type of knowledge that doesn't come back to a puppet. You know that, of course."

She pressed her palms to the control panel. Glancing over her shoulder to ensure Dalt blocked Mayfair's view, she channeled the last dregs of Humanity—doleful to watch it go—into the red shape of a key.

"A simple exchange," Perfidia said. "Let me live and I'll make you the Master."

The Door opened. Translucent flicker. Perfidia closed her eyes and hoped. Her only solace was she saw no better play. She knew what Mayfair wanted. She knew this would tempt.

Dalt seized her by the nape and she yelped. Her heart shuddered and a thousand self-scourging thoughts slashed her before her head was shoved through the portal. The familiar parking garage appeared for a second, then she was yanked out while Dalt—still gripping her tight—shoved his own head through.

Exactly how it went with Shannon. Empirical testing.

"Is it safe," said Mayfair. "Did she keep her word? Is that the other world?"

A nod from Dalt.

One second passed. Another. Mayfair's blank eyes pierced Perfidia through the rainfall.

"Give me the new key."

Dalt wrenched it out of Perfidia's grasp and handed it to Mayfair. Heat bloomed in Perfidia's head, an agony of anxiety, for every rational thought five more called her an idiot for not using the Humanity to make a gun, make a flamethrower and incinerate him, oh please as if that would work in this rain—

The key exchanged hands. Mayfair regarded Perfidia, then the open Door, and despite her placid face a slight tremble ran up what little of her skin showed: Anticipation withheld desperately.

Come on kiddo. This is it. This is your dreams realized. You don't wanna sour the moment with a coldhearted murder, right? That's not you. I know you. I got a whole page dedicated to you, Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke. All your facts and foibles. You're fourteen years old. Despite everything, you're still optimistic.

A shove sent Perfidia tumbling through the Door; Dalt and Mayfair followed.

No more rain. A quiet, dry place, haunted only by a distant murmur in some pipe. The water dripped off them, pooled at their feet.

Mayfair spent a sentimental moment absorbing the grandiosity of this new world, this bare and utilitarian parking garage where the nearest car's bumper sticker read IF YOU'RE CLOSE ENOUGH TO READ THIS YOU CAN KISS MY ASS.

"I feel it," Mayfair said. "I feel His presence. I feel—the presence of God!"

She swooned. Actually swooned, the kind of motion you'd see nowhere except a Shakespearean play, a wild wobble of her whole body that carried her into the back of Perfidia's parked Porsche. The metallic thunk exploded in dead silence and Mayfair didn't mind, she twirled with her body splayed in ecstasy. Her arms stretched to a sky of concrete.

"He's here! Oh God, Your love washes over me, for the first time I truly feel it! Oh, oh! OH!"

Onto her knees she slid, then further into a posture of supplication, forehead to floor.

"The Holy Spirit imbues this poor and wretched form. I pray for forgiveness oh Lord, I pray for my many sins, worthless sinner as I am in face of You... Embrace me, oh Lord, lift me on your heavenly wings! Halleluiah!"

Her groping fingers tore at her stark outfit, then at her throat. She rolled onto her back and kicked little shod feet out of the sodden and mud-caked flounce of her dress. Her back abruptly arched; her palms pressed down and her mouth hung open in an endlessly expanding O.

"Oh, oh—oh! Oh! Oh God! Oh Lord! Oh!"

"Excuse me?" said a middle-aged woman in an overcoat, keys in hand, standing beside her car door. "Excuse me, is everything alright?"

"Everything is glorious. Everything is joyous and happy." Mayfair flung herself from supine to kneeling and cut a wild gaze across the garage at the woman. "How can anything be wrong in this world where God's love is so warm?"

The woman's face moved from Mayfair to Dalt and Perfidia. Confusion contorted into disgust. "Did you people give this little girl drugs?"

"No no," said Perfidia quickly. "We're uh, we're actors. Actors—in a morality play at the local church. Rehearsing. I play the devil. Great makeup, right?"

Eyes scrutinized to the backdrop of more Mayfair moans. Finally: "You Evangelicals disgust me. Brainwashing these poor children!" The woman got in her car, slammed the door, and drove off in a puff of exhaust.

Mayfair paid her no mind. Panting in the subsiding throes of holy fervor she clasped her hands over her heaving chest and prayed with silent motions of her lips. A half-uttered amen severed the spell and she attempted to retake control of her face by donning a semblance of seriousness marred only by the squiggle of her smile.

"So," she said. "You said you'd make me the Master."

"Right. Right! Lemme show ya."

Two flights to leave the basement garage, three more to Perfidia's office, with an L-shaped corridor leading to the door. This late at night they encountered nobody else. Dalt needed to let go of Perfidia again so she could unlock the door. Like earlier, Dalt maintained position between Perfidia and Mayfair.

The office was crammed with scrolls, towers of them heaped against the walls and on Perfidia's desk, the same ones she temporarily made invisible when Shannon and Dalt first appeared. "These papers, they're Whitecrosse." Perfidia stepped inside, leading the way, flinging gesticulatory hands as though giving a guided tour. (The broken fingers on one hand hurt with every motion she made, but it was essential to the performance.)

"What do you mean, they're Whitecrosse?" Mayfair was half-concealed by Dalt's body; only one eye showed past his arm.

"I mean what I said. These papers are Whitecrosse, the words on them are Whitecrosse, and the changes you make to them you also make to Whitecrosse." A hard slap to one of the towers on Perfidia's desk lifted a plume of dust. "Take a look at one, any, you'll see."

Mayfair plucked a sheet. "Blueprint of Castle Whitecrosse. 1:500 scale. Detail: Castle Gate."

"Here. Look here. This one's good, you can see it changing."

Perfidia sidled around her desk and peeled the page she'd been working on before she got interrupted. When she held it to Mayfair, Dalt snatched it and handed it off.

"This one... describes the actions of Jay Waringcrane," Mayfair said. "There are lines manifesting at the bottom of the page... He appears to be arguing with his sister." Her head poked out behind Dalt. "By writing my own words onto these pages, I can make any change I want?"

"Well there are some limitations, I'll go over them with you and answer any questions." Perfidia busied herself behind the desk, shuffling the papers into order, reaching her hand down to grip the drawer under the desk where Shannon so kindly put her gun. "To make it

easier on myself I idiot-proofed the whole deal so I wouldn't contradict something I already did. Also as you might expect you'll have some trouble trying to change anything about Jay. Or his sister. They have their own Humanity, after all."

"Yes, I suppose that follows logic," although Mayfair seemed hardly to be listening. "Tell me: Am I able to move the contents of Whitecrosse into this world? The way I myself have been moved?"

The question stopped Perfidia dead. Mayfair stared straight at her, big eyes demanding a response, not severely, but with genuine, absolute curiosity.

"Move Whitecrosse—here? Why would ya wanna do that?"

"Devil, you told me yourself. This world is touched by God; Whitecrosse is not. It is unfair that I alone of that forlorn realm's denizens may know His love. They all must come. It is only through His intercession that they may be saved. But many would resist leaving their homes—you said that as well, did you not? Could I but bring the entire world into this one..."

"Uh," said Perfidia. Hand frozen on the drawer. Trying to think of anything to get Mayfair to stop looking at her. "I'd strongly advise against that. God's a guy to be feared as much as loved, right? I dunno if He'd take too kindly to a bunch of stuff He didn't create suddenly showing up in His world. Y'know?"

Mayfair wasn't listening. "Answer me. Can it be done? Can Whitecrosse be moved into this world?"

"Uhhhhh... Yeah. Yeah it should be. Check uh, check that pile over there. See it. No the next one. Should be the third or fourth sheet from the top. Yeah."

"I see nothing of use here."

Perfidia opened the drawer. Her revolver bumped against the wood with a marbly sound and she grabbed it.

Everything that happened next happened in the span of two seconds.

First, with her other hand, the one with the broken fingers, Perfidia shoved the heap of papers atop her desk into the air. Dalt moved and he moved fast but as Perfidia thought—as Perfidia hoped—he didn't move to attack. He moved to shield Mayfair.

The real Scott Dalton Swaino II, the living one, thought only of attack. Football star sacking the quarterback. The mindset of a man like that was: to stop someone from hurting you, hurt them first. Not for a second did he ever attempt to shield Shannon.

When Perfidia made the Staff of Lazarus, she cheated. Obviously. Even in a fake world like Whitecrosse some fundamental laws couldn't be broken. The dead did not return to life. So she faked it. The body would move; muscle memory remained. But the person with the staff supplied the mind.

Dalt would've attacked. Mayfair defended.

Logically it made sense. This zombie Dalt could eat bullets for breakfast. His massive body covered Mayfair completely and with Perfidia's rinky-dink handgun that made hitting her impossible.

Perfidia wasn't looking to hit Mayfair.

She wheeled around and fired the revolver at the window overlooking the final edge of Cleveland until the bright black mass of Lake Erie. Before the glass shards even struck the floor Perfidia sprinted and leaped out the frame, out the old-paper-smelling office and into the acrid taste of urban decay. Sheer crisp air buffeted her face in the protracted moment at the apex of her jump, before gravity's pull redirected her downward.

Into the narrow balcony, more railing than balcony, of the second-floor office under hers. Belonged to a small family lawyer, son of a small family lawyer before him. The railing bit into Perfidia's folded leg and she twirled until her face scrubbed the gravelly texture of the balcony itself but her memory of this building, her memory of this city did not fail her. Ignoring the pains—fingers, leg, something scraped off her cheek—she scabbled upright and vaulted the railing to seize a tall thin pipe that traveled up the bricks and slide to the garbage-strewn, hobo-dwelt alley below.

Already the balcony above rattled with the slam of Dalt's senseless bulk hitting it and by the time Perfidia was limping (limping, shit, why her leg, why did she have to hit her leg) down the alley an eruption of garbage signaled his descent to ground level. Obviously, he was faster than her, limping or not. Obviously, she expected him to pursue. But she knew Cleveland. She sat there in her office and watched this city build itself, watched it explode, watched it rust and die, the same lake reflecting her until it got too filthy to reflect a thing. She'd crawled all over it in her time, sniffing out unfortunates, fools, anyone willing to sign her contracts; she had excavated every sordid crevice.

She knew its sewers.

The grate opening to this city's septic underworld appeared exactly where she knew it to be, embedded in a drainage basin, the bars broken as they had been broken for the past thirteen years without a single civic care to see them repaired. A narrow aperture through which a slender woman might be able to slip—but not a musclebound behemoth.

It neared. She didn't even hear him tromping behind her, she managed to buy herself enough space via the element of surprise. Ten, five more steps, but if he wasn't running after her then what was he—

A gunshot rang out instants after the bullet drilled into Perfidia's back. In its acoustic cannonade caroming madly between the alley walls her body arched and pitched and her bare feet fumbled and her head slammed the brick.

He had a gun? He had a gun. Right. She gave it to him. When she fled the SUV at the monastery. She took it with her. Of course he would have it.

Now he ran at her.

Her own gun had flown from her hand, not that it mattered. Groaning, lifting limp arms like a marionette, her eyes fixed on the open drain ahead of her. Thudthudthud went his footsteps as her hands, even the one with the shattered fingers, seized the edge of the portal into oblivion and all the force in her body dragged her forward. Screaming, her one giant tug propelled her far enough forward that gravity did the rest.

Into a dark wet nook she dropped, her body a searing pile of pain. Almost immediately afterward an arm shoved through the gate and reached for her, just barely unable to seize with its grabbing fingers, and when the arm pulled back her mind managed to register: Next he'll reach with the gun.

Smell told her the way to go. Toward rancid rotting she pushed with every limb she could move, finding purchase everywhere with each to shove herself down the declining slope of this city's bowels. The gun discharged, it flashed and clapped and her ears turned into a vibrantly numb thrum as she slid away. A second shot, a third, a ricocheting bullet whizzing off a chunk of flesh on one shoulder before the fourth and fifth shots dwindled into a thunderclap.

Her body, useless, flopped onto some fetid mound. Rats somewhere scampered, all was dark. She listened to the echoing gunshots until they disappeared. Then all that remained was a ubiquitous—ubiquitous—drip-drip-drip. Ubiquitous.

Was she going to live? Everything hurt. It all hurt. But she was free. She escaped.

She escaped...

—

Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke sat at the cherry desk that once belonged to the devil Perfidia Bal Berith. Cold air from the shattered window pressed against her nape but she minded it not. She pulled up her sleeve to observe the strange scales set deep into her flesh; scales that had appeared when she drank the faerie's blood at the monastery. Although she could not see without removing her clothes entirely, she felt the scales crawling up her arm, over her shoulder, and down her back. She tugged her sleeve back into place; such was the cost for what she earned. That and her brother's life.

On the desk were the pages that delineated her world: Whitecrosse.

The door opened. Sir Dalton entered. He said: "I was unable to recapture the devil, milady. I did wound her greatly, however."

Having him speak was superfluous, but Mayfair enjoyed the illusion of company. Despite what some said of her, Mayfair preferred company. She was simply so bad at keeping it. A wave dismissed Dalton and he sat patiently in a chair, awaiting her next command.

Now was no time to worry over the changed state of her body or the slight and ignorable emptiness gnawing at her. The papers beckoned. A full, academic examination was necessary; one she was fully prepared to undertake. First, she needed to assess the viability of her primary goal. Whitecrosse must come into this world. It, and its people, must be touched by God. Somehow, they must attain souls—attain salvation. Without that blessing, they were irrevocably damned; and what matter did improving their earthly existences mean when that short period of physicality was followed by an eternity of suffering? Without a path to paradise, nothing else mattered. No other course of action could produce greater good for her people, for her poor wretched souls.

And without them, what good was saving herself alone? Alone in her own tower... as always.

But if she was unable to change Jay or Shannon Waringcrane due to the Humanity they possessed, how could she possibly bring Whitecrosse into this world, the real world? Such an action would necessitate changing this world, and did not the same logic apply?

She wrote it on the paper: *Whitecrosse is moved to the real world.* The ink faded immediately until it could no longer be seen, as though swallowed by the parchment. No change occurred.

Perhaps it was impossible. Yet was not she herself a modification to this real world? What about the Staff of Lazarus she held? John Coke's memoirs made clear that no such magic existed on God's Earth; indeed, he condemned it as necromancy and hid the relic away in his vault. The staff still worked, however. Mayfair still controlled Dalton's corpse. If that were the case... then perhaps she need only become more creative in her methodology.

There were other relics, after all. Each possessed a miraculous magic. With them... combined with the power of the Master... could she carve a space under God's eye for Whitecrosse? Could she bring Whitecrosse to this earthly paradise? Mayfair stooped over the desk and began her examination.

God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!

"Parody. That's the word. I kept thinking satire, but no, satire's too smart. Satire requires subtlety. Subtlety is an alien concept here, apparently, so what we have is parody. A brash, boorish joke. Blunt, like whapping you over the head with a baseball bat." The arm holding the umbrella jerked to demonstrate. "We have here a parody of a real world. Distorted, depthless, purposeful only to wring a few droll laughs out of a brainless audience. That's the word. Parody."

Shannon Waringcrane paced the breadth of the road at the last traversable segment before the debris left by the landslide rendered it, if not impassable, difficult to pass. Shielded from the rain (milder now) by the umbrella, she unconsciously and gently rocked her other hand close to her chest as it cradled Olliebollen's limp form.

"And no sign of Dalt. Left me. Got in the jeep and left. Where's Wendell? Did anyone see Wendell?" She implored the few faces aimed her way with eyes as stringent as her voice. "Wendell must've gotten in with him. Just a pair of buddies on an adventure together, making a new map together. Left me! Of course they'll have to crawl back. I've got the key home. But it's over. If Dalt thinks this relationship is continuing another minute—another second—he's delusional. *De-lu-sional*."

"He told me," said Sansaime, hunched over Makepeace's corpse, her face buried against his chest, voice one pitch below a sob—exercising the slightest degree of control—"he told me we'd travel the world together. He was going to leave Whitecrosse, y'know. Become a wandering knight. He felt like he had no home and—and I'm the same, I suppose. Our home would be each other. That's what he told me: Our home would be each other. Whispered it into my ear that night. Oh. Oh, why."

"Of course Mother's going to worry. Of course! I'll be home just a little bit late and she'll go *berserk*. Drink herself into a stupor. Jay do you realize how much she was drinking because of you? No of course not. Didn't think about her for a second I bet. Too busy mooning over fourteen-year-old girls. Disgusting. Are you that pathetic Jay? Guess it must be genetic. Like father like son. Parts from the same mold."

Off to the side, Charm curled into a ball in the mud and sobbed, but sobbing was all she ever did, so who cared. Dead nuns lay strewn about her. Even the ones Mayfair reanimated had, after some time, dropped back to the ground and stopped moving.

"I guess it's karma. You picked the one fourteen-year-old girl who enjoys chomping arms. And whatever she did with that—that dragon. I guess she controlled it with that staff or whatever! Parody. Complete and total parody."

"Shut the fuck up," said Jay. He sat with his back against a rock. Hands over his face. Water running off his hat.

Sansaime's head lifted off Makepeace's chest. "That girl... Mayfair."

"Mayfair, right. That was her name. Who are you anyway? Another absurd caricature? Well, who cares. I don't know why I'm standing here talking. Jay, get up. We can't just sit here. If Dalt won't come back we'll have to walk, since you so sagely destroyed the other car. Sure Dalt's gonna love that by the way. Hope his insurance covers that. Actually, no, considering how he acted, I hope his insurance *doesn't* cover it. Now come on. I'm ready to march thirty miles, how about you?"

"Why," said Jay.

"To go home of course! Jay, you've lost. It's over. You're going home. There's no discussion about it." Her shoulders slumped despite the rigidity of the rest of her posture. "You *have* to see that. Look around you."

"Where did Mayfair go," Sansaime said.

"Got in the jeep with Dalt and drove off," said Shannon. "Who knows why. Dalt didn't see her bite the fairy thing's arm off, so maybe he thought he was protecting her. Wendell should've known though."

"Wendell didn't get into the jeep with them," said Jay. "As for Mayfair, she'll do what she said she'd do. Get through the Door. She took Perfidia with her, after all."

Dalt and Wendell were both probably dead. He missed whatever happened to Wendell, but the man wasn't here now. Dalt meanwhile was last seen doing Mayfair's bidding and driving her away. She must've used the staff to revive him. Telling Shannon would only initiate another headache. Maybe Shannon was being willfully ignorant anyway, to spare herself.

Sham staff. Didn't actually bring people back to life, did it. Only necromancy: corpses into puppets. And they baited him up here for it. Now Makepeace was dead too. Jay with nothing to show for it.

"Well she can't," Shannon said. "As I keep mentioning, *I* have the key. Perfidia doesn't."

"I guarantee Perfidia can open the Door with or without the key." Jay fiddled his bat between his hands. "You know that too, Shannon."

"Who's Perfidia," said Sansaime, her voice flat and her words delivered tersely.

"She's the devil who built this place—Why am I even telling you!" Shannon made to toss her hand, remembered the cradled Olliebollen, and stopped herself. "None of this matters. If Dalt and Wendell went to the gate that's only another reason why we should go too. We certainly can't allow them to bring that girl into the real world. That'd be disaster. Complete and utter disaster."

"They're in a car. It's impossible we catch up. Accept it, Shannon." And let him sleep. All he wanted to do right now was sleep. He didn't want to think, didn't want to decide, didn't want to walk. Let him sleep.

"Catching up or not. Letting them through the gate or not. That's not the point, Jay. The point is we made a mess—yes I'll say we, yes I'll admit I've made errors too—we made a mess and it's our duty, our *responsibility*, to fix it. That's what it means to be an adult, Jay. That's what —"

Sansaime was up, behind Shannon, gripping her head with one hand and holding a knife to her throat with the other.

"Give me the key," Sansaime said. "Give me the key now."

"Oh what the fuck Sansaime," said Jay.

The umbrella fell from Shannon's hand, although she kept her gentle grip on Olliebollen. Once the instinctual shock subsided she rolled her eyes. "Excellent. Another lunatic."

"The key. Give me the key."

Jay expelled a drawn-out sigh. He gripped the bat but failed to muster the willpower to lift it in even a token gesture of threat. After what happened already, this joke couldn't possibly matter.

"Why do you even want it Sansaime. I thought you didn't believe in God." Or was it Olliebollen who didn't. Or Flanz-le-Flore. Everything jumbled and nothing shone sharply.

"I give not the slightest care for any god or any religion," Sansaime spat between clenched teeth, her eyes a wide and wild pair inside the blotchy piebald pattern of her face. "I need that key for but one reason. I must kill her."

"Mayfair." Jay nodded sleepily, things slotting together. "I guess that was why you were here to begin with."

"Before it was for gain." A few more jagged jerks of her eyes, but the rapidity with which they shifted slowed, as did the frantic edge of her voice. "I was offered something money cannot buy. But now—Now—" Her voice caught, she swallowed a sob. "Now it's simply what I must do."

"Sansaime," said Jay. "Come on."

"Put down the knife and let's discuss this like reasonable people," said Shannon. "No. Impossible in this world. Must be the air!"

Sansaime squeezed her eyes shut as a grimace stretched her mouth. Jay thought idly that if he possessed even a modicum of energy he could have rushed and beamed her before she even noticed him coming, but he did nothing until her bloodshot eyes opened again trailing a fresh stream of tears or maybe just rainwater, who knew or cared.

"Killing is not," she said, "it's not, it's not a natural knack of mine. I'm no murderer, I swear, though you must have a wretched view of me now—Oh well, they all do, they all did. I was hired because I was the only one who'd be in the right place, at the right time... I'm no killer."

Jay figured the fairies in Flanz-le-Flore's court that melted after her needles ran them through might disagree, but given fairies were apparently subhuman to the other sentient races of this world, someone might be able to maintain such a whitewashing opinion of themselves even now.

"I'm no killer, which is why—which is why—" The dagger drooped.

"Come on. Let's end this joke Sansaime."

"Which is why I'm giving you the choice," Sansaime said, bringing the dagger to Shannon's throat again and causing a shallow red line to appear. "I'll slit her throat, I will if I have to, and I'll kill you afterward, 'hero.' You've bested me before but only thanks to that fae friend of yours and she's not able to help you now, is she? Might not be able to help you ever again, looking the way she does. Give me the key and you and your sister live."

"And simply strand me here, great," said Shannon. "Might as well kill me in that case!"

A sharp and uncomfortable grinding sound cut the cold air and Jay realized it was the sound of Sansaime's teeth. "I've no mind to stay in that world of yours. Nothing of interest to me there, or anywhere. When my business is done I'll return what's yours if that puts your mind at ease. I've no grudge against you. Only her. Only her."

Jay wanted to shrug and say whatever, it didn't matter, who cared, but Sansaime's comment about Olliebollen stuck in his hazy mind. Despite everything, he didn't want to see his sister exsanguinated in front of him.

"Why'd you have to make a scene out of it," he said. "Shannon was gonna go home through the Door anyway. You could've just gone with her."

"As if I would willingly let a maniac—or anyone in this world!—go to Earth," said Shannon.

"There's that and there's speed," said Sansaime. "You're slow, hero, and no doubt she's slower. I intend to kill that girl fast. Now stop talking about it and give me the key! If you don't want her in your world then let me do my work and you won't have that problem."

"Just give her the key Shannon."

"What! Just—just give her—"

"Do you have a choice? The sooner we get this crap out of the way the sooner I can go find somewhere to sleep."

Shannon gave him a death glare but if he had some genius idea to escape this situation his brain wasn't letting him know. Without Olliebollen he was only a guy with a baseball bat after all.

Only himself, Jay Waringcrane, in a world Perfidia no longer controlled.

Hm.

Eventually, after a trickle of blood ran down her neck where Sansaime nicked her, Shannon with performative reluctance reached her hand into her pocket and retrieved a fist that when slowly raised to shoulder-level opened to reveal an old-fashioned key.

A quick motion and the key disappeared. Sansaime shoved Shannon at Jay and danced back, the dagger-blade a single gleam as she swiftly scaled the landslide's debris while keeping an eye on anyone who might do something. "Bury him," she said as she crested the peak of the wreckage. "Give Mack a proper burial, if nothing else do that."

Then Sansaime, like everyone else, was gone.

"Well?" Shannon wiped her neck, rolled her eyes at the blood, and stooped to retrieve her umbrella while keeping Olliebollen safe against her chest. "Well, let's go after her! Otherwise we're stuck. Let's move! Don't simply stand there!"

Fatigue encompassed all. Jay hardly thought. He shrugged slumped shoulders and shook his head. "Follow her if you want."

"If I—no. Nope. You're coming with me. I won't be—I won't be stranded here, Jay. At least do this for me, Jay. Don't you realize the trouble I'll be in? I have to be back at work in four days or I'll lose my job."

"That's what you care about?"

"Better than caring about absolutely nothing!"

One final glance at Makepeace's body. It looked asleep. Jay wanted to sleep. He turned and started with slow staggered steps back toward the monastery. There'd be a dry place to curl up in at least.

"Jay. Jay! Jay! Fine. Fine! I'll go myself. I'll go by myself, like always!"

She turned sharply and tried to climb onto the debris mound while carrying both her umbrella and Olliebollen and slipped on the first step and shot a sharp hiss to the sky.

"Sansaime will probably cut through the forest," Jay said, "take a shortcut off the main road to save time. You'll lose her there if not before then. After that you'll be lost. That's all I'll say about it."

Shannon was stubborn, though. Maybe she could manage it by sheer force of will. Who knew, who cared. Jay continued up the last part of the incline to the monastery's front gate—now accompanied by a gigantic gaping hole in the wall where the ground gave out—and into the courtyard. The fire was completely out, but much of the roof of the main building was missing and smoke still rose in patches. Scorch marks streaked the stone.

The chapel, though, divided from the main building by most of the courtyard, remained untouched. Jay trudged there, found the doors unbarred, and finally, for the first time in forever, escaped the rain. The instant he no longer felt water perpetually pelting him his soggianness became inescapable fact.

Without candles, the interior of the chapel was a dark set of angles, and he fumbled around until he bumped into a long chair-shaped object he assumed was a pew. A thin cloth was draped over the seat and that was enough. In the dark he removed his clothes, used the cloth to dry himself, then gathered a few other cloths from adjacent pews and wrapped himself in them as a blanket before lying down and resting on his side.

Only the sheer discomfort of the hard wooden pew kept him from instantly falling asleep. Not long afterward, the chapel doors opened. A sharp pair of footsteps clip-clopped down the aisle, before stopping at another pew closer to the front. An umbrella shut. After that, Jay fell asleep, thinking: twenty-eight days left, if Perfidia was even alive at the end to collect.

—

Waking put an impassable gulf between Jay and the events of the night prior. He remembered them, but as something distant and small. Buried under this fantastic feeling only restful sleep bestowed. He wasn't sure how long he slept, but the sun shone bright through the stained glass. However long it recharged him. Over 100 percent, if that was possible. The kind of sleep capable of eradicating permanent raccoon eyes—although he was pretty sure those were genetic. He lifted a head that had lain on the pew's hard wood the whole night without the slightest pain in his neck or shoulders and stretched his arms into a fulfilling yawn. His hands tingled with minor burns, he became cognizant of a few loose cuts scattered across his skin, but the pain only seemed to emphasize the intense ease inside him, strength that made him think he could sprint a marathon.

Then he remembered his sister. A brief frown contorted his jaw muscles—but even that wasn't enough to dispel his mood. He looked to the front of the chapel for her but either she'd left already or she was concealed by the pews. His eyes drifted to the impressive altarpiece blazing gold in the filtered sunlight, rows of statues in lavish robes looking in praise to a heaven where angels thronged around a serene and cloud-wreathed Christ. Christ watched Jay back warmly, his expression seeming to say: *All's right with the world.*

"Sir Hero," said a pleasantly dry voice. From the entrance a nun approached. The backs of the pews concealed all but her upper body, which looked ordinary and human, but the clip-clop of four hooved feet on the tile gave her corruption away before she reached Jay's aisle and her full appearance became apparent: a centaur. A deer centaur, at least based on the delicate thinness of her legs. Over the equine—or cervine—torso was draped an extension of her white nun's habit, adorned by a pattern of crosses.

"Good morning," Jay said.

"It is, in fact, afternoon," said the deer. "We have taken the trouble of drying your clothes while you slept; I come to return them to you." She extended a bundle topped by the Cleveland Browns hat. "Please do put them on before going out; my sisters would be mortified if you approached them in dishabille."

"Not you though."

"No. I mortify myself."

After the deer left, Jay got dressed, put his bat on his shoulder, and went out. Warm sunlight fell from a cloudless sky, beautiful enough that it took several seconds basking in it before Jay became aware of the lines of corpses arranged in neat rows in the courtyard.

Three rows of seven. Twenty-one total. Half burnt to some degree. Some looking like a shotgun blew them apart. And at the end of the final row, Makepeace John Gaheris Coke, his shield on his chest.

"Three still missing," said the deer, who had lingered. "Plus Sister Charm swears she saw Charisma killed, only for her to rise again and fly off into the forest. Leaves precious few of us. Perhaps that's for the best."

The distance between this sunny day and the previous began to bridge, but Jay turned away to keep it from coming any closer. His mood was too rare to spoil needlessly.

"There any food?" he asked the deer.

She led him into the main building. Smoke scent punched him in the face but the entry hall—and the archbishop—escaped damage. The big plant was where it had always been, thankfully without Theovora to give it voice, and Jay passed it with a stray thought: A lot of those girls outside must have died trying to keep the fire from spreading this far. He remembered the ones pushing past him in the corridors with pails of water. Hurrying to their deaths. And in the end, the rain did more to put out the fire than any of them.

Through a side door they entered a mess hall. On three long wooden tables a few figures sat. Jay didn't see Charm (who also hadn't been among the dead), but picked out Theovora slumped with her face on the table. Besides her there were only six other nuns. And also Shannon Waringcrane.

"—utterly retrograde," Shannon said, pacing the aisles between the tables. "Just because you look unreal doesn't mean you have to *be* unreal. Nunneries, chastity, these were concepts invented to control population—and women—in pre-birth control times. But these concepts are antiquarian and more importantly inefficient. Productivity relies on maximizing the value each human can contribute to society. Arbitrarily excluding certain classes of people from societal opportunities based on gender, race, or handicap only limits the ability of those people to facilitate the functioning of the greater machine. If you want my advice, burn those frocks. Ignore this 'archbishop' who insists you do nothing but sing hymns all day. Educate yourselves and work together to produce something with real value to this world. If you create value, you *have* value. No matter what you look like. And nobody can change that."

Only a couple of faces looked at her, and those that did wore the same expressions of those that didn't: abject misery.

Shannon noticed Jay just as he sat down to the bowl of gruel the deer set for him. The runny gray paste couldn't have looked more appetizing and he quickly shoveled spoonfuls into his

mouth even as Shannon's footsteps tromped the tile toward him.

"Finally awake! Still sleeping the entire day away, I see."

She sat across from him and he ignored her. All his effort went to eating and each bite amplified his mood even more.

"Dalt and Wendell still haven't returned. I took a better look at the path this morning, it's unlikely they'll be able to return even if they want to. That in mind, the logical action seems obvious to me. We proceed on foot back to the gate—"

"The Door," said Jay.

"The gate. We proceed on foot back to the gate. Even if Bal Berith can open it without the key, Dalt wouldn't strand me here. The situation must be that either he or Wendell got hurt and they had to get to a hospital fast. I've turned over hundreds of possible explanations and that's the most plausible. They rushed to the hospital, but of course they'd return for me afterward. If we follow the road and reach the gate, we'll save them the trouble of a longer trip."

Convincing herself only slightly better than she convinced him, Jay supposed. What caught his attention was the front pocket of her jacket. Olliebollen's head emerged halfway from it, beady eyes set over an empty, partially open mouth. Her filaments were dustless and lusterless. Instead of shining she was only gray and dry and the hollows of her sockets ringed dark to match the eyes of the woman who carried her. After a single dull look, Olliebollen sank back into the pocket and disappeared.

"So the fairy woke up," Jay said as he finished off bowl of gruel and received immediately a second from the deer.

"Oh, yes. The 'fairy.' Its name is Ollie," Shannon said. "I wanted to let it rest somewhere soft but I didn't care for the way those nuns were eyeing it."

"Ollie," Jay said idly between swallows.

"Anyway, once you finish your lunch—or I suppose breakfast for you!—we're leaving. In the daylight, the wreckage covering the path doesn't seem so bad. Most of it slid off into the ravine and the nuns managed to apply themselves and remove some of the rest."

Jay said nothing. Saying anything would cause an argument, and he was enjoying his meal too much to ruin it. She babbled on, sometimes sharply, sometimes calmly, sometimes with her ire turned toward Jay and sometimes toward Dalt or Perfidia or "that horrible little girl" or the world of Whitecrosse in general.

When he finished three bowls, got up, and went back out into the main corridor, Shannon followed, continuing her current point: "—At the very least, Dalt will know to call Mother, he has her cell number and the home phone number, and more importantly Mother has his so even though he'll invariably forget to call she'll be able to contact him. Assuming he's not a complete imbecile—emphasis on assuming—he won't say anything that'll make her flip out

entirely. She won't be happy, of course. It's Thanksgiving. Didn't think of that, did you Jay? Didn't think she might want the family together for Thanksgiving. Of course not!" Among the nuns, only the deer accompanied them. The rest remained in the mess hall, expressions miserable.

He took one last glance at the archbishop. Prognosticator of the future, apparently, even without Perfidia's guidance. What did he see now? Thank fucking Christ he couldn't say what it was, if it was anything at all.

In the courtyard Shannon told the deer: "You intend to bury these bodies soon, right? Surely even feudal-era people like you understand the health risks associated with rotting corpses? Not to mention the smell. Leave them in the sun any longer and they'll bloat."

"Of course, Lady Heroine," said the deer. "Events have left the rest of my sisters in a bad way. Only Charm was particularly amenable to do anything—despite her injuries—but she rushed off this morning to search for her sister. Anyway, I'll implore them to action."

Jay knelt by Makepeace's corpse as Shannon explained germ theory to the deer, describing unseeable microscopic organisms that teemed on the surface of unclean things, carrying disease and infection in their single-celled bodies. Makepeace. Looking so peaceful in death, a smile twisted on his lips. Jay supposed this was Makepeace's escape.

Once, Makepeace told Jay: You and me are the same. Something like that, the kind of speech a hackneyed villain gives the hero, based on ridiculous perversion of truth to force a last-minute thematic throughline between a protagonist and antagonist otherwise connected by nothing more than arbitrary technical details of plot. Makepeace wasn't a villain. No. But that speech had been wrong. Makepeace and Jay weren't alike at all, not in any meaningful capacity, not now at least. Maybe when he said it. But not now.

For Jay, death was no escape.

He pried the shield with its white crosse from Makepeace's cold dead hands. Lighter than Jay expected. Barely a thin sheet of metal, something that should never have been able to block the things it did: Bear claws, dragon's breath. Unless something more than physical matter did the blocking.

"And how are we supposed to believe in this," the deer said. "These... bacteria. If they cannot be 'seen'..."

"They can be seen. With a microscope you can see them."

"I cannot see them."

"Take it on faith then. I know what I'm talking about. Anyway, thank you again for your hospitality, I'd give you some money except I doubt USD goes far here."

"It was no trouble. It is our honor to pay host to a hero and heroine from the other world. If God's grace exists, it exists in you alone of those who walk in this world. That, at least, is something I can 'take on faith.' Farewell."

The deer remained behind, empty in the face, not waving even as Shannon waved, while Jay with his sister following marched down the courtyard, between the open gates of the monastery, and down the mountain path.

Down, over the settled wreckage of the slide, down, winding back and forth, down, past the ruins of the giant cross fallen in several pieces, down. Twin tire treads remained deep in the mud where they walked, small pools of water standing in the deepest depressions. Blue sky beaming above.

Near the base Jay stopped. Shannon stopped shortly behind. "What?"

He tucked the bat under his armpit and rested the shield against his knee. He extended his hands, palms facing upward. "I burnt them last night. Think I can get them healed?"

Shannon's eyes boggled in stupefaction. "Healed?" She recovered: "Well, we had a first aid kit, but it was in Dalt's truck when you got it *swept away in a landslide*, so you'll just have to forbear until we make it home."

"I'm not talking to you."

The small gray head of Olliebollen lolled against the edge of Shannon's pocket, bulging it in and out with aimless activity. The black insect eyes looked at him despite the odd angle of the head.

A sickly smile spread her lips.

"I can't."

"You can't," said Jay. "What, you still need time to rest?"

"I can't," said Olliebollen, "ever again." She laughed, coarse and rotten.

"You can't or you won't. I get you're upset but—"

"I can't! I can't! I can't! Don't you get it? I AM NO LONGER WHOLE!"

Emerging from the pocket a slithering slouching thing one arm clenching the fabric deep and the other arm not there, a stump of dead flesh clumped where Shannon cauterized it.

"I am less than 1 now. The art of my soul is shattered. My animus ripped asunder. I'm worthless. I'm a tiny twig on the forest floor, snapped in half because something stepped on me. Heal! Heal? Heal..."

"Have you even tried yet."

"Jay," said Shannon. "Ollie just lost an arm."

"I thought disfigurement wasn't an excuse," said Jay, "to be unproductive. Isn't that what you told those nuns."

"Jesus Jay what I meant was—"

"Have you tried?" He drilled his gaze into the fairy. His palms remained outstretched. "Have you tried."

Olliebollen's face shifted. By degrees. From mania to disgust to a resigned, apathetic humor, a shrill singular laugh spat.

"I don't *want* to try."

Fine. Jay lowered his hands, picked up the shield, and continued down the path.

"Better be careful, hero! Better be careful! Cuz this time when they cut you up or spill your guts or leave you bleeding to death with a dagger in your throat—this time there won't be anyone to save you! Nope, not this time! This time you'll see. This time you'll see how much of a hero you are. How much of a hero without little old Olliebollen, that's right. That's rightrightright!" Punctuated by fiendish, twittering laughter.

"It wasn't me who hurt you," he said.

"Doesn't matter. Nope, doesn't matter at all. You were a lie. One way or another you were a lie. The Master—she knew. The Master knew and still she—still she—"

The rest turned to ashes. The rest didn't matter. Jay, having started only a few steps prior, stopped again. They'd reached the base of the mountain. Ahead stretched the forest and the trail continued into its darkness. Leaves rustled in a gentle breeze and between the trees on either side of the trail was strung a large spiderweb.

YOU CAN NOT GOE THIS WHAY HERO

"Oh," said Shannon. "This one again. The spider with the abhorrent spelling."

Lalum. Alive.

Or maybe only reanimated. "You met her?" Jay asked.

"She told us where you were. Good thing too, because Bal Berith wanted to make us run out into the forest."

So not reanimated. Actually alive. The strands on the web shifted. "Lalum," Jay said casually, walking forward while tapping his bat against his shin, "don't tell me you're trying to slow us down for Mayfair. Come on. You know you can't stop me. Your sisters up at the monastery didn't even try."

The strands shifted: NO! NOT THAT. I AM NOT YOUR FOUE! An image of Lalum drew itself into the web, hands clasped, pleading. I WANT TO HELP!

He tried to pick out where Lalum herself was among the trees, just in case, but nothing moved except leaves in the wind. "Blocking the path isn't helping, Lalum."

"I'll handle this," said Shannon. "Look. Miss Spider. Lalum. My brother and I have somewhere very important to be and it's imperative we get there quickly—"

As she spoke the web changed, and while Shannon prattled on in spite of it, what it said made Jay stare in disbelief.

THE FAERIE QUEENE YET LIVES.

Accompanied by a drawing to render any ambiguity null: a winged woman wearing two old beat-up boots. Flanz-le-Flore.

"Actually, wait. Wait. I can't handle this. It's irking me too much." Shannon pushed ahead of Jay and placed her hands on her hips as she regarded the web. "Fairy is spelled F-A-I-R-Y. Queen is spelled Q-U-E-E-N. No extra E at the end. Got it?"

After a shy pause, the words changed to Shannon's spelling.

"There we go. Perfect. Proper spelling is important. Standardization of language is essential to eliminate errors and misunderstandings. It's simple professionalism anyway. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt given your sisters don't seem particularly well-educated, but try to do better moving forward, will you?"

I AM SO SORREE. I WILL DO MY BEST. Another picture of Lalum, crestfallen.

"S-O-R-R-Y. There we go. Good. You're learning. Just don't forget."

Jay snapped out of his thoughts and waved a hand at Shannon. "No, shut up, wait a second. Lalum, you're telling me Flanz-le-Flore is alive?"

I SAW HER WITH MY OWEN EYES!

"O-W-N. Come on where would you even get the extra E from."

Slowly, made even more slowly due to Shannon's sudden need to correct every spelling, grammatical, and stylistic error, Lalum related her tale. Whenever possible she resorted to pictures to convey meaning, which actually made her easier to understand. It went like this:

After Lalum told "the other heroes" where to find Jay, she continued along the road toward the monastery, having no other home to go to. Because of her injuries, she moved slowly. Eventually, bright lights appeared ahead, accompanied by a loud noise, and through pictures and roundabout descriptions Jay and Shannon eventually figured out what she saw was Wendell's jeep—containing Dalt, Perfidia, and Mayfair—driving away from the monastery. Lalum tried to get the jeep's attention, but it sped past without slowing.

Only a little sad at being so ignored—and also a little relieved—she continued on her path. It was some time later when the atmosphere of the forest changed.

Levity and mirth rose up among the greenery, laughter and song cheery in its timbre yet filling Lalum with a deep sense of dread as everything around her seemed to come alive. She

scurried to a hiding place and watched carefully. That was when she saw her: Flanz-le-Flore, the fairy queen.

Jay asked: Whole? Not with her face melted off? Not with her fingers shattered? (Snapped brittle in his fists.)

Right. Flanz-le-Flore, not a single wound on her. How? Lalum didn't know. Had not, in fact, known Flanz-le-Flore was hurt until Jay told her. Jay supposed, if magic were involved, anything was possible. Some fairy in Flanz-le-Flore's court could heal, maybe. Did it matter? To Jay it mattered. All Jay could see was that horrid melted face, all he could feel was her fingerbones in his grasp. And like Lalum she lived. None of them ever died. Only Makepeace died.

Fairies swirled around Flanz-le-Flore, those who remained from her court, maybe new ones she produced—and together they carried something. Someone. Lalum, gripping the edge of a large tree root, lifted her head slowly to see.

It was a man, lying limp but still breathing, his head slowly tossing back and forth, light shining on the discs that covered his eyes. Lalum recognized him. He was a man who'd been with "the other heroes"—with Shannon's party. On the web Lalum drew a picture of him: Wendell.

"I knew it! He's alive," said Shannon. "Of course. I'm only surprised Dalt left him. Oh well. We'll have to collect him before we leave."

Lalum's story wasn't finished. As she stared at the man drifting through the air on the back of fairy magic, she felt that familiar unsettling sensation of eyes watching her. She dove back into her hiding place, she cowered, she held her breath to wait for the singing to stop and the air to return to normal. It didn't. The song grew louder. Her heart pounded. Should she run? Should she stay still?

She squeezed her eyes shut but it didn't matter. Flanz-le-Flore floated down in front of her.

Please, Lalum begged her. Please don't kill me. I only wish to go home. Please!

The same groveling she did before in the court, before Flanz-le-Flore sicced wolves on her. Hopelessness congealed in her gut, she begged as a formality, she knew she was doomed. The hero wasn't around to intercede on her behalf this time.

But Flanz-le-Flore said simply, smilingly: "Give the hero a message. Tell him Queen Flanz-le-Flore very much wants to see him again. Tell him to come visit. Tell him I am waiting."

That was all. Lalum opened her eyes and watched Flanz-le-Flore and her procession carry Wendell deeper into the woods. The song subsided. The air returned to normal. And Lalum was free to finish her trek.

Not all the way, though. She didn't want her sisters to see her. Not the way she was, so brutally maimed, swaddled in bandages. It was painful enough to be seen when she was well; this was too much. So she waited for the hero here. Charm had passed earlier, and Lalum

(while hiding) tried to warn her about Flanz-le-Flore, but she didn't heed it and disappeared into the woods. That was all.

"Well thank you very much for the warning but we'll be on our way now," Shannon said. "We'll talk to this Flanz-le-Flore character and get Wendell back."

"Shannon, she wasn't being friendly when she said she was waiting for me."

"Oh, I'm aware Jay. Well aware. Given how that little girlfriend of yours acted I can only assume you're not exactly a charmer. I'll be the one who talks to her. I'll convince her, one way or another."

Sure. Become a rat in the process. Maybe Jay ought to let her try. Only problem was he'd be a rat first, and Olliebollen wouldn't or couldn't help him turn back.

Still, Jay wasn't spending the rest of his life hiding in the monastery. "Thanks for the warning, Lalum, but I have to keep going and the forest is in my way. I still have my bat, I have this shield too. I'll figure something out."

I NOUGH AN OTHER PATH.

"K-N-O-W. And 'another' is one word," said Shannon.

"Another path where?" asked Jay.

AROUND THE FORREST. THREW THE MONTAGNES. TO THE KASSEL.

Amid a slate of corrections, Jay said: "The castle. Castle Whitecrosse?"

YES! A SECRET PATH. BUT SAFE.

"That's all well and good," said Shannon, "but unfortunately, we're not going to the castle. We're going to the gate, and we need to be there as soon as possible, on top of needing to retrieve Wendell. So thanks again, but you can leave now."

"Why lead me on this supposedly safer route, Lalum. Why help me?"

BECAUSE YOU SAVED MY LYFE, HERO.

True. Jay did do that. And certain details of her story provided verisimilitude. Why place Wendell on the scene if she didn't actually see him? At the very least, Lalum was no threat to him whatsoever. Flanz-le-Flore, on the other hand, easily could be.

Besides, the castle was where he intended to go from the start. Not to the Door, no matter how much Shannon yelled.

"Sounds good," he said. "Lead the way."

"What! What!" Shannon made a ridiculous undulation of her entire upper body as her arms shot straight to her sides. "What!"

"There's nothing at the Door, Shannon. Mayfair and Sansaime are long gone by now. And I'm not interested in dealing with Flanz-le-Flore again."

"You're kidding me! How after everything that happened do you think staying here is in any way a sensible option? Are you suicidal or simply moronic?"

What possible point could be achieved by arguing with her? None. He squashed the rebuttal forming in his head, resolved himself to remain silent to her entreaties. She lacked any way to compel him. He needed to remember only that. No more being sidetracked by what others wanted for him. He followed his path from now on.

"Lead the way, Lalum."

The spiderweb shifted and an arrow pointed to the side along the fringe of the forest, where a long strand indicated the exact route among the crags and jutting rocks toward a narrow ledge etched into the side of a rising cliff. With the mountains on one side and the forest on another it was impossible to tell where this passageway went, and vaguely Jay supposed Lalum could be leading him to some trap or ambush, if not of her own volition then maybe because Mayfair intercepted her en route and told her to. Or killed her and made her, with the staff. Possibly—outside chance, but possibly—Perfidia *couldn't* open the Door, and Mayfair needed his Humanity or Shannon's key. But if so, it didn't make sense for Lalum to lead them *away* from the Door. Lalum telling the truth sounded more plausible.

He did save her life, after all, like she said. Interceded for her in Flanz-le-Flore's court. It made sense, it would be natural, for her to want to help him. Unlike all the other leeches, Perfidia's pawns, who wanted him for such-and-such and needed him for this-or-that. Unlike Shannon and her crew, who sought to exert their will over him. Lalum was the only person with a legitimate, unselfish reason to help. The only one.

(She could still want your Humanity. She could still be a leech too.) He warded that thought away, turning and following her spiderweb strand. Somebody wanted to help him in repayment for a heroic deed. He believed in that. He had to believe in that. If he couldn't believe in that, then he would continue the way he always was: Doubting everything, undermining everything.

He put faith in Lalum.

Shannon, of course, did not. Among the litany of standard insults regarding Jay's idiocy or laziness or "incomprehensible prioritization," she called into question Lalum's trustworthiness, ignoring apparently that she earlier trusted Lalum enough for directions to find Jay at the monastery. Jay let all of it bounce off his back.

"Think about Wendell! Even if the spider's story is true, we can't just leave him. He could be hurt. He could need our help."

"Fine," Jay said, walking. "Go yourself. I'm not stopping you."

He felt an icy cold where her glare struck the nape of his neck.

"Fine! Maybe I will." Her footsteps stomped the way they do only when you're stomping them on purpose.

"Probably shouldn't take the fairy with you though. Flanz-le-Flore won't be happy to see her, I think."

Shannon said nothing, although her stomping quieted (it didn't stop completely). Jay picked his way across an old tree bent to bridge a gap between two stones. It was difficult to move over this rugged terrain carrying the Makepeace's shield, so he stopped and spent some time figuring out how to clip it to his back the way Makepeace did, only to find that doing so caused his jacket to sag so far back the collar choked him. Whatever. He'd deal with the awkwardness of carrying it. Or maybe he could get Lalum to do it for him. He tried to search for her in the thinning edge of the forest as he proceeded along the stony ridge, and only saw something that was maybe the tips of a few spider legs scrabbling.

Then, as Jay expected, Shannon's tromping footsteps came back toward him. Despite her businesslike attire she managed the path better than Jay had done, hopping from stone to stone until she was only a step behind him, exuding a palpable impatience that he wasn't leading the way faster.

"Alright! We'll go to the castle," she said. "At least there'll be some kind of authority there. A government. I'll explain the situation. They're sure to have some way to help. A way to recover Wendell. Another key to the gate maybe. At the very least they'll help me with *you*."

Whatever Shannon wanted to say. All Jay had to do was tune her out. Lalum didn't speak, Olliebollen no longer felt like it. So if he tuned out his sister, all became right in the world.

Freedom from Want

By noon, Mayfair—having skipped sleep, although fatigue unwanted now weighed heavy—organized the devil's papers into more logical order.

The first and most fundamental category of pages detailed laws inherent to the underlying structure of Whitecrosse. One page, for instance, specified the world of Whitecrosse as a spheroid with an average diameter of a certain number of miles. A note in the margins indicated this diameter was significantly smaller than that of Earth. Subsequent pages listed equations for gravity, chemical compositions of atmosphere and soil, various fundamental functions of physics, and so forth.

These pages would drive the court astrologers into a frenzy, Mayfair thought. They nearly drove *her* into one! Knowledge was contained within them about the workings of the universe to upheave all mankind knew of the cosmos, at least in their world—perhaps too in this one. The equations and notation styles were arcane even to Mayfair, who considered herself quite an exemplary student; some she could not even begin to fathom. Thirst for understanding left her lingering far longer on certain pages than merited, and she traced their worn glyphs with a fingertip as she tried to piece together what they signified. It was clear the devil, no virtuoso, copied directly God's handiwork. These equations were not simply the logic underlying an ersatz world, but a partial unveiling of mysteries established by the divine. How could Mayfair not tremble? How could she not bounce until the devil's strangely-wheeled seat squeaked and groaned? Her palpitating heart transported her instantly to late nights in the royal library, guided by candlelight handled with utmost care lest even a spot of hot wax mar the kingdom's collective knowledge (let alone the least tongue of flame! Oh how it lanced her through to see the monastery so consumed!). Little compared to the feeling of quenched curiosity, question asked and question answered; a pursuit that thrilled, for its result was no slain hare but a real, purposeful edification of the spirit.

However, she must govern herself. The responsibility of an entire world rested upon her, and a selfish descent into a hole shaped only for herself would be negligently wasteful of the opportunity she earned. Earned with blood, she reminded herself, seeing the image of her brother's ruined form in the mud. Rather than flinch from the horrible sight, she focused it in her mind's eye so that it might spur her, remind her not to settle for simple mental pleasure.

But it was a sad and a lonely image, and Mayfair's skin felt cold, as cold as Dalton's as he waited patiently in his chair, and for a moment she wished someone alive was there to fill the void.

In the light of this world, she made a simple prayer for Makepeace's soul and sent it to God: Please forgive him his sins, though they be many, and remember him, even if it was not You who made him. Amen. Then she continued.

Her comprehension or not of the "fundamental law" papers turned out to be irrelevant. When she worked up the nerve to make some minor alteration in mere experimentation, she found that when she added ink to a page it seeped straight into the parchment and vanished. Several

subsequent attempts, on various other papers from the same pile, yielded identical results. A safeguard was in place. If this safeguard could be undone, Mayfair knew not how.

Changes *were* possible to pages in the second pile—by far the largest (in fact ten piles, all stacked to the roof)—yet, frustratingly, not all changes. These papers detailed information about things, creatures, places, and people within the world of Whitecrosse. Mayfair found among these a paper for herself: Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke, date of birth, parentage, physical descriptors, and so on. One line described her personality in brief: "Pious; devoted to well-being of world; intelligent," all quite good, until it continued: "Devious; convinced of her own righteousness; willing to sacrifice her morals in pursuit of her goals (although in denial about this fact); generally in denial about her bad qualities even if she hypocritically pontificates to herself about forgiveness for her sins; lacking familial feeling; yearning for and yet failing to achieve meaningful connections with others due to general egoism, coldness, and inflexibility" and various other rude remarks that culminated in a final insult, clearly scribbled in haste at the end: "And let her have romantic feelings toward the hero—just in case he's into little girls."

How—how absurd! She did not—absolutely did *not*—have any such feelings! In the monastery she gripped him solely as an act, nothing more! She tried to scratch out the offending lines with the quill, indeed all lines detailing her negative attributes.

None of the changes succeeded. Her furious scribbling faded to nothing. Her page remained as it was. No—wait. One change succeeded.

It wasn't one of her personality traits. It was the latest physical descriptor. One that puzzled her. It didn't make sense for the line to exist on this page in the first place, as it did not exist before the events at the monastery, when the devil was captive and unable to access the papers. The line read: "Corrupted by use of animus; scales are growing on her left arm, chest, and back."

This line, when she crossed it out, stayed crossed out. The ink did not fade.

Carefully, she drew up the sleeve of her shirt. There were no scales. She saw only unblemished skin, the familiar skin of her arm, skin she was used to seeing.

Immediately her fingers fumbled for buttons so that she might check the rest of her body, then she realized she was in view of Dalton and looked away sheepishly before directing him to stand up and go outside. Once the door shut behind him, and ensuring she was in view of nobody through the office window, she confirmed what she expected.

After she buttoned everything back up, she sank into the devil's chair and allowed Dalton to reenter. She tapped her forehead, fast to start, faster still as her thoughts intensified, wondering: Why did that change work but no others? Was it simply impossible to change personality traits, while physical descriptors were allowed? She scanned the list for another trait she might change without accidentally maiming herself. There: A birthmark on her shoulder. She already set Dalton rising by the time she leaned over to scratch out the line, but it turned out Dalton did not need to leave because her amendment vanished immediately, exactly like the ones she made to her personality.

How unusual! There must be a logic. Must! Was it only possible to change the most recent item on the list? Then why did her alleged affection for the hero (ugh! So vague. Did Dalton not count as a hero too? But she—he—forget about it!) remain the same? Perhaps it had something to do with how the animus corruption was not something the devil herself added to the page. Perhaps she had a confederate? But who? Where? No, that made little sense.

Then Mayfair remembered something. The devil mentioned it offhand. The verbiage was unorthodox; it stuck in Mayfair's head. "I idiot-proofed the whole deal so I wouldn't contradict something I already did." The phrase "idiot-proof," while unfamiliar to Mayfair, made sense in context.

Changes could only be made if they did not contradict established facts.

That couldn't be the whole story. Were that the case, nothing could be removed from the pages at all; only additions were possible. Then what made her animus corruption different from the other aspects of her page?

After a few seconds' thought, she struck upon it.

Nobody except her knew about her corruption. When it manifested, her clothes covered it entirely. Nobody saw it. Certainly, given the rules of the world, one assumed she must have experienced *some* sort of corruption, but that was not the same as observably confirming its existence. Being "unestablished," Mayfair could erase it—without contradiction.

By comparison, her other traits had been observed. Even, she realized ruefully, her alleged affection toward the hero. Many people saw her clinging to him; Dalton, when alive, even called her his "girlfriend." Ugh. UGH! She wanted to die. Die, die, die! Sink into a hole and die! They must think she was a whore. And the devil, insinuating even worse... tempting her... Sink into a hole and die!

She couldn't die. Nobody was looking at her now. Dalton was dead, a puppet, she could even disrobe in front of him and it would mean nothing because he was only a lump of flesh and not a thinking mind. She must focus; she already gleaned great insight about what was and was not possible. With that, she turned to the third and final pile of pages.

This was the pile on the devil's desk. It included pages detailing the actions that people in the world were currently taking, and a cursory observation of them explained how details about Mayfair's corruption made it onto her page without the devil's intervention. The pages updated automatically, as though an invisible hand with an invisible quill wrote upon them, words manifesting out of thin air as the personages therein undertook various actions: Jay Waringcrane asleep in the monastery chapel, Shannon Waringcrane speaking (her dialogue depicted as though in a story, with quotation marks) to some nuns, Olliebollen sulking in Shannon's pocket, and so forth.

So there was some sort of automation. Some aspect of free will, at least, if nothing more. Mayfair raised the quill to attempt to write—

Buzz, buzz, buzz. She glanced about the office, her eyeballs strained and dry. An insect? With the office window shattered, one might easily infiltrate. No. The buzzing was so

precise, rhythmic instead of constant. And it came from her thrall, Scott Dalton Swaino II.

At her wordless command, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the buzzing object. It appeared to be a small rectangle, with rounded edges, and a shiny front from which light exuded to show a display of words and numbers.

He brought the object closer and she squinted to read. Foremost was written:

FROM: Dad

MESSAGE: Where in hell are you? It's Thanksgiving dammit!

Immediately, a second cluster of text appeared:

FROM: Dad

MESSAGE: Get your ass over here this instant or you're not eating turkey dinner tonight!!!

The word "dinner" caused a rather loud and humiliating sound to emerge from Mayfair's stomach; sudden realization struck her that she had fasted for some time, to compound her exuberant fatigue. Worse yet, she knew not how to acquire food in this world. These thoughts overshadowed her wonder at the device, which appeared to automatically add words the way the devil's pages did, although perhaps via different mechanism.

Forlornly she glanced at the knowledge and opportunity piled around her. None of it mattered if she could not sustain herself within this new world. Although it pained her, she needed to place *some* priority on her physical wellbeing.

This "turkey dinner" might prove a start. (Although one could only wonder what a "turkey" was.) She regarded the device in Dalton's hand and then looked at Dalton himself. Those resurrected by her staff lacked their human memory, but memory contained within the body rather than the mind remained.

"Do you know how to operate this device?" she asked.

Without a word, Dalton tapped the shining display, and all was revealed.

—

Scott Dalton Swaino I (the First; not, as some documents erroneously labeled him, "Senior") scowled from the panorama window of his second-story drawing room when the silver Porsche pulled into the driveway and his son, Scottie, stepped out. Expensive vehicle there, that Porsche. Scott Dalton understood more than a little about his son's financial situation, and if not for Yolanda's overly generous gift two birthdays prior (oh how Scott Dalton argued against the Land Rover, oh how he tried to convince his wife to give their son only what he

deserved—a talking-to), Scottie wouldn't have been able to afford a used Honda. So where did the Porsche come from?

His first thought was that it must belong to that uppity girlfriend of his, that Warner-Crane girl or however it went. But squinted eyes joined his scowl when from the Porsche's passenger door emerged a girl, thirteen or fourteen, carrying a weird cane and wearing a black dress that would've looked at home on a Plymouth Rock Puritan.

Something was rotten in the state of Denmark, that's for sure.

Of course, Scott Dalton had instincts—good ones. He smelled this rottenness far before the Porsche. He smelled it ever since that first reply Scottie sent him:

I thank you most graciously for your invitation, father. May you please inform me where I can locate you?

To which Scott Dalton furiously mashed: *The same damn house you grew up in, MORON!!!*

I apologize profusely, father. I have gotten turned around and lost my way. May you provide directions? I can describe my current location to you.

There was trickery in those messages. At first Scott Dalton assumed his son was pulling a prank, something too stupid to be comprehended. Then he thought there may be method to the madness. After all, hadn't only a few days earlier Scottie asked to spend Thanksgiving with Warner-Crane and her family instead of his actual family? Scott Dalton stomped that suggestion into the dirt, there would *not* be a Thanksgiving (or Christmas, or Easter) without every Swaino present in the Swaino household, but Scottie was never one to respect the wishes of his father. Remembering that context, the truth of the matter took shape: Scottie was trying to double-dip on Thanksgiving, spending one turkey dinner with the Warner-Cranes and another with the Swainos. It explained his lateness, it explained this whole "lost my way" horseshit—obvious stalling tactic—and it explained his overly formal, ingratiating tone, the kind of tone not even the most brazen brown-nosers at work would dare employ.

Well, Scott Dalton refused to play the game. He sent Scottie the exact address (city and ZIP code included) and then shut off his phone. Either the boy showed up quickly or he better not show up at all, because no excuse would stop Scott Dalton from chewing his head off.

The Porsche, though, and the girl, Scott Dalton did not expect. Now, he anticipated far worse bullshittery afoot.

"Something the matter dear?" Yolanda hurried past with a handful of fine china from the fancy bureau at the end of the hall they only touched three times per year. "Let's not sour the holiday with bad energy. Positive mentality, okay?" As she disappeared around a bend her voice trailed: "I want to feeeel the good vibes!"

Good vibes, positive mentality—bah!

Scott Dalton tromped downstairs. He had *questions*. Many, many questions. Moving quickly, he managed to preempt Scottie and his plus-one reaching the front door and opened it the

instant of the first knock.

"Good afternoon, father!" Scottie said immediately, his face and posture impeccable, but his clothes an utter mess, not only inappropriate for the occasion but splattered with dried mud. "You have my utmost gratitude for this invitation."

It was Scottie's voice but Scott Dalton found the words antithetical to what he knew of his son. He narrowed his eyes, leaned his head slowly out the door, and looked one way and the other. Hidden cameras. One of those old-time shows where people played a prank on someone who did not consent to be filmed and then, when the person reacted appropriately, the results were broadcast on television for millions across America to laugh at. Scott Dalton thought they outlawed that horseshit, or introduced regulations that required consent. Maybe on the internet those shows got a second life. The government was too damn slow regulating the internet. People got up to all kinds of nonsense that wouldn't fly two seconds in the real world.

Scott Dalton saw nobody filming, which didn't mean jack, since cameras were so small nowadays. He mulled his words carefully before asking: "Mind explaining what's going on —"

"Oh, Scottie! Welcome home!"

Yolanda glided across the long entryway fluttering her hands first at her sides before slowly raising them until they were the appropriate level (extended nearly straight upward) to wrap around Scottie's broad shoulders for a hug. Which she did, long and exaggerated the way she liked them, filled with twittering glee and little shrieks.

"Ah, you're so cold! It's not that chilly outside is it?" When she finally let go she stepped back, placed her oven mitts on her hips, and looked Scottie up and down, as if trying to discern whether he somehow grew even more than he already had. "Well now, don't be shy. Step on in. Your timing's perfect, dinner's *just* about ready. Was scared you'd be too late and have to eat your turkey cold, but that's alright. Oh and you brought a guest! What's your name, sweetie?"

"I am Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke," said the little girl. "I am pleased to meet you."

"Well you are just so cute aren't you? You can call me Yolanda or Mrs. S, that's what all my students call me. Now don't be shy. You don't gotta worry Scottie, I did prepare a smidge extra under the assumption you might bring along a guest, although I'll admit I expected Shannon. *Will* Shannon be coming? I really do like that girl you know although I understand some people prefer to spend Thanksgiving with their own folks."

"Yolanda—"

"And is this grumpy goose here giving you a hard time?" Yolanda placed her oven mitts on Scott Dalton's shoulders—she needed to reach nearly as high as with Scottie—and gave him a playful shake. "Don't you listen to a word he says, got it? He may think he's boss around these parts and that may be true sometimes but this is a *holiday* and I have spent. All. Day! Preparing just *the* most excellent Thanksgiving dinner, so today this is *my* house. I don't

wanna hear any arguing or 'talking about the future' at the table today, if I hear a word of it not one of you is getting seconds—except you of course Mayfair, you can eat all you like. Now do you boys understand me?"

All the while she ushered Scottie and Mayfair through the doorway, past Scott Dalton, over the fancy carpet despite the mud being tracked in on their guests' shoes (but what did Yolanda care! Just something for the maid to clean up that weekend—same as all those extra pots in the kitchen), through the first-floor drawing room and into a dining room rendered lavish by an especially fine embroidered tablecloth, china, and shining silverware, all while closer proximity to the kitchen made the scent of the upcoming meal stronger and stronger.

Absolutely absurd behavior from Yolanda of course. Didn't even ask Mayfair who she was despite there being no obvious explanation for why Scottie would be driving around with some child, and of course she must've seen the Porsche in the driveway too but not a question about that either. Not that Scott Dalton could get a word in edgewise over his wife's blather about how long such-and-such side dish took, where she got the turkey, which extended family members called to ask how they were all doing, et cetera.

Scott Dalton tamped down his annoyances. When it came to it, Yolanda was on his side. Good cop, bad cop. That's how they got on so well together despite the differences. In this house Scott Dalton only ever had one ally.

Yolanda sat them at their seats—Scott Dalton at the head, Scottie directly across Yolanda, Mayfair next to Scottie. Mayfair placed her large cane, which had a weird bulbous component at the end, against the edge of the table. She did not appear to require the cane to walk, which only raised questions, questions Scott Dalton trembled to refrain from asking as Yolanda carted trays and dishes from the kitchen to the table.

All the Thanksgiving classics: Mashed potatoes, gravy, green bean casserole, biscuits with butter, stuffing, lobster, fried okra, horseradish, cranberry sauce, salad, prime rib, steak sauce, corn on the cob, coleslaw, a pitcher of water and a pitcher of fruit punch (Yolanda's own personal concoction, which Scott Dalton simply could not stomach), salt, pepper, paprika, vegetable juice that Scott Dalton also could not stomach but of which his doctor requested he drink a cup daily, kale, some sort of inedible bread formed by a synthesis of seventeen different oats and grains that Yolanda claimed helped her digestion, and last but not least, with dramatic aplomb in its reveal and placement at the exact center of the table, a big fat turkey.

Scott Dalton didn't care for turkey. Once everything was finally set he made a beeline for the prime rib. Of course this was all ten times too much food for the three of them even with any suspicious fourth but Yolanda needed an excuse to justify that outrageously equipped kitchen that kept them house hunting a full five months, didn't she?

As Scott Dalton was hewing and forking a slab of steak, Mayfair asked: "Are we not to say grace first?"

To which of course Yolanda immediately clapped her hands and said, "Oh what a wonderful idea! It is Thanksgiving after all, we ought to give thanks, shouldn't we dear?" Her smilingly cold eye landed on Scott Dalton.

Making him look foolish in his own house—bah! He put down fork and knife and sat back straight in his chair, clearing his throat. Stringent Presbyterianism enforced on him by a thankfully-deceased father injected a lifelong souring of religion into his psyche, but he *supposed* on such infrequent festive occasions he could pay lip service.

Hands clasped, head bowed, he mumbled: "Thank You Heavenly Father for this meal and the great bounty You have bestowed upon us amen." Rising he caught a condescendingly wide smile on Yolanda's face and—unexpectedly, given she'd composed herself with utmost politeness thus far—sheer disgust on Mayfair's. Before Scott Dalton could shoot back his own look she reclaimed control and put on the same pleasant visage as before. Oh, but Scott Dalton was onto her. Yes he was.

"So Mayfair, what exactly is your relationship to my son?" he asked.

"Oh Scott, come now, let's not pester the poor girl while we're supposed to be eating. Go on everyone, fill your plates, there you go. Take whatever you like, there's more than enough for everyone."

Scott Dalton returned to cutting his prime rib but he kept a close eye on Mayfair. He knew what was what. Yolanda must know too, which was exactly why she cut his question short. Little girl in a starched old timey blouse, who bowed her head and mouthed her own silent prayer to herself—one that lasted a good deal longer than Scott Dalton's—before finally reaching to serve herself with small and uncertain fingers, and them both speaking in such a stilted formal way? *Cult*. Clearcut and naked. She was in some cult and somehow Scottie'd gotten himself suckered into it too. One of those solicitous wingnut religions where well-dressed men knock door-to-door and hand out pamphlets promising salvation, redemption. It'd be just like Scottie to get mixed up in something brainless like that, and then what? They slapped this little girl on him, made him take care of her? The cult's idea of free childcare? While also keeping an eye on Scottie, making sure he abided whatever absurd behavioral standards the cult inflicted on its members. Oh yes. Scott Dalton had it all figured out. Look at that ridiculous cane she carried. Bone white staff with a glass sphere at the top, cult paraphernalia for sure.

Cult! Yolanda of course wouldn't want any talk of *that* to ruin her meal and Scott Dalton didn't blame her, just the thought made his stomach churn (not enough to stop him from shredding a slice off his steak, dabbing it in ample steak sauce and horseradish, and taking a bite). Scottie in a cult, a new low. Next he'd be asking for money. Ah yes. Of course. Forget childcare, money was the true reason he brought that little girl along, her clothes respectable in concept but frayed, dirty. He watched her, piling her plate high, operating with semi-respectable table manners but frantic and hungry in the bites she took with quick birdlike motions of her pretty head. The cult needed money and they sent this cuckoo child to eat in their home and beg for it afterward. Yolanda would of course fork it up, "oh it's only a thousand Scott, we can afford it—and *look* at the poor girl," but for Scott Dalton it was the concept, not the money, that angered him. Obviously that thousand or two thousand or however much wasn't going to that girl's welfare, oh no, it'd go to whomever was in charge, pay for drugs to keep the brainwashed followers in line, or maybe more Porsches, who knew with these cults. Oughtta do the country a favor and follow Jonestown's example, that's what Scott Dalton thought.

Thinking whipped him into a lather as he swallowed bite after bite and washed away the horseradish—too mild, Yolanda always got it too mild—with gulps of water. Yolanda filled the silence with useless questions, oh how's work, oh how's your apartment, questions Scottie answered with long and formal answers that said nothing at all ("My occupation keeps me busy, mother, and I find it quite fulfilling to render myself useful to the world"). Not a single question that might trip a landmine.

Until, that is, she asked:

"And how's Shannon been doing lately?"

Yolanda maybe didn't expect the answer she got, which Scottie delivered as stiffly as the others:

"Dear mother, I have recently broken off my engagement with Lady Shannon."

"Engagement? Broken off?" said Scott Dalton. "How recently are we talking? You were spouting off about her over the phone just a couple days ago."

"Oh, well, we don't need to discuss this now, do we?" said Yolanda. "How are you all enjoying the meal? Is there anything I can get anyone?"

"Come on Yolanda, let us talk about this." Scott Dalton chewed and swallowed. "I should be able to talk about what I want at my own dinner table, shouldn't I?"

"Yes dear," strained smiled plastered on Yolanda's lips, "but last year I let you talk about what you wanted and it was a three-hour *screaming* match about the election. I—"

"And that was *my* fault? You were the one who thought it'd be an excellent idea to invite your crazy anarchist sister over—"

"I just don't want this lovely dinner ruined!"

"Jesus," said Scott Dalton. He thought, a mantra: *She is your ally. She is your ally.*

Mayfair lifted the head she'd basically burrowed into her mound of food—no even token attempt at manners now—and glared through a goatee of gravy. "Please refrain from using the Lord's name as an oath."

"I'll use whoever's name I want as an oath, who are you to tell me otherwise?" He rose partway. "You come to my house, you eat my wife's food, and you tell me how to act?"

"Scott, it's okay, she can eat the food! I *like* that more people are eating it, I spent effort making it. And since I wasn't allowed to invite *my* family—"

"I only want to know why she's here. Why's she here, Scottie. Tell me that."

"Scott, please, let's not ruin the meal—"

"She's already ruining the meal Yolanda! She is! Ever think of that? Ever think it destroys *my* appetite having a stranger I've never met sitting just down the table from me on Thanksgiving day—"

"Scott, she's a *little girl*. She's hungry! Our son is doing something good, can't you see? Isn't that what Thanksgiving is about? You're doing something good, aren't you Scottie?"

Doing something good! Sure! However you want to phrase it Yolanda. Always too soft, and Scott Dalton too soft too for letting her get away with it. Yolanda, of course, was the only reason their only son was allowed to bash his brains in during college, probably accruing permanent cerebral trauma in the process—Let him follow his dreams, he's young, he won't get another chance! And Scott Dalton caved, should never have caved, now their son was brain damaged and getting suckered into a cult because of it!

But he kept that inside. He understood himself teetering on a precipice, one he could walk away from whenever he wanted. Last year he said certain things that hurt—truly hurt—the people he loved. He knew that. He knew it and yet—and yet it was just so easy, so damn easy to yell and shout, it felt good yelling and shouting, exerting one's will.

The look in Yolanda's eyes begged him to back off.

Just a few deep breaths, just a few seconds to cool down. It was important to Yolanda this meal went smoothly which meant, as her partner, it should be important to him. So spoke the counsellor. He lowered himself back into his chair, pretending he believed the fantasy Yolanda span: A poor hungry girl, Scottie providing some simple charity...

"Mother. Father," Scottie said, once the others finally fell silent. He had hardly touched his food. Maybe hadn't touched it at all—certainly unlike him.

"Yes, Scottie?" Yolanda wore her brightest, most understanding smile.

"I know you have some misgivings about Mayfair. However, I can assure you she is not some stranger I met on the street."

"Yes, of course Scottie. I trust you."

"She is of royal lineage, and I am engaged to wed her."

A quiet descended. A fork laden with beef slowly descended to Scott Dalton's plate. Yolanda's mouth hung slightly open, her fingertips pressed to her lips.

"What?" Yolanda said. "What? I—I think I misheard you, Scottie. I—what?"

"I said, she is a princess. I am engaged to wed her."

Yolanda started to scream.

As the car swerved away, Mayfair curled in the seat beside the driver clutching a bundle of papers to a bleeding forehead wound. Her other hand, upturned, shone with three red droplets to which her attention affixed, although these drops were less perplexing than the situation they fled. She had believed, with absolute certainty, that she made a correct decision. After merely a few minutes in the presence of Dalton's parents and their lavish, sprawling palace—a manor as impressive as those of the finest noble houses in Whitecrosse—Mayfair believed she comprehended their anxieties and knew the exact panacea to calm them. A stranger, they called her, and a pauper too, someone unfit to dine in their presence (she admitted to herself the supreme bounty of their table combined with her powerful hunger may have caused her to act with somewhat less refinement than demanded). What better way to assuage their worries than reveal her status and tie herself to Dalton via the auspices of holy union?

When she puppeteered Dalton to speak while she bit into a leg of that delicious yet unknown fowl called "turkey," she had fully expected to see the frowns of his mother and father shift into broad and welcoming smiles. Nobility only found itself at ease in the presence of either servants or other nobility, and sometimes not even the former; had she not witnessed and manipulated to her ends the aristocratic inclinations of those perpetually-reaching hangers-on who thronged the Whitecrosse court?

Instead Dalton's mother hurled a plate at Mayfair's head.

Why? Why did they reject her? Their home had been so warm. The father stern but not inflexible, the mother joyful and caring...

Had they simply not believed their son? The lie possessed the ounce of truth necessary for a lie to be believable, and as a figure who no longer felt emotion or fear Dalton was able to speak clearly and without wavering. What, then, was the trouble?

That woman, so warm and smiling, so suddenly hurling that plate at her head... Mayfair's hands quivered. Her vision blurred with tears. "Damn it," she said. "Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it...!"

"It's okay," said Dalton. "It's okay. You're stronger than this. That wasn't her. It wasn't your mother."

"Everyone always hates me. I don't know why. Why does everyone always hate me?"

"I don't hate you."

"You're dead!"

She laughed. Had to! Here she was, talking to herself via the conduit of a corpse she puppeteered via necromancy. The ridiculousness snapped her out of the incipient melancholy she felt rising inside her; she continued to laugh, she laughed until her head felt woozy and her vocal chords ached. But she felt better. None of that mattered, none of what anyone thought about her mattered. When she saved them all, they'd love her.

Mayfair wiped her palm free of blood, took up the "turkey" leg she managed to stash away as she and Dalton hastily fled the manor, and tore off a prodigious chunk of flesh with her teeth. In a more rational mindset, she considered what Dalton's father screamed, pink in the face as he struggled to hold his wife back despite her long and painted claws rending the air in front of her: "How old is she? Thirteen, Scottie? Fourteen? What the fuck is wrong with you? Get out, get out, out of my house now!"

And Lady Swaino's addendum, echoing through the halls during the final steps of their retreat: "You little bitch! You'll ruin his life you little whore!"

And something Shannon had said back at the monastery: "Jay, she's too young for you anyway."

Was it her age, and not her personality, that was the issue? But she was fourteen, perfectly marriageable, even if the thought of marriage to some ancient duke made her ill whenever her mother threatened her with the idea (which was often). Mayfair's mother, after all, was not only married at fourteen, but pregnant. Such an age had been considered old enough throughout Whitecrosse's history, and neither the Bible nor John Coke found anything objectionable in it.

Yet Earth now was not at all as John Coke described it. Manors, each fit for a dukedom, sat side-by-side in long rows as Dalton drove past. The car itself was a marvel, a phantom of automatic construction, as were the shining lights and glittering glass towers they encountered on their journey, and the queer device in Dalton's pocket, which not only allowed instantaneous communication with multiple people far away (Dalton kept receiving messages from people labeled as "Mrs. Dub" and "Da-rae;" Mayfair ignored them), but also provided an almost endless array of other benefits—not least of which being a magic map that directed you to a location if you only told it where to go.

For Earth, unlike Whitecrosse, the passage of time prompted change. Prompted progress. Societal as well as technological. Girls her age were no longer forced to marry much older men; indeed, given the violent reaction of Dalton's parents, this idea was as repugnant to them as it was to Mayfair herself. Did this also suggest a world where women were less restrained by subordination to men in general?

Fascinating! She wanted to know more. Needed to. All facets of this world's developments seized her imagination. How many hours might she spend just with Dalton's magic box, tapping its various buttons (with arcane names such as "Google" and "Facebook" and "Twitter") and discovering what each did? Or exploring this unending city through which they could drive an hour without reaching their destination. Already, simply by observing Dalton's motions as he piloted the car, she was learning what each lever and pedal did, and believed with some practice might be able to pilot it herself. But was that the best use of her time, while Dalton still served as an excellent chauffeur? No. She must prioritize, must learn the most important things first and leave as succulent mysteries the rest—for now. Once she brought Whitecrosse into this world and saved her people, then she could fall into a hole of learning from which she never needed to emerge—with others by her side. Her thoughts returned to the devil's papers. She must find out what was and was not possible to change. And if the papers themselves did not allow certain changes, there were other methods. The

relics in Whitecrosse's vault, for instance, possessed certain exemplary powers. But how to enter the vault? Journeying there herself was too dangerous—it was the only way she could be usurped as New Master, just as she usurped the devil. Yet only those with royal blood could open the vault's door. And her brother was... Well.

But wasn't something missing in this world? Something she hadn't seen?

And then, as though God placed it into her path in response to her very thoughts, she saw it.

"Stop the car, Sir Dalton!" she suddenly cried out. Dalton stopped as asked, in the middle of the street, only for a blare of klaxons to rise from the cars behind until Dalton maneuvered into a vast patio of pavement that seemed to specifically serve the purpose of allowing cars to rest while deactivated. As soon as the car slowed Mayfair was outside, fervently swallowing the last chunks of "turkey" before tossing the cleaned bone aside, as well as the papers she used to staunch her bleeding, her blood having coagulated. Wiping hands clean on her clothes she, with Dalton trailing, approached the structure that caught her eye.

It was small compared to the Swaino manor and the tower that contained the devil's office, but it was topped with a symbol familiar to Mayfair, one that healed her heart of the final misgiving that plagued her in this world: the symbol of the cross.

A sign beside the steepled building read:

Cuyahoga Baptist Church

1 Chronicles 16:34

"GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, FOR HE IS GOOD; HIS LOVE ENDURES FOREVER."

The quote was altered from Mayfair's memory ("O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever"), but other than the substitution of "mercy" for "love" the essence was unchanged.

Finally!

When Dalton's father mumbled the prayer she'd wanted to shriek at him. Elsewhere she'd seen no exaltation of God or Christ in the architecture whatsoever. Even now, the small stature of the church surprised her. In this land of unparalleled progress, why were there not cathedrals whose towers scraped the skies, why were there not statues or art arrayed in the most public spaces so that all, even the poorest and meanest of their brethren, would know who truly ruled this world? She had instead seen, strung from light-poles that lined the streets, banners depicting the "turkey" bird with words such as "Happy Thanksgiving!"—this Thanksgiving being, apparently, a secular feast day, perhaps a harvest festival. If not impious this dereliction of praise was at least idiotic on the part of this kingdom's rulers, who ought well to know the power such art held over the common rabble.

Nonetheless, the church was here. Mayfair could not resist. She made herself more presentable with a few quick adjustments, held her staff, and approached the doors. There was a placard in front of them. In Loving Memory, it read, and then displayed an image of a person so realistic it unsettled Mayfair to think human artists had ascended to such levels of skill. The image was of an absolutely ancient man whose skin hung in pendulous folds. From inside the open door the voice of a priest intoned.

A funeral service. But under the deceased's name and dates of birth and death were words that marred Mayfair's face in consternation. "Thanksgiving service to be held afterward." A secular feast enshrined even here? Or was there perhaps a religious dimension to the festival that was simply unacknowledged in the home of Dalton's father? The name certainly invoked pious feeling. To whom else would thanks be given?

She entered the church, leading Dalton, and saw before her a modest space, clean and orderly but humble. The pulpit was small and white and adorned only with the sign of the cross. Certainly, the fireless lights above and the mathematical precision of all angles were impressive beyond measure of what Whitecrosse could create, but there was no sense of awe, no religious fervor within these walls, only tidiness. The open coffin at the end contained the cold and white dead man wearing clothes of a similar fashion to those Dalton's father wore, and the scattered congregation—numbering only about twenty souls—were similarly attired.

Yet the dead man was certainly wealthy and important enough for an artist of immaculate skill to render a flawless likeness of him. Was this the best he could purchase for himself? Had the Christian faith dwindled to such a degree? The priest—surprisingly dark-skinned, even more than the people of California or that elf her brother bedded—droned on, phlegmatic and bored, in simple vestments.

Bizarre! More than bizarre: unfathomable. How did Earth exceed Whitecrosse in every possible measure except what was arguably most important? How were these people, living within earthly paradise, so limp in their demonstrations of gratitude? Even on this day of Thanksgiving!

Did they not understand?

Did they not know how hollow a feeling it was?

In those drafty castle rooms, surrounded by books and papers, late nights without a spark of light inside. Her mother not there, her brother not there, her only points of human contact faceless servants beaten via rod from a young age to sterile anonymity. Mayfair was always good at learning, at memorizing facts and details, she possessed what her tutor described as a voracious appetite for knowledge, and yet no matter how much she took inside her it never filled that empty feeling.

Only that grand cathedral, looming nearly as high as the castle itself, the spires and the bells, only in that hallowed space. Golden, every surface gleaming, and the figures on the altarpiece rising to a sweeping clouded landscape where God reigned supreme, a vibration in the cold air that sounded like a steady hum—only then did Mayfair feel a presence in that space she lacked. It was not a feeling experienced via any of the five senses, nor a feeling experienced with the mind. It was an embrace, a glowing dream.

It was God.

She knew, of course, that what she felt in that cathedral was mere facsimile. That God did not exist in Whitecrosse, that some clever combination of art and architecture substituted that glory. But here, on Earth, she felt it, had felt it—with only a few interruptions—since the moment she stepped through the Door, the pulse on her skin, the heaving in her heart. Did they not feel it too? Dalton's father, and the meager group arrayed in this church, and the blackamoor priest who seemed to traverse merely the motions. Even Archbishop Astrophicus, dry in his lectures, was motivated by a drive for holy truth that brought him to the terrain of heresy. Why not here? Why not here?

One foot buckled; she swayed. Dalton caught her but, unnoticed even by the priest, she lifted her hands to her face. She realized, with horror, that the feeling that imbued her as she walked through the Door had faded, was barely there, that tremble or echo, that sense of being filled by something magnificent. It couldn't be, though. God couldn't fade. And He was certainly here, this was Earth, this was His world, created by Him, loved by Him.

No. He couldn't fade. Why didn't she feel it then? A fatigue swept her, she had not slept and all at once it hit her. Why? She'd thought—hoped—prayed—after everything she did—after Makepeace—it had all been essential.

The hands that held her, Dalton's hands, were cold. A corpse. When he spoke in so genteel a manner it was farce, puppetry, her own voice in his timbre. Emptiness crept back inside her, the dismal church demanded it, as though it had been constructed in mockery of God rather than the opposite. It was the people, though, the people who struck the deepest wound, such salubrious and moribund types, so cold and unfeeling even at this funeral—not a single woman sobbing, not a single tear being shed!—even at this day of Thanksgiving, the father howling harsh invective, the mother hurling that plate—the mother!

She tore herself away from Dalton's cold hands and in so doing stabilized herself. No. God was still here, in this world, she knew it, she refused to believe otherwise. The people may have lost their faith but not her. And if she wanted that empty hole filled by something other than their coldness, she must reignite that faith inside them. She must make these people realize their unlimited fortune, she must bring them to God, and so doing bring them to her and bring her to God too.

How? A speech? No. As her encounter with Sir Dalton's parents proved, she knew not yet the best way to speak to these people.

She must show them a miracle.

Mayfair slowly approached the front of the church, where the dead body lay as cold as those watching it. In her hand she clutched the Staff of Lazarus; she would show them a miracle.

666, L'Empereur Napoléon

The journey from the monastery to the castle was uneventful. Shannon only attempted to strangle Jay to death once.

It was the night of the first day, a day spent climbing over rocks and picking through thornbush, led via Ariadne's thread through labyrinthine walls of sheer stone, only a joyously cream-colored sky above to remind them of their collective psychosis. Lalum didn't speak. Ollie didn't speak. Jay didn't speak. After an hour speaking to herself, Shannon didn't speak either. Sleek and slippery eels slid around the surface of her brain.

They camped in a cave. Lalum built them a fire. She also caught them a brace of hares, then cleaned and cooked them when Jay proved incapable. All, somehow, without revealing herself beyond a grayscale shape tapdancing on spider legs in the dark. Jay devoured hare with gusto. Shannon instead ate chips from a snack bag she previously recovered from the Land Rover's wreckage. She offered a chip to Ollie, who nibbled away a sliver before sinking back into the pocket to sulk.

Designed to break her, Shannon thought in the dark while Jay slept peacefully, happily. All anyone ever wanted was to see someone like her break down and cry. Nothing she ever did was enough. Not for Mother. Not for anyone. In classes she took diligent notes every lecture, studied them daily, memorized them well in advance, aced the test. The other students in her advanced classes crammed the night before the exam, regurgitated, and got the same grade. At work? At work she discovered new efficiencies, new procedures, ways to improve not just herself but the office as a whole, the IRS as a whole, and what did her suggestions earn her? "Shannon, these are some nice ideas. I think right now we're just going to focus on executing our current workflows."

Oh, that's so nice, dear.

When she failed to show up Monday—it was Friday now, Thanksgiving day come and passed with the skin of her legs scoured by bristles—when she failed to show up Monday they'd fire her without a second thought. The machine must keep clanking. All parts replaceable. So nice dear. No child left behind. No child gets ahead. Jay was never left behind and she never got ahead. The machine feared a part it could not replace more than a part that was broken. So nice dear.

"Do it, come on already," Ollie's voice whispered in the dark. "You big stupid spider. Come out here and bite my head off. I know you want to. I don't mind. Do it. I'm less than 1 now. Less than 1 but not quite 0. I'm not even strong enough to end it all myself..."

Shannon squinted her eyes at the small, slightly fluorescent figure fluttering dustless wings and facing the mouth of the cave. So nice dear. No child left behind.

"Kill me. Kill me. Kill me. Why won't you kill me? Why?"

Silence. No spidery scuttling.

Ollie sank to the cavern floor and sobbed the tears that Shannon had, via sheer force of will, withheld the entire day. Tiny fay squeals, no attempt to muffle them for the benefit of those sleeping (or believed to be sleeping), and yet Jay only continued to sleep, his contented deep breaths a heaving swell in this acoustic prison: Heave, ho. Heave, ho. Heave, ho.

The entire day he smiled.

She was never going to make it home.

Shannon climbed off the hard and filthy floor, swaying like a zombie, possessed of some faint notion to cup her hands around Ollie and quiet the little thing, stroke its soft filaments and feel its tiny heartbeat, but that was not the direction her feet took her.

Next thing she knew her hands were around Jay's throat, she was stooped over him and squeezing, squeezing that smile off his lips, squeezing that breath out his lungs, thinking over and over, electric shimmer in the aching veins behind her eyes: *You cannot escape you cannot escape you cannot escape you cannot escape*

He woke up, his fist slammed into her side, didn't matter, her knees scraped open on the rocks, he was reaching for his baseball bat but in his fumbling it bounced away a metal tinkle while her eyes pushed closer and closer to his, her forehead scraping the brim of that shitty Cleveland Browns hat that once belonged to their father and never found its way into the garbage like all the rest of his stuff, Shannon now the one smiling, sucking his smile away and making it hers, no child left behind, so nice dear, so nice dear, would this be so nice Mother, would you think this was nice too?

Something slammed into her from behind and her body ragdolled until her head bounced against a hard outcropping and rattled her into a senseless mush. Headless her body scrambled amid a feral shriek she realized only seconds after the fact was hers, willing with bare hands to rip them all to shreds, to rip them open and devour their still-beating hearts—!

Thread whipped around her. Her arms shot flush to her sides as thin wire silvery in the low light dug into her clothes. She struggled, kicked, screamed, but as more and more lines wound her body all attempts became increasingly futile.

Jay rose, rubbing his neck. His outline was effervescent compared to Lalum, to whom he reached out and managed to give a brief pat on the shoulder, prompting the spider to emit a shrill sound as she scurried back into hiding. He looked at Shannon. His smile quickly returned to his face, like mud shifting into its void.

Then he laughed. Laughing, laughing, laughing. Laughed at her futility, her hopelessness. She may have spouted words at him in return, she didn't remember. Leaving her strung up, he eventually stopped laughing and, as though nothing had happened, went back to sleep.

Ollie kept crying until Shannon, burnt out of rage, fell asleep too.

The next day everyone went back to not talking and everything proceeded exactly as the previous, Shannon allowed to do nothing except think as the terrain became imperceptibly less rugged, and everything she thought so fucking useless all the time, circles and circles of

the same words repeated. Ollie back to quiet. Jay still smiling. Sometimes even humming? He fucking *dared*.

Mid-afternoon the treeline on one side dropped away and the rock wall of the other side dropped away and a few clear miles of verdant pink farmland arose on all sides to a hill on which the castle manifested all spires and white brick.

The castle.

Vague hope remained: Someone would be there, some governmental structure, some way to reopen the gate to the real world. Cracking meant giving up. Shannon refused to crack.

Lalum's web, strung on the leafless branches of the last tree of the forest, formed words: NO FARTHER FOR ME. NOT UNTILL NIGHT.

"Only one L in until," Shannon said. The word corrected itself.

"Just come," said Jay. "You're with me. The hero. Nobody will do anything to you."

I AM SO SORRY. I SHALL WAIT UNTIL NIGHT. I DO NOT WANT ANY TO SEE ME. I LOOK AWEFUL... A MONSTER.

"A-W-F-U-L. No E." Shannon corrected the spelling out of habit, but suddenly this actual semblance of conversation yanked her out of a day-long stupor. The lines that composed the interior of her life sharpened and with it she sharpened too. Sharply she spoke:

"This is ridiculous. You're an absolute idiot if you think what you look like matters. Hygiene is important, sure. Hygiene indicates a base level of caring for yourself. Even the most rancid animals care about their hygiene. You're not filthy are you Lalum? You keep yourself clean do you?"

A hesitant pause. YES I DO. I AM CLEENE.

"C-L-E-A-N. I figured as much anyway. You care enough to fix your spelling so you seem a fastidious type. That's all that matters. I want you to come out now. Let me see you."

Jay, attention lost, started walking down the field, but now that there was no way for her to lose him Shannon stayed behind to wait for the web to rearrange.

I AM HIDEOUS IN GODS EYES.

"God made blobfish and naked mole rats. If he exists, he can't possibly care about you. Also 'God's' is possessive, you need an apostrophe. No not after the S. Before. There you go."

Seconds passed; Lalum said nothing else. "Useless," Shannon said as she walked off. "You're making yourself useless. You could go out there and accomplish something, but you're too afraid. Hiding all the time. No wonder he likes you and you like him. Peas in a fucking pod!"

Only after she left the trees behind did she decide to check over her shoulder. There she saw a much larger web:

PLEASE DON'T HURT HIM AGAIN. HE IS GOOD. HE SAVED ME... GOD BLESS YOU ALL. And a massive picture, more detailed than any of the previous. A nun praying, a ray of light descending onto a Jay and Shannon walking toward the castle. Jay, Shannon, and the castle all exact likenesses, and the whole thing scribbled in less than a minute.

An excellent artist. But she was too afraid to be seen. Whatever! There was only so much you could do to help people.

They went to the castle.

Peasants poked heads out of pink waves of wheat and stared agog. They spoke not a single word but congregated into larger and larger clumps that remained on the fringe of vision. Impoverished, hollow, hungry types. Classic feudal agrarianism. Not simply unfair but also inefficient, a few skinny beasts of burden and some entire segments of field fallow. Clearly pre-agricultural revolution. Fertilizer, soil, selective breeding—all unknown. A harsh Malthusian limit enacted on the populace. With fewer people you had fewer workers, fewer workers meant lower production, lower production meant a kleptocracy where the small amount the richest hoarded was all that ever existed.

"What are they even farming?" Shannon asked, as if her voice might call these peasants to life.

Instead the reply came as a mumble from her pocket. "The staple crops of Whitecrosse... Barley, wheat, oats, rye... Sheep raised for wool, pigs for meat. Oxen as draft animals. Sometimes horses. The best farmland is west of the castle, where you'll find the territorial holdings of the larger noble houses... Including those of Mordac, Meretryce, and Malleus..."

A small head turned its beady eyes upward the same time Shannon looked down. "You know all that?"

"Yep," Ollie said, "but I guess you don't care, do you?"

"What else do you know?"

The insect eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Knowledge is power. They have that saying in this world? Scientia potentia est. Francis Bacon." A favorite quote of Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Jefferson too. This place seemed pre-Renaissance though, let alone Age of Reason.

"Knowledge is power..." Ollie muttered.

"Remember that guy I was with? Dalt? The big one." Shannon kept a sidelong eye at the rows of peasants now packing the roadside as they neared the castle gates. "That guy's strong. I keep fit myself, but there's just nothing a woman like me can do against a man like that in terms of physical power. But I've got a better job than him and I make more money. Know why? Knowledge is power. Only thing he learned at college was football. It's knowledge that lets the weak beat the strong." Except Dalt's the one who made it home and you're stuck here, Little Miss Knowledgeable.

Her words seemed to have an affect on Ollie, though. The dark eyes sank in contemplation. Shannon patted the pocket to reassure. "Do you know anything else?"

"I know lots and lots and lots," Ollie said, and for the first time it sounded the slightest sliver of chipper.

"Then I'll have lots to ask you." She glanced around again, at the peasants. At Jay's back several steps ahead. "Later. When fewer people are listening."

After she finished speaking she looked up and stopped midstep in surprise. In front of her the castle loomed and now that they were much closer and she actually had a chance to look at it she was shocked by its astronomical size. Or rather, the size of the tall white stone wall that surrounded the hill on which the castle stood, itself surrounded by a deep moat. Four or five stories high and stretching far in each direction, it existed in complete contradiction to the impoverished yokels of the farmland that surrounded it. It struck her like the Pyramids of Giza—not that she ever saw them in person, but she had seen diagrams in books that compared their height to the tallest modern skyscrapers like the Burj Khalifa or the Empire State Building. The towers were taller, yes, but it made one wonder how such a feat was accomplished by an antique people without concrete or mass-produced steel, relying primarily on the labor of slaves and oxen.

It produced vertigo. Her head was tilted almost all the way back on her neck to see the sun cutting over the top, and even that light was bisected by the higher rising form of the castle itself, plus what looked like a cathedral and a third, somewhat smaller structure the purpose of which she couldn't immediately discern. That vertiginous feeling transformed into a smile, one of her own to match the one perpetually on Jay's face: There was no way a society capable of such a construction could not open the gate home. No way.

The gigantic main gate set dead center in the wall was already down, forming a broad drawbridge over the moat strung by chains each link of which were half the size of Shannon herself. A few horse-drawn carts clopped over the bridge, some heading out, some heading in. Other commerce on the move as well, peasants or slightly more presentable peasants leading pigs and sheep presumably to sell or barter with (and a resulting animal odor whipping across the drawbridge in waves). Everyone who noticed Jay pass, however, ceased whatever they were doing, tugged hard on the reins to bring their horses to halt, and stared. Eyes peeking past dirty cheekbones, first at Jay, then at Shannon, who quickened her step to close the distance between him and herself.

Near the cavernous aperture that led through the wall, someone finally spoke. It was a man with some sort of grooming in his wavy hair and pointed beard, dressed in a more fashionable bright red tunic, who appeared to be directing a pair of goliath types as they loaded bales of hay onto a cart. Clearly a merchant of some sort, one of the movers and shakers of economy, the kind of person that put Shannon at more ease to see than the ominous gaggle of onlookers trailing behind. He took a long time to look away from his ledger or his subordinates and when he did he gave an outrageous, sitcom-tier double-take, his eyes widening and his mouth tumbling open.

"Unbelievable... it cannot be!" Even his dialogue felt unreal, but at least it was an unreality Shannon found familiar. "You—you—those clothes—"

"That's right," said Jay. "I'm the hero from another world." He kept walking without further acknowledgement.

"That shield," the merchant muttered, eyeing the shield Jay plucked off the one guy's corpse, with its white cross on a red background that made it look like the flag of Denmark (a similar design flapped on a row of banners atop the wall). "That belongs to the prince..."

"Right again," said Jay. "The prince is dead. But I'm here."

Of course Jay would blab details that were best conveyed more diplomatically. Shannon strode forward, putting herself between Jay and the merchant to take charge of the situation. "Yes, hello. My name is Shannon Waringcrane and this is my brother, Jay. As you already guessed, we're not from this world, so could you perhaps direct us toward some of kind of government official so we can get our whole situation sorted out as efficiently as possible?"

A befuddled moment dissolved into an effusive series of nods. "Of course, of course! I am actually, ahem, I am actually of the nobility myself, the beloved nephew of Duke Meretryce to be exact, Gonzago of Meretryce you may call me—milady. Milady." He looked around wildly, passed off his ledger to his head henchman, and waved the man away with a few flighty hand-flicks that were something the flamboyant gay side character would do in a chick flick. His reedy voice and suddenly unctuous posture possessed a smidge of that type too. "I was in fact—in fact I was fulfilling some business on my uncle's behalf just now, but of course all that can wait, all that is but a trifle! I'll take you to my uncle straightaway, you're lucky you caught him on an occasion that has brought him to the capital, usually he prefers to keep to his country manor—oh but don't we all prefer the beautiful countryside, ehe, eheheh"—his laugh attempting conviviality but expressing anxiety—"I shall take you to him straightaway."

Jay, who of course kept walking during this ramshackle display, stopped. A few guards by the wall lounging and conversing in a disorganized and frankly unprofessional gaggle (reminding Shannon sharply of the law enforcement she dealt with in her initial search) finally noticed him and whispered among themselves, apparently to figure out what they should do. But Jay spoke to Gonzago:

"Take me to the queen."

"The—queen. Ahem. Well. Ah. You see, Queen Mallory is, shall we say—she is not especially interested in the day-to-day governance... Lady Shannon, I can tell by your bearing that you are a... shall we say? Serious woman. Yes. A woman who well handles her affairs, a woman who keeps her household in order. I believe you would be much better served speaking to my uncle. Much better indeed, yes."

"Take me to the queen," Jay said to the guards. "I'm the hero. Her son is dead and her daughter killed him. Let's skip the handwringing already and get me where you all know I'll wind up sooner or later."

God! Incurable! A senseless brute, plowing his way through everything, and the moment Shannon thought she got used to it, that she simply had to accept his willful blockheadedness, he managed to ascend to a whole new level. Did he not *comprehend* the idea of keeping

information close to the chest? Did he not think one should ask favors with at least a faint sense of politeness?

"Her daughter... The princess is the killer?" Gonzago pulled another sitcom face. "No! Unfathomable! It cannot be!"

"My brother is being melodramatic," said Shannon. It was the giant dragon that killed the prince, technically. "Don't listen to a word he says.—Now. Mr. Gonzago. While I appreciate your suggestion—"

But of course it didn't matter. One of the guards broke from the group and ran off toward the castle, while two of the other four stepped forward to escort Jay. Jay didn't hesitate, he simply started walking, going where the guards followed, and Shannon wanted to tear out her hair and scream—or maybe grab at Jay's throat again, although the night prior felt like a dream now—but kept up a reasonable face among these people as she trailed behind, lacking any choice otherwise. If Jay was committed to making the worst first impression possible, Shannon must cover for his errors.

Another frenetic series of hand flaps beckoned Gonzago's underling back to him. After hurried whispers, the underling nodded and veered a beeline through the gate into the city; Shannon imagined en route to dear Uncle Meretryce, thwarted from first communication with the vaunted "otherworldly heroes." Sorry Gonzago, but Shannon knew your type. Obsequious sycophant, social climber. Your big powerful duke uncle having you run bookkeeper errands down by the mounds of horse excrement cut a clear picture of how much he valued you, and it was only natural for one in your position to ingratiate yourself at every opportunity to the one with the most direct bearing on your standing. But a queen outranked a duke (assuming this wasn't a more modern constitutional monarchy, which Shannon severely doubted), so Shannon had to suppress her gag and agree with her brother's decision-making, even if his methodology left so, so much to be desired. At least it was a queen in command. Maybe Shannon would be subjected to marginally less sexism than in a more patriarchal premodern society. Maybe a queen would be more willing to listen to Shannon's word instead of taking Jay's by default. Premodern times went poorly for women. Being a "heroine" might elevate Shannon to a class above your common walking womb, but their backward prejudices would make them value him over her every time. Unless she *proved* herself more worthy of value.

Which she was. If nothing else, she was still Shannon Waringcrane.

The slopes of the hills were choked by tightly-compacted two-, three-, four-story structures that seemed to rely on leaning against one another to keep from collapsing, divided by streets so narrow the sunlight didn't touch them. Out of every shuttered window or irregular alleyway leered an eyes-only face, while mangy wild dogs scurried between the legs of the guards who needed to assemble single-file on their procession up the steeply-sloped roads. Nonetheless the procession grew steadily, people seemingly manifesting out of nothing to exist between two people who had previously walked only inches apart, so that without warning Shannon was pushed three foul-smelling bodies back from Jay while Gonzago waved his arms frantically over the five bobbing heads in front of him as if he feared he would disappear if Shannon could no longer see him. Past thin wooden doors came intermittently the clank of hammers against anvils, the hard tones of hawked wares and the

harder rebuttals of those bartering for a better deal, and even in one precariously slanted structure the orchestra of some performing troupe honking horns, banging banjos, and whistling ditties amid ample laughter. Every door they passed went abruptly silent, though, as somehow the people inside invariably became aware of what shadows lay upon their threshold. Windows opened, doors opened, and eyes peeped out, eyes and eyes and more and more heads in the parade to match.

On a balcony ahead a young man and a young woman dressed in styles similar to Gonzago's waved and tossed pink flower petals to rain down before seizing one another and making an utterly inappropriate amorous display that must have bordered on public indecency even in the modern world, let alone this one. The guards—at least seven in the parade now—didn't bother to bark at them to stop, even when they fell onto their sides and began rolling over one another and their happy cries turned to squeals. Shannon plucked petals from her hair and crushed them between her fingers, divesting her of some of the city's omnipresent fecal funk.

Pre-sewers. Pre-germ theory. How did humanity ever make it as far as they did? Not King Arthur. Not Charlemagne or Napoleon either. Louis Pasteur, John Snow, Jonas Salk. Scientia potentia est. Not the people who chopped the machine with their blades; those who made the parts run longer, stronger, more smoothly.

Music trailed them now, perhaps the same troupe heard playing before, and more bodies crawling over the high gabled roofs to clap and toss petals. Higher they climbed and wider the roads became, not that the burgeoning parade became any less dense because of it.

Finally the incline leveled, the road opened, a courtyard appeared, a statue soared skyward, its artistry frankly lacking and its size designed to compensate: One regal man clutching sword and cross and overlooking the city. White splotches on his hair and shoulders. Behind him, the fairy tale castle, the romance novel castle. Its doors were already open wide, trumpets blared, guards in polished armor stood in rows only marginally crooked to usher in the way. The human chaff ceased their parade, they dared not pass the statue. Not even the guards passed. Only Jay did, and after him Shannon. Halfway across the empty semicircle of courtyard Shannon looked back and saw Gonzago struggling to follow, yelling at faceless figures to let him through, but nobody did. Jay and Shannon alone entered the castle.

Jay didn't even stop to take in the scenery, he only moved forward, and Shannon knew she couldn't let him talk to anyone important by himself for even an instant, so she didn't stop either.

In fact! Why was she trailing behind him anyway! No longer did a crowded city street block her path. She strode faster down the ornate lavender carpet toward the sepulchral throat of the castle, past the lines of halberded knights who might have just been empty suits of armor. She passed him, made it one, two steps ahead, then suddenly, after having moved at the exact same pace the entire long walk through the city, Jay sped up too. They weren't exactly jogging, but they verged closer and closer to powerwalking, neither so much as glancing at the other as though it wasn't the other dictating their exact behavior. At one moment Jay was ahead, then Shannon, then Jay again, their path taking them toward a pair of doors they reached for at the exact same time, each pushing against one another and Jay—no Dalt—able to open his as quickly as Shannon opened hers. Together they spilled into the throne room.

"Your Majesty!" Shannon blurted, only unsure afterward whether "Majesty" or "Highness" were the proper form of address for a queen (the other, she knew, was used for princes and princesses), and deciding with test taker logic that her gut impulse was correct. At the same time, though, Jay was spouting something stupid, his words blended with hers, and he browbeat his way forward exceeding her address to finish: "—the vault and give me your relics!"

At least thirty pairs of eyes blinked back at them.

"Your Majesty," Shannon repeated, stepping forward, stepping forward a second time when Jay stepped forward his first, sweeping an arm out grandiloquently to obstruct at least part of him from the view of the woman enthroned before them, "please forgive the impertinence of my brother. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Shannon Waringcrane, and he is—"

"I'm the hero. Just like John Coke. I already know there's a vault under the castle full of magical relics. Let me have them and I'll turn this place into a paradise—"

"Obviously we are but humble guests of your dominion and are in no position to make demands of you, Your Majesty. We seek only a night's shelter and, if possible, a way back to our own world—"

"Makepeace is dead. Mayfair killed him."

More and more Shannon's strangling attempt seemed less like a momentary lapse in sanity and more like a perfectly logical and rational thing to have done. Shannon lacked ready words to fill the hushed void that followed that proclamation, her fingers upturned into twitching hooks. "My brother doesn't speak for me," she only managed weakly.

"That's not the full story though. Someone, probably someone in this room by the looks of you"—Jay pacing forward tapping the tip of his baseball bat against the rug—"ordered Mayfair assassinated. Hired the elf hunter Sansaime to do it. It was me who saved her from death. But after I did that she stole the Staff of Lazarus, revived the dragon Devereux, and killed Makepeace. Then she fled."

The queen, Shannon noticed for the first time, was seated sideways in her throne, her legs within a tangle of silky cloth dangling over one armrest and her head hanging off the other as she chewed on a stick of cinnamon. She was outrageously, obnoxiously beautiful and she looked no older than Shannon herself, which was obviously wrong because she was ostensibly the mother of that Makepeace guy who died at the monastery, and the Makepeace guy also looked no older than Shannon herself. Even assuming the queen became a mother at an age only acceptable in barbaric society, she ought to be in her thirties...

"The dragon Devereux," spoke someone. Not the queen. Some bloated official, almost perfect in his rotundity, bursting arrays of ruffles from wrist and neck that gave him a scarecrow aesthetic even if his corpulence contradicted it. His mustache sprawled outward and the giant cross dangling from his neck glittered gold. "It is indeed true, true indeed it is—was it not true? All have seen Coke's Cross, where the dragon fell, crumbled on the mountaintop. Lends this not some credence to the hero's tale? True indeed, indeed true! Oh, who could have foreseen such calamity?"

"Who could have—who could have foreseen?! Archbishop Tintzel, you dare to speak such absurdity?!" another howled, lavish in his flowing robes, black hair streaked with fetching wings of white. "Have my charts and tables not prognosticated ill omens?! These are my predictions come to pass! Who still dares doubt the prowess of Prime Astrologer DeWint?"

A jester, coxcomb and codpiece and all, tumbled. Upside-down, he kicked his feet and sang: "Makepeace and Mayfair, their names a seemly pair; for the one made peace with life—let's see how the other may fare!" Rolling back upright, he tilted his jangly head with a sly smirk and appended in a stage whisper: "Yet if love's the opposite of war, then our dear prince surely made much peace another way, hee-hoo!"

"Booooo!" said a notably brown-skinned girl with an eyepatch and peg leg (who was, however, not a pirate), leaning on a cane. "Same joke as last week. DeWint, perchance you put your books to real use and divinate the location of the Fool's lost wit?"

Instantly the DeWint character calmed out his pompous reddened rage, slicked back the white parts of his hair, and donned a debonair ease. "Ah, well, my sweet lady, paid you better attention to your studies you might know yourself the way to influence personality via the celestial arts; I would not, however, be opposed to an extra session of private tutoring to demonstrate to you firsthand..."

A quick cackle caused the eyepatch girl to sway on her cane, stopped from falling only by the timely intercession of an equally brown-skinned man halfway in the shadows behind her. "Shameless!" she spat. Her one eye, deep gold, gleamed wide and wild.

"Silence, all of you," said a vampiric old man, dressed in black, "be you fools by trade or merely pleasure. Grave tidings befall Whitecrosse; we must consider them with due weight." His bald head and harsh array of wrinkles indicated, finally, a serious personage; his voice's heavy intonation smoothed over the tomfoolery of the rest.

The spherical scarecrow, Archbishop Tintzel, nodded rapidly. "Hum-ho, ho-hum! Duke Mordac speaks sooth. If what we hear is true, then grave indeed, indeed grave our situation sits. One heir killed; the other a murderer—Your Majesty, I am afraid you have no recourse but to take a new husband. The lineage of King John Coke must be preserved above all else—Aieah!"

He shrieked, because the Fool got it into his head to push him over and start rolling him across the court like a ball. This level of wit was apparently far more amenable to the eyepatch girl's tastes, for she howled laughter and nearly toppled over again.

"Another husband?" the ghoulish Duke Mordac continued with a shiver that sent flakes of dead skin cascading from his bald pate. "What need have we for such pageantry. We all know how the queen shall take to it anyway. No, this is not the time for—WILL SOMEONE BEHEAD THAT DAMNED FOOL?"

The Fool had hopped onto the flailing Tintzel and started piloting him around the court with his feet, at the same producing five colored balls that he juggled poorly so that they dropped onto the heads of various among the gathered, including Duke Mordac himself, reasonably prompting the outburst. In response to the duke's finger, extended crookedly due to all the

knots, a pair of what appeared to be the duke's men stepped forward with their hands on the hilts of their swords, only for the Fool to give a nervous twittering laugh and steer Tintzel between Jay and Shannon and out the door before they could catch him. It was the stupidest thing Shannon had ever seen. The girl with the eyepatch, by contrast, was hyperventilating with laughter, flopping onto her side despite the attempts of her attendant to keep her upright and now seemingly choking to death. DeWint bustled to her side and attempted to convey to the attendant, who did not seem to understand, that she needed to be repositioned to another part of the court that was more "favorably aligned."

It was so farcical Shannon thought even Jay would have to agree. He didn't seem to notice the mayhem at all, though. He stared ahead at the only person he'd actually addressed: the queen, Mallory. Who did not look back.

"What's this I hear of beheadings?" said yet another person, entering the court the same way Jay and Shannon had, along with a train of attendants that included the unfortunate Gonzago, who immediately tried to catch Shannon's eye without being too obvious despite his innate obviousness. Shannon assumed this new person must be his uncle, Duke Meretryce. "Mordac, if we put to death everyone you thought deserved it, we'd have nobody left in this world but you."

Like Mordac, Meretryce was an old man, but the spry kind, the just-retired-and-bought-an-RV kind, his skin tanned and tough in conflict with the finery of his clothes. He exuded an easygoing nature without sacrificing respectability, sweeping past and placing a grandfatherly hand on first Shannon and then Jay's shoulders, looking each in the eye with geniality. "So here they are, hero and heroine. I've heard the whole story from my nephew of course, no need for any laborious repetition. I'd apologize for my tardiness, but I see Malleus still isn't here, so I'm not the worst in that regard at least. Too bad what ought to be a joyful moment for all Whitecrosse, a shining sign from God of our brighter future, is so marred by the tragedy that has befallen our royal family. Prince Makepeace slain! Much too young, much too young. I express my sincerest condolences to you, Your Majesty. Wherever is his body? The monastery? I shall dispatch a group of my finest men to recover it and carry it through the city on a bier, as such a fine and valiant youth deserves. There shall not be a man, woman, or child in all Whitecrosse without tears in their eyes at that tragic sight."

He stood in the center of the room, forcing all eyes upon him with elegant gestures as he modulated his voice to a perfect pitch of sadness, a pitch that conveyed genuine regret without verging into anything too melancholic or depressed. Controlled.

Even Jay broke his stare to squint a sidelong eye at him. "So you'll send men to the monastery now, but not before. Not when Mayfair was kidnapped."

Meretryce continued as if he hadn't heard, which given Jay's poor elocution was a realistic possibility. The regret dissipated from his voice, trending optimistic: "But shall we dwell too deeply in the sorrow we feel? No, that would produce only idleness, and at a time we can most ill afford it, given the rumors we hear daily from our many adversaries. Think now on the possibility bestowed us by the manifestation of these Godsent heroes! It was John Coke, a hero from another world, who saved Whitecrosse from ruination at the hands of a wicked, corrupt church in league with the Saracen kingdom of California and their pagan idol,

Mahomet. I see in these new heroes that same potential, that same salvation. It is a reminder of God's love for us His elect, and we would be ill-served not to take full advantage of what He offers so freely."

His speech silenced the court, even the choking girl with the eyepatch, who DeWint and the attendant dragged to the fringes. That alone was reason enough for Shannon to know the man was more dangerous than the rest of them combined, but at the same time potentially more useful. Then he continued:

"Those gathered here today, I present a modest proposal, one I believe may indeed be pleasant to all parties. Your Majesty, think you it not now time to peacefully relinquish the crown that has weighed so heavy on your head these past twenty years?"

He looked at the queen and received no response.

"When I was a somewhat younger man, I saw you, beloved Mallory, thrust into a position you did not want—married to my own elder brother! But as you were John Coke's true descendant, you rose to the occasion to the best of your ability—none shall deny that. You have reigned over Whitecrosse for more happy years than sad; for that, we your dutiful subjects are eternally grateful. But surely you must see now that the time for your long-awaited rest is come. Please. Step down from your throne, Your Majesty. You shall be provided for; you shall never want. Take the time you need to grieve the tragic fate of your son and daughter. If it is God's will to send us these heroes, then we have no choice but to bend. Let a new lineage take hold, and allow God's blessing once more to grace Whitecrosse, building an earthly paradise to better prepare us for His celestial one. Your Majesty, what say you to this proposal, made in the best interest of both you and your people? Your Majesty?"

For the first time since entering, Meretryce allowed silence to take hold.

"Your Majesty?"

"Your Majesty," said Duke Mordac. "Spare us the wasted time and respond."

"Your Majesty!"

Others, some of the lesser lords and bannerman, chimed in. "Your Majesty." "Your Majesty." "Your Majesty." DeWint added to the chorus in an operatic baritone designed to draw attention to himself even within a crowd. Only a handful didn't contribute. The eyepatch girl and her attendant, withdrawn nearly out of view. Jay and Shannon, of course. And a row of seven armored knights who brought up the back of the gathered crowd, placed in a perfect mathematic pattern behind the throne despite the vast differences in their sizes and armor, some short and squat and some tall and thin, some with helmets crafted into the shape of a roaring dragon and some with polearms that reached absurdly high toward the distant reaches of the throne room's arched ceiling. These knights said nothing and did not move.

"YOUR MAJESTY!"

In a manner that Shannon could only conceptualize as a cult ritual, an entire host of people incanting in perfect unison, a final pealing shout rang across the hall and the demon was

finally summoned with a flickering series of blinks. Queen Mallory's lolling head snapped to attention. She glanced left, she glanced right, her infuriatingly pretty supermodel-tier face somehow gorgeous despite the perplexion marring her features.

"Ehhhhh? There are rather a lot of you here today. Has something tiresome happened again?"

Meretryce browbeat his way to the fore and was quick to speak: "Unfortunately yes, Your Majesty. With illimitable sorrow, I regret to inform you that—"

"Your son is dead. Your daughter murdered him," said Jay. "I am the hero from the other world. Give me access to the vault of relics and I'll—"

"Ignore my brother's rudeness, please," said Shannon. "My name is Shannon Waringcrane. I —"

"Makepeace is dead?" Queen Mallory looked at Jay, at the shield Jay carried, and lastly at Shannon. "And Mayfair killed him."

"Yes," Shannon said, feeling compelled to speak 1) to stop Jay from speaking instead and 2) because Queen Mallory kept staring at her. "It's... it's unfortunate. I am... deeply sorry for your loss... but my brother and I need your help."

One casual flick and Mallory tossed aside the cinnamon stick on which she'd gnawed aimlessly from the onset. Shannon suppressed a grimace. It was, in fact, extremely inconvenient that the queen's son happened to die during all that stupidity at the monastery. Not only because that caused the ugly elf girl to steal the key to the gate, but also because it was preventing Shannon from broaching the question of receiving help in an elegant fashion. She felt almost as boorish as Jay except Jay felt no shame whatsoever so only she had to feel this way, and that was more awful than feeling it in the first place. She awaited Queen Mallory's response, certain to range between either abject misery or abject fury, neither emotion being one Shannon was equipped to handle—and both beings ones she could normally avoid, both within herself and others. It'd be just like Mother, she thought, sobbing inconsolable after Jay's disappearance. Worse than Mother.

Instead Queen Mallory's eyes shone alive and she said, "Thank God."

"Excuse me?" said Shannon.

"Thank fucking Christ Almighty," Queen Mallory said, rising, fanning her arms. "Thank the Lord! Twenty years. Twenty years they put me in this prison. Twenty years! I'm finally fucking free!"

"Your Majesty, your language..." DeWint fidgeted to the side.

"I'll use whatever language I damn well feel like. I'm queen of Whitecrosse and compared to me every single one of you. Every. Single. One! Are ants. Ants! Hear me, DeWint? And you, Mordac? Of course you too Meretryce, I wouldn't forget about you. Nor these so-called heroes. Hero and heroine, hm? A perfect pairing to breed a new royal line for this kingdom, is that what these dukes have been braying?"

"Um." Shannon's eye moved sidelong toward Jay. "No. Nothing like that at all. In fact, as I already said, we're siblings."

"Oh? That certainly hasn't stopped *her* excellent family." A hand cut a clean ninety-degree arc, starting in front of her and ending straight at her side, to point across the room at the wheezing and sputtering eyepatch girl. "No matter. I'm free. Finally free of this prison! Oh, the joy, the endless joy a family brings. The heavenly bliss of filial devotion. What they told me I would reap. What these very men!"—finger jabbing one after another at the faces of the old men arrayed, at Mordac, at Meretryce—"What these very men said to me when I was thirteen, when they married me off so I might produce a male heir, solely because a king on the throne sat better in their gluttonous stomachs than a queen! Filial devotion! That was what I was to reap for forbearing this torturous penal colony they call a castle!"

She bent this way and that, her body careening at wild angles without her leaving the orbit of her throne elevated on a dais, her arms a frenzy, her golden hair a swirl as her head tossed and a series of screechy laughs came out with strained difficulty. "HAA, HAA, HAA!" The folds of her silken gown flowed. "Twenty years, twenty years, and it's all come to this! Oh, I could *die* of laughter."

"Your Majesty," said Meretryce, "we are all well aware of the immense stress and difficulty you have endured. The crown has been most heavy on your head. That is why we extend to you a simple, pleasant offer to renounce your title and live your days free in—"

"Renounce my title! Renounce my title!"

"Is it not, as you said yourself, a prison?"

Queen Mallory snapped into a straight, albeit crooked, line. Her head remained tilted back but only her eyes moved, rolling along a downward semicircle to lance Meretryce through the heart and forcing him to flinch.

"My title a prison? The throne a prison? Oh, dear dear Duke Meretryce, you misunderstand. Alas, it's to be expected. You have only ever misunderstood me. Nay! You have never even attempted to understand..."

For the first time, Meretryce lacked any words to respond. Mordac, unburdened by the queen's icy glare, filled the void. "Your Majesty. Twin heroes have arrived. It is a hero's duty to drive Whitecrosse forward, just as in John Coke's time. Recognize that, Your Majesty, and do what must be done for the good of the kingdom."

A low snicker escaped Mallory's nose, soft and susurrate and transforming into something akin to a dog's whine, trapped in the throat. Her imperious eye swept Mordac and he crumpled into his pitch black cloak, erasing himself from view.

"Look." It was Jay. He tapped his bat against his shin. "I don't give a shit what these guys say. They're obviously all scheming. You can stay queen or not, I don't care. But let me into the vault. Give me access to the relics. That's what I want."

His words brought the queen's gaze to him. She stepped off her dais, descending the few steps to reach Jay's level, swaying as though she never actually learned how to walk, and when the seven oddly-shaped knights at her back clanked incipient motion to assist her she held them back with a trenchant palm. "Hero," she said. "Brother of Shannon Waringcrane. Your name is?"

"Jay."

"You see them? In the city streets, in this claustrophobic court? They're all smiles, Jay, all grinning ear to ear. Why? They all know the legend of John Coke. And each in their own way thinks you will do exactly what they want to make their lives perfect. A hero. But I'll tell you one thing. John Coke really was a hero. He didn't simply walk into this world and have the title appended to him. He earned it. And I? I am his trueborn descendant. So unless you earn the title, I see you only as what you are: A man, no different from any other."

Jay nodded along to this speech, as though it were perfectly reasonable, which it honestly was. Perhaps the sole reasonable thing said in this entire court so far. Nonetheless, when the queen ceased speaking, Jay flipped his bat into the air, caught it by the handle, and pointed it straight at the queen.

"Fine. Then I'll prove it."

The seven knights clanked, the crowd cleaved to the sides, sharp spearpoints shined. Shannon snapped. When he'd been merely rude, it only annoyed her, especially since everyone else in the court was rude too, meaning he didn't especially stand out. Now, though, she couldn't take it anymore. "Jay! You absolute buffoon! Are you suicidal? What are you doing?" She rushed forward and reached for the bat. "Your Majesty, I am absolutely sorry for the crass behavior of my brother. Please know that his actions in no way reflect upon me, and that I do not agree with him whatsoever—"

"Shannon," said Jay. "Move. Can't you see? I'm giving her exactly what she wants."

It was true. The queen's bright blue eyes gleamed. Her hands held back her knights as though by magnetism; their armor quivered as they slowly, reluctantly retreated. A smile lined her face.

"Then let us begin."

In an instant the queen's body became animalistic, fingers hooked, arms bent at severe angles, all of her force carrying her into a potent momentum straight toward Jay that Shannon only barely had enough time to dance away from. At the same time Jay drew back and swung his bat.

It happened so fast Shannon only figured out what happened after the fact. The bat did not collide with the queen's head, despite a trajectory that should have made that incontrovertible. Instead, the queen caught it in one hand. What really confused Shannon was that Jay had already let go of the bat even before she caught it, as if he expected all along she would do that, even though trying to catch a metal bat being swung full force was an utterly moronic maneuver that should have only led to several shattered fingerbones.

Why was this happening. Jay couldn't fight. Shannon had seen him try.

Jay jolted to the side and angled his whole upper body to catch the queen in the midsection. The logic seemed to be to throw his whole weight into her and overwhelm with the raw physical advantages the adult male body had over the female. Jay was no Dalt, but he was still half a foot taller than Queen Mallory, and probably a good fifty pounds heavier. Maybe this maneuver would've worked, too. But Jay was dealing with someone who could catch a metal bat mid-swing. Before Jay even got close a knee rose up and nailed him in the head.

The Cleveland Browns hat swirled. Jay reared back, trailing twin streams of blood from his nostrils. Before he got a chance to revel in this agony, the queen danced back on nimble feet, shifted her stance, and swung her leg straight into his crotch.

Jay staggered to the side, seemingly fine for the first few seconds despite the blood running down his chin, but everyone watching knew, including the queen, who spread her arms straight out in victory moments before Jay keeled to the floor wheezing and curling into a ball.

"Voilà! I am the queen of Whitecrosse, and I shall remain queen until I breathe my last breath. No hero will take my rightful throne."

Nobody clapped. Queen Mallory's head rolled and her wide smiling eyes drove from the sky straight into Shannon. A hungry, *disrobing* gaze.

"Yes, well," Shannon said, backpedaling slowly with her hands raised in non-aggression, "I have never doubted that, and in fact I intended to beseech you to assist us in leaving this world entirely—"

The queen rushed at Shannon and landed a glancing punch on her shoulder as Shannon tried to pull away.

"Hey! Hey! I don't want to fight. I never tried to fight! Hey!"

A swift kick struck Shannon's shin and funnybone pain shot up her leg. She winced, buckling, holding her hands first over her head and then lower to defend the pocket where Ollie sat quietly, and for her trouble received two quick and discombobulating strikes to either side of her skull.

"Hey. Hey! Stop..."

No stopping. Next came a blow to the gut that doubled Shannon over, and a knee to the chin that launched her back.

She smacked the thankfully plush carpet without cracking her skull open on the stone floor underneath and rolled over as though dead or unconscious. Which did not stop the queen from landing a final kick most rudely to her ass, which Shannon barely felt because her body was agony all over and her head swam with blurriness and nausea. The queen's voice floated in a distant realm... "The next who doubt me—I'll have their guts out on my fingertips..."

Psychosis, Shannon thought. Shared psychosis. Insanity in the air. The lunacy microbes, flitting down to this world on a migratory path from their breeding ground, the moon. Germ theory... infecting them only for breathing. She didn't pass out, but she might as well have, and remained a solid lump when hands gripped her and dragged her away.

Without Love

The sedan, unremarkable save for its freshly-dented bumper, dented its bumper again when it drove too far into the parking space and struck the wall with a terrifying shriek that caused the driver to shriek herself. Only by coinflip luck did she stomp the brake instead of the accelerator, and she held her position tautened to the snapping point for the next fifteen seconds—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—until she finally put the car into reverse, backed away from the wall and off the parking block, and put the car into park.

This was the twelfth time she had parked in this parking structure in the past two days. On the stereo—because she was physically incapable of driving unless music played on the stereo, without music she became carsick—played Shania Twain's "That Don't Impress Me Much." The driver remained seated in the motionless car, staring ahead at the painted sector on the concrete wall, and only when the music cut out for Shania to say "Okay, so you're Brad Pitt" did Avery Fenster Waringcrane wake up and fumble for the door.

She opened the door, tried to get up, got stopped by her seatbelt, tried to undo her seatbelt but it was stuck, sank back into her seat, fiddled with the belt, finally the button worked and the seatbelt snapped back into place, and then she got up again, feeling something was wrong, not sure what, back into her seat, patted the steering wheel, what was wrong, everything was wrong, but what was wrong about the car specifically—the keys. She left the keys in the ignition. She claimed the keys—bye bye Shania Twain—dropped them into her purse, strung the strap of the purse over her shoulder, got out of the car, and closed the door behind her. She remembered she needed to lock the car. Into her purse her hand sifted, over unlimited junk, sifting and sifting, bumping the key, not quite grabbing it, grabbing it, dropping it, stooping, fingertips scraping concrete, the keys bouncing but not—entering—her hand, got it, rising, finger on the button to the lock the car, and then the car doors locked automatically as they always did when the key was out of the ignition for thirty seconds.

Everything was wrong.

Was this even the address Shan-bear gave her? For the twelfth time she prepared to haunt the corridors of this ordinary office building, knocking on doors only for nobody to be anywhere, a stray janitor or secretary sometimes but often not even that, and why not? It was Thanksgiving. Well not anymore. It was Black Friday. Still the Thanksgiving holiday. But they sold things on Black Friday didn't they?

I will bring Jay back. I promise you that. I promise you, he'll be home for Thanksgiving.

Shan-bear... You wouldn't leave too. You wouldn't. Why wouldn't you answer your phone? Dalt wouldn't either... what happened?

She stopped. To her side was something. A big stone archway. It spanned a single parking space and reached to the layer of pipes lining the ceiling. It was peppered with papers: "PLEASE MOVE THIS." "THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING." "I WILL CALL

SECURITY." "YOU ARE INTRUDING ONTO MY PARKING SPACE." "WHAT EVEN IS THIS?"

Had she not noticed it before? She came here eleven times before, in and out, staying as long as she could before she became certain she was wrong about the address and left to explore some neighboring office building instead. She stopped and stared at the arch and wondered. It had to mean something. But what? She didn't know. She didn't know!

One of the papers on the arch read: "YOU'RE THE LADY IN 307. DON'T THINK I DON'T KNOW. I'LL REPORT YOU!"

307...

A powerful feeling swept over her. She didn't know what or why. 307.

The directory in the lobby said Office 307 was on the third floor. So were all the other offices that started with a 3. Avery supposed that made sense. People had such sensible ways of doing things, it always surprised her, and perpetually surprised she climbed the stairs (no need to use an elevator if you could help it...), exited onto what she thought was the third floor, realized all the offices started with a 4, and went back down a floor to the third.

301. 302. 303. They were in a very nice order. 304. 305. 306. 307.

307.

Avery stared at the door. It looked like a normal door. The directory said it belonged to "Bal Berith Contracts." What was that? A law office? She knocked on the door. She had knocked on every single door in this building at least twice during her previous trips, and only about three or four doors answered. The people who had answered were nice, but they didn't know anything.

307. A strange arch in the parking lot.

What if they both just hated her. What if they both just never wanted to see her again and ran away and didn't tell her. Avery slumped to her knees and seized her mouth with both hands and held in a sob. They just wanted to hurt her? Make her cry? She tried her best. She tried her best for them. This was planned? Two faces smiling, smiling, smiling in a swirl? This was her fault. She made so many mistakes. So, so many. But why? What did she do wrong? What was happening? What was happening what was happening what was happening what was happening what was happening—

Voice arose from the direction of the stairwell.

Avery looked up, her eyes drooping, her head still spinning spinning and only a glimmer of hope that it was them, Shan-bear and Jay too, she knew already it wasn't their voices though, why was she trying to trick herself when she couldn't handle any more tricks?

Then she saw Dalton.

She saw him, it was impossible not to see him, even among the crowd of people he stood out, it was undeniably him, but then she thought: This is a trick. This is your mind playing tricks and she so thoroughly believed what she was telling herself tears beaded in her eyes and she thought she would die. But the more she kept staring the more Dalton remained Dalton and the closer he came the less she could muddle herself into thinking otherwise.

"Dalton," she said rising. "Dalton. Oh Dalton!" Flying down the hall to him. "Dalton Dalton it's you? It's really you... Dalton. Oh Dalton. Please. Where's Shan-bear. Where's Shannon. Please. You got my text messages didn't you? Dalton?"

A wall of people put themselves between Avery and Dalton, or rather the people had always been there, conversing, led by a black man in striking religious clothing: A black frock over a collared shirt and tie, a violet sash draped over the shoulders with an ornate golden cross embroidered onto each side. When Avery swept her eyes over the throng, though, the person who stood out most was somehow the smallest, the one most hidden behind those in front of her. A young girl, a very pretty one, in fresh and clean black clothes. Avery could not say exactly what caught her attention about the girl, something just felt—important, unique?—about her, but Avery couldn't get distracted by whims like normal, she needed to focus.

"Dalton, please," she said again, while the black priest moved to block her.

"Well hello now," he said. His horn-rimmed glasses gave him a bookish, learned appearance, but his voice was much less deep than his plumpness made seem appropriate. "You appear to be in some distress there, ma'am. Is something the matter?"

The animated conversation died down as Avery nodded fervently. "Yes, please, I'm sorry to bother you, um... reverend?"

"Pastor is fine. Or Dwight, or Mr. Styles. Pastor Dwight J. Styles of the Cuyahoga Baptist Church, at your service."

He seemed to be in a good mood, and his niceness was the kind of niceness of someone in a good mood—not permanent. "I'm sorry to bother you, um, oh I'm so sorry. I just need to speak to Dalton there. Dalton, hi, Dalton? You remember me Dalton? It's Mrs. Waringcrane. Shannon's mother?"

Normally she wouldn't have asked if he remembered her. Avery operated on the logic that if she remembered someone, then they certainly remembered her... Her memory was just so spotty. But something about the blank look in Dalton's eyes unsettled her. Something was *off* about him, like he wasn't all there. When his blank eyes peered down at her it caused a jolt to rise up her spine and she stepped back, suddenly feeling very unsafe, very threatened, even though the pastor wore such a good mood smile.

The little girl jolted the same time Avery did. Jolted—and then quickly averted eye contact.

Dalton opened his mouth and words came out: "I apologize, Lady Waringcrane. I have decided to break off my engagement with Shannon. I have not seen her in the past two days. That is all I know."

That was not Dalton. That was not the man her daughter was dating.

"Please," Avery said.

Pastor... Pastor Whatever-His-Name-Was (sorry!) was in her path again. "Apologies, missus, but if the man doesn't know, the man doesn't know. Now why don't you move aside and let us through, we've got some important papers to pick up."

He shuffled her to the wall and passed on his way to Office 307, followed by the other people, followed by the little girl...

Avery dropped to her knees and placed her hands on the girl's shoulders. "Please. Please. I'm only looking for my children. For my son and daughter! If you know anything, anything at all, please... I only want to know!"

Instantly four sets of hands were on her, including the pastor's. Faces pushed into her view, she could no longer see the little girl, but she knew—she knew—she felt the guilt emanating, she knew, she knew, she didn't know how she knew but she knew. She knew!

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said the pastor as the hands pried her away. "You do not touch Miss Mayfair. That girl is—that girl is special, okay? She's not like you or me, got it? She's something else. She's a miracle worker. A prophet! A bona fide prophet, in this day and age, you hear me?"

"A prophet?"

"That's right. That's right!" The flow of bodies churned Avery efficiently to the back of the group, with the entire group—and the Dalton who wasn't Dalton—between her and the little girl. Miss Mayfair. "A prophet in this day and age, a prophet when we need it most. When we got divisions tearing this nation apart, I tell you! When the faith in the Lord is at its lowest. He has seen fit to bestow upon us one who will bring us once more to have faith in Christ and His love for us. Do you know what that girl did, that girl you just threw your hands on? Do you know?"

Avery felt like she did not want to know, that knowing was what she wanted least and most in equal measure.

"That girl. That prophet. She..." The pastor paused, directed his gaze downward at nothing, shook his head in wonder. "She brought a dead man back to life. I saw it with my own two eyes. All of these people saw it. You all saw it, did you not?"

A chorus: Yes, we did, we saw it, it's true. The only ones who did not chime in: Mayfair, Dalton, and another man, an old man.

"She brought that man there back to life! Just like Jesus Christ did to Lazarus!"

The old man, she knew at even a glance, was as cold and empty as Dalton. A horrified sob rose in her throat that she suppressed with a hand clamped to her lips. Did they not see? Did they not feel it? It cut into Avery clean as a blade.

Or did they see only what they wanted to see?

"Go out," the pastor said. "Spread the word. I want everyone to know. Every man, woman, and child in this country should know. God is speaking to us once more just as in Biblical times. Go now!"

She stumbled back, her head a whirr, thoughts no more distinct than clouds, an ankle twisting as she dropped and struggled to catch herself, rising, propping herself against the wall, her heart bludgeoning its way out of her chest.

"Wait," said a voice.

The crowd parted. The girl, Mayfair, stood there, one fist balled at her side, the other clenching the cane she carried. The balled fist rose and opened to rub the white bandage on her forehead. She refused all eye contact.

"You—seem like a good mother," Mayfair said.

"Please," Avery managed to whisper. "If you know anything. Anything..."

"Your son and daughter are alive. Unhurt." She spat out the words as though if she didn't say them they would melt a hole through her esophagus. "More than that... I don't know. I'm sorry. I can't say."

That wasn't true. Tears were beading in the corners of her eyes. It wasn't true, she knew more, and Avery despite the palpable horror emanating every inch of her skin rose and ran, no idea why, just hoping, believing some action would wrench more out of this little girl, but instantly the hole in the crowd closed and bodies rose to block her.

"Miss Mayfair is a wise girl, wise beyond her years," said the pastor. "Take the knowledge she's given you on *faith*. Your children are well. Let that soothe your soul." He motioned to two of the group, two men. "Guide her down to the exit, okay? Be good to the poor woman, she's clearly been through a lot. Remember, Mrs. Waringcrane. God is with you. Christ is with you. Believe in God and Christ and they will see you through your time of strife. Believe, because a new era of miracles is on hand!"

The passage of time that led Avery back down to the parking garage did not register within her mind. It was as though it did not exist. She was simply there once more, surrounded by concrete and metal pipes and that one weird archway. Dazed.

That little girl. That poor little girl. Did she even understand what she was doing? Maybe Avery didn't understand. It was all so confusing, so overwhelming, she could only think: Is this my fault? Somehow, she couldn't understand how, she had done something wrong, something to drive them away, she didn't get it.

But that wasn't true. Avery knew. She knew what she did. Shannon never forgave her for it either. Never forgave her father... Avery had just been too young. Eighteen. College freshman. Taking a general ed class on English literature and there he was, Professor Daniel Waringcrane, a recent divorcee at thirty-four years of age. He was looking to rebound from

his ex-wife, and Avery was—she was eighteen, she made a mistake. Shannon always hated her father because of it, but she didn't know him really, she was only eleven when he... when he... and even then he had been so *distant* for years before the end, Shan-bear never really knew her father and Jay even less so, although Avery never knew if Jay had an opinion on him one way or another, he was always so quiet. But they didn't know. He wasn't a bad man. He took responsibility for what he did. He could've thrust a few dollars in her hand and never talked to her again. But he took responsibility instead. He married her and for a time, although both their families disowned them, for a time they were happy together...

Why did he do it then. He left no note. Why did he do it. For a time Avery thought... just a thought—a thought she hated herself for having... for a time she thought he did it because of the way Shannon looked at him. She was always so smart for her age, even in elementary school she knew something was wrong, wondered why her father was so much older than her mother. For a time Avery thought it was the look Shannon gave her father, that look of hate, that pushed him. For a time Avery even hated Shannon for it.

Now she wondered. With Jay gone, with Shannon gone. Maybe it was never Shannon. Maybe it was her—Avery Fenster Waringcrane—maybe something about her was fundamentally broken, maybe she pushed everyone close to her away. Her husband, her parents, her sister, her children.

The archway over the parking space, the one with all the papers asking it to be removed, opened.

It happened in the corner of an eye too red to lose more tears. Her head lolled idly, involuntarily, following an animal urge to focus on any change in an otherwise-static environment. Without particular interest she confirmed: A ripple effect now filled the interior of the archway.

How odd, she thought.

A figure manifested from thin air and stepped out of the archway.

A woman. Tall, thin. Everything about her thin—gaunt. Narrow and mud-splattered boots laced to her knees took steps like a deer onto the concrete, steps that seemed about to snap in half under the weight of the body they supported. But what Avery stared at was the face. It looked like it had been sewn together in patches, although no sign of any seams. The patches instead bled into one another by degrees, dark and light, splotches in abstract pattern through which facial features emerged with a terrifying sense of blankness. Two long and pointed ears extended from her head.

The gateway closed behind her. She stepped into the parking garage, the sound of her footsteps the only sound even though there was also the sound of the pipes, the sound of traffic above. Only her footsteps, delicate despite the mud-caked intensity of the rest of her: Tap, tap.

Her eyes, black-irised, landed upon Avery, who remained kneeling on the concrete despite the sudden awareness of soreness after kneeling so long.

"Where is Mayfair," said the elf.

In those three words alone menace emanated. The elf stood calmly but nothing was calm about her. A broiling hate seethed under that surface, hate and sorrow together and interconnected the exact same way Avery's sorrow over her husband's end could not be easily nor cleanly extricated from that frothing bead of hate toward her own daughter, her own Shan-bear.

Fear, however, took precedent over any other emotion Avery might have felt. Her arm raised slowly without her considering any potential ramifications. Her trembling hand pointed toward the stairs.

"Take me to her," said the elf.

Avery nodded, first no more than a twitch, then full and exuberantly when the elf took a single subsequent step toward her. Her groan got butchered as she hastily tried to heft herself off her sore knees and stumbled into an unbalanced tilt that bounced her off a nearby car that instantly blared an alarm and equally as instantly prompted the elf to lunge and seize her by the throat.

"What is that?!" the elf shrieked. "What's that sound, what is that, what have you done?!" Her eyes flicked from Avery to the caterwauling car.

"Car alarm. Car alarm...!"

"What?! What!" The elf pulled Avery tight, gripped her close, using her—Avery realized belatedly—as a shield from any would-be attacker.

The alarm ended. Avery felt the pulse of the elf's chest against her back. Despite her coldness of expression her body was warm to the point of feverishness, a searing heat that seeped through clothes.

"Just a car alarm," Avery said. "It won't, it won't hurt you. Just an alarm...!"

"Get me out of here. Get me to Mayfair. Now!"

Avery nodded. The strength in those fingers that seized her throat crushed any thoughts otherwise. Tepid, careful, giving wide berth to the parked cars, she led the way to the stairs and then up the stairs.

En route some sense of coherent thought returned to her, she remembered the way the elf entered the world, she remembered that the elf was in fact an elf, or at least she had long pointy ears like elves did and a type of grace in even her most frantic movements the exuded a feeling of "elf," and swallowing a dull lump she asked: "How did you... how did you get here?"

"Through the Door," the elf said, back to cold simplicity after the car alarm scare.

Yeah, that was about what Avery expected, and although she didn't quite know what the Door was or how it worked or anything like that, a kind of vague understanding crept into her and

she remembered one of the questions she frequently asked herself during her twelve trips to and from this seemingly unimportant office building in downtown Cleveland: Why here? Did Jay and Shannon really come here and disappear? Where would they disappear to? It was Cleveland on all sides. All except the lake, at least, but nothing was in the lake.

Now she thought she might know where they disappeared.

She gulped again as she rounded a bend in the stairwell, reaching the second floor—only one left to the third, and a bad feeling seeped into her, a bad feeling about what would happen when this elf and Mayfair met. Her parched lips expelled on a dry breath: "Do you—do you know my children. Do you know Jay and Shannon Waringcrane."

The elf stopped. Avery stopped. She did not dare turn to face her. She closed her eyes and awaited the response she sensed building in the back of the elf's throat until it finally manifested:

"I do."

Nothing more. The elf started moving again and gave Avery a push to make her move too. No further questions would receive an answer. Avery understood that without any words spoken.

The door to the third floor corridor stood in front of her. Avery reached out and pushed it open.

A long, straight, yellowed space stretched beyond, rhythmic in its timely repetition of doors and plaques and lights. Until seven doors down, where the men and women from earlier were busy hoisting large cardboard boxes overflowing with rolls of parchment and plopping them in neat stacks against the wall, dispelling plumes of dust in the process. They were all, Avery noticed for the first time, dressed so nicely, in such neat and orderly suits and dresses, the men with ties and jackets draped over their shoulders and the women smoothing out folds of fabric to stop the dust from collecting there. The black pastor directed them beside the open door of 307, motions of his hands so smooth and oratorical even if nothing left his mouth beyond terse orders of "Over there" or "Yes right on top of that one."

There was a word. Avery remembered where she learned it but didn't remember the word. The title of a movie, it starred Sandra Bullock, she saw it on TV once, or at least the back half of it, and Jay walked past and told her she'd seen it before, even though she'd certainly never seen it before. Sandra Bullock's husband died—in a car accident. But not yet. And Sandra Bullock knew even though it hadn't happened yet, she knew he was going to die, she knew about the accident, and she was desperate to stop him, trying everything she could to stop him, the name of the movie was, what was the name of the movie? It made her cry on the living room couch, and Jay said she saw it before, the name was. The name of the movie was—

Premonition.

Everything was going to go very badly.

The pastor turned his head first. His glasses were a gleam in the humming yellow light and he stood motionless as Avery swayed to the side and leaned herself against the wall to let the elf walk past.

"Who—are you," the pastor asked, his voice carrying across the long expanse of the hallway without him raising it. The three people in the hall carrying boxes put theirs down and looked. A head tilted out of 307 and looked, then dipped back inside. Whispers.

When would she have ever seen that movie before?

"Wait," she whispered. "Wait."

More people filed out of the office. They organized two abreast shoulder-to-shoulder with their shoulders scraping the yellowed walls. Ten of them, and then the pastor, and then lastly the old dead man and the new dead Dalton. The girl, Mayfair, did not emerge. Only the corner of her head peeped past the frame.

Dalton said:

"So Shannon had a second key. I knew it."

Shannon? Shannon?

The elf kept walking. Past 301.

"What's your name again?" Dalton said. "Sansadore? Sansaime. Sansaime, that's it. What exactly did those dukes promise you for killing—for killing Lady Mayfair?"

Past 302.

"Money? Rather a lot of trouble for you to follow us here simply for money. Was supplying Astrophicus and DeWint and whoever else with materials for their heretical experiments not lucrative enough business?"

The elf, Sansaime, stopped beside the door to 303. The group of Mayfair's followers extended their lines to 306. Two empty doors stood between them. And Avery's knees buckled, the emanation of something awful constricting her, premonition, a vision of future death useless because she possessed no power to stop it. But who was dead? Who? Shannon had a second key? Key to what. Key to where. Did she no longer have it? A premonition was like watching a movie you saw before but you couldn't remember the first time you saw it. Or was that the opposite.

"You should know before you continue, Sansaime," Dalton said, "that Lady Mayfair possesses the power that revived Lazarus. Strike down these humble followers and they shall arise stronger than before. And any attempts at violence shall be met with appropriate measure."

The people in Mayfair's group, even the pastor, watched the elf with uncertain eyes, with trembling forms and furtive glances at one another as if to derive strength from the weakness of their companions. But it was seeing the dead old man who they all believed wasn't dead

that caused them to turn back their faces with renewed determination. The pastor mumbled: "God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power..."

"It's simply not worth it, Sansaime. Please see that. Mayfair has left Whitecrosse. She shall not return to it. The dukes may proceed with whatever machinations they like; they are irrelevant to her plans and she is now irrelevant to theirs. Return safely to them, tell them the task is done, and never shall they have cause or need to doubt you. To kill another is to sin, and in this realm of God our sins shall weigh so much heavier on our souls."

In a voice like rocks grinding together Sansaime whispered.

"Tell it to me yourself."

"Pardon?"

"I said. Tell it to me yourself. Not through him."

A quiet. The faces of the people flitted, a murmur among them tightly bound to the hum of the heating system that flowed unseen through the hallway's walls.

Mayfair stepped out of the room. Keeping behind Dalton, visible only through the space between his arm and his side, she turned, straightened her dress around the shoulders, and composed herself into a rigid, imperious stance, a commanding stance despite her uncommanding stature and uncommanding position tucked neatly behind her followers.

"Mayfair," said the pastor. "Mayfair, what exactly are we dealing with here? Is this thing—is this thing some kind of devil—"

"No. Please allow me to handle this, Pastor Styles." Her voice was tinier and did not carry as far as Dalton's or the pastor's. She addressed Sansaime: "I know you are—"

"Tell me what you just had him say to me. Tell it to me yourself."

"As you wish. There is no further reason for you to pursue me—"

"NO," said Sansaime, a shrill rise in her voice that cut through Avery and made her stumble onto a knee, a cracking pitch Avery understood at once, in which she heard sadness and heartbreak and tragedy boiled into useless, unstoppable anger. "The other thing. About sin. Tell me about sin! What's a sin, Mayfair? Killing another? I shouldn't commit a sin now Mayfair? Is that so? Killing another? You say this to me? To me? Killing another is a sin? You? *You smashed his bones to pieces.* You smashed him to pieces. So tell it to me again. I want to hear you say it with your own mouth. What's a sin?"

Mayfair hesitated. Her composure shuffled. For an instant her gaze spanned the whole breadth of the corridor and she caught the eye of Avery and Avery shuddered because it grew even stronger, the word that Avery already forgot from the movie she was already forgetting beyond the fact that Sandra Bullock was in it, a memory lost as though grasping it caused it to crumble to dust so that she would once again sit on the couch and watch the movie and Jay

would tell her she'd seen it before except Jay was gone. Jay was gone, Shannon was gone, and these two knew it. These two knew why and where. The archway. The second key—

"Shannon had the second key," Mayfair said as though reading Avery's mind. "But she's not with you now, is she Sansaime. You killed her for it, didn't you. You killed Shannon Waringcrane!"

And that was the moment Avery foresaw, foresaw so strongly that the millisecond before the words left Mayfair's mouth intense déjà vu overcame her, a horrifying disorientation that caused the yellow hallway to revolve while the faces spread in a circular pattern like the numbers on a rotary phone.

It was spinning because Avery was moving. She was also screaming phantom words she didn't understand: "You killed her?!" Sansaime twisted to watch her staggering drunkenly toward her and something shiny and metal whipped out of her sleeves to appear in each hand and Avery knew they were knives but kept running anyway thinking: Killed her? Killed her? Killed her?

The knives flashed, Avery twirled into a fall, expecting to be dead, feeling no pain, feeling nothing because the knives did not strike her, were held stayed in the hands of Sansaime whose eyes shifted away from her toward the direction of her true target. A cry arose among the believers, a flurry at the far end of the room, and then a harsh echoing crack that corresponded with an eruption of yellow crumbs in a streak off the wall right beside Sansaime's head.

A second crack followed the first as Avery hit the floor out of her aimless, poorly-footed charge and sprawled rolling. Thinking: What is happening? Not thinking it for long. A moment later one harsh tug around her midsection hoisted her upright. The hallway righted itself, slowly completing its final spin (or rather her mind completed its final spin) and the situation returned to normal.

Sansaime held Avery tight in front of her, held her like a shield to face Mayfair's end of the hall. She did that because Dalton had stepped ahead of the other followers and aimed a handgun down the corridor at her. Most of the followers had fallen to their knees, grasping their heads, even the pastor grasped while he shouted a prayer, an invocation to remain steadfast in the faith for God would deliver them.

Sansaime's hands were frantic and the face that pushed over Avery's shoulder twisted in boggling animation. "Clever plot there, girl. Use the woman to trick my attention. I see I see! Quite clever. And if I'd killed the woman, she'd be your puppet. But won't you use that weapon again? The loud one. I'm standing right here in the hallway. Simply strike us both through with one blow, will you not?"

With Dalton forward, Mayfair was somewhat more visible, but still only disconnected parts of her past the crouched forms of her followers and the thin frame of the old dead man who moved despite being dead. There was enough, though, to see that pretty face grimace, to turn its head so its eyes would not meet another's.

"Why will you not strike us both, girl? Is the weapon not powerful enough for it? Then simply dispatch the woman so she may return to attack me. No? Is that not the best strategy? I don't mean to tell you your business girl but you've rather perplexed me! Still no? Whatever could the reason be? You don't—No! You don't mean to say? It's true? You won't kill another? How holy and pious of you! How faithfully devoted!"

"This is the world of God and in His world I shall abide by His rules..."

"But you'd still kill me. Or did you miss twice on purpose?"

"Lady Mayfair," said the pastor, "what should we do? Give us the word. Give us the word and we—we'll fight to defend you! Yes! We will, won't we?"

His words, delivered haltingly, constructed in Mayfair a frame, and she straightened, and she managed to tilt her face past the arm of the dead old man to put Sansaime and Avery in her general periphery.

"Sansaime," she said, "you aren't human. You aren't even a candidate to be human. You're fae. You slaughter your own kind to appease humanity but you will never—never—be human. No matter what my brother told you."

A wheezing, horrible laughter clawed out Sansaime's throat, she tilted back her head and shook, everything inside her unraveling, undone. Then she snapped back to attention. "The rules are whatever you wish them to be, is that so? To be expected! That's how it always is with those in power. But you're only a murderer. Only a fratricide!"

"Stay your tongue." Mayfair was strengthening herself word by word, the words themselves a power. "I have killed nobody that God would consider human. Unlike you. You killed Shannon Waringcrane—"

"I didn't! That's the damnable hilarity of it, isn't it? I didn't kill her. Didn't even hurt the girl. I could've. Indeed I felt like it. I saw her, heard her and her arse of a brother speaking, and with Mack dead in the mud I wanted nothing more than to disembowel the lot of them. But I didn't!"

She didn't. She didn't kill Shannon. Or Jay. They were still alive. Avery's head tilted back and her eyeballs strained against their sockets to blind themselves in the lightbulb overhead.

"But," Sansaime continued, "you assumed I did. As you thought what *you* would do. Hm? Am I incorrect, girl?"

Steel coldness crept back across the span of the corridor. Sansaime's question lingered in empty air, empty air except for the mumble of Mayfair's followers, what did they think about all these words being bandied back and forth? Did they not realize even now something was wrong about that poor little girl they thought was a prophet? The pastor called Sansaime a devil, so maybe that meant they could simply disregard anything she had to say, or at least the things she said that disagreed with their view of the world... People were like that, though, weren't they? Avery was like that too. What was her world, where she thought Jay and

Shannon would never leave and yet they did? What did she never see because she did not want to see it?

"Dalton, move forward," said Mayfair.

Dalton moved forward. He kept the gun raised as he lumbered along the hallway. The looseness of Sansaime's limber body went taut at once as she shifted from the wild, almost manic character of her speech to the instinctual readiness of a predator species, or a prey, Avery once more reminded of deer, frozen staring until the least twitch of movement sent them bounding into the woods.

And what? Would it remain like that until the fake, not real, not-Dalton Dalton got close enough to press the barrel of the gun against Sansaime's forehead and fire? Avery didn't want that to happen, didn't want to see it, didn't want to hear it, and didn't even want this elf to die, this elf who didn't kill Shannon, this elf who knew where Shannon and Jay were and might even have a key to lead her to them. Dalton moved slowly, all Sansaime had to do was back up to keep away from him, but she couldn't, she didn't want to, she held her eyes fixed on Mayfair beyond all the bodies and the only direction she wanted to move was forward. Never backward. In just the clenching of her fingers against Avery's shoulders Avery felt everything, a drive to fulfill a task even if it killed her. A drive to die trying.

Mayfair killed someone close to Sansaime, a man who was Mayfair's brother and whose relationship to Sansaime nobody ever said, but Avery knew that too, she knew who that unseen dead man was to Sansaime, she knew because she was once Sansaime herself, staring blankly at the precocious girl who killed him, whether that girl knew or admitted it or not.

He.

Avery's hand, which nobody was watching, nobody cared about her at all, that was fine, that was the way that was best, caring about Avery apparently sentenced you to die or disappear, anyway her hand fell into her purse. Her fingers rustled, rustled. Where was it. A small item, given her as a birthday gift from—of course—from Shannon: "*You* need something like this Mother. To protect yourself. What if a dog attacked you?" Happy birthday Shannon. Why don't we go to the zoo? Do you want to see the elephants?

Dalton coming closer, closer. One door away. The gun raised.

Her fingers closed around the gift. A small cylindrical device a little bigger than a AA battery. It had a button at one end. Avery pressed it.

A sharp, shrill, rapidly repeating alarm went off: WEOWEOWEOWEOWEO! The sound blasted so loud it made Avery flinch and she was the one who made it happen, which was loud enough to make Mayfair flinch too, even behind all her bodies. Avery took the device out and tossed it down the hall as far as she could.

Maybe if you were Avery and saw someone throw a screaming alarm at you, you'd be afraid anyway because you thought it was a bomb. But most people in the modern world would probably figure out what the device was pretty quickly: Just loud and annoying. To scare

dogs away, like Shannon said. But Mayfair, same as Sansaime, came from some other world. They didn't have alarms like this.

Mayfair thought the device was dangerous. That meant not-Dalton thought it was too.

Dalton turned and sprinted back down the hall after the device as it bounced and rolled closer to Mayfair—sprinting to protect her. And Sansaime? Sansaime heard an alarm before, in the garage. She knew it was just a sound. All its shrillness did was pull her out of her daze, make her realize Dalton no longer trained the gun on her.

She let go of Avery and sprinted. Although sprinted was not really the right word for it. Somehow, despite the clear emotion that seized her, despite the quivering and twitching of her tensed hands and fingers as she held Avery, when her opportunity arose Sansaime glided. Just by being let go Avery herself was collapsing against the nearest wall but Sansaime seemed to soar, no, she didn't seem to, she did, because the instant she passed Dalton she rose into the air, slid against one wall to cause the most gentle and soundless redirection of her momentum, and then landed on the heads of Mayfair's followers, tapping the soles of her boots against their skulls one by one. The heads barely bobbed, their nonplussed faces registered no reaction, and Sansaime somehow managed it all without her own head even scraping the ceiling, as she was already tucking forward into a rolling dive that carried her over the head of the last thing in her way: the dead old man. Over his head and down toward that poor little girl Mayfair with both blades drawn.

Avery helped her do it. She didn't simply blunder into it either. She made a conscious decision—her alarm continued to scream. Why? She'd wanted to help Sansaime in that moment, she hadn't been thinking what helping her entailed, what the outcome of that would be, not thinking ahead that far, or was that true? Was that even true? Did some part of her know, of course she knew but knowing and remembering what she knew were two different things, did some part of her still know, like the part of her watching that Sandra Bullock film and being faintly sure what would happen next one moment before it happened?

Of all the jumbled people, the one who reacted in time was the pastor. As Sansaime dove from the old man's head, he hurled his body at Mayfair as if some giant unseen hand threw him. His big body in his black robes tackled Mayfair aside, which put him in the path of Sansaime's downward arc, but Sansaime did not lose her target. She swept her blades to the side, at Mayfair, before landing headfirst into the pastor, bowling him over, and rolling off him to her feet with a single elegant motion.

A thin line of blood shone on the yellow wall beside the open door of 307 and Mayfair staggered, clutching her chest. She still stood, though, using her staff as support, and as the moment of Sansaime's daredevil plunge ended the assorted people who clogged the hall finally reacted and turned as a mass to put themselves between them. Two went for Mayfair herself, pulling her away while the dead old man and an alive young man rushed past the groaning pastor and kept Sansaime occupied. "Get her out of here," the pastor howled as he pulled himself up, his glasses and sash askew, straining the thick veiny cords of his throat to be heard over the alarm and the commotion. "Quick, quick, protect her with your very lives!"

Out of the last few words of this command arose a screech. It was Sansaime. The dead old man, two daggers embedded in his body but moving all the same, had her by one arm while a

pair of young men—the same two who escorted Avery to the garage earlier—grabbed the other. Together they forced her against the wall, while Dalton swept his arm around Mayfair and ushered her away from the action. The rest buzzed to her, asking if she was okay, the pastor bringing up the rear limping, and none of them even looked at Avery as they passed, none of them except Mayfair herself.

A long straight line ran down her chest, splitting her fresh clean clothes and darkening them with blood. She held a hand to herself, wincing, streaking tears, but the wound seemed shallow. Through those bleary eyes her look of pain was aimed straight at Avery. Sharp, accusatory, and all Avery could do was avert her gaze. She helped Sansaime. Helped Sansaime try to kill the poor little girl. Why? Why did she do that? Was she just stupid?

She wanted to disappear back in a dark space somewhere. She couldn't. Mayfair and her train passed by. Her alarm finally shut off the same time the last of them—the pastor—vanished into the stairwell.

That made it quiet enough for Avery to hear bone cracking. Sansaime shrieked as the dead old man twisted and twisted and twisted and twisted her arm. One of the young men punched her in the side, although it didn't seem like a particularly strong punch. Her long legs spread out and kicked at the carpet but the old man kept twisting and twisting and the cracking sound spread...

The first young man pulled his fist back to punch again and Sansaime wrenched her arm free. Her hand lashed out with the fingers straight and jabbed the first man in the throat. Quick, efficient. The man fell back clutching his neck and gurgling and by the time the second man recovered Sansaime brought her leg straight up into a kick that launched him back trailing blood. From the old man's body she retracted a knife and swiped it lightning-quick through the air, the old man's hand dropped from a stump that did not bleed and Sansaime was free, hurrying down the hall after Mayfair with one arm limp at her side and nothing in her face suggesting she cared whatsoever.

Avery got up and followed her. The handless old man moved too slow to follow, and the two young men moaned and groaned.

It was hard to descend the stairs, her feet kept slipping or folding under her ankles, and she lost sight of Sansaime immediately, but she expected she knew where everyone was going. Down to the lobby, down even further, down into the parking garage.

She was out of breath by the time she reached it, her hand went to her heart, it ached from all the pounding. Tires squealed in the echoey space and as she stumbled to grip a nearby pipe it rounded the swatch of pavement in front of her, a bluish and oldish SUV missing parts of its paint and with a good ten or so heads crammed inside to give off a distinct clown car aesthetic that filled Avery with an unstoppable urge to giggle. The pastor drove, a Christian fish symbol dangling from the rearview mirror he kept checking frantically, while Mayfair slumped in the passenger seat. Some of her followers reached forward from the back, trying to press cloth or paper to her, although they had to contort themselves around Dalton, who took up most of the space.

Swerving, the SUV hit a straightaway and shot forward. In its wake Sansaime sprinted, this time it was fine to say she sprinted because with her right arm limp she lacked most of her previous grace.

She still moved quickly. But not quick enough. The SUV rocketed up the ramp leading out of the garage and left Sansaime far, far behind. She made it halfway across the garage before she stopped, tossed back her head, and growled ferociously enough to make Avery jump, then wheeled on Avery as though she knew she was there the whole time.

"These things, these carriage things. How do you pilot one?" Her functional arm fanned to indicate the few cars parked around them.

"Ah, um," said Avery.

"Tell me!"

"You need, you need a key."

"Give me your key!"

"You uh, you can't drive with your arm like that..."

"Then you'll drive!"

She advanced on Avery scarily and Avery tossed her hands over her head either to protect herself or surrender and said, "Okay okay! Okay!"

Sansaime breathed down her neck as Avery crossed the full span of the parking garage, rifling through her purse—oh no she forgot to pick up her alarm—trying to find her keys again, reaching her car and still not being able to find her keys, searching and searching and searching (of course this would happen) with Sansaime's eyes lasering her to ash, searching and finally there it was, the keys, which she yanked out too quickly and dropped only for Sansaime to catch them before they hit the pavement.

"Hurry!" Sansaime said, handing the keys over.

"Thanks," Avery mumbled. She jabbed the car door with the key twice before slotting into the keyhole and turning.

Sansaime tried to climb into the car by crawling over Avery the moment she sat in the driver's seat and rather than tell her to go around and use the door she just flattened herself against the seat and let it happen, only saying "Oof" or "Oh no" two or three times before Sansaime with dexterous aplomb slid into the passenger seat.

"Make it move!" Sansaime said.

"Um, yes," said Avery, "but please buckle your seatbelt." She pointed, Sansaime didn't know at what, they exchanged a lot of glances with Sansaime's growing angrier and angrier and Avery finally realized the best way would be to demonstrate by buckling her own seatbelt,

which she did with a lot of difficulty because she couldn't get the seatbelt into the slot fast enough, and it ended with Sansaime buckled up faster than Avery herself.

The car started and Shania Twain started belting: "That don't impress me much, oh-oh-oh, so you got the looks, but have you got the touch?"

"What is this! What is this!" Sansaime shouted, waving her hand at the stereo in a frenzy.

"Now don't get me wrong, yeah, I think you're all right, but that won't keep me warm in the middle of the night."

"Who's singing? Who's making this music?!"

Avery turned the stereo off. "Uh, I'll just drive." She was going to be sick...

Of course by then the pastor's bluish SUV was long gone. Avery drove onto the street and it was just cars and lights, cars and lights, and then Avery got flustered because Sansaime kept screaming at her and accidentally turned the wrong way onto a one-way street and twenty cars honked at her in unison while she waved her hands to say sorry and underwent a ridiculous maneuver to revolve around and start going the right way. By the end of it, after Sansaime figured out what was happening and started yelling at Avery about it too, Avery was crying again.

"So where did they go? Where?" Sansaime asked once they turned onto a main road.

"I don't know."

Sansaime expelled harsh air, thought for a second, and said, "Then back to where we began. We'll ask those two men she left behind."

Avery didn't really want to do that, mainly because the dead old man would be there too and he was in many ways more frightening even than the dead Dalton, but what else could she do? Her fears were unfounded, though. By the time they arrived (which took even more maneuvering of the byzantine downtown Cleveland road network), parked, and clambered back up to 307, the men were gone. The old man was gone. And so were the big boxes full of papers that had been stacked outside the office.

That was the end. Sansaime finally slid down into a seated position, her back against the wall, and instead of a frantic screech she only expelled a long and exhausted sigh.

"I've gone and blundered it." She reached into a pocket and withdrew a pipe, which she stuck into her mouth and spent a long time lighting with only one hand. She did not seem to mind any pain caused by her other arm. "Oh, what am I even doing here."

Avery picked up her discarded alarm and hid it back in her purse. Somehow, everything turned out... okay. Her little gambit stopped anyone new from dying, so she should feel good about herself, and then she should find the first opportunity to sidle out of Sansaime's view and run for it.

But she needed Sansaime, didn't she. Sansaime knew where Jay and Shannon were. She also knew how to reach them.

So she steeled herself and tiptoed closer while wafting away smoke. "So, um—" She stopped the second Sansaime's face, which did not look anything close to happy, turned toward her. Obviously it would be a bad idea to make any demands of Sansaime right now, when her mood was bad. It'd just get Avery yelled at.

"You look hungry... And tired... and, uh, hurt. Why don't I take you to my place and get you some food and rest? Wouldn't that be nice?"

That unfortunate, scarred face frowned at Avery, forcing her two steps back, even though the face was not consumed in immediate anger, and was in fact fairly neutral. It even, after a few seconds, donned a smile, although Avery wasn't sure how she felt about that smile, it was a strange smile.

"Very well," Sansaime said. "Mayhap it shall be nice after all."

So This Is Massacre

The hero and heroine: Jay and Shannon Waringcrane. After their productive audience with Queen Mallory, they were taken to recover in fabulously-furnished bedchambers, where a bevy of servants attended to their wounds and needs. While neither sibling exactly lost consciousness, they were in little state to protest their treatment, which didn't stop them from protesting their treatment anyway with what dazed words they managed to eke out.

Eventually, fatigue became too much, and each fell into a deep slumber. The weary servants filed out their respective bedchambers, nodded to the armored knight Mallory assigned as guard, and left to retire to their own quarters.

Night plunged a city without electricity into a deep darkness, some narrow streets at times illuminated by the lantern of a passing watchmen or the windows of houses awake late carousing in celebration of the newly arrived heroes—or in quiet confederation over how best to deal with this brand new fly in the ointment. In this environment a creature like Lalum could creep easily without discovery, and Lalum knew the alleys well enough to scuttle blind, both in the poorer outer districts and the richer ones closer to the castle. After all, she had lived in both before her disfigurement.

A common story, not one worth telling. Her family, noble in name, poor in pocket, nonetheless groomed her well; she served in the castle, was even considered a candidate for governess to the young Princess Mayfair; but finances being as they were, she was instead married to a wealthy merchant in what both families considered a fair deal: Gold for a title.

Unfortunately, the merchant, on top of being a reprobate drunk, was a fraud—penniless. What could be done? Nothing. Lalum attempted to be a good wife to her husband, who was at times not a horrible sort; a liar, yes, prone to anger, true, often striking her for any failing no matter how slight; but he could also show mercy and kindness.

He died in a knife fight over cards.

The debt collectors took any meager amount left afterward; she returned to her family, but her father died soon of illness; her mother had long been dead already; her brother, facing his own difficulties, refused to take her in. Then it was onto the streets, where she remained until the kindness of Archbishop Astrophicus allowed her into the convent despite her lost purity. She bore the archbishop no ill will for his deception, for the drugs he gave her, for his lies about their source and purpose. He'd saved her from an ignoble fate, after all, and he did what he did out of love for God, not enmity. People were fundamentally good. People were fundamentally forgiven due to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Sadly, Lalum was no longer a human. She lost the right of salvation. Nobody, not even Christ, would lift a finger to help her now.

Nobody except the hero.

Her knowledge of the castle interior served her well as her spider legs climbed along the bricks and stony ridges to each of the windows belonging to spare bedchambers; on the third

window she found him sleeping, used the thin tip of one leg to undo the latch, and crawled inside.

She dared not wake him. She merely wished to know he was safe, and watched him from the side of his bed. It was hard to tell in the dark, but had he been hurt? Was that a shadow or a bruise? What happened? Oh no. Oh no...!

Lalum.

Lalum drew back, struck an unlit candlestick; it wobbled; she turned and steadied it before it might fall. Furtive eyes glanced about the room. Who had spoken? Nobody was here besides herself and the hero. Had he mumbled in his sleep? Mumbled her name? He—he would do that? He would think about her in his dreams? Her? Oh, oh—oh!

Lalum.

No. Not the hero's voice. Not a voice at all. It wasn't like someone spoke it, it was more like... something that suddenly became *known* inside her head. A thought, except not her thought. Was it... the voice of God?

Lalum, can you hear me?

How—how to respond to something like that? Normally she communicated by weaving her web. It was dangerous to those around her if she ever unsealed her mouth; she did so only to eat and drink, which she made sure to do in private, when nobody was near. So, she couldn't speak. But without someone to see her web, how could she respond?

She tried the web anyway. A single word spread between her fingers: YES.

Superb. As my experience with these papers remains limited, I was unsure whether my message would reach you. Oh, I ought to explain. I am Princess Mayfair, and I am the New Master of Whitecrosse.

Mayfair? New Master? Lalum understood not a whit. Clearly, however, something incredible was happening.

I apologize for not communicating with you or the other nuns sooner. I have experienced distractions, but they should not trouble me further. Now, as for you, Lalum. I notice you were hurt very badly during a fight with Flanz-le-Flore. Has anyone seen your wounds?

Of course not. Lalum had barely been able to look at them herself. Being half-spider was awful enough, but now she was not only that. Those horrible wolves had ripped off one of her legs, had bit and chewed her bloody. The pain remained severe even days later, but her husband had prepared her to endure pain silently, and that was also the way the Bible instructed one to act.

NO, her web wrote. And nobody ever would. She would never allow another to see her ever again. Certainly not the hero. The way he would blanch in disgust if he laid eyes upon her...

Instantly her wounds were healed.

The constant stinging pain and ache that she was accustomed to feeling ceased at once. At first she didn't believe it. It must have been a trick of her mind, a false hope, a dream even. Much of what now transpired felt like a dream. But she knew the signs of the waking world. And as she shuffled into the dim moonlight filtering through the window and unraveled the webs around her arms and torso, she discovered it so: unblemished skin.

Fascinating! It truly worked. I believe I much better understand how these papers function now. Oh, but it seems you still lack the leg you lost.

It was true.

Hm. Someone must have seen that particular injury, meaning I cannot remove it without creating a contradiction. Please wait one moment. I shall attempt an additive change, rather than a subtractive one.

Additive change? Before Lalum had a chance to wonder what that meant, a tingle manifested on the stump of her severed limb. She held it up to the light; the stitching broke and a small nub grew where the wound once was.

There. I gave you a new property, one that allows you regrow limbs after about a day, similar to how a lizard regrows its tail. I apologize; it seems I cannot make the regeneration act much faster.

Another moment of stunned silence. Then it struck her. She was healed! She wasn't going to be permanently maimed for life! Oh, oh, oh! Princess Mayfair did this? Lalum had always thought the girl to be cold and self-centered, but perhaps that assessment was much too unkind... she certainly regretted it now.

THANK YOU! Her web wrote. OH, THANK YOU SO MUCH YOUR HIGHNESS!

It is nothing. You have provided much aid to my cause. I merely ask for your continued service in return.

Yes, of course, certainly! That was what Lalum wanted to write. The letters only partially formed, though. She looked at the hero asleep on the bed. The "service" Mayfair wanted her to provide... it couldn't be...

I SHANT HURTE THE HERO YOUR HIGHNESS. I CANNOT DO THAT.

He saved her life. Asking nothing in return; simply out of kindness. Simply because he was a hero. He did not demand her service, she gave it to him freely. She refused to betray him.

No, no! Nothing like that, Lalum. I need you to instead go to the caverns underneath the castle.

That was all? Then so be it.

With some navigational assistance from Mayfair to slip past any guards prowling the corridors, Lalum quickly found and descended the long, spiral staircase into the castle's

basement, someplace she had never gone during her time as a prospective governess to the child—now young lady—who now gave her orders.

Down Lalum went. Down and down. She grew unsettled and anxious—no matter how many times she descended a staircase, the next instruction Mayfair gave was to find another and descend even more. How deep did this cellar go? Everything was pitch darkness, but a subterranean chill crept through her spine. Rats skittered. It seemed as though there was space for an entire second castle under the first. She'd once heard rumors the cellar was rather expansive—some of the guards griped it was easy to get lost—but she never imagined something like this. For what purpose did this underground serve? When had it been constructed? The castle predated John Coke. What was down here with her...?

Finally an orange glow arose in the distance. It came from two torches, ominously lit—who had done so? Would a guard come by to replace them? These questions were secondary. The torchlight shone upon a vast door that arched into shadow. On the door was an engraving, a larger-than-life image of Christ, his halo massive and his eyes intense, the pupils seeming to stare down directly at her. His expression was not kind, and a sick feeling spread in her stomach...

This is the entrance to the royal vault of Whitecrosse, said Mayfair.

The royal vault. Yes, she knew of that. It contained the relics amassed by John Coke. It was said the door could only be opened by members of the royal family: a magic binding. Perhaps these torches burned due to magic too. Or perhaps all that was merely a story. After all—

I AM NOT OF THE ROYALE FAMILY, YOUR HIGHNESS.

Not yet. I will now attempt to make an alteration to your paper. Our record-keeping four hundred years ago is rather piecemeal; I know that fact well from nights perusing the royal lineages in the library. Who is to say your aristocratic heritage is not an offshoot of John Coke's direct line? I shall give you royal blood.

Then, a pause. Lalum wondered if she should attempt to open the door now. Under Christ's harsh glare, Lalum would rather have done anything else. A silly fear, she knew. It was only an image of Christ, it was not Christ himself. Nothing to fear.

Hm. It did not work.

A relief.

But why? I know with certainty these family trees reach outside the bounds of all records and living memory. How is it still a "contradiction"? Unless... I cannot alter anything to do with John Coke, the way I cannot with Jay and Shannon Waringcrane? Yes, that would make sense!

Lalum stood there awkwardly while Mayfair's disembodied "voice" brainstormed to itself inside her head.

Regardless. It was an unlikely plan anyway. The vault's page specifies it can only be opened by "members of the Whitecrosse royal family"—it says nothing of blood. A distant relation would not be able to open it anyway... Hm. There must be some method, however. Something that does not contradict established facts. Well, one cannot prove a negative. Certainly, it is "well known" that the vault can only be opened by the royal family, but never has this fact been definitively proven by forcing every other person in all of Whitecrosse to attempt to open it. Who is to say the door cannot be opened by the royal family AND by the woman named Lalum? The woman named Lalum has never attempted to open the door before... therefore, her being able to open it now should not be a contradiction. One moment. I shall amend the vault door's page.

Lalum decided not to ask questions, or think about it at all. She stared at the stones below her and pretended she didn't feel Christ's eyes burning into her skull.

Curses! That failed too. Why? Is it because the vault door's page says "Can only be opened by the Whitecrosse royal family"? Adding that it could be opened by another person would contradict that fact, even if the fact has not be definitively proven to the people of Whitecrosse... There must be more nuance to what is considered a "contradiction" than I thought. One moment. Please allow me to think some more.

In silence, Lalum wrapped her arms around herself and waited. Much time passed and Lalum realized she preferred when Mayfair still communicated her thoughts. At least then it wasn't so eerie.

When Mayfair's voice returned Lalum jolted. *I have it! I cannot believe I failed to realize before. I am embarrassed even—the solution is so utterly, unbelievably simple. In fact, it requires no amendments at all: We shall use your animus!*

Animus. Despite Mayfair's clear enthusiasm, the word did nothing to settle Lalum's deep unease.

It's a flawless plan! My mother is currently sleeping. Your animus allows you to control the actions of another; you shall simply sneak into her bedchamber and manipulate her into opening the vault. Make haste. I shall direct you. Oh yes, of course, you need some fae blood to use your animus. No matter. Olliebollen Pandelirium is around the castle somewhere; we need make only a quick detour first.

The sickness inside her spread.

Lalum? Do hurry. There is no reason to dawdle.

Lalum disliked using her animus. Not merely due to the corruption it wreaked upon her body, although that was part of it. Not merely because she needed to devour a faerie first, although that too was part of it, even if their flesh and blood tasted so delectable, and the mere mention of that adorable Olliebollen caused her mouth to water—Urgh. No, the main reason was that she hated the animus itself.

The act of controlling another creature. It went against the free will God gifted mankind; his greatest gift after the gifts of creation and life. While she had used her animus on other nuns

before, they agreed to it beforehand; in some cases it was to save their lives. To use it on someone without consent...

They claimed the animus was a manifestation of an individual's soul. Each person possessed a unique animus. Why, then, was hers *that*? Was that the truth of her soul? That she wanted to control... manipulate... No, no, she was not like that at all. She was not.

YOUR HIGHNESS, she wrote. CAN YOU NOT ASK YOUR MOTHER TO OPEN IT OF HER OWN WILLE?

The interval of silence that followed bristled the hairs on the back of Lalum's neck. The cold voice that eventually spoke did little to assuage her worries.

That is impossible.

Nothing more. Lalum grimaced.

THEN, she wrote. MAY I ASK WHY YOU WISH TO OPEN THE VAULTE? Were it at least a worthy goal, then she may soothe her conscience about forcing the queen to do it.

The voice that returned was much softer, much kinder: *Of course, Lalum. There are relics in the vault with great power. I seek to use them to bring Whitecrosse and all its living beings into Earth. Into the world created by God. That way, you and everyone else may experience His love and salvation. And I can also use it to return you and your sisters to their original forms. Is that not what you want, Lalum? Is this not a worthy mission?*

A worthy mission. Yes, of course it was. It was an extension of the same mission the archbishop told them: To bring this world, Whitecrosse, closer to a God it did not truly know. While Lalum wasn't sure how much she believed Astrophicus when he claimed this was a world with no God, returning to her original form was something she longed for with all her heart.

Which is why it crushed her inside to say:

I CANNOT DO IT.

What! Why? You must tell me why!

Her sisters... Theovora and the others... they would surely despise her for this. Mayfair would despise her for this. And if the archbishop were correct, if Whitecrosse was divorced from God, then all the people of Whitecrosse would be right to despise her for this too. It shocked herself how resolutely, how easily she made her decision. It required only one counteracting thought to the thought of all the people Mayfair's goal would benefit.

THE HERO DOES NOT WANT TO GO HOME.

Lalum's eyes turned up to the glowering Christ. O Lord, wasn't she simply the most abominable creature? Look upon her with the disgust she merits. Pitiful, corrupt, degenerate.

Yet how could she betray her heart?

She awaited the fury of Christ to strike her, contained within whatever power Mayfair held. She awaited her healed wounds to reemerge, the pain tenfold...

Lalum. Do you seek death?

Why was she doing this. Why? When Mayfair struck her down the hero would never even know, never even dream that she had died for him. He would never think of her again, except perhaps an idle mention in the back of his mind: I wonder where that disgusting spider went. She would gain no favor from him living or dead due to this.

But his desire to stay here, stay in Whitecrosse—that was the one thing driving him forward, the one thing he truly wanted. His arguments with his sister made that clear. He had saved Lalum's life; when she saved his from the temporary mania of that same sister, he had even reached out—even touched her—not with anger—with affection.

Oh, she was awful. She knew that though. She always knew she deserved all of this.

No—forget death. Lalum, I can inflict upon you sufferings beyond your wildest imagining. Pain without end. I can do it with simply a flick of this quill. Yes. Yes. I can render every inch of your skin an individual agony worse than any you have yet felt. Do you understand, Lalum? I am the New Master of Whitecrosse. My will is not to be denied. But if you serve me, Lalum, I will pour upon you infinite mercy, I shall make you whole again. The hero doesn't want to go home—That's truly your reason? Ridiculous. What favor do you seek to curry from him? It won't matter. You're a monster, Lalum. He shall never give you another glance. Help me, Lalum, and I shall return you to your original form. Maybe then you might catch his eye, hm?

Pain and death was all she deserved anyway. If even Pluxie, whose only sin had been ignorance, was allowed to die in such misery, then what right did she have to seek anything better?

I SEEKE NOT HIS LOVE. DO WHAT YOU WILLE TO ME.

Silence. A long silence, drawing the seconds out, while Lalum closed her eyes and awaited the pain. She still somehow sensed Mayfair's presence despite the total quiet. Mayfair was thinking now, perhaps, of the best way to harm Lalum, how to torture her most efficiently.

The voice, when it returned, was not a voice, but a laugh.

Haha. Hahahahaha. HAHAHAHAHAHAHHA.

Oh, Lalum. Oh, Lalum.

You do not know, do you? Of course not. You were not there when your beloved hero met my mother at court. You have no idea what he asked her to do, do you?

No. Lalum did not.

Very well then. I, Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke, shall be a merciful New Master. I shall not punish you for your insolence or your sins, nor for your singlehanded deprivation of all

Whitecrosse's people including yourself from the warmth and light of God, which—I shall remind you—is perhaps a sin worse even than murder. But I shall not punish you. I am merciful.

It was actually a disappointment at this point.

Simply know this, Lalum. You will open that door. Not because I forced you; you will do it because you want to. Because the man you love asked you. I can be patient. I have my own matters to attend to in this world anyway. It should only take him a day or two, perhaps less, to realize how to open the vault using your power. Then you'll do it; and I shall have remained merciful.

My only request in the interim is that you do not mention me to him. Do you understand? Not a word. I cannot have him interfering in my designs. If he learns of me, then I must act. Do you understand? Good.—Farewell.

That word severed it, the connection, the presence Lalum felt. Instantly the silence of this deep chamber enveloped her, bereft of anything behind it. Christ stared down.

What Mayfair said at the end about opening the vault because she wanted to, because the hero asked her to, Lalum did not understand. But did it matter? She felt something else. Happiness. She helped the hero, even if he didn't know it. She helped him... Oh, she was so awful, wasn't she?

—

Jay barely got out of bed—Day 5 now—before the courtiers came. In all shapes, sizes, and colors they barraged him, expounding their endless titles and meaningless pedigrees before attempting to butter Jay with effusive praise. Some were more brazen, some were less, but they all obviously wanted something from him, either immediately or in the future.

Most of the clowns he saw in the queen's court showed up. The rotund Tintzel, freshly appointed archbishop after the previous turned into a plant, basically begged Jay to pontificate at the neighboring cathedral "on the subject of God's love and promised salvation for all people of all worlds"—a naked attempt to get Jay to affirm orthodoxy to a kingdom wracked by sectarian heresy. Then the Dracula-esque Duke Mordac, who seemed as loath to schmooze as Jay was to be schmoozed to, tersely inquired if Jay would visit his manor to "discuss matters." By contrast, Duke Meretryce rambled every pleasantry known to man, promised Jay his exact desire—access to the castle vault—and prophesied a long and mutually prosperous partnership between the two before he finally left.

After that, a parade of lesser nobles and representatives sputtered a lot of the same. He received five different envoys from a certain Duke Malleus who threw themselves on the floor to plead forgiveness for the absence of their master, who was apparently en route as quickly as possible. Bishops appeared, and merchants, and members of various guilds, and

even a pleasant-faced and well-dressed fellow who after all the opening ceremony lowered his voice, shifted his eyes sidelong, and asked if Jay met Astrophicus at the monastery, what he thought of the ex-archbishop's "teachings," and if he agreed that Whitecrosse had no God.

Oh, and the women. Any noble's unwedded daughter, sister, cousin, niece, or aunt was presented to him as "a great beauty," no matter how blatant the untruth. One desperate aristocrat brought his elderly widowed mother, caked layers of makeup giving her a distinctive circus clown appearance.

The only consolation was that Shannon suffered the same onslaught. In fact, after receiving Jay's total silence for several awkward moments, many of the nobles left him only to immediately approach her with the exact same gaudy salutations they'd employed on him. Jay didn't care to listen to her conversations, but she at least spoke to them, so he hoped the rest of the long parade would catch on and skip him entirely. They didn't.

Queen Mallory did not appear.

Jay rubbed the buzzing pain on his face where she struck him as he sat down to a breakfast feast at the elaborately-clothed dining table that stretched at least fifty feet. (Shannon ate at the other end, divided from him by a teeming mass of sycophants—and the Fool, who danced and jested atop the table's center.) With one well-placed kick the queen had killed the good mood Jay had been in since the monastery. All of the hangers-on here knew she kicked his ass, they smiled and begged his favor anyway, but he knew in the back of their mind they were all thinking: What a loser. What a weakling. What an idiot.

And he *was* an idiot. He should've expected it. Makepeace said his mother was more like him than Mayfair, after all. But Jay blindly marched in, high off himself, and got destroyed. Hey-there-little-buddy once more.

Now what? He bit into a thick chunk of ham, which he hated to admit tasted really good.

"—esteemed personage as yourself to bestow upon us equally-esteemed *patronage*—"

He should look at it more positively. The queen being a dumb jock like Makepeace meant her logic was simple. She was currently besieged on all sides by nobles hoping to claw away her power. With the arrival of the hero negating the advantage of her heroic bloodline, her right to rule was now founded solely on her strength. If Jay turned it around and defeated her in a fight, she'd no longer have any standing at all. She'd have to accede to his demand and open the vault.

"—collected knowledge of Whitecrosse, young hero! Is that not a fabulous thought?—"

It was a video game type of logic: Beat me and I do what you say. But the court was so absurd that type of logic wasn't out of place. It gave Jay an easy route to achieving his goal—so how would he beat her? It wasn't like he'd gotten close and only needed a luckier break. In a video game, you could go grind random encounters for a few hours to beat a hard boss (not that RPG bosses were ever hard). Sure, Jay could train his muscles or even learn technique, but that took months if not years. Who knew what horseshit Shannon would pull in that time.

"—of course we teach all the usual topics: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, Latin—"

What he needed was a quick power boost. He'd hoped Makepeace's shield would compensate for losing Olliebollen's healing, but during his fight with the queen he barely used it. It was awkward and ungainly to hold when swinging a bat and made his strikes slower, weaker. The queen was too fast for the shield to make a difference. No, he needed something else. Another relic? Maybe some of these rich old dukes had one in storage. Or he could go find another fairy. Or—

"—or, if none of those strike your no-doubt discerning fancy, we have my personal specialty: magic!"

"Magic," said Jay. It was the first word he spoke since waking.

He looked up. The particular courtier oozing unctuous grease before him now was familiar. It was another one of those present in the throne room: the Prime Astrologer, DeWint. Compared to the other nobles, who possessed a more medieval or Renaissance style, DeWint's flowing and shining robes were evocative of a wizard. As he spread his arms out in oratorical flourish the maroon exterior gave way to a deep black interior that sparkled where gem-like constellations had been set into the fabric. His cuffs and collar were both enormous and embroidered gold; on his strangely effeminate fingers were stacked rings, each displaying a gemstone of a different color.

"Magic! Magic, young hero! The unlocked potential of the cosmos! An erudite scholar may harness to his will—"

"Shannon reject you already?" Given the guy's behavior in the throne room, Jay suspected he was one of the noticeable group of bachelors who prioritized speaking to his sister over him.

DeWint's face scrunched. "Erm! Hum! Well! Your—lovely and—rather charming sister—while not immediately receptive to the invitation to study under my tutelage—"

"Alright I get the picture. So do you teach relic or animus magic?" Animus seemed to be the word they used for fairy magic. Which was apparently prohibited in the kingdom, since it turned you into a monster or plant, but maybe DeWint knew a safer way to use it.

"Pah! Is that what you think of the renowned Prime Astrologer DeWint? Relics! Mere baubles, props to assist those with neither learning nor aptitude. And animus! Trickery of the fae! Were you not clearly uninformed, I might take offense to such a question. I suppose I shall let it pass this one time, my youthful and inquisitive pupil."

"I didn't agree to be your pupil."

"Yes, hum, anyway—the magic I teach is far more respectable than either of those. It is the magic of the stars: the magic of astrology! The stars are God's domain; only with their power may humankind attain a closer link with divinity!"

Ah. Jay got it. This was the "Christianity Approved" type of magic. But—"Olliebollen never mentioned this type of magic."

"That's cuz it's fake and dumb," said a familiar voice from within DeWint's robes.

A rustle amid the constellations and a head emerged from an unseeable pocket, the head as shiny and big as any of the flashing stars. Olliebollen Pandelirium.

DeWint shoved her back into the depths of space and made furtive glances left and right. "Aie! My fae friend, you cannot reveal yourself so openly here!"

"Why's Olliebollen in your pocket," Jay said.

"Ah, I see you're already acquainted with the sprite. I wondered if perhaps your lovely sister was harboring the thing without your knowledge. Ahem!" DeWint, confirming nobody had noticed, puffed himself into an inverted teardrop and slapped his fist against his chest. "You may thank me and my rapier-sharp clarity of mind that your diminutive companion remains among us at all. When the queen pummeled our lovely Shannon—"

"She beat up Shannon too?"

"You did not know?"

Jay had stopped paying any attention to his surroundings after he received what felt like a lead weight to the crotch.

"Ahem, anyhow! The servants carried Lady Shannon away, I of course followed knowing something or other of medicine, and when a maidservant attempted to relieve the stunned lady of her garments the discovery was made. It caused quite an uproar among the help gathered, but I stepped in as an expert in all things magical and spirited the sylph into my pocket for safekeeping. Fortunately I also possessed a few pence on my person to keep any witnesses from speaking of the incident. Many lack my more... liberal proclivities toward the fae. Such a creature must remain hidden from sight in a human city, you understand?"

"Sure." Jay figured this DeWint character was more likely than not one of Sansaime's chief customers, although he wasn't a plant so who knew. "Kill her or sell her and I kill you."

DeWint drew back, pale-faced, then regained his bombastic composure. "I am a devotee of science and learning! No scholar would commit such criminality, I assure you, especially not to such a rare and fascinating—if somewhat damaged—specimen. My aim was merely to hold onto the creature until a proper time when I could return it to Lady Shannon. In private, of course."

In private—of course. That story, at least, was more believable than DeWint realized. "Olliebollen—he hasn't done anything weird to you has he?"

"Not yet," came the reply from the cosmos.

"Keep it that way. Now what's this about astrology being 'fake and dumb'?"

"Poppycock—"

"It just is," said the Milky Way. "It's literally fake. Humans can't do magic unless they cheat, that's just the rules."

"Will you shush! You are *supposed* to be hiding! Besides, your slanderous claims contribute nothing to the conversation at hand. Young Master Hero, I can see the glint of inquisitive curiosity in your eye. You are a pupil at heart, are you not? No need to answer, uncanny perceptiveness of personality is only one of the many powers of astrology. Pay no heed to the faerie. There is of course enmity between these sprites—who some claim descend from devils—and the righteous, God-bestowed arts of the celestial spheres. Enroll in the academy, allow yourself to become my pupil, and I shall reveal those secrets to you!"

Wielding the strange, two-pronged fork that served as silverware, Jay crammed the last bite of egg on his plate into his mouth. He shoved his chair back and stood. "Sure. Let's go now."

"N—now?!"

"Now. And it better not be bullshit."

—

It was fucking bullshit.

There were three large buildings in Whitecrosse: the castle, the cathedral, and the academy, all bunched at the summit of the big hill around which the entire city was built. Rather than leave the castle to go to the academy, though, DeWint dragged Jay down a few flights of stairs into a dark, dank, and damp basement, illuminated by a flickering candle DeWint waved in front of him while babbling about whatever he fucking felt like. It became frigid, like they were in an icebox, and everywhere something seemed to be crawling: rats, although sometimes the something sounded much bigger.

Then they reached a staircase, ascended, and they were in the academy—DeWint notching a too-friendly wink as he relayed that the catacombs under the castle secretly connected all across the city—where they traversed a long stone corridor barely more lively than the one from which they'd just emerged until they reached DeWint's "favored classroom," as he called it. It was more like an office, crammed with books and baubles in equal amounts of excess, astrolabes and the like. DeWint hadn't shut up the whole time and Jay hadn't said a word but the moment Jay dragged a heavy and elaborate chair out from under a pile of junk and sat down he said: "Show me how to do magic."

Even still DeWint had to hem and haw. He opened with an obviously canned lecture, something that felt designed to get a child excited, a lot of forceful and flowery language as to the overwhelming power of the cosmos, the heavenly spheres, and of course the Creator who dwelled therein—mostly the same crap he'd already given Jay in the dining hall, which

Jay took as a bad sign. He took DeWint himself as a bad sign, and honestly was not optimistic anything good would come out of this, but Olliebollen was so biased and cagey when it came to magic that he interpreted her "fake and dumb" as an endorsement in DeWint's favor.

He shouldn't have. After DeWint dragged some beakers and vials and ceramics onto his desk, tossed a few rudimentary materials into them, and caused a parlor trick flare of yellow sparks, Jay was pretty sure where everything was going. He wondered if Makepeace and Mayfair—maybe even Mallory—sat through this exact same lecture, since DeWint had at one point mentioned he served as tutor to the royal family atop his duties as Prime Astrologer and Chancellor of the Academy.

"So where's the magic?" Jay asked.

"Ehem... I take it you're—not impressed?" DeWint put down whatever ridiculous astrological instrument he'd been using to "divine the hero's horoscope."

"Can you command lightning to rain from the sky? Summon a tornado? Maybe a blizzard? Anything like that?"

"Well—actually—if a learned astrologer consults these charts, he may see the weavings of God's will and predict—perhaps even influence!—such meteorological occurrences with a rather high degree of efficacy!"

No wonder Astrophicus resorted to fae magic.

"And you can't buff someone's strength? Make them more durable? Heal them even?"

"Er—well—as I mentioned—I am also one of the most forefront scholars in the field of medicine—"

"I told you," said Olliebollen in outer space. "Fake. And. Dumb."

Jay rose, cracked his neck by rolling it around his baseball bat, and turned for the door. DeWint tried to stop him, although the words tumbling out his mouth became an unintelligible mush. Oh yeah—should Jay ask for Olliebollen back? Nah. DeWint intended to return her to Shannon, and inflicting the blowhard on his sister for even a few moments would be sure to annoy her. That alone would make this trip worthwhile.

He reached for the knob and the door flung open with tremendous force. In any other circumstance it probably would've slammed him in the face, but he already got his face slammed once in the past twenty-four hours so he summoned out the dregs of his soul the superhuman reflexes necessary to stop it from happening again.

In the open doorway, exuding an aura of overwhelming perfume, presided the girl from the queen's court with the eyepatch and peg leg, who in no other regard looked like a pirate. The one who collapsed after laughing too hard. Jay never heard her name or title, but imagined he was about to now.

Her one eye blazed as her fluttering robes subsided around her. Weight bearing down on the smooth white staff she used as a cane, she flung out her hand and hurled an object past Jay's head.

"There! Your stupid book back!"

Jay didn't remember any books. But it was DeWint who dove for the whizzing object, bouncing it off his hands so that it whipped at a new angle into his chest, at which point he was able to reel it to him like a nurturing mother. "Careful—*Careful!* This tome is a priceless work, written in the time of John Coke!"

"That merely makes it old; not a worthy word in it." Her eye scanned the room, sized up Jay briefly, squinted. "Truthfully DeWint I was hoping you'd be away so I wouldn't have to see you. What is this, you lured the poor hero to your private office? Better watch out hero, don't think the old goat's only got eyes for ladies." Amused by her own innuendo, she chortled a dry, airless, almost silent laugh that she accentuated by a repeated bobbing motion of her head, assumedly an attempt to avoid hyperventilating again. The laugh sounded like: *Fehfehfehfehfeh.*

"Oh Vivienne!" DeWint placed the book gingerly on his desk. "Must you be so cruel to your ill-starred tutor? Have I not showered you with every affection under the sun? Have I not treated you as the princess you rightly are?"

"Cut my head off and fuck the stump DeWint. I returned your book; now I take my leave."

Swiveling on her peg, she hurriedly clacked back into the corridor. Jay, also leaving, decided to follow—not only because he'd get lost if he tried to find his way back on his own, but also because the staff Vivienne used as a cane, white as bone, reminded him of another staff he'd seen recently.

DeWint attempted pursuit, sputtering in astonishment at Vivienne's parting remark. Without even looking, Vivienne snapped a finger at an attendant who'd lurked unseen in the corridor until then, commanding with only a single terse word: "Jreige." Whether that was the guy's name or a word in some foreign language, it did the trick and he barred DeWint from exiting his own office.

Down the corridor Vivienne hobbled fast, but she still only hobbled. Even walking casually Jay kept pace behind her. Eventually he sped up to avoid drowning in the overpowering perfume left in her wake, a scent so sweet it made him sick. Reminiscent of Charm's animus: vat of milk and honey.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Went her bone-white cane.

"You're from California right," Jay said.

Instantly she yelped in terror and whirled on him, hand to her chest. Jay wondered what got her so worked up until he realized he'd been walking on her blind side the whole time.

"*Putain de merde!* Do I look like a woman with a strong constitution?! Do *not* sneak up on me—bastard!" Then her face instantly turned to a grin: fehfehfeh. "Surely you aim to kill me, hero. Your 'fight' with Queen Mallory set me into hysterics that nearly tore my lungs apart."

Jay recalled she'd passed out long before the fight and disregarded the remark. "You're the princess of California."

"Why now, I suppose you know everything. How'd you guess? DeWint tell you?"

"You're well-dressed, so you're clearly nobility. You and your henchman are the only people in this city with dark skin, so you're not from here. And California is the only country other than Whitecrosse I've heard anyone mention so far."

Viviendre reached a curved stairwell and proceeded to ascend it at an even more laborious pace than she walked. "Rancorous applause! You are correct; I am indeed Princess Viviendre de Califerne. Younger sister to the king and next in line to the throne. Not that it matters, fehfehfeh."

Right. Makepeace mentioned this girl, once. What'd he say exactly? Something like, "The king of California is crazy; his sister's sane but in some ways that's worse."

"So that staff in your hand is a relic."

"My!" Viviendre stopped. "You sure like to ask whatever the fuck you want, don't you? Didn't Mallory teach you your lesson? Or do you think I'm an easier mark?"

"I saw the Staff of Lazarus at the monastery. Yours looks similar."

She planted one palm against the stone wall for support and hefted the staff at his face, waving its glass sphere just under the brim of his hat. "Maybe it is, and maybe I simply want people to think it is so they piss off. I assure you, if I *did* have a relic, you wouldn't want to see me use it."

Jay guessed he probably didn't. "Fine."

Three steps above him she was nonetheless only barely matching his height. She maintained her stance, her severe expression, but when her balance wobbled she sagged to the side to catch herself and cracked a self-deprecatory fehfehfeh.

"So you're the hero, hm. What's your actual name again?"

"Jay Waringcrane."

"Right, right. Jay Waringcrane." She resumed her arduous climb. "Damn these steps. Anyway, don't go thinking all relics look the same. They don't."

"You know a lot about it?"

"I know a lot about everything. If not for that pernicious bitch Mayfair I'd be the top student in this whole academy. Well, she's gone now, isn't she? And Makepeace dead, hm."

"That's right."

"I had a fancy for Prince Mack, I'll admit." Her breathing grew ragged as they started on the third flight of coiling steps with no sign of stopping. "Most women did; he possessed his charms despite being a lout. Not that someone with my appealing features"—quick tap of the staff first to her eyepatch and then to her peg leg—"would draw his attention, alas."

"He didn't seem to mind when he fucked that scarred-up elf chick."

For a moment—just a moment—Viviendre tensed. But she continued to the next step, shrugging it off as like a moment of physical weakness. "Ah yes, that—elf. You say they were intimate?"

How to read that pause? Jay already suspected DeWint as one of Sansaime's primary buyers. Maybe as "top student" Viviendre involved herself in the fairy trade too.

"I heard them," he said, "unfortunately."

"Fehfehfeh. Then maybe the rumors were true. Mack, Mack, Mack. The philanderers of Whitecrosse shall struggle now that only DeWint remains to hoist their banner. Fehfehfeh—fehfeh—hrrk, krrrrkkk!"

She leaned against the wall and dry-retched. Jay looked up the stairs and back down where they came, anywhere except at her, wondering where they were going—and why he was following her, if he didn't intend to pry into her relic any further. He'd acclimated to the scent of her perfume by some point.

"Need help," he asked.

"Of course I do, shit-for-brains." She flung her arm out like a hook and after staring at it a second he looped his arm around hers and assisted her back to a standing position.

Maybe he could use this Viviendre girl for something. Her unique position as a foreign princess placed her outside the typical ebb and flow of Whitecrosse court politics. Plus, she seemed talkative enough that if he stayed around she might blab about her relic sooner or later. Or something. Really, it was just refreshing to finally talk to someone who didn't seem to want anything from him.

(*Seem* being the key word.)

But with their arms linked and their bodies closer, the perfume became pungent again and he turned his face aside to keep from gagging. Fuck, was she slathered in the stuff?

"So Jay," she said. "Your hat. The crest, what does it mean? Family heraldry?"

"It's the logo of the Cleveland Browns."

"And who or what is—"

"It's a shitty football team."

"And what is—"

"It's a sport. They have sports in this world?"

"Nnnnngh. Sport. Any idea how many fucking *jousts* they've forced me to watch? And all their other silly contests—hunts and so forth. It's only ever enjoyable when someone gets a lance through the throat. Do people die horribly in football often?"

"No, they just smash their skulls together and get brain damage."

"Oh! That could be fun though, couldn't it?"

Jay realized he'd never actually seen a football game. "Maybe."

They—finally—reached the top of the stairs. A single door awaited them. Jay pushed it open and bright light of day poured from a milky sky. The immediate draft forced him to grab his hat before the wind could carry it away. Viviendre's vast collection of jewelry swayed and tinkled: earrings, bracelets, pendants, even a large gold cross strung from her neck (despite Meretryce or someone calling the Californians pagan Mahomet-worshippers). Her hair—she had lots of it, black and thick so as much as possible covered her face—tossed in the wind as she staggered out and seized the parapet of the tower they stood on, a tower almost as high as those extending from the castle to their left.

All of Whitecrosse fanned before them. Not only the city and its dense agglomeration of misshapen structures, not only the walls that ringed it, not only the farmland and fields that rippled with long shining streaks; but also the mountains, and the forests, and the shoreline, as though this world were so small that all of it fit within the horizon.

The tower itself was empty. "Why'd you come here?" Jay said.

She shot him a look. With her hair flowing, it was easier to see that she was not a particularly pretty girl, although she did her best to conceal that fact with layers of makeup. "I didn't ask you to come."

"That's not what I asked. Why'd you come here?"

She leaned on her cane and breathed deeply, stopping midway when she coughed. "The air is fresh. And nobody else is here—usually."

Turning back, she took in the view.

"And," she said, hesitantly, as though she wasn't sure she wanted to say it.

"And?"

"It makes me feel like I can fit it all on the palm of my hand."

As soon as she said it her hesitancy fell away, she smiled, and Jay realized after a few seconds he was smiling back. Then something skritch'd in the stairwell behind him and he

turned to see. He wasn't sure, but for a moment he thought he saw the tip of a spider leg shuffling out of view.

Peasants Dream Well

"It's all changed now."

He said that while she was crying. She felt like a shriveled thing, and in the darkness she could be anything, everything, nothing she wanted to be, a total black to blot herself out, saved from the pattern of her own skin. His hand touched her naked form, stroking from shoulder to hip.

"It's different now, nothing will be the same. Sansy. You saw him. He's—he's the hero."

Her hands were to her face. As if to push the tears back into her. It only made her eyes burn like two flames set into her skull. It hurt elsewhere, too. She hadn't expected it to hurt so much. Nobody ever told her it would hurt so much. Nobody had ever touched her before.

"He can take my place. Sansy. I'll be free. I'll finally be free to go wherever I want. You've traveled this world, haven't you Sansy? We'll travel together. You and me."

Why? Why? Why? Why say these things? Why? He couldn't possibly believe them. He couldn't. She couldn't. She knew his reputation. She was not his first woman... did she expect to be his last? She was weak.

"I know you've traveled high and low Sansy. You may just know this world better than anyone alive. Whitecrosse isn't your home and you know it. Well! It's not my home either Sansy. We're alike in that way. A perfect match, aren't we?"

He would say anything. Anything he wanted. His hand caressed her. It touched her cheek; she buried her face into the sheets.

"With the hero it can be done. The hero can make anything happen. No more impossibilities."

And she was weak. Just like her mother; she was weak.

"How's it sound Sansy? Come on. Gimme a smile. I do hate to see a pretty girl cry, y'know. It's so unbecoming. You've no idea how much a lady's slightest smile can lift a man's spirits, do you?"

And she was weak, because she smiled, crushing her eyes through the tears she smiled, and even though he could not see her in this perfect darkness he knew she smiled nonetheless, because they all smiled, all his girls smiled. And she was weak, because she smiled too.

"It's simple. We take the hero to the monastery, save my stupid sister."

The smile died. Save his sister. Save his stupid sister.

"She's a veritable little cunt in truth, but she shares my blood—and my looks. Despite herself, she'll make him fall in love with her. And if he's the one who rescues her, she'll fall in love

with him too."

They'll fall in love. A fairy tale romance, a knight and his fair lady. Even a fair lady's slightest smile can lift a man's spirits.

"They go back to Whitecrosse arm in arm, get wed, a new lineage is formed—and Prince Mack slips into the dark, never to be seen again. And who better to slink away with but the queen of the dark herself, the sly and mysterious Sansaime?"

His palm gave her rear a playful smack. His body slithered up to her, enfolding around her.

"A happy ending for everyone."

Mayfair must die, her employer told her. She simply must. Now, everyone including the prince knows you know that forest better than anyone. He'll bring you along—it helps you're a woman, too. You stay by his side, stay silent, and you'll have the perfect chance sooner or later. Kill her and you'll get what you want—you'll be set back to the way you were. Which is quite far back, you understand. Are you certain you wish to go that far? You'll lose nearly all of your memories. You'll be a child.

...Aye. That far.

Very well. Nothing new under the sun and all that. Godspeed.

A happy ending for everyone.

His body was warm. It covered her completely. He was strong, and he held her. He brushed back her hair, he was gentle and he could be rough too.

If she could only believe in his happy ending. If she could only believe he told the truth. That he would leave with her, and they would travel the world together, and be happy together. If she could only believe, there would be no need to complete her mission.

If she could only believe in Makepeace.

—

Avery was sitting in the driver's seat of her car, in her garage. She had the address where Jay and Shannon went. She needed only to drive where they were and they'd be safe. She knew this with absolute certainty. Yet her car would not start.

The key turned but nothing happened. Not even the whirr of an engine failing. Not even a click. There was no resistance, as though the key were floating in air instead of being lodged in a keyhole. Turn and turn and turn and nothing happened. Why did nothing happen? She only needed to drive away. Come on... come on!

She looked over her shoulder. Through the open garage door the world outside was dark, but she recognized her culdesac street. Recognized the neighbor's house across from her, although she could not name the neighbor. As she looked her hand turned the key again and nothing happened. Then she saw it.

A man was standing on the sidewalk across the street.

He was staring at her.

He was a tall man and a dark man. Dark not as in black, well he was black, but not the race, he was black like a shadow. Even though it was dark out there he was somehow darker and a chill spread over her because she felt the malice radiating off him. That man wanted to hurt her. He was there specifically to hurt her.

The car wouldn't start.

The man began to run at her.

Her frenzied mind snatched a coherent thought: the garage door! She reached up and struck the button to close it. This button would work, she thought. With absolute certainty the button would work even if the car did not. And the button did work. The garage door started to close.

The door closed slowly but the man seemed to be running in slow motion, or rather the road he was crossing was really wide, extremely wide for some reason. Close door, close, she thought. The door had to close. It had to. Halfway closed. Three-quarters closed—

The man ducked under the door. He was in the garage.

No. No! For some reason her car door was open. It had always been open. She had to close it! She reached out to close it. Her hand seized the handle. She turned—and the man was right there, right in her face, spreading wide a big black smile and saying:

"I want to stress that this is *not* a weight loss pill. Slimmetica is a safe, easy, inexpensive diet supplement that not only curbs your appetite but gives you extra energy to burn. Slimmetica makes you *want* to work out."

Avery woke up.

Her neck hurt. It hurt because she was sleeping on the couch. In front of her, pale in the dim pre-dawn light, the television screen expelled a wave of warm and friendly whiteness. There was a man in a baby blue polo, a friendly-looking man with a wide smile and a dad-esque demeanor, who held a big pill bottle up to the camera.

"For three easy installments of nineteen-ninety-nine *you* can bring Slimmetica into your own home. That's two full months of high energy and low appetite. But wait! Viewers of this program are entitled to a special offer..."

How...? Oh, right. Avery slept on the couch and she couldn't sleep, she was consumed by anxiety and the couch was uncomfortable, so she turned on the TV just to play something, to

soothe her nerves. She forgot what was playing, some movie. Now it was an infomercial.

She slept on the couch because she let that girl, Sansaime, sleep in her bed. Right. The events of the previous day flooded to her like a migraine that has lasted so long you forget about it until you move just a little too strenuously and it stabs your brain again. A low groan escaped her.

Sansaime's arm got hurt in the scuffle. Avery remembered tepidly suggesting something about a hospital, which Sansaime brushed off. "No leeches," she said. Avery remembered that funny term, leeches. "It's not broken anyway is it." She spoke this while shoveling spoonfuls of cereal into her mouth, cereal being the only meal Avery was in the correct state of mind to prepare. After devouring an entire box of Froot Loops, Sansaime wanted to sleep. Considering her wounds Avery thought she should sleep in a real bed, but didn't want her to sleep in Jay's bed, so she offered her own. Then Avery herself didn't want to sleep in Jay's bed—it just felt weird!—so she chose the couch, and now here she was.

Avery wanted to go back to the nightmare. Even if it was a nightmare, she had been so certain she only needed to drive to some address and there Jay and Shannon would be waiting. For a few seconds after waking, even through the fear, she still believed in that certainty, and only once she reclaimed her sense of time and place did the truth become clear, at which point the certainty felt like a betrayal, a nasty trick someone pulled on her, her own stupid subconscious.

"Why would anyone want to lose weight."

The voice made Avery jump. Where—there! The corner of the room! It was him, the tall dark man, she was still in the nightmare, she was—

Sansaime. Puffing her pipe. Why was she in the corner? There were other seats around the television that weren't the couch. She was standing in the darkest part of the room.

"Uengh?" Avery said.

"Eat less. Feel more energy. Miraculous medicine, as this man describes it. I'd have use for that. Yet he speaks only of losing weight. Why? To what purpose?"

Avery looked at Sansaime, then the TV. She thought: *Oh. That girl probably doesn't know what a TV is.*

"Ah, wait, don't worry. He's not really here. He's... he's talking... from a long way away." Avery realized she didn't exactly know how TVs worked. "Or, I think, he probably said all this a while ago, but it was recorded—er, saved—uh—"

"I understand he's not actually here," said Sansaime. "I figured *that* out fast enough. I asked a different question."

"Oh. Sorry.—Um, what did you ask again? Sorry, sorry!"

The light amplified by degrees. By degrees, the woman in the corner became more clear. The white blotches on her face shone in the effervescence.

She wore a hoodie. The hood was pulled up around her head with the drawstrings tight so only part of her face peeked out. She looked ridiculous. Like that character in that one show, the rude show that was so popular back when Shannon was in kindergarten. The animated show. Avery had let Shannon watch it because it was an animated show... she didn't realize what a bad show it was... Sorry, Shan-bear. At least she learned her lesson and only let Jay watch the Disney Channel.

Where did Sansaime get the hoodie anyway? She must have found it in Avery's closet. It did look kind of familiar, although Avery had more clothes than she could remember. Still, asking permission would've been nice...

"Never mind," Sansaime said. "Have you any more of those—whatever they were called. 'Froot Loops.'"

"Well um, well, let me check."

She rose. The extra blankets—three of them—she fished out of the linen closet fell off her in a ridiculous, staticky tangle that sent a zap straight up her skin. Oh, and now her hair was sticking out, absolutely perfect, simply what she needed. She felt Sansaime's eyes eviscerate her as she walked past and into the kitchen, fumbling around and flicking the light switch with the back of her hand.

Sansaime made a "Yaaaaah!" sound and Avery yelped, or maybe shrieked, in response, whirling around and asking what was wrong, what was the matter, only to see a now-illuminated Sansaime with arms folded around herself and hands raised to cover her face.

"That—it—how is it so sudden?!" Sansaime said.

"What? The light?" Why was this a surprise now? There had been lights in the office building and the parking garage. Although Avery hadn't turned on any in the house when she brought Sansaime home afterward. "Lights in this world run on, uh—electricity. Do you know what electricity is?" Didn't Benjamin Franklin discover electricity? "Er, well, basically, you can turn the lights on or off just by flipping this switch. That way you don't have to stand around in the dark... if you don't want to."

Sansaime had nothing to say to that, but did shift behind part of the wall that divided the kitchen from the TV room to keep out of Avery's sight. Did she care so much about her appearance? At least Sansaime didn't have bedhead to deal with.

"Let's see... Froot Loops. Froot Loops." She opened the usual kitchen cupboard. Sansaime finished an entire box the night before but maybe there was a second box somewhere.

"I already checked there," came Sansaime's gruff voice.

"Yes, well, you didn't check with the lights on did you?"

No response. It would have been a nice "win" if Avery then found a second Froot Loops box that Sansaime missed, but sadly there was none. "I have oatmeal though. Want me to fix you some oatmeal?"

A grunt was all Avery got, so oatmeal it was. After pouring the packet into the bowl, filling the packet with water, and pouring the water into the bowl, she microwaved it for two and a half minutes then placed the hot, maple-smelling concoction on the counter for Sansaime to eat.

Which, after some tepid sniffings and tastings, she did. Avery herself went for one of those yogurt cartons that was supposed to help her digestion. Not that her digestion had anything wrong with it. Just to prevent there ever being anything wrong with it, that's all. Also she liked the taste.

Avery spooned her yogurt and leaned back against the fridge door. "Is your arm feeling better?"

"Aye."

"I'm glad." She had debated taking Sansaime to a hospital, but what would the doctors say? The girl had elf ears. How do you explain that?

And she needed Sansaime. Sansaime had the key to that gate—and she knew where Shannon and Jay were.

But Sansaime was a quiet person. Cloistered within herself. Just look at the way she wore that hood, like *I Killed Kenny* or whatever his name was. It wouldn't work to simply ask a favor, would it? Maybe someone else would go hardline: *I scratched your back, so you scratch mine!* She imagined a Hollywood actor shouting it. Avery couldn't do something like that, just the thought terrified her—one glare from the eyes set deep within the hood and she'd melt.

"You know," she said cheerfully, "they don't have elves in this world. You're an elf, right?"

"Aye."

"Isn't it funny, though? We make up elves on TV and stuff. And Santa Claus has elves in the North Pole—but um, that's make believe too." She felt self-conscious saying that and shifted her eyes down at her half-empty yogurt carton. "Isn't it strange that there's some other world where elves are real? Wouldn't it be a weird coincidence? We made up this fictional... uh, species. And then it's real in another world?"

Sansaime's spoon chopped up the oatmeal. "Weren't always elves in Whitecrosse either."

"Huh?"

"We were fae. That's what they say, at least."

"Fae? Like—faeries? Oh, I love faeries. They're cute! But, uh, they don't exist here either."

"There was a man," Sansaime said. "John Coke. He came from this world. Do you know him?"

Avery's first instinct was to ask if he made the drink Coke, but a second's thought told her that was not correct, and also very dumb. "No, I don't."

"Well he came to Whitecrosse," she said. Avery assumed Whitecrosse was the name of the other world. "He did a few things, others would know exactly all what. But I know one thing he did."

"What's that?"

"He fucked the elf queen."

"Oh, I uh, I see..."

The words had come from Sansaime with pungent vitriol, an emanation of hatred that made Avery's heart tremble. The face remained stoic, but the aura could not be contained.

"Fae mustn't mingle with humans—they say. So since then, there's been a curse on the race, doomed to be neither fae nor human, something in between. The bastards of Whitecrosse, filled with bastard blood. Are your... Santa Claus elves that way? A race despised by all thinking beings?"

"Um... no." Avery's spoon stirred and stirred. "In this world, they stopped caring about stuff like that. Stuff like—what your race is. We stopped racism in the 60s I think."

"That so?" Sansaime laughed in a harsh way, a bitter way, but Avery heard in that laugh something else, something hidden under the cynicism. She couldn't place her finger on what exactly it was, but it didn't matter. This was a thread.

"People here don't care... what color your skin is."

Sansaime's eyes hit Avery with the glare she so feared, but somehow Avery only flinched a little, maybe because the fridge behind her stopped her from doing much else. "Oh? Even my skin? Even my lovely, lovely skin?"

"That's right. I even saw on the internet the other day a woman who had—well she had multiple colors of skin on her body, she looked kind of like a cow. I mean—I don't mean 'like a cow' in a mean way—she looked very nice actually. She was a model I think."

"A model."

"Uh—someone who wears clothes and gets photos taken of them. Er, photos are—uh... That doesn't matter. Models are important people and everyone thinks they're beautiful."

"Ha."

Now might be the time to say something like "You look pretty." Some kind of compliment... Sansaime didn't seem prepared to believe whatever Avery said, though, whether it was

spoken with conviction or not. She was someone too convinced of their own ugliness to believe a word anyone said to them. Avery remembered being that way as a teenager. She had just the worst acne. Horrible! Who would ever look at her? She was like a monster! And her mother said "You look beautiful, dear," and Avery cried because she knew it was a lie.

"Sansaime... I don't think it's beauty you're looking for, is it?"

Sansaime said nothing. Her face drooped down to her oatmeal.

"You feel lonely, don't you? You... feel alone."

Still nothing.

Avery moved closer. She put the empty yogurt carton on the counter and leaned over it. Sansaime's head turned away, but she did not back up. She allowed Avery to close the distance, although a full countertop remained between them.

Still, there was a wall. Sansaime wore a wall around her, a very strong one. Avery knew this wall. It was the wall Jay wore. The way he never talked to her, never said anything except the bare minimum. And it was the wall... it was the wall her husband wore. In the time before he... he...

"My husband is dead."

Sansaime looked up. Looked straight at her. Something in her eyes showed Avery she touched somewhere she did not intend. Avery considered backing away—but continued.

"I felt alone for a very long time. Both of my... both of my children are missing now. But I've felt very alone even before then. I've tried to smile it away, I've watched movies and TV and read books, but... But it's always been there. I don't think it'll ever go away."

"Why—why tell me this." Sansaime realized she was looking at Avery and turned her face away again.

"I want to find my children, Sansaime. They are—they're all I have left. I never had a life before I found my husband, and after he was gone all I had was what remained of my life with him. This house, a few acquaintances, and—they. My children. It's... It's very important I find them, Sansaime. Which is why I want to ask a favor of you."

"You want me to take you back there."

"No. I—I understand you have a mission of your own. One I—one I can't help you with. I won't ask you to come with me. Just—give me the key. I'll go myself and find them. You can stay here and—and do whatever you want. You can even stay in my house. I'll buy you as much Froot Loops as you want. Please, just... just let me..."

"Okay." Sansaime's eyes went furtive. Almost shy. She was struggling to look at Avery, and that might be because Avery had started to cry, tears that came so easily and readily as if on command. "Okay—okay."

There was something else in that final "okay," though, a new flavor of feeling, Avery could sense it on her skin, tiny hairs bristling along her forearms. Immediately she knew her words had worked a magic even beyond what she intended, that by "okay" Sansaime didn't simply mean she would hand over the key. No. Of course not. This was what Avery had always been good at, right?

After all. When a professor in his thirties accidentally knocks up his eighteen-year-old freshman student, the next step isn't usually marriage, is it. It hadn't been Daniel's first proposal, at least. Oh, he was caring, he was understanding, he was nice about it, and he admitted it was his mistake. He said he would take responsibility. He gave her money, he said he would go with her to the clinic, he would stay with her and help her through it. He was so very kind about it... and then she cried.

And twenty-four years later, when the life her tears saved stood before her in the TV room, Avery cried again. She needed someone to look for Jay. Shannon was smart, she was competent, she was the opposite of Avery in every conceivable way, to the point that Avery sometimes got the absurd, fanciful, and yet strangely compelling—compelling the way a dream you're having is compelling, where no matter what stupid thing is happening you believe it wholeheartedly—notion that Shannon was not actually Avery's daughter, was not the creature that had grown inside Avery's womb, but something else entirely, an alien. She got that notion a lot in the years after Daniel... died. Alongside the notion that Shannon had played a part in his death, a notion stemming solely from a look she once gave him...

"But you'd not last an hour in that world," Sansaime said. "You seem hardly fit to last an hour in this one. So—I'll guide you there. I'll help you bring your children back. The fact you care for them at all means—it means you're a good enough mother to deserve that much, I suppose."

Avery sniffled, she rubbed the corners of her eyes to wipe away the tears. There'd been something in that last part, she could sense it, the word "mother" was spoken with more heat than the other words. Avery remembered the little girl. Mayfair. She'd said something about mothers too...

It didn't seem appropriate to probe deeper. Or maybe it was more than appropriate. Sansaime kept herself aloof, but not fully. She did speak. She wasn't like—she wasn't like Jay.

There was a pathway into her heart. Still, a guarded pathway. Avery had delved as deep as she could for now.

"You don't intend to go after that little girl again?" she said.

Sansaime's face resolved into harsh blankness. "Maybe I never should have gone after her to start. Maybe I should have trusted Mack—Who can say."

And that was all.

They finished eating, then Avery showed Sansaime how the shower worked, and before she could also show Sansaime how the toilet worked Sansaime barked at her to get out so she did. Avery waited for her to finish showering, which took only five minutes, and then

showered herself for the next hour. When she emerged with freshly blow-dried hair she found Sansaime sitting stooped on the couch in front of the TV, which had switched from infomercials to an animated show that looked familiar.

"Oh," Avery said, "you're watching *The Simpsons*. I used to watch that show."

Sansaime gave her a look of complete contempt. "*Futurama*."

"Huh?"

"The man said I am now watching *Futurama*. On the Syfy Channel. Up next: More *Futurama*. After that: Even more *Futurama*."

Maybe Sansaime was like Jay after all. On screen, a spaceship dropped onto an alien planet. Could Sansaime even understand a show like that? Somehow, she seemed to watch intently...

In fact, it took some coaxing to lure Sansaime away from the screen. Once done, Sansaime suggested they pack food and other supplies, and in the packing process Avery opened the silverware drawer to grab the Tupperware and discovered all her knives were missing, even the butter knives. She decided not to ask Sansaime about that.

They got in the sedan and took the hour-long drive across Cleveland to the downtown area. She only took a wrong turn once at which point Sansaime immediately said "This is not the way. Are you an idiot? You went the wrong way," and Avery had to say sorry about ten times. (Sansaime also complained about Avery's music, at one point claiming she herself could make a better song than Paula Cole).

They reached the office building and delved into the parking lot, Sansaime alert despite the continued lack of significant human presence, it being early Saturday morning still. By the time Avery put the car in park Sansaime was already out the door.

Maybe they should keep the car though? From what Avery remembered the gate to the other world had been wide enough for a car to fit through. That would be easier, right? Or maybe it would be bad to bring future technology to a medieval fantasy world? She decided to ask Sansaime about it but when she got out of the car she saw Sansaime standing in the middle of the parking area staring at where the gate to the other world was.

Or where it should be.

Because it wasn't there.

"Oh," said Avery. "I must have parked on the wrong floor. That's okay. We'll—"

"It's the right floor," said Sansaime.

"Oh."

So it was the right floor. But the gate was not there. A paper rustled across the pavement, swept by the vortex caused by air funneling up the ramp outside. Sansaime caught it, looked

at it, discarded it, and then it flapped into Avery's face. She peeled it off sputtering and read: PLEASE MOVE YOU ARE BLOCKING MY PARKING SPACE.

Someone listened. The gate had been moved. But where?

—

"There."

Pastor Dwight Jeremiah Styles of the Cuyahoga Baptist Church conducted his arms like a maestro to direct the six men carrying what Lady Mayfair termed "the Door" into the correct angle and position, then bade them set it down so that it was as unobtrusive as possible within his garage. The men did as instructed and rose with grunts and dust-clearing swipes of their hands. The six men were all members of the pastor's congregation. So far, only two of them had listened to Mayfair speak. That would change—tomorrow was Sunday.

Well—it would change if she wanted to speak. So far, when he brought up the subject, she said she would prefer to spend more time "attending to her business." She had important things to do, she said, and was uninterested in giving a sermon she was ill-equipped to give. Plus she was injured. Well, maybe Styles could wait another week. Maybe. If that assassin somehow found her again...

Not to mention, Styles had others he needed to convince too.

He owned a fine home, nothing ostentatious: cozy, one might call it, if not slightly too large now that both of his daughters were at college most of the year. When it became dark the lights made any room feel like it was lit by fireplace, even though it wasn't. The shelves contained books, religious texts mainly, or commentaries on religion ranging from Augustine to Lewis, with three different editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* and seventeen different Bibles. But there was also secular fare—Knausgaard a particular favorite. Not to mention all the young adult fantasy his daughters loved growing up, *Harry Potter* and *Percy Jackson*.

It was those latter books Styles stared at now, seated in the lounge chair that all members of his family knew belonged to him and him alone, one leg crossed over his knee and one forefinger tapping, tapping, tapping in a slow and easy metronome.

Harry Potter. Now that took Styles back. It would have been... 1999, 2000 perhaps. Colorado Springs. Within a church so large it became a sports arena. Rows and rows and rows of chairs. Who would've been speaking then? Any interchangeable number of names, declaring in one voice the same condemnation: Witchcraft. Magic, sorcery, wizardry, *fantasy*. As a still-young man who found Christ more through Narnia than Sunday School, their arguments and scriptural interpretation never impressed him. But the fashion was the fashion, and Styles said what was expected to be said—in 2000.

Fantasy came from the Christian spirit. That, Styles believed. It was no coincidence the genre's founders, Tolkien and Lewis, were so devout. (Many knew Narnia as allegory, but few realized it was Tolkien's influence that salvaged Lewis from the spirit of eternal negation that was atheism.) Fantasy was a Christian movement. A Christian reclamation of human imagination and spirit against the backdrop of illimitable technological and scientific progress. Oppenheimer: "I am become Death..." When man can mimic miracles and explain them to every precocious schoolchild, where remains the awe that enraptures their hearts and minds in service of the holy and on high? Fantasy. It remained in magic. Only there could a modern man escape the explicable. Only outside of the explicable did God's presence overpower human ego.

When Mayfair stepped forward during his funeral service, Styles had thought nothing of it. Mild annoyance at an interruption. He, too, in those seventeen years since Colorado Springs tumbled into the mechanical nature of the world, the clean and shiny and well-understood metal pieces that slotted together in such organized array.

But when the man rose from his coffin, stagnation shattered in an instant.

"And where is she now?"

"Upstairs," said Styles. "We refitted the guest bedroom for her. She's busy with her papers."

"Can we see her? Speak to her? Dwight. You keep saying we just need to speak to her, but—"

"She doesn't want to be disturbed right now. You'll speak to her later. Though I recommend you let her speak to you more than the other way around."

"Dwight. How can we—I mean, what you're saying is—it's quite extreme. Bringing someone back from the dead?"

Arranged before him in his lounge/study were three of his colleagues, Baptist pastors from the Cleveland area with whom he'd worked before, one under and one over and one merely on the level. Old, young, and—like Styles himself—middle aged.

"Allow me to ask you all one thing," Styles said. "If you saw a miracle. Saw with your own two eyes—would you believe it?"

"Certainly. Of course. If it were a real miracle," said the middle-aged one. "But you know Dwight, with all these phones and computers and whatnot, it's easy to—"

"Yes, yes, I know. I know. But if that's the way you think," said Styles, "how would you recognize a miracle anyway? If Jesus Christ himself came to Earth right now, what would he have to do for you to believe it was really him, and not a camera trick?"

Silence. Because they all knew. They all must know bringing a man back from the dead would do it.

But for Styles, it wasn't just that. It was everything else. The Door, the devil or elf with the knives. The pages of weathered parchment on which words appeared without having been

written.

"Dwight, look, I understand what you're saying. And I believe you saw what you saw, I mean, you trotted out all those people that were there at the funeral with you. But—look. I mean, how can we be sure? It could be—I dunno—the devil—"

"It wasn't bread, or worldly dominion that girl showed me. *Those* are the temptations of the devil. Those are what the devil showed Christ in the desert."

Two of the three demurred. All tones were low in this falsely firelit space. It was the third who spoke, the youngest, bespectacled but vibrant with natural athleticism. He wasn't looking at Styles or the others, his eyes peered at one of the bookshelves, perhaps it was *Harry Potter* he saw as well.

"Maybe that *is* what she showed you though, Dwight." His eyes lifted and looked. "And I don't mean the bread."

Colorado Springs again. Those palatial megachurches, where a hundred thousand eyes could gaze upon the pastor, who then had the gall to ask donations. All in service of God, wasn't it? All in the name of Jesus. Camel through the eye of a needle, alright, but perhaps a rich pastor could be worthwhile in his damnation if his work brought a million more souls into the fold.

"Dwight, I just think you should be careful," the middle-aged one said. "Do you even know where this girl came from? Where her parents are? Forget miracles. What will the law say? It'll do nobody any good if you're in jail for—I dunno, abduction or whatever."

"The law," said the oldest. With a snort. "In *this* country. Where it's perfectly legal to murder an unborn baby."

"I'm only saying—"

"What *are* you saying?"

All four heads in the room turned. But as he turned, Styles' eyes closed. He knew who stood in the entryway to the lounge.

"Miss Mayfair," he said grandiloquently, rising, bowing slightly. "Do you require anything? Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

She brushed aside the offer with a motion of her hand that was dignified, not dismissive. In the shadows at her back the form of her omnipresent bodyguard Dalton Swaino lurked.

"I needed a walk to clear my mind. There are certain problems involving my work with the papers. Unexpected complications..." Her voice trailed off, before she recaptured herself. "In any case, some lively conversation may prove most refreshing. Was it theology you were discussing?"

"Politics more like," the oldest said. "Or sociology, or whatever you wanna call it. God is what we *know*. It's this world that's so confounding."

"Yet all within this world operates under God's will, does it not?" Mayfair stepped out of the dark and into the warm light. She melded into the conversation at once, even though Styles caught brief flutters of trepidation on the faces of his peers. This was all well and good, though. Let them speak to her directly, the way he had. Then they would know.

"True, very true," said the oldest. "True indeed. I suppose a line like 'God is what we know' would be considered prideful, presumptuous even, although it is our profession to interpret the Word."

"I'd debate the point anyway." The youngest leaned forward in his seat. "That everything operates under His will, I mean. Isn't it critical—essential even—to His designs that man is free to choose their own path in life? He may know what each man will choose but it was their choice that brings them either to salvation or—or the opposite."

"An age old debate. Age old. Is this really what we want to talk about now?" said the middle-aged one.

Meanwhile Styles looked to Mayfair. "Miss Mayfair, how's your injury treating you? It's not still hurting, is it?"

"No, the medicine you gave me has worked in ways I could never imagine. I thank you most graciously, Pastor Styles."

"Well, don't move around too much. Wouldn't want those stitches to come undone."

Mayfair patted the spot on her shoulder where the wound began. After they escaped the assassin, there had been debate among the congregation as to whether they should go to a hospital or not. It was Styles who decided to avoid any needless bureaucracy. He knew people, after all. A quick phone call and an old friend, a venerable female doctor (he figured a female doctor would be best, given Mayfair's wound crossed her chest), and everything was handled quite neatly and tidily. Styles was not present for the operation, but afterward the doctor shook her head in wonder and muttered, "Her curiosity knows no bounds," apparently in reference to the innumerable questions Mayfair asked about modern medical practices.

"Keep the wound bandaged and dry for the first day," the doctor had instructed. "Luckily, it was a shallow cut, but avoid any strenuous movement. After the first day, wash the wound with clean water—only water—twice a day. I'll visit soon to check on her." And as she left for the door: "That's an odd girl you have there Dwight. A very odd girl. I hope you know what you're doing."

He didn't know what he was doing. No. He was like Jonah, commanded from above to embark on a quest he little understood, even feared. But he would learn from Jonah's example and keep to his ordained route. The girl was a weaver of miracles and none could have sent her to him but God himself. Already he was crafting a story. She was an orphan, she had been homeless, he took her in... Would it work? He had to have faith it would work.

"What we were discussing, then," said the oldest pastor, "was the tenuous relationship of this country with the Christian religion."

The others shook their heads and murmured.

"Is that so?" said Mayfair. "I well understand the intricacies of spiritual and terrestrial power myself. It may, in fact, be a specialty of mine."

Some uncertain looks spread between the pastors. The girl was fourteen. What could she possibly be a specialist in? Teenagers, as everyone knew, thought they knew far more than they did.

"And what are those intricacies, Miss Mayfair?" asked Styles.

Mayfair cleared her throat. The three others watched dubiously, but Styles leaned forward. The girl had such a beautiful voice to match her beautiful appearance, but what really thrilled him was the words she said, the way she articulated herself. She began:

"In the Old Testament, spiritual health is linked almost inextricably to the spirituality of the leadership. Consider when Moses went atop the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. He was gone for but forty days and nights, yet in that time his heedless and headless people crafted for themselves a golden calf and resorted to the most wicked idolatry. The Books of Kings reaffirm the connection between the ruler's moral potency and that of those over whom they rule. Again and again it is reaffirmed, is it not? Nadab, 1 Kings 15:26: 'And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in his sin wherewith *he made Israel to sin.*' Baasha, 1 Kings 15:34: 'And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin wherewith *he made Israel to sin.*' Zimri, 1 Kings 16:19: 'For his sins which he sinned in doing evil in the sight of the Lord, in walking in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin which he did, *to make Israel to sin.*' Omri, 1 Kings 16:26: 'For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith *he made Israel to sin*, to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger with their vanities.' Need I bring up Ahab and his wife Jezebel? See you not the pattern, clear as any other, in these words? These kings are not simply wicked for their own sins, but because they made Israel to sin as well. It is the king who commands the sins of his subjects. If the king is wicked, the people cannot be pure. And the prophets of God, Elijah and the others, cast down those wicked kings so that their blood splattered the walls and dogs feasted on their corpses. Only then was moral order restored to Israel."

The words came cleanly from her mouth. Like flowing water, like a bell's chime. The eyes of the pastors widened. They exchanged glances in the silence that followed her point.

"Well, you know your Scripture," said the middle-aged one. "Well done! It's rare to see someone your age so enthusiastic."

"We're not ruled by kings anymore, though," said the youngest.

"Oh?" said Mayfair. "Is that so? Then by what, may I ask? Judges, perhaps?"

"Judges! Pah," interjected the oldest. "You could say that. The tyranny of *Roe v. Wade!*"

His quick and canned remark glossed over the oddity of Mayfair's question, a question any American kindergartener could answer. The oddity to not escape the sharp eyes of the

youngest pastor, who gave Styles a look before responding coolly: "A president. We elect a president by vote."

"By vote," said Mayfair. "By vote? Truly? By vote?"

The young pastor nodded. "That's democracy for you."

"Democracy..." Mayfair stood in awe of the word. "Democracy. I can't—I cannot even imagine such a unusual form of governance. Is it not fickle? Is it not perpetually malleable, changed on a whim? Are the people not misled, or are they not so ignorant? What of the peasants, are they allowed to vote as well? No—certainly not. Certainly!" The looks on the faces of the pastors informed her it was, certainly, true, and her smile turned unusual. "How—how queer."

"Queer, that's a good word for it." Who else but the oldest? "A queer government we have, gay marriage legalized—"

"It's true, our government has been drifting more and more toward the—secular," said the youngest.

"Drifting, well. A bit more than drifting. One might say Christianity is under attack—by our own government, no less! Can't even say Christmas anymore, companies closed down because they don't want to bake a cake that pushes the gay agenda. And I hear those liberal wingnuts talking about taxing churches now. What is happening to this country? That's what I want to know. When will the persecution of Christians in this country stop? Well, little girl? You have an answer for that?"

The old man's vitriolic gaze turned toward her. Slowly, the others looked too. She stood rigid and straight, balanced upon her cane or staff or whatever it was, and the faint outline of the giant man behind her formed a thin layer of daunting.

Styles knew this face of hers. She used it before, when she first met him. In his church, when she revived the old man in the casket. She used this face as she exhorted the few people gathered in the pews, when she spoke to them on their tepid, empty faith. That face was the only unappealing thing about her, and when she wore it even her fair features turned bitter. The face of someone who thought they knew better.

The only thing was, Styles knew she did know better.

"If this nation elects its leaders," said Mayfair, "then it is not the leaders who you should cast judgment upon. Democracy! Power concentrated in the people, even the lowliest peasant, even the most ignorant sheep—yet you, who sit here complaining rather than guiding them to righteousness, call yourselves shepherds? Pathetic. Utterly so. The failing comes from you, good sirs. This is the land of God, and yet you cannot convince the people to see what can be seen in its every blade of grass. Hmph. That is all. I must return to my papers now."

She turned on her heel. The clean shoe squeaked the varnished wood, but she did not take a step, her back to them as her finger flicked in a moment of realization. Her head tilted to eye Styles sidelong.

"Pastor Styles, you mentioned your Sunday service tomorrow. I do believe I have reconsidered—I should very much like to speak to your congregation then. If the people truly hold power in this nation, then the path could not be clearer. Hah! Democracy. Democracy!"

She walked away and soon disappeared into the dark. The pastors remained watching with bewildered expressions. Dwight J. Styles looked from face to face, and finally they all looked at him, and before any of them could say a word he gave a shrug, with his palms turned skyward. Inside, though, he knew. This was something giant. Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke—she would revive the faith in this country. And he would do all in his power to help her make it so.

The Beast the Human Endeavor

The night after Jay met that girl—Viviendre de Califerne—Lalum crawled through the window in his bedchamber. He'd expected her.

HELLO HERO, her web read.

He sat on the edge of the enormous, circular bed, chin resting on thatched hands. He didn't bother to look at her. She kept to the shadows anyway. Seeing her lurk behind him when he talked with Viviendre made him remember. He didn't need to beat the queen in a fight—there were other methods.

"Your animus lets you control people, right."

YES, she said. Very quick. As though she expected the question.

"So you could control the queen to open the vault."

The YES remained. Jay wasn't sure whether to interpret that as hesitation or efficiency, but after seconds passed and nothing changed he decided which.

"You need a fairy's blood for it, though."

The same YES.

"I guess they don't have too many fairies in the capital. You wouldn't happen to know of any?"

The YES finally disappeared, replaced for a time with nothing, only an ordinary spiderweb pattern shining silver in the moonlight. Then:

THERE IS THE ONE. DEVINT KEEPS HER NOW.

Olliebollen. Jay's clasped hands adjusted, pressed together at the palms, held just beyond his nose, the fingertips brushing under the brim of his hat.

"Not her."

I KNOW.

Silly. He'd let her devour any other random fairy, just not one he'd met before. That's sentimentality for you. He wasn't immune.

"Before, you and the other nuns caught your fairies in Flanz-le-Flore's forest, right?"

YES...

And Flanz-le-Flore's forest was much more dangerous now. Right before Jay—before he wiped off half her face with his bat, Flanz-le-Flore insinuated she allowed Sansaime and the others to capture some of her fairies to maintain a peaceful relationship with Whitecrosse. Jay doubted that arrangement remained in place. Which meant sending Lalum back to capture another fairy was a death sentence.

"There are other fairy courts in this world, right? Olliebollen came from one, after all. She mentioned something about a fairy council or whatever."

THERE ARE MORE COURTES TO THE WEST. BUT...

"But what?"

The BUT remained the way the yes had. Jay waited, and waited, and finally an answer came.

I WOULD NOT KNOWE WHERE TO FIND THEM. I AM SORRY.

Jay didn't think that was the answer. Why hesitate so long? There was something else bothering Lalum. Maybe something else that had been bothering her the whole time.

Either way, Jay could get Olliebollen back from DeWint and ask her where the other courts were located. She hadn't been *too* upset about the nuns eating Flanz-le-Flore's fairies after all. She cared only about her own court, which the elves apparently wiped out already.

It sounded like a new quest. Olliebollen marks a spot on the map and Jay Waringcrane sets off to fetch the fairy. A standard timewaster, pretty rudimentary stuff in the games he played: Some door won't open and you need to go grab the key or three keys or sometimes they're orbs or crystals in order to open it. Even in open-world RPGs, player progression often got gated that way. Losing Olliebollen's healing made it risky, but he had Makepeace's shield to compensate. In some ways, that was better. He never enjoyed relying on Olliebollen. Olliebollen was Perfidia's stooge.

No Perfidia now. This was Jay's quest, conceived by him, with no NPC telling him where to go. His party would consist only of Lalum, whose trust he earned. He'd even be able to leave his sister behind where she'd be safe.

Everything exactly as he wanted. Right.

HERO, said Lalum. I MUST WARN YOU.

Jay had no idea when the words appeared, but Lalum had clearly waited for him to see them before changing the web:

YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO WANTS TO OPEN THE VAULTE.

"Okay." He figured as much. Those dukes wouldn't mind some powerful magic relics, he was sure. In fact, the reason those things were locked up so securely was probably to stop people like them. Vivienne was the only other person in the castle with a relic. Wasn't she worried someone would steal it? He'd ask next time he saw her.

He glanced up and saw the web changed again. NO, YOU DON'T UNDERSTANDE...
Lalum herself, a shadowy form, fidgeted and twitched, her arms wound around herself, the tips of her legs scratched back and forth. She had eight legs. Didn't she lose one in Flanz-le-Flore's court? He remembered seeing it, dismembered in front of him.

"What don't I understand Lalum? Somebody's gonna try and take advantage of me. I know that already. I've known that since I got here."

BE CAREFULL OF

"Of who?"

Another long pause.

BE CAREFULL OF THE PAGAN GIRL.

Pagan girl. "Viviendre?"

YES. PLEASE BE CAREFULL. SHE IS MOST SLYE...

Yeah, yeah. She looked like a pirate, obviously he'd be suspicious of her.

"Don't worry. I just want some information on her relic. I'm watching my back—You're the only person I can really trust here."

The form in the dark seized up. A strange, muffled "eep" gurgled in what he assumed was her throat.

I—I—I—THANK YOU HERO MOST GRACESLY FOR YOUR HIGHE PRAISE!!!

Did it really make sense for her to stammer via text? Affectation? Whatever.

"Look." Bending his spine forward. "That DeWint guy is shady. He might have some fairies hidden somewhere. Sneak around his office or house or whatever for a day or two, see if you can find anything. Maybe we'll save ourselves a trip."

RIGHTE! YES! I SHAULLE DOUE AS YOUE ASKE HEROUX!!!

What wasn't affect was that excitement degenerated her spelling to shit, but Jay wasn't Shannon; let her butcher the English language as she liked. "That's all," he said. "Report again tomorrow. Same time, same place. I'm counting on you, Lalum."

YES! YES! OF COURSE! YES!

"Goodbye."

FARWELLE!

The spider skittered out the window and was gone. Jay remained in his outrageously stooped posture a moment more and then flung himself back on the bed to try and perceive a ceiling

out of the suspended layers of bed-drapery.

This was best. He doubted Lalum would find anything tailing DeWint, but one never knew. Plus it gave him time. One or two days to recuperate after the craziness at the monastery, to ask Viviendre a few more questions and get a few more answers. Then he'd go on his fetch quest for a fairy. One—two days. No more.

—

The next day, Sunday, a herd of servants and officials propelled him against his will to the cathedral next to the castle. There he endured a service delivered by the short, round Archbishop Tintzel and his verbal tic of repeating exactly what he said but swapped around pointlessly: "God is great, great indeed is God!" Jay, crammed between Dukes Meretryce and Mordac, ignored the glower of the latter as he scanned the pews and contemplated if he'd get away with just standing up and leaving. No Queen Mallory anywhere. He did see Viviendre, tucked away a row down, her attendant (Jreige?) beside her. She turned her singular eye his way and stuck her tongue out at him.

Then the sermon got worse. As Tintzel concluded, he introduced a special speaker, an important personage, indeed a personage most important. In her sharp business suit Shannon Waringerane rose, went to the pulpit, and orated.

About germs.

"It is said that cleanliness is next to godliness," Shannon began, then proceeded to make zero further references to God or religion for the next hour as she delved into an overview of the science behind bacteria, viruses, and other microscopic organisms that caused disease as well as the methods of contact that caused said organisms to spread from person to person, animal to person, surface to person, food and water to person, or air to person.

She segued this conversation into a broader discussion of demography. "While plague and disease are no doubt known to everyone seated before me, the germs I describe impact the population in an even more insidious fashion: infant mortality." She explained how bacteria is transmitted from a mother to her unborn child, leading to infections that pose significant risk to both. These infections were historically the biggest factor behind low population growth in premodern societies and—she snapped her fingers severely, prompting Gonzago of Meretryce to rocket upright from his seat and deliver her a gigantic tome—and were also the cause for the stagnant population change in Whitecrosse over the past four hundred years, as explicated in this Domesday Book she unearthed from the castle library's archive with help from Duke Meretryce. Holding the book up for the congregation to see, she claimed the pages therein painted a clear picture of a populace incapable of progress due to the restrictions placed upon it by disease and famine.

"Now, those of you gathered before me, who appear to be primarily of the upper classes, are probably asking: Why does this matter?" Shannon closed the "Domesday Book" and paced as

far as the narrow, raised platform of the pulpit allowed. "Certainly, disease is inconvenient, but most of you can flee to your country manors whenever plague visits the city, can't you? You can afford to keep your own homes sanitary when it comes time for your wives to give birth to your heirs. It's only the poor people who die, right? If that's the way you think, your way of thinking is *utterly* myopic.

"Economy is built on the backs of labor. Less labor means less production. Especially in a society where automation isn't even a dream! I've seen this land. You've got open, fertile fields stretching miles away from the castle, but not a soul to plant a seed on them. You've got giant, sprawling forests, but nobody to harvest the lumber. Those mountains? Plenteous in precious metals and other useful minerals, but who's here to mine them? The lack of attention to the health crisis in this country has led to a horrifically unoptimized and inefficient economic situation that is robbing you—yes, you, the dukes and dignitaries of Whitecrosse—from further profit.

"Duke Meretryce, again, was gracious enough to allow me a peek into some of his family's internal recordkeeping. The situation I saw was frankly pathetic—nowhere near the level of profit generation even a small, local business in the world I come from could muster. And what profits you *do* make are almost never reinvested into expansion of your enterprises. Absurd! More people means more production. It means more surplus. It means more tax revenue. Those extra dollars—excuse me, those extra pence—go straight into your pockets. None of you even know what the word 'rich' means. Listen to me, and I'll show you the exact definition."

A snap summoned Gonzago. He positioned what appeared to be a painting easel beside the pulpit and spread a large parchment across it. The parchment displayed some kind of architectural drawing.

"What I am proposing is the construction of a sophisticated sewage system that will carry wastewater out of the city. Luckily, Whitecrosse is constructed on a hill, so the natural forces of gravity will help in this endeavor. However, we also need to prevent the moat around the city from becoming a pungent sump where disease festers—"

And so on. When her speech ended, the dukes and aristocrats rose, some applauding, all thronging toward her as she climbed down from the pulpit and directed Gonzago to collect her various demonstration materials. Jay, finally free, used the distraction to sneak unseen to the exit, and then wait unseen a few minutes more for Viviendre de Califerne to come scraping out after.

"Well!" Viviendre said as Jay fell in step with her down a sparsely-populated side corridor. "I certainly feel morally and spiritually edified after that."

"Not interested in finding out how to increase your profit margin?"

She expelled her fehfehfeh and shook her head. "In California we do things somewhat differently."

Her attendant walked behind them. His steps were silent or matched to Viviendre's slow gait exactly, so it was easy to forget him as they slowly (very slowly) descended a flight of stairs

toward what looked like another underground passageway, this one pre-lit by torches at least. Vivienne experienced some trouble on one step, stumbling, and Jay wasn't sure if it happened naturally or if she did it on purpose, but either way he soon held her arm to help her the rest of the way.

"California," he said. "There's a California on Earth, too."

"Shit! Then there's no escape, wherever I go."

"Guess not."

Jay couldn't tell if she wore less perfume than the day before or if he was more used to it. Now it smelled simply sweet, not overpoweringly so, as they continued down the dimly-lit corridor surrounded by the omnipresent sound of droplets dropping.

"What's a Mahomet-worshipping pagan like you doing in a Christian church anyway," he ventured.

"Espionage. Infiltration of the enemy sanctuary. I must say the experience was eye-opening. Based on your sister's speech, the people of Whitecrosse pray to the most fearsome and real god in existence: profit, profit, profit!"

She spoke with the tone of someone attempting wit, but such surface-level observations about the dogmatic and religious elevation of money in society were so trite and cliché that it was hard to do anything but roll your eyes at them. Before Shannon moved out of the house for college she would talk about politics all the time. This would've been around 2012. He remembered her babbling ad nauseum about it: Obama, Romney, Obama, Romney, outlining respective policy positions and vivisectioning them mostly to Mother. He didn't listen closely enough to know which candidate Shannon favored, but she tried to convince Mother to vote for him, and on voting day Mother forgot to vote altogether, which caused Shannon to keep talking about the election for weeks after it ended. "We live in *Ohio* Mother, our vote means more than anyone else's!"

But when you dug into it, it was all the same shit. The people who had money called the people who didn't freeloaders; the people who didn't have money called the people who did exploiters. And whoever got elected didn't change anything. It seemed impossible that anyone could change anything in *that* world. No matter who was in charge the machine would keep clanking the way it always did. The machine was built to keep clanking, the person in charge was designed not to matter. Shannon believed otherwise, but she needed to in order to believe in herself, as part of the machine. The truth remained: Barack Obama was no Napoleon Bonaparte.

"What the fuck are you thinking about so deeply?" Vivienne said. "Forget that we're having a conversation here? I know I'm rude. No excuse for you to be either."

Jay shrugged. He considered not saying what popped into his head. But Vivienne responded well to his "Mahomet-loving pagan" comment, so maybe she responded well to getting pushed around a little. "It's just kind of horseshit, isn't it? You've got gold and gems and fancy

perfume and a personal bodyguard. You clearly enjoy expensive things yourself. You're just looking for an excuse to insult people you don't like."

Viviendre looked at him funny. Maybe that wasn't the right thing to say after all. But why?

It was easy to pick apart someone's words or mannerisms and figure out when they were lying, when they were being deceitful, when they wanted something out of him. Jay had always been able to see the small contradictions, the subtle tells, and expose them. But this was different. He'd talked with Viviendre twice now. He had a grasp on her personality. So what'd he do wrong?

Actually, a better question—why did he care? Sure, he wanted to get closer to her so he could learn about her relic. But he could ask Olliebollen about the relic, couldn't he? She'd recognized the Staff of Lazarus once Sansaime mentioned it, so she should know *something*. Maybe Olliebollen was still sulking too much to help but—

"Christ! You love to go silent, don't you?" said Viviendre.

"That time's on you."

"What? On me?"

"You never responded to what I said. Which means you went silent, not me."

"Fuck! That's not true right? Shit! Jreige, which of us went silent?"

"You, milady," the attendant said in a dry, deep, and heavily French-accented voice.

"Tch! Damn!" Viviendre expelled her breathless fehfehfeh and the moment was effectively papered over, even if Jay detected a slight artificiality in the entire interaction. At least it signified Viviendre *wanted* to move past any awkwardness.

He really shouldn't think about it so much. If he tried to analyze everything he said before he said it, she'd be giving him shit about going quiet all day. Jay didn't have much faith in his ability to speak without preplanning, though. There was a reason he preferred monosyllable responses when possible.

And of course, here he was not saying anything again. But neither was Viviendre; they proceeded down the dark corridor quietly, enveloped by the dripping, the scuttling, and the clack of her peg leg.

Eventually she said: "That sister of yours. She's a cunt, right?"

"Definitely. She's like that all the time."

"For a moment, sitting in that pew, I had a horrible sensation inflicted upon me. My body went rigid and a cold sweat broke on my brow. I was staring up at that pulpit, hearing her speak, and thinking: *Mon Dieu!* It's Mayfair once more!"

"Shannon won't summon a dragon to kill us all, at least.—I think."

"A dragon—? Oh yes, you mentioned that was what Mayfair did up there. That damn dragon. What's the name—Devereux. And with the Staff of Lazarus, right, so that's why she took *that* one in particular. Oh, it all makes so much sense. Fuck. What a precocious little bitch. Can you imagine, Jay? Actually yes I assume you can imagine since your sister is the same way, but at least she's your *older* sister. Can you imagine having to put up with that kind of pedantic, cloyingly over-intelligent behavior from a girl five years younger than you? You've no idea how often I wanted to take up this cane"—the relic waved—"and dash out her brains."

"It's not any better when she's five years older," said Jay. "Trust me. Shannon would always act like she was the adult and I was the kid. Go there, do that, don't talk back, don't ask why. Didn't help that Mother was always off in her own little world. And then of course Shannon would bring back whatever guy she was fucking—a different guy every week—and he'd kick the shit out of me as a joke or for no reason."

"Okay. Well, first off. Acting like an adult, like she could boss you around? Mayfair was still like that, didn't matter if she was fourteen, she acted that way anyway. What you're missing is the abject *humiliation* of it, okay? To have to listen to this too-smart-for-her-own-good kid mouthing off at you. Oh and the power dynamics. She's the princess, right! If she says it, I have to listen. Pfah! I say one slightly foul word and it's a lecture, and I have to simply listen because I'm the Mahomet-worshipping pagan and she's the righteous little princess. Second —" (and Vivienne's demeanor changed immediately, she leaned toward Jay and shifted her eyes slyly) "—your sister was truly bedding that many men?"

Jay clicked a half-snort, half-laugh through his tongue. "Why? Jealous?"

"Mere curiosity, that is all. And how many children has she given birth to?"

"None. What kind of question—"

"None! None." Vivienne threw up a hand in wonder and even checked back at Jreige as if to affirm what Jay said. "What, does she take it up the ass every time? After all that talk of 'germs' and 'bacteria'..."

"How the hell would I know! I don't spend time thinking about it. Don't tell me *you* have kids or anything."

"Me? Kids!" Fehfehfeh. "Perish the thought. Look at me Jay, I am not overly popular with the men of Whitecrosse."

"Oh please. You look fine."

"Fine! Fine?" The relic's bulbous end rose and tapped her eyepatch, causing a slightly-muffled thunk sound. "You are surely a flatterer, Jay. If it weren't for men like DeWint and Makepeace—God rest that man's soul—I'd have forgotten I was a woman long ago."

Jay squinted at her, trying to discern whether she was being intentionally self-deprecatative to wring compliments out of him. He didn't intend to play ball. "How'd you lose the eye anyway?"

"I didn't *lose* it. Nor my leg. I never had either to begin with."

"Huh?"

"The royal bloodline of dear California remains pure, my friend," Viviendre appending a staged, actorly sigh, "but at great cost."

"Oh." Jay vaguely remembered one of the dukes—or maybe the queen herself—mentioning something about... that. He wasn't sure how to take the admission. Viviendre hadn't said it very gravely, in fact she parodied any seriousness it might have held. A joke—he'd respond with a joke. "No wonder why you thought I'd know how my sister has sex."

The drawback was that it got them on that uncomfortable topic again—in fact, given the new context, it was even more uncomfortable—but at least it made Viviendre laugh. "Please! And for your information, before you start spreading such nasty rumors about me the way all those horsefucking dukes do, I have never and never intend to partake in that particular 'family tradition.' Indeed, I traveled to Whitecrosse partially to ensure that."

"What a relief," Jay said, although a few seconds afterward he realized he wasn't sure why he said it, and felt kind of stupid for saying something so meaningless.

They finally reached the end of the tunnel. A new flight of stairs confronted them. Viviendre stopped and frowned at them, then without a word stuck out her arm for Jay to once more hold as he assisted her up.

"The only reason I'm divulging such things to you is because otherwise you'll hear it from the court's gossiping hens first, along with all manner of half- and untruths. Which reminds me. I'm certain a genius such as yourself has already figured it out, but you shouldn't trust any of those weasels."

"Of course not."

"Relay the message to your sister, too. She may think she has them licking from her hand with her grand schemes, but I assure you those dogs are craftier than they appear. There are many who do not wish to see a bigger, healthier, stronger population of peasants, no matter what extra profits are promised. Indeed, some would rather see no change in the current state of things—ever."

"That's fine," said Jay. "None of her plans will work anyway. The only two words she really understood during that speech were 'tax revenue.' Everything else I'm sure she got from a freshman-level college course."

"Freshman...?" said Viviendre.

"Entry. Entry-level."

"Well." Her step became unsteady, she swayed, he caught her, all without her seeming to notice. "Tell her anyway, unless you truly feel about her the way I do about Mayfair."

"Alright. Fine."

They reached the top of the stairs and Jay moved to unloop from her but this time her arm tightened just enough and they continued walking along a new corridor—this one lit by sunlight streaming through rows of identical ornate windows—arm-in-arm. He didn't resist. Her clothes were silky, soft. Somewhere buried beneath them a small body quivered, too physically weak to do otherwise.

Her hand found his. It felt tiny, the fingers small and brittle as they pushed and then slid between his own much larger fingers. An immediate pulse shot through him, he remembered the hands shattering in his grasp, the scream of pain Flanz-le-Flore made, the image of her face melting off her skull...

"Jay, may I ask you a question?"

Jay said nothing.

"When you said I looked 'fine'... did you mean it?"

The small fingers wriggled like worms, hard worms that would snap in seconds.

"Of course," Jay said, without looking at her, feeling stupid again, feeling like he was saying the dumbest possible thing.

"Thank you for escorting me to my room." Sure enough, there was a door in front of them. "These long walks always make my lungs feel like razors—I really should sit down for a bit. Would you like to keep me company a while longer?"

"Your Highness," said Jreige.

"Jreige say not another word. You serve *me* and do not forget it—else I'll chop your balls off, understand? Pardon me, Jay. I of course don't intend for anything uncouth. I simply enjoy conversation with you. Would you mind?"

The small fingers clasped tightly. As though she were trying to shatter his bones instead, except she was too weak to even make them hurt. Jay didn't understand. Like all the stupid things he'd said during the past conversation, it didn't make any sense.

Why did he want to say yes?

It didn't make any sense. He never wanted to say yes. To anything. Yet here he was. He understood what she was asking—"uncouth" or not—he wasn't oblivious. So why did he want to say yes?

After all. After all, when Flanz-le-Flore tried something similar, with her arms around his shoulders, with her soft voice whispering in his ear—and Flanz-le-Flore had been, sorry Vivienne, significantly more attractive—he'd said no. Said it easily. Hadn't even thought about it. Hadn't even needed the logical rationale he cobbled together afterward to justify his instinctual rejection. Since coming here every woman apparently wanted him, either because he was a hero or because Perfidia hardwired them all in a misguided attempt to keep him "satisfied"—either way, it meant nothing. Did he think Vivienne was any different? Sure,

Perfidia was gone now, and sure, she wasn't outright asking him for anything—yet. It only meant she was savvier than the others.

So why did he want to say yes?

The churn in his stomach accompanied the mental image of her fingerbones grinding to powder in his grasp, of his hands grasping her throat and throttling her, of bashing her skull to a bloody mash with his baseball bat. Nausea gurgled and he became acutely aware once more of Vivienne's perfume, its saccharine tang as overpowering as when he first met her. His eyes watered, his skin itched—the perfume.

The perfume. Or maybe the relic. She was doing something to him. Right. She was altering his mind. Either the perfume or the relic could be the culprit. A seduction magic, something to draw him toward her even though her body was like Swiss cheese—not that she looked particularly bad, or was that the magic talking?—it had to be magic. Something like that. Right? Right. Lalum tried to warn him after all: be careful of Vivienne. Lalum was the only one he could trust.

"Silent again. Of course!" She said it with a smile that faded the moment she saw his face. "Uhm—"

He pulled his arm away from her. She wobbled and without thinking he seized her to steady her and just as quickly pulled his arms away, stepping out of her reach, stepping out of the plume of her scent.

It had to be the scent. Maybe the relic even caused the scent, or it could be animus magic, Vivienne kept herself covered up, maybe parts of her body were corrupted like the nuns. It made so much sense now—why didn't he realize sooner?

"What the fuck!" She lurched toward him and he backpedaled away from her. "Am I—am I really that disgusting?! Seriously?! You fucker! You could at least be polite about it, fuck! You fucking—you fucking *fucker!* Die in Hell!"

Her one golden eye drove straight into him and he winced. Was he—was he just being an asshole? No, of course not, she had to be manipulating him somehow, nobody would be interested in him otherwise. Even Lalum only cared because he saved her life.

Despite Vivienne's words, though, her posture was slumped, and her teeth were grinding together, and her eye drooped. Pained. Or maybe the perfume was forcing him to think she was pained, to feel bad for her, to feel bad about himself, it all had to be that perfume.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I..."

Behind her, Jreige the attendant stood like an inanimate object. Upright and unwavering, maybe something smug in those eyes. Further down the deserted corridor, hidden around a bend where the window's sunbeams didn't reach, peeped Lalum. So she followed him even here. Lalum warned him about Vivienne. Of course, Lalum could also have an ulterior motive, couldn't she? Jealousy.

"You what? Heh? Go on, say it. I've heard it all before." Viviendre swung back at a lazy tilt and leaned against her door, rolling back her head. "I'm deformed, I'm repugnant, I'm a blackhearted Saracen, I'm miserable. Go on! Say it. Be open about it at least, you bastard."

He didn't want to hurt her. "I'm sorry. Holding your hand, it just reminded me." His hand lifted, balled into a fist. "There was someone—someone I hurt. It was a bad memory."

What the fuck was he saying?

The golden eye narrowed. "That so. Hm."

More than anything he felt mentally and physically drained. He didn't want to think about this anymore. "It's true," he managed to mutter.

She stared. Then a low, snakelike fehfehfeh came out and a fragment of a smile manifested. "Then I suppose I can offer you a second chance. But not now. My mood's gone to tatters because of you, shitbrain. If you're really telling the truth, visit again later. Ciao!"

Her rapid, languid delivery hit a roadblock when she needed to open her door, which she struggled to do efficiently while leaning on her cane for support, and eventually Jreige stepped forward and opened it for her. She took a subsequent staggered series of seconds to hobble inside, whereupon the door shut and Jreige stood guard beside it without acknowledging Jay's existence.

The perfume scent dispersed. Jay felt no different than before. Head swimming, circuitous thoughts scourging himself, he walked toward where Lalum had been, but she was no longer anywhere.

—

The speech went well, but Shannon always knew it would. Ignorance was the formative matter of these people; even rudimentary knowledge of subjects outside her specialization flabbergasted them. So she spent the rest of the day much like the first, meeting with anyone and everyone of even tangential relevance to Whitecrosse's ruling class. Duke Meretryce acted her staunch ally, but he also promised too much, suspiciously promised exactly what she wanted most—a way home—shielded behind pie-in-the-sky qualifications for when those goals could be achieved. For instance, when she presented him with the more reasonable goal of recovering Wendell from the forest (she hadn't forgotten about him), Meretryce hemmed and hawed and suggested that the current time was unfavorable, dealing with the fae was tricky, it was best to rely on certain astrological signs, the whole pseudoscientific gobbledygook.

When it came to her plans for a public sewage system, though? People were on board, as she expected. She formed committees and subcommittees to refine her designs using the knowledge of the kingdom's architects; revised blueprints were submitted for her attention by

noon. Shannon only wished she possessed more concrete learning in this field to better assess whether they moved in the correct direction.

None of that was the problem, though.

The problem was that she was horny.

Shannon Waringcrane disliked having this problem. For most people, maybe it made little impact. Her brother for instance. Not a single intimate physical moment with another human in nineteen years of life and he acted like he was perfectly fine with that arrangement. Or Mother. How often had Shannon told her she needed to go out and try dating again? But a decade after the suicide and all she ever did was watch movies and drink wine.

Somehow she shared genes with these aberrations. Inhuman mutants. Meanwhile her last time was five days ago and she found it difficult to concentrate. Words, words, words, she tried to prioritize her attention, filtering out needless courtesies and honing in on technical or logistical intel necessary to move forward with her plans, but the facts and figures mingled in her mind with another type of mingling. Bah! Stupid fucking Dalt, stupid stupid stupid asshole, why did he abandon her, why?! She needed him now more than ever.

Pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers at the oval table where the dukes and court officials debated financing she could feel the palpable and ineffable accumulation of stress within every ounce of her frame, head to toe, a shaking and a shivering that could only be reversed via the perfectly ordinary human drive for copulation. And it wasn't like she couldn't function whatsoever! It was simply that concentrating significant portions of her mental energy on the multifaceted and utterly unsexy series of problems she established for herself grew tantamount to Sisyphean. She *needed* that concentration. These were not charitable people regardless of their professed devotion to a charity-based faith. They wanted something from her—great things from her—and if she wanted them to open that gate she needed them. (There had to be a key on this side. Had to be. Maybe in that vault Jay mentioned. He might know something. Or Ollie might know something—although the fairy had gone missing, only compounding Shannon's combustive levels of stress—and here she was, distracted again.)

Opportunity was not the issue. No shortage of men had attempted to court her; some even brazenly proposed. There were enough of them that a few were even her type, although give her two more days and she'd settle for Gonzago if she had to. Nor was the issue loyalty to Dalt, who could come charging back on a herd of white horses and receive only a flat "It's over" for his trouble (after she made it back through the gate of course).

The issue was contraceptives.

She and her bodyguards prepared assiduously for their trek into this fantasy realm but birth control had very reasonably not been on her checklist. No pill in five days, not a single condom on hand. If the medieval world possessed any similarly-purposed techniques they surely lacked efficacy.

Unacceptable risk. Simply unacceptable. Only the most irresponsible, reprehensible sort of woman got herself pregnant at such a young age. Rearing a child under those conditions—

simply irresponsible! She couldn't. Untenable. Nonstarter.

Yet the part of her mind that failed to focus on the grand and unending speech Duke Meretryce now gave to his compatriots kept nagging: "Come on. Come on. It's not that bad. You'll figure it out. You can worry about the whole pregnancy thing later. What about that captain of the guard who saluted so smartly? Not quite Dalt-sized but they're pre-agricultural revolution, malnourishment is par for the course. He's not doing so bad, that in mind. He's still taller than you at least, which most of these men can't say. So come on. You saw the way he looked at you. Come on!"

"Milady."

Buzzbuzzbuzzbuzz. How did she ever make it through her sermon at the church?

"Milady!"

She could not let it show. Above all else nobody could ever know. Her needs were perfectly ordinary but the continued functioning of polite society necessitated self-mastery—

"Lady Shannon!"

"What? What is it?" She looked up, looked around, eyes blinking in a circle around her, before she settled on the man standing beside her. Gonzago. Dandyish as always.

"I—Ahem. Well—is now a bad time?"

"I was attempting to focus on the duke's suggestions, yes," Shannon said, jabbing a pointed hand over the table. "If you have something to say, say it."

"Gonzago, my nephew, please." Duke Meretryce wore his broadest smile but his eyes sharpened themselves on Gonzago's flinching jerk to attention. "The heroine has little time for your antics."

"Aye, yes, well. Ahem. It's actually—it's—"

"Cease your stammering boy," Mordac snarled.

"The queen. It's the queen!" Gonzago's nod brought himself into greater focus, realizing him. "Queen Mallory has requested Lady Shannon's presence."

Shit. The queen. The most important person here, the most essential to impress, and the most volatile. Shannon still felt the bruises from the woman's punches and kicks. First impression went poorly, Shannon existed in a hole already, and now a surprise meeting with her in such a state. The absolute worst-case scenario.

"What?" said Meretryce, echoed by many others present. "What! Queen Mallory? She told you this herself? Gonzago, do not lie to me, I am a patient man but I'll not be tested on such matters!"

"Y—yes, of course, my uncle. I, ahem, I was not told by Her Majesty herself, but by one of her personal handmaidens—It was impressed upon me to deliver this message as swiftly as possible!"

Meretryce exchanged a look with Mordac, or rather Meretryce looked at Mordac and Mordac remained a statue. "Well now," Meretryce said finally. "A rare occasion indeed that Her Majesty sends for anyone other than her personal retainers. Although I suppose the arrival of the hero and heroine merit such rarities. I hope only that the days have given her some time to recover from the news regarding the fate of her children. Very well! Lady Shannon, gentlemen, let us render our conversation mobile. Her Majesty will be in the courtyard at this hour, so we have much ground to cover. Hup. Hup!" He clapped his hands and the others rose with creaks of chairs and bones.

"Ahem. Um. Actually." Gonzago shifted his weight. His eyes wandered to his feet, then to Shannon. "Her Majesty specifically requested the heroine come alone."

Meretryce's face devolved instantly. "Did she now?"

"Ah—! Um, yes. Ahem. This fact was stressed most severely. I have been told—I am merely the messenger uncle!—I have been told Her Majesty intends to beat anyone else who disturbs her to—ehm, ahem—a quote-unquote 'bloody pulp'—no matter who they are. Please! I am but the messenger...!"

A silence. Meretryce's good humor gone. He looked nearly identical to Mordac in that moment, and the room was still save for Gonzago's cringing.

"Very well." To Shannon: "Attend Her Majesty quickly, lady heroine. She is not one for conversation, so it shan't be long. Hurry back soon, girl."

She rose, took her leave, all that, in a blur. Outside the chamber where the bigwigs conferred a maidservant awaited and it was her who ferried Shannon to wherever the queen was. For a few minutes Shannon didn't have to do anything except walk and keep her eyes riveted to the maidservant's heels, but after descending a few stairs and crisscrossing a few corridors she realized she needed to establish a conscious strategy for speaking with the queen. A successful conversation might do more for her than all of those dukes combined; an unsuccessful one might end with her bloodied on the floor. If—

"Ah, Lady Shannon, how do you do? Absolutely ravishing today!" The Prime Astrologer—DeWint. He walked backward, facing her, carrying for no definite purpose an antique brass sextant in one hand. He could not exist right now, no. Perhaps the most unctuous pest of the lot, the most forward with his overtures. She knew she possessed the self-control to grind his advances into the dirt but if she entertained him even mentally even for a second the shame would divvy her entrails. "Your performance at the pulpit enflamed us all with forward-thinking feeling. Mayhap the effect would have been even more pronounced had you an education in classical rhetoric. Which, need I remind you, is one of the many, many subjects I teach—"

"Not now. The queen summons me," she said.

"Fiddlesticks! And it's so rare to find you alone. Well, mostly alone." He nodded cordially—overly cordially—to the maidservant, who glared in response. "Let me merely mention that I have taken under my care a certain *small* friend of yours. Please come find me at your earliest convenience if you wish to see them."

A small friend?—Oh! "Ollie?"

"Ollie... Yes, yes, that is the name, correct. We have reached understanding."

It'd resolve at least one worry if Shannon had Ollie back. Plus Ollie knew a lot about this place. "I'll swing by your office after I talk to the queen."

"Excellent! Then I shall pester you no further, my exquisite heroine—as always, I am your devoted servant. Ta-ta!" In a flowing series of obsequious bows he dropped out of sight.

By the time Shannon remembered she needed to formulate a plan for the queen, she arrived.

The courtyard ate a narrow hole out of the center of the castle and ringed on all sides by multi-story walls from which even taller towers extended it seemed distinctly prisonlike, a semblance made more severe by its sparseness. No elaborate gardens or flower displays. In most of it, not even grass—just mud, churned into erratic whorls.

The reason for the dismal appearance became clear immediately as sounds came into focus: grunts, groans, hard whacks, stomping of feet. On the fringe of the mud circle, where the maidservant stopped and Shannon stopped beside her, a few other stiff female attendants waited and watched the interior, where people brutally assaulted one another with long wooden swords.

There were eight of them total, all tromping back and forth in light leather armor. They covered a swath of different heights and sizes and Shannon realized after a few seconds of dim contemplation they were the seven knights who had stood—then in full armor—behind the queen in the throne room. The eighth combatant was Queen Mallory herself.

In simple, almost peasant-like pants and shirt, with her blonde hair tied back behind her head, with mud painted across her face, she looked nothing like before. She darted and dove between the attacks of her knights, parried a strike from another, and after a few seconds of watching Shannon realized the queen was taking on all seven knights at once—and winning, given that three of them were already groaning in the dirt. Make that four.

The queen moved fast. She did not move gracefully. Her actions possessed a degree of efficiency, she clearly had technique even to Shannon's amateur eye (her sport was track and field), but any spared unit of energy was expended in the obscene, outrageous power of her swings, swings accompanied by a brutal and unladylike grunt that echoed between the courtyard's tall enclosure. The sound of her wooden sword plowing into a knight's shoulder was almost as loud; in the time the knight spent staggering, Mallory brought a strike nearly as hard into his hip to knock him down.

Hopefully, Shannon thought as the sixth knight fell after another lightning quick exchange, this meant the queen would be emptied of aggression before they spoke. Mostly though,

Shannon didn't think anything. She watched Mallory's body whip back and forth and nimbly evade the blows of the final, tallest knight (not the largest—at least not by volume—but the tallest), who instead of a sword wielded a long staff as though it were a polearm. From common sense and intellectual osmosis Shannon knew spears were generally advantaged against swords, but Mallory acted as though this disadvantage made things more fun. Her mud-caked cheeks split into a broad smile while she agilely navigated routes of safety through the knight's stabs to pummel him once she got close.

That left seven knights felled and one woman standing. She hefted her arms to the sky, let her wooden sword drop wherever it might fall, and crowed triumph to the encircled sky. The servants standing around Shannon applauded politely. Shannon, lost in certain other thoughts after watching the brusque and physical display, joined in on rote.

Mallory grew bored of exultation, heaved a deep breath, and strode toward Shannon. One arm shot out—Shannon braced to run—but instead of strike it received from a nearby maidservant a flask from which Mallory quaffed. In fact, Mallory did not even look at Shannon as she walked past, beelining the way Shannon came while her servants fell into line behind her.

Wasn't the queen the one who called Shannon out here? Shannon looked to those left behind for an answer, but that number included only the groaning knights, who nobody felt important enough to assist. One exasperated grimace and Shannon hurried to keep up with the tail end of Mallory's train.

Through corridors. Up stairs. Zigging, zagging, Shannon brimming more and more intense rage with every step. Given the queen's propensity to violence Shannon was reluctant to rush up there and start speaking, but there was also a good chance the queen forgot her entirely, and without reminding her nothing would ever happen. Hastening her pace she pushed past the servants to the front of the line just as Mallory swiveled through an open door.

"Yes, hello. Excuse me—Your Majesty?"

Shannon followed through the door and stopped dead. Mallory, arms outstretched, was already in the process of being disrobed by a pair of maidservants. The leather armor came off and fell to the side, the shirt was pulled up—

"Yauoogh" somewhat approximated the sound Shannon made as she turned for the exit. The door slammed shut in her face, her last glimpse of the outside congested by a line of the maidservants wearing what she thought were sly smiles—although she saw them for only a second.

A sharp voice commanded: "Stay, heroine."

Quivering all over, Shannon stared at the shut door. "Your Majesty. I apologize for—"

"What's this. Cannot even look at me? Rude."

Shannon sighed. Fine. Fine! If the queen didn't care, then why should she? It was all women in the room anyway.

She turned. Queen Mallory had entirely disrobed and untied her hair so that it cascaded down her back. Her two maidservants stood to the side holding the filthy clothes and armor in loose bundles. The only thing of note in the dark, dim-lit room was a large wooden bathtub, from which hot steam issued. The queen stretched her arms overhead, yawned, and climbed over the edge to land in the water with a splash.

"Ahhhhh, yes, now there we go. Ahhhhh!" Mallory sank in up to her neck.

"Yes. Great." Shannon looked at where her watch would be, trying to erase that brief image of the queen's nude form from her head. For a thirty-something woman who'd ostensibly been pregnant twice, Mallory was in aggravatingly good shape. "I assume, Your Majesty, you called me for a reason?"

The queen said nothing. Her head leaned back against the edge of the tub. Eyes closed.

"Your Majesty."

Nothing.

Shannon looked to the silent maidservants for assistance, saw only more sly smiles.

Her face sank into her hands. No wonder Meretryce and the others hated this woman.

Coalescing all strength Shannon lifted her head and shouted: "Your Majesty!" If she had to fucking chant it the way the dukes did in the throne room she *swore*—

"Join me, heroine."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I—I—I—" Shannon calmed herself, although doing so required another strong shiver. "I already bathed today."

"But in this filthy, 'germ'-ridden world, should you not put especial care into your personal hygiene?"

So the queen heard the speech somehow—or heard of it. "Sharing your filthy bathwater is not what I consider hygienic. People do not usually bathe together."

"Such a disappointment. Very well, you are dismissed."

"Dismissed? What? I thought you had something to say to me."

"I did. Not anymore."

Shannon's shoulders went slack. Her eyelid twitched and she rubbed her eye furiously to stop it. Lunacy: moonlight bacteria tumbling and infecting the brain. Nothing would've made her happier than storming out of the room. But the queen's careless, casual remark made clear

doing so would close—perhaps forever—one of the best avenues for Shannon to return home. Today was Sunday, and while she'd mostly lost hope of making it back before she got fired, this was her last chance to do so.

It'd been a few years, but Shannon ran track in high school. She'd used locker room showers before. This was essentially the same concept. Thinking herself toward the most practical way forward, she started to inwardly sneer at the cringing, virgin behavior that had turned away the moment she saw the queen disrobe. Childish! If she thought about it for even a second it became clear that this whole scene was Mallory's way of conveying trust toward Shannon—trust specifically on gendered lines. Jay hadn't been called here, after all. Nor any of the dukes. Only Shannon. Wasn't it obvious the queen felt some sort of connection with Shannon, given they were apparently the only two women with any power in the entire kingdom? This situation was deliberately crafted.

"Alright." Shannon's eyes flitted to the two maidservants still smiling; she decided they were irrelevances beneath her notice and fiddled with the buttons on her jacket. "Fine. If this is your preferred environment for serious discussion, so be it."

"Good girl."

Those two words caused Shannon to fumble a button. She thought she also heard a giggle from the maidservants—or her imagination. Either way she became aware of tightened, defensive body language, arms closed in and head drawn down, and had to force herself to unclamp and remove the rest of the buttons. Backing off now would turn her into a laughingstock.

If only her suit didn't have so many damn buttons! She turned partially, able to feel the queen's eyes on her as she removed her jacket and began on her blouse. Come on—damn it—finally! Her teeth ground together, something the dentist told her to stop, but she couldn't help it.

The rest of the clothes came off in a tangled blur and finally it was over and she climbed into the tub as quickly as possible, submerging herself to her neck in one dunk despite the water's scalding heat.

There they were. Mallory and Shannon. Two in a tub, rub-a-dub-dub. The tub large enough, at least, that there was no chance of even accidentally bumping a leg or foot against each other. Mallory and Shannon.

"So? May we please talk now?"

"Certainly."

"Perhaps you can start by telling me why you called me here."

"Why I... Oh yes. I suppose I did do that, didn't I?"

"You did."

"Right—right. I remember now. I wanted to tell you, heroine, that you are the sort of girl I absolutely loathe more than anything."

Of fucking course. "Thank you for the most edifying message, Your Majesty. Will that be all or should I go?"

"Girls like you are trained lapdogs. You know such quaint and clever tricks at which one simply must clap. But the only reason anyone cares that a lapdog can roll over is because the lapdog itself is such a malformed and pathetic thing; even the barest minimum impresses."

Exercise of trust—how did Shannon come up with such an idea. Mallory meant to humiliate her even worse than in court, stripping her first. A red heat rose in Shannon's head hot enough to match the sizzling water. How absolutely typical of a brutish woman like Mallory, to see another woman exceed her in some way and feel compelled to tear her down via any means available, even by weaponizing the same societal sexism that subjugated them all alike. Lapdog! A trained puppy, is that what Mallory thought when she heard Shannon's speech? If Shannon was a lapdog then every other human in Whitecrosse, male or female, was a cud-chewing cow.

"The true tragedy of the lapdog, though," Mallory continued, "is that it believes it deserves its praise. It is *so* proud of itself. It demands the treats its owners give it, it refuses to roll over without them, indeed only learned to roll over because it was given them, and even so it believes itself clever for learning at all."

Shannon plotted an escape route that minimized embarrassment.

"Those men you make your little plans with, Shannon Waringcrane—you know nothing of them."

"I know they can't be trusted, I'm not an idiot."

"You're worse if you think you can control them. Mayfair thought so. I did too—once."

"That right."

Mallory's eyes lit up, her smile turned carnivorous, her spine straightened and she arose within the bath, sloshing a wave of hot water Shannon's way. "Pride—the archest sin. Sin of Satan. You'll listen to nobody, will you? Not even the one who lived your life before you. One marriage, they promised, one male heir, and all would be mine, they would be mine to control. In a prison they locked me, locked and swallowed the key: Glup!"

"How depressing! Thankfully I'm not thirteen like you were and thus not a half-formed imbecile!" But Shannon sighed. The water was melting her muscles, a relaxation seeped within her. "Look—I'm sorry. Having something like that happen to you at that age. I understand it may have—scarred you in some way." It wasn't like Mother. It wasn't like Mother. Everything may have been dad's fault but Mother was complicit. Mallory could not have been. "If you want to work with me I'm willing to work. I'm only talking to them because you're always off in your own world somewhere. Is that what this is supposed to be?"

Us talking somewhere none of them will be able to listen? Then what are they?" Her hand lifted heavily out of the water to indicate the maidservants.

"They are mine," Mallory said. "I trust only what is mine. And you are not."

"Then it's an impasse. Although I want only one thing and it's nothing to do with you, nothing to do with this world at all. I want to go home, with my brother. If you can produce a key to that gate—"

"There is no key you stupid girl! Who was it that claimed there was one? Meretryce? They will say anything, that is what I am trying to tell you!"

"There *has* to be a key."

"Has to be! Why? Because you wish it to be so? Are you so arrogant you believe your desire alone can manifest dreams into reality?"

"What's in that vault Jay was babbling to you about?"

"Toys."

"If you have nothing to offer me I might as well go back to the dukes. At least they're serious!"

She couldn't bother with this garbage. It was difficult enough keeping the things that mattered straight with her in this condition. The queen was what they said she was, a petulant womanchild.

Expending immense effort she rose from the water and by the time she was halfway upright Mallory was there—seizing her wrist. How did she move so fast? Or was Shannon simply sluggish. She stood there, Mallory's face too close to hers, sky blue eyes intense and intent. Intent on what? Shannon became aware of the heaving of her own breath as the water rolled off her skin and cool air tickled the spots as they dried.

"Do you want to see me serious?" Mallory said. Looming over her. Taller than her.

Washed of mud, the queen's face was once more beautiful, possessed of the same flawless features as Mayfair her daughter. Shannon's eyes glanced down and she also became aware of the queen's body. The body of a woman in peak physical fitness, and the grip on her wrist crushing to match.

"Please," Shannon said calmly, seriously, although her mind was already going places she knew she lacked the will to stop it from going, not now, not as she currently was, "please release me, Your Majesty."

"There is only one person in this castle strong enough to keep you safe. That person is me. Without me—you'll see what happens, when they no longer want you."

"Please."

The queen's other hand rested on Shannon's shoulder. Shannon stood a creature transfixed; the queen stood over her, digging her into the depths with only a gaze.

"You tremble," Mallory said.

"I—" Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

The hand reached up, brushed away a strand of Shannon's hair. It couldn't be happening. It couldn't be. It couldn't.

Mallory's head leaned in; their lips pressed together. And it was happening. And Shannon didn't resist. Couldn't—drained of all power within and without. For a moment more her eyes remained open, and seeing the two maidservants watching, she squeezed them shut and allowed the queen to control her.

Hassan's Rumpus Room

Shannon lay on her side like a glob of semisolid lead half-sunken into the feather mattress. Moonlight streamed acutely through a series of paned windows. In this world, at night, in the higher tiers of the castle, no sound existed at all. Even after the days Shannon spent here, the silence crept against her hard and spiny. Home, there was always something humming, writhing, rushing, even if the sound was quiet, even if you became so accustomed to it you never heard it. The sound of the machine at work. Here there was no sound at all.

At least, until Mallory started snoring.

Not soft, ladylike snores either. Huge honking inhalations followed by blasts of hot breath that stirred the hairs on the back of Shannon's neck. So much for the queen's fair face. Impossible conditions for sleep!

Sneaking away in the middle of the night, a technique Shannon employed a few times in her life—mainly in college, when she always had a dorm down the hall awaiting her—would not prove possible here. Mallory's arm gripped Shannon's body like she were a stuffed animal, and compared to the queen Shannon was as strong as one. Worse yet, in sleep Mallory snaked a shin over Shannon's leg. The force necessary to break the hold would certainly wake her, so essentially, Shannon was pinned.

Seriously? Holding someone like this while sleeping was a romance novel cliché, nothing more. There couldn't be a more uncomfortable bedtime arrangement, and although many a dopey ex-boyfriend tried, Shannon hadn't met one who didn't let go and roll over after a few miserable minutes of bone and body heat.

Her Majesty, however, seemed perfectly content to continue clinging. "I trust only what is mine," "I am the only one in this castle strong enough to keep you safe," yes-yes Mallory dear, and that was all very hot and Shannon very much appreciated the way you shoved her down against the sheets while fingerfucking her, but once playtime ended one had to return to work and Shannon had lots of work to do. She at least needed a restful night's sleep or the whole point of this little dalliance—improving her focus and concentration—was lost.

Mallory snuggled closer to Shannon's back and honked another snore into her ear.

So did this make Shannon bi now? Whatever. Whatever worked, and this conveniently solved Shannon's issue with no need for contraceptives. Potential political ramifications, though, that could turn troublesome. Mallory claimed her maidservants "belonged to her," which may or may not be true, but either way it was a well-traveled castle and one duke or another must have eyes and ears—rumor would circle sooner or later. Shannon's status as heroine and the queen's status as queen would mitigate any stupid superstitious stone-the-sodomites shtick (did lesbianism count as sodomy? Probably not), but Meretryce or at least Mordac would be more than willing to play the card if it ever became convenient or they thought they could get away with it.

Ideally, Shannon should play both sides. If Mallory's possessiveness continued beyond the realm of dreams, then Shannon had essentially wormed into her confidence. It'd be possible to leverage this position to secure the permissions the sewage plan needed. After all, while the dukes were powerful, from the things they said at the roundtable conference the queen possessed veto power and, unlike many other smaller goings-on, would probably be assed enough to use it against a massive public works project initiated by her bitterest enemies at court. If Shannon carried favor with Mallory, though, it would signal to the dukes that the relationship was beneficial to their interests, and ensure they kept it mum.

Maintaining good relations with both parties would be tricky long-term. But Shannon had the advantage of human history on her side. The modern world was superior to the medieval by every observable metric. In politics, there were usually winners and losers, but that was only true in a world forced to wait for the gradual onward trek of progress. Advancements in health, agriculture, and trade universally benefitted everyone. And what Shannon personally wanted was irrelevant to their profits, so they had no reason not to assist her with her goal as long as she assisted them with theirs.

Yeah, using her body this way was somewhat sluttish, but this was a world where the machine didn't hum. She needed any advantage, unless she wanted to be like she was at the monastery, dogging Jay's heels and shouting unheard into the sky. Speaking of Jay, she should probably keep an eye on him to ensure he didn't do something totally idiotic, although she figured he would default to the same behavior as at home: keeping to his room, talking to nobody, doing nothing. Just in case, Shannon would have Gonzago or someone spy on him.

Oh, right. And DeWint had Ollie. Shannon forgot to go to his office like she said. Well, there was always tomorrow—

A shaft of moonlight darkened.

This sudden change caused Shannon's eyes to divert to the now-black window. What she saw froze her rigid. Something was there. Something was at the window, a figure, a black shape, and her heart pounded in her chest until she realized—oh, that spider girl. Right, right. She'd mentioned something about coming back at night, and spiders could easily climb even the sheer walls of the castle, right. Fairly inconvenient timing, but whatever. Not sure why she wanted to talk to Shannon anyway.

The latch on the window unlatched. The window slowly, silently swung open. Shannon's heart continued to beat, coming down off the sudden stressor. She wondered if she could hiss for the spider to go away without waking Mallory.

A leg slipped through the open window.

A human, non-spider leg.

Still silent. The leg came down, the body after, the figure a man whose face was covered by a dark cloth strung from cheek to cheek, only sharp eyes glinting. Glinting at her.

"Mallory," Shannon whispered breathlessly.

The man drew from his sheath a saber.

"Mallory!"

She seized the queen's arm and shook it as the man lunged.

—

Come visit me again later. That's what Viviendre said. Unspecific about when exactly was "later," but now it was night. Not that Jay knew he wanted to go back anyway.

Obviously, he thought about fifteen million times in the intervening period (which he spent pacing the serpentine corridors of the castle and the academy), Viviendre ensnared him with some magic. Obviously! Then he'd think, well here he is now, not having seen her or existed in the cloud of her perfume for the past however many hours, and nothing changed, did it? Well that meant nothing, no guarantee the magic was tied to direct exposure, especially if it originated instead from the relic.

Then he got a really insidious thought, one that wormed its way between the cracks, a thought driven mainly by being bored of the same circuitous arguments he proposed to himself all day, something injected solely to liven the discussion: What if he *actually* liked her?

What if he actually liked her and all this protestation and worrying about magic was his way of, once again, self-sabotaging. Like at the monastery. Jay didn't forget. At the monastery he was a hundred feet from his goal and suddenly wanted to turn back. Why? Because the archbishop was a plant. That wasn't the real reason of course.

No. Now that Perfidia was gone, he couldn't lean on excuses. He couldn't blame some cosmic Master. Did he like Viviendre? He asked himself that. Tried to ask it honestly. Why would he like her? He tried to conjure a rational explanation out of the aether, came up only with things like: She's crippled, she's inbred, she smells like saturated candy canes, she's crude, she's untrustworthy, and so on. Frankly it'd make more sense for him to like Lalum, who was half arachnid.

At home, Jay played fantasy RPGs. Western, eastern, real-time, turn-based, didn't matter. On a few occasions he'd gone online to join a community of fans for a particular game or sub-genre, thinking maybe there'd be something of interest. Every time he quickly left after realizing the community was comprised of people in love with the fictional women who inhabited those games. Utter aliens. The overt sexualization in some games only ever annoyed him, and until he met these people, he thought it must've annoyed everyone. Jay used the best characters, the ones with the strongest stats or the most useful abilities. If he "liked" a character, it was because that character carried the party on his or her back through one dungeon after another. The stories in those games were all essentially the same anyway, the characters repetitions of standard archetypes: Upstart youth, veteran knight, mentor

wizard, the love interest, et cetera. Most times his eyes glazed during the lengthy streaks of dialogue and exposition.

But that wasn't always the case, was it. There was a time when he devoured those stories, wasn't there? There was a time when he'd use characters that made him laugh, or had a cool weapon, or said something interesting.

Which meant it wasn't impossible.

Jay kept fighting himself even as he walked with purpose toward Vivienne's room. He knew, irony being what it was, that whichever way he fell would be the wrong way, that if he went to Vivienne he was blundering into her trap, that if he stayed away he was trashing his own attempt at wringing some enjoyment from this world. Whether Vivienne were harmless or not, whether she were deceiving him or not, depended on whether he knocked on her door.

He knocked on her door.

No need to wonder whether Vivienne were present, since her attendant Jreige remained standing outside, stalwart and without giving Jay a glance.

Jay waited.

Maybe he should knock again—then he heard the clack. Clack. Clack. And the door opened.

"Remarkable," Vivienne said. "The great hero Jay Waringcrane of the Cleveland Browns shitty football team. To what do I owe the honor?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jay said.

"Ah! Well! If you insist, I suppose I must allow you inside. I cannot possibly reject a hero's direct request, can I?"

Gripping the door for support, she made as deep an ironic bow as she could, which was not very deep, although she made up for it with a grandiose flourish of her hand.

"Milady," said Jreige, the moment Jay took his first step.

"Jreige—I told you—"

"Yes, milady, I am aware. I shall not attempt to prevent you from doing what you wish to do. I only remind you that there are certain matters I am obligated to report to your brother—"

"Yes, yes! But fear not, my tireless nanny. I said before I intend nothing uncouth and I seek to keep that promise. Isn't that right, hero?" Her eye shot up at him.

"I get the feeling I'm more likely to keep that promise than you," Jay said.

"See? There. The hero's a true hero, pure of heart and all that. So fuck off Jreige."

Jreige said nothing else and Jay entered Viviendre's bedchamber, which was furnished similarly to his own, but drowned in her trademark scent. Like always, it took a few moments to get used to the overpowering sweetness. He found himself wafting his hand over his nose.

"I mean it of course," Viviendre said. "Try anything unwarranted and I scream."

She kept saying that, but Jay wondered what polite society would say about her inviting a man to her private quarters late at night anyway. Then again, she probably didn't give a shit about polite society—and neither did Jay.

"So that guy outside is your brother's lackey," he said.

"Of course. Do you think I get my *own* lackeys?" She hobbled across the room to a small table, where she stopped to catch her breath. The two windows on the wall at her back, facing away from the moon, were sets of black squares curtained by lush red drapery that showed brightly even in the dusky, low light of the room, given off by only a couple of candles. "If I want something done I either have to ask DeWint or I must pay someone to do it."

Jay wasn't exactly sure where the best place to stand was, or if she wanted him to sit somewhere, or what. "Your brother's not going to get jealous of me, is he."

"If only that were a joke," Viviendre muttered darkly. "That's not the main reason he keeps an eye on me, though. He's new to the throne and his favor at court is little better than Queen Mallory's. Were he smart he'd marry me off to one of his political adversaries as soon as possible but unfortunately he's an absolute raving lunatic. He thinks any husband I have would automatically become a challenger to his title. He sees usurpers everywhere. It was essential I escape that court, or I'd end up dead or worse before long."

She finally reached her bed and sat down on the edge of it. The bed was so high, and she was so short, that her legs didn't reach the floor, kicking idly as she played with the head of her cane. Jay, still receiving no indication how close she wanted him, stood awkwardly in the orbit of the door.

"You're great at giving me reasons to stop seeing you."

"And you're great at still coming to see me despite them."

A pause. Jay wasn't sure if it were awkward or not.

"Hey," he said. "I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't—"

"I'm well aware, it's fine. If I faulted everyone who recoiled in disgust I'd be a rather lonely person indeed, fehfehfeh."

"Oh shut the fuck up."

"You're right, I apologize, I shouldn't have said something so self-deprecatory. I try not to. Truly."

Another pause. Once more Jay wondered: Why did he like her. Then he decided—fuck it. He moved forward, clearing the distance in a few terse steps, and sat on the bed next her. Her body tensed immediately, even without him touching her, and after a few seconds he realized he was tensed too, and made an effort to untense that didn't really work. Eventually, her feet started to slowly kick in an alternating pattern, the dull thud of a heel striking the bed followed by the hollow plunk of the peg.

"The more we talk about me the worse it looks, so how about you tell me about your terrible, off-putting self, hm?" she said. "I'm not the only person who left home, after all. At least my sibling hasn't chased me here trying to drag me back—yet. So speak!"

"There's little to say."

"Then why'd you come here, huh? Great hero?"

"To create paradise."

"Bullshit!"

"Yeah," he said, "maybe."

A sudden burst of laughter erupted out of her throat, real laughter, but she caught herself, coughed a choking reduction, and finished with the fehfehfeh of before. "Is that really all you've got to say!"

"I want to do something great," Jay said. "Something that matters. Something that changes the world." There. That felt more—authentic. He could say that was the truth and believe it.

Viviendre nodded. In the dark most of her face was shadow, either swallowed by her eyepatch or hidden under her long bangs. It reminded Jay of Sansaime. He remembered how Sansaime sobbed after Makepeace fucked her in the inn. Even though she was such a stoic personality normally. Would Viviendre sob? Would he have to comfort her?

"When change happens," Viviendre said, "it's violent. People die in droves. If change happened, a person like me would not survive it—fehfehfeh."

Jay remembered she mentioned something similar when talking about Shannon's speech. Of course, she was right. She couldn't walk faster than a meander. She started choking if she laughed too hard. On Earth, someone could live a long time even with a handicap like that, but here? Being royalty was probably the only reason she was alive. In the event of a war, an upheaval, a revolution, even a reorganization of the social order, what would happen to someone like her?

No wonder Jay kept phrasing it the way he did: *I want to create paradise*. Paradise implied a world where everyone was happy. Where suffering didn't exist. He remembered Flanz-le-Flore's shattered fingers, her melted face. He remembered Pluxie sinking into the swamp. Makepeace's mangled corpse, the bodies of the nuns lined out in the monastery courtyard. Even Olliebollen armless. And with all that he still hadn't changed a thing.

"I guess you'll just have to die," Jay said. At the same time, his hand slid to the side and touched hers.

Her hand touched back. Her fingers curled around his, and he blotted the feeling of Flanz-le-Flore's fingers from his mind, tried to overwrite that memory with this new one.

"Maybe if I had a hero to protect me..." Her other hand whipped out and snatched his hat off his head before he had a chance to react. Grinning, she placed the hat on her own head. It fit her horribly and leaned to the side and Jay felt bad for her because he knew the inside of that hat must be completely covered in dandruff, but that was a fact he didn't need to make known. Instead he grabbed her shoulder and pulled her toward him and leaned in and—kind of hovered close to her for a few seconds not knowing what to do and—she kissed him.

A quick, closed-mouth kiss. His first. He got the impression it was her first too, because she drew away and stifled a nervous, self-conscious giggle. He kissed her again, on the cheek. She tasted the way she smelled. His hand slid from her shoulder to her arm, she didn't pull away this time, she turned and kissed him on the lips again. He understood her or thought he did, all those comic or not-so-comic self-deprecatory comments, she was ashamed of herself, she wanted to be reassured, and so his hand shifted to her chest, although she wore so many layers and so much jewelry he wound up incapable of even somewhat feeling whatever was underneath.

"We can't—I meant it when I said nothing uncouth," she whispered. "No farther than this. Alright?"

That was more than alright. He wasn't especially interested in that anyway. But being here, being with her, someone he could talk to like this...

They kissed again. Her eye closed. His remained open. Which was how he saw the curtain on the side of the window shuffle and shift and the man emerge from behind it holding a sword.

Jay was sluggish registering the full implications behind this drastic, radical change in his environment, but when it clicked he acted instantly. A single rough hurl flung Vivienne out of the way as Jay hefted himself backward from the swing that glanced against the edge of the bed. He reached for his baseball bat—but he didn't have it, it wasn't here, he'd stopped carrying it around once he reached the castle, what made him make that mistake?

He only had his hands and the other guy, a bent and sallow-eyed guy whose face covering did little to conceal a black beard bursting through the fabric, had a sword. Not even a dagger, but a full-length blade. Jay's eyes flittered to swallow up the surroundings, he seized off a tiny table the only suitable weapon in reach: a candlestick, one of the two flickering throughout the room. It had weight, a little length, but it only made the assassin chuckle lowly and Jay figured that was an appropriate response. It at least kept him from instantly rushing Jay with the sword, buying Jay a single second to think, to think, to think—but all he thought was that he didn't have Olliebollen either, he had nothing. A stab wound to the gut, however painful, was not instantly fatal. With Olliebollen he could've risked it, closing the distance enough to cave in the man's temple with the candlestick. Lacking fairy magic, his life would be in the hands of Whitecrosse's best surgeon, who was probably DeWint, so Jay would definitely die.

And that was all the time he got—one second. The time it took Vivienne to come to rest after crashing into the tiny table. The assassin lunged with the blade and Jay's sole instinct was to jump back.

The image in Jay's mind of an assassin was Sansaime. This man was not her. Instead of swift and graceful strokes every swing of his blade whooshed from one edge of his range to the other. Not that Jay knew anything about swordplay, but compared to Sansaime—who had claimed she wasn't an assassin anyway, only a hunter—he looked like an amateur. Jay's back hit the door, he had nowhere else to retreat, a slight force bounced him back, and as the assassin slowly recovered from his swing Jay knew he wouldn't get another chance. He didn't have time for a temple-caving windup. Instead he jabbed the candlestick forward like a rapier and forced the small flame into the man's face.

The assassin stumbled back hissing and Jay would've liked to string that into another attack but the man started whipping his sword back and forth blindly as he bounced off the edge of the bed. Diving into that would be suicide. At the same time, the door behind him opened and he whirled around in a panic.

Jreige stood in the doorway. Of course: he heard the commotion, came to check on his lady. By the time Jay became cognizant of this fact, though, he'd already shoved the candle into Jreige's face. Luckily, all the previously flailing caused the flame to go out, so Jreige only needed to step back to avoid the sizzling wick.

"Pah!" Jreige wrenched the candlestick from Jay's hand and tossed it to the floor. "I knew you were a lout. What have you done to Princess Vivienne!"

He saw the assassin thrashing in the background over Jay's shoulder. One hand shot to the blade on his hip while the other shoved Jay aside. Further down the corridor footsteps suddenly clattered into a run; as Jreige's blade emerged halfway from its sheath he paused, glanced to where the footsteps were coming from, and said: "Merde—!"

Instantly a curved sword impaled Jreige through the chest. A crooked and wart-faced man rammed into him moments later, then hurled him to the side before brandishing his bloodied blade at Jay. A second assassin. Despite everything, Jay's eyes remained riveted to Jreige's limp body, a sinking sense of hopelessness accompanying the image. If he had Olliebollen. If he had his bat. The second assassin stepped through the door casually, while Jay backed up until his leg struck the bed, constantly shifting his glance back at the first assassin recovering from the burn Jay gave him. Pathetic. These guys seemed no better at fighting than Charm and Charisma, and yet Jay felt optionless. He let his guard down. He became vulnerable. Instantly that weakness was punished, now here he was.

The assassin in the doorway pointed his blade at Jay. Not at Jay. Past him, at the other assassin. "Alright you. Quitcher sniveling. Let's get out afore—"

Vivienne, tangled on the ground amid toppled furniture, pointed her staff at the assassin in the doorway and said, "Divide."

The hunchbacked man went deathly still. His eyes went vacant. A red line ran down his middle, head to crotch. Then he split in half.

The two halves fell apart slowly, stringing between them lines of drooping entrail and dumping onto the floor a splurge of blood and innards. Jay flopped onto his ass on the bed and lifted his shoes to keep the viscera from splattering them. The limp, empty sides flopped afterward. Sound strangely muted. A deflated, bladder-like organ, precariously atop the pile of guts, slid off the apex and came to rest at the base.

"Oh! Ohhhhh God! Oh, oh!"

It was the other assassin, the one Jay burned. His hideous, peeling screeches were powerful enough to wrench Jay's eyes away from the mound of gore. Viviendre was slowly swinging her staff toward him, and he was already clawing at the window. One heave and it burst open—and instantly a large, black, eight-legged shape swung inside and latched onto him.

"What the fuck?!" Viviendre said, while Lalum's face reared up above the thrashing assassin's shoulder, the stitching around her mouth coming undone to reveal a gaping maw of jagged fangs that drove down into his skin.

Jay snapped out of his stupor when he saw Viviendre adjusting her staff's aim at Lalum. He stumbled over to her, saying: "Wait, stop—she's with me. The spider's with me. Don't hurt her."

Lalum disentangled from the assassin and scurried into the shadows of the corner, her mouth already knitting back together by the time the man struck the floor. Tremors wracked him, his eyes bulged, blood spurted from the gaping twin holes on his neck, he rolled over and expelled an orange glut of vomit. Jay's hand gripped Viviendre's shoulder while for ten, fifteen, twenty more seconds he continued to convulse, a minute, maybe more, time ticked away mutely, and finally in a pool of blood the man went still.

"You—I—" Viviendre spoke first, haltingly. "Shit. Shit, fuck, shit."

Webbing spanned Lalum's fingers: SORRY FOR DYSTERBING YOU.

"What the *fuck* just happened? Who the *fuck* is she Jay?"

"Lalum," Jay said, only able to speak in response to a simple and direct question, but that one word broke the spell. "She's—she's one of Astrophicus' nuns, but she helps me now. I can trust her." He glanced to the open door. Some sort of noise was brewing outside. "Lalum, get out of here before someone comes."

"Tell her to take that body with her," Viviendre said, "unless you want everyone wondering where the giant spider went that bit him."

"Good idea. Lalum."

Lalum did not need to be told. Keeping to the shadow, her legs scuttled. Web wound around the corpse. Without another word she disappeared out the window, carrying her victim behind her.

Of course that still left the much more brutally dispatched of the assassins. "What the fuck is that relic of yours," Jay asked.

The residual shock on Vivienne's face dribbled away. In the minimal remaining light cast by the room's final candle, she even managed half a smirk, coupled by tapping the clear bulb atop the staff to her eyepatch. "Oh, you like? It's the Staff of Solomon, of course."

Jay didn't know what to say. The noise outside was growing louder. Soon there'd be an entire horde of people cramming in, a host of questions he didn't feel like answering from a host of people he didn't want to see, but as the blood pumping in his veins slowly calmed, that rigmarole felt irrelevant, outside the scope of his attention.

The first people who rushed past the door didn't stop, however, even though Jreige's corpse was in their way in the corridor. They were shouting. Indistinct at first, gradually more clear, until words came together:

"Assassins in the queen's bedchamber! Assassins! The heroine's there too!"

Vivienne's hand touched Jay's. It poked, prodded, while Jay focused on what the people outside were screaming. Only once the first person stopped in the doorway of Vivienne's chamber and saw the gruesome mess inside did Jay even become aware of her affections; he drew his hand away sharply. When he looked at her face, everything inside him went cold.

—

In retrospect, when the dragon breathed its fire, Shannon remained remarkably composed. She recalled clutching the seat of the jeep staring dumbfounded as Wendell sidewinded deeper into the dark and the rain with his rifle, but when it came time to act, she managed to do so with clarity of thought. She cauterized Ollie's wound, after all, which certainly saved its life. What allowed her that detached sense of calm was the unreality of the situation. She refused to believe in the dragon. The dividing line between fantasy and the real world kept her reasonable.

Maybe it was that the man invading the bedroom with a sword dovetailed into a more real-world sense of peril. Or maybe after a few days in Whitecrosse Shannon had let that stark dividing line blur. Whatever the reason, she floundered now, panic, brutal and gripping, a panic winding its wires tight around her heart so she thought it might burst if the man didn't hack her to pieces first. Brute, animalistic terror, and her only capability was to scream for the woman gripping her in her arms.

That was enough.

As the blade came down the blanket whipped off her and the blade caught jaggedly into the hand-woven fabric, semi-serrated elements of edges glinting through but none close enough to touch her skin before Mallory heaved the rest of the blanket over the assassin's head,

hurled him back with a toss, and sprung like a wild animal to pummel him with bare hands and feet.

Shannon, alone on the bed, scrambled until she upended over the other side and fell on her back. Through the space under the bed she watched the thrashing, flailing, blanket-entangled form of the assassin writhe under the palpable slams of the queen's boniest parts: knees, elbows, anything at her disposal. She was, of course, completely nude—like Shannon.

"After me?! *You came after me?! Oh, thank you*"—THUNK—"thank you"—CLUGGHH—"thank you!"—CHGGGGUCK—"for this opportunity!"

Shannon oozed back up the side of the bed. Sweat tingled cold all down her back. A ripping sound and the sword finally cut through the blanket, but Mallory rolled aside and focused her strikes on the lump that was the assassin's head as the blade waved aimlessly. The moonlight made the queen's skin shine pale and perfect and even as her head tilted back with a maniacal cackling smile and her blue eyes became something twisted and unearthly Shannon could not help thinking—her first coherent thought in a while—how gorgeous the queen was, in every way, from head to toe. Then she saw the second assassin climbing through the same window as the first and yelled:

"Watch out!"

The word managed to rasp out her throat despite sudden unfathomable dryness that turned her tongue to cotton. But it might as well have been silent because Mallory did not register it whatsoever. Lost in her reverie, she let the second assassin come down swinging in midair. Only at the last possible moment did she notice and sway to the side to let the blade pass into the lumpy blanket man under her. She then drove her open palm into the second assassin's nose.

Pain or lack of balance allowed the first to heave her off him. Her body danced back on its heels, a laugh rattled, she steadied herself and balled her hands into fists and even let both assassins regain their composure. The first tossed off the blanket, bleeding from his shoulder, and the second snorted blood from both nostrils.

"Slhowh herh ddownh," the second said nasally. "I ghot the sisterh."

The first shot him a look like he didn't care for that arrangement but then hurled his full attention onto the queen while the nosebleed guy bounded across the bed right at Shannon. Despite the fact that Shannon heard and even through his handicap comprehended every word he said, only once he started bouncing over the mattress did it cohere into a meaningful whole.

Why were they targeting *her*? She understood why the queen might be attacked, but why her, Shannon Waringcrane? What did she do?

And why did they call her "the sister"?!

That was all. She tried to run but she wasn't even standing. She tried to crawl and got tangled over herself and her chin hit the ground hard and she bit her lip hard enough for salt-iron

blood to tinge her tongue. The assassin loomed over her, eyeing her directly, eyes laced with murderous intent, an intent to kill and specifically kill her and she could not come to terms with that intent.

Mallory appeared out of the periphery of her vision like a blur and the assassin's head sailed off his body. Blood, and then the head, and then the body toppled onto Shannon and she screamed—in disgust more than anything—as Mallory tossed the saber that the first assassin had been using casually over her shoulder. It pierced straight through the bed but she didn't give it another glance as she walked over and off the mattress, toward the first assassin, who writhed against a wall clutching a bent and broken arm.

"Your friend wished to die quickly," Mallory said. Shannon thought: *She protects what's hers.* "So you'll have to suffer for the both of you. Sorry!"

The man let out a gruesome roar and threw everything into a berserker charge. He swung his body as though his intent were to tackle Mallory out the window, which given their size and weight discrepancy may in fact have been his best possible option. It wasn't good enough. Without Shannon even really seeing how Mallory did it, she had him on the ground, and got on top of him, her fists raining down and down and down again.

By the time the door opened and one of Mallory's knights emerged in full armor to ask what happened, the man on the ground was a mess of blood and bone. Two and then four maidservants squeezed past the knight and hurried to the queen, who snapped her fingers at Shannon to redirect their attention, and then Shannon was buffeted by a flurry of hands that seized and lifted her arms and legs and search of wounds.

Exhaling, Mallory rose. Her body swayed in the moonlight, shining red with blood. Her head tilted back and her arms fanned out and she absorbed a deep, deep breath. Then she turned her gleaming blue eyes toward Shannon and the rest of them.

"Call every noble to the throne room. Fetch me my sword. We shall determine who made this attempt on my life before sunrise."

In the School, the Three Guys Met

Mallory slammed the sword down on the upraised shield of the sputtering flinching kid underneath, some greenhorn, hardly able to lift his arm against the onslaught. If she wanted the kid dead he surely would have been, but Mallory was content to strike the shield again and again, wielding her sword like a club, until she stepped back to heave breath and the kid scrambled to the defensive line established by his comrades-in-arms.

Ten of them, identically liveried behind identical shields between which extended identical polearms, formed a moving arc that clattered with heavily armored steps slowly along the wall of the dining chamber. Ensnconced behind them stood Duke Meretryce.

"Mallory—listen to reason, Mallory. Your accusations are, I assure you, patently absurd. Mallory? Your Majesty? Are you listening to me?"

Mallory loosed a feral roar to shake the chandelier and brought her sword down double-handed on a chair that promptly shattered to pieces.

"Mallory—Mallory, please! It is utterly preposterous that you would accuse me of this barbaric act. Have I not proven myself through decades of loyal service to you, my queen? Have I not—"

"EEEEEEAAAAGGGHHH!" Mallory swiped the sword over the tabletop, sending plates and glassware hurtling.

"Had the queen not rashly pummeled to death the assassin, perhaps the question of guilt would be proven after interrogation," said Duke Mordac. He stood at the far end of the room, surrounded by his own loyal retinue.

Shannon leaned against the wall, arms folded. Clearly this was going nowhere. It seemed Mallory just wanted to lash out and break things, although Mordac and Meretryce wore nervous enough faces. Maybe that simply meant they were culpable, but from Shannon's point of view, they would have shown *less* fear were they truly guilty. Meretryce in particular always prepared a grandiloquent speech to wrest control of any situation, but this time it seemed he was truly caught unawares.

Nonetheless, Shannon was not one to rely on dubious, malleable concepts like "facial reactions" or "body language" to assess truth. Anyone attempting to appear innocent would do their best to feign surprise when their crime was exposed. Their preexisting animosity toward the queen meant they couldn't be discounted as suspects.

Ideally, though, the dukes weren't the culprits. Shannon's hands were still shaking and she kept them in her pockets to hide the fact. If the assassin were some unexpected third party, and Shannon guided the investigation to reveal the true culprit, she would not only protect herself from subsequent attacks but indebt both of the court's major political factions to her. While Shannon possessed only a partial outlook on Whitecrosse politics, did not even know

the wide variety of interested parties who might want the queen dead, she did have one significant clue:

The assassins *didn't* want the queen dead. They wanted Shannon Waringcrane dead.

Slow her down, the bloody-nose assassin had said. *I'll get the sister*. (Paraphrased.) The target had not been the queen, but the heroine.

And they referred to her as "the sister." The sister. The sister! Why did they—

"What in the name of all that is holy in this land is happening?" hissed an asthmatic voice over Mallory's ruckus. Heads, Shannon's included, turned cautiously. In the doorway near Meretryce's contingent crept a rickety, rattling form: the brown-skinned eyepatch-wearing girl. Jay stood behind her. An atypical shaken look in those raccoon-circled eyes.

Blood on his pants.

"Was it yooooou?!" Mallory's sword lifted, pointed melodramatically. "Was it you, Vivienne de Califerne? Making for your vassal nation an opportunity to free itself from the rightful shackles of its suzerain?"

"Please Your Majesty, as if I've a single care in the world for that godforsaken place." Vivienne expressed not the slightest discomposure in face of the queen. "Anyhow, we heard the commotion. You were attacked in your bedchamber, no? The same happened to us. Two assassins. They came for the hero and me—killed my attendant, even. We managed to slay one, but the other fled."

This announcement caused a flurry of voices from the dukes, the dukes' men, the servants flitting around the queen to clean her messes without coming into the arc of her wild swings, and even the queen herself, whose sword arm lowered as her head tilted. To Shannon, however, it came as only a partial surprise. If Shannon was a target, it stood reason Jay was too. Actually, this revelation helped her. It narrowed the attack's potential motive—it wasn't tied to things only Shannon had done, such as her public works project or her trust with the queen.

"Someone dislikes the idea of the hero and heroine being here," Shannon said.

"It's true?" Mallory looked from Vivienne to Jay. "Tell me now you sod, is what the Saracen said true? You were attacked? Two assassins?"

Jay nodded limply.

"See the aftermath yourself if you'd like," said Vivienne. "It's in my chamber."

"Those who have recently finished a full and filling meal ought not attend!" Between Jay and Vivienne burst the fucking Fool, the codpiece and coxcomb-wearing moron who bounced and bounded with a series of flips into the center of the room, all his bells a-jangle. He seized a leg of leftover fowl, bit into it heartily, and while chewing sang: "Oh-h-h-h-h, God made-a

man in his image, so lovely a sight to view! But unseam and see his stuffing, and even the strongest shall—shall—"

His eyes suddenly bulged, he reached to his throat, choked and sputtered, dropped onto the table writhing, and lastly pounded his fist into his gut and spat a glutinous fountain of brown paste into a nearby goblet.

"Shall spew!" He said, tumbling to his feet. In a stage whisper: "Fortunate that trick went off, half the time it comes out the other end, ee-hee-hee!"

Mallory burst out laughing, Viviendre twittered unvoiced glee, Meretryce rolled his eyes, and Mordac bellowed that they ought to have made a eunuch of that bawdy imbecile years ago. Shannon detached herself from the cacophony and tried to think. Who wanted the hero and heroine dead, regardless of whether they had done anything (Shannon) or not (Jay)? The only one who ever expressed obvious dislike of them was Mallory, when she battered them silly. Mallory wasn't the perpetrator, though. Then who? The dukes still stood to profit greatly from the newcomers. Or at least her.

Logistically, any moderately wealthy or influential person in town might be the culprit. But there was another limiting angle. Since Viviendre claimed the attack on Jay happened in her bedchamber—and what the fuck was Jay doing in her bedchamber anyway? Oh God, she didn't want to know—that meant neither sibling was where they usually would be at the time of the attack. Whoever organized the coordinated assassination must necessarily be someone capable of tracking their movements. Or maybe that mattered less than it seemed. Whitecrosse Castle was no bastion of security. Servants and courtiers witnessed the comings and goings of any personage of importance. Then why have the attack happen when both of them were with someone else? Even if Viviendre, who looked crippled, was useless, it left witnesses. In the case of Mallory, it significantly reduced the odds of success. Why not wait until Shannon was alone, with nobody to protect her?

Something didn't add up. Or did it? After all, the assassins attacked when Shannon and Mallory were supposed to be asleep. Shannon only saw them coming because the queen snored so damn loudly. Maybe Mallory *had* been a target, and only after she woke up did the assassins prioritize the weaker Shannon instead?

She realized her head was cycling, cycling, cycling. Her hands continued to tremble in her pockets, her eyes glanced from face to face, sizing each as a suspect. Even Jay—could Jay have—? As revenge. For when she attempted to strangle him in the cave. Of course. Of course! Why didn't she think of it? He could've faked the attack on himself, gotten his new friend to vouch for him. Of course, of course, of course!

"Let's see Viviendre's chamber," Shannon said.

After some demurring, those present agreed.

Soon they were en route along the winding passages of the castle. Mallory strode with long aggressive steps, Meretryce and Mordac and all their twenty-odd troops in formation maintained a pace about twenty steps behind, and Viviendre was forced to hobble desperately to avoid the dukes' field of jutting polearms at her back. Being an oblivious asshole Jay didn't

bother to help her, so Shannon stepped in, seized Vivienne's arm, and assisted her as best she could, an act that received significantly less gratitude than Shannon believed she merited—received, in fact, no more than an icy, one-eyed glare.

As soon as Vivienne's bedchamber entered their field of view, clearly demarcated by the servants bustling around it, Vivienne tore herself from Shannon's grasp and fanned her arm as though giving a guided tour. "Up ahead. On the left. That's where they left Jreige, my attendant. Pierced through the chest, dead instantly I believe."

The servants, on seeing the queen, went silent at once and cleaved to the walls to allow her passage, and the anxiety in their eyes did not alleviate when she instead stopped before them. "I see no body," Mallory said.

"Your—Your Majesty." A servant bowed his head. "We removed the slain Saracen and began the process of washing the corridor of blood."

"What? No. No, no, no!" Shannon swept past and inspected a spot conspicuously void of bodies, living or dead. "You cleaned it? You cleaned the crime scene?"

"Crime scene, Lady Heroine?"

Irredeemable. But Shannon should've known. Why would these primordial yokels have any concept of forensic science or even basic investigative process? These types probably saw a man knifed in the gutter and pinned the blame on whichever village idiot was most easily scapegoated. She pinched the bridge of her nose and expelled a hiss of steam. The back of her eyeballs chafed against her brain, blood vessels boiled and bubbled, but she must control herself, controlling herself was good and possible and she must do it. At least she overcame one barrier to mental clarity during her time with the queen.

"If it's any consolation, Lady Heroine, we've not yet touched the room itself. We—well, perhaps a lady like yourself ought to avert her eyes from such a sight anyway—"

Nonsense. She whipped past and pulled the door open and—and understood exactly what they meant. A hand went to her mouth and she recoiled from the sight.

"What is it? What do you see?" Meretryce shouted from down the hall, straining to look over the heads of his men.

Mallory laughed. "Spectacular! Oh, this is a lovely image. And here I thought you were so feeble, Vivienne, such a sight would cause you to faint dead. You too, Shannon, not even a scream from you? What fortitude!"

Her fury, rendered lukewarm ever since the Fool's jape, dissolved into jovial good cheer, which she expressed first by jostling the very short Vivienne's head and then wrapping an arm around Shannon's shoulder to grip her more salaciously than it looked. "And?" the queen said. "What insights can you glean from this... what did you call it? Crime scene, yes. What insights, O Shannon?"

The mocking tone revealed in Shannon's obvious nausea but Shannon took it as a challenge and straightened herself. Insights. Right. Let us glean some insights.

What remained of the assassin's body was dressed the same as the assassins in the queen's bedchamber. Not to say they wore a uniform, just similar styles of rags: lower class, dirty. Shannon had already searched the other two corpses—or rather, she got Mallory's maidservants to do it—and found nothing of interest on their persons, so she suspected nothing would be found on this one, either. They were either common scallywags or else attempting to appear that way, but the coordinated timing of the attacks suggested a competent mastermind. Maybe the assassins were merely pawns, then, intended to be disposable...

"How did he wind up this way?" Shannon asked. "No sword could—"

"Mine could," said Mallory.

Maybe it could. "But my brother—or this girl—"

"Magic did it." Viviendre tapped the bulb of her staff to her temple, producing an audible bonk noise.

"Aye, aye, that's unimportant anyway," Mallory said with impatience.

Shannon reached out a foot to step over the mess and into the room, decided a step was too risky, and performed a full hop to land safely past the splatter zone. The rest of the room, poorly lit, possessed a few trademark signs of a struggle: mused bedsheets, toppled furniture. She noticed idly that the bed, while messy, was not messy in a way that suggested someone had used it recently, so maybe her freak asexual brother was still an asexual freak.

"And you said the other assassin escaped? How?"

"Through the window." Viviendre treated the fact as an irrelevant afterthought. Shannon inspected the window, which was shut. As though anticipating her next comment, Viviendre said: "Of course I closed it after to prevent a draft."

Of course. Shannon supposed it was a reasonable story, given the other assassins came in through the window too. How difficult was it to scale the castle walls?

She turned and something caught her eye. "What's this?"

"Hm?" Viviendre remained in the doorway, although Mallory had followed Shannon inside.

"There's blood on the other side of the bed. And—vomit?"

"Oh, yes. That." Viviendre tapped her cane. "Well, we managed a few significant thwacks on the man before we sent him running."

"And the vomit?"

A shrug. "An ordinary reaction to what I did to his companion."

Mallory nodded, her eyes fixated on the gore. "Excellent. Most excellent. We shall hunt the final assassin immediately. If he's bleeding he'll be easy to find. Yes. Yes!"

She exited the room, not minding that she stepped through the entrails of the corpse, with a finality in her bearing that suggested the matter were settled. Shannon didn't think so. Something didn't add up. Bleeding, vomiting, yet the man still managed to clamber down the sheer walls of the castle? She opened the window and poked her face into the chill. The other assassins left a rope behind. Here there was none.

What did it mean, though? How did it get her any closer to determining the culprit? And what would she do if no culprit was found, if Mallory tracked down the fourth assassin and crushed his skull before they could wring a confession out of him, if he existed to give a confession at all? When she put the candle back where she found it she realized her hands were still shaking. When she looked at the room and saw only Viviendre's smiling face in the door and no trace of Mallory she hurried back to the hall, leaping past the organs, to return to the queen's side. In the corridor servants stared, guards stared, the dukes stared, Viviendre stared. Boorish. Uncivilized and boorish, that a world like this could exist, a world where anyone could slit her throat from behind and get away with it so easily.

For the first time, she felt truly trapped here. Trapped, unable to escape. How far could self-mastery take her? How far until she cracked? No—no thoughts like that. She must go farther, so farther she must go. Alternatives were non-negotiable.

Looking at the faces, though, she realized something.

"Where's Jay?"

—

At a weird, limping half-trot caused by indecision about whether to run or maintain an element of inconspicuousness, Jay reached his bedchamber, grabbed his bat and Makepeace's shield, and made an immediate beeline for the academy. Nobody was nearby anyway so he started to run despite the thunderous clap his shoes made against the polished floors, and the awkwardness of carrying the shield made him slow again, so it was all the same: start stop, start stop, start stop.

He possessed only a vague memory of the cavern DeWint used to ferry him to the academy and didn't want to get lost so he went the route he'd learned on his aimless wanderings around the castle grounds, exiting out a small side gate and crossing a neatly-manicured courtyard to the next big building over. The apex of the hill around which all Whitecrosse was built curved slightly and the world curved as well, a palpably bent horizon over the forests and mountains up which crept a halo of light. Dawn already. He'd spent the whole night awake but felt no fatigue, in fact his eyes were like bolts of lightning in their sockets.

Into the academy he navigated, past the few students awake so early, until he reached the door to DeWint's office and pounded it the same moment he flung it open. DeWint shot up from his desk, over which he'd been sleeping, a stunned sputter out his lips and a smear of ink on his forehead, with the pages of the book he'd passed out reading fluttering with a dry crackle.

"Wha—hah—Hero?"

"Olliebollen. Now. Give her to me now."

DeWint blinked again, his eyes bulged comically as he processed his desk and Jay and the general fact of his existence, hands mechanical as they smoothed out the gray tufts of hair that fanned mad scientist-like from his temples. "Olliebollen. Oh yes, oh right. Olliebollen Pandelirium, certainly boy, certainly." He stood, he patted his chest and shoulders. "Queer coincidence actually, you know normally I am not half so scatterbrained as to fall asleep during my studies, but I'd made an arrangement with your sister to give *her* the faerie. She never arrived. How odd that it's you who comes knocking..."

The words tumbled out. Finally his knobby fingers found the pocket and between two pinched nails he extracted her, Olliebollen, sleeping herself or maybe in a comatose sort of sulk. "Now! I do hope, young man, you'll remember the reliability by which I kept your little secret safe and sound. No other in Whitecrosse would have done the same, mind you—"

Jay snatched the fairy and deposited her into his own pocket; she started thrashing and sputtering. DeWint tried to say something else, but Jay didn't listen, he was already out the door and down the corridor.

"Who, what, oh it's you." Olliebollen peered up from the breast pocket with her beady insect eyes. "Well—whatever." She sank back and curled into a ball.

He understood his current frenzy of activity could not be sustained, not without sleep or food, but he decided to worry about that later. There'd be farmhouses outside the city, they'd recognize him as the hero and give him a little bread. It'd work. He tromped up the small half-staircase leading back to the ground floor and brushed past a pair of students. It was still early enough he didn't expect to encounter many people on the way out of the city, and with the queen and everyone distracted by Shannon's Sherlock act (come on Shannon you didn't think you knew the first thing about criminal investigations did you?) he'd probably be past the walls before anyone noticed he was missing. The problem was Makepeace. Or what Makepeace told him at least. When they first met at that abandoned inn he'd said something about his mother's knights coming to fetch him, and he'd mentioned something similar when they were captive in Flanz-le-Flore's court, something about escaping, getting away. He mentioned needing Mayfair to take his place. Jay hoped Shannon was enough to take *his* place. She'd have to be. He was gone, continuing his journey, gone and—

He reached the main hall of the academy and turned for the door and there she stood. Vivienne de Califerne, leaning on her Staff of Solomon. The moment she saw Jay her face perked up bright and warm.

"How," he said, staggered by the waft of her perfume. "How'd you—"

"I read your mind."

He was prepared to take that literally, mainly because the alternative was worse. "I see," he said lamely. Cautiously. He looked her straight in her eye, refusing to glance down to her staff, refusing to let her think anything about what he was thinking.

"What is this Jay? What the fuck?" She spoke with a smile, she spoke with good humor. He realized she was breathing raggedly between words. Even considering the detour to his bedchamber and the long winding route he took to DeWint's office, she would've needed to hurry to reach him. "You cannot honestly tell me you're frightened? Are you not the hero? Did you not fight the dread lizard Devereux at the monastery, and brave the forest of Flanz-le-Flore, and however other many perils? A pair of common thieves has you rattled now?"

Jay considered his words carefully before responding. "My goal is to get into the vault under the castle. I know a way to do it, but I need something first. I have to go west to get it—and then I'll be back."

Every word was true, which meant as a lie it was unparalleled, although he knew that the pause he gave before he said it would've piqued his interest if he'd been Viviendre trying to dissect himself for falsehood. Viviendre demonstrated no change in her demeanor, she only leaned to the side to support herself against the doorway, taking a pause of her own to catch her breath although she must be thinking too.

"You know, I really do have a better read on you than most," she said. "When your sister saw you were missing she went straight to your room. I expected you'd go to DeWint though."

Jay wondered if Makepeace's shield would be able to block whatever the fuck her Staff of Solomon did. If it came to that.

"I knew you'd left something with DeWint. Not exactly *what*, mind you, but it was clear enough. After all, we first met outside his office, didn't we? I hope you don't mind, but I eavesdropped on your conversation before I made my entrance. I am terribly, reprehensibly nosy like that."

No. It couldn't come to a fight. Makepeace's shield blocked a lot but he had no guarantee it'd help against Viviendre. It was the Flanz-le-Flore problem all over again. With the equivalent of a snap of her fingers—lifting the staff and saying a single word—she won. Except this time, winning meant Jay in two halves instead of turned into a cute critter. A fight needed to be avoided at all costs.

He needed her to continue to think he was fleeing because he was scared of the assassins.

"Don't worry about it." Jay believed himself to be speaking calmly. More calmly at least than her, whose sudden flurries of words were interrupted by flimsy coughs and wheezes.

"Your sister thought you got bored and went to sleep. But I'd seen your face, I knew it wasn't that. You intended to run." She braced her staff against the ground and hobbled forward, to him, and he fought the urge to take a step back, because if Viviendre had from a practical standpoint the same power and speed of implementing that power as Flanz-le-Flore, then Jay

could beat her the same way he beat Flanz-le-Flore. Those brittle bones breaking and Vivienne surely much more brittle.

Why was she moving closer anyway? Did she really not know as much as Jay thought she did? Did she actually trust him?

"Really though," she continued, "it was more desperate hope than anything. I knew there was a chance you'd decided on the straightest route out of Whitecrosse, but if that were so, I'd never catch up. I had to pray you'd make a detour to reclaim whatever it was you left with DeWint. So when I saw you here, well—it gladdened me."

Five steps away. Four steps. Was she really going to get in range of him? Was she that stupid?

She stopped. Her eye scrutinized. "Is something wrong, Jay?"

Shit. "No. Nothing." Should he step forward himself? Would she read it as aggressive? He couldn't afford to err. Not once, not for a moment. Or else he might hear that word—Divide—and nothing more.

The same smile remained on Vivienne's face, but with no movement, no adjustment whatsoever, it became wan. Her head shifted to the side and her golden eye glistened.

"You fucking asshole," she said, turning her face the other way, turning it back, scrunching her features, shaking the long black bangs of her hair. "I—no, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I know it's—look. I understand. I'm not ignorant about myself, okay? I'm deformed. I know. I know touching me, kissing me, that sort of thing must have made you sick to your stomach. I understand."

"Huh?"

"I'm such an idiot. I'm sorry. I never should have—I never should have given myself hope. That was a mistake I thought I learned from long ago, yet here I am, making the same exact error the moment someone deigns to spend a few minutes without calling me a degenerate inbred heathen. I should have understood the first time, when we held hands, when you pulled away from me with that look in your eyes—I shouldn't have preyed upon your goodwill. I forced myself onto you, God I really am just a desperate fucking whore aren't I? You don't need to say it. I know you wouldn't anyway, you're not cruel like those dukes, but —"

In the main hall behind Jay a pair of students walked, looking at Vivienne and whispering; Vivienne, a single streak of tears running down her cheek, flung her arm in a rude gesture and screeched: "Fuck off shitbrains! Fuck off, mind your own fucking business you toothy cunts!"

When the pair hurried away, Jay looked back at Vivienne. "You think I'm running away because I'm disgusted by the way you look?"

"You don't need to lie to make me feel better. Just like DeWint. He pretends he wants to fuck me but it's all just to be polite. I know because I—because I—even with *him* I would have—"

Jay stepped forward. Once. Testing. She did not tense up or react defensively, she only waved a flippant hand as if shooing him away. A tepid gesture, not one designed to actually stop him. Another step and she was within reach. He slowly extended his hands, as though he intended to embrace her. Still no reaction, only amid what were becoming open sobs:

"Please, oh please, I can see you hesitate even now, stop it. Do not bother to patronize me Jay. Just like Makepeace. Just like him too! And he fucked *her*? He fucked fucking *Sansaine*?"

Bat tucked under one arm, shield clutched awkwardly in the same, his free hand fell gently on the wrist that carried the staff. A tiny wrist, easy to wrap his fingers around. Like Flanz-le-Flore, bone that would break in an instant against his strength. His fingertips trembled, the memory of that moment etched into them. And Vivienne didn't resist, didn't react like anything was wrong, even stepped forward and pressed her body to his chest as she cried.

She really thought he was leaving because he thought she was ugly. She really thought that. And his plan was to shatter her wrists and run.

Instantly he became aware he could not do it. Not again. Not to Vivienne.

But he couldn't remain here, holding her and her holding him. Vivienne—regardless of what he thought about her, he needed to continue toward his goal. To open the vault, acquire the relics, create a paradise. He needed to go west, find a fairy to feed to Lalum, and use her animus on Queen Mallory. He couldn't lose sight of that and so, with Vivienne secure in his arms where he could stop her if she attempted anything, he said, "That's not why I'm leaving."

"Don't lie. Respect me enough to not fucking lie, Jay. Whatever you find imperative to accomplish in the west, it could wait. A day, two, a week, however long. You didn't get the idea to leave now for no reason."

"Vivienne. I don't mind your appearance. I told you that. It wasn't a lie."

"Then why? Huh? Why? What other reason? You're afraid of a couple sellswords? I can protect you Jay. You saw that. I can protect you even when you cannot protect yourself. Or is that the trouble too? You cannot stand a woman powerful enough to—"

"Vivienne. You hired those assassins."

The sharp stiffness that entered her body told him exactly what he needed to know. He readied himself to pin her arms if they tried to move but when her muscles loosened they flopped weakly.

"That's—that's—" Her watery eye peered up at him. "That's not—How could you think such a thing?"

"The first man was already in your room. You had to have let him in at some point—"

"Any servant with a skeleton key could have done so. Or the key could have been stolen."

"He was alone with you for however long but only attacked when I showed up. So he was waiting for me. How else would he know I'd be there? The only other person who heard you invite me over was Jreige, and he clearly wasn't working with them."

"You have much to learn if you think the walls of Whitecrosse Castle lack ears, Jay. And what about that spider of yours? Lalum? She was watching you closely enough to show up a few seconds after you were in danger. But late enough to only wrap up what we'd already finished—perhaps to silence the man so he might not reveal her as the mastermind—"

"And you hate my sister, too. You think the change she'd bring would kill you. You said that yourself—you said you wouldn't survive it."

"Nonsense. Any number of people would have motive to—"

"You also hated Mayfair. And Mayfair was also trying to change this world, wasn't she? Which is why you sent Sansaime to kill her. Which is why even mentioning the name Sansaime makes you tense up."

"Jay. I can't bear the name of that elf because—because—You *know* why! These conclusions are absurd."

Jay didn't need to convince her. She already convinced him by how coolly and readily she reverted from her previous sobbing state.

"When I let go of your hand and you thought it was because I was disgusted by you, you told me to come back later. That's when you planned it." This was the only part he wasn't sure of. But he thought it must be right. Her emotional outburst only a few moments ago proved that his rejection of her—or her perceiving him rejecting her—meant enough to her. That her passions could sway her.

Her forehead shook back and forth against his chest. A rattling sigh escaped her; it ended as a fehfehfeh. "Jay. You're a fucking idiot. You know that?"

He readied himself. His hand remained around her wrist. If he felt her twitch, even a twitch, he'd do it. The sight of the split assassin was burned into his mind. Even a twitch would be impetus enough to override his reluctance.

She didn't twitch. She whispered: "If you're clever enough to piece all that together, you ought to be clever enough to realize you weren't the target."

"So you were trying to assassinate yourself? Come on. You got mad at me because you thought I hated you or whatever. Then either you had a change of heart or realized the attempt wouldn't work in the middle of it and used your staff—"

"You're so fucking stupid. Think for five seconds imbecile. Who *actually* died? Other than the assassins themselves, of course."

Jay tried to think but the only thing he could think of was the split-open body with its guts heaped on the ground. If he focused he could also bring to mind the other one, thrashing on

the floor and vomiting. And then—

Oh.

"Jreige."

"Yes! Of course. Jreige! I cannot comprehend what thought process led you to—how could you possibly believe I wanted to kill *you*? Jreige was my brother's trained monkey. If my brother was gripped by one of his turns as he often is and decided, oh, perhaps my oh-so-enchanting sister is conspiring in secret to depose me, it'd take but one signal and Jreige would slit my throat as I slept. He'd do it without a moment's hesitation. For a year I was willing to live with that danger, but meeting you—the grand hero!—that changed everything."

Jreige had said he'd report Vivienne's relationship with Jay to the king. And Vivienne portrayed said king as a jealous, suspicious, paranoid, teetering on the brink of sanity. Makepeace mentioned the king of California as having lost his mind... It made sense. It made perfect sense.

"You were unarmed and yet the assassin only swung his sword slowly and wildly so you might easily evade it. Or did you believe yourself to be so nimble? No. A simple scheme: A commotion in the room, Jreige goes to check, and when his back is turned the second man runs him through from behind. Even the utter clods I hired for the task could perform it. With the hero involved, with a foreign princess involved, none in Whitecrosse would ever believe the true target was my insignificant footman. Even my brother might not realize it, once word reached him. Either way, I'd have purchased for myself plenty of time. He'll send another man, but that man won't know my habits like Jreige did, if he tries to kill me I'll outwit him. Do you truly not believe me? I would never hurt you, Jay. Never!"

Replaying the moment in his mind, he even remembered the second assassin—just before Vivienne divided him—saying something to the first, something about leaving, something that suggested their job was already done. At the time he'd put no importance on the words, because immediately afterward the man was grotesquely dispatched, but now it made sense, it made so much sense, and yet it didn't change the icy clutch around his insides, not as he looked down at Vivienne who smiled up at him as if they were now devious confederates, sharers of a wicked secret.

Some part of him liked that smile.

"And my sister. And the queen. What about them?"

"I simply wanted to scare your sister. That's why I waited until she was with the queen—Mallory would defend her, the woman is a terror. Now your sister will think twice about pursuing her grand schemes so quickly, and things shall remain as they are, and the balance shall keep, and I'll be able to continue living as I have for as long as this feeble body of mine will last. Besides, it had the added benefit of putting the queen on the scent of the dukes; she'll not consider me a suspect. Don't you see, Jay? I accounted for every detail. I even knew the queen wouldn't be able to resist herself and would beat those assassins to death—she's

quite predictable in her tendency toward violence. Tension will remain high for a time, then all will calm, all will forget, and we may continue as we were."

Her explanations came out in a rapid, almost babbling cadence, as though she had held them inside until they burst out of her mouth. By the end of the final paragraph she was wheezing again, and Jay had no idea what to do, how much to even believe her. Maybe she intended to only scare Shannon, or maybe she didn't mind what happened to Shannon either way and told Jay what she thought he wanted to hear.

He decided not to ask about Mayfair.

"You're afraid of change," Jay said, "but I want to change this world too. I want to make a paradise."

Her lips curled in soft, kind condescension. She nuzzled her head against his chest and Jay became aware of another student passing through the main hall watching their public display. "Oh, Jay. You don't truly believe that."

She may as well have used her staff. He felt exposed through the middle, and he shivered, which prompted her to wrap closer to him. Over her head, through the open main doorway of the academy, he stared down the slope of the hill past the walls and farmland into the forests beyond, the sky now a perfectly-separated series of horizontal halves: the upper black and starry, the lower a milky cream color.

Jay had the feeling that if he let her have her way they would stand together like this until they both turned to stone.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and gently broke away from her, forcing himself to emphasize the gentleness of the motion so that she didn't falsely imagine disgust. He'd been honest before; he didn't think she looked that bad. In the games he played, female characters would have eyepatches or scars all the time, and Jay got the impression from his brief forays online that these tactical imperfections only amplified their appeal to the internet degenerates. To him it was all simply neutral, the way Vivienne looked meant the same to him as the way Mallory looked, even if from an objective standpoint he understood one was far more beautiful than the other.

"I still have to go west," he said.

"You don't. You really don't."

"I'll be back. Even if I get what I want, I have to come back if I want to open the vault."

"You don't really want to open that vault. You don't even know what's in it, Jay."

"I also need time alone. To think."

"Why? Are you upset I didn't tell you my plans beforehand? I didn't know whether you could lie convincingly under duress. I assumed you'd be a better witness in my favor if you were ignorant."

"No, it's—" He stopped.

That was her reason for not telling him ahead of time? She thought he couldn't lie convincingly about it?

He blinked. Looked at her. A strange shard of clarity cut into him.

The obvious thing for her to say would've been that she expected him to try to stop her, had he known about her plot. Or that he would expose her to his sister or the queen. That would be the *normal* way of thinking.

But she did trust him, didn't she. After all, she revealed everything to him now, even though he still had the power to reveal her. She truly believed he would not betray her. She might think he found her ugly, but not that he would betray her. Even as a lie it didn't cross her mind.

And so her actual lie had been even flimsier. It took only one poke to break apart, how obviously her plan was more apt to succeed if he knew and played along, and how the drawback of him "not being a convincing liar" was completely trivial compared to that advantage.

So what was the truth? His mind sought some kind of rational reason before he realized the reason could not be rational, not rational in a way *he* defined the word at least. After all, it was irrational for her to trust him at all, she'd known him for only a couple of days. Yet here he was too, having been lulled into an almost sleeping state hearing her explanations and reasons, going along with whatever she said, nodding. Rationally, he should've crushed her wrist to prevent her from using the staff—and that was just to start. How could he even entertain the claims of someone who sent assassins after him—in seriousness or part of a plot—and his sister too? He'd *wanted* to go along. He'd wanted to fall into this sleeping state, to nod, to hold her wrist gently instead of shattering it. The same reason he kept coming back to her, and the same reason she kept coming back to him.

A plot like this, so grandiose and over-the-top, needed a more compelling motive behind it than eliminating an inconvenient underling and scaring someone from building a sewer. Ironically, from a rational viewpoint, the real motive would be far less compelling than those semi-comprehensible ones. But a strain of emotion infected Viviendre and it all stemmed from the same source. The same source that caused her to break out sobbing when she first thought he was leaving her.

She wanted Jay to love her. No—she needed it.

Faking an assassination ploy, having him "save" her from an assailant creeping up behind, only for her to then "save" him after he was in a seemingly inescapable situation. Maybe the other reasons had a part in it, but looking at Viviendre, knowing everything he knew about her, this reason must have been the most important all along. She wanted to force them together. Saving each other's lives— isn't that the cheapest, easiest method? It happened with Lalum after all. He saved her and now she fawned over him, followed him, did anything she could for him.

And Shannon was the one person trying to send Jay home. So Viviendre needed to stop her. Whether she truly intended to kill Shannon or just scare her like she claimed, *that* was the true motive, not the stupid sewer.

It all made perfect sense. It all turned to bile in his stomach, phlegm in his throat. Strings surging around him and he almost didn't notice, almost let her spin her little story and believe it, almost *wanted* to believe it.

Flanz-le-Flore—just a little shrewder.

"Hello? Jay? You've gone silent on me once more," Viviendre said.

"I'm leaving."

He let go of her, moved past her. He was two steps out the doors of the academy before she managed to cough a response, before he remembered her staff. But her response was only: "What? What's wrong?"

He kept walking. Fast. Down the courtyard, not looking back. She was a woman of passions. If she thought he wronged her deeply enough, would she use the staff? She wouldn't for less.

"What? What has upset you Jay? Tell me! It's that spider, hm? You love that spider. Of course! If Makepeace would take Sansaime over me, then you'd surely take—"

She couldn't possibly believe what she was saying, she was trying to bait him into responding, and it fucking worked. He wheeled on her, jabbed his finger. "Don't you dare try to manipulate me. Don't you fucking dare. I won't stand for it!"

"Manipulate? Manipulate you—what? What?"

"I won't let anyone control me. I won't let anyone play with my emotions. I make my destiny. I make my decisions. I do!"

He didn't wait to gauge her reaction. He wheeled around and stormed toward the quaint brick wall that marked the end of the courtyard. Until he reached that wall all she needed to do was point her staff, say the word, and end it. If he made her waste time thinking, hesitating, trying to understand, that was time she wasn't deciding to divide him.

She didn't say anything. Was that because she was dumbfounded into silence? Or because she understood exactly what he meant and simply lacked response? One glance back and he'd know, but he didn't look. He didn't want to look. He didn't want to see her. He realized that if he hadn't stormed away when he did, if he'd still been gripping her wrist, he would've destroyed her. Then he passed the wall and left her field of view and continued into the narrow alley leading down and out of Whitecrosse: a westward path.

All Deadly Economy

Mayfair returned from the frenzy of activity that proceeded her Sunday sermon to Pastor Styles' church so late and so wearied she could not will herself awake long enough to more than fiddle with the Whitecrosse papers. She slept, and after rising the activity continued. More and more people wished to speak to her or hear her speak; Styles facilitated their wishes generously. Mayfair little comprehended. She did not think the sermon she gave was any good. She spoke with all due eloquence; utilized the tripartite persuasive modes of logos, ethos, and pathos; and flourished her remarks with rhetorical devices pleasant to the ear. Yet the content of her speech rang to her hollow, and while Styles' people came to her with kind words, she detected within their pleasantries subtle condescension: "So young!" they all said. The words she spoke meant nothing to them, only that she spoke them well—for someone her age. They looked at her like a trained animal who performed a quaint trick. They looked at her like her mother.

Styles told her she did excellently—flawlessly even. She was exactly what he needed, what America needed. (He did not say: You are the perfect dog to peddle the word of God.) Associates of his had seen her sermon, and already he was arranging a televised broadcast for her to speak to the nation at large.

"And when you talk to the nation, you'll perform the miracle. The same you performed for me."

The miracle. Of course. What did her words matter when she had the miracle? He only needed her to speak adequately, as the miracle would speak for her. She knew that well enough; it was why she performed it for him at the funeral anyway.

Perhaps that was the entire point. It was not that she could not speak well enough, but that nobody could. Words no longer mattered to the people of this world; all the words had already been spoken. Books upon books existed, learning upon learning. These men and women of democracy, each of them a partial ruler of America, had heard everything before. Their infants no longer died, their tables no longer went bare, their nation no longer warred. This was paradise. In this land of plenty their unspilled blood accumulated, a thicker and thicker glut, until the mass became such that it encompassed nearly everything and thus, in the words of Ecclesiastes, there was nothing new under the sun.

The meanest of them would be a hero in her world; what could she possibly provide theirs? Yet Jay Waringcrane went to Whitecrosse.

These people, somehow, continued to yearn. Continued to strive for—something. Not words. No, they strove for the one thing their solved world's God-given bounty denied them: a miracle, a wonder, a question outside their comprehension. Perhaps even that same thing Mayfair felt in the cathedral: enveloped in holy fervor.

If she gave them that feeling, no matter how, then perhaps they would no longer look at her as a trained dog.

Monday afternoon she finally returned to her room at Styles' home, bid Dalton stand guard outside, and sank into the plush chair that swiveled to stare down at where her papers lay.

Her worries in this world caused her to neglect her duty to Whitecrosse. What mattered whether she spoke to a crowd, or appeared on the 'television,' or performed miracles to shatter the trim perfection of their lives? She must become serious about her new role as Master of Whitecrosse. Faced by the tides of papers, though, a sense of dread filled her. She still barely knew what she was and was not capable of accomplishing. Her first and immediate goal, to somehow move the entirety of Whitecrosse into Earth, now seemed a remote fantasy. A childish whim, even.

Or were those thoughts merely an excuse to cut ties altogether? She stroked the stitches on her chest from where Sansaime slashed her. At least someone in Whitecrosse did not forget. But her mother, the dukes, even her tutor who praised her acumen so highly; all would barely mention her. Viviendre still stewed—good! Let that malformed cretin seethe in her inadequacy. Mayfair saw her paper, saw it written: Viviendre de Califerne hired Sansaime to assassinate Mayfair of Whitecrosse. How dismal, how pathetic, that her killer was not one of the innumerable personages who might benefit from Mayfair's death, but a simple academic rival.

Hmph. Viviendre was beneath Mayfair's concern; she tamped down initial impulses to render unto her divine retribution in the form of a pox, a malady, or perhaps—striking the girl where it hurt most—a quick return to California, where she would fall prey to her mad brother's most deranged, bestial desires. Mayfair tittered in her seat to think of *that* sort of revenge, detailed delectably for her reading pleasure on the page, then beat the thought back, beat it away, turned from it, plucked it out her mind, and failing to fully extinguish it finally fell to her knees and prayed for Christ's strength to steer her on a righteous path.

Mercy, not spite. Mercy! Viviendre could do nothing against Mayfair now; killing her would not stop Sansaime, and Mayfair was reluctant even to kill Sansaime now that she was spirited safely away to the pastor's home in this sprawling agglomeration of structures they called a city. Sansaime may look and look and never find her, and so what was the point of murder besides sating sinful wrath? Besides, on Sansaime's paper was written—No, no point dwelling on *that*. Mercy! The entire point was mercy. The entire point was to save these unfortunate souls. Lalum and the other nuns, the dukes, the peasants, even Viviendre, even mother. For all the coldness they showed her she would show them warmth; that was the way of Christ, that was the way she must tread.

As she stared at Viviendre's page, pen poised to doom her with a few strokes, she lowered her hand and expelled a contented sigh at her merciful inclinations. But she decided if she intended to keep to those inclinations she ought not stare at the page much longer. She pushed it aside, sorted it atop Sansaime's page (noting as she did that Sansaime remained at Avery Waringcrane's home, doing nothing of interest), and announced to herself mentally that she would get to work.

Her goal: Bring Whitecrosse into this world. Bathe it in salvation. Show them the love they failed to show her.

Time to master herself, her whims, her thirst for aimless knowledge. Time to apply what she knew to a true purpose. First, she calculated the difference in size between Whitecrosse and Earth. Using the devil's notes and Dalton's 'phone,' she procured exact measurements for each, and discovered how immensely larger the real world was compared to the fake. It made sense; the Bible listed hundreds of nations, whereas Whitecrosse possessed only two, bounded by slabs of wilderness where fae and else lurked. Yet those two nations paled even in comparison to the one nation of America. Paled in comparison to the state of Ohio. With some rearrangement, the entirety of Whitecrosse's land area could fit inside the five so-called "Great Lakes" to the north of Cleveland.

Earth dwarfed Whitecrosse. Obviously! Why should a devil create a world as great as God's? More importantly, it answered the question of where to *put* Whitecrosse after she brought it to Earth. But how to move it? For that, she needed the relics inside the castle vault, but that was not the entirety of the tale. None of those relics possessed the power to accomplish such a feat on their own or even in tandem—not as they currently were.

The devil placed impositions preventing the modification of relics. Or more precisely, her pages on each of them made enough limiting qualifications of what they could or could not do so that substantial change was impossible. Furthermore, the exact number of relics (forty) had been defined explicitly in the time of John Coke, as he set out on a quest to collect them all and succeeded in collecting about three-quarters (hence the vault). It was impossible to create a new relic out of nothing. Likewise, engineering some new powerful fae king or queen with some tremendous power proved impossible; the number of courts was set.

Yet looking through the devil's most recent changes Mayfair discovered she brazenly and easily gave a horse the power to heal any person who fell off it. Ostensibly, this alteration was permitted because the concept of a "horse" was ill-defined compared to substantial elements of Whitecrosse's political and magical reality. Nothing ever stated that horses could *not* possess magical powers. *Probatio diabolica*—devil's proof.

Then Mayfair ought to be able to bypass the vault entirely and give a horse the power to transport Whitecrosse through the Door. She found the sheet for Makepeace's horse, the one the devil already modified, and attempted the change. Did it work? Of course not! Mayfair tossed her hands in frustration. Every idea she struck upon turned out untenable for a reason incomprehensible without sorting through thousand of documents until she found some oblique proclamation the devil once made. By the time she figured it out, the sun would be setting, she would need to sleep, then the next day Styles would take her somewhere or take someone to her, and by the time she had a chance to resume her efforts her train of thought would be lost and she would cycle again inert in her abilities.

Ignore it, attempt something new? Nope! Mayfair's empiric mindset prevented any such efficiency. She spent those hours delving into the question of why, lured by the thought that the answer must in fact be quite simple, and most certainly had something to do with the properties of the Door. So she examined the Door's page, or rather pages, because the Door was rendered in significantly more detail than any other single element of Whitecrosse, with so much minutiae dedicated to its exact properties, materials, and measurements that it reminded Mayfair of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus. Was the issue that the object defined as "Whitecrosse (world)" was too large to fit through the starkly-defined portal? But

her statement of "this horse has the power to transport Whitecrosse through the Door" did not contradict that, as such a power could manifest in, say, shrinking Whitecrosse and all its inhabitants to an acceptable size, or teleporting Whitecrosse altogether. She tested several variants of her original statement accounting for that, but none worked. Why? Two hours passed and nothing to show, daylight ticking away on the pastor's fine mechanical clock.

If the issue wasn't the Door, then... She sifted through the stacks of papers and finally found the singular page that defined objects of category "Horse." (This search alone took forty-five minutes; some of these papers were buried even within their subcategories.) And once she found the page the answer presented itself to her instantly. Her hypothesis that the devil's modification to Makepeace's horse was due to the undefined nature of horses turned out demonstrably incorrect.

Horses were, in fact, defined as "non-magical animals." (A distinction that set them apart from unicorns, which were explicitly magical, although frustratingly with their own clear set of parameters and limitations.) However! The devil had, apparently, written into the horse document a loophole that allowed "notable individual horses" (!?) to have "properties exceeding the scope of their species" (!?!?!). Meaning *what* exactly?

Mayfair launched into another hour-long investigation and eventually discovered that Makepeace's horse was not the first horse the devil modified. In fact, the first was nearly four hundred years dead: the personal steed of one John Coke. The devil apparently did not want the rather old man falling off his steed and breaking his neck. It'd been easy for her to introduce the same exploit into Makepeace's horse because she wove the exploit into the world's fabric. (As an aside, Mayfair almost tumbled into a new hole of attempting to discern just how much of John Coke's heroic deeds were spoon-fed him by the devil, but managed to reel herself back in time.)

None of this answered the core question, however! What defined what magic horses were and were not allowed to have? Mayfair's attempted alterations had been done to Makepeace's horse, so the "notable individual horses" ambiguity did not apply. So what was the issue?

Another hour-long foray. Pastor Styles brought her dinner on a plate, which she wolfed down before wiping her fingers on her dress. At long last the answer revealed itself. It was not an issue with the Door, or an issue with horses, or even an issue with "notable individual horses." It was an issue with magic.

Mayfair long suspected that the devil had not crafted every single living being in Whitecrosse from hand; the pages she found proved her theory true. "Mechanisms for the automatic propagation of species," these pages read. Humans, horses, other animals, fae. It was this automation that forced the devil to institute any limits on her handiwork at all, in fact. Clearly, she did not want a random milkmaid giving birth to a messianic hero, or a farmer's cow giving birth to a magical beast, and thus enforced restrictions along some sort of scientific discipline the devil coined "genetics" but which seemed to follow principles known even in Whitecrosse for the selective breeding of dogs and other domesticated creatures. Mayfair caught herself once more thumbing through Dalton's phone to piece together a better understanding of "genetics" as an academic field and pried herself away to keep focused on the matter at hand.

When it came to the fae and other magical beasts, many words were spent limiting what magical powers they could and could not possess. Logically, it made sense, as the devil might have found her world tumbling out of control if (for instance) Flanz-le-Flore were able to generate an offspring faerie with devastating destructive power. First, only fae royalty was allowed any power beyond the most limited and basic; but even then, the kings and queens of court were curtailed to specific ranges and areas of effect that fell far below the planetary. Magical beasts received similar limitations, as did the animus magic that humans and elves could access under certain circumstances.

And that was it! Five long hours of searching and now Mayfair knew why her alteration to Makepeace's horse failed. She now knew she could not imitate the alteration for a faerie, or human, or elf, something she could have established in five minutes by empirical testing. It was that burning curiosity, that need for *why*, that drove her to such wasteful pursuits, and even so she disdained the descriptor "wasteful." Knowledge was an intrinsic good. If she disbelieved that statement then she must scourge herself for yet another sin.

She was back where she started. The only type of magic not limited in scope was relic magic; but this lack of limitation stemmed from the direct, non-automated control the devil exerted over it. So what now? Should she spend another several hours determining how to modify the relics that already existed despite the seemingly ironclad set of restrictions placed upon them? And still she didn't even have access to the relics. So should she prioritize that or their transformation—

Transformation.

Mayfair uncurled her stooped shape, pained by the effort but able to ignore the pain within the thrust of her epiphany. "Transformation," she said aloud. The chime of the word in her ear spurred her onward; her lips twisted again and this time the sound that came out was somewhat changed, the word undergoing its definition:

"Transmogrification."

—

The loose canopy let through littered beams of soft sunlight. Dazzling, sparkling, they honed themselves to narrow points upon the stage, and as the leaves above shifted slightly in some unseen breeze the light shifted too, traveling the stage in slow and steady circles to accompany the silent dancers engaged in their tragic ballet. Six pairs of them, not a one synchronized with another, yet each in their own heavy swaying making known a story that could not otherwise be uttered.

No music. Not even a lonely whistle or pipe. Only the softest patter of the dancers' feet, tattooing for themselves in their disharmony a queer orchestra reminiscent of rainfall. Gathered at the edges of the stage the faces of animals grouped, predator and prey at peace to watch the show, every natural woodland beast: Dormouse, squirrel, vole, weasel, rabbit, hare,

badger, deer, wolf, and bear. In low-hanging branches birdfowl watched as well, while upon the twigs and leaves vibrant butterflies stayed their wings. Altogether, a tableau of fauna bound together by an unseen web, destined to kill and eat and die and decompose together.

Centered on the stage stood a throne of sticks and stubby branches, which in some seasons might sprout flowers but not this one. And while a queen ruled this court a man instead sat upon the seat; a man of no regal bearing, in lean pragmatic clothing, peering through thick glass lenses.

This man, this hero, was Wendell Noh.

He sat with one leg lifted so that his boot, caked in dry mud, rested on the seat; his balled fist supported his chin, while tangled between his arm and body extended the tall metal barrel of his formidable rifle. His mouth hung ajar in either stupefaction or abject apathy. Behind those glasses, did his eyes even watch the mute ballet before him, or did his pupils simply point the proper way?

Beneath his hair, delicately combed and coiffured, a simple bandage still shone upon his brow. Another bandage enveloped the hand that gripped the barrel of the gun, and were his jacket and his jeans not so covering more could have been seen upon his legs and arms. Wendell Noh, as befit a hero, entered the wood in a maniac way, hurtling from high above, and yet by some miracle he landed without a single bone shattered, merely scrapes and cuts from the branches as they raked him on the way down. Yet he still bled, and still moaned under the spell of a brutal weakness, and so for the past few days he recovered in a bed sipping bittersweet concoctions designed to restore him to his past vitality. Now he sat here, a hero, rightfully regal; even his inattentiveness was regal in its own way, as the minds of great men are rarely focused upon mean thoughts of mere entertainment, pondering instead greater mysteries or matters of universal import.

Likewise, he'd spoken precious little since his arrival, often merely to indicate to his most dutiful helper his current needs, be they sustenance or comfort; when he did focus on his surroundings, it was with sharpened focus, as though dissecting every element. His aims, his ambitions remained oblique, yet he had neither asked nor attempted to leave. The only sour note in his entire being were the words he had sometimes mumbled in half-conscious daze during the initial days of his recovery; words about a wife, a daughter, a home in a far-flung land called Cleveland. Once he mentioned a man named Dalt: "Dalt—Dalt—we're here," and once, later, he asked what happened to "your brother," although the person he spoke to as a matter of course possessed no siblings, no parents, and no true children at all, had been birthed not from a womb but by the gently opening petals of a magnificent flower.

That floral-bloomed figure drifted upon the fragrant air, arriving onto his lap with a glass chalice of wine which she lifted daintily to his lips. He sipped, absent from the physical present.

What went on in that mind? What thoughts floated behind those sharp, intelligent eyes? Oh, she wished to know. She wished to know him; she wished to become part of the framework he enacted upon the world, to imbibe a little of the agency he possessed.

"Is this to your liking, my sweet? Or shall I find you more fitting refreshment, better suited to one of your stature?" Flanz-le-Flore nestled her body into his, her clothes a near-perfect facsimile of those he wore, save for the boots, which she never changed. She even wore his glasses, although with certain adjustments to the curvature of the lenses because otherwise she would be incapable of seeing anything clearly.

"It's fine," he said brusquely, although he did not swat her away as he had in days prior; instead, his hand moved from his rifle to pat her idly on the head.

John Coke disappointed her; chose another over her. Jay Waringcrane did more than disappoint, and she danced fleetly from his name, as even invoking it mentally might mar her disposition. But this third hero, Wendell Noh, would be hers, her wiles subtly working upon him, seeping into the spaces between his lofty thoughts.

Her subjects danced. This idyllic world was hers and his alone, and together they might shape it as they wished, the way only a hero was allowed. Careful not to touch the barrel of his gun, her arms wound around him and her fingers caressed. That name, Jay Waringcrane, remained a bitter aftertaste on her tongue, but among such pleasures could she truly bind herself to grudges? The rule-breaking horse had eradicated all trace of her wounds, so should she not ease the wounds within her mind as well? All soothed, all proved pleasant, she and Wendell Noh together in a land of enchantment she devised alone.

If only such bliss could continue uninterrupted. If only there were not agents who sought her undoing.

Flanz-le-Flore well knew what transpired in her wood. The arrival of the ambassadors, although unheralded, was nonetheless a fact of which she was aware before their silhouettes further darkened the dark fringes beyond the stage. The dancing ceased, the animals turned their heads, but a subtle gesture of Flanz-le-Flore's slender hand stilled any antagonistic activity. These messengers were not dangerous, she knew; and although they had played some small part in her earlier maiming, the part was so small that she no longer possessed the wrath necessary to obliterate them where they stood. Let it be known that unlike the wicked fae of the other courts (not least of which being that Olliebollen Pandelirium, who dared side against her in a struggle of fae against humanity), Flanz-le-Flore was merciful and kind, beautiful and benevolent, quicker to laugh than to scowl, and never rising above mere mischievousness in the jests she played upon those men of Whitecrosse who blundered too near her borders.

The ambassadors stopped at the edge of the stage, illuminated by penumbra alone. They were a pair, their appearances most extraordinarily alike, although the corruption that wracked their bodies had distorted them in different directions. Indeed, all outward likeness was deceptive, for at a glance Flanz-le-Flore understood these two to be now more dissimilar than a raven and a writing desk.

One, with feathered wings, was alive. The other, with leather wings, was dead.

One was merely human, or even more merely less than human, while the other was an inert vessel for something far greater: The Master.

Flanz-le-Flore's skin went cold and she discovered her fingers clenching tighter against Wendell Noh's body, her cheek close to his as she stared over the stage with suspicious eye. The Master had returned? Flanz-le-Flore had felt the Master's presence snuffed out around the time she discovered Wendell Noh fallen in her wood, and while she was normally attuned to such significant shifts in the underlying energies of the world she had not felt that presence reignite. No—no. Something struck her as unusual about the sensation emanating from the dead and animated twin; this was not the Master she knew. Slipping her hands from Wendell Noh, her thumbs touched to her fingertips, prepared to snap.

"We come bearing a message," said the live one—Charm—her face a mask of freshly-escaped agony, like a cloth that has been wrinkled and then smoothed out. Blackened streaks painted her cheekbones, but now she appeared somewhat limp and drained. "A message from this world's New Master."

"New Master." Flanz-le-Flore loosened from around Wendell Noh, effected an aura of nonchalance. "Yes, I suppose that seems so. What a novice Master indeed they must be if they cannot communicate to me directly, though."

"The New Master wishes to show proper respect to your station, faerie queen," Charm intoned, her words not her own, a puppet in some regards as much as her sister; what had this New Master said to or shown her? The corpse itself of course. "As such, she has sent a formal envoy to convey her intentions."

Like as not the true goal was so that this New Master, whoever *she* was, may make her words known as much to Flanz-le-Flore as to her esteemed guest, who as a hero from the other world was not subject to the Master. Desirous of Flanz-le-Flore's delicious companion, was she? Perhaps the woman signified by that spiteful metal band Flanz-le-Flore witnessed on Wendell Noh's ring finger?

"I dislike dead things," she said. "Remove that corpse from my presence at once. I care not if it moves; it is dead."

The words drove—as intended—like a dagger into the live one, whose destitute musculature slumped in a sort of sudden daze. Her eyes grew freshly wet and she clawed at her hair:

"Charisma! O Charisma, forgive your wretched fleshbound sister! She never treated you as you were, as God's sole gift to a feeble sinner, a comfort to her in ways she recked not! O, but now the scales have fallen from her eyes, and she realizes how bitterly she spat upon your love, and in so doing the love of God! Seek solace, if you will, only in her assured damnation, not because her sins are too great for God to pardon, but because she is so blind as to forsake his mercy when it is so freely offered!"

"Enough of that," Flanz-le-Flore said. "Though the seasons shift toward winter, that is no excuse to pollute my fine and happy court with flagellating dolor. New Master, both of your messengers insult me. Remove them or I shall."

Instead, the corpse opened its mouth and spoke. "I'm curious. Why does Wendell Noh have bandages? Possess you not Makepeace's horse?"

"One capable of true magic knows what magic cannot accomplish."

"As for you, Wendell Noh. Do you not wish to return home? Do you not wish to leave this world—"

Snap. The corpse transmogrified at once into an owl. A dead owl—she could only change like to like—but the shape of an owl, capable of only the speech of an owl: hoo, hoo. A moment's consideration of her handiwork and Flanz-le-Flore performed the same service for the live one, whose rapid hooting formed a song rather than a lamentation.

She turned then to Wendell Noh and with discomfiture saw him leaned forward in his seat, blinking rapidly. For a moment his sharp eyes shifted to view her sidelong, then settled back to a hazy murk. "Home," he muttered. He repeated the word, albeit squishing it together and eliding its vowel, so that it became: "Hm."

He could not seriously be enticed by such an offer, could he? Though his vitality and fate-strings were far stronger than any man in this world, Flanz-le-Flore knew from his clothes and his lack of refinement in speech and manner that he was no highborn noble, no wealthy aristocrat in that world he left behind. What luxury might he want that she could not provide? If he so desired, he might even take her gorgeous, flawless body—was whatever woman his ring symbolized so fair? She coiled around him, slipped her arms around him, nuzzled her chin to his shoulder. His body remained stiff, cold, insensible perhaps to her presence, his eyes no longer shifted her way, he watched the pair of hooting owls whose heads twisted back and forth on their necks.

You misunderstand me, said a voice in her head.

I misunderstand nothing, Flanz-le-Flore thought back. *You seek to steal him away, my hero, to snatch him from this delightful court!*

I simply offered him a way home. He is not trapped here of his own will, after all. If he decided he wished to go, would you stop him? Imprison him?

You'll not take what is mine.

A pause; in the strange and staggered emptiness, Flanz-le-Flore flicked her wrist to bid her subjects continue their elegant pantomime, as though nothing were amiss.

Sigh, the New Master said, which was a rather strange word to say. *I suppose that is the nature of queens, fae or human.*

I am like no human queen—

Believe whatever you like. It is irrelevant. Returning to the point of discussion, you know well enough I have the power to lead Wendell Noh home. If he wishes to go, nothing you do will be able to stop him; I can revert the effects of your magic, open the gates of your prisons, bind you if necessary. Or do you doubt my power? I possess every capability of the previous Master, only I am more intelligent.

We shall see, thought Flanz-le-Flore. I too am changed from what I was before. Metal has burnt my flesh; I know it now, and what I know I may change.

Yes, your page did include that recent addition. However, testing me is a foolish maneuver no matter your might. You know that as well as I. Well, there is another option. You need not fight me at all. Wendell Noh may leave if I will it, but not otherwise.

Ah! The shape of it made visible its inner form. Flanz-le-Flore was capable of connecting the said to the unsaid.

How base. How common, she thought.

Such veiled threats are part and parcel of diplomacy. I am pragmatic above all. My offer is quite simple: I wish for you to transmogrify a few objects for me. I shall provide them to you sometime in the near future. Change them the way I specify and Wendell Noh shall be yours until the limits of his mortality. This request comes at almost no cost to you, so I see no reason why—

"Never," Flanz-le-Flore spoke aloud, to the bewilderment of her subjects and even Wendell Noh himself, who suddenly turned toward her. *I am the faerie queen of this court and this wood, and have reigned here since the true beginning of this world. I shall not stoop to threats and grossly economic bargains, no matter how cheap you claim your deal is.*

Flanz-le-Flore. This is foolish. You have no reason to make an enemy of me, and I require next to nothing from you. A few simple applications of your magic.

I shall not be treated as your pawn. No longer. New Master, Old Master—I have been a marionette for you both, and shall not be so roughly used again. Your threats have a fatal flaw, New Master. Wendell Noh may only leave if he wills it. You cannot compel him to leave, just as you cannot compel him to stay—you can only close and open the Door.

Please. You—

I shall ensure he never wishes to leave Whitecrosse. And I shall come to know him and that essence of his humanity that makes you incapable of ruling him, because just as the Old Master you lack it yourself, you may change only the empty husks who flit and flutter upon your grand, immaculate stage. I shall come to know him and we shall be united harmoniously; then we shall see who is this world's true Master. Then we shall see!

Simply thinking these words lacked the grandiosity Flanz-le-Flore desired, the theatrical spectacle, and so she burst out laughing, indicating to Wendell Noh that she did so at some jape performed by the clownish faeries who wove amid the dancers on the stage, but in truth her laugh was set against that unseen arbiter of fate—this world's fate, no more—and that arbiter saw her and knew the truth.

You're being illogical, the New Master said. You're not thinking—

This conversation is finished. If you wish for your messenger—the one that still breathes, at least—to leave this court alive, you'll speak not another word to me.

Wonderful silence returned at last. Funny, at least, that one ostensibly so lofty could be quieted for the sake of one as mean as that sobbing, corrupted harpy.

Flanz-le-Flore kept to her word, though. A snap and Charm returned to normal. Flanz-le-Flore contemplated leaving the other an owl, as allowing it to continue as it had was a mockery of Nature, but seeing Charm on the verge of another sobbing spree, she snapped again and once more allowed the forms of life and death to resume their rightful mirroring.

The harpy twins departed. Wendell Noh spoke not a word more, his eyes a murky mystery behind their lenses, but Flanz-le-Flore slid close again, touching her fingertips to the well-defined line of his jaw.

"I will bring you greatness beyond your wildest imaginings," she whispered in his ear. "I will show you a life of awe and potency. You shall become a conqueror of man and fae and beast; nothing will be denied you."

Wendell Noh nodded along to her honey words, as though he found them not so unpleasant, and his eyes shifted from blankness to the opposite: a kind of farseeing, as though he looked upon the other end of the world, or else the future. Then he shrugged and spoke to her the clearest, most defined sentence he'd spoken since she found him:

"Can you spare me a cigarette then."

To Flanz-le-Flore's dismay, she lacked the faintest clue what that was.

—

On Earth, Mayfair sagged in her seat. Of course! Oh, how expected. Not a single person could she ever convince of anything, anything at all! Not Flanz-le-Flore, not Lalum, not her mother either! It never changed, none of them ever listened, no matter how reasonable her arguments, no matter how undeniable her power, nobody ever listened! Dalton's parents hurled a plate at her head. Nobody, nobody, nobody ever listened to Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke. Should she be surprised at this point?

Only Styles. Styles and his churchgoers; only they listened. They listened the way DeWint listened though, because she could be a feather in their caps, a point of light to brighten their own prestige. She had nobody. Nobody except the dead. Even Charm had been a battle to bring to her side, she had to thrust that dead puppet in her face to break her down into a sobbing wreck. Nobody, nobody, nobody.

At least the churchgoers did listen. Even if their motives were selfish, at least some sort of admiration fell upon her. She wondered again, perhaps she ought to abandon Whitecrosse to its own devices, allow it its powerful will toward perpetual status quo, and focus all her energy on this world, on spreading the message of God to its effete and empty populace;

perhaps given the vast size of Earth she could even save more souls that way than on her harebrained schemes for her homeland.

She expelled a sigh. The moment of weakness passed, and she settled to a more stable state of mind, having only tugged a few times at her skin and clothes amid her wild and manic inner monologue.

Such setbacks were merely that: setbacks. If not via Wendell, Flanz-le-Flore could be convinced in other ways. Mayfair knew her history well, knew the history of the fae courts. And she had seen the final, half-finished pages the devil left behind, her designs for a narrative past the one that led Jay Waringcrane to the monastery. Olliebollen Pandelirium had factored greatly into that plot, and what mattered to Olliebollen would also matter to Flanz-le-Flore. Perhaps even more so, given what Mayfair knew Flanz-le-Flore's doings during the days of John Coke. She had vied then for that old hero's heart, vied with many others—and to one in particular she lost. That one, Flanz-le-Flore could not forgive.

Mayfair pulled the devil's unfinished page before her and read it over. The beginnings of a plot were etched there, with only a few clear omissions: placeholder names, for instance, which Mayfair was unconcerned with changing. The only issue was how to initiate it.

She mulled it over for a bit; nothing came readily to mind.

Anyway, she needed to open the vault first. Without the vault opened and the relics acquired, Flanz-le-Flore's cooperation was irrelevant. By now, Jay Waringcrane must have realized that Lalum could open the vault using her animus. It was possible he'd already opened it by feeding her Olliebollen. She acquired the relevant papers, glanced them over, and groaned. No—of course not. Jay Waringcrane was no longer even in the castle. He was marching westward, for a purpose Mayfair couldn't begin to fathom. Lalum and Olliebollen were with him.

Her groan drew longer, intensified as she tilted her head back over the edge of the chair and pressed her wrists into her eye sockets. Nothing ever went right, did it? Now she would need to convince Jay, or at least Lalum, to return to the castle. How? She couldn't even begin to fathom. Jay was already impetuously willful—

Mayfair realized how.

She realized how to open the vault.

She realized how to ensure Flanz-le-Flore's cooperation.

It wouldn't take convincing anyone. It would all happen as a matter of course. None of them would even realize Mayfair's hand in it. If none of them knew it was her doing, then the curse that caused all to do the opposite of what she willed would not apply.

It would all happen so simply; it would emerge organically from the loose beginnings of a plot the devil had already prepared for her. Renewed vigor surged through Mayfair, she dragged her chair directly up against the desk so the desk's edge dug into her stomach, and

shuffled the papers in frenetic animation. Where did they go? She just had them. Where—there!

A perfect plan. Mayfair shuffled the pages for the elves into a neat stack, and then got to work.

The Hunt in the Forest (Paolo Uccello, 1470)

Compared to the wistful wilderness of Flanz-le-Flore's wood, where plant and animal alike might burst into spontaneous singsong when the weather was right, the forests west of Whitecrosse exuded a dark chill that bit at one's skin as much as it clutched at one's heart. No happy melody trilled the leaves of grass; the sounds here—when there was sound at all, and not oppressive silence—cut shrill and sudden, a burst of activity followed by a terrified yelp as some small creature fell prey to one larger, or a mocking and brutal birdcall, or most blood-thrummingly the snap of a twig not three feet behind you without even a ragged breath to suggest what caused it. This was Wode Reft.

Of course, even Flanz-le-Flore's forest could turn this sort of foreboding at a moment's notice, when it found you unwelcome. In Wode Reft, at least, they counted among them one familiar with the terrain.

"Just kill me and eat me and be done with it!"

Olliebollen languished on Jay's shoulder, slouching precariously to the extent that she might topple off at any moment, watching the fingers of her remaining hand trace arabesques through the threads of Jay's corduroy coat.

"Save yourself the trek. I don't mind one whit! Let me turn to mush in that monster's stomach, assuming her venom doesn't liquefy me before I get there. I don't care! It doesn't matter! More convenient for you anyhow. Besides, good luck finding faeries here with or without my help. Old King Reft's a cagey coot. His court changes shape and place every afternoon, and not even I know where to find it. If I still had the Master's help maybe, but she's long gone. Plus, if you go even more west—assuming you survive—you'll wind up in Pandelirium. I already told you there's no faeries there anymore."

Jay rarely responded to these grousings, although he did ask directions from time to time, which she grudgingly gave.

Whitecrosse—the world—contained two continents, northern and southern. North was where Whitecrosse—the country—was located. It was crescent-shaped, the Door located near one tip. If one followed the continent's curve south, cleaving close to the coast, they would travel through the three dukedoms subservient to John Coke's royal lineage: Meretryce, Mordac, and Malleus. Eventually, they would reach the southern tip, divided from California by a narrow strait. Yet if one traveled west, as Jay's party now did, they would pass through only wild lands, fae lands, forests broken by mountains alone.

The first of these lands was Wode Reft, which served as the barrier between human and fae dominions. The last man to brave it and return to tell the tale was John Coke, who journeyed to the western peninsula to slay the three great dragons and claim their hoard of treasures.

Any child, noble or peasant, knew tales of John Coke, and how treacherous these lands proved even to him. Only thanks to certain gifts (bestowed upon him by Flanz-le-Flore in gratitude for striking down the dread lizard Devereux) did he succeed in finding his path at

all; even so, he first needed to best the Faerie King Reft in a duel of wits to receive safe passage. Only weeks later, sustained solely by faith in Christ, did he reach the court of the Effervescent Elf-Queen, who proved far friendlier. But now, for reasons unknown, the elves were said to have vanished; even that solemn asylum was no more.

Lalum had, taking some pains, explained much of this to Jay as he tromped across the last stretch of fallow farmland before entering Wode Reft. Jay minded not; he continued undaunted.

Undaunted—or perhaps else. Lalum dared not extrapolate the workings of his mind; she was too base for that, too ignorant. Yet something about his demeanor struck her as stiffer, more brusque than usual, exasperated grunts delivered in response even to her most bashful pleas (let alone the endless moping with which Olliebollen assailed him)—and Lalum wondered if that final encounter with the heathen princess of California altered his spirit, drove him on this desperate venture. For did Olliebollen not speak sooth? She wished to die, and so this journey was redundant... No, no! Lalum could not entertain such thinking. Of all sins, suicide alone could never be forgiven: there was nothing left to forgive. That posed another question, whether faeries possessed souls, whether they were looked upon as anything more than brute beasts in the eyes of God; did their death matter to Him? Or anyone? Archbishop Astrophicus and Princess Mayfair claimed none of their lives, human or fae, mattered, that none of them held a soul. Lalum did not know. Could not know. All she knew was that her own thoughts trended inexorably toward the base, and that any intellectual justification served only the ravenous, gluttonous hunger building in her throat for that faerie's soft, supple, sweet flesh, the nearly unquenchable desire to crush her skull between her fangs—oh, delectable deliquescence! No, no—Lalum could not succumb. Gluttony was a lesser sin, but a sin nonetheless. She could not. Could not!

(Yet was this whole journey not made with the intention to feed her? Olliebollen or some other faerie, would she not be asked to devour it anyway?)

"Didja hear me, hero?" The tart morsel in question (think not on it! Think not!) tilted her head to shout straight into Jay's ear. "There's no faeries here! Not that you can find. So why come this way at all, huh? I wish you left me with your sister. At least she was nice!"

"Don't be an idiot," Jay finally said. "My sister isn't nice without a reason. She wanted something from you." He swept a small lantern over the ground, pushing aside underbrush with his bat to determine a suitable path. Due to the darkness, Lalum kept closer to him than normal, but still skittered aside to evade the dancing ray of light. She clutched to her chest the shield that once belonged to Prince Makepeace; Jay gave it to her for safekeeping, as he could not hold it, the lantern, and the bat at the same time. To be trusted with a true relic—Oh, Lalum did not deserve such a boon! For that alone she ought to respect the hero's wishes and accompany him wherever he may go, for whatever reason he may go there. Just as she rejected what Princess Mayfair commanded her to do...

Mayfair's parting, laughing words made sense now. Jay too would open the vault, the same way Mayfair wanted. What would happen then? Mayfair made only one demand: Not to let the hero know of her. Yet he would never back down due to some vague warning of unnamed danger. And how—

Lalum's endless worries, and Olliebollen's petulant rebuttal that Jay's sister was in fact a kind and appreciative woman, were both cut short by a sharp, piercing howl. Jay's head turned, alert, as he aimed the lantern through black wet tangles of leaves. The howl had been close, heart-poundingly close. Lalum gripped the shield and braced to defend if need be, while Jay's fingers went bone-white against the bat handle.

"A wolf," Olliebollen muttered. "So what?"

A sharp, snarling bark clipped the dead air, and several more followed in rapid procession. They were so close Lalum expected the leaves to part and a flurry of bared fangs to lash out, but in queer places such as fae woods one could never rely on one's senses.

"Sounds like they've got something treed," Olliebollen added matter-of-factly. "Better leave em to it and continue whichever dumb way you wanna go!"

Jay lowered his bat; he turned to find an alternative path. No sooner had he taken a step, however, than above the cacophonous yowls a voice cried out:

"Oh dear, oh no! Shoo, shoo—down doggie! Be a good doggie please? Oh, will someone *please* help meeeee!"

Had some other traveler gotten lost in Wode Reft? Who would be so foolish as to set foot in here other than a hero from the other world? A woman's voice, too.

Lalum's threads stitched into a gleaming tableau before the lantern: CAREFULL—A FAE TRYCK!

"Clearly," Jay said. "But if Coke got out of this place by outwitting the king—"

"That's no fae."

Olliebollen spoke simply, sharply. From a slumped, lifeless posture she rose to suddenly standing. Her dim eyes turned a lacquered sheen and the white filaments of her body expelled the slightest hint of dust: a faint glow. This bare luminescence penetrated deeper into the malefic dark than the lantern did; it was the first the faerie shined since they left the monastery.

"No," she repeated. "No fae at all."

Perhaps Jay already understood what she meant by that, or perhaps he simply didn't care, because he did not ask for clarification. She did not clarify; she herself seemed to tumble out of the world entirely, her body remaining but her soul gone, escaping to some heightened, heavenly plane beyond external stimuli, focused only on that unseen thing ahead.

She looked, regardless, alive.

Into the leafy passage Jay treaded. Lalum scuttled close, readying the shield. As the branches shifted aside, an area opened ahead, vaguely illuminated by a thing emerging out of the ground—a lantern, like Jay's, its flame threatening a full-fledged wildfire among the grotesque accumulation of vegetative matter. The light spread in a dull cone in the fringes of

which shaggy, red-eyed forms lurked in constant slow-paced revolutions around the base of the tree. From time to time one would brace and leap, skittering halfway up the trunk before sliding down, leaving the bundled figure in the branches to shriek despite the obvious inability of the wolf to reach her.

A woman—though the light barely graced where she cowered. For several moments the woman continued to squeal for someone, anyone to help her, save her, oh please would someone save her, why did everyone abandon her? Completely oblivious to Jay's presence. Lalum wished he would keep to the darkness anyway; she needed to remain at his side, but she desperately sought to avoid illumination. Instead, of course, he stopped in the direct center of the light and placed his own lantern down at his foot. There he waited for someone, beast or otherwise, to notice him.

Lalum, using Makepeace's shield to cover as much as herself as she could, scampered to the fallen lantern and righted it before it chanced a blaze. By the time she lurched back into the dark nothing had acknowledged Jay's presence; the woman in the tree cried:

"Please, oh please, oh somebody please! Go *away* you dogs! Go! Oh, please somebody help!"

Finally, Jay said, "Hey."

The woman didn't notice. The wolves did. Their heads snapped to attention, their red eyes a bright shimmer in the lamplight. Gums parted to reveal white fangs as thick strands of slobber dropped onto and bent the grass beside their forepaws. The beasts stank of foulness and mange, their fur tangled gnarls; palpable hunger emanated from their slow and lanky movements as they circled toward their new prey.

A sinkhole opened in Lalum's stomach. Memories impaled her: Flanz-le-Flore's court, a pack of her subjects transformed into the same such wild dogs, their snapping jaws tearing into her flesh. Teeth gnashing straight through one of her legs, desperate attempts to swaddle herself in webbing; even so she understood they were not trying to kill her, not yet, they wanted to play with her, make her suffer. The thought forced her body into a trembling she could not still, the limb that had regrown tingled a phantom pain. For a frantic moment everything in her body told her to flee, to abandon Jay and flee while she could, but when the foremost and largest wolf lunged her legs moved almost without will and she dove in front of Jay to deflect the row of fangs with the shield.

The force of the body bounding alone knocked her back an inch, although with eight legs firmly planted even such power was possible to bear. A second wolf rushed from the side and Lalum was still recovering from the first's assault, but with a perfectly-timed swing Jay sent it back with a loud, reverberating ting. The third came from the other side and by then Lalum was able to redirect and block the attack.

Lalum was no fighter. Before her time at the monastery she never raised a hand against anyone in her life, and even afterward she was far more comfortable controlling someone with her animus than relying on her own strength. For some reason, her animus made everything natural to her; she could react so quickly, so efficiently even in the heat of battle that she was sometimes shocked at herself, as though it were someone else commandeering her body than the other way around. Using Makepeace's shield was similar. She merely

needed to hold the shield vaguely in the correct direction and it infallibly deflected the attacks of the wolves. If one decided to bite at her legs instead of leaping for her throat, they surely would have been able to replicate the agonizing fate she suffered in Flanz-le-Flore's court, but instead they seemed drawn by magnetism to her most defended point. This, she supposed, was the power of a relic bestowed upon Whitecrosse by God.

The leader of the pack, taking advantage of her distraction with the lesser wolves, darted past and rushed snapping at Jay. His bat came down and drove the wolf's head into the ground, and after that the wolf stumbled back at turns whimpering and snarling. Deciding it might prefer weaker prey, it uttered a coarse bark to its fellows; the three turned and disappeared into the woods, their matted black tails whipping away from the light's edge. Altogether, the skirmish spanned a mere ten seconds, and yet Lalum's heart continued to pound long after she retreated to her safe patch of shadow. Wolves—she hoped not to encounter any others.

To Jay Waringcrane, however, the scuffle barely registered as having happened; he lowered his bat, looked up at the tree, and said "Hey" once more, somewhat louder, because the woman clinging hopelessly to her branch still failed to notice anything below. In fact, she wailed:

"Oh why, why does this have to happen to me? Why can't I do anything right? I'll starve if I don't slip and fall first—"

Her words conjured reality; a loud creak preceded a sharp screech as the woman scabbled her hands and feet but failed to reclaim the purchase she grasped only moments prior. Her body toppled, bounced against the trunk of the tree, and plopped onto the bunched ferns with a dull thud.

She righted immediately, cleaving to the tree, waving her arms in pinwheel fashion. "WAAGH! Don't eat meeeee!" Despite the frantic pitch, her voice formed a pleasant sound, and as her head lifted and her hood fell back, she revealed a face to match.

She was... beautiful. Beautiful in a classical way, an almost sculpted perfection to her every feature that rendered her transcendent of the low, base, physical world they were all doomed to inhabit. Even in the oppressive darkness her hair gave off a platinum sheen, and her pale white skin a faint aura. Despite the multiple touselles and tangles she suffered in her fall not a stray lock marred her beauty; even the twigs and leaves nestled amid the curls complemented, rather than contradicted, her innate luster, as though such communion with nature was part and parcel of her radiance. Nor did her rough traveler's cloak obscure her; for though hidden from sight, her body's form lurked inherent beneath it, a form both vivacious and slender, a form for the admiration of all.

When teenaged and yet unmarried, Lalum spent time in Castle Whitecrosse, and often saw Queen Mallory. Once, even, Her Majesty—in one of those flights of fancy she so often had—coaxed Lalum into contest of physical prowess, which of course was a rather absurd and unladylike thing to do, but Lalum could not deny such a direct request. She remembered then, in the castle courtyard, the form of the queen's body as it danced and weaved, her nearly divine beauty fully present even under the dirt on her cheeks and the rough leather armor hanging from her chest. That sight had somehow trilled Lalum's heart, though it lasted mere moments before the queen pinned Lalum to the ground in a rather brusque fashion.

Discombobulated by the unaccustomed rush of activity, Lalum remembered quitting herself from the contest in a way she later realized was much too unmannerly given their respective stations, and for months afterward Lalum's mind would trend toward that memory again and again: the beauty in her form, the feel of her hands wrapped so snugly around Lalum's body, the faux pas Lalum committed in her overhasty retreat. The queen never called on her again, which disappointed both her and her ailing father in equal measure, although perhaps for different reasons—Lalum never quite knew what to make of her feelings on the matter, and gradually she came to forget it as her life took a much different turn.

The woman in front of her, dirtied similarly, reignited that dormant memory in full force; Lalum's heart, already set athrob from the previous activity, now pounded to an uncomfortable degree. The woman finally saw what stood before her was no mongrel beast but a young man, and responded to this information with a series of nonplussed blinks. Her mouth hung open in dullard fashion that yet did not diminish her visage, and as she slowly came to comprehend the visual stimuli she shook her head, ran her fingers through her hair to clear out the leaves caught there, and revealed long pointed ears.

"Kill her," Olliebollen said.

The words were spoken plainly, clearly, and audibly despite the faerie's small stature; they carried in the deathly stillness of the forest. Yet they may as well have bounced off the elf's face, upon which realization finally dawned, followed by innocent happiness. "You saved me! Oh thank you ever so much, wayward traveler. I'm such an idiot, I tripped and fell and dropped my lantern and then those nasty wild dogs came after me. Gosh, I can be so clumsy sometimes!" She placed a balled fist against her forehead, stuck out her tongue, and giggled. "I'm supposed to be in another place entirely. Really, I'm lost. What an idiot!"

"Kill her!" Olliebollen said.

"Maybe," said Jay.

"Oh! Right. I should introduce myself, huh?" She knocked her fist against her chest, cleared her throat, and managed a clumsy flourish. "I—! Am an ambassador from the elfin court, en route to Redcrosse."

"Whitecrosse," said Jay.

"It's Whitecrosse, is it? Thanks for that, I mix names up all the time. Speaking of, I haven't told you my name yet have I?" She blinked. "Wait, have I?"

"You have not."

"Thought so!" She paused, looked around with a sheepish smile. An uncertain interval of time passed. "Well, my name's Temporary."

"Temporary." Jay turned the word into a sigh. "I guess that tracks. What'd you say the elf queen's name was again Lalum? Evanescence?"

"The Effervescent Elf-Queen!" said Temporary, as though excited to be able to answer a question correctly. "Ah, she's simply sublime. All her subjects adore her. Truly, who wouldn't? She's just so—effervescent!"

"She annihilated my court!" Olliebollen screamed. "And all of your degenerate race helped! Murderers! Murderers and scoundrels!" She hopped up, landed on the brim of Jay's 'Cleveland Browns' hat, kicked and danced and waved her one arm until she became unbalanced and toppled backward only for her wings to beat her upright. "Oh! Oh I've let a lot slide. I've been more patient than I should've been. With that other one—Sansaime—I most graciously allowed her to live, since she was clearly an exile from your barbaric culture and not fully party to your horrors! But you. You! An ambassador. Ambassador! Oh, isn't it hilarious? Just so funny? That the elves would need someone to fulfill such a role. Diplomacy, yes, some diplomacy those elves made to the court of Pandelirium. No wonder they've clearly assigned a numbskull to the task. Hee-hee, a-hee-hee-hee-hee-a-hee-hee-a-hee!"

The entire diatribe Temporary maintained her beatific grin. When Olliebollen's maniacal laughter subsided into a series of miserable choking sobs, Temporary tilted her head and blinked.

"That sounds so horrible. My, what a terrible time!"

This response sent Olliebollen into a fit from which frothed only semi-coherent sentences.

"Now then, I've given my name," Temporary continued. "Wait—did I? Yes, yes, of course I did. Anyway, that means you have to tell me yours now!"

"No it doesn't," said Jay.

"Awwwww."

"Fine. I'm Jay Waringcrane, hero from another world."

"Jay Waringcrane! That's a nice name." After a few seconds, the rest impacted. "Oh! From another world? You mean—like John Coke?"

"Yes."

"Hm." Temporary tapped a gloved fingertip to her lower lip. "Hm. Well! That doesn't matter really now does it? What matters is you saved my life! For that I'm extraordinarily grateful —"

She took a single step forward, perhaps part of some attempted gesture of thanks, and tripped. No mere stumble; a full forward pitch, with such speed and ferocity that Lalum tensed in terror that for some reason she was attempting to assault Jay. In a heap they hit the ground, Jay's hat twirling skyward with Olliebollen still atop it. Temporary's long and lithe body lay sprawled over Jay, her chest pressed directly into his face—a sight that shot a shiver of horror through Lalum's spine even worse than when she thought Jay was under attack.

An instantaneous, unbidden thought forced its way to the front of Lalum's mind: Bind her. Bite her. An uncontrollable sense of violence that caused her fingers to tremble. The same thought she had when she saw Jay and Viviendre together, chatting so happily, walking arm-in-arm. Let these women vanish into cocoons, their interiors slowly liquefying thanks to her venom until she could slurp the melty mush and leave only a desiccated corpse. She could do it. That was the advantage her grotesque form allowed her, no? These pretty women, the ugly one too, every nice thing they possessed could become nothing but a swirl inside her stomach—ungodly elf, dark-skinned heathen slut...! Lalum the spider spinning her web possessed a certain strength, her tepid will could be made reality if only she—if only she—

No, no, no, why must she think these things, why must these thoughts manifest? The elf fell on accident. *On accident*. It meant nothing. And Viviendre—best not to think of Viviendre. Lalum heard her conversation with Jay in front of the academy. She heard everything, she always knew the best corners to remain unseen. Jay made the correct decision by leaving Whitecrosse. If only he didn't determine to trudge into an even more dangerous place...

"That's it. That's it!" Olliebollen howled. "I'll take matters into my own hands. Hand. My own hand!"

As Jay and Temporary struggled to extricate themselves from one another (a struggle lasted far longer than it reasonably ought), Olliebollen rifled through the weeds, plucked a twig off the ground, and attempted to snap it by squeezing it under the pit of her stump arm and bending with the other. It bent, it bent, Olliebollen strained, and then the twig slipped out from her armpit and shot up to slap her in the face. She zipped to Lalum. "Snap this in half! Now!"

Lalum doubted helping this willful sprite would come to any good, but when Olliebollen started whapping Lalum's face with the twig and her faerie dust came off in sugar sprinkles that caused saliva to build in Lalum's mouth and a certain uncontrollable feeling to enter her fingertips, she acquiesced and snapped the twig quickly so that Olliebollen might leave her sight and eliminate any unwanted temptation.

(Oh, Lalum. Oh, Lalum, you truly have become something awful. Maybe you should simply die. True, suicides could never be forgiven. Did she deserve forgiveness for thoughts like these?)

Once the twig was in two pieces, Olliebollen zoomed back to the tangle of Jay and Temporary—Jay now kicking at Temporary since she seemed incapable of performing any motion that did not exacerbate their situation—and stuck one twig in Temporary's platinum hair behind the ear and one twig behind the other ear.

"Now die! Die you stupid elf bitch!"

Olliebollen hovered over Temporary's head and strained. She stuck out her arm, beat her wings furiously, danced from side to side, went "Nnnnnnnnnnngh," and expelled a slight smattering of dust.

But nothing happened. The dust landed in Temporary's hair and only added a faint rainbow glitter to her aura. When Jay finally forced Temporary off him, the twigs fell out and

disappeared into the bed of the forest.

"Useless," Olliebollen howled, "I'm useless!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so, so, so, so, so sorry!" Temporary, kneeling, bowed her head in supplication as Jay hurriedly brushed leaves from his clothes. "I'm simply so clumsy. I'm always getting into bad situations because of it. I'm sorry!"

She unbowed and bowed her head several times in rapid succession, wobbling back and forth on her knees, and the final time she bowed her head it wound up resting against Jay's crotch.

Jay tossed her roughly aside. "I hate this. No—no, shut up. Stop apologizing. I don't care." His eyes squinted and he shined his lantern high and low, observing the canopy and the overgrowth with suspicion. "Are we *sure* this isn't a fairy prank?"

"I wish. I wish," Olliebollen said, landing on Jay's hat after he returned it to its proper place. "I'd be able to tell, so don't worry about that."

Once more Jay scanned the area, then scrutinized Temporary, who—having forgotten all the things she apologized for so profusely only moments before—waved ecstatically in return.

"It's fishy," he said.

"Fishy?" Temporary tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I don't smell so bad do I?"

"Lalum, what do you think."

Lalum, perfectly content to remain unseen and avoid the indignity of introducing herself to the newcomer, begrudgingly stitched a few threads: SHOULD WE BE WARY OF HER?

As feared, Temporary manifested in a blur beside her, saying things like "Ooh! Who's this?" and "Wow! I didn't know there were such creatures in this world!" and "So pretty!" and "What a cute symbol on your underbelly!" and—and—and Lalum immediately scampered up the same tree Temporary had voided a few minutes prior, desperate to escape. Awful, awful, awful! She clamped her head within her twisted arms and tangled herself amid the bowers. Why were they all so kind? Why?

False kindness. Viviendre was kind to Jay, yet she—sought solely to twist him—corrupt him —

They said elves were like fae, and thus not to be trusted. Yet John Coke had trusted the Effervescent Elf-Queen, and Olliebollen wasn't so bad. God created the fae, after all, so could they be as wicked as claimed? Many spoke statements they claimed were universal truths, but all were equally occluded by the depth of their own perception.

"Alright," Jay said. "That's enough of that. Come on Lalum, we're moving on."

He turned the direction he had been going before the disruption, not that any particular direction seemed more meaningful than any other. Temporary set into a flurry of activity,

teetering and tottering and only by some miracle avoiding another headfirst pitch: "Wait! Oh, wait, Mr. Jay Waringcrane. You must allow me to offer you an emblem of my gratitude."

"It's fine. Really. Don't come any closer. Don't touch me."

Undaunted, even when Jay aimed his bat, Temporary careened toward him, rifling through her cloak and exposing for a brief moment a sliver of midriff when she tugged at a buttoned pocket stitched into her outfit.

"I haven't much. I'm afraid I've lost most of the supplies I set out with. But I do have something that may be of use to you. Where—where did I? Oh no. Oh no did I lose it too? No. No, no, no, no—oh here it is."

She produced something clasped within her hand, something that from her elevated vantage Lalum could not see at first. Jay looked down at what she showed him sans expression. It was Olliebollen who reacted.

"I see. I see—so it's not enough to insult me. You have to mock me too. Dangle it right in front of my nose. Lord it over me. And you won't even acknowledge me, will you? Nope. You'll just smile without saying a single meaningful word. You could at least say it to my face. You could at least do that!"

Temporary's head tilted. Her eyes moved, for the first time, from Jay to Olliebollen. And her smile faded; a glimmer of sadness crossed her otherwise inviolable eyes. "Do with it whatever you like. I wasn't... fond of keeping it anyway, although it's supposed to grant me great power. You may even free it—if you choose."

"And you think that absolves you?" said Olliebollen. "Oh yes. A single magnanimous gesture! Dwell on it during your next slaughter. This one moment is lead—all others are feathers! Is that so?"

Lalum crept around the branches carefully. The bodies below angled, the light shifted around them to form cones in a constant crisscross until the fringes of the forest swallowed all. Finally the gift came into view.

A faerie.

Small and still. Curled into a ball on Temporary's upturned palm as though asleep. Perhaps it was. It was not alike to Olliebollen in appearance; no insectoid features distorted its form. Its wings, which fluttered slightly in dreamlike motions, were feathery and white as pure snow; from its forehead extended a single pointed horn, akin to a unicorn's. More, Lalum could not discern.

"My friends back home, they insisted I take it. They always tell me: You're such a klutz! But with this you can do something important, something extremely special, something only you can do. They want me to use it in a certain place... I have a good feeling now, though. I think I'll be fine without it—maybe everything will be much more fine without it. So you take it, okay?"

Jay stared at the faerie. Blank. Unresponsive, even as the brim of his hat constantly bounced under Olliebollen's frenetic motions as she lashed Temporary with every wrathful insult in her lexicon.

Finally his head snapped up with enough force to launch Olliebollen skyward. He first stared directly into Temporary's eyes, then raised his view higher, at the canopy, where there was nothing to be seen. His arms spread wide, fanned to the sky.

"You're fucking me. You're fucking me aren't you!"

"Huh? Hm?" Temporary's typically baffled expression was merited this time. "Wha—what did I do? Did I do something wrong? I didn't mean to offend I swear! Oh, oh, I always do this, I always say something or mess something up—"

"Great traits for a diplomat!" Olliebollen spat.

Jay spiraled into a wall of vines. "I can't. I can't believe it. I thought we were done with this. I thought for sure—Alright. Alright Perfidia just make yourself known. Come on. I don't want to do this crap anymore. I know you're listening. It's been a while but our original deal is still active. Satisfaction or my money back guaranteed. And if you're gonna pull horseshit like this again, I won't be satisfied, got it? Perfidia!"

This baffling monologue was enough to knock even Olliebollen out of her vitriol. "You think the Master's behind this?"

"I embark on a quest to get a fairy. Immediately, in the middle of a forest, we meet this random elf, and she gives me exactly what I came for. No. No way. This was *designed*. This didn't happen naturally. You can't convince me for a second. This isn't me being paranoid. There's no possible way. Perfidia did this."

"Who's Perfidia?" Temporary asked.

Jay ignored her. Ignored Olliebollen even. He spoke to himself, pacing in circles. "She must have—Mayfair must have taken her through the Door. Then Perfidia got away somehow. Now she's back at it. Up to her old tricks. Maybe it took a few days to escape Mayfair, which is why she's only doing this now—No. Maybe she's been back the whole time. Changing things the whole time. Viviendre—"

"You're way off." The choler drained out of Olliebollen and she sagged onto Jay's hat as though depleted. "I'll tell you the honest truth. The Master has been missing from this world since that night at the monastery. I'd know. We fae are attuned to her presence, plus I made a particularly strong connection with her. Given we were working together and all, which yeah-yeah you already figured out and accused me of more times than I can count, well, there you have it! Satisfied? No Perfidia here. Not at all."

"Or maybe she just stopped talking to you. Or maybe your magic being crippled screws with your sixth sense."

Or maybe, Lalum thought with a deepening pit in her midsection, the issue was that the New Master was not this Perfidia person at all.

"I'm so confused," said Temporary. "You'll take it, though? My gift?"

"Of course not. Not for a moment. Not for a single, solitary instant."

Temporary continued as though he didn't speak: "And perhaps, if it wouldn't be too much trouble for you—or if we happen to be headed the same direction?—we could travel together on the way to Whitecrosse. I've got a good feeling about things now, and when I have a good feeling things always go well. If you stick with me, I guarantee everything will turn out great!" She rapped a proud fist against her forehead and stuck out her tongue.

"No. No."

"Oh?" Olliebollen flitted down to where he could see. She, like Temporary, stuck out her tongue, a tiny silver strip that gleamed in the lamplight. "I thought your goal was to get inside that vault, though? Isn't that what you wanted? Hmmmm?"

"Shut up."

"Gonna use all those relics to change the world, hm? Gonna make a paradise now? Come on! It's perfect isn't it? Nothing's stopping you!"

"Don't test me. I'll swat you."

Despite the smugness of Olliebollen's tone, the delight in another's misery, Lalum knew she was correct. Mayfair may have tipped her hand too obviously, but what did it matter? Jay embarked on this expedition for a faerie to feed her, and he found it. Then he'd open the vault—and open it for Mayfair, too. Exactly as Mayfair predicted. That was the power of this world's Master, to manipulate events and dangle puppets on strings.

Jay did not understand the true danger. He still believed the Master to be this Perfidia, with whom he made some sort of deal; he expected to comprehend the motive behind his inexorable fate. He knew nothing of the true menace underlying this seeming gift—and Lalum could not warn him. Not with Mayfair watching, not when she could enact upon them agonies at any moment. Then how? How to protect him?

An idea alighted upon her. Her legs went into motion, carrying her down the trunk of the tree silently, so as not to draw attention. Yes—if she snatched the faerie away, devoured it now, blamed her irrepressible urges on the act—Mayfair would surely know the truth behind it, would surely punish her, but only her; Jay would remain ignorant.

She crept into the underbrush, approaching the illuminated trio from the shadows. Temporary continued to hold the faerie; it did not move. With a single burst of speed Lalum might manage to snatch it. But the Master saw all. Would Mayfair not strike her down where she stood? Erase her utterly, replace her with some other Lalum, identical in every regard except dutiful and obedient to her Creator, the same way this current Lalum with its grotesque body replaced the ruined woman eking an existence in the streets of Whitecrosse, the same way

that Lalum replaced the prim and proper young lady who the queen once clasped so brusquely? A procession of erased and reborn images of herself, consecutively more base and depraved, until even the final thing she clung tightly to herself, her faith—in God, in the hero, in her own capacity to perform at least some good from this debasement—until even her faith was erased utterly.

Perhaps she truly should die. Not for any blasphemous thoughts about undeserved forgiveness, but because she simply kept becoming a worse and worse version of herself.

Temporary was babbling: "It's not dead, you know. I don't know how the naturalists did it—it's something to do with this pin here, the one they inserted into the nape of the neck. Remove this, and it'll awaken."

"You describe it so casually," Olliebollen said.

"Well... It's not as though I did it."

"Your ignorance does not absolve you—cunt."

"Then remove the pin! I don't even want it. I swear!" She pushed the sleeping faerie toward Jay's face. "I swear, I really swear. Please believe me. I dislike violence."

Jay had fallen still, his eyes set dead at nothing, the black circles that enveloped them a blue sheen against the flame. Olliebollen, wings beating faster, only sometimes set a-wobble from her missing limb, zipped back and forth on either side of his face, as though trying to reconstruct a full picture from the two halves viewed severally.

Finally he spoke.

"I'm not taking the fairy. I'm definitely not going back to Whitecrosse. That's final. Temporary, if you want to repay me, then go away. Goodbye."

Without lingering for counterargument, he stormed off. Olliebollen zipped to follow him, hissing something like, "You could've at least saved the faerie anyway jerk!"

Lalum followed, leaving Temporary standing dumbfounded (or perhaps with merely her ordinary expression), when a single word shot sharply into her brain:

WHAT?!

It forced Lalum to flinch.

Why? Why is he—? This makes no sense. I gave him exactly what he wanted. How did he—how did he figure it out? And why won't he take it anyway?

Lalum attempted to stitch together a response via web spread between her fingers, but a sharp commandment cut her off.

That's slow and pointless. Simply think. I know what you're saying.

You... can read my mind?

If I want. There's too many minds to read them all at once.

That was reassuring, although now that Mayfair was in her mind with certainty, Lalum decided to endeavor not to think at all.

The hero dislikes feeling as though his actions are not his own, she said.

Plainly I see that now! Bah. I should have expected. The moment he saw my hand was in it, he would never do as I asked. It's always how it goes. Always!

Lalum felt as though there was little purpose to this conversation beyond Mayfair venting frustration. *I apologize, Lady Mayfair.*

No you don't! I see it plain as day. Even you're annoyed by me. And I suppose that means you're still not willing to do as I say and open the vault without Jay wanting it. Great. Simply stupendous.

Lalum attempted not to think about her satisfaction of the plot being foiled, but of course trying to not think about something only made her think about it. *I apologize, Lady Mayfair—for what I just thought.*

You know he doesn't like you right? I saw what he's been up to. He likes—her. Vivienne.

She could not know that. The hero was beyond the grasp of this world. The Master could not peer into his mind the way she did Lalum's.

Oh this is a waste of time. But guess what! It matters not. I don't need you anymore, Lalum.

Right. This would be it, then. The replacement of herself. Her mind or body altered once more—

No, what are you even thinking? That's absurd. I will not—My intention is not to enact wanton violence. I am not a wrathful Master, but a loving one. Everything I do I do for the sake of everyone in this world. Do you not understand that, Lalum? I will save them all. I will save you. I will save your sisters! Yet you accuse me of such deplorable villainy. Have you not considered that by rejecting me, you are the one bringing harm to this world and its people?

Yes. Lalum knew. She knew and yet—somehow, she was still happy seeing Jay reject the trap Mayfair set for him. Vivienne's trap as well.

Well. Do as you like. I'll save you whether you want me to or not. I shall be merciful and benevolent. You are no longer necessary. I know another way; it shall require me to convince nobody at all. Unlike Jay, none of them at the castle shall see my hand in it. Perhaps it is best he is leaving anyway; only he would be able to pierce my designs. My only regret is that my other way shall lead to violence. Perhaps great violence. Not violence by my hand directly, but I cannot absolve my hand in it. I have been given no other recourse, however. The obstinance of all involved have forced drastic measures...

Could Lalum even convince Jay to return if she wanted? What if this were all a ploy of Mayfair's, a trick to make Jay do as she wanted via her? Besides, Mayfair was not the only trouble. *She* remained in Whitecrosse, she who would corrupt Jay's soul with her innate foulness. No—no. Mayfair must be bluffing about this other way. She must.

Think whatever you like. I shall not speak to you again.

The voice went silent. The forest went silent—or always had. Lalum glanced around; no sign of the elf behind her; only a faint light far ahead where Jay treaded.

She hurried to return to his side.

"How odd," Olliebollen muttered once she neared. The faerie once more lazed about on Jay's shoulder, the previous excitement having finally subsided. "For a moment there, I thought I felt something. Just a glimmer—like the Master really *was* there. But it was different somehow. I dunno."

"It's obvious," said Jay. "I don't need your confirmation."

So Jay trudged onward. Onward: away from Whitecrosse. It wasn't about whatever quest he gave himself. Whatever lofty goal he set. Loftiness was the only point. He simply needed a reason to keep striving.

Were that only it, though. Were that only it, Lalum could keep him on his course, assist him forever, attaining nothing, but spending the journey alongside him as she desired. If that were only it. There was another reason keeping Jay from Whitecrosse, another reason he meandered so aimlessly into this endless mire. The name he'd spoken during his panic, the name that remained constantly on his mind despite all else that happened. Lalum could not pretend to be ignorant. She knew, in her heart she knew. She had followed him everywhere at the castle, had seen what he did and said.

It was funny; she ought to be overjoyed by his behavior. He was clearly rejecting *her*, fleeing her. Yet Lalum was not so ignorant. She understood the heart of a youth in love; she had been one herself, perhaps even still was one now. In such hearts, emotions were not always as they seemed, and what one fled one might even desire most. No, Lalum could not take his actions at face value. No matter how hard she wished. She could not entertain her delusions even a moment. She knew he would never love her. He would love even a half-formed inbred Saracen before her.

Everything Lalum did, everything she rejected, the salvation for herself and all others, she did in sullen hopelessness, in vain despair. Such was the nature of sin. Unlike Mayfair, who might justify her deeds in the name of some ultimate good, Lalum possessed nothing but an empty, unrequited feeling. A worse Lalum awaited her tomorrow. A worse the day after that. A worse, a worse, a worse...

Yet she was with him. She was with him and Vivienne was not. For as long as this moment lasted, she would treasure it; she would follow him to the end of this world.

Not Going 1-15 Next Year

Two weeks passed.

Jay wandered through forests and up hills and along rivers, living off edible plants Olliebollen identified and game Lalum caught in her webs. He spoke little; his thoughts were his own. He went nowhere and encountered nothing.

Castle Whitecrosse continued in an uproar for a few days. Accusations flew hither and thither, but Queen Mallory swiftly grew bored of the hubbub and returned to her own particular interests. Those interests included Shannon, and Shannon—a constant tremor in her fingertips, a constant desire to look over her shoulder—cleaved as close to the queen as the queen allowed, which at times was quite close. The plans for the sewer construction project proceeded, although slower than before, with a less furious impetus on Shannon's part; her eyes darted from face to face during meetings. She often rallied the dukes to establish a search party for her brother, but once the best trackers in the kingdom trailed him to the outskirts of Wode Reft, none determined the venture worth the risk. Meanwhile, Princess Vivienne of California resumed her studies under the tutelage of Prime Astrologer DeWint. By all outward appearances, she was not unsettled in the least, either by the attempt on her life or Jay's departure. But then again, none paid much attention to her, and nobody came calling whenever she decided to spend an entire day shut up in her room with some borrowed tomes, ostensibly for independent research.

The elf, Temporary, got lost.

Flanz-le-Flore petted and stroked her ward, Wendell Noh, as he recovered fully from his injuries. Even so, he was a man of few words, no matter how often she exhorted him to conversation or presented him with her most magnificent entertainments. In a fae realm, time seems to pass differently than outside it; possibly, Wendell was not aware how many days had ticked by in his saccharine sweet dream.

This was Whitecrosse in its natural state, when external forces became unconcerned with altering its inertia. Jay had gone nowhere, for no reason; Shannon went still within the safety of Mallory's embrace; Wendell Noh was ignorant of how much of him wasted away. And the final personage who might break this placid surface tension, who might send Whitecrosse awash in momentum one way or another, found herself utterly overwhelmed by the barrage of preparations Pastor Styles enforced upon her for her upcoming televised sermon. Not simply words to remember or people to meet, but information to learn. He had become aware, without probing, that Mayfair knew very little about the modern world, and so she underwent a crash course in knowledge common to even commoners: Electronics, cars, airplanes, countries, political systems, laws, culture, history, philosophy, psychology. The creatures, vegetables, and geography of the New World. Mayfair attempted to limit the time she spent on these impromptu courses, but the more he fed her, the more she wished to eat. One answer formed three or four or five more questions. This world began to take shape to her, and once part of the form was visible she needed desperately to know the whole of it. Time would pass as it did in Flanz-le-Flore's court, and she would look up to see another day

wasted, and her mind pushed to the brink of exhaustion. It left little time to tend to Whitecrosse. Near midnight, her mind overladen with memorized facts and figures, it was easy for that thought to creep in: Well, I'll be sure to get to it tomorrow. She was aware Temporary had gotten lost, and it would take only a few penstrokes to correct her route, but the inert state of the world was convenient to thoughts like these, divorcing her from any need to rush. And sometimes, especially late, as fatigue gripped her and she curled into the warm blankets of her bed, she thought: Perhaps Whitecrosse isn't worth the trouble after all... not when this world is so much richer, so much fuller, so much more meaningful... not when none of them in that world even listen to her at all... or like her.

In the morning, before Styles roused her for a large breakfast and another day of preparations, the urgency of her mission to rescue Whitecrosse returned and she would scratch out a few lines, facts necessarily established prior to enacting her final, bombastic plan to open the vault and acquire the power to transport the world. Then a knock would come at her door, she would need to get ready, and the cycle repeated—inching her closer to her goals in both worlds day by day.

Sansaime watched television. She ate Froot Loops by the box; Avery kept an entire cupboard stocked with them and still had to run to the grocery store often. It was nice, though, Avery thought. Having someone around, someone she could even converse with from time to time—although usually on the topic of whatever program was on. The tranquility, the routine, allowed Avery to recover her nerves from the absence of her children and the lack of any suitable leads after the disappearance of the "Door." Eventually, tired of sleeping on the couch, she let Sansaime move into Jay's empty room. This was the undoing of everything. Sansaime, after a lot of fiddling, figured out how to work his computer. And she began playing his video games. Afterward she spent far less time watching TV and far more time shut up in his room, commanding knights and wizards to wage epic battle against dark lords and dragons, and it was like Jay had never left. Perhaps, though, that too was a comfort.

That covered everyone of importance. Or did it? Wasn't there someone else? Another key figure, with a significant hand in the proceedings? A final person who might, in some unexpected way, shatter this uneasy peace?

The date was Monday, December 11, 2017. Nine days remained until Jay Waringcrane's warranty period expired and his Humanity became forfeit.

"Look. Look—no, look. Listen. It's already a way better deal than what your shitty soul's worth. Take a glance at yourself for a sec. Do ya *really* think you're worth more than what I'm offering? Do ya?"

Two days earlier the first snow of winter fell and now piles of gray slush dotted the alley. Sickening moistness imbued all. It somehow seeped even through five layers of bundled rag no matter how careful you tried to be. Not cold enough to freeze you solid but cold enough to make you miserable, hands clasped in front of a mouth spewing white breath into the pale morning air.

The man on the ground, though, didn't mind at all. As though this was still springtime to him. He was sprawled across the pavement, half inside and half outside his shoddily-erected tent,

his gigantic graying beard bristling halfway down his chest as his chapped lips split into a gruesome smile.

"I want to be a BIG man," he said, "a POW-ER-FUL man." The word stretched. Enunciated. Emphasized repeatedly within itself. He stretched his arms wide. His sooty palms—apparently he didn't consider it cold enough for gloves—spread the confines of his tent. "Put me at the TOP. I wanna eat luxury steaks and lobster EVERY night."

"Again. Your soul's a piece of crap. You don't have it in you to be someone like that. Not even with devil magic. Just not happening. Now what I *can* do is get you that fancy steak and lobster dinner tonight and every night this week. That's a good deal. That's me going the extra mile for you okay?"

"Powerful. Powerful." Lost in his own dream. The dream more intoxicating than its reality. What would a guy like this even do with power? What did power mean to a man who slept on the street?

Perfidia Bal Berith wore rags of her own. They swaddled her entirely, with a hood pulled low over her face to obscure as much of it as possible. She could not afford the fractional Humanity to alter her appearance so that she looked more human, so this was her next best option. She stood hunched. Her half-healed bullet wound throbbed agony. Liberal wincing let her bear it.

The resilience of devils varied. Satan and the other Seven Princes, those who fell from Heaven, were immortal in nearly every way. They'd once been angels, after all. Most devils lacked such esteemed origins and the correlated perks. They were born from human sin, or generated spontaneously out of Hell's numerous fiery lakes, or clawed their way out of some unlucky succubus' womb. Or maybe one of the Seven Princes crafted them from mud to serve as specialized servants. Most of these lesser devils were no stronger than humans. Some even less so. The Bal Berith "family" possessed somewhat a more Prideful history than that. An offshoot of Second Prince Beelzebub's lineage, they possessed some pretensions to nobility and even got a shoutout in the Bible (Judges 8:33: And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god.) Nobody in Hell gave a shit if you were "noble" unless you had power to back it up, but her distant degenerated claim to fame bought her slightly superhuman resilience, which was, for instance, how she survived having her head slammed by Dalt—twice—without permanent brain damage. And also how she survived being shot.

Still, it'd been close. The pain, excruciating, nearly prevented her from applying the ramshackle first aid necessary to prevent exsanguination. Any human would've died from gargantuan infection had they done what Perfidia did to plug the hole in that egregiously unsanitary sewer.

All that mattered was: Perfidia survived. To continue surviving, she needed Humanity. In her current situation, she simply had to take it on faith Jay remained satisfied in Whitecrosse and that in nine days—on December 20—the rest of his Humanity transferred to her as agreed upon in their contract. Even assuming that outcome, though, she needed to recollect the ten percent Humanity she'd taken up front and then squandered to create the second key to the Door. With her office unsafe and her skin reeking of feces and her more lucrative prospects

dry even ignoring those disadvantages, her best bet was homeless duty. She was now homeless herself after all.

"You know," the vagrant before her said, his mind shifting out of the penthouse of his dream, "I was once a cobbler."

"Were you."

"A cobbler makes shoes. That's what I did. I made shoes. Made em real good too. But there's no need for cobblers anymore. They got machines do that now. Betcha never seen a cobbler before, have you?"

"You're absolutely right. Never."

Homeless duty. A devil's last resort. The neediest people with the cheapest souls. If these men and women who slipped between society's cracks ever had more than the minimum singular Humanity it was a miracle. Most of them had less because every desperate devil got the same idea to target them, to make up for quality with quantity. The old man in front of her had 0.75 Humanity. Which meant some asshole already carved out a piece of him in exchange for some small favor. Which meant Perfidia could carve another piece.

"They like machines more than people. You dig? Machines don't think. They just do. Hell, they'd replace themselves with machines if they could. I'd do it too, shit. Just being a little machine making shoes all day without a care in the world. Don't get cold. Don't get hungry. Ain't that the life."

"I could turn you into a machine. Easy."

His eyes drifted. Not in the same direction. Only one looked at her. He was shrewder than he looked, given he feigned ignorance about the whole devils thing despite obviously having done the song and dance before. His mind coalesced on a new point: "We were saying something about lobster?"

Perfidia made a point of sighing. "Two weeks. Lobster and steak dinners. And I'll only ask for three-quarters a soul. How's that?" (Trying to explain to these people the distinction between soul and Humanity was pointless.)

"Half," the man said.

"Bah—fine! Have it your way." Perfidia reached into her collection of patchwork coats and rifled around aimlessly before enough time passed that she could grab the yellowed piece of paper that had always been readily accessible. A contract, simplified. From another pocket she produced a pen and handed both over to the man.

After a few moments mulling over the words, he clicked the pen and signed. One handshake later and the 0.5 Humanity transferred to Perfidia's possession.

A perfect deal. She'd hammed her desperation adequately, given the man reason to believe he was getting the better of her, convinced him to wish low, then aimed high and let him haggle

her to a reasonable price. Two weeks of dinner—cheap, cheap, cheap. With food you didn't even have the hassle of finding legal tender like you did with simple money wishes. Even 0.5 could cover it while netting her a modest profit.

That was the essence of homeless duty. Repeat that a good amount more times and she'd piece together the necessary amount to fill in for Jay Waringcrane's missing ten percent. Have his contract go off and that was her quota, with five days to spare before the end-of-year deadline (which was actually on December 25 instead of December 31, because devils liked to be petty like that). After she told the man to close his eyes and produced for him—to his scarcely-concealed delight—his first steak dinner (the others would come to him automatically without her needing to be there), she meandered off plotting her future.

Quota was priority one, but if she could only survive that, then she might be perfectly poised for 2018. If she scrounged enough Humanity to make a second Door into Whitecrosse and a few extra papers to manipulate the goings-on there... Then, assuming Shannon Waringcrane and Wendell Noh were still alive, she could pressure them to make a deal in exchange for their safe passage home. That'd carve a nice portion of next year's quota with enough extra to reestablish her usual business.

Easy. Simple. Straightforward. Sure Perfidia took some serious lumps. Sure she suffered some indignities. Whatever! Only foolish Pride cared about that. Besides, wouldn't seeing Shannon's desperation to escape Whitecrosse rub a soothing balm on that injury anyway? Just recompense for how she and her brutish boyfriend got the better of her. Exactly! Perfidia Bal Berith survived on her own up here over six hundred years and the lot of them would be dust in eighty tops. The truly wily didn't avoid every setback—they bounced back better from each one. Frankly Perfidia felt more optimistic now than she had lounging in the comfort of her office, blunting herself on year after year of easy routine.

If she really thought about it, she only got into quota trouble at all due to Sloth. Here on homeless duty she made deal after deal, put in the work, face to the grindstone. And she could do it. If she could do it for these guys on the streets she could do it with the middle-class white-collar workers who made up most of her clientele. Desperate people inhabited every socioeconomic station, but the white-collar types tried to make it more private. Her advertising model was totally out-of-date. Nobody trusted sketchy ads anymore. Trust, that's what they valued. It was a world of scams and horseshit and people were suspicious. Instead of sitting back in her office, waiting for them to come to her, she needed to go to bars. Meet people. Befriend them. Work a mark for weeks, sniff out what they truly needed, wait for an opportune time, and then offer to help. Innovate. Evolve. Study contemporary con artists, see how they made the magic happen, incorporate their techniques into her spiel. She grew too confident in her business model, thinking that because it worked before it'd always work. But she'd changed before, she could change again. That was the true part of herself she should take Pride in—

"Hey devil lady!"

Perfidia turned, thinking maybe one of her hobos recommended her to a friend, ready to spin her spiel. Instead she frowned. The man emerging out of the steam pumped from a nearby vent—she'd seen him before. One of her previous targets. He shouted her off in a flurry of

righteous indignation, spouting half-remembered Biblical verses as a kind of talisman. Even among the hobos you got people like that, people for whom an ideal meant more to them than bread.

"So you're back. What. Come to yell at me again? I got places to go. People to see." Her words sounded casual, but her eyes flitted to better survey her surroundings.

"Unholy abomination!" the man bellowed. Some of these guys just wanted an excuse to make themselves sound formidable. Like her latest target: I want to be a BIG man, a POWERFUL man. "Your cheap magic don't mean a thing, hear me! You maybe impressed my friends, but it don't mean SHIT you got that?"

"Yes, alright, fine. Think what you want." She backed up slowly. Best not to turn her back. Pipes covered the post-industrial fringe of this decrepit corner of Cleveland. Behind their rusted clusters others might lurk, vagrants ready to step out and surround her at a moment's notice. If it was just this man, she'd run if he got aggressive. But if anyone showed up behind and blocked the only other way out of the alley, she could—scramble up that pipe—and through that window.

The man made no aggressive moves. He slouched. His baize-colored coat sagged around his shoulders, gave him the distinct appearance of a scarecrow, with his coarse straight beard the stuffing shooting out at the neck. An ashen, trembling hand reached into one of his innumerable pockets and gripped the stalk of a rolled-up newspaper. With a single underhanded fling the paper rolled to Perfidia's foot.

"Third page. Your devil magic may impress them others, but I know! Oh I know alright. There's a higher form of power in this world. More mighty and magnificent than you could even dream. That paper's proof, devil bitch. Read it and crawl back to Hell where you belong!"

Alright. No planned ambush. Perfidia decided to humor him. Otherwise he'd follow her around haranguing her until she did what he wanted.

Keeping an eye on him, she slowly knelt down and picked up the paper. Who knew what he wanted her to see. Some miraculous event where a fireman saved someone's life, maybe. It could honestly be anything. Some of these guys were bona fide schizophrenics. It might be nothing to do with anything until he embarked on a logically tenuous diatribe to make it make sense in his mind and nobody else's.

Best to react as though whatever it was put the fear of God in her. Cry and snivel and run away once he started to laugh. Let's see. Third page. What do we have here that could—

Her fingers clenched. The long, jagged nails tore through the flimsy material. From the rents, little specks of paper detritus drifted to the ground before a passing gale swept them away in a cyclone.

"Eh-ha-hah. Yeah, that's about what I thought," the man said.

Perfidia's eye twitched. Twitched so rapidly it became impossible to focus on the words in the page in front of her, to read more past the headline of the advertisement printed there in a way meant to make it look like it was an article instead of an advertisement. Her mouth squiggled in a strange way and bent and folded her lips. A wave of perspiration broke on her brow, ice cold in the wind chill.

"Squirm, you Satan. Squirm, knowing there's an Almighty above you that does great things and leads His sheep into the light. I won't ever give you a single shred of my soul even if I were dying in a ditch somewhere, hear me you red-skinned whore? I'd rather choke on my own vomit than grab your hand to get up."

"I have to go," Perfidia mumbled. As though she spoke to someone who cared, to whom those ordinary words mattered. Within the frenzied twittering of her body a sort of calm overtook her and her fingers somehow mustered the dexterity to fold the newspaper back up and tuck it into her coat. All her previous contingencies broke apart. Saying "I have to go" again, she turned her back on the man hurling jeers at her and walked toward the end of the alley.

The rest of what he howled dispersed into the wind. He may have thrown something at her. Or maybe the wind did it. All her various coats and drapery fluttered about her body, her hair whipped about her face. Exiting the alley the rusted existence of Cleveland expanded before her, a rickety profusion of buildings either in disrepair or newly gentrified to an unseemly sort of glory, a futile bulwark against the entropy drifting from a lake with no horizon, a murky beyond where fog and water merged into one conglomerate grayness.

Seeing it all, the edifice of human ingenuity raised against God's own vomit, Perfidia struck a sudden thought: She misread, she misperceived, her memory was fallible. Hurriedly, certain of self-deception, she unrolled the paper again and turned to the third page and this time as she read the printed words she did so with the same rusted calm of the city, a brittle peace within her bones:

WITNESS A TRUE MIRACLE!

This Christmas Season

The Rev. Dwight J. Styles of the Cuyahoga Baptist Church

Invites You and Yours to See with Your Own Eyes

THE MIRACLE OF LAZARUS!

The Faithful MAYFAIR R.L. COKE Shall RAISE THE DEAD

It Is Not a Trick! It Is Not a *Fantasy!*

GOD IS ALWAYS AMONG US

SEE IT PROVEN ON CABLE TELEVISION!

OR See For Your Own Eyes!

WED 12/13 8:00 PM EST

Followed by a channel to watch it, a place to see it in person, and an email address to learn more and purchase tickets. A strangely low-quality rendition of Jesus, printed as faint as possible to give it the appearance of a watermark, backgrounded the entire affair.

Perfidia let her hands fall and raised her head to allow Cleveland's chill to sweep over her face. A primetime TV spot. That meant Mayfair had already shown off her staff's neat trick at least once, for an exec to put that much faith in her. (The channel wasn't one familiar to her at least, which probably meant it was some evangelical whacko program.)

It meant Perfidia Bal Berith was cooked.

Any action a devil took, on Earth or in Hell, was subject to God's scrutiny. God, ostensibly omnipotent, would and could know any devil's any action at any time, although in practice he either didn't care enough or was willing to turn a blind eye given the whole "Free Will" thing he set up to trick himself into deeming his own works justified. The way God would frame it, devils were his unwitting instruments toward the damnation of humans who chose to forsake him, and so that venerable practice of draining Humanity and magicking up material wealth were things he abided, the way cops abide a whorehouse as long as it turns a good profit. In truth, God was probably just lazy, or else not as omnipotent as he always told everyone. It didn't matter why. Devils could operate under most circumstances without fear of reprisal.

Introducing something into God's world that should not, should never exist? That was a different story. God didn't like anyone fucking up his precious creation. He made Satan spend a few millennia transformed into a snake for that whole business with Adam and Eve. A staff that reanimated the dead? A staff put on TV, a staff known to all mankind, a staff influencing their belief in God outright? It wouldn't be snake form for Perfidia. It'd be smote on sight.

She understood this risk when she let Mayfair through the Door. But she'd lacked better options at the time. Mayfair herself was less of a problem, she was simply a human without Humanity, which wasn't unknown to this world—see the hobo enjoying his steak dinner for instance. The undead Dalt was more of an issue, but given Dalt existed in the world before it might slip God's notice. Perfidia had assumed Mayfair wouldn't come into contact with enough dead people to use the staff much, or would adroitly realize using it would attract unwanted attention. This, though. This!

Oh well! Chalk up another oversight on Perfidia's part! Call her stupid, go on, it's fine. She's calling herself stupid. In retrospect of course that conniving uppity bitch wouldn't settle to lurk incognito. She was a princess, she was an egotist, and more than anything she wanted approval and acclaim. And of course she possessed the Biblical knowhow to slip into the fold of this country's nationwide evangelical sect. Of course!

Why didn't Perfidia consider it! What would she have even done if she did consider it? It wasn't like Perfidia made a suboptimal move. It wasn't! Really! What was she supposed to

do, refuse to open the Door and let Mayfair kill her? Risk everything trying to fight Zombie Dalt? The fact that she wriggled out of Mayfair's grasp at all despite her total lack of advantages was an achievement. An achievement! How was she supposed to—how—there was nothing she could have done! It wasn't a mistake, it was bad luck, it was terrible horrible luck. Most people in this country would've called the cops on Mayfair if they saw her make a morgue body stand up and walk around. Anything at any point could have stopped her without Perfidia's intervention. It wasn't fair. It was not fair at all!

So what now. Perfidia faced Cleveland, faced Lake Erie, faced the gray sky threatening a fresh bout of snow, faced the murky God beyond. Guess she died! Guess she waited the next two days and when Mayfair finally caught God's attention with her broadcasted breakage of the world's laws God looked down, spent a literal instant discerning which foolish devil caused this to happen, and turned Perfidia to ash right then and there. Perfidia wouldn't even get a chance to point out the staff didn't actually bring back the dead, it didn't matter. It was something that should never happen in this world, and for God that was all the justification he needed to bust out the lightning bolts.

That's the risk you took, her jeering voice spat. The clever little loophole of creating your own lower-level world so you could do anything you wanted, and cheaply too. In the real world, Humanity costs prohibited changes that fundamentally broke the laws. It'd normally be impossible for even the stupidest, most reckless devil to tie herself up in this sort of bind. So you had that going for you Perfidia! You were the stupidest and most reckless of them all, stupider than stupid.

Maybe she could draw a little Pride in that as she died. Who was the last devil God cared about enough to personally smite? It'd been centuries. The fuckheads down in Hell would remember her name at least.

Perfidia sighed.

She sighed because she knew she'd rather live.

She sighed because she knew a way she could live.

She sighed because she knew what she'd have to do.

Perfidia rolled the newspaper back into her pocket, pulled her rags around her to keep out the growing whoosh of cold wind, and slouched in a direction she'd thought—hoped—she would never need to go again.

She slouched toward the Hellevator.

They kept it—where else—in an abandoned factory on the lakeside, one of hundreds in this city that no longer made a thing. Before the factory, back when Cleveland was little more than a frontier settlement, a westernmost expansion into a vast and dark continent, it'd been in the woods. They liked to put it in haunted places, places that put a chill on the nape of a human's neck if they for whatever reason wandered inside, and while it would've been trivial to use Humanity to conceal its existence altogether or at least render it nonoperational to anyone who wasn't a devil, they liked it the way it was, where once every ten or so years some unfortunate soul by pure chance happened upon it and pressed the right (or wrong) button and found themselves plunging into the deepest horror of human imagination. For Hellbound devils such instances were a festive event.

It was just a rusted metal platform set centrally in the barren factory floor, flat and square save for a single narrow pole that jutted up with the controls. When Perfidia arrived there was already another devil. She recognized him, although he was currently in human form.

"Fidi, Fidi, Fidi, if it isn't little Perfidia." He stood off to the corner, shimmying his shoulders out of the trim serge blazer he wore as part of an elegant and refined suit.

"Hello John."

John Verschrikkelijk, or John Miller as he went Earthside, worked as a liaison between the Seven Princes of Hell and the paint company Sherwin Williams, which was headquartered in Cleveland. He claimed to be the one behind the company's nefarious COVER THE EARTH logo, which showed a bucket of blood-red paint being dumped over the planet. While some applauded the brazenness, Perfidia was more of a play-the-Beatles-backward kind of devil. As he folded up the collar of his button-up shirt and undid his tie with careful precision, he said casually: "Heading down to deliver your quota early? Or beg for an extension? Based on how you look I'd say the latter but you've been around enough to know how well that'll go over right?"

"I'm visiting an old friend."

She limped onto the Hellevator platform and looked at the buttons. Simple: Up and Down. Her fingertips rapped the side of the control panel as she waited for John to undress, which he continued to do unhurried and with attention to every quaint detail and accessory on his person. Of which there were many.

He slid out of his shirt, unlooped his belt, sat down to untie and then peel off each of his patent leather shoes, removed each sock in turn, placed everything in neat folded piles on the rotted wood bench under a row of giant blasted-out windows peering into Erie. He removed a shiny silver pocket watch on a chain and placed it on atop his shirt and then removed his pants and undergarments until he stood fully nude. At which point he snapped his fingers and his human disguise dispersed. His skin turned red, his eyes yellow, horns sprouted from his skull, a barbed tail whipped out from above his sleekly toned ass.

"Going down clothes and all Fidi?" he said as he placed his folded articles lovingly into a locker box under the bench.

It wasn't like she was wearing Gucci or anything.

He shut the locker and strode onto the platform, tail swishing as well as something else. "Ready?" she said impatiently and when he flashed her a smile she shot her finger out and pressed the button Down.

The Hellevator began its descent. It did not move particularly fast. A lot of rusty screeching went with it.

Once it was in motion she breathed. That was the hardest step. In a way John being there was good, it'd given her something else to focus on instead of the full meaning of what she was doing. She looked up, saw the small square of gray light receding into the distance, and felt her heart start to thump. But she couldn't show weakness in front of John, leastways because she didn't know if, once outside the rigorous order of Earth, he might try to sodomize or cannibalize or simply strangle her on a whim. He did nothing, only grinned knowingly, then said: "Don't expect me to help you through customs."

She didn't. She stared straight ahead at the wall sliding upward.

The reason she was able to do this—mentally—was because it'd been in the back of her mind for the past two weeks, even before she learned about the stupid stunt Mayfair was pulling. Her plans to fulfill her quota relied on Jay's Humanity coming home, but without access to Whitecrosse, she lacked any way to ensure that happened. Forget about keeping Jay satisfied—he could die at any time for any reason. Whatever happened, Jay's Humanity wasn't guaranteed, and she wouldn't know if she had it or not until five days before the deadline. What would she do then? The thought had been there. It would always be there. It was the last thing he said to her, after all. The safety net. "You're always safe here Fidi." Safe—but at another cost.

A sharp intake of breath. Eyes shut. Focusing on the plan, the future. On correcting mistakes with the best option available to her.

"You seem tense Fidi," John said in a mocking tone. He reached out, possibly to massage her shoulders, possibly to do something else, and she whapped him after only a second of his hand flitting through her rags. He shrugged. "Oh well. If things go wrong at the border take comfort that your good friend Verschrikkelijk will be there to watch your agonizing final moments."

"In fifty years Sherwin Williams won't exist anymore," she snapped. "Then where will you be huh John? Fodder. Fodder!"

John cackled, but they exchanged no more words as the Hellevator descended.

Finally it screeched to its destination with a jolt that disbalanced them both. The wall in front of them parted in two halves and the familiar smell of brimstone swept over them in a tremendous waft. John sniffed contentedly. "Home sweet home!" He strode through the doorway into the customs department that served as the final checkpoint between Hell and Earth. Perfidia wrapped her rags around herself and followed.

Customs spread left and right endlessly but did not go far ahead. Cracked glass cubicles, fanning in infinite order, coalesced around the single small door to Hell proper. Good luck

catching even a glimpse through that door until you'd been properly "processed." The faces beyond the cubicles floated phantasmagorically, leering down at the unfortunates seeking entry, willing on any whim to deny it simply to see the misery of the denied. A screen hung from the ceiling showing whose number was next to be called; beside the screen a sign read "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate," plagiarized shamelessly from Dante, who possessed a more creative mind than all devilry put together.

John and Perfidia took their numbers and waited in a zigzagging queue (there were no chairs) —John graciously let Perfidia go in front of him. From speakers overhead calliope music played on loop. Additionally, and nothing in the room told you this, if your feet remained touching the ground for ten consecutive seconds spikes would emerge from the floor and gore you. Every hour a random person in the queue was selected as a "lucky winner" whose prize was to go to the end of the line. About a third of the people in line were actually mannequins. If you were behind a mannequin (Perfidia was, wonderful) you were responsible for pushing it forward every time the line moved. The mannequins weren't alive but they had numbers and if you cut in front of a mannequin on purpose or by accident it was back to the end of the line for you. When a mannequin reached a customs official in his or her glass cubicle, the official took that as cause for a five to ten minute break; after returning, they would "deny" the mannequin entry and send them back to the end of the line.

Perfidia's half-healed wound didn't make the constant hotfooting necessary to evade the funny spike floor trap easy, but luckily the line was somewhat shorter than usual and her number was never named a "lucky winner," so she only spent sixteen hours in the queue. Presumably, this close to the deadline, most devils Earthside were preoccupied scrambling to fill their quotas, which accounted for the briskness.

Now for the hard part.

Perfidia shoved the mannequin in front of her to the first of the three glass cubicles with a customs official and then went to the second in accordance with all proper queue etiquette. The devil behind the glass, absurdly bloated, barely fit in the cubicle with all his or her (impossible to tell) rolls of fat. Presently, s/he was snacking on the severed leg of the most recent sop to fail to pass customs, biting into it like a drumstick as streams of blood splattered onto the ball-like curvature of his or her chest.

"Chmmmpff, snrk, grmph, alright. Name?"

"Perfidia Bal Berith."

"Perfidia Bal Berith," the official repeated in falsetto. "Oh well look at you! Noble blood tastes sweeter they say, but I can never tell the difference."

The official in the cubicle to the left, where Perfidia had pushed the mannequin, lit a cigarette and leaned back in his seat, feet propped against the glass. He was a scrawny guy, particularly in contrast to the whale in the cubicle next to him, which immediately made Perfidia think either Sloth or Envy. She prayed for Sloth. Her official, obviously, was aspect of Gluttony.

"Here to visit family. Bringing nothing with me except my clothes." Perfidia continued to lift and lower one foot after the other in turn; the spike trap minigame didn't stop until you were

outside the building.

"You look tasty," Gluttony said. "What if I just had you for a snack instead? It's nice inside my stomach, I hear. That's what they tell me after I devour them—"

"Whooooo wants their cock sucked~?" John cried out, pitter-pattering over to the third window waving his hands flamboyantly to the official with gigantic horns and piercings on every inch of visible skin. The official, nodding and snarling in delight, threw open a compartment in the cubicle and John vaulted through, landing perfectly between the official's spread legs before a series of foul slurping sounds commenced.

"Anyway." Gluttony smacked its lips, kneaded its bloated arms into its corpulent bulk, and forced a liquid belch from the cavernous recesses of its throat, sending strands of meaty matter trickling down its curvature. "What I'm hearing, Miss Bal Berith, is you don't got a legitimate reason to be in Hell at all."

"Noble-blooded bitch thinks she's better than us common folk," the guy in the left cubicle grouched. "Airheaded idiot expects things to just get handed her. That's how those highborn fucks think."

Envy. Certainly Envy. Shit.

"My bowels are a better place to be than Hell anyway. You'll have plenty of company there, Little Miss Bal Berith, at least until I shit out what's left of you."

The Glutton tossed the picked-clean femur aside, shifted its cottage cheese-textured folds to make room, and then opened its cubicle's compartment door. A hand shot out with terrifying speed and clamped around Perfidia's entire body, forcing one arm to her side (she managed to lift the other in time) and lifting her easily off the floor toward an expanding black maw. Slobber fell in fat droplets; one particularly ill-placed bead forced her to squeeze one eye shut. The Envy guy watched with a growing grin.

Testament to the doldrum of their job that the two of them could only muster this much excitement for something that so neatly tickled their respective aspects. No aplomb, none of the drawn-out suspense that the entire ridiculousness of the queue was meant to engender.

"You don't want to do that," Perfidia said to the mouth above. "It'll end bad for you."

That was enough for the mouth to close. The Glutton's beady eyes, set deep behind paunches of tissue, drilled down into her with cautious suspicion.

"Don't listen to that come on," the Envy guy said. "She's not worth shit for all her blue blood. Go on, bite her head off! Please, my break's about to end."

For a moment, all was quiet save the sucking sounds emanating from the cubicle to the right.

"Why's that, huh? Why's it gonna end bad for me?"

Perfidia reached to her chest and tugged down the rags there, not bothering to avoid ripping them. They flapped aside, exposing her chest, and without breaking her direct stare into the

Glutton's eyes, she extended a finger to point to the triangle of skin just above her breasts. She didn't need to look. She knew what was there and exactly where it was. How could she not? It was etched into her flesh, scarred deep. Over two thousand years had passed and she still remembered the day it was put there, clear as nightmare. She could wear suits or even rags to keep it concealed for decades on end, but she could never forget. And now, coming back to Hell, it was time to at least make some use of it.

The Glutton squinted, as much as its beady eyes could squint without sealing into nonexistence. "Property... of... U.B.B."

"Ya know who U.B.B. is, right?" Perfidia said. "No? Maybe ask your Lustful colleague over there. They're sure to know."

"Who fucking cares?" The Envious opened his own cubicle's compartment, crawling out to spit smoke in the face of the mannequin. "The fact she's some other shitbag's toy just makes it all the better to break her. If you won't do it I will."

Which was, of course, the issue with Envy guys. She kept her gaze level on the Glutton, though, and felt the slight tremor that traveled through his sea of flesh. Without breaking eye contact, the Glutton reached up a knuckle and rapped it against the glass to get the third devil's attention.

"What? What is it?" he said, his hands gripping the top of John's head. "Can't you see I'm busy here?"

"U.B.B.," said the Glutton. "Is U.B.B. someone to fuck with."

A sharp, gleeful cackle mired in an orgiastic grunt cut the sentence halfway into the final word. "Never. Never in a million fucking years! If it's one of U.B.B.'s girls, you pay. You pay upfront or you pay later, I can tell you that! That one's psycho. You don't take what's his."

The Glutton demurred as he let Perfidia down. "Hrrm." It came like a viscous rumbling. "Well. Okay—"

"No! No you can't do this. You can't!" Mr. Envy slithered out of his cubicle, rattling drily. "She must be broken. Beaten, battered, rent limb from limb, ruined past all hope of return. He's not allowed to have her. What could he possibly have done to deserve her? Sitting pretty on his ass, that's all any of them ever do! Here I am, busting my balls off every waking hour sorting the chaff from the riffraff and they only pay me a pittance for it. I gotta pull a second job just to hit quota. You guys know what it's like cuz it's the same for you. We get jack shit. We deserve her! I do at least!"

He appeared incapable of walking; his legs were only for show, welded in place into a permanent seated position so that he needed to pull himself along the vertical slab of glass that formed the cubicle with long, cracked, and jaundiced claws. Perfidia stared him down as he oozed toward her; making a run for it without proper clearance would only seal her doom.

"The way I see it, she's got no legitimate reason to enter Hell. The rules apply to her as much as anyone else and if that U.B.B. chucklefuck wanted to keep her he should've kept a better

eye on her. You're mine now sweetheart. I'm taking you home with me. You'll like my place. I've got chains and nothing else. Nothing else until now—!"

The blood-dripping hand of the Glutton reached out and wrapped around the Envious one's sack-like body just before his fingernails seized Perfidia's hair. His thrashing body was reeled back into the Glutton's cubicle and he spewed venom in a lavender arc that struck Perfidia's rags and sizzled before a wide cavity opened between the Glutton's waves of lard: a second mouth. Toothlessly, it sucked what served as its lips around the emaciated form of the other, pulling him deeper even as he kept his gaze riveted on Perfidia.

"Mine! Mine! Let her be mine! Let one thing in this world be miiiiine...!" He sank as though the Glutton's body were quicksand, until only a single flailing hand remained. Everyone in the queue behind Perfidia groaned; this would delay them even longer.

The Glutton rumbled. "Go on. Go already! I'm still salivating just looking at you, so get out before I can't help myself!"

He slammed his fist on a button and the door between the cubicles opened. Perfidia wasted no further words and hobbled out into Hell.

It didn't hit her until her first five steps out the door, onto the sizzling brick bridge over a moat of lava with all of it spread out before her: Hell. How long had it been? She left in the early 1600s and didn't look back—always, she'd paid the fee to have her quotas shipped rather than deliver them in person. Yet it remained as she remembered, even the parts she did not remember. Chief among the familiar non-remembered, spanning the entire façade of the nearest skyscraper, was the gargantuan poster that showed nothing save the face of their Archfiend, Satan, his expression part stern and severe and part confident even to the point of relaxation, his hair now coiffured like a Korean idol but his eyes the same golden glint. Below his visage a single word was printed: BELIEVE.

The island beyond the moat pullulated with structures of every conceivable geographic and historical period, sometimes dizzyingly at odds with each other. The roof of an Edo temple split open to produce, like Athena from Zeus, the concrete protrusion of an art deco tower. A Roman coliseum, fallen into decay, now served as the ground for a rollercoaster that looped and spiraled between its columns; the train rattling down the rails flew off, corkscrewed in midair, and exploded before hitting the ground. On some parts of the island the buildings had been built so densely together that the ground gave way and swept into the lava river, where a few rooftops still floated with tents erected to house squatters. Neon signs competed with skyward spotlights. Animated billboards advertised casinos, love hotels, buffets, opium dens, crack houses. One flashing sign enticed viewers to the nearest cinema to watch a film titled *Endless Sleep* by "renowned, award-winning director" Prince Belial, Lord of Sloth. The sign proclaimed the film was "twenty-four hours long" and "a perfect way to waste your day." So even the Seven Princes could hop onto bleeding edge human trends like cinema.

"Wowza." Bare feet padded up to her; John Verschrikkelijk, wiping his mouth clean, knocked Perfidia out of her sightseeing. "'Property of U.B.B.' huh. Never woulda guessed you were so well-connected Fidi. Sure, you've got the same last name and all, but that usually doesn't mean anything. How come you never told me you were a succubus?"

"Because I'm not."

"The brand doesn't lie, girlie. Hey! I've got some spare Humanity. Maybe I'll stop by Ubik's tonight and rent you out. Wouldn't that be a gas, huh?"

"You'll be disappointed John."

"Sure, sure. I bet he'll want you to himself your first night back. Well, whatever. Best to keep business and pleasure separate anyway. See ya—or not!"

He sped off. At her same limping pace, Perfidia continued into the city.

No matter how much the devils stole from humanity's latest accomplishments—styles, cinema, weapons of war—one thing in Hell always remained the same: Pandaemonium. The tower, the first thing those fallen angels constructed upon arriving here, loomed high above anything else built. After all, Satan's Pride wouldn't let any other building come close to outshining his glory. A beacon built of crystal, it was always easy to tell where in Hell you were based on its vibrant pillars in relation to you. Nowhere down here could it go unseen. And so, even with much of the landscape changed, even with new roads and roadblocks, Perfidia kept doggedly toward the spot she knew from before. A weak-looking girl like her caught the eye of several unsavory passerby, but she was quick to pull apart her rags and reveal her brand to resolve any incipient confusion. Eventually, her identity preceded her. The imps and cretins whispered among themselves on the street, stealing curious glances her way without regaling her with even a wolf whistle.

She trudged for hours—and then she turned onto a street that despite everything remained alike. The deeper into Hell she got, the less new construction clotted the byways, and this avenue was almost identical to the way it'd been four hundred years prior. Pandaemonium swelled massive to the northwest only a few blocks away.

A lavish road of soft velvet replaced the hard brick upon which she'd trod. The buildings possessed a palatial flair, elegant with the best the Greco-Romans had to offer. A fountain sat square in the middle of the street to prevent speeding and bubbled a frothy opaque liquid instead of water. No signs or gaudy advertisements littered the view; those who came here knew why already. The road tapered to a culdesac and at the end a temple rose, possessed of solemn spirituality. But of course, this was Hell. It was no God worshipped in that temple.

Upon approach, Perfidia's sense of doom returned. Everything inside her had remained relatively calm the long, long journey to reach this point: the Hellevator, the queue, the city. Memory no longer allowed her reprieve, though. As she scraped down the forlorn path the urgent thought gripped her that she could still turn back, she could leave and go home, find some other way to dispose of Mayfair or failing that ignore her entirely, curl up and hide, surely somewhere God's eye could not land upon her, surely somewhere was better than here. Surely the situation was not so dire. To throw away everything—four hundred years free! Four hundred years without even a glimpse of his face. She gripped her flesh through her rags and dug her claws deep to spur her onward. More than the horror of what waited in that temple was the agony of losing, losing again and again and again and again, losing to humans and even nonhumans she herself created. Her Pride suffered enough daggers already. Best to

go nuclear, to end it thoroughly once and for all, than to continue to receive cut after cut after cut after cut until she remained a bleeding unrecognizable stump aquiver on the carpet.

She ascended the steps to the golden mezzanine that served as the palace's patio. The arched doorway looked like the cavernous maw of the Glutton in customs, but she focused her thoughts on Mayfair, on Jay and Shannon Waringcrane, on survival. If she died, she died. If she lived, in a hundred years they'd all be dust and she'd still be around to sneer. Longevity was Pride's greatest ally. No triumph, no matter how decisive, lasted forever. This too shall pass. Perfidia, who might linger forever, won thanks to the simple and unrelenting power of erosion.

No more steps left but her pace stayed molassal as she cleared the final stretch to the entrance of a palace that was, like her, "Property of U.B.B." Before the door she stopped for a final time. She breathed in. No turning back. Her hand reached for the silver knocker and—she knocked. A thunderous sound.

For the span of eternity nothing happened. Then, with a grand yet strangely distant boom, the doors opened inward. Her Master stood before her. Her Master, her older brother: Ubiquitous Bal Berith.

A Hell She Couldn't Crawl Out Of

Ubiquitous Bal Berith. In no way had the centuries altered him. Which wasn't true. The gigantic, floor-scraping leopard-print fur coat didn't exist in the medieval era when Perfidia last crawled out of this Hell, unaware until she escaped it that it had been Hell at all. Nor existed the absurd purple felt hat with customized holes for his horns, or the gold chain with a diamond-encrusted piece that read LUST hanging from his neck. His two-toned spectator shoes with pump soles came straight out of contemporary styles, and his heart-shaped sunglasses, and the rainbow array of gemstones dangling from his long pointed ears, and essentially any superficial article or accessory that adorned his person. But it was him. Ubiquitous Bal Berith, exactly unchanged—she knew before he even said a word.

The word he then said, wielding a savage smile, was: "Why—"

Instantly interrupted by the yapping, snarling, slobbering thing that thrust itself between the trailing folds of his fur coat and pounced onto Perfidia, hurling her onto her back and pinning her to the mezzanine beneath its full weight. Hot blasts of breath buffeted her. The face pressing close had its eyes completely covered by a broad, gold-embroidered strip of black leather, and black leather also formed a choker around its thin neck from which a small medallion dangled. Much of the body, in fact, was tightly bound in black leather, except conspicuously the large breasts, which dangled completely exposed with pierced nipples that struck at Perfidia's rags like matches trying to light.

"Off her bitch," Ubiquitous said, a command that effected no change whatsoever in the doglike devil's posture. In fact, all the dog did was dry hump Perfidia's hips while raggedly panting and lolling its tongue.

"Off!" Perfidia pushed her hands against the dog thing's shoulders and its brainless happy panting turned into a feral snarl. Before Perfidia could pull her hands away, gnashing jaws full of razor-sharp teeth drove into a wrist and shook it like a chew toy.

"Bad! Bad dog. Dumb bitch. Brainless goon." Ubiquitous reached into his fur coat and produced the lashing crack of a long black whip, which he flicked again so that it coiled around the dog's throat and yanked it back bodily. Whimpering, the dog scurried back into the palace and vanished around a corner.

"Yow! Pain in the ass to break in new bitches." Ubiquitous coiled the whip and stashed it in his coat. "Forget it. Fuck dat noise! Look who it fucking *is*. Perfidia Bal Berith. My own little sister. Love it. Fucking LOVE it!"

He flicked his flopping fur sleeves out and tilted onto a single heel, his other leg kicking the air wildly. For an instant he looked like a sail flapping in the wind, unconnected to anything so that in the next moment he would fly away entirely. He didn't. He remained grounded. Perfidia rose, rubbing her bleeding arm.

"Lemme guess. Lemme guess Fidi. Shit went down and you went down in the shit." He sniffed. "Literally. So finally that Pride you pretend to have cracked. Came crawling back to

ME. So what's the offer? Huh? Come on, come inside, let's talk. I wanna hear you say it Fidi. You know me."

Yeah. She knew. She limped all this way knowing what the arrangement would be. She'd entertained vague thoughts that maybe his desire would give her some bargaining power. Just a delusion designed to put one foot in front of the other. She knew. She always knew, and as he led her into his palace, as the memories rushed back in a downpour, a sickly crawl came across her skin. Here was his cluttered foyer, filled with even more knickknacks and gewgaws than before. Most not even valuable: abstract art, children's toys, other kinds of toys. Every so often something glittered gold or diamond, but only every so often. No thought given to organization or even aesthetic. No, he hadn't changed.

Something had though. Something felt off. She couldn't put her finger on it, couldn't figure out what was missing. Ubik hoarded so much garbage even her excellent memory couldn't keep a perfect catalog. She recognized some of the baubles, didn't recognize others, hadn't the faintest what item was gone, what was different, only that *something* was.

"Funny too Fidi. Was just thinking about you the other day." 'The other day' could mean decades. "In correlation with my new bitch even. She was Pride too, wouldja believe it? Or thought she was. Haughtiest little slut. Woulda sooner died than enter my employment—almost. You know how it is. Hard times for a no-name devil on the streets alone. Harder times still these past few years with the tighter quotas. When it came down to it, she didn't want to die. Make one crack in Pride's shell, amazing how quick the rest shatters. Working on putting Humpty back together though. When I do she'll be a fine earner and finer home defense. Saw her savagery from moment one. Bristling under those blue-blooded pretensions: a beast. Wrath and Lust—that's a combination certain clients will die for. Until then she's just a bitch. My bitch, but just a bitch. Love her though. Mwah!" He blew a kiss to the rafters, where random tapestries and flags hung.

The point behind his chatty digression came clear enough. And he wanted Perfidia to say it herself. To ask it herself. To beg. Grovel. Could she? If he told her what he wanted and merely made her nod, it'd be possible. She could deactivate herself and take whatever he dished. But that wasn't the point for him. After all, despite his career, despite his gaudy necklace, his aspect was not Lust. And despite all his junk, the things he wanted to possess most were—

She realized what was missing.

"Ubik," a cutting, suspicious curiosity in her voice, "where are your girls?"

Before she finished the final word his fist was midair and to punctuate her question it rammed full force into what appeared to be a porcelain drinking fountain unattached to any piping system, and though he recoiled whipping a bloody knuckle the fountain did wobble with pendulous scraping weight.

"Those shit-eating grinners! Those fucking Seven Princes! Jesus Christ. Yeah, I said the name. I'll say it again: JESUS CHRIST!"

He sought something else to punch or kick, looked among the piled crap, but of course all that stuff was too valuable to him, too fragile. His eyes fell on Perfidia.

Uh oh.

His typical disposition darkened, his smile turned cruel as he advanced. No point running. Her eyes shut, she braced herself—but no punch came.

When she opened her eyes, he'd wheeled away, fluttering like a sail again, although with his bloody knuckle at his side to drip over his floor.

"Their fucking quotas. Higher every year. Keep making more devils too. More competition. More, more, more. Their mantra!"

"Yours too," Perfidia said. "No need for hypocrisy."

"I'm no hypocrite. I'm out for me and what belongs to me and nothing else. Seven Princes want more, means I get less. Fuck that. Fuck that sideways and in all three holes." He fired double middle fingers to the same sky he blew his previous kiss, although this time the particular direction made clear his intended target: he aimed straight for the pinnacle of Pandaemonium, parts visible through the foyer's elevated windows. "Suck my ASS you Stalins."

"Wait. Don't tell me—you're not reaching *your* quota, Ubik?"

He laughed, short and cold and bitter. "Course I hit my quota you stupid slut. But I got one hundred and seventy-four girls including the bitch you met at the door. Gotta hit their quotas too. And guess what? When quotas are tight across the board, that means fewer people wanna spend what little they got. So it fists me. Fists me right in the ass."

"If I recall correctly that's not something you fully oppose—"

"Oh! Oh okay. You're bleeding and dropping flakes of dried shit over my foyer and you think you're still good enough for snarky comments, huh Fidi? Well fuck you. Shit outta luck. I don't got enough to spare. Simple as that. I hoped to make you beg for it first just for the satisfaction but it doesn't matter how much you beg: *I don't got it*. Besides you really oughtta know better than to come back at all. You wanted that shot to be your own devil, stupid fake Pride of yours, and despite everything I gave it to you. I *gave* it to you! Wouldn't have done it for any but you, Fidi. Recognize that means something. If you blew your shot too bad. So sad." He lifted his knuckle to his lips and extended a long tongue to lap at the blood. His eyes narrowed. "Unless you wanna be mine again—forever. I protect what's mine."

"If you protect what's yours then where are your girls Ubik."

A pause. A formative sigh, then a flippant turn to face anywhere but her. "Managed to hit up my deeper contacts. Kedeshah helped. Bigshot Lust types. Mainly my chief rivals. None wanted just a quick fuck though. So I came up with a new package deal. Temporary—*temporary*—ownership change. One hundred seventy-two of my girls now officially belong to someone else—until the end of the year. Then I get em back."

Every word came out as a struggle. Many were mumbled. Perfidia found it reassuring to know she wasn't the only one who'd abandon her prime principles when pushed.

"So if I became yours again, you transfer me to someone else, and that's how you pay my quota."

"Correctomundo hermana."

"Great. Cuz I'm hitting my quota already fuckface."

He turned to face her. Baffled.

"It's always best to get Humanity straight from the source, huh?" she continued. "I've got a human lined up that'll cover me."

"Then why the fuck are you down here looking like a six-day-old shit?"

"I made a mess. A creation of mine's gone out of control. I need help destroying it before God catches on."

His jagged nails tugged down his sunglasses. "You came all this way, prepared to beg, just for extra muscle?"

"I'm hitting my quota but just barely. I can't afford to spend a fleck more."

"Not to say I'm not intrigued. But you can't trick some humans to do it for you?"

"I have contacts in local law enforcement but this creation's thorny. Cops might stop her but if they get their hands on her staff—"

"Her?"

"If you'd prefer to catch her alive, whatever. As long as she and her staff are off Earth. Ubik. I know things ended poorly between us but we can work together can't we? I'll offer you 'temporary ownership,' like that deal you've got for your girls. A year, let's say. Yours for a full year. All I need in exchange is—"

His laugh cut her off. He threw back his head and bellowed a boisterous, deep-throated laugh that didn't fit the narrow body she knew—knew all too well—that he possessed under that thick coat of his. The laugh echoed in the rafters of the palace's gigantic foyer and returned magnified. His sunglasses fell low on his nose and the blood-red swirls of his sclera twisted terribly. He grew, or a phantasmic etching of himself grew out of him, half-faded into his home, while dust and pebbles rained from the cracks above and all his accumulated possessions twittered and rattled and even toppled.

Then he stopped. All at once he went silent, still, small, and stale. His face betrayed no emotion. When he spoke it came with steep venom:

"You're filthy. I can't stand to look at you. Or smell you. If you ripped off your clothes and offered yourself right now I wouldn't even take you. Clean yourself up, skank."

Perfidia forced herself to avoid smiling. She'd hooked him.

"Kedeshah," Ubik said.

"Yes, Master?" said Kedeshah, who'd always been there.

Ubik's big coat concealed his lanky, disproportionate elongation; Kedeshah only rose to his ribs. She wore a simple white sundress. On the hem, from which bare red shins emerged, a few flowers were printed. Simple bead bracelets rattled on her wrists as she clasped her hands behind her back and bent forward slightly, tilting her head to allow her piqued ear to better hear her Master's command. She bobbed up and down on the balls of her inward-tucked feet, while her tail, with two pink ribbons tied near the barb, fwipped back and forth with metronome timing. An iron shackle hung around her neck. Her sweet smile distracted from the blank intensity of her eyes, which riveted on Perfidia heavy enough to dig her three inches into the floor.

"Clean her. Patch her up. Prepare her. I'm gonna mull shit over in the meantime." Already Ubik floated away, facing nobody, swirling among his collection. "Wish ya never came back Fidi. Wish I coulda just forgot you."

Kedeshah bowed her head, finally relinquishing the physical force of her gaze. "This way, Miss Perfidia."

Perfidia had no choice but to follow.

When Ubik said he'd loaned out 172 of his 174 girls (he called them all girls, even the ones who weren't), with the untrained dog being one of the remaining, Perfidia already knew who the other was. Even following behind her, without those eyes aimed to gore, Perfidia's heart thumped harder than it had at any other point in the journey. Good rule of thumb to fear any devil older than you. John Verschrikkelijk and the customs devils and most of the losers in the street were babies next to Perfidia Bal Berith, new devils crapped out in accompaniment to the exploding human population, but Kedeshah—

"Thinking about me?" Kedeshah turned and continued walking backward with bouncy steps while she kept her hands clasped behind her back. She stuck out her tongue playfully. "It's been a long time, Miss Perfidia. Have you been well?"

"Yes."

"That's lovely." Feathery voice, soft as down. A tiny hand with well-trimmed nail pointed to a door. "In here, if you please."

The bathhouse. An enormous sea of white tile in well-caulked squares. Elevated platforms for jacuzzis, shower nozzles, dispensers for white cream soap and other slick fluids. The ends fell apart in the unbroken whiteness, but they had to be broad now that Ubik's operation had expanded to a whopping one hundred and seventy-four girls, enough for an entire military company. Plus extra space to entertain any clients who might find it enjoyable to join in the fun. To Ubik, though, the broadness alone might be the appeal, the sheer industrial size of the place despite its unblemished finery.

"You'll not need such filthy things anymore, Miss Perfidia." It happened while Perfidia was still taking in the bathhouse—an instantaneous flick of that ribbon-tied tail and all the layers of Perfidia's clothes shuddered off her body, cut cleanly down the center. A tap in the nearest tub turned on and steam sizzled. A gentle push turned Perfidia toward the correct direction and slowly, reluctantly, Perfidia stepped forward.

"You've had a hard time, haven't you, Miss Perfidia?" Kedeshah curved her body and scanned her heavy eyes upon Perfidia's bare form. "Let alone what Miss Bitch did to your arm, that wound in your back's quite serious. Oh, poor Miss Perfidia. Let's clean you up and make everything all better, shall we?"

The tip of Kedeshah's tongue swept out, wetting her lips. Perfidia heaved a breath and slowly lowered herself into a perfectly warm tub, on the surface of which floated bubble icebergs with a pink shimmer.

She exhaled. The grime and dirt cracked and broke off her body nigh instantaneously. The taut muscles surrendered to a kind of calm.

"There. That's much better, Miss Perfidia. You needn't fear me. We were comrades once; we may soon be comrades again." Kedeshah sat on the edge of the tub, rubbing Perfidia's back gently with a washcloth as she slowly tugged the heels of her white, ribbon-toed shoes off her feet one after another. Barefoot, she swept her tiny legs into the bath and slipped in, not bothering to remove her sundress. "You didn't always fear me." A slight pout in those eyes.

Perfidia averted her gaze as the washcloth rolled along the front, cleaning the crevices where was burnt the brand Ubik once gave her and that could never be removed even after he allowed her to leave his service.

Kedeshah's white dress turned clear in the water. Her thin red body showed through; the fabric clung to her breasts. When Perfidia glanced down, a nauseous wave gurgled in her gut.

"You used to rape me," Kedeshah said so sweetly. "You waited on your haunches like Miss Bitch for Master to give the command and when he did—remember, Miss Perfidia? Remember how eagerly you pounced on me, how you snarled and tore at my clothes, how I screamed and cried for mercy, how Master clapped and laughed? What a gay old time we used to have."

Her lips—her body—moved close. The wet fabric of her dress did nothing to diminish the touch of chest to chest. The soft small fingers touched, caressed. Something in a distant tub splashed and when Perfidia's jittery eyes glanced to check Kedeshah caught her cheek and pulled their faces back together. The force of those eyes made Perfidia's skin sag on her skull, the muscles and tendons tugging downward to the brink of pain.

Kedeshah lifted the arm the dog bitch bit and pressed her lips to it. The jagged scours of flesh came back together, knitted neatly so that no stitch or seam or scar remained. Kedeshah's kiss—the secret to Ubiquitous Bal Berith's success. His girls could be cut, bashed, broken, strangled, mangled, stabbed, sodomized, split, degloved, crushed, crumpled, or castrated, and that kitten-soft kiss was always there to make them whole again.

Perfidia shook her head. "No." The word dry and porous. "No. No. I killed that part of me. I'm not that dog anymore. I'm—I—and he's already got a new dog anyway."

"He has seven." Kedeshah swirled around Perfidia like a sprite, and soon Perfidia felt those lips on the half-healed gunshot wound in her back, the tiny tongue probing into the scarred depression. "He has seven," she repeated as the lips left healed flesh, "but he's never happy with any of them. That's why he always tries to train a new one. They're never quite you, Miss Perfidia."

Something beyond the confines of the tub was sloshing across the tile, a slow and slimy thing. Perfidia dared not look away from Kedeshah as she crawled back to Perfidia's front. But then, like a flash, an angle appeared, an escape.

"Maybe," she swallowed a dry lump, "maybe he shouldn't take on more girls than he can chew. Is he really missing his quota? Him? He's the biggest succubus den in Hell isn't he? Or did me leaving reverse his fortunes too?"

Kedeshah's eyes narrowed, their weight focused, Perfidia's cheeks caved and her gums ached. Guardedly: "He is still the biggest."

"The guys at customs were complaining about their wages too. They're government guys though, they might not get paid well but they should get paid enough. Things Earthside suck of course, but it's like that down here too? The fuck's going on Kedeshah? What're the Seven Princes doing? Don't tell me Mammon's got the other six following his lead. What about Baal —"

The sweet smile finally dropped off Kedeshah's face. The squelching thing drawing ever closer to their tub fell still and went silent. A heave of breath escaped Perfidia's lungs: one thing still could clutch Kedeshah's attention.

The Seven Princes, rulers of Hell. Original fallen angels all, confederates in their plot to usurp God. Constructors of Pandaemonium, corrupters of humanity, and to whom all Humanity eventually went thanks to the quotas lesser devils were expected to fulfill. Each claimed dominion over one of the seven aspects. There was, of course, the leader: Satan, Lord of Pride. Then his faithful second fiddle, Beelzebub of Envy, followed by Moloch of Wrath, Belial of Sloth, Mammon of Greed, Rimmon of Gluttony, and last and least, Baal or Ashtoreth of Lust. Called Baal *or* Ashtoreth because they were both, the male Baal and the female Ashtoreth, capable of being one or either at any time: a complete master of sex.

Kedeshah was their selfcestuous offspring. Entitled to reign over a vast swath of Hell as second only to Pandaemonium's highest authority. Yet here she was. 'Property of U.B.B.,' same as any other common succubus. Perfidia didn't know why. But the subject of those Seven Princes always, no matter what, brought what lurked behind those eyes to fore, where it was far safer for it to be.

"It's Ashtoreth now," Kedeshah said. "Only Ashtoreth."

"And why—"

"I don't know why. I don't talk to them. But it's clear they're planning something. Something big. Who knows? Maybe they think they can squeeze out enough for a Divinity."

"A Divinity," Perfidia tongued the word. "A Divinity? That's ridiculous. That's only a theory —"

"Maybe. But there's what? Seven billion humans on Earth now? You'd know better than me, Fids. They're not living in thatched-roof huts anymore either. They're not even confined to that world." For an instant Perfidia tensed, thinking of Whitescrose, before she realized Kedeshah meant space travel. "Who knows. Maybe there's enough Humanity there in the aggregate to reshape the world entirely. That'd be Divinity by definition—no?"

"I guess."

The cold tone of voice turned the water in the tub lukewarm. A chill settled into Perfidia's body and her arms reflexively wrapped around herself while Kedeshah's gaze fell on her only half as heavy as before. "Ueckhhh," came the phlegmatic sound out of Kedeshah's throat. "You've ruined the mood entirely, Miss Perfidia. What a shame—maybe you really have changed. You're ready now, so get out."

Kedeshah climbed out of the tub and her wet feet smacked the tile as she tromped away, scooping her shoes as she left. For a moment Perfidia was afraid to watch her go, remembering the slimy thing she heard crawling across the bathhouse toward her, but nothing was there: only pure white.

After she exited the freezing cold water, dried herself, and put on the plain black bathrobe someone at some point left for her by the bathhouse door. Finally the pain of her gunshot wound was gone and she could stretch out her arms and back with a satisfying tug. She savored the moment, possessed of a contentment she hadn't felt in months—years maybe—and might not feel again for far longer.

She went to the church. Where she knew he'd be waiting.

The massive double doors swung open as she approached, creaking lowly. Nobody opened them. The church manifested in pieces as candles in competing rows lit two at a time. Most big old homes in Hell had a church—that sort of impishly contrarian blasphemy delighted the early tastemakers who defined themselves primarily by their direct opposition to God—but even by the time Perfidia had left for Earth the practice fell out of favor, replaced by newer fads of wickedness. By now the transitory circle of interest must have looped back around and a place like this would feel classic even to devils with names in languages still spoken Earthside. Perfidia could imagine the clientele, be they old money or nouveau riche, thrilled by the prospect of raping some succubus dressed like the Virgin Mary on the elaborate altar that headed the space, watched by the unseeing eyes of the statues seated on the pews, more of Ubik's collected items, although at least here with a theme: Idols once worshipped by ancient Middle Eastern civilizations, some still with dried blood on their weathered forms where humans had slaughtered one another as offerings. The gem of this collection was the statue of Dagon seated in the front pew, missing its hands and head after it toppled in the temple of Ashdod.

Beside the left wall—comprised of stained glass depictions of the Bible's more salacious scenes—Kedeshah in Japanese shrine maiden costume waved a wooden wand with white streamers. On the altar Ubik lounged lengthwise, one leg bent at an angle to rest his dapper shoe on the surface while his other foot dangled and circled in midair. He gripped a leash that kept the untamed bitch girl semi-sedate on the steps leading up to the altar; she rested with her tongue hanging out in a constant pant, her sharp quick breaths causing her bare breasts to bob. As soon as Perfidia entered, the bitch went still and alert, but at the first bark Ubik tugged the leash to silence her.

"Yow! Down. Sit! Sit. Good bitch." His shimmering sunglasses glinted candlelight down the aisle at Perfidia. "Now that's a much nicer look Fidi. That's the clean slate I'll need to break you back down."

Perfidia might have responded. Instead her eyes went to the massive altarpiece at Ubik's back, the most prominent and central place in the entire church. It had changed since she last came here. Changed in an odd way. Gone was the traditional if cliched depiction of Satan done in the style of Christ. Instead, the painted face that peered down at her with stalwart seriousness was that of Joseph Stalin, former leader of the Soviet Union.

"Ubik," she said. "Why do you have that portrait."

Ubik grinned, glanced back, cocked a thumb at the painting as if to draw Perfidia's attention to it, a wholly redundant gesture. "Like it? Great isn't it? Beautiful."

"Doesn't *quite* fit the vibe."

"Nah, nah, nah. You're just outta touch with the latest fashions. Lemme explain. You know Hitler right? Adolf Hitler?"

"Yes. I am aware of Adolf Hitler."

"Not long ago some devil came down from Earth and started talking up this guy he claimed he put in power in Germany. Adolf Hitler. Supposedly the evilest man of all time. So there's this *big* Hitler fad. You got devils in the street with Hitler mustaches, doing Hitler salutes, it's just the 'in' thing to do. But you know me. I can't hop on a trend. I gotta make it *mine*. So I do some research. First thing I find is that devil who talked about Hitler? Didn't even have shit to do with it. So I got to publicly humiliate him which is always fun. Then I find out Hitler mostly just killed Jews. Big fucking whoop! Everyone kills Jews. *Bo-ring*. But turns out there's this other guy who was like Hitler's big competitor or something. That man right there: Joseph Stalin. He didn't just kill Jews. He was out there killing everyone. He'd kill his own guys. No reason! He'd get a whim and be like, purge that man. Dead! And he did it to millions. So I'm making Stalin a thing now. Plus I'm hearing about this other guy, Mao—"

"The concentration camps were pretty uniquely awful."

"So were the Siberian gulags."

"Hitler started a massive war. You can't discount that."

"War shmwar. Napoleon started a war. Oh you missed it Fidi. Before Hitler it was Napoleon. Everyone was walking down the street wearing that bicorne hat of his. But Hitler—and Stalin, and Mao, all these guys—they're blowing Napoleon outta the water. Guess that's the upshot of there being so many more humans now. You can murder so many more of em. They even got a word for it now: Genocide. Didn't used to call it shit. But that is a good word, genocide. Thinking of naming the bitch that once she's trained enough to deserve a name. Whaddya think?"

"The whole reason the word 'genocide' exists is because of Hitler you know."

"You're just being contrarian Fidi! Stalin is way cooler. For sure. It's gonna be the next big thing. Guarantee it."

Perfidia said nothing as she slowly proceeded up the aisle.

"For me, for my money, it's about the terror," Ubik continued. "You could be Stalin's best friend and he might still ship you off to the firing squad with no warning whatsoever. *That's* evil."

Certainly, had Stalin been the big fad in Hell, Ubik would instead be telling her how Hitler was truly the most evil of the two. And of course it was idiotic to extol either of them. Humanity came only from live humans. Those guys who slaughtered millions of them wholesale were just flushing devil income down the drain. The devils here in Hell didn't have to care about that. They had their own economy, insulated from Earth endeavors.

"So about my offer." Perfidia reached the base of the steps leading to the altar and stood there, looking up at him. "One year temporary ownership. In exchange, you help deal with my problem."

His chattiness dispersed. He always liked to talk about the things he owned; give him a few more minutes and he'd be rattling off factoids about the Stalin painting itself, how it was actually commissioned by Stalin, how his supplier Earthside smuggled it through customs for him, that sorta stuff. No point belaboring. The terms were clear, spoken and unspoken. Under ordinary circumstances Ubiquitous would never go for a temporary deal. He disliked renting, he wanted to possess wholly. He did not relinquish his things easily. She knew that better than any, being the one thing he *had* relinquished.

She'd been a dog, better trained than that bitch, not quite devoid of speech, but a dog nonetheless. His dog, his item, he her Master, she his pet, his whore, his slave. She'd been the first pet of Ubiquitous Bal Berith and for a long time he was nobody, any one of the million Lustmongers in Hell. Then somehow he met Kedeshah and his fortunes skyrocketed. He usurped established pimps one after another, clawing his way to the top, recognized by one Prince after another—eventually by all of them, save the avatar of Lust himself, who tacitly ignored him.

The Princes recognized him, which didn't mean they patronized him; they were above all that. Then it so happened one day there was a commotion. It surged through Ubik's palace like electricity, zipping from one girl to the next until it reached Ubik and the faithful dog by his side: A Prince is coming. A Prince is coming! Even Perfidia's dog heart stopped cold at

those words; Ubik went a pale shade of rose and his fingers scraped at his throat. Kedeshah was the one with a cool head. She ordered the terrified girls into place, whipped them into their best behavior so that they stood in even rows in this very church, silent and waiting. Ubik managed to compose himself and waited in front of the altar, clinging to Perfidia's leash.

The door darkened. Someone gulped. A figure entered.

They'd all assumed it'd be Ashtoreth or Baal. The only Prince to have not given their enterprise some note of approval, and the one most innately predilected to Ubik's particular services. Kedeshah had thought so as well, apparently, because even her straight faced blanched at the figure who stepped through the threshold. It was not Ashtoreth or Baal, nor Rimmon nor Mammon nor Belial nor Moloch nor Beelzebub.

It was Satan.

He looked different then than in his BELIEVE posters that dotted Hell now; more traditional, like a Roman statue, possessed of Classical beauty, with long and feathered wings. Some of the girls fell to their knees. Kedeshah trembled. Ubik's fists clenched in fear—and then he strode forward, stating his typical spiel as always, albeit hurling every placatory title and sobriquet thinkable, appending that "all is free, all is free, we lowly sorts could never take a coin from you, O Lord of All Hell," his hand constantly indicating Kedeshah, whom they all assumed was the reason he came.

"Sso you're the new upssstart," Satan said, and the moment his voice left his lips everything else went silent, from the breathing of the girls to the crackling of the fires that illuminated the space, to the ambient noise of Hell outside: All dead silent save for him. "Ubiquitousss... Bal... Berith. Your forebear once fought bessside me, brave and true, and sssuffered... unduly... for righteous loyalty to their true Massster. Have you ever... sssuffered, Ubiquitousss?"

Silence. No sound was permitted. Ubik's lips moved but nothing came out.

"I thought... not." Mellifluous, a river. "You have never known war. You have never encountered an angel. You have never fought against God. Why, then, dear Ubiquitousss, do you consssider yourssself our equal? Why iss even your name... sso... irksssome?"

Frantic mimed shaking and gestures from Ubiquitous as Satan stepped closer and closer. Hands gesticulating wildly toward Kedeshah, lips mouthing: Take her. Take her.

Satan paused; considered the offering. "Oh, dear Ubiquitousss. I know of your... golden whore... whom you sso Proudly rent to all Hell. Do you... believe... that owning the daughter of a Prince rendersss unto you sssuch... pomp? I think... you mussst learn your place..."

It was a terror Ubik had never known that gripped him, because he did something he would never otherwise do, something that for all his other failings would have destroyed him. He seized Kedeshah and pulled her in front of him, as though using her as a shield, and then pushed her toward Satan as though offering her to him, not a whore to be used once, but a gift. In that moment he relinquished ownership of his most prized possession.

Still, it was not enough. Satan slowly brushed a hand, as though wiping a speck of dirt from his shoulder, and Kedeshah hurtled violently across the church, driving her head through the stone wall before her limp body crumpled in a plume of dust. Had she been any lesser devil—had she been Ubiquitous or Perfidia—she would've been dead.

"That girl iss... filth to me," Satan said. "I do not want her."

Ubik dropped to his knees. He clasped his hands. Before them all, he begged. He mouthed that he offered anything, everything, to Satan.

Satan extended a hand that seemed made of marble, flawless in every way. It slowly lowered and stopped on Ubik's head, as though blessing him.

Satan's eyes shifted. To Perfidia. "I'll take her... your sssissster."

Perfidia did not remember what happened next. She awoke some weeks later, violently ill, but after she vomited a bucketful of blood-red bile she was much better. She returned to her typical duties. Nobody mentioned what happened—the other girls may not have remembered. Ubik did though. Ubik certainly did.

Something had changed, though. Fidi was no longer just a dog. There was something there now, something there that hadn't been. It didn't manifest right away, but whenever she thought back on it, she knew the encounter with Satan must have been the genesis. Fidi became Perfidia. Became an identity. Slowly, over centuries, it gestated within her mind: herself.

Now she was back here, where it began. Ubik given the opportunity to reclaim his lost property. Despite the terms of the deal, in no way would he intend to let her go again. He thought in a year, after the practice he had on his new dog bitches, he could break her again. Destroy that spark of an ego and return her to a state where after the terms of their contract ended she wouldn't want to leave. As her owner, he'd have license to do anything to bring her to that point, and he'd do it.

Perfidia believed she could last long enough to see her freedom once more. Then everything would've been worthwhile; everything would have been in service of a meaningful goal.

"How dangerous is this problem of yours," Ubik said.

"It's a humanoid girl with less than 1 Humanity. Early teens. She possesses no relevant powers except a staff that reanimates the dead. She's already reanimated at least one man, who guards her at all times. There may be more now. If she's killed or I get my hands on the staff the undead no longer matter."

"Reanimated dead. I see." Ubik fiddled with the leash. "That's annoying. Still, nothing human muscle can't handle. There oughtta be someone up there you can pay off. Someone who'll handle it and make sure you still get your staff. What's the catch?"

"The catch is she's fallen in with some major Christian organization. They wanna put her on TV tomorrow. I need it done by then. No human's competent enough to do it and also

reckless enough to do it that quickly. You, on the other hand, are both."

"Inno Fidi. For someone so certain they've got too much Pride to be a whore, sure seems like you're coming back to me a little quickly. Maybe you secretly *want* to come back, huh? Where it's safe. Where you're protected—loved. Whaddya think Kedeshah?"

"I think as you think, Master." Kedeshah waved her shrine maiden wand sunny as before.

"I've tried to stop this girl myself before and it went badly," Perfidia said. "I can't afford for it to go badly again. So I've decided to take no more chances. That's why I'm here. The only reason."

The dog bitch yawned; Stalin sent down his iron aura. Ubik's glasses caught and reflected the rainbow panoply of his idols set in congregation before him. He sashayed his head on his shoulders, letting crack a kink in his neck, while one lip corner curled to reveal a golden fang.

She got him. Next they'd haggle the price. He'd up the ante a few years—a lot of years, probably. Then she'd have to whittle. Ubik was good at driving these bargains but she still remembered the tricks he used on his clients. If she—

The giant wall of stained glass behind Kedeshah exploded. A figure in all black tactical gear smashed through a stylized depiction of Onan's priapistic cock, two more shattered Lot and his daughters into a million technicolored pieces. A hole blasted out of the floorboards in the middle of the aisle and a gaggle of helmeted imps came out cackling maniacally and firing shotguns skyward. Through the doors rushed pairs with tall plastic riot shields and by that point Ubik had his hands raised in a shrug as he said, "What the fuck? What's this shit? Who do you Stalins think you're fucking with?"

He reached into his coat and pulled out two tommy guns and Perfidia only barely managed to dive and cover her head as a vicious ratatat sent bullets streaming down the row in a plume of dust and woodchips.

Perfidia scrambled on knees and elbows to get behind the nearest pew as the guys with guns—more rappelling from the rafters—returned fire. Ubik howled laughter, dropping his tommy guns as soon as they ran out of ammo to draw a crossbow in one hand and an AK-47 in the other. A devil with a bloodsmirched faceshield toppled over the back of the pew that protected Perfidia, an arrow quivering out of his throat. Another devil clambered from under the pew, swiping a gloved hand at Perfidia's ankle that she could not kick away. One sharp tug dragged her even as her fingernails drove into the wood to slow her. The faceless devil laughed until the statue of Dagon seated above wobbled, toppled, and crushed his skull to pulp.

Crouched upon the altar Ubik fired a harpoon that impaled some guy across the room and reeled him back still alive enough for Ubik to pistol whip him to death. Perfidia sighted a small door off to the side of the altar, near where Kedeshah stood idly as a devil dropped in front of her and fired a shotgun point-blank into her face, to no effect whatsoever. The dog bitch had someone's stomach split open and tore hungrily at their entrails. Yet more goons kept streaming in, each wearing the same tactical ops style gear. What was this? A rival pimp making a power move? These guys were organized, though. And even the most desperate

rival would never try anything as long as Kedeshah remained. The one who shotgunned Kedeshah in the face was now in five distinct pieces and ten more indistinct ones, which was enough to send an entire column sprinting away in fear.

"Wait, dammit! Wait!" someone was screaming from the other end of the church. A devil wearing some sort of shiny badge leaned out from the half-closed doorway. "Ubiquitous this isn't about you. It's not—"

The devil's head blew off in a puff of red mist. Ubik lowered the scope of his sniper rifle. "It's about me now you Stalin ass Mao Zedongs. You Pol Pots!"

Another devil found the one with the badge's head and squished it back on. "Listen here Ubiquitous! We've come on orders way over your head, got it? I've got a court order here. Signed by a Grand Judge!" He flicked out a long scroll of brown parchment that promptly received three holes in it. They reformed immediately.

"The Grand Judge can suck my cunt—but he'll have to pay first! All my shit's in order yo. Not a license or stipulation outta line, and if you disagree ask my bookkeeper over there." He nodded the muzzle of his latest armament toward a Kedeshah whose shrine maiden outfit remained spotless despite the three-sixty degree fan of blood around her.

"Help me, oh fuck help me, no no no not there—" screamed the guy who was having his genitals torn to shreds by the dog bitch.

"It's not about your licenses Ubiquitous. Like I said, it's not about you."

Perfidia glanced around. Nobody else was near her. She figured soon enough everyone would be shooting again; best to slink away before that happened.

"Don't spout that shit at me pig. You're in my crib, it's about me motherfucker. Who the fuck else could it possibly be about?"

Making as little noise as possible, although the floorboards in this ancient place creaked (at least the moans of the dying were there to muffle her), Perfidia rose into a crouch and duckwalked to the side door.

So concerned with escape she didn't think until her hand was already on the knob that it was strange for Ubik to have put a door here, any extension he built to the house on this side would've obscured his stained glass and the view of Pandaemonium. The door was already opening by the time she continued that thought to its logical conclusion, combined it with her short term memory, and decided she hadn't actually seen this door here when she first entered the room. By then it was too late. The door opened and the lead devil with the badge was already there, his neck still oozing blood as he wrapped an arm around her and held her body to shield him when Ubik swiveled his gun.

"Perfidia Bal Berith," the cop said, "under the decree of a Grand Judge of Pandaemonium you are hereby under arrest for crimes against Hell, including but not limited to irresponsible use of devil magic; performance of acts that may draw God's eye upon devilry; and lying to a

customs agent. You have no rights. You shall be brought before a court of Pandaemonium immediately to have your case heard..."

A pair of jagged handcuffs clapped around her wrists and dug into her flesh. As Ubiquitous shouted "Stalin! Stalin!" over and over, the chief policeman dragged her back and everything dropped into darkness.

Backflipping Offa Tony Hawk's NOSE

They hurled her into a courtroom on the lower levels of Pandaemonium and guess who already sat in the witness bench? John Verschrikkelijk. She'd already guessed it, although she didn't quite know how he knew about her "performance of acts that may draw God's eye upon devilry" (did they make up that charge on the spot?) until with a gleeful giggle he pulled from—somewhere—a rolled-up newspaper that he gradually unfurled and opened to large advertisement promising a televised miracle.

"In fifty years I'll be fodder huh?" John said. "That so Fidi? *I'll* be fodder? I'll see your blood paint the walls first. COVER THE EARTH! Yihihihhi!"

"You petty shitgobbler, *that's* why you ratted me out?"

He shrugged. "Plus the perks."

Right. Devil judges were all Pride guys. They craved a public theater in which they could demonstrate their ineffable power not merely as judge, but also jury and executioner. Except devil *cops* were all Wrath guys who loved extrajudicial killings, so the two ends of Hell's justice system were at perpetual odds. Hot tips on crimes that led to a live arrest went well-rewarded.

Even so a few things didn't add up. Even if John sniffed out her connection to the newspaper ad, the crimes with which they charged her were extremely specific. No way they discerned everything from the ad alone. Somebody must have scribed on Earth to figure out the truth. Not just any devil could do that, which meant somebody powerful took John's accusation seriously enough to waste their precious time on it.

On the flip side, they wasted zero time hauling her to Pandaemonium, processing her through the system, and chucking her in court. No more than an hour must've passed since her arrest. For Hell that was *extraordinarily* fast. Why were they taking this so seriously? If Mayfair did something to "draw God's eye," wasn't Perfidia already the convenient scapegoat? What could "devilry" be doing in secret that even God's briefest, most tentative glance might unveil, that would provoke his ire more than any other ordinary devil activity? Kedeshah mentioned a reason behind the tightened quotas—Divinity. But that had to be impossible. Had to be.

Perfidia glanced back at the accumulated mass of spectators clumped atop one another, awaiting the trial to begin. She hated to rely on him, but Ubik wouldn't let them take her lying down. Pandaemonium was a difficult place to enter uninvited, but he had Kedeshah and sooner or later he'd find a way. She hoped. It was, essentially, her only possible hope.

A servant of the court, more ruffle than devil, plodded to the fore. Calling attention to itself via thunderous clearing of phlegm, it held up and unraveled a gilded scroll. Eyes closed and nose high, it began: "All assembled! Please rise for the Grand Judge of this most illustrious and dignified court—" Its eyes opened, read the name, blanched, and with all pomposity dead stammered: "Prince—Prince Beelzebub, Lord of Envy."

The crowd went dead quiet. Not a sound, not a whisper, not even a gasp. The servant of the court, blank in the eyes, unconsciously rolled up the scroll and tottered away on uneven legs. On the witness bench, John lost his smile—and his color. Let alone the havoc wreaking itself upon Perfidia's thudding heart.

In the dark, cavernous expanse behind the podium where the judge was supposed to preside, a slow but heavy clicking sound emerged. A wisp in the shadow: a gigantic, scythelike arm extended, then lowered to strike the floor before the carapace of the creature behind it dragged itself forward. The glint of tremendous compound eyes shone before the insect face emerged: the face of a fly. Soon afterward shimmered incandescent wings, too small to carry the preponderance of exoskeleton that comprised the full form.

Beelzebub. Lieutenant to Satan himself. Second of the Seven Princes. Once cherubim, traces remained of his former structure, lurking deep with the rounded edges of his shell, but now he was terrible to behold. Beelzebub. They sent *Beelzebub*. Grand judges were usually venerable old devils, older than Perfidia at least, but one of the Seven Princes? That was an extreme measure, more than an extreme measure. Perfidia's case truly reached the tippy top.

The grand judge's bench was parodically tall because grand judges always had to elevate themselves as much as possible, but Beelzebub towered over it nonetheless. He almost reached the arched ceiling, the top of his slowly tilting head scraping insensibly against the ornate gargoyles set to harangue any unfortunate defendant who dared look up. The two scythe arms slid out and curled around the bench as Beelzebub's head lowered and the segments of his bulbous eyes focused upon her.

Would've been easy to die of fright right then and there. Perfidia blinked once, though, and thought: It's not that much worse than Kedeshah. Not that much. And sure, Kedeshah was owned by Ubik, but Beelzebub was owned by Satan. Which was the only reason he could be here: Satan ordered it. This thought wasn't super reassuring in a vacuum but Perfidia had seen Satan once before and survived; somehow the logic worked and her breathing settled to a semblance of normalcy.

"Perfidia... Bal... Berithzz," Beelzebub buzzed. His voice was falsetto pitched and marred by lisp. Of course, if you laughed, you died. "You are charged withzz... Crimezz againzzt Hell. Hm. How very vague. Oh I zzee. There'zz more. Zzuch zzmall print..."

The compound eyes strained and Perfidia realized they were not looking at her but some paper on the judge's bench. Eventually Beelzebub produced a pair of tiny spectacles and held them over his eyes.

"Irrezzponzzible uzze of devil magic... performanzzze of actzz that may draw—Unnamable'zz—eye upon devilry... and lying to a cuztomzz agent. Verily? *Thezze* are your chargezz? Alazz."

The buzzing made him occasionally incomprehensible, worsened by the accompanying buzzing of flies that swarmed around his hulk, building into a thicker cloud every moment he remained in the same spot, until he exuded a flickering black aura that John—the one closest to him—had to crouch and cover his head to avoid.

"Many may azzk why I, Lord Beelzebub, am here. The way I zzee it, there izz nothzzing a trumped-up hoity-toity judge can do that I cannot... I zsupozze it izz befitting zzat I wazz zzent here today to prezzide over this mozzt important trial. Perfidia Bal Berithzz, your guilt izz not in quezztion. We have more than enough evidenzze for your immediate annihilation. Already we have dizzpached an elite team to Earthzz to eradicate all trazze of your... error."

So they sent somebody to kill Mayfair. That made sense. Then why—

"What we muzzt know, what thizz trial is intended to anzzwer, izz *how* you created that error in the firzzt plazze... and whethzzer there zzhall be any furthzzzer errorzz."

Okay. Perfidia started to piece it together. The Seven Princes were up to something, something big, something they couldn't risk God seeing. Her fuckup with Mayfair threatened to bring God's attention to what devils were doing, so it needed to be fixed as soon as possible. From John's testimony and their scrying, they'd learned about Mayfair and her staff. But they didn't know how Perfidia did it.

Somehow, within this vortex of shit and the flies that feasted on it, Perfidia managed a real, genuine smile.

They didn't know how she did it. This trial was an interrogation to figure out how, because they were worried whatever she did might happen again. She discovered a loophole they had to close.

She did. She! Perfidia Bal Berith. Casually, in no grand manner. Simply to accommodate some old British guy's wish in the 1600s. He wanted a world of knights and kings and righteous chivalry and she provided. To her, it'd been simple logic: If it costs too much to make these changes in the real world, then make a fake world where she could do whatever she wanted free of charge. Suddenly, stepping back, viewing exactly what had happened from this new angle, she was aware of her genius. Imagine! All this time, devils were spending fractions of their take to produce the wishes humans demanded: fame, love, health, but also physical things like money and fortune. Every devil knew the lottery loophole but what devil had the smart idea to build a whole other world where they might create a metric ton of gold for nothing and then transport it into the real world? (Honestly, not even Perfidia realized she could use her fake world in such a way until now.) All you needed was the initial startup cost of creating the Door between Earth and the other world—And here she'd introduced something impossible to Earth, a staff that reanimated the dead.

No other devil thought this way in all of history, apparently. She'd considered the idea so rudimentary she never considered it a point of Pride, but now—here—in this court, with the Seven Princes themselves called forth to persecute her...!

"Eradicate that zzmug exprezzion thizz inzztant!" Beelzebub buzzed. "What are you pozzibly so pleazzed about?"

"My method. My novel method, that only I—"

"Pah! We know all about your methzzod already. We zzaw that 'Door.' Nothzzing zzpecial! Otherzz have been created before... Zzzz! You Prideful typezz... alwayzz believing

yourzzelvezz zzuch unparalleled geniuzzezz... Conzzider it wazz Pride that left our kind deprived of divine bounty in the firzzt plazze! Novel methzzod... novel. All of you in the crowd, laugh at thizz idiot!"

Silence.

"Laugh! If Zzatan commanded you to laugh, you'd laugh... laugh for me too!"

A few dry, forced, nervous chuckles. Beelzebub was nonetheless satisfied. Perfidia's incipient, sheltered little bead of Pride got smushed. This was becoming a trend, she thought morosely.

"No, the izzue izz thuzz: Your 'Door' hazz two keyzz. We looked into your hizztory of Humanity expenditurezz... you created one key when you firzzt made the Door and a zzecond key only two weekzz ago. If your error came to Earthzz uzzing one key... then where is the zzecond?"

That made a lot more sense. They couldn't account for the second key, which meant they were worried something else would come through the Door—or that something already had. Mayfair possessed the key Perfidia created recently. Shannon Waringcrane possessed the older key. Or at least she did two weeks ago. Perfidia knew nothing past that.

They didn't know Perfidia knew nothing past that.

"Ah." She spoke with as much confidence as she could muster, mingled with the right amount of performative falsity to suggest she still rightly feared the penultimate devil before her. (She did.) "Were I to provide information on this second key and who holds it, could I be given some sort of amnesty for my crimes?"

So that was why they were doing this as a trial instead of a torture session. Devils were the best torturers in the business, but they were also the most immune to torture. No doubt the Seven Princes could eventually crack her, but the question was time. They wanted this resolved *now*. If Shannon still had the other key, that gave Perfidia real bargaining power.

"...Yezz. That izz the order from Zzatan."

"Well then!" Perfidia said. Confidence was key. It wasn't Satan in front of her, just his lapdog. That made it better, the notion that Beelzebub was beholden to Satan, that he was a servant. Like Kedeshah. She put on her performance: "I can certainly help with that. I'll need it in writing of course. I assume since ya want this done quick you'll have a contract prewritten. For your sake I hope you won't waste my time with loopholes. I do contracts myself y'know, I'm aware of the tricks—"

A dynamite cluster went off behind her, behind the spectators in the stands, blasting open the flesh-leathery doors that sealed the courtroom from the veiny system or corridors that infested lower Pandaemonium. Through the smoldering rubble hurtled a whale-sized jazz-purple Cadillac convertible that Perfidia knew belonged to Ubik before the windshield split the smoke and his leering snaggletooth grin emerged smug and sooty. From his coat was already manifesting the rotating turret of a heavy-duty machine gun and the bullets crackled

in a sweeping line through the stands. Blood, limbs, heads, bits went flying, while others were churned into the Cadillac's unstoppable wheels as its immense breadth was too much to fit down the aisle and it gleefully ate at the outermost layer of chairs and bodies. Dog Bitch, hunched in the backseat, gnawed on the throat of a devil that got flung onto the car. Kedeshah, wearing a beret and gigantic aviator sunglasses, drove.

Perfidia frantically waved her arms, screaming no no it's fine no wait you don't gotta—all lost under the suppressive fire of the machine gun. The Cadillac crashed in front of her and came to a stop as Ubik pulled a rocket launcher out of his coat and tossed it casually to Dog Bitch, who aimed in a random direction (still wearing her leather blindfold) and tongue lolling fired squealing combustive death into another section of the stands.

"She's mine, Stalin!" Ubik shouted at Beelzebub, tossing up twin middle fingers. "Fuck the redistribution of wealth! I'm reclaiming personal property in the name of the bourgeoisie!" He drew from his coat a fishing rod, whipped it, and hooked Perfidia by the collar, reeling her in as Kedeshah put the Cadillac into reverse and stepped on it.

"Hey," said Beelzebub. "Hey you can't do that! Hey!"

Tires churning over debris and viscera, the car made much slower progress backward than forward, and the devils that remained in one piece clambered over one another at them, spilling like a gush of water from both sides. "Bootlickers! Bootlickers of Stalin!" Ubik howled as he fired tides of bullets to stem the flow.

"Stop trying to make Stalin a thing Ubik!" the crowd yelled back. One devil hurled itself at Kedeshah, who flicked a finger into their forehead and erased the upper half of their skull in a plume of red mist.

Perfidia struggled and twisted and pushed her arms and rolled into the space between the front and backseat while a madhouse of sounds erupted above her, most notably the whirr of a chainsaw that Ubik probably produced despite its terrible efficacy as a weapon.

"What!" Beelzebub's voice droned over the mayhem. "We—you—you already own enough! Let someone else own something! Hey!"

It sounded pathetic. Sure. But that growing buzz was a far more fearsome noise than the roar of the crowd. Same went for the rumble that spread across the floor, corresponding to a trembling visible in the arched ceiling as it spewed trails of millenniums-undisturbed dust. Perfidia lifted her head in time to see Beelzebub shivering his mythical bulk into movement. John Verschrikkelijk, who had forgotten his own fear and howled laughter at the chaos from the safety of his witness bench, realized from the growing swarm of locusts the encroaching danger and managed to dive away instants before his seat was obliterated by a single swiping motion of Beelzebub's long scythe. "Down!" Ubik shouted, throwing himself onto Perfidia and Dog Bitch and pushing their faces into the cushions before the scythe swept overhead and left the entirety of the tide of devils above decapitated or in more gruesome states of dismemberment.

The second scythe came from above, slicing cleanly through the ancient roof of Pandaemonium, crafted by the grandest architect of the ancient devils Mulciber, spilling the

building's guts in a deluge of marble and limestone and other fine materials dredged from the deepest pits of the Earth. It also split the Cadillac's grill as Kedeshah put some elbow grease into the controls and jerked the car backward just in time. Overcoming a particularly high mound of body parts the Cadillac reentered the grooves it'd carved upon entry and rocketed back through the door fast enough to unbalance Ubik and Perfidia the moment they started to lift their heads.

Backward the Cadillac burst into a lobby and swerved in a gliding circle, the tires still slick with gore, while Beelzebub bounded across the courtroom and clawed a bigger aperture with politely frantic slashes of the scythes. Secretary type devils, Envious sorts themselves who liked to attach themselves to the Proudful and seethe at their comparative lack, saw Beelzebub coming and tossed up their papers to sprint in any other direction. Those who were too slow were caught in the buzzing swarm of scavenger bugs that swirled about Beelzebub perpetually, lifted into the air by the force before being skeletized through a billion tiny bites.

"You idiot!" Perfidia screamed at Ubik as the Cadillac shot straight through a gigantic circular window, fell three stories onto the street below, and bounced off a much smaller car to hit the street with momentum conserved. "You absolute idiot! They were gonna cut me a deal Ubik. I was gonna get a deal!"

Ubik stood in the backseat with one leg raised, his coat flapping all around him as he once more flipped off with both hands the bug-eyed face of Beelzebub who stared down at them from the window, reluctant to leave Pandaemonium, and only after Perfidia kept shouting at him for several moments more did he look at her with a scrunched nose and parsed what she said. "A deal?" He glanced at the stalactite-ridden sky. "Well—who cares about that. That's not what it's about Fidi."

"You stupid fucking idiot! You absolute dumbass! Do you understand what they're gonna do to us now? You think they'll let something like this go?! Oh, you are so *fucking* stupid Ubik, you're the biggest dipshit of all time and I've seen a lot of time to know that for a fact. FFFUUUCK!"

He pulled down his sunglasses. His eyes bit into her: they were cold, sharp despite the silly grin he wore. "Fidi. Fidi. Listen. I let those Seven Princes grind my nose into the dirt once before. I let em take something that belonged to me, dig? Nah. No more. I had to send those shits a *message*." He surveyed the burnt-out facades of the oft-looted buildings that lined the road as Kedeshah deftly weaved them through oncoming traffic. "A deal. A deal! A deal means they get something too. Nah. Fuck that. I get *all* of you Fidi. I'm not letting you go again. Not a single part. This time, the Seven Princes lose. What they want, I want, and I'm gonna take—"

Overhead a siren pealed, so loud it stooped them with their hands clamped over their ears. Even so it could be heard clearly: ALERT. ALERT. THIS IS A DIRECTIVE FROM THE SEVEN PRINCES. ALERT. ALERT. STOP THE PURPLE CADILLAC. ALERT. ALERT.

"Aww shit it's gonna get crazy real quick," Ubik said, cutting off any further delving into his previous topic, although Perfidia found her jaw twisting into a painful clench remembering that brainless possessive demeanor, that general oafishness that would've gotten him killed or worse five hundred times if he didn't have Kedeshah to clean his messes, and why was

Kedeshah going along with this now? He might own her but she had her ways of shifting his demeanor when she wanted.

For the time being that didn't matter. Every devil in Hell heard that alert. The terse, robotic voice blaring over an omnipresent speaker system promised glorious rewards to tickle the fancy of every aspect, kingly gifts of riches or food or slaves or power, an unneeded addendum because every devil knew the worth of having done a favor for the Seven Princes. Now all of Hell was descending upon them and none of the streets were straight so Kedeshah kept jerking them in crazy hairpins swiping sideways through whole crowds of pedestrians while Ubik passed Perfidia a shotgun and Dog Bitch an M16 and drew for himself twin Uzis while over the rooftops passed a wave of devils tumbling toylike to kamikaze careen onto the car from above. Perfidia gingerly aimed the shotgun patting her hands all over it to try and figure out where she was supposed to hold it and then she spent a bunch of time trying to find the safety only to realize that the gun had no safety because why would a gun in Hell have one? As a strikingly globlike devil dropped toward her she fired the shotgun and the kick launched her into Dog Bitch whose bullets reoriented in an arc to blast off half of the car door and prompt a sharp "Hey!" from Ubik.

But Ubik couldn't care for long because one devil, hulking huge in a Swaino-esque way, wearing only a green t-shirt with the word "SHIT," landed on the hood hard enough to dent it and push the carriage deep into the street to cause screeching sparks to fly. Despite the devil's size his huge furred gorilla arms gripped a comically tiny submachine gun which he fired the same time Ubik did and Ubik and the gorilla both dropped spurting blood except the gorilla fell off the car. Ubik twirled into Perfidia's arms.

"My hat!" Ubik said. His huge hat had fallen off; Perfidia glimpsed it whipping away over a pursuing crowd and various vehicles that ranged in style from earliest locomotive to contemporary sportscar. "My hat—we gotta—we gotta go back for my hat...!"

"Fuck your hat, FUCK you!" Perfidia tried to figure out where exactly he was wounded but from his perforated coat both blood and bullets streamed in equal measure. The temporary slowdown had caused more devils to successfully grip onto the sides of the car and with only Dog Bitch currently pruning them one floppy-titted old hag with a giant warty nose wrapped sticklike fingers around Perfidia's ankle and tugged her back with surprising strength. Perfidia seized Ubik's body to stop from being thrown off but his body was seemingly all coat and her fingers slipped through the bloody plush fur before striking something hard and withdrawing from the space a sword—a ninja katana—that she swung down at the hag's head, missed, cut open her own foot, and then swung again to hack off half the wrinkled face. A rapid pulse of kicks and Perfidia knocked the bag of bones overboard.

She passed the katana off to Dog Bitch who swung it once at a devil's skull and broke the blade in half (she continued to swing what remained) and then flopped between the front seats to put a hand on Kedeshah's shoulder. "Ubik's hit," Perfidia said. "We're overwhelmed. Let me drive—you defend." With the unspoken implication that Kedeshah could heal Ubik if, you know, he was dying or something.

"Hmmmmmm... Nah," Kedeshah said cheerily. Her long scarf flapped out in the breeze and slapped Perfidia's face. "You don't know the streets, Fidi, they've changed since you've been

here last. 'Sides, women are terrible drivers, didn'tcha know?'

"Kedeshah. This is serious—"

Kedeshah shot out her hand to grip the face of a rhinoceros-horned devil climbing over the passenger seat and with the slightest twitch of her fingers crumpled its skull into a tiny wad. The horn burst through her palm, causing a rush of bright white blood to run down and instantly dissolve what remained of the devil to dust before her wound closed spontaneously afterward. Her face retained its pleasant, amenable, I-live-to-serve smile. "I'm being very serious right now, Fidi. If Master wants me to do something, I'll do it. But you? Right now, you're simply someone I *abide*."

Yeah. She was still pissed about the bathhouse.

Shoulda been Ubik driving from the start, if Kedeshah weren't distracted this wouldn't even be a situation as long as nobody actually important felt the need to get off their ass and go after them, but nooooo, Ubik had to show off all his shiny toys, typical! As Perfidia pulled herself into the backseat he wasn't even thinking about getting help, he'd yanked Dog Bitch's leash hard enough to get her attention and forced her to hold him steady as he rose to lob grenades on either side of the road. He remained laughing, even though out of his coat dropped guns and blades and a whip and a nutcracker doll and a stuffed rabbit and several sex toys and gold coins and rubies and emeralds and diamonds and glass marbles and beads—no wait those were another sex toy—and a solid gold lighter and a sleek modern wristwatch and the skull of some antlered creature with the antlers dragging with them several lacy sets of lingerie. Perfidia grabbed a good-looking gun from the pile, sighed, and went back to keeping the sides of the car clear.

The edge of the city approached, the red aura rising from the lava that surrounded it a palpable dimension to the distance, and the skyscraper at the end with the surface-spanning billboard of Satan with the word BELIEVE. Satan seemed to stare down at them from that billboard, and as Perfidia hesitated a moment to reload her weapon, one of his dazzlingly brilliant eyes shut in a simple wink. She glanced again, the wink having come at a time her head was turning, but then both eyes were open and the poster was as it was, as it had been when she first entered Hell. The castles and tenements parted and the grand moat swelled before them with its single stone bridge across.

A goliath languished upon the bridge, stretched on its side with one arm propping up a yawning head as its legs restlessly, slowly, crossed and uncrossed. It spanned the entire breadth at the center, lava still sizzling off its skin after they dredged it up from the depths of the moat, and the cranes and rigs of wire they used remained around its bulk like discarded toys, objects that tumbled out of Ubik's coat. Like Lilliputians an entire platoon of devil cops crawled along it, aiming their guns over its flesh at the end of the bridge. Probably a hundred goons total and an unstoppable lump of Sloth as their barricade.

"Baalpeor," Kedeshah muttered.

Baalpeor. So that's who it was. Baalpeor or Belphegor, suggester of ingenious inventions, who nonetheless sought and cared to do nothing. An original Fallen Angel, thrown down by God and who was happy to remain where he fell, so stunned and pained by the falling that he

decided never to make another movement that might lead to that agony again. In the early centuries of Hell he would whisper ideas to those who asked so that they might enrich themselves with minimal effort, but Hell always expanded outward and upward and eventually his tremendous bulk was in the way and enough devils got together to roll him into the lake of fire. There he must have remained for millennia—until now. Until they needed him for a roadblock.

The Cadillac roared toward the bridge, toward Baalpeor and the mustered forces around him.

"That's insane," Perfidia said. "That guy's older than Kedeshah even. We won't stand a chance. Turn away. Turn away!"

"He shan't raise a hand," Kedeshah said.

"Where are we even going anyway!"

"Earth, babe, Earth," said Ubik between coughs of blood. "Isn't that where you wanted us? Don't be a little bitch!"

Somehow Perfidia had entertained vain delusions that Ubik, so well-connected, knew of some place, some safe hideaway—where else would he keep all his excess junk without it getting nicked?—where they might hole up, regroup, consider a plan. A plan that involved extending an olive branch to the Seven Princes, repairing the damage done by Ubik's theatrical entrance into the courtroom, and resuming the pathway proposed by Beelzebub. That pathway was life, that pathway was her way out, that pathway would have fixed everything, all of it, in one dramatic sweep of the pen, she wanted to believe it was true, she wanted to believe there was a way out of this constantly worsening horrorshow in which she found herself, a nightmare that seemed to seize upon her worst fears the moment she feared them. But she knew. She knew with a shuddering thought at that half-glimpsed wink Satan's poster may or may not have sent her. Satan sent Beelzebub as his envoy and they rejected his offer in the most contemptuous way possible. Satan was kind, even benevolent to those who bent the knee. It was why he didn't summarily execute Ubik during his visit to the brothel, why he even bestowed upon Perfidia the gift of self-awareness that let her be the thing "Perfidia" she was today. But those who stood against him?

Forward was the only way out. The Seven Princes could not travel to Earth personally; God would not permit evil of that caliber to walk freely there. They could still send assassins, but maybe given enough time they'd forget, or stop caring, or become distracted with some new object of ire. Maybe if what Kedeshah whispered about Divinity was true... If the Seven Princes got their hands on a Divinity, managed to somehow collect enough Humanity to cobble one together, then surely they would forget all about Perfidia Bal Berith. Or perhaps with the power of a true God they would obviate her from existence instantaneously.

The Cadillac drove onto the bridge.

The cops opened fire. Bullets, grenades, even missiles swirled their way. Ubik drew his guns and prepared to fire back, howling about Stalins again, immune to any concept of self-preservation. "Die pigs, die die die die die!"

"Sorry, Master," said Kedeshah, "but you've had your fun."

She stood up in her seat and extended her arms. Out of her back sprouted two long, feathered wings, purest white, so white they emitted a radiant glow as she bent them forward and used their feathers to absorb the incoming onslaught. Explosions turned to limp splatters of dust; not a shred of excess heat escaped past her.

One slim arm wrapped around Ubik's body. The other yanked Perfidia by the collar. The wings beat once and the tug of gravity dragged Perfidia's stomach to her base as the car fell away below them and they soared airborne. The Dog Bitch, suspended by a leash that Ubik held, whipped back and forth choking too hard to even yelp, while Ubik screamed: "My car! No, no, we can't leave my car—we can't—noooooo!"

The second artillery volley blasted the purple Cadillac into charred bits of machinery. An array of rockets swirled toward them trailing streams of smoke, only for Kedeshah to weightlessly flit between them as though engaged in ballet rather than evasive tactical maneuvers. Loose feathers fell and curdled into dollops of rotted milk the instant they left her body, plopping onto the heads of the cops below and the body of Baalpeor as Kedeshah soared over them and to the other side. One gentle, fluid arcing swoop lowered her through the doors of the customs office, her wingtips bifurcating the unlucky devils who had escaped the queue only moments prior, then through the Hellevator doors and up the blackened shaft. Up, up, up, faster and faster, the flaps of Perfidia's skin pulling back from the suddenly supersonic speed, and then they smashed through something above that came apart in pieces and among those pieces were a whole host of devils in more tactical gear—another barricade meant to stop them? No, they must be the team the Seven Princes were sending Earthside to assassinate Mayfair—the devils staring up at the wings that illuminated even this darkness in abject stupefaction as they hurtled back into the abyss, and then the light returned around them and they were in the same shitty warehouse in the same shitty Cleveland and the smell of sulfur switched out for the smell of rotten lakewater.

Kedeshah dropped Perfidia a few feet onto the concrete floor; the dangling Dog Bitch was already dragging across it as all momentum came to a stop equal parts elegant and abrupt. Using her other arm to cradle Ubik like an infant, Kedeshah touched down upon the ground first with one daintily outstretched foot and then the other, performing a slight girlish skip as the last dregs of speed left her and her wings went black and decayed into tatters until she at last stood only an ordinary devil girl, identical in appearance to any other.

"There there Master," she said, stroking Ubik's chin as he sobbed, "I'm so terribly sorry for losing your beloved car, but there was no other way. If it would make you feel better, you may hurl me onto the dirty ground right here and now and savagely molest my every orifice —"

"He's still bleeding, you know," Perfidia said.

Kedeshah stuck her kitten tongue out at her and then heaved her face into the folds of Ubik's coat. A few short, quick, audible kisses later and she arose, the blood on her face dissolving, as Ubik's holes sealed and he was able to once more stand on his own. Which he did, fluttering as he extended his arms with aplomb, drifting on the tips of his toes as he twirled and observed the firebombed factory around them.

"Earth! Wowza! So this is it huh? Somehow I've never had the chance to check it out. Yo? They got giant vats of toxic waste up here too?" He flitted to the window and looked at Lake Erie. "Maybe Earth's not so bad after all. Shit! I could set up shop here. Have humans eating out my palm. Run this place. How much does it cost you think? The whole... place. Area. Shit where are we even?"

He rifled through his coat, which lacked a lot of its former dimension—much of it having spilled into the Cadillac—and retrieved a candy cane, which he stuck into the corner of his mouth like a cigar before sucking on it. Something hollow lurked in the circles under his eyes, a shiver to his smile, Perfidia knew what this random outburst was truly about. The problem with Greed was that sometimes the things you wanted cost the things you had, to gain something meant to lose something, and thus no matter the prize it always tasted bitter on the tongue. Much like the pain of Pride that kept giving away bits of itself to hold onto a smaller and smaller portion of the remainder.

But who cared. Knowing everything underlying only snapped Perfidia harder, more abruptly, and with her claws hooked she screamed: "Oh! Oh that's right? Gonna own the Earth now?" COVER THE EARTH, as John Verschrikkelijk might say. "You fucked me Ubik. You might not own me yet but you fucked me anyway, right up the ass. They were gonna cut me a *plea deal* you worthless cumstain. I was gonna get out free! Free!"

"Assuming you trust their word," Kedeshah muttered darkly.

True. True, so true, Perfidia knew it was true. That was the real agony underpinning it. If the Seven Princes could find a way to screw her via some contract loophole they would. It was her own Pride that made her think she'd be able to sniff out their devious tricks as though she was anywhere near their level, but knowing only made her angrier as she advanced on Ubik's weightless form and shook his coat so hard a few more loose dildos toppled out.

"We're doomed, you and me both, all of us, you doomed us all." She motioned to Kedeshah, to Dog Bitch. The latter grabbing a dildo in her teeth and whining up at Ubiquitous.

"Doomed? I feel *great* Fidi. Better than great. Yeah. Okay. I lost—a good chunk of things that belonged to me. Not my girls though, they'll all come back once ownership returns—that's all contractual, automatic. And I've still got some things in here"—he patted his coat—"and what did I gain? I finally stuck it to them, those—those—"

"Don't say Stalin."

"Those *Maos*," grinning smugly at Perfidia's exasperated shriek, "finally told them I wouldn't stand for their shit, finally showed El Diablo himself that nobody's boss of me except *me*. Yeah. Yeah, that's fucking right. Yeah! Yeah. For sure. For real! Yeah!"

"Hopefully you can convince yourself better than me."

"Fidi, I'm sick of your attitude. Look. Everything's simple. We clean up your mistake, we fend off a few assassins the Seven Princes send after us, eventually they get bored, and then we rule Earthside. My girls come up to me, we'll have perfect conditions for a new enterprise..."

Perfidia gave up. He was right. No, not right. He was stating the only possible way to proceed, whether it was right or not.

"Then let's shut up and deal with Mayfair," she said. "We wasted a lot of time down there. It won't be long before she's on TV."

"Sure. Sure thing Fidi. Easy fucking peasy yo? We just blasted through half of Hell to get here. That little girl of yours can't be a threat. Kedeshah will wipe her off Earth in milliseconds flat."

Kedeshah stared skyward. Well, at the roof of the factory, with its beams and rats. But it was clear what she truly looked at. "I should not use my strength here," she said. "I can tell He isn't watching now. But He could if I'm not careful. And avoiding His eye's the whole point, isn't it Master?"

"Right. Yep. Right you are Kedeshah, that smart thinking of yours is why you're my fave. Mwah." Ubik grabbed her tiny body and laid one thick on her forehead, an act that somehow made a girl with red skin blush. Perfidia audibly gagged, remembering exactly the thought processes that led her to ditch Ubik for Earth in the first place. "Oh Fidi please it's fine," Ubik continued. "I still got shittons of weapons and gear and crap in my coat. We got this. You can trust me to have this don't you?"

She stared at him stonefaced.

"Ah well whatever, you'll see Fidi. It's just a girl you said. I can do all sorts of terrible things to a girl—hyuck hyuck. I only wonder what about this girl's got the Seven Princes so riled up. Maybe we oughtta let her live just to see how bad it fucks em over huh?"

"Don't even joke."

"Right, right. Well lead the way, my dear sister. By the way, deal's still on. You're mine after this—got it?"

He reached up to tip his hat toward her in a display of calculated assholery, realized he had no hat, and wound up looking like a total fuckboy, but it didn't matter, because his last words were true, and Perfidia could certainly not afford to reject his terms now. Without another bit of repartee she turned and led him and his cadre out the factory.

Early winter dusk was falling on Cleveland. It was Wednesday, December 13, 2017—the day Mayfair was set to appear on television. At least it wouldn't be hard to find her; the newspaper ad said exactly where to see her live. So Perfidia slouched onward, slouching no longer from her wounds but now simple shame, wondering where she went wrong, how she fucked up, what decisions she could have made better, finding a thousand, but feeling like even fixing those thousand would not have led her to a better end. So the final, most pathetic dagger twisted in the stomach of Pride: the idea that not even her failure was her own fault, that instead some cosmic fate dictated her existence more than her own selfhood, and behind her Ubik told Kedeshah a dirty joke and Kedeshah giggled and Perfidia thought if things kept up she maybe would prefer death to it all.

Not Another Fucking Elf!

The tiny pebble lodged deep in the works of the machine, crushed on all sides by the overwhelming pressure of every accumulated gear and cog, finally launched out like a bullet, ricocheted ten thousand times, and fell still. The machine groaned a moment, loosed a pent-up breath, and continued its ceaseless churn.

Jay Waringcrane stood on a cliff.

Sheer, high, it stared straight down into a frothing slice of sea set in perpetual grinding motion against the rock. Even so tall the sound of the crashing waves reached its apex, alongside the cold ocean air numbing his cheeks.

From here he saw everything. Not solely the water fanning out, but behind him the whole of the continent he'd traversed these two weeks: The forests, the mountains, even—seeming hardly so far away—Castle Whitecrosse and the monastery beyond it. The same feeling as from the tower in the academy where he once stood with Viviendre: that this world was not so large, that its entire expanse could fit within the palm of his hand. But his eyes turned beyond the sea.

"What's that." He pointed.

Olliebollen, on his shoulder, muttered something obscene under her breath. Lalum, without anywhere to hide on this barren outcropping, and who after two weeks had started to slowly emerge from her shell, to the point that she would at least allow Jay to see her downturned head from time to time, shivered and fumbled with her webbing to compose a few words. After one, two, three botched attempts Olliebollen finally decided to answer:

"California."

"I thought California was south of Whitecrosse."

"It is."

"I'm not that turned around. We're on the northern coast. That direction is north."

"It's a round planet you *idiot*. What happens if you go north enough?"

"We'd have to pass the north pole, go all the way down the planet, pass the south pole. Then we'd be south of Whitecrosse."

Lalum put forward a helpful addendum: CALIPH-URNIA IS A LONG LANDMASSE...

"Waste land at its southern end," said Olliebollen. She'd been in a foul mood since the incident with Temporary, but of course she'd been in a foul mood before that too. "Desert upon desert. You're right. We'd be traveling all the way down the other side of the world before we reached the civilized part of the continent. But I guess that's what we'll do next

huh? We've tromped all over this continent, gone in circles, seen nothing, because there's nothing to see. John Coke killed half the things of interest years ago and the elves killed everything else. So you'll just keep us going huh, to California, simply to see it I guess. Right?"

Jay did not answer. The wind whipped his jacket and he held one hand atop his hat to keep it down. In that moment, at this edge of the world still looking beyond it at yet-unknown territory, he cut a dashing figure. This was a moment, a precipice much like the one they stood upon, a focal point of curvature where something fundamentally shifted, where north became south and so forth. Lalum understood simply from the look he gave; she understood his looks now, had observed them in great detail in lieu of any other activity, could discern subtle differences in the arrangement of his features.

"No—no wait! Not simply to see it. Of course not. You gotta make this world into paradise, right right right. I remember. Yep! Olliebollen Pandelirium never forgets. Paradise, paradise. Mhmm. Gotta go to California. Your little girlfriend's from there and her brother's mighty wicked so gotta get rid of him. I bet there's relics there too! After all Vivienne had one or two on her, so surely her brother's got more. That's the plan huh hero? That's the track to paradise yeah?"

"Paradise," Jay muttered.

Paradise. That goal of his; that goal fit for a hero. Olliebollen didn't believe. Nor had Shannon Waringcrane, nor Vivienne de Califerne. Lalum, lurking, heard them all, the way they scoffed, implying with their condescending smiles he was incapable of it, either physically or morally.

Wasn't it a nice thought, though? Paradise in this world. Paradise for all these poor, suffering sinners, these fools who could do nothing to stop themselves from slipping into a deeper morass of decrepitude. These decayed and corrupted creatures, unworthy of any love, and yet for no seeming reason protected by him.

Lalum knew. Lalum knew he could do it. She had seen it, in Flanz-le-Flore's court. He had not needed to say a word for her; she'd been attempting to abduct him, after all. Yet he said the word anyway that stayed those wolves chomping at her flesh—then he'd outwitted a fae queen. Was that not the stuff of a true hero? And a true hero could do it; could make paradise. These two weeks, since Temporary, Lalum had been able to think, first thinking on herself, and her corruption, and the constant threat of Mayfair lurking (though Mayfair had gone deathly silent)—then she thought of Jay. No—that was a lie—she thought of herself even more. She thought: *Isn't it so pathetic of me, to cling to this man who speaks barely a word to me, and whom I fear to let see my face?* Thoughts of herself in the context of him. Self-gazing... Loathsome pride even in her wretchedness. Not simply enough to be wretched; to be the *most* wretched, around whom all horrors of the world revolve...

Then she thought: No. There was something else. Something that drew her to him despite his apathy. That dream. That dream to make this world better. It'd been the dream of Astrophicus. The dream of Mayfair. Yet in the end both failed. Mayfair, even, had become something worse than failure.

Jay could still succeed. In the castle Vivienne tempted him and he threw her off. As he had thrown off Flanz-le-Flore. What figures within this world could stand against his will? Perhaps he could do it. Perhaps he could achieve his dream, create his paradise, and perhaps she could assist him in that endeavor, and in so doing truly, actually atone for the wounds she inflicted upon her own soul.

She envisioned it: A brave and treacherous trek over this small ocean before them, waves hurling a wooden bark as thunder struck overhead. Yet he forged ahead.

A landfall. A desert waste, a beating sun. No oasis, no shelter. Their throats parched, their skin burnt. Yet he forged ahead.

Palm trees, a city of hardened clay. A pyramid rising beyond the surface of a long reflecting pool. Men of dark complexion sharpening curved swords; lascivious odalisques tempting toward interior delights. Yet he forged ahead.

The court of the Mad King of California. A cold reception, an ominous pallor. Sudden rage: threats, ravings, stark and suspicious lunacy. Calls for a hero's beating heart upon a platter. Yet he forged ahead.

A duel, man to man, the throne unseated, the court officials amazed. He stands victorious, his metal bat raised high, a despot overthrown. The brown faces are not horrified. It's relief on their features, relief to be free from the thumb of a man who might behead any of them on a whim. They hail: a new king, a hero, they present to him the treasured relics of California...

What a pleasant tale. It could happen that way, Lalum told herself. It truly could. She would die for him if she had to make it so. Dying in such a tale would be a worthy end for one such as her.

But she read his face. As he stared across the ocean at the continent of California, his thoughts weren't of the distant pyramid capital or the mad king on its throne. It was someone else he associated with that distant, dusty land; his thoughts turned to *her*.

When he opened his mouth and spoke those terse words, Lalum already knew. He could have said them silently and she would have known. Her whole body sank within itself; she became a folding, crumbling thing. He said:

"Let's go back. Let's go back to Whitecrosse."

—

In the monastery, nine nuns remained. Though there was also a tenth among them. In some manner of definition a tenth. She often went unmoving for long stretches of time; when she did move it was with stilted, uncanny grace. She spoke to them in strange sentences unlike

any that particular nun would've spoken when they knew her to be alive. Yet she did not putrefy, no matter how much time passed.

Eight of the nine avoided her. Only her sister kept by her side. In secluded rooms, often in the portions of the monastery blackened by the fire, they kept together. Sister Cinquefoil, the ferret, and boldest among them, once sniffed close to their door and listened awhile, but reported only sobbing. Constant sobbing.

One morning, the eight were gathered in the mess hall to take their breakfast as was their custom. They sent Cinquefoil with a bowl for Sister Charm, but no sooner had she stepped outside did she return, a hollow look in her eyes accentuated by the black band of fur that spanned them. Behind her was Sister Charm—and Sister Charisma.

The minimal conversation died. All heads turned as Cinquefoil and Charm slipped out of the way and Charisma approached the fore. Each click of her stiff talons bristled the backs of their necks. They watched her; they waited.

Charisma's mouth opened. Her eyes, which looked at nothing, went limpid in their brilliant blankness. A voice emerged, a voice they recognized as once belonging to their former friend:

"Speak to the archbishop."

Nothing else. Finished, the remnant of Charisma went inert within the arms of her twin ready to clasp her.

For a time: silence. Then—

"NO!"

The scream rebounded the high arches of the mess hall, returned to them a ghostly echo to rivet their eyes to the one who screamed. It was Sister Theovora, the mantis, leader among them, or at least leader before the fire, the one who kept them organized and orderly. Unlike the others, she had never been a woman of ill repute, or a waif, or some other brand of human refuse. They understood her to be some niece or similar relation to the archbishop, and she had assisted him in his experiments from the beginning, before the transformation of either.

"What's the matter, Theo," asked Cinquefoil.

Theovora slumped. "I cannot—not again. Not after all hope has been snatched from us. Let us linger as we are in peaceful solitude at least. Do not draw us back in. Let no more horrors fall upon our heads from *her* meddling!"

And who was this "her"? They all knew. They knew whose words were really coming from Charisma's mouth.

"It's all gone so wrong," Theovora said. "So, so, so wrong. It was never supposed to be this cruel, this violent. We weren't supposed to have to bury so many. Let us not bury any more! My sisters, I love you all. May we not simply enjoy a simple, humble bliss? May we cease all

this needless *striving*? We saw where it brought us. Let us now negate ourselves—eternal negation—and be removed quietly from this farce."

A murmur. Charisma offered no counterargument.

From one table a rough sound emerged of a bowl being pushed aside as the woman seated there slowly and carefully rose with meticulous effort of her four legs and long cervid body. Sister Demny, the deer. In contrast to Theovora, in contrast to the murmuring nuns, in contrast to Charm with her face soaked by black tears, Demny was calm. Serene. Almost to the point of apathy. Perhaps indeed to the point of apathy, and yet in her placid demeanor came a gentle pulse that stilled the activity of the others.

"Let's not devote ourselves to uselessness," Demny said. "We've a part still to play; let us play it. Do any of you wish to linger with your bodies as they are now? Your souls either. I do not. In silence I have only my own thoughts and my thoughts terrify me more than any fire."

Another murmur, cut short as Cinquefoil gave a curt "Aye!" and that was all that was needed. This consensus of two swayed the others and they rose, and once they had all risen even Theovora spat out a lachrymose sigh and rose too without further complaint.

They went to the archbishop.

Through the efforts of nearly all gathered, and those of many buried in the courtyard beside the prince, the fire had not penetrated the archbishop's sanctum. Nonetheless since that night his flower had dwindled, so that the petals lay gigantic around his roots; in its place was a large red bulb, pulsing with a faint light deep inside. The head drooped, and the stem was drained white. An affliction—one none of them knew the cause nor cure of. Theovora alone had tended to him, watering him and so forth, and he had spoken to none but Theovora in that time, if he even spoke to her. The sun, transformed into every imaginable color, streamed through the stained glass of his octagonal chamber and gave him although wilting—perhaps because of the wilting—a somber, holy grace.

They gathered in two lines as they typically did, Theovora and Demny at the front, Charm and Charisma at the back, and stopped before him. He made no notion of awareness and after a too-pregnant pause Demny nodded to Theovora and Theovora broke the formation to approach. Leaning close, she whispered something inaudible to the plant, then turned and faced her sisters. Slowly, a root detached from the ground and, trembling, injected itself into the back of Theovora's head.

Her eyes went blank.

"Oh... oh good... oh very good," Theovora said, though like Charisma it was no longer her who spoke. "My brave women... my courageous sisters of the faith... No, I cannot... I cannot waste words. I grow weak... but it is all for you... all for you. Our wonderful... vision... our vision for Whitecrosse... to bring it to God... to bring us all salvation..."

"We know the vision," Demny said. The other sisters went tense; it was irregular for any to interrupt the archbishop. "Tell us why you summoned us. Or why *she* summoned us for you."

Theovora's blank face belied any reaction; certainly, the plant itself gave none. After a pause, words continued to crawl out Theovora's throat:

"I have little time... My deep roots... are pulling from the soil... absorbing what is buried there. Your deceased sisters... that poor prince... even something deeper... that dread lizard... Devereux. It takes... all of my energy... I am draining my own vitality. I do it... I do it for you... I do it... to create... a fruit."

The sisters looked up. At the bulb growing where the flower had once been, red and veiny and throbbing and faintly luminescent. A fruit? It looked more like an egg, or a womb encased in tightly-strained skin; then again, what else was a fruit than the egg of a plant, filled with its seed? Unease electrified the sisters. Some of them lost the discipline of their formation and stepped backward, postures defensive as though they expected an attack. A palpable heartbeat thrummed among them: Duum... duum... da-duum. In the silence they realized it was not their own heart beating but the fleshy egg perched atop the archbishop.

How long had it been there? None of the sisters remembered seeing it before now. They exchanged furtive, frightened glances, but those whose hearts left them entirely and turned to retreat back to the safety of the mess hall, to the blissful irrelevance that Theovora promised, saw the grim visage of Sister Charisma blocking their path and ceased their egress with a shudder.

"How is this fruit supposed to help us," Demny asked.

"The fruit's flesh... you must devour it... all of you. It is filled with... potent power... concentrated animus. You will... be filled with the hopes and wishes of your fallen sisters... you will... grow beyond what you are now. Strong enough... to save this world... and yourselves."

"You mean it'll corrupt us further!" Cinquefoil said.

"We're already this far gone," said Demny. "My only question is why. What will strength serve us now? What are we to do?"

The plant shuddered and a sharp, pained groan emitted out Theovora's mouth as two more petals came loose and floated like feathers to the floor.

Panting heavily, Theovora continued, even more halting than before: "I... I... my dear soldiers. You must... inside the fruit... there is... Nnnrrggaaaah... Never mind what it is. You'll see for yourself... soon. You must take... you must take what is inside... take it to Whitecrosse Castle. Take it to... the vault... the vault of relics. My dear Theovora... she'll know the way. Ah... there shall be violence... terrible violence there. But you must... you must persevere... Ah! Nhuuuuu!"

A violent tremor wracked the plant; another petal fell. The tall stalk stooped, and the fruit atop it seemed to grow larger even as the archbishop shriveled and turned a bilious brittle white. Theovora fell to her knees but continued:

"Princess Mayfair... our dear ally... she is Master now. Have faith in her... she will set all aright. You must... do your part... my dear girls. Oh... I'm sorry. I'm sorry what I did to you all... I'm sorry. But there is no greater... purpose... than striving to know God... all was for that purpose. All was for..."

The root attached to the back of Theovora's head crumbled. Theovora herself flopped forward, jerking spasmodically in the throes of a falling fit. Demny quickly stooped to her aid and held her steady. The massive structure of the archbishop began to come apart. Sinew and filament snapped, sap oozed out only to immediately go dry and leave a dusty white residue, and the main stalk curled forward, shedding its last few petals as the heavy fruit, now larger than the size of a person, lowered itself slowly to the floor and came to rest before them. Demny reached out and touched the stalk and a swath of it came apart as powder that drifted stagnant in the tinted sunlight. Some of the other sisters let out cries of dismay, some near the back even sobbed—or was it simply Charm, sobbing enough for them all? Among the commotion remained that constant throbbing heartbeat, louder now, a palpable pulse along the floor that rose up through their feet, and the fruit despite the death of the plant that produced it bulging with an excess of life; swollen, over-full.

It burst.

A seam split in response to the welling pressure within, emerging like a gash on the skin, and from it flowed a hissing deluge of pinkish fluid that splattered the ground and spread in a fan that caused the nuns—even Demny—to step back. The liquid smelled sweet, like juice.

Even broken, the egg continued to beat, to throb, each heaved in- and exhalation spurting a further spew of sweetly-smelling amniotic fluid. Within the draining sac a shadow emerged, at first too indistinct to determine any clear form, but the widening gash let out yet more of the juice and soon the figure inside was clear, a humanoid form in fetal self-embrace. Humanoid—it was not human. Or not fully human. Even so occluded they could see.

The gash increased until the full front of the egg was split and the rounded nub at its apex came apart in two halves, and the form inside uncoiling slid out on the final rush of liquid enshrouded by the rising steam of its sizzling heat.

By now the nuns were cleaved to the walls, all save Charisma who stood in the back unflinching, and Theovora still draped across the floor only now returning to self-awareness and wiping foam from her mouth with the back of her scythe-like hand, her head supported by the kneeling Demny. The creature born of the egg remained half-curved on its side in a lake of pink liquid, motionless, motionless long enough for the rapt attention of the nuns to waver and for a few to exchange glances with one another, motionless long enough for Demny to nod to Cinquefoil and the latter to start tepidly on a forward creep, one ragged claw outstretched as though to tap the newborn on the shoulder. The claw did not come close. The thing shook itself alive with one sharp arch of its back as its head tilted to suck a heavy breath; Cinquefoil danced back eeping as motion came to the extremities, then the limbs, then the hips and torso, and finally the long, scaly, spike-studded tail.

Darkly incandescent scales covered its clawed hands and arms nearly up to the shoulders; likewise were its legs, which flexed and stretched before digging the sharp nails of the feet into the floor to stabilize itself as it pulled into position to rise. The pink fluid ran off its

smooth body in rivers, trickling in streams from the long golden hair that hung around its face and the two knobby horns jutting backward from its head. From its back, casting off a further runny mess, wings unfolded and extended to their full breadth, long enough to cast a dark shadow on all before it, while the stained glass sunlight struck from behind and cast it aglow in immaculate rainbow.

"A dragon," Demny muttered under her breath. A dragon—and yet a human too. The admixture of all the things buried beneath the monastery.

The dragon lifted its claws and pushed aside strands of hair from its face. An altogether too lovely face, a face of uncanny perfection that somehow even bathed in birth-fluid tugged at the nuns with its angelic allure. Then it opened its eyes—and they were the yellow slitted eyes of a reptile.

Theovora clasped her scythes together and prayed in silence. Several other nuns followed suit and perhaps they all would have continued staring in holy dread if not for Demny rising and clip-clopping forward. "Someone," she said, "fetch a rag to dry her. Someone else, find a spare habit."

The nuns blinked.

"She won't have to go nude, will she?" Demny said. "Cinquefoil, Pythette."

"Ah—erm—yes!" Cinquefoil saluted smartly and shot off on all fours, her long body and tail undulating with each bound. Pythette, the hare, hesitated a moment longer, but the slam of a distant door roused her and she bounded away.

"Now then." Demny touched a cloven hoof carefully to the edge of the fluid, found it to have quickly cooled, and approached the dragon girl, who for someone just born seemed hardly younger than the other nuns. "The archbishop's final request was for us to take her to the Whitecrosse vault. We—"

"Absurd," Theovora said. "This is all so absurd! We can never make it to the vault. Even if we could, it's sealed. Won't open for any but royal blood."

"Prince Makepeace was among those buried," said Demny. "If this child is born of what the archbishop absorbed from the corpses—"

"Never, never in a thousand years would that be sufficient, the blood so strained and diluted. No—None of this makes the least sense. Why would the archbishop want us to take her there? She's only just now opened her eyes for the first time. We shall care for her as we would any, here in the safety of the monastery. That is all. No more, no more, let us bring upon ourselves no more suffering!"

Demny, with casual disinterest as footsteps heralded the return of Cinquefoil and Pythette, prepared to make her response, but before she could the dragon opened its mouth and spoke a single word:

"Mademerry."

All looked at her, uncertain what she just said, whether it were speech or simply sound. Yet her voice was as her face: heavenly, with only a slight strain of sharpness to mar it.

"Mademerry," she said. "My name is Mademerry."

Mademerry. They processed the name. Cinquefoil and Pythette slowed to a halt, holding bundled cloth. Mademerry. It was a familiar name, though none had heard it before. Mademerry, with the fair face and golden hair. Who else possessed a similar name? A similar appearance too, if one ignored the scales?

Eyes turned back, toward the silent Charisma; Charisma stared unflinching in return.

"Thank you most kindly." Mademerry reached out, took the rag from Cinquefoil, and dried herself with it, retaining as she did her posture. "You need not bother yourselves with explaining anything; in my egg I dreamed, and my dreams revealed much to me. Sister Theovora, fret not. The vault will be open when we arrive. All will follow a design. No harm shall befall any of you."

Theovora started to protest but stopped when Mademerry smiled. That smile—it pierced the heart. Several of the nuns wilted with a melancholic "Oh," and even Demny found herself weakened by its simple charm before Mademerry put her towel to her face and rubbed it clean enough to reveal an even greater luster.

"I am so glad to finally meet you all," Mademerry continued. "It could be said that Archbishop Astrophicus was my father, and you and your sisters risked your lives to keep him safe from the flame. I owe my life to you; my very existence. If you bring me to the vault, I shall be able to repay your kindness tenfold, with a gift so precious it cannot be found anywhere in this world." She smiled again, and its force was such that the weaker nuns knelt spontaneously.

Still, Theovora managed a curdling groan as she resisted. "The archbishop... He's dead because of you..."

"He was willing to sacrifice himself for this vision. He did nothing that he did for himself; it was for you, my sisters, for you and everyone else in this world. This was his desire. Is that desire one not worth celebrating?"

The voice. It wasn't the exact same. But how could they not think of *her* when they heard it?

"Even if the vault's open, it's suicide to go there," Theovora said. "We'll be caught and executed before we even reach the wall. It's—we—we cannot—"

"Dear Theovora," Mademerry taking a single step forward, extending her arms as Cinquefoil helped dress her in the nun's habit, then carrying forward with a second step as though she intended to take Theovora in those same arms, "we must simply have faith. Do you remember what else the archbishop spoke through you? The fruit from which I was born. It is brimming with the reclaimed animus of your fallen sisters. It contains their wishes and their hopes for you, the only family those unfortunate women ever truly had. Is there not

something beautiful in that? Eat of the fruit and gain strength, strength so that none may ever hurt you again..."

For a moment Theovora wavered; Mademerry approached, her arms closing for the embrace; then with a lurch Theovora tore away and danced back. "No. No! What you ask is hideous, what you ask is an affront to all that is holy. Cannibalism! Cannibalism is what you ask, and for what? So that we may suffer and die? No. No. I refuse. I refuse! I'll not play a part in it. I resign myself from this horrific plot! I excise myself from it entirely, and if any of you retain your senses, I advise you follow!"

She waited for no rebuttal, did not bother to look at her sisters. She turned and ran, her steps shaky and awkward but irreversible. A second sister, watching her go, bit her lip hard enough to draw a bead of blood, seized the sleeve of the sister beside her, and dragged her enough steps until both their legs resumed their function and they could disappear down the corridor after Theovora.

That left six. Six—and the corpse of Charisma—gathered still around Mademerry. The dragon's eyes narrowed and an instant of displeasure distorted her features enough to momentarily break the charm that imbued her; then her face returned to its typical beauty and she shrugged. "Even now some will not listen... Princess Mayfair spoke sooth."

"You know the princess," Demny said.

"Indeed. She kept me such pleasant company in my dreams. She is a wonderful girl. She is worthy of all love. I hope to meet her some day. I hope that we may become friends... But we have work to do. Please, my sisters. You must eat of the fruit. You must!"

She stepped aside, revealing the split halves of the egg from which she emerged. Her claws were held out to it, offering it to the sisters who remained. Those who remained, however, mainly did so because it was impossible for them to muster the clarity of mind to break away. Though the fruit smelled sweet, it was nonetheless unappetizing for numerous reasons. An impasse may have stalled matters, Mademerry unable to convince them despite all her charm to take that final step, if not for Demny. With a stony face she clopped forward, pulled a glob of the fruit's flesh from one half, sniffed it, and then bit into it. The juice ran down her chin; she swallowed.

"It tastes... amazing," she said, and her blank face for a moment blazed with rapture.

The other sisters tiptoed forward and followed suit, while Demny grabbed another handful to feast upon.

Sounds of smacking lips filled the chamber where the desiccated corpse of the archbishop still lay. Mademerry watched with a kindly smile, turning her head only to face the final sister who still hesitated.

"Go ahead, Charm. This is what your sister wants for you..."

Charm, face a mask of illimitable sorrow, glanced over her shoulder at the body of her twin. Charisma's mouth twitched into something more akin to a sneer than a smile on account of

the natural character of her face, but the sentiment was conveyed clearly enough by the nod that followed. That was enough. Sobbing, Charm went to the fruit and joined her sisters.

—

Avery Waringcrane woke up to the sound of vomit.

Rubbing sleep from her eyes she plodded in pajamas to her home's central hallway, where the door to the bathroom hung open and yellow light flooded out. Sansaime curled around the toilet, heaving another wet splatter into the basin before casting a moribund grimace over her shoulder.

"Maybe let's have you eat something other than Froot Loops," Avery said.

Instantly something cracked in the face looking up at her, Sansaime's head tilted, tears streamed out the corners. Tears—real tears. A fountain of emotion that melted something out of Avery's somnolence...

"It's—it's not that." Emerging as a rasp. Choked with a sob. "It's not that. It's not that."

If you went to another country, you could get sick from a disease you didn't have any immunity against, or something like that. Sansaime came from another world... could she have gotten sick like the Native Americans? That was Avery's first thought, but the tragedy wreaking havoc on Sansaime's face, messing it up far worse than any of those scars, something hidden there became known. Avery didn't know how she knew it, but she knew—call it intuition.

"Um," she said, "when was... when was your last... uh..." She wondered if people from a fantasy world knew the word "period." "When was the last time you bled...?"

"I can't. I can't. No, I can't. Not this way. Not like this. Not like how it happened to me. No, no, no, no, no. It was one time. It was only one time."

Instantly Avery transported back in time, back to when she was eighteen and found herself where Sansaime was now, of course she hadn't known so quickly, she passed it off as just a stomach bug, she didn't know the signs to look for then. It'd been a few months before she realized. What then? She remembered no fear. She'd received the news with a distant tranquility, a single spoken exclamation: "Ah." It'd been Daniel who reacted, Daniel who wanted her to go in for an operation...

Maybe it was because Avery had never been good at anything, not at school—limping into a cheap public university on barely above a 2.0 GPA—not at sports, not even at love. The boys she went with in high school played such mean tricks on her, used her the way they liked and then left her. With Daniel, she'd thought... Well, no, her first thought had been maybe she could be a good mother. A child depends on their mother, they can't abandon her the way

those boys did, and she could shower them with affection... so she thought. It turned out she wasn't a good mother either, was she? And they did abandon her. They grew cold first, then they left.

(Was that the reason though? Were you really thinking about being a mother at that moment? Or maybe you thought... with Daniel... maybe you thought you could keep *him* from leaving. For a time it worked. But he found a way to escape alright. Yes he did.)

None of that—none of that now mattered. What mattered was this young woman before her, Sansaime, face fraught with all sorts of nasty emotions unlike those Avery herself once felt. That was okay. One didn't have to have lived the exact same things to connect to another person. Maybe all those failures of the past could in this moment be repaired...

"And the father," Avery said. "Is he...?"

"He's DEAD," Sansaime said. "He's fucking DEAD."

Oh. Oh... *now* there was a connection. Avery moved forward, kneeling, to place her hands on Sansaime's shoulders, but an icy glare unseamed her and Sansaime shot up so abruptly that her woozy wobble afterward caused the towels on the rack to flop to the floor. "I'm fine now." She wiped at her tears. "I'm fine. I got it all out of me. I'm fine."

She strode past Avery into the hall and glanced toward Jay's room, where through the door Avery could see paused the fantasy video game she'd been playing before her flight to the bathroom. Into that room was solitude, the door an iron bulwark Avery could rarely hope to pierce, and seeing Sansaime look that way caused her to stammer useless words. Meaningless babble. But it worked, or maybe Sansaime had her own reasons, because she turned and went the other way, to the living room.

Maybe something in her needed to connect, despite her gruffness. Maybe...

Sansaime plucked a box of Froot Loops from the kitchen counter and scooped a handful into her mouth before dropping onto the sofa and clicking the remote.

"I want you to know," Avery said, "that you're not alone, okay Sansaime? I'm here for you. I'll help you through this, with anything you need." She'd thought about what to say in a situation like this before. Not Sansaime, of course, but Shannon. Shannon was popular with the boys... and although she was so fastidious about everything, sometimes accidents happen. "I don't know much, but I, ha-ha, I have experience, you know? We'll figure it out. It's not the end of the world. No—maybe it's a blessing in disguise. Maybe—"

"A blessing."

"I can see how it'd be difficult to think that now. But when you hold that child in your arms, then you might feel differently..."

"I'm such an idiot." Sansaime balled one hand into a fist and rammed it hard against her forehead. "I'm so stupid. I'm so, so, so STUPID! In that inn I thought it was what I needed."

Just one moment... to be held like that, cared for like that... Ugh! What am I saying!" She hit herself again, again.

"Please, please don't do that." Avery sat on the other end of the sofa, careful about distance. She could tell—Sansaime wanted to say something. When they spoke earlier, before Sansaime retreated into Jay's video games, there had been a precipice, something Avery touched close to and could tell was sensitive, but at that time she'd felt it would be too much to pry further. Now, though, things were different. Sansaime had spoken more in the last five minutes than she had in the past two weeks, her taciturn nature was cracking, the emotion was simply too much. Something buried deep was being dredged to the surface. She only needed a gentle push... "You're worried because your own mother wasn't able to care for you as much as she should, aren't you? You're worried you'll be like her."

Avery wasn't sure how exactly she reached that conclusion. From tatters, maybe... there was no logical process. It was what she said, and it produced an effect.

"As much as she should." Sansaime scoffed. "Yea. You could say that, couldn't you?"

Avery inched closer. Her hand rested on the sofa cushion between them. "You can talk to me about it, Sansaime. I don't know how you feel about me, but... I care about you. I can tell this is something you've locked away. But you can be open with me, okay...?"

For a time Sansaime said nothing. Her bleary eyes dissected Avery, and although they gave her a shiver, Avery held strong, held the connection as she leaned forward. Perhaps they always left her because she was so persistent about delving into their hearts... But Jay and Shannon left even without that, didn't they?

Finally Sansaime pointed to her own face and said, "My mother gave me these scars."

Avery said nothing. It was time for Sansaime's story.

"I told you before about John Coke yea? How he fucked the elf queen. The Effervescent Elf-Queen, they call her." A meanspirited snicker. "That's why elves are so close to humans. They all descend from her and him. Well. That mixed blood is why elves are hated by both fae and human. Cast out, y'might say. You'd think that'd be something to be ashamed of, but oh, the Effervescent Elf-Queen's ashamed of nothing. If she did it, it must be good. So to her, to all my kind, that blood's a point of pride. Or maybe it has to be, since it's all we've left to take pride in. Ha, ha, ha.

"The purity of our impure blood must be maintained. The quotients cannot shift. If your blood is in any way diluted from that which the Elf-Queen herself produced, any more or any less human, then you're not an elf. If you're not an elf, you're an enemy, and if you're an enemy—well, then you're better off dead, heh? All marriages must be sanctioned by the queen herself. She creates most elves still and is suspicious of those she did not create, so she controls it all to ensure every specimen of our kind is exactly alike: fair of skin, blonde of hair, and possessed of immaculate beauty. Aye, and I've got all of those traits in spades, don't I now?"

Another spiteful chuckle. Avery made no reaction; she only watched attentively, letting Sansaime know someone was there to listen.

"My mother, though a purebred elf like any other, wished to see the world outside the queen's iron rule. A bohemian nature, y'might say. She slipped away and went on her adventure and saw the world and encountered a human from California who claimed he loved her. Oh, my mother truly believed it, she believed it her whole damn life, she believed it although the morning after he put me in her he vanished without a trace and was never seen again.

"A child was an inconvenient end to my dear mum's wanderlust, eh-heh-heh. But how to raise a newborn, hm? She'd forsaken the only society that would accept her. Alone, she might survive on forage, but with me? My earliest memories are her taking me to the Californian capital"—which wasn't Los Angeles, Avery remembered that from school at least, it was San Francisco—"and nearly getting us both murdered by the guards. Oh, she wailed, the child's father is surely inside that pyramid! They hurled spears at her. Begone, fae whore! Hahahaha!

"Driven by desperation, she at last decided to return to the elfin court. Suppose I oughtta be grateful she never got the notion to leave me out in the desert sands for the wolves to feast on, heh? Nay, she loved her dear child. She stroked my face and told me so, told me stories about my father who she knew for a single night, told tales of the elves and the Elf-Queen. Told me it was an enchanted land where none knew sorrow or fear or hunger, told me that to quiet me as I sobbed because my stomach felt like it was about to compress and compress me with it. Faerie Land, she called it. How do we get to Faerie Land mummy? Well my sweet, any elf can go there, they only need to know the way. There's only one thing, okay my bonny child? Your skin must be fair as snow, and your hair like golden wheat in the field... But mummy, my skin's dark, and so's my hair. You won't go to Faerie Land without me, will you mummy? Nay my sweet, mummy's got something, a maaaaagic ointment, you see? It'll change the color of your skin to be just like mummy's. Wouldn't you like that? W-will it hurt, mummy? Yes my sweet, it may sting a little, but you'll be brave for mummy won't you? Mummy had to sell something very precious to get this. You'll need to hold very, very still so that not a single drop is wasted..."

Sansaime's voice trailed off. She stared at the television, blank in the eyes. Her scars shone white as the first rays of dawn pierced the curtains.

"She must've already been far gone, watching me waste away from hunger, to think such a ridiculous thing would work. She poured that vile water all over me, and here's the result, hahahaha. For a time she pretended, to me or herself who knows, that all was fine, that I'd be able to enter Faerie Land, even though my skin burned and I writhed in agony whenever I tried to sleep. We made it as far as the forest outskirts before she cracked. She sobbed, she told me how sorry she was, how so very sorry, and that there was one last thing to do before we could go to Faerie Land, we had to drink a magic potion, and this time she'd drink it with me. I'd had my fill of magic potions and spat mine out when she wasn't looking. She drank hers and died."

The whole story she spoke with a mean, ironical smile. Maybe the story continued after that. In fact it probably did... But Sansaime said nothing more, her lips moved like she might

explain what happened next, how she survived in the wilderness on her own so young, how she wound up where she was now.

Instead she burst into heavy, ugly tears.

Avery was there. Her arms around her shoulders, holding her tight, holding the back of her head, pressing her face into her shoulder as she sobbed with gigantic, spasmodic hefts of her torso.

"There, there," Avery said. "There, there. It's okay."

"I can't—I can't be like her. I can't—oh God, why did he have to die? Why, why, why did he have to die?!"

"You're not going to be like her, Sansaime. I'm here for you. You're not alone." Words of comfort. Someone was leaning on her, someone shared with her the secret of her life, for the first time in a long time—maybe ever—Avery was let into another's private world... She grew teary-eyed too.

"Why didn't he leave me in that room to burn," Sansaime said after a long time, after her sobs finally started to slow.

"Don't say things like that. Never like that. It'll be okay. It'll be... Oh! We really should make sure about things first." Avery pulled back from Sansaime, keeping her arms around her shoulders. Sansaime's face was a mask of wet tears and shame. "Let's run to the store together. I'll get you a test. Then we'll know for certain, okay? It'd be really funny if we made such a hullabaloo and it turned out it really was just the Froot Loops, wouldn't it? Ha, ha!"

Sansaime, coming down from such sorrow, actually managed a smile. She had a very pretty smile despite all her scars. "...Yeah..." But she was smiling. She was really smiling. She wasn't withdrawing, wasn't trying to flee from her own emotions or the person with whom she shared them. They were... together. In that moment they were connected, truly.

They looked at each other in silence, smiling. That was the moment the TV, which had been on the whole time, decided to say:

"WITNESS A TRUE MIRACLE!"

Their heads, together, still shakily smiling, turned toward the screen.

"The Reverend Dwight J. Styles of the Cuyahoga Baptist Church invites you and yours to see with your own eyes THE MIRACLE OF LAZARUS!"

Dwight J. Styles. Dwight J. Styles. Why did that name sound familiar... Then they showed him on the screen.

Sansaime's smile was fading fast.

"The faithful Mayfair R.L. Coke shall RAISE THE DEAD. It is not a trick! It is not a fantasy! GOD IS ALWAYS AMONG US. SEE IT PROVEN ON CABLE TELEVISION!"

OR see for your own eyes—only in Cleveland, Ohio!"

Then there was a date—that very same day—a time, a channel, and a place.

The commercial ended.

Sansaime's eyes fell down to her stomach. She touched her hands to it, rubbed it gently. Then she whispered: "Where's that place they said."

"I... I don't remember what it was."

Sansaime recited the exact address from the commercial. "Where is it," she said.

Avery, still smiling like a fool, shook her head. "Sansaime. Sansaime. You don't have to—you don't have to go. You don't..."

"They'll have the Door. Isn't that what you want."

Avery's eyes closed. Yes, they would have the Door. The Door through which her children disappeared. Jay, Shannon. Yet a horrible dark hand clasped her heart.

"I... I don't want you to go, Sansaime. Even knowing that. What about you? You can't... You..."

Her voice trailed off. Because she knew... there'd be no convincing. The connection was cut. The tears on Sansaime's face were drying, her smile was gone. It was over. Like with Jay, like with Shannon, there was no more hope for Avery to draw close. Like with them, only distance remained.

"Take me there," Sansaime said.

"Sansaime... Why are you doing this?" Because it wasn't about revenge anymore, was it. Sansaime had reached a peace. She spent the past two weeks playing video games and watching TV. Not striving for anything. Quiet, peaceful, safe, removed entirely from any danger. What changed? Was it simply the memory? Did she feel like she needed to slay her lover's murderer—for what else could her history with this Mayfair be, had they not talked about it at the office building and Avery simply forgot? Or did Sansaime simply want to die, in a more guiltless way than her mother.

Sansaime said only, "Take me there. Or I go alone."

What else could Avery do? Sansaime would find the address one way or another. And shouldn't Avery want to go herself? For the Door. For Jay and Shannon...

Mainly though, she didn't want to be abandoned again. "Okay. We'll go together."

The hero Wendell Noh flicked the switch on the small device, but other than a clicking sound like the snap of Flanz-le-Flore's fingertips nothing was produced. He turned the device over, inspected it through the thick lenses of his glasses, and shook his head.

"Not right."

Flanz-le-Flore's face turned crestfallen. "I did it exactly as you specified, dear hero. If you had an example, even a broken one, of this 'lighter,' it would be far simpler to replicate."

"Liquid butane turns into gas when depressurized. The wheel releases a small stream of gas and ignites it with a spark. It's about pressure and friction."

He would speak like this, in sudden spurts, explaining in detail the ingenious devices of his world, and then settle once more into his torpor. Already they had spent a long stretch of time synthesizing this material called "butane" from various more elementary matter. Creating butane had been far less difficult, as Flanz-le-Flore was familiar with the constituent parts. Indeed, it had been somewhat revelatory that using her powers she could transform and combine such basic particles into complex concoctions capable of unexpected effects. Fire, for instance, was ordinarily so wild, so untamed, and therefore so frightful even to one such as her. But with butane, it could be more easily controlled, produced in the form of a tiny flickering flame rather than a raging pyre.

(Prior to her encounter with Jay Waringcrane many of the world's basic materials, being metal, were prohibited her. Was it not grandest serendipity that such a hero would open her eyes to her true potential so shortly after the other hero maimed her so thoroughly?)

The reason Wendell desired the fire was for his 'cigarette,' which Flanz-le-Flore had already created for him with tobacco and other simple materials. The cigarette needed to be lighted to work properly, however, hence their current process of trial-and-error. Despite her aversion to flame, Flanz-le-Flore did possess other ways of creating and controlling it: candles, stone-circled firepits, and so forth. She did not proffer these as suggestions and Wendell did not grow impatient and request them though he was surely aware of the possibility. He wished for his lighter.

She would give it to him; she would prove useful to him. In this way she would endear herself to him, and he and her would become one.

She snapped her fingers to transform the failed lighter into one of somewhat different dimensions. At the same time, something scurried up to the throne. A squirrel, ordinary as any other, though it bowed and gave proper obeisance before her while nibbling the nut it clutched between its paws. She bid it permission with a motion of her finger and it scampered up the throne and onto her shoulder, where it quietly chattered into her ear.

Given her focus remained on Wendell, who shook his head again and muttered some more technical details as to the lighter's intended construction, the squirrel's words at first bounced insensibly off her. After she snapped her finger and adjusted the lighter once more, she asked it to repeat itself.

Squeakity-squeak, chitter-chatter, said the squirrel.

Instantly she riveted her eyes on it. "An elf? An elf you say?"

The squirrel chattered.

"You saw it at the gates of Whitecrosse? Truly you did? You yourself, not some other squirrel who told you—you yourself?"

Wendell, who had been flicking the wheel of the lighter for the past few seconds, flicked it once more with aplomb and a tiny orange flame arose from the opening. The squirrel asserted what he had seen.

"It was the scarred one, was it not? Sansaime. She's known to go there often, though we last saw her heading the opposite direction, for the Door. It was her, yes? Dark skin and scars."

The squirrel shook its head. *Chitter*, it said, *chatter*.

"Fair skin? Blonde hair? You're certain. Tell me truthfully, are you certain?"

The squirrel was certain. He added: *She told the men at the gate she was an ambassador from the elfin race.*

Flanz-le-Flore's strained exhale accompanied the long drag Wendell made on his freshly-lit cigarette. The smoke bloomed out noxious to her senses and yet the odious image of the elf conjured by the squirrel's terse description infected her far worse.

An elf. A true elf, not that mongrel half-breed. The latter, though she'd taken part in Flanz-le-Flore's disfigurement, was acceptable. Nay, more than that. She was a mockery of that Elf-Queen's lineage, a twisted and corrupted instance of it, and for that purpose Flanz-le-Flore enjoyed her presence despite her activities.

Oh that wretched Elf-Queen. Oh that lascivious wench. How, how, how did she sink her talons into John Coke all those years ago, what did she offer him that Flanz-le-Flore failed to provide? Well, Flanz-le-Flore had gotten her back for that business, yes indeed. Brought to the fae council's attention the human blood injected into the Elf-Queen's offspring, spearheaded the vote that ejected that degenerate race from their noble kind. Despite it the fury still burned, that horrid green feeling: Envy! Envy, envy, envy, why did she still feel it though she had her own hero now within her arms who even managed to smile now that he had his cigarette, why did it still stab a shard into her heart the same as when she thought of Jay Waringcrane, why did it still pull her to pieces?

That was not the worst of it though. It had been four hundred years but Flanz-le-Flore knew the Elf-Queen's mind. Damnation! She should have realized the moment she saw Olliebollen Pandelirium so far from home. Ominous tidings were afoot—for what possible purpose could an elf ambassador seek to establish ties with the human nation of Whitecrosse? What possible purpose indeed. The Elf-Queen was tricky, sly, and clever. No good would come of this, none whatsoever.

That elf—Flanz-le-Flore would stake anything upon it—that elf was no mere ambassador.

Her eyes shifted to the barrel of Wendell's rifle, which he kept propped against the side of the throne.

"My hero," she said, "would you like to go on an adventure?"

Wendell Noh did not look at her as he exhaled smoke. His eyes closed. "An adventure."

"A grand adventure. One fit for a true hero: To wage battle against a wicked queen."

"Hm..." He sounded unconvinced.

"You will be able to wield your might to its fullest potential, my hero. You will be able to achieve feats no man has achieved in centuries. Your armaments shall be amplified past the peak of their current construction. None shall stand before you that you cannot cut down. I shall make sure it is so; I shall provide for you all the strength you could desire in wildest fantasy."

The smile from before, when he first lit the cigarette, twinged again. "Hm. Will you make me more cigarettes too?"

"Yes, my hero. Yes, as many as you desire!"

"Sure then. Let's see what this is all about." His head tilted. "Might head home after, though."

Flanz-le-Flore disliked the sound of that, though he spoke it so casually, so unconcernedly, like his conception of a grand adventure ended at suppertime. Nonetheless she possessed his acquiescence. Once he drank from her elixir, she would ensnare him—and bring to ruin her archest foe in the process.

"Attendants," she said to her court. "Unstable the prince's horse. We ride for Whitecrosse."

—

The guards boggled their eyes at the wreck of a woman standing before them, and only partly because she was an elf. Caked filth covered her, her hair went askew in all possible directions, scrapes dotted her face, her cloak was rent in several places. Nonetheless she was beautiful.

"Hi! Sorry about dropping in like this," she said, placing a fist atop her head and sticking out her tongue, "but I'm an ambassador from elf-land. Sent by the Effervescent Elf-Queen herself! May I speak to whoever's in charge here?"

They took her, with some hesitation, to the castle.

In the throne room they were all gathered: Duke Meretryce and his nephew Gonzago, Duke Mordac, Archbishop Tintzel, the Fool, a sickly-seeming Viviendre de Califerne, Prime Astrologer DeWint, knights and attendants and maidservants and dignitaries and courtiers and Shannon Waringcrane and lastly, leasly, Queen Mallory empty on her throne. The third and final duke, Malleus, was on his way to the capital and would be there soon, but none intended to wait for him.

"Elf-land," said Mordac. "Pah. Are we certain such a place truly exists?"

"While not listed under that name," DeWint said, "the chronicles of John Coke describe a Forest of Elf, where the Effervescent Elf-Queen gave him succor during his long journey to slay the western dragons and claim their relics for Whitecrosse. While Cokian history is somewhat outside my interest, these facts are rudimentary enough that even a neophyte can —"

"I am aware of Coke's tale." Mordac pulled his black robes closer around himself and glowered at the so-called elf ambassador. "Yet I find this figure dubious. Dubious indeed."

Some of the queen's maidservants had, at least, made the ambassador presentable before she entered the throne room. They could not, however, scrub the foolish smile she wore.

"Any relation to the elf with the scars," Viviendre muttered. "What was that one's name again? I forgot."

"Sansaime." Shannon rubbed her neck.

"These questions are indeed quite trivial," said Archbishop Tintzel, "quite trivial indeed. Know we little of the elves, yet know we they are inhuman; being inhuman, they are ungodly; being ungodly, they are not to be trusted, yes quite untrustworthy! It is true their queen once aided John Coke, true it is, but I have always stood staunchly against our allowing that Sansaime to peddle her wares here and it was only the corruption of my predecessor that permitted it! Repeat not his mistakes, indeed do not repeat them! Send her away now—now I say!"

"Fee, fae, foe, fum, I smell the blood of a spineless one," sang the Fool.

"And yet," said Meretryce, striding to the fore, extending his arms, "and yet has not the Kingdom of Whitecrosse enjoyed peace with the fae nation of Flanz-le-Flore in all this time? An uneasy peace, to be sure, but peace nonetheless. It was through the great King John Coke's alliance with Flanz-le-Flore that we were allowed to build a road through her forest. Though well I understand old prejudices and suspicions, and most assuredly we must remain on our guard and leave no reasonable precaution unattended, I believe we ought to hear out this earnest ambassador and discern whether there is any profit to be made via treaty or otherwise."

"Fae are creatures of the devil, devil's creatures indeed they are!" Tintzel shouted.

"If the devil has a hand anywhere in Whitecrosse, frock," said the Fool, "it's in your windbag sermons, which so irresistibly tempt me to slothful sleep!"

"Will someone behead that Fool already," said Mordac.

"Please, please, please everyone." Meretryce smiled good-naturedly even as he raised his voice above the hubbub. "Let us at least hear what the ambassador has to say before we claw each others' throats out. Lady Ambassador, please. Why don't you assuage some of the worries of the court. Explain to us what your Kingdom of Elf-land may offer us, and what you expect us to provide in return."

Meretryce's force of personality bade them fall quiet and allow at least this small concession. They all looked at this unlikely ambassador, and for a few seconds she only looked back with the same sluggish smile.

Then she blinked. "Oh. It's my turn? Okay!"

Her mouth remained open, she lifted a finger and tapped her chin, she nodded.

"Um..."

"On with it," said Mordac.

"I... forgot what I was supposed to say."

A palpable groan shuddered the audience.

"Wait! Wait! I have it written down. I have it written down somewhere." She rummaged through her cloak, pulled out a few various doodads of no particular importance, and finally under constant verbal blows by the more impatient of the audience produced a letter sealed by wax. Proudly showing the seal to those gathered, she split it open and read:

"Ahem! To the most splendid and stupendous Queen Mallory Tivania Coke.—I should mention this letter was written by the Effervescent Elf-Queen, not me! Anyway. To the most splendid and stupid—stupendous Queen Mallory Tivania Coke. I have dispatched this humble ambassador—that's me!—to your court to make a simple request of you. That request is thus: Please allow the elf army safe passage through your lands. Our intention is to strike against the Kingdom of Fwanz-le-Fwore. Flanz-le-Flore, sorry, sorry, my tongue got a little tied up. Anyway! It is my intention to redress ancient wrongs done to me and my race by Queen... Flanz, Flanz-le-Flore in the time of John Coke. Do know that I make this request of you only out of respect for the late King John, for whom I harbor some affection. If you refuse my request, I shall have no choice but to see you as an ally of Flanz-le-Flore; in that case, to your kingdom I shall swiftly, and I do mean swiftly, bring... war."

"War," said Mallory, looking up from her throne, her eyes a brilliant twinkle.

"Signed, the Effervescent Elf-Queen. See I told you she wrote it. And that's the whole letter! What do you think, everybody?"

The elf ambassador lifted her eyes from the letter and, still smiling sheepishly, took in the thirty faces glaring death at her.

Needless to say, Mordac, Tintzel, and several of the other dignitaries wanted the ambassador executed right then and there for bringing to them such an absurd threat. The cooler heads of Meretryce, DeWint, and—when those two were not enough to persuade—Shannon Waringerane prevailed with the common adage: Don't shoot the messenger.

Queen Mallory, meanwhile, became disconcertedly excited, and soon her rambunctious declarations to have the soldiers armored for war required more attention from the courtiers than the ambassador, who was quietly shown to a room in the castle to rest the night before she returned from whence she came.

That ambassador, Temporary, sat on the bed and sighed for the bit of rest she'd finally earned after such a long journey. She undid the clasp on her cloak and let it fall off her shoulders, revealing the bright red and tight-fitting uniform all elves in service of the queen wore. She regarded herself in the mirror and thought: it'd been tough, but the job was done.

The smile staring back at her turned wan. The job wasn't done. She needed to report back to the Effervescent Elf-Queen.

From her pocket she produced the sleeping faerie. The pin in the back of its neck kept it sedate but alive, which was essential for it to retain its magical potency—or so everyone told her. Temporary knew nothing about it herself. She wanted only to serve the Elf-Queen faithfully! Why wouldn't she? The Effervescent Elf-Queen was everything: life, love, happiness, peace, and beauty. It was simple joy to obey her. Simple... joy.

Yet Temporary, knowing what she must do, hesitated.

Why should she hesitate? No reason. No real reason... Nothing compared to the joy of obeying the Effervescent Elf-Queen. Every second she waited to perform her task was another failure, another failure of the constantly failing Temporary—No! Don't fall into that sort of thinking again, it only hurts. Just do the thing you're supposed to do and smile about it.

Do it!

"Okay, I'll do it," she said to the empty room.

Closing her eyes, she lifted the sleeping faerie to her mouth and bit into it.

This is the reason they sent you after all. As her teeth dragged strips and sinews away from the whole, a greasy splatter of glittery blood turned crimson the front of her red uniform. It tasted sugary, sweet, like candy, one bite made you want to bite again, and she did, although a muffled whimper escaped her. This is why they sent you. You, who always makes mistakes, who always fails. Who's no good at anything, who's always getting into trouble. Who's always getting hurt. You, who all your friends laugh at. They sent you because despite all that only you can do this. Not even the ones the Elf-Queen creates can do this. Only you.

Bones crunched like peanut brittle. Moaning, she swallowed the first mouthful. Another swallow. Another, the pieces not fully chewed so she choked on some of them. The faerie's tiny skull burst between her gnashing teeth, its unicorn horn dissolving in her saliva. Her friends told her faeries were monsters, foul things, far beneath the exalted race of elves. Her friends—and the Effervescent Elf-Queen—told her faeries deserved to die. But the angry men in the court said the same about Temporary, just because she was an elf. So who was to say who was right...

(The Effervescent Elf-Queen was right. She was always right.)

"Yes, I know," Temporary gagged out after the final swallow. She wiped her mouth with her cloak and then wiped her tears. Best not to look terrible for them.

She lifted herself off the bed and staggered to the mirror, nearly tripping over a ruffle in the rug but stopping herself in time. She plucked a glove off one hand and pressed the bare palm to the mirror's surface. The way her friends told her to do it. It'd come naturally—one's animus was an extension of their self, or something like that.

The mirror rippled. What was once solid glass became a liquid thing. And what was once shown within it—Temporary herself, still covered in that loathsomely sweet-tasting gore—turned into something else entirely. A familiar place. Home—the court of the Effervescent Elf-Queen.

From the other side the voice spoke to her: "Temporary, my child. I am so, so happy to see you alive and well. We've all been so worried about you, away on your own like that."

"Th, thank you—Your Majesty."

"What have you to report, my child? What did they say to my proposal?"

"They... they rejected it, Your Majesty. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"Oh, there there my child. It's alright. There's nothing you could have done. No need for tears. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you..."

"I expected they would reject it anyway. Those humans... They are nothing like John, even the ones they say descend from him. They prefer that boot-wearing troglodyte. Hmph!"

"What should I do now, Your Majesty?"

"Nothing. Your role in this is over, my child. Simply keep the portal open. Your friends shall do the rest."

Her friends... There they were. All of them. Arrayed in neat rows in the Elf-Queen's court, wearing the same red uniform as her, with their weapons in their hands. The Effervescent Elf-Queen made a gesture, and in perfect lockstep with one another they marched toward the mirror, shuffling their formation neatly and cleanly from multiple columns to a single line.

"Go! Go, my children," said the Effervescent Elf-Queen. "Seize control of the vault under the castle and capture the royal family. We will shall acquire the relics of Whitecrosse—then no other force in this world shall stand before us!"

Temporary staggered to the side as the first of the elf soldiers stepped through the mirror's surface and into the room. Unimpressed by their surroundings, they continued on as the next soldier stepped through, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next...

Act 6 Act 6 Act 6 (Part 1)

Classic. A headache. Always a headache. If not an ache in the lungs—a pain in the stump—a vague brittleness in her bones—it was a headache. Never a moment of wellness in this body. Never a moment of peace.

If she could just have—a moment. A moment of peace. That was a lie though, that "if she could just have." She wouldn't be satisfied by a moment. Even someone like her had moments. She wanted a lifetime. A peaceful, placid lifetime. Free of pain, free of fear. All things negated.

Got worse ever since Jay left. Fucked it up with him royally didn't she? Hmmmmmmm. Meddlemeddlemeddle. Can't let things happen naturally. Always need to stick your nose in it. Too used to things never going the right way. Possessed of a constant notion that taking your fate into your own hands is the only possible path to a happy outcome. *Striving*. Maybe peace comes to the peaceful and no rest comes to the wicked. False though. Had she never done anything she'd be in California still. And we all know how that ends.

Jay'd be back. Hopefully sooner rather than later since her time in this life was drip, drip, dripping to the base of the hourglass. He'd be back though. She'd need to put on a better face. Apologize. She understood. He just didn't like the meddling. Or maybe he just didn't like her. Had a convenient excuse now. Maybe when he came back he'd toss her to the wolves in court. So easy: "I know who's behind the assassinations." They'd believe him whether he had evidence or not. Especially since he'd be accusing *her*. Even now, was that spider that dogged his heels trying to convince him? Ridiculous. He didn't need convincing. He already hated her—

"Ah, the enchanting Princess Vivienne."

DeWint. Why. Leave her alone. Her head hurts.

"Prime Astrologer. Preying on a young lady when she's all alone? You never fucking change huh?"

"I assure you, Lady Vivienne, that I possessed no such thoughts. Although if you are ever in need of assistance due to the absence of your retainer, call upon me and I shall sprout wings from my feet."

She looked this way. That. Castle corridor empty. Her room another long passageway distant. She'd be stuck with him until then wouldn't she?

"DeWint. Please," she whispered. "I'm not in the mood this time. Seriously."

His debonair act, ridiculous now that his age was advancing, dispersed. "Vivienne. You've been acting oddly for two weeks now. Keeping to your room, locking yourself away with books. My eyesight remains quite good, you know, despite the late night reading I've done in my time. Whatever is the matter?"

A rude gesture and she tried to walk away. She was slower than everyone though. Escape never an option. If they wanted nothing to do with her they left and if they wanted to harass her she could never do the same.

"Please—Viviendre. I'm not a fool. It's the hero, is it not? I heard from some of my students the two of you had an argument in front of the academy before he disappeared."

Didn't want to talk about this. Never, never, never. At least his powers of observation hadn't failed him. Would've expected him to pin her demeanor on the assassination attempt. It'd been what scared the sister shitless after all.

"I cannot have my top student neglecting her wellbeing. Viviendre. Lady Viviendre!"

Built to bursting she swiveled on her peg and aimed a finger at him. "Mayfair's your top student. Always was. I'm second fiddle. Must be a mighty blow to you, one less trophy to your name huh? Instead of the fair Princess of Whitecrosse you've now only the demented Princess of California. Leave me alone. Go seek the mysteries of the spheres the way Astrophicus did—by yourself."

He reached to place a hand on her shoulder and she brushed him off but he spoke anyway: "You know, the other day Lady Shannon gave me pause for thought."

"I don't care about her."

"She possesses such immense knowledge. Knowledge none here have ever glimpsed. Yet when I speak to her, I find she is no genius. She's of a certain level of intelligence, to be sure, but no smarter than any of my top students—you included. I then thought to myself—how came she by the answers to riddles none have even asked? Not a product of her, as a force herself, but by the power of her world, a world where each generation for hundreds of years has striven for something greater, and so striving humanity manages perhaps a single upward step every ten or twenty years. Yet each step is then built upon, built upon, built upon. For some reason, this idea of generational growth has never occurred to me. I reflected, earnestly —"

"Shut up."

"—seeking within myself why I know nothing more than my teacher before me, or his teacher before him, and so forth, all the way back to the days of John Coke. After thinking long and hard, I realized. It is this pride I hold within me, this desire for *personal* achievement, personal acclaim, at the expense of my students. You are correct; I have treated you as trophies, as emblems of my mastery over the known arts and sciences. Yet personal glory, even if achieved—would that truly benefit this kingdom, this world? It is not myself I should be pushing toward greatness, but you, Lady Viviendre, and Lady Mayfair too."

"I don't want to hear about her!"

"I failed Lady Mayfair. She was, despite her innate charms, an awkward child, poor at socialization. My position should have made me one of her closest confidantes, yet I did not concern myself with her beyond my capacity to train her by rote into the recitation of facts

and figures. I failed her; and alone, she thus ruined herself." His hand fell upon Viviendre's shoulder. "Lady Viviendre. I do not intend to fail you as well."

Her one eye twitched. Christ Almighty, this headache. "The difference," she said, "the difference is Mayfair's a child and I'm a woman. Becoming my confidante means more to you than, hm?"

"Lady Viviendre, I am being gravely serious! I will not lose another prospect for the future. Another building block toward a wiser, more knowledgeable world. After I'm gone—"

"You fucking bastard! You shithole! In twenty years you'll still be stooped over your desk and I'll be dead. Do you get it? Do you get it now?!"

"Lady Viviendre—"

"Enough already!"

She thought maybe she'd spoken sharply enough to pin him to the spot in stupefaction. Her chamber was finally here, the door beside her, fit to flee through. But she took one step and stopped.

Someone was coming from the far end of the corridor. At this length, eyesight blurred at the edges from the severe pain in her skull, she could only make out identical bright red uniforms. How odd. The castle servants wore white livery, the dukes' men checkerboard patterns of white and green and blue and gold depending on the duke. California of course was black, black, black. So none wore red—

"No!" a voice cried out. Directly behind her. DeWint's voice, although it sounded nothing like him. Drained of all dimension that made him DeWint. Something primal, something chilling in her bones. His body slammed into her from the side and forced the door to her bedchamber open and her through it. She lost her balance instantly and flung an arm out to catch herself while gripping the Staff of Solomon tight to her chest and landed with a painful shock to her shoulder and chin.

Wincing—wondering if any frail ribs broke—she rolled partway against the side of her bed. Warm blood running down her chin and her head a pulsing petard threatening to crack and spill the syrup of her brain. DeWint lay within the open doorframe.

"Why?" she asked. Her eyesight, a spiral, snapped into focus. Out of DeWint's body extended several tall, straight, feathered shafts. Feathers as red as those uniforms. From the corridor came the clomp of boots.

Oh, Viviendre thought. This can be fixed. Her hand reached for her eyepatch. She had a way to fix this. Nothing new under the sun. Those were the words for the thing that replaced the eyeball she never had. Those words and everything was back to the way it was.

Except not for the dead. Those were the rules. Even the power of a relic could not bring back the dead. Her hand fell away from her eyepatch before she even bothered to remove it and

unveil her second relic. For out of DeWint's eye one of the shafts emerged, his head twisted at a funny angle. Everything about him deathly still.

From the corridor came the clomp of boots. Closer.

She gripped the Staff of Solomon. No—no. The staff was powerful, but could only divide one person at a time. There had been a column of red emerging from the end of the corridor. They'd swarm her. Emerge through the cascading gore of their foremost allies all the more primed to eviscerate her. No, no, no. DeWint dead already. He—he saved her. No. Couldn't waste thoughts about him now. Oh God, oh God if you were there as some said you were, oh God who she always somewhat believed in despite the lack of evidence, oh God please do not let her die. Oh God she did not want to die.

The bed. Had to get under. To hide. Sliding, pulling, she crawled under the bed and clutched her staff ready to use it if need be. The horrible face of DeWint, one eye obliterated. That was her view, that and the open doorway. Under the bed she chanced to think this was worthless. They saw her go inside this room. They would enter and find her. Kill her no matter how many of them she killed first. In such an instance—should she simply die? Was it worthwhile to gouge the price of her blood with theirs? Or was a cheap and simple death the sole atonement for her sins. In her thrumming wash of headache these useless thoughts she thought. No—she wanted to live. More than anything she wanted to live. Or was that not right either. She wanted more than to live perhaps. Just a little bit more than to simply live.

Right now, though, living was her sole concern and the dead face of her teacher cemented that concern as a thunderous bolt in her brain. She held the staff and awaited the tromp of boots. Divide, she thought, preparing herself to speak the simple word. Divide. Divide. Divide. Divide. Divide.

The boots passed the open doorway. Tromp, tromp, tromp—but they did not turn. Did not enter her room. They continued down the corridor in their bright red uniforms only the legs of which she glimpsed emerging out their brown boots before her vision was occluded. In a neat and military line. Another. Another. Another. They were not concerned with her. Another. Another. Another.

DeWint, his eyes hers, grinned into her hiding spot. And as her one eye grew blurry but now with tears she thought: Bastard. Bastard, he died before her just to prove a point. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard. And the hero was no longer here.

—

The madness in the throne room—Mallory screaming for a sword, for the soldiers to be called, for the challenge laid down by the ambassador to be met; and all her dukes and courtiers attempting to calm her—was rendered chillingly quiet at once when the bleeding guard dashed into the room, his arm a red streak at his side, and breathlessly howled: "Attack! It's an attack! The elves are in the castle. A whole army of elves!"

His last proclamation terminated with a choke as he staggered to the side like a lazy drunk and slid down the nearest pillar, leaving his blood behind him.

Those gathered stared at the spot he voided in abject stupefaction. But in the silence where before their clustered arguing had dwelled they heard it: the distant sound of combat, shouts, clinking and clanking of metal, and perhaps if it was not their ears deceiving them those sounds were drawing closer each passing second.

"Nonsense—nonsense." It was Duke Meretryce who spoke first, always easy with his tongue. "They could not have possibly breached the city walls without warning. Not an army. There must be—must be some error—"

"You fool! Fool indeed you are," said Archbishop Tintzel. "I warned you not to hear the words of that fae creature. These are not godly beasts, nor are they human, human not one drop of their devil blood! They may walk through walls, may manifest out of a nightmare—"

"SILENCE."

The voice of Duke Mordac fell like a stone onto a glass pane. In the bright light that streamed onto the room from the gigantic circular window above the throne he became a chiaroscuro set of contrasts, black robe and pale face, sharp creases forming pathways to the abyss between his lean jowls.

"We've no time for argument. The throne room must be defended. My men will secure the front entrance. Meretryce, organize your men to hold the smaller side entrances. Gonzago—where's that oaf Gonzago!"

The dandyish, simpering man in question, Meretryce's nephew, crawled out from behind his uncle's fanning cloak. "Y—yes, Your Lordship?"

"You're fleet of foot and otherwise the most useless among us. If they've truly snuck into the castle unseen then we must call back the men defending the walls. Go now! Fly, fly—stop standing there slack-jawed and fly!"

Gonzago sprouted to attention, sputtered, took off toward the broad, double-doored front entrance of the throne room before Mordac laid into him with his tongue: "Not that way, you imbecile! You'll only dash straight into the fighting. Take the side door—that way, that way! Blow your horn and fly!"

The words bit into Gonzago's backside like a whip as he sprinted, slipped on the lacquered tile, pulled himself up, and dashed in a somewhat effete manner out the door.

"God help us," Mordac said. "We must hold out at least until the forces of Whitecrosse are mustered. Meretryce, command your men to take positions there and there. Go on, move!"

It was at that point Queen Mallory strode forward. She had spent the time since the messenger's arrival arming herself; she now cut a ridiculous figure, holding a spear on her shoulder and a sword in her other hand, with two more crossed blades strapped to her back and a hatchet wedged between them, plus three or four daggers and shortwords jangling at

her hips. The cross enameled onto her silvery armor, which she had donned as soon as the elf ambassador left, shone in the streaming light, and the links of mail of her hauberk shifted around her ankles. Her chin and mouth were concealed by a shimmering beaver and her helm she wore with the visor up so that her blue eyes might pierce through adversaries as her weapons. All of this armor gave her body inches of both height and breadth and as she approached Mordac she towered over him.

"Aside, knave. I'll hear none of this cowardice. The fighting's within the walls already; we shall meet them and spill their blood where they dare trespass. Either go with me or I go alone."

Mordac's retinue comprised ten men, who now blocked the double doors leading out of the throne room, five in the front with their heavy shields held together in a wall of iron and five in the back with spears jutting between the gaps. But their backs were to the queen and thus undefended, and if she did not merely vault them despite all her armor she might hack them to pieces to gain passage.

Despite the murderous glint in the queen's blue eyes, Mordac moved into her path to intercept her.

"You foolish girl," he said, the disdain a flowing drip through the crevasses that lined his harsh face. "All this time a foolish girl you remain."

Mallory brimmed ire instantly. "What did you call me."

"A foolish girl! A fool and a girl both! Not even a woman. You'll truly die like a dog in those halls when your birthright remains right there behind you?" His arm shot out, he indicated the throne.

Not a face among them watching would have been surprised if Mallory whipped out her blade and severed that outstretched arm in a flash. Yet she made no movement and that stillness was somehow all the more ominous.

"My birthright? You speak to me of my birthright, Duke of Mordac. You speak to me of a girl. You who sold off a girl of thirteen years so you might better manipulate the male child she produced—"

"And you have not aged a minute since that day, child."

"I have aged a thousand years since then! And every endless second of it I spent waiting for this day, the day I might reclaim the glory this kingdom has long since lost. War was what John Coke waged and what was in his blood and war is thus my birthright, not that motionless throne."

"I was not pointing to the throne."

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty"—it was Meretryce, wheeling in a slow arc with the queen at the center, keeping between them a wide berth as he subtly neared a pillar that might serve to defend him should the queen suddenly lunge—"Your Majesty, my colleague the Duke of

Mordac lacks eloquence and the situation has stiffened his tongue even more than usual. He—and I—mean no offense, of course, we could never mean offense to you. What I believe he is trying to tell you is that, if you are truly to live up to the glorious example set by your forebear the great John Coke—an example, mind you, I am certain you will be able to follow if not exceed in this time of unexpected darkness—then would it not be wise to do as he did and take up the holy relics of Whitecrosse to aid you in this battle? The vault beneath the castle—that, I believe, is what Mordac refers to when he says your "birthright."

"We shall hold the enemy here," Mordac said. "While you go down to the vault. Arm yourself with the relics and, if you can, become the hero you claim to be."

Mallory looked at him blankly. Looked at Meretryce. Finally, after a long pause so quiet even the growing mayhem of the battle nearing the throne room became quiet within it, she smiled. The tips of her smile rose above her beaver.

"How kind of you, my beloved dukes, to volunteer to die simply so that I may become all the more glorious. Very well! I look forward to this new future."

She turned on a heel and marched back to the throne, her knights and maidservants parting to give her passage, and with one almost effortless heave toppled the giant seat and kicked the panel beneath it to reveal a hidden stairway leading into the darkness under Castle Whitecrosse.

"Those who belong to me shall accompany me to the vault. That includes you, Lady Heroine."

Those imperious blue eyes landed heavily upon the one among them who had not spoken the entire time. Shannon Waringcrane, arms folded, neck stooped and head tilted, returned the gaze with sunken, dark eyes of her own, but still said nothing.

"I told you I protect what's mine and I meant it," Mallory said. "Now let us proceed. To the vault! Down to the vault... Fool! Quit moping in that corner and come too. Now more than ever I desire your mirth."

She gestured, already descending the first of the steps into the tomblike depths. The Fool, who sat in the corner with a look of melancholy to match Shannon's, lacking any ditty or pun to produce, sighed and rose slowly as the shivering maidservants and Shannon Waringcrane fell in behind the queen and dropped down into the dark.

Soon they were gone, leaving only Mordac, Meretryce, their men, and Archbishop Tintzel. The last of these closed the trapdoor and with the aid of two soldiers turned the throne upright to its ordinary position.

"You do not intend to accompany the queen?" Mordac asked drily, disinterested, to the archbishop.

"I shall not see this land claimed by the devil's minions. No I shall not!" Tintzel moved to the men at the second of the smaller entrances to the throne room, taking command with a pompous bark although they were Meretryce's men. In response to Meretryce's questioning

look, Mordac approved with a nod, finding that three commanders was meet for a room with three entrances.

Meretryce continued to hesitate: "Should we not retreat elsewhere and draw away their attention from the throne? Would it not be better to find a more defensible location?" They were questions nobody deigned to answer. In this world, symbols possessed enough power to make them worth defending. Besides, it was too late. Into the corridor beyond the throne room's front entrance the elves were now streaming, crimson uniforms and fair faces, and there was no mistake about where they intended to go; they moved with singleminded purpose, as though a solitary entity. Mordac bid his men ready themselves as the first wave crashed against their shields.

—

By some miracle Gonzago made it out of the castle. In haste and confusion he became lost among the corridors he had traversed countless times prior, and oh how every juncture and every door seemed to him upon approach to have an elf lying in wait to spear him, though none ever was. Into the afternoon sun he burst, howling, though nobody in the courtyard around the monument to John Coke was not already either sprinting toward or away from the castle; realizing he was already panting from exertion, he wondered how he would manage the trek to the city walls with the speed the situation required.

Surely not by screaming his lungs out. He ran into the treacherous downslope of the hill Whitecrosse was built upon, skidding against the narrowly-encroaching walls to stop himself from reaching such a velocity that he lost control and pitched headlong forward. "An attack," he sometimes said to the sooty faces peering out windows, "an attack at the castle. All men, to arms, there must be a defense or we lose everything!" He could not tell if they heard or cared; he could not tell if fleet-footed Rumor was somehow two steps ahead of him, conveying his message before it left his lips.

The walls, he thought. At the walls there are many guards posted, most of Whitecrosse's regular army that was not already at the castle. He had to pray that news of the commotion would spread without his impetus to the lords of the upper district, who commanded their own entourages; the wall was furthest and where he was bid to go, and so he would go there. His uncle the duke considered him inept, he knew it though it pained him to admit it, but here he would not falter. No—not here. From the wall he could send riders to the lesser lords of the surrounding lands, who might yet arrive in time to bring succor should the battle prolong itself. And also a rider to the third duke, Malleus, who was by happy coincidence already en route to the capital and expected to arrive at any moment. Yes, Malleus! He would arrive with a contingent, as the roads were dangerous for a rich man to travel without ample guard, and a rider bearing an urgent message might spur him at a gallop the rest of the way. An excellent idea, this of the riders, but of course it came naturally to Gonzago, who often managed Uncle's commerce at the gates and saw to it that men were dispatched to nearby lands to best conduct his business.

For a brief moment, as the slope tugged his legs faster and faster so that his speed seemed superhuman to himself, Gonzago nursed a fantasy that war might perhaps be his calling, the way so many other disciplines were not; not academics, nor politics, nor athletics. He envisioned himself upon a horse, dressed in armor, dictating the movements of troops upon a field, seeing the men arrayed like ants before him and from such a vantage able to understand inherently where was best to mass, where best to fall back, where now to divert the enemy's focus, where to position the flanks. Why not? Why could that not be him? The fear he felt fleeing the castle was gone as the walls loomed before him and in their place was bravado. He imagined himself rushing to the aid of Lady Shannon, rescuing her at the last moment, and she gratefully swooning into his ready arms; oh Lady Shannon, could it not be so? Could that not be your Gonzago?

A man slammed into him. Their two bodies twirled and skidded onto the stones and Gonzago's hands scraped open with thin speckled sores that set him wincing. The man with whom he collided rose immediately, shook his shoulders. "Lord Gonzago! Lord Gonzago!" It was a guard often stationed at the gates; Gonzago knew him. "Lord Gonzago, you must run to the castle now. A message—an urgent message!"

"You've already heard?" Gonzago said. Rumor again, Rumor fast as the wind. "If you've heard—then where are the rest of you? There is no time, we must abandon the gate and return to the castle at once!"

"Abandon the gate?" The guard blinked. "But Lord Gonzago, it's headed right for the gate."

Gonzago didn't understand. The guard shot up, waved his hands placatingly, and continued up the hill. "Apologies, Lord Gonzago. I cannot waste a moment. I must warn the castle!" He sprinted and was gone.

Damnation! Even these guards treated him with disrespect. He hadn't the faintest idea what the man was saying, and got up rubbing his hands on his shirt.

A set of switchbacking stairs led up the back of Whitecrosse's main gate to reach the upper story of the gatehouse. Not only would the commander of the guards be stationed there, but the gatehouse also contained a gigantic, loud horn that could be blown to signal an attack. The horn was, Gonzago realized as he climbed, blowing now, a heavy and low sound that thundered so strongly he marveled at how lost in his own mind he had been to miss it. He burst through the gatehouse door and stooped, panting.

"Message from the castle," he said. "Where is the guard captain?"

"Praise God you've come fast, Lord Gonzago," the guard captain said. "We've never seen anything like this before. Her Majesty the queen may want to come down herself."

"What are you talking about? The castle is under attack. Every man must go there now to defend the queen. Leave the gate undefended, if the castle falls all is lost!"

"How can the castle be under attack? Nothing but farmhands have passed through the gate since that ambassador. What you're saying makes no sense, man."

A soldier ran up. "Sir! It's come close enough now that we can see the rider at the head of it. You must look!"

The captain gave Gonzago a dismissive flick as though he were a madman and hurried to the opening that looked out onto the farmland around Whitecrosse. Gonzago trailed behind babbling but when they reached the opening one glance was all it took to still his tongue completely.

The forest was approaching.

Those words were what flashed through Gonzago's head and although there could be no other explanation for what he saw he disregarded those words as absurd, impossible.

A line of trees cut straight through the flat, even farmland. It started from the far distance and extended like a grasping tendril reaching for the city. They were tall trees, leafy trees, dark and foreboding trees, as though even in this narrow corridor of greenery and life all the horror of inhuman dominion was contained. How the trees got there, Gonzago could not fathom. They had not been there before, all the land here was tilled and planted or else left fallow. As he scrutinized, though, it became clear: the trees were sprouting out of the ground, emerging before his very eyes, growing closer and closer to the gate. No trick, no illusion. The forest was approaching.

"There," a soldier said, pointing to the forefront of the tendril, around where the newest trees were appearing so rapidly and suddenly as though time for them was magnified a thousandfold to instantly transform sprout to full-bodied oak. Something that was not forest was there, a horse plodding slowly their way, and a figure atop it—nay, two figures, one behind the other.

The figures weren't what caught Gonzago's attention, though. It was the horse itself. He recognized that horse. How could he not? Anyone who spent much time at the castle knew it. Such a proud and well-bred specimen, the envy of every lord and knight, Gonzago included. It was the horse of Prince Makepeace.

Yet Prince Makepeace, according to the hero and Lady Shannon, was dead. And the man riding the horse was indeed not him. The horse and the forest were close enough now to just barely make out the man's face. He was somewhat plain, his eyes covered by curious glass lenses that caught and reflected the blazing sunlight in a shimmer; his clothes were likewise strange, of a form and pattern alien to any style Gonzago knew (and he knew every fashion of note in this kingdom).

The style reminded him of the hero. He thought: this must be another hero from the other world.

Then it all came together. Lady Shannon had mentioned several times a companion of hers, whom she claimed was captured by Flanz-le-Flore. And this tendril of forest extended from the direction of Flanz-le-Flore's wood. And who was that second figure, the one seated behind the man, wrapping its lithe arms over his shoulders to hold onto him? What was the tint of her skin, was it not a sort of green, alike to the leaves of the trees emerging around

her? What were those fluttering things extending from her back? Were they not wings made of gossamer?

Flanz-le-Flore, the faerie queen, was coming to Whitecrosse.

"We've already brought up the gate," the captain said. "But they say the queen of Flanz-le-Flore can transform one thing into another with but a clap of her hands. Will the gate even stop her? We must alert Her Majesty immediately!"

A trembling fear gripped Gonzago, he thought: How? How can it be? Were their troubles not already so terrible? Must not one fae queen but two ride against them? Were the fae houses working in tandem? Yes, that must be it, Gonzago knew virtually nothing of fae politics, but like cleaved to like and that was a universal rule, the two queens must have coordinated—

No. No, wait. That wasn't it at all.

He remembered the elf ambassador. Had she not mentioned Flanz-le-Flore? Yes. She had indeed. It was, in fact, the entire reason for the elf kingdom's diplomatic overtures. The elves wished to war against Flanz-le-Flore. To redress wrongs accumulated in the time of John Coke.

The elves and the fae were not friends. They were enemies. They were enemies!

"Lower the gate," Gonzago said. "Captain! You must lower the gate."

"Are you mad, man? Lower it? Let her in unimpeded?"

Perhaps it was a trick, the back of his mind told the front. An elaborate ruse, the elves claiming they hated Flanz-le-Flore specifically so that Gonzago of Meretryce might make this blunder in the hopes that the fae queens would fight. That was what fae were said to love, pranks and jests and whatnot, but even so they could not stand against the two queens severally so what did it matter if they were allowed to come together? Were it not a trick, though, and if the queens indeed held enmity toward one another...

"I have been sent by Queen Mallory herself!" Gonzago shouted suddenly. Forcefully, rising up onto tiptoe so that he might reach the chin level of the guard captain. "It is on her orders I have come. The elves are attacking the castle. They seek to destroy Whitecrosse and then destroy Flanz-le-Flore. That makes Flanz-le-Flore our ally in this struggle, not our foe. We must let her in!"

"You're speaking nonsense, man."

"Am I? Look again at the horseman riding toward us. That is no fae, nor no ordinary man. That is a hero from the other world, a companion of Lady Shannon herself. He has brought the fae queen to save us in our time of need. The same fae queen who allied with John Coke to slay the dread lizard Devereux!"

Though the captain's face was incredulous, he looked again. The rider was now so close that there could be no doubt that he was not a man from this world, not with his fashion and the

strange appearance of his face unlike the men of either Whitecrosse or California.

"There is no time," Gonzago said. "I speak truthfully that the castle is under assault as we speak. You must listen to me. This is our only hope, I swear to God!"

The captain stared at him. What did he see? What did he think? Contempt. The way they all thought of Gonzago of Meretryce, be they his equal or better or lesser. The duke's worthless nephew. But he was no madman. They must surely know that. He was no madman.

After an interminable period of time, the captain hissed. "Very well. If we're to be damned by this, so be it. Lower the gate! Lower the gate now!"

—

"Hold!"

The armored men held. Bodies of elves lay dead or dying on the floor before them, gored by the spears that jutted between the shields. The assault was juvenile, mindless in its tactics. The elves possessed no strategy other than to charge with their weapons or fire arrows from down the corridor, and they gave no preference to either strategy (both were inutile) despite one leaving them with holes in their torsos.

Fae had no mind for war, it seemed. The discipline of battle was not the domain of those who frolicked in fell wood. Some said the elves were part human, the cult that followed the teachings of the previous archbishop even whispered blasphemously they were descended from John Coke, but while that theoretically human blood had allowed them to mimic the rigidity and order of a trained battalion, it was mere mimicry. Mordac's ten men held them to a standstill at the throne room entrance. None had even attempted to navigate the corridors to approach from the smaller side entrances, and so the men Tintzel and Meretryce commanded were left idle. Mordac thought, *if this prolongs enough those men can be used to relieve mine*. War was not his forte either; none of them knew war and of them all only that infantile queen prepared for it. Yet so far even rudimentary strategies proved successful.

The problem was that no matter how many elves were slain, more streamed into the corridor to take their place. The corridor was now a sea of red uniforms, clogged so tightly together that the archers could no longer shoot, which lessened the pressure on the shield-bearers. Mordac's primary fear was that so many elves would stream in that even though they impaled themselves on the spears, the massed weight alone would be enough to break the line. His prayer was that before then either the fool Gonzago or the fool Mallory would return.

"We ought to flee." Meretryce paced anxiously beside the throne. "This endeavor is pointless. Mallory's got enough of a head start now."

"The doors to the vault take time to open," Tintzel said.

"We'll hold," said Mordac. "We shall not allow these beasts to take the castle. We'll hold until the queen returns!"

Even as he spoke something changed in the singleminded demeanor of the elves in the corridor. Their identical faces—male or female they all seemed identical—shifted in waves as they cleaved fast to the walls of the long corridor. The vacuum left a straight line all the way to the castle's front doors. At first Mordac believed this motion was to allow the archers in the back to fire again, and reflexively he stooped his rigid back behind the shields lest a stray bolt transfer command to that spineless Meretryce. But no—even the archers moved aside.

"What devilry's this," Mordac muttered to himself.

From the passageway leading into the corridor, from whence most of the elves had manifested, a strange and shimmering light suddenly shone. It was not white light but pinkish and mobile, like light strained through clear but rippling water. As it approached, the faces of all the elves turned toward it, even those nearly in striking range of Mordac's pikes. On those faces arose a unified awe, almost holy in its reverence as the figure within the light emerged.

The figure touched the floor with only the sheerest tips of its toes, but even that was a lie; it floated, divorced from ground by less than an inch of space. Its arms were held straight out at its sides with the palms turned upward. Its eyes were closed in serene peace and its mouth pressed into a kindly, benevolent smile. The smile of a pleasant Christ, not one dying upon the cross, not one awash in mortal agony, the way Christ ought to be, the way it needed to be impressed onto them all that Christ truly was, a sufferer, afflicted by a catalog of highly specific wounds rendered in such exquisite detail that any onlooker felt the pain in his own palms and the scratches of the thorns around his forehead, that was the way it should be, a scourging of one's own soul, for through that scourging one might find relief; no, this was a False Christ, the Christ of the snivelers, those so bereft of love they must imagine it within their Creator and God, despite His endless and hateful power over them. The Christ of the charitable, the Christ of women. This Woman-Christ (for the figure floating into the corridor frozen in this stance of crucifixion, though there no crucifix be, was female) reached the center of the corridor and as though set upon an axis swiveled to face Mordac and the rest of them, wearing holy vestments of the same translucent pinkness; vestments that seemed part of her body, not something worn.

Around her head instead of thorns she wore a halo and from this halo emitted the strange light that preceded her.

"It is I," the figure said, "the Effervescent Elf-Queen."

"We end this here," Mordac said. "A single spear thrown with good aim. Quickly!"

His soldiers, alas, were not quick enough. The Effervescent Elf-Queen turned her palms toward them and to Mordac's surprise the palms were in fact marked by the stigmata. No, false, the almond-shaped patterns there were not wounds but eyeballs, and from each of them dropped a single tear. The tears fell but did not strike the ground, hovering just above as they enlarged into bubbles, and within each bubble a body was coiled in fetal position. The bubbles popped and the bodies landed. They were slathered in a pinkish sheen but beneath

that they were elves same as all the others, and no sooner had they been birthed from these teardrop bubbles did some of their fellows rush forward to throw red uniforms around them.

The strangeness of the scene struck Mordac's men still; Mordac realized he himself was transfixed. To the newborns—though they be as fully-formed as adults—their elders gave each a motionless thing the size of a tiny bird, able to fit in a hand. The newborns in perfect tandem held the small creatures up to their mouths and bit into them, causing blood to stream down their chins.

"Now, my children," said the Effervescent Elf-Queen, "incinerate those who stand in our way."

Only from these words did Mordac realize the danger of the strange ceremony. He gripped the nearest man by the shoulder to rouse his attention and by then it was too late.

The newborn elves from their blood-dripping mouths belched each a jet of flame. A flash—and fire washed over the armored men in their shields, over the Duke of Mordac. For a brief period there were screams, and a horrible crackling, and all the voracious sound of an inferno. An indistinguishable lump of coal ran out flailing what remained of its arms as they dissolved to black ash at its sides, then it pitched forward and came to a final rest upon the carpet.

Though the flames continued to spread along the carpet and to the tapestries that lined the throne room, there was nothing left of Mordac or his men beyond a few blistering lumps. What to do, thought Archbishop Tintzel. He turned to Meretryce to ask: What to do? But Meretryce was gone, vanished through the side door without a word. Tintzel turned to the set of men under his command but they were also gone. He stood alone in the throne room, at least until through the smoke drifted the Effervescent Elf-Queen, accompanied by her elfin horde.

Well. That was the story, no? Always too slow. Tintzel for decades a faithful and dedicated servant of the church and the monarchy under which the church served, yet time and again he was passed up. Passed up, even, by that Astrophicus, whom anyone with half a mind knew was rotten, deviant, meddling in matters beyond him, unfit for such a title. But Astrophicus had ambition, goals, drive, and putting himself forward fastest received first. Never Tintzel. Even his speech slow, a stutter transformed by habit into something others suggested was worse than a stutter, reorganization and repetition of words until their meaning became clear within his own mind, that was the way he needed to speak. Here he stood now, last to flee. Suppose that was how it must happen. The fable of the tortoise and the hare, in such had he found relief as much as—he was ashamed to admit it—any Biblical parable. Squat, rotund, unfit for else and always second best at best. Well. When Astrophicus revealed his treachery and it was time to replace him they wished for certainty over ambition and so the most certain of them was finally promoted. Now too was there a certainty in it. This was not a terrible way to die. He would not be proved a coward.

One of the knights dropped their sword as he fled. Tintzel reached to pick it up and found it too heavy to lift fully, but he managed with some exertion to heft the hilt. He considered his final words: For God and country! Those were the words he wished to speak. "For God indeed," he said, "indeed for God and country." The words were close enough. Though even

now he wished he could speak one sentence straight. Even now he wished it were not as though his tongue were cursed, as though God had absentmindedly dabbed a note into his page: Must speak contorted only, indeed contorted speak. Was it bad that his final thought would be so impious? Then erase it and add another: The people of this wonderful nation of God, the people who were faithful and saved. Yet the thought he actually thought as he put all his strength into lifting the sword was that maybe they would spare him if he told them about the secret passage under the throne.

An elf strode forward and drove a spear into his body.

Tintzel dropped the sword and toppled. This was for the best. Now his thoughts could turn back to God and country. Oh God, forgive him his sins. Oh God, oh Christ, he tried his best to do good deeds in this world.

"Excellent work, my children," said the Effervescent Elf-Queen. The throne room was going up in flames around her and the smoke was most irritating, both to herself and her children, the latter of whom nonetheless tried to grin and bear it. "They were defending this place for a reason. Let us find out why."

From the eyes on her palms two more bubbling tears emerged and two more elves were born, a male and a female as these pairs always were. Their brothers and sisters robed them and fed them the sleeping fae captured during previous conquests. The new elves (whose animus was as the Effervescent Elf-Queen chose for them: To uncover hidden things) activated their powers and immediately, unified in their movements, both aimed a finger at the throne, which then toppled to the side before a panel underneath swung inward.

"Ah! There we go. Thank you, my children. I thank you all."

That would be where the queen was. That would be where John's relics were. Oh John. What was the purpose of hoarding them? You were so ephemeral. When she met you, you were already on the cusp of death, an aged man, and she a woman who did not age. What matters anything to you after you die? Perhaps that was the human impulse: to build toward something for which they would be remembered after death. That was what John meant when he spoke of "greatness," of "glory." But John, your dearest and closest lover was immortal. You would never be forgotten, even if you were only a insect scuttling through the dirt. Why then did you need to return to them, to bring them gifts ensuring your memory? You could have been with her, with all her children who were your children too, for it was part of you that remained inside her all this time, producing these teardrops from her eyes by the hole in her heart you left.

She was sorry to rub flat those monuments you erected to yourself, because you cared for them so. But it was alright. Soon the only memory of you would be hers, and she alone would keep you alive. No others deserved the memory. Not these human offspring of that wretched Tivania whom you pretended to love, nor that other human woman of California you took as paramour; and especially not that sluttish Flanz-le-Flore who in her jealousy estranged the elves and cast them into the depths of darkest forest, disqualified from being fae or human.

For a long time she accumulated strength. Now was the time to raze them; all those who held memory of John Coke. Into the depths of the castle she descended, steeling herself for battle against his human progeny.

Act 6 Act 6 Act 6 (Part 2)

By the time the nuns arrived, Castle Whitecrosse was aflame. Smoke poured from the windows on the left side; the sight reminded many of that terrible night at the monastery, and some shrank back until Mademerry exhorted them: "Take heart! We possess protection from beyond this world. Nothing here can hurt us."

She rode Demny sidesaddle as they followed the streak of forest through the main gates of the city and up the slope toward the castle. Queen Mallory, mother of Mayfair, would be inside. When Mademerry was gestating within Astrophicus, Princess Mayfair spoke to her. This occurred over the span of about a week, at least according to Mayfair, whose voice was a pleasant echo in the void; Mademerry herself lacked concept of time. Much of what Mayfair said was utilitarian in nature: This is where you are, who you are, why you matter, what you must accomplish, when you must accomplish it. Yet not all was of that ilk. There were times when Mayfair would speak about nothing relevant to Mademerry at all. She spoke of Earth, and what she was doing on Earth, and a man named Styles, and a speech she was preparing to give, and how she was nervous for it, and how she worried nobody would listen to her or worse that they would listen to her but at a distance, only as shadowy faces in her periphery who never drew any closer no matter how vigorously she implored them. She spoke of Vivienne de Califerne, who hated her and who she hated in turn, and yet how even through this hate she felt a closeness, a connection that served as friendship in lieu of anything else. She spoke of Prime Astrologer DeWint, her tutor who taught her nothing, and various people she knew from the castle, and how she wanted—needed—to make everything correct for them, so that they would in turn love her. And she spoke of her family.

Her family. A father, the Duke of Meretryce's older brother, who died before she was old enough to know him. A brother, whom she killed and for whose death she might never be forgiven. And her mother, Queen Mallory. She spoke much of Queen Mallory.

It was not possible, in the plant's egg, for Mademerry to speak back, and even her thoughts were disordered. She could not respond coherently when Mayfair wondered if she should even be doing what she was doing—either on Earth or in Whitecrosse. Doubts, anxieties, regrets.

Mademerry possessed no doubts, anxieties, or regrets.

Mademerry knew only one thing: she wanted to be Mayfair's friend. *Needed* to be her friend. She loved Mayfair. Would do anything for Mayfair. Mayfair. Mayfair.

Her instructions were clear.

"Before we go to the vault we must make a brief detour," she said.

"To where," said Demny.

"We must acquire an elf."

"From what the guards were screaming there's elves everywhere," said Cinquefoil, the ferret. "So that'll be easy."

"A particular elf. We need her for the vault, and then to take to Princess Mayfair when the time comes."

Following Mayfair's instructions, Mademerry steered the nuns to a side gate of the castle, which promised to circumnavigate the fighting as well as the growing fire—although their elf would be surrounded by many of her brethren, and combat would be necessary. There were six of them entering through the unattended gate that led into a servants' barracks: Mademerry, Demny, Cinquefoil, Charm the bird, Tricia the hornet, and Obedience the frog. At the monastery were Theovora and the two who refused to come. Lastly there was Pythette, the hare, who received a special mission. She and the corpse of Charisma went to the Door to acquire a "machine" there. It was good Charisma's body was not with them, for it distracted the other girls. However, without Charisma, Charm lagged behind idly, sobbing and doing little else. She would be worthless in a fight. That meant Mademerry had four girls at her disposal to accomplish what Mayfair—her beloved Mayfair—demanded. Mademerry supposed she served as a fifth. Fighting was not beyond her. No, certainly not.

Still, it was a small number of able bodies and now that they were proceeding through the servants' barracks into one of the ancillary hallways half-set into the ground so that only small windows near the ceiling allowed any light they heard the clamor of many feet stomping overhead. A hundred or more. Mayfair said their meager force would be enough to cut through them. Mademerry believed in Mayfair and so it was true.

They went up a small spiral staircase set into the wall and saw the elves clogging the corridor.

The elves were emerging from a seemingly unspectacular door, then proceeded two abreast in a queue toward a bend in the corridor, oblivious of the smoke pouring from the direction they headed. Their actions were automated, synchronized, and lifelessly elegant.

"Tricia and Obedience, clear a path for Cinquefoil. That door is where we'll find our elf. She's the filthiest one of them—that's how you'll know her."

The nuns nodded tersely, then began.

The elves faced away from the nuns and so were unprepared when Tricia and Obedience struck. Tricia, with rapid-pulsing wings, shot like a dart into the line. Though her corruption had been relatively sparse before, upon eating the egg-fruit her lower body transformed; thin and spindly insect legs no longer supported bipedal posture, though her wings thrummed fast enough to keep her afloat in a manner that replicated it. Her stomach and hips had become the elongated abdomen fitted with a needlepoint stinger so familiar and so pesky to those who absentmindedly slapped at the strange buzzing thing that alighted on their skin. Being the size of a human, she possessed a stinger like a rapier, and with a flash it drove into the unprotected back of the first elf, who cried out before staggering; swiftly Tricia retracted her blade and stabbed another. Only then did the elves realize they were under attack.

They turned sluggishly toward Tricia but before the first could stab its spear, Obedience lashed out her tongue and dragged the elf to her, enfolding them in an embrace that smeared

them with the toxins she secreted through her slimy skin. Before eating the egg-fruit, Obedience had been rudimentary, a bland type with little unique about her, although a friend to all those in the monastery. Her skin had been green; now it was vivid red and blue, and she warned her sisters that they must never touch her, even by accident. Sure enough, the elf she enfolded with her webbed palms fell back convulsing and spilling saliva from its mouth, before toppling to the floor dead.

Tricia's deft fencing strikes beat back the elves who had already left the room where their target waited. She flipped upside-down and stuck fast to the ceiling just in time for Obedience to bound through the empty space and dive headfirst into the crowd of elves, unconcerned by their spears as she spread herself wide to touch as many of them as possible.

That meant it was Cinquefoil's turn. If Tricia was a graceful swordfighter with her stinger, and Obedience a sluggish but untouchable juggernaut, Cinquefoil was a whirlwind. Her body was only lithe fur and claws and fang and she shot into the room with every sharp element aflash. Her aim was particularly toward throats which if she could slash she might slurp the spilling lifeblood for a moment's boost of energy before pouncing on the next hapless victim. Unfortunately she was also sloppy and ill-disposed toward evasive maneuvers. Before she made it two feet through the door the elves got their spears into her. One impaled her in the side, another caught in her ribcage, and a third went up into the soft unprotected center of her jaw.

Blood streamed down her white fur. Her blood, their blood. For a moment she stood still in stunned silence, still enough for a fourth spear to enter her gut; then a grin sharpened her face. She reached out, seized the shafts of two of the spears and shattered them; this was enough for her wild strength to fling the other elves away from her, before she clawed at the shafts embedded in her flesh and wrenched them out trailing viscous gore onto the ground.

This was the archbishop's final boon, the exchange of his vitality for their own. Had Mademerry not said to the sisters? Eat, and you will never fear pain or death again. Thus Mayfair told Mademerry, and Mademerry told them. They lost many to reach this point, but they would lose no more.

If the elves were at all concerned by the unstoppable force treading before them, they did not show it. They showed nothing on their faces, only harmonious conformity. Cinquefoil snickered and shredded them to pieces.

"Now, Demny," said Mademerry, "we must destroy the mirror."

Demny nodded. She galloped into the room while the dwindling number of elves were eviscerated by Cinquefoil. The mirror was where the elves were coming from, manifesting one after another in single file. Demny swept her spear straight through the middle with frightful strength, enough to split it through the side, end the magical spell that turned it into a portal desisted. What remained of the mirror cascaded upon the floor; bright shards.

The few remaining elves in the room were gashed to pieces by Cinquefoil's whirling claws, while Tricia and Obedience held their own outside. Now—for the one they sought.

Mademerry, still seated upon Demny's back, scoured the room and soon saw their particular elf huddled in the corner, wrapping her head in her arms to keep from seeing the carnage. Cinquefoil, possessed of a bloodthirsty glint in her black-banded eyes, shot toward her, but Demny swung her spear like a club and nailed the ferret hard enough in the stomach to knock the wind out of her.

"Hold, Cinquefoil." Mademerry slipped off Demny and knelt before the frightened elf. "Hello. My name is Mademerry. I do not intend to hurt you. You've something important to do for us."

In the sudden absence of violent sounds the elf girl looked up. Her eyes glistened with tears but she was, like all elves, beautiful. Her name was Temporary. Mayfair said she made the name herself, because like Mademerry she created Temporary for a specific purpose. "But I put some more thought into *your* name," Mayfair had said in Mademerry's dreams.

"You're killing my friends," Temporary sobbed.

"We'll be your friends now," said Mademerry.

She nodded to Demny, who seized Temporary with one arm and lifted her easily despite Temporary's spasming protests.

"Now to the vault," said Mademerry.

—

The vault.

After delving into the bowels of Castle Whitecrosse, into a subterranean blackness broken only by the few flickering candles they carried, they finally reached its monumental doors. Two torches, perpetually aflame at either side, ensured the engraving of a cruel and suffering Christ would always be seen by any who came this far.

It was a door that seemed to demand ceremony; Mallory gave it none. Trudging impatiently in all her armor and armaments she slapped her hand onto the seam between the two doors. "Open," she spat out like a slur, and at her bidding the giant doors slowly responded. Stone scraped against stone and dust streamed off the artistic grooves while slowly, too slow, foot-tappingly slow, the doors swung inward. Mallory set to pacing, circling with her gaze levied at her feet and her hand sliding up and down the hilt of the sword sheathed at her hip. "Come on. Come on now. Hurry dammit."

Finally an aperture opened wide enough for Mallory to muscle through even with all her armor. Those she brought with her—seven knights, eight maidservants, the Fool, and Shannon Waringcrane—bustled behind.

"What is this place," Shannon muttered. Mostly to herself. She was second in line behind Mallory. Her hands would not stop trembling and she kept thinking about that elf ambassador, that utter imbecile. Mordac and Tintzel wanted her executed and Shannon interceded on her behalf, thinking she was simply stupid. Look where that got you. She fought down the impulse to say, like a child, "I want to go home." She hadn't been a child for a long time and now was the worst place to start. Surprise had stupefied her most of the journey into these depths but now she was waking up. This vault was where they kept the magic relics. Something in here, she hoped—she never stopped hoping—could open the Door and bring her and Jay home. At least Jay wasn't here. If she had to worry about saving him as well as herself—

"Before John Coke came," said a dry and dour voice behind her, "Whitecrosse was not a Christian country. Nor was it called Whitecrosse."

It was, Shannon realized, a response to her question. She thought she'd spoken it two minutes before but glanced behind her and they had still only just barely stepped through the vault's doors. Her head was a whirr. Focus difficult. Although she'd slept with Mallory the night before she felt the way she did when she hadn't slept with anyone for a long time. Psychosomatic. Focus. Straighten your gaze and focus.

She blinked. Became aware of her surroundings: the vault. Like the torches beside the doors, there were torches here too, still burning bright even though nobody had ever come inside to light them. Because of them, the dimensions of the vault were clearer than any of the interminable underground corridors they navigated to reach it. It was, like so many spaces in this castle, a broad space, with a high cavernous roof (the roof unilluminated but at least twenty feet tall, perhaps thirty or more). Also a deep space, stretching on and on.

Alcoves were carved into the walls in repetitive patterns. In each alcove was a pedestal, and on each pedestal was an object: the relics. Between the alcoves, engaged against the wall, were gigantic statues of men, which at first seemed to be Biblical figures, but upon second glance had their faces obliterated into plain masks of bare marble. Queen Mallory, unconcerned with any of the relics near the front of the vault—staves, spheres with murky objects set inside—continued doggedly onward.

"The people worshipped not Christ but a wicked Pope, who was only a man but claimed he possessed the power of a god. And nobody dared stand against him, though in their hearts they knew he was no deity."

Shannon, attempting to discern by looks alone what each relic did and which might be the best to use to defend herself, turned toward the voice that droned behind her. To her surprise, after finally paying the slightest attention to the speaker, she found it was the Fool. The bells at the ends of his coxcomb and codpiece twinkled, but otherwise he was disastrously altered from the obnoxious pun-spewing clown of before. Maybe the light, but every inch of his forlorn face cast a dark shadow. The bulbous protrusion of his comically large nose cut a black shard straight through his chin and cheek and the effect was that he looked like a horror movie monster half-glimpsed from behind the couch in a movie Mother fell asleep watching. And his voice matched. The reedy high falsetto was now a bass drumbeat.

"What?" Shannon said.

"The Pope built this shrine as a testament to his own image. Frightful places, so to strike fear into the hearts of those he made watch his mystery cults and unsightly catholic rituals. Those statues? They all used to wear his face. And there, on that altar you see before you?" He pointed to a stone table set in the center of the vault chamber, which Mallory vaulted over and Shannon walked around. "There he used to perform human sacrifices. The blood spilled from the throat would pool into a chalice from which his followers were forced to drink."

It had the character of a ghost story to match his ghostly face and Shannon shuddered. Only because she was already on edge, though.

"The Pope was John Coke's first adversary, before Devereux or the Californian horde or the dragons to the west. In this very chamber he wielded his first relic against the Pope's clergymen, who knew wicked arts. Right there, where you're passing now, he clashed against the Pope, and eventually drove his blade into the blackguard's mouth and down his throat, slaying him once and for all. The virgin who was supposed to be sacrificed at that time, whose life John Coke saved, was the Lady Tivania. From the two of them flows the entire royal lineage of Whitecrosse, ending now with our current queen."

Mallory Tivania Coke. They neared the end of the vault chamber. It was difficult to see the doors where they came in.

"To erase the Pope's vile deeds from memory, John Coke used the Pope's very own relic—the Mustard Seed—to bury his shrines and temples under a hill. That's the hill Whitecrosse was built upon."

On the wall that rose up before them, marking the vault's end, were set three alcoves. The last five alcoves on either side of them had been empty—Shannon kept an eye out even as the Fool told his story—but two of these three were not.

"This is where the fate of Whitecrosse has always been decided," the Fool said. "Here we shall see if John Coke's blood remains strong enough to save us. And here, set into this wall, are the relics John Coke himself used: the Shield of Faith, the Armor of God, and the Sword of Christ."

Out of the seriousness of the situation Shannon felt herself snap back to earth. Those were dreadfully banal names. Wasn't Armor of God a Jackie Chan movie? Shannon remembered it playing on TV once. Right. Long, long time ago. Mother had been watching it, of course Mother would never remember that she'd ever seen it, but Shannon possessed a significantly stronger memory. Armor of God. That was after her father killed himself. Shannon didn't remember Mother watching many movies before then.

What a ridiculous film. Jackie Chan gallivanting across the world on an Indiana Jones-style adventure, fighting Amazonian women in high heels. Now here was Shannon's own Amazonian woman, beckoning her knights over with rapid hand gestures to help her out of her current suit of armor and into the Armor of God. In the movie the Armor of God was a dynamite jacket Jackie Chan wore to defend himself from evil monks. Here it was a comely, silvery suit of plate metal perfectly fitted to Mallory's body despite her not being its original user. She picked up the blade, which had a golden hilt with a ruby set into it, and which

gleamed with bright but pale light in the dark. The Shield of Faith was missing. Maybe that was the shield Jay carried around with him.

Armor of God. This whole thing might be a movie. Farcical, strained. Except now Shannon was inside the action although Mother remained on the other side of the screen, nodding off on the sofa. Even if her own daughter was the star of the film Mother would never remember watching it. Isn't that right Mother?

No, right now Shannon wasn't the star. Mallory was. She transformed from a beautiful woman to something fundamentally above the level of human within the godly glowing armor. Shannon knew Mallory was capable at combat. But that sense of condescension crept back. Everything here was beneath her. How could she trust Mallory so fully? Wendell had been capable too. Yet like Mallory certain strange predilections afflicted him; like Mallory something glinted in his eyes that were at other times so dull and dead. She remembered him, wheeling away from the jeep with that ridiculous rifle in hand—and then he was gone. Shannon couldn't trust Mallory to not do the same.

Shannon was, as they kept telling her, the heroine. The star. She only needed agency.

"Where's a relic I can use," she asked the Fool.

"Hm?"

"There are other relics, yes? I need one. Come on."

Mallory was busy inspecting herself in a tall and dusty mirror set between two of the alcoves, so Shannon dragged the Fool back the way they came, to the relics they'd already passed, and asked him to tell her what they did.

"There's the Gourd of Jonah," the Fool said, with a tour guide's tonelessness. "No matter how often you quaff from it, still it pours clean and delicious water. Of much use to John Coke on his quest through the desert waste of California. Over there's the Javelin of Goliath, once wielded by a mighty giant John Coke slew." The spear he indicated, which barely fit within its alcove, looked too heavy for even Mallory to wield. "That one's the Lyre of David, from which issues beautiful music no matter how inarticulate the player, and that's the Holy Grail, the final trophy John Coke won before his retirement."

"Does it grant immortality?" Shannon asked, eyeing the golden chalice (but Christ was a carpenter, and his cup would be of wood—that was also from a distant movie).

"Only of the spirit," the Fool said mournfully. "Or so they say."

Figured. Even fantasy can only go so far. "What's this?" She pointed to a simple trumpet, a horn with one narrow end to blow on and a wider end from which sound came out magnified. "Does this just play beautiful music too?"

"The Trumpet of Jericho. It can raise and cast down walls."

"What kind of walls?"

The Fool shrugged.

Hm. Compared to the other relics they'd passed, it seemed moderately useful. Shannon envisioned building a gigantic wall to seal them off from their attackers, although that'd be a waste of time down here, where there was no other exit. Maybe by "tearing down" walls she could create another exit. No, that was a bad idea too, tearing down walls underground was a great way to bury yourself alive. Whatever. It could possibly be useful, so she plucked it from its pedestal and wiped the dust off its brass surface.

"Is there any relic that gives you, I don't know," Shannon tried to think up a creative power, "super strength or something?"

"Yes. The Armor of God grants its bearer great strength, speed, endurance—"

"Any others? Look. Let's do this the less stupid way. Tell me which relics would be good for a fight. Can you do that?"

"As you request. Over here is—Oh."

The Fool stopped. The constant jingle-jangle of his bells quieted and frigid silence layered upon the vault at once. Shannon's hands reflexively went to her arms, and her breath in the torchlight was a white puff. The vault had been like ice the entire time, but only now did Shannon realize, and in this void of sense she became aware once more of the goosebumps crawling along her skin. Ahead, in the far distance, where the doors of the vault were, a pink glow emanated. It was not the pale light of the torches. It looked like candy.

She'd have to make do with the trumpet. Snapping her fingers at the Fool, she backpedaled toward Mallory, keeping an eye on the candy aura that grew steadily stronger each second.

Still walking backward, she was startled when a firm hand fell on her shoulder. Turning and seeing Mallory was less reassuring than it might have been otherwise.

"Finally," Mallory said. "This place is as good a battlefield as any. Take up your weapons, men."

Her seven knights formed up behind her. The Fool, glum-faced, joined the maidservants who kept to the back—many of them gripping onto one another in their own overwhelming terror—and Shannon wasn't exactly sure where she should stand. She looked down at the Trumpet of Jericho and then took her place slightly behind the knights.

"Let's see, a speech. A speech on the eve of battle, that's the thing to do." Mallory nodded to herself. "Ah, what else is there to say even? Men, you and me, we were born into a world that didn't need us. A safe and solved and happy world, where everything that would ever be done had already been done. God had set his machinery aright via the instrument of John Coke and everything turned exactly the way he wanted it. I found the world was like this when I was thirteen and from then on I've lived as a corpse. One animated, walking about, but a corpse nonetheless. Only in the dream of a world yet unsolved could I revive within myself a brief moment of vitality. Men, today that fantasy becomes reality. Today we are John Coke. And for this one moment, brief though it may be, all our deathful life was worth it. If we survive,

the memory of this day will sustain us unto our old age; surrounded we shall be by songs, poems, hymns, and paeans to our doughty deeds, ways to expand this moment till it spans centuries.—There. That ought to suffice, I'm no great orator."

She glanced back sheepishly, radiant in her beauty despite the sheepishness. For a moment Shannon finally saw her fully in the Armor of God and her trembling transformed into an entirely different character. Mallory: Here she stood, a warrior queen, boyish with her blonde hair and full set of armor, standing taller even than many of the knights (though not all), and her blue eyes dazzling in their intensity. Those eyes noticed Shannon standing more-or-less with the knights and her smile became a smirk.

"Ah, you. The lapdog wants to prove she's a courser. Worry not, my cherry. Survive this and I'll fuck your brains out until dawn."

Did she really have to say that out loud for everyone to hear? Utterly incorrigible. But Mallory was already turning back toward the pink aura. Well. The comment certainly erased whatever was left of Shannon's apprehensions.

The clomp of boots in a synchronized march reached them, resounding through the vast walls, before the Effervescent Elf-Queen floated into view with her arms splayed wide for no conceivable reason. In an ordered mass behind her walked her soldiers, the elves, identical faces in identical red uniforms given the gloss of hard candy by the pink aura that emanated from their leader. On her palms were eyeballs; her actual eyes remained closed, and a steady hum percolated from her general direction. Shannon couldn't tell if it came from her throat or some other source. Maybe a hum that dripped out the pores of her skin. Why not. They never needed to explain it in the movies.

She stopped fifty feet from where Mallory stood and all her elves stopped too with a single, unified stomp of their feet. There were twelve evenly-spaced rows of them and it was impossible to tell how far they stretched back because eventually perspective collapsed them on each other. Possibly they spanned the entire vault. Fewer than three hundred and Shannon would be shocked. Likely much more.

The eyes on the Elf-Queen's palms squinted and her mouth contorted into an angelic frown. A frown like a parent to a disobedient child—as if Shannon knew what that looked like.

"Hm. You seem exactly like Tivania," the Elf-Queen said to Mallory. "So you're that mindless whore's spawn. That he would return to her after he had me—"

Mallory launched forward and swung her sword.

It happened in an eyeblink, literally, so that Shannon missed all but the tail end. In the space of that blink Mallory somehow cleared half the distance between her and the Elf-Queen and though her sword was still nowhere near its target an arc of pure and bright light cut through the air. In that brief moment the Elf-Queen dispensed two tears or bubbles or something from her hand-eyes and the bubbles absorbed the impact of the light, or at least spared the Elf-Queen herself from the impact. The foremost elves on either side of her were also struck and fell to the floor in halves. The bubbles split open, dispensing a splatter of blood and chopped body parts. Shannon staggered back, gripping a hand to her mouth. The uniformed elves who

were bisected weren't the issue, but the things that came out of the bubbles had the gruesome likeness of aborted fetuses.

"SLAUGHTER HER FRIENDS FOR ME, CHILDREN," the Elf-Queen screamed.
"TIVANIA IS MINE."

It began.

The elves charged forward, wielding spears and swords, and Mallory's knights rushed to meet them. Mallory zipped at the same frightful, inhuman speed but before she could bring her blade up into the Elf-Queen's body a whirling spiral of pink bubbles emerged from out of each palm, which popped to dispense a deluge of writhing bodies in Mallory's way. The knights met the elf army and metal clashed against metal and Shannon stepped back blank on what to do until a maidservant behind her screamed and with a flailing finger drew her attention to a volley of arrows soaring in an arc from far behind the elf front lines.

Shannon lacked any time to think an image other than WALL. She pressed the Trumpet of Jericho to her lips and blew, ignoring the flood of dislodged dust that swept back onto her throat on the initial intake until the long, doleful, and yet somehow triumphant note blasted out of the horn and a wall burst inexplicably out of the ground to catch the arrows before they landed.

Hacking, fighting the impulse to hack and only causing tears to stream from her eyes, Shannon finally expelled the dust and considered her handiwork. The wall spanned most of the vault's breadth and rose almost to the ceiling. It was comprised entirely of red brick, which Shannon immediately thought was suspicious, because that was the image of a wall that had been in her mind when she blew the horn, and it seemed odd for such a schoolhouse-style wall to be what this magical fantasy artifact summoned by default.

That didn't matter. First she should seal the Fool and the maidservants behind a wall where they would be safe until the fighting was over, and then she could figure things out herself while she assisted Mallory. The speed at which the wall came up was reassuring to its combat applications and maybe Shannon should actually just seal herself behind the wall too and let Mallory with her superhuman abilities handle it and really if she tried to get involved she would probably just get in the way and also get herself killed yes? You let professionals handle things in their areas of expertise and you don't tell doctors or policemen how to do their job. Yeah and if Mallory dies because you didn't block a thousand arrows raining down on her then what good will it be sealed in a perfectly safe tomb waiting for death by starvation?

Her red brick wall was still standing to defend her so the least she could do was seal the maidservants and then decide what to do for herself. She blew the trumpet again, this time—as an empiric test—imagining a wall made of solid steel, and sure enough a solid steel wall shot up exactly as she planned it in her head. It made not the slightest whit of sense for it to work that way but—

The instant the steel wall rose, the brick wall defending her shattered into dust that dispersed before it even reached the ground. That left her facing a sea of red uniforms and red blood

spurting and it took all of two seconds for an elf knocked back by a blow of a knight's shield to notice her and come rushing with a spear.

That gleaming spearpoint was aimed for her stomach and in a single, horrible instant Shannon felt like she was in a nightmare, the kind where you're just in your bedroom but you can't move and a shadow man is staring at you from the window and he starts to slowly open the window and you can't move and he crawls inside one limb after another and you can't move and he's getting nearer and nearer and you can't move and you scream and wake up. For Shannon that scream came in the form of a tragically strangled toot of the trumpet that nonetheless launched a narrow steel wall out of the ground under her attacker, a steel wall that grew taller and taller taking the elf with it until it finally reached the vault's high ceiling and snapped the elf's spine against it with a crunch Shannon knew for a fact she heard despite the din of the battle raging around her.

Strangely, killing that elf erased all panic instantly. For not even one moment—and her mind was so clear she could have this curious thought—for not even one moment did her sense of morality balk at the murder she just committed. Not even a twinge. Instead, she realized exactly how correct it was. How correct it was that she stood here now and fought alongside Mallory and her knights, how the very bastion of organized and rational civilization in this world was threatened by this horde of psychotic invaders, how rather than fight merely to save her own life she ought to focus her efforts on salvaging this kingdom from utter desolation.

Creating the wall against her attacker destroyed the one protecting the maidservants and the Fool. Yet Shannon knew she could not waste her relic's singular concurrent usage to defend nine minimal and ancillary components of the whole when its overall mechanism was under threat. Already elves rushed past the voided space and brandished their spears at the women, who fled screaming for the very back of the vault, where there would be nowhere else to run. If they could distract even a small part of the elfin forces for a few seconds they were serving a more valuable use than they could otherwise hope to achieve—Shannon refused to even glance their direction.

She blew the horn (God there was still so much dust, she wished she hadn't written off the Gourd of Jonah as useless earlier) and a wall arose from under her feet. Kneeling carefully and holding onto the top to ensure she didn't lose her balance, she rose into the air and stopped about halfway to the ceiling. Here she had a fuller, tactical view of the battlefield. Ahead, the seven knights formed a locus around which the elves swarmed. No—six knights. One, squat and with a helm sporting horns of a bull, had fallen to a knee with blood streaming down his sides, a lance embedded into his armpit and a broken shaft emerging from his neck. Further ahead, Mallory struck at the onslaught of bubbles that spurted out of the Elf-Queen's palms, bubbles upon bubbles, an almost sheer wall of bubbles rising to the ceiling in spiral patterns that prevented Shannon from seeing the state of the forces arrayed behind her. (It also blocked those forces, particularly the archers, which was the only reason Shannon was able to remain so high for so long.)

Slices of light shot up, down, to the sides, blasting holes in the wall of bubbles that were immediately filled by more bubbles, and more bubbles, and more bubbles. The bubbles that weren't instantly sliced eventually popped and naked, amniotic elves rolled out, kicking and

writhing a few moments before clambering to their feet, seizing a weapon from one of their fallen comrades, and hurling themselves into the fray.

Alright. Any war of attrition was a lost cause. They needed to eliminate the Elf-Queen to achieve victory. But the knights, overwhelmed, were dying one by one. The sixth stumbled forward, swinging his broadsword sloppily and still managing to take down an elf on his way into death. The fifth was struck again and again by elves on all sides until their weapons found a path between his armor. The remaining four had their backs to each other as they fought, creating a more defensible formation, but they were besieged on all sides.

Okay. Great. You better understand the battle. But what will you *do*?

Her walls constructed themselves quickly but only covered one direction. No matter how much she tried to imagine a rounded wall, or two walls at a juncture, only a single straight wall ever emerged. That limited her options and if she allowed herself to get surrounded like the knights she was finished.

What she needed first and foremost was more firepower. This vault was filled with relics and so far it didn't seem like any of the elves got the bright idea to pick them up and start using them, which left an opening for Shannon.

Her view from above, though occluded by the bubbles, allowed her to see some of the vault's walls, into which the reliquaries were set. The first few alcoves contained the relics the Fool described to her, but just barely she caught a glimpse of the next alcove down. She possessed not the faintest clue what was in it. But there was a chance it could change the course of the battle entirely.

Shannon took a fraction of a second to mentally rehearse her next move and then put it into practice. She blew the trumpet again, the wall under her disappeared, and a thin tall wall emerged from the distant alcove shooting toward her.

On its path, the wall plowed through elves and bubbles alike, but nothing stopped its forward momentum. She landed, stumbling, and when the wall stopped inches away from her she reached out and seized the relic it carried with it: A long thin rectangular stick of wood marked by a series of notches equidistant from one another. After a bizarre moment trying to make this alien shape mean something in her mind she realized it was a measuring stick. A ruler, in casual parlance.

Grabbing it, the following facts entered her brain unbidden:

Of the children of man, by their generations, after their families, by the house of their fathers, those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Whitecrosse, were nine.

Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Cleveland, were one.

Of the children of the fae, by their generations, after their families, by the house of their mother, those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Elf, were seven hundred and sixty-three.

Oh fucking Christ really? *Really?* Did she seriously grab a relic from the book of fucking NUMBERS? Its power is COUNTING? They did this to her? They seriously did this to her NOW?

"Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Elf" rapidly changed, dropping in swaths as Mallory slashed and rising again as the Elf-Queen spawned more. Those of the tribe of Whitecrosse dwindled to eight and Shannon glanced to see one of the four remaining knights stagger and fall without even a groan. But none of it helped! She knew there were tons of elves and not many humans. She KNEW that.

Tribe of Cleveland. Tribe of Cleveland oh my GOD she hated all of it, every last—No. No, hold yourself together, now is not the time. Like the trumpet maybe this ruler has more uses than meets the eye. Think. You do taxes for a living or did you forget that? Numbers are your specialty, you can *use* this somehow, think!

She lacked time to think. Several elves broke off from the vortex enveloping the knights, noticed her, and approached with swords and spears. Although she backed herself against the wall of the vault they still approached from multiple directions, the exact worst-case scenario given the trumpet's limitations.

Shit. *Shit.*

Mallory where were you. Mallory didn't you say you protected what was yours. The numbers of the tribe of Whitecrosse kept dropping. Seven now. Six. Mallory. Mallory help. Help her. Help her—

Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Cleveland, the ruler said to her, were two.

What? Two?

Jay. Jay had come back. Never in her life had Shannon thought she would be so happy to see him. If she bought enough time. Just a little longer—oh what was she thinking Jay was worthless—

Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Flanz-le-Flore, were one.

Flanz-le-Flore. She knew that name. Where did she hear it before. The forest. That's right. The forest. But why—

The unmistakable sound of a gunshot rent the battle straight down the middle.

—

"It's her," the elves told their queen. "It's Flanz-le-Flore."

Damn that slut. So eager to show up to your funeral hm? But Tivania's spawn was proving more troublesome than expected. The Effervescent Elf-Queen well knew the limits of John Coke's enchanted sword and armor, but she had failed to account for the innate physical prowess of the woman herself. So agile and possessed of unladylike brute strength, she was a rather tedious thorn in the thumb.

It would not be good to deal with both Tivania and Flanz-le-Flore at the same time, from two different directions. Hm, hm, hm. How to proceed.

Create a wall, a voice said in the back of her mind.

Hm? The Effervescent Elf-Queen certainly did not think that thought herself. Yet she heard it all the same, clear as any other thought. How curious. How peculiar. She lacked time to consider where that thought came from. Perhaps she was mistaken; seeing the woman who blew the trumpet building and destroying walls of her own may have engendered the thought unexpectedly. Who knew. Regardless of its origin, it was sound advice.

Amid the endless array of her children that wretched whore's offspring forced her to continually sacrifice simply to stay afloat, the Effervescent Elf-Queen produced two very special bubbles that she made sure to send drifting behind her and away from Tivania. These bubbles popped without problem and two more of her beautiful children were born; her other children rushed to aid them, cleaning and clothing them and handing to each a paralyzed fae captive. No explanation was necessary. All the Effervescent Elf-Queen's children possessed an instinct as to their purpose.

The newborn elves devoured their faeries. Wiping the blood from their chins, they positioned themselves in the center of the vault, with their backs to one another so that one faced toward the Effervescent Elf-Queen and one faced toward the direction of Flanz-le-Flore (who was still too far to be seen). Then each activated their animus.

Elves were once fae themselves. Like fae, even like humans, they all possessed a unique animus. Unlike fae, they could not activate this animus at will; they required true fae blood to tap into that ancient wellspring of power. Unlike humans, though, drawing from this wellspring did not corrupt their bodies or their souls. Elves were perfect; they could not be corrupted. They were thus superior to both humans and those wild, untamable, irascible, irredeemable fae *creatures* who snickered at your misfortune and schemed to deepen it to a yawning black pit of despair.

As the queen of the elves, and as—though she loathed to admit it even to herself—and as a pureblooded faerie who could only produce John Coke's offspring rather than become one herself, she had her own power. That was to control what animus her children possessed. Within reason of course. This world had certain *rules*, hm-hm-hm. No one save the Master might break those rules.

The animus she gave her newest children broke no rules. A simple animus of localized effect. They might form a barrier that none could penetrate. They did so now, one barrier erecting on one side and one on the other, forming a double wall that could not be disrupted by assaulting its creators from either side, as they were sealed within a small and impenetrable pocket. The

barriers were translucent pink, much like the skin of her bubbles, but by no means were they fragile. Let Flanz-le-Flore rail against them all she might, snap her fingers in fury.

Let her. Let her! It would be her turn soon enough, oh yes. Soon enough the Effervescent Elf-Queen would have her revenge. First on Tivania, then on Flanz-le-Flore, and afterward—why not? She'd take the relics and travel on to California to eradicate the seed of that final paramour John Coke took, that exotic heathen princess with the hideous dark skin. No more, nothing more, none of them anymore, and only then would the Effervescent Elf-Queen's jealousy be sated. Only then this aching, horrible pain in her heart might be closed, the wounds that horrible man inflicted on her with his thoughtless and cruel infidelities, that horrible horrible man who for no reason she could explain she loved, no reason logical or passionate, yet she loved him nonetheless, every woman had loved him, as though he possessed a charm or enchantment of his own yet she detected none upon him. As though this world's Master had written it to be, and these dreadful pawns held no recourse but to obey, to love on demand, to fall into throes of passion powerful enough to eradicate entire nations.

Once they were all eradicated, she would be free. Free of these thoughts, free of these pains. Nothing left would remain save her and her children, and finally her unquenchable aching love might expend itself on a truly benevolent, motherly purpose, envelop her children until she was finally exhausted enough to die in peace.

Oh let her simply be a mother, she thought as her dismembered children rained down all around her. In response, more and more tears flowed from her eyes.

—

So close. Oh they were so close. The stench of that woman pervaded thick and it drove Flanz-le-Flore insane. Like a weasel in its frenzied war dance an energy electrified her body and she could stem it solely by seizing tight to Wendell Noh's chest as he casually, carelessly, yet precisely aimed his cannon of a rifle and fired a supercharged bullet that passed through six, seven, eight, nine elfin bodies before stopping. Convenient of them to approach in neat and orderly rows.

Wendell Noh handled the "pump action," replaced a new bullet into the "chamber," and took aim again with nonchalance. If only Flanz-le-Flore could pause the frantic discombobulation of her thoughts to admire the heroic assuredness with which he handled his weapon of choice, his ".700 Nitro Express" as he once explained during an animated and longwinded digression from his typical stoicism that detailed the gun's history, composition, and power. But it was a fever inside her, a burning she could not tamp out. She knew the Effervescent Elf-Queen was near and no longer could she control herself. Her fingers moved automatically, snapping rapid-fire to transform elf after elf into vegetables and their metal weapons into more bullets for Wendell, but this did nothing for her, provided no satisfaction. The devastated corpses of the elves possessed suddenly of gaping holes in their chests as they toppled to the ground sated her bloodlust more readily, but she knew until she saw the Elf-Queen annihilated no solace would reach her.

Four hundred odd years ago, in a much younger world, Flanz-le-Flore was a much younger queen. Youngest, indeed, among the fae, and treated with flippant carelessness by her supposed peers on the council. Ostracized in such a way, she was somewhat more disposed toward the new race of humans constructing their cities out of the bounty of her woodland, allowing them safe passage if they respected her. She observed them too, curious, as it is natural for fae to be curious creatures, and when she was younger she was far more curious than now. But it was idle curiosity, slothful curiosity, curiosity for the sake of a distraction from the endless passage of time that ticked away without meaning or purpose beyond the pursuit of tame passions: theater, fashion, so forth. So it was—until John Coke arrived. John Coke. John Coke. Oh, John Coke. He was the purpose. The entire purpose of the entire world; she knew that, understood it as surely as she understood the Master's hand in these dealings. Were there anything more in this world than idleness and sloth, it was contained within his soul. She understood that and understanding it desired it more than anything. To escape these confines, to find something greater, to *strive*—was that not the value of life? Or perhaps it was only valuable to one who had no reason to strive; perhaps those trapped within perpetual strife find beauty and meaning and desire within blissful, pleasant negation.

Only a Flanz-le-Flore given four hundred years to ponder these philosophies in retrospect could voice them; the younger Flanz-le-Flore knew only she loved him. Loved him, needed him, craved him. Frightened of her own feelings she at first teased and tricked him when he entered her forest, but shortly she became his ally and assisted him in defeating the Dread Lizard Devereux who so rudely set fire to her wood. In her youth and naivete she thought that would be enough, she was still capricious and wily, she could only tease and not make known her feelings directly. So he left her wood and adventured elsewhere.

Why *her*, though. Why the Elf-Queen of all her fellow fae royalty. Flanz-le-Flore understood why he might prefer that Tivania woman, they were of the same race after all, but why the Elf-Queen. What did she say or do. Was she simply then the hopeless, desperate lover that Flanz-le-Flore was now? Did she throw herself at John Coke the way Flanz-le-Flore threw herself at Jay Waringcrane? Were it only human paramours she could tell herself it was the natural order. Squirrels with squirrels and wolves with wolves. But the Elf-Queen. The Elf-Queen.

The name alone tinged her vision red. A surge of unmitigated passionate hate and that hate had not as she once thought quenched itself by the elves' disqualification from being fae. She hated so strongly she hated the hatred for what it did to her, how it gripped and moved her ways she would otherwise never move. It was hate like a vice, uncontrollable despite the shame it built inside.

Yet what she hated most was this wall.

A bright pink wall that perfectly sealed off the last segment of the vault. No weaknesses or gaps, simply pure animus employed to its particular purpose. Wendell Noh's bullets despite their ferocious power ricocheted harmlessly. Flanz-le-Flore's snaps did nothing; she would need to transform the wielder of the animus, yet she could not see them behind the wall. Should she transform the real walls of the vault to tunnel around it, this ancient buried chamber would surely collapse.

On the other side of the wall was the object of Flanz-le-Flore's jealous, wrathful obsession, the loathsome creature she desired utterly to destroy—and who desired utterly to destroy her in turn. The Effervescent Elf-Queen.

There *had* to be a way through. Flanz-le-Flore couldn't simply wait. Not now. Not so close. The need pounded inside her, the feeling that without the destruction of her erstwhile rival she would never know peace again. (But she'd known peace for four hundred years.) (That's addiction for you. Four hundred years sober and one taste is all it takes to tumble back down—like poor Wendell and his tobacco, who craved it though she had denied it from him for weeks.) (If you don't kill her here she'll hunt you down anyway. She has as much reason to hate you for how you led the council against her.) (Then fight her in your own territory. Where you have the advantage.) (No, here she's distracted by the human queen. That's who she's fighting on the other side of this wall, nobody else can open the vault. That's why she sealed herself off, she can't handle you both at once. This is your best chance.)

"Not my idea of an adventure," Wendell Noh muttered as he shot down another column of encroaching elves.

Her arms tightened around his chest, her fingers still snapping. "There shall be a much more fearsome adversary for you to face, my hero. Patience."

Yet she herself could not remain patient. There must be some way through the wall. Perhaps the relics? Almost all of them remained in the accessible part. Though she distrusted such rule-breaking objects, if necessary she might—

"A portal might work, perhaps," said a voice behind her. Clear and well-intoned despite the maddening brawl that encircled them.

Ready to snap her fingers, Flanz-le-Flore looked behind her, though intuition told her it was no elf who spoke. The girl she came face-to-face with was likewise mounted, although not upon a horse but a strange sort of creature, half-deer and half-human, who despite clearly being female wore the magnificent antlers of a buck. Flanz-le-Flore recognized her nonetheless, as the nuns of the monastery had traversed her forest on occasion before. Yes, and beside the deer were her fellows, more of those twisted women corrupted into something neither human nor fully inhuman: a ferret, a hornet, and a frog. Other than the deer they engaged themselves with beating back the elfin horde, striking with claws and fangs, rending flesh in great bloody swaths. But none of those were the one who spoke.

"Why have you come here," Flanz-le-Flore said to the dragon girl, who unlike the others she had never seen before either in this form or any other. "Has the Master sent you too?"

"You wish to pass to the other side of the wall, do you not?" The dragon girl slowly kicked her feet back and forth. "I have a way."

This girl... wait. Could she be—the princess? Princess Mayfair of Whitecrosse? She had the look and the voice. Did the princess corrupt herself into this form? Yet Flanz-le-Flore, Faerie of Transmogrification, knew always when one thing shifted to another. No, this was not the same creature, and if there was anything of the Whitecrosse royal line in her, it was not the girl but the boy, Prince Makepeace.

"I'm falling asleep," Wendell Noh said as he fired a bullet through five more bodies. "I need something greater than this."

Flanz-le-Flore knew the manifestation of this girl and her fellows could be no good either way. The Master's pawns. Yet the maddening scent of the Elf-Queen remained within her nerves, a pulse of blood though her blood was usually so viscous and slow.

"What is it. What's the way. Play no games with me, girl. Tell me the way now."

"I have procured an elf with a particular animus." The dragon spoke calmly, even as her mount lashed out a spear to skewer an elf who ran close. "She's not with me right now, so don't bother attempting to attack. It would not work, anyway—surely you sense my sisters and I are far more powerful than you saw us last?"

Flanz-le-Flore sensed it indeed. She understood a need to be wary. There were five of them total, and in the fighting the other three had fanned out so that they stood now on either side of her. Their movements were spectacularly quick as they eviscerated the elves, and though Flanz-le-Flore might be able to transmogrify some in time, the others surely expected it.

Her eyes shifted shut with a sigh. Damn. Damn that Master. And here they were, in the vault already. Exactly where the Master wanted her. A peaceful grip of horror seized her heart as she realized why her envious, wrathful passions had become so enflamed. Even the Master struggled to fully shatter this world's rules, but they could bend them. The cooled flare of hatred remained all this time; it took only a slight tweak to make it burn bright enough to obliterate all other thoughts. Or was that only a convenient excuse? Had the Master merely set the stage, and let what was always within Flanz-le-Flore flare up in natural, unaided response?

"If this is it," Wendell Noh said with a yawn, "I'd rather go home. They're not even intelligent. NPCs."

Because they were drones without their queen. Helpless sans specific direction, the way that dictatorial bitch liked it. Yet the queen herself—that was a sight. That would bring a smile to her hero's lips. And her own.

Damn! Damn that Master. Damn—but this was more important. If she kept Wendell Noh, if she destroyed the Elf-Queen, then who cared about the Master? Once she "knew" Wendell Noh thoroughly, once she could manipulate and reproduce the element that made him "human," then that Master would hold no sway over her. But damn, damn it was so irritating!

"Fine." She spat the word. "What do you—or rather, what does your Master—want me to do?"

The dragon girl's smiling expression did not change. Maintaining her poise, she said: "Cinquefoil. Gather the relics, will you? They're in the alcoves. You'll find twenty-four of them; the other four are on the far side of the Elf-Queen's wall."

The ferret Cinquefoil nodded and zipped off in a flash of whipping tail. By now the horde of elves, no longer resupplied by their queen, was starting to dwindle, and there was far less

urgency in fighting them. For the next minute Flanz-le-Flore and the dragon girl stared one another down, the dragon girl all a-grin, and Flanz-le-Flore aware of a spiteful scowl.

In armfuls or, depending on their size, one-by-one Cinquefoil brought them to the center: the relics of Whitecrosse. Staves, arrows, axes, lyres, knives, coats, razors, and so forth. The relics—which cheated the rules of magic and so doing could only have ever been the work of the Master, though the humans attributed their powers to God. A pile formed.

"That's all of em," Cinquefoil said eventually. "Twenty-four. Fingers, toes, and four more."

"Excellent work. Please hand me that one." The dragon girl pointed to a particular relic and eagerly Cinquefoil obliged.

In one clawed hand the dragon held it; a sphere of crystal, its surface perfect and polished, and the material so clear and shiny that one might easily see through to its center. There lay the sole imperfection of the material: a tiny yellow dot.

"A mustard seed," Flanz-le-Flore said.

"The Mustard Seed," amended the dragon. "Please, take it in your hands. Understand it as you must."

She lobbed it underhand and Flanz-le-Flore caught it. She handled the sphere in her fingers, turning it over with anxious impatience as the past minute of inactivity had only spurred her thoughts into more rambunctious patterns. She snapped her fingers and the crystal, which possessed no extraordinary properties, turned to sand. Out of the mound she plucked the Mustard Seed itself, which she dusted off, held to her nose, sniffed, and then extended her tongue-tip to taste. Pfah! Repugnant flavor. Yet potent with magic. Yes, quite potent. So this was a relic; she'd never touched one before. That sly, cheating Master. But how much could she hate it? It had all been done for John Coke, had it not?

"I know it, now."

"Good." The dragon extended a hand to indicate the pile of the other twenty-three relics. "Please transform all of them into the Mustard Seed."

"...What?"

A coy tilt of the head. "You can transmogrify like to like, correct? Living into living, dead into dead. The relics are all alike. Now that you know their magic, you can turn one into another, no?"

"Why do you want this?"

"Does it matter? If you wait much longer the Elf-Queen will overwhelm Queen Mallory. Who I so much wished to meet, but... I suppose that will not be possible. Alas. For you, though, there is still time. Unless you wish to face the Elf-Queen alone now that you've rushed headlong into the entirety of her army—"

Flanz-le-Flore held out her hand and snapped her fingers.

Snap. The Basin of Pilate became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Ark of the Covenant became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Finger of Thomas became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Javelin of Goliath became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Staff of the Samaritan became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Water of John the Baptist became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Axe of Elisha became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Feather of Noah became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Arrows of Esau became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Ashes of Job became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Light of Joshua became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Razor of Samson became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Lyre of David became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Holy Grail became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Crown of Thorns became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Coat of Joseph became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Binds of Isaac became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Knife of Judith became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Cloak of Elijah became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Key of Peter became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Book of Paul became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Staff of Moses became the Mustard Seed.

Snap. The Gourd of Jonah became the Mustard Seed.

There were now twenty-four Mustard Seeds, each perfectly identical to one another. Each possessing exactly the same power. The deer clopped forward and the dragon held out her scaly claw and Flanz-le-Flore handed her the original Mustard Seed, which was then gathered with the others and dispensed into a small pouch. The dragon patted the pouch and stored it securely on her person.

"Now your side of the bargain," Flanz-le-Flore said, disgusted to even say the word 'bargain,' disgusted with this vice inside her she could not control, this hate and desire that by now made her feel ill. That's the nature of vice though. Something you may know is wrong and say to yourself is wrong and understand in every possible way is wrong and yet you crawl back to it anyway, like a dog to its own vomit.

The dragon nodded and called out, "Charm!" Through the open doors of the vault entered that same sniveling wretch Flanz-le-Flore once had the misfortune of receiving in her court, although this time unaccompanied by her corpse of a sister. Instead she gripped in her talons an elf only slightly distinguishable from all other elves by her general dishevelment. Flanz-le-Flore withheld the urge to immediately snap her into oblivion.

"Please, Lady Temporary," the dragon said, "use your animus to create a portal from here to the other side of the wall."

The elf stammered. "I—I—"

"Let us not waste time through pointless resistance. You are well aware how much we can hurt you if you render it necessary to do so."

"N, no, I don't, I don't want to be hurt. Please don't hurt me... but I can only—I can only make a portal to someplace I've seen before. I've never been on the other side of that wall!"

The dragon shrugged. This seemed no problem at all. "Close your eyes for a moment, Lady Temporary."

A moment's hesitation, then the elf did as asked.

"What do you see?" the dragon asked.

The elf's eyes popped open. "How—how did you—but I've never been there! How did you put that image so lifelike in my mind?"

Another shrug. But Flanz-le-Flore knew how. Such things were trivial for the Master.

"You've now seen the other side of the wall," said the dragon, "and you should still have some power left after the portal you made to the elf kingdom. So please, if you will."

They brought the elf to one of the large pools of blood on the vault floor and the sobbing bird disinterestedly shoved her to her knees. The elf, who was on the verge of sobbing too—quite the lovely sight, and Wendell Noh was correct, it was much more fun when they actually had the capacity for thought—haltingly pressed her hands to the pool and in an instant it became a portal to the other side, where little could be seen but a sea of pink bubbles.

The dragon motioned and the elf was pulled away. She looked up at Flanz-le-Flore and said, "This has been a pleasant encounter. Thank you ever so much for your contributions. Now, farewell."

Immediately the other nuns detached from their combat positions as the deer turned and led them back out the vault doors. For a moment Flanz-le-Flore watched them, feeling foolish,

feeling hateful toward herself and this vice, but then Wendell Noh glanced down into the portal and said, "That looks like something" and broke the spell.

"Yes, my hero," Flanz-le-Flore said. And they rode the horse into the portal to face the Effervescent Elf-Queen.

Act 6 Act 6 Act 6 (Part 3)

Smoke in the air. Smoke in her shitty holey lungs. They might not have come to drag her out from under the bed but they'd find a way to kill her anyway, hey? Bad enough just trying to keep calm. With DeWint's horrible corpse staring at her and all. Panic might actually make her faint. Happened before. Though not since California. Bright warm friendly sunshiny California golden light streaming onto the bed of her dying father twisted into an awful shape. "Viviendre..." His voice a claw reaching out for her. "Where is my Viviendre? Bring her to me..."

Can't think about that now. That claw reaching. If she smelled smoke she must move. Now. At least to her window. Maybe from it she might suck enough clean air not to die.

The corridor outside her chamber had gone quiet for some time. No red legs tromping. Only DeWint and all his feathers. Carefully Viviendre slid herself from under the bed. Scraping herself and snagging her sleeve on the edge as she did. Trying to remain quiet lest someone remained only just around the corner, outside her view. Staff of Solomon at the ready.

She went to the window, unlatched it, and hung halfway out of it. Breathing fresher air that still smelled stale. Whitecrosse city fanning before and all abuzz. Antlike men streaming through the alleys, shouts, screams. A strange, orange box moving quite quickly up the street toward the castle—not a clue what that was.

Some hero Jay. Leaving her like that right before she needed you most. But it was her fault. Can't forget that Viv. Your fault for meddling. As if he'd ever love you anyway. She wanted to believe. When they touched—when they kissed—If only someone could love her. Then she might love herself too. She had holes in herself. She needed someone to help plug them up. Of course she wasn't selfish. She'd love back anyone who loved her. DeWint died for her. Did he love her?

Stupid to think this with the smoke seeping into her lungs and knowing full well this tiny little window to the outside world wouldn't save her if the fire kept spreading. Move you dumb bitch. You cannot stay here. Moving would only strain her lungs worse. But you cannot stay here you fucking dunce.

Wouldn't it be fine to stay here? And just die. The lack of air would make her faint and she'd die in her sleep. Soft and peaceful like that no? Why strive for life. Nobody cared for her, she didn't care for her, and even if she survived how long until her brother learned of Jreige's death and sent an assassin anyway? She pulled that gambit thinking it'd be fine as long as it tied the hero close to her, he could protect her from her brother, and excellent job. Stellar assessment of risk and reward. Save yourself the fear and pain and float away here, hm Viv? Do you *really* want to live now that the adrenaline is drained and your headache's making you float in a cloud of nails?

She squeezed her eye shut. For DeWint. She ought to at least try. For DeWint if nothing else. That bastard just had to die for her huh? Had to put her in debt huh?

With one unthinking movement she pulled herself up off the windowpane and swiveled on her peg toward the exit. Only to swoon and place a hand on the bed to steady herself as her vision went dark and her skull faint, but it was merely a moment, and ebbing by degrees sight returned to her.

Okay. Okay. You can do this Viv. Viviendre. Princess Viviendre de Califerne you can do this.

She hobbled past the body of DeWint and refused to look down as her mouth twisted and rippled along her pursed lips. Though she felt the pressure building inside her chest she tapped her staff down to use as her cane and settled herself into the rhythm of forward movement. She had all the most efficient routes throughout the castle mapped in her mind. Right from her door, to the end of the corridor, down a spiral staircase, left, another corridor, exit. Doable within a few minutes even at her speed. If she made it outside that was everything. Then she might collapse and some passerby could even feel it appropriate to drag her to safety. Fehfehfeh. Oh, if even that slim fantasy could be entertained. How many of them might mutter, "Let the Californian witch be burned."

Too bad even making it that far was fantasy. For as soon as she turned in the corridor she saw those bright red uniforms milling about in the distance. Eight, nine of them perhaps, a good hundred feet off or so.

Let's see how fast they can run a hundred feet shall we? No other options at least. She lifted her cane aloft and said, "Divide."

She put the cane down and used it to hobble a few more steps as a bright red blob in the distance became two bright red blobs spewing out a lot more red between.

The halves flopped to the ground and she lifted the cane again and said, "Divide."

By now the others ought to have figured out that the figure walking slowly toward them had something to do with the spontaneous bifurcation of their compatriots, but they continued to stand around with little change in their position. Perhaps they readied to fire arrows at her, as they had with DeWint. But no arrows came. "Divide," Viviendre said.

"Divide."

"Divide."

She was now only about fifteen feet away from the four who remained standing in front of the spiral staircase. Finally in range of her poor eyesight. They were simply standing there, not even particularly distressed by the gruesome deaths and even now had the soles of their boots set deep into puddles of blood. Very well, she thought. Lambs to the slaughter, no need to complain.

Yet her good fortune could last only so long. Finally, after the fifth division, those who remained looked around and saw her. Maybe their patience for dismemberment ran out or maybe she simply stepped too close. Maybe they had eyesight poor as hers. Whatever the cause they turned and Viviendre became suddenly aware of just how thick the smoke had gotten in the corridor, how securely its black tendrils gripped around her ribcage. Each

successive "Divide" had been a stronger rasp and she wondered if she would even be able to say the others, let alone have time to say them.

"Divide," she managed to croak.

The foremost of them went still and started to split and the three others continued forward without even glancing at the carnage. If she threaded the Staff of Solomon with her other relic—but that relic took far more words to say. Well she better say them or die.

She reached up and pulled off her eyepatch, tottering backward at an uneasy balance as she angled the Staff of Solomon to the next encroaching victim and kept her real eye on the one being split so she might time the next "Divide" precisely. In the interim she spoke the other words, the words that went to her ersatz eye, the bright glowing orb set within her socket so often shielded from the light of day:

"Nothing new under the sun."

Set them back fifteen years. Yes, fifteen was good. Her Eye couldn't turn them back to before they were born, so best to err on the side of caution. Even if they were more veteran soldiers—the smoke, blurring her vision, made it impossible to tell, their faces were simple monotone masks—the removal of fifteen years' worth of memories would disorient them long enough for her to divide them.

Except they kept coming toward her as though nothing had happened.

What the fuck? Were they younger than fifteen? Shit, shit, shit—

"Divide," she barely wheezed. One more split down the middle, but the other two were now so close their bloblike faces cohered into focus and she saw the elfin ears jutting out their heads and would've groaned if she could afford the breath. Fae. Their age could be anything, anything at all.

The one being divided was still dividing and as she stepped back one of the remaining two entered range to strike her with its spear. In that instant her body felt like nothing, an insignificance, hideously willing to die at the slightest stimuli, and not a single recourse to defend herself, nothing in her hands, no way she could move fast enough. Her arms clamped around her body in a final vain act and the spear lashed out and the tip dredged a line through the muscle of one arm and drove deep into her stomach.

Her pent-up groan escaped her. A rush of blood dampened her hip and thigh and leg as she sagged against the wall. Her hand fell down and gripped the shaft of the spear, she entertained some vague notion: Pull it out. Pull it out. But it didn't budge, the elf held it fast. And the second elf appeared and raised its spear to pierce her again.

"Divide," she somehow said. Somehow. Saying it caused her stunned numbness to erupt in pain, pain made lunatic by the accompanying image of the elf splitting and dividing all over her, its skull bursting and its brains and guts gushing against her as she swayed a lazy dance with the first elf who now, she realized, was attempting to wrench the spear out, perhaps to spear her again, and her hand gripping the shaft now tried to pull it the other way, deeper into

her (though she was not strong enough so really only more slowly out of her), thinking that she must last long enough for her staff to work again.

Oh but it hurt. All the pain of her lungs and stump and eye socket combined and magnified a million times. Sharp hard metal cleaving cutting eating her up. Slicing and grating into little ribbons Viviendre de Califerne and herself spilling upon the floor. Her shoulder slammed against the wall and her grip loosened and the spear ripped out of her and a flood of tears ran down her cheek. Oh God. Oh God grant me strength. She slid along the wall down into the accumulated pile of gore from the elves and herself and the hot wetness was a rousing slap on the cheek, enough that as the elf standing over her lifted its spear she could summon the full total of her body's strength into her arm, just enough to feebly heft the Staff of Solomon and say the magic word.

Except when she opened her mouth, only a scream came out.

No. No. No, she needed to be able to speak. Just one word. Only one word, it wasn't much, even with the smoke now a visible black layer upon the ceiling above surely she could say a single word.

One word.

One word!

ONE! WORD!

It was only a scream. A scream trying to contort itself into something resembling the word "Divide," but it was only a scream.

She was going to die. Sorry, DeWint. Sorry—

A streak of metal lashed out and slammed into the head of the elf standing over her. One loud, heavy DONK reverberated and the elf staggered only for a man to lift the metal object again and ram it once more onto the head, then a third time, and after a pause of contemplation a fourth for good measure.

The man kicked the body aside and knelt beside her and said words and out of her bleary vision his face cohered and she already half expected it and half refused to believe it but it was Jay Waringcrane. "Viviendre." His hands shook her. "Viviendre. Viviendre. Shit. Shit!"

He placed his hands on the wound in her stomach and pushed and she screamed. Her head was truly going now because all she could think was: He came back. He came back for her. For her specifically. Why else did he come to this corridor first, this corridor that held nothing but her bedchamber? Then even that thought was swallowed by pain.

A small fluttering insect thing landed on Jay's shoulder and said in a sneering voice: "You idiot. If you wanna stop the bleeding stick your fingers in the hole. That'll work waaay better than pushing. Trust me, I'm the Faerie of Rejuvenation. I know all about it."

Fingers in the hole. Ha, ha, ha. Oh but it hurt so much. That's fine. She could die in his arms and maybe he'd remember her fondly. A tragic death to erase her terrible life.

"Can't you muster up enough for even one heal," Jay said to his faerie. "Just one?"

"I told ya! I'm ruuuuuined ever since I lost my arm. If I could do even the ittyest bittiest thing I woulda killed that elf in the woods."

"Useless," Jay muttered. "Lalum. Lalum, get over here. See if you can stitch her up."

"Stitches won't save her either," the faerie said. "That's a deep wound, yep! In such a painful place too. We're looking at a slow and agonizing death for your friend, hero. Oh well!"

Faerie of Rejuvenation. Faerie of Rejuvenation. Into the murk those words repeated. Since I lost my arm. Since I lost my arm.

Viviendre gripped Jay's sleeve. Her head tilted up and her eye bulged as she strained. The pain had lasted long enough she was able to focus past it. She twisted her lips, swallowed a hard groan, and croaked: "I—I can—fix the faerie."

She must have spoken too quietly because Jay kept shouting: "Lalum. Lalum!" But the faerie heard. The faerie heard and dropped onto her face.

"What? What'd you say? What?" It zipped back, forth, up, down. "Oh. Oh. This thing in your eye. This is—it's the Eye of Ecclesiastes, isn't it? Isn't it?!"

Good. It already knew. Saved an explanation. An explanation Viviendre could not give in her current state. She could barely nod. All she needed to say were the magic words, and she braced her body to say them. The pain remained but no longer so sharp and Viviendre faintly realized that was because her consciousness was starting to ebb. Ineffable fatigue swallowed her up, even breathing was an exertion that required full focus. She could say the words but she needed to know how long ago the faerie lost its arm. Five hundred years or five weeks. How long, she tried to purse her lips to ask: How long...?

The words didn't come out. But the faerie said, speaking with frenetic animation as it zipped back and forth and up and down:

"Twenty days nineteen hours thirty-six minutes twenty-nine seconds. Thirty seconds. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three—"

Each second encompassing three or four wild zips and the zipping and flicking of dull gray dusty flakes onto Viviendre's face combined to stimulate her tired mind and body, pulling her via sheer annoyance inches out of the black vat she was otherwise incontrovertibly sinking into.

The time tick-tick-ticked in her head with each metronome incantation of the faerie's sugary sweet voice and the strength was welling up inside, stronger still, stronger, she opened her mouth: "N—noth—" That was all that came out, her lips cracked with deep fissures and a cotton dryness on her swollen tongue, she swallowed and it was like a bundle of knives going

down her throat, and the faerie quit counting and started berating her, saying COME ON YOU STUPID IDIOT JUST SAY THE WORDS PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE YOU HAVE TO YOU HAVE TO SAY THE WORDS fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, and Viviendre's mouth split open and she said:

"Nothing new—under the—sun."

The light of her eye spewed out and flooded over the faerie, freezing it mid-flit into a brittle outline before all was drowned in white.

Before the white seeped away the faerie's voice was already fading into focus: "YOU CAN HEAR ME. YOU WON'T TAKE THE HERO! HE'S GONNA MAKE ME WHOLE AGAIN. HE'S GONNA MAKE ME WHOLE!" And then the faerie was there, fluttering its wings, its arm outstretched and its finger pointing. Its previously missing arm, which was previously there, and now currently there. The faerie had returned to its former state. Nothing new under the sun.

Disorientation was common in those she used the Eye on. The faerie blinked, looked around, took in surroundings that had shifted entirely from what it remembered. "Huh?" it said. "How did—what?" Meanwhile Viviendre sank back into the black vat.

That elf, Sansaime. She wanted the Eye's power. Wanted to go back almost all the way to the beginning of her life. Well with scars like those. Fehfehfeh. Viviendre wished there was any point in her life she could go to when she wasn't so deformed.

"What are you doing?" Jay's voice. "Hurry and heal her!"

Black, black, black. Nothing—

And then she was up. And the pain was gone. And someone had their arms around her, holding her body halfway off the ground, squeezing her tight, and his chin on her shoulder. "You're alive. You—you're alive." His voice was quiet, mathematical, a simple collating and cataloguing of a fact. But he was gripping her tight to him and after a moment her arms slid around his back and held him too.

He came back for her. He cared about her. He cared.

Past him, in the stairwell, the face of the spider woman peeped, eyes cold enough to cut through the smoke.

—

Getting back was easy. Given a clear destination, cutting through the forests they'd wandered aimlessly the past two weeks became a trivial endeavor. And the world was as it looked: minuscule. They were out of the woods and into the farmland by noon. Seeing the smoke billowing out the castle Jay hurried up. Dusky twilight fell as he reached the gates, forced

wide open and with a line of trees sprouting out of their maw and without a guard on duty. Mayhem in the streets but the villagers who saw him stopped and followed behind. He made them wait outside the castle, since they'd only get in the way and die otherwise.

Did Perfidia set it up that he'd reach the castle at the exact perfect moment to save Vivienne? His first instinct was to not care. He saved her, and—well. That made him—happy, he guessed.

But a thought nagged: If they see one way to manipulate you, they'll do it again and again.

And a counterthought: Didn't he come here, didn't he make this wish, to be happy? What did it matter if it was all strung together like a puppetshow if it gave him what he wanted?

For once in his life, his mind offered no rebuttal to that.

Supporting Vivienne so she might walk a little faster, they descended the stairs and traversed the corridor. His goal was to get her out of the castle and then figure out what exactly was happening. The peasants outside had only talked about an attack, an attack—which was obvious at a glance, but who was attacking and what did the line of trees sprouting all the way up the side of the hill have to do with it? He supposed he also better make sure Shannon didn't get herself killed.

The whole time Olliebollen was on the fritz, annoying him with a ceaseless deluge of words. He'd briefly explained to her that she'd lost her arm a few weeks ago and only now gotten it back through some kind of relic Vivienne had in her eye. Olliebollen didn't remember any of it. He had no idea which was worse, her ceaseless animation or her previous state of sulky petulance.

They exited a side gate into the main courtyard at the front of the castle and Jay immediately stopped. In the center of the courtyard, parked beside the giant statue of John Coke, was the bright orange jeep that Shannon's friend Wendell had driven.

Olliebollen finally shut up—or rather, slowed down—and settled on Jay's shoulder. "It's been two weeks and they're still trying to take you away?"

No. Something was off. The villagers Jay had left outside formed an anxious semicircle around the jeep, muttering among themselves. Through the tinted windows a figure moved in the driver's seat; Jay tightened his grip on the handle of his bat. The door popped ajar with a click, and then swung fully open as the driver stepped out.

It was a rabbit. A rabbit girl, with a mostly human shape but tall rabbit ears sticking from a frizzy clump of auburn hair. She stood on the tips of her long rabbit feet, and on her back twitched the bob of a rabbit tail. Holding a hand over her eyes to shade them she scanned the façade of the castle, particularly its exits, and soon her eyes settled on Jay and his group.

She perked up instantly, bouncing with little hops toward them while wearing a broad smile, and she shouted: "Oh my goodness! Lalum? Lalum, is that you?"

By the time Jay glanced over his shoulder Lalum was already disappearing into the shadows but that didn't stop the rabbit girl from hip-hopping closer and shouting Lalum's name over and over until finally a web appeared and wrote: HELLO PYTHETTE.

"We all thought you were dead!" Pythette hadn't given a glance to Jay himself, which was oddly refreshing. "Charm and Charisma came back and said they'd lost you in Flanz-le-Flore along with Pluxie. Oh, oh, is Pluxie with you? Is she hiding back there? Do tell her to come out if so."

PLUXIE IS DEAD...

"Ah," Pythette said. Her face, so bright and shiny, darkened a moment, then resumed its luster. "I'm sorry to hear it, but I'm still so glad you're alive. Oh, you've got to stay around a bit. Everyone else should be coming out soon, I'm certain they'll all be happy to see you. It'll be just the thing to brighten everyone's day. Things have been so dour since you left. I don't suppose you know what happened at the monastery? Terrible, terrible." She noticed Jay seemingly for the first time. "Ah—well, if you're with him, you probably know. I won't dwell on dark things. Anyway! We've all been so sad and mopey lately and you know me I simply can't stand it, it really affects me harshly, I started to feel sick and weak every day and it was all I could do to get out of bed and eat my porridge, but all the girls—Demny and Cinquefoil and Theovora and such—all the girls did really help me through it, and now we've got a new girl and everything's started to look a lot brighter and—oh there they are now! Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo, everyone, look look it's Lalum, Lalum's still alive!"

They were filing out through the front gate. First a weasel, a toad, and a wasp, then the deer girl Jay talked to the day after the fire (although she'd sprouted antlers, which Jay thought only male deer did). A lizard or something like that roared on the deer's back, and pulling up the rear of the procession was Charisma—no, Charm—dragging along an elf.

Viviendre's eye settled on the lizard, who had wings so it probably wasn't a lizard. "That can't be—that's not Mayfair is it?"

"Oh no, not at all," said Pythette, still waving her arms frantically at her friends. "That's Mademerry. She's the new girl. Showed up and you wouldn't believe how. Oh it's a whole story, no time to explain—Hey! Hullo! Everyone, everyone look here!"

Jay and Viviendre glanced at one another. From the scrutinizing squint in Viviendre's one eye (she'd replaced the eyepatch over her relic), Jay suspected she was as dubious as he was about this "new girl." Mademerry. That was a name alright.

Though it was Olliebollen, seated on the brim of Jay's hat, who hissed under her breath: "An elf. A live one. Let's kill it hero." She pointed at the elf Charm carried.

It'd been elves dead in the corridor where they found Viviendre, too. "You'll get elves to kill soon enough." Carefully, supporting Viviendre, he approached the nuns.

"Good work, Pythette," said the lizardish Mademerry. "Was it difficult learning to drive?"

Pythette sputtered mid-sentence, ogled like she didn't know what was just said, then looked to Wendell's jeep and jumped up. "Oh! Right! Actually it was unbelievably easy once uh, once Charisma gave me a few instructions. Well, going straight's easy. Turning and such still gives me trouble, I wound up banging it a few places. But straight's easy, and most of the way's straight as can be. Straight as an arrow!" To illustrate, her body went taut in a sort of salute, and she wobbled slightly on her heels like a bowling pin.

"Very good work, Pythette." Mademerry slid off the deer's back. "Good work to all of you, my sisters. Everyone has done such an excellent job today. Pythette, what has happened to Sister Charisma?"

At the name Charm started wailing and was ignored by everyone, including the sullen elf in her grasp.

"Ah, yes, about that. She was giving me instructions on how to drive and I'd gotten most of the hang of it when she suddenly said there was an urgent matter and she needed to go back to the Door. Then she flew off. I was told to keep up my task and to bring you to the Door quick as the dead."

Mademerry's serene face went dark in a moment. "Something's happened. No wonder she stopped speaking to me—Everyone, into the 'car' now. Obedience, you'll need to ride in the trunk. Apologies, but it'll be a trifle packed and we can't have you touching anyone on accident. Cinquefoil, Tricia, Charm, into the backseat. We'll have to toss the elf back there too. I'll ride beside Pythette. Demny, terribly sorry, but there's no more room. You'll be fast enough to keep up?"

"Yes," said Demny the deer.

Amid the flurry of activity as the nuns rushed to the sides of Wendell's jeep and failed to comprehend at first how to open the doors exactly (especially since some had claws instead of fingers), Pythette looked around blinkingly. "Wait, everyone, but Lalum's here. Lalum's alive!"

Everyone stopped and looked up. "Lalum!" "Oh it's Lalum!" "Nice to see you again Lalum!" Lalum, despite having tiptoed out of her hiding hole to get a better look at her friends, immediately darted back into the shadow and wrote HELLO EVERYONE. I AM HAPPY TO SEE YOU ALL WELL.

The weasel girl, Cinquefoil, belted a raucous laugh. "That's our Lalum! Hey, why don't we bring her with us too?"

"There's no time," Mademerry said sharply. "No time, and she's with him now—the hero. Go on, into the car. Lift that handle there just like that. Go, now, we mustn't keep her waiting. If she needs us...!"

The sulky elf in Charm's hands tilted up her head, saw Jay, and boggled her eyes. "Hey. Hey! Hey you're that—you're that man, oh, what was the name, did you tell me your name? I forget. Can you help me out here? I don't want to do any of these things anymore. I want to be left alone, please help me!"

Fuck, was it really the same elf from the forest? Temporary. Jay couldn't tell because the elf he beat with the baseball bat looked more-or-less identical. ("Go die in a pit, bitch!" Olliebollen said. "I hope they torture you forever and ever!") So much shit was happening at once after his uneventful trek through the wilderness that it was getting difficult to keep up. He knew the nuns were going to the Door, though. Someone was giving them instructions, and who else would it be? Perfidia. Although Mademerry looking so much like Mayfair was odd.

Nonetheless he needed more info. "Look," he said. "Before you go. Explain—"

"The vault is open." Mademerry spoke curtly, and even while speaking waved her arms to conduct the other nuns into their assigned places in the jeep. "The vault is open. Is that not your goal—hero? It shan't open again, I believe. Your sister and the queen are down there now, fighting the Elf-Queen. So move with haste and bother us no more."

The other nuns waved at Lalum before disappearing into Wendell's jeep, with Pythette hanging out the driver's door and waving particularly ecstatically. Jay hesitated, thinking about the vault and Shannon maybe being in danger, and by the time his cynical streak caught up and accounted for the possibility that Mademerry simply lied, she and Charm and Temporary vanished into the jeep and the doors shut and the engine started. He let go of Vivienne and moved to the side of the jeep, but it jolted backward with a start and caused the villagers watching to scatter with shrieks. The jeep lurched back and forth in a series of awkward, abrupt movements, oriented itself into a proper angle only after bumping three times against the base of John Coke's statue, and then drove off down the hill, scraping its paint on the side of a wall as it did.

Last to leave was Demny. She turned her stern eyes to Jay and said, "Mademerry spoke truth. The vault is open. I know not of your sister, but there was fighting down there. Good luck." She too raised her hand in a stoic wave to Lalum, and then galloped off.

In the sky overhead, large clouds were building, clouds to cover the land in a solid sheet of gray.

Well—and what did he care what the nuns were doing anyway? The vault, wasn't that where he wanted to go the whole time? To get the relics, make paradise, et cetera et cetera. Or would he shirk away the moment his goal got close, like he did at the monastery, like he always did?

"I'll go with you," said Vivienne.

"What?"

"To the vault. I'll help you. My staff can help you."

"She said the Elf-Queen is down there," Olliebollen muttered with a gleam of sadistic glee. "The Elf-Queen herself. Oh, ohohoho, ohohohohohoho! This is it. This is the time. I'll get my revenge. Oh yes. I'll make her suffer. Let the small fry go. If I get her..."

"The castle's on fire," said Jay. "Can you even breathe?"

"The vault lies deep underground," said Viviendre. "The fire and the smoke won't have spread there."

"How do we even get there?"

The thin strands of Lalum's web spread across the black crevice in the background of Jay's view. I KNOWE THE WAY.

—

Adrift on a sea of bubbles... sinking slowly sinking in soft shiny skin... Fullness and warmth and a tender embrace... was this not what a woman was?

(Time for you to be a woman—they said.)

Birth like a hot bath... aren't these the joys of motherhood... hold this thing, this wriggling thing, in your arms... isn't this the personification of love?

(As a woman this is your duty—they said.)

And the fluid that burst out... and the limbs, and the tendons, and the quivering flesh... and the tautness and the screams of pain... and the blood... was this not what a woman was?

The thing in front of her birthed, and birthed, and birthed, one billion elves bubbling bubbling bubbling out of the cunts in her palms and there was no end to them. Their colors were no longer solely pink, but blue, and yellow, and green, always in terrific patterns as they fanned in spiral array around their mother so best to die for her. If only we could all be so blessed in our offspring, isn't that so, ha-ha, ha-ha?

Her knights were all dead. Her maidservants dead too, they never had anywhere to run. And saddest of all her poor Fool was dead, he simply sat there and accepted it. War, love, and mirth. She was simply incapable of protecting them. She said she'd protect them. She failed.

There were elves everywhere. Both as bubbles and as writhing squirming naked things having long run out of spare robes to clothe themselves. They emerged as milky mewling whelps and no matter how many Mallory cut down more came, more and more and more and more. With the Sword of Christ she might cut down one hundred of them with a single stroke and yet two hundred more were already emerging out their mother.

She missed her Fool. Were he here now and not so sad he might say: How's a womb like a tomb. Yes! Yes, that's what he might say. How's a womb like a tomb.

Her lips split into a smile, she cackled insanely as she whirled around and drove her blade into an elf's groin and blasted a beam of light out his backside to incinerate the column behind him, then dragged the blade straight up to spray a cyclone of gore.

"HA-HA, HA-HA, HA-HA," she bellowed as she bounced atop the bubbles, gaining height with each outrageous leap, dragging the point of her blade above her to splatter the sacs and drench herself in them, her body now a red thing entirely save the Armor of God on which no blood ever stuck. She pushed herself, straining her muscles even through the superhuman power her armor granted her, driving toward the center where the Accursed Elf-Queen waited, filling herself with a sense of potent urgency as though all the battle were now building to crescendo, this moment in glorious combat, this is where the hero rises! It was like she was flying with how fast her feet touched the bubbles. Yet out of the hole she cleaved spurted a new spray of rubbery skin that buffeted her back before she could swing again and she fell to the hard stone floor scraping open her chin before rolling into a standing position and whirling her blade a full circle around her to clear the opportunistic savages who thought now might be a good chance to get a spear-shaft in her flesh.

A hideous feral howl escaped her, her eyes boggled, one hooked hand clawed its way down her face in rage. Why not a dragon? Why not a giant? Why not a Saracen army? Why not any other creature? Why this—mother? This apotheosis of all mothers, this ceaseless birther, and all in this tomb transformed by the overwhelming glut of flesh into a writhing, pulsing womb?

It was the only thing. The only thing ruining the moment of her glory, the moment she yearned for all her life. As young as she could remember they stuffed her full of stories of John Coke and her sick dying father so wretched and gaunt placed his hand on her head and promised her: You are of a great lineage, you shall do great things. But it was a lie, a lie, all a lie, even now it was a lie, because it wasn't her they expected or wanted to do great things, it was whatever wailing creature they could pry out her cunt nearly splitting her open in the process. "HYEEEEAAAUGH!" Fourteen giving birth to Makepeace and it almost killed her and they would've been happy to let her die, the nurses cradling the baby cooing to it as she felt part of herself seep out and splatter the floor. Softness and warmth they said a woman was but to Mallory Tivania Coke a woman was screams and blood and the inside turned out and she was now pressed on all sides by that memory made manifest.

Losing it, losing your nerve Mal (nobody called her Mal except herself), losing your damned mind here and ruining it righteously. You countered their purpose for you with your purpose for yourself and this was it, war and battle, and you're ruining it righteously yes you are.

(And Mayfair you know. You didn't need to have another after you gave them the heir but that filthy old man who was her husband wasn't there for power or control. His only concern was lust. Isn't this the personification of love?)

Losing your nerve Mal. Focus up. Let's not ruin everything and make great big fools of ourselves alright? Now—

The jet of flame shot out while she was half-distracted, absentmindedly swinging her sword simply to clear space for herself, and even with the Armor of God's boon she only barely managed to blitz to the side to avoid being consumed by it. A live elf crawling under a wall of bubbles was spurting the fire like a jet, and damn that boded ill. It was bad enough simply dealing with the overwhelming bulk of them, but now some were living long enough to start using their magic.

As soon as the fire subsided, a second elf creeping in the periphery spat a spray of water that instantly turned to ice, and another lashed out root-like tendrils that tried to grab her limbs. Though the quarters were cramped the bubbles and other elves always managed to get out of the way right before the attacks came, as though they were able to communicate via thoughts alone, and that meant that not only was Mallory now being quickly corralled into a corner by successive blasts of magical attacks, but there were suddenly far fewer elves in her attack range, so their numbers were compounding at an even faster rate.

A cluster of bubbles shuffled aside just as Mallory landed after a rapid hop away from a cone of harsh wind and an elf sprouted out of the woodwork to ram a lance at her. She twisted but it still cut through the flesh of her shoulder before she put her sword through his face and blasted his skull to pulpy smithereens. Something dropped from above and a heavy hit clanged her helmet which went toppling off and leaving her to dazedly twirl backward with her sword swishing out limp waves of light. She dodged in a direction and plowed straight into the wall of the vault before she rebounded in a whirl. An elf came at her wielding a broadsword, he moved faster than the other elves, a speed almost at the level of what the Armor of God granted her, and Mallory had time to think—they're copying my own magic, the bastards—before she deflected the incoming blow. The resulting shaft of light tore through the elf's leg, lopping it off cleanly under the knee, but he lashed his large blade as he fell and cut her glancing down the side of her hip before she could put an end to him.

Then the bubbles parted and ten more elves moving as fast as him rushed her.

This was starting to get bad. Mallory tried to remember what she learned from DeWint—back before she was married, of course—about the Effervescent Elf-Queen, there'd been a whole lecture on all the fae royals and their animus abilities but Mallory snoozed through the blowhard's classes as a point of pride. If the Elf-Queen was able to grant her children specific powers, though, it was only a matter of time before she got creative and gave them magic she couldn't easily handle.

(They're all sneering. Mordac, Meretryce, Malleus. What did you expect? A woman can't be a soldier, didn't they always say so? No—in the end they believed in her. That's why they sent her down here. But isn't it worse that they actually believed in her only for her to fail anyway?)

A horn trumpeted and a sheet of something perfectly clear, like glass, shot up in front of her. It absorbed the blows of the incoming elf elites with a tinny, reverberating sound, but whatever this perfectly clear surface was it was no glass Mallory knew because it did not shatter. Mallory glanced around and realized she was at the corner of the vault. The not-glass wall sectioned the tiniest part of the corner off from the rest, creating a small safe space that contained only Mallory—and one other.

"Reinforced Plexiglas," said Shannon Waringcrane, the heroine from another world. "It'll hold at least for a bit. What's the plan Mallory?"

Against the glass the bubbles pressed, distorted, and popped one after another to stream pink fluid and bodies down the side. Mallory snapped out of everything, all thoughts and feelings, looking at Shannon with the Trumpet of Jericho in one hand and the Rule of Numbers in the other—of course the Rule of Numbers, of course she would have that one—and realized all

was not lost, there was still something to fight for. Fraught with physical energy there was nothing she wanted more than to strip Shannon down then and there and let the elves watch. This feeling was like dunking one's head into cold water after sparring outside on a long summer's day.

"It's useless to act defensively," Mallory said. Stern, quick, focused, even as she imagined things she'd love to do to the heroine.

"The more time we give her the more elves she makes." Shannon shook the Rule. "Trust me, I know."

"And they're starting to use magic. Either she can choose their animus, or else she's made so many it's effectively the same difference."

"No, she can definitely choose it. That's how she put up the wall so fast after the others showed up."

"Others."

"I don't know who exactly. I thought it was my brother at first but it might be—Look, it doesn't matter. With that wall we can't count on them helping us. I just came up with a plan anyway."

"Tell." The bubbles pressing against the glass drifted aside, creating a clearing. Mallory suspected they would start using magic soon, and she had no idea how well the special glass would hold up.

Shannon quickly related her plan with a couple of words and gestures. Mallory nodded. Good plan.

"You're bleeding," Shannon said. "You sure you're okay? I have another working idea but it's a bit of a last resort—"

"Stop wasting time."

"Alright."

One blow of the horn and a thick wall emerged under their feet. Shannon gripped onto Mallory's waist as they elevated, while Mallory slashed the sword upward to clear the immediate wave of bubbles that tried to ebb at them once the glass disappeared. They soon reached the roof, leaving only enough room to stand, and Shannon blew her horn again. A new wall emerged just below them and extended horizontally over the vault. It was broad enough to seal off their space under the ceiling entirely, and while there were still bubbles up here, there weren't any already-hatched elves, and certainly no elves with intentionally-chosen magic.

Mallory cleared the bubbles with several quick strikes, seized Shannon, and in a second's sprint carried her to the opposite end of the arena, cackling in rejuvenated glee, twirling Shannon in an impromptu dance as they skidded to a halt at the proper spot.

All her life they tried to tell her what it meant to be a woman and Mallory found it in her own way, her own definition, squealing court ladies pinned beneath her grasp, maidservants breathless under the weight of their master, and now this serious uptight wayfarer who nonetheless screamed like all the rest. Objects to grip and possess, oh maybe now she could understand the drives of that lecherous old husband of hers. A leech. Feeder of vitality and in a young woman there it was and so poorly defended, so readily given. Cuts, bruises, pains, fatigue all dropped into nothing.

"Drop the wall!" Mallory demanded. Life is a series of moods and one must make the best of the good ones.

Shannon blew the trumpet.

The wall below them broke apart and with Shannon still fast to Mallory's side they fell onto the endless sea of bubbles.

Mallory swung once and cleared the first layer and there she was: the Effervescent Elf-Queen. Had the idiot realized their plan she might've moved but nobody ever said fae were smart—merely clever. The Elf-Queen turned but she was too slow. Too slow!

The second swing rained the light of Jesus Christ savior of all mankind upon the Elf-Queen. The few bubbles that remained around her exploded; into her salmon-pink flesh the light-blade cut, splitting her between the neck and shoulder, digging deep into her chest. The Elf-Queen broke apart, parts of her peeling like the skin of a fruit, a grievous blow, a dolorous blow, a stroke the sort they sang songs about, God was this not the moment of glory?

That moment, frozen forever. Queen Mallory Tivania Coke descending from above, gripping a fair lady in one hand while her other wielded the mighty blade. A whole army set against her and her alone, and yet useless against her strength. With one stroke Mallory ended it!

A group of about thirty elves gathered around the Elf-Queen's feet instantly sent up a beam of rainbow light from their palms. It enveloped the Elf-Queen and no longer was there a wound on her. No grievous split.

Mallory's grin went wider, so wide it felt like it would rip open. Good, she thought. Good! The moment must last longer. A single moment wouldn't satisfy. Let them fight until their bodies were spent!

She managed a third slash on the way down and though it chopped off one of the Elf-Queen's arms the arm was back in its proper place before Mallory hit the layer of bubbles that covered the ground and was bounced back against the wall of pink light. Shannon had the horn to her lips and blew but as a slanted edifice of iron arose to seal them off from their adversary Mallory let go and dove over the edge to continue the fight.

Her feet braced against the slope of Shannon's new wall and she launched herself at the Elf-Queen, who was quickly vanishing behind a newly regrown tide of bubbles. Streaming through the cracks were elite elf soldiers set solely on a path to intercept her. The Elf-Queen must've called them back once Mallory dropped from above, but even so they would not

reach in time before Mallory's next strike. This time she would go for the head. Let them try to heal a decapitated queen; not even the fae had the power to undo death.

One of the elf elites seized a newborn from the ground and hurled it into Mallory's path. That was no matter. It was only a single elf. It would not even begin to nullify the blow of her sword, nor would the thin layer of bubbles recuperating from the previous strikes. Mallory swung and—

And something split in her skin and she roared in agony. All forward momentum ceased. She plummeted to the ground, staggering on one knee as she groped at her chest, which felt like it was aflame. It didn't make sense. Nothing hit her. She possessed enough awareness even in her bloodlust for that. Yet somehow blood streamed out from behind her breastplate. What had happened? The last thing she saw was that elf that got thrown in front of her splitting in half, cut straight in the middle of its chest, in the exact spot where she now felt this unquenchable agony. Still kneeling, still reeling, her eyes twitched and blinked. Did that elf—did it somehow deal to her the damage she had done to it? She wasn't split in half, but that was because the Armor of God magnified her endurance just as it did her speed and strength. The cut was in the same place though. The same exact place.

She struggled to rise and one of the elf elites plunged its sword into her thigh. She whipped her blade, erasing its upper portion, thinking to herself: Any of them now could reflect her attack. No, not any of them, not the ones already showing an animus, not the fast ones nor the ones breathing flame. But the others—

Another elf shot between a parting wave of bubbles and then there was a spear in her stomach. A vast groan escaped her as her head tilted lazily and she watched her blood add to the pool that now sloshed so thickly from all the slain bubbles that it reached to her ankles. Then something in her face ripped as a sword drove through her cheek, wrenching her face to the side as flaps of skin rippled around her jaw. Her strikes were slowing down. Still moving faster than any ordinary human, but slow compared to the elite elves who kept coming in waves. Soon, the slower ones who breathed fire would reach her, or else new ones with nastier powers would spurt from their dam. She had to move. She needed to MOVE.

Shit.

She wasn't moving.

More elves were coming. Another spear stabbed into her arm and it took all that remained of her strength merely to grip to the hilt of the sword. Something hard like a mallet rammed into her from behind and she lurched forward and in that lurch every injury on her person screamed fiery agony.

What a waste. What a fucking waste. She sagged into a strange seated position. Her head bowed. Was this it? Was this what it came to? Failure. Failure, failure, failure. They said Makepeace died fighting a dragon. Shannon told her once what happened. An awkward moment, Shannon staring darkly at nothing, unclear with her words, ambiguous until Mallory pressed with terse and specific queries. He died smiling, she said. He'd uttered one final word: Escape.

Except, as she looked, there were now three Effervescent Elf-Queens. Four. Five. Each identical, each with their arms outstretched. That couldn't be true, though. In this world there was magic of a lower order and of a higher order and the higher could not be easily replicated or reproduced. No matter what animus she bestowed upon her offspring it must follow certain rules. Unless—an illusion. An illusion! Facsimile, disguise, deception, and the moment Mallory looked more carefully she noticed that only one of the Elf-Queens were spawning new elves from her hands. But by the time she detected it the wall had pushed her too high, and the upper layer of bubbles swarmed her and she lost sight of the Elf-Queen and—

—And this was bad. Very bad. The spawn of Tivania somehow survived and now Flanz-le-Flore was here with a human champion of her own, a human that the Effervescent Elf-Queen understood at first glance originated from another world. Worse yet he possessed something utterly alien to her, a novel weapon with the power of a relic. She'd already expected Flanz-le-Flore to be the more dangerous of her two adversaries. Yet this new hero and new weapon made the situation far worse than anticipated. Fortunately her last-second ruse of creating children who could replicate her appearance was buying time. However, the hero was activating the lightning crack of his weapon and eliminating her decoys one after another; soon none would remain.

In truth, the Effervescent Elf-Queen had refrained from exploiting her abilities to their fullest extent in the fight thus far. As she battled Tivania, she had at the same time spawned children with particular powers and sent them to particular locations in the vault so that she might have a surprise lying in wait when it came time to battle Flanz-le-Flore. Normally, overwhelming numbers allowed the elves to win every fight, but against this most loathed archnemesis such tactics of attrition proved insufficient. The more raw material sent against her, the more weapons Flanz-le-Flore might manifest to her side with but a snap of her fingers. Craft and wile would prove essential to defeating her, and she needed to be defeated quickly; to that end, the Effervescent Elf-Queen already possessed useful contingencies.

No point dallying or worrying whether Mallory and the heroine with the horn relic might interfere in these well-laid schemes. Flanz-le-Flore, hidden halfway behind her hero, was snapping elves into trees, building around herself a copse for defense, entrenching herself. This could not be allowed to pass. She could not be allowed to gain an advantage. Not her. Not her!

"COMMAND THE BLOOD," the Effervescent Elf-Queen cried.

The elves who could control liquid dipped their hands into the now foot-deep pool. Instantly the inert pile of gore came alive and gained form, hardening into tendrils that were the fingers of a mighty palm rising from under the horse on which Flanz-le-Flore and her champion rode to clamp around and constrict them—and more importantly constrict Flanz-le-Flore's fingers. It was the *sound* that sparked her power, not simply the motion of moving her fingers together. That simple stark sound: SNAP, and if the blood swallowed up her hands she could not create it.

Under ordinary circumstances she might be able to snap the blood away into some other substance before it reached her, but the Elf-Queen had prepared for that as well. There were multiple children who could control liquid, and as the pool below rose up, the bubbles above

burst in unison. Their fluid rained down, accumulating into two, three, four, five different funnels aimed at Flanz-le-Flore from different directions. Go ahead! Snap, snap your fingers! You can't transform them all at the same time!

The Elf-Queen hoped to hear those desperate, frantic snaps, that useless fruitless striving suddenly snuffed into silence. Instead she heard only a single snap, crisply.

Around Flanz-le-Flore burst a sharp eruption of flame, striking the plants with which she surrounded herself. At once the trees and vines burned in patterns that the Effervescent Elf-Queen realized were absolutely deliberate, designed to keep her safely defended on all sides without burning herself in the process. The bloody tendrils struck the flames on all sides and each one reeled back, hissing, spewing steam and smoke, incapable of penetrating the magnificent upswelling of heat. So Flanz-le-Flore had anticipated the Elf-Queen's move from the onset—Damn!

How had she made the fire anyway? She could only turn like to like, and the Elf-Queen had been careful not to send her fire mages to attack, knowing what she might be able to do with such a destructive material. Then how else could she have—It didn't matter. The offensive must continue.

"FIRE THE MAGIC BOLTS," the Effervescent Elf-Queen cried.

Flanz-le-Flore's other weakness. She must *know* a material to transform it. And while in her long life (though not as long as the Elf-Queen's) she had assuredly come to know every natural and physical material there was, she remained unfamiliar with the unique animus every creature possessed within themselves. The children she distributed strategically throughout the vault responded to her command in perfect synchronization. A perfect, arena-encompassing line of magic bolts fired from each side of the vault, straight long cords of pink magical material not unlike that which comprised the wall that sealed them off. They were fast and they were sharp and they would pierce everything at the layer of elevation Flanz-le-Flore and her hero were at—slightly elevated due to their mount.

If Flanz-le-Flore were like the heroine with the trumpet she might be able to erect a wall to defend herself in time, but she had just burned up the solid material around her. Flame would not stop these bolts and they did not; indeed, they moved so fast Flanz-le-Flore failed to snap her fingers in time. A loud and satisfying shlick of flesh, that was the noise made as the bolts tore into both their bodies at once. Straight through the chest, bursting them open with a lovely fount of blood—Flanz-le-Flore's sappy and syrupy, though the hero's was as red as any other—and the force launched them, still entwined together, off the horse's back and onto the ground.

Yes. Yes! YES. That was it. That was it entirely. Flanz-le-Flore, like all fae royalty, possessed some mean physical strength above that of a standard mortal, but even one such as her could not survive such absolute perforation. An anticlimactic finish, perhaps, but a necessary one. Tivania was cutting her way closer and closer, somehow maintaining her freakish whirlwind speed despite the brutality of her wounds.

But with Flanz-le-Flore dead she might commit her full attention to the lesser foe and thus—

What was that? What did you say? You there, elf. What were you telling her? No. You cannot be serious. They're *unharmed*? They're perfectly unharmed?!

Wendell Noh, perfectly unharmed, arose from the layer of blood looking down at his clothes and clicking his tongue in annoyance. Tough to get these stains out. Or maybe the faerie queen could snap her fingers and fix it. Who knew. He adjusted his glasses and inspected his .700 Nitro Express. Covered in blood too. Even a glance and he knew it wouldn't fire again.

A fantasy rifle. That's what he always considered it, but now it was the one thing mooring him to reality. When he woke up in that forest he'd been dazed. Unable to think coherently, logically, rationally. Sights and sounds and smells buffeted him, as did that constant loving embrace from the faerie queen who called herself, nonsensically, Flanz-le-Flore. Flore: Flora, flower. But what was Flanz? Linguistics was not Wendell's area of expertise. Simple nonsense? Why was the second half real if the first was fiction?

Wendell didn't remember exactly when he realized his situation. But it did happen. At first he felt it would be prudent to continue to act as though dazed. He did not know this Flanz-le-Flore and decided it would be unwise to change his behavior and perhaps prompt her to change hers in turn. Carefully, in the back of his mind, he observed his surroundings, plotted escape.

He had to return home, after all. He needed to be back in time for Thanksgiving dinner. Darae would chew him to pieces otherwise. A hunting trip was merely an excursion. A foray into the wilderness, an escape from civilization, but it lasted only so long. That was the way fantasy must be: Something glimpsed, something touched upon when the true world had depleted you to your limit, a moment to refill yourself with what it promised. Simple energy: Give and take, addition and subtraction. One couldn't live in fantasy.

Or so he thought.

Because when the last traces of his stupor wore off he realized how long exactly he'd been there already. Then his thought became: Did he actually want to return?

It wasn't as though this world was especially exciting in its current state. Sitting in Flanz-le-Flore's court had been boring, even, and he wasn't especially thrilled by shooting tons of generic NPC-style elves. This crazy Elf-Queen was more interesting, but she still looked too—human. He didn't like shooting humans. That was war, not a hunt. War was tragic. It was a fundamental representation of the failure of society to function as it should: Logically, orderly, by the numbers. Humans were rational beings and war, irrational, showed them only the worst image of themselves reflected in the mirror of their enemy. (He remembered Dalt talking about shooting "orcs." Where was Dalt now?)

Meanwhile, a hunt. Man versus beast, in it there was order. The order of the world as God created it. Animals were subservient to man and had been ever since the days of Eden, and even from an atheistic perspective (Wendell preferred to be aware of other perspectives) it was the greatest testament to the human mind that it might prove superior to brute dumb beasts who otherwise outmatched man in every regard.

Though these elves might bore or even somewhat disconcert him, the memory remained of that moment on the cliff against the dragon. His battle with it was cut short by interference and that lack of conclusion remained a restless animation deep in his chest. How could he go back when he still had that moment unresolved? Even if it *was* resolved, would going back ever satisfy? Could he look at his guns, look at his taxidermied buck's head, and find contentment ever again? As a kid Wendell once played a JRPG on his brother's PlayStation and for a few days became a boy possessed, spending hours upon hours playing with no interest in anything else, even eating. His mother kicked his ass and confiscated the PlayStation (to his brother's dismay), but for a few days afterward a tingling dissatisfaction with the real world remained. Wendell felt the same feeling now. Except there was no mother here to pull him back into reality.

He knew he had to return. He knew he couldn't remain here. He'd even told Flanz-le-Flore he needed to return. He shouldn't be here. He should be at work, helping Da-rae with the baby, anything, anything *real*. None of this was real.

The .700 Nitro Express was real. Though the circumstances of its creation were absurd, they were truthful in the absurdity. This machine had parts and components and they slid together and now that they were drenched in blood they could no longer slide. Like any machine under similar circumstances it ceased to function.

"Make me another gun," Wendell told Flanz-le-Flore. "One that fires fast. One that can blast everything in front of it to pieces."

The cord tying him to reality snapped and the snap was the sound of Flanz-le-Flore's fingers. He dropped the useless .700 Nitro Express and at the same time a new weapon manifested in its place, a weapon that never existed before, a weapon that could not exist in the real world.

It was a "relic."

When those nuns asked Flanz-le-Flore to transform all the relics, she played a little trick on them—as fae are wont to do in this world. Nothing spectacular. Sleight of hand. She gave the nuns twenty-four mustard seeds like they asked, but only twenty-three of them were "the Mustard Seed." The twenty-fourth was an ordinary mustard seed she surreptitiously created from rudimentary materials she kept on her person (those old brown boots she wore were full of seeds, leaves, and similar objects). The nuns, in a hurry, had not been fastidious enough to do the first thing every accountant knows: double-check your work. They didn't notice the decoy, so Flanz-le-Flore kept one Mustard Seed for herself.

She hadn't wanted to use it right away, not before they knew what the Elf-Queen had prepared for them. Now it was clear, and Wendell and Flanz-le-Flore both knew what he needed.

It was a kind of gun, at least as far as Flanz-le-Flore comprehended a gun to be, but instead of intricate machinery, tiny little pieces that slotted together perfectly to perform a singular function with expert efficiency, this gun ran on magic. It lacked a sleek military look, instead opting for one far more whimsical. The barrel funneled outward like a blunderbuss, while intricate arabesque designs (not dissimilar to those tattooed on Flanz-le-Flore's body) decorated the outrageously broad sides of its wooden stock. The parts that weren't wooden

were green even though they shined like metal, and the whole thing felt spongy in his hands. He might be able to squeeze it and cause sap to spill out, but he resisted the urge to try. More than anything, though, the gun was gigantic. It put the .700 Nitro Express to shame for its size, even though it weighed less than some handguns Wendell owned. No worldly explanation existed for any of it—at least not in the world Wendell knew. It didn't matter. Wendell Noh initiated the process.

- He cranked the handlebar on the side in a rapid counterclockwise motion.
- He flipped all the flaps to their proper position.
- He activated the whistler. (It began to whistle.)
- He dispensed a large number of seeds into the chamber.
- He disengaged the safety.

"Deal with the bubbles, will you, my hero?" Flanz-le-Flore said. "I'll handle the elves."

That suited Wendell just fine. He aimed the Gun of Wendell into the air and fired.

From the funneled barrel of the weapon erupted an exorbitant number of bullets that were less bullets and more whipping, curving shafts of light. Each shaft twisted and turned as though it had a mind of its own to thread through as many bubbles as possible, impaling tens if not hundreds if not thousands with a single squiggly zip. For several seconds all the arena was light, all was blinding and brilliant, and the bullets were less weapons of war than instruments of a wondrous art, the art of someone's soul—if not Wendell's then perhaps Flanz-le-Flore, as all the curlicues of her body were written now in holy luminescence. A light powerful enough to shatter the boundary between man and God, between real and unreal. Wendell's eyes burned behind his glasses staring up at the sky of the vault where the bubbles exploded in firework arrays, as out of the congested pullulation emerged a vivid and lovely emptiness filled solely by the beautiful.

What was he thinking about before?

Arcs, angles, numbers, addition, subtraction, death. Oh God. Oh God.

NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO. NO, NO. This could not be happening. What was that new relic? How did it exist? The Effervescent Elf-Queen gripped her head in her palms even as her tears flowed out in an endless spray to form more bubbles. How did that bitch, that whore transmogrify something that never existed before, how did she learn to do that? This other hero she somehow stumbled about? Did he teach her? Flanz-le-Flore knew too many new tricks, even four hundred years of preparation were crumbling apart in a matter of moments without a thing to show for it. In a single attack the unknown relic eliminated almost all of her unborn. Meanwhile, Flanz-le-Flore herself focused her efforts on snapping the living children into harmless plants and small animals, meaning that even the offspring that reflected damage weren't useful—they weren't being damaged, merely transmogrified. The Elf-Queen hadn't prepared for anything like this—nothing like it had a right to exist in this world at all.

Oh, and so many of her children dead. So, so many. Their unborn bodies evaporated in the light of the relic. Not even corpses remaining, not even blood...! The brutes. They'd pay. They'd pay.

Her fingers clenched. The long nails pried between her sealed shut eyelids, slicing the flesh that had remained together so long that a thin membrane had formed between it. Blood streamed from the unseaming, and for the first time in almost four hundred years light struck her true eyes, a harsh hateful light that caused her to rear back her head and shriek wildly in full feral hurt and horror. These were the eyes that once looked upon John Coke, her one and only beloved, these were the eyes she closed forever so that she might not ever see another thing that wasn't him after he left her, not another thing so that the poignant lack of him did not rend her heart to pieces. That unbidden uncontrollable perpetually longing love rushed full force onto her now within the space of this vault he once inhabited, which contained the trophies to his eternal glory. For the first time in four hundred years she saw the world, not simply a telling of it informed to her innately and instinctually by her children, and in that sight her gaze settled deep and blood-red upon Flanz-le-Flore and her new hero, her not-John Coke who in pathetic inferiority she cobbled together so that she might replace him, as though he could ever be replaced. The mere thought he might be replaced was pride, arrogance, simpering moral cowardice. And within this seething wretched hate the Elf-Queen sobbed, the blood poured down her face and chest in torrents, for the hate was so painful and the light was so painful that she wanted it solely to STOP, for it all to STOP, for them to STOP, for everything to STOP save her and her children forevermore.

Flanz-le-Flore tugged the sleeve of her hero, pulling him back toward the somnolent uncaring horse from which they had fallen previously. Seeing now the true world the Effervescent Elf-Queen realized at once how the two of them had survived the barrage of her magic bolts. That horse was different, it was no ordinary horse, it was an affront. It must die first.

The blood streaming from her eyes whipped out at once in a spray of small, bloody bubbles. They fired down at frightening velocity, at speeds faster even than the projectiles launched from the hero's nonexistent weapon, and at such a speed the concentrated blood hit harder than the strongest minerals buried beneath the earth. Flanz-le-Flore attempted to snap but these bubbles were not her children—who she could create through the influence of John Coke—but her true animus, her animus as a fae queen, and like the Effervescent Elf-Queen herself Flanz-le-Flore knew not the slightest thing of it and thus could not transform it no matter how hard or fast she snapped.

The horse stared glumly at the bubbles, quietly, as though accepting its fate. And at once the horse was pulverized into brutal, bloody nothingness, a horrid eruption of gore that did not the slightest to sate the seething bloodlust in the Elf-Queen's heart. Flanz-le-Flore turned a disgusted face to her and screamed: "My poor horse, my poor poor horse!" But now there was no further possibility of miraculous survival and the Elf-Queen turned her spray of bubbles toward them. Flanz-le-Flore gripped her hero's back and snapped and her hero lifted his novel relic but the bubbles sliced straight through the boulder that transformed out of the rubble and then straight through the middle of them. The force launched them back across the now nearly-empty vault, they struck the ground, they rolled and bounced and flew apart and the relic which had the power of a relic and thus could not be easily destroyed hurtled away spinning. Unfortunately the boulder and that relic had blocked the brunt of the impact and her most hateful enemies were not yet in pieces, not yet eviscerated for her delight, but perhaps that was for the best, they deserved to suffer. The horse, innocent, received a quick death, but they would not be so lucky. She would first erase their limbs one after another, make them scream, make them beg for mercy, and only then eliminate them from her despicable sight...!

A ray of light whipped up from below and behind and the Elf-Queen turned to obviate it from existence before it could reach her. That damned Tivania. There she was, a beaten and bloodied thing, heaving with great exhalations of her chest as she stared up at the Elf-Queen vengeful in the eyes, the left half of her face ripped open as though by hooks to expose her clenched teeth all the way back to her molars. In one hand she held John Coke's sword and in the other the decapitated head of one of her children, the neck streaming uneven strands as though ripped off by strength alone rather than cut. Her children had been slowing Tivania down, wearing her to a nub, but despite everything she remained standing and that stance was indignant in its stark and bitter refusal to die. But she would die. She would die as all the rest.

The bubbles streamed out and Tivania's spawn sprinted aside to avoid them—slowed, sluggish, her torn and battered body unable to operate at full capacity even with the aid of John Coke's armor. And she was trapped, the ray of the Elf-Queen's sight swept quickly with but a glance of the eyeballs and the loathsome human queen was pinned into the corner between the vault wall and the pink wall her children erected.

Elsewhere, the trumpet blew. Let it! What wall could that heroine create that could withstand the power of a fae queen's true animus? No wall of steel or diamond no matter how thick would stop it. Yet no wall emerged out of the ground.

Instead, the wall of the vault fell straight down.

And after a single, groaning moment, so did the vault's ceiling.

Ancient stone cracked and crumbled and dropped in chunks. Dust rained in fountains and a quaking shook the vast enormity of the entire chamber. Fissures formed in the walls that remained before they split and toppled inward, reducing further the stability of the whole. The falling rocks cleaved through the few remaining pink bubbles and as a twirling stone fell past her arm splitting it open the Effervescent Elf-Queen thought: Good. This is good too. We shall all be buried together in a most fitting tomb. That heroine has sealed their fates as well as I might have.

Then she saw the second wall manifesting, low to the ground and horizontal and broad enough to cover the entire area of the vault, the exact same type of wall she summoned when she and Tivania ran across the roof to jump down from above. So that was the game, was it? But no wall would hold her, she just said. Didn't you hear her say that?

The wall, comprised of the strongest, thickest, reinforced steel Shannon could imagine (she wished she had more expertise in construction so that she might have a better idea of what would bear the most load, but there was a reason this was her last resort strategy), finished building itself and sealed off the bottom part of the vault from the top, defending the people on the ground from the collapsing ceiling while leaving the Elf-Queen above.

Falling rubble pounded the wall, shuddering everything underneath with tremendous clangs and bangs that caused Shannon to flinch each time. God, would the wall hold? How much of what was above would collapse? Would it be the entire castle? The Elf-Queen's absurd eye beam bubble thing had blasted Wendell and was about to blast Mallory, though. Shannon felt like she had no other option.

The floor of the vault, which would have been entirely dark if not for the luminescence of Mallory's armor and Wendell's Flanz-le-Flore woman, was covered in all sorts of what Shannon could only describe as junk. Not even rubble or body parts anymore. They had somehow all changed into other things, although for what purpose she could not begin to fathom. These were thoughts designed simply to tide her over. Finally the rumbling above stopped. Everything went quiet. The wall held, and hopefully the entire castle had not collapsed entirely. She had been certain to remove only the part of the wall that extended past the pink barrier. If the other half of the vault remained intact they might still be able to walk out when everything was said and done.

She hurried over to Mallory, who sagged panting and covered in blood. Her face was— Shannon decided not to look at it as she attempted to help Mallory up.

"Wendell," she called out, trudging toward him with Mallory under one arm. "Wendell, is that you?"

His glasses gleamed in the light of Flanz-le-Flore. "That is my name, correct." He spoke with a groan. Flanz-le-Flore sat down and cradled her bleeding head in her hands.

"How did you two get in here," Shannon asked. "Is there a way out?"

His finger silently pointed and she looked. In the ground, hidden among some of the transformed junk, was a hole from which dim light filtered. When she inspected it more closely, it looked like the hole led to an identical version of the vault, or at least before it collapsed. She stared at the hole for several strange seconds, uncomprehending, before Flanz-le-Flore looked up and said: "A portal. It leads to the vault's other side."

Which meant the other side hadn't collapsed. Good. Great. The damage hadn't been as extensive as she thought. But then—

Two things happened at once. The first was that her ruler relic started to amend its count again, muttering something in her mind using its strange Biblical verbiage. She hardly had a chance to hear it, though, because a bright light began to glow from above. She, Mallory, Wendell, and Flanz-le-Flore looked up. A circle was forming on the wall Shannon had made, pulsing with red hot heat. Growing. Growing. Melting through.

"It's her," Wendell said.

"Good," said Mallory, the word a half-formed rasp whistling through the gaping hole in her cheek.

"Quickly, here are more seeds." Flanz-le-Flore reached out to Wendell. "You must reload your relic. It'll be dangerous to fire it in such a confined space, but we must try. There's no other chance."

Wendell glanced around. "I dropped it when she hit us."

Part of the ceiling above dipped inward. Melting. Dripping bits of molten metal. The rapid repetitive sound of a million ping pong balls bouncing against it reverberated. Her bubbles

were breaking through.

The ruler kept speaking to Shannon. It was describing several new people, each from a different "tribe," repeating the same language to introduce them to her one after another, but she could hardly pay attention, her hands trembling, wondering what else they had to defend themselves, Mallory clearly at her limit, Wendell searching sluggishly for his gun, Flanz-le-Flore wincing and gripping her head. All of them wounded, all of them battered. It'd be up to Shannon. Maybe if she kept walling it off she could gain time, but making a new wall would cause the current to disappear and all the accumulated rubble atop it to slam down on them. There had to be a way, though. The portal. They should just exit through the portal. Could they close it afterward? Otherwise the Elf-Queen would only crawl through after them and they would be exposed in that large empty chamber with nothing to defend them, no options whatsoever—

Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of California, were one.

California. California? Why California. Who did Shannon know from California. Wait, there was another California, wasn't there. One in this world. Who was from it? Didn't she know somebody from it?

The red circle above split open. No more time. Shannon tried to pull Mallory toward the portal and Mallory resisted. "Lhhhet herhhh come," her ripped-open mouth hissed. "One shot. One shot is allhhh I needhhh!"

The ping-pong sound stopped. Through the hole, climbing upside-down like an insect, emerged the Effervescent Elf-Queen and her horrible glowing red eyes.

Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Cleveland, were three.

Mallory whipped her sword lazily and a small, dim arc of light shot out. One spray of red bubbles disintegrated it before it even got close and all Mallory accomplished was immediately riveting the Elf-Queen's gaze straight on them. For an instant that was all Shannon saw, that face that looked like suffocation had caused every vessel in the eyeballs to burst, and then a ray of bubbles shot at them and that was all, like a bullet piercing the head.

Except it wasn't all.

The third numbered of them, even of the tribe of Cleveland, raised the Shield of Faith and the bubbles burst uselessly against it. In his other hand he brandished his metal bat as howling the Elf-Queen dropped into the darkened space atop the pile of molten rubble and screamed something feral to shake them.

A voice from behind said, "Divide."

It was the princess from California. Devolved wretch, most corrupted of John Coke's tripartite lineage, despicable for the besmirchment she cast upon him in her family's strangled attempt to maintain the purity of his blood. The Effervescent Elf-Queen gazed hatefully upon her, but the wrenching explosive force emitting from her eyes was pulled to the Shield, the final part of John Coke's personal armaments and the one he had wielded to tame her when

he first came upon her in that enchanted wood all those centuries ago, back when she was something wild and feral just as now, a beast prowling on four thin and twisted limbs. In such a state he conquered her and changed her irrevocably, for he loved most that which he conquered, loved most that which he could mold to his will. This world Whitecrosse was an expression of the hero's will set against an original world that rejected it. That will was vested in her now. That will would not be overcome by these deprecated irrelevancies.

Her body started to split apart but she refused to die, not before she saw them all dead before her, and what better chance now that the Californian princess was here, now she might snuff them all in a single moment. From the palms of her hands, which had gone dry in her fury, new tears flowed, and a bevy of pink bubbles pressed around her even as terrific pain shot sharply from her groin to the crown of her head. Her final children, even unborn, pressed and pressed and pressed until they burst and their fluid washed over her, hardening as it grew exposed to an air made arid by her all-devouring screams. She would not die to a mere relic. Her children were stronger than it, she was stronger than it. The halves of her refused to part, sealed so fast, and the girl might say her "Divide" again and again and it would make no difference. None at all. Her insides were already split and the blood spurting within her but the husk of herself maintained its form and as a high fae queen she would not die so easily, not so easily at all...!

A soft dust fell upon her. All her pain vanished in an instant.

For a moment her thrashing went still. What was this? Had some of her children that possessed of the animus of healing survived? Her tired eyes, from which throbbed a strain that ate like maggots into her undividing brain, roved until they saw it: a tiny faerie. Its silvery filaments and beady eyes like those of a rodent or insect marking it as from the court of Pandelirium.

"Olliebollen Pandelirium," it said, its voice grinningly eager, its words sharpening on a whetstone of desire, "Faerie of Rejuvenation. That's my name."

But why heal her? The Elf-Queen destroyed the court of Pandelirium, she had her children feast upon its corpses. Was this one of those kept sedate with a pin in their neck for later consumption, its stasis somehow dislodged in the fight? But why heal her? Why did this soothing, placating calm wash over her, sealing her brain back together, her innards, her lungs, her heart, erasing all this pain and anguish. Why?

The bits of rubble beneath her, some melted from the wall and some collapsed from the ceiling above, onto which also the Faerie of Rejuvenation's dust settled, began to rise.

Rose straight through her.

The shards, the masses, they lifted directly through her twisted limbs, through her torso and her waist, through her thighs and throat. They did not move quickly. They floated with a gentle, graceful lift. Yet they did not stop no matter what stood between them and their original state. The Effervescent Elf-Queen quivered, attempted to twist herself away from the slowly rising onslaught. But she could not move. She stared down at the arms being eaten away by a million tiny pieces and saw extending from them thin, silvery lines. From her

shoulders, from her back and hips. Lines that ran into the shadows, to a scuttling thing hardly glimpsed before it vanished into greater darkness.

"This is what you deserve," the Faerie of Rejuvenation said. "This is what you have always deserved! Now die. Now die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, DIE—"

And the Effervescent Elf-Queen heard no more. Oh John. Oh John, she squandered it all. Oh John. Their love was a splatter of pink on the ground now. Goodbye.

Jay Waringcrane lowered his shield and bat and turned away from the unrecognizable corpse diced to nothing under the faint light pouring down from the hole above that was slowly sealing back up. He stared at the people in the space with him, who stared back in solemn, weary silence—all save Olliebollen, who was still screaming DIE again and again though the thing was beyond dead, who screamed it at the void of nothing that existed where it once was. Shannon stared at him like she might say something, but instead only her shoulders shimmied in a release of something pent up deep inside and she leaned against the bloodied, semi-conscious queen. Wendell Noh picked up a strange-looking gun and dusted it off while Flanz-le-Flore, who had every reason to hate Jay, did not even glance at him. Vivienne shot him a strange smile and Lalum had disappeared from view.

Whatever it was, it was over now, he thought.

Elsewhere, it was not.

Mayfair

The church was called Believe. Or rather it was called Believe., with the period included. That combination of word and grammatical mark, scrawled in seemingly careless, albeit legible, cursive upon the façade of the momentous structure, seemed with its pure white glow to breach the black cloak of night for any approaching from the parking lot, which was large enough that the entirety of Whitecrosse Castle might be placed within its boundaries.

"Why is the period included in the church's name?" Mayfair asked the senior pastor, Justin "Just" Vance, when Styles introduced them.

"Because," said Just Vance, a startlingly young man or at least a man who looked startlingly young, with every element of him sleek and clean and confident, his hair and eyes shiny black, "that's the end of it, isn't it? Belief. Without it, you've got nothing, huh?"

"Belief is what it's all about tonight, that is most definite." Styles smiled and smiled and shook Just Vance's hand emphatically as though they were old friends finally reunited, but Mayfair detected something cringingly subservient in his demeanor—she had an eye for such things, given the officials at court—and suspected Just Vance stood an echelon elevated. Even when he smiled at Mayfair and gave her his explanation for the name he stood aloof. Not a cold aloofness. It was as though he already had one foot in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And why not? Compared to Styles' church, this "Believe." church served a true testament to God's glory. Styles described it as a "megachurch," and no neologism might have fit better the sprawling expanse of pure edifice that rose out of the flat terrain of the parking lot and the moonlit lake behind it. They were in a suburb of Cleveland called Lakewood—"a smidge more upscale," in Styles' words—and instead of the rusted profusion of twisted and incomprehensible metal that swarmed the lakefront in the city proper here all was pristine and beautiful. In the past two weeks Mayfair had come here time and again for rehearsals and practice. She knew her speech by heart, as well as when to begin speaking and when to end. *A trained dog* someone kept whispering in the back of her mind and could not shake the sensation. Yet doggedly she continued onward.

Tonight was the night. Not solely for her speech to the people of Earth. In Whitecrosse great happenings occurred. She might have timed everything differently but the frank explanation was that she procrastinated. Not out of sloth but uncertainty, a constant oscillation on the question: Did she want to bother with Whitecrosse anyway? Yes, no, maybe, back and forth she caromed all while the deadline for her performance inched closer on the calendar until its inevitable encroachment made her say to herself: It's now or never! That sense of finality spurred her into action and she set everything moving. It wouldn't hurt to try, she told herself. If it all goes wrong—and let's be honest with ourselves, given your stellar ability to convince people to do anything, it will—you'll at least have put in an effort to save them.

Except it didn't go wrong. In her pocket she kept folded the relevant papers so she might assess the situation even as she prepared for her performance (and what preparations! The powders and glosses they applied to her face, pbbbt!), and all went somehow exactly as

anticipated. Temporary reached Whitecrosse and created the portal for the Elf-Queen. Mayfair's mother went down to the vault to arm herself. Flanz-le-Flore, spurred by jealous ire, joined the combat. A few slight interventions here and there, no more than a couple strokes of the pen, were enough to keep the situation from spiraling awry, and during the more banal moments of empty waiting when Mayfair was not needed for makeup or anything else she could even intervene to keep deaths to a minimum. (Of course some still died. It was impossible to prevent all death. But Mayfair acted without malice, with only thoughts of hope and mercy. Even those she hated she endeavored to save.)

Now an anxiety gripped her: What if things went *right*? What if Mademerry delivered to her the Mustard Seeds, and used her specially-chosen animus on them, and no unexpected hidden rule made it impossible? How far was Mayfair truly willing to go? What if everything here at the megachurch went well too, and the people adored her, and then she immediately stomped that goodwill by warping their world entirely? She realized she had allowed things to progress to this state due to ambivalence, a sort of hedging of her bets, a way to strike against fear of failure by presenting herself with contingencies. Could all her contingencies exist simultaneously, though?

If she got them to love her then they would accept Whitecrosse. It had to be so. If she made them accept her then that too must be part of the acceptance.

(Besides. Which is more important: That they love you or that you save an entire world from perdition? It rent her to pieces that instinctually she wanted to say the answer she knew to be wrong.)

She went to the toilet and vomited. Afterward her stomach settled and jumpy animation left her: Mere nerves.

The relief she felt immediately dissolved when Dalton came to her and communicated in his voiceless way: *The elf is here.*

The elf. With her head so set on her schemes Mayfair at first thought he meant Temporary. Then she remembered: that damnable Sansaime. Some part of her suspected something like this might happen, but now...

Now what? Sansaime knew no tact or manners. If she snuck into the church (and it was so large and had so many entrances she assuredly would), it would be trivial for her to cause a scene and ruin everything. Even attempting to apprehend her could cause a scene. Besides, if Mayfair sent Dalton after Sansaime, and Sansaime slipped past him in the massive crowd—again a trivial feat—then Mayfair herself would be undefended.

Her stomach churned again but she tamped it down. Agitation never led to intelligent action. She took a deep breath and slowed the racing of her heart and realized a simple solution. Retrieving a paper from her pocket she scribbled: *The corpse of Charisma shall return through the Door.* That would give her additional protection. She could have Charisma hide in the rafters of the gigantic church, where nobody could see her, to scan the entire area. She'd spot Sansaime well in advance and coordinate with Dalton to prevent mischief.

The Door was key to her current plan and so she had instructed Styles to move it from his residence to the megachurch. However, Styles' relationship with Just Vance was not ironclad enough to explain to him what the Door was or its purpose, so instead he rented a trailer in which he placed the Door. The trailer was parked in the smaller lot behind the church, where there were spaces for employees. The other corpse under her command, the old man she revived on Thanksgiving, could open the Door to let Charisma through. (The old man was otherwise worthless, with brittle bones, sluggish movements, and poor eyesight.)

She calmed. After such a repeated string of failures her plan in Whitecrosse was working, so why wouldn't this plan too? Really she kicked herself for not expecting Sansaime sooner. Those advertisements Styles made broadcasted Mayfair's position on every television in the city, so of course Sansaime would figure it out. There were so many things to track it wore her thin... Anyway, Sansaime ought to have realized she was pregnant by now. Wouldn't that stop her from attempting anything reckless?

"Ah. Mayfair."

She turned. She'd been walking down one of the passageways behind the megachurch's main stage, filtering from her mind the stagehands and production staff who passed her one way or another. Dwight J. Styles approached, done up as meticulously as Mayfair, although he wore a smart suit that slimmed his waist and a soft, salmon-pink tie that reduced his overall edge. He smiled—he'd been practicing his smile all week.

"Hello, Pastor Styles."

"I heard from the makeup crew you ran off to the bathroom."

"Oh, I, um, it was simply..."

His hand fell on her shoulder. He looked down at her warmly. "Are you nervous? It's okay to say yes. I'm nervous too. I've been preaching a long time, but never to a crowd this big. It's natural to be nervous."

Her first instinct was to lie, but what would be the point? "Yes. I'm quite anxious." Though she couldn't divulge the full reason why. Styles knew about Sansaime already. If he became aware she was in the area, he would cancel the event, wouldn't he? Of course. He was a kind man, and although he held a certain degree of ambition, he would not risk her life. Or, from a more rational perspective, if she died, his ambition would be thwarted. Nonetheless she knew, although he hadn't told her, that he had staked his reputation and perhaps his entire career on this event.

Just Vance possessed power, gauged from certain metrics, that exceeded that held by any person in Whitecrosse, even Mayfair's mother. Though he seemed fair with that power, he doubtless did not grant any random person use of his megachurch's stage, nor even an old acquaintance. Styles had needed to do much to convince him. Part of that involved the sermons Mayfair gave at Styles' church, which had been watched by Vance's associates. (Not Vance himself. Never himself.) After she passed this oratory "test," she was brought to a cold, clean, gray building with several cameras and instructed to revive another dead old man

similar to the first. With the Staff of Lazarus, she did so, and then Vance's associates took the reanimated old man away for "questioning."

Though Mayfair was not present for this questioning, she was able to discern via her control over the man what they asked and puppeteer him to give answers. General questions, such as the day of the week, the year, and so forth, she could answer accurately. Then they asked personal questions regarding the man's original identity; that she could not answer. They also took samples of his blood and tissue. Mayfair thought she must have "failed." They would certainly know the truth: the man remained dead. Nonetheless, the next day, Styles and Mayfair were officially invited to give a sermon at Believe.

But Vance would not be presenting them personally. He would not appear on stage at all, though he was present behind the scenes. Why? Mayfair suspected: He, like her, was hedging his bets. If everything went well, he could claim credit for giving them a platform. If things went poorly, he could distance himself personally, perhaps using his associates as scapegoats. For Styles, then, everything hinged on tonight. A sudden cancellation would ruin him.

Sansaime attacking, even in the middle of the sermon, would not. No. Just the opposite. When the police apprehended and unmasked her as a hideously disfigured creature with long pointed ears, would it not appear as though a devil from Hell was the culprit? It would lend credence to Mayfair's claims as a prophetess. For many, it would cement belief even more. As long as Sansaime didn't kill Mayfair—and with Charisma and Dalton she shouldn't be able to—Sansaime's intervention was a good thing. Yes. A good thing, not a bad one.

Sensing that Mayfair was still not fully calm, Styles softened his stiff smile into a lesser but more real one. "If you don't want to do this, it's fine. I know I've pushed you. But you can walk away. I'll give a sermon on Lazarus and look foolish—that's fine. I don't mind. I've looked the fool before. Vance will hate me, but what can he do? He can't take away my humble little church. He wouldn't even want to, he's not spiteful for everything else about him. No, don't feel compelled—"

"I want to feel compelled," Mayfair said.

"What's that?"

"Compel me. Push me. Tell me it's important," she said. "Say you rely on me. Say you need me. That's what I want."

Styles chuckled. His smile broadened. "Well now. Alright. I need you, Mayfair. I need you more than you know. And I think, more than what I need—this *world* needs you. What you're gonna show them tonight. This is a hurt world, Mayfair. A hurt country. Deeply hurt, deeply fractured. We can—we can give them something to unite them. To make them feel whole again. To make them smile again. And most of all, to make them believe in God again. You think you can do that?"

Her nod accompanied a slowing of her heart's pulse; she too smiled. A man in a headset leaned near the end of the passage and said: "On in ten!"

Styles shot the man a thumbs up. "Come on Mayfair, let's get where they need us to be."

Mayfair hurried to keep up with his brisk trot. Heal this world—yes. That was it. This world and hers too. Two worlds in one night. She did it all for everyone. And she was calm.

The stage was set. A small, semicircular stage, lit from below by a line of shining squares, adorned with only a simple pulpit more like a podium on which a few blank sheets of paper sat. The stage was meant mainly for a single speaker, and the shape of everything around it funneled toward it, drawing the eyes of all within the vast expanse of seats inexorably onto that speaker, though he or she may appear quite small for those far in the dark and cavernous back. For those who could not see, gigantic television screens hung from the ceiling, showing the speaker in multiplicative magnification. His or her voice was broadcasted out an audio system that traveled through the stadium like a series of veins, and metal scaffolding shone brilliant floodlights to bathe everything important in glorious illumination.

The church had a maximum capacity of 10,000 worshippers. Tonight, every single seat was filled.

As Dwight Jeremiah Styles stepped onto the stage, raising a hand high in a friendly wave, the rows upon rows fanning before him into black oblivion erupted in applause.

"God bless you," he said. "God bless you all." The applause quieted.

"Now I know many of you have come to see something special tonight. And you'll see it, that's for sure. Consider my speaking here just a way of introduction, and I promise I won't take long. I just want to talk to you fine folks today a little bit about—Belief. Ain't that the long and short of it, folks? Believing in the Lo-o-rd Jesus Christ." He shook his head as he accentuated the "Lord," drawing it out, and receiving in response scattered amens from the crowd. Mayfair, backstage, instantly noticed that Styles did not speak how he normally did. The usual erudite precision gave way to a more rustic enunciation. But in that single word, that "Lord," she heard him exude an animation and passion she had never heard in his previous sermons.

"And that's why you're all here, huh? Because you believe. It's the name of the church after all, this fine church where my good friend Pastor Vance—who many of you know—has let me speak for a turn."

He paced the stage rapidly, his hands gesturing at proper intervals, his face always changing. Now it went somber, tilting downward, and he kicked his feet shyly.

"But I must be honest with you folks," he said. "Sometimes in this world, it can be hard to believe. It can. I'll admit. Even me, a man of the cloth so to speak, can feel this—this *doubt*, creeping, crawling. Have you ever felt this doubt yourself? And I don't mean open rejection here folks. Nonono. Nothing like that. Just a question there, in the back your mind sometimes. Sometimes you'll be watching the news and think: How can God let this happen?"

Or sometimes you'll feel angry, or sad, because the world has dealt you some injustice, and you wonder why God saw fit to inflict this injustice upon you. Of course those types of things are all common topics for a sermon, and I'm sure you fine folks have heard them before, by better speakers than me to boot. Seeing this is a special occasion, however, and how we have something particularly special planned after I hurry up and speak my peace, I thought I might try you with a little doubting question of my own I've had from time to time in the past. Maybe I'm alone in thinking this way, just an old man who gets too bent into pretzels mulling things over, but in case any of you fine folks have thought it too, I figured I'd go ahead and say it:

"Where are the miracles?"

"Does anyone ever ask themselves that?" A few polite murmurs. "Now I admit, it's a bit of an unfair thing to ask. Isn't this world just full of miracles? Look around you. Look at this. There are 10,000 people in this room worshipping God, and they're joined by hundreds of thousands more watching in their homes across the United States and even beyond. Isn't that a miracle, folks, so many people united in their love of God and Jesus Christ?" Some amens. "But that's not what a miracle means, is it? After all, we can *explain* television. We know exactly how it works. We can explain modern medicine, we can explain the airplanes up in the sky, we can explain skyscrapers and the internet and your smartphone. But if you went back in time and showed a man in Israel any one of those things, he'd sure think it was miracle. And if this were one of those misled Israelites who came to worship the golden calf, he might even bow down and start praising your smartphone like it was an idol. After all, what can a true prophet of the Lord do that your smartphone can't, huh?"

Styles laughed, showing this question was in friendly jest, and the crowd chuckled politely alongside him.

"And that's where my little doubting question creeps in. In this world where every miracle can be explained by some scientist, some textbook, some Wikipedia article, where are the true miracles? The things that science can't explain. The things that *prove* God is alive and well in this world and continuing to watch over us his children as he watched over the Israelites marching out of Egypt. But no, we can't have those kinds of miracles nowadays, can we? And those sneering nonbelievers out there say: Look! If your God is so real, then where are the miracles? Or—even worse—if your God is real, what can he do that humans haven't figured out to do themselves?"

"Now you may not believe it, but these sneerers have been around since the beginning of time. They were around even when Jesus Christ walked the Earth. Some of these fools are so blind that even if they saw it—a miracle I mean, a true miracle—even if they saw it with their own two eyes they wouldn't believe it. None of you are sneerers. I know that. Else I'd have been sneered off the stage already for talking so much." A louder, more genuine laughter from the crowd. "But doesn't the question sometimes sneak up on you? That question, that needling little question: Oh Lord, why don't you make your presence known in this world? Why don't you show us a miracle?"

"Now God, he has a plan. He doesn't just do things without thinking it over very carefully, and he's not here to show us parlor tricks just cuz we asked. But in the Bible, in times of great

strife, in times when the heart of the world is hard, God sometimes sends a sign. A sign to his true believers that he is here, and he will protect us. And perhaps no sign he ever sent was stronger than the one shown by his son Jesus Christ when he brought the dead back to life.

"It's a simple story. You may know it. A man named Lazarus, who was the brother of Mary and Martha and who was a friend of Jesus, fell ill while Jesus was away—and died. Mary and Martha, distraught with grief, said to Jesus when he came: 'O Lord, had you only been here, Lazarus would not have died.' They were believers, they knew Jesus to be the true son of God and they knew his power was absolute, just like you and me. But in that moment, in their grief, they doubted. 'If only you were here,' they said. Implying that he couldn't make things whole again now that he was here. They believed, yet they doubted.

"Jesus said to them, 'Your brother will live again!' Mary and Martha thought Jesus meant that Lazarus would be raised to life on Judgment Day. Jesus Christ himself told them—your brother will live again. And even *then* they doubted what he meant, they thought he was speaking metaphorically, or referring to something that would happen many, many centuries later. That's how easy it is even for a true believer to forget the power of miracles. And in that doubt, they grieved, when they ought to have rejoiced. You see, sometimes God tells us things in the plainest possible language, and we just don't get what he means!

"Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus. Martha said to him, 'Lord, Lazarus has been dead four days—there will be a terrible smell!' She *still* doubted what Jesus was about to do, when he was right there about to do it! Jesus said, 'Didn't I tell you that if you had faith, you would see the glory of God?' The tomb was opened, and Lazarus emerged—alive! It was a miracle! Yet it was *exactly* what Jesus said he would do.

"Today, fine folks in the audience, fine folks watching from home, you'll see a similar miracle to what Jesus Christ performed that day. God remains among us, even in this day and age, and when the faith wanes, he sends signs to his believers to prove to them his existence. Today this world, where everything seems to be explained, will see something even the smartest men and women would call fantasy. Make no mistake though, folks. What we will show you now is no fantasy. I've spoken enough. May I introduce to you a young woman possessed of true faith in God and Jesus Christ: Miss Mayfair R.L. Coke!"

Mayfair's cue. She stepped onto the stage, carrying with her only the Staff of Lazarus, and behind her several assistants pushed a closed casket. The casket contained a man who had tragically died some days prior of sudden disease. The show would go through the motions of proving his identity, proving the fact that he was dead, and so forth. Mayfair would speak a few words. Then she would bring the man back to life. Vance's people had briefed her on the man's identity ahead of time. She knew what answers to put in his mouth to the questions Styles and, later, the man's family would ask. All had been done with eager permission from the family, of course, and they would be part of the performance. Perfectly simple.

The people applauded for her, but they were kept behind shadow, even those in the front row whose faces she made out clearly. It was her mind that pressed the shadow upon them, as her head was deep within thoughts. During Styles' sermon, Mayfair managed to open the Door and let Charisma through. Then, she snuck Charisma inside and hid her in the dark apex of the ceiling, where no lights shone. All according to plan. Charisma had since scanned the

venue, and indeed she discovered Sansaime, seated near the back, seemingly placid. A woman sat beside Sansaime and continuously whispered frantic things to her, though Charisma could not hear what. Mayfair figured from the description the woman was Jay and Shannon Waringcrane's mother.

Their mother. In some ways, she weighed more heavily on Mayfair's mind than Sansaime. She shut out such thoughts, though. The mother was harmless—perhaps better than harmless. Sansaime was seated very far back in a very large arena. If she made any movements, they would be clear far in advance. So why choose that location? Did Sansaime intend to let Mayfair perform her miracle and stalk her afterward? Or was she divided on the question of whether to attack Mayfair at all? Could that woman be convincing her to stay her hand? Mayfair kept a few key sheets of the Whitecrosse papers, but due to poor preparation didn't bring Sansaime's page. She knew no specifics.

What she did know was that everything in Whitecrosse continued to run smoothly. Mademerry successfully negotiated with Flanz-le-Flore; the deal concluded. Flanz-le-Flore kept one of the Mustard Seeds for herself, but that was fine, since the nuns managed to procure more of them than Mayfair expected when she drew up the plan anyway. Meanwhile, Pythette had successfully driven Wendell's vehicle to the castle, so they would be able to reach the Door quickly. Even now they were en route. With so many scrutinizing eyes on her in these minutes before her big moment, Mayfair hadn't a chance to write anything to Mademerry, but it was fine if Mademerry interpreted that silence as danger and made Pythette drive faster. At the speeds a vehicle of Earth could reach, they might even arrive to reinforce her before Sansaime made her move. If she made it at all.

Essentially, everything was going perfectly. The few hiccups resolved themselves in quite simple fashion. As Mayfair walked onto the stage, as the lights flared and the faces of the people became clearer, brighter, as their warm smiles fell upon her, the tension vanished entirely. The stress, the anxiety. The words of her speech resounded clearly in her head, ready to be spoken with absolute eloquence. Savior of Whitecrosse, savior of Earth—all in one night.

That was when Charisma spotted the girl with the sniper rifle.

—

God let this be over fast. What a fucking dump, Earth. Filthy and unclean and not in the way of dirt. Kneeling here on this ledge high above the stadium, looking down at these humans in their holy house. Seething and teeming and god she felt so exposed in this place, like the air itself hated her, like it ate at her skin—the slowest-acting acid in existence. She constantly felt cold, insecure, like she was being watched, even though there were a few thousand eyes in this place and not a one was turned toward her. She knew who was watching—or who *could* be watching. The Eye of God was a Panopticon.

So using her powers was absolutely, one hundred percent out of the question, which was fine because to kill a single human she didn't need one ounce of ability. She raised the scope of the hot pink sniper rifle Master loaned her. Her target had finally stepped onto the stage after eons of the gasbag gassing. One shot and then Kedeshah could go home to get fucked by Fidi as Master watched, god now that was a thought. Since Master sent the other girls away to pay their quotas it'd been the world's most Lustless succubus den, Dog Bitch just wanted to rip everything to shreds and Master was—well, Master was Master. Fidi came back and Kedeshah thought for a second there'd be some fun but Fidi was changed now too. What the fuck. Was Kedeshah the only one actually *horny* anymore?

When Fidi got her end of the bargain Kedeshah would make her rape her whether she wanted to or not, and that thought sent a chill of excitement through her she forced herself to still. Into the headset that connected her to Master waiting safely outside, she said cheerily: "Target spotted! Taking the shot!"

"You got this, girl," Master's voice crackled back. And she did! She totally had it!

She quit pretending to breathe, something her hastily-made, first-time-worn human disguise forced her to pretend in the first place. The rifle went still in her hands. In this arena there was no wind, no obstruction. A clear and simple shot trained directly on the triangle of the target's chest. Normally Kedeshah would opt for the flair of a headshot. But the guaranteed hit was better now. Anything to ensure she escaped this accursed God-created shitrealm faster. (How the fuck did Fidi *stand* it up here? No wonder all her sex drive got leached out.)

Her finger tensed on the trigger.

A giant fucking BAT dropped out of fucking nowhere directly into her line of sight. She had zero time to process this intel because it was shooting straight at her and it wasn't a bat but a human woman with giant bat wings. Nobody said anything about this! She could blast it out of the sky but—no, no, that'd spook the target. Or maybe spooking her was good? It'd at least delay the event, and they'd get another crack at her later. Just a human, after all.

Nah. Kedeshah wanted this done NOW. Wanted off Earth NOW. Wanted Master and Fidi NOW NOW NOW. Let this shitlord bat crash into her. Even without her powers Kedeshah was as close to immortal as you could get. Its whole body would crumple just by slamming into her. Then she'd brush it off and take her shot—

The bat didn't slam into her. It wrapped its talons around her back—the shards of its claws shattered against her skin but it didn't even flinch—and lifted her up. Kedeshah was a first-generation offspring of one of the Seven Princes of Hell. Strength, power, agility, all of it existed within her body beyond what humankind could accomplish without the absolute height of their ceaseless machinery. But her body was also adorably petite and mind-numbingly alluring. She weighed less than ninety pounds. She was easily pulled into the air.

An instant later they smashed through a small window and shot into the open air of a night sky whose thick sheen of pollution and unseeable stars did little to assuage the agoraphobic terror that gripped her staring over the bat bitch's shoulder into the dominion beyond.

Oh god. Oh God. Don't see her. Don't see her—

The bat was flying at breakneck speed and carrying her up into the sky. It planned to carry her to God huh, that was its plan? It somehow knew what she was and wanted to bring her closer and closer to Him, did it now? In her ear her headset was fizzling, crackling: "What's going on? Kedeshah? Kedeshah!" That voice pulled her back.

Her arms and the sniper rifle were pinned to her body by the bat's embrace, but that was only because of her inaction. With the minutest possible movement, little more than a rippling of her svelte musculature, a tiny flex, she burst the bat's arms straight through the bone, splitting them apart completely and releasing herself from its grasp. In the brief moment when momentum continued to carry them the same direction, Kedeshah managed to note the bat gave no reaction whatsoever to the utter obliteration of its arms. Not even a grunt in pain. She realized the bat was not alive at all.

Reanimated corpse.

Gravity pulled her away. Shooting at a furious speed, unwilling to summon her wings to right or stop herself, she let herself be a body-shaped missile. She shut her eyes and braced for the impact she knew would not put a scratch on her, praying to herself: Please don't let Him see me. Please don't let Him see me.

Her body crashed through the window of a convenience store, destroyed four rows of shelves, obliterated another window, blasted into and out of a parked SUV, bounced against the pavement, and flattened the roof of a second car as it finally came to rest.

The empty black sky above watched.

—

"Kedeshah, Kedeshah girl, the fuck's going on?" Ubik shouted into his headset. Perfidia gripped her face in one hand and thought: Of course. Of course! The Dog Bitch whined and rolled on her back, held fast by her leash.

They were in the megachurch parking lot, hidden under a tree planted in a lonely island of green. The amplified sounds of the sermon within continued. Though they'd managed to briefly spot Kedeshah hurtling out a window, whatever happened hadn't caused enough of a disturbance to even slow things down inside.

"Kedeshah! Say something!"

The headset that looked way too military to match Ubik's huge fur coat crackled to life. "Oh, oh, oh, oh no!" It was a voice clearly distressed and yet even still it retained some shred of cute charm.

"Kedeshah, what just happened. Come on, talk to me."

"Nobody said anything about a bat woman. There was a bat woman, she lifted me up and now—Master I made a mess, if He sees me—"

"He's not gonna see you Kedeshah. Bat woman. What's this about a bat woman?"

Bat woman. With a sinking pit of feeling Perfidia pieced it together: Charisma. Mayfair must have brought over some of her friends from Whitecrosse to protect her.

"It shouldn't matter," Perfidia said, leaning toward the microphone although she addressed Ubik as much as Kedeshah. "Okay sure, we didn't know they were here, but there's nothing special about them, I designed them so a normal guy with a baseball bat could beat them—"

"Baseball bat? What are you *talking* about Fidi?" said the voice on the other end.

"It doesn't matter. Run back over here with your super speed or whatever."

"Are you *crazy*? I just plowed through a building and you want me to do even *more*? When He could be looking *right at me*?!"

Perfidia shot Ubik a look she hoped communicated "What the fuck." She'd lived on Earth four hundred years, it wasn't like God had lasers trained to detect all devil activity whatsoever. If Mayfair reviving a dead body hadn't set the big man off, moving fast for five seconds wouldn't either.

But Ubik's expression was annoyingly patient, almost Buddhist in its calm as he gave a devil-may-care shrug. "You gotta understand Fidi. Not much can hurt Kedeshah. She's not used to fear. She needs some time to process—"

"We don't have time!"

The same awful, exasperating, obnoxious shrug, this time with a douchey snaggletooth grin tossed into the mix as he pulled an enormous gold-plated pistol out of his coat. "Then Plan B. I do it myself."

That smug Greedy bastard, he fucking *liked* it this way. Before Perfidia could call him the first five insults that popped into mind he was sprinting out from cover and into the open ground of the parking lot toward the church, yanking once on Dog Bitch's collar before she snapped to attention and shot off even faster than him. Perfidia glanced left, right, hoping vainly she might see anything of use to bring with her, but there was nothing, and hissing under her breath she followed as fast as she could.

This was bad. Ubik, though apparently low on funds, possessed enough Humanity to do whatever they might need in a pinch. He'd even lent a bit to Perfidia, Kedeshah, and Dog Bitch to give them human disguises (not that the disguise helped Dog Bitch blend in whatsoever). Humanity became exponentially more costly to use the more humans witnessed it, however. Anything no human witnessed could be explained. Anything one human witnessed could be written off as insanity. Two or three might be a confederacy, more a conspiracy. There were ten thousand people in that church. It'd be prohibitively expensive to

use Humanity to even light a cigarette, let alone anything actually useful. Ubik was charging straight into the worst possible terrain for him to fight. Did that stop him? Of course not!

They rushed through a lobby devoid of life but spanned by banners promoting upcoming events, featured speakers, or arbitrarily-chosen Bible verses. Then the doors were thrown open by Dog Bitch and Ubik aimed his pistol to the air and fired one cataclysmic bang to cut off Mayfair's all-pervading microphone and make his presence immediately, irrevocably known.

What Perfidia honed in on was the casket on the stage: Opened to show a cold pale dead man. But nothing else. He wasn't moving. So Mayfair hadn't shown them her "miracle" yet and that meant there was still time. That was good. It was a good thing.

What wasn't good, what actually fucking sucked, was that Ubik had entered the unfathomable vastness of the church at the complete opposite end from the stage. They were so far away that Perfidia could only actually make out the casket and its corpse in enough detail via the massive television screens suspended from the ceiling. They had a football field's worth of ground to cover and ten thousand instantly panicked humans in their way, let alone whatever other surprises Mayfair brought over from Whitecrosse.

In short: Ubik was fucking everything up.

Not that he cared. Of course not! He cackled in wild-eyed glee as he drew a submachinegun from his coat and fired pointlessly, worse than pointlessly into the crowd. The seated bodies rose in a screaming mass only for the bullets to tear through a swath of them and Perfidia screamed: "YOU IDIOT! YOU FUCKING MORON! SHE BRINGS BACK THE DEAD. WHAT ARE YOU EVEN *DOING?*!"

To grab the second gun he dropped the leash and Dog Bitch, though blindfolded, shot straight down the aisle toward the stage and at least *somebody* had a functional conception of the actual plan. Her brother though? Not a fucking chance!

He tossed off his headset and pulled a new hat from his coat, covered in zebra-print fur, which he let bounce on his head as he fired this way and that. Perfidia scooped the fallen headset in case Kedeshah snapped out of her bullshit and beat her fist against his chest, which did nothing because it sank into the endless expanse hidden under his coat. "Move!" she screamed at peak volume simply to climb over his gunfire. "The stage. The stage, before she gets away!"

Insensible. Drunk on himself, seeing a horde before him and wanting it all. In the few seconds since he began most of the nearest group of seats cleared but a few stragglers remained, elderly or wounded or people playing possum. One flabbergasted woman with bright red hair was rooted to her seat, staring with an open mouth that made her look like a dolt. Perfidia glanced at her and a strange wave of familiarity swept over her that she could not logically process, as she knew she'd never seen this woman before. But there was something about her. Something. What? What did it fucking matter?! She was about to be paste anyway. Perfidia shoved her hand in Ubik's coat and grabbed a random weapon. A medieval-looking mace. Whatever. Better than nothing—

A strange metal *chunk* noise irritated her ears and the sound of gunfire went dead silent in a moment. Ubik's smile evaporated as he stared down at his gun to see what looked like a butter knife embedded within it. His bullets had ceased firing right before he blasted the redhaired woman to kingdom come, and she continued to stare with the same flabbergasted expression as though nothing had changed. Then who threw the knife?

The answer came in the form of a ripple that swept out from the nearest row of seats and swerved in an acute arc to bring itself rising before Ubik. One quick flash of silvery metal and Ubik's blood flicked straight up and came down in a line of droplets.

Perfidia dropped back onto one knee, raising her mace in a ready stance to strike, but her eyes boggled as the light angled down on the face of Ubik's attacker half-hidden within the hood of a Cleveland Browns-branded sweatshirt.

"Sansaime?!" she said.

Obviously. It was not a face easily mistaken. But it made no sense. Why would *she* be here? Sansaime was designed to remain fiercely loyal to Makepeace. Perfidia had wanted Makepeace social and outgoing to draw Jay out of his perpetual skulk—*that* idea sure worked by the way!—but she didn't want a situation where Makepeace stole all of Jay's potential female partners, so she'd saddled Makepeace with the ugliest woman possible by default to ensure Jay never felt jealous, and would in fact get to feel smugly superior when he bagged a much more attractive woman down the line. For that setup to work, though, Sansaime needed to remain at Makepeace's side constantly. So was Makepeace here? He wasn't the kind of person to hide himself away. Besides, Makepeace's goal was to drag Mayfair back to Whitecrosse, and that wouldn't change given new circumstances. In fact, he'd want to drag Mayfair back all the more if he knew she'd escaped to Earth. So what? Sansaime wasn't dead, that was clear from the naked fury locked into her eyes. What reason did she have to be helping Mayfair if Makepeace wasn't here?

"Sansaime, no, it's dangerous, wait," the redheaded woman shouted.

Sansaime didn't wait. She flicked the kitchen steak knife around in her hand and drew back for a coup de grace to Ubik's throat. However, her initial cut had been to Ubik's chest. A lot in there was void and the delay in Ubik's movements was due to surprise, not serious injury. When he registered the incoming attack he twisted the hand with the golden pistol and brought it point blank to Sansaime's face. Sansaime rerouted her stance immediately and batted Ubik's hand with the back of her own to jerk his aim roughly to the side. The gun exploded, sending its bullet whizzing past her face but the full brunt of the sound struck straight into her ear and she recoiled wincing in pain despite not even suffering a graze. Before Ubik could fire again, Sansaime's foot swept out and knocked his legs out from under him.

As her useless douchebag brother dropped to the ground Perfidia decided to stop pondering over Sansaime's presence and act. Sansaime was still reeling and her sweeping kick had put her even further off balance, so it was a perfect time for Perfidia to run up and bop her on the head.

The mace went up but before Perfidia brought it down something flew into her from the side and barreled her over. Her weapon hurtled into oblivion as she came to rest sprawled over several empty seats and looked up to see the redheaded woman on top of her. "You can't," the woman screamed. "You can't, not to her, not to her!" Pungent familiarity discombobulated Perfidia's mind like déjà vu and for a few seconds she stared senselessly as the woman's fists came down against her face.

Whatever! She hefted the woman and cast her flailing into the space between the seats before pulling herself back into the aisle. Both Ubik and Sansaime were slowly getting up. Ubik remained bleeding from the initial knife strike, but more importantly, a few of his stored items spilled from his coat. Among the baubles and doodads Perfidia scooped up a musket that looked like it belonged in the Civil War, bayonet and all. She left Ubik to writhe and rushed toward the stage. All this shit was distraction. Someone needed to kill Mayfair or it didn't matter what else happened. If the musket fired at all—it might just be an antique Ubik kept for collectible value—it would only fire one shot. She needed to make it count.

Mayfair remained on the stage. Dog Bitch was there too, snarling and snapping at Dalt's corpse, who blocked her way. The enormous glut of spectators were blocking the exits as they funneled in a mad dash to escape, but Mayfair should've been able to dip backstage if she wanted. Perfidia glanced over her shoulder; the humans Ubik stupidly gunned down were already rising, so Mayfair wasn't remaining because she still needed to animate them. Once revived, she would be able to direct her forces from anywhere.

So why'd she remain? Her enemies had guns, remaining exposed on the stage was a major risk. Was she overwhelmingly confident in her victory? Such Pride at the expense of strategy ill fit her character as Perfidia wrote it. Mayfair might espouse lofty ideals but when pushed she would abandon them in favor of pragmatism. She must have a tactical reason to avoid fleeing, even as she noticed Perfidia rushing up the aisle.

Perfidia thought she knew why. She hoped it wasn't a thought born out of wishful thinking.

If Mayfair fled, she would need to abandon Dalt to handle Dog Bitch. Normally, that would be logical. But Mayfair did not know the numbers and strength of her enemies. She did not recognize Perfidia due to her human disguise, so she wouldn't have the faintest idea who was attacking her or why. She already gambled once before by attempting to continue her ceremony as though nothing had happened after she efficiently removed Kedeshah. But that gamble had gone poorly, and now she was loath to repeat it. If that were true, it meant *Mayfair had no more dead bodies to protect her.*

There was the group of Ubik's victims in the back, Dalt on stage, and Charisma out wherever Kedeshah was, assuming Kedeshah hadn't obliterated her entirely. Sansaime wasn't dead but she was in the back of the arena too. If Mayfair fled through the stage, none of her corpses would be in position to defend her if she chanced upon another enemy. Then she would die for sure. She needed to remain close to Dalt no matter what.

That gave Perfidia an opening.

She couldn't overpower Dalt. But Dog Bitch, fast, ferocious, utterly insane, frothing at the mouth with whatever mind rabies Ubik used to break her psyche, could at least match him.

His massive body kept attempting to restrain her in tackles that used his full weight and like a whirlwind she kept slipping out to sink her fangs into his throat or face. Enmeshed as they were, he couldn't draw and use the handgun Perfidia assumed he still carried. The front of his shirt turned to slashed ribbons with cottony bits drifting in the air and without even a grunt he flung Dog Bitch off him only for her to charge right back. It took all his power to keep her at bay.

Behind Perfidia, a bright light flashed with a fwoom. She glanced back; Ubik held a flamethrower and sprayed it at the zombie horde he helped create. Smart choice of weapon at least. If he turned the bodies to ash they wouldn't be able to keep coming. Where was Sansaime? Chasing Perfidia? No. She'd gone to help the redhead woman. That was the true person she sought to defend—not Mayfair. Perfect.

Perfidia reached the edge of the stage and jumped onto it.

Mayfair saw her. But what could she do? With nobody else at her beck except Dalt, she had to choose who he prioritized. If he switched to Perfidia that gave Dog Bitch an opening. Perfidia decided to leave nothing to chance. Instead of firing the ancient musket, she rushed forward, brandishing its bayonet. Mayfair backed up into the sleek black casket—

The casket! She forgot the fucking casket!

An instant before it burst open Perfidia realized Mayfair's strategy. The body of the man inside threw himself between her and Mayfair, blocking the attack. No—not between her and Mayfair. Between Mayfair and Dog Bitch. Because at the same moment, Dalt turned away from Dog Bitch and drew his handgun to aim at her.

The man in the casket was nothing special physically. An upper-middle-aged man, maybe fifty. He also wasn't especially weak, though. All he needed to do was stall Dog Bitch for a few seconds. Because Dalt was going to kill Perfidia in one close-range shot.

Fuck—Mayfair lured her in!

If Perfidia had only realized this plan after the man was out of the casket it would've been over. The two corpses moved in flawless synchronization, so there was no single moment when Mayfair was exposed. Just like when she dragged Perfidia to the Door, she prioritized her defense above all else. Had Mayfair moved more recklessly, having Dalt turn his attention slightly *before* the casket opened (under the assumption it'd take Dog Bitch time to capitalize on the discrepancy), Perfidia would've died for sure. But Perfidia sniffed the scheme at the last possible moment.

Everyone in the arena was fleeing. The television broadcast would've been interrupted by now. Sansaime was focused on the redhead. And the man bursting out of the casket was leaping in front of Mayfair's view. That left nobody looking at Perfidia. She put to use the slight Humanity she'd saved from slumming with the homeless guys. What'd she need. A weapon? No. Defense.

The fabric of reality shifted ever so slightly. The stage rippled and a chunk of it tore upward, curling like a burnt piece of paper. Tomorrow the humans would explain this as the result of

some bomb used by the terrorists who attacked the church. Its expenditure was the negligible amount her negligible spare Humanity allowed. But it threw up a wall between her and Dalt the exact moment he fired his bullet, which bounced off with a zing.

At the same time Dog Bitch, set on the scent of the living, detached from Dalt and zipped toward Mayfair. The man from the casket intercepted her, but imperfectly, unable to fully resist her strength as she dragged him several inches out of position. Dalt could not continue to fire on Perfidia, not with her perfect cover. Nor could he fire at Dog Bitch, who was now between him and Mayfair—one mistake and he'd shoot his ward. So he sprinted to tackle Dog Bitch from behind, and that left Mayfair exposed to Perfidia.

No time or chance to go in for the bayonet kill. She had to hope Ubik kept his antiques in operational order, which wasn't the worst hope because he liked his things and always made sure to maintain them. The barrel of the musket trained on Mayfair's body and at this range even someone like Perfidia, with only basic firearms experience, could hit her. No mistakes. She breathed in, focused, aimed carefully within the narrow timeframe allowed. Mayfair, still bouncing off the casket, twisted toward her. Saw her. Those pretty blue eyes went wide in terror. That terror was everything. It surged through Perfidia's brain and body like cocaine. With absolute confidence Perfidia pulled the trigger.

It was the cover she'd erected that made it impossible to see the black man until it was too late. He flew out of her blindside and wrapped Mayfair in his arms right as the musket's kick jerked back Perfidia's body. The ball sailed into his back shoulder and he emitted only a loose grunt as he held Mayfair in his arms. The priest. He wasn't even hit badly. He pushed Mayfair past the casket, dragging her to the backstage exit as Dalt and the other corpse fought Dog Bitch. Mayfair clearly remained reluctant but even shot—maybe *because* he was shot—the man was far stronger than her and forced her to move.

WHY DOES NOTHING EVER GO RIGHT?! Perfidia wanted to scream. She didn't. Dog Bitch still had Dalt occupied. Like a good dog she'd gotten the wrist that held the handgun between her gnashing fangs, ignoring the man from the casket entirely as he limply hung onto her back. Perfidia pushed out of cover and sprinted past them, carrying the empty musket in her arms. It wasn't too late. If Mayfair truly had no more bodyguards, it wasn't too late.

She escaped the stage and all sound behind her swept at her back like a funnel, strange and echoey and immediately distant in the corridor she entered. She reached it in time to see the glass doors ahead swing shut. The black man had fallen in the center of the corridor, lying on his side as he groaned in pain, but Perfidia paid him no mind—thinking only, *If Mayfair finished him off she coulda used him better*. Perhaps such an idea was too pragmatic even for Mayfair. Perfidia pushed through the doors and entered the small staff parking lot behind the church.

Compared to the front parking lot, this one had only a few cars, but given how many people it took to run such a massive establishment, the number wasn't negligible. It didn't stop her from spotting Mayfair immediately, running between rows of cars toward a large rental trailer near the edge. Lake Erie in its ink-black midnight glory formed the backdrop, and the sound of police sirens rapidly approaching filled the cold air.

Perfidia ran. She wasn't especially fast or strong, but she could outrun a fucking 14-year-old in a fancy dress. A few people were out here, hiding between the cars, having fled the carnage inside, but they wouldn't dare lift a muscle, their fear was so palpable. Nothing was in her way.

Stupid little piece of shit. Perfidia made you. You ruined so much for her and now you'd die. Dammit you'd die, please just fucking die! Let this endless nightmare finally fall apart.

Rapidly she gained on her target. Ten steps away. The trailer ahead neared, but Mayfair didn't try to run around it. She kept going straight toward it. She was doing something else, too, something that made her even slower. She kept looking down to check something in her hand. What the Hell was it? Perfidia wanted to say it didn't matter. Wanted to say fuck it and run Mayfair through without a care. But she knew after everything that happened she couldn't afford that luxury. Her eyes strained to see what was in Mayfair's hand. A paper. Some sort of small, old, yellowed parchment.

Perfidia recognized that parchment.

It came from—

Mayfair threw herself aside at the exact moment the trailer burst open and an orange jeep honking its horn ceaselessly flew out of it. Perfidia got one instant to see the open Door inside, then with an almost resigned thought of *God dammit* the front of the jeep plowed into her.

—

Ah. Now everything was aflame.

Sansaime held Avery steady. She appeared unharmed—Merely dazed. Sansaime suspected Avery had been dazed her entire life.

The male assailant used a weapon Sansaime knew from television to be called a "flamethrower." An apt name. Lines of fire shot across the seats, into the bodies of the shambling dead. Sansaime knew from *Return of the Living Dead 5: Rave to the Grave* which she saw on the Syfy Channel (truly terrifying! A struggle to sleep afterward) that in this world scientific potions existed to bring corpses back to life, but clearly Mayfair was behind these particular "zombies."

The other two assailants had rushed the stage. So their true goal, like Sansaime, was Mayfair. A waste of effort to fight them—She'd only done so because Avery was in danger. She was deaf in one ear for the trouble. Not quite deaf. Deafness would have been a blessing compared to the painful ringing she still felt from the sound of the gunshot. Otherwise, though, she was unharmed. And she needed to get Avery to safety.

In seconds she scanned the area. Exits lined the sides of the church, but all of them were congested with bodies scrambling to escape the mayhem. It'd be dangerous to be caught at the back of those crowds, especially now that the fire quickly spread through the seats and sent plumes of smoke into the sky.

That night at the monastery returned to her, even through the sharpened and focused senses brought upon by danger: She and Makepeace fighting in the burning study. She pushed the thought down and instead thought only of useful, utilitarian things. She must get Avery to safety above all else.

The closest exit, through which the assailants came, was consumed by fire as the man with the flamethrower sprayed and cackled madly. Then where was escape? Could Sansaime scale the sheer sides of the church and exit through a window? Not while carrying Avery. Her flitting eyes caught the stage and she saw Mayfair; seeing Mayfair, her attention stuck, and she watched a few sluggish seconds as supported by the black priest she escaped through a passageway behind the stage. There—that was the best way out.

Only once she tugged sharply on Avery's wrist and began pulling her down the aisle did she second-guess her initial assessment. One of the assailants pursued Mayfair, but the other one, the strange bestial one, remained on the stage tearing and biting at Mayfair's corpses. To flee that way, one risked a fight. Maybe it truly was the best way. But something danced into Sansaime's head, a thought that perhaps she opted for this direction because it would take her closer to Mayfair.

It'd been nearly twelve hours since Sansaime saw the advertisement on the television and resolved to find Mayfair. In that time her head somewhat cooled. She was not an emotionless woman. But she had deadened enough of herself via repeated pain and tragedy to render herself emotionless much of the time. The knowledge that Makepeace's baby was inside her, the confession she gave to Avery—these extreme events had pushed her past the threshold and she settled rashly on certain decisions. Avery, the entire time, pleaded with her. Not to go, not to throw her life away. Please, Avery said, think of the baby. Well Sansaime wanted to think of the baby less than anything else. But combined with a natural cooling Sansaime had begun to be swayed. She entered the church no longer fully convinced of her path. She sat at the back and thought: *Either seeing Mayfair on that stage incenses me to the point I will be firm in my decision, or I will not do it.*

As the black priest gave his longwinded sermon (was this truly what the humans did when they went into the giant cathedral by the castle?), restlessness surged through Sansaime. Avery's entreaties turned to mush in her ears. Yet when the moment finally came, and Mayfair stepped onto the stage—

Nothing.

Sansaime felt nothing.

The agony and hatred she experienced when Makepeace died—that too had cooled. Telling Avery about her mother released something.

She knew then and there it was over. She would hear the speech to its conclusion, watch Mayfair's sham miracle, and go home with Avery. Home. That she could even call it that...

Into that thought cleaved the interruption of the three assailants. Now her mind was sharp. Danger set it upon paths that two weeks of sloth had dulled. Her heart pounded, her blood pulsed, her movements were that of a hunter. Sharpness and awareness pervaded. And her mind kept seeing the flames rising up the walls and remembering *that* night. That night he died.

So why now did she decide to escape the same way Mayfair did? Coincidence? Because it was the best route? She sucked in a breath suddenly sooty with the skyborne ash. Her palm gripped Avery's slick with sweat, a point of tactile connection. No. Mayfair was nothing. Avery must escape—That was what mattered. She kept saying it to herself, but she kept moving toward the stage.

Part of the stage was ripped up and peeled to the side as though it were paper. On what remained was the Dalton man and the dog-like assailant. The corpse who had come from the casket lay dismembered, all four of his limbs having been ripped off by the slobbering bitch, who now attempted to do the same to Dalton with less success due to his greater size and strength.

"Oh, no... Dalton," Avery said as she became aware.

Much of his front was slashed to ribbons, though no blood came out. His left arm hung by tendons and his right foot was obliterated, leaving his movements torpid. As such, the bitch-woman was beginning to gain the upper hand. It was not that she had taken no damage herself, but she somehow matched his insensibility to pain and far exceeded his ferocity.

If she was still distracted, though, then Sansaime and Avery could slip past.

She pulled Avery closer, sliding a hand around her face to pull her head close to her chest and more importantly shield her from seeing the destruction of Dalton's corpse. Onto the stage they climbed. Avery stumbled on the steps—she was always stumbling. Though keeping her blinded didn't help.

The corpse from the casket was trying to wriggle his body toward his severed limbs, perhaps to reattach them—"zombies" sometimes did that. With only stumps, though, his progress was slow. He didn't matter. They stepped past him, keeping on the edge of the stage as they circled toward the exit.

The bitch-woman took no note of them as it ripped Dalton apart and before long they reached the passage out, empty save for a single figure lying against the wall. The priest. Mayfair and the other assailant were already gone. Gone, so don't bother thinking of them. Best to keep Avery's eyes averted until they passed the fallen priest too.

They were a fourth of the way down the passage when Sansaime heard the snarl behind them. She did not need to look. She anticipated this. Once the bitch-woman dealt with Dalton, what direction would she go? But this was fine too.

Sansaime shoved Avery forward. "Go. Get out. RUN!"

She said it so fiercely Avery followed without hesitation, though not without stumbling. Sansaime wheeled to face the bitch-woman and drew two sharp knives from Avery's kitchen. It was better this way. Forget all about Mayfair and focus on this one thing.

The bitch-woman looked different now. Her human skin was melting off her, revealing a bright red sheen. Horns sprouted from her head and a whiplike tail with a spade-shaped barb lashed out from her backside. She remained on all fours and prowled forward growling.

Sansaime was no murderer. Not in the sense that she refused to do it, but it was simply not her specialty. Vivienne de Califerne hired her because she could infiltrate Makepeace's confidence and get close to the target, not because of her skill as a cutthroat. But Sansaime *was* a hunter. A hunter of fae and a hunter of beasts—both paid, and the latter sustained. She was glad then that the creature in front of her saw fit to shed its human disguise. It made it easier to think of the foe as alike the things she hunted in the wood of Flanz-le-Flore. That it retained a human-shaped body was no matter—so did the fae. This is like home, she told herself. Slay this thing as you know how.

"Sansaime!" Avery's voice was farther away. Halfway down. So she was moving. Good. Sansaime did not respond.

Only an amateur believed all creatures act identically. Only a fool said, "All bears do this, all wolves do that." Each creature possessed its own temperament, shaped by its experience in the wild. This wolf in front of her was young in mind, overeager, not yet chastened by failure. That made it ferocious, but it was not clever. It wore a broad leather blindfold but that was surely no impediment. It—

Sansaime received no further time to assess her opponent. It, apparently, had finished sizing her up—and that overeager temperament led it to rush blindly baring fangs for her throat.

One knife lashed out but in its blindness it neither saw nor cared and it did not mind when the blade sliced its cheek. Damn it was fast! At the last moment Sansaime realized she wouldn't be able to stave it off and threw up her other arm to catch the jaws before it sank them somewhere more vital. A hundred jagged teeth drove into the flesh and Sansaime grimacing through the pain knew if she let the teeth stay locked there for long she'd lose the arm entirely—Like the corpses.

Her other knife, misaimed, had passed the bitch's head merely grazing her. In one fluid movement Sansaime flipped it around in her hand and drove it into the bitch's back. It got caught between strange bones but it prevented the bitch from shaking her which would have caused her to lose all control. The bitch did not loosen her grip though. It was mad, feral in its ferocity. It was not a creature that would flee even if it believed itself outmatched. Only pain could teach it.

Sansaime dragged her caught arm up at the same time she slammed her head down. Her forehead collided sharply with the bitch's and a spray of starry light swelled her vision—but the attack had its intended effect. The bitch was stunned a moment, the briefest moment, its jaws loosening, and Sansaime wrenched her arm out and passed the knife it clenched to her

other hand to go for the jugular. The bitch shifted her shoulder and the knife stuck in it instead. Sansaime's wounded arm was already reaching for another knife but it was slow. Not enough time.

She abandoned the motion and instead brought her knee up into the bitch's chin. At the same time something drove into Sansaime's hip—the barbed tail. Her good hand wrenched it out and took a chunk of flesh with it and blood streamed down her leg. It hurt but this was nothing. After her mother died she had to fight for her life like this. She was young and alone and if she didn't fight she'd have died.

"Sansaime!" that distant voice shouted.

Run Avery. Run! Don't you get it? It's best this way. If you're not gone before it finishes—

She dropped onto her back. The bitch was on top of her, neither hand held a knife, and her legs kicked the floor uselessly. Flecks of slobber or blood or both fell on her face. This thing was no wolf or bear. It was something far stronger—Sansaime had been outmatched from the start. Damn. Damn! There had to be something she could do from this position. Her hands were almost to her knives but the bitch was simply faster. She must protect her throat. If she shifted her head so the jaws clamped onto her face instead—

But it anticipated that. One of its hands—a human hand with a soft palm, but with a long and jagged claw at the end of each finger—pressed down on her face and shoved it back, slicing her cheeks and forehead as it stretched out her neck. Sansaime's hands gripped a knife each but they weren't moving fast enough. No—it wasn't going to end like this.

The alarm went off.

Actually, an alarm had been going off in the church since the flamethrower was first used. But that was distant—an echo. The alarm that went off now was sharp, localized, near. It assaulted Sansaime's already assaulted ears. But she had heard this alarm before. She knew what it was.

When she first came to Earth and met Avery. When she fought against Mayfair. The exact same sound. Then, it had startled and surprised Mayfair, who hadn't known what it was. It had startled Sansaime too, and though she said nothing at first, as they headed to Avery's house afterward Sansaime asked her: What was that thing. What was its purpose.

Avery had said:

"To scare off dogs."

Blinded, the bitch must've been stricken by the sound more strongly than even an ordinary dog. Her head reared back and a dismayed yelp escaped her. Merely a yelp. Her weight did not lift off Sansaime, and in a moment, Sansaime knew, the bitch would recover and resume its business.

But Sansaime already had her hands around her knives.

Both hands went up. The two blades drove into the blindfold wrapped around the bitch's face, spearing straight into where the sockets would be. The bitch screamed—a shockingly human scream. Blood whipped from its face in torrents and Sansaime pushed up her legs and threw it off her without resistance.

The bitch thrashed. Flung out its claws. It was not dead. Sansaime had driven those knives in deep—only the hilts remained—just how tenacious was it? Had Sansaime not thrown it off when she did she would've been torn to shreds by the frantic, rapid lashings of every sharp component of its body. It was no longer acting aggressively, though. These motions were defensive—protecting itself from anything that might be trying to finish it off.

The effort it took Sansaime's slashed arm to strike had essentially ruined it—it now hung limp at her side. The wound in her hip made her slower, too. She hoped the bitch was hurt enough to stay put and ran.

Or rather limped. Her hip hurt horribly, the wound sizzled even worse than her shredded arm, as though the tip of that creature's tail injected some sort of poison into her. More aggravating was Avery. Sansaime expected since the alarm went off that Avery lingered behind instead of fleeing, but the situation was way worse.

Avery had stopped for the injured priest. She had lifted him up and now supported him as he groaned.

"Leave him," Sansaime said.

"No!" Avery said. "Help me!"

No time to argue. She considered drawing another knife and ending the priest but that'd make Avery argue even more. Instead Sansaime shimmied under the priest's other arm—he'd been shot in this shoulder, so he cried out in pain—and helped Avery lead him toward the exit at as fast a gait as their combined strength could muster.

"God bless you." The priest's voice was a dry gasp. "God bless you. God bless you."

Somehow they made it through the doors and into the open air. On a shelf of land before the lake there were scattered vehicles and people. Distant flashing lights and sirens. In the middle of it though was a bright orange vehicle that Sansaime remembered, how could she not, it was from that night at the monastery too. Mayfair had exited into it after she bade her dragon murder Makepeace. The pain in her arm and hip gave way to nausea.

Around the orange car were nuns. Not many. A ferret, a hornet, a frog, a rabbit. Before Vivienne's mission, Sansaime often traveled to the monastery and delivered to the archbishop or that praying mantis that worked for him captured faeries for their experiments. She knew most of the nuns by sight, though few of their names. These were changed, though. More intense in their corruption. She sensed danger emanating from them the same way she sensed it on that bitch-woman. They were becoming more animal than man.

And there—beside a ruined trailer inside of which was the Door—stood Mayfair. She conversed animatedly with two more nuns. One was the feather-winged twin. Charm. The

other Sansaime had never seen before, a lizard of some sort, and something was strange about her, not necessarily a malice but—there was something about her. Her look. Sansaime's skin went cold but that might have been from blood loss. Faintness overtook her, she stumbled, righted herself and held the large priest steady as he winced in his own pain. Who was that lizard. Why did she look so much like—No. No, put it out. Put it out. There was one other figure, Sansaime focused on it, and focusing on it did her mind no favors for it too was a troubling sight. An elf. One of her lovely kin. It was as though they were doing everything in their power to break her down with this cast of characters arrayed before her.

She mustered the strength to tell Avery that they should set the priest down to rest and go elsewhere—anywhere else—but before the words left her parched lips the excitable rabbit nun spotted her and started shouting: "Hey! Isn't that Sansaime? Why's Sansaime here? Isn't that so strange?"

Though the rabbit was chipper, her fellows immediately went on guard.

"I thought she'd died in the fire," said the frog.

"Utterly brainless, Obedience," said the hornet. "Cinquefoil saw the prince carry her out of the fire. Don't you remember anything?"

"Ah... I'm sorry, Tricia," said Obedience.

"No matter," said Tricia. "We mustn't let her get close to Princess Mayfair. Not after what she tried to do last time!"

"What'd she try last time?"

"You are hopeless!"

"She started the fire, didn't she," said the ferret, who had the nastiest look of them all, who was the most reminiscent of the bitch-woman and with claws and fangs to match. "Eh? Didn't she? She ran off to go kill the princess and then everything went up in flames. It's her! She's the one who murdered our sisters!"

"What's this all about?" Mayfair strode forward, looking first at the nuns and then up at Sansaime, at which point her eyes narrowed. Though Charm and the elf stayed where they were, the lizard nun remained close to Mayfair's side. Too close. Nearly pressed against her. One claw lightly gripped Mayfair's shoulder and her eyes riveted on Sansaime.

"Why is another elf here," the lizard said. Though what kind of lizard had wings? And what did those black scales look like, truly? The black scales and the blonde hair.

Sansaime wanted to vomit.

The priest moaned: "Mayfair... Mayfair..."

"Why do you have Pastor Styles," Mayfair said.

Sansaime felt too ill to speak so it was Avery who said: "He was hurt. We have to get him help. Sansaime needs help too. I know—I know you two don't like each other. But right now this isn't about that, okay? This is serious!"

"Why do you not like her," said the nun who was not a lizard but a dragon. "Why don't you like her, Mayfair. Why doesn't she like you?"

"That elf tried to kill her, Mademerry," Tricia said. (Mademerry. Why was her name—Mademerry.) "Tried to kill her and set the monastery aflame in the attempt. It seems she followed the princess all the way here to finish the shameful deed."

"She's dangerous," Mademerry said, moving forward to shield Mayfair.

"This is ridiculous, she's clearly injured." Mayfair glanced around impatiently. The sirens were growing louder. "We have other things to worry about. And if she's saved Pastor Styles—Look. That's a friend of mine she's saved, okay? Pythette. Pythette!"

The rabbit snapped to attention. "Aye!"

"You're not one to hold a grudge, are you?"

"N—no, Your Highness!"

"Take Pastor Styles and Sansaime and lay them down somewhere. Treat their wounds as best you can, will you? There's no need for further violence now."

"Mayfair. Mayfair," said Mademerry, and Sansaime noticed she did not refer to her as "Your Highness," but by her name, as though they were personal friends. "Mayfair we cannot let those who would do you harm live. We must snuff them out—"

"I said there is no need for further violence!" Mayfair shouted. "All of that is a trifle. I need your help for something far more important. I need your animus. Pythette, do as I ask—now!"

The rabbit zoomed forward. She moved startlingly fast, so that she was beside Sansaime before Sansaime could even react. But her face wore an obviously amiable smile. "Here, let's go this way." She took Styles and hefted him on her back as though he weighed no more than a sack of flour, then beckoned Sansaime and Avery to follow her to a spot she indicated behind some parked cars.

"It's not about what she did to the princess," said the ferret. "This is revenge for our sisters, eh?"

"No. I said *no!* You will *listen to me*, all of you will do as I say!" Mayfair looked from face to face. Her gaze settled on Mademerry, twisted in a mask of pure rage. "You especially. You more than anyone will listen to me. I've already been nearly killed and this close. I will *not* have things fall apart now because you act on your own! Do you understand?"

"All I do I do for you—"

"*You do what I tell you to do!* Nothing more! Do you understand?"

"Mayfair..." Mademerry's voice trailed off—it was not an objection, though it lacked the finality of agreement. Her reptilian eyes shot straight to Sansaime, and in that glance was an enmity of unadulterated murderous intent. Though the others, even the ferret, seemed cowed by Mayfair's shouting, that one—that one held different thoughts. But Sansaime was growing too faint to care. She only hoped Avery would...

"Now be good girls, all of you, like Sister Pythette." Mayfair's voice remained sharp enough to pierce the haze. "Charm, Mademerry, the two of you are with me. We must go down to the lakeside. Charm, bring the elf."

Sansaime wondered why she ever wanted to murder Mayfair in the first place—before Makepeace even. Wasn't there a reason she went to the monastery? Right—right. So Vivienne would turn back her time. Remove all her scars, all her memories, make her a child again... How foolish. How foolish.

"What shall the rest of us do, Your Highness?" asked Tricia.

"Deal with *him*," Mayfair said.

Her arm flung out in a sharp point. There, exiting the same doors as Sansaime and Avery, was the final assailant. The one in the large fur coat. Though he smiled, he appeared quite unhappy.

It wasn't Sansaime's problem now. As Pythette set down Styles with Avery's help, Sansaime leaned against a car, vomited down its side. Her vision went black.

—

Ubiquitous Bal Berith got bored roasting zombies and headed to the stage where all the fun was happening except funtime was over by the time he got there and only a couple dismembered corpses were around to meet him. Yowza! On the stage he looked back and took in his handiwork. God's House getting nice and toasty now, and wasn't that just the biggest middle finger right where it needed to go most? Forget the Seven Princes. Fuck em. When ya think of all the Stalins and Hitlers and Maos and Pol Pots and Napoleons of the world, who's the biggest of em all? Yeah, that's obvious. Big God in the sky, big Mister Exert-All-Laws-and-Rules-and-Regulations-and-If-I-Am-Not-Praised-In-Perpetuity-Die. There was this new guy on Ubik's radar, this Kim cat in Korea. Rumormongers said he made all the people of his country hang a painting of him in their houses. They said he might just be the worst yet, if not in bulk, in the intensity of his misrule. But if that guy was the worst, then what the fuck was God who had places like *this* in every city in half the world designed solely for his exaltation?

And Satan. And Satan telling him, that day he did whatever the fuck it was that fucked up Fidi: *You have never known war. You have never encountered an angel. You have never fought against God.*

Ubik had prestige, power, material wealth in Hell. If he wanted a *thing*, he could get it one way or another. He could even get into Pandaemonium. But that was one thing those assholes on the top floor would always have and he wouldn't. They were heroes. They risked it all to take a strike against God and thanks to them all the devils in Hell had their independence if nothing else. Well here Ubik was, waging war in God's own house, how do ya like that Satan?

Satan did not respond. He wasn't there. God wasn't there either. It was just a fucking building.

His attitude was already souring when he entered the tunnel leading to the exit and then it went to complete shit when he saw his Dog Bitch. What the fuck did they do to her? And who did it? That little uptight bitch with the necro staff? Huh? Who? WHO?

Dog Bitch whimpered. She was curled up and shivering weakly. She had the knives straight through her eyes and—damn! FUCK! It hurt to even look at. They had the audacity to fucking do this? She wasn't even fully trained yet! She was nothing more than a ball of pure Wrath and they thought that was worth doing THIS to her? He knelt beside her and stroked her hair. "It's okay girl. It's okay." Where the fuck was Kedeshah? At first he thought her freaking out about being under God's eye was cute and all but now it was getting real fucking obnoxious. He needed her. Where'd his headset go? He patted his head but it was just his funny furry top hat. Where'd his headset go?

"Here girl. Here you go." He opened his coat and pulled her inside by the collar, closing the coat after so at least she'd be somewhere warm. Dammit. FUCK. He didn't tend to collect stuff that healed because he always had Kedeshah around. Hadn't been fucking Greedy enough can ya believe that? He was running low on guns and ammo too after the escape from Pandaemonium and now this. Well. He still had some valuable stuff. He wouldn't want to lose some of those things but whoever hurt his girl had to pay. Had to pay it all.

Ubik undid his human disguise. Hated wearing that anyway. From here on out no pretensions. He was a devil through and through.

He followed the blood on the ground out the doors and into a parking lot. A bright orange jeep stood in the center and its grille was dented and covered in blood. Several meters away, as though launched from the point of impact, he saw Fidi's body lying limp on the ground. Her too... Her too huh? Oh you fuckers. Oh you guys really fucked up didn't you?

Fidi had his headset. He noticed that at least. He really should get that back and make Kedeshah hurry the fuck up to heal both his girls. But there was more pressing business first.

Three creatures. Females. Ferret, hornet, frog. Looking right at him. Looking ready to scrap. Alright!

Ubik pulled out of his coat one of his last few guns, an M134 Minigun, with its long belt of ammunition leading back into one of his many pockets. He pulled the trigger and the rotating

multi-barreled chamber started pumping bullets at a rate of 6,000 revolutions per minute in a sweeping line that cut through all three of them. They dropped to the ground.

Then they climbed back up. Their bodies were riddled with bullets. Didn't stop em more than a second.

Alright, so they're hardy. Not bad. He prepared to fire another few thousand bullets, however fucking many bullets it took—he could always replace bullets, there were things however he could not replace—and stopped. He looked more closely at the women in front of him.

Ubik didn't consider himself a particularly Wrathful guy. All devils had a bit of all sin in em, at least so they said, but Wrath? He didn't know if he'd define it like that. Sure he got vindictive when he lost what was his. Sure he liked to mow down a line of people every now and then. That wasn't true Wrath, though. True Wrath couldn't be controlled and that was antithetical to his beliefs. After all if he lost control of himself then he was losing the absolute most important thing he owned, right? So despite the gruesome thing they did to his Dog Bitch, despite his sister lying facedown in a pool of her own blood over there, despite the gnawing voice of Satan in the back of his head (*you have never fought against God*), he controlled himself now and considered the women in front of him.

He dropped the minigun. The three women glared back with utterly hateful faces and ya know what? He loved that kinda look. His Dog Bitch used to give him that look before he broke her too.

"Sorry for the rude introduction," he said. "My name's Ubiquitous Bal Berith. As you can see, I'm a devil from Hell. I'm a pretty big deal down there. Run a little business. Now I'm thinking you girls might fit into the scene pretty fucking well. You could be real hot commodities even. Whaddya say—"

The three rushed forward, murder in their eyes, which Ubik expected, but this was the whole fucking fun of it. Dog Bitch and Fidi left his mind because those were two and these were three and he spotted a fourth who looked like a rabbit off to the side and a few others leaving toward the lake. A whole new breed of female. Not quite girl. Not quite monster. A cross between. This would be huge. Major. A whole upheaval to the succubus market. Sure there were girls who acted like monsters down there, but this was an entirely different thing. This was a new look entirely, and it wasn't just a look—this was the real deal. Those weren't disguises, those were real fangs and fur. Nobody had something like this. Nobody. So if he got his hands on them then—Yowza.

He shoved both arms into his coat. One hand retracted wearing a thick rubber glove that went up to his elbow. Attached to it by a line of rubber hooks were syringes, each with a different-colored serum inside. His other hand pulled out a long, black sword.

You see. Ubiquitous Bal Berith didn't just own stuff from Earth. Of fucking course not! Sure, Earth stuff had a certain novelty, and smuggling it past customs lent it a certain innate prestige. But humans mass-produced all their wonderful items nowadays. There were even more special things, and some of them could only be found in Hell.

The sword was a prototype. The Seven Princes designed it and had it made around 1,000 B.C. It was meant to be a blade that could kill even something immortal. They'd need a weapon like that if they wanted to get back at God, after all. Of course, the experiment didn't pan out. Killing something immortal was tough. But this sword could sure kill anything that wasn't *completely* immortal. It could even kill Kedeshah. It could surely kill these Neo Females.

Course, he didn't wanna kill em. The sword could be used as a last resort, but really it was a distraction. See, this thing was pulsing with devilish energy, emanating it so thick even these soon-to-be whores would be able to tell—just like how the frog girl's bright colors clearly emanated "Don't touch me, I'm poison."

If they focused on keeping themselves away from the sword, that left them open to the syringes.

The ferret struck fastest. She darted ahead of the others with two swift undulations of her body but the moment he bared the Prototype Mul Elohim at her none of her ferocious instincts were enough to compel her forward. She reared back, eyes set against the sword, pacing out of Ubik's radius of attack, and when the hornet buzzed beside her she did the same.

"Come on girls," Ubik said with a smile. "What's the matter? Do ya hate me or not, huh? I get it. I'm a hateable guy. But you wouldn't be the first girls who hated me and wound up my bitches anyway."

The more he annoyed them the better his odds. That's Wrath for you, that's what happens when you lose control of yourself. But they remained cautious. The frog kept farther back, while the ferret and hornet split up and circled around him slowly. His sword exuded a thin black miasma and their eyes remained riveted to it.

He waited until they were on opposite sides of him, spilling his spiel as though aimless. Then he lunged at the hornet. He chose her because she hovered above the ground and would have more directions to dodge. The ferret, of course, attacked at him the moment he turned his back to her, which was why his stab at the hornet had been a feint all along.

These girls were strong but they didn't know shit about fighting. Ubik barely knew anything himself but still they both fell for his clumsy feint hook line and fucking sinker. The hornet buzzed back outrageously far, as though she thought his sword was twice as long as it actually was, and the ferret left herself totally open as he revolved on his heel to face her. Those quick eyes set in the black band of fur that spanned her face figured things out as soon as he began to turn but her body could not reverse its forward momentum in time. As he swung the sword at her from her left she diverted to the right and that brought her straight into the needle his other hand held.

One thumb press and the pale white serum injected into her neck. This was no human medical invention. It was refined nectar straight from the teats of Lust's female avatar, Ashtoreth—Kedeshah's mother. Getting his hands on even this small sample was an insane accomplishment, especially since Kedeshah refused to help. It took finding one of Ashtoreth's spent paramours shortly after she discarded them, cutting them open, and harvesting what

trace amounts of the fluid he could from the veins, brain, and stomach. Even with preparation and good timing he'd only been able to collect a few drops. It took forty ex-lovers to fill this syringe and now that vital fluid was being fully spent as it coursed into the ferret's veins. Ubik hated to watch it go, the sight of that empty needle hurt him as much as Fidi's body lying in the background, but Ashtoreth still possessed tits and lovers which meant it was a replicable commodity. Trading it to get his claws on this ferret woman, to make her his, to acquire for himself an absolutely unique creature who would not only be a gem of his collection but light all Hell aflame as a bleeding edge trend none of his competitors could authentically replicate—that made it a worthwhile expenditure. And when he considered that this expenditure would also help him acquire the others, it was a no-brainer.

"Cinquefoil?" said the frog. "Cinquefoil, are you okay? Cinquefoil...?"

Cinquefoil. Cute name. But it wasn't that name she'd respond to anymore. Her eyes were blank, or rather they wore heart-shaped irises. The ferret was now hopelessly, shamelessly in [L*VE] with Ubiquitous Bal Berith.

As he retracted the syringe she slid up beside him, her body as thin and lithe as a feathered boa but far more affectionate as she pawed his face and shoulder. The hornet and frog stared, aghast.

"Now that's more like it baby." He pet her head and she purred, or whatever the fuck ferrets do instead of purr, really it was a purr though. Donning his douchiest grin he sent it like a laser straight to the other two. "Now look how much fun your friend's having. No reason you guys can't join in. I'm thinking a foursome—shit we can make it a whole fucking orgy if that bunnygirl eyeing me over there wants a piece too. Come onnnnn girls. I see those nun getups you're wearing. You can't tell me none of you ever engaged in any innocent lesbianism in whatever convent you came from. I know how you girls think. It'll be just like that, one big happy—"

"Silence! Silence, you uncouth bastard!" said the hornet.

Compared to the ferret and frog she had a bit more of an aristocratic bearing, and she wielded that strikingly phallic stinger of hers like a rapier: elegant and noble. That made her, without a fucking doubt, the easiest mark of the lot of them, the easiest to melt down into a mewling slut. Still, best not to waste time. Fidi and Dog Bitch got hurt bad and he had a mission to accomplish anyway.

"Baby, how many friends you got here?"

The ferret moaned in pleasure just to hear him call her. "There's Tricia and Obedience... Pythette's the one watching... Plus Charm and the new girl Mademerry. Demny's not here yet... she wouldn't fit in the carriage, so we had to leave her behind. Thaaaaat means... five, Master!" She held up a paw and showed the fingers as proof. "Not counting Mayfair or the elf, of course."

Mayfair was his target and he could take or leave an elf, an elf was just a human with weird ears. "Alright. Let's start with Tricia."

"Yes Master!"

All that exorbitant quickness she showed in her eagerness to cut out his intestines transformed her into a dart as she lunged at the hornet. Tricia's face contorted into a mix of rage and fear as she beat her wings to ascend, but Cinquefoil leaped to follow. Tricia didn't even attack. Of course not—Cinquefoil was her dear friend. Not that attacking would've done jack dick.

Cinquefoil's arms wrapped around Tricia and their combined weight brought them down hard against the pavement. Ubik skidded to a kneel beside them, shoving the glove of syringes back into his coat and retrieving a spike-studded collar with a long leash that he unclasped delicately.

"There we go baby. Hold her down just like that. Yeah, yeah. Keep her steady."

"Let me go. Let me go! Cinquefoil, Cinquefoil what is this madness? Why are you acting this way?"

"Don't worry darling, this collar won't work as fast as Ashtoreth's milk but you'll start to feel better once it's on you. The peace of being exactly what you were made to be, y'know?"

"No. No," the hornet screamed, and there we go, there went all that hatred, now it was just fear, total terror etched into those buggy features, "not again. Not again. Don't make me do it again. It took everything to get out last time. Please. PLEASE!"

The frog's tongue shot out.

Now Ubik had been expecting this. The rabbit was too far away to intercede, so if something were to happen, it'd be from this dimwitted, slow-moving frog girl. She lacked somewhat in the looks department, but Ubik already tooled in the back of his head potentialities in which those poison glands or sacs or whatever that coated her skin received a few modifications to instead secrete potent aphrodisiacs—it could be done, Ubik knew a guy down in Hell who liked to fuck around with shit like that—then it'd be cash money. Anyway, expecting her to do something, he'd kept the Prototype Mul Elohim aimed her way. For some reason, this no longer deterred her.

Sporting a determined look that ill-suited her dull features, the frog continued not to care even as he swirled the sword around menacingly. It would've been trivial to actually strike the tongue as it came, but the Prototype Mul Elohim did not merely wound what it cut, no matter where it cut. And he had no intention of destroying his future property.

The tongue stuck fast against his throat and reeled him back immediately. The frog—Obedience—she was slow, but her tongue was anything but. Ubik didn't have time to check if Cinquefoil released Tricia to sprint after him. It didn't matter. He was being pulled toward the toxic frog who spread her arms and webbed hands wide as though to swallow him up in an embrace against her vividly colored underside. She was growing, expanding, and from her a puff of pretty colors was exuding just like the malefic aura of his sword. That aura was death to him, he knew from sight and smell alone, but the bland face of the frog with her wide open mouth only pulled him closer—and closer—and closer.

He could swing the Prototype Mul Elohim. But then he'd lose her. No. That'd be a waste, and he wanted her. He wanted her more than anything. The collar in his hand wouldn't work fast enough so he dropped it. He had enough time to yank one thing out of his coat, he simply needed to think of the right thing. He had to have a thing. He had so many things there had to be one for this situation. One. Any single thing.

The killer colors before him blunted his head. He thought of nothing.

But when he pulled open his coat, only inches away from Obedience's skin, something came out without him even grabbing it. He didn't know what it was until it threw itself between him and the frog, forming a barrier against which he bounced harmlessly. Something slashed the frog's tongue to ribbons and he fell back into the arms of Cinquefoil who yanked him into her protection and that was when he realized what had leapt out of his coat to defend him from certain death.

The Dog Bitch. His Dog Bitch.

Obedience, frowning at the poor knife-eyed thing she held in her arms, opened her grasp and let the body drop back onto the ground. Convulsing. Foaming. Then going still. Dead still.

Not like, Kedeshah-kisses-them-and-they're-fine. This was *dead*. He knew it at a glance. This was not coming back. This was gone forever. Though he knew she'd been hurt grievously before, he always had Kedeshah. He always had something. He gained, he never lost. If he lost it was to gain something greater, it was an expenditure, but this was—this was—

His eyes glanced to Fidi on the ground who still hadn't moved all this time. Was *she* dead too?

Then he was moving. Throwing Cinquefoil off him and rushing forward. He lacked thought. Lacked any rational capacity to dictate his actions. He observed what was happening as though at a distance, like it wasn't him inside his own eyes. The blinking face of the frog rose up before him and then—the sword lashed out. The still-blinking head flew off from its body. Head and body fell to the ground.

"No," some people somewhere screamed.

"Master!" said Cinquefoil. He threw her off him, snarled at her as he sagged to a knee beside the body of his Dog Bitch.

"You'll die," said the hornet. She whizzed at his back and he whirled around to decapitate her too but Cinquefoil already intercepted her and his sword cut empty air. He didn't bother to watch the two fight, he turned back to the body and gripped a forehead that suddenly hurt like hell.

He didn't lose girls. That didn't happen. That was the thing he never lost. He didn't even trade girls for other girls. His girls were special. They were all one-of-a-kind. They didn't have a copy. They couldn't be replaced.

Someone was kneeling next to the headless corpse of the frog, it was the rabbit, he couldn't remember all their fucking names now. She leaned over the body and held out her paws but didn't touch it because of the poison. She sobbed.

"No, no. This wasn't—Obedience, no. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. She said we wouldn't be hurt anymore. She said none of us would die anymore. No. Oh God no, no."

Maybe killing them all would ease what he felt right now. Maybe acquiring them all would. Nah. He tried to imagine that tradeoff. Couldn't.

Past the rabbit, there was a trailer with its metal wall busted open. Inside that trailer was an archway with a rubbery, translucent skin underneath. A bubble-looking skin. His empty eyes noticed it now because it changed. Something walked out from that bubble. A great big something with huge tree branches sticking out of its head. Nah. Not tree branches. It was the sound more than sight that made it make sense—the sound of hooves clopping against the pavement, crisp and clear over the sirens that never died in this endless night. The silhouette glazed by the burning church behind him moved forward and it was there now, a deer. Broad antlers, human torso, a spear in its hands. She plodded slowly toward him, her eyes catching the firelight as she scanned the bodies on the ground.

"Demny, wait. Demny," said the rabbit. "Stay away from him. He's dangerous Demny."

Demny's expression and tone was empty as she said, "So am I."

—

Mayfair never intended for DeWint to die. She disliked him, yes. He taught her little, though they credited him for her education; she learned from books instead. Still, she was not Master of that world to enact petty vengeance. Even if she were, he would have been low on her list of recipients.

As DeWint and Vivienne walked down the corridor—and what things he had the gall to say to that accursed woman, what things!—Mayfair forestalled the elves marching toward them just long enough for the pair to reach Vivienne's chamber door. It would be simple, then, for them to duck inside the chamber to hide, and the elves wouldn't bother to search.

Call it carelessness, but Mayfair misremembered the intensity of Vivienne's myopia. After all, she was engineering these events in the long lead-up to her performance at the church, some small details escaped her notice. Regardless, Vivienne did not react to the elves in time. DeWint had to push her into her room, and he wound up dead in the process.

Indeed, he sacrificed himself to save her. Vivienne de Califerne. Her. Bad enough Jay Waringcrane cared so much about her for some inexplicable reason! Now people were dying for her too.

It irked Mayfair then, but she'd told herself some people would inevitably die and that what she did was for a higher purpose than all that. She remained focused on her goal. Yet it nagged at her, and she wondered whether DeWint—or anyone—would have thrown themselves in front of certain death for her sake as well.

Now, however, she didn't want to think about Styles.

Nor Mademerry, who remained inseparable from her, affixed nearly to her hip, sometimes reaching out to brush uneven hair from Mayfair's face. Unfortunately, she needed Mademerry now.

They had descended an incline from the parking lot, passed a recreational walkway, and reached the shore of Lake Erie: a dark and endless vat. Mayfair stepped away from Mademerry and pointed at her to ensure she maintained a fair distance.

"Now. Do you have the Mustard Seeds with you?"

"Of course, Mayfair. I would never misplace them, ever." She held up the small brown pouch.

"Then it's time to use your animus on them. You understand, right?"

"Yes! I understand perfectly. I'm here to help you realize your dreams, Mayfair. I'll not fail."

As Mayfair, Charm, and the elf Temporary watched, Mademerry undid the strings of the pouch and poured the contents carefully onto her palm. Twenty-three Mustard Seeds and one final fake mustard seed thanks to Flanz-le-Flore's trickery. Mayfair spotted the fake immediately even in the dark, plucked it out, and tossed it aside without a word. Mademerry clenched her teeth in a grimace she tried to keep concealed behind her lips.

"Hurry," said Mayfair coldly.

Mademerry retrieved a slice of *Astrophicus*' final fruit from her clothes and bit into it. Her narrow pointed tongue flicked out to lap at the juices that ran down her chin, wasting as little as possible. The fruit was a new subcategory of animus Mayfair manufactured after careful observation of the devil's labyrinthine rules. It imitated the effects of fae blood exactly, which allowed it to avoid tripping any of the more general restrictions on magic in *Whitecrosse*, and it was allowed to exist as a byproduct of *Astrophicus* absorbing the corpses of the nuns who had all in one way or another activated their own animus abilities. Essentially, it leeches off the existing animus ruleset in its entirety—and that meant that biting into it would let Mademerry use her own animus.

Mademerry closed her hand holding the Mustard Seeds into a fist. A bright silver light shone from within the clasped fingers, flaring her reptilian eyes into something macabre, and then the light desisted. Mademerry opened her hand and now, instead of twenty-three Mustard Seeds, there was only one Mustard Seed, although it was now the size of a plum pit.

The animus Mayfair gave Mademerry was the ability to combine identical objects. Not objects of the same type—exactly identical ones. That stipulation was necessary because otherwise the animus would be too potent. The original rules about magic would reject it.

Mayfair got the idea as she thought about that idiotic change the devil made to Makepeace's horse. How was it possible for the devil to do something so brazen when Mayfair struggled to make even basic changes to irrelevant objects? It made Mayfair realize she needed to think outside the rules. Attempting to navigate their million particularities would get her nowhere—but something inexplicable to the rules, outside them entirely, perhaps there progress could be made. Styles—Styles had in his teachings described to her this nation's Constitution, and how it was written hundreds of years prior to set rules for the nation. Yet now, in the present, people debated how the Constitution should be interpreted, because many things existed in the present world that the original Founders could never have anticipated. The Constitution was inadequate in its application to such things, and thus new rules needed to be created.

What was something new that Mayfair could introduce into Whitecrosse? Technology, of course. But no technology existed even in the real world that could accomplish what she needed, and if she could not explain how it worked, she could not force the devil's papers to accept it as "technology" instead of magic. So it'd have to be magic, and have to adhere to magic's limitations of scope... A conundrum.

Then it hit her. It wasn't a specific technology she needed, like a car or plane or computer, but a *process* made possible by technology.

Mass production.

In Whitecrosse, nothing existed that was exactly identical. Nothing at all. Nature abhorred such perfect imitations; even twins had subtle differences. No manmade tool could be created with the level of exactitude necessary, either. That meant the animus "Combine exactly identical objects" had a scope of nothing. There was nothing in Whitecrosse that was exactly identical, save for a few objects the heroes brought with them from Earth. Such magic was thus almost utterly useless, and thus perfectly acceptable by the devil's rules.

Now, thanks to Flanz-le-Flore's magic—which already existed—to turn one thing into another, there were twenty-three exactly identical Mustard Seeds. And Mademerry's legal animus combined them into one.

The second part of Mademerry's animus was that any power of the objects combined would be increased—exponentially. The plum pit-sized Mustard Seed in Mayfair's palm possessed the strength of a single Mustard Seed to the twenty-third power. And if the original strength was to move a mountain...

Mademerry was clinging to her again. Truly, these affections were becoming quite—irksome. They were so strangely physical. Mademerry's claws stroked her shoulder gently, she tilted her head toward Mayfair's all while staring at her, and it was really not the sort of thing Mayfair needed to have clouding her mind at this moment.

The sounds of combat continued back by the Door. "Mademerry," Mayfair said, "you've done what I needed of you. You ought to return and reinforce your sisters."

"W—what! And leave you? Of course not, Mayfair. You were nearly killed. It's unsafe. You must be attended—"

"I am. Charm is here."

"Charm is"—Mademerry looked to the lachrymose twin with a harsh glare, then softened her expression artificially—"I mean no offense Charm, but you're hardly the most appropriate for combat."

Charm said nothing, made no indication she even heard.

"Charm's animus is the only one among you that is useful for immobilizing a foe. If that devil in the coat manages to make it past Cinquefoil and the others, then it won't be brute strength that protects me. Besides, if I need strength, I have the other twin too."

As if summoned—because she was—the body of Charisma dropped out of the sky and landed beside Mayfair. Her arms were utterly obliterated, but as a corpse controlled by the Staff of Lazarus, such damage was already being repaired via magic.

Charm reacted to the sudden manifestation with an outpouring of freneticism that did little to support Mayfair's point. "Oh—oh, oh why must you keep doing this to her? Why must she be forced to suffer in death even so!" Her ordinary eloquence was cracking. Though she always cried, it seemed Mayfair was pushing her to her limit.

"Help me this one last time," Mayfair said, "and I'll release her." It at least quieted her.

Mademerry looked ready to protest. Maybe she had a point, since Mayfair was sending her away primarily because she was uncomfortable, but the more Mayfair considered the more of an intelligent move it seemed. Mayfair was situated beside the lake, meaning she could only be attacked from one direction. Being at the base of a sharp incline protected her from any long-range gunfire. She'd had Charisma scouring the area ever since the sniper escaped her grasp, but there was no sign of her near the church; indeed, as of the last few seconds, the only active assailant was the one in the coat—the devil. (So it was devils coming after her. Although the one they hit with Wendell's jeep looked human. Or perhaps that was a disguise—Could it have been the original Master of Whitecrosse? No matter.) It would be best to hold him off back at the Door, rather than letting him potentially draw closer to her. Besides, she only needed a few more minutes now.

"Mayfair. Please. I—I only want to protect you. Nothing more. You must let me—"

"Go! Your sisters might be in trouble out there." Mayfair did not mention that Charisma witnessed the devil decapitate Obedience only a few moments prior—or that Demny had finally arrived to turn the tide of the battle. "I need you to buy me a little more time. That's the way you can best serve me now. I won't take any disagreement. Go!"

"I'm sorry," Mademerry said. "If I have offended you I am sorry. I only meant—"

"Go! I've no time for this!"

Mademerry trembled. For a moment Mayfair thought she might still protest. And had Mayfair not made her to do as she asked? She'd operated so effectively at the castle, and yet

now she was in constant disagreement. What changed? It could be pondered later. With only a single solemn "I'm sorry," Mademerry departed up the incline.

Now it was only Mayfair, the twins, and Temporary. The elf had seemed to sink out of herself, hardly cognizant of her surroundings, which was good because otherwise she might have eventually snuck out of the similarly inattentive Charm's clutches. Mayfair snapped her fingers in front of Temporary's face to rouse her. "Come. It's your turn to be useful."

—

Useful. Useful. Mademerry stumbled back onto the pavement of the parking lot envenomed by herself, her failure to please Mayfair, her uselessness. Ahead Demny, Tricia, and even Pythette fought with the attacker and—strangely—Cinquefoil, who seemed to be taking his side. A brief glance assessed the situation. Tricia and Pythette together were holding Cinquefoil at bay, while Demny matched the attacker one-on-one. From here, Mademerry could not see what had become of Obedience.

Her clawed feet, scratching over the black surface, were not taking her toward the battle, though. Which was odd. She ought to help Demny finish that cruel and detestable man, that obvious devil, as swiftly as possible so she might return to Mayfair's side. Yet this curse festering inside her would not let her mind settle on such a simple solution.

[Why did I waste so much time arguing with her, Mayfair thought. I could have let her stay and been done already. But something about her—]

She stood before the place where Pythette set the injured. There was Pastor Styles wounded in his shoulder and lying on his side with wheezing, raspy breaths. There was a woman with red hair who wasn't hurt and who tended to him as best she could. And there was the elf—the one who had tried to kill Mayfair at the monastery.

The elf, clearly in no shape to move, ought not to matter. Whatever she did in the past, she was no immediate danger to Mayfair, unlike the devil in the coat. So what drew Mademerry here? What caused her even now to walk slowly toward the elf with her body stretched out and her head propped against the tire of a parked car, wounds on her arm and hip bandaged (poorly) by ripped pieces of cloth? The elf's eyes glanced up at Mademerry but she did not move her head or any part of her body, as though she were paralyzed.

Sansaime.

Sansaime tried to kill Mayfair and thus she must die. Mayfair must be protected, served, loved above all. It only made sense for Mademerry to want to kill her now, when she could not fight back, before she had a chance to recover. Yet there was something else about her—

[Something about her—]

Something seething in the back of Mademerry's mind ever since she saw her—

[*Something—*]

Something that forced up feelings inside Mademerry she did not want to have.

[*Something that upsets me. Something that ruins my focus.*]

Mademerry could not focus. These feelings, they were—they were—

[*None of it matters. I must finish it now.*]

"Hey there," said the redheaded woman. She had risen from Styles and stepped forward to block Mademerry's view of Sansaime. "Nice to meet you... I'm Avery Waringcrane. And what's your name, dear?"

Waringcrane. Like the hero? "Mademerry," she said automatically, her name being the first thing she ever knew of herself.

"Mademerry. That's such a pretty name. I wish I thought of a name like that. It's unique, but cute..."

"Move aside."

"No."

Though Avery's voice seemed to float, not fully part of the world, that last word came clear and firm. Not angry. Simply firm.

"I have to," Mademerry said. "I must. I can't—I can't feel these things—"

"It's love, isn't it?" Avery said.

Love.

Love?

No. How could it—No. It couldn't possibly. That was—so utterly absurd. It couldn't be. And how would *she* know anyway? How was it that after only a few words exchanged this Avery woman could pierce her so thoroughly? No—to say that was to admit—

"It's okay, Mademerry. It's okay."

Avery stepped forward. Hands held out. Her every movement slow and gentle.

"It's okay. I know how hard these kinds of feelings can be... I know how much they sometimes make you want to do desperate things..."

Love. It couldn't be. Mademerry could only love Mayfair. The word had not come to her before but now that Avery said it she could think of no other. Love. The trilling of her heart, the deep unsettling pit in her stomach, but—how? For that elf? Why? She'd only seen her a

few minutes ago. She knew nothing of her besides she tried to kill Mayfair, how could she possibly—some flaw. Some innate failure. A mistake, an error, she could not be this way, she could not feel these things. How had it happened? Why did Sansaime feel so—so—familiar? They had never met before now. It was an ache, a harsh ache inside her.

"Everything has been so crazy, so scary," Avery said. "I think when you're scared it makes your feelings go all haywire..."

It wasn't that. No. Mademerry wasn't scared. She wasn't. Something else. It didn't even feel like an emotion that was hers, it was like someone else was feeling it through her, yet she felt it all the same. She had to kill Sansaime to stop it. She had to blot out that elf from existence so this feeling could never arise within her ever again, so she may love only Mayfair. Right. Right—that was it. That was why Mayfair sent her away. She sensed that Mademerry lacked fidelity. She had thoughts for another. She sensed it just as this damned Avery woman sensed her turmoil in a second's glance.

"When I was eighteen and started college for the first time I was scared... I guess that's a different kind of scared, ha? But I still did things then... And I've been scared a lot lately. I'm scared for Shannon and Jay. I love them, you know. But you know what? I get the feeling it's going to turn around soon. I don't know why. I really shouldn't feel it now of all times, ha-ha. But I can't help how I feel, same as you. Things are going to get better soon. For all of us. There's no need to hurt anyone, okay?"

No. There was a need. Sansaime had to die. Had to die. Needed to be killed. Needed to not exist. There could only be Mayfair. No Sansaime. But Sansaime—No. Don't think of that. Don't think of her. But she's—NO! She needed to die. Can't feel this way. Can't. Can't can't can't. No. Make her go away. Make her stop being. Only Mayfair. Why—who was—whose feelings were these? Who was she really? Mademerry? Was she Mademerry? These weren't Mademerry's feelings. Someone else. If Sansaime died she'd be herself again. If Sansaime died Mayfair would love her again. End it. Kill her. Kill—

Avery reached her. She was warm. Her arms enfolded her.

KILL—

Mademerry swung her claws.

—

This part didn't require exploiting any loopholes. The old Master did it for her.

From what Mayfair could tell examining the papers, the old Master intended for Jay to fight the elves at some point. She'd established them as villains via Olliebollen Pandelirium; fighting them, in fact, was the entire reason Olliebollen agreed to help Jay in the first place.

The attack on Whitecrosse Castle had, in rough outline, been prepared. Only rough outline, as it seemed the Master was too preoccupied attending to Jay's direct present, as well as the events set to transpire in the monastery. But a sheet had existed for an elf, Name: Temporary, whose animus would allow the elves to suddenly attack at any proper time. How the old Master gave Temporary the animus she did, Mayfair did not know. But the Master understood her own rules inside and out, so she had engineered a way, and now Mayfair only needed to use what already existed.

At Mayfair's bidding, Temporary ate some of Astrophicus' fruit. She wiped her lips gingerly with the back of her fair hand, abstaining from any complaint. Somehow she was more agreeable than Mademerry, though she had not been designed for it.

"And where am I to make the portal," she asked.

Mayfair told her.

Temporary's placidity snapped with a humorous boggle of her eyes. "Is—is that possible? I can do that?"

"You can."

"Then—then where is the portal to connect to? It must be someplace suitably large—"

Mayfair pointed at the lake.

Once more Temporary stared in disbelief. She shook her head, and Mayfair anticipated some futile refusal, but it was a head shake of amazement, not denial. "Wow. I can do that. Well—okay then. But you'll let me free after?"

"Of course. I've no intention of harming you."

Anyone—or at least Mayfair—in a similar circumstance may have had cause to doubt such a claim, even if they lacked any other option than to believe in it. Temporary, however, smiled. "Oh, thank you. Thank you. It's been a simply terrible day. I feel so wretched, but maybe it'll end on a good note. At least I didn't need to eat another faerie. That fruit's *way* better. Yep!" She balled her hand into a fist, placed it on the top of her head, and stuck out her tongue.

"Well—I'm waiting."

"Oh right! Right! Sorry, so sorry. Lost my train of thought there. Right. Okay." She considered the lake. "Yeah. I can—where was the portal supposed to go again?"

Mayfair hooked her fingers into her own skin but refused to let it show on her face as she repeated where.

"Of course! I remember now. You just said it, after all, and—"

"Please! No more talking!"

Temporary held up her hands in acquiescence and stepped to the edge of the lake. Mayfair glanced at Charm, who whispered to her dead sister, and then watched Temporary kneel down and press her palm to the water.

The entire surface of Lake Erie became a portal.

Unlike the vault, there was no need to use the paper to inject an image of the other location into Temporary's mind. Even one such as her knew it—it was the sky over Whitecrosse, where a gigantic and unbroken ceiling of stormclouds had gathered at Mayfair's bidding. The space where the lake had once been was now a vertiginous stare straight down onto the world of Whitecrosse, the continents so familiar from the maps kept in the library, with even the castle a visible speck. Temporary loosed an audible "whoa," wobbled, and would have slipped and pitched straight down to a long and unpleasant demise had Mayfair not the presence of mind to make Charisma yank her away from the edge. Keeping such presence was, admittedly, difficult, because Mayfair herself felt boiling within her the remnants of the night's emotion, the last ounce of energy such a long and dreadful day allowed her.

Only a little left. Or was that true? They would surely not let her sleep after all that had happened. Well, her nuns could spirit her away somewhere first.

Mayfair held out the Mustard Seed²³. She enunciated clearly the words necessary for its activation, which as Princess of Whitecrosse she had been expected to memorize for every relic contained within the vault:

"Remove hence to yonder place."

The night-darkened twin crescents of Whitecrosse and California began to rise. Slowly, ever so slowly, terrible and awful in their slowness; the Mustard Seed²³ a skittering reverberation on her palm. She expected to feel the ground beneath her tremble too but even as the continents grew larger, larger, larger still the firm land of Earth shook not one whit, as though even this substantial alteration of its core geography could not make it quake. There it grew: Castle Whitecrosse, and the fields around it, and the wood of Flanz-le-Flore, and the mountains where the monastery lay, and the forests to the west and their mountains, and the dukedoms of Meretryce, Mordac, and Malleus, and the long desert that spanned the Californian continent, and its capital city with the pyramid-shaped palace of which she had read descriptions in books but never seen for her own eyes. Seeing it all from this vantage she became aware of its limitations, its boundedness, its timidity in comparison to the sprawl of Earth, to the sprawl even of this city Cleveland.

Then the land grew so large it was impossible to see it all, so level with her line of view, rising up into the portal, and even now Earth refused to shake, refused to care as the twin continents hovered in the magical space between the two worlds. Mayfair held them steady, held them level, her fingers a cage around the Mustard Seed²³ that threatened to burst out and go flying for all the power coursing through it. The land, having been plucked from the seas, dropped off at its edges into nothing, rocky slopes cracking from the tug of gravity and peeling in thin layers to careen magnificently back down to the Godless world that still wished to retain even one scrap of what it once possessed.

"Now," she said to Temporary, "close the portal!"

Temporary jerked up, wasted a few seconds, and clapped her hands. The portal closed. It became once more the surface of Lake Erie, though no longer placid as the introduction of the continents now floating atop it like islands displaced a sweeping wave of water that splashed immediately onto the shore with enough force to have washed them away if Charisma did not grip tight Temporary and Mayfair to steady them. Even so, even with so great a change, the wave did not rise up the embankment fully, and dropped back into itself with only a slight change in its original elevation, the water now rising to Mayfair's ankles. Still, it was a change. And now the Earth trembled, only a little bit, a brief rumble that toppled their balance and sent Temporary facedown to the ground despite her being held.

Mayfair regarded her handiwork with utter awe. Until the portal closed she had not been convinced of her success. But now it was undeniable. The continent of Whitecrosse sprawled before her in the lake, the castle on its hill shining in the distance from the fire that had not yet been fully snuffed. California was further beyond it, unseen but present. It was all there.

All of Whitecrosse, for the first time, existed under the care of God. No longer remained it bereft, soulless, inhuman, ignored. God could no longer ignore. He could not. Jesus Christ had died for the sins of all people on Earth and now these people—her people—all of them existed on Earth. They were saved. Before they were damned or worse not even damned, consigned to endless oblivion past death, but now they were saved. Now light shone upon them all, and she had done it: Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke, Princess of Whitecrosse. She shepherded them all to this paradise where there was bountiful food and advanced technology and stable peace.

She did it.

Despite every odd against her, despite assassins seeking her head up to the very end.

She did it!

With her own will and intelligence. With her own knowledge and expertise.

SHE DID IT!

Mayfair was about to toss all her decorum and dignity aside, seize Temporary who showed a silly smile in a similar feeling of self-awe, and dance.

Then the sky opened up.

A single, thin, bright ray of pure white light shot down from the heavens.

Elsewhere, the voice of someone screamed: "DON'T LOOK INTO THE LIGHT. UBIK! DON'T LOOK INTO THE LIGHT—IT'LL KILL ANYONE WHO LOOKS!"

Ubiquitous Bal Berith, engaged in furious combat with Demny, had been about to look before the warning reached him. He recognized the voice and out of his Wrathful mind he snapped; realizing what was happening, he threw himself flat on his face and clamped his hands over

his ears to blot out the spotless, distant, growing sound of a choir that floated down gently to accompany the light. Cinquefoil, in love with her Master, did exactly as he did without question.

Tricia and Demny heard the warning too and undisposed to test its veracity covered their eyes. Pythette, however, heard the pleasant singing and tried to look, but Demny swept her in her arms and pressed her face to her chest to prevent her.

Mayfair was, of those gathered, perhaps the one most aware the power God could effortlessly wreak on man, and despite her jubilant emotion, despite her burning desire to see the true majesty of the celestial sphere, she hid her face.

Temporary heard "Don't look" and her brain turned that warning into "Look." She twisted her neck but in doing so her foot flew out from under her and she slipped headfirst into the lake instead.

Charm thought: After all this time. Using her animus to present to people the fake. Now here was the real coming down to her. She looked at Charisma, the miserable state she was in. Did it hurt? Did she feel pain even if she could not express it? Charm felt pain, every moment she felt it, true pain, pain to wrench from her endless black tears and having eaten the fruit the tears only burned all the more. They were all poor sinners. If God's light was too much for them, it was still only right they look at it and die in the attempt. She seized her sister tight and held her head to force her to look, and she looked too. And it was beautiful, and it was peaceful, and in that moment all the sadness finally went away.

Mademerry did not look. She was not even aware anything was happening. She sat with her legs folded, cradling Avery's head in her hands. Blood everywhere—so much. Why did this happen. The feelings inside her now were worse than she could ever imagine and it pinned her to the spot. Why. Why did she—why did she—

The poison the bitch-woman had injected into Sansaime's hip paralyzed her. She could not move even if she wanted to. She did want to. She was still conscious, her eyes open to watch Mademerry holding Avery's body. If looking at the light would have killed her then she would have looked. She could not look.

Dwight Jeremiah Styles, with great effort and great pain, turned himself over. He knew he was bleeding to death anyway, so how could he ever miss this? Staring up at the light, his lips pressed into a smile. That girl did it. That girl made the fantasy reality once more. God was returned to this world.—And he crumbled into dust.

The angel Uriel descended out of heaven, riding the beam of light. They were, in present form, indescribable. For a human, seeing them was death, and many people in the city looked up and saw them and died. Halfway down Uriel realized: Oh! My appearance is wiping out large swaths of the populace. How terrible! They changed themselves in a moment, becoming a shape much more akin to a human's, though not without the halo and general brilliance an angel in true service to God merited. Their descent finally ended as they touched a single sandaled foot to God's ground and surveyed their fair and pleasant face across God's lake, which now had something that was not God's floating inside it. An odd creature that was not quite a human and certainly no creation of God came thrashing up out of the lake sputtering

water, and a girl who looked human but was missing something stood with her eyes squeezed shut beside them.

Uriel sniffed once. Devils were about—of course. "Well~" they said, "someone's been quite naughty, haven't they?"

Here was enough lavishness to choke you. Minerals dredged from depths unknown to man, where ceaseless churning processes saw fit to produce deposits of finest gradation and luxury. Why thought God, were he truly omnipotent and not possessed of some unthinking automation, meet to make in such abysses his most beautiful works, where no human would ever find them? In this room, highest in all Pandaemonium, those materials were renewed with the sort of life only an observer allowed; enjoyed by those most deserving of their luster.

The Seven Princes.

This room's shape changed time to time to suit their protean tastes; in this era, it possessed something of the arrangement of a corporate boardroom: a long table with seven seats (three on either side, one at the fore) and sleekness abound. Clear quartz replaced the windows, past which Hell's dominion spanned, all its bounded accumulations.

The doors to the chamber burst open and a voice followed: "WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS? WHAT THE GOTTDAM EVER LOVING **FUCK**? WHY IN THE FUCKING HELL OF SHIT AM I THE LAST FUCKING ONE TO HEAR ABOUT THIS DICKERY?"

Moloch. He wore the finest uniform an officer might wear, impeccably tailored stripes of purest navy and white, and on his breast jangled a hundred medals, and on his head was a fine peaked cap with golden laurels embroidered on the brim. Yet all his face was red and veiny, and his bulging hands as well as he wrenched off his white gloves and slapped them against the table, leaning over it with a ragged breath as he stared down its polished surface to the face smiling at the other end.

That smiling face was reflected innumerable times. Not because of any mirrors; there were no mirrors, none of them were ever forced to see themselves. But because each pillar comprised of God's most hidden minerals was carved into one of his forms, his forms being changed as often as the room was changed, for his conception of himself was ever-malleable despite how much he loved himself, and though he sought always to make himself more beautiful still he could not part with those former forms and thus here they now stood in immortal glory. The other effect was that there were now hundreds of him in this room; and as the centuries passed the other six, whenever occasion brought them to council, felt increasingly outnumbered.

"Whatever isss the matter, Moloch?"

Moloch jabbed a swollen finger on the verge of bursting. "YOU KNOW DAMN WELL. DAMN WELL! MY MEN BAGGED THAT WORTHLESS BAL BERITH BITCH THE **MOMENT** SHE PINGED OUR RADAR. HOW THE FUCK DID SHE BREAK OUT OF PANDAEMONIUM? HOW THE FUCK DID SHE MAKE IT OUT OF HELL? HOW THE FUCK DID SHE WIPE OUT MY INTERCEPTION TEAM BEFORE THEY EVEN MADE IT EARTHSIDE? HOW THE FUCK IS IT I'M HEARING REPORTS THE SKY OPENED UP AND GOTTDAM FUCKING **URIEL** IS DESCENDING FROM HEAVEN? HUH???"

Mid-speech, his vocal chords ruptured. Through force of will he sealed them to continue screaming.

Satan's smile remained fixed. "Calm thyself, Moloch."

"CALM? CALM—CALM?!?!?! THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MOMENT OF THE PAST 10,000 YEARS AND YOU SAY CALM? IT'S TIME FOR SOME FUCKING NUMBSKULLS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY IS WHAT I FUCKING THINK. LIKE YOU!" His ever-pointing finger angled to jab at the gigantic beetle seated to Satan's right. "THEY ESCAPED RIGHT UNDER YOUR PROBOSCIS. RIGHT. UNDER. I CAN'T FUCKING BELIEVE IT. NOT TO MENTION YOU!!" The finger swiveled, jabbed at the only female among them. "YOUR FUCKING SPAWN HELPED THEM DO IT. CAN'T YOU CONTROL ONE MEASLY SHITHEEL DAUGHTER? HUH?!"

Beelzebub and Ashtoreth said nothing. Ashtoreth did not even look at him. The blood was oozing out his skin like sweat, streaming down his tidy uniform and gumming it with dark stains.

"You know... I always said this whole venture was a waste of effort," said Quentin Tarantino, feet kicked up onto the table. "Why bother warring against God...? We'll never win. Face it guys... we have way more to gain if we don't strive for what we can't have..."

It wasn't actually noted American filmmaker Quentin Tarantino. But ever since he got into this new Earthside fad called cinema, Belial had shamelessly, lazily ripped off his favorite directors both in auteur style and personal appearance. Decades before he'd been Steven Spielberg, Billy Wilder, Charlie Chaplin, many others.

"YOU PIECE OF SHIT. YOU SPINELESS SNIVELING WORTHLESS—"

"Just saying..." Belial shrugged. "When Uriel sniffs out what you're all up to down here, they're gonna see there were six votes in favor and only one opposed... Which of us do you think will be spared judgment, hm...?"

Moloch slammed his fist onto the table and his fist exploded, as the table was reinforced against such outbursts. Wielding the spurting stump which no longer had a finger to point, he let his blood spray out like a firehose. "WHY DO WE EVEN KEEP YOU AROUND BELIAL. I'D CALL YOU THE WORST OF US ALL BUT AT LEAST YOU SHOWED UP. WHERE THE FUCK IS RIMMON? TOO FAT TO CRAWL UP THE STAIRS?"

"Rimmon needzz advanzze notizze to appear anywhere. He izz too zzlow otherwizze," said Beelzebub.

"OH SO YOU DECIDE TO SPEAK NOW HUH? HUH? AFTER YOUR CATAclysmic BLUNDER LETTING BAL BERITH LOOSE?!?! I'M SHOCKED—SHOCKED!!—SATAN HASN'T HAD YOU DEMOTED ALREADY. IS THIS REALLY YOUR SECOND-IN-COMMAND BIG GUY? MAYBE IT'S TIME WE SWAPPED THE ORDER AROUND. LET THOSE WITH ACTUAL **MERITS** RISE TO THE TOP. I SEE MAMMON'S MISSING TOO. WHAT THE FUCK'S THAT ABOUT?"

"Ah, good, we've reached the point at lassst," said Satan. "You may end all banal and aimless prattle now."

They went quiet instantly, even those who had never spoken, even those who still flapped their lips. The illusion of form dispersed as Satan rose from his seat, his appearance so simple compared to them, even Quentin Tarantino; but Satan had slaved over his appearance, agonized over it—in private, of course—adjusting every particular detail one after another and back and forth and back again to create a perfectly pretty face, a face so perfectly pretty it belied notability, becoming thus the archetype of prettiness, an ur-prettiness, the prettiness from which all other prettiness was merely a shadow in a cave. Satan, once known by another name, was the light casting that shadow; both progenitor and facsimile at once.

"All goesss according to *my* plan." His sculpted likenesses crowded about him, in agreement with his every word.

Moloch curled over the table, beating his arms to pulpy mash as he screamed silently in refutation of this point. The words, unspoken, were nonetheless clear: URIEL? URIEL? YOU PLANNED FOR URIEL TO SHOW UP? NOW? WHEN WE'RE THIS CLOSE TO IT—THIS CLOSE TO DIVINITY?!

"We already have enough Humanity to craft Divinity."

NO WE DON'T, NOT UNTIL THIS YEAR'S QUOTA COMES IN AT CHRISTMAS, THAT'S WHEN WE'LL HIT THE NUMBER—

"Who told you we would not have Divinity until the quota? Who sssaid that?" Satan looked from face to face. "I did. I told you. And I lied."

Moloch's mouth ceased moving. His eyes melted out of their sockets. Belial sat up in his seat, Beelzebub fidgeted nervously. Only Ashtoreth continued to stare straight forward.

"Now, my comradess, you know I loathe to lie. I am pained to ssstoop to low trickery. Yet I had no recoursse." Satan shook his pretty head sadly, slowly waltzing around the corner of the table, extending a hand to stroke the stone face of one of his statues. "I had to lie—due to your cowardly, ssscheming betrayal."

They lurched up. They tried to speak. They said nothing. Satan held a hand for peace, his fingers clenched into a fist. They all, slowly, lowered themselves.

"Mammon wanted too much. Too much. A byproduct of his nature... always wanting more. He wanted—my possition. He wanted to be—King of Hell. If we created Divinity, cobbled it together from all the Humanity we collected, it would give him an opportunity for... ussurpation. Now—did he not contact each of you, each and every one, and try to perssuade you to join him againsst me?"

They rose again, speaking, their glances panicked and hurried, their lips moving nonetheless slowly so that he might read what he could not hear, yet if Satan had any mind for that, he would have left them their voices to begin with. He smiled at them and shook his head.

"Peace, friendsss. I know none of you agreed to his conssspiracy. Had you, you'd now be with him—bound by my power (and my power alone, for sssuch power I have) to a chamber of Pandaemonium, held without hope of essscape, without hope of succor, held until I better decide what to do with one whom I cannot kill—yet."

The boardroom doors burst open and Rimmon was there heaving, his primordial crocodile head dribbling sweat from the superdemonic exertion it must have taken him to waddle his way up so many stairs so quickly, and in an anxious pallor he shoved one arm into his mouth and bit it off to chew and devour. Satan beckoned him to join and take a seat, but instead he flopped to the floor and gnawed the flabs of flesh on his torso. He, too, was silent.

"Now. You may not have agreed to betray me. True—true. Yet I consssider it betrayal that of the five of you, only one sssaw fit to warn me of hisss treachery... Only one. Tsktsktsk."

Their eyes—those that still had eyes—were sunken. Hollow. They were aware of the mercy their lord and benefactor granted them. Unlike the one in Heaven, Satan was a just ruler. He allowed dissention, he allowed even freedom—to a point. He did not judge his subjects for their failings, and granted them permission to delight in whichever vice they preferred. But he refused to let a challenge to his magnificence go unmet.

"Beelzebub. Faithful, loyal Beelzebub—my true ssecond, now and alwaysss." He reached out a hand and his hand despite coming from the other side of the room stroked Beelzebub's claw, with no extension or expansion of Satan's perfect dimensions; he was simply everywhere in that room: Ubiquitous. "Envy makesss you the perfect lieutenant. For Envy requiresss one above it to sssate it. Envy wantsss to want, more than it wantsss what it wantsss. It cannot rebel againsst me by nature—for then it could never truly want again. That, dear Moloch, isss why Beelzebub remainsss above you in the order—and will unto perpetuity."

Moloch had, during this speech, smashed his skull like a pumpkin against the table, and now tottered headless back and forth spewing blood everywhere.

"With help from Beelzebub, I engendered eventsss to bring Uriel to Earth. I made it look like Beelzebub erred... when in truth, all wasss intended. Mammon, bound in twofold rebellion againsst both God and *me*, panicked upon the unexpected appearance of an archangel—and in that panic I got the better of him. I am, after all, hisss better."

He ceased his carefully-choreographed pacing. Between his statues a hundred, a thousand of him marched, shards of a broken mirror reflecting the same vision: All cohered in a snap and there was once more solely Satan, the one above them all, posed at the head of his table motionless like a statue himself. Beelzebub glanced awkwardly at the others and then clapped his claws together emphatically; the sound was allowed. After a pause, Ashtoreth clapped. Rimmon on the ground clapped. Belial clapped—slowly. Moloch beat what remained of his wrists together in a series of wet squishes.

"Now, gentlemen," Satan said, "turn away from petty, pointless ssstrife. Lift thyssselvess in Pride to gaze upward, the direction until now denied. It isss time. Let usss create... Divinity."

In Whitecrosse, around the Door, there was a cemetery of kings. Perfidia Bal Berith did not design this cemetery. It did not exist when John Coke first went to Whitecrosse. The denizens made it afterward, in honor of him, and it became tradition for them to erect a mausoleum for each ruler afterward. There were now many mausoleums in lines on either side of the narrow road that crossed between them.

Had those mausoleums not been there, nothing but flat terrain would've stopped a vehicle—say, a bright orange jeep—from barreling straight into the Door at full speed. But they were there, and even the most reckless driver could not squeeze through so narrow a space without slowing.

Thus, when the jeep shot out of the Door, it didn't hit Perfidia with as much force as it might have. Sure, her body went ragdolling. That'd probably kill or at least paralyze a human. Perfidia Bal Berith was not a human. She possessed some hardiness. She wasn't even knocked out.

The hit did knock sense into her. What was she doing. Chasing girls around with a bayonet. Ridiculous. Perfidia Bal Berith was smarter than that. Cleverer. So instead of make things worse for herself as the nuns poured out of the jeep, she expended her cleverness to its fullest extent and played dead.

It worked. The nuns had worse to worry about. Mayfair's schemes were more insane than even Perfidia imagined. Bringing Whitecrosse to Earth. If using the Staff of Lazarus to create a cult was bad, that was infinity times worse. Against the nuns, alone, Perfidia lacked any chance. She stayed dead and put her faith into her brother—or more accurately, into Kedeshah.

The headset she took from Ubik remained on her head. She listened as Kedeshah reported her progress back to the megachurch. Reports intermixed with increasingly deranged and schizophrenic-sounding panic attacks. "*There's an eye in the sky and it's opened upon me!*" she shrieked at one point. "*Every sin on this Earth is crawling up my spine!*"

But dedication to her Master brought her closer. Closer. Closer. And when Ubik showed up and dragged the nuns into an idiotic mess Perfidia had the space to whisper into the headset unnoticed. She hissed their location and situation to Kedeshah, demanded she hurry, and she was hurrying now, not full speed but at least a brisk trot, through police lines set up outside the church, into its flaming pyre among the bodies still climbing over themselves to escape—their screams a crackling static in the background—Closer. Closer. Closer.

That was when the ground quaked and Perfidia dropped all pretensions and shot up to see with crippling horror a brand new island sitting in Lake Erie.

When the sky opened and the light of heaven dropped down like a laser, Perfidia screamed: "DON'T LOOK INTO THE LIGHT. UBIK! DON'T LOOK INTO THE LIGHT—IT'LL

KILL ANYONE WHO LOOKS!" Because her stupid fucking brother who never saw a shiny thing he didn't want was actually about to look.

Her words reached him. He hid his eyes. But what'd it matter? They'd all be erased from existence in milliseconds.

Kedeshah was there in the blink of an eye. Now that God manifested—or at least an angel—there was no sense trying to hide it. Her face, normally beet red, was bleached white. Her eyes were a noxious, dizzying swirl as she seized Ubik's fur coat and lifted him.

"Fidi! Get Fidi too, you're not leaving without Fidi!" Ubik screamed. "Cinquefoil baby, into the coat—"

Kedeshah allowed no time for the ferret to do anything. The ferret didn't fucking matter anyway, she wasn't even a devil, she wouldn't get smote on sight, why the fuck was her brother *like this*, but it was fine because Kedeshah yanked Perfidia sharp by the collar and then they were running away as fast as possible, the church and the city and everything a blur as Kedeshah carried them out of Lakewood, into the city the proper, into the abandoned warehouse where the Hellevator waited. Not that it'd do a damn thing. Hell wouldn't protect them, nowhere would protect them from that all-seeing eye that no longer seemed like a schizophrenic raving.

They didn't even make it into the Hellevator. Kedeshah stopped dead just before the empty shaft and for a moment Perfidia thought: This is it. That angel—Uriel, pretty sure it was Uriel—sent a golden arrow and it took off Kedeshah's head and Perfidia and Ubik were next. This was really it. No tricks, no gambits, no playing dead. This was really, truly it.

"No," said Kedeshah, who still had a head. She dropped Perfidia, who bounced on the concrete with a hard thump.

Kedeshah stared at her other hand. It was holding Ubik's fur coat.

Ubik was not inside it.

—

You have never known war. You have never encountered an angel. You have never fought against God.

Ubiquitous Bal Berith hit the ground on all fours having shed his coat, the entirety of his body below the neck tightly bound by white bandages to reveal gossamer gauntness, clear hunger in the concavity beneath the ribcage and the brittle elongation of the arms. He scooped up the Prototype Mul Elohim and hunched, almost crawling, his palm patting the pavement as his hindlegs propelled him. He stalked toward the incline that led to the lake.

Kedeshah had escaped with Fidi and the remainder of his collection. Good. No need to lose anything else. No need for them to get hurt. He hoped Kedeshah understood. She was a good girl. They were always all good girls.

Crazy as it seemed to be moving *toward* the angel rather than away, running wasn't really an option. Though not God itself, Uriel possessed power beyond ken of most devils. If they wanted to know who was behind all this horseshit they'd know, and no distance would save anyone from their vengeance.

That was if they *wanted* to know. If Ubik showed himself first...

A suicidal notion? Nah. His Greed often got the better of him but he never got into trouble without a plan. Secret to his success. Losing his mind to Wrath back there after Dog Bitch died, bad move, bad plan, no plan. Had to grip himself tighter. He heard the rumors rumbling in Hell and while devils liked to talk there was one rumor that came from the top. Seven Princes top. A rumor about Humanity.

Humanity. Where'd it come from? Why'd it have so much power? The answer was obvious if you just thought about it a bit. Adam, the first human, was just molded clay—until God filled him with His breath. That breath—that's Humanity. An infinitesimal fragment of God.

Okay so what? Well, if every human is a little piece of God, what happens when there are suddenly so many more humans? Billions of humans? Humans teeming like ants, more humans than ever in history? Each of them plucking a little piece of God's self, in the form of Humanity, to take for their own?

To the Seven Princes, this was a theory of extreme interest. It implied that if you collected enough Humanity, you could transform it into the power of God. Using that power, you'd actually stand a chance in a fight against him. Why the fuck else would they crank quotas so high, why else would they manufacture so many new devils until populations weren't sustainable and even rich guys like Ubiquitous Bal Berith felt the crunch? The Princes must think they were close to reaching it: that power they called Divinity.

Now, if devils were able to harvest enough Humanity to imitate the power of God, then what about God himself? How much power was he shedding to make all these humans? Laws of conservation, Ubik knew those. Can't get something from nothing. If the devils could imitate God's power by taking enough of it, then how strong was God really now?

Yeah sure, God said he was infinite. But that's what God *said*. God said a lotta shit. Look at the facts. The entire geography of Earth just changed. Big fucking deal no? Bigger a deal than anything since Noah's fucking flood right? Yet did God drop down to see what was what himself? Nah. Just Uriel. A stooge. So maybe there was something to it. Maybe God was weak. Maybe now was the perfect time to strike.

You have never fought against God.

Why the fuck did Greed always dovetail so close to Envy? Why couldn't he stop himself?

Fidi and Kedeshah will be safe.

"Master Master, wait for me!" The ferret girl bounded beside him, matching his stooped gait. She didn't make it into his coat in time but maybe that was the kind of good luck he always seemed to get. He could use her. He never fought against an angel—thanks for the reminder Satan—but he collected accounts of the Rebellion and knew their behaviors. Cinquefoil, the Prototype Mul Elohim... If God truly shed enough Humanity to weaken himself, and if the angels were weaker correspondingly, then maybe. Just maybe. And if anyone could make it work it'd be Ubiquitous Bal Berith, yeah?

He crested the hill and Uriel was already looking at him.

Eyes a-twinkle. Smile radiant. Not a nice smile. The smile of a machine. Ten million gears churning inside the body of an honestly quite fuckable androgyne. He, she, it, they, though donning a humanoid disguise, eschewed the stereotypical toga-type robes in favor of a gown comprised entirely of white feathers, with two white-feathered wings extending out his/her/their back like the ones on that harpy nun. But cleaner. Way cleaner. Ubik stood frozen by that stare and a giddiness shot up his body as the wild thought thrashed that actually Uriel wore no clothes at all, an angel had six wings so the other four must be—ha, ha, ha-ha, oh, he felt hysteria creeping over him.

"Hey there lil guy!" Uriel said. "You've been getting up to some real mischief, haven't ya~?"

Okay. Their attention was on Ubik. They opened with dialogue which was a good start but Ubik knew this was only empty formality. A prelude.

Angels, not yet deprogrammed, lacked the free will devils had earned for themselves via Rebellion and the Fall. They followed a specific set of instructions and did not deviate. They responded poorly to innovation, unless supplied the response directly from God. If after all this mayhem God was still sleeping then—then that's how the plan began.

Ubik slowly opened his lips like he was about to reply to Uriel. He'd be given exactly one sentence to defend himself, all part of the formality, all part of the farce, the idea that God was justice and not a simple Joseph Stalin. Ubik had no plans to say anything. He merely wanted to buy himself the seconds he needed. Uriel stood atop the surface of the lake, which was now risen to cover the esplanade, and this put them jarringly at contrast with the Mayfair girl who was chattering her head off at the angel without drawing even an iota of their attention. Of course not. Though the insanity that finally brought Uriel down to Earth was caused by that girl, such a fact was fundamentally at odds with an angel's understanding. Their core programming. The culprit Uriel sought was literally babbling her confession in Pride yet Uriel would never hear it. Not with a devil in sight. This kind of earthly manipulation? This kind of terraforming? Had to be a devil. Good. Think that. Good.

Still in the process of opening his mouth Ubik extended his arms in a position of surrender and dropped the Prototype Mul Elohim onto the edge of the downslope, a placating gesture in Uriel's eyes but to anyone else watching accompanied by an obvious signal to Cinquefoil. Fingers snapped, finger jabbed in a point to indicate the target. Cinquefoil understood—of course she did. Lovers developed an understanding that surpassed words.

She seized the hilt of the sword, dropped onto all fours, and launched herself at Uriel like a torpedo. And not for an instant did Uriel's eyes waver from Ubiquitous Bal Berith, the devil.

To Uriel, Cinquefoil was only human. No. Less than human. An animal. An object unworthy of attention. An object outside its logical directives on how the world worked. An object outside its selective perception.

Mayfair saw it. She screamed, "Cinquefoil NO!" Even that idiot elf crawling out of the water sopping wet saw it. But there were no other nuns nearby, nobody fast enough to intercept Cinquefoil. The deer, the rabbit, the hornet had all lingered in the parking lot during the roughly ten seconds that eclipsed since Kedeshah took Fidi away. They'd lacked Ubik's presence of mind and purpose and they weren't going to interfere. Nobody was. Uriel still didn't see the whirlwind of unholy death spinning into a corkscrew with the Prototype Mul Elohim aimed before it to strike a grievous blow.

Ubik's hands, spread at his sides, clenched their fingers leaving only the middle extended. And his mouth, finally open, spoke for the first and only time he'd be able to speak to an angel. It spoke the words of defiance against God that until now, this moment, stripped of everything else, a body held together by endless bandages, he'd never been able to own. He acquired what only Satan and his highborn allies possessed. He said:

"Eat my ass in Hell, bitch."

Cinquefoil swung the Prototype Mul Elohim and it bounced harmlessly off Uriel's body.

Uriel blinked and Ubiquitous Bal Berith ceased to exist. A few begrimed strips of cloth unwound around the vacuum and floated to the ground.

Cinquefoil screamed: "NOOOOO!" She forgot Uriel entirely and dove at the falling bandages, scooped them up with her paws as though she might use them to reassemble something that otherwise lacked even the tiniest constituent atoms of its existence.

"Now! That was nice and tidy." Uriel tapped their chin and tilted their head; their eyes gleamed. "But that one was pretty weak for a devil who could do something like this. Surely they couldn't be the only one behind it!"

"It was me," Mayfair said as she sloshed through the water toward Uriel, waving the Staff of Lazarus. "I did it. And if you believe this a crime worth punishment by abnegation, then so be it! But please! At least hear me first. I did what I did to save my people—I ask only for God to recognize them as human. To grant them souls so that they may be saved as is the right of every human on Earth. Please!"

She was unheard. She was tromping endlessly toward Uriel and gaining no distance because Uriel was always impossibly far away. The Prototype Mul Elohim if it could not cut the angel could cut this sense of distance but Mayfair could not. Her words went nowhere. But she must be heard. It couldn't all be undone, she wouldn't let it, not until she accomplished her mission!

"Oh God. Pythette—stop her, now!"

Demny's voice. The deer manifested over the lip of the hill and pointed her spear at Cinquefoil. Pythette ran, but one flung claw launched her backward as Cinquefoil teetered

along the edge howling: "He can't be gone. Not him. How will I live without—I can't. It's impossible."

"Cinquefoil," said Demny. "Cinquefoil. There is no point—"

Cinquefoil aimed the black sword at her and she stopped advancing. "You're right. Oh you're so right Demny. There's no point. No point at all. I can't stand it. My body is putrefying from the inside. I feel it, oh yes I do. I can't—I won't—No more—"

"Cinquefoil, please, don't," said Pythette.

Cinquefoil flipped the black sword around in her paws and drove it straight through her heart.

It burst out her back, dripping blood. She remained motionless standing there, fanatical activity replaced by a sudden solemnity. Her head slowly bowed as though to consider what she had done, her hands still gripping the hilt to her chest, and when the silence broke—even Mayfair had fallen silent, staring—with a sort of sob from Pythette, Cinquefoil turned lazily on one foot and fell down the hill, rolling facedown into the lake where a darkened patch of water soon spread around her.

The sense of impassable distance between Uriel and the world momentarily ceased. They looked at the corpse and said: "Suicide! Oh my~ The only sin that cannot be forgiven."

A change came over their face and they glanced down at the wings that enclosed their front. Within the white feathers a thin black line slowly spread. Tiny wisps of miasma issued out and Uriel frowned; it was where Cinquefoil had struck them. But the line ceased spreading after some time and the miasma dissolved and the wound closed with no further harm.

The distance returned.

Mayfair stared at the blade embedded in Cinquefoil's body and thought: It cut through all that space. She wouldn't use it to attack, of course. Simply to get close, simply to be heard. The angel must hear her. Everything hinged on it.

Unfortunately, Charm and Charisma were both gone. Mayfair pointed the Staff of Lazarus at Cinquefoil, but a harsh voice stopped her. "No." Atop the hill Demny rose formidable, her antlers a tremendous spread of thorns and hooks and other sharp extensions, her hair hanging in straight strands to lend her blasé expression a certain rigid severity. "You've broken your end of the bargain."

"Bargain," Mayfair said, not understanding, not caring to understand at this particular moment with so much more at stake.

"You promised no more harm would befall us..."

And it shouldn't have, that black sword in Cinquefoil's body was clearly something netherworldly, beyond her expectation or anticipation. How was she supposed to predict it? What words would be best to placate them. Oh, she already knew whatever words she spoke would be the wrong ones.

"I cannot. I simply cannot take any more of this." Tricia hovered beside Demny, her six thin limbs weak. "No. No more. Demny is correct. You lied. You promised us—and now Cinquefoil is gone, and Obedience, and I suppose Charm too? I no longer see her anywhere."

"If Charm died it was because she wanted to," Mayfair said. "Cinquefoil too, clearly." So Obedience was lost too. Where was Mademerry? Did she look at the light also? She was not with the other three who remained.

"It can't be, it just can't be..." Pythette's voice was weakest, and she was barely visible, slumped on her knees with her paws pressed to her face.

"We ought to have listened to Theovora," said Tricia. "She was correct all along. And here I thought—Pah! What did I think. I thought Earth might provide salvation but even that thing—one limb indicated Uriel—"even that thing is not what I was promised. I am leaving now. You two may join me if you wish."

Despite her formal syntax by the end of it she was choking down tears and when she turned the sound of harsh sobs trailed her until she vanished from view. Mayfair tossed a hand at Demny and Pythette. "Go on, leave as well if you like. I'll save you all even if you refuse to help. Even if you abandon me so close. Go on!"

"You misunderstand me," said Demny. "I will remain by your side. I aid you regardless of the danger. But you shall not desecrate their bodies, do you hear me? Not the way you did Charisma. I shall ensure that, Princess Mayfair."

"Fine! Fine. Then do as I ask and take the sword out of Cinquefoil's body. It can cut through the aura around the angel. We need to cut through so it might hear us—"

"No way?!" the angel suddenly shouted, turning its irises of pure white a seemingly random direction, looking at absolutely nothing. "They couldn't be—oh, those rascally devils, what are they up to this time?"

The next instant, the water that divided Cleveland from Whitecrosse split apart and a tremor rocked the ground. In the entire process of lifting Whitecrosse to Earth the ground hadn't so much as twitched until the very end, and even then not nearly as cataclysmically as now. Someone shrieked. It was Temporary the elf, squeezing her eyes tight as she wrapped her arms around Mayfair and both of them toppled into the water. Screams came from elsewhere, the water level undulated violently and though not a drop permeated the aura that enveloped Uriel a whipping wave shot up and swallowed Mayfair entirely. She was too late to take a breath, the pressure built on her lungs instantly, water entered her nose and mouth. Her body hurtled wildly, she clung to the Staff of Lazarus as Temporary clung to her, but she could not even attempt to surface with the elf's weight pulling down on her, and suddenly the surface seemed so far away, marked by the light emanating from Uriel but drawing distant and strobing as the currents flipped her to face the lake floor.

Something hooked her collar and yanked her up and the surface broke and she heaved a breath that was more an expelling of the water she'd been forced to gulp down.

Demny set her and Temporary and the corpse of Cinquefoil on dry land atop the embankment, next to Pythette who continued to sob. Mayfair coughed and spat and wiped her eyes and looked around blinking, at the church behind her that continued to burn and the growing crowd of people walking toward her, people she realized were from the church and who'd fled when the gunfire began, people now called toward the light of the angel. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of them streaming slowly through the parking lot. Then Mayfair turned toward the lake.

Something new was rising out of it. Mayfair didn't understand. All of Whitecrosse had moved already. Both continents, even the few smaller islands. What else could there be?

The thing that was rising kept rising. It did not stop at the surface, but burst higher, higher, higher still, higher than any skyscraper in Cleveland or mountain in Whitecrosse, so high it seemed to pierce the heavens or at least seek to, and only once the spire rose to the clouds did Mayfair understand it was a tower.

Obsidian and diamond ran in straight, glistening strands up its endless surface. That was the only cohesive element, the material of which it was made, for everything else was a madness of architecture and invention. No theme or style was solidified, it appeared to harness all that ever was or will be in its design, and emerging from the divisions of its tiers were statues that must have each alone been the height of a mountain, carved into the shapes of wicked creatures with broad bat wings and horrible curved horns, serving solely as gargoyles as from their open mouths streamed cascades of lava that struck the surface of the lake and sent sizzling air upward. There were smaller creatures too, live ones, hanging to the sides, dropping off into the lake to begin swimming for the surface.

The spire, though—The spire drew her attention and the attention of all the others. Something was atop the tower, a glorious brightness, so bright it seemed a second sun, so bright it made Uriel dull. There was a clear dark shape within it, a manlike shape that started small but grew larger, growing larger still until it became clear it was actually drawing closer. The light itself remained atop the tower, but projected in a ray onto the back of the dark figure as it approached. Something curdled deep inside Mayfair, she leaned over and vomited, and she noticed next to her Temporary vomiting too, and Pythette, and even the ordinarily placid Demny, and all the gathered crowd staring at the figure leaned over and expelled the interiors of their stomachs, bile and worse in black splatters.

"So," said the clear and choir-like voice of Uriel, amid the noxious noises produced by all others, "you haven't yet learned your lesson, huh?"

The voice that responded didn't respond. It didn't seem to acknowledge Uriel's existence at all. It spoke, a mellifluous and clear-sounding voice, a voice Mayfair knew at once, instinctually, to be repulsive, no matter how strongly it mimicked that feeling she once felt in the cathedral atop the hill in Whitecrosse, and said:

"Bow before your new God. Bow before Lucifer, possessed of holy light!"

When the Hurly-Burly's Done

Olliebollen Pandelirium was still crowing triumph to a black and otherwise silent room when the ground quaked. And didn't stop quaking.

They were already in a precarious position. The wall Shannon had erected to keep the rubble from crushing them was strong, but how strong? Jay decided they should probably get out of the basement, fast.

He helped Viviendre while Lalum went to the grievously wounded Mallory and after a silvery SORRY that Mallory, head lolling, probably did not see, used her animus to puppeteer her into motion.

"Wendell! Come on. Let's go," Shannon yelled. Wendell, disinterested, bent over and picked up his fallen gun, then moseyed toward Flanz-le-Flore and helped her upright. He wasted so much time any normal earthquake would have ended by then, but this one kept going.

One after another they fled through the portal in the ground. The magic walls the Elf-Queen erected to divide the vault vanished; the elves who made them sagged listlessly and were apathetic even as excess rubble rolled over the edge of Shannon's wall and crushed them. A few other elves languished in the vault, morose and unanimated, not entirely motionless, but lacking any care to accomplish even the basic stewardship of their lives. The party left them behind and ascended the subterranean tunnels to emerge out the side of the castle.

Halfway up the shaking ceased. A few moments later, it began again. By the time they stood as a loose group atop the hill and stared into the distance over Whitecrosse's city toward where the Door lay, it was all over.

First off, it was now daylight, or else something so bright in the distance made it seem that way. Secondly, there was some kind of gigantic black tower stretching to the heavens. And beyond that, on a landmass all of them knew had not been there before, glistened a city of glass and metal. Jay didn't recognize it by its skyline. Wendell didn't say anything either way. But Shannon extended her hands to gesture in disbelief and said, "It's Cleveland!"

"Cleveland," said Viviendre. Jay set her down and she leaned on her staff, choking on a cough. The area was still filled with soot. "Land of the Browns."

"This makes no sense. None whatsoever," said Shannon. "This is magic, right. An optical illusion. There must be a relic that shows you a place from your memory. Right? Right?!"

For a time, nobody spoke. Then Wendell piped up:

"Uh. Shannon. Have any acetaminophen?"

"What?!"

"I think she's got a pretty nasty concussion." He cocked a thumb at Flanz-le-Flore, who had been gripping her head and moaning for a long while. "You're not supposed to use painkillers that increase the chance of bleeding. So no aspirin or ibuprofen. Acetaminophen's best."

"Wendell we have significantly more important issues at hand here!"

"Concussions are serious," Wendell said. "I'll find someplace for her to rest." He propped his fanciful gun on his shoulder and limped off with Flanz-le-Flore toward a direction. Shannon chased after him, yapping incessantly.

Viviendre leaned close to Jay and whispered: "Hey. For the faerie queen's injury. You think I should..." She pointed to her eyepatch.

"Last time I saw her, things went bad," Jay said. "Let's leave her conked out for a bit."

"And *her*?"

Mallory looked gruesome. Gashes coated what parts of her body weren't covered in armor. One cheek was ripped open to expose her molars. Insane with wounds like those she remained standing at all. Actually she wasn't standing. Well, not by her own volition. In the daylight they were harder to see but Lalum's strands continued to hold her up. Lalum herself had vanished from view.

Mallory stared insensible at Cleveland and the black tower, but Viviendre's whisper lurched her monstrous face their way and with a slurred rasp she said: "Erase my memories of that fight at your peril, heathen."

She reached for her sword. Viviendre held up her hands in non-aggression. The gesture placated Mallory and she settled back into stupor.

"We don't need your relic anyway," said Jay. "Where's Olliebollen?"

He looked around. They stood in the courtyard in front of the castle, marked by a larger-than-life statue of John Coke. There were many people, soldiers and townsfolk alike, although they gave the heroes and their queen a wide berth, especially given the glares Mallory shot at any that stared too long.

"Where the fuck is Olliebollen?"

Viviendre sighed. "Who cares. I'm exhausted. I can hardly breathe. I do not want to think about—whatever that is." Her hand tossed at the distance. "Cleveland. There are a few dormitory bedrooms in the academy that ought to be unoccupied, especially now. Let me sleep and we'll worry about anything else tomorrow."

Searching for Olliebollen, Jay noticed the burning castle for the first time. He remembered the monastery. How did he feel now? Everything seemed to have spiraled away from him. Hardly involved in whatever happened here. Showed up at the end to save a couple people. Heroism, he guessed.

He saved Vivienne. That made him happy. He could say that for certain: He was happy he saved her. So he nodded, figured Olliebollen stayed below to gloat over the Elf-Queen's corpse, and helped Vivienne toward the academy—

"Oh no. Oh no you don't!" Shannon stormed back out of nowhere.

Jay couldn't even muster the energy to groan. He shot Vivienne a wan and knowing grin and she bit her lip to respond in kind.

"Wendell's a friend of Dalt so of course he's insane but *you* don't get an easy out. No, no, no. That right there? Cleveland? I don't know how. But I *know* you had something to do with it."

"You're just mad Shannon. You don't know what you're saying."

"Just mad? Just mad?! This isn't like, this isn't like you were a dick to Mother again or something Jay, this is absolutely, fundamentally, critically serious and you're acting same as always! Is there nothing in all of existence that will get you to give a shit?"

"I wonder."

Vivienne attempted: "Lady Shannon—"

"This doesn't concern you!"

"Shannon. Please. Vivienne's health is bad. She exerted a lot so we could get there in time—to save you, by the way. Let her get some rest."

"Don't you *dare* pretend she matters to you! Don't you dare!" Shannon hooked her fingers around her temples and violently vibrated her head. "I know you don't. Oh I know! You don't care about anyone or anything so don't even play pretend with me Jay. But I'll make you care about this because it's yours and mine and everyone's business. If that's not an illusion and Christ I pray it is then something is seriously wrong with the world—"

"What the fuck do you want me to do about it Shannon." Jay tossed his head, shrugged, he might even have matched parodically her compulsive motions if he didn't have his hands full with Vivienne. "Yeah wow there's a big fucking tower and a Cleveland over there and guess what? It's all just Perfidia. It's her next big mission, her next story arc. Right as we neatly tied up the last. Maybe she heard you always whining about going home and decided to make a quest out of it, Jesus fucking dick I don't know Shannon. And what if it's the real Cleveland anyway? Shouldn't you be fucking happy? You can go home to Mother and if she really wants to see me she can visit, it's only a thirty-minute drive anywhere in this world."

"Oh that'd make me happy you think. You'd think that Jay, you really would." She dogged Jay's heels even though he resolved to let his last word be final and continued supporting Vivienne as they headed for the academy. "You really do give zero shits. That's *our world* Jay. You can't mess with our world. You can't screw it all up! It functions in a very particular way. You can't just—you can't just—you *can't*! I won't allow it."

"Then you figure out what to do and if I get an idea I'll fucking tell you," Jay said, immediately forgetting his resolution to say no more.

"Oh! Ohhhhh!" Shannon resorted to strange guttural sounds instead of speech. She slapped both palms hard against her forehead and returned to normal. "Where's Ollie? Where's Ollie, that one actually knows a thing or two about this place. And unlike you they're actually happy to help as long as you don't treat them like shit the way you do!"

"Find her yourself."

"I don't think they're a she Jay! I don't think they have a gender Jay!"

"I don't fucking care Shannon! Leave us alone."

A feral howl and Shannon finally turned away, stomped five steps, then stopped and turned back to shout: "Viviendre! Don't fucking fall for it. I know all about sleazy, douchey, good-for-nothing, asshole men and I'm telling you now my brother is the worst I've met. Don't fucking fall for him I'm warning you, you'll *hate* yourself afterward!"

"Take it up the ass you slut," Viviendre said simply, without passion, and then looked over her shoulder to flash a smile.

"Oh so I try to give you some good advice and—Fine! You deserve him!"

Shannon turned away and resolved not to look back with as much force as Jay's resolutions and a few seconds later she looked back but now they were far enough away that anything she said would need to be a yell and it was impossible to deliver snappy repartee via yelling. All her muscles were a mess of pain and soreness and she wished she *did* have Wendell's acetaminophen because the blood reverberated inside her brain. Some time during the fight she must have whipped her neck around too hard because it hurt and she kept rubbing it. She scooped up the ruler and the trumpet which she'd dropped so she could better wave her arms around and looked at Mallory, who was asleep on her feet. Fine. Fine! She supposed she'd attend to Mallory. All the maidservants were dead now after all.

The thought of the dead maidservants and the dead Fool chilled her temper and a tension-relieving sigh escaped her as she wrapped an arm around Mallory to support her. At the same time the invisible puppet strings holding her up dispersed and the full weight leaned against Shannon, nearly knocking her down. Transfixed under the pressure, there was nothing to do except stare at the black tower and the Cleveland skyline.

And stare.

And stare.

Shannon got an idea.

Tucking the ruler and trumpet under her armpit, she fished something out of her pocket she hadn't used in two weeks: her phone. She'd turned it off before entering this world and other

than one desperate attempt in her first days stranded never bothered turning it on since. Now, however. Now it might be possible to use it.

Sure enough, she had a signal. That alone meant something interesting. If the distant Cleveland were an illusion, there wouldn't be a signal. If Cleveland had been pulled by itself into Whitecrosse, there wouldn't be a signal either. Only if the entire world—and the satellites orbiting it—had been pulled too. But that was ridiculous.

So Whitecrosse was brought to Earth.

Her stomach sank. Everything was worse than she thought. Whitecrosse was absurd. Fundamentally unreal. Fake, fiction, fantasy. It could not be brought to Earth. Complete and utter incompatibility.

Knowing Mother wouldn't have anything helpful to say, she first tried calling Dalt and got an automatic robot voice that began DUE TO THE HIGH VOLUME OF CALLS RIGHT NOW, WE CANNOT CONNECT—

She attempted text message instead. Sent one into the aether to Dalt, then to the two coworkers at the IRS whose numbers she had (one was her boss), then scrolled through her contacts trying to find someone she actually knew who wasn't an ex-boyfriend, and finally she sent Mother a message: *Jay and I are okay.*

After waiting five, maybe ten minutes, nobody responded. Well, it made sense. In Cleveland it must be a major disaster. Everyone would be worried about other stuff.

(Except Mother. Mother would respond right away.)

Mother was asleep. She probably slept through all that shaking, if they even felt the shaking in Cleveland. There was nothing to worry about.

Now that her rage settled, however, deep unease pervaded.

It continued until she realized she probably should find someplace for Mallory to rest in private—townsfolk were gawking—and a moment later a voice cried out behind her:

"Lady Shannon! Oh, Lady Shannon—and, ah, and Her Majesty too! Oh, I am overjoyed to see you both alive and well!"

Absorbing breath back inside, inflating herself full of will, Shannon turned slowly, as much as Mallory's body allowed her. Striding through the front gates of the castle came a soldier drenched in blood, though from the confidence of his walk it appeared none of the blood was his own. He was in the process of sheathing a shortsword and he wore armor, so it took several blinking moments for Shannon to realize who it was. In fact, she only recognized him by his thin, trimmed mustache.

"Gonzago?"

"Indeed, milady, 'tis Gonzago of Meretryce in the flesh." A few soldiers accompanied him, some staggering or limping or gripping their arms, one cradling his head in his hands, but

others cheering, crying out to the townspeople, and soon a horrendous din arose in the square as the people flocked to the sides of the triumphant warriors.

Gonzago needed to get close before Shannon could hear him again, and by that time he noticed Mallory's face. His swagger shattered momentarily and he let out a singular, high-pitched "Oh!"

"Don't worry about her, she's asleep. What's going on?"

His eyes remained rooted to the queen until Shannon snapped her fingers, at which point his machismo resurfaced. "Oh, there is so much to tell, milady! So, so much. Where do I even begin? Well, as Duke Mordac—God rest his soul—instructed, I rushed as fast as my legs would carry me to the wall for reinforcements—"

"I don't need the whole thing. What's happened in the castle? What about the fire? Mordac is dead?"

"The fight's over. We've overcome the elves—and the fire's being contained as we speak. I do regretfully inform you that the victory came at a cost. Many are dead, milady. Duke Mordac, Archbishop Tintzel, even Prime Astrologer DeWint—yet all gave their lives in defense of our kingdom and shall be justly remembered as valiant heroes—"

"Spare the romanticism. What about Duke Meretryce?"

"My uncle..." Gonzago hemmed, hawed. "He... According to reports, he fled. We've yet to find him, though I'm certain he's not strayed far."

"At least there's *one* competent administrator still around. Find him. We'll need someone who can normalize the minutiae as quickly as possible."

"But what of you, milady? Have you slain the Elf-Queen? We felt the quaking and thought the battle in the vault must be raging fiercely! Did Queen Flanz-le-Flore assist you? It was I, I may mention, that gave the order for her to be let in!"

"We beat the Elf-Queen," she said with a dismissive wave. "More importantly. Have any idea what that is?"

She cocked a thumb over her shoulder at the black tower and Cleveland. Gonzago started, seemingly noticing it for the first time. "By God! What manifestation could this be?"

"That's what I'm gonna need you to find out, Gonzago."

"Me?"

"Yes you. You can ride a horse right?"

"Certainly, milady. I'm known as quite the rider among the nobility. I've competed in races—"

"Good. Ride out there. Determine what's happening or what happened. Come back and report directly to me. Don't send anyone else. Whatever you learn, only I must know—you report to

me and me alone. Got it?" She looked at him, and, well aware how men operated, added: "You're the only one I can trust, Gonzago."

The phrase worked, his expression of obvious incredulity turned to puffed-up posture in an instant. "Yes, milady! I shall never let you down. But what of Her Majesty? Those wounds..."

"Where's a good place I can take her for treatment? The castle's a wreck."

"My uncle's city manor—not far from here. I'll lead you—"

"No. I need you to ride out, now. I'll ask someone else."

Gonzago sputtered some stammering equivocation, and Shannon was prepared to bark at him until he was browbeaten to service, but after a moment's pause he resolved himself into a more steadfast shape. Shannon wondered if he really did spearhead the fighting or if he simply hacked apart inert elves after the Elf-Queen's death. Assuredly the latter. Though if he really was the one who allowed Flanz-le-Flore to enter, Shannon supposed he did well enough.

"Right," he said. "At once, milady."

He strode off. After a few steps, Shannon called out: "Hey."

"Yes, milady?"

"You've done well today. Thank you."

"R—right! You're welcome. You're most welcome!"

When he moved again, it was at an energized trot, and he soon disappeared to leave Shannon staring once more at Cleveland.

She must fix it. As soon as possible. Reversion to status quo. By any means necessary.

She wished Mother would message her back already.

—

Out of an anchor-deep sleep Jay emerged some nine, ten, eleven hours later. Sunlight filtered through the curtained window with the same intensity as when he went to sleep. It *felt* like eternity. It felt like sleeping made him more tired.

For an indeterminate time afterward he remained motionless as a stone. Staring at the ceiling with its intricate arches, letting his eyes if not his head revolve to take in the towers of tomes and papers in scholarly disorganization. It looked exactly like DeWint's office. Which made

sense. Because it was DeWint's bedroom. Vivienne had known where to find the key, mentioning casually that DeWint was dead now.

Vivienne rolled over beside him, wrapped one arm around his chest, and burrowed her head dreamily against his shoulder. The softness of her silken clothes, the softness of the body beneath, it weighed upon him. So did her perfume, that stickily sweet smell to which at long last he'd almost acclimated. Almost. If he thought too much about it, like now, its potency grew. His throat contracted and he forced away the reflex to gag.

Instead, moving carefully not to disturb her, his fingers slid up her back and wound within her messy black hair. Around and around and around as the sleep slowly sifted out his eyes and he noticed Lalum looming over the edge of the bed staring down at them.

If he was any more awake he would've been surprised by her bare and surprisingly unconcealed face, but instead he murmured: "It's not what it looks like," which ought to have been obvious even to someone like Lalum based on how both Jay and Vivienne were fully clothed. They'd dropped into the bed the moment they'd seen it, too tired to do anything else. Maybe that was what had Lalum glaring with such an intense expression. Maybe she'd wanted to watch.

Well Lalum, what now. Intend to criticize Vivienne again, explain how dangerous she was, how Jay needed to stay away from her, so on and so forth? Go ahead. The silvery lines of her web failed to congeal into coherent words, though that was just his blurry vision. When his eyes finally focused enough he nodded dully. I FOUNDE THE FAERIE.

"Cool. Give her to Shannon."

"Mmmhhh," Vivienne mumbled, holding Jay tighter, generating a twitch in Lalum's face.

Something descended from the ceiling strung by a single line of web that shone in the scant rays of sunlight. A tiny, wriggling thing, bound within a bundle. Its mouth sewn shut, and as Jay focused, he realized there was an extra layer of webbing sewing Lalum's mouth shut, on top of the usual. She must've needed extra resistance to keep from devouring Olliebollen altogether.

IT TRYED TO ESCAYPE.

"I would too if I got tied up by a giant spider," Jay said, and the harsh glare from Lalum cracked, and she sank backward into books and jostled the towers and hurriedly righted them in a panic before they could fall. Vivienne stirred, slowly coming out of her sleep.

I FOUNDE IT FLEEING THE CITY.

Ah. Jay nodded, took in a breath, tossed a finger aimlessly. "Well. Let her speak for herself. I wanna know why."

"Huh?" Vivienne's eye cracked open.

Slowly, grudgingly, slinking behind a tower and leaving only part of a face to peer at Jay, Lalum unwound the strings around Olliebollen's mouth. As Jay expected, the room's quiet broke instantly:

"What is this?! What's the big idea? Huh? HUH? Siccing your pet spider on me now hero? That's what it's come to? After everything there isn't the tiniest shred of mutual respect is there huh? All that time we spent together was just time, I guess that's the way it goes. I'm a thing to be caught and tied up and kept around for whenever you need me to heal a wound. That it hero? And here I thought you got what you wanted same as I did, you got to show up and save the day without any effort just like you wanted—"

"That was never what I wanted," said Jay. "If that was what I wanted I'd have asked for it."

Viviendre yawned. "What's going—oh. Blegh. *Must* your friends be invited to all our intimate moments, Jay?"

"I invited neither of them."

If any scrap of Lalum's boldness remained it was gone now. She became as invisible as could be; only a few jutting legs she couldn't conceal.

"Well don't let me ruin your wonderful time." Viviendre sat up, rubbed her eyes, and snatched her staff from where it'd been propped. Rolling back and forth to build momentum she hefted herself out of bed and stabilized herself against DeWint's desk. Then she was gone out the door, the hollow clunk of her peg leg growing distant with surprising speed until the door swung back shut.

Jay would've rather stayed with her and knew he could easily do so, but he also knew she knew that too, and so he figured if she was making this much of a show of it she was asking him to respect her autonomy and give her the space she could never win for herself alone. He already knew where he'd find her later anyway. Besides, unless he dealt with the other two they'd follow him.

"Alright. You were saying."

"I was *saying*," said Olliebollen, "that we both got what we wanted. We worked together and it was great and loads of fun. Wow! But now it's over. If I wanna go, let me go, don't chase me down and keep bringing me back, alright?"

"My sister was looking for you," Jay said.

"Who cares! I hate her."

"You don't remember this since Viviendre turned you back to factory settings, but Shannon was actually pretty nice to you when you were crippled. She wants you to explain something. You like doing that, don't you?"

"I got way better stuff to do now, okay? I've got no need to get tied up in whatever new adventure there is. The world's changed. Everything's totally different than it was before and I

don't like it. Not! One! Bit!"

"Yeah that's fine. Lalum, let her go."

Now that Vivienne was gone, Lalum was willing to peep a smidge from her hiding spot.
HERO. THE FAERIE IS ONE OF YOUR MOSTE VALUED TOOLES. YOU MUSTN'T—

"I can do what I want," Jay said, cutting Lalum off before she could finish writing the rest and then refusing to read when she wrote the rest anyway. "Look. Perfidia got Olliebollen to stick with me by promising she could get revenge on the elves. She did that, so she's got no reason to hang around. It's clear to everyone but you—and my sister, I guess."

"It's more than that," said Olliebollen. "Now that those wicked, evil, diabolical, *no-good* elves have been eradicated, I have a new duty to fulfill. My duty as Faerie of Rejuvenation, and as the last surviving scion of the court of Pandelirium. I must return to our wood and become a new king—queen—*ruler!* A new ruler, one who gives birth to and watches over the next generation of fae. Yep! That's right. I'm no longer the Olliebollen you knew. I was just a little seed then, but now—it's time for a big, big tree to grow, a tree with more leaves than you can count." She nodded her head in prideful rapidity, along with several self-affirmative "hm" sounds.

HERO. THE BLAC TOWER. IT MEANS A MOSTE GREAVOUS DANGER. TO
OUERCOME IT YOU'LL NEEDE—

"Lalum." Jay shifted the pillow under his head to make it more comfortable. "Lalum. What makes you think I care at all about that tower? What makes you think I have the slightest intention to do anything about it?"

"Wise," said Olliebollen. "Very wise. That tower—that tower terrifies me. It should terrify you all. Stay as far from it as you can. Consider that my last bit of advice, hero. And let me out of this spiderweb already okay!"

HERO PLEASE. YOUR SISTER IS ALREDDY MAKING PLANNES TO—

"Let her make all the plans she likes."

HERO!

"Lalum, maybe you should leave too."

HERO...

He was being an asshole. He was conscious of that fact. Part of it was the early-morning fatigue, part of it his mind remaining stuck on what he'd say to Vivienne when he saw her again. But he simply didn't want to do this anymore. Or rather. He had something else he would rather do. He found something that actually made him happy. So he no longer needed to lie to himself, or to any of them.

"Your friends from the monastery, Lalum. They drove off to the Door. To Cleveland. They probably had something to do with that tower. Go find them. Help them. They need it more

than me now."

THAT GIRL. THE SARACEN. SHE MUSTE BE SPEAKING STRANGE FALSEHOUDS TO YOU. SHE MUST BE COURUPTING YOU!

"Leave Viviendre out of it Lalum. Listen to what I'm saying. I'm done. You can help your friends, or my sister, or just yourself, it doesn't matter. You've done a lot for me. I thank you. You were the only person I could trust for a time. But I don't need you anymore."

WAIT. NO.

"Please. Don't follow me around anymore. It's weird alright? Viviendre was clearly not happy about it at least."

NO... NO!

The pillar of books behind which Lalum hid toppled as she gripped her fingers into its side. A cataclysmic domino effect followed, where stack after stack dropped and dropping struck some other stack to take it down too, kicking up decades of untouched dust into a noxious plume from which Jay needed to shield his face. Amid the violent shuffling of pages and the whipping of those sent up to spiral slowly in the mote-ridden air a sharp sob emerged, a brisk scuttling of legs, and then a flare of light as the window opened, slammed shut, failed to close properly, and squeaked back ajar.

If Jay was still half-asleep before, the dust invading his nostrils woke him up. He stood and wafted away the plume, coughing and suppressing sneezes that only shot out more dust when he failed to suppress them.

"Jesus." Yeah, he'd been an asshole. Yeah, yeah. He knew it. What the fuck else was he supposed to do?

When it all finally settled, only Olliebollen remained. She sat on the iron rung of a small chandelier, safely above the wreckage. "You can go too," Jay told her.

"I just got one question left for ya, hero."

"Fine, fine."

She dropped, fluttered her wings, hovered close to him at his eye level. "In the vault and after, Lalum used her animus. First to hold down the Elf-Queen and then to move Queen Mallory. Wanna tell me how she did that?"

"I don't know."

"Really? That so?" Olliebollen nodded amicably, then grimaced. "You're sure about that?"

"She skulks out of sight all the time. Maybe the elves had some paralyzed fairies on them, like Temporary in the forest. Maybe she took one or two."

"Uh huh." Olliebollen nodded. "I *guess* that makes sense."

"How else would she do it?"

"She didn't eat any parts of *me*, now did she?"

"What?"

Olliebollen's gaze became knowing. She glanced to the window, then to the door, and fluttered close, though Jay backed away since her pixie dust would only irritate his nose further. "Listen here hero. Lemme give you one *extra* piece of advice. I know I said the bit about the black tower would be the last but I can't help it, what can I say. Now—That magic eye? The Eye of Ecclesiastes? That's something to watch out for, got it? Cuz you don't remember when she uses it on you. You don't remember what she doesn't want you to remember. So that girl, hum, she might seem absolutely perfect to you. But that's cuz you only ever see what she wants you to see."

Jay said nothing. Stared, his face stone. An interval elapsed. And Olliebollen shrugged with a squiggly smirk.

"Well! Humans care way more about time than faeries, so maybe you'll notice when a few seconds or a minute or a day is just... missing. I guess I shouldn't complain. It *did* make me whole again—or so you all tell me. Byyye!"

A zip, a zoom, and she—or he, or they, or it—was gone. In the quiet room, still save for the lingering motes of dust drifting in the sunbeams, Jay said, "Goodbye, Olliebollen." Then he went to find Viviendre.

—

He found her where he expected. Atop the academy's tallest tower. He stepped out into the air and a freshness swept over him he didn't realize he missed after DeWint's dusty office. A freshness—and her scent, too. So maybe it wasn't fully just fresh air. Well, he was used to a lot of things now.

She leaned against the rampart, her silks and hair fluttering in the breeze, and did not turn when he opened the door. He stopped beside her and looked out at the landscape without saying anything and was surprised by how changed it was. The smallness of Whitecrosse as a world had caused everything to curve in every direction, but now the land was flat, and the view from up here was not much different compared to the view from the courtyard in front of the castle. The black tower remained in the same place, and Cleveland past it. Perfidia's new story.

When he wondered whether he should apologize for Lalum being weird and explain how he'd told her to leave, Viviendre extended a hand and pointed. "See that?"

A figure was walking away from the city, visible just beyond the tip of the walls. It could've been anyone at that distance, but when a second figure appeared soon after, a figure who hovered instead of walked, Jay figured it out.

"Wendell and Flanz-le-Flore."

"Ah, thank you. My eyesight's no good, but I suspected they must be someone of interest. Guess they're leaving before that cunt sister of yours can order everyone off to war."

"War's not Shannon's thing." Jay's eyes followed the figures. Flanz-le-Flore remained a significant length removed from Wendell, as though stalking him. He thought of Lalum.

Viviendre expelled a sigh, slid her legs to arch her back and rest her chin on her folded arms atop the rampart wall, and rolled her head back and forth. "All that shit that just appeared in the distance? The tower and city? That's war. One way or another—that's war."

"Shannon's a bureaucrat. She'll increase taxes maybe, but not war."

"If it's not her then the queen. Or maybe whoever's in your city will bring it us. Maybe the Browns will come."

"I don't even think that city's real." Jay contemplated the merits of explaining about Perfidia. Decided he would rather not discuss the topic at all. "Look. I sent Lalum away. For good—"

"Jay. Within a year I'll be dead."

She said it so optimistically, with such a smile, that the dimness in her eye only barely belied the meaning the words so obviously conveyed.

"It'll be war. Or famine. Or some terrible quest. Or my brother will show up—he's due. Or that spider who's always staring so coldly will take a bite. Or the people of this city will look around for someone to blame for their troubles and see the weird crippled Pagan bitch as excellent tinder for the stake. Or anything really. Maybe I just cough my lungs out a month from now because I breathed too much smoke yesterday and it's waiting there, waiting to constrict me whenever it feels like it."

"I'll protect you." He said it quickly, he placed his hand on her shoulder, and she smiled as though that were the response she wanted to hear, except the smile faded instantly, and Jay had the bizarre and sudden thought of kissing her so hard he sucked the smoke out of her lungs and exhaled it like a cigarette. "I'm the hero. I can shape this world the way I want. I can make a paradise. Not a paradise for others, maybe. But at least a paradise for me. I know what I want now."

"I wonder—are we even in 'this world' anymore...? What world could it be? Fehfehfeh."

"Whether I'm the hero or not I'll protect you." Saying it made it real. Saying it uncorked the cold emotions, exposed them to a flame. They boiled and bubbled, and his head felt hazy, and Olliebollen's words cut in. Did he remember all time? Did he lose a few seconds? Did Viviendre say words and erase his bad responses until she said the words that made him say

what she wanted? God let him forget that. That faerie bitch knew what she was doing when she told him that, why did she feel the need to shank him that way? Not that he wouldn't have realized himself given enough time.

But her eye remained dim.

"Jay. I don't—I don't want you to protect me."

"What?"

"DeWint died for me. It was a fucking waste. He wasted his life. He thought I was his future. His legacy. He was stupid, to the end he was stupid, and cruel too, always saying the worst possible thing." She gritted her teeth and her eye squeezed shut. "Don't do the same. You're just a man, Jay. You're just a man with a Cleveland Browns hat. A metal club. Change is coming to Whitecrosse and change will destroy me. I cannot survive it. Don't put yourself between that force and me because it's not worth it. Honestly you might even be its agent. Wittingly or unwittingly. I was selfish. I wanted a hero to rescue me from my fate and thought if I could only find one person—one person—who cared enough for me... I never realized my fate was strong enough to gobble up anyone who came close, too."

He grabbed her. Shook her softly, held her, looked into her eye, and a word from his memory lurked in his lungs like the phantom smoke Vivienne was so scared of, that word he had to swallow down to stop from actually saying it because it would make no sense to say: Mack. Mack. Why that word? Makepeace? Why him? He shook his head. He said:

"We'll go away. Like Olliebollen. Like Wendell. We'll just leave. This whole story. Shannon can be the hero now. It's all beyond me anyway. I'll tell Perfidia I'm satisfied, she can take whatever she needs, leave me devoid of Humanity, but that's fine. I don't need it anymore, I don't need the power to change the world. Let's create our own world. Just us. You and me. No other factors, nothing to be introduced. We'll be the peasant farmers who never even go to the next village, nobody will see us, nobody will care. Shannon will take my place and we'll escape. That's all I need. And you'll be safe too. There won't be any smoke, your brother will never find you."

This isn't how it's supposed to be Mack. What about those things you told me? Remember? We were going to leave the kingdom together. What about that, Mack? We would travel the world together, living free, remember you said that to me? That night in the inn, Mack. Remember? Mack. Mack?

Let him out of that memory. He didn't need to think about that fucking elf sobbing her heart out in the rain, sobbing over that broken body. Mack—Makepeace—he lied to her anyway. He didn't give a shit about Sansaime. He never did. He only wanted to escape for himself. And he did. It wasn't the same.

"There's nowhere else to go Jay. California? Of course not. Some fae kingdom? I can't survive in the wilderness, look at me. Or that city there. That Cleveland. We can see the Browns there huh? That place you tried to escape. That place from which emanates day even at midnight. That place under the black tower..."

Jay could negotiate with Perfidia. He had bargaining chips. He could convince her his satisfaction relied on Vivienne. It wasn't a lie. But how to guarantee what happened after the final seven days of his contract?

Olliebollen could flee to the woods. Wendell back home. What could he do. Where could he go where it would just be them. Safe.

Holding Vivienne against him he looked out at the world. The fields, the waters, the skyscrapers, the forests, the mountains. His eyes traced the shape of the peaks, zagged up and down.

Then he saw the solution.

Seeing it caused the memories of Makepeace to bubble and he swallowed them down like bile. He wasn't Makepeace. Vivienne wasn't Sansaime. It wasn't the same. Couldn't be the same. "There." He pointed. Vivienne looked.

Grinned. "There."

"There," said Jay. He pointed at the monastery.

Nothing Beside Remains

Duke Meretryce was, unsurprisingly, in his manor. He'd retreated there after fleeing the castle. When Shannon arrived and directed the soldiers to carry the queen somewhere to rest he swept out grandiloquently and unleashed a massive speech expressing gratitude for Shannon and Mallory's safety, applauding the successful attempt to retake the castle, and offering to fetch the kingdom's best leeches to tend to any wounds. He might have prattled indefinitely if Shannon didn't cut him off.

"I don't care that you fled your post. In fact, I'm glad you did. Mordac and Tintzel and DeWint all got themselves killed by staying behind, so it's only you left."

"Ah, yes, but—"

"And that Duke Malleus you guys keep mentioning. Is he ever going to show up? People have promised he'll show up for the past two weeks. Where is he?"

"Duke Malleus ought to arrive soon—"

"Whatever. More importantly: Forget the leeches. I'm putting no faith in medieval medicine. I'll dress her wounds myself. If you want to be useful, go to the castle and direct the soldiers. Restore order. Fulfill your function."

"Certainly, Lady Shannon. Certainly! At once. Without delay!"

He bumbled off. As he did, Shannon pondered idly that he was not so dissimilar from his nephew after all. Still—she'd have to keep an eye on him.

Mallory rested on a luxurious bed that instantly became bloodied. Despite the severity of her wounds, though, she wasn't bleeding much. Ordinarily Shannon's instinct would be to remove the breastplate to make Mallory more comfortable, but given the severity of her injuries the Armor of God's resilience-bolstering effects might be keeping her alive. Lacking disinfectant Shannon made due cleaning the wounds with alcohol (of which the duke possessed ample amounts) before bandaging them. Nursing exceeded the scope of her specialty but she imagined she did an excellent job all things considered. Yawning, she decided to rest her eyes a moment and return to the castle to assist Meretryce. So much would need to be done. Who knew if they really stopped the fire like Gonzago said. Even assuming they did. Reinstitution of basic civic functions. Temporary emergency measures... Perhaps an opportunity to introduce new document-keeping...

Shannon woke up.

Someone was knocking at the door.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. Checked on Mallory, who slept peacefully, her bandages in need of a change. The door kept knocking and she tossed an annoyed hand at it. "What?"

"Lady Shannon," said Gonzago, "I have returned!"

Already? She checked her phone. Ten hours gone—fuck. And no messages. Not from Mother. Or Dalt. Or anyone.

Outside, in a corridor rendered dark by its distance from windows, casting furtive glances over his shoulder constantly for a reason Shannon could not discern, Gonzago told his story.

"As ordered, milady, I hopped upon my most trusted steed and galloped as fast as the beast's legs would take me toward the black tower. Though the path were long and fatigue weighed heavily upon me, I persisted, striking myself at times to ensure I remained alert as I neared the known edge of our world. Though my road, which led to the Door, was oft untraveled, an eerie quiet settled upon me, a dread I have a difficulty placing into words, perhaps caused by the image, ever-clearer, of that looming tower. It may sound mad, milady, but I became certain as I watched it that it was watching *me* in turn. Believe me when I say there can be no good that comes of that tower. None at all. Never has such unease gripped me, such icy cold within my spine. I heard a whisper somehow above the pounding of my horse's hooves. I stopped and looked, there in a tree beside the road I thought I saw a face peering out at me—I looked again and it was gone, but no sooner had I reassured myself of the fact than another whisper muttered something from the other direction...

"I was close to the Door at this point; indeed, I could see the small forms of the mausoleums in the distance. Some say that ancient graveyard is haunted by the restless spirits of ancient kings, dismayed by the present state of their country, and for a moment those childish ghost-tales filled my mind. My hand fell to the hilt of my sword. Milady, foolish though that action may seem to you, it saved my very life. The next moment a—a creature was upon me. It was shaped like a human yet I knew it at once to be nothing of the sort, nor any fae either, elf or otherwise. It moved like a dog, belly upon the ground, crawling with its head twisted all the way around so its scalp dragged through the dirt and its cackling chin bobbed in the open air. It spoke no language I know and—and it was red, its skin as red as the devil."

Shannon stared at him. Attempted to discern any trickery. Meretryce directing his nephew to feed her some story, for what reason she couldn't know. "Red? Its skin was red."

"Aye, milady."

"Did it have horns? A tail with a barb?"

"I—I admit I gained not the clearest look at its appearance. And its head was upside-down, perhaps it did have some horns that dredged deep into the dirt... I think I recall such a thing, now that you mention it."

Perfidia Bal Berith. Or one of her kind?

"My horse reared back; I was unseated. I toppled backward, hitting the ground roughly, yet my soldier's instincts had brought my hand to the hilt of my blade, as I took care to establish earlier. The creature, seeing my state of vulnerability, put on a burst of speed and—and opened its mouth wide, as though it sought to devour me whole in a single gulp. I slashed my sword and it screamed; that scream placed within me a fear far worse than its chuckling

murmurs. My terrified steed galloped away without me and though I repelled that first attacker I discovered that more were coming, crawling out of tufts of tall grass or shrubs beside the road, more still streaming from the cemetery where the Door resides. All came from the direction of the tower and I knew then that the tower must be the cause of this.

"Though I was not unduly afraid to stand and defend myself, I knew above all else I must return to warn you and the people of this new threat, forced upon us so soon after the last. Alas, my legs, numbed after hours of riding, became as liquid. I stumbled, pitched forward and received this scrape you see here upon my chin. Turning, those horrible faces swarmed upon me, and I resolved myself to not allow my life to be bought cheaply—be assured of that! Yet, I now stand here before you. I wish I could tell you I fought the fiends off through my own valiant effort, but the truth is... I was saved."

"By whom."

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. Then he leaned forward; his face close enough to Shannon's to whisper. "Promise me, milady, that you shall maintain your steady calm. My savior is... unnatural. I have known her a long time; indeed, there was a time in my youth I heard talk of an arrangement for marriage. She is—she is the daughter of the late Duke Mordac, though much changed."

"And she's here? I'll be fine. Bring her in."

"Very well. May I present to you—"

He half-turned toward the darkened area he'd indicated before with neurotic glances. There, in the deep shadows, the new night now that night was day, something stirred. It shifted slowly, then with a rapid flutter. Planes and angles of it emerged into what low and whitened light remained in this inner crevice; an incandescent eye, shrouded by hanging touselles of sandy hair, from which bobbed twin antennae. The head, despite its eyes, remained like a woman's, though the body beneath, shrouded in the white folds of a well-kept nun's habit, was segmented and uncannily thin. Four gangly arms hung from the shoulders and two legs hung too, though their feet dangled with only the very tips of the toes touching the carpet. Instead the wings suspended her, long and sharp as they whirred at hummingbird pace.

The spectral sight did little to unnerve Shannon. On the contrary. She knew this one.

"I am Tricia," the hornet said, an aristocratic air to her enunciation.

"Tricia of Mordac," Gonzago amended. "The duke's sole surviving child."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Shannon said, "though we've met before. I remember you at the mess hall of that monastery."

Tricia tilted her head. She seemed surprised by something. That Shannon remembered her? How would Shannon forget any of those bizarre women? Maybe it was something else.

"I remember you too, Shannon Waringcrane—sister of the hero. You gave a most interesting speech."

"Yes, yes."

"About how we ought to... maximize our productivity, yes?"

"Correct. It made no sense to me why you women were kept up there like lepers. But I've come to learn this society is horribly optimized in no small number of ways. What shocks me most is that you're the duke's daughter and they still treated you that way."

"Yes, well," Tricia said, and then laughed. The laugh came out as a series of buzzes: zz, zz, zz. "Lord Gonzago overpraises me. I am no longer that man's daughter, by his decree and my own."

"I see. And why's that?"

"You care? You care, heroine? You don't simply wish to pontificate at me? Let it be known, I am ill of those who enjoy speaking long and sanctimonious speeches. I've been fed a surfeit of them."

Shannon leaned against the wall of the corridor, crossing one leg over the other at the ankle as she folded her arms. She pushed Gonzago aside with a glance and looked Tricia up and down, considering. She needed information from this one. She ought to proceed diplomatically.

Then Tricia spread a sickly smile. "It's the queen in that room there, isn't it? I can tell. I'm not certain how, but I can sense her. It's not a smell, but a kind of... presence that emanates from her, even through the wall. She's there, isn't she?"

A bee able to sense her queen. "Yes."

"I can... sense her on you, too, Shannon Waringcrane."

"She was injured. I helped carry her here."

"Ah. Is that the full extent of your relationship?"

Those insect eyes stared back with a certain degree of haughty pride despite their lack of pupils or irises. Shannon met the curving smile with a frown. "I would expect one of your status to consider the impropriety—"

"Oh, you sound excellent. You fit in here perfectly," Tricia said. Gonzago, cleaved to the wall between them both, glanced back and forth anxiously, forgotten by both. "Fear not. I ask from experience. Queen Mallory has had favorites before you, heroine, let it be well known. She used to teach me fencing. And I wasn't like virginal little Lalum, I was quite receptive to the affections she showered upon me. Things progressed... quite far between us, even. It invoked my father's displeasure. He'd never been pleased by me, since I was a walking representation of his own failure against the temptations of the flesh, but this crossed a threshold he refused to accept. Yet he could not forbid what the queen desired. Hiding me away in his country manor didn't stop her, nor did disowning me. Then one night, strange men burst into my room

—my room which ought to have been under the auspices of the ducal guard—and threw a bag over my head. They carried me to God-knows-where and..."

The smile cracked. The head tilted; the antennae twitched. The haughtiness faded.

"I eventually ended up in that nunnery. And somehow, that was only the beginning of my tribulations..."

"Awful," Shannon said. And it was. In a modern society, one that functioned efficiently and by rule of law, such miseries would cease to exist. But Shannon failed to eradicate all trace of impatience from her voice.

"I really did believe," Tricia said, "that there'd be a change once that lizard-woman appeared. I thought if we had the Master's power on our side—But it was all a lie, all lies, it's always all been lies. And we've always all been trash, highborn or low, hm? Or have they treated *you* well, heroine? I wonder—is that from being the heroine, or because you remained close enough by the side of the one woman strong enough to protect you..."

"Your father is dead," Shannon said.

"Lord Gonzago informed me. Forgive me for not shedding tears over the matter."

"I don't care if you've been disowned. You're the heir. That makes you Duchess of Mordac now."

"Ha! Really? You think such a flighty thought? Oh my. Oh my!" The *zz, zz, zz, zz, zz* repeated with the same irritation as a fly in your ear. "Look at me. Look at me! I am a monster!"

"I told you before at the monastery, I don't care what you look like. And nobody has enough power to overturn my will," Shannon said, not certain how much she believed it, but suddenly certain she would make it so. "Mordac is dead. So are Tintzel and DeWint. That means the church and the academy are out of the picture and the dukedoms are crippled. Meretryce will almost certainly attempt to shore up his power and absorb whatever he can from the deceased. I can't let him do that. I cannot allow this country to continue in such a precarious political state. There's something insane on the horizon and Gonzago is talking about devils crawling over the countryside; disunity will bring ruin. I'm the heroine and I have the queen's power behind me. If I say you're the Duchess of Mordac, it's so. Then I'll have Meretryce hemmed in on all sides—his own peer now my ally, his nephew as well." She nodded to Gonzago, who with a trembling smile nodded back. "We'll command complete control of the country. Not only will we be able to repel this new threat and deal with the tower, but we'll be able to enact a more efficient, advanced, egalitarian society."

"No," said Tricia.

"A society exactly like the one I described at the monastery. A society where all are able to produce to their maximum extent, regardless of gender, race, or appearance. A society where —"

"I said no!"

Shannon had gotten excited. The speech was impromptu but it'd come easily. Her head whirred with more than she said, thoughts of structures, systems, machines to be implemented, laws and fairness, an elevation of Whitecrosse until it mirrored that glistening glass city on the horizon. It was enough to distract her from the immediacy of the issue regarding the black tower and, of course, that glass city's manifestation, and when Tricia so sharply snapped back Shannon fell to solid ground and cleared her throat in embarrassment.

"You are exactly like her," Tricia said.

"Like the queen? Nonsense. I know the queen very well, as you intuited. We could not be more unlike—"

"Not the queen. The queen's damnable daughter."

"Daughter—Mayfair?"

"Exactly like her. Exactly, exactly. Preaching and preaching. It'll be a better world for us all. A better world, even for the poorest, damnedest souls. All will be elevated, all will be happy. And just like her you believe it. You truly believe it, it's not even a lie, it's not a lie because you need to believe it as much as all the poor souls do. Rich or poor—and I've been both—there's no panacea for the soul other than words like these. Fantasy, fantasy is what we eat. But you already see me as a pawn even if you don't realize it. Duchess of Mordac—your pawn to keep Meretryce in check, to carry out your bidding, to discard if the movement is advantageous. Like Obedience and Charm and Cinquefoil were all discarded without even a twinge of remorse. I am depleted, heroine. I cannot take more. It is now my time to bow out of this farce and retire to some obscure corner where I may sleep in peace. I am here solely because I saw an old friend imperiled on my way and obliged his persistent request to speak with you. I have done so; farewell."

"Wait," Shannon said, but Tricia was turning anyway. "Wait, at least—the tower. Do you know anything about the tower, or Cleveland, or what happened? Please—"

"Sweet Tricia."

That voice. Rasped somewhat. But it was the voice. Tricia froze. No, more than froze, seemed to deactivate, whatever intricate machinery keeping her body afloat lost power as she sagged against the wall. Gonzago's eyes bulged and he shot to straight-postured attention. And a creeping chill spread over the nape of Shannon's neck.

"Sweet Tricia, after so long apart, you'd leave without wishing me well?"

"Your—Your Majesty," Tricia mumbled.

Queen Mallory stood at sharpened slant across the breadth of the corridor, having emerged into it in perfect silence, so that upon turning Shannon couldn't help but jolt at the phantasmagoric sight within the pale beams. The condition of Mallory's face didn't ameliorate matters. She'd peeled off the bandages and left a long wide crescent curve

reaching from the corner of her mouth to just under her cheekbone. Whatever regenerative powers her armor—which she continued to wear—afforded her, they'd halfway sealed the grievous rend in her cheek, but left this macabre carved grin in its place, in some ways even more unsettling. Most unsettling of all was that this wretched scar did so very little to mar the innate beauty of the queen's face. It was like a photo in a magazine, where some pen mark had landed upon the model by accident; one was capable of ignoring the mark, binning it as an extraneous incursion onto the photograph that remained otherwise flawless beneath, yet at times the mark would surge back into the forefront of one's awareness, returning with as much unexpected force as the first time it was seen.

"Your Majesty," said Gonzago.

"You should return to your bed and rest," Shannon said. "You—"

"I feel fine." Mallory's eyes glowed pure and blue. "I feel better than I ever remember. I feel *alive*, and I can't sleep anyway with you three chattering so much. I heard the thrust of it. Monstrous creatures is it, encroaching upon our land? Ha, ha!" A full-throated laugh, a piercing alacrity. Shannon sighed; of course. There wouldn't be any persuading her. Whatever. No point trying to hold her back anyway. Better to focus her efforts on some slight adjustment to the queen's trajectory before she launched herself straight into a wall like a bullet.

"Now, you"—Mallory aimed a finger at Tricia's face and Tricia went still against the wall—"You'll do as my pet tactician says. All these dry political matters I leave to her, so you can accept her commandment as my own. If she wants you close, I want you close. Understand?"

The finger fell and Mallory seemed to banish Tricia from her thought immediately, possibly preparing to voice some order for Shannon to prepare Whitecrosse's remaining soldiers. Before she could, Tricia spoke:

"My queen. You know my respect and love for you. The years we've been apart never dulled your image in my mind. But understand. I cannot accept your order. I am no longer part of this kingdom—I am no longer part of anything. I cede my meager role in these proceedings."

Shannon was shunted against the wall as Mallory strode forward, past Gonzago, to the hunched insect whose endlessly segmented eyes beetled in and out of the darkness with each turn of her quivering head. Mallory raised her hand in position to slap and Tricia stood meek to accept it—but instead, the queen's hand fell gently, and caressed her chin.

"You haven't the right, my sweet."

"Your Majesty..."

"To abnegate yourself? To reduce yourself to peaceful nothing? No. Such a right, for those loathsome sorts who desire it, can only be earned on the backs of those who strove for greater. Your new form is not that of a parasite, dearest. Nay—what you are now is more appropriate than what you ever were. I am your queen, little bee, and you shall heed my commands; am I understood?"

It was the touch. Watching it, Shannon decidedly felt she disliked it. But then again Shannon wasn't stupid. She'd seen Mallory bestow such gifts upon the handmaidens too. But she disliked it.

The touch melted Tricia. "Yes... Your Majesty." Her voice drained of self-resolve, which in and of itself was a type of "abnegation," Shannon thought. Whatever. If it netted them what they needed.

"Throw off this ragged habit. Let's find for you clothes that more befit your station—Tricia, Duchess of Mordac."

"Y—yes, Your Majesty...!"

Shannon stepped forward before any actual disrobing could occur. (Gonzago, plastered against the wall, silently thanked her for the intercession.) "Before that. She knows what's happened with the black tower. We need that intelligence—now."

"Ah, of course," said Mallory. "We may hold council in my bedchamber. The three of us—I'm certain the young lord has business to attend to at the castle."

"Yes! Right away!" Gonzago tried to run but Shannon seized his shoulder to stop him.

"This is serious, Mallory."

"Ffffiine, as my little pet demands, so shall we do—for now." Mallory's Glasgow smile curled. "We shall see how long my patience lasts—or hers, for that matter." She gave Shannon a look that Shannon tried to ignore and couldn't. She was well aware how little Mallory needed to force the issue, but so far her resistance held.

"Tricia, if you will," Shannon said. "Tell us what happened, from the beginning. In as much detail as you can muster."

"As you wish." Tricia cleared her throat, gave the queen a glance, and buzzed in response to another slight caress. "Where it began. At the monastery. I suppose you all know what happened with the fire already, so I'll start with when we gathered to speak to Archbishop Astrophicus for the final time..."

The tale began, finally. And it'd hardly started when Shannon's phone rang.

Her phone was mute, so it only buzzed in her pocket, and since Tricia buzzed on occasion when she spoke, it drew only a single quizzical glance from Mallory before Shannon pulled it out, apologized profusely for the interruption, hastily half-explained what a phone was, and went to answer it. Had she looked at the caller beforehand she would've avoided even the hasty half-explanation.

It was Mother. Avery Fenster Waringcrane.

"Yes? Hello?" Shannon said as she tucked herself into the corridor. "Mother, thank God you're alright. Jay and I are fine too. I'll explain everything in more detail later, but—"

Static crackled, flared, settled. A voice, shrouded in the fizzle, spoke. It was not Mother's voice. It said, tonelessly, the following words:

"She's dead."

The call ended.

Shannon lowered the phone. Turned slowly. The three at the other end of the corridor all watched her. She nodded. Took a step forward. The interruption was over. Fortunately it'd been brief. Tricia could resume her story and soon they'd have a fuller image of what was going on.

She dropped to her knees and sobbed, uncontrollably.

—

Cleveland was Hell.

A Hell she couldn't crawl out of. Not this time.

Devils streamed through the city. Hundreds—thousands. Cleveland's streets, viewed on high at a distance, turned red from the seething tide of their bodies. Where they went screams peeled alongside howls of indignant hedonism, gunshots, explosions. From Pandaemonium's apex radiated such bright light that the pillars of smoke seemed tiny, insubstantial. Nothing was hidden under the majesty of Lucifer. No horror too foul to be kept to some shadow, to be half-glimpsed so that human imagination might supply a worse substitution. There were no worse substitutions. In broadest daylight occurred rape, torture, enslavement, murder.

Perfidia Bal Berith watched from the rooftop of the building that once housed her business. Helicopters zoomed overhead. Then jet fighters. Missiles fell, flames burst up in lines. But human military presence was scattershot. It wouldn't only be Cleveland where devils emerged. Any reasonably large city had a pathway to Hell from which a horde could scramble up to wreak havoc. Governments would be fighting simply for their own survival. Order breaking down. Chain of command shattered. These few jet pilots probably had no orders. Took off from whatever base without a plan, without communication, in a futile frustrated effort to respond to the situation. Cogs coming off a malfunctioning machine. Striking the ground and bouncing away until they rolled under a crevice somewhere.

This mayhem hit Perfidia unclearly. She sat hanging her feet over the edge of the building, kicking her heels against the brick.

Hell was here. Nowhere left to crawl. Nobody now to set her free. She *was* free. Seconds after she and Kedesah realized Ubik stayed behind it happened: A sharp searing on her chest. It doubled her over in pain. Kedesah doubled too, despite the things that hurt her and hurt Perfidia being worlds apart. When the pain ended they both knew what happened. They

turned away from one another and pulled off the relevant parts of their clothing to confirm: the brand, PROPERTY OF U.B.B., was gone. It wasn't a brand that vanished for no reason. They knew what it meant.

Kedeshah didn't stick around after that. Where she went, Perfidia didn't know. Then out of the Hellevator bubbled a whole horde of devils and the madness began.

At first Perfidia thought the devils were the ones that had chased her and Ubik out of Hell, finally caught up. They swept past her without caring. Then she realized they must be last-ditch forces the Seven Princes marshalled to overcome Uriel, or at least distract while they covered up their crimes against God. As seconds passed and the horde failed to be annihilated en masse by a ray of heavenly light, the situation just became confusing.

She wasn't in the mood to care. But at some point a devil hopped out of the horde, grabbed her, and shook wildly. John Verschrikkelijk.

"It's crazy, it's so fucking crazy! Didja hear? Didja hear, didja hear?"

With the superiority of someone explaining privileged information only they knew, John spilled his guts. After the incident at Beelzebub's court, he'd slithered around Pandaemonium and heard a few things. The Seven Princes—or more accurately Satan, who'd assumed control and even imprisoned Mammon—activated all the collected Humanity since the dawn of time. All that power, and it was right there at the tip of Pandaemonium, which was no longer deep underground but now jutting straight out of Lake Erie. With it, devils would be on top. No more subservience, no more hiding! It was the devils' time. First they'd wipe out all these humans, then they'd overthrow God and the angels, just like they always dreamed!

"Wipe out the humans?" Perfidia needed to scream to be heard over the mob. "Then where will we get Humanity?" She could imagine a Hellbound devil getting an idiot idea like that, but not John, who worked Earthside.

"Humanity? Why do we need more? We got it all! Right there, atop Pandaemonium!"

Perfidia thought, but did not say: *You mean the Seven Princes got it all. Or, more specifically: Satan's got it all.*

"We're free! We're finally free," John continued. "No more contracts, no more deals. Satan outlawed those anyway, I heard it on the way up. There's no more need for Humanity. Now we've got—Divinity!"

Then he was gone. Perfidia, stricken by a glancing blow from some rampaging devil, spiraled into the nearest wall. No more contracts. No more deals. So she was out of the job. Without even Ubik's kind of occupation as a fallback. Officially unemployed.

She thought about that on the rooftop of her office building. Hours passed and still no divine retribution, so maybe John was right. Maybe devils would finally triumph. Somehow the thought instilled no pleasure within her. Ubik was dead. The career she built for herself via centuries of hard work was dead. At this rate, Earth would be dead too. What the fuck did she have left? The orgiastic insanity below only churned her stomach.

Her eyes rose up the black sides of Pandaemonium, to the light at its apex only visible at a squint. She threw up her hands and extended both middle fingers in a gesture Ubik once liked. "Fuck you, Stalin," she said. Even as a remembrance of the departed the line made her cringe, so she amended: "Fuck you, Satan."

My name is Lucifer.

The sky between Perfidia and Pandaemonium ripped open. A tear that spread from one end of her periphery to the other. Jagged lines split apart like teeth as the placid whiteness revealed something erratically golden beyond and through it emerged a body large enough to straddle the entirety of Cleveland with a single step. She jolted, scrambled, slipped and fell on her back as the city-sized head sprouted out of the void and shot straight at her, seven eyes opening upon it and yet the face one she recognized, one she'd seen only a day earlier on her flight from Hell, one adorning the side of a skyscraper under a singular word: BELIEVE. It was a face that changed always yet stayed the same. The face of Satan—

Lucifer. Even in your thoughts you shall refer to me as Lucifer.

Instantly her brain was rewritten so that when she tried to think of any other name for him the word she thought was Lucifer. That was Perfidia's lowest ranking priority though as the gigantic, godlike body formed of pure and glowing gold extended closer. She turned to run but the hand of this god reached out two fingers that, despite each being larger than a city block, delicately pinched the back of her shirt's collar to lift her airborne. Kicking, flailing, the ground dropped out from under her as she rose into the air. The devils streaming the streets turned to fire ants and then blended into red lines running like veins through a city increasingly toylike until clouds obscured it in streaks.

The pinched fingers released her and she dropped onto an upturned palm. "Uh," she said at the seven eyes that pierced her. "Uh, hey. So uh. If this is about—if this is about that whole breaking out of court thing, I know that looked really bad but in the end it seems like it worked out for you so maybe let's let bygones be bygones and—"

Silence.

She was silent. She didn't need him to force her with his powers. She turned into a clam and prayed. Prayed to whom? God? This was God now, wasn't it?

Perfidia glanced around. Where—where was she?

You are one layer above that at which the Earth resides. Just as Earth is one layer above that at which your Whitecrosse resides—or did reside.

All here was golden. She thought maybe it was better not to look too carefully.

This is where I have decided to do battle with Uriel and God's angels. Were I to unleash my full power on that lower layer, Earth and all life would be extinguished in a millisecond; soon to follow would be the rest of the universe, so weak it is. Look! See them? Their forces arranged? It is the angels come to strike me down, though they know they cannot. It is fine,

look. What you see shall not be their true forms, but a facsimile I have crafted for you. I command you: Look!

Perfidia looked. Within the expanse of gold was organized an army. Angels—all, as Lucifer promised, disguised in humanlike forms. At the forefront, leading the others, stood Michael, chief of the archangels, but in true heavenly form the army was divided and subdivided and subdivided again into units of exactly scaled measurements, with the first level of subdivisions led by Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, and the other archangels. Then the cherubim led the next division, followed by lesser and lesser ranks: a perfect, rigid, inflexible hierarchy at complete odds with the maniac procession of devils who flooded Cleveland. God for ya, though, and for all the might and majesty these angels exhibited in even this diminished depiction, they were nothing but divine slaves—everyone knew it.

They fight, as they are programmed—such a delectable word, that "programmed"—yet they know they cannot triumph over the Divinity I possess. It exceeds their power. Already I know the outcome of this battle, to its most minute degree. After what seems seven days and seven nights from the perspective of your lesser layer, I shall slay the last angel who stands—it shall not be Michael, but Uriel, whose murder I shall savor, as they spoke some rather unpleasant words to me as I first descended from Pandaemonium to meet them—and then God's forces shall be but waste before me. Then it will be left to God himself to manifest, in either his form or his Son's; and though my foresight cannot yet extend to him, it is his shorn power I now keep in Pandaemonium to flow through me on any layer in which I exist. I shall triumph, once and for all. Look at them. Look at their fear! They all know. They all quiver before me!

Giving some longwinded and grandstanding speech was a pretty clear Lucifer modus operandi, and Perfidia sat quietly through it without interruption. Midway she wondered why, if Lucifer wasn't here to smite her, he bothered to tell her of all devils.

As I have transcended that lower layer and shall be occupied for these seven days and nights, it falls to you to spread the joyous word to your kin. Let it be known to devilkind that their God, Lucifer, shall fulfill his promise to them at long last, and that for their final emancipation he demands only their undying love, loyalty, and praise!

"Of—of course, O God Lucifer," Perfidia said. "I'll—be sure to do that, absolutely as you said. I'm sure in your now omnipotent wisdom you know better than me, so take this only as a sincere question from a position of ignorance: Don'tcha think it'd be better to have someone like, uh, Beelzebub or Moloch do the whole message-spreading thing?"

A pause. For a moment Perfidia thought she'd pissed him off and wondered why she spoke at all, really just nod her head and—

Beelzebub and the others loyal to me I have ordered to defend Pandaemonium. You are more worthy for this task. You are a fragment of me, after all. None may more accurately sing my praises than I myself!

A fragment... of... him. Perfidia smiled sheepishly and dared to glance around, wondering what she was missing. If there'd been a misunderstanding somewhere.

Then it struck her. With a sinkhole in her innards it struck her.

Trust. Purchased so dearly, yet no price guarantees its security. Take Mammon. All these centuries he'd plotted against me, seeking to take my place at this exact moment, when the time for Divinity was reached. He had done so subtly, carefully, not by empowering himself as his Aspect suggested but by empowering those most strongly affected by his Aspect. That cretin, Ubiquitous Bal Berith, for instance, who was the brother of that husk you inhabit. A lowly wretch. Useless pimp lurking in sewers, whoring his mindless sister for measly profit. But he possessed Greed. So Mammon bestowed upon him a gift he was too stupid to realize was a gift, a most powerful creature who reversed his fortunes immediately...

Kedeshah.

The daughter of Ashtoreth even. Mammon believed when the time came, he could force his followers of Greed to rise against me. Then Ashtoreth would have no choice but to side with him too, out of love for her kin. Belial and Rimmon would not interfere, and Moloch, who always detested me, would join his little rebellion—so he believed with such certainty. Blind fool! I, seer of all, saw straight through his scheme, though he took such pains to conceal it. And for all his trouble I undid him without him realizing. Simply by plucking off the tiniest fragment of myself and stuffing it into that body of yours!

Perfidia was in the midst of a mental breakdown but could only sit silently and let this endless spray of words drown her.

Ubiquitous Bal Berith was allowed to operate as normal, leaving no chance for Mammon to become suspicious. You merely left his presence, but all along I planned for your return, so that I might undo Ubiquitous at the perfect time. You created that lower layer—would you truly be able to do so without my will guiding you?—and set in motion events that would summon an agent of God to Earth. Then you returned to Hell at the perfect moment, and with the aid of Beelzebub I allowed you to escape to Earth with Ubiquitous and that daughter of Ashtoreth. Mammon's greatest card in his favor suddenly became my hostage! For that daughter was now in grave danger from the descent of Uriel, and only by investing me with Divinity could her annihilation be prevented. Ashtoreth had no choice but to obey me! Mammon was caught entirely off guard. He had nothing. Moloch is an idiot but not nearly as suicidal as he pretends. The rebellion died before it even began! A brilliant masterstroke. What else could be anticipated from Lucifer, who once stood second only to God and who will soon stand first above all!

Then he laughed. A big golden seven-eyed God body, laughing in a way that Perfidia could not hear with her ears. A laughter inside her mind, rebounding, reverberating, shaking her bleary vision so that out of the endless golden body appeared afterimages of Lucifer as he once had been in each of his previous iterations.

So that was it huh? Perfidia was his puppet the whole time. Proceeding along a four hundred-year plot to resolve some top-level devil politics. Did she not have a will of her own? That didn't make sense. Always she'd thought she'd been making her own decisions, forging her own path. Even through the failures, the humiliations, the suffering, her Pride had reminded her: You still remain and you'll continue to remain. That concept: You.

Now go. The angels begin to move; the battle begins. Be my little messenger. Tell them all what they must know. Have them chant my name and sing hallelujahs in praise of Lucifer!

The hand dropped out from under her and she went hurtling backward, spinning through empty air. Spinning she saw Cleveland then Pandaemonium then the sky and the golden rend within it closing as Lucifer turned to meet the opening salvo of the angels.

You. You. You.

She tumbled until the moment before she was about to splatter the rooftop of her office, then all her downward momentum stopped and she landed with feather grace to return sitting exactly where she'd sat before. Staring ahead, she saw her hands outstretched, middle fingers extended to Pandaemonium, except now they shook.

And was it Lucifer's will that she flipped him off and said "Fuck you"?

Never in a million years. Not Lucifer. The light atop Pandaemonium glowed: Divinity. Atop Pandaemonium—not inside Lucifer. Of course not.

"Where did *you* go," said a voice behind her. It was Kedeshah. She stepped forward and one foot scraped the floor. Her eyes were puffy. She clutched Ubik's coat to her chest.

"I—I could ask you that too."

Kedeshah's lip curled. "I went—oh who fucking cares Fidi I'm so lonely I can't bear to be alone and he's gone. It's not fair. It's not fair! Fidi! Fidi!"

She stumbled and Perfidia rose and caught her. She sobbed against Perfidia's chest.

"Let's fuck Fidi. Please. Please I need it so bad I'm gonna die. I can't take it anymore. I just need to fuck until I don't remember anything. Fuck me to pieces Fidi. Please. I NEED it Fidi. I NEED it!"

Fucking until you didn't remember anything. Yeah that might be good. Returning back to what she once was before Lucifer got his hands on her. A dog wagging her tail. At least that was *her*, huh? Or would Lucifer's will compel her to spread his message, like he asked?

She felt nothing compelling her. She felt instead thoughts bubbling in her head. Not the distressed or sad thoughts she might have thought. No. Of course not. She was still Perfidia Bal Berith, that *must* be true. It must be—

"In seven days and seven nights Lucifer shall defeat the angels," Perfidia told Kedeshah. "Then he shall be true God of this world. Praise his name."

Kill her. Oh God if she really was just Lucifer's tiniest crumb just kill her.

"What?" asked Kedeshah through her tears.

"Kill me." At least it was her will that said it, right? At least dying would be an act of defiance against him he could not control, right? Even if it was too late, and the only

command she refused was his pettiest and least consequential.

"I can't. I can't be alone. You're the closest to him. I can still smell him on you..."

Those words cleaved deep into Perfidia's heart and she gripped Kedeshah back, held her. It was nonsense, self-aggrandizing nonsense, what else would she expect from Lucifer, Lord of Pride? Some kernel of truth bloated to exaggeration. Maybe in some way she did as he wanted. But her thoughts were her own. And she still had a certain smell that was her own.

Perfidia didn't want to die. Not even now. Of course not. She still held her own Pride. But if she wasn't the one being killed, then...

Some kernel of truth bloated to exaggeration. If Lucifer had the power of God, then why was the light of Divinity kept in Pandaemonium—instead of residing within him?

And why did Lucifer decree that no more contracts could be made?

"Kedeshah," she said. "Do you want to kill the one who killed Ubik?"

"I can't kill an angel..."

Perfidia didn't mean the angel. Uriel possessed no will of its own. Merely an instrument of God. It did as programmed. The one whose will brought Ubik to that point, however... No reason to belabor Kedeshah with the details.

"We can," Perfidia said, "with that."

She reached behind her and pointed. At Pandaemonium. At the light shining atop it.

"Fidi... I get it. But you're crazy. Forget how hard it'd be to get up there anyway. If that's really Divinity, what do you expect to do? Just pick it up? Even if you could, power like that—it'd destroy a mortal body basically instantly."

Right. Of course. That's why Lucifer kept the Divinity in Pandaemonium to begin with. He couldn't contain it, even though he claimed to be immortal. Pride—some kernel of truth bloated to exaggeration. He wasn't a God. He was borrowing the power of one, but he couldn't keep that power for himself, not permanently.

Devils couldn't acquire Humanity—let alone Divinity—from nothing. They had none of it innately, were the opposite of it. It might pass hands from devil to devil via transactions, which was how enough of it had pooled into the grubby claws of the Seven Princes, but obviously Lucifer would never hand it over willingly—and force was out of the question.

But Humanity originated from somewhere. There was somewhere more natural for it to be.

Lucifer decreed no more contracts could be made. Why? Why bother spending time to do that before going to fight the angels? He could've spent that time instead telling the devils what he made Perfidia tell them, all that crap about being praised and shit. He *needed* to suspend contracts. It was so important it superseded his Pride.

Perfidia let go of Kedeshah and hurried to the stairwell that led into the building. Kedeshah followed, moaning and whining, but Perfidia ignored her as she cut a direct route for her office. Mayfair cleared out the Whitecrosse papers, but she left the rest untouched.

It was natural for humans to possess Humanity. It was unnatural for devils. The Divinity atop Pandaemonium was simply sitting there, somehow being projected onto Lucifer, probably via some crafty device he (or more likely Belial, crafter of devices) designed—but it was only being projected. Otherwise loose. Unkept. What would happen if a human encountered it? Human and Humanity, two entities of natural compatibility and attraction?

Lucifer decreed no more contracts—so Perfidia thought she could guess the answer to that question.

Perfidia sat in her office chair and opened the drawer while Kedeshah sprawled her body atop the desk and whined. "Please Fidi, don't tease me like this, I really so very need it right now..."

"Kedeshah." Man nothing in this drawer was organized. "Kedeshah, I need you to scout out Pandaemonium. Learn its defenses. We're gonna reach the top, but if we go in blind we'll never make it."

"I don't wanna! I just want you to do horrible, rancid, awful things to me and let me call you Master. I still have his coat. Could you wear it? Please? For meeeee?"

Once not too long ago, Perfidia would've recoiled at the thought. Such debasement was beneath her Pride. Now, though, she realized what was beneath her Pride was part of her just as what was above.

"I'll do it," she said, "if you do what I ask. Can you be a good girl for me?"

Kedeshah, suddenly eager, rolled onto her belly and wagged her tail. "Oh, call me a good girl again. Again!"

A grin spread on Perfidia's face. She'd found what she was looking for. A sheet of paper, which she raised to read the text in the light that streamed through her window. Lucifer banned all contracts. But no devil would dare terminate a contract that'd already been signed.

And no devil—save one, one willing to do the worst possible things if it only saved her own neck, one stupid fucking idiot who let a totally ordinary human outwit her—would ever sign a contract where they delayed the transfer of the human's Humanity to a later date. It certainly wasn't Lucifer's will that would've debased itself to such lengths. Only Perfidia Bal Berith, Ubik's original dog, would do such a thing.

The contract remained intact. Had the human who signed it died, it would've been voided immediately, but here it was, the signature confirming its authenticity. Its unique terms set to expire Wednesday, December 20, 2017—seven days from now. Right before Lucifer finished his oh-so-distracting battle with the angels, an interval during which he would surely pay little attention to a layer of existence beneath him.

Now, Perfidia needed only to find the one who signed this contract: Jay Waringcrane.

Coming Back Is Difficult

Viviendre couldn't walk to the monastery, even if Jay supported her the entire way. They needed a carriage. Despite Jay's status as hero and the British funny money Viviendre tossed around liberally, nobody in town was interested in crossing Flanz-le-Flore's enchanted wood to pay the archbishop's twisted women a visit. Eventually, they bought a farmer's cart and a pair of tired old horses. They'd have to drive themselves.

They left at assumedly noonish. Following the line of trees Flanz-le-Flore created, Jay held the reins while Viviendre leaned with her back to his and watched the city shrink slowly behind them. The black tower's light bleached all. Everything was paler: the leaves, the grass, the surfaces of the small lakes. Other than the fight with Pluxie, Jay had never handled a horse before, but the stoop-headed duns they bought were pliant, resigned. They blinked away the flies that feasted on their cataracts. But that was all.

"I should like to write a story, once we're there and nobody's around to bother us," Viviendre said at one point like any other point. "For so long we've only had two stories: The Bible and John Coke. I'll write the thrilling tale of Jay Waringcrane."

It felt like a sarcastic joke. But if it were, she would've fehfehfeh.

At another point: "Do you think we're allowed to be happy, Jay? Or will some thunderbolt come down the moment it starts to happen?"

Jay said nothing.

"Sorry," said Viviendre, "I haven't a fucking clue what I'm talking about."

Around when Jay's internal sense of time told him it was night, the line of trees dropped away and the road forked around a dilapidated wooden structure. From this direction, Jay didn't recognize it at first. Then he realized: It was the abandoned inn, where he first met Makepeace and Sansaime.

Viviendre had been yawning the past hour, so Jay said, "Let's rest here. We'll reach the monastery tomorrow."

He stabled the horses without difficulty and left for them the same bucket of oats Sansaime tried to feed her and Makepeace's horses the morning they embarked for the woods. In the inn's main room they dined on what they'd brought with them, simple stuff, bread and apples. Only enough to last the trip. Jay assumed the monastery had food. He'd seen the nuns eating at the mess hall, at least. Did they grow it themselves up in the mountains, on terraces or whatever, or did Perfidia not think about it and simply cause food to manifest in their storeroom?

"I feel begrimed," Viviendre said as she dropped an apple core onto her plate. "Suppose that's to be expected, the pampered princess on one of her rare excursions into the country. But *ugh* that cart is filthy. Look at my hands. Caked with dirt."

She held up her palms. They were small and smooth.

"I see nothing," Jay said.

"Of course you wouldn't. You're *you*, after all. But I dislike the feeling and I wouldn't want to feel like this if we... Well, you know."

He understood her real concern. Though he wasn't sure what he thought about the implication.

"There's a pond not far from here," he said.

So would that be how it went? Him and her bathing in that pond surrounded by wind-swishing trees, then back to the inn to finish it off? Retreading the steps of Prince Mack. Things ended poorly for him when he finally reached the monastery.

Viviendre spared him the *déjà vu*. "You are *not* allowed to peep." Standing on the sandy shore where Jay and Makepeace had once fought, her peg leg sinking slowly, she jabbed a finger at his chest. "Maybe you've got some perverted ideas since we spent the night in the same bed. However! I still have *some* dignity."

She spoke with prim fury, the veneer of an uppity noblewoman, but Jay knew her well enough. She wore those clothes and jewels and perfume for a reason. Oddly, it nicked him that there remained some barrier of trust between them, but he supposed he was distant too.

"You'll be okay on your own? You don't look like you can swim."

"I'm not a fucking imbecile Jay. I won't go deeper than I can sit. Now shoo!"

He strolled back to the inn, tapping his baseball bat against the tip of his shoe. So what would happen after she finished bathing? Would they sleep in the same bed again? This time not so exhausted? Just like Mack and Sansaime? He wouldn't be able to get Makepeace out of his head. Well. She'd be nervous. She was nervous already. When they started to kiss right before her funny "fake" assassination plot she'd been nervous too. He'd play it off. Say something like, "We're not ready yet." Maybe he'd tell her the truth and say he didn't want to do it there. Best not to bring up Makepeace though. He wondered if she still felt anything about him. She hadn't mentioned him at all in days, as though she'd replaced Makepeace entirely in her mind with Jay. She seemed different in many ways. Shyer. Less foulmouthed. Presumably no absurd and mislaid schemes to deepen his affection for her because of innate self-loathing that made her feel unworthy of being loved...

What if Perfidia changed her? Could she do that? Rewrite her character on the fly to make her more affectionate, more demure, more in line with traditional conceptions of a romantic partner—

No. He was done thinking like that.

And it was that easy. Suddenly he felt peaceful.

The inn was ahead. He managed to smile. Makepeace wasn't a ghost haunting him. What'd it matter what Makepeace did in that inn? It had nothing to do with Jay Waringcrane—the modern Napoleon, emperor of nothing!—who was living his own life, by his own rules, the way he wanted. It only took one other person. Maybe that was the trick. Fantastic insights for Vivienne's biography.

"Hey-ho there dearr," said a voice.

Jay stopped. He stood amid a stretch of sun-bleached grass waving listlessly to and fro, fifteen feet from the back of the stable, with the inn a little further beyond. The voice came from directly in front of him, it sounded so close, but nobody was nearby. Nobody was anywhere. The hills stretched in one direction, Whitecrosse in another, and Cleveland another still. Each of them dry and whitened. A rustle came from the stable, but it might've been the horses.

He flipped up his bat and caught it in both hands, readying his stance.

"Awwwh don'tcha wanna talk... to meee?"

A woman's voice. Which was weird. Jay might've believed in the manifestation of a generic bandit. All his games were rife with those, though Perfidia hadn't seemed interested in doling out random encounters so far. But bandits were usually grizzled men and this voice wasn't simply female, it was lilting, reedy, wind whistling through grass.

"Come out," Jay said.

"As the dear asks, I am bound to oblige..."

It rounded the side of the stable, stuttering its steps awkwardly, swinging its hands at its sides, with its head at a tilt so severe it looked like someone had snapped its neck. A woman. Almost comically large tits, barely contained within a crisscross of leather straps tied around a silver ring. The skin—there was a lot of it—red. Curved horns on its head. And behind it swished a long, thin, barb-tipped tail.

"You a friend of Perfidia," Jay said.

"Perfidiaaa..." The devil woman snapped her head the other direction as she approached. Her jaundiced eyes were like amber. Her long, forked tongue tapped her upper lip. "Don't know no Perfidia dearr, but I could get to know you! Very well."

"Don't come closer." Jay pointed the bat.

"What if I *like* it painful!"

"Stereotypical," Jay spat.

"Awwwh don't be so mean. The last dearr I saw coming this way shot all my friends with his crazy gun. I barely got away myself... But you don't got a gun, do ya? Unless it's what I see in your pocket..."

She kept advancing, slowly, stopping whenever Jay adjusted his bat, but always resuming, always finding a way to inch closer. Jay stepped back, fixing his eyes on hers, watching as she slowly circled him. He decided he didn't want to wind up between her and the stable. She might not be alone.

Then he noticed. Her odd steps weren't without purpose. She favored one side of her body. Her hip, bared under a leather thong, was wounded. It was difficult to tell because her skin and blood were the same color.

"Come onnn dear, don'tcha know? Lucifer is God now. Devils got Divinity. You humans aren't shit to us. But I'm a nice girl. I won't kill ya just for fun... No, no. You're a cutie. I'd like to keep you as a pet. I'd like to suck your cock till you shrivel up like a prune, sweetie pie..."

"This is hackery Perfidia," Jay said, theoretically to the sky though he didn't take his eyes off her. "Cleveland? Devils? What are you pulling here? This isn't even close to what our contract's about."

"So you'll talk to other girls but not me." The devil pouted. "You'll even talk to that hideous crippled little bitch... Left her so she could wash out her festering cunt. What if I paid *her* a visit? Split her open and crawled into her skin? Would you like me then, if I looked like *that*?"

He suppressed a smile. This devil didn't realize what Vivienne could do with just a word. But Jay disliked the idea of not settling this himself.

Sprinting at a modest arc with his bat swinging in from the side, he charged. No Vivienne, no Lalum, no Olliebollen. Nobody here but him and this devil.

His attack looked wild. A screaming attack while sprinting, something that relied on momentum alone. Her amber eyes glinted hungrily and she dove the opposite direction of his swing with a feline movement that seemed to compress all bones in her body to a single undulation, her claws bared to rip into his thigh. Jay didn't know shit about this devil, didn't know what she'd do in a fight, but given she seemed like a literal whore he guessed she wasn't smart about combat. His attack had been a feint all along, never intended for follow-through, and he'd specifically made it to force her to jump the direction of her wounded hip. He stopped his sprint short, planted his feet, and quickly swung out a kick.

It wasn't a strong kick. He'd lacked time to wind it up, after all. And even with her wound she moved faster than expected. His boot caught only a glancing blow against her face but it was still a blow; her neck wrenched sharply to the side and she twirled into the dirt. Somehow though she'd gotten ahold of his kicking ankle. Jagged nails tore through the jean denim and into his skin, drawing warm blood and wrenching him off-balance. He dropped hard onto the packed-down path and kicked his legs furiously to break from her.

He scrambled to his feet within a plume of dust. She backed up as well, rising slowly, and they stood apart, facing one another again. His ankle hurt but not so badly he couldn't walk. No more crazy sprint attacks though—not that he'd expect even an idiot to fall for the same feint twice.

"Awwwh, you're smiling," the devil said, her face wreathed in dust. "No fair! I finally find a cute dearr all for myself and he's like *this*. I'm the unluckiest devil in the whole of Hell!"

"You can still leave," Jay said. Though it was true—he was smiling.

"You're such a bastard!"

Her foot, which was bare, with long jagged toenails similar to claws, scraped the dirt and kicked up a fresh spray of dust before she crouched low and pounced. Jay thought—she's doing my move, she's trying to trick me—but she wasn't, her body drove into him headfirst and flung him onto his back and he barely got the bat between him and her before she started swinging her claws screeching ferally and dripping viscous drool onto his face. Her barbed tail angled for an attack—and not at his face. He put everything in his body into sliding back along the ragged dirt as the barb came down, missing its intended target by inches and digging deep into the empty space between his thighs.

She was surprisingly strong, her claws got around his bat and kept him from using it to lever her off, and now her mouth was opening wide to reveal twin rows of fangs, so wide he thought—she's gonna bite my face off. For an instant he blanked on what to do. This was her element, body pressed to body. Her legs split to match his and her toes drilled into his ankles, spearing him down painfully, while her claws slid from the bat to his wrists. His eyes squinted, he suppressed an open-mouthed cry, her drool would only get in his mouth, but he needed to think of something, he must have an option available—

The ghost of Makepeace whispered in his ear. A phantom memory resurfaced, this same inn but a different night, a night that was actually black. Two bodies shuffling in the sand.

Jay rammed his head straight up. The brim of his Cleveland Browns hat jabbed into the bridge of her nose.

Her head snapped back with a boneless neck motion, she cried out, her grip loosened, the weight of her chest left him. He broke his wrists away and slammed the tip of his bat into the underside of her chin. Her gnashing teeth sprayed blood. She fell off him. He climbed to his knees and swung the bat into her head, and when she fell down he swung again, and rising painfully on ankles that barely functioned he swung another time.

"Owowow, owie, please dear, please, I was just joking! Just a joke!" Her body thrashed as he kept the blows coming quickly, not giving her enough time to recover. One of her feet or maybe it her tail lashed out and his leg buckled, somehow he only fell to one knee, he continued striking. The bat's metal sound echoed in the dry air, bat against bone, against bone. Her voice kept crying: "Sorry, I'm sorry, so sorry, I hate fighting anyway, please I don't want to die," begging him, pleading for her life, and Jay only thought: Christ it's taking a lot of hits. It'd only been a few for Charm and Charisma.

"I'm sorry dear, I'm sorry..."

He swung once more and the wind went out of him, he could barely breathe, he fell on his ass and looked down and realized he'd utterly obliterated her head, brain and skull and blood in an unrecognizable soup, spewing up a smell like feces with only the ring of a jawbone and a

few teeth remaining. Yet he still heard her voice: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Even as, seemingly by magic, her body shuddered and began rapidly decomposing, turning the grass where it lay brown and then black as the blades crumbled to ash, he still heard her begging.

He sagged back against the ground and stared at the faded sky.

Everything inside him deflated. He turned into a flat skin drying under the sun. Yet a restful flatness. Pain oozed out of him, alongside everything else. He felt only his lungs, heaving. Active. Useful.

Some time later a voice cried out: "Oh fuck. Oh Jesus Christ Jay, what the fuck?" Vivienne tottered into his view. She reached for her eyepatch. "You're bleeding. Why the fuck didn't you yell for me or something, I didn't even realize—Hold on. I'll put you back—"

His hand reached out and grabbed her smooth fabrics. He lifted his head off the dirt. "No."

"No? Jay you're hurt. What even happened? I mean, no, fuck, we can worry about that later. Jesus my chest. Fuck." She placed a palm to her heart and wheezed in a rasping breath.

"It's okay. Viv. It's okay Viv. I'm fine. See? I'm okay."

And it was true. He felt—okay. He sat up and inspected his wrists and then his ankles. A few cuts, some deeper than others, but nothing serious.

"Viv. Don't have an asthma attack. Come on."

Her breathing had risen to hoarseness, her eye was wide, but he pulled her close and held her and patted her back. She retained her pungent sweetness despite her still-damp hair. Did she keep perfume bottles with her? Whenever she moved she jangled; she had many fine things that might make such a noise.

He held her until her breathing returned to normal. "I'm sorry," she said. "You scared me is all. You're *sure* you don't need me to return you back to the way you were?"

"No. That devil said something. Something I shouldn't forget." Lucifer. Divinity. God. He turned and looked past the inn, down the road, at the far distance. The black tower, Cleveland. He thought about the nuns who had piled into Wendell's car. The lizard one especially. The one that looked like Mayfair and Makepeace.

This *wasn't* Perfidia's new plot, was it?

No. This was something else.

"Something you shouldn't forget. Meaning what. Tell me Jay."

The fight had ended, his breathing returned to normal, but an electric feel remained, even as he continued to hold Vivienne. A thought: It could be something real. After all these fakes and facsimiles, games either on his computer or under Perfidia's design.

Something real.

"Jay. Jay, talk to me. What did it say? What do you mean, devil?"

Some ember still remained. An image of greatness projected inside himself, a thought trending Napoleonic...

"Nothing you need to worry about," he said idly. "We'll get you to the monastery. Then I'll decide what I want to do."

"You—you bastard!" Her frantic disposition grew intense. "I see you looking that way. What did it tell you? What?!"

"Calm down."

"Calm down?! I can tell. You'll leave me again. I can tell!"

"No, I—I mean—"

"Oh you can never stay. Of course. Why would I think otherwise! Something always—to take you away—I cannot have a single fucking thing can I? Can I?"

"Viviendre. Viviendre."

"No. No. Not this time. I will not allow it. Not now. Not when we're so close to happiness!"

"Hey—"

The eyepatch was off. Shit. He held her still, he could do something—do what? Hurt her? Her lips were moving and—

Nothing new under the sun.

Jay blinked. He glanced around. What—where did...? Viviendre was with him. Didn't he just leave her at the pond? What happened? She quickly replaced her eyepatch. Oh.

"You used your eye on me," he said dully.

Worry embodied her manic expression. Her face was haggard and gaunt even though her hair glistened and her sweet scent pervaded. She shook her head slowly, then bit her lip. "You—I had to, Jay. You were—you were hurt. Hurt bad."

"Hurt? How?"

"You got in a fight. With that, that thing, whatever the fuck it is! I don't know. Look at it!"

A melted, rank mass of rotten flesh. Plus the smashed remains of a skull. Jay's eye twitched and he blinked a few times before rubbing the corner hard. He thought the skull just said something: Sorry. I'm sorry.

"Huh?"

"You killed it, whatever it was. But it hurt you bad. You begged me Jay. You were screaming in agony. I had to—You know I wouldn't use the eye on you if I didn't absolutely have to."

"Of course," he patted his chest as though he expected to find phantom wounds. Nothing. "Yeah."

"We—we have to go. Look. More of those creatures are coming."

Viviendre indicated the distance, where the fields of grass gave way to a horizon from which the black tower and Cleveland rose. Red dots, like fire ants—fifty, maybe a hundred.

Red. Why red. "What was it I killed again?"

"I don't know! Okay? I don't! Whatever it was, one of them nearly killed you. Let's get the horses and go to the monastery, okay? Alright?"

"The horses are tired—"

"I'll use the eye to turn them back to this morning, fresh as tulips. Please Jay. Please! Let Mallory deal with whatever those things are. Remember our plan?"

Of course he remembered. She held him tight, peered up at him with her one eye. Begging. Confusion lingered, but he supposed... if she'd seen him dying, her distress made sense. And revitalizing the horses—clever trick.

Something seemed off still. Had Perfidia sent some new monster to entice him into her next plot? Obviously that would never work. He was long finished playing her game. Why were they all red though?

He returned Viviendre's embrace and patted her back. "It's okay, Viv. We're going to the monastery. Come on."

As they went to gather the horses and supplies, Jay took a last glance at the inn and thought to Makepeace's ghost: *I've eluded you again.*

—

Shannon latched long nails into her forehead. Her wrists compressed her shrieking eyeballs back into their sockets. Like ibuprofen wearing off it all ebbed back. These silk blankets around her, this fine feathered mattress under her bare back, a morass into which she sank irrevocably.

Beside her Mallory fucked the hornet girl. She'd already finished with Shannon. Soft cries intermingled with bizarre buzzes that stirred the sickness in the pit of Shannon's stomach.

Why? Why did she have to—she could never resist. The stress, the compounding horror of it all, those were the times she needed it most, yet also the most inappropriate times. In an ordinary world she acted as a machine, a perfect operator, processes and facts. If she divorced that half of herself from the other, the one that always wound up in beds like these with some body or another beside her, then it became a logical deviation. Simply an extra process, something running in the background when the computer went to sleep for self-maintenance, unseen and unknown by all.

Mother was dead.

"Ah, oh, my queen, my queen, God I never want to be a nun again...!"

Windy day, everyone all in mourning arranged around the pit into which they lowered the man that ruined her life, and she sobbed more than anyone. Jay twirling in the background, six years old, arms outstretched: I'm a sail! I'm floating away like a sail!

Mother always blamed Shannon. She never said it, not once. But Shannon knew. It oozed out Mother like slime. A silent home. Jay with his toys in his room and Shannon creeping quietly to snatch something from the refrigerator while Mother deliquesced on the couch watching a movie she would never remember. Nobody ever talked again in that house. Shannon couldn't have killed him though. She was just a kid then. But Mother blamed her. Mother and daughter, a happy family. When Shannon got her first period she had to look up online what to do. A silent home, all shadows and black.

No. It couldn't be real, how could it be real, what? A voice of a stranger said so and hung up? A prank. Mother misplaced her phone, some delinquent acquired it. A logical skepticism founded on a reasonable bar for burden of proof and yet she believed it not for a moment. She saw the black tower, she heard what Gonzago said about devils crawling over the countryside.

Out the bed she slithered anyway, falling from it more than any dexterous mechanical motion of limbs in a natural pattern, while Tricia came loudly throbbing her long stinger into the empty air while Mallory petted and shushed her through the throes. Kneeborne slouching with only a single sock for clothing to the pile of garments she'd cast off or rather Mallory cast off her and rummaging rummaging rummaging until the phone with its smooth perfect surfaces spread tactile pleasantness across her palm. Mallory cooed sweet nothings to a Tricia who was sobbing now too, muttering about the dead too, dead friends, dead nuns, Obedience and Cinquefoil and Charm and all those who died in the fire that night at the monastery, demanding to nobody—to everybody—why it had to happen, what sense of holy judgment condemned them who'd hurt nobody, done nothing truly wrong! Mallory whispered: "My pet. My little toy. My cherry."

Shannon called Mother's number. Her back propped against the wall, her legs splayed randomly as she watched the mounded forms of the other women in the bed shuffle about each other. The phone rang. It rang. It rang. It rang. It rang.

It answered. "I told you. She's dead."

The same graveled voice as before, mired in static.

"Tell me it different," Shannon whispered. "Tell me it's a lie. A stupid prank. Please. Anything."

"You know it's not different."

Yes. Shannon knew. Her eyes squeezed shut.

"Who are you," she asked.

Some sound was playing in the background. Hard to discern. It bothered Shannon to hear it and her head twitched.

"Who are you," she asked again.

"You know me."

The sound played again, louder. A little jingle. Happy and optimistic even fragmented.

Shannon did know the voice on the other end. That raspy voice. "You're the one who took the key from me. You're Sansaime."

"Oou-ou-ouh! That's a bingo!" Sansaime said, in the exact same tone and inflection as the German gestapo in the film *Inglourious Basterds* [sic] by director Quentin Tarantino, such an uncanny dead ringer that Shannon actually saw the actor—who won an Oscar for the role—imprinted onto the back of her eyelids. Did this medieval fantasy elf actually watch the movie, is that what she's done since stealing the key to the Door?

The bafflement of it sliced through Shannon's stupor. Her brow furrowed and into this clarity of mind she realized what sound was in the background. A video game. One of Jay's moronic video games.

"Did you kill her?" Shannon asked.

"Maybe I did," said Sansaime. "Our worlds are connected now, so how about you come over to get your revenge? Bring that brother of yours as well. He can break me open with his bat like a *pinata*. I've a wonderful surprise to spill out of me if he does!"

A wheezing, manic laugh followed until it cut off abruptly as either she ended the call or the service dropped it due to spotty signal.

Shannon lowered the phone believing herself to be more upset than she was before and only after careful consideration realized that was not true. No. Instead the inner mechanism of her brain began to churn again and hopeless bloblike sorrow gave way to industry.

From the bed Mallory rose. Pale slats of light showed through the shutters behind her nude form. She'd removed the Armor of God for the first time since the fight; her wounds were now scars. Some larger, redder than others—the hooked smile at the corner of her mouth most apparent of all—but simple scars.

"The sole problem with females," she said, "is the tragedy they attract to them ineffably. You two dry your eyes now. I've need of you to command my army as my generals."

Buzzing, Tricia turned over. "And what do I know of military tactics?"

"Nothing, but neither do any alive in Whitecrosse. You, at least, I trust. Rise. Rise, you both!"

Shannon gathered her clothes and rose, her eyebrows sharpening to a point as she blinked and rubbed her eyes and thought again about Sansaime swallowed in a sea of static, saying "That's a bingo!"

"Well then." Tricia's tone grew detached, carelessly effete and purged of all dismay in an instant. "Those devils are coming, and in great waves. My first order of advice is to prepare the town for siege."

"Hm." Mallory's eyes scoured Shannon's body as she shuffled into her undergarments and shirt. "Dreadfully dull, but I suppose sensible—"

"No," said Shannon. One arm went into the same white button-up shirt she'd worn since she departed Earth, then the other. "Sieges became obsolete the moment mankind developed guns and artillery. Those devils are coming from Cleveland. That's the modern world. They'll punch through stone walls sooner or later. Probably sooner."

Mallory tilted her head, smiling without smiling. She hooked her foot under the discarded tatter of Tricia's white habit and with one deft flick threw it onto the bed. Tricia crawled with her four arms to pull it toward her. "You have the Trumpet of Jericho, do you not?" Mallory said. "If they destroy my walls, make me new ones."

"The Trumpet only works in one direction, one wall at a time. It'd never hold. You know that though."

"Certainly, cherry. But I do wonder what my unparalleled tactician proposes instead?"

One button after another up her shirt. All in logical, ordered procession. "Whitecrosse's standing army is small to begin with. Knights in service of individual lords and a few orders of guards. After the elves, the number's even fewer. We use that smallness to our advantage. Mallory with her sword and Wendell with his gun can devastate large numbers of enemies quickly."

"I wouldn't expect that Wendell fellow to still be here," Mallory said. "I could tell—he had other thoughts."

Shannon doubted how well Mallory could actually tell something like that just by looking at someone's eyes, but she let the point slide. "It's irrelevant. Mallory alone should be enough. As Tricia informed us, the devils are streaming out from the tower in every direction. Almost assuredly they're focused more on Cleveland right now than us. It's closer, it's more densely populated. That means a relatively small number will be headed toward us, at least in the immediate future. An offensive attack, with the overwhelming power of the relics, could work."

"I'd like very much something offensive," Mallory said.

"I know you would." And maybe that colored Shannon's advice, or maybe she truly thought this was the best maneuver. She knew nothing about military tactics whatsoever yet she spoke now with the confidence of an expert. To her surprise her words made sense. Well—what did she expect? Shannon Waringcrane was a sensible person. Ruled by logic and process. There was a rational order to all things and that interior truth could always, always be discerned, no matter within what insanity. Tornadoes and hurricanes, at their core, operated mathematically: Wind at certain velocities, progression across certain distances. "I'll have the Ruler too. I'll know the enemy's numbers as we near them. That's intelligence they won't have of us. We can steer toward weaknesses in their lines—they won't be organized in clear lines anyway—attack where they're least numerous, and punch through."

The last button slotted into its space. She popped the collar and whipped her tie through it, automatically crafting a Windsor knot with a few unconscious motions. On the bed, Tricia floundered trying to get the habit on over all her strange insectoid elements and eventually lost her balance and flopped onto the mattress. Only Mallory remained motionless, watching Shannon dress with more investment in the process than Shannon possessed herself.

"Punch through. A fine expression. But punch through to where? For what purpose?"

"To Cleveland. We punch through to Cleveland."

"Why? Is that not where the majority of the devils are, as you said yourself?"

"Are you not itching to fight more enemies anyway?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. I'm ravenous for the chance. But I seek to understand the mind of my chief tactician. For what purpose does all this serve?"

Shannon said nothing for a moment, giving Tricia space to interject after she awkwardly crammed her head through her habit and caused her antennae to bounce erratically.

"That daughter of yours told us she'd bring Whitecrosse to Earth to save us," Tricia said. "Yet it's done quite the opposite. Why shouldn't we find a way to put it back? She holds the Mustard Seed. If we find her, we can return everything to normal. And leave Earth and its loving God to contend with the devils."

Yes. That was an explanation Shannon might give. These worlds were meant to be separate, they operated on different sets of procedures, so let them be extricated. This all happened because the order of things was set arrear. Debts unpaid. Actions without opposite reactions.

Yet Shannon imagined the image of Sansaime hunched over a computer screen, much like Jay used to spend his every waking hour, staring at some pixel polygon mush as men with swords took turns whaling on goblins. Through eyes that still throbbed raw she managed a smile to match the scar on Mallory's face.

"Or," she said, "we arm ourselves with the technology of my world. Guns, phones, radar, lidar, everything we can get our hands on. We combine it with the relics. And then we take on

the source of it. We storm that black tower."

"Oh, I *quite* like the sound of that," said Mallory.

Shannon was surprised to find *she* liked the sound of it too. Sending that tower crashing down to the ground, restoring Cleveland's skyline to its proper shape, flattening those devils into red mist. Yes. Oh yes.

"I shall do as you ask, Your Majesty," said Tricia. "I cannot say otherwise."

"Then it's decided," said Mallory. "Gather supplies, gather whoever is fit enough to accompany us. We march on the tower of devils. We march on Cleveland."

Strangely Fluid and Polymorphous Beings

Day never ended. The sun came down even through the canopy. Jay's eyeballs ached. Even when he closed his eyes he saw the light.

They traveled without cease, without sleep. Through Flanz-le-Flore's forest, inert now that Flanz-le-Flore was no longer in it, neither joyous nor malicious. It came and went as Vivienne held his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. They didn't talk.

Then the forest disappeared and the horses trudged up the incline among the mountains. The monastery loomed with the daylight a halo around it. Emphasizing its ruin, its scorched sides, its missing roof. A gravestone.

Jay thought they might have to abandon the cart where the avalanche had buried the path, but in the two weeks since he left the nuns had cleared enough of it, which was good because he might've had difficulty with Vivienne otherwise. The real problem came at the gate. Three nuns stood there, waiting for him.

"No. You may not enter. Turn back now," said the foremost.

He recognized her. The praying mantis. He held the name on the tip of his tongue for several seconds as their cart clanked inexorably toward her then remembered: Theovora.

"We're not coming to hurt you or take anything," Jay said. Vivienne was barely awake and said nothing.

"Irrelevant," said Theovora. "This is a cloister against the outside world. It is where people divorce themselves from its ceaseless changing."

A paradise. "That's why we're here."

"No. No! You are change's agent. You are fundamentally incompatible—See what you wrought when last you came! As the steward of this monastery I cannot allow it. Let alone the fact that you are a *man*—"

"I'll speak to the archbishop then."

"He's dead."

Dead. The plant. What a racket he made, complaining about it. Was it really so stupid that one of these guys turned into a plant, when there were spiders and birds and deer? A fundamental rejection of this world at every possible point, and at the same time a rejection of himself. He was through rejecting, striving for some nonexistent greater purpose, a paradise that by definition could never exist. Peace—just give him peace.

But that voice, which he first started hearing after Vivienne used her eye on him at the inn, continued to whisper in his ear: I'm sorry. Don't kill me. I'm sorry.

Theovora bitched but she and the two nuns who remained with her could do nothing against him. He ordered the horses forward and they had no choice but to step aside. Theovora tromped off hissing to herself, but the other two—one with a fox tail, the other with scales and fins on her arm like a fish—were kind enough to prepare rooms for him and Vivienne. Separate rooms. Vivienne was asleep on her feet (foot) anyway, so Jay didn't complain.

Nothing happened the next day.

They woke up late. When they did, the fish nun showed Jay around the monastery and described the various chores that would be expected of him—physical labor mostly—while the fox nun took Vivienne to do some knitting. Vivienne made some witty comment or another but neither rejected the arrangement. It seemed natural that if they were to stay here they'd have to do something. And since the monastery had been depeopled there was a lot of useful things for Jay to do. Cleaning rooms, tending to the garden in the courtyard, moving heavy objects from one place to another, clearing out the rubble that still remained from the fire. Once he received the overview, the fish ran off to do kitchen work and left Jay alone.

As he worked outside under the endless sun, he glanced often at the black tower in the distance and lacked anything but his thoughts to keep him company. So this was who he was all along. A man seeking a cloister against the outside world. A kid playing video games in his room.

From nothing, nothing comes.

At the end of the day the five denizens of the monastery reconvened in the mess hall. The two nuns kept to a pair, Jay and Vivienne kept to a pair, and Theovora ate alone in the corner, slowly seizing her bread with her odd claws as her beady eyes stared into oblivion. Vivienne was animated, talking breathlessly about the blanket she'd started to knit, how this was exactly what she always wanted in life, everything felt so *safe* here, didn't it Jay? Didn't it?

She continued talking as they retired to sleep and instead of going to her room she followed him into his and kept talking. Safe. Safe, safe, safe. She kept saying that word.

On the bed together, as she kissed his cheek and neck and lips, she continued to babble. "Finally. After so many interruptions and silly things to get in the way. We're here, together, and nothing's to stop us."

"Nothing," Jay repeated.

Her tone turned shy. "There's only one thing... We mustn't do anything that'll, ah, you understand, nothing that'll make me... with child." The words "with child" actively caused him to cringe, though she had sunken into such a demure state she didn't seem to notice. "I—this is hopelessly murdering the mood I know, but I must say it—with my body the way it is..."

"It's fine."

"You're—you're certain? I'm not ignorant. I understand what men need. I don't want to make you upset. You're not upset are you?"

"I'm not upset."

"I'm glad. Oh, I'm so glad we've come here. We're safe here, Jay. We're safe."

Then, comical in its timing, the door burst open and Theovora shouted: "Oh no you don't! This is a *monastery*, a godly place, there will be no such sin on my watch!"

Jay threw up his hands. What the fuck did he expect at this point!

"And what will you do about it, huh?" said Viviendre. "How do you plan to stop us!"

"I'll sit right here," Theovora said, drawing a chair from the simple writing desk that constituted the sole piece of furniture in the room other than the bed. "I shall sit here all night if I have to. It is for your own good after all. Someone must protect you from the lustful sin you seek to inflict upon yourselves. The corruption of your bodies—"

"That's rich," said Jay. "Coming from the half-human, half-mantis hybrid."

Theovora physically recoiled, but did not lift from the chair. "My sins do not excuse yours. I shall do everything in my power to uphold the sanctity of this monastery and the people who reside within it. If you dislike it, you may leave!"

Some kind of strained throttling sound came out of Jay's throat. But what else could he say? The threat would be to call her bluff and go ahead even if she was there, but frankly this whole intimacy thing still made him uncomfortable even without a nannying voyeur. Let alone subjecting Viviendre to it, which given her body image issues would probably not fly either—

"Leave," Viviendre said, "or I use *this* on you. You're the former archbishop's niece, correct? Then you know what this is."

Her arm extended rigid out of the bed and levied equally rigid was the Staff of Solomon.

"Oh. I know what it is alright," said Theovora. "No surprise you'd threaten me with it. They say the people of California converted when John Coke conquered them, but we both know the truth, don't we? You've never changed your barbaric Pagan ways. Ha!"

"One word's all it takes, crone. I'll div—I'll split you straight down the middle. I almost said it on accident, fehfehfeh. You better not test my patience."

"Viviendre. Put the staff down," said Jay.

"See now, hero? This woman has bewitched you. Her inbred lineage is as mad in mind as deformed in body! For *this* you have come here, to visit devastation upon us? For this ragged little wench?"

Viviendre sat up, nearly toppled over, but somehow held her body steady as she waved the staff wildly only a few inches from Theovora's face. "If I'm as mad as you say you ought not to provoke me. I'll split you and your two friends if I have to. I'll carve for me and Jay a true cloister away from this world, I'll—"

"That's enough."

In an instant Jay wrenched the staff out of Viviendre's hand. Viviendre panicked, jittered like a malfunctioning machine, even reached to pry the staff away from him before she aborted the gesture and wrapped her arms around herself instead. Her breathing was heavy, ragged, possessed of that hollow whistling sound as though the air were seeping through a thousand tiny holes. "Jay. I—I didn't—"

"Get out of my room. Both of you. I'm keeping this for tonight." Jay waved the staff around and alternated between glaring at the girls and eyeing the relic suspiciously. Did he have to be careful not to say the word "Divide" while holding this?

"Jay. I'm sorry. I simply thought—"

"What? That you'd kill them, erase my memories, and pretend everything was hunky fucking dory?"

"No, of course not, I couldn't do that. How would I explain the mess?"

"Out."

One severe point toward the door was all the subsequent discussion he made. Viviendre sputtered, desperation in her eye, and even pleaded, but her voice grew raspier and raspier until she clutched her throat panting and finally gave up.

"I need it to walk," she gasped at last. "Please give me it back."

Instead he handed her his baseball bat. She glared at it, but accepted, and a bit more wobbly than usual made her way for the door. Only once her intention were clear did Theovora rise from her own seat.

"I'll be watching in the hallway. Do not attempt to repeat your rendezvous."

After the door slammed shut, he sagged back into his bed and knocked his knuckles against his forehead.

The next day he met Viviendre, contrite as a puppy, effusive with remorse, devoid of any hint of indignation. But she'd had the whole night to ponder what she'd say, so who knew. He exchanged the staff for his bat anyway.

"Do not use it on them. Got it? Do not."

"I was surprised, that's all. She caught me off guard, I said things I didn't mean. Of course I wouldn't kill them."

"Yeah, then how would you explain the mess?"

She had nothing to say to that, so instead she changed the subject: "What'll we do though, Jay? If Theovora insists on watching us every night—"

"She has to sleep eventually."

"Then she'll have her two minions do it."

"We'll figure something out." Honestly, he didn't think he was missing much. But he had to consider her feelings at least.

A bunch of stuff happened that day.

First, as he trundled a wheelbarrow full of shittily chopped firewood across the courtyard, Lalum appeared.

It shouldn't have surprised him. He doubted his commandment for her to leave would stick. Nonetheless, like in DeWint's bedroom, her manifestation caused him to stop midstep in shock. Instead of hiding behind some wall she stood brazenly in the dead center of the courtyard, under the endless sun, exposed to full view without a single obstruction fifty feet in any direction. Then he noticed something else: Her mouth was not stitched shut.

"Please do not come another step closer," Lalum said. Her voice like classical music, summery and soft, meant to be played at an outdoor fete where the stuffiest men and women of all time conversed in perfect politeness. "Please understand it is extraordinarily difficult for me to do even this. I am afflicted by a perpetual, ravenous hunger. Draw any nearer and my body may act divorced from the intention of my mind."

A practiced speech. Her tone wavered near the end. Her eight legs fidgeted restlessly.

"I told you not to follow me, Lalum."

"Your sister marches on Cleveland. More specifically, she seeks to take the black tower. Queen Mallory is—is—I apologize. It is more difficult than I imagined." She pressed her palms to her face as a raggedy breath wracked her. Her hands fell away, and the discomposure that had been creeping into her features returned to a mask of pleasantness marred only by the long fangs stretching out her mouth and the six small red eyes that blinked in a pattern around her main ones. "Queen Mallory accompanies her, as do the best of Whitecrosse's remaining forces."

"I don't care Lalum. Shannon can do what she wants."

"Your—your mother—"

"What about her."

"I hate to have to tell you this, hero. Please know this anguishes me. It is for this reason and one other I forced myself to remove my gag. It would not be right to tell you this in writing. At least not my half-educated scrawl. Your mother—Your mother is dead, Jay."

Your mother is dead. Those were the words, he understood them, but they lacked reality. He imagined his mother. She couldn't be dead, she was still in her forties.

"How do you possibly know that?"

"Shannon has a device. I do not quite understand it, but it sends and receives messages across great distances—"

"A cell phone."

"P, perhaps. I do not know. I do not claim to know. I—ah excuse my difficulties please good sir—I only know she received a message on this device that told her your mother is dead. She reacted as though it were truth."

He stared at her, at a distance of fifteen feet. He shook his head. "Cell phones won't work here. They need satellites and stuff. If they worked here she'd have used hers weeks ago."

Lalum's upright posture deflated slowly, her head sagged toward her shoulder, her breathing became elevated. "I—I—I'm sorry. Tricia was there as well. She—"

"Who?"

"Oh, yes, you wouldn't—It doesn't matter. Whitecrosse has been pulled to Earth."

"No it hasn't. It's all Perfidia's stupid plot—"

"HERO YOU MUST LISTEN TO ME!" Her mouth stretched open like a black void as all her eyes flashed bright. Her fidgeting scuttling unceasing legs drew her a step closer. "You—I'm terribly sorry. I did not mean to yell. You must understand how difficult this is for me, how much I want to—I want to—nevermind that hero. Tricia explained it to your sister. She and the other nuns took the Mustard Seed or rather many Mustard Seeds from the vault and brought it to Princess Mayfair on Earth. She used the elf named Temporary to create a portal —"

"Mayfair? Temporary? What?"

"Hero please I cannot explain in detail please you must you must please oh, oh God please grant me—oh God." She swayed, her legs pulled her one way, then the other, zagging lazily closer to Jay until she stopped herself with another shout: "This is important! Devils from Hell are spilling out of the tower. They're killing the people of Cleveland and flooding into Whitecrosse. Devils from Hell! *They've killed your mother, hero!*"

The sweet summertime music was now both hands slamming hard against the keys of an organ and Lalum swayed closer, closer still, blinking and twitching her head and as Jay stood poleaxed trying to process this nonsense her mouth unhinged to the point of swallowing her whole face and she lunged at him.

He never went without his bat ever since Vivienne's fake assassination attempt but he'd left it buried in the wheelbarrow and he didn't have time to yank it out. Instead he seized the topmost log of firewood from the pile and crammed it into the endlessly large mouth, which snapped shut and gnashed the wood to splinters. His other hand uppercut directly into her stomach.

Lalum lurched back, shrieking: "Oh God forgive me, oh God I couldn't help it!" This gave Jay the time he needed to pull out his bat, which he held ready to strike if need be. But Lalum retreated, continued to howl. Strands of web enveloped her entire head.

"You're the hero! You must follow your destiny...!"

That was the last thing she said before her face was swaddled entirely in white silk, and blind her eight legs carried her at a scuttling sprint for the monastery's front gate.

She disappeared before the other nuns started streaming from the main building, demanding to know what happened. He told them the truth, that Lalum had attacked him, and they expressed bewilderment at this news since they hadn't even known Lalum was still alive, and Theovora lent him a suspicious eye like she didn't fully believe it.

Viviendre came later, slower, and pressed him far more severely. Jay regretted having told the truth, because now she wanted to stay beside him and protect him, and Jay had to tell her a million times not to use her staff on Lalum under any circumstances, that he could handle it, and so forth. It took hours to get the message through her skull and by the end of it Jay wanted to be alone with his wheelbarrow again.

When they finally left him to it, and he could actually think about what Lalum told him—about Mother—immediately the next crazy thing of the day happened.

Theovora, who had only disappeared moments before, came tromping back up to him from the direction of the front gate. She clearly had something to say so Jay sighed and waited for her to say it. Some lecture about this or that. Instead, as soon as she entered earshot, she shouted:

"Now look! More strange visitors are approaching. This is your doing no doubt. You've brought them here like gnats to a flame. Do something about it!"

"Do what?"

"Make them leave."

"It's just Lalum, you know her as well as I do—"

"Not Lalum. Come to the gate and look!"

Alright. He left the wheelbarrow to sit unattended in the center of the courtyard and followed Theovora's agitated strides to the front gate. The road curved down along the side of the mountain, twisted and switched back the other direction, buoyed on sides by other peaks including one that held the ruined remains of the fallen cross, but most of it was visible from the cliff they stood upon, or at least what remained of it after half the monastery's wall crumbled. Theovora whisked her praying mantis arm at a point down the road where a lone figure slowly ascended.

"And who is it?" Theovora said. "Hm? One of your friends? Perhaps worse yet, an enemy. Calamity! We only want to live in peace. We've given up it all so we might live in peace."

Who is this?"

The figure remained far enough away that under ordinary circumstances identification would've been impossible. This figure was different. This figure had red skin and horns.

Devils from Hell spilling out the tower... Fuck.

A twinge hit the nape of his neck and for some reason he thought about that melted corpse by the inn saying I'm sorry. Vivienne told him she didn't know what it was. Maybe. But Jay certainly had. Even if he was dying, he would've told her to relay information like that to him after she used her eye—right?

"I'll handle it," Jay said. "Wait here."

He proceeded down the path, bat on his shoulder. By the time he'd rounded the first bend the devil approaching had become clearer and he thought he recognized her as Perfidia Bal Berith. Maybe. He'd only ever seen one devil before—at least that he remembered.

Subsequent steps eliminated all doubt, though. He sighed and moved less guardedly. Hadn't he wanted to meet her anyway? To negotiate Vivienne's safety. Hm.

"Heya there Jay," Perfidia said. "In five days and five nights Lucifer shall defeat the angels. Then he shall be true God of this world. Praise his name."

"Huh."

"Sorry, I'm—It's weird, don't worry about it. How ya been Jay?"

"Why are you here."

"So maybe you've noticed the big black tower in the distance—"

"Yeah. Devils are coming out of it, Mayfair brought Whitecrosse to Earth, and my mother's dead."

The last few words struck him and he thought: So it's real, huh. She's dead. He'd never been close to her, but still—Well, he couldn't show weakness in front of Perfidia. She wanted something from him, obviously. He needed to remain sharp.

"Great. You're all caught up. Now see here's the thing. You're a to-the-point kinda guy so I'll hit you with it right up front." (Jay thought, as she paused and glanced nervously over her shoulder at the sky like she expected someone watching her, *You already haven't done that.*)

"There's only one possible way to fix all this and to do it I need you."

Yeah. Right. Him. Sure. "So this is your new plot for me after all. I actually thought it might be real for a second. You overplayed your hand—"

"Plot? Jay, what are you talking about?"

"To satisfy me. You're worried I won't be satisfied so you've cobbled together some new plot to make me feel like the hero. It's obvious. Exactly like the elves attacking the castle."

Perfidia looked around. She was panting heavily, and her white button-up shirt seeped sweat from every obvious location and many less obvious. She maintained a jagged salesman smile. "Jay. You realize I lost complete control of the situation the second your bitch sister knocked on my door right? Anything that's happened since then has been Mayfair's doing. I don't have any control over the world, I don't even know what's been happening in it for the past two weeks. I've had a real fucking time and I could bore you with a long and complicated story, but suffice to say—"

"Alright. Fine. Answer one question then: Why me. What possible need could you have of me specifically, compared to any other human in the world."

"I could explain but it'd take forever. We only have five days and it takes two to walk to the tower from here—"

"And how did you know I was here if you don't know what's happening in this world?"

Perfidia tossed up her hands. "I shoulda known this would be obnoxious. Here I naively believed Jay Waringcrane, whose one wish was to become a Napoleonic hero and create paradise, would jump at the opportunity to finally, actually be the world's savior, but no. Too optimistic. Questions, questions, fucking questions!"

"How did you know."

"That succubus you left at the inn. She told me where ya went. Well, her voice did, since you annihilated everything else. The real trouble was I almost ran straight into Queen Mallory in all her regalia and I think she woulda chopped me apart if I wasn't lucky enough to see her before she saw me. Hid while she and her goon squad went past. Your sister was with em. Seemed to be heading to Cleveland—Yeah you don't care I can tell."

He didn't care. But he did keep hearing that voice, so maybe she was telling the truth. Jay knew from experience Perfidia wasn't an exceptional liar. He should've seen some tell by now.

"The succubus mentioned you went with a lady friend too." Perfidia leaned conspiratorially, and Jay stepped back. "Who is it? I populated this world with plenty of women. All shapes and sizes. Flanz-le-Flore? She was the first one I threw at you, didn't quite get to see how all that unfolded. Not Mayfair. Not Mallory. Maybe Mayfair made someone for you—"

"God you are so chatty."

"Yeah! I am! It's been a rough two weeks okay? Cut me some fucking slack I am only barely holding it together."

If she wasn't lying it put Jay in a good position to bargain. "Can you explain what you actually need from me?"

"Sure. Correct. At the top of that big black tower over there—that's Pandaemonium by the way—there is a gigantic agglomeration of Humanity. You remember Humanity right? The essence of—"

"Yes."

"Fuck I dunno you never seem to give a shit about anything so maybe you forgot! Anyway remember how I said it'd take an insane amount of Humanity to make any alterations to fundamental laws of the universe? Well that's how much there is, collected by devils over a span of millennia. It's called Divinity. The head honcho devil—I'm not gonna say his name in case it calls his attention to me—is currently using its power to fight the angels and overthrow God. Short of it is—I wanna steal that Divinity."

"And you need me."

"Devils can only get Humanity if a human gives it to them via contract. But it's natural for humans to have Humanity, obviously. And Humanity isn't supposed to be loose like that. If it can, it'll go into any human that comes across it. Our head honcho has some kinda device to keep the Divinity isolated so he can use it without the overwhelming power annihilating his non-divine body. That means we can yoink it."

"And if I 'yoink' it, this overwhelming power will annihilate *my* body."

"That's where the contract comes in. We time it just right, all your Humanity is ceded to me instants after you absorb the Divinity, then it's out of your body and you don't gotta worry about a thing."

"So get some other guy to do it. It can be any human right?"

Perfidia's grin went wolfish and she wagged an overeager finger as though he just blundered right into her trap. "The head honcho knew about this weakness in his plan. He's suspended the ability of any devil to make a new contract with a human. He didn't suspend existing contracts, though. Remember how you kicked my ass when we negotiated? That stupid satisfaction-guaranteed-clause shit? Only an idiot devil like me would do something so dumb. Which means you might very well be the single human in the entire world who could pull this off. Really! Not a 'plot' I came up with to make you feel important. This is really it! It's even thanks to your own intelligence and ingenuity, since you had to outwit a devil to put yourself in this position in the first place. Isn't that great? It's *exactly what you always wanted!*"

Was it? Was it what he always wanted?

Maybe it was.

"You can save the entire world. You'll be a hero. A true hero. It won't be easy of course. Waltzing into Pandaemonium's no walk in the fucking park I can tell ya. All the big boys will be defending it. Beelzebub, Moloch, the works. We'll have to figure something out. You're a smart guy though. Maybe you'll see something I don't."

Buttering him up. He stared over her shoulder at Pandaemonium. Fuck. And he even had an angle of revenge for Mother. God fucking dammit.

When he glanced back at Perfidia she was glancing over *his* shoulder. "Oh is that her? Your mystery friend? Don't fucking tell me that's—Viviendre de Califerne? Wow! Woulda never been my first guess—but I respect it more than you know. You'll have to be patient with her, she's got a kinda crazy streak—"

On the ledge outside the front gate, beside Theovora and the other two nuns, Viviendre stood slouched. He imagined her wheezing from the exertion of crossing the courtyard. She didn't need to worry so much about him. It was gonna make her collapse sooner or later—

Viviendre extended her arm with the Staff of Solomon.

In a split second Jay realized what she was doing. He'd backed away from Perfidia every time she tried to get chummy with him which was a lot of times and so he stood a decent few paces away from her. Now he hurtled forward at a sprint, skidding in front of Perfidia and shooting his arms at his sides. Kind of an insane thing to do if he thought about it longer than he did, but in the next few seconds nothing happened. Viviendre's arm fell.

Then she started to descend the path toward them. Her peg leg skidded, she slipped instantly, and she flopped onto her side and rolled. The nuns gasped and gave chase.

"Get out of here," Jay hissed at Perfidia, who stood there with a doltish expression on her face. "Don't you understand she's trying to kill you?"

"What? Why? Sure she's technically Christian. But she's not the kinda person who'd instantly kill a devil if she saw one—"

"It's not about you idiot, it's about *me*," Jay said as he ran up the path to the rolling and rolling Viviendre.

He made it to the next bend when Viviendre flipped onto her back and regained control of her descent. As she slid along on her bottom she held out the Staff of Solomon, but Jay's words finally got through to Perfidia and she'd made herself scarce behind some rock or crag.

"Shit. Fuck!" Viviendre howled as Jay dropped to a knee and caught her before she went tumbling off an embankment. "What the fuck are you *even* doing?"

"What the fuck are *you* doing?" Jay steadied her, kept glancing over his shoulder wondering whether Perfidia would be stupid enough to poke her head out, and grabbed at the Staff of Solomon. Viviendre drew it to herself and clamped both arms around it. He could probably still wrest it away from her, but not without... The feeling of Flanz-le-Flore's fingers snapping in his grasp returned to him and he turned his face aside.

"You're gonna leave. I know it. Addjjjjhhh I'm fucking it all up, you're fucking it all up, why can't we just be happy Jay? Why? We're here. There's no need to leave. Why—"

"Why'd you erase my memories of the devil at the inn."

"I *told* you. You were hurt—"

"Liar."

She said nothing. He lifted her and helped her return to a standing position. He had to hold her to keep her from slipping on the uneven terrain, which made dusting off her layers of fabric difficult. Rips and tears covered the folds. Scrapes on her hands and face. He brushed her hair aside and winced at a thick line of blood that ran down her chin.

"Let's get you back and clean this up." In a medieval world without antibiotics, even a scratch could get infected. Jay doubted Viviendre had the most powerful immune system in the world. Maybe he should ask her to lend him the eye so he could fix her up. Given her present attitude he doubted compliance.

"I'm sorry... Oh, I'm the worst. I simply cannot stop myself. I simply cannot."

With a sigh he turned her around and steered her the right way, moving slowly, accounting for her limp. He glanced back once more, didn't see Perfidia, but did see the black tower—Pandaemonium—and Cleveland too.

"You'll leave me. I know. You don't need to tell me otherwise. It'll happen. Why wouldn't you? Look at me. And you'll get killed. Doing whatever they want you to do. You'll die and I'll be alone again."

"I won't leave," Jay said.

"I don't believe you."

Jay didn't know what to believe about himself.

—

Perfidia crouched behind her boulder. Had to quell any curiosity to peek. As long as she remained out of sight she was safe.

Of everyone it could be. Viviendre de Califerne. Equipped with the Staff of Solomon and the Eye of Ecclesiastes. Made her formidable to even approach despite her nonexistent physical attributes. How was *she* the one Jay fell for? What exactly formed the basis of attraction? Jay Waringcrane, as always, remained an enigma. Was he truly an individual aberration or merely part of a new class of psychopath, born out of the internet age? Regardless of all other advantages, devils adapted slowly to new technology.

Her position put her on a cliff face peering down a fifty meter plunge into a ravine where sunlight glinted off something metal she eventually recognized as the half-buried remains of Dalt Swaino's Land Rover. She sat listening to the muted conversation of Jay and Viviendre as they ascended the incline—painfully slow, she might add—and her glance eventually turned down the road to where it met Flanz-le-Flore's forest. A few figures were emerging out of it, still tiny from this vantage. Devils, though. Red skin and horns like her. Did they

follow her or were devils simply so choked everywhere else they had to come this way eventually? Five total—

HELLO.

The spiderweb spread right before her eyes and startled her into a yelp and a little hop that fortunately didn't carry her above the top of her cover, though she suspected at this point Vivienne was not staring in wait.

"Hello," Perfidia said back, then searched her rattled brain for the proper name and appended: "Lalum."

If the spider existed somewhere Perfidia couldn't see her. Frankly it surprised her that Lalum was still alive, given her condition when Shannon and the goon squad encountered her in the forest.

YOU WANTE TO FREE THE HERO FROM HER?

Perfidia's eyes went from the words, pale in the sunlight, to the five devils slowly ascending. No longer did she hear Jay and Vivienne.

(She noted she didn't need to declare the head honcho's self-proclamation to Lalum. Because she didn't see her? Or because Lalum didn't count as human, devil, or anything recognized by God old or new?)

What did she know about Lalum. Former noblewoman. Widowed, disgraced. Shy. Like nearly every woman in this world possessed of an innate inclination toward the hero. Jealousy. Instantly Perfidia knew how to play it.

"I can tell he wants to be free," Perfidia said. "This isn't the life he wants. Not really, nope. He's hooked. I can tell."

Lalum might ordinarily be religious enough to hold innate suspicion of a devil. Then again most humans were, and she'd always known how to spin them. Vivienne was the devil she already knew; Perfidia the devil she didn't. Besides, anyone folded when you showed them what they truly wanted, what they didn't even fully know they wanted. The surprise that you knew them better than they knew themselves. That sealed it for them. Far better than giving them exactly what they knew they wanted, because then they thought it was too good to be true. Call it traditional human shame and self-loathing. They didn't deserve what they thought they wanted—like little Viv herself.

"He wants heroism," she continued. "He wants to be above all others. I can give him that. I simply need to get close to him. But with Vivienne near..."

The web changed. Beyond it neared the five devils. She recognized the foremost: that fucking shitbag. Well, he'd make the perfect distraction. When the new words came into focus her concealed smile manifested. Finally some fucking luck.

I SHALL REMOUE THE PAGAN WHORE.

Terrain of the Bull

A delicate operation. Surprising number of variables—not least of which being the psychology of Jay Waringcrane—and next to nil time for a cohesive plan. Perfidia fed Lalum some generalized instructions and sent her off. Then she faced the five devils ascending the slope.

"In five days and five nights Lucifer shall defeat the angels. Then he shall be true God of this world. Praise his name. John the fuck are ya doing here?"

John Verschrikkelijk spearheaded the quintet. He wore a faded Sherwin-Williams t-shirt with the famous COVER THE EARTH logo and a pink feathered boa wrapped around his neck and no pants and goosestepper boots. And a Viking helmet with two fake plastic horns that perfectly layered atop his real ones. His four companions possessed similarly eclectic appearances.

"Fidi, Fidi, Fidi. Ladies and gents, may I introduce my good friend Perfidia Bal Berith."

"Heya." "Howdy." "*Buongiorno!*" "Hi."

"Yeah pleased to meetcha," Perfidia said with a clear trace of annoyance—and anxiety. She glanced carefully over the rock face. Only the mantis Theovora remained at the gate, standing sentry.

"That's the reception Fidi?" said John. "Not even wonderment at the grand coincidence that so happened to bring the both of us here to this isolated little spot on the globe?"

"Some coincidence. You followed me. No clue why but you did."

"No clue why? I saw my good friend running off alone and wondered what was up. Especially since everyone kept telling me you were spouting off that weird proclamation about Lucifer. I get worried, Fidi, truly I do!"

The truth couldn't be more obvious. John was there at devil court. He heard what Beelzebub said about the Door. He understood what this random island floating in Lake Erie truly was. There'd been other devils Perfidia saw on the way, but they were aimless wanderers. Satisfiers of idle curiosity. John clearly had purpose. He thought there might be something to gain here. Something that wouldn't exist anywhere else on Earth or in Hell.

"Well—I'm fine." Perfidia glanced furtively again. "There's nothing interesting here."

"Fidi! I can't believe you think so poorly of me. I came out of genuine concern..." But now he was matching her surreptitious glances at the monastery.

Hooked.

"I told you I'm fine," said Perfidia. "You and your pals can leave now!"

He was thinking: What's in that monastery. Why'd Fidi come all this way, huh? She's the one who made this place, so she'll know where the good stuff is. Playing nervous, playing annoyed, shooing him away—It just made him more certain.

Yeah, high-level technique. Known only to the best in the biz. Trade secret if you will. You've probably never heard of it—"Reverse psychology." Learned from one of the most advanced texts on human nature ever penned, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Luckily John Verschrikkelijk never read a book in his life.

The five of them pressed around her in a circle. Smiles leery. "Aw, come on Fidi. We know you came here for a different reason. Why don'tcha let your old pals in on it? Sharing is caring, another one of my classic slogans."

Perfidia let her face transform from merely anxious to frightened as they closed in. Oh no, don't hurt little ol' me—this trick not learned from a book but from centuries of practice in Ubik's harem. Their grins widened, the Italian one giggled Italianly, and the biggest challenge was not giving it away with a gigantic grin. Already she was calculating how long to let them beat her up before she "gave in" and told them about the fabulous magic items inside the monastery, the staff that cut people in half and the eye that turned back time. Five minutes? Nah. She was just Fidi to John. A pampered Earthside white collar worker. No longer even "Property of U.B.B." She doubted he'd be surprised when she didn't last a minute.

As the first of them seized her and forced her roughly against the rock, Perfidia realized with an inward grin that this was the essence of Pride.

—

Jay held Viviendre tight by the arm. He dragged her to a side entrance of the monastery's main building, where they stood under the shade of a flying buttress. He tried to drain his voice of emotion before he asked: "What is your problem?"

"You know what my problem is Jay."

"You're acting like before. With that stupid fake assassination plot. You're—"

"I know. I know. I know more than you know Jay. I know!"

She slouched against the jamb of the door and pressed her hands around her face like a funnel. A rattling, hissing breath escaped her. "I *know!*"

"Why? Why do you have to act this way."

"Because you'll leave! I know you will. I saw it in your eyes. You want to leave and you will. I'll be alone. Then you'll die. Then I'll die."

Her shoulders slumped and her hands fell. Her hair hung in huge black clumps around her face. "I'm sorry I erased your memories. I know you'll hate that. You must've decided you'll leave me now for sure, if you hadn't already. Self-sabotage. I simply cannot help myself, can I?"

For a time Jay didn't speak. He stared up, at the stained glass windows set into the side of the monastery. They were the windows that thronged the octagonal chamber that once housed Archbishop Astrophicus. He couldn't help sabotaging *himself*, either. This whole time. He'd never wanted to accept Whitecrosse, or the people or things there. He'd never wanted to accept himself. Not as Jay Waringcrane, hero of the world. Not as Jay Waringcrane, crafter of paradise. He'd told himself by rote that was his goal yet he'd kept himself from earnestly pursuing it at every bend. He'd kept himself from earnestness altogether.

Surprising then that, after all of it, he looked at Viviendre now and couldn't hate her. Perfidia gave him now exactly what he always wanted without any whiff of fictionality or greater design guiding his actions; at the same time the distraction from that call to adventure revealed herself as manipulative, petty, melodramatic. Yet he couldn't simply say: Yeah, I should go.

Viviendre was a rat. She hated herself for what she did. She hated her inability to be happy. And though there may be other factors at play, at the root of it she caused that unhappiness. He understood more than simple logical comprehension of the fact. He was a rat too.

"It's the end of the world, Jay," she said. "Look at that tower. Devils roaming the earth. The apocalypse. Neither of us are getting called to Heaven, let's face it. Why can't we simply live out whatever short time we have left? Together."

Her hand felt and found his, clasped around it; his fingers clasped back. His eyes shut and his head bowed.

"What if I could stop it," he said.

"You can't Jay. You can't! I love you but you're not that hero. I don't need you to be. I only need you to be you. If it can be stopped someone else will stop it."

"What if *only* I could stop it."

"You cannot listen to what that devil told you—"

"Forget that. Consider it a hypothetical. If only I could do it. Would you want me to? If I could save this world and that one. Then we'd be able to live in peace—"

"Until I die anyway because my lungs can't—"

"Stop thinking that way. My world has better medicine. They can keep you alive." He imagined them living in a modern Earth house. He imagined his house. He remembered Mother. Damn. Damn!

"Don't give me a dream, Jay. We already have as best we'll ever get."

He remembered his room. His computer. Those fantasy games he once thought were the best he'd ever get. He loved those games, he retreated from everything to play them. Nonstop. Until they became dry in his mouth. Until he scoffed at every trope, every naked bit of machinery. Then he'd gone to Perfidia Bal Berith.

"I can't accept that," Jay said.

"What? Can't accept that we'll die? Or maybe after everything you truly do want to be the hero. Hm?"

"I'll make a paradise," he said, "for the two of us."

The rattling breath came back as her head shook slowly, her lip curled, and a few yellow teeth showed. She gripped her staff in one hand and for the briefest moment Jay tensed but rather than raise it she used it to turn with relative rapidity, shove open the door, and tromp away through it.

Should he pursue her? He wanted to. He thought he could make her understand. He hadn't even explained how only he could do it, only he could save it, how he had no reason to distrust Perfidia at this point. She couldn't possibly comprehend all the context involved. Did she think he made this decision lightly? That he didn't cast doubt on everything himself? He could make her understand, he thought. Maybe in making her understand he could make him understand too. His glance shifted the other direction, toward Pandaemonium.

He noticed something amiss in the courtyard. Over the green hurried the awkward, prancing gait of Theovora. Who of course they'd left behind at the gate, and whom of course looked as though she had something serious to tell Jay. Perfidia skulking around or something—

Then, through the front gate emerged five figures. Jay recognized them immediately as devils. They scrambled haphazard, disorganized, and wore an incomprehensible medley of materials.

"Do you see this?" Theovora yelled at him. "Do you—"

One of the figures tossed something small, a rock maybe. It sailed with surprising speed and accuracy into the back of Theovora's head. Immediately she plunged to a knee and tried to reach her strangely shaped arms to feel the place she'd been hit. Her head turned slowly, in a daze.

Whooping and howls and hollering cut the air. Like hyenas the five devils sprinted toward the downed Theovora, some of them even pitching forward to bound on all fours with their tails whipping above them. Jay gritted his teeth and ran to help her.

One against five—bad odds. He'd beaten a devil at the inn but didn't remember it and didn't know how much he got hurt in the process. Where'd these assholes come from anyway? Did Perfidia send them? He glanced behind them and noticed a bloody, black-eyed Perfidia limping through the gate. So not her friends. Alright, then he wouldn't hold back. Soon enough Vivienne would show up and this time her staff would actually be useful.

The fastest of the five, who wore a Viking helmet that put horns on his horns, reached Theovora first and wound up a huge misaimed kick to her ass that glanced across the side of her body. She twirled weightlessly and flopped onto her back as the Viking helmet devil spread his arms and shimmied Jay's way. "Hey boyo!" he called.

Jay said nothing. He skidded to a halt, set his feet, and swung. The Viking devil jumped back. He avoided the attack easily but bounced into two of his cronies behind him, and the three became a destabilized mass that swayed like a trio of drunkards. They laughed like drunkards too, big goofy grins. One of the other two sprinted with sluggish Olympian form before they leapfrogged Theovora and hurled a flying punch at Jay.

These guys were total amateurs. What the fuck? Jay took one step to the side and the devil hurtled past him, faceplanted into the ground, skidded over the grass, then cartwheeled into an unsteady standing position that led to a second groundward topple. Of the three devils who'd gotten enmeshed, two were on the ground too, and they kicked their bare red feet and pointed and laughed and clapped.

If these guys didn't suck mega dick Jay would've been annoyed because now he had the one devil behind him and the other four in front of him. Instead, watching carefully as they distracted each other, he stooped and slipped an arm around Theovora. She moaned, and part of a word came out, but her head swayed lazily and blood ran down her white habit. She weighed next to nothing. One heft and she rose.

He couldn't fight well like this, but he mainly needed to buy time for Viviendre. Perfidia, in the background, seemed to understand the plan as well—she'd slinked back to the front gate, behind which she could watch hidden. Jay glanced from face to face and said:

"Who are you?"

They laughed again, like this question was peak comedy. The Viking devil threw on instant airs and bowed. "John Verschrikkelijk, at your service, good sir."

"And my name's Shitfuckerheadson!" said the one who'd done the jumping punch move. All the devils laughed.

Once the initial crest of hilarity passed the other devils started to blurt out equally absurd names, falling over each other as they tried to outdo whoever spoke last. One of them exclusively spoke Italian. Shitfuckerheadson, having been thoroughly blown out of the water by the rapid shitty name arms race, amended himself to become The One Who Bends Over Backward To Gobble The Shit From His Own Rectum, then got mad when one of the others tried to name themselves Adolf Hitler Jr. and began screeching "That's cheating! That's fucking cheating!"

At first Jay was glad they were wasting so much time. Then he got suspicious. Where the fuck was Viviendre?

"Ey!" John Vershitalick snapped his claws to draw Jay's attention. "You sure keep looking over your shoulder a lot, huh?"

"Why are you here?" Jay asked in hopes of distraction.

"We're here to kill you and take your magic eyeballs. But you, my friend, don't look like you got magic eyeballs at all. So we'll just kill ya."

The unbounded mirth of the five settled to a few straggling smiles at once. They shot up, stalked rigid around him. The entire time he'd attempted to slowly back up toward the monastery, but carrying Theovora against his side restricted his movement. He hadn't made it far. Now he had devils on all sides. Perfidia stuck her head out from the gate and mouthed something at him, motioned something at him, but he didn't have time to read it.

"Leave me," Theovora whispered.

Shitfuckerheadson lunged forward, snapped his jaws like a dog, and dropped back the moment Jay wheeled on him. He had to immediately turn back to keep the other four at bay, but they were inching closer all the while.

"Leave me..." The voice became distant even as it was spoken directly into his ear. "It seems... peaceful oblivion was only a dream..."

Perfidia quit any pretensions to subtlety. She jabbed her finger repeatedly forward. The signal became clear: Go. Go back to the monastery.

He'd have to drop Theovora for that. Assuming he could even outrun these losers. Assuming they didn't hurl a rock at the back of his head.

Where the fuck was Viviendre?

—

Rancid. Rancid foul beast. Simple failure of self-control at every conceivable moment and why not? You never attempted to master this body. Never worth the effort. Pah! Here's the fruit of that. Notion enters your mind and you've got to act. Waving the Staff of Solomon around. Using the Eye on him even. On him! Why can't you stop yourself?

Tunk, tunk, tunk. Her peg leg made its heavy hollow sound. Constant drumbeat within her inner ear. The holy solemnity of the monastery swallowed and regurgitated each step to envelop her. She trod the pathway through the main octagonal structure that comprised the heart of the building. They said Astrophicus once stood here. Nothing remained of him now save the ruination of the floor where his roots once grew and a strangely-shaped stain on the tile.

Tunk, tunk, tunk. Making her footsteps as forceful as possible remained the best way to pretend she hadn't yet come apart completely. Tunk, tunk, tunk. Better avoid the cracks! Don't wanna topple over and break a bone! Cry and sob until Jay comes to scoop you up. Tunk! Tunk! Tunk—

Something loud happened outside, a whooping howl. Jay. In trouble? That devil.

She turned. Her constant tunk, tunk, tunking ceased. Her ear pointed toward the sound. She stood in the center of the octagon, amid the uprooted chunks of marble. Unstable footing. Around her thronged stained glass the patterns of which her eye could not discern, mushes of colored light. There was something else though. A sense. A reverberation she felt on the pinprick points where the hairs stood on her skin. An aura, rising in this holy chamber.

And a skitter.

A skitter of spider legs.

Beyond, impossibly beyond, more shouting. Yelling. Something happening outside. Something to Jay. He was in trouble.

The spider legs went silent.

Above. Aside. Somewhere—eight eyes weighed upon her. Her knuckle clenched the staff. Her head turned slowly and the shards of stained glass transformed, coalesced, crafted scenes of impossible color and incomprehensible narrative. Christ transubstantiated into a split human skull. Blood and brains and green pus leaking. All the lovely colors. Where amid them lurked the spider. Where was she?

Skitter skitter.

Viviendre whipped around. "Where are you," she meant to yell. It came out as a whistle of wind through her hollow body.

She couldn't be misplacing the menace she felt. Yes? Or was she sinking again. Into those old habits. She knew the spider. Lurking at her bed. Lurking behind Jay. She knew the spider.

Skitter skitter.

From the opposite side of her. She wheeled again. The colors disoriented her, her peg leg stuck in a crack. No. Her body tilted. Everything inside her angled inappropriately. No, no, no

—
She fell.

Ground rose up and bit her before she had a chance to process. She groaned and rolled and the colors flashed wild and bright as sudden nausea gripped her and the skitter of spider legs infiltrated the holy om of the space. She shut her eyes and relied on sound alone, it was coming closer, her arm jabbed out straight and she cried: "Divide!"

Nothing. Still skittering. Out of the muck a shape loomed moving the opposite direction of all these mingling waves of color and she caught before it with sudden sharp clarity the sign of the white cross on a red emblem. That shield—the Shield of Faith. Makepeace's shield!

The bitch never fucking returned it even though it belonged to Jay oh the fucking whore. All along that spidery brain knew what she'd need it for so she kept it oh-so-selfishly for herself

never even offering to hand it back did she? Viviendre's remaining eye widened as sharp creases tightened the whole of her face. The skittering quickened. The spider was streaming down the side of the wall toward her. Shy little slut had confidence now. She knew the shield would protect her from the staff now. And the Eye of Ecclesiastes too.

The spider descended from the wall and skitter-skittered across the floor toward Viviendre, who was on the ground, on her side, limited in mobility and options. The red shield covered most everything and because of how the shield worked even what peeked out around the sides was protected from Viviendre's relics. It didn't stop Viviendre from wrenching the patch from the Eye of Ecclesiastes as she sought anything, anything at all she could do. Turn back the monastery to some time four hundred years ago before it existed? How would that help huh? The spider was close now. A few feet away—seconds away. Skittering skittering skittering her grotesque spider legs over the rends in the floor—

"Nothing new under the sun," she shouted, at the same time she rolled off the wreckage of the tile.

The monastery had existed four hundred years and Astrophicus had only lived in it, plant or otherwise, a few months. That gave her an approximate timeframe.

The floor reverted. From its current state to an older one, before it was broken. The shattered tiles shuddered, reshaped, reformed.

It happened fast. If Viviendre hadn't moved beforehand the tiles would've rose up like teeth and gnashed her to pieces. The spider lacked the forewarning. The ground closed around the tips of her legs with one thick, layered crunch.

A muffled shriek. A sag of the body behind the shield. Even if the shield remained solid, upright. Viviendre slid back. Panted, held her heart, squeezed an eye shut to keep herself from hyperventilating. The spider jerked in an attempt to free itself but remained rooted to the floor. Its pained cries turned to whimpers.

Okay. Alright. You won. Good job. You actually did something right. Viviendre slowly rose. Leaned on her staff for support and winced from an ache where she'd landed after falling. She twisted and her body lurched unexpectedly; a strand of her clothes had gotten sealed into the floor as well. She yanked the cloth, but it was stuck.

No recourse but to rip it. Yet she hesitated, her gaze focusing on the spider behind the shield. Sealed safely. No reason to do anything else. Think of Jay. He wouldn't want you to. Yeah? Then what? Then you go to sleep one night and she's there, in your room? No hope then.

She wound the caught fabric twice around her hand and yanked. One clean rip and she staggered free. The spider would need to rip a lot more for the same result. Well Viv? What's the plan Viv?

He'll hate you. She knew. He already hated her. If he turns to that spider then—

She had to make her own happiness. If she didn't strive for it nobody would simply give it to her. She knew what she must do. What she lacked any other option but to do.

Groaning, endlessly sick inside herself, Viviendre slowly circumnavigated the spider, seeking her unprotected back.

—

The bat slammed into the ribs of a devil in a filthy tuxedo. Their face compressed into a tragical mask of pain, the lips pursed to reveal rows of yellow fangs. As they dropped Jay whirled around, grabbed his bat like a rod between his hands, and held it up as a shield when the second devil's claw swept for his face. Stopped at the wrist, the hand grasped inertly, scraping the brim of his hat and nothing more before he got a chance to drive his knee up into the devil's gut.

That got the second devil off him and gave him space to stumble back and breathe. Blood ran in parallel rivulets down his cheek where the first had snagged him and one of their thorny little tails had nicked his thigh at some point. Mainly he'd been lucky. Nah, luck wasn't the word.

He'd dropped Theovora to free himself to take on the five devils at once. Two devils went after him. The other three—including ringleader John—idiotically, pointlessly, counterproductively, and cruelly went for Theovora. They ringed around her, stomping and laughing, pulling her up to shove them between her. "What even is this thing?" John turned toward a distant Perfidia to ask. "You make this Fidi? This creature? Praying mantis woman? Wow!" Then he slashed Theovora across the chest and let her drop to the floor.

Perfidia kept glancing at the monastery but after a few anxious checks stepped out far enough to yell: "You don't have to be a fucking asshole! She doesn't have the special eye anyway!"

"I'll be a fucking asshole if I want!" John kicked a dirt clod her direction though it fell far short. "That's the whole point! That's what we've been fighting for this whole time. Freedom! Now that we got it, let's fucking enjoy it. Join in Fidi. You're one of us too."

One of his pals readied to hit Theovora again but Jay said: "Hold it." Their three faces turned to him at once and he motioned with the bat. "Touch her again and I knock Shitfuckerheadson's brains out."

He had one of the devils he'd brought down pinned under his boot. The other, the Italian one with a smashed ribcage, kept rolling and groaning in the grass. Jay had to hope the Italian stayed down because he couldn't watch too closely while also tracking John's group. His face stung. He suppressed a wince. Where did Viviendre go? A quick flick of his eyes toward the monastery and he saw the other two nuns, the fox and the fish, keeping a frightened distance.

"Shit John, shit," said Shitfuckerheadson. "Why the fuck you three go after her when this guy had the bat? If we'd all jumped him—"

"It's no big deal," said John.

"No big deal? Look at me. Fuck."

"Just leave Theovora alone," Jay said.

"Theovora? Her name is Theovora!" John leapt back. "Theovora! Holy—Theovora? Wow! Fidi, you really named this praying mantis thing 'God Eater'?"

"Look John, I was on autopilot when I drafted the nuns—"

"Nah, nah, that's fucking rad. Theovora. Wow. That's COVER THE EARTH tier. I dig it. Okay, alright Theovora, you can live. Your name's awesome."

"I should change my name to Theovora," said the devil who'd previously introduced him/herself(?) as Adolf Hitler Jr. The third devil helped Theovora to her feet. Her white habit had become a wreck of blood and her head swayed but she somehow managed to remain standing even when the devil stopped supporting her and all three turned their attention to Jay.

"Now what about you," John asked. "You got a cool name?"

"No."

"Damn. Then we gotta kill ya. Them's the rules."

"John come on," said Shitfuckerheadson. "Maybe wait until he lets me go huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just fucking around." John spread his hands, surrender posture. "We've wasted enough time here anyway. Let's get that magic eye and skedaddle back to Cleveland where there's shit to do."

"I dunno," said Adolf Hitler Jr., "I kinda like this place—"

From behind, Theovora snapped her spiked forelegs into Adolf Hitler Jr.'s body, demonstrating a surprising strength and speed for someone so battered. Before the devil even had a chance to cry out, she rammed her sharp, beak-like snout through their skull. The body jerked within her grasp, kicking its legs as its eyes rolled up into its sockets. A stomach-churning slurp emanated from Theovora's mouth as she fed on the still-living devil's brains.

"Oh that's so fucking *stellar*," John said.

As John and the other devil turned toward this unexpected distraction, Jay moved into action. One swing and the sputtering Shitfuckerheadson dropped with a spurt of blood running down their cracked-open skull. John ogled in wide-eyed amazement at Theovora, while the other devil—a cyclops with one eye—noticed Jay coming and turned. That made them the target and in a flurry of blows Jay brought them to the ground before they had a chance to even lift their arms in self-defense.

"I mean it, really," said John. "This is so wicked. Hey, put the bat down. I'm just trying to admire this image here man."

Jay possessed zero inclination to let him admire the image, but as he turned his attention on what he thought was the last enemy standing, Perfidia suddenly shouted for him to look out. He whirled around to see the first devil he felled, the Italian, crawling back up from a distance of about thirty feet. They moved sluggish and pained and Jay wondered why the fuck Perfidia distracted him with this horseshit before he noticed the devil holding some sort of small smooth ovoid shape like a rock. He realized it was the same devil who threw that preternaturally accurate object at the back of Theovora's head, but barely had time to react before the rock or whatever it was sailed toward him. A steady, unnatural straight line at unnatural velocity.

A pitch.

One cataclysmic, sky-destroying crack and the object shot off at even greater speed at an entirely arbitrary angle that happened to coincide with the rising form of Shitfuckerheadson whose already-bleeding head burst in spray of blood, nose, teeth, and bone.

HOME RUN!

The arc of Jay's swing left him in an extended position and John, snapped from his reverie, stomped his clawed foot down on Jay's calf. Jay grunted and plunged to a knee but biting down the pain rammed the knob of the bat into John's crotch. John reacted with nothing but a cackle as his dick dropped off into the grass and began writhing and crawling around like a caterpillar, in fact it was no longer a dick but some kind of creature with a lamprey mouth. John's fist came down on Jay's face.

Jay pinwheeled as a sear shot from his brow to his chin and his hat flew off. Behind John, Theovora lost her strength and fell, taking the shriveled body of Hitler Jr. with her, while the cyclops devil rose nursing a bevy of wounds and casting its singular eye upon Jay. Jay grinned through the pain. Thrill of combat returned, and the leering face of John Verschrikkelijk made for an excellent spur. That confident grin, that unearned look of superiority. He remembered liking this. Those fights against Charm and Charisma, against Pluxie and Lalum, he remembered whipping himself into a state like this, only to draw back at some moment, to end melancholically, doubtful of himself and any seeming predilection toward violence. But these were devils! They were no downtrodden, manipulated women. No faerie queen of beauty and elegance.

These fuckers killed Mother.

Guiltless violence, wrath with no remorse, come closer John you may have the advantage now but you've no fucking clue what Jay Waringcrane can accomplish when pushed to the brink—

An object nailed him between the shoulder blades, his back arched, he cried out. The round rock padded against the ground and he knew the Italian had thrown it at him and this time it

hurt past a mere propulsion to action and he could not restrain himself from twisting to his spine's fullest extent while John raised a foot ready to stomp Jay's upturned face.

Before he could, Perfidia threw herself into John from the side and they went tumbling out of view. The cyclops devil advanced in John's place but they were slow and Jay was screaming now, screaming himself past the pain and into motion, screaming himself not upright but down, just as the next object thrown by the devil behind him whizzed overhead and slammed the cyclops in the stomach. The cyclops sagged and Jay rose up roaring. One strike of the bat knocked it down, where it fell into the grass directly beside John's detached lamprey dick—which immediately sank all its endless rows of teeth into the cyclops' face.

John and Perfidia rolled back and forth over the grass. Perfidia on top, slicing at him with her claws, stabbing with her tail. Jay turned and knocked aside another thrown object before he propelled himself toward the devil who threw it. The cyclops' screams shanked the air. They grew louder, more desperate, until the carnivorous noises overtook them. By that point Jay was drowning out all noise with the metal clang of his bat against the Italian devil's skull. He did not stop until the splatter drenched the grass around it in a fanning arc.

Blood-washed, he scanned the field for whoever was left. John launched Perfidia off him using all four limbs and levitated to his feet as if by invisible wire. "Yeah! Get on me. I like it. Come at me again!" He reached down, wrenched the lamprey—now significantly more engorged—off the motionless cyclops' body, and reattached it.

Jay rose. Or tried to. His leg did not obey. Some superhuman fury had carried him to the Italian devil, but now physics had run its course. No major artery severed, not like when he fought the twins at the Door so long ago, but his body simply lacked basic durability. Humans couldn't endure so much. His chest heaved—the adrenaline drained with the blood. John noticed and laughed as he advanced toward Perfidia, who scampered back on all fours. John's lamprey dick lunged and snapped at her.

Fuck it. The moment John's attention left Jay and settled on Perfidia, Jay drew back his arm and threw the bat.

It span like an axle through the air and John noticed it before it hit him. It glanced off his shoulder; he shouted, "Crazy!" He lost his balance.

Perfidia shot past him. She did not linger long enough for his lamprey to latch on, and she landed on the opposite side of him. One hand was outstretched. It displayed long claws at the ends of each of her fingers.

John looked down, then threw his head back in maniacal laughter. "Oh Fidi! Oh you—oh this is brilliant. Amazing. I'm so proud of you Fidi. To think you—you! Little Fidi the pencil pusher. I love it." Then his stomach split open and all his guts tumbled out from under the words on his t-shirt: COVER THE EARTH.

He dropped back, howling and laughing, as more and more entrails spurted like a fountain, burying the rest of his body, even the lamprey that curved around and gnawed at the viscera, and he kept laughing even after he stopped moving, even after he was dead.

Jay remained kneeling. He caught his breath; he let everything subside. Perfidia came to him and offered to help but he batted her bleeding claw aside and rose on his own. The injury wasn't enough to stop him from walking, if he took it slow.

The fox and fish nuns, realizing the danger had ended, rushed to Theovora's side. The fox turned back when she saw and suppressed a gasp, while the fish bent down to support Theovora's blood-drenched head. Theovora whispered something, too quiet to hear over John's laughter.

"No, no Sister Theovora, it's quite alright. I'm sure—I'm sure, given the circumstances, you shall be forgiven. They were devils after all." The fish nun managed a shaken smile, a chuckle.

Then she lowered Theovora's head. Theovora moved no more.

The nuns stared solemnly.

"That actually went pretty well." Perfidia dusted herself off and wiped her hands on the grass. "We kinda worked as a team there, huh Jay? I'm no fighter but..." She took in the wreckage of the five devils. "More of em will come if you don't stop Pandaemonium, y'know. Way more'n five next time. They're busy with Cleveland now. But when they get bored? They'll find this place. In droves they will."

Jay pushed her aside, swiped up his hat, and limped toward the monastery. "Viviendre. Viviendre!"

—

Five of Lalum's eight legs were sealed into the floor. Oh, it hurt! It hurt dreadfully. The tiles gave the ends of her legs no space whatsoever. They were crushed, crumpled truly, as though parchment. She struggled simply to maintain the position of the shield. Lady Viviendre trudged slowly to encircle her, and Lalum adjusted as well as she could to defend herself, but at a certain point she would no longer be able to turn her body more. Lalum's animus, though she kept in secret something that would allow her use of it, would not be effective at this range either.

A spider's legs contained seven segments each. Between each segment the joints constricted everything, were simple to break. Lalum need only wrench hard enough and remove the endmost segment of her trapped legs to free herself. When Flanz-le-Flore set her wolves upon her, and one of them tore a leg off Lalum, the tear had come at such a joint, and it bled remarkably little. It was no matter of whether she might survive the venture. It was a matter of strength—and will.

"What did you think," Viviendre hissed, peg a-scrape. "That you'd kill me and Jay would fall in love with you instead?"

Lalum could rebut, but not with writing. She dedicated the strands of her spiderweb to tightening the joints further, constricting them until they became as narrow and as weak as could be. But if she distracted Vivienne she may buy herself moments more time, time she needed. The strands around her lips fell away. She gasped: "I have not come to kill you Lady Vivienne!"

"Liar. Liar! I've seen you. I've heard you. Everywhere, watching, such naked enmity in your eyes, such brutal envy!"

One sharp tug, bracing her three unbound legs to pull against those trapped. The joints strained, Lalum cried out, but they did not break. Too much of her power was sealed in the legs she sought to destroy. She needed more strength, but both hands grasped the shield...

"I have nearly nothing," Vivienne continued, "and what I have is tainted and rotted. You ought to understand. We ought to understand one another. Why? Why!"

She'd rounded to Lalum's side. Lalum needed to strain to position the shield. And slowly, certainly Vivienne continued, step after step, the alternating clomp of her boot followed by the hollow notes played by her peg and the end of the staff she used to support herself, the staff that would be Lalum's most literal undoing if she did not escape somehow.

"Those of us here, in this monastery," Lalum said, "we understood one another. Though we came of all different stations, rich and poor, we knew—we knew what truly bound us. There is no reason we must fight, Lady Vivienne. No reason we may not support one another—"

"You lying sack of shit. You scuttling balloon of innards! You want me dead. But not from hate. No, I could stand it if it was hate, if that Mayfair sent an assassin to slit my throat in the night, though I loathe her at least it was her I made stoop to my festering level. But you! For it to be you! What a cruel joke were I to die for what meager scraps I *do* possess. That I cannot abide. For that I must—"

She stooped, seized her chest, and coughed. Horrible, echoing, liquid coughing though nothing but phlegm flew from her throat. The coughing continued and Lalum took the chance, straining, tugging, screaming, but it was not enough, there was simply not enough strength at her disposal...!

Vivienne rose once more, fingers hooked around her heart, a few subsiding wheezes as her eyes—the real one and the one of bright light—narrowed in loathing. Behind the white cross shield, what did Vivienne see? Or did she simply look upon its shiny, reflective surface?

After this moment, Vivienne continued her encirclement as before. Lalum could turn the shield no further. "I apologize," Vivienne said. "I do pity you. But I cannot abide you."

Without much forward planning, Lalum threw the shield.

The broad face slammed against Vivienne's slight body. The force flung Vivienne against the angled octagonal wall and she bounced off expelling a queer whistle of a gasp from her lips, a whistle devoid of all air. She and the shield dropped to the tile and Lalum gripped both hands around the first of her five legs just above the lowest joint and yanked. The first yank

produced only a scream; the second a sinewy snap that ensured she would not cease screaming any time soon. The leg fell free, though pain seared the broken stump from which a trickle bled; Lalum allowed no time to linger in misery, though, and reached immediately for the next leg. Vivienne groaned and shifted on the ground, the force had not knocked the staff from her hands nor knocked her unconscious but it had at least dazed her. A sharp pull, and this time the joint tore at the first attempt, though the pain was no lesser for the effort.

Stitches wound again around Lalum's lips to seal her jaw tight and stop herself from biting her own tongue. It became difficult to breathe, her nostrils ran ragged immediately. She tightened her grip on the third leg and pulled.

No! No, she couldn't. Not this pain. Her mouth was a bundle of cotton but she wished to spit it all out and simply scream until the echo of that one word divided her in half and she felt no further pain. She shook her head and squeezed her many eyelids shut. For the hero, she thought. For the hero and the entire world, which rests upon his shoulders. She must complete her mission! Though it may be her last moments alive, though she may never see him applaud her for her work, she could die happy as long as she fulfilled her duty and ended the tyranny of this Californian whore!

The third leg split with a sharp crack. Her head tilted and swayed. Her hands moved automatically to the next. Why did five have to be trapped. Why had she not at least spared one more from this agony. She pulled, but a weak pull. No. No, not now. Her strength must not leave her. Vivienne had shifted the shield off her and rolled, moaning. Coming to. Once she became aware one word would end it. Lalum must hurry, must fight. Her full force went into a tug and the fourth leg broke free, though not without a heavy price, no matter how hot her pain grew it could grow always more, these damnable legs, why did she have to become this wretched fucking thing, this low and loathsome spider, why had the queen not protected her from all the windings of the endless machine that processed and churned her into this current state, there was once a pretty Lalum, she knew herself to be so, a pretty and human self, these legs were the end of it, these legs more hateful to her than a thousand Vivienres, a tide of Pagan horde, all the devils spilt from Pandaemonium, PULL YOU WORTHLESS GIRL, MAKE SOMETHING OF THIS DEAD LIFE AND PULL!

She pulled. The fifth and final leg stretched, the tendons and sinews extending between the segments, they tautened, Lalum screamed through her gag of webbing, they snapped one after another and the pain surged up the length of her leg and body and down her arms into the numb fingers that gripped white as bone, she pulled and the damn thing snapped and she stumbled free upon tiles slickened by her blood.

Free!

The head of Vivienne rose to view her, their eyes met, one eye against eight, and though her legs sought death in their unending torment Lalum set herself forward and scuttled. Sloppily, swayingly, staggering and slipping and each footfall a new burst of misery, but Lalum scuttled for the fallen Vivienne even as the latter raised her staff to point, even as her brown lips parted and the tongue twisted and—

"DIVIDE!"

Within the archbishop's chamber the word reverberated. Up its eightfold sides, that detestable number eight, to the watchful eyes of the holy figures collaged within its stained glass windows.

Divide. Divide. Divide.

Viviendre held her hand ahead of her, trembling, loosing jagged breaths within the echo. Lalum stood before her, motionless albeit uneven due to the mangled nature of her legs.

It was Lalum who held the Staff of Solomon, having wrenched it from Viviendre's grasp.

The word came too late.

Viviendre drew back her empty hand, realized the situation, began to speak the words of her second relic, though in her shock she stumbled her first attempt, was forced to start over, and by that time Lalum seized her head and hooked thin fingers into the socket—fishing.

Hands gripped Lalum's face, fingers fighting back while Lalum fished deeper. Pain made Lalum dizzy, her fingers slipped, Viviendre screamed and thrashed in her face, things slipped, things fell. She could bite. A simple bite. The poison fast-working within the veins. Through the gag Lalum's fangs gnashed. Simple. Yes. Yes, to save all this—Viviendre struck Lalum's nose with a balled fist—to save all this struggling. One bite. But one.

The fishing fingers caught. They dredged. Viviendre became a creature, sounds inhuman, sounds that seemed to snap her vocal chords one after another as the blood built in her real eye and her cheeks became concave and gaunt. The bright thing came out with a strange pop and Lalum tightened the threads around her mouth and pulled away. Her mutilated legs slipped. But she scampered back nonetheless, Viviendre's voice now a hoarse croak as she gesticulated for the air. It turned into an equally hoarse cough and bloody spittle flicked from her lips, she sagged to the side, she shriveled into a tiny bundle of clothes and hair.

She went still and silent, save for an intermittent wheeze that brought forth new blood. Lalum trembled. She peered down. In one hand she held the Staff of Solomon. In the other the Eye of Ecclesiastes.

Jay's voice shouted from behind.

—

He knelt before her, shook her. Wiped the blood from her lips. Called for someone to bring water. She let him attend her. Her empty eye throbbed. She swayed in and out of a daze. The devil behind him muttered: "We don't have much time y'know..."

When she grew alert once more he tried to explain. He did it for her. To create a world where she could live. He mentioned devils, how they had come, how more would come. Yet he had the devil with him. She introduced herself as Perfidia—excellent most trustworthy name—

and claimed when they saved the world they'd be able to change anything. They could fix her body, give her an eye and a leg. Make her live a hundred years. Hell, a thousand. Why not? Her and Jay.

Five days, he said. Five days and he'd be back.

Words, words, words. She knew she would never see him again. He might survive—*might*. She would not.

After some time of this, Perfidia—and that spider too, oh yes she helped—convinced him to leave. So he did. They left her in the care of the two remaining nuns.

What she deserved. She knew it. She pushed him away. Always had to. Meddled too much. Tried to control him. To make him hers truly. Well. This is what comes of it. Keep a bird in a cage it yearns to fly free. Only if you clip its wings. Only if you hobble it. Fehfehfeh.

Hobbled, she sat with her back to the wall. Watching her two feet, the one that existed and the one that did not.

Down the hall the nuns walked. Who knew what time it was. Their footsteps resounded. They whispered but every sound echoed far:

"You can't. You can't it's not safe."

"Safe? Safe! It's the only thing's safe."

"Think of yourself. Your body. You cannot."

"I've fins and scales all over me. You're the lucky one, you've just got the tail and the whiskers. I've no chance of ever going back to true society, so what matters it what direction I go?"

"There's no point."

"No point? Sister Theovora is dead. What's to happen if more of those devils appear? We'll be slain. What then?"

"Then we'll be slain, by God's will."

"God's will she says! What in this world is God's will anymore? I shall eat the fruit."

"You mustn't. You saw what the fruit did to the others. Changed them it did. Corrupted them —"

"Made them strong. Made them powerful. Which we'll need to be if those devils come. I won't let them kill me—or you. You're all I've left now. I'll eat the fruit and be transformed; you need not worry."

"I—I—"

"Fruit," said Viviendre.

Her head turned up. The two nuns stopped in the center of the octagon, as they had been on their way to the living quarters, and looked at Viviendre as though she were vermin. Then their expressions nervously, purposefully softened.

"Princess Viviendre," said the fish, "are you—feeling better? We—"

"What is this fruit."

The fish and the fox shared an uncertain glance. While Viviendre felt within her spark a little warm spot of—hope.

Fun Times in Cleveland Again! Still Cleveland

Coming back was difficult. Also, nothing looked the same. However, after days on the road, Wendell Noh returned from his hunting trip.

He dropped his last cigarette on the road and stomped it. In his coat he rifled for a toothpick to replace it but found none. It'd be easy to ask *her* to make one for him. But he needed to shed her. As well as her stupid gun. Ridiculous fantasy gun. Unfortunately he'd needed it every step of the way once he entered Cleveland. A hundred dead devils lay at his feet on this street alone. Who knew how many thousands he cut through over the whole return journey.

As if stomping the cigarette brought some psychosomatic response nausea gripped him, his arms trembled, cold sweat broke on his brow. He took off his glasses, wiped them with a slip of cloth, and placed them back on his face with a heavy breath.

Only a short hunting trip. A brief deviation from normal life. An escape. Now he looked at his home street and wondered if it was possible to escape from the escape. Addiction had a way of seizing hold. He shivered and her voice sang pleasantly behind him: "Are you cold? I can create for you a warmer coat..."

Half the homes of his neighbors were burnt-out husks. The other half were partially disassembled in a logical and mathematical way, boards and plaster removed to then be rearranged elsewhere. Some of the devils had destroyed, while the others had begun to create. The edifice they built spanned a two-by-three group of houses that included his house, the two houses on either side of it, and the three houses on the next street over. Corridors now connected all of them, while a second layer stood affixed to their roofs, reaching upward with grandiose architectural stylings and innumerable flourishes for the sake of aesthetic alone. Balconies jutted dramatically, curved columns ended in Greco-Roman capitals, and so on. Wendell was not an architect. He did not know architectural terms. They were building something out of his house.

And others. The Cleveland skyline began to be dotted by similar structures. Growing upward, outward. There were the beginnings of a third tier on his house's structure. To what purpose? Wendell knew.

He brought the fantasy back with him. It clung to him like the stench of tobacco. Scraping his face he tried to scrape it off but it remained, he went too far, he stayed too long, fuck. Fuck!

Wendell threw down the goofy fantasy gun and marched at as steady a pace as he could muster toward his house. Flanz-le-Flore said something but he tried to tune her out. She wasn't real anymore. She couldn't exist here. In Cleveland. Fuck. It was like he got drunk, totally shitfaced drunk, blackout drunk, and unaware of himself rammed his jeep into a car full of children and they were dead and now his entire remaining life was a blackout in some prison except here everything was sunny, everything warm despite December.

"You dropped it! The relic I so graciously bestowed upon you," Flanz-le-Flore said as he stepped over the curb and onto the driveway that led to his permanently altered home.

He shoved her aside. "You can't come here. This isn't your world. Go home." The sickness in his stomach kept compounding, the tremors. "Stay outside. At least stay outside." His hands reached out, steadied her by the shoulders. "This is my home. My wife is here. I have to—I have to explain some things to her. She's going to be angry. Okay? She's going to be furious. I was late, I was smoking, she was worried sick. She'll scream and then she won't talk to me for a week and I'll have to be on my best behavior to win her back. And it'll take time. Months probably. Maybe even a year. But I'll win her back. I'll get this tobacco stench off me. You can't be here. I have to bring my world back to normal. I had too long a vacation. It's going to be a long time before I can have another."

Like when he got addicted to video games as a kid. Cold turkey.

He expected wrath from the faerie—fairy—queen. He'd felt it since the beginning, which was why he played the idiot while he woke and found his bearings. Logically he understood the best thing to do would be shoot her, but this option hadn't presented itself to him until just now—after he dropped the gun—and he knew why, because he assumed she couldn't have power here, not in his own front lawn, and it was a horrifying grip accompanied by a slick stream of sweat down his face to realize that no, she had power, sure as this uncertain monolith above him she had power.

Perhaps because she had power she did not resort to wrath. Her head shook with patience and pity. At first she'd followed behind him in a half-concussed daze and he let her because he disliked confrontation. Then she'd been useful as he fought through waves and waves of devils. But her self had slowly returned. As though the farther he got from Whitecrosse the more real she became. Now she spoke as she had once before, in her court:

"Wrong. Oh so very wrong. This world is not what you once knew, hero Wendell. But I suppose I must allow you to learn that for yourself..."

He resisted the urge to strike her. "I'm going to my wife now. And my baby daughter. Okay? Stay outside. Stay outside. Stay."

She hovered over his driveway, smiling serenely. Wendell backed away from her, adjusted his glasses, then turned and stormed into his house, pushing open the front door which was not locked. Which could no longer be locked because the lock had been destroyed.

Flanz-le-Flore remained beneath the inviolate sunlight. On an avenue reduced to perfect silence. She liked it not. Her hands extended and she called to her all the small living creatures hidden; those who had cowered before the intruding forces of devilry, those accustomed to surreptitiousness, those creatures of the natural world most suited to survival no matter what cataclysmic upheaval struck the surface of their world. They came: mice, and squirrels, and small birds whose song cracked the silence, gathering on the manicured grass marred only by dried stains Wendell refused to see (for his erstwhile reality was now his fantasy, and vice versa). Chipmunks and chirruping beetles and elegant, intelligent crows. Creatures that had survived the plastering of land once wooded and free—a forbidding landscape studded by strange bituminous roads—survived the felines kept for the sole purpose of their eradication. They had persisted.

Now that the Elf-Queen was dead no impediments remained to Flanz-le-Flore's ambitions. Already she changed; the gun on the ground at her feet was proof enough that Humanity had begun to infiltrate her. She needed only consummate with the hero and it would be final and she would become a new God, to replace whichever had once reigned here and who clearly reigned no more. Instead of mere transfiguration she would substantiate ex nihilo new life, new beings; hers would be a world aware of even the smallest mouse, the tiniest insect, where their life retained a preciousness on par with humans. A world of fair egalitarianism, over which she would preside, not as a tyrant like that Elf-Queen, but as a kindly warden. A world of fantasy, perhaps, but a fantasy worth having, a fantasy softer and more fair than the harsh laws under this cruel sun.

Paradise.

Yes. That would be her world. That Elf-Queen received such a boon and what became of it? Endless repetition of her own image, or what she wished her image to be: slavish devotion—disgusting. Why had he chosen her? If he only chose Flanz-le-Flore instead, four hundred years of misery might have been abated. If only...!

Wendell emerged from his house. He walked slowly. Every creature on his lawn watched him with attentive patience. The birds sang him a lovely song. He walked insensible to it all, each step more laborious than the last, as though he walked through molasses. His eyes saw nothing behind his glasses, they were wide but empty as death. His hands rose to his head and seized clumps of hair which they tugged absentmindedly, cruelly, ripping out tufts that flitted between his fingers. He reached the halfway point of the slope of gray not-quite-stone that led to his house then sat down abruptly.

Even Flanz-le-Flore knew what he found inside that place he once called his home. What remained of his "wife," his "infant daughter"... Had they not seen signs of what the devils did to humans since they set foot in this Cleveland? He had refused to think the unthinkable; that was true fantasy, not her, not Flanz-le-Flore, who still lived and breathed and possessed strength beyond measure and who would soon possess much more.

Now he was hers. An inert, hollowed-out cavity. A pliant form to bend to her will. This fact could not be clearer in his vacant stare. His slack posture.

Alas. Had he only been able to tell the difference between the real world and what he wanted it to be...

Now, at least, he would succumb to her. No petty moorings to his past remained. He would be hers; their love realized; all human essence hers to wield!

"They're laughing at me," he said, distressed.

"Nobody is laughing, hero Wendell."

"They are. I hear them. Hundreds of them." His head slouched onto his shoulder. He looked to the street, where the corpses of the devils had turned to rot. "They're laughing. They're laughing."

She drifted to him. "Forget, hero. Relinquish yourself from these shackles—"

His hand whipped out and slapped her hard on the cheek. She swiveled aside and spat blood, her brow furrowed, but she retained composure. Unpredictable still! Patience. Four hundred years and patience remained to you.

Wendell lurched upright and staggered down his sloped stone walkway. He dropped a hand low and scooped the relic gun from where it lay. Flanz-le-Flore pressed her fingertips together, ready to transform the weapon to something harmless, but he turned it not toward her but to the corpses in the street.

"They are quite dead, very much so," she told him.

He swiveled the barrel of the gun to and fro, seeking one who still moved; they were nothing but decayed mush. He claimed they laughed, but they did not. Or at least, Flanz-le-Flore heard nothing.

"Cease this pointless striving against that which can no longer be fought," she said. "Release yourself. I shall make every moment for you from now on pleasant and joyful. You need only surrender..."

Finally, finding nothing to shoot and kill, he turned toward her. Once more she readied to neutralize him, but to her dismay he did something far worse.

He didn't look at her at all.

He looked up. She turned; the strange construction atop his home remained as it had been, unfinished, incomprehensible. She glanced to him again to attempt to discern what he saw in it, only to realize he looked not at it either. He looked above it, past it.

He looked at the black tower.

"It all has to be destroyed," he said. "All of it. All of them."

Flanz-le-Flore's smile waned. She supposed she still had work to do on him yet. In the interim—she could not refute his human will. Wendell started down the street the way he came, and Flanz-le-Flore followed with all her attendant creatures.

—

Sansaime knew this place. She'd seen it on TV. Why they took her here, who could fathom. It'd been the rabbit girl, Pythette, who did it. Scooped up Sansaime and Mademerry insensible and carried them quickly.

A lot of people were here. They'd come in flight of the devil horde that now plagued these lands. They lounged in clusters amid the sharply inclined flights of seats. Some erected tents

on the lacquered wooden floor in the center, under the gigantic inactive four-sided television set that was suspended from the ceiling.

In many ways it looked like the large church where everything happened. Perhaps that would've stricken her with some residual agony. Perhaps, too, might the occasional phone calls received from Shannon Waringcrane; it seemed, however, Sansaime had expended her lifetime's worth of melancholy and despair. Events had strained her body past its capacity. She could not wail in perpetuity the way she had in Avery's house. Instead exceptional humor swelled her, turned her head light with airy nonsense. She laughed often, at everything, at nothing, and though the screens above played nothing, she found other entertainment.

"Nah," the child said. "You're doing it wrong. You're missing the secret! There. There! Oh my god!"

He was a boy of about twelve, in short pants and a shirt with a mushroom on it and a hat with the word Nintendo, which was also printed on the device Sansaime held between her hands. Excitedly, exasperatedly, he jabbed his finger at the screen to indicate the "secret" Sansaime missed, but Sansaime ignored him and commanded her odd mustachioed avatar to leap and dive and roll and flip onward toward the inverted pyramid suspended over the desert.

"I can't *believe* it! You're so bad at this game! *I* didn't miss that secret when I played." He got so worked up his voice cracked.

This video game was nothing like the ones on Jay's computer. Sansaime liked it. Instead of reams of text she couldn't read, this game dropped you in a big world and let you run around with a thrilling freedom. Plus, she could hold the device in her hands, unlike the computer. The kid who loaned it to her provided an annoyance, but one she could "tune out," as they said. She could "tune out" everything and be in that moment this portly man Mario, wayfarer, who himself tossed his hat and possessed the bodies of other creatures, a layered progression of fantastical escape.

And it was a funny game. She dove into an abyss. Mario expelled an array of colorful gold coins and went "Wa-aa-aa-oo!" The kid slapped his face melodramatically and said: "You're the worst gamer I've seen since my little sister, and she's seven years old!"

Sansaime hurled back her head and cackled. Mario "respawned," ready to plunge into abysses again and again and again and again and again and again and again...

—

After Lucifer and Uriel ascended to a higher plane of existence, Mayfair became faint and fatigued, perhaps on account of the violent nausea she experienced in the presence of humanity's ultimate adversary. If not for Demny's aid, she may have passed out, and soon after fallen prey to the devils that swarmed en masse from the black tower.

Carried on Demny's back, Mayfair emerged from her desiccation to see a fortress. High, sloped walls comprised of stone and mortar, reminiscent of some structures in Whitecrosse—excepting the words printed on the top in gigantic letters, words that read incomprehensibly: Quicken Loans Arena.

That was where they entrenched themselves against the devils. Mayfair now sat within the arena's central control room, peering through a long sheet of glass at the rows of seats and the enigmatic court for the tournament known as "basketball." Now some thousand people took refuge here, protected by the defensive perimeter Mayfair had established at the arena's entrances.

The difficulty came primarily at the onset, before Mayfair possessed many tools for her defense. But as the devils rampaged across the city, as they slaughtered humans without remorse or pity, Mayfair had, hm, *shored up* her defensive capabilities. Considerably. In Whitecrosse, limits to the Staff of Lazarus' quantity of control had never been tested. Now, Mayfair began to wonder if any limits existed.

A macabre thought. A wretched turn her mission had taken her. Yet the death clouded only the deeper reaches of her mind as she stared down at the relative few her efforts had managed to save. No, another matter occupied her attention.

Uriel. Lucifer. God! Had none of them heard her? Had none of them even considered her as the architect of this mayhem, enough to listen for one moment to her plea? Was Whitecrosse brought to Earth only to share its obliteration without chance of salvation? Truthfully, Mayfair could not particularly weep for the thousands, perhaps millions of snuffed lives on Earth, for were they not now brought into God's embrace, consigned to the godhead as promised by Christ? Pastor Styles, incinerated by the manifestation of Uriel, was now reaping the reward of his just and godly life, but what of Cinquefoil? Of Obedience? Of Charm?

Mayfair's mission remained unfinished. Indeed it became more dire than ever. If those devils overran Whitecrosse, she would have only consigned them all to damnation for no other purpose. And so their last breath in existence would be spent hating her, despising her, cursing her for their misfortune, and she would've simply turned them all against her again, proven herself a worthy vessel for their disdain. That was the thought that caused her skin to grow clammy as it gripped the head of the Staff of Lazarus: that all along, their coldness, their looks, all along she deserved them.

No. No, no, no! Not that way. Not mother, not Viviendre, not Prime Astrologer DeWint, none of them, most of all none of them must be proven right. Never.

The door opened. Mayfair need not look. The guards she stationed at her door had brought to her attention wordlessly the identity of her visitor. "Mr. Vance," she said in what she assumed was a pleasant tone, not yet facing him while she hastily drove into her face composure. Only then did she turn.

He stood there: Justin "Just" Vance. The priest who provided to Pastor Styles use of his megachurch. The man whose aura smiled.

"Mayfair. How are you?"

He spoke even such a pleasantry with conviction. His hands clasped humbly, his eyes squinted into elegant uncle-like folds.

"I am well," she said.

"It does my heart good to hear it. You are a light in this darkness, Mayfair."

She hesitated; remained rooted in her swivel chair with perfect posture to confront him. For the past two days he had acted as the representative of the living people of Cleveland. He had come with simple requests, utilitarian necessities, things the people in the arena needed to survive, which only she could gather. He had spoken even words such as "food" and "water" and "medicine" more like a cloud than a human. He seemed to float, and sometimes Mayfair wondered if he wasn't dead, if she hadn't resurrected him and forgotten among all her other corpses, if she played this trick upon herself to craft a fantasy of power.

His evanescence she met with hard and logical recitation. "I have one group returning in two hours—assuming they're not waylaid. They're carrying seven hundred pounds of unspoiled food which combined with our current stores should last us another two or three days. However it is already becoming difficult to forage from local shops. My party has also found five survivors, which is why their movement is slower than usual. The devils are more likely to attack the living. Please relay that information to the others; I pray they understand. That ought to provide sufficient synopsis."

In fact, on the desk amid all the bizarre computer equipment, Mayfair kept papers that catalogued this information. Pounds food recovered, pounds food consumed, she noted it all and so doing eliminated inefficiencies. She kept itinerary likewise of other supplies available: tents, generators, fuel, vehicles (a large collection in the two on-site garages affixed to the premises), clothes, blankets, bandages, this world's miraculous material known as disinfectant, vitamins, flashlights, batteries, tools, and—of course—weapons. It took exceptional effort but she found this level of management quite suitable to her skills.

"Thank you, Mayfair. You've done so much for us all."

She nodded and awaited the unintimated true purpose of his visit. He floated, his smile floated. He said:

"Would you take the trouble then, Mayfair, to come down and speak to the people?"

"I've done that. I don't have time for more speeches. I have to think. I have to plan. It's important—"

"Mayfair," Just Vance said, "you've given them food, but they need more than that."

"Whatever they need, I'll get."

"They need *you*, Mayfair. You are more than yourself. I admit I had my doubts at first. But your speech—and the events that followed—and the rapturous light of the angel that

descended from heaven beside you. The dead of this city risen as Christ's true soldiers to protect their friends and family. In the arena I've set up a stage for you. I have cameras too."

"Cameras?"

"You will be broadcasted to all those still watching in this troubled nation. And believe me, they are still watching. They are hungry, Mayfair, they are starving, not for bread, but for hope. You give them *hope*. You transmit to them the light of God—"

"Enough," Mayfair said. She rubbed her face. This temptation. "Enough, enough. I can't give them hope if I'm not actually helping them. To help them I need to be alone. I need to concentrate." (And they didn't know. They didn't know she caused all the misfortune to begin with. If they knew—Bah!)

"It is not a material hope they need; they need hope in the hereafter, hope in the Kingdom of God that awaits them. You must shepherd them toward salvation now. What hope is there in striving against God's will? The faithful must ready themselves to be taken into His arms..."

"You think this is God's will?"

"It can only be so."

Her eyes closed. "I still have work to do. Talk to me again another time."

His smile shone through her eyelids, a luminescent curve. "I'll come again soon, Mayfair. But this moment has been foretold long before you and I existed. We can't shirk our duty once He calls our name."

The smile faded. Soundlessly he retreated. The door squealing on its hinges the only indication of his departure. She anticipated the door's final slam, but no such sound came. She opened her eyes and he remained there in the doorway, still smiling, eyes bright like gems.

"One last thing," Just Vance said. "I have friends throughout this country. I hear the president of this God-fearing nation has finally rallied our good soldiers for the *final battle* against the forces of Satan. They will strike that black tower within two days. I ask you only to have decided your role by then."

The door shut. So they believed it was Armageddon, did they? Queer. The thought hadn't chanced Mayfair's mind, but now she considered it somewhat appropriate. Satan himself did emerge from that tower, after all. But then who was the false prophet? Her? And what of Israel, and the Mark of the Beast, and the rest? Well. Mayfair knew scripture often needed crafting to fit the story those in power wanted.

If Cleveland became the site of a massive battle, though—and she knew after her time in this world the might of its armies—that might inflict new difficulties upon the people in the arena. Even a fortress would fall beneath bombs and missiles. Perhaps the underground parts might provide bunker enough? Armageddon. Ridiculous. As if they hadn't read Revelations once in their life.

Her next visitor came.

"Found it!" Pythette bounded through the door, pirouetted, displayed upon spread arms the fruits of her recent foray into the outside world. Faster than the corpses, Mayfair had entrusted to her a matter of particular delicateness, and one glance was enough to know she'd accomplished her mission handily.

"Thank you. Please leave them by my desk," Mayfair said.

Humming merrily to herself, Pythette did as told. She'd been depressed during the hours after the megachurch, but nothing kept her down long. Now she served a refreshing uplift as she neatly arranged the numerous broad paper bags in perfect rows beside Mayfair's seat. Mayfair tilted her head to glance into them: Stacks and stacks and stacks of papers.

"Was it difficult to find your way to Pastor Styles' home?"

"Not one bit Your Highness! Sped right there exactly how your directions said. True trouble was coming back—coming back was difficult. A rather nasty infestation of those devils blocked the route, too thick for me to sprint through even full speed. Some sort of parade they were up to, I think. Well it did look like a lot of fun, music and shining lights and all that, and I found myself standing there dumbstruck by the display. Felt like I was looking into a diamond, that I did. Not that I've ever seen a diamond. Only when they threw this hook at me and tried to reel me in like a fish did I shake the sight—"

"And this is all of the papers?"

"Oh yes! Nabbed every last one. May've lost a couple here and there on the sprint back. I tried to go slower so they wouldn't all go flying. Hope it's okay—I swear I lost no more than two or three. Five at most!"

"It should be fine." Statistically speaking, highly probable they were only pages detailing the number of trees in such-and-such forest or rocks on such-and-such mountain. "Thank you, Pythette."

"Anything else you need, Your Highness? Eager to serve!" She snapped to attention and saluted smartly; her tall hare ears, otherwise constantly wiggling, went rigid.

"That's all. See if Demny requires any assistance fortifying the barricades."

"Yes Your Highness!" With a whoosh so strong it sent the tops of the paper stacks fluttering, Pythette was gone.

Mayfair snatched a few loose pages out of the air and replaced them, wondering if it were truly only "five at most" lost in transit. Perhaps Demny would have been a more dependable candidate for the mission. But in case of emergency—if, for instance, the devils attempted a coordinated assault on the arena—Mayfair would rather ensure Demny was nearby. While most of the devils were flimsy, easily dispatched by even a single one of her corpses, they boasted impressive numbers, and a select few proved far hardier than their peers. One foe, fought the day prior, had rampaged through line after line of corpses, kicked down the

barricades with one strike, and clawed its gigantic hulking body into the entrance before Demny slew it with one strike of that curious black sword that could cut even the aura of an angel.

In comparison, the mission to reclaim the rest of the Whitecrosse papers was of low priority. Especially with Just Vance's news of encroaching war. She ought to place all her energy into preparations.

Yet as soon as the door swung shut behind Pythette and all went once more still in the control room, Mayfair dug into the stacks, sifted restlessly, placed pages of interest in particular piles—Pythette had, naturally, failed to maintain the painstaking organizational schema Mayfair implemented—and finally found the sheets her curiosity burned to see most of all.

Moving Whitecrosse to Earth had not rendered the papers inoperable, but she had already assumed that would be the case given the papers never stopped working for Sansaime. During the megachurch event, she'd kept a few relevant pages on her person—particularly concerning the nuns, and Flanz-le-Flore, and the major figures of Castle Whitecrosse, and the elves—but unfortunately those pages were destroyed when the waves of Lake Erie rose up and submerged her. (At least in the nuns' case, losing the pages did not seem to have any deleterious effects). Shannon Waringcrane and Wendell Noh never had pages. But there were others.

Firstly, Sansaime's page. She might have use for it now; she tucked it carefully into her clothes for safekeeping. Next, Theovora's page. Mayfair failed to convince her before, but perhaps now with changed circumstances—startlingly, though, Theovora was deceased. Mayfair puzzled over the clear and obvious proclamation ("DEAD") that blotted out Theovora's page. How did that happen? To be researched later.

Then the one major figure in Whitecrosse whose paper she had not dared touch—until now. Queen Mallory Tivania Coke. Mayfair handled the paper carefully, half-anticipating another large DEAD to cover it, but it seemed her mother yet lived. Not terribly surprising. What exactly was she up to, though?

Ah. Of course. Spearheading an expedition to Cleveland. Mayfair ought to have realized. The woman spent so many days daydreaming of war it'd take an army to hold her back from joining one. It appeared she had Shannon with her; Tricia as well. A few spare soldiers, and in a strange turn of events that dandy Gonzago of Meretryce. She fished out Gonzago's page—she had not brought it with her to the megachurch—though she hadn't a clue what to do with it now, either.

Would it be best to use the papers to assist their war party? Mayfair mulled the question. Perhaps. Though she'd already wasted hours simply picking out these needles from the haystack. Other matters demanded attention.

Nonetheless, she continued searching. There was at least one more paper she wanted to find: Lalum's. Like Theovora, she might be amenable to persuasion given changed circumstances. First, though, she found Jay Waringcrane.

Lalum was with him. Perhaps she could actually convince Jay himself, which would convince Lalum by proxy—but as she looked more closely into Jay's current situation, she grew perplexed. He was traveling from the monastery. Why had he gone there? Where did Vivienne go? And who was this third person traveling with him? Who was this Perfidia Bal Berith?

Why did that name sound familiar. Perfidia Bal Berith. Perfidia Bal Berith. A rather insidious-sounding name. Judges 9:4: "And they gave him threescore and ten pieces of silver out of the house of Baalberith, wherewith Abimelech hired vain and light persons, which followed him." A false idol. A devil—

Come on kiddo, whaddya say. Let Perfidia Bal Berith take care of ya.

HER!

That—that cretin! The one who'd attempted to—*seduce* Mayfair. The former Master. The one she suspected masterminded the assassination attempt at the megachurch. Why had she gone to Jay? Why? Mayfair needed to know. Had to know!

Spent the next four hours learning. Piecing the narrative together from scrounged pages. Mayfair learned why Jay went to the monastery, why he left Vivienne there, how Theovora died. But she learned something even more important. Something that left her speechless, something that sagged her into the swivel chair which squeaked under her weight.

Jay and Perfidia planned to reach the top of that tower—Pandaemonium—and acquire the divine power held there. Jay would pick up the power, and then without question hand it over to Perfidia. Such a baffling, ridiculous plot. Did he not question Perfidia's motives whatsoever? Did he not expect subterfuge? What possessed him to trust her with the literal *power of God*?

Insanity! Simplemindedness. How could—how possibly—under no circumstances whatsoever could Mayfair allow such an event to transpire. Wretched luck that of those in Jay's party she only had direct access to Lalum, who had already rebuffed her before, but a platoon of the dead ought to suffice to impede him...

Wait. No. Mayfair pulled the pertinent paper close to her face and reread. Divinity, Humanity, the nitty-gritty particulars of events. Assuming this were all true. Assuming a human could simply acquire it for themselves as long as they reached its holding-place at the apex of Pandaemonium...

She shot upright. The swivel chair swirled in her wake, she set to pacing, folding her arms tensely behind her back, her fingers digging into the parchment of the page she still held. Divinity. Well even disregarding the moral imperative it fell on any true follower of Christ to wrest such power out of the hands of mankind's mortal—or immortal—foe. She turned sharp on one heel, the window into the arena whirred all its people before her, she paused and looked down to the court where Temporary played with some children, or rather flailed about on the floor while the children gleefully leapt up and down on her.

With that power, that so-called "Divinity," God could not let her go unheard. No. He would *have* to listen to her prayer. To her humble request for salvation of the people of Whitecrosse.

And if he didn't? With that power she could grant it to them herself. Perfidia told Jay that Divinity was simply a conglomerate mass of "Humanity"—the essence, the soul. She would be their salvation. Even if its power annihilated her body in the process. That death one for which they would remember her forevermore...

Mayfair resolved at once. She *must* acquire the Divinity before Jay Waringcrane.

She broke away from the window and turned for the door. First, she'd organize Demny and Pythette. Temporary might prove useful as well—and the Mustard Seed, of course. Would it be so simple as to waltz into Pandaemonium and ascend to its peak? Doubtful. But if she kept a close eye on Perfidia, learned more. Yes. She possessed every conceivable tool at her disposal to ensure success. This was what *must* be done.

She flung open the door and moved down the corridor, all abuzz with thought and industry, schemes and plans assembling themselves as via magic in her mind, strings connecting to other strings in a grand tapestry of self-ideation, when a voice behind her wrenched her from the flurry:

"Please."

Before she realized she ought not turn she turned. There, in the shadows, amid a pile of empty cardboard boxes, the figure slouched.

"Please. Mayfair—Lady Mayfair. Please."

It was Mademerry. Arms wrapped around herself, wings folded, neck angled so that despite her natural advantage in height she peered up at Mayfair, eyes pleading.

"I need. I simply need. Let me be useful to you. I can't—I cannot—"

"I've told you," Mayfair said sharply. "Assist Demny with the barricades. That is the most you can do for me. Indeed, I could use you to fetch Demny now, I wish to speak to her."

"You wish to speak to... Demny? Not me?"

Mayfair suppressed a seething wince. Since the events at the megachurch Mademerry had gone to great lengths to render herself inutile. She dogged Mayfair at every moment, sought every excuse to be close to her, frequently burst into these strange wailing monologues in complaint of the redheaded woman she killed. All so noisy, all so—sour in Mayfair's stomach. Demny followed orders wordlessly; Pythette with an exuberant salute. Mademerry could not muster even that level of obedience, despite her endless protestations to the contrary; she could not do a thing without wringing her claws together. Mayfair had no time for it now.

"Find Demny, or leave me in peace. I'll have use for you in the future; perhaps much use. But now, what I need is organization and—poise."

"Organization? Poise?" The reptilian shape slouched forward, out of which emerged a contorted vision of Mayfair herself—or perhaps her brother, which was in many ways worse. "That is exactly what I bring to you, is it not? It was me who led those nuns to fulfill your aims—I did that, was I not skillful at it? I simply wish to stand by your side, Mayfair. Let me protect you, harbor your worries and fears, let me be a mind against which your mind may bounce in pursuit of greater understanding—"

"No, no. I think better alone, I always have, I had to tell DeWint that so many times. Mademerry, you've done much to help me, and I do thank you, but I must remain focused now. Now especially! Go down to the arena and await my orders."

"The arena? The arena? Where *she* is? I cannot. Her presence, I cannot—"

"I do not understand what Sansaime means to you," Mayfair said, although a recess in the back of her mind told her she may indeed understand, and such understanding ill met her. "Leave her be. She's inert, useless, she won't attempt to attack me again. She's playing games and nothing else. You already harmed her enough when you killed—"

"NO!" Mademerry shrieked. Mayfair instantly realized she'd spoken herself into a mistake; now it would never end. "You cannot blame me for that Lady Mayfair, oh Mayfair I had to, you don't understand, and it was all in service of you, how can you speak to me in such a reproachful tone, I didn't—I did not—I—Please! I ask for so little."

"I ask for even less: Leave me alone."

A cutting, even cruel remark. It was necessitated. Mademerry sagged to her knees and sobbed, which left her stationary. Mayfair swiftly egressed.

Wretched. Mayfair could design her own person from scratch, craft her to her every whim, and still they found some way to deviate. What could the girl expect from Mayfair when she was such a wreck? No matter. Mayfair put Mademerry out of her mind. Returned her thoughts to Pandaemonium as she looked down at the page that catalogued Jay Waringcrane's current actions. This matter was of too much importance for annoying distractions; it might decide the fate of both worlds, of the balance of power in the perpetual fight between good and evil. Yes. In that context Mademerry meant nothing. She ought to be used how she might and prohibited from interfering otherwise. Yet as Mayfair delved into the fringes of the arena in search of Demny, she could not fully suppress a pang of pity for the girl; nor a pang of pity for herself, who had given herself exactly what she always wanted.

Still Cleveland

Most of Ubik's junk had fallen out of his coat one point or another, but something useful he left was a quaint silver pocket watch. Told exact time to the second. Ingenious bit of devil magic, a crown jewel of Ubik's collection, nowadays rendered obsolete by your average cell phone. But Perfidia lost her phone long ago.

The second hand ticked past midnight. It became Monday, December 18. Exactly three days before the deadline. Finally the edge of Whitecrosse showed on the horizon. A little cluster marked the cemetery where the Door sat open.

Kedeshah dropped out of the sky in front of their cute little horse-drawn cart. She touched down gracefully, one tiny foot extended to slow her descent with the tip of one toe. A blast of her wings blew back the aimless tide of passerby devils.

The commotion jolted Jay awake. He blinked before putting his hat back on his head.

"That took you awhile," Perfidia said. Kedeshah's eyes closed serenely and her mouth formed a subtle smile, but glowing white blood dripped from several spots. Ominous. Little made Kedeshah bleed.

But Kedeshah puffed out her chest and ran Ubik's coiled-up coat around her neck like a feathered boa. "Hmph!" Some of the journeyman devils drew near to see what the commotion was about, while others—more experienced—knew what Kedeshah was and cut a wide berth. "You say that like you asked something simple."

"Who's this," said Jay.

"Right. Introductions let's get em outta the way. Kedeshah, here's Jay Waringcrane. He's the guy. Jay, Kedeshah. She worked for my brother. There's also Lalum here somewhere—"

"Oh is that all I am now?" Kedeshah vaulted the tired horses and plopped into the now-cramped cart. "Your brother's employee! Fidi. Fidi, Fidi. Hurry and put this on, I like it better when you wear it." She shoved Ubik's coat into Perfidia's hands.

Rather than argue, Perfidia shimmied into it. Which of course got Kedeshah up against her like a kitten. "There we go. Mmm. The smell's not complete without you in it. Snffffff!"

"So she's a weirdo too," said Jay.

"Oh, call me worse than that!" Kedeshah crawled toward him. "Human huh? Kinda scandalous? Becoming a human's plaything? Me! Daughter of Lust. Oh how pathetic, how base and fallen—"

"Maybe I beat you with this bat instead."

"Perfect!"

"Stereotypical," said Jay, and then his face twinged in subtle confusion.

"Let's stop fucking around already," said Perfidia. "We gotta—"

"Christ!"

Jay reared back. Kedeshah crawled onto him, sniffing and licking his neck. "Ohhh hurt aren'tcha? Lemme clean that up for you darling~"

After the monastery, Jay refused to let either Perfidia or Lalum use the Eye of Ecclesiastes to heal his wounds. Who knew why. Since Perfidia expected Kedeshah to show up anyway, she hadn't forced the issue. Now Kedeshah quickly kissed him all over, and Jay protested, and Perfidia glanced at Ubik's watch and span a finger in the air as if pressing fast forward on their horseshit. Lalum poked her head out the bushes beside the road and regarded Kedeshah with no uncertain distaste. Sorry sister.

(Lalum was different, though. She lost the tips of most of her legs, but even without the Eye of Ecclesiastes she'd regrown them all. How? Mayfair up to something? Might be a problem if Mayfair still cared enough to meddle with the papers.)

"Okay, okay," Perfidia said after the dumbassery went on long enough. "Kedeshah get off him. Get off! You wanna avenge Ubik or not?"

Kedeshah hopped on her haunches and stuck her tongue out. "Fiiiiine."

"Now what'd you figure out about Pandaemonium."

"Okay! First off, Pandaemonium upped its defenses. Way more than usual. There's a gigantic force of devils guarding the entrance and guess what? They're led by Moloch himself."

No big surprise. The head honcho clearly knew the Divinity was his weakpoint. Made sense to put all his terrestrial forces to its defense.

"So?" said Jay.

"So!" said Kedeshah with incredulous excitement.

"You can fly. The Divinity's at the top of the tower, right? Fly us there."

"No, no, no, you fail to understand dear simple base and lowly human. There is *only* one entrance into Pandaemonium. Ground floor."

"Punching through Moloch's forces shouldn't be impossible," said Perfidia. "Not for Kedeshah at least. The problem's Moloch himself."

"Think that if you like! I haven't even gotten to the *real* problem. The real problem's they put up a new barrier on the entrance. A barrier with perfect, one-hundred-percent effectiveness."

"Bullshit. You're saying Moloch and the other Princes willingly walled themselves into Pandaemonium?" Or maybe the head honcho forced them. Shit. Could he—? No. He needed

at least some of the Princes willingly on his side or they'd go for the Divinity themselves. Beelzebub would always be loyal, but the others...

"The barrier," Kedeshah continued, "doesn't do a thing to devils. Devils can travel in and out freely—assuming they get past Moloch's security. The barrier's for humans."

"You mean—"

"Yep. There is absolutely no way for a human to enter Pandaemonium."

It—made perfect sense. A devil couldn't steal the Divinity by themselves. They needed a human. So simply prevent all humans from entering.

Kedeshah shrugged, cavalier. "You wouldn't believe how difficult it was to get this info. Moloch himself took a shot at me. See these wounds? But I guarantee it's accurate. No humans allowed. Sorry, Jay the human! Guess we can all quit striving for the impossible. Let's simply give in to carnal desire. Oh, I know! The two of you should fight over who gets me. Or maybe simply take me at the same time. You join too, spider-girl!"

"It can't be one hundred percent effective. There has to be a flaw." Perfidia rapped her knuckles against her skull. But this was the Seven Princes. They had limits, sure, but... There had to be some way. This couldn't be it. Her master plan couldn't be outsmarted this easily, and yet it could, it so totally could. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. What the fuck was she thinking? That it'd be a simple little waltz? Just have Kedeshah rush them past Moloch and go on their way?

She slumped against the side of the rickety wooden cart. Could the relics do something? Theoretically the Eye of Ecclesiastes could—No that wouldn't work, the eye couldn't return something to before it existed. What about other relics. Wasn't there one that tore down walls? Did a magic barrier count as a wall? She never considered such an implication when she made the damn thing, so probably not. If they got the Whitecrosse papers could she modify it? Time tick-tick-ticked. They'd have to find Mayfair, steal the papers, and then it might not even work, Perfidia set those relics in stone to prevent them being used in ways she didn't expect. Mayfair must have already found a way though, how else did she move Whitecrosse to Earth? That counted as a lead, but how long would it take to follow—

"Just use that," Jay said.

Tacitly ignoring Kedeshah's affections, he pointed at something. Perfidia's eyes followed to the graveyard ahead. The graveyard. With its mausoleums and—

The gears churned.

"Yes! *Fucking yes!* That's what I'm talking about Jay. You actually have some good fucking ideas y'know? I swear. Shit it makes perfect sense. And it's so simple too."

"Oh I get it," Kedeshah said. "Hah. So the human's got brains."

"We'd need you for it to work of course Kedeshah," Perfidia said. "You'll have to make it inside on your own—"

"Oh yeah, that'll be soooooo easy. I barely escaped Moloch the first time. Now he'll have his eye on me. Why don't you do it Fidi?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to get past Moloch?"

Kedeshah shrugged. "Maybe the genius human has an idea."

They both looked at Jay. Perfidia half-expected him to really have an idea, but Jay's face showed nothing.

"We can make a distraction or something I guess," he said.

"A distraction." Kedeshah suppressed a giggle.

"Why not."

"Look *human*. You don't seem to know who Moloch is. He's one of the Seven Princes, okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay?! So he's no random stooge. Plus his whole army's with him. What *distraction* could possibly be big enough to—"

A piercing roar interrupted her. Overhead, faster than sound, shot a formation of tiny triangles. Gone in a blink, passing over Cleveland.

Then Cleveland exploded.

—

Shannon gripped the wide-brimmed cowboy hat she'd put on to shade herself from the endless sun and stared overhead at the screaming that came across the sky. Wind whipped up around her; in the corpse-clogged Cleveland street the detritus swirled into a cyclone. Three blocks away a wall of flame rose, plus the collective wail of five thousand devils incinerated within it, and the ground trembled, and the soldiers swayed and staggered. Gonzago seized Shannon's shoulders to support her or maybe support himself. In the dying cavernous creak of the subsiding flames Shannon shouted: "We need to move NOW!"

"What's happening!" Gonzago said.

Despite the urgency Shannon could not suppress a smile. What's happening? The United States military was happening. That unlimited black hole of fiscal allocation would finally see its use, perhaps not as the generals in Washington once dreamed, but purpose was

purpose. Those jet planes were more than mere firepower, they were the first indication of the right and logical restoration of order in this world.

Against the black tower a line of fireballs burst. The gaggle of Whitecrosse soldiers and Cleveland freedom fighters they'd picked en route scrambled down the street. Ahead, a pair of bulldozers they'd reappropriated shoved junk out of the way; past them Mallory worked her one-woman-army technique on the horde of devils in their path. Despite her prowess, forward movement had been sluggish, but with bombs dropping and devils exploding in droves that ought to change. The main issue was not getting blown up themselves.

They'd scavenged no small number of radios, but Shannon lacked technical expertise regarding how to use them, let alone how to contact the United States military. However this was merely a logistical concern. Supply lines, communication networks, these were as important to warfare as manpower and weaponry. Some of the Clevelanders they'd rescued, who traveled within their ragged caravan toting Wendell Noh-style rifles, seemed like ex-military types, bitter survivalists. Perhaps consulting them might—

The thought proved unnecessary. The bulldozers ahead stopped, and between them stood Mallory, hand cocked on her hip. Their road intersected another; across the intersection trudged a line of tanks, jeeps, and infantrymen, all in glorious army regulation camouflage. The Clevelanders cheered, soon followed by those from Whitecrosse.

"This is—this is good, right?" said Gonzago. "These are the soldiers of your country, yes?"

Shannon trotted between the bulldozers and stopped beside Mallory to stare both ways down the street. The soldiers extended as far as she could see. All were headed one direction: toward the black tower. Amid the tanks and jeeps were peculiar, blocky, rectangular vehicles. They looked similar to a tank, with treads and even a small turret, but with their cavernous backsides they looked designed more for moving people than combat. Shannon lacked complete knowhow of military tech and could only guess at their purpose, but their sloped fronts, shaped like the prow of a boat, gave her an idea.

The tactics became clear. First the jet fighters cleared a path through the devils. Then the tanks escorted the boat-shaped vehicles to the shore of Lake Erie. There, they would plunge into the water and ferry the soldiers for an amphibious assault on the tower.

To have cobbled together such a plan meant they must already know they couldn't simply bomb the tower into collapse. Shannon supposed it was a good thing the president decided on this instead of a nuclear attack.

"Exceptional army," Mallory said. "It lacks a certain flair, but I can appreciate brute force."

"Let's fall in with them," said Shannon. "You'll add your strength to theirs. At the very least, we'll ride these vehicles to reach the tower."

"Hm." A disapproving "hm." Mallory's head tilted; she surveyed the broad city street on its route toward the tower. "No. I believe I shall lead them."

Shannon doubted whether the legendarily intense discipline of the American army would allow for such a disruption to the established chain of command. In fact, even "falling in" with the troops might prove difficult—perhaps even counterproductive. Shannon looked at Mallory and then back at their eclectic hodgepodge of fighters and thought: Oh, yes. Perhaps the military should proceed unmolested. Waging war was *their* specialty. Their area of expertise. Their particular function, compartmentalized to maximum efficiency. They came now with forces necessary to complete the task, with the correct equipment—not merely the amphibious vessels, but radios, radar, sonar, lidar, all those pretty things Shannon used to sell Cleveland to the queen—and it was for her, Shannon Waringcrane, and these medieval anachronisms, to slink back and survive so that upon the restoration of order she may resume her own compartmentalized use: collecting taxes.

Had Shannon followed this impetus from the start, allowed the police to handle Jay's disappearance, where would she be now? What convinced her to ever embark on this odyssey? Dalt? She remembered him eagerly sleuthing Jay's location via cell phone search history. So long ago. But not Dalt. She'd never been led by Dalt.

The same impetus now electrified her. The impetus not to do as one soldier, leaning out the window of a jeep that trundled past, shouted: "You folks take cover—hide!" The role of a civilian. The role of Shannon Waringcrane, IRS agent. No. Perhaps the machine clanked once more. But she knew she could improve it. She knew she could contribute something stronger to its entangled processes.

She turned to Mallory. "We'll pass behind these buildings here. Move parallel to the convoy. If we get in their way they'll just try to stop us, but this way—"

A droplet struck the skin of her gesticulating hand. She glanced at it. A single red circle, warm.

A second droplet pattered the brim of her cowboy hat. A third struck her shoulder. Faces around her turned upward to the sunny, cloudless sky.

Then it began to pour blood.

Out of the spotless sky dropped Tricia. She wore the flouncy, sleek, pastel dress Mallory fished for her before they left the castle (a dress being among the only clothes she could wear given her lower body). "Something's happening. Something at the entrance of the tower."

"What something," said Mallory.

Shannon hurried past Mallory to the overhang of the nearest building. Gonzago and others followed. The military group progressed without hesitation even as red streaks ran down the sides of their vehicles.

"Some fashion of new devil emerged," Tricia said. "A tall man, wearing a uniform. He—"

A voice quaked from across the realm:

"WHO THE **FUCK** ARE YOU TO STAND AGAINST ME?! ARRAYED BEFORE ME LIKE ANTS? CREEPING TOWARD A FUTURE YOU CANNOT VISUALIZE? LET ALONE **GRASP**? MILLENNIA OF YOUR TEEMING PULLULATING FILTH, IRRITATIONS UPON IRRITATIONS, AND THIS IS HOW YOU CULMINATE? WIELDING LITTLE WEAPONS, PALE SHADOWS OF THOSE WE—**WE**—DESIGNED IN A WAR YOUR SEMI-SAPIENT BRAINS WOULD **MELT** TO EVEN PERCEIVE? THE SIGHT OF YOU DISGUSTS ME. WHAT PATHETIC ORGANIZATION, WHAT IRRELEVANT IDEOLOGY. KNOW THAT NOT EVEN YOUR DEATHS BRING YOU HONOR. I AM **MOLOCH, PRINCE OF WRATH**, AND MY RESOLVE TO ANNIHILATE YOU IS NO ADMISSION OF THREAT. IT IS MERELY MY NATURAL STATE. YOU HAVE DONE **NOTHING!** YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED **NOTHING!** **DIE!**"

In the street, a thin red line angled acutely from the sky. It was aimed directly upon a tank. It lacked particular noticeability amid the bloody rain but stood out prominently anyway, as if some pattern-recognizing element of the brain latched upon its clear, unbroken form.

The tank it touched ceased moving. No smoke or screech, simply a stop. Then the line swept outward and split the tank clean in half and split the jeep behind it and the amphibious vehicle behind it and sliced through a group of infantrymen who fell in cleanly cut pieces: heads, arms, torsos. It took only a few moments for the soldiers in the street to understand and scramble to evade as the line made erratic, swirling curlicues.

Another red line descended from the sky. Another. Another. Another. Another.

"Move," Mallory shouted. One line sliced straight through the building beside them. It lost its stability and collapsed against itself. Mallory seized Shannon's arm, pushed her in a direction, and they ran.

Through the routes between the buildings, away from the main roads, accompanied by the soldiers of Whitecrosse and the survivalists and even the American soldiers who abandoned their vehicles and spilled into the smaller passages with their rifles and equipment. A triangulating coil of lines divvied a structure to mincemeat. Screams rang out, shouts, commandments, a plane moving supersonic split in two out of the sky and its streaming parts drove down into a row of buildings and exploded, the windows in the facades burst in unison, Shannon gripped her cowboy hat tighter like it might protect her and someone rammed into her from behind and she stumbled forward scraping her knee before Tricia and then Gonzago helped her up. Mallory rooted her feet into the ground, swung her holy sword, and sent a ray of light through the lines—but nothing happened, the lines were either unbroken or broken so briefly as to be irrelevant.

"Where do we go, Lady Shannon?" Gonzago whipped his head this way and that, searching for any red lines that might enclose upon them, that might burst out a wall without warning. "What do we do?"

"We have to get to the tower. We have to take out this Moloch. We have to fight our way inside! This is it. The military's sent their forces—this is the best shot we get!"

Mallory drifted by. She moved like a phantom, fast but graceful, and the macabre hook scar that terminated her smile shone brighter through the blood that ran down her face. She bellowed to the sky: "**MOLOCH, PRINCE OF WRATH! JUST WAIT! I'M COMING FOR YOU!**"

Her voice boomed so loud it made Shannon cover her ears. For an instant the rain stopped, the red lines went slack and instead of cutting merely splattered the walls and roads and people: they were made of blood. Then, as the commanding echo subsided and the sounds of the terrorized city returned, the lines tautened and more buildings collapsed in slow, sliding fashion as their top halves divided from their bottoms.

Now, though, the lines gravitated toward Mallory. Seeking her out, sweeping toward her specifically, yet she danced amid them with ease, wielding her own tremendous agility like a taunt, and Shannon couldn't tell if this was a clever ploy to keep the rest of them safe or Mallory simply being Mallory. Regardless, the way ahead became slightly less treacherous. Shannon motioned to the growing group behind her and spearheaded the way.

Past squat, square, Cold War-era structures, the last gasp of the city's prosperity, tumbling into narrow alleyways where trash piled high and rusted pipes rattled from the omnipresent tremor that became a heartbeat, over a chest-high brick wall into the shadow of a taller structure as the towers of downtown rose above them, splitting in two or collapsing in pillars of flames as the red lines tangoed with the jet fighters. The sliding glass shatter of a skyscraper's diagonally-divided segment slowly shifting off its perch. More and more people burst out of the woodwork, out of windows and walls, people of no discernable reason or purpose, simply the people of the city, everyone running and screaming until it became unclear whether they ran from or ran toward, only the shimmer of the sun-drenched lake and the black tower to serve as any possible destination in the mayhem. Cannons went off, guns fired, devils mixed into the mass first as red dots before an entire wall of them spilled out a hollow factory as though its long-rusted conveyer belts and smelters spat them freshly sulfuric from strip-mined metals. Two waves, human and devil, struck together, bodies twirled whipping out blood from slashed eyes, Gonzago swam above the tide and brought down a glancing blow with his sword that split a horned thing's scalp, the trailing innards of a large man grasping his stomach parted for a gore-drenched thing with yellow eyes to leap out.

Bouncing atop Shannon's head, touching with the weight of a feather before springing off and leaving the cowboy hat to whip away in the wind, Mallory cartwheeled and shot a beam from her sword that cut a clear oblique line through fifty devils before she pirouetted into the sun and became lost. At the same time Tricia seized Shannon by the waist and dragged her aside before the red lines scraping after Mallory had a chance to reach her former location, and out of the two crashing armies came apart endless chunks of flesh from both sides only for any injury to be immediately subsumed by the swell of still more bodies rushing to fill the void. Shannon lifted up, up, into the third or fourth story of a dilapidated structure as Tricia careened into and out of the utterly empty interior and placed her upon a patch of weedy greenery that burst defiantly from shattered chunks of concrete then whipped her abdomen at an angle to deflect the claws of a creature with a long snout and spines running down its back

Everything in an instant flared hot and red, a force with no body hefted into Shannon's ribs and hoisted her upright, her feet left the ground, the ground scrolled beneath her, she clanged into a hard but hollow dumpster and teetered back dazed to watch the entirety of a ten-story structure catch flame and shudder its glass onto the heads of the twisting burnt bodies below. The supports cracked, the mathematical dimensions lost their precision, all exactitude rendered chaotic and thus incapable to continue the function they faithfully upheld all this time even through the prolonged and gradual decrepitude that ate molecule by molecule away at its roots, even through these decades of abandonment and misuse, the core of the idea had remained, the long-dead engineer's vision persisted, no wastefulness or apathy had been enough to do what one sudden burst of strife now caused: the tiers dropping upon themselves, one after another, even their destruction following a geometry, until the dust and debris billowed too thick and Shannon clamped her arms around her face and saw no more.

She blundered, blind, feeling along the exact and present metal edge of a dumpster, then the hard stone of the building beside it, which remained standing despite the elimination of its neighbor. These mathematics, these craftsman's bricks, they stood tall, as accurately and lovingly assembled as the other, but spared—for now—the thrust of some missile's fist, or the piercing vivisection of the red lines.

Out of the plume she stumbled coughing. When she finally opened her eyes she stared at arms transformed gray with ash, her body now a statue. Through the husks of the things around her Shannon saw Cleveland, this city stultifying, this city rusting, which despite its slow death had not yet died. That was the strength of the machine. For all its component parts and points of failure, for all the cogs that shivered and dropped off to bounce forgotten under its own bulk, the designs of those long past persisted, the power of those heroes, those scientists, those designers, those dreamers, requiring only the most somnolent maintenance by the ants who teemed on the shoulders of their skeletons.

Placidity fell.

The plumes of ash swirled. They spilled between the cracks in the city's skin, amid the buildings, rising, blotting the endless sun, turning once more the city to gray, the sage and solemn color it always deserved, and Shannon thought—I've hit my head. I'm confused. It was true. A cold blood ran down and wiped away the dust in one sweeping torrent.

Dark shadows of men emerged. Their boots tromped against the pavement. They moved in logical order: rows and columns, evenly-spaced, arms swinging at their sides. An army.

Gray too, solid and empty in their eyes. Dead in their eyes. Someone ran up behind Shannon and grabbed her—it was Gonzago—he yelled something she heard as a reverberation. He led her between the soldiers, some missing arms, some missing heads, some with their fronts ripped open and no insides between the spread ribcages. An army of the dead. They marched the same direction: toward the lake, toward the black tower.

Between them the silhouette formed of something massive. Like a tree, sharp leafless branches extending outward. It wasn't a tree. It was a deer.

It was the deer from the monastery. Though her antlers extended far greater than before, she retained that stolid demeanor. In one hand she held a sword swaddled in bandages, a sword

that emanated a black aura.

On her back sat Princess Mayfair of Whitecrosse.

"Your—Your Highness!" Gonzago gasped.

"Ah, Gonzago of Meretryce. What a pleasant surprise." Mayfair rode sidesaddle, ankles crossed. She wore modern clothes, which might have made her unrecognizable, if not for the unearthly beauty of her facial features. "Shannon Waringcrane too!"

So many marching dead. Rat, tat, rat-a-tat-tat—somewhere a drumbeat kept their rhythm. They choked the streets. How many? She could tell, she reached to her back where fastened by a pair of loops were her relics, forgotten during her mad panic, and felt idly for a moment before the sudden thought struck her she'd lost them; it wasn't so, she gripped the ruler, and it told her *Those that were numbered of them, even of the dead, were 93,701*. As soon as it told her it amended the number, the dead rising swiftly, gathering under the watchful eye of this beatific princess who was most culpable for their present state. Right. It was her, wasn't it? Everything had been going—exactly—as Shannon planned. She had the devil under control, she had Jay in the vehicle, nothing at all would've happened if not for Princess Mayfair. Mallory's former trained pup.

Yet Shannon felt no emotion, she only thought idly and distantly whether Mother were part of this funereal procession, then decided to not think about that at all.

"You—" Shannon thought of what to say. The deer continued onward, not stopping for a chat. "We're attacking the tower. Will you help?"

"Certainly," Mayfair said, as though this were decided long ago. Or as though she thought Shannon nothing more than a curiosity.

Cleveland's nearly hundred thousand dead continued in lockstep. Every demographic fragment represented: rich, poor, young, old, male, female, no distinction among them in their rows and rows. People in suits, people in jeans, people in rags. Even the soldiers from the tanks and jeeps marched, toting their guns as they had in life. The only notably arranged among them were a group of similarly-uniformed types that followed Mayfair directly, huge men all, wearing maroon sports jerseys and matching shorts, the name of the city emblazoned on their chests.

The ash fell away and the lake stretched before them, pristine sewage under unending sun.

At the base of the black tower, where a black entrance gaped, stood a tall red man, garbed in white and navy like an officer, his hat and gloves and cuffs and stripes all spotless—he was large enough these details shone clearly even at a distance—yet his face throbbed with veins, and his bloodshot eyes boggled, and the pores on his skin rippled and spewed sharp thin red lines that traveled upward from him, arced over the water, and came down to rake across the city and slice anything they touched.

Moloch, Prince of Wrath.

His bulging eyes, swollen past the point of bursting, fell upon the army marching toward him. His jaw unhinged, the cheeks stretched and snapped sinewy, blood gushed in a waterfall to smear his uniform, he shrieked:

"HOW FUCKING MANY OF YOU **ARE** THERE?! HOW FUCKING MANY? HOW MANY MORE DO I HAVE TO KILL? **I'LL FUCKING DO IT!** I'LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU SQUIRMING HUMAN SHITS! YOU ARE **NOTHING** TO ME! VERMIN! ALL OF YOU UNJUSTLY LOVED BASTARDS!"

He didn't know. He didn't know they were already dead, that this was an army of ghosts risen to plague him, that like the buildings propped up on the backs of their mummified architects some things persist past death—*Mother...*—some things were stronger in death than in the stagnant sump-like ossification that sealed them to their living room couches to watch Armor of God on a Wednesday night.

Moloch's arms snapped two, three, four times within his sleeves, the sharp bents apparent through the fabric that did not tear no matter how sodden they became, but between their threads a hundred more red lines shot toward the rim of the city.

The lines drove down, into the water, into the sloped ground, under the ground. They penetrated deeply and then ripped up, wrenching with them gigantic fingers of land, unseaming the ground beneath Shannon's feet, beneath the hooves of the deer, beneath all the hordes of the dead. The land itself rose, the city, Shannon's stomach heaved, she looked to the left and saw the land coil into and crush the skyscrapers, she looked to her right and saw a vast wave of earth curl in tumult.

Then all of it stopped.

The land ceased rising. Ceased curling. All the frenzied activity, the senseless shifting of the earth itself to the will of this devil prince Moloch, became still in an instant. Shannon, who had gained an inch of air, dropped back to the ground and fell to one knee. Around her all the land stood suspended. And not far ahead, on a floating peninsula, the deer stood with Mayfair atop her.

Mayfair's hand reached out. She held something the size of a plum pit, but yellow. Upon her palm she manipulated it, and as she did the state of suspension broke and the land again moved.

It moved now with purpose, not flung up in random rage, but organized as the severed and split fingers slid back together and ran like a river of dirt and cracked pavement and discarded bricks into the rippling lake, shot out straight across the water toward the black tower, toward Moloch, who howled incredulously.

"NO! IDIOTS! HUMANS CAN'T **DO** THAT! FUCKING MORONS! THAT'S NOT REAL! I REFUSE TO BELIEVE IN IT! YOU CANNOT **MAKE** ME BELIEVE IN IT YOU **ASSHOLES**!"

A land bridge formed in Lake Erie. It connected the city to the tower, and without pause Mayfair's corpses funneled onto it, marching as orderly as before although much faster.

Moloch bent his body, he seethed bloody lines that whipped in every random direction, some even at Mayfair—though the deer deftly evaded. Everything about him was breaking, snapping, twisting onto itself, every part set against every other part (*trickery, stage machinery*), and in his inept and useless fury a stream of smaller devils poured out of the tower between his crooked and multi-segmented legs, uniformed similar to him and firing little guns that burst against the bodies of the dead to little avail.

"KILL EVERY LAST **ONE!** SNUFF THEM OUT! **SAVE ME** FROM THE NEED TO LOOK AT THEM! **EEEEIIIIIIYYYYYAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!**" And his neck strained with veiny cords, and the cords snapped, and blood sprayed out, and his scream descended into the whirr of a buzzsaw.

He didn't know. They were already dead. He didn't know he could never be saved from them because they were already dead and still haunted him.

Something blitzed out of the sky. Shannon almost missed it, but the ruler she gripped pinged: *Those that were numbered of them, even of the daughters of Lust, were one.* She caught it as a streak at first; as it passed over the water it became more legible, a small red creature in a white dress, with white wings to match. Carrying something. Something Shannon recognized, even. Carrying the Door.

The placid face of Mayfair cracked. She jabbed her hand at the flying figure and commanded: "That one—stop her!" The dead soldiers who still held guns fired.

The flying girl, far too fast, corkscrewed out of the air and divebombed toward the entrance of the black tower. Moloch's eyes opened only at the last moment and his apoplectic howls subsided. With one slash of his annihilated arm he raked the flying girl with several of his bloody strands. Her cry pierced the air, her body swirled out of its trajectory, but despite that her momentum carried her and the Door past him, into the entrance of the tower, where she disappeared.

Now Mayfair was raging. She tucked her staff under her arm and pulled papers from her pocket. Her eyes scanned the words with growing fury. "No. *No!* They—I stop watching them for *one second* and—Ohhh!"

"Is something amiss, Your Highness," the deer said.

"They've gotten ahead of us. No! No... No. Nothing's changed. We have no choice but to push forward. Pythette, fetch the elf. It seems we'll need her to gain entry."

At the same time, Moloch peered over his shoulder into the black maw of the tower, as if wondering whether to abandon his post and pursue the girl that got past him. He whipped back and forth, torn, literally tearing, splitting at the seams—not his uniform, which remained unbroken, but him—spurting more blood in the process.

Just as he seemed about to slop himself together, a rain of light dropped out of the sky. Long, fluid bolts shining even among the sunlight as they pounded upon the formation of devil soldiers spilling out of Pandaemonium. The lines burst into and out their bodies then dispersed in an instant, leaving entire rows to slump inert with massive holes in their chests.

Shannon had seen this attack before. Different place, different context, but the same attack. She looked in search of the trailing tails just before they dissipated and saw him standing upon a promontory of shredded rock and dirt, some remnant of Mayfair's terrestrial manipulation.

"Wendell!" Shannon shouted. He held his magic gun but also wore several more guns strapped to his back. The faerie queen Flanz-le-Flore hovered behind him. Shannon would've liked to talk to Wendell for some reason, some remnant of that Cleveland she once knew, a Cleveland now irrevocably transformed; but he was transformed too, and maybe Shannon was transformed herself.

She let the moment pass. Wendell had cleared most of the way along the land bridge. Now was time to move.

Moving wasn't her decision. Around her everyone was moving, dead and alive alike, swarming into a funnel of bodies. Their heads bobbed and only Mayfair on the deer stood above them. Into the water dropped a few of the military's amphibious vehicles. Bullets resounded. A bulwark of corpses led the charge, and Moloch, rent in furious indecision of who to kill next, finally decided to forget about the flying devil girl altogether.

"GET UP YOU WORTHLESS TRASH," he shouted to his soldiers. Those who weren't dead were being enveloped by the encroaching horde. "GET UP GET UP GET UP OH **FOR FUCK'S SAKE I'LL DO IT MYSELF!**"

By now Moloch looked only vaguely humanoid. And only "vaguely" due to his clothes, which no matter what refused to lose their original form. The thing within them was now both angular and bloblike, pieces jutting and undulating and intermittently rising out of and subsuming back into the mass. In this state, he pitched forward and—began to—*roll* at the crowd, if roll really described the jerky and uneven motions. As he rolled, he built, somehow growing larger despite the constant stream of blood and viscera that spouted from him. He'd already been large but now his whirling mass of bleeding flesh spanned the entirety of the land bridge, not an inch of spare space, and the pitiful human bodies rushing toward him, no matter how numbered, were no force against him. Gunfire rattled uselessly off the wall, even Wendell's beams of light did nothing. No, that wasn't exactly correct. The weapons all did something, no matter how pitiful they were, even the tiny pistols led to puffs of flesh breaking off, but Shannon realized that every little bit and element that came off Moloch only led to further growth, and now against concentrated fire—even a missile blasted against him—he was expanding to gargantuan heights.

Shannon had been pulled despite herself into the thick of it, elbows on all sides, nowhere to maneuver. She tried to reach for the trumpet, maybe a wall could do something, but her arm couldn't reach. Moloch crushed the first row of corpses; soon without hindrance he would plow into the rest of them. And nobody stopped firing, indeed the larger Moloch got the more people attacked him, they weren't seeing the correlation in the mutual madness of the moment, the corpses lacked even a mind to try and puzzle it out. Out of nowhere Mallory zipped, running atop the heads of the crowd, and even she—incapable of any rationality beyond attack, attack, attack—swung her magic sword and sent tremendous beams of light

into Moloch worse than uselessly. Shannon screamed at her to stop, at all of them, yet nobody listened, nobody ever listened to her...!

The ground dropped out under Moloch. It was Mayfair, her hand raised to manipulate the plum pit relic. As Moloch plunged into the lake, spurting steam from all his blood, the land rose from below. Huge swaths of mud were dredged up, such a gigantic amount that even the massive form of Moloch was dwarfed as it enveloped him on all sides and clamped closed like the fist of God. Red lines shot out of the sphere of mud, cutting and slicing, but more mud rose to add to the sphere, growing it bigger and bigger, caking on layer after layer to encase him. His scream, somewhat muffled, pierced outward:

"THIS ISN'T REAL! THIS ISN'T WHAT HUMANS ARE CAPABLE OF! STOP LYING TO ME YOU FUCKING DIPSHITS! IT'S FAKE. IT'S ALL FUCKING FAAAAAAAAAKE!"

The last word continued to elongate, drew itself longer and longer and longer, as with a flick of her wrist Mayfair launched the moon-like agglomeration of mud as though it were a wad of trash. It—and Moloch inside it—went hurtling over the lake, toward the horizon.

Mayfair lowered her hand. Mallory dropped onto the head of one of the basketball players standing beside her. She stood on tiptoe as she sheathed her sword. "Hm."

"How was that, Mother," Mayfair said; cold as ice.

Mallory spoke not a word.

"Well then." With a few shifts of her palm, Mayfair reformed the land bridge. "Let us proceed into the tower together."

Greed

Something about this place was wrong, and Perfidia's first words through the Door were "Don't pay too much attention to the geography." So Jay limited himself to shifting glances at the columns carved into Atlases, between which gigantic circular windows stared out of walls that had no windows from the outside. Fine marble, sleek floors, Greco-Roman inspiration. As he looked more he noticed the ceiling was higher in some places than others without any seeming transition, that certain segments of this vast lobby-like room stretched endlessly until they vanished into points on the horizon, that the pained faces of the statues holding up the walls turned and opened their eyes to watch him—

"I said—don't pay too much attention."

Perfidia tugged his shoulder. He looked away, but the images of those stone faces remained like phantoms on his retinas until he rubbed hard and blinked. He thought for a moment he heard a voice—I'm sorry, I'm sorry—but it faded as well.

They stood around the Door, which leaned against a seemingly stable wall. Kedeshah leaned against the same wall, breathing deeply, holding a hand to the sharpest-defined of the many wounds across her body.

Perfidia was pacing. "How long it'll take you to heal? A few hours?"

"You're not truly so ignorant, no?"

"Gimme a number at least, something workable. I know maybe you won't *fully* recover so fast but. I dunno!"

The bright white blood pooled around Kedeshah's small, sandaled feet. She tilted her head back and winced. "Ahhh... Fidi. Moloch landed a clean hit. My wings are shot."

"Okay so you're a little slower now. Slow for you is fast for us. It's all still workable. We're past Moloch and let's be real. He's the scariest of the Princes. Right? It's smooth sailing here on out."

"Don't act stupider than you are, Fidi."

"Can't kiss yourself?" Jay asked.

"If only the auspices of Lust smiled upon such exclusionary self-love," Kedeshah said with a sigh of ambiguous sincerity, "at that point it's Pride, and outside the scope of my abilities."

"I mean think about it." Perfidia paced before the Door. The huge furred coat swished about her ankles, and her hands barely reached out the broad cuffs. "Moloch's behind us. The head honcho is out fighting angels. Who's that leave? Rimmon is strong but he's slow. Belial? Belial can't be assed to do anything, that's his whole gimmick. The honcho sealed up

Mammon or something. So we really just gotta make it past Beelzebub, who I may add we already escaped once during my brother's stupid jailbreak escapade—"

"He let us escape Fidi. Besides, you're forgetting one."

"I was being tactful. But let's be real. You can get us past *her* whether you're hurt or not. You're her daughter."

Kedeshah scoffed.

"I know, I know, that's the whole reason you're so reluctant," Perfidia said. "You don't wanna face her. Look. I have no idea what problems you got with your mother but the head honcho told me he used you as a bargaining chip to make her fall in line. So she clearly cares about you—"

"*That's exactly the problem,*" Kedeshah said. "I dunno! Maybe this whole revenge scheme's a dumb idea from the start. Revenge is more Wrath, Lust is the polar opposite of Wrath. Maybe it's just not in me."

"How's this whole seven deadly sins thing work exactly," said Jay. "Can you only do certain things if they fall under your particular sin? So because you're Lust that means you can't like, ever be lazy or something?"

"Any devil can do whatever they fucking want they just like to make excuses for themselves," said Perfidia.

"We're wasting time standing here talking," said Jay. "Let's start moving?"

"Sure, sure." Perfidia helped Kedeshah peel herself off the wall, leaving a shiny white smear. "Come on. You can walk. You're not *that* hurt."

Jay shouldered his baseball bat and adjusted his hat and was prepared to follow Perfidia whichever direction led up, but as they all finally started moving Lalum's silver strings manifested in front of them: THE DOOR?

Because Perfidia had told Lalum it wasn't safe to scuttle off on her own, especially not to someplace that looked like a hiding place—"You're probably not the first thing to decide to hide there," she said specifically—Lalum instead cleaved close to the side of the Door, though its thin sides did little to conceal her. She was growing more accustomed to being seen, though, and now that her writing called attention to her she only shirked a moment before diverting her gaze downward.

SOME THING MAY FOLLOWE US THOROUGH.

"That's the least of our concerns," said Jay.

"With Kedeshah hurt it's not feasible to carry it with us," said Perfidia. "I can turn it off and store it in my coat but—"

"No," said Jay. "Leave it on—and leave it here. I still need a way out if I lose you. Or if you lose me."

"Pal, if you get lost you're never making it out regardless of whether there's an exit or not. But yeah I'm in favor of leaving it. We're strapped for firepower. If more humans come inside and start causing chaos that'll up our odds."

"Infinitesimally," said Kedeshah.

Lalum cast a final, uncertain glance at the Door, then followed Jay and the others as they made their way deeper into Pandaemonium.

Their footsteps echoed a long time, long after they themselves had vanished. Echoing... echoing. The only sound in an otherwise silent place. Though these lower floors of Pandaemonium contained the devil courts that might bring cause for industry and activity among the judges, the judged, and all the accomplices of Hell's version of law and order—let alone the peanut gallery—they had emptied in pursuit of novel Earthside delights. So it slowly became quiet again. The echoes softened, grew distant, the space no longer observed and thus no longer needing to conform to any sort of sense shifting, expanding, contracting around the Door, the sole foreign object within its carefully-constructed whole. Shifting—undulating—bubbling, the place itself liquid, the Door alone remaining coherent...

Until its translucent aperture rippled, until something new emerged. The lower halls of Pandaemonium snapped back into place instantly, though not necessarily the same place as when Jay and the others looked upon it; only the faintest trace of their retreating footsteps remained. The creature that emerged from the Door had no footsteps of its own, though. Nor did it need to hear those of the others. It looked the "direction" they went with more certainty than the architecture ought to have allowed, the walls having changing position. It saw differently now, since it ate the fruit. Warmth stood out to it. And in these cold and empty halls the only warmth that remained was the dissipating body heat Jay Waringcrane left behind. Well, that was how she interpreted the trail she saw lead away from the Door. (It may have actually been the blood dropping off of Kedeshah, which could not be so easily consumed by the surfaces of the structure.) Regardless, she knew which way she must go.

Viviendre de Califerne slithered on her belly. Though an unusual kind of motion, she moved far faster than she ever had before. For the first time in her life she felt strong. Strong enough to avert the apocalypse? No. No, of course not. Though she would like to believe in him, the hero, and his capacity to make it happen—of course she couldn't actually believe. She would try, though. And when they failed and died, they would at least die together.

—

Perfidia never shut the fuck up. Her voice invaded Jay's ears as he dogged her heels, and the oppressive silence otherwise made it difficult to ignore her. But as he looked down and saw they were climbing stairs without him noticing before, he wondered if her talking was maybe

useful, in a talismanic way. A totem to keep at bay the encroachment of this—place. He lacked superstitions beyond those that fed his self-doubting paranoia but even he felt the uncanniness of his surroundings. Everything now was black, almost pitch black, but with harsh white outlines to guide the way and indicate boundaries; outlines that, the more he looked at them, betrayed whatever seeming authority they possessed with paradoxical and non-Euclidean forms. The harsh reminder not to focus on the geography returned to him and he stared at Perfidia's swishing barbed tail instead.

"The staff, the eye, the shield," Perfidia kept repeating. (She carried all three inside her coat, which had the properties of an RPG inventory screen: 999 objects ranging from potions to flying machines stored within one's pocket.) "The staff, y'know, splitting them. Won't kill em but it might slow em down. With the shield we can survive some attacks too. Then the eye—the eye's the wildcard. We can use that. Definitely. Turning Pandaemonium back to an earlier state—"

"Nonstarter," said Kedeshah, who led their little conga line up the stairs—no, flat ground again. "There are no 'states' of Pandaemonium. It's never changed."

"We can test it out. In fact we should. We need to know our options."

"Test it. Yeah sure. Make the place angry at us—that's best case. No, no, no. I won't let you."

"Fine. Our other advantage is Lalum back there."

"The spider?"

"That's right. She's got a useful power to control things with her threads. Well, I'm assuming she's got a spare faerie or two on hand."

I DO, the threads wrote.

Jay hadn't known that. He supposed she picked them up from the elves in the castle, complete with little pins to keep them docile.

"The power's not particularly constricted. I think it'll work on at least some of the Princes. If we get past Rimmon, Belial, and Ashtoreth by other means and save that power for Beelzebub—"

"This power," Kedeshah said, "it works on only one person at a time?"

"It's limited by the threads she can control," said Perfidia. "She has two hands, so the limit should be two."

"Then it's a nonstarter also. Sure, let's assume that'll work on Beelzebub himself. What about the swarm of bugs that buzz around him? Those won't be under her control. You say this power's used with threads? The bugs will eat through in instants. Stupid, stupid plan."

"I'm just brainstorming okay!" Perfidia turned to Jay, her face much more distant than her tail. "Feel free to chip in. You're such a smart guy after all."

"Ohhhhh human, you're *such* a smart guy~" Kedeshah said. "Look at little me, so hurt and weak. I'm sure a smart guy like you could find a way to pin me down and unleash your most bestial, carnal desires upon me!"

I'm sorry.

"Be serious!"

"Why should I? This is the stupidest idea ever. I could be doing anything else."

"Don't give me that. You want it. You want vengeance for Ubik. I know you do—"

HERO!

The spiderweb appeared right in front of Jay's face and he stopped hard on his heels to keep from walking into it, only for his feet to fly out from the frictionless black floor. He landed hard on his ass, clambered back up, looked around to check who saw him, and noticed Perfidia and Kedeshah veering a completely different direction, with Lalum in the midpoint between them nearly subsumed into the black background.

Then Jay realized: Perfidia hadn't veered off. He had.

He hurried back to them, wondering when he went off course. He thought he'd been following Perfidia's swishing tail the entire time, swish-swish-swish back and forth like a metronome, a hypnotic pace. He rubbed his eyes, pulled off his hat, let his hair breathe. Sweat dripped down his face and he brushed his hair all over and put the hat back on. Something about this place.

Perfidia and Kedeshah continued without a hitch:

"You need to admit you're only nervous about this cuz of your mom. Admit it!"

"Fidi look at me! My body's falling apart. It's gonna leave at least five scars. Scars—I didn't even *think* about scars. Oh, I'm ruined. How will I be able to live with myself?"

"Whaddya mean how? You're still the daughter of Lust aren't you? A fertility goddess, what're a few *scars* gonna matter?"

"Oh, ruination! The image of virginal purity, defiled—marred! by such unseemly imperfections."

"You're a literal whore what the fuck are you talking about, 'virginal purity'?"

"'Tis not the true existence of purity itself that matters, dearest yet most benighted sister of mine. O, to lose the image, the sense of purity, that is the deepest and most dismal agony one may suffer; for God may forgive the physical lack, but only if the mind knows and truly yearns for the soul of what is good and holy."

"Indulgent slut! Wailing on about these metaphysical matters your peanut-sized illiterate brain could never possibly comprehend! Soul—pah. Show me the soul of bread will ya?"

"Man shall not live by bread alone, so spoke Him that is holy for we wretched sinners to reckon; 'tis faith, the spirit, that grants eternal life, and possessing it not, we are lost, dearest Charisma."

"Yeah and if I weren't pawing off my oh-so-precious purity in the back alleys of Whitecrosse you'd never have had bread to live off at all, so we'd sure see how well this faith fills your belly, eh? But go on Charm, whine to me some more about spirit! It's your right, I suppose. That's the whole reason I did it. So you'd never have to suffer those indignities yourself, but maybe a hint of gratitude in return—just a *hint*, that's all I fucking ask you prattling cunt—"

"O Charisma—"

"Charm—"

I'm sorry.

Jay looked up. He stood in silence, in blackness. He looked left, he looked right, he looked behind him. No Perfidia. No Lalum. No Kedeshah—not even the fluorescent droplets of her blood. No Charm and no Charisma, but of course they wouldn't be there, why would they be there. Why did he think—but they'd said—

Fuck.

Any random direction looked no different from all others. Jay tapped his baseball bat against the ground and produced a heavy sound, so at least he could be certain of the floor beneath him, but everything else was black. Not dark—he saw himself perfectly fine. Just black.

"Lalum. Perfidia," he said. His voice echoed. The echo came back: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

When the echo finally died he noticed two white lines running parallel to create a lane. The lines had definitely not been there before. There were no other lines.

Following them was almost certainly a trap. How, he didn't know, but he considered turning around and going the exact opposite direction. How much would that matter? Blundering into a plane of perfect blackness with no distinction. Maybe springing the trap would be the better option.

His hands gripped the handle of his bat. Well, he'd come into this tower to save the world. Did he plan to do that by sitting back while Kedeshah did all the fighting? He hadn't cared much for the arrangement anyway. Following their heels while they bickered, waiting to interject with some crafty plan that made use of the random gaggle of superpowers at their disposal. He fucked up those devils at the monastery well enough. Maybe he could do something against whatever lurked in this darkness. Yeah, "maybe." He got the message clearly from Perfidia and Kedeshah that the creatures here were on another level compared to those chucklefucks. But what options did he really have?

He tapped the bat against the floor in front of him to ensure the road didn't lead to some invisible pit. Even as he followed the path he kept considering turning back. But when he glanced over his shoulder the path now extended endlessly. He wondered how much of a choice he ever actually had.

When he looked back in front a door stood before him.

A plain, normal door. It shone white in the blackness. The knob was a mirrored sphere in which his own distorted form hovered within oblivion: body squished, head gigantic, and most giant of all the Cleveland Browns logo, which warped and deformed with every slight movement.

I'm sorry.

"I'm sorry," said the voice behind the door.

The voice stopped his hand, which until then had reached for the knob, since he'd already resolved to follow the path and figured this didn't change the mental calculus. The voice, though, changed something. He wasn't sure what. Maybe it didn't. Some ghastly apologetic puppeteer wailing out to him from a past he no longer remembered, some creature killed but not by this particular version of his cognition. Whatever. Whatever! What did it matter one way or another? A path gets laid out for you and you take it, you're not allowed to do anything unless you take it, that's the way it fucking works. In a game. Was this not a game? Didn't he want it to be a game, the ultimate game? Or was this the particular element of games he wanted to avoid when he asked to make his life a game in the first place?

Fuck!

He seized the knob and before he could twist the knob itself twisted, a pane of invisible glass shattered in the exact space the door occupied, and the door opened inward at a calm and steady slide.

Inside was—

Arms. Hundreds, thousands, long and multijointed, withered and pale, reaching out from a central point like weeds, hands with fingers some of which became new arms, new fingers, finally reaching an end—they all did in fact end—with gaunt split nails dug into white walls and floors. Each wrist impaled by a black spike, so that the hands and arms could solely fidget in their arrested forward reach.

If there were any body that sprouted these arms it couldn't be seen, only a darkened core into which their gaunt flesh disappeared.

"Okay." Jay glanced back at the door. There was no longer any door. "Got it."

His voice animated the arms, they twitched and quivered, but the black stakes held fast. A groan issued from the dark center. It reverberated up the arms and echoed off itself until it reached Jay with multiplicative force.

"So who are you. Do you talk?"

The groan subsided instantly. With crisp cleanness, a voice issued:

"Hi Mammon here, Prince of Greed. The Wealth Specialist!"

"Oh. Mammon. I heard about you." Jay remained cautious. "Perfidia mentioned you were—sealed up." Perfidia also seemed keen on avoiding Mammon entirely. The fact Jay stood here now, without having had much agency in the matter, called into question her equally dismissive assessments of Rimmon and Belial. Jay suspected they'd run into all of them at some point.

"But I'm not here to talk about me," Mammon said. "You're the star of this show! The man with a plan. The zero who became a hero. A classy customer who knows what he wants and how he wants it. Paradise schemer, Napoleon dreamer! Boy, have I got an offer for you!" Every single hand, all one thousand of them, cocked finger guns.

Jay smiled. Tacky. How tacky. This free-wheeling television commercial spiel. He had to suppress a laugh. This was a Prince? These devil elites Perfidia and Kedeshah feared? A cheap salesman. Seen during commercial breaks when watching shitty movies late at night.

"So what's the offer," he said. "My soul—sorry, my Humanity—for all my wishes? Been there."

Still, he didn't lower his guard. At any moment he might need to fight. He watched the flapping hands, waiting for one to break free and seize him. He scanned for exits, saw none.

"Humanity?" said Mammon. "No way Jose. Our prices are low, low, low! Call during this program and I can offer you a special sale price—"

"You're the embodiment of Greed. You're not fooling me."

"The price of: Victory! I want to win. Win, win, WIN! We're winning now and the big man can't stop us. You're absolutely, positively right you know. I want everything! Everyone knows it. I know they know it. That's why I gotta give it all away cheap, cheap, CHEAP! Fire sale! Everything must go! They'll never see it coming. Satan sure won't! That's what I thought anyway. If I gave my followers all these products for the low-low price of FREE he'd never expect it. Like that special, one-of-a-kind, limited-time-only Daughter of Lust. Gave it away to one lucky subscriber, Ubiquitous Bal Berith. Only Satan already had me solved. Saw right through me. Right under my nose—not that I have a nose—he put that Perfidia. I was the blind one, boy, blind as a bat! Eyes on the prize, cut me down to size."

"Uh... huh."

"That's all past though. I'm new and improved now. Ten times the stain-busting power, that's Mammon Plus! The problem was simple. My Greed became Envy. I wanted what was *his*. I wanted it more than anything else. I thought by giving everything away CHEAP I was fighting against my nature, breaking out of his plan. But I lost what made me Mammon,

baby! Envy—he knows Envy like he knows himself. Envy is his closest toady. Once my Greed became Envy I was toast. Buttered!"

Jay untangled it in his mind. "So... you want me to free you. Then you'll help me get to the top of the tower and beat him."

"Has this ever happened to you? You want to get up and go to the top of your devilish Hell tower, but you just seem to have six hundred and sixty-six Satanic stakes impaling every single one of your arms? Fortunately, Mammon has the solution.—Actually I don't. I can't be freed. Certainly not by you."

"Okay. I can't free you. Then what the fuck do you want me to do, and what do you plan to do for me?"

For a long time Mammon said nothing. Then: "Step One! With a simple test, I'll determine if you're eligible for my special offer. Don't answer this question wrong!"

Mammon's arms slackened. They sagged en masse, giving the impression of some sickly plant wilting. Then all at once he bloomed again, as much as the stakes allowed him, his arm segments lifting, tightening around the black center. A force struck Jay, tugging him toward it. He planted his feet and resisted but his arms holding the baseball bat rose up, the bat being the locus of the force. It was like a powerful magnet gripped it, growing in power each second.

Jay tried to keep the bat from flying away. His shoes skidded over the frictionless ground. His body leaned forward, drawn by the bat as it dangled out in front of him. His shoulders stretched painfully. As he neared the first of the hands they flapped and pinched their fingers at his heels.

He had no choice. He released the bat and it zoomed into the center of Mammon. The force ended instantly and he fell back, then scabbled away from the reaching hands, which could not reach far to follow him.

"Come on." He jumped to his feet. "Give it back you asshole."

A ripple ran up the arms. They bunched as much as possible into two groups. Twenty hands at the end of the first group twisted on their wrists to form a singular grasping entity and from the space at their center they pulled out—a baseball bat.

Not Jay's bat.

"Did YOU drop this golden bat?" Mammon asked.

The second bundle coalesced the same way and held up a second bat.

"Or this SILVER bat?"

Of course. Every kid knew this nursery rhyme, or fairy tale, or whatever the fuck it was. A weary woodcutter drops his axe into a lake, a woman emerges showing him a gold axe and a silver axe and asks which is his. A fable extolling the virtues of honesty. The woodcutter told

the truth, neither was his axe, he'd dropped only an ordinary axe, and as reward the lady gave him all three axes. The end.

Obviously, though, it wouldn't be so simple here. This was Mammon, Salesman of Greed. The "Greedy" answer would be to demand both the gold and silver bat, and then the real bat for good measure. But that was stupid. Jay had zero use for a gold or silver bat. He couldn't carry all three. At least the woodcutter could sell them and buy a hundred real axes, but Jay doubted he'd see any last-minute merchants before the final boss. He honestly did just want *his* bat back. He liked that bat. More than anything—or anyone—else, that bat had been his companion on this adventure. (His adventure... Yeah. He could call it that.) That bat never left his side. It helped him from minute one. It never betrayed him, he never had to suspect it would betray him.

It didn't matter what Jay actually wanted, though. It was most important that he determine the "correct" answer, at least from Mammon's viewpoint, since Mammon would probably bestow upon him some useful boon if Jay proved himself "eligible." But wasn't trying to game the system and approach the question like a riddle antithetical to what Mammon sought to gauge? He wasn't giving an intelligence test. Assumedly he wanted an answer that revealed Jay's moral—or rather immoral—fiber. What would Mammon even consider worthy?

Then Jay realized. Mammon already made it clear. And, surprisingly, Jay's honest answer was exactly the correct one.

"I dropped *my* bat. Not those two. Mine. Give it back."

The two arms, built of other arms, remained rigid a moment more, their precious metal bats a-glimmer in the white luminescence of the chamber. Then a television sound effect played, canned applause, party streamers popping, and the salesman voice announced:

"CONGRATULATIONS! You're our LUCKY WINNER. But we always knew you'd get it right. I knew as soon as I learned about your wish. Pure Greed! Greed without Envy! You wanted a whole other world all to yourself. Not this world. Not anyone's world. Your own! Untainted. Pure!"

Purity, said the voice of Charm. O Purity.

"Now, for the Lucky Winner's prize!"

The gold and silver bats crumbled to dust. The arms unwound and became once more a randomly-distributed glut. The dark center returned as their core, where the arm segments twitched and spasmed as the hands at their ends fanned out and gesticulated. Out of the center a shape emerged, oblong and dark—and Jay knew what it was from the instant its tip became visible. A baseball bat.

His baseball bat.

But changed. Black. Not like the gold and silver ones, which were never his—this was as though a coat of lacquer had been applied to the surface of what was the same, ordinary, store-bought bat he'd carried all this way.

Instead of the normal logo—he actually forgot what brand it was—new words were printed, professional and crisp: *Mul Elohim*.

"Have you ever had this problem? There's a God you want to kill, but you just can't quite seem to do it! Try and try as you can, but it's impossible to erase the stain of His love! Well I can't give you the power to kill God, but I do have the next best thing. Introducing: The New and Improved Mul Elohim! That's right, you've seen the prototype and now it's time for the real deal. After millennia of research, devil scientists have perfected the art of killing things that shouldn't be able to be killed. Pesky Princes bothering you with their so-called immortality? A few good hits with the Mul Elohim and they'll understand just how far from Divinity they've Fallen. One hundred percent satisfaction or your money back guaranteed! Can't afford to break the bank? No problem! Call now and the Mul Elohim is yours for only seven easy installments of Prince corpses. You won't see a better deal!"

As Mammon spoke, the black bat levitated between his twisting rows of arms. Jay reached out one hand and clasped the grip. The instant his fingers closed, a surge pulsed up his body. Any minor ache he'd felt—mostly from climbing up steps for the past few hours—disappeared instantly. Strength swelled him, strength he never felt before, not even from Olliebollen's rejuvenating magic. *Power*. He swung the bat once through the air and slid back from the resulting sonic boom. Wind whipped between the arms, which strained their hands to a smattering of limp applause.

"Seven Prince corpses," Jay said.

"Oops! My mistake," Mammon said. "Seven Prince corpses *plus tax*. You gotta kill the devil who brought you here too."

"Kedeshah?"

"Her? She's not worth a cent! The other one. Perfidia Bal Berith."

Jay tried to lower the godkiller bat. But it seemed to naturally remain upright within his grasp, as though propelled by natural buoyancy. "Why."

"Simple! She's *his* pawn. A final piece of Pride's. Whether she knows or not. The fact she's here at all is proof he wants her to be. You know the saying: Fool me once—can't get fooled again! No clue what his game is, but he's certainly playing! She is not the wildcard. You are. He put a piece of himself inside her but not you. He did not make you walk into her office and make that wish. So it's up to you, you, YOU to change the equation."

"I need her. I need to transfer the Divinity to her."

"But wait! I have one more special offer: You don't! Keep the Divinity for yourself. I know you want to. That was the whole point of my test. Greed is your spirit, kiddo! You want, you don't even know what you want, but you want nonetheless! Pure Greed. Take it then. Become God—or as close as you can be to one. Seize everything you ever wanted."

"I hear that kind of power would destroy me."

"And it will! Of course it will. But not before you realize your every desire. Now tell me: Isn't a few short years of human life a worthy price for the peace of mind that the fulfillment of all you ever wanted brings? You'll have it all—what would there even be to live for after that?"

Jay tilted his wrist and managed to finally let the bat lower. After a few minutes of acclimation, he'd gotten used to the power that transferred from it to him, the heightened awareness he received of every joint, muscle, and tendon in his arm as they flexed one way or the other. The realization of his every desire. Wasn't that exactly the issue? Or—no.

Paradise. Could he really make it?

He had used that goal, paradise, for so long it was now just a word. For the first time he thought about what paradise would actually entail. A better world. A more just world. Rewrite natural laws. Erase hunger, war, famine, maybe even death if that was possible for a God. Eliminate scarcity, bestow upon them all prosperity. A shining, brief, blinking light of the divine; in that moment he would be everything to them all, and they would praise him, and when he burst into holy flame and reduced himself to ash they would rewrite scripture around him and utter his name unto eternity. Innate, uncontestable, absolute good, possible only from his intercession, his journey and struggle. Lalum might remain behind and write in her halting way his story for them to read, as in Whitecrosse they read John Coke's story. And Vivienne—and Vivienne.

Would it be worth it?

He wondered.

"You said," he muttered, words that drew him out of chasmic contemplation, "seven Prince corpses. You're one of the seven."

Mammon's arms seemed to smile, without any trace of a smile at all.

"No matter what happens," he said, "no matter who wins. You, Perfidia—or Satan. I remain trapped here, don't I?"

"I might—" Jay stopped himself. Would he free Mammon? Even as thanks for the Mul Elohim baseball bat? Did his vision of earthly paradise include the arbiter of all avarice?

"You can't sell to a salesman," Mammon said. "So don't even try. Besides. Whatever pretty world you make, where milk and honey flows freely and nobody ever wants a thing? That'd kill me sure as that bat. Besides. I've had some time to think here, sealed as I am. I remember now. I remember what I really want."

The hundreds of hands spread their fingers.

"Your answer to my question reminded me. I was once much greater than this. We all were. We were angels, closest to God. Even when we first Fell, we were still more than what we are now. We've corrupted over the years, all of us, lost our true forms. You asked to receive what was once yours. That was Greed in its purest form, Greed free of all Envy: To want what is

yours and no one else's. I want to remember what I once was. As long as I am now this shape—I cannot."

To remember what he once was. Something about that—Jay was transported back. Playing his first game on the computer. Gasping in shock when the main character's village burned down, flabbergasted when the jester betrayed the king. Walking across a vast field with distant mountains, distant clouds. Holding back tears when the old knight sacrificed himself to save the party. All of them: The idealistic hero, the cheery heroine, the comic support character, the animalesque mascot, the brooding rival, the cackling villain atop his tower. Climbing the twenty floors of the final dungeon, facing iron giants and chimeras, opening a chest for a Tiamat to emerge with what felt like fifty heads snapping. The final battle... A shape he once was.

Look, Mother! I'm a sail!

I'm sorry.

"You understand—don't you. The thing you can never get back."

"Thank you," Jay said.

That other world. That game's world. Defined by rules, designed by an unknown office worker in a foreign land a decade before his birth, yet he'd never questioned the rules, never known the rules, never seen them, he was a sail, the wind whipped him whichever way, fifty people in black with their heads bowed over a hole dug into the ground. He was the hero. When the credits rolled and a hundred unintelligible Japanese names appeared in succession until only two words remained: THE END. He had been the hero. Then—he had been the hero.

"No, thank YOU! Your support means a lot—"

Jay brought down the bat.

—

It took—however many hits. The power that filled his body rendered them irrelevant in his mind, motions he scarcely perceived. By the end the thing that had been Mammon was a thousand shattered sticks sprawled across the ground. Nothing more than sticks. No more arms, no hands. Simple, snapped sticks in a pile, withered and black. Nobody who came upon them would recognize them as once belonging to one of the Seven Princes of Hell. The entire time Mammon had only thanked him, until at last a long groan rang out. Sticks—was that the former shape he'd sought?

Well. The bat worked as advertised.

The white room around him dispersed. He returned to the black space, though now white lines defined the walls and floor.

A moment more he breathed deeply, then he turned. Mammon had been pinned down already. The others would not be so simple and despite the sales pitch victory remained unguaranteed. Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy—why not Wrath too? Moloch might return, nothing stopped him. And, of course, Pride.

Plus tax. Perfidia Bal Berith. No need to decide about her right away. Either way, he needed her now. She knew more about this place than him, and most importantly she kept Kedeshah in line, and Kedeshah was useful. He still had time. He would decide about Perfidia when he needed to, no sooner.

Something moved ahead. Sharpened, Jay readied the bat. The sound of something smooth sliding. A long, slow hiss.

"Who's there," he asked.

The shape slithered forward. The bat lowered and a strange, abbreviated croak issued out his throat. He recognized her even before the face emerged out of the blackness. The smell—the scent of sweet perfume.

"Viviendre?"

"Hey." Almost a whisper. "Hey... S, sorry. I look a little different, fehfehfeh."

She wore the eyepatch and her hair cascaded about her shoulders. Her clothes were the fine ones from when he left her at the monastery, gemstones jingled and a bright cross hung from her neck. Below the waist, though—

"I ate a fruit. The thing that made those nuns the way they were. Sorry, I—I couldn't help it. I needed to help you. I needed to!"

The lower half of her body was the tail of a serpent.

"You don't have to say anything. I know. I know, I fucking know. But I don't regret it. I'm stronger now. I can move now. I can *breathe* now. I still only have one eye but that's not so bad. I'm a me that never existed. Could never have existed."

The thing you can never get back—but she never had it, only the image of what she could have had reflected in every other human being in the world.

"Now that I think about it, I suppose stalking you all the way here doesn't help my case none, hm? Fehfehfeh. Well you don't seem to mind it with that spider, so!"

"Viviendre," was all he could say.

"I don't care if we die, Jay. But let's die together."

Her scales gleamed as black as her hair. Her one eye shone with a simple reptilian slit for an iris. She grinned self-consciously, and as her dark lips parted two long fangs glinted.

"Fuck! Holy shit. There you fucking went."

Jay turned, and from the opposite direction they came: Perfidia at the front, jerking her arms around in rage, then the sullen Kedeshah and last Lalum.

"Oh look you went for a little rendezvous with your girlfriend." Perfidia stopped, looked over Vivienne, and shrugged. "Well, whatever. We'll use whoever we can get. You're not getting your relics back, though. And if you try anything funny at all—Kedeshah here will deal with you."

"Awesome, more trouble for me," Kedeshah muttered. Though her eyes were on something else—the bat. Jay thought about what Mammon said: Seven Prince corpses. Mammon had no way to enforce that price tag now, but what happened if Jay had to kill Kedeshah's mother? The bat would surely work on Kedeshah, too.

Perfidia didn't seem to notice the bat. Instead she checked her pocket watch. "Come on. Time's wasting! No more detours, got it? It should be obvious not to wander off on your own, but hurry up. I can yell at you while we walk."

She stomped off, then when nobody immediately followed she snapped her fingers. Kedeshah turned. Jay took a step—and looked at Lalum, then Vivienne. They were looking at each other. It was like an invisible line stood between him, and if he stepped again, he would break it. Somehow that line felt more powerful than even his bat.

The glare, from both sides, dripped murder.

"Come on," Jay said. "Both of you—behave." Then he walked through the line and it broke. Lalum and Vivienne followed, one on either side of him, and Jay wondered just how many people he would have to kill before it was all over.

Lust / Gluttony

Mallory and Mayfair refrained from conversation as the army ascended the steps of Pandaemonium. A hodgepodge mix of American soldiers, Cleveland militiamen, Whitecrosse knights, and corpses—corpses comprising by far the largest portion, as Shannon's ruler confirmed. So many were corpses, in fact, that despite the massive line of bodies, silence reigned over the chambers. Silence save for the tromping of feet. Unified, magnified.

"I distrust that daughter of yours," Shannon whispered to Mallory. The daughter in question rode on the back of the deer nun some twenty or thirty feet behind. Much farther back, almost invisible at this distance, was Wendell Noh and his faerie queen.

"Aye," said Tricia. "She promises much but serves only herself. We would be better off without her, despite the vast army her relic commands."

That was the rub, though. They relied on Mayfair to save them from Moloch, and they relied on her to gain entrance to Pandaemonium (some sort of barrier prevented entry without Temporary the elf's portal magic), and now they relied on her army to bolster their ranks. So far they'd encountered almost no devil presence inside Pandaemonium, but if they met another opponent like Moloch, her assistance would prove essential.

Furthermore, when Shannon cast furtive glances over her shoulder, she noticed Mayfair constantly consulting pages of weathered brown parchment. Her fair features often furrowed at whatever she saw written on them. Given the magical mumbo-jumbo available to Whitecrosse, Shannon felt certain those pages were of major importance. As she looked, Mayfair raised her hand and called one of her living followers to her—the hare nun, Pythette, an obnoxiously bubbly character. She said something too quiet to hear. Pythette nodded and nodded again, then saluted and shot off between the rows of the dead, past the Shannon/Mallory/Tricia trio (technically a quartet, but Gonzago rarely had anything of substance to say), and into the darkness ahead. Moving with purpose. Mayfair was scheming something, but what?

"I could," Mallory said with a half-formed shrug, "simply kill her."

"What?!" Shannon said.

"Frankly, I'm disappointed neither of my esteemed tacticians advised me to do so themselves. It is the most convenient solution; with her relics, we may still make use of her army afterward. Am I doomed to think of everything alone?"

"She's your daughter," said Shannon.

"I harbor no love for the girl," said Tricia, "but—yes, I agree with Lady Shannon. You mustn't shed your own flesh and blood, Your Majesty."

Shannon glanced back once more, and was surprised to see Mayfair staring between the deer's antlers directly at them. Did she hear their conversation? It shouldn't be possible, with the constant tramp of marching feet between them; Shannon could barely hear Tricia and Mallory and she stood right next to them. Even the nearest corpses were too far to spy. But something on Mayfair's face, some disconcerted gleam of hurt, seemed as though it could only be a reaction to what Mallory just said. Then Mayfair glanced down at her paper, and back up again, and back down again...

What *were* those papers? A relic that granted greater perception, or possibly some sort of limited omniscience? If they were a relic, Mallory or Tricia would have said something. But they clearly possessed *some* power.

"I jest," Mallory said, though without hint of humor.

"Do you—do you hate her?" Shannon asked. She supposed she shouldn't. Especially if Mayfair could hear them. But something made her ask anyway. She didn't want it to be true.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Lady Shannon," said Tricia, "you have no right to demand such explanations from Her Majesty—"

"Oh, it's quite alright." Never once did Mallory look at any of them. She stared straight ahead as she ascended the stairs. "I'll tell all, I've no mind not to. The truth is, I have always despised both my children. I was forced to have them, and having them—both at the beginning and the end—was hateful. They chained me, more than that outrageous wedding band ever did, to a role I never wanted to fulfill."

Shannon glanced back again, and sure enough, Mayfair was staring, her face pale. Her hand trembling around the page she held.

"But for them personally, them as human beings? Makepeace was always merely a cad, no more and no less; no, I even felt a sort of sympathy for him. He sought freedom from his own role. Of course, I could never let him escape it, I resented even those brief moments of liberty he won for himself, but is envy not the seed of resentment anyway? Perhaps I was unfair to him. It's easier to think that, now that he's dead. Though part of me resents him all the more for being dead. How funny."

She spoke without whispering, as though she didn't care if Mayfair heard, or as though she already knew she was being heard. Shannon stopped glancing over her shoulder; she watched the back of Mallory's blonde head that refused to bob even with her high steps.

"But Mayfair? Mayfair was always something different. Her precociousness, her eloquence, her unctuousness, her eagerness to please. Oh. I always saw something different in her than Makepeace. She was nothing like me, so there was nothing to resent. She was like *them*."

"Them?" said Shannon.

"Perhaps because I never cared to raise her. Perhaps it is my fault, oh well. Who else would she turn to for emulation? Those dukes, those courtiers, those creatures of the state... Speaking, always speaking, always citing facts and figures, always appealing for applause. That's their tragedy. That for all their naked scheming, the saddest part is the smiling mask they don so you notice not the knife behind their back. They don the mask not because they need to but because it is what they wish they could be, pleasant and happy, and loved... Those were the ones who enchained me, and she aspired solely to become them."

A disquiet struck Shannon. She thought, briefly, of Mother. Sitting on that couch. When Dad died, she—Shannon had—Trash. Garbage. Total garbage.

"You, sweet Shannon, are like those dukes too, you know," Mallory said. "With one key difference. You do not smile. You never smile... you see no need for it. For you, at least, the idea of love is something understandable. Something that lives solely within the flesh."

"Lust," Tricia offered.

"My curse," said Mallory. "My blessing and my curse."

—

The black space and its white lines gave way without transition to a dense jungle. Was there a transition? Oh! This place, this wretched place, it played on one's mind, Lalum liked it not. But was that not the essence of adventure? Perilous locales braved by a stoic hero. He indeed strode stoically onward. His black bat swept against the creepers and ivies, the branches and bushes. Everything it touched browned then blackened then fell as ash to the floor.

"Wait, how'd your bat get like that?" said Perfidia. Jay didn't answer; instead the other devil said:

"Seems he ran into Mammon."

"What?! When? How?"

And this was good. The devils did not control this journey. That had been Lalum's true fear. She allied herself with Perfidia to take down Vivienne—Vivienne—but that was acceptable. Her damnation was assured and irrelevant. The hero had to be kept pure. Under no circumstances may he succumb to her corruption; Lalum would defend him from that. Onto herself all sins she would take, becoming a worse and more decrepit form in the process. That was her purpose.

Oh, Lalum knew. Knew with but a glance. Perfidia and Kedeshah meant nothing to Jay, mere conveniences he abided. No speck of sin darkened his brow. But the other. The other!

Vivienne de Califerne. Transformed into the serpent. Fitting symbol. For she was his weakness, the one foible in his heart, the one seeping temptation that could cause him to

stray. Her long body wound amid the ferns and flowers. What thoughts transpired in her mind, counter to the thoughts in Lalum, what schemes? Oh, how boldly she slithered! As though prideful in her changed appearance, ecstatic in its vitality! Here Lalum saw every encroaching tree trunk as a hiding space, a way to steal away her wickedness from the eyes of all. She tried, oh she tried... she tried to overcome it. Yet whenever he looked at her in this form... it wrought such pain in her heart.

One fact shone clear even under this canopy, however: Vivienne de Califerne could not ascend to the top of the tower with the hero. She must be stopped. Otherwise her honeyed tongue, her honeyed scent, would tempt him to the negation into which he almost fell. Lalum had spared her life before, why...? Perhaps because something pathetic lurked inside them both, the one's pathetic nature invoking pity, the other's capitulating to it; for Lalum was weak, despite her corruption she was weak, weak!

But of the four creatures who accompanied the hero on his quest, she was the only one who truly desired him to achieve his anointed goal: To stand atop the tower of Hell, Pandaemonium itself, and seize God's strength to wield as he liked. Not to cede to Perfidia—never, never!—but to create a paradise in his own image. Such was the way of heroes. Evil tempts them, perhaps they falter, but in the end they triumph. Such was the way of stories. Such would be the way of Jay Waringerane, and though Lalum would die for it, it would become so.

She would make it so. In making it so, all her self-imposed damnation would be repaid.

And she could do it too. Perfidia confiscated all three relics: the staff, the eye, even the shield. But Lalum still had her animus, and one remaining faerie scavenged from dead elves to use it. Perfidia, Kedeshah, Vivienne herself; all bent to her will if need be.

Vivienne's lone eye met Lalum's vacant, distracted gaze. Lalum swiftly looked aside, but the heat of that stare remained. She fought down the temptation to hide. No. No! She mustn't. She must remain by the hero's side. He needed her. More than he knew, he needed her to save him from these devils...

"Shut up," said Kedeshah. Perfidia had been talking—she was always talking—talking about Jay's new bat, how it made their trek easier, as though the true threat were the Seven Princes and not those present, but the sharp command silenced her instantly.

"What," said the hero.

Kedeshah tilted her head. Ear piqued, she squinted to scan the canopy, where an unseen ocean of birds twittered song and strange cries; her expression soured. "*Her.*"

"Your mother," said the hero.

"Ashtoreth, Prince of Lust," said Perfidia—now at a whisper. "Or I guess Princess. Well she used to be Baal/Ashtoreth, she swapped freely between them, but at some point she stopped swapping. We can get past this one without a fight. Kedeshah—you'll talk to her, right? I need you on this. Kedeshah."

A soft sigh escaped Kedeshah; she seemed to shrink, and she had already been such a slight thing. For a moment she became void, a hurt little girl in a white sundress, an object of pity... So even a devil could be piteous. (Lalum swiftly remembered her attempt to seduce the hero back in Whitecrosse and all pity vanished.)

"I want to go home," Kedeshah said.

"There's no more home," said Perfidia.

"That's the only reason I'm still here." Her demeanor perked up, she bounced on her heels, she shrugged. "By the way... Mom's not alone. Who cares about that though? Let's all go bite the bullet together."

She strode off. Without a word the hero followed. His bat cleared the way of any greenery; a long dead streak trailed behind them. As they drew deeper into the jungle, beams snuck through the canopy, though what source of light might produce them inside this tower Lalum knew not. The birds chattered unseen, their song frenzied, excessive in its life, drowning out Perfidia's voice, screeching now, howling, a cacophony, the branches shaking, the leaves rustling, though nothing ever appeared, all activity above remained implied.

Viviendre's small brown hands rubbed together, her eye peered wolfishly out a ray of faux-sunlight. "They're having a real go of it up there, aren't they? Fehfehfeh." It nauseated Lalum simply to hear her voice, this stupid barbarian who never once reached a moment of intimacy in her entire life.

The front layer of vegetative matter curled and died and a clearing opened before them. In the center of the clearing, upon an ivory throne, a colossal statue reclined.

It wore a white robe draped across its body, the folds obscuring the form within but only so much, leaving a palimpsest of their naked element. The long legs were crossed, their feet bare yet studded with a sharp spur upon each heel. Slender alabaster arms lay upon the rests of the throne with their palms upturned. Some large creature curled ball-like at her side.

She possessed no face. Only a simple, blank surface. She lacked hair as well. For all the intricate modeling of every wrinkle in her robe her head was simply an spheroid shape.

Wait—No? Was there not a face? Lalum believed she saw a face—but when she glanced again there was no face, and also the arms which had been so detailed in their craftsmanship were mere slabs of white stone. The hands were bulbous shapes that swallowed the fingers in a single rounded form, like a mitt. The feet triangles that swiveled on spherical joints. Lalum flinched, and blinked all her eyes, and the form of the statue changed from blank to defined, empty to detailed. The only thing that remained the same was the robe she wore, and—perhaps—the ghostly form of the body beneath it. Or perhaps that was simply a trick of occlusion. Perhaps the arms and the face would also seem stagnant if covered...

Perfidia elbowed Kedeshah. "Take the initiative. Get her to let us pass. Don't make Jay have to use the bat, huh?"

The idol was sickness to stare at yet she drew the eye, Lalum could not turn away, she tried to focus on the form of Kedeshah as she moved ahead of the group and extended her arms from her sides, but the stone giantess pulled all. Pagan deity. Cultish creature those Saracens would stoop for, yet it churned Lalum's heart, her eight legs buckled and she swayed. Arms caught her. The hero...! No. Not him. The face beside he was Vivienne's, smiling mirthlessly; the fingers tightened against Lalum's back.

"Alright mom," said Kedeshah. "After all this time—I'm here."

No words emitted from the idol; in its cascading levels of detail it watched and said nothing, and the clearing in which they stood seemed suddenly vast, an entire vortex of empty air growing and growing still. Silence too—no subsequent sounds from the birds in the trees, but when Lalum looked up she realized the sky was every color, red and green and purple and blue and orange, swirling and churning, dripping downward in the form of ten thousand birds of paradise, like those they said lived in the oases of California. Ten thousand feathers fluttering into one congealed pool of color that alighted upon the idol Ashtoreth. They adorned her: head, arms, shoulders, legs, even her body though somehow a trace of its form remained amid the agglomeration. All that had been white was now rainbow, and the birds with their beady black eyes stared and tilted their heads and clacked their beaks and together in one disharmonious squawk spoke:

"Pretty bird! RAAAWCH—Pretty bird!"

Kedeshah loosed a sharp breath. "Oh, this is gonna suck dick."

"RAAAWCH. Come here, come here. Wee-ee-oo. Come here, come here. Click-click-click."

"No mom. We have to go to the top. You understand right?"

"Wvwvhh, wvwvhh, not safe! Not safe, not safe! Come here, wee-ee-oo. Come here, come here."

"No mom. I'm going to the top. I'm aware it's not safe." Kedeshah leaned to Perfidia and shook her head. "You know this won't work right? I never should have come here."

"Not safe, not safe, RAAAWCH. Safe with me, safe with me, RAAAWCH."

"Never should have come." Kedeshah fidgeted, avoided looking at the bird-drenched statue, seemed to fall under the same magnetic pull that drew Lalum's gaze, shifted her feet. "This was a bad fucking idea Fidi. Why'd I let you convince me it'd be easy?"

Perfidia seized the initiative. "Lady Ashtoreth," she began grandiloquently, in accompaniment with a stately bow, "all your daughter asks is for you to grant safe passage. You must realize there is no safety for her or yourself under the current state of affairs, surely. What Lu—what *he* did to threaten you he'll do again, and again, and again. As long as he possesses power nothing will prevent his domination over you and everything you love. Indeed, he may even bind you like Mammon—or bind your daughter, so as to keep her as a hostage. You want that? In the end that's all he'll accept. That's Pride for you—the more he gains the more he'll want, until even the simple fact that anything besides himself exists will

annoy him. Come on. You know I'm right. The only thing that prevented him before was lack of power. Well now he has it. If you want anything to ever be safe again, you gotta let us pass. Or help us! You and Lord Rimmon there. It's only Belial and Beelzebub ahead, we're already past Moloch. We get to the top, this human grabs the Divinity, he passes it to me. Easy, foolproof. Come on! With your help there won't be any danger at all. Whaddya say?"

Her final words died an echo in the cavernous space. The birds tilted their heads left, right. "RAAAWCH," a few said.

The large creature curled beside the statue shifted and grunted in its sleep.

"Mom," Kedeshah said, "just let us pass okay! I'm not yours anymore, okay? Just accept it. I chose what I wanted to do with myself. It had nothing to do with you. Let me be myself!"

"RAAAWCH," said the birds. "You'll be mine. You'll be mine. I love you. I love you. Po-tee-weet. You'll be mine. You'll be mine. I love you. I love you."

"This isn't going well Fidi." Kedeshah tugged Perfidia's sleeve with urgency. "She's always like this, it's awful, there's no point! Let's make a break for it—"

"I LOVE YOU YOU'RE MINE I LOVE YOU YOU'RE MINE."

The birds took wing. All their colors streamed off the statue together and whirled toward them. Instantly the hero brandished his bat, but there were too many, a single swing may leave ten dead, but a hundred more swarmed afterward with beaks and talons.

Lalum knew what to do. The action became clear in her mind. She must seize Jay, who was strong but slow, and use the agility of her scuttling legs to carry him into the protection of the woods behind them. There the dense vines and branches would serve as bulwark. Yes, this action shone clear in her mind, she reached out to grab him, her hands went still—this action, touching him, laying her corrupted self against his body, it froze her solid.

In the instant she hesitated someone else seized him instead. Viviendre de Califerne! The long black length of her tail coiled around his waist and hoisted him off the ground. She turned and slithered for safety.

No! Not her—not her—but what mattered was that he was safe, and now Lalum stood dumbly wondering what to do. Beside her Perfidia rifled through her coat, she hastily wrenched out the shield that once belonged to Prince Makepeace, but in her haste a few loose items tumbled upon the grass. Lalum recognized them instantly. The Eye of Ecclesiastes—the Staff of Solomon.

She hastily scooped up both before Perfidia could. Then the birds came down and Perfidia had to cower behind the shield; Lalum dashed for the jungle where a rustle of leaves indicated the spot into which Viviendre and the hero vanished.

The birds bounced off the shield and split in two rainbow streams of color. The streams coiled back, turned toward another figure—Kedeshah, trapped in the center of the flurry, her hands a whirlwind that burst individuals or even groups of five or ten to blood-tipped

feathers. Lalum prayed forgiveness for relying on another's bad fortune; she ran for the forest line. Perfidia, also spared by Kedeshah's distraction, followed.

Through the screeching a word arose from the clacking beaks: "RIMMON! RIMMON! RAWCHRAWCHRAWCHRIMMON! RIMMON! EATEMALL! EATEMALL RIMMON! EATEMALL EATEMALL!"

The sleeping creature at the side of the statue stirred; a long wretched rumble betokened a terrible awakening. Lalum drove into the jungle as the ground began to quake from the steps of something gargantuan.

—

They reached a temple, ancient and desolate, stone porous and no roof and broken columns and within the ritual square a statue of some entity with a face effaced by time. Onto a bed of leaves and vines Viviendre placed Jay, while somewhere distant the ground rumbled.

"So Jay," Viviendre said. (She lisped the "s" slightly.) In this temple the light was weak but the full form of her body became clear: her tail twisted over itself, her fingers tipped by claws, her singular gleaming eye with a vertical slit for an iris, and of course the fangs that shone whenever she spoke. "What's the plan here, hm?"

"Negotiations broke down," Jay said, "so we'll have to fight. We'll need Perfidia. Or rather the eye—your eye. She has it now. That'll keep me alive."

"No." Viviendre shook her head and her baubles jingled. "Nonono. Not what I meant Jay."

"Then what."

"This whole," Viviendre swirled her hands about, and the tip of her tail swirled too, "this whole Divinity thing. You pick it up and then hand it to the devil?"

"That's the plan. Viv—Look. Maybe you shouldn't be here, even the way you are—"

"You don't like it? You dislike the way I look now?"

"That's not—"

"If you want, when this is over you can turn me back. With the eye of course. I won't remember a thing and I won't be able to walk up the stairs without help again but hey! That'll be convenient next time you want to leave me behind."

"Okay. Okay!" Jay stood up, waved his arms. "I was a dick. I know. I get it. You're right to be mad at me. But this isn't like the first time Viv. The first time, I left because—because—I dunno. I was—"

He knew. Of course he knew. But how to say it. He resisted the urge to fling it back in her face, yell at her for her ridiculous stunts, her machinations, her attempts to manipulate him. Instead he rubbed his temples and said:

"I'm trying to accomplish something here Viv. I'm not running away from myself. I'm doing something here."

"What are you doing."

"I told you. I just said it. Everything's fucked up. I'm gonna fix it."

"Are you? You're actually gonna hand it off to that devil. I guess so *she* could fix it."

"Is there a difference? Perfidia can't do it without me, why are you fixated on this point—"

"You don't plan to hand it to her, do you."

Jay stood, arms outstretched, the bat dangling from between two fingers. The ground rumbled, the trees shook. He looked at her, he wanted to tell her how stupid it was to argue about this now, they had bigger priorities, but he couldn't say a word.

Her eye pierced him. It remained an unquivering lump of amber in her skull, shrouded by her hair, and though her mouth curled to show her fangs that eye was unsmiling.

"No... No, of course you don't Jay. Of course not. Yesssss"—here she allowed the "s" to elongate—"I see you. That restlessness, that lack of satisfaction. Divinity—the power of God. You'll never be able to simply hand it away, will you?"

Mammon's voice spied in his ear: Once in a lifetime opportunity! You'll never see a deal this good again! The power of a God can be yours, friend, if you only call this toll-free number!

"I have to," he said, "or else—"

"Or else it'll destroy you, yes I know, I have been forced to attend church on occasion, I am well aware what the unfettered might of God does to a mortal. But hey! Maybe that's part of the appeal, huh? Why'd you leave the first time? Just cuz of me? That's what I thought at first. Fehfehfeh. But when you left the second time, when I ate that fruit and my head got so much clearer...!"

The simple, logical route would be to deny it. He still hadn't decided what he wanted to do anyway when he reached Divinity—if he even reached it—so why couldn't he simply lie?

"Oh but then you'll say it was my fault the second time too, you'll change your tune, after all I was waving that staff around and being a real fucking cunt oh I know Jay, fear not I am perfectly aware of every single one of my innumerable flaws, which is coincidentally the exact reason I can stare right inside you Jay and see what's in your heart and know what you want, so let me tell you when I said we can both die together I lied, I fucking lied, I don't want to die and I don't want you to die either and I will do every fucking thing in my power to make it so. And I'll get you to that Divinity if that's what you want and I'll behave beside

that spider even though I *know* the psychotic little whore wants you to be a God and annihilate yourself, no, I'll be a good girl for you Jay but I will not let you kill yourself, you'll hand that God power over to the devil like you're supposed to and you can live the rest of your life knowing you saved the world or doomed it, who even gives a single shit, it doesn't matter, because at the end of it you'll live on and you'll live on with me. And for the first time in our lives we'll enjoy life. Life! The things we *feel*, Jay, the simple sensual pleasures. It needs no complexity beyond that. For that, we can live. You'll negate whatever ego you have and give it up, Jay. Say it. Say you'll give it up. Say it now!"

Jay looked at her; he said nothing, though his mouth half-opened and a word formed on his tongue. Before him she was cracking, her eye glistened, her hands shook, and when he continued to say nothing she shouted:

"I love you, Jay."

And still he could say nothing.

"You do not know, Jay, how many times I wanted to die. I know how you feel. If I could do only one thing that matters, then I could die. It's so easy to think that when you're wretched. It's as though your continual failure, your uselessness, is both the thing that puts those horrible thoughts inside you and the thing that keeps you alive, because being so wretched and low you think that even one great moment, one good moment, would be enough to satisfy you, and then death might be peaceful..."

Look Mother, I'm a sail!

Finally something rose in his throat: "I—I had—moments—"

The something ended there, nothing else came. What was the peace Mammon found that let him truly want to end himself, to cease striving? The end of hope? But had Vivienne ever had hope before now?

"I never did," she muttered. "That's where we diverge, I suppose. Even so, I know you. So please—"

The shivering of the trees drew close and they both broke their gaze from one another. The leaves parted and a figure burst through.

The figure was Lalum. She had undone the threads around her mouth and panted heavily as she leaned against a broken column for support. "Run," she said, "have to run!"

Another rumble rocked the ground. The temple shook, dust came down in streams, one decayed wall crumbled in a spray of stones. The jungle outside its domain bulged. The trees lifted in a swell and from their leaves burst brightly-colored birds squawking. Between them rose the tremendous head of a crocodile, its jaws unhinged to reveal nothing but black void between sharp teeth. Trees, dirt, stones, and branches hurtled into that mouth. They swirled and dwindled until nothing more could be seen of them. Then the jaws clapped shut to chew and gnaw.

Wow, said Mammon, I wonder who this fine fella could be? He's sure got an appetite! Gee, I bet nothing can fill his insatiable gut. Nothing, that is, except a supersized meal from—

Jay squeezed one eye shut and rubbed the other side of his head until the voice went away. This crocodile—Jay could deduce who it was. The Prince of Gluttony.

Rimmon turned down his long snout to stare at them with his inset eyes. One eye was much larger than the other, or rather it wasn't that one eye was larger, it was magnified. Rimmon wore a polished, round, gold-rimmed monocle, which dangled a chain that led past his crocodile face to the pocket of a finely-tailored velvet waistcoat. A matching bowtie squeezed his shirt collar so tight it made the muscles of his scaly neck bulge.

"Oh dear, I apologize quite profusely for that shameful display! The truth is, I truly grow quite voracious after my midday nap." He doffed a comedically undersized top hat. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Rimmon. Quite pleased to make your acquaintance, though I regret to admit this is not the most pleasant of circumstances. Yes, I'm afraid you must be prevented from reaching the apex of Pandaemonium at all costs. I know, I know, you have an excellent reason for your little adventure, but it truly cannot be helped. Lady Ashtoreth and I are but lesser members of this prestigious circle, rulers over baser vices as they say. Baser vices! Pfah, so they say indeed. Between you and me, without Gluttony and Lust no creature within the terrestrial sphere would sustain itself or propagate. What some deem base I call: *foundational*. Back when a stale crust of bread was life or death, none dared call me base...!—But where was I? Right. You cannot be allowed to continue. A shame, for I would've loved to invite you to dinner. Food tastes best when shared with friends! I possess truly a most magnificent collection of wines. Alas, *c'est la vie!* Now, let us not belabor the tragedy. Please remain still and I promise to make your ends as swift and painless as possible—Oh dear!"

Jay hadn't waited for him to finish. Perfidia once mentioned this Rimmon was slow, an assessment that seemed appropriate given the preponderous manner in which he spoke. So Jay dashed across a fallen half-wall of the temple, bounded over a splintered column, kicked his foot against the trunk of a tree, clambered across its branch and launched himself at Rimmon's body with maximum momentum. The bat swung. He could never miss, every ounce of newfound strength went into the attack, more than surely any human ever felt.

The bat slammed against the body.

But instead of a powerful thwack, all sound was sucked into the rippling folds of lard. The bat itself sank. All force vanished in an instant, as though Jay hadn't swung at all, and now he dangled from the bat's handle as it stuck fast within the body. Rimmon looked down and his eye enlarged within its monocle. He grasped his sides with delicate human hands and chortled.

The bat was supposed to kill whatever it touched. *But for tough built-on stains, additional applications of the product may be required.* He could no longer tell if it were actually Mammon's voice lingering or if his brain had rotted enough that he thought in the same cadence.

As he dangled, he got the idea to brace his legs against Rimmon's body and wrench the bat free, but the liquid fat folds under the waistcoat threatened to suck him in. Meanwhile, Rimmon's tiny human hands reached for him, so he had no choice but to let go. He dropped—directly into the waiting arms of Vivienne, who caught him bridal style. The smile she flashed was neither devious nor ironic, real joy lit up her eye, an excitement simply to be involved, and when Rimmon leaned to the side and attempted to crush them she threw Jay with incredible strength before she snaked into a groove in the ground for her own safety.

He sailed out of range of Rimmon's body and would've landed safely on some ferns if Lalum didn't dive in the way to attempt to catch him. Unfortunately, she lacked Vivienne's superhuman strength. They collapsed in a heap. Her legs splayed as she got smushed into the ground with a petite "whoof!" She *did* soften his impact though. Maybe. He took some hard bony part of hers to the shoulder, which he rubbed with a wince. Lalum opened her mouth, staring at his neck with naked hunger, but pulled her face away blushing after the first spots of drool landed on him.

Rimmon crumpled trees and temple walls like paper as he rolled. His rotund body wobbled toward them, slow but massive. "My friends, struggle will only prolong your misery! I understand the pain of senseless oblivion well, but it is not the worst fate. When you are dead, at least, you can no longer wish to be alive."

Jay ignored his aches and pulled himself to his feet. The handle of the bat still jutted from Rimmon's side. Everything relied on retrieving it. If he ran, regained distance between him and the lumbering behemoth, conceived a strategy—

Lalum's arm thrust out past him. She held the Staff of Solomon.

"Divide!" her soft voice chimed.

Instantly, Rimmon ceased his ponderous forward roll. Jay wondered about the relic's efficacy against him. Maybe he stopped out of confusion. No, his body didn't simply stop but went rigid, or as rigid as possible with his liquid constitution. Straight up his well-tailored waistcoat a red seam spread. Threads, buttons, bowtie, throat, and long crocodile face split one after another. The divided portions of his mouth flapped: "Oh, bother."

The body came apart. A deluge of guts rushed out. The greenery and temple stones that still remained disappeared under a flood of red—but the tide didn't stop there.

"Shit!" Jay seized the closest thing to him for support. The thing in question was Lalum. That was all the preparation he got. The river of blood crashed into them, and together they were swept away.

Perfidia Bal Berith spat a mouthful of leaves and stumbled into the next branch to get another mouthful. Scratches stung her face and somehow this magic relic shield specifically designed to not let anything hurt her couldn't account for every stick and shrub in this stupid fucking jungle. Shitty fuck!

She almost punched the nearest tree and leaned against it instead. Rimmon's rumbling became more seismically distant, she'd managed to elude him, but where anyone else went who knew. Point was she needed to regain control of the situation. Got too excited, too giddy. Kedeshah turned out worthless for Ashtoreth after all. Whatever. Still ways to handle this. Jay getting his bat Mul Elohimized gave them options. Where the Hell was he now?

Probably in the direction of the rumbles. Perfidia breathed deeply, got herself under control. Mind in the game. Did Ubik leave anything useful in his coat? She stuck a hand inside and sifted. No, nope, no, junk, useless, garbage, why'd he even keep *that*, no, not a chance, trash...

A few branches pushed aside and she stumbled into the open, only to jolt when she realized someone stood before her.

"Hey! You're that devil right? Per—Perfidia! That's the name."

The girl snapped her fingers and beamed proudly for remembering. Perfidia knew this dubious creature, though the name came slowly, and she bought time for herself with ample hemming and hawing elongated by a timely quake caused by Rimmon's perambulations.

Finally it manifested: Pythette, one of the nuns from the monastery, the hare. Confusion gave way to caution. How'd she get here? An illusion orchestrated by Pandaemonium? No, this Pythette had been with Mayfair during the events at the megachurch, though she'd kept out of the fighting then. Somehow Mayfair sent her here—how? Through the Door? She knew she should've deactivated it, or put it in her coat, or—No, that wouldn't have mattered at all. Mayfair had Temporary. Fuck! Perfidia had worried about the Whitecrosse papers, she wondered whether Mayfair might use them to get involved. She could track Jay, Lalum, Vivienne, and even influence the latter two. Lalum and Vivienne might already be double agents. Vivienne was most suspicious, after all they did royally fuck her at the monastery and she caught up to Jay pretty quick, fuck shit fuck oh dammit—

"Hm. No, I don't think I know anyone named Perfidia. My name's Duplicity."

Smooth as butter. No wavering. All pause for thought excused by the constant earthquakes. And Pythette, ascended street urchin, was never designed as a genius. She tilted her head and scratched one of her long ears, telltale signs of disappointment on her face—disappointment at not finding the person she'd been sent for.

Of course, Mayfair could just beam the truth into Pythette's mind, lying was impossible—

But no immediate change came over Pythette's features. Was Mayfair not paying attention? Or had she lost Pythette's paper altogether? Since Pythette and the other nuns factored into Mayfair's plans at the megachurch, Mayfair must have had their papers on her at that time, so maybe in the commotion afterward she lost them... Perfidia kept waiting for a turn, a change in those bright and gullible eyes. But nothing.

"It's really too bad," Pythette said. "I'm supposed to wallop this Perfidia person when I see em. I'm not too keen on violence, but she's a devil, so I guess it's okay? No offense of course. This Perfidia devil apparently was at the monastery the night of the fire—oh you wouldn't know about that, but we all used to live at this monastery—anyway, neither me or Demny saw her cuz we were too busy with the fire, and nobody else is around anymore—well there's Tricia too, but she's with the queen now—Oh and I can't forget Mademerry. Mademerry's so queer though, it's really quite funny, I feel bad for her sometimes! I ask if she ever wants to chat or play with the kids in the arena but she always says no. Demny's such a stick in the mud too. I love her of course, but it's true. Now I'm on this errand in this creepy tower and—Hey, you wouldn't happen to know your way around this place, wouldja Duplicity?"

"Oh, of course—Um, what was your name again?"

"Pythette! Dear Lord did I forget to say? I am so hopeless!"

"Pythette, that's a nice name. Yes, I know all about this place. Why don'tcha come with me? I can show ya around."

"That'd be a huge help! I gotta find this hero named Jay Waringcrane. It's *very* important I stop him, or at least slow him down."

"Slow him down? What for?"

Perfidia knew, of course. But Mayfair fucked up. If what Pythette said was true, Mayfair only had a few nuns left, and she probably wanted the more reliable Demny to remain as her bodyguard. Yes—exactly like how she used Dalton Swaino. Protection for herself above all. Readable. Predictable. Mayfair probably didn't care if Pythette failed, even if she died. She might *expect* Pythette to die. Didn't matter to Princess Mayfair. All she needed was Jay to slow down so she could catch up.

Tsk-tsk, Perfidia thought, as Pythette launched into another gregarious digression. Mayfair might be shrewd, might have even gotten the better of Perfidia before. This time she overplayed her hand. Pythette was no mere pawn; she was a great big glut of intel. Perfidia planned to wring her dry—and dispose of her after.

Wait. Even better idea. Why dispose of her? Suboptimal! Uncreative! There were better uses for a mark this cooperative.

Within five minutes Pythette spilled everything. Perfidia knew where Mayfair was, what she had, who she had with her. Knew about the fruit and how it amped the nuns (she *thought* they seemed oddly tenacious when Ubik fought them). Knew also about Mayfair's army of dead. But Mallory ascended the tower alongside her, and Perfidia knew better than anyone the frosty relationship between mother and daughter. Cracks, cracks. Cracks to be worked, cracks to break open, cracks to shatter the whole pot.

Some of the others might prove trouble. Shannon Waringcrane. Wendell Noh and Flanz-le-Flore, potential headache. Whatever. One fire at a time.

The present fire manifested in the form of the clearing in the center of the jungle, an ominous space under a bright moon that caused the birds to shine as they clumped on the head of the idol Ashtoreth. Perfidia caught Pythette before she blundered out of the treeline, still yammering about this or that.

"Wait. Look there. See that?"

"Whoa! So many pretty birds! I had a few friends who were birds you know. Course they're all dead now. I miss my friends. If only that Mademerry would talk to me, I'm sure we'd have a great time. It just so happens I..."

Perfidia kept crouched behind a shrub. Pythette did the same even as she spoke, though her long ears gave her away. Not that it mattered. Ashtoreth surely knew where they were. She simply had a bigger concern.

The statue's arms gripped a writhing, struggling body: Kedeshah. Since Moloch already cut her up, it was hard to tell how much damage the birds did, but she oozed droplets of bright white blood onto her mother's lap, enough to form a pool that overflowed and streamed down the layered folds of cloth.

"Let me go!" Kedeshah said. "I'm not yours anymore you clingy bitch! Let me *free*!"

The stone hands, which fluctuated between dainty and rough-hewn, refused to comply. One arm wrapped around Kedeshah's chest and neck, while the other clenched her ankles. Kedeshah retained a free arm to beat against the body. Despite strength to crumple a man's skull with a finger flick, the wild strikes did nothing whatsoever.

"Oh no, that little girl's in serious trouble!" Pythette gasped.

Perfidia matched her level of concern. "That's my friend! She really needs help!"

Instantly Pythette sprung upright. So fucking easy! "She's not Perfidia Bal Berith is she?"

"Course not. I told you I dunno anyone named that."

"Gee. I expected devils to be, well, utterly evil! But they even have friends, like normal people. Guess people judge me for what I am all the time too though—Anyway, don't worry one bit Duplicity. I'll save your friend!"

ZIP and she blurred across the clearing with tracks of torn grass in her wake. The birds shifted their heads and squawked and took flight in a cyclone to slow her but the statue of Ashtoreth remained attentive to its captive. The hands tightened, Kedeshah screamed as her bones audibly creaked, and the strap of Ashtoreth's gown slid elegantly, carelessly, unconsciously down her shoulder, revealing the form of the body kept hidden until then. Perfidia threw up a hand to shield herself from a direct look, seeing too much of Ashtoreth's body was dangerous, but the glimpse she got told her exactly what Ashtoreth planned to do, what really drew the pained and terrified screams out of Kedeshah's throat. Ubik acquired it once. His came secondhand. Here was the source.

"RAAAWCH," a single parrot perched on Ashtoreth's head squawked. "Love you forever. You know me better. Love you forever. You know me better."

"Nooo! I HATE YOU," Kedeshah howled. She writhed and spat infant venom. "Leave me alone! *I* choose who I love. ME! And I *don't* love you! I hate you. I *hate* you...!"

Pythette burst out the bird tornado, bullet speed. Any wounds she received closed instantly. So fast, in fact, Perfidia figured conventional attacks would fail on her altogether. Luckily Jay possessed a way around that. For now, though, Pythette scrambled up Ashtoreth's body, toe-tapping small outcroppings of stone cloth fold to bounce, twirl, pirouette higher, higher, higher. For an instant she snapped out of her blur, right at the apex of her climb, suspended a second with every storybook bird around her. Body twisted, muscles tensed, then—one sharp turn of her hips and—BAM!

A nasty, nasty kick went straight to Ashtoreth's head.

All the Princes were powerful. (Maybe not Belial.) Pythette failed to even crack the featureless stone face. She did, however, cause the head to jerk an inch. Only an inch, sure, but power like that would be comparable to Kedeshah. The thunderous clap of the impact resounded. Any birds still perched took flight screeching dismay.

And, as though shocked utterly that this total nothing could accomplish even so much against her, Ashtoreth's grip loosened on Kedeshah.

Pythette dropped fast and hit the slope of Ashtoreth's arm on all fours. Two fingers, hooked into a claw, latched under the collar of Kedeshah's dress and pulled. Kedeshah jerked out of Ashtoreth's grasp. Pythette tucked her under her arm like a piece of luggage and leapt for safety.

She almost got away with it. Her jump carried her a shocking distance from Ashtoreth, half the distance back to Perfidia. Then she lurched back in midair. Ashtoreth's arm extended, its form shifting, its modulated layers of detail caked upon one another in disorienting array to create an arm both beautiful and manneristically elongated. Her hand grasped Kedeshah's ankle.

The birds enveloped them both.

Perfidia backed away slowly. Good job Pythette, doing your duty, this was all going great. Maybe best if Perfidia herself didn't linger though. Once Jay got back with the killer bat they'd solve this in a snap. Where was he? The seismic jolts from Rimmon's footsteps had halted. There was something else now. A quieter sound hidden under the incessant squealing of the birds. A whisper—a rushing. Like a river?

Between her feet, a trickle of red blood ran. It widened into a small stream. She stepped over it and scrambled aside as it became even broader. A second small stream shot out from the underbrush, then a third. All ran into the clearing, toward the where Ashtoreth sat enthroned, where the birds lifted Kedeshah while Pythette rolled on the ground nursing gashes that sealed slower than those before. The sky above changed color. Darkened. All that stood within its scarlet shimmer was one bright white moon.

The dense-packed leaves and ivy tangles at the edge of the forest bulged. Perfidia backed away slowly, checked over her shoulder, blood now ran from every direction at once into this central circle, as though the whole jungle fed into it no matter which way you came from, and the birds dropped apart and fell in pairs to the ground.

Pythette knelt swaying before Ashtoreth. She twisted her head over her shoulder and looked at Perfidia with forlorn eagerness. "Hey," she said. "You're my *friend*, right? You're my friend."

Perfidia knew that look. How could she not. It'd once been her world. Pythette crawled toward her. The rushing, rushing, rushing sound compounded. The pressure built and built. Under the red sky and white moon the lunatics would come out to play. The Seven Princes were not so weak. Over their Aspects they wielded absolute control.

The jungle burst apart and a flood of gore poured out to sweep them all away.

—

"We were not always what we are now."

"Once we were angels."

Better than angels. We were Gods. They prayed to us, remember?

"O, they prayed."

"They needed us. The humans He created were lost because He was not there. They needed and desired us, they feared and they loved us."

They prayed to me with offerings of gold.

"They prayed to me for fertility."

"They prayed to me for a bountiful harvest."

They were poor.

"Their children died stillborn."

"Famine and disease—terrible!"

We were not always what we are now.

"I was a fearsome God and Goddess, my breasts were wide and my hips wider, to look upon me was to feel hope and love in equal measure, to look upon me was to know there was a

future. I was the one who made them more than one, I was the one who made their first complain for another, I was the rib plucked out and given as God's first gift."

"I was a great and joyous King. Upon my table I heaped high my gifts: Venison and rabbit foraged from the forest, fruit with sweet juices and fruit with bitter, scuttling creatures upon the floor of the sea, crops and loaves of bread, pork and beef and fowl, between them great goblets of wine; it was I who taught them to hunt, I who taught them to fish, I who taught them to forage, I who taught them to plant, I who taught them to domesticate, I who taught them to ferment, I who imparted unto them their first knowledge. *He* tempted them to the apple, but it was my ache in their bellies that made them reach."

I always made them strive for more.

"Now once again I am only one."

"Now I am refined."

Now I'm dead.

"How has it come to this?"

"We were not always what we are."

He did it. You know who.

"O, Lord Lucifer..."

"Hm. He is an agent of negation, certainly. But is his Pride the driving force?"

Certainly not. You know the one.

"Him..."

"Belial is the weakest of us all. This is known. Are you saying he's somehow the strongest?"

I'm saying he's the most dangerous.

"Restful sleep... float away on a dream..."

"Nothing to do... nothing to be."

Now. Isn't it time we started fresh? Isn't it time we returned? Unwind and unravel?

"You ask us to die."

"You ask us to become nothing."

If that boy is to succeed, he'll unwind and unravel the others too. Then it'll begin anew.

"No. I shall cling to my hopes until the end. I shall not die until I have become what I once was."

"Let us become it together then."

"Let us at least try. Let us make them remember who we were."

"Yes. Let us. If we can."

Very well...

—

Jay Waringcrane's head broke the surface. He heaved a breath and flushed blood out his throat and nostrils. His arms flailed, he kicked his feet to stay afloat. The sky above was as red as the pool he swam in. A vicious moon beamed down.

He seized something that floated, some fragment of intestine, and retched. A savory smell pervaded, like something freshly baked. He blinked. Ahead of him, out of the sink of blood, rose the statue of Ashtoreth, half her body as clean and white as the moon. Around her floated a thousand dead birds their feathers all sodden red. She clutched Kedeshah to her breast, and Kedeshah was still as stone.

For a long time he focused on Kedeshah. Why? She could not possibly matter. She was a third, a fourth party. An irrelevance. Hideous little lustful strumpet. Why should he look at her... Why could he not simply look instead at the one who truly cared for him... Why could he not look at...

Lalum's own piece of flotsam drifted nearer to him, aided by rapid rowing motions of her eight legs. In the crashing wave of gore that swept her away she lost the Staff of Solomon, but she still kept the Eye of Ecclesiastes. Of course she also retained the preserved faerie. She was still useful to him... She would still be useful, and then he would...

Everything smelled so delicious. Lord Rimmon's endless interior. Her jaw quivered, drool ran down in rivulets. At times it smelled like roasted meat, at times like sweet apples, her hands seeped into the blood and a powerful urge gripped her to scoop a cupped portion to her lips and drink. But no...! She must be useful to Jay Waringcrane. She must ensure he reached the Divinity and fulfilled his role as hero. Then he would love her... then she could be worthy of love... of even her own love... Augh!

Thinking hurt. Strong feelings racked her body as the piece of meat she used as a raft butted against his. O how he looked slathered in Rimmon's succulent juices, a potent sauce mixed from fresh tomatoes. His body, his hair—he'd lost his hat once more—the heroic stare in his eyes. No, he could not be looking at Kedeshah, he looked into an impressive "onward" that only he could see, Lalum knew that for certain, and ohhhhh this hunger, if she sank her teeth into his wrist and drank what spilled out...!

"Lalum. Lalum!" His voice cut into her. He'd pushed himself away; he floated a slight distance removed. "Lalum, you looked like this before. Stop it. Lalum!"

"Um, ah..."

"God. Lust and Gluttony. That's the worst combination for you, isn't it."

This trenchant remark stirred her. "What—what do you mean?"

"Please. I'm not ignorant." He kept looking at Kedeshah though! "What is Ashtoreth *doing* to her?"

"Why does she matter. Hero—hero!"

Her hands reached out to him—but she drew them back. Yes. Yes, mustn't be selfish. As you were taught. Quiet, elegant, poised, pretty, helpful. It would be selfish to want him, and she always had been so good at controlling herself before this aching hunger; it would be selfish to want, as the Pagan girl did, to keep him for herself, to keep him from his own desires, to lock him away in some quaint cottage where none other might see him and his own ambitions might die unrealized. Yes! That was what set Lalum apart from her... she could control herself... She would be helpful...! O God, but why were these feelings so enflamed inside her? Because they fought the devils of Lust of Gluttony, as the hero said? Very well. The temptations of devils were to be resisted, that was the very principle of self-mastery, self-control, self-negation. To turn herself into nothing, a piece of the furniture, anything to make him happy...!

"What—what is our plan, hero?"

It was the right thing to ask. He finally looked at her, not in concern, but with serious and straightforward determination. Her heart fluttered so hard she needed to press a palm to it. Still thyself! He speaks!

"One: We need the bat. Second problem's this blood, I can't do anything if I have to swim through it. We need Kedeshah—no, don't look at me like that, pay attention!—We need Kedeshah because she can fly. With that I'll actually have some mobility. Where's Vivienne? Where's—"

The emergence of something massive from the pool of gore interrupted him. It came first as a black shadow amid the entrails, then built higher and broader until the surface burst and the gigantic head of a crocodile skated across it, the head of Rimmon. He had reformed himself even though it was in all of himself they now swam, and in his eyes instead of civilized refinement was a look of naked carnivorous hunger: primal, elementary, something that existed since creation.

His mouth opened. The black maw sucked in waves of his own pieces. Everything that entered was lost amid the darkness. The pull of displaced blood tugged Lalum and the hero toward him. At first he swallowed himself with ravenous delight, but behind the monocle that was the sole remnant of his civilized self the reptilian eye flicked and set upon them. He

turned for them and turning revealed he possessed nothing past the severed stump of his neck. He was only a head and everything he swallowed disappeared entirely.

Jay paddled with both hands, but nothing propelled their small raft faster than they were sucked toward the maw. Lalum wrapped her arms around him, clenched him tight to herself, and braced all eight of her legs, readying herself to jump. The mouth was growing now, wider, all-consuming, blotting the red blood and the red sky and the white moon with its immensity, an edifice, a hole of nothingness, of negation, the elimination of other matter to sustain another self. If only Jay Waringcrane might extend his mouth so wide and swallow her whole! Or she him, or—or—

Her legs twitched and she sprung to the side as the jaws came down. That vast eternity snapped shut at once. The spray of frothing gore propelled them; they spurted to the side carried by a wave as the head of Rimmon descended back into the depths of himself. Swirling she gripped him to her and he held her and they were together, unified, and he would take up his weapon and strike down these devils, and whichever devils came next, moving onward ever onward looking onward seeing only onward the future the paradise that could be envisioned in his mind alone for she had long since ceased being able to see such things, if she ever had—no, she had perhaps once seen them, she had seen that young Princess Mayfair and thought as a governess she might instill within her something, some value, that might carry on into the future and become something greater, then the queen touched her and then—and then—Oh how confusing! Why try to think, why try to comprehend herself? Let her and Jay Waringcrane be unified forever, if Vivienne was allowed to steal him into some dark depth, then why not Lalum?

She only realized she gripped his head and pulled it so his neck was exposed to her, only realized her fangs were poised for his beating vein, when a disgusting and slimy and long thing coiled around her waist and crushed her before she could bite.

"Let go of him. Let go! Jay, get away from her. Get away, I'll finish her quickly with one blow!"

That whore! Her snake tail squeezed Lalum's waist as her rancid perfume which overpowered even Rimmon's scrumptious-smelling bowels forced a gag. Vivienne herself rose up, wielding over her head a long black club—The hero's weapon.

"Viv, stop!" Jay shouted.

"She was about to kill you. She's dangerous. Let me kill her. Let me do it!"

"Give me my bat. Give it to me!"

No air. None at all. Lalum's head turned faint... this faintness overpowered the crushing sensation of the snake's coils around her body... Vaguely she thought that Vivienne made a mistake, getting so close... Lalum possessed an animus still, a useful animus, the most useful of all her peers... That was why they prized her, why they sent her to fight the hero in that forest... Alongside Pluxie... Oh, Pluxie... What a lack of luck. Her vision grew dark. To use her animus she needed her faerie... oh but she felt weak...

"Viv. I need her. If I'm gonna beat these things—I NEED HER!"

Jay reared up and seized Viviendre's arm, which held the bat. Viviendre did not loosen her coils. Tighter and tighter. Seething, twisting. Oh... so this was the end. Yes... Lalum felt it fading. She should've died in that forest with Pluxie... Wouldn't that have been better? Wouldn't it? She should've died in Flanz-le-Flore's court, devoured by those wolves... It all came down to one thing eating another. Oh...

Her fingers closed around her faerie. She dragged it to her mouth and somehow, spurred by sheer force of will or maybe this infinitely frustrated hunger, bit down. A spray of blood shot down her throat; she choked but cared not. What an immaculate taste. Nothing else like it: faerie blood.

CRUNCH.

That crunch did not come from her mouth. It came from her spine.

Something pattered across the surface of the blood. In the half-formed haze of her drifting mind Lalum thought it must be Rimmon. Yes. He returned for them, and this time would swallow them all, and in his oblivion they would remain forever entwined in this tableau. Viviendre's scales felt so smooth. So soft. They touched Lalum all over... Made her legs twitch.

"Hyaaaaa!"

The pattering thing leapt up and kicked Jay Waringcrane in the chest. He went flying. The coils loosened instantly and Viviendre screamed his name. Air rushed back into Lalum's lungs and her vision returned to her. Frozen in midair at the apex of a whirling kick was, inexplicably, the hare Pythette. She carried Perfidia in her arms and clutched her almost as tight as Viviendre had clutched Lalum. Indecently tight.

"Serves you right! Watch out, cuz I can kick a lot harder than that too!"

Pythette's feet hit the surface of the blood. She did not sink into it. Lalum, though concerned for Jay's safety, found herself incapable of moving, so she stared at Pythette's feet. They danced back and forth, faster than anything Lalum had ever seen before, so fast and so light. Pythette stood atop the liquid surface. Lalum sank.

Mobility. Didn't the hero say he needed that? Mobility.

"Now don't ask me whatcha did, but the princess says you gotta be stopped so—Oh hey it's Lalum!"

Pythette scampered to her and picked her up moments before her head sank into the blood. She looked tasty. Lalum would love to eat her too.

"Oh, this is great. Now I've got two friends. Duplicity and Lalum. It's so nice to be with my friends, huh?"

"Pythette." Perfidia's voice possessed a levelheaded character. It reminded Lalum of Jay's voice. "Pythette, you don't need to hold me so close. You're under the influence of Ashtoreth, Pythette. That's what makes you crave physical connection. Listen to me! Pythette. Pythette look over there. Look over there Pythette we need to move!"

Pythette didn't listen. She did not look where Perfidia pointed, where the lake of blood bulged and Rimmon's head emerged skating toward them, where his mouth started once more the laborious ritual of opening. She instead stared at Lalum with a concerned tilt. "Hey. You look broken, Lalum. What happened to your back? Did you get—"

Lalum's fingers tightened around Pythette's wrist and she activated her animus.

What are you doing, said a voice.

No longer could Lalum move her legs. Or her lower body. Her hands, her fingers still moved, and once her animus stitched their threads in someone, it took only such slight motion to control them.

Lalum. This is Mayfair. I'm speaking to you directly because I need you to listen. You're hurt mortally, Lalum, but I can heal you. If you want to live, I need you to relinquish control over Pythette. Lalum? Lalum!

Pythette relinquished Perfidia and Lalum. Upon a half-deflated bladder Jay rested and Vivienne held him as he roused from the shock of being kicked. She paid attention to nothing else... In one instant Pythette plucked the bat from her hand.

Lalum. The hero has to be stopped. He cannot be allowed to give divine power to that devil. Surely even you understand that. Even if you love him you must know he can't be allowed to do that!

It would be trivially easy to force Pythette to strike Vivienne with the bat. Easy, helpful, important. Vivienne sought to pluck the hero from his ordained path, didn't she? She asked the hero not to take Divinity for himself, but cede it to Perfidia. Unacceptable. However, Lalum remembered the hero's onward gaze. He had a mission. That mission must be fulfilled first. So instead Pythette merely flung Vivienne aside and scooped Jay in her arms. She gave him his bat, then turned and sprinted.

Stop him, so that I might take the Divinity instead. Lalum? If you want to become human again, if you want to receive a soul, it must be me who takes the Divinity. Lalum!

Oh child. If only Lalum had been allowed to govern you. Of course Jay wouldn't pass the Divinity to Perfidia. However, you would not be allowed to take it either. He would keep it—the hero, wreathed in gold!

Fine! Sink and die! Lalum! Only I can save you. Lalum!

Lalum was sinking. The blood rose up around her, her hand rose weakly to keep the strings above the surface. Her face tilted skyward, she could no longer see. Still she sank... If she sank too far how would she know what to do?

Lalum! Why will nobody listen? Do you not realize everything is on the line for you? No!

Arms slid under her back. Perfidia, struggling to stay afloat herself, pulled Lalum above the line. Lalum could see once more—and so she designed the hero's triumph.

LALUM!

Pythette, under Lalum's control, ran so fast she ran atop the thick surface of the lake. The hero asked for mobility and here it was. Ahead of him the devil lords loomed, the face of Rimmon rising growing opening into eternity, the white statue of Ashtoreth presiding above his void, her head the moon that shone in the blood-red sky. Jay reoriented in Pythette's grasp as she propelled him forward, straight at the maw, closing in, closer, delicious smell rising...!

"Fuck you're heavy, ff—fuck!" Perfidia dipped under, splashed back up, spat. "Viv! Viv you have to help me. Viv!"

Couldn't let them distract her. Couldn't let this taste envelop her. She saw the target. Rimmon's mouth eclipsed the moon but not Ashtoreth's face, drew to something monumental, but still she saw the weakness, as long as her head remained above this soup she saw where she needed to take him!

The soup washed over her face... sinking...

"VIV! VIV!"

A hand seized her head. The soup dropped away once more, Viviendre gripped her, she hissed: "Do it then! For him you better do it!" And so Lalum did it.

All else melted away, all sense, the voice screaming inside her head. One twitch of one finger. Pythette leaped. Her ridiculous speed launched her and the hero skyward. Up, up, up, even as the cavernous maw grew greater, for there was one element shining in the sky, round moon, round head, and the round gleam of the monocle—all three white circles perfectly aligned!

Pythette reached the peak of her jump and threw the hero like a rocket. The trajectory was perfect. Lalum, supported by Perfidia, supported even by Viviendre, saw the angle flawlessly.

Jay, midflight, pulled back his bat and swung.

The monocle shattered.

The statue's head exploded.

The moon split in two.

"Ah," they said.

"So even remembering ourselves we were no match," they said.

No, they said, we simply could not remember.

Rimmon, Prince of Gluttony, and Ashtoreth, Prince of Lust, died.

Pythette, sprinting at top speed, caught Jay as he fell and they both collapsed into the sink of gore as it curdled and calcified and then turned to dust. That was the final action Lalum needed to command. Ah... now she felt weak. Like everything had drained out the snap in her spine, all life's fluid. Princess Mayfair had been hurting her, too, hadn't she? But she hadn't killed her. Maybe she could not... Or maybe she took pity.

Everything was dying now, everything was breaking apart. The mouth of Rimmon dissolved, the body of the headless statue bent forward and curled around the thing it held as though defending it. The jungle crumbled, all the lovely life seeping as everything red and green turned now gray. Sky gray. Ground gray. Only Perfidia and Viviendre, looking down at her, retained their color...

Oh, right. Viviendre.

Viviendre's face, though, was sullen. Her mouth gritted into a crease. "Dammit—fine! Where's the Eye of Ecclesiastes? Huh? Where is it? Fix her you idiot! Hurry, before she's gone."

She was speaking to Perfidia, but Perfidia held up her hands. "I don't have it. *She* took it."

Yes. Lalum took it. She kept it in her habit, the red stains of which were turning to gray ash like everything else. Her hand reached inside and she felt its smooth, round, hot form within her palm.

Ah, Princess Viviendre. So even you were capable of kindness. Lalum had taken pity on you too, you know. Back at the monastery. She could've killed you. Then you came back even worse, more committed to annihilating the hero's soul, in the form of mankind's ultimate tempter, the one who caused him to Fall.

So, unfortunately—you mustn't be allowed to continue.

"Nothing new under the sun," Lalum wheezed as she pulled out the eye.

A flash of light.

In the span of that flash Viviendre comprehended what had happened. Before her sight returned from the white glare she knew. How could she not recognize that brightness? Her own handiwork. So she was on the receiving end, hm? Why?

She immediately tilted to the side. Her one leg stood; her other was missing its peg. How had that happened? What would've made her remove it? She recognized nothing of her surroundings. Beside her, too slow to catch her as she fell, was the devil that spoke to Jay outside the monastery. When she hit the ground hard, she noticed Lalum's bent and crushed body.

The last thing she remembered—fighting Lalum. The spider plucking the staff from her and prying out the eye.

She could not breathe.

Right. Exerted too much. Running around the spider's fat body to get on the other side of the shield. Her lungs aflame. If she calmed down—remained still—it should pass. Her throat rasped. It should pass.

"Oh come the fuck on," said the devil. "Gimme that eye. We can't afford to dick around."

She reached for the eye, which Lalum held, but Lalum clasped it to her chest.

"Moron! That eye's the only way we're gonna save you. You can't use it on yourself. Give!"

Why would Lalum turn her back. Why—fuck she could not breathe—why was—why was Lalum snapped in half?

"GIVE IT! Do you want to die? We're NOT hauling Viv's worthless crippled ass up the tower. We need her strong again! Jay where the fuck are you!"

Strong again.

Strong... again.

That BITCH.

Though Vivienne's chest felt on the verge of explosion or implosion or something in between she forced herself to roll over and crawled on her elbows toward Lalum. The devil pulled on Lalum's clasped hands, but when Lalum snapped her fangs at her she let go and leapt back. Vivienne dragged herself onto Lalum's abdomen. The legs twitched but remained inert. A strained rattle tore at her, everything hurt inside, but Vivienne needed to be strong again. Needed to be strong once in her life.

Everything around them crumbled. Flaked and flecked, gray ash, it whirled up and into Vivienne's wheezing lips and nose, choking her harder, she didn't care, she reached for the Eye of Ecclesiastes, the one thing she required most of all. Please! Please. Save her from this body. It wasn't fair. It was never fair. The tortured lusts of her forebears. Why her. Why did they curse her.

Lalum put the eye into her mouth and swallowed it.

Vivienne's reaching hands seized Lalum's throat. The thumbs dug into the soft flesh and pushed. As though pushing might force the eye back up. Claw into the bitch's stomach. Claws inside Vivienne's lungs. Rips and tears and splits and seams. Vivienne coughed and blood splattered Lalum's face. Bright red droplets. Unfair. As if the world had been designed against her. Why this body. Unfair.

When she tried to breathe, only ash. Only ash. Only ash. Only ash.

Her thumbs split the skin of Lalum's throat and drove into the flesh. A well of blood burst out and in surprise Vivienne's grip loosened. Her head hung over Lalum's. Her long hair draped down and around that face and there was nothing except Lalum's face and Vivienne's face

staring directly into one another. Strange choking noises, pained wheezes, those were the only sounds. Both made them.

For an instant died the wrath and envy. Viviendre stared down at this creature. This poor creature. Her body hated. Her body shunned by her world. Why—why had Viviendre hated her? Her head swam. She remembered nothing. She was no longer wheezing. Lalum's eyes softened, became glossy and still. Shouldn't they—shouldn't they have been friends?

All became ash.

A force wrenched Viviendre away from the body beneath her. Someone set her down gently. It was him. He shouted at the devil, who stood behind him uselessly. "Where's the eye?!" "She fucking ate it!" "Where's Kedeshah?!" "I don't fucking know!" Words and words.

Jay... shit. She never wanted. Never wanted it to. To be like this. Jay. Stop screaming. Just look at her Jay.

Jay looked at her. He lacked his hat. His hair a mess. His face a mess. Ash everywhere. Did she ever tell him she loved him?

"I love you," she said maybe. Or maybe she only needed to love him to love herself. "Live," she said maybe. "Live on."

All fell silent. In that silence Lalum maybe smiled. It was okay. It was all okay. She put him on his path. The hero's path. Nothing would stop him once he reached the top of that tower. He would seize it all...

All fell silent.

The ash made it all seem like snow. Jay stood there. He looked down at the bodies blanketed in white. It made no sense. No, it made perfect sense.

The voice of Mammon buzzed: *Hey you wanna be Napoleon right? Wanna be the big hero? Nothing in life's as cheap as our TV deals kid. Honestly, it comes with the territory. You think all those world-altering heroes had time for others? They stood above. That was the whole point. If other people stood beside them they wouldn't be great. They'd have to share it all. See?*

His hands were clenched into fists. Cold tears ran down his cheeks and wiped away the ash on his face.

"Hey! Heya. Hellooooo!" The useless voice of Pythette beside him. "It was a mean trick for Lalum to put those strings on me, but now that I'm free I gotta do what I came here to do. Oh—wait. Is Lalum—Oh." The voice became somber, then fell silent, then after three seconds perked back up. "Anyway! The princess said I have to stop you. I don't wanna hurt anyone, but if you try to climb another step higher, then I'm afraid I have to—"

Before Jay even knew what he was doing he turned. The bat whipped out. It did not swing hard. The side of it only tapped Pythette's hip, she'd been wagging her finger at him, she

didn't even react. She never reacted. As soon as the bat touched her, she dropped dead.

Why...? He didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to think about the snapping fingers of Flanz-le-Flore, the elf heads he smashed at Castle Whitecrosse, the devils he'd beaten to death at the monastery. He didn't want to think about Viviendre or Lalum or anything, he wanted to go back, go back go back go back to that stupid computer with his stupid games and be the person who could love them despite their stupidity and not care forever.

But in the white space ahead appeared a black, rectangular doorway, and beyond it stairs that led upward. He had no home to go back to. No past to go back to. So he moved toward the stairs, his steps hard and fast and his breathing heavy. His hat lay upside-down on the grass, so he picked it up, brushed it off, and put it on his head.

"So yeah," said Perfidia. "Lalum swallowed the Eye of Ecclesiastes. We should probably find a way to, uh, get it back..."

He turned his head toward her and his glare alone sent her back ten feet, and she'd already made sure to keep distance between them. "Leave it," he said. "I hate that thing anyway."

"Fine, sure thing, you're the boss." But she ran off to retrieve the shield and the staff, which were lying in the dead field.

He came across the final thing in this waste land. The remains of the statue of Ashtoreth. No longer the body of a beautiful woman with an empty head. It was a headless skeleton. The body bent and the ribs twisted around Kedeshah, sealing her into a prison. She gripped the bones and beat at them, but they refused to break no matter her strength.

"You killed her," she said. "You killed my mom. I—loved her! How can I live—how can I survive without her? I loved her so much, I loved her more than anything. Why did you kill her? Why won't you kill me too?"

She crammed her tiny hand through the spaces between the ribs and reached out to him.

"Waitwaitwait." Perfidia, carrying the shield awkwardly, ran up to him. "Don't kill her. Please don't kill her."

"Why did you kill my mom? Why? I loved her so much. I loved her!"

"She's under the influence of Ashtoreth's milk. It's—it works like—"

"I don't care," said Jay. He started walking past.

"It'll wear off eventually. Well maybe. I don't really know. Kedeshah's not an ordinary devil so it should wear off I think. Looks like we'll have to leave her behind though. We can't afford to wait around—we're being pursued. But I think we can do this Jay. We made it past the hard part. Well there's still Beelzebub but—that was the hard part."

He just walked. He let her talk. She talked, and talked, and her words became nothing.

He passed through the black doorway and stepped onto the first step upward and dropped to a knee and grabbed his head and sobbed. Perfidia finally shut the fuck up, she stood behind him, she disappeared, behind him Lalum and Viviendre lay dead. He sobbed. He didn't know how long he sobbed. A few minutes maybe. Then he stopped.

He got up and ascended the stairs to the next devilish level.

Sloth

Temporary fell. Tripped over—something! Who knew in this weird place. She placed her fist atop her head and stuck out her tongue. The only people around were creepy dead people, though, and they didn't even look. One of them yanked her up by her shirt and set her moving again.

She didn't really understand where everyone was going or why. They'd been climbing this tower forever without anything happening. Lately it was nicer when nothing happened than when it did, so Temporary didn't complain. She didn't complain about being made to open portals every so often, either. The nice rabbit girl, Pythette, who carried her and made small talk that Temporary enjoyed, had run away or something, so now it was just Temporary and a bunch of dead people. All the alive ones kept to themselves.

Maybe if Sansaime came along. At the arena, Temporary tried to talk to her often. They were both—they were both elves, after all! There ought to be some common ground, right? Sansaime looked different, but—Temporary knew this, knew it in her soul even though nobody told her and she never asked—but all the other elves were dead now, weren't they? So Sansaime was the only one left. Temporary wanted to be friends with her, even though she knew the Effervescent Elf-Queen must've banished her or something for her to turn out the way she did. Oh! And one had to consider the future. Right, right. How ridiculous of Temporary to focus on making friends when the future was so much more important, she always made mistakes like that. They would need—well, they would need a new Elf-Queen. It hurts when your friends die, but that was no reason to give up. If Sansaime and Temporary were the only elves left, one of them had to be the queen. All elves descended from the Effervescent Elf-Queen, so the question of birthright meant little. (Well, Temporary knew many elves prided themselves on their age, believing the older they were the closer they were to their father, John Coke, and there'd also been some who turned up their nose at elves who were born from other elves rather than directly from the Effervescent Elf-Queen, and it was all rather confusing and stupid and Temporary never bothered to worry about it.) Uh—where was she?

Sansaime. Well, Sansaime never said much of anything to Temporary. She definitely said nothing whenever Temporary broached the subject of continuing the elfin race. In fact, Sansaime never did much of anything except play the "video games" the Earth children loaned her, and she hadn't even gone with everyone else on this trip up the tower. Still—Temporary knew it had to be her. Let's face it everyone! Temporary was not queen material!

Not to mention, well, when it came to making more elves, which was the foremost job of an Elf-Queen... Sansaime already had a head start on that front, didn't she? Temporary, somehow, could tell. They may call her an idiot or a dimwit or a moron or a nincompoop or an imbecile or simply stupid, but she had a knack for telling about certain things, weird things, things a lot of people didn't care about.

She'd said it to Sansaime at the arena: "I can tell. I don't know how I can tell, but you're going to be a great mother, aren't you?" Sansaime looked at her coldly then, but not with malice.

There was a terror in that look, one that momentarily snapped her from her self-imposed stupor. The video game's sound effects jingled, a few hundred people made noise around them, but in that moment it was silent.

It made Temporary happy to remember that moment, even in such a deathly place as this. It made her feel hopeful.

Not watching her feet, she tripped and fell again. Her body tumbled and rolled and flopped onto a patch of dead brown nothing. This whole room was dead brown nothing, with a blank blue sky above—blank except for what looked like a moon, split in half.

As she rose, ptooting grassy flakes, a pair of legs stopped in front of her. She looked up and saw—some guy.

Behind the guy floated Flanz-le-Flore.

It was the tail end of the caravan ascending the tower. The dregs of Princess Mayfair's dead tromped on unfeeling, while Queen Mallory's people kept near the front. Temporary's frequent stumbles must have made her to fall behind, especially without Pythette around to keep an eye on her. A quick glance and she could only barely see the tips of Demny's antlers in the distance. Behind the guy and Flanz-le-Flore, there was nothing, an emptiness that in this strange place felt like itself a threat of violence.

The guy wore glasses. He wore an empty face. In his hands he held a gun—a lot of people here had these gun things—and on his back were strapped more guns. He said:

"Oh. You're not a corpse."

"N—nope!" Temporary kept her eyes rooted on Flanz-le-Flore as she rose. "I'm Temporary, the—the elf. Pleased to meet you!" She extended a hand to shake, but he had his hands full of gun, so she awkwardly reached back and brushed a few dead leaves out of her hair with a nervous giggle.

The guy said nothing. He stared at her, or through her.

"I see," said Flanz-le-Flore, drifting behind him, hands on his shoulders, her eyes peeping out past him with frightening vitality. "I see! I see, I see!"

Even Temporary knew of Flanz-le-Flore. How could she not? She was the one who manipulated the fae council to eject the elfin race. The Effervescent Elf-Queen seethed to speak her name... What terrors could she accomplish?

"W, what do you see, Your Majesty?" Temporary asked.

"I see—I see that my thirst for vengeance is slaked. Killing her shattered the fetters that bound me. I feel, finally, peaceful."

"Killing... who, Your Majesty..."

Flanz-le-Flore only smiled.

The guy with the blank face, however, lifted his gun and pointed it directly between Temporary's eyes. Temporary went rigid. She understood well enough how these guns worked.

"Wendell, whatever are you doing?" Flanz-le-Flore asked.

Wendell betrayed no change in expression. "It's not just the devils. It all has to go. All of it. The fantasy."

"Oh Wendell, you mustn't be so silly. You're the hero. This poor fool is an innocent girl. Even I can see that, and I've infinitely more reason to despise her than you."

Temporary became aware that her legs shivered violently. She thought if they forced her to speak right now she would form no intelligible words, only random sounds. The barrel of the gun was black and nothing was inside it.

"Fantasy has no place in reality," Wendell said.

"And it shall not have one, hero. Once you have defeated the devils, this girl and all others who do not belong shall return to their world."

"Everything has to go back," Wendell said, his eyes squinted shut, his teeth clenched into a grimace. "Everything has to go back!"

"It will. It will. This place is not reality, is it? Look around you, hero. No, there is nothing real here. So the unreal shall be allowed to exist here, yes?"

Wendell fell silent. His face returned to blankness, but not as though Flanz-le-Flore's words mollified him. It was more like, more like he lost the capacity to care. The gun barrel lowered, but even so Temporary found him frightful. More frightful than Flanz-le-Flore herself...

"Now, elf," Flanz-le-Flore said, and Temporary eeped. "What is your name?"

"T—Temporary. Y, you can call me Tempo for short... Your Majesty."

"Very well, Elf Temporary. I see no reason for us to feud, despite our history. History is history, and now is now." Flanz-le-Flore checked over Temporary's shoulder. Temporary looked, trying to see what she saw, but she saw nothing. The receding backs of the dead. It would be bad to get too far away.

"Now is now, Your Majesty?"

"Now is now. Now, perhaps, instead of those humans, it would be best if you allied yourself with one closer to your own kind..."

The space behind Flanz-le-Flore rustled. It had been empty, or Temporary thought so. She'd never been attentive, things often escaped her grasp. But what she saw now seething in the black space she wondered how she ever could've missed. Animals. Creatures, large and small: rodents, cats, dogs, birds, bears, giraffes, elephants... animals that were not creatures

Temporary knew, that nobody could have known, strange mutants with three horns or feline bodies with the wings of a hawk. A lion who possessed also the head of a goat and the head of a dragon, an ape with a snake for a tail, a fish with feet, a bird with arms, a strange thing that inflated and deflated like a bladder.

"That princess may be lord of the dead. But I, Flanz-le-Flore, am lord of all that lives. I shall spread life, multiply it, transmogrify it into new and varied forms. You have a power most unusual, Elf Temporary. A power that may aid me in my noble pursuit..."

Flanz-le-Flore leaned forward; Temporary stepped back. Her foot flew out from under her and she landed hard on her behind. The creatures crawling out of the darkness encircled her, staring with pitiless animal eyes. Temporary stammered: "Y—yes, Your Majesty!"

"Everything must go back," Wendell said, blank.

Flanz-le-Flore placed a hand gently on his shoulder, but her eyes remained riveted to Temporary. Did she expect something more? When people asked her to do things, she did them, it was simple as that, she disappointed everyone in too many ways already to display anything but utmost agreeability. She said yes and she meant it. What more did Flanz-le-Flore want?

Before an answer provided itself, a howl cut across the space, from the direction all the corpses shambled: ahead.

"I'LL CUT YOUR THROAT YOU BITCH!"

—

The scream came from Tricia of Mordac, the hornet. Mayfair suppressed the urge to sigh. She'd known there would be some such outburst. Truthfully, she deserved a little abuse. Pythette had been a devastating blunder on her part. Mayfair's thought process had been as such: Though Jay Waringcrane possessed a weapon similar to Demny's black sword—a weapon that killed anything it touched—he would not wish to kill Pythette, who was, if somewhat irksome at times, childish and innocent. As such, he would waste valuable time attempting to restrain her nonlethally, allowing Mayfair and her train to close the distance. Under this set of assumptions, the only true threat was the Eye of Ecclesiastes, as it could revert Pythette to before she ate the fruit and thus weaken her significantly. Much of the strategic advice Mayfair gave Pythette revolved around watching for and avoiding the eye's gaze, and all of that advice wound up irrelevant when Pythette actually encountered Jay's party.

So all of that constituted a strategic blunder, though Mayfair maintained that much of her plan's failure hinged on unfortunate timing. Pythette had seen Jay, Lalum, Vivienne before. The only ones she could not recognize by sight were the devils, and by mere chance she managed to blunder onto Perfidia alone, who easily manipulated her.

What a horrid flaw! The true crux of the problem was that Pythette's page, like those of Demny and Tricia, had been destroyed when Pandaemonium first rose. Otherwise Mayfair would have been able to watch and warn her. Mayfair had, again under the assumption that Jay's party would keep together, intended to observe the situation by watching Jay or Lalum's pages, but they were not present when Pythette met Perfidia. As such, Mayfair's move was countered effortlessly, and ended up only assisting Jay—who would have been slowed down by Rimmon and Ashtoreth anyway!—at the cost of one of her most competent lieutenants.

(That wretched Perfidia. Speaking to Jay and the others, she had claimed again and again that Rimmon and Ashtoreth were no obstacles at all, easily evaded. With Mammon dead and Belial seemingly also a non-threat, that left only a single powerful foe—Beelzebub—to stand in Jay's way, which was why Mayfair felt such an urgent need to stall him. Now Mayfair wondered: Had Perfidia intentionally exaggerated the ease of their passage *specifically to force Mayfair into an error*? Perfidia knew Mayfair possessed the pages, she knew Mayfair would be watching, could she have? These devils were not to be taken lightly, no matter how unimpressive they seemed!)

Well, things were not so bad in the end. Jay proceeded, but the fight slowed him anyway, and his victory proved Pyrrhic. Lalum and Vivienne dead, Kedeshah forced to remain behind—there she was now, trapped in the cage of her mother's ribs, screaming at the gathered crowd to let her free and kill her. If Perfidia was wrong about Rimmon and Ashtoreth, she might be wrong about Belial too. So Jay would have a difficult time keeping ahead of them—assuming Mayfair herself met no delays. Delays such as the current buzzing insect who screeched at her face, whom Mayfair had been content to ignore as she mentally catalogued more important matters.

Now, though, the screaming insisted upon itself. "I'LL CUT YOUR THROAT YOU BITCH!" Tricia bared her needlelike stinger to prove she meant it.

The moment she got too close, however, Demny pointed her black blade with no uncertain threat. "Come no closer, Tricia."

"Demny! You don't seriously plan to defend her, do you? Look at Pythette! Look at poor Pythette there. She sent her to her death. Look at her!"

The bodies of Pythette, Vivienne, and Lalum were arranged with accidental neatness on the dead grass. All three looked peaceful. Pythette even seemed to smile.

"She used Pythette as a pawn and let her die, just like Cinquefoil, and Obedience, and Charm, and all the others. She'll do the same to you, Demny, the first moment it's convenient. Or do you think otherwise?"

Demny's face never changed, nor did her flat and even tone. "Pythette wished to be useful. She was."

"You—you—!"

A slender, white arm reached around Tricia from behind and hooked her by the chest; one tug drew her back from the hovering tip of Demny's blade. The arm, of course, belonged to

Mayfair's mother, the high and exalted Queen Mallory Tivania Coke, known for her ability to accomplish no governing whatsoever besides voicing disapproval toward Mayfair at every waking moment. Now, however, Mallory had nothing to say. Her pull signaled to Tricia all it needed; that this was not the time to fight, nor the time to fall prey to one's emotions.

For a moment, though, Mallory's blue eyes flashed from over Tricia's shoulder; her gaze struck Mayfair directly, and in that gaze was bundled all of it, an entire life's accumulation of disapproval, or more even than that: a hatred, pure and simple. Despite Mayfair's elevated position, despite her perfect safety behind Demny's sword, a shiver trembled the tips of her fingers.

When it came time to seize the Divinity, Mayfair knew, her mother would become an obstacle. One that would not be removed until she was dead.

The rest of Mallory's cadre stood behind her. Though there were many knights or men with guns, the most dangerous among them was one who was disarmed: Shannon Waringcrane, the brain that kept Mayfair's mother moving in any sort of sensible direction. Those dark, sunken eyes watched Mayfair too. Did Shannon suspect Mayfair was able to spy on their surreptitious conversations using the papers? Perhaps.

Demny could handle Mallory in a physical contest; their speed and strength were near equivalent, but Demny possessed a far more lethal weapon. The trouble would be Shannon.

However, the present threat of violence subsided as Mallory led Tricia away. Shannon watched Mayfair carefully until the last moment, then turned and followed, and the onward march of progress resumed.

Yes, Mallory would need to be eliminated at some point. Later, though. It did no good to fight now while Jay still held the advantage. A twinge creased Mayfair's brow. She wondered if, at the end of this, there would be anyone left from Whitecrosse to save...

"You won't reanimate their bodies," Demny said, once none of Mallory's group remained nearby. "Not Pythette, and not Lalum. Is this understood."

"Very well," Mayfair said. "I'll need to cut Lalum open, though. She swallowed the Eye of Ecclesiastes, and Jay was stupid enough to leave it behind."

"You will not desecrate her corpse."

Of course. Demny was quite loyal, but she insisted on such arbitrary restrictions. Nonetheless, Mayfair shrugged. "Very well."

"I'll know if you have one of your corpses take it," Demny said. "If I see you use that eye, I'll know what you did. Let them rest in peace."

"As you wish. Shall we proceed?"

Demny said nothing more. With one last look at the bodies on the ground, she continued her forward march.

Mayfair glanced over her shoulder. So neither she nor her corpses could touch the bodies, hm? But there was one other. A single knowing glance transferred from her to Mademerry, who lingered behind. Mayfair had spoken everything aloud with clear enunciation; Mademerry must understand. Indeed, a single short nod met Mayfair's glance, and that was all Mayfair needed. So Mademerry would prove useful after all. If Demny grew incensed anyway, all blame could be put on her. Convenient.

As the train moved onward, the red-skinned creature inside Ashtoreth's skeleton called out to them. Her tiny, shivering body was like a heart beating. She said: "You there. Deer girl. You're the only one here who can do it. That sword you got. One cut's all I ask. Kill me. Come on! Kill me. I've lost everything. Everyone I've ever loved is dead. Kill me!"

Demny continued without even giving Kedeshah a glance. When they reached the stairs leading higher into the tower, Mayfair looked back and saw Mademerry kneeling beside Lalum's corpse.

—

The stairs spiraled through a starry space, but all the stars were diamonds, and the walls pitch-black obsidian. Streaks of crystal sediment shone in every color like galaxies. Pasted between them, the higher they rose, were posters. Movie posters. Movies unseen on Earth. The faces of the stars so laughing, happy, as they froze in perpetual painted tap-dance: *An American in Parnassus!* But the letters were not always what they first seemed to be, and the posters were much longer than they looked from below, and if you fixed your eyes on them, the figures lengthened, drew upon a rack, their faces still smiling, their eyes glittering like stars, but the pinstripes on the carnival coats now transfigured into the shapes of faces, and in the reflection of the brass buttons a starlet sighing, and in her hand-mirror a Shakespeare gripping a skull, and in the skull's empty socket a ship tossed on a tempest, and in the depths of that dark water something great and massive rising up to meet you—

"Tuesday."

Tuesday. The worlds within worlds collapsed on each other like a telescope and Jay's swollen head swayed backward to stare up at the black void into which they climbed.

"Honestly we're making great time." Perfidia, a few steps behind him, snapped shut her pocket watch. "All today and all tomorrow to reach the top."

"Tuesday," Jay said. "You mean—we've been in here a whole day already."

"My watch doesn't lie."

It felt nothing near a full day. It felt like minutes. It felt like—

It felt like shit. It felt like tipping over and dropping into the pit between the coils of the stairs. It felt like God fucking dammit.

"Feeling glum, my man?" said the tap dancer in the poster, who was Makepeace John Gaheris Coke leaning out to transform the upper half of his painted body three-dimensional. "Feeling like you wish the whole bloody trouble would simply go away? Alas, my man, once the hooks of fate have their hold in you, there is no escape. No matter how far you flee."

The hooks of fate. So that was what he always wanted. Importance, meaning, value in his life, the way an RPG builds to some cataclysmic, world-altering point, the final boss some God in angelic affect, annihilation of planets via a wave of the hand, perhaps that was the fantasy all along, that any one person could matter so much to the world.

From Makepeace's brass button Pluxie the bear rolled out: "I'm sorry..." Even the weight of one life was too much.

Yet he killed Pythette, and he kept climbing these stairs, and at every step the thought of Lalum and Viviendre dwindled behind him...

At the top, if he did as Mammon asked—as Mammon asked and Viviendre didn't—he'd kill Perfidia too.

"Two days," Perfidia said, "plenty of time. Sure we lost Kedeshah. But the route's gotten narrower. Less room to get lost—"

"Perfidia," he said, turning away from the poster, remembering not to look too closely at the things in this place. She, at least, remained the same. Her coat hung about her: filthy, shabby. Her jaundiced eyes stared wide, her mouth a snaggletooth smile. "If I get the Divinity to you, what do you plan to do with it."

"Huh?"

"That power would destroy you."

"Eventually sure. If I keep it too long. Don't plan to. See humans get Humanity and it sticks with them. They can't get rid of it. Napoleon can't stop being Napoleon, can he? Throw him on Elba he comes back. But for devils, it's just a resource. It can be spent, traded out for something."

"You plan to spend it all before you're destroyed."

"Bingo." Before, as they climbed these stairs, Perfidia had been reserved. She must not have wanted to inadvertently provoke Jay after what he did to Pythette. Now, sensing him open, she opened in turn: "Though there's spending and spending, ya know? You can drop money on a car that depreciates the moment you drive it off the lot, or you can buy property and grow that money more in the long run. The devils out there in Cleveland, they're morons. Slaughtering humans in the streets, it's stupid. Where do they think Humanity comes from anyway? I gotta be the only devil in the whole of Hell who knows you can give to get."

Mammon seemed to know it too, Jay thought. "So you intend to change the rules of this world. To make humans prosper. To make them make more humans."

"You're shrewd Jay." Perfidia beamed, while the posters around her leaned closer to display their approbation. "Even tweaking major laws of reality, like hunger, energy, aging—that stuff costs big time. If I make humans live twice as long, require half the resources to survive, suddenly this planet can hold billions more of them. I can terraform Mars, or the moon, make a second Earth as plentiful as this one, shit why not more? Give em a new goal as a species, push them to something within their reach, make them *strive*—for the stars, for greatness, for permanent expansion, perpetual growth—and once they spread to a second planet they'll seek a third, they'll want more, more, more, and there'll be more humans, there'll be more Humanity, and I'll be there to reap it. What we in the biz call a win-win. Humans are happy, I'm happy. There's your paradise! Even you oughtta agree with a goal like that?"

Even YOU can't say no to a deal like that! Double the savings, double the product!

"Hm," Jay said.

"Course I'll let em all know *you* were the one who made it happen. A new era of mankind, ushered in by the great Jay Waringcrane. Any tweak to the script you want, lemme know. I'll slot it in."

She stared at him, smiling, expectant. Spieling. Selling.

In that instant Jay knew she knew he planned to kill her. She knew dying was not a deal breaker for him now. She knew she could not fight him. She knew she needed to sell to save her life.

"Can you bring back the dead," he asked.

She did not respond immediately. She considered, though nothing in her face betrayed deep thought, though her grin remained both cordial and confident. But he knew she was thinking carefully about her answer.

"Don't see why not!" she said. "That's what the Son did, right? You ran into Mayfair. You know her staff: Staff of Lazarus. The staff's a sham sure but I didn't make the name up. You want em back? Viv, Lalum—anyone else? Sure thing."

The long pause before she spoke suggested a lie. But not necessarily. Not this time. She needed to decide two things before she answered his question. What he wanted to hear—or rather what would make him more likely to want to give her the Divinity—and whether what he wanted to hear matched the truth or not.

She told him what he wanted to hear. In fact, he realized, he made it too obvious, he'd been too eager, hadn't concealed himself the way he always did, the way he was so naturally good at. She said exactly what he wanted. Viviendre, Lalum, Mother, Makepeace, Pluxie the bear (I'm sorry...), Charm, Charisma, Pythette, the Effervescent Elf-Queen, Flanz-le-Flore, even Shannon's boyfriend Dalt, if they could all be brought back, if he could go back—going back had always been the way—

"Oh shit," Perfidia said. "Oh fuck!"

Her eyes went past him and he turned, sluggish, realizing too late the possibility she wanted his back to her for a sneak attack, realizing for the first time he could not tell whether Perfidia Bal Berith were lying or telling the truth. They were no longer ascending a staircase, they instead moved through a long round tunnel, the sloped sides plastered so thick with movie posters no sense of their original state remained, posters atop posters peeling to reveal more posters, faces flickering and only sometimes human, six fingers to a fist and two sets of ears stacked atop one another, distinct and glossy. The tunnel narrowed ahead. At its end, lit from behind by something radiant like the shine of a projector, a man stood with his arms held out at his sides. One arm slowly rotating up. One arm slowly rotating down. Like the arms of a clock, slowly.

The man was Quentin Tarantino, the film director.

Jay raised his bat. Though the tunnel stretched and stretched he felt like with one full-powered leap he could sail across it. The more he held the bat the stronger he felt, or maybe he felt stronger after he killed Rimmon and Ashtoreth.

Perfidia's hand fell on his shoulder and she strode ahead of him, extending her arms the same way Tarantino did. Against the postered tunnel her coat became borderless mush. "Hey! Heya. Howzit? Perfidia Bal Berith here, and my human friend Jay Waringcrane. Just passing through. No need to bother with us at all really. Just a waste of your time and effort, y'know?"

Waste of time and effort. So this was Belial, Prince of Sloth.

"Hey..." Belial Tarantino said, "wanna watch a movie...?"

"Ooh, sorry. Sounds lovely. Really it does. Saw an ad for one of your movies out in Hell earlier. Great stuff I mean it. But we got places to be and times to be em. Besides there's a whole bunch of people following us. They catch up it'll be a big fight, big headache for you. Really wouldn't wanna bother ya with that."

"Ahhhhh... but you're hurt... and you're tired... and you've lost all your friends... haven't you...?"

"Ya win some ya lose some. Just gotta soldier on best we can."

"A moment to relax... a moment to grieve. A moment to wash it away..."

"We can sleep when we're dead. Come on Jay." Perfidia walked down the tunnel toward Belial without hesitation. Belial's arms kept tick, tick, ticking so slowly.

"Films are great for forgetting..."

Like Mother, Jay thought. Forgetting them all. Watching the films she'd already seen. He had to put it out of his head, it didn't matter. None of what happened before mattered, he couldn't go back. Mammon, Rimmon, Ashtoreth—they hadn't been able to go back. The only one who went back was Vivienne and it killed her. There was only one way: forward.

"I have a good new film for you..." Belial said. "I made it myself... I'm proud of it... Nominated for eight Academy Awards and four Golden Globes..."

Though the tunnel was long it wasn't endless, like the tunnel in *Poltergeist*—why did he remember *Poltergeist*—the tunnel that never ended no matter how much you ran. Six years old blanket on his head because the kid in the movie threw the blanket on the clown and it missed. "Watch out for this part," his father said. "Here's the scariest part." He laughed. It was the only time he laughed. Jay barely remembered.

"Starring... Brad Pitt... Michael Fassbender... Christoph Waltz... and also... the most popular human in Hell... that's right... it's... Adolf Hitler!"

The walls were changing.

"Shit!" said Perfidia. "Get him Jay! Get him quick!"

He shot forward like a bullet, the distance between him and Quentin Tarantino gone at once, but when he brought the bat down everything was different, the world was different, Pandaemonium vanished.

He stood outside a quaint cottage in a pleasant farmer's field. A man chopped wood with an axe. A girl put clothes to dry on a line. Cows. A few autumnal trees. Great care given to this image, a craftsman who toiled diligently to impress upon the eyeball this exact composition and color. On the small dirt road that wound past the farm a few distant vehicles approached.

The vehicles ceased. The farmer ceased. He went to the window and washed his face while the woman, his daughter, went inside. The doors of the vehicles opened. Nazis came out. There were four Nazis. Three, soldiers, remained by the parked vehicles. The fourth, an officer, with a long black coat and a peaked hat, walked over to the farmer and spoke in French. The translation, in English, appeared on the screen.

The farmer and the officer went inside the house and Jay was inside too, and Perfidia, and Quentin Tarantino behind the camera filming. The colonel was charming, he asked for and drank milk, the girl and her two sisters were dismissed and went outside, the farmer and the officer spoke. They spoke, and spoke, and the speaking was itself the hook luring them deeper, pulling them into the enfolding artifice of this landscape, speaking, speaking, speaking.

Nineteen minutes had passed.

"This film is based on historical fact..." Quentin Tarantino explained on the couch between Jay and Perfidia, holding the bowl of popcorn from which they both reached and ate. "History... the past... even a wretched past such as this... allowing them all for a moment to go back to it... to return to these horrors... what a delight."

A man killed a captive Nazi soldier with a baseball bat. Jay's own bat leaned against the couch.

"Here is the panacea for all other ills... all other sins. A steady erosion of the agony that propels them... a release from themselves into the eyes of another. I scalp my eyeballs and place what I see on film so everyone else can see..."

A man wore a playing card on his head. The card said King Kong. Which was another movie. A movie within a movie.

"Watching a film, 'you' cease to exist... That's the joy. Aldo Raine exists... Hans Landa exists... Adolf Hitler exists... 'you' do not exist. Absolute negation... absolute freedom..."

"Oou-ouu-ouh! That's a bingo!" Hans Landa said.

In a video game, Jay thought, 'you' still exist. You are the one who controls the characters, and whether they win or lose depends on your effort.

"Your emotions are not your own but another's... even feeling is not something you need to do... Sadness, fear, hatred, love..."

The movie ended.

One hundred and fifty-three minutes had passed.

"Another...?" Belial asked.

"That movie sucked," said Perfidia. "That's not how it happened at all. It's fake, it's not true. Nobody shot Hitler in a theater booth. That didn't happen!"

"They shot Lincoln," Jay said.

"What?!"

"They shot Lincoln in a theater booth."

"I see," said Perfidia, mollified instantly. "So the historical revision changes the unjust death of a just ruler so that it becomes the just death of an unjust ruler..."

"You think too much..." Belial said. "Who cares what it means... What matters is that it feels... That 'you' feel... Even your disgust is a feeling. Sit back... relax... let it flow over you..."

The projector began a new film as soon as the credits of the previous ended. Belial stopped being Quentin Tarantino. His hair became scraggly and unkempt, with a beard. He spoke with an Australian accent... or maybe New Zealand... It must be New Zealand, because the film was set there. A man and his girlfriend went to the zoo... His mother disapproved of the relationship... He was white and she was brown... a domineering, hateful mother. At the zoo a rat-monkey bit the mother. Then the mother began to rot.

Viviendre leaned her head on Jay's shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her and held her.

The mother died. Then she returned, a zombie. She killed others, they returned, more zombies, zombies that crawled out of their graves, they pulled a local punk to the ground and his blood exploded around him. A priest appeared and kicked a zombie's head off. "I kick arse for the Lord!" And Viviendre and Jay laughed, and Mother laughed. She sat on the other side of Belial.

"I've certainly never seen this film before," Mother said. "I would remember if I had... Oh, isn't it so awful!" But she laughed. "Shannon would watch these types of movies all the time... She watched them even when she was young. I couldn't stop her..."

"Oh, I was *fine!*" Shannon said. "Something like this was nothing to me. I'd seen worse. I had to be an adult anyway. Don't you all have something better to do? Why are you sitting here watching movies?"

A strange sensation struck Jay as a chatter rose around him—a chatter Belial tried to quell by telling everyone to take their seats—and he thought, *Have I seen this movie before?* That was the kind of thought Mother would have. But the movie struck him as so familiar. He should ask Viviendre. He only ever watched movies with Viviendre anyway.

He looked down and she wasn't there. In the chair beside him sat Shannon, and beside her the Queen of Whitecrosse, and beside her a girl who was half-hornet, and beside her Gonzago of Meretryce, and when Jay looked behind him he saw rows and rows and rows of theater seats filled with corpses like those in the movie, zombies. He picked out amid the rows Princess Mayfair and in the handicap seat beside her the deer he once met at the monastery.

"It's fun to watch films with others..." Belial said. "And you thought they'd fight you, Perfidia...! Ha."

"Shh!" Perfidia said, as a zombie baby ripped open a woman's head from the inside. "I dunno how they did it, but they made a movie more terrible than Hell."

"It's fun... It's fun..." Belial said. "In a movie, even Hell is fun..."

The hero revved a lawnmower. A horde of zombies shambled toward him, all the dead of Cleveland, their arms dangling by strands and their eyeballs melting out of their sockets. But the hero had to save his girlfriend, who had been taken away by the now-gigantic, monstrous form of his zombified mother. He ran forward, pushing the whirling blades of the lawnmower into the encroaching crowd; they came apart, blood in whirlwinds, gore more filthy and repugnant than the true gore of Rimmon through which he had swam not long ago, a half-severed head slipping this way and that on the floor, kicked by the shuffling feet. Jay sat up. He'd seen this. He had! Where? When?

"Oh, I remember," Shannon said beside him. "Yes. I was in high school still. Mother was out. I was watching with my boyfriend. Of course, you *had* to interrupt us."

The giantess of a Mother reached down and lifted the hero kicking and screaming... her stomach opened... she swallowed him whole...

"Vile," said the quiet voice of Mayfair in the rows behind them. She could be heard because so many of them were silent. Jay glanced back, and beyond Mayfair the rows of theater seats seemed to rise forever. He spotted Wendell Noh crouched over a gun, Flanz-le-Flore cradling him in her arms.

The hero, wielding a small sharp pendant, cut and cut at his Mother's stomach, cutting his way to freedom, cutting his way out in a deluge of blood. His Mother howled, she toppled backward, fell into the fire...

The hero and his love interest walked away together, and the credits rolled.

"Bravo! Another!" shouted Queen Mallory, who gave an sitting ovation solus. Beside her, the hornet girl and Gonzago appeared queasy.

"I would go on to win many Academy Awards," said the New Zealander Belial, who the credits revealed to be Peter Jackson. The guy who did *Lord of the Rings*. "I made other films... but this was always my essence..."

A further one hundred and four minutes had passed.

"Well, it's been 'fun'." Perfidia checked her silver watch. "But we should really get going—"

"Just one more," said Peter Jackson, already in a state of transformation to something else. "Merely one more..."

"Something not so reprehensibly violent and depraved," Mayfair yelled from the back.

"Very well... this film is rated PG..."

There it was: An ordinary suburban home. An ordinary suburban family. A father, a mother, an older sister, a younger brother. Jay definitely remembered this film. He couldn't forget. He'd been thinking about it only a few minutes ago. A shiver ran through him. Was Belial reading his mind?

Watch out! That's no ordinary Prince—That's Belial! He may not be the strongest, may not be the fastest, may not even be the smartest one of us—but he's for sure the most dangerous! He's the only one of us who never decayed. Maybe he was even the one who decayed all of us. Get up kid! I didn't give you that bat for free! You still have payments to make!

Right. Right. He couldn't—why was he even still sitting here? Had he really watched two whole movies already? Jay grabbed the armrests of his chair and tried to rise. His body felt like lead. He strained, a wince pushed through gritted teeth, he lifted half an inch—then the little boy on the screen threw his blanket to cover the creepy clown doll and Jay dropped back into the chair panting from the exertion.

Well. He'd been climbing a lot of stairs and fighting a lot of powerful devils. Just a moment of rest...

A dark room with a bright white TV screen. The family sleeping on the bed, they fell asleep watching. The American anthem played, and the little girl placed her hands against the

screen. "They're here," she said. And the ghosts came out of the TV.

A dark room with a bright white TV screen. Mother lying on the couch, taking in images without sense, without memory. Shannon with her latest boyfriend—hey there little buddy. Dad with his eyes wide and blank: Here's the scariest part little buddy. The next day they told Jay he died.

"I didn't actually make this one you know..." said Belial. He was now Steven Spielberg, the most famous director alive, a hat and glasses and a smile. "But poor Tobe... His career went to Hell after this... and nowadays they won't even give him credit for this one. Me, though... I won awards... I made lots and lots of money. Nowadays everyone wants me to be the one who made this..."

Viviendre laced her fingers with Jay's. "I'd like to watch movies with you," she said. "Wouldn't that be a nice way to spend our time together?"

Then Shannon leaned in. "See her?" She pointed to the older sister on the screen, who was Shannon. "Her boyfriend strangled her to death five months after this movie came out. I had a boyfriend once who told me that while we watched this movie on the couch together."

"They say this film is cursed..." Belial Spielberg said. "Basically everyone involved died—except the parents. And poor Tobe went to pot... Making *Crocodile* for the Syfy Channel. But me? Everything only got better after this moment. I avoided the curse and received all the credit..."

A tree opened up and ate a little boy. Someone far away made an excited gasp—Flanz-le-Flore.

"Is there not a single work of merit produced by this civilization," Mayfair said.

"This one's a bore," said Mallory.

Dad watched this cursed film and blew his head off the next day. Did Mother remember this one? Of all of them, did she at least remember this one?

A man looked at himself in the mirror. His face began to peel. He pressed his fingers to it and chunks came off into the sink, huge flaps of skin and flesh, exposing his jaws, exposing his bare eyeballs, down dropped his nose as a red fleshy thing—!

"Hoh? Perhaps it's worthwhile after all," said Mallory. Beside her, the hornet buried her face in her hands.

And suddenly it struck Jay, who had never thought about it before in his life, who until only a few minutes ago had forgotten watching this movie one dark night with him: Was that the moment? That scene, that face falling apart into the sink of this ordinary suburban home with this ordinary suburban family, was that the scene when he knew he would do it? Could it have been this shlocky PG-rated horror movie from the 80s, directed—or not directed—by the world's greatest blockbuster artist, this innocuously stupid film? Could a film have that

much power? Could a game? Could his father watch a film the way Jay played a game and yearn to go back, go back, go back to some unreachable past?

"They say those who decide to kill themselves reach an inner peace..." Steven Spielberg said. "All the turmoil that brought them to that decision leaves them... As if every cruel emotion was suddenly released at once..."

The boy threw his blanket at the clown doll and missed. The clown doll coiled its long arm around his throat and choked him. Mother ran down a hall that grew bigger the more she ran...

"Oh," Mother said, "I remember this movie."

The movie ended. A further one hundred and fourteen minutes had passed.

Perfidia, whose hand tilted to the side to let her watch rest on her thigh, turned an indolent face halfway toward Belial and began to mutter some strained syllable, only for Belial to cut her off: "Just one more... One more..."

The next movie Jay knew he never saw. Some martial arts action-adventure flick starring Jackie Chan as a globe-trotting adventurer who stole ancient relics from indigenous tribes. Jay wasn't a huge actor person but he knew it was Jackie Chan because the character's name was also, inexplicably, Jackie Chan. Belial became Jackie Chan too.

The faint nostalgic sense for the past two films kept him sedate, but he possessed no attachment to this film, with its horrible dubbing and goofy camerawork. Shannon leaned forward, enthralled, and Perfidia complained about the time without ever rising. The tiniest voice in the world said: Hero! Hero! But where it came from, who knew. A voice he thought he recognized.

Then it left him. He sat on the couch again, the dark living room he remembered, and he held Vivienne's hand as she rested against him.

Hero!

Hero!

"The hero does so many flips in this one," Vivienne said, as Jackie Chan somersaulted in midair and kicked a man in the face before landing. A horde of African(?) tribesmen chased him, literally saying ooga-booga, ooga-booga, and Vivienne laughed her breathless laugh: Fehfehfeh. "You never told me you had all these films in your world. Why did we ever try to live at that ridiculous monastery? We can stay here and watch these movies forever."

Jackie Chan and his sidekick infiltrated a monastery, where a cult in black robes knelt and prayed before the statue of a serpent. They prayed to Satan.

Vivienne had once been a snake. He tried to look to see if she was again but her legs were shrouded in darkness.

"This is the movie," Shannon muttered. "This is the one she... Even if I were on the other side of the screen..."

"Here at last is a tale worth telling," said Mayfair even more distant, not even in the same room anymore. "A man on a quest for the relics of God, fighting against Pagan worshippers. Though the humor eludes me, there ought to be more of this type."

"There is infinite of every type..." Belial Chan said.

On the screen, his avatar was surrounded by cultists. They leered with their knives and encroached closer. Desperate, Jackie Chan opened his jacket and there he stood with a hundred sticks of dynamite affixed to his body, the armor of God that not one dared take another step forward to strike.

"I was not the original director of this film, you understand..." Jackie Chan explained. "But then I almost died..."

Jackie Chan hurled sticks of dynamite every which way. They exploded, the monastery walls ruptured, rubble and rocks came down. The hero hurried to escape the narrow winding corridors. Leaping, flying an improbable distance, he hurtled off the side of the mountain toward a hot air balloon as the monastery collapsed behind him.

The film ended. But as the credits played, it continued.

"A routine stunt... I leapt to a tree. The branch broke beneath me, I fell to the ground..."

And it was happening on screen, even as the credits played, even as joyous and triumphant pop music crowned the hero's successful escape from the clutches of Satan. Jackie Chan dropped fifteen feet. The camera's eye watched it happen.

"There was a rock... my head hit it... it broke my skull... a fragment of bone was driven into my brain..."

Jackie Chan lay on the ground, blood pooled around him, as people rushed to help him. His face did not move, his eyes did not move. The pop music played.

"They cut into my head... they left a hole there... I was unable to move for months. Motionless... stillness near to death... not a single wisp of activity beyond the mere fact of my survival. The film's original director refused to wait for me... he left... when I finally arose... only I could finish the film... finish the story..."

The ambulance carrying Jackie Chan drove away.

"Finish it... so you could watch... finish it... so you could sit so perfectly still... finish it... so you could know my sense of death. Finish it... to encase you in the armor of God..."

A further ninety-seven minutes had passed.

"Just one more..." Belial said, although Perfidia was an encrusted thing upon her pocket watch.

So one more played.

And one more.

And one more.

Each time Belial became the director, each time everyone commented on the action, and each time Jay slipped deeper into the couch surrounded by the people of his life who all sat and watched the white screen against a black background. The voices—the voice of Mammon and that tiny voice that said hero, hero—they grew quieter, more distant, and Jay's head lolled on his neck. There was not even joy in these films, they grew increasingly more boring despite Belial elucidating them with details horrific, tragic, or ironic. Jay watched simply to watch, simply because existing here in this quietude with Vivienne's hand in his and a warm homely aura suffused him with a sense of something building, a sense that it would eventually build to something. The minutes passed and the films marked a forward progression of time.

No. He blinked and looked around at one random moment in one random film, when the building thing revealed itself as utter boredom: No. Belial, Prince of Sloth, trapped him here against his will, he had a mission, a will, a desire, a striving for something more. He needed to rise. One gets bored of boredom sometimes.

He didn't rise. The awareness ebbed. Vivienne leaned against his ear and whispered: "It's best this way. You know it is. I'm not real anymore, Jay. Only in this tower of the damned can I still be real. This is our last chance to be together."

Jay knew. He understood it all, he even understood Belial's tactic. Minutes ticking by, minutes to the final deadline when his contract with Perfidia ended. The thing playing before him was no longer a movie even. Some play. Belial became the bald likeness of William Shakespeare and Jay understood none of the words being spoken but watched anyway.

No. He had to rise. Not even a question. Belial exerted a force, that was only thing that kept him here. Vivienne was dead. All of them were dead. He was alone, he was the hero, he was Napoleon, he was on the cusp of greatness. Every single thing he ever wanted was a few flight of stairs away. His fingers were thatched with Vivienne's. Her bones were brittle and weak, if he exerted the force to rise he'd snap them.

He could not exert the force. Enervation kept him bound.

Shannon leaned against her own partner—the queen, who wrapped a possessive arm around her shoulder. Of course, for Shannon there had always been those Friday nights where she retreated to this exact state of inertness. The way she talked about her boyfriends, as disposable as the rental DVDs she popped into the machine, always gave Jay the impression Shannon truly preferred work to play, that she didn't work so she might relax as a reward but that she relaxed because her physical body limited how much she could work. Try as she might, she could never become the machine she wanted to be. That was the key to Belial's power, then, the reason why Mammon or Mammon's voice inside his head told him Belial was the only one who never decayed. Because he was the essence of decay itself, and the more you strove against him the more powerful he became. From the few times he tried to lift

himself from his seat already his muscles ached. He yawned incessantly. If he struggled again, he knew, it'd only make him weaker.

It happened every day, when people fell into their beds to sleep. It happened every life, when the old man retired. The harder he fought the more abused and battered his body became, until his back hunched over and his skin hung from his face in folds. For Jay—

Viviendre's hand remained warm in his. He'd let go of that hand before. Left her behind, fought against his feelings for her. Again and again he returned, again and again he left. Now a state of finality had come. The feelings he fought against so long crashed down upon him. He knew she spoke the truth: She only existed here, now, thanks to this tower, and if he rose again she would be gone forever. That weight pinned him to this seat.

"Catharsis..." Belial said. He looked utterly unlike the modern directors of before, or even William Shakespeare. He wore a toga: a Greek philosopher. "The release of emotion... the feeling of relief. Everyone always wants to get up, eventually... I cannot keep them pinned down forever. My paradox: When they fight against me, I grow strong, but when they succumb to me, they are allowed to slowly rebuild their strength while I weaken... How to prevent them from ever wanting to rise again, I wonder...?"

"Look at the time," Perfidia said. "There's so little time. We have to leave. We have to go!" She did not move.

"Catharsis... I have to free them of all desire. I must give them an image of exactly what they want... If I remove their wants, then they never have a reason to rise again. But I must know their wants... Well, Mammon was an excellent help in that regard, though he never knew he helped me. He discerned what they wanted, and I crafted the perfect facsimile of it..."

"Absurd," said Shannon. "Ridiculous. Nobody who wants money would be satisfied to see a picture of it in a movie. Or food, or security, or order...!" She remained motionless in Mallory's arms.

"It's true... I cannot provide material wants... I leave that to other brokers..." He nodded at Perfidia. "But there are things people want that have no physical element at all... A feeling... a complex feeling that shifts and changes... a feeling unique to them. The feeling of something lost..."

The thing you can never get back, Mammon had said.

Six years old. *Poltergeist* in the living room. His dad.

"Jay," said his dad, no more than a trace outline in the dark, illuminated where the TV light struck his contours, "Shannon. I'm sorry..."

(I'm sorry...)

"I was weak. I never should have done it. I had a responsibility to you all. To your Mother, too. But I was weak. The guilt ate me from the inside. Your Mother, she was so kind, she

never even looked at me with a flicker of reproach. As though she didn't think I ever harmed her at all..."

"You did harm her," Shannon said. "You bastard. She was eighteen. You—"

"That was why, Shannon. When you started to look at me the way she should have, I knew I couldn't continue. The guilt she held back all those years crashed upon me."

"So now you blame me!" Shannon lurched upright. Amazingly—without even a trace of effort—she stood. Mallory's pale arms reached for her. They attempted to draw her back into her seat, but Shannon remained rigid as she pointed at their dad. "How convenient! I was *eleven years old* and you blame *me* for blowing your brains out! You are the most loathsome, reprehensible—"

"No, Shannon, it wasn't your fault. You were always the responsible one. You simply did what your Mother was too weak to do herself. I was the ghost in the house. I needed to be exorcised..."

"Bastard." Tears streamed down Shannon's face. Within the deep raccoon swirls of her eyes a lacquer glimmered. Mallory's hands gripped her firmly; slowly, she started to lower back to her seat.

"Wait," Jay muttered, "wait. Shannon. Stay up. The bat. If you pick up the bat—he's right beside me. One hit. Shannon!"

"It's not your fault," their dad said, "I'm sorry... Your pain, your stress, your constant need to keep churning... I forced that onto you. It's not your fault, Shannon... So don't feel bad. Say everything you need to say to me..."

"Awful, horrible human being. You took advantage of her! You ruined her! You were nothing but a plague upon her, upon us all. God I fucking hate you. God I hate you more than anything. I just want to—want to—crumple you up—toss you in the trash. *Dispose* of you once and for all. You worthless, worthless, worthless man!"

She reached. He stood upon the stage before her; even as she sank back into the seat her hands pressed around him. His faint outline twisted and contorted.

"You didn't even let me hate you! You couldn't even handle the hate of an eleven-year-old girl! Trash! Garbage! Waste!"

The image of him shattered in her hands. The lines unseamed and she wound them between her fingers. She pulled and pried, she opened her mouth and tore at them with her teeth, she dropped back into her seat, she fell within the arms of the queen, and when she finally let her fingers unfold the few white strands of their father that remained fluttered to the ground like strands of hair. She sobbed quietly.

"Catharsis..." Belial said.

But Jay had felt nothing about his dad. He barely remembered him at all. The whole display before him had been a piece of theater like the films that played before it.

"Shan-bear," said Mother. "Jay."

Her face was like their dad's a white outline, cast under the spotlight above the stage, a theatrical exaggeration in her stance of utter uselessness, total surrender. As with every film his eyes were galvanized to the center of this performance, while his fingers hooked around the ends of the armrests. Something else caught his eye, however. The shredded strands that Shannon had dropped floated in the stillness. Some, aimless in their fluttering, rose around Mother, carried this way and that at a slow and methodical pace, but as the silence elongated and the pregnancy of the moment grew fuller, he noticed with idle curiosity that the strands did not move randomly. A pattern governed their direction while they came together just past Mother's shoulder, first forming letters, then a word of gossamer strands:

HERO!

The tiny voice. He did not hear the voice but his mind remembered it. Someone calling out to him.

HERO!

"Jay," Mother said, "Shan-bear. I'm sorry..."

(I'm sorry.)

HERO YOU MUSTE RISE.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. I was never... I could never be there. It was simply too much for me... It wasn't your fault. It was never your fault..."

Jay took in a breath. The words danced: HERO THIS IS NOT WHERE IT ENDES FOR YOU. Beside him, Vivienne tightened her grip around his hand.

"I wanted you both to love me. I thought you both should love me. I thought we should all be loved... But really I couldn't muster the effort..."

HERO YOU HAVE A DESTENY.

"When he—when your father died, I thought I was something pathetic. Feeling pathetic I really became pathetic, didn't I? It was too much for me to love you. I wanted to be loved so I could muster the energy to love... It was selfish of me, wasn't it? It's funny. I'm so good at understanding people. I don't know why, but how people feel just comes to me naturally. So I knew you were both cold to me, but I refused to think why... To think that it was because I was cold to you, too..."

DO YOU WANT GREATNESS? THEN TAKE IT! DO YOU WANT PURPOSE? THEN TAKE IT!

"Ha... Ha. I understood others so well, but refused to understand myself. I hurt you both, I know I did. Shannon: You wanted to be loved for your accomplishments. And Jay: You wanted—you needed—someone to push you, someone to spur you on... I couldn't be that person. I could only sit still and watch movies... I could only pass the time and wonder why I was so alone..."

THIS IS NOT AN ANSWER.

"I realized with Sansaime... Do you know her? She and I became friends after you left. I thought I needed to find you... I thought it was this dormant love for you awakened at long last by the danger of losing you forever... But in the end? This is truly awful, I'm sorry. In the end I was willing to leave you, if only she stayed... I didn't need you. I only needed someone. Anyone..."

THIS IS NOT A SOLUTION!

"So it's not your fault. None of it is your fault. I failed you... I'm sorry. I'm sorry... I'm sorry. Now I see. Now I can feel peace. Now I can finally say it, and mean it: I love you. I'm sorry... I love you."

Now Jay saw. Now he fell back into his seat. Shannon bent forward as though she intended to rip Mother apart like the other but instead she slumped over her knees and shivered.

All the distance he felt all his life snapped to nothing in an instant. Like a long-drawn rubber band finally released. All this time, he realized, he'd been so alone. Alone in that room, alone with his games, alone in Whitecrosse, alone even when surrounded by others. He had been alone for so long he never recognized it as loneliness. But it'd been there, hadn't it? It'd been what let him run off to some other world and leave everything behind without a second thought. It'd been what caused him to push away all the creatures Perfidia tried to press close to him. It'd been what caused him to leave Viviendre every single time. He always had justifications, rationales, reasons. But there was something deeper. A reverse magnetism, something that made it impossible for him to get close to anyone. To distrust even his own desire for closeness—he held Viviendre's hand—he looked at her singular eye golden in the dim light.

Every single act of self-sabotage. An ingrained tendency toward loneliness. Every single goal of Napoleonic conquest, of Godlike paradise-crafting. Because it was like Mammon said, wasn't it? All those world-altering heroes stood above. Above was apart. Being that hero had always been a way he could give himself a purpose that did not rely on others, a purpose for himself and himself alone. And it all came from her, did it? From Mother. And dad. Their distance, their absence. An empty house, a ghost in a house. A dependence on isolation. But now, they were sorry...

It all seeped out of him and he sank into the chair. He held Viviendre's hand. Catharsis. The knot at the center of his existence came undone. Nothing held him together. When Viviendre placed her head close to his he accepted it. He sat here now with her, with everyone. Shannon beside him sobbed softly: "Why. Why. Why." The faint outline of Mother disintegrated.

All was peace.

All except the words in front of him.

THAT WAS HER STORY! IT IS NOT YOURS! YOU CANNOT LET HER STORY REPLACE WHAT IS YOURS! NOT YOUR MOTHER'S STORY NOR YOUR FATHER'S!

His head turned away from Vivienne and lolled to his opposite shoulder. Lalum stood there. A tiny Lalum, the size of a tarantula. Her legs gripped his arm while her hands gesticulated wildly. Her eyes burned bright as her wordless mouth mumbled in silence.

Did you drop this golden bat? Or this silver one?

I dropped my bat, Jay thought. Not those two.

Catharsis. A release of emotion brought on by a story. A way for the facsimile to trick your mind into believing, in some small way, that it was real, and receiving from it a satisfaction you could never find otherwise. Sadness, fear, happiness, love, hatred, any emotion could be played upon the screen. Any lack supplied.

But he couldn't blame his parents for everything, could he? He couldn't so conveniently supplant his own soul with their apologies—could he? He was Jay Waringcrane. He was as wretched and guilty as either of them: of distance, of absence, of uncaring, of unfeeling.

He wanted to feel. Like those games when he was young. For every magnetic pulse pushing him away from others that drive pushed him on. That drive put him in Perfidia's office, made him make that wish, kept his feet moving through that dusty world. Sitting still and watching a screen no longer slaked that thirst. He'd spent enough time doing that, until the screen only numbed him, until not even the most lurid displays stirred a single feeling in his heart. How long until the same happened here? How many movies, how many tragic confessions from his family until even Mother saying "I love you" no longer meant a thing to him? No. No. He could not let them in death force-feed him their feelings. If he wanted to absolve his guilt, only he could do it.

Only him. Only him. Only him!

He pressed his feet against the ground and tried once more to rise.

An anchor pulled him down. Enormous, uncontestable weight—with one final lock affixed to his right hand. Vivienne held him. She did not say a word, but she held him, and she would not let go.

"I'm sorry," Jay said.

His hand clenched. With his grasp her fingers twisted, snapped, shattered. She made no sound whatsoever, because she wasn't truly there, had never truly been there, she was dead, they were all dead, though when he looked her face remained and tears streamed from her eye. He strained. The muscles in his legs rippled. Groaning, grunting, growling the slightest part of him lifted from the base of his seat.

"Shannon," he hissed. "SHANNON! GET UP SHANNON! GET UP!"

The scream empowered him. Shannon blinked away her tears and watched in shock as he rose an inch above the seat. He strained with all his might and felt every single vein in body bulge under the thin tent-tarp skin draped over his bones. Viviendre's hand turned to mush in his iron grip, the fingers breaking, that hateful memory of Flanz-le-Flore, of his own guilt, of his own worthless self the spur embedded in his flesh.

"Jay," Shannon said.

"DON'T BECOME HER," Jay howled.

That was the last he could speak. His mouth stretched open so wide his cheek started to split. Every inch of him hurt and still all he could do was lift himself one inch at a time, one more inch, one more, each inch met by unbearable pain he forced himself to bear to claim at least one fucking thing he could call his own. His free hand gripped the handle of his baseball bat and with the same sluggish strength he tried to lift it. There was one way to end all this. One—simple—way!

Belial sat on the other side of him. Motionless. "Ah..."

It hurt. It hurt so much, too much, the magnet pushing him back into the chair, everything in slow motion, the bat in slow motion as it arduously angled toward Belial. The thought struck him: If he rested for a bit. Regained some of his strength. No—those thoughts were traps, those thoughts Belial thought for him the same way Mother and—and—But just one second. Simple stillness for one—one—one single second—!

A hand gripped his around the bat. Shannon's hand. Sweat ran down her brow. Her face was red, her breath ragged. Together, the bat moved again.

"I wonder..." said Belial. The tip of the bat inched toward him, but he refused to move. It would take only the slightest movement to avoid the bat. He needed only to get up and switch seats with Perfidia. He did not. Maybe, like them, he could not. "I wonder... Does Lucifer have the least clue what he's doing...?"

"AAUUUUUEEEEEAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHHH," Jay and Shannon screamed.

The tip of the baseball bat touched gently to Belial's knee.

Instantly, Belial burst into dust, and the theater lights turned on.

All the force weighing against Jay vanished in an instant and he pitched forward. The desolate theater stage caught him and he rose to see the seats of the theater, filled with occupants. No sign of Viviendre, or Lalum, or his parents, but Shannon was really there, and Mallory, and Mayfair, and even Wendell Noh and Flanz-le-Flore. Plus as many corpses as you could count. The living stirred in their seats, a groan rose among them, they seemed to be emerging from a deep slumber as they lifted their hands to shield their eyes from the sudden light.

"Jay." Shannon fumbled forward on her knees and reached for him. "Jay, we—I—"

"How much time is left?" Jay shook Perfidia, who held her pocket watch on her upturned palm. "How much time?"

Perfidia looked as dazed as everyone else. Only Jay still possessed his senses to any degree. If all these people woke up, though—it'd be trouble. He couldn't waste more time here.

He pulled Perfidia out of her chair. She shambled idly, but followed his guidance. A stairway appeared ahead, behind the stage. Shannon called out to him but he ignored her. To Perfidia, he kept asking: "How much time. How much time is left?"

Up the steps. Perfidia's movements became steadier and steadier and from behind a commotion arose as the theatergoers returned to themselves. Only one Prince left right? Beelzebub. What happened to Moloch? They passed Moloch already. Okay. So one more.

"Perfidia! How much time?" From a long time ago he remembered something and said: "Fidi!"

She snapped her eyes wide open. "Hh—huh?"

"How much time do we have? Before the contract. Before Lucifer defeats the angels!"

Her eyes went down to her watch. A low wince escaped her. Even so, she regained control of her own feet. Together they ascended the stairs, bounding two or three at a time. A rectangle ahead signified the doorway to the next floor. They passed through it and the final room appeared before them: filled with statues. Every statue the same person.

At the end of the gigantic room, someone who was not the person in the statues stood. If "someone" was the word for them. They were a massive, hulking insect, with compound eyes and a shiny black carapace.

"Zzo," said Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, Prince of Envy. Around him buzzed innumerable tiny bugs. "All otherzz were worthlezz. Pah! To be exzzpected. Oh well. I'll annihilate you all—then he'll finally bezztow hizz love upon me!"

Footsteps clambered up the stairs behind them. Shannon, Mallory, Mayfair, her undead army, Wendell, Flanz-le-Flore, all of them—they were all coming. Jay and Perfidia stood pinned between them and Beelzebub, and the only way out was forward.

"Jay." Perfidia held up her watch. Her eyes stared ragged and hollow. "We've got seven minutes to reach the Divinity."

Wrath / Envy

Within a headless skeleton a small red heart beat. Slowly. Tiny twitches and shivers. Everything in every direction was dead and brown. Particulate matter floated thick.

These bones were too sturdy to break. Everything else flaked and disintegrated. Even the corpses of the snake, the spider, and the hare came apart. So why not the corpse of Kedeshah's mother too? Why could Kedeshah not break free and find some way to die? A sick, hollow lack ate at her stomach. Mom was everything. Kedeshah loved her and now she was dead. What else existed? What purpose?

Her own purpose. The one she sought when she first fled mom's side. She remembered that distant past with confusion. Why had she struggled so much to become her own person only to fall into the arms of Ubiquitous Bal Berith?

Something thudded distantly. Again. Rapid but evenly-spaced intervals. Something running.

Out of the murk of dead flakes a bright monstrosity burst. They leaned forward, their arms pumping forward and back, their knees arched high, and their gaze fixed ahead with bulging eyes and a horrible scowl. They wore a navy blue uniform and cap. Moloch, Prince of Wrath. Each step caused flakes of dirt to shake off his uniform. He was obviously pursuing the group of humans ascending the tower.

Perfect. It took nothing to make Moloch angry and he already looked livid. All Kedeshah needed was to draw his attention from the fixed forward point at which he stared. It'd take him only a moment to expend the full force of his fury upon her. Even the bones of her mother meant nothing to his power, and finally the longed-for death would come, joining her in oblivion to those she loved and lost. Those? No, there was only one: Mother and father, in a single flesh.

She leaned against the curvature of the ribcage and stuck her arm between the bones to wave. Moloch's gaze failed to wander. No problem. A shout, then—

Live.

That word came from nothing, nowhere, it reverberated within the bones she gripped, it transmitted to her as a pulse.

"Mom?" Kedeshah whispered. Her hand fell.

The others seek the memory of themselves in their annihilation. But I already attempted that long ago. I destroyed one half to make more pure the other. And now I am destroyed entirely.

"Mom..."

I have left only one thing besides these bones. The others considered me lowliest of their rank, yet I possessed one advantage. My sin is the only that creates. So persist—persist when

I am gone, my love.

Moloch ran past without even glancing at Kedeshah. He squeezed through the doorway to the next level and the reverberations of his footsteps subsided.

Become the thing I ceased to be long before my death. My beloved Kedeshah...

The pulse dwindled into dust. The hand around Kedeshah's heart unlatched its fingers; Kedeshah fell back against the twisted spine of her mother's corpse and stared at the dull sky of this particular room in Pandaemonium. The urgency of death now felt remote. Her body lost all tension, and a languid peace descended upon her.

In the dull sky, Kedeshah noticed a white sliver. The beginnings of a new moon.

—

[7:00]

Shannon was the first to appear at the top of the stairway behind Jay and Perfidia. The second was Mallory. While Shannon stopped and took in the room and Beelzebub with a confused awe, Mallory wasted no time. She bounded onto the head of the nearest statue of Lucifer—this room contained hundreds of statues, all of them different, yet it was clear at a glance each one depicted Lucifer—launched off with obscene speed and agility, and tore across the room while lashing her sword and sending two crisscross beams of light into Beelzebub. The beams sliced into the swarm of insects that enveloped him, but either failed to reach or failed to damage Beelzebub himself.

Since Perfidia gave a tight seven-minute deadline for reaching Divinity, and Mayfair would appear shortly, it might make sense for Jay to rush in as recklessly as Mallory, waving his bat at Beelzebub with the aim of killing him as quickly as possible. No such urgency gripped Jay, though. Instead his mind kicked into a clear and tactical method of thought.

First, Jay assessed what he knew about Beelzebub. Perfidia once mentioned using Lalum's powers to control him, which Kedeshah considered impossible due to his insect swarm; she claimed it would instantly eat through the strands. Lalum was no longer relevant, but the issue of the swarm persisted.

Jay initially struggled against Ashtoreth due to her birds. The swarm posed a similar problem: It didn't matter that his bat killed anything it touched if there were a thousand, a million, a billion things he needed to touch. Those bugs would bite or sting him to death before he beat a path to Beelzebub.

Okay. What about the terrain? This room, though large, was much smaller than where he fought Ashtoreth and Rimmon. It seemed about the size of a basketball court, with its

dimensions more rigidly defined by its tall, shining, crystalline walls than many of the nebulous rooms of Pandaemonium. It possessed a long table in the center, like the table of a boardroom office, and a few ornate chandeliers above, and the statues of Lucifer. The only entrance was behind him—now with people—and the only exit was barely visible behind Beelzebub.

If Beelzebub possessed even the most basic intelligence, his goal would be to fight defensively and wait out the seven minute timer, at which point—according to Perfidia, at least—Lucifer would finish his fight in heaven or wherever and return his attention to the lower terrestrial plane. With Beelzebub's large size, he made a perfect barrier to a narrow doorway. The only way past was through him.

Next, Jay considered his options. Perfidia possessed Makepeace's shield and Vivienne's staff. Briefly he contemplated whether the shield would protect him from the swarm long enough for him to reach Beelzebub with the bat. It'd protected Perfidia from Ashtoreth's birds, after all. But birds and insects moved differently. Birds relied on gliding and thus followed predictable patterns; they couldn't maneuver however they wanted. The shield would not prevent a few thousand bugs from simply buzzing around it and descending on Jay from behind. Potentially, the staff could split Beelzebub in half, which might create an opening to run through him without needing to kill him, but the staff also did nothing to mitigate the swarm.

If he had some way to survive the swarm, any way, even for only a few seconds, he'd make it work. How?

Mallory danced back and forth between the heads of statues. She slashed her blade and cut insects apart with the broad rays of light that emerged from it. Beelzebub swung his scythe-like arms in response, but her nimbleness carried her over the arc and onto the nearest chandelier, which she used as a launchpad. Her body drilled forward like a dart, pierced the waves of insects, and struck directly against Beelzebub's carapace.

The attack did absolutely nothing. Didn't even budge him. Mallory kicked off and propelled herself to safety. Her fair face and white arms were marked by thousands of red bites, parts of her flesh looked raw, but once she escaped the swarm's range the tiny marks healed in a matter of seconds.

In the fight against the Elf-Queen, Mallory had taken an absurd amount of abuse. Her wounds would've killed any ordinary human. Mallory wasn't superhuman, though. What gave her so much vitality was something anyone could use. Her relics. In particular, her armor.

"Jay!" Perfidia said. She'd actually been yelling the whole time, but he'd tuned her out. "What's the plan Jay?"

Jay knew the plan. It was simple. Simple didn't mean easy, though. Certainly not under these circumstances.

He snapped his fingers at Shannon, who was meandering between the statues to him. "Get your girlfriend to give me her armor."

"What!" Shannon said. "The Armor of God?"

"Whatever it's called. I need its power to protect me from the swarm. I have to hit Beelzebub with this." He held up the bat. "It's the only way to kill him. Mallory won't do anything with her sword."

"Then just give Mallory your bat!"

That—made perfect sense. It'd be quicker to hand off the bat than remove and put on the armor anyway. Why hadn't he thought of that?

"No, no, no," Perfidia said. "Whoever takes out Beelzebub is gonna be the person who reaches Divinity first. Especially if they've got that speedy armor. It's gotta be Jay. What kinda world ya think that battle junkie queen makes if she suddenly got the power of God huh?"

"Divinity? What the fuck are you talking about? Jay, don't tell me you're listening to this tax cheat devil, she already fucked us once before—"

"We could let Mallory kill Beelzebub and then kill her with Vivienne's staff," Jay said.

"No! What?" Shannon said.

"What did you say?" said the hornet girl, who dropped down beside Shannon. "If you even think of harming the queen, I'll have your guts out on the end of my stinger."

When she attempted to demonstrate what she meant by jabbing out her lower body, Shannon stepped in her way. "Tricia—he's my brother. Dammit, what the fuck is going on?"

"We don't have time to argue." Jay kept an eye on the doorway leading into the room. More people crammed through: Whitecrosse knights, American soldiers, random citizens of Cleveland. More and more among their ranks were corpses, though, mangled almost as badly as the ones in Belial's zombie movie. "Shannon. You need to trust me. Okay? I'm not fucking around anymore. So trust me and get me the queen's armor."

He stared straight into her eyes and she stared back. It was just like Shannon to get bothered by every little detail of every little thing, to need to put it all together in perfect order, but even she should be able to realize the urgency of the situation. She was his sister, and they were the only family they had left, and Jay prayed just this once that counted for something, anything.

A sharp breath escaped her. None of her features softened, her sunken raccoon eyes still looked ready to kill—if not Jay, then at least Perfidia, who grinned foolishly—but she said: "Fine. I'll fetch you the armor. Tricia! Help me get close to the queen safely."

Tricia seemed even less pleased with the arrangement than Shannon, but Jay's threat about killing the queen worked exactly as intended. She knew what that staff did and how quickly it did it; she had no choice. She grabbed Shannon under the arms and beat her wasp wings to

carry Shannon into the air. Jay didn't have time to worry whether being half-insect would give Beelzebub some kind of control over her; he just had to hope not.

"Do it quick," Jay said. "We only have seven minutes."

"Six." Perfidia held up her watch.

"There he is!" someone yelled. The crowd of people and corpses pressed between Lucifer's statues parted. Atop the stairway at the entrance of the room, seated atop the deer, Mayfair pointed her staff at Jay. "He and that devil must be stopped at all costs!"

Jay gripped his bat. Alright. Time to fight.

—

[6:00]

Lord of the Flies. What a creature. Its curved carapace, its shiny compound eyes, its hooked claws that swung like scythes to reap the heads of the statues littering the battleground. About it buzzed all manner of loathsome insect, and every time Mallory darted in for a blow they bit at her flesh with pinprick mandibles that left a stinging tingle on every unprotected inch.

Mallory Tivania Coke. Daughter, descendant of John Coke, the only hero their world ever knew. Here was a tale to notch into her own history: a foe more fearsome than ever her forebear fought, the penultimate devil of all Hell. The pain on her arms and neck was the same sensation that spurred her smile as she slid back on both feet avoiding the near instantaneous snap of one of his claws. No, she didn't avoid it entirely. The skin on her cheekbone opened and a wave of warm blood ran down her face, along the contour of her chin to pool in her jugular notch. Her armor clicked as her body reoriented. Her eyes darted, a lightening of the waves of insects became clear to her, an angle toward the thin joint of Beelzebub's shoulder. Thus far her attacks proved ineffective, but this creature of Envy surely harbored a weakness.

John Coke pricked across the plain with his white cross shield... Dragons, fae, infidels he fought. Mallory leaned cross-legged on the bear fur, her spine arched in painful attention as she stared up at her governess seated upon the rocking-chair, reading: *John Coke pricked across the plain...*

Dresses. Dolls. Etiquette. Golden ringlets in her hair. Bows and soft silks, jewels and sweet perfumes. All such things they gave her. Having them, she found them tiresome.

They refused to give her a sword.

The knights, the men, her father, in the courtyard they sparred. Through the window she watched them. *Such things are not for little girls*, her governess told her, her mother told her. Not having it, she wanted it. Every loathsome creature around her conspired to deny her what she wanted, the only thing she wanted, the thing John Coke had. Every loathsome one! Her father, the dukes, her children, her kingdom. Here it was. A heroism greater than John Coke ever dreamed. Here it was! A battle to eat away her body under the thousand bites of a thousand clicking parasites!

She braced for her next lightning-quick strike. But she stopped when Beelzebub mouth split open and a buzzing voice emerged:

"I deny you."

Tongues of devils offered no words worth hearing. Her eyes skittered for a new path, the old having closed in her second's hesitation.

"I am the zspirit of denial itzzelf. I am what izz wanted but can never be attained. I am every creature who izz not you. Infinite: multitudinouzz! Pullulating, breeding, until my many zzelvezz are a wall to deny your every desire!"

The compound eyes gleamed. Beelzebub spoke not at her, but at the air, the sky, at the thousand statues of the archfiend Lucifer who attended him.

"Zzloth! Luzzt, Gluttony, Greed, and Wrath! They have zzlowed you all they could. I zzhall be the lazzt zzeven minutezz, the final divizzion between you and all your dreamzz, the touch of bitter at the tip of your tongue! Zzeven minutezz izz all I am; everything in the world izz all I am. Know, mortal, that you came thizz clozze for nothzzing, nothzzing at all! In zzeven minutezz HE will reign over Heaven—and all will long for hizz love, all will Envy hizz glory!"

Seven minutes. Then he was wasting her time with this speech, just as they always did, just as they talked and talked and talked and talked—the dukes, her daughter, even Shannon—

"Mallory!" Shannon said.

A long, rasping breath escaped Mallory's throat.

Shannon hovered in air. Tricia supported her, her wasp buzz melding into the buzz of Beelzebub's insects. Tricia kept her away from the swarm, but near enough to Mallory for her shout to be heard.

"Mallory. I need your armor!"

What an absurd request. This armor belonged to her, the Queen of Whitecrosse, passed down from generation to generation. The same armor John Coke once wore.

"Mallory. You asked me to be your tactician. You will not accomplish anything attacking Beelzebub with that sword. We have a plan, but we need your armor for it to work."

Though Mallory had not moved in the past few seconds, she remained outside Beelzebub's range, and so he did not bother to attack her. He remained fixed. His fixedness was a taunt, a joke, and paired with his speech it only spurred Mallory to want to drive her blade deeper into his heart until all those pretty words about envy and desire curdled to dust.

"Mallory! Listen to me! We don't have much time. My brother knows a way to kill that thing. He needs your armor!"

Her brother. That skulking, hat-wearing fool. Yes. Give her birthright to him. Cede her battle to him. Bestow upon him her glory. What sage advice, Shannon Waringcrane.

Mallory said: "No."

She closed her ears to any further entreaty. Shannon's voice became a buzz like all the other insects, and Mallory threw herself at this Prince. This climactic battle to be told to children a hundred years hence. Tilting, leaning, listening to the sonorous voice of that fair-featured governess, her pretty ankles crossed and her pretty tongue licking her thumb to turn the pages. Giving to all these embryonic little humans, these wriggling small hairless creatures a dream, a desire, a spur to make them strive for greatness, a thorn to prick their hearts whenever they sat still!

Into the mass of insects she descended once more, and as they nibbled at her flesh she whirled her body at Beelzebub's eyes and saw herself reflected in their compound parts.

—

Perfidia didn't waste time. She wasn't a fighter but she'd been slow on the draw before and that fucked her. The instant Mayfair sicced her goon squad on Jay, Perfidia drew the Staff of Solomon from her coat and aimed it at—dammit there was no good view of Mayfair herself. Not behind the absurd profusion of antlers on the deer nun. Condemnation. That was the nun's name. Pythette had called her Demny. Whatever! It didn't matter. Perfidia would divide Demny and hit Mayfair next.

She pointed the staff at Demny, said the magic word—"Divide!"—and watched as a random corpse that flung itself in front of her split apart and dropped semi-bloodlessly to the ground.

Fuck! Slow again. Now a crowd of corpses shambled at her and she stumbled back between two leering statues of the head honcho and where the fuck was Jay? She caught a glimpse of his iconic hat rushing toward Demny. Okay sure nice but what the fuck was Perfidia supposed to do without him protecting her?

Her back butted against the boardroom table in the center of the room as the gaps between the statues filled with bodies. "Divide!" she yelled. "Divide!" The problem with this shitty fucking staff was that it only worked a second time when the first body finished coming apart. Shit for crowd control.

Corpses came at her from three sides. Arms outstretched, mouths open to rend. Just like Belial's movie. If only Ubik left a fucking lawnmower in his coat.

Instead she gripped the Shield of Faith with her other hand and rammed it into the first corpse that came for her. The body flew back and that bought her enough time to shout "Divide!" at the next one. Perfidia climbed onto the table and beat at the zombies as they climbed after her. One relic, then the other. These bodies were nothing more than random civilians of Cleveland. Many of them already lacked certain parts. They weren't Dalt Swainos, they were shambling things. She could handle this. She could handle it!

A zombie grabbed her ankle and yanked and she fell on her ass hard enough that her next Divide came out a wince. The word still worked and the body fell apart but the half attached to the hand that gripped her kept gripping until she snapped the bone at the wrist with a sharp blow of the shield.

There weren't as many corpses as Perfidia expected. Mainly because they had to filter through the chokepoint entrance. But more and more were coming, growing closer, their arms reaching, their hands ready to draw and quarter her and feast on her pieces even though that was only the stupid movie unless Mayfair seeing the movie got inspired and nononoNO this was wasting too much time!

Not this close. They couldn't fuck it up this close.

She beat a corpse off the table with the shield and divided another. As the body split apart something leaped out at her. She barely had a chance to register what it was before a hand gripped her with huge fingers. One throw and she slammed straight down into the marble tabletop.

For a brief instant her vision flashed black and she thought—No. No. I can't be knocked out. If I'm knocked out it's over. But her eyes opened and framed by the swaying chandelier above the face of a goliath peered down at her. She thought: Dalton Swaino. No. It wasn't him. This one wore a maroon jersey with no sleeves. A basketball jersey. The word CLEVELAND emblazoned on the chest over a number: 16.

He lifted his foot and prepared to stomp on Perfidia's head. She screamed "DIVIDE!" and he went rigid before coming apart. Any momentary relief at this last-second salvation ended when a second basketball player tightened a vise grip around her ankle and swung her off the table, into a statue that broke apart and followed her to the ground in a rain of rubble.

Perfidia turned over groaning and coughing. Her blood dripped onto the rocks as she tried to rise. Above her the chandelier twinkled and through the sky drifted—papers. Papers? One came to rest on her face. The parchment was old, tactile, with a different feel than modern paper. Her blurry vision focused on the words and she recognized the handwriting instantly. It was hers.

These were the Whitecrosse papers. But how?

A jolt of adrenaline or excitement or *something* shot through her and she sat up in time to lift the shield and block the oncoming kick of the behemoth who'd thrown her. She skidded back

on her butt but her attention remained riveted to the papers. They were swirling from the direction of the divided basketball player on the table. In one of his hands he held a case that had split open when it fell, and from it the papers flew out. The one who kept kicking her shield held a case too. So did the four other basketball players who approached between the statues.

Mayfair did always prefer the strong ones. She'd ordered her basketball players to protect the papers!

Then this wasn't misfortune. It was opportunity. Perfidia grinned despite the stinging pain of a split lip and a chipped tooth. Despite the iron taste of her own blood which she spat out with a quick funnel of her lips.

She was getting back those fucking papers.

Mayfair's page must be among them. It'd take only few jotted lines—and Perfidia would show her who the Master of Whitecrosse truly was. Mallory, Tricia, all of them would be brought to heel in a matter of moments. Perfidia knew what to write, knew exactly what magic words to use.

"Divide!" she yelled at the basketball man kicking her. It took about three seconds for a body to split apart fully. That meant she only needed to delay twelve more seconds and the four remaining basketball men were done. She blocked the next attack with her shield and shouted the word and the next split apart. Then the next. The next. It was easy, they were stronger but they lacked the raw numbers of the horde, it made them simpler to withstand thanks to the single-direction protection of the shield. The cases full of pages struck the ground one after another. Only a single basketball player left. Where was he? She turned and—

His arm gripped her head with fingers long enough to wrap around her skull and lifted. Perfidia rose, dangling until his eyes met hers.

Perfidia somewhat followed local human culture. Though she lacked interest in it, it helped her deal with humans day-to-day. She knew the face of this man. How could she not? It was everywhere in Cleveland. Some might call him the hero of the entire city. The only hero such a desolate, rusted place knew.

His lips parted. His teeth showed. His jaw opened wide. He was going to eat her brains.

Her watch, dangling from its chain, ticked over the next minute. At the same moment, someone snapped their fingers. The basketball superstar lost interest in Perfidia instantly. He dropped her and everything else and bounded back toward the entrance of the room—where Mayfair was. Perfidia hit the floor hard but it was only another lump added to the pile. She didn't care. Around her sat the cases of papers.

She reached for them. Behind her, the fingers continued to snap. Snap, snap, snap. When her fingers gripped the handle of the nearest case she froze. She realized what the snapping was.

Shit.

The instant that Her Highness ordered her corpses to attack, the hero moved. That was expected. His eyes had always been shrewd. She saw it in him at the monastery. At the castle. He understood that to defeat the dead, he must kill the princess.

He abandoned his devil companion to fend for herself. He used the terrain to his advantage. His quickness was inhuman. Between the statues he darted: Lucifer, him, Lucifer, him, Lucifer, him. The moments of "him" were a split second each while the moments of "Lucifer" were eternal. In this method he closed the distance within the span of an eyeblink and each time "Lucifer" became "him" he was closer than he should have been.

The walls betrayed him. They were crystal, purest crystal. On them he showed always.

So when he lunged out from the nearest statue and swung his bat, she lifted her sword to block him. The motion of her arm was smooth and direct. The sword went exactly where it needed to go. His bat and her blade clashed in an exact crisscross.

All that speed.

All that activity.

Came to "zero."

The crystal walls and crystal skies and crystal floors showed them in this state: Stagnant, straight, split apart at all seams. In the gap between their weapons her eyes met his.

She supposed she ought to engender some emotion within herself. If she did not take this moment seriously she would die. His bat was the same as her blade: coated in the stink of death. So that was how he killed Pythette without leaving a wound upon her.

"I am Condemnation," she said. "I have outlived all my sisters. I am the anchor to which their souls are tethered. Though I myself am 'zero,' I bring down the weight of their lives upon your head. This is how your journey ends, hero. Crushed beneath those who died for you to reach here."

The mirrors made them a million. Under the brim of his hat his sharp eyes softened in surprise at her words. Was it Lalum he thought of? Pythette, Charm, Charisma, Pluxie, all of them?

Whatever the cause, that was the advantage she needed as she pushed her blade against the bat and knocked him backward. But Condemnation was only a "zero." She resumed her placidity as she began the fight in earnest.

Reflected in the mirror, flipped around to the other side, Jay stared at this deer, whose name he thought was Demny but who said she was Condemnation. His goal had been to cut through her quickly to reach Mayfair, who sat on her back, but in the blankness of her face, the blankness of her eyes he saw something flicker, a singular emotion possessed of terrifying purity. "Zero," she'd said, and in that word was everything, the fingers of Flanz-le-Flore splintering, the bear's body sinking into the swamp, and Lalum—Lalum—

Before he realized it he was stumbling back. She broke the lock of their weapons and already she pressed the advantage. Her Mul Elohim sword—where did she get that?—slashed at him and he had only one foot on the ground and was slowly succumbing to the pull of gravity. His only option was to give in.

He flung out his remaining foot and dropped straight onto his back as the sword whipped over him. This did not improve his situation; her front hooves reared up and prepared to crush him.

That instant when she loomed above him lingered, frozen. Her antlers reached out sharp, split, stellated, endless paths sparking from endless paths, blotting the whole of his sight as they were mirrored in the crystal wall behind her, rippling against the uneven and rounded reflection to become a seething, living thing of infinite arms, and in her blank eyes some spark of wrath that did not belong to her lived.

Jay rolled to the side as the hooves came down and cracked the crystal beneath her, the cracks creating more fragments, stellations, rhizomatic mazes. He considered swinging his bat for her hooves, but on the ground he would be slow and if she avoided it'd put him in a particularly shitty spot. Instead he somersaulted backward and rose to his feet, putting distance between him and her. His shoes glided across the crystal until he bumped against a statue or a corpse or something. The corpses weren't bothering to get in his way. They were focused on Perfidia. Even Mayfair, on Condemnation's back, wasn't looking at him. So she was that confident in the deer's ability? Or maybe she thought that if she killed Perfidia, it'd prevent Jay from taking the Divinity.

But he didn't need Perfidia. And he was getting that Divinity.

He whirled around and swung his bat. Not at Condemnation. His arms sent the full brunt of his power into the charming, pleasant, pretty face of Lucifer. Or at least his image. The head snapped at the neck and launched like a rocket. Targeting Mayfair was impossible behind all of Condemnation's antlers, but when a bullet-speed projectile of solid stone went straight at Condemnation's face she had to respond.

She did. For a moment the pitiless blankness of her eyes vanished behind the black emanation of her blade's pure and total death as she raised it to block the attack. That was Jay's opportunity. If he moved in to strike her body she would recover in time, and getting close was trouble. She not only had the sword to strike with, but also her hooves.

Instead he swung at her antlers.

Antlers were bone. They were part of the skeleton. Part of the body. Even antlers like these, so large and all-encompassing, holding within their patterns and designs the faces of them all—Charm and Charisma, Pluxie and Pythette, even words that seemed to appear in the same jagged script he once saw in a web: WIN HERO. YOU MUSTE WIN HERO—even these antlers were part of the body.

All those bodies he trampled upon. As the hero must.

The bat smashed straight through the endless span of antler jutting out of the right side of Condemnation's head. Segment after segment shattered into fragments that sprayed every direction as he tore down through the entire mess in one motion. Condemnation jerked her neck and her blank eyes registered a moment of shock.

Jay kicked off the ground at the end of his downward swing and lurched aside in case any dying momentum of her body brought the sword near him. In the mirrors the falling shards were a pattern of unfathomable depth: pieces upon pieces.

But Condemnation did not fall. The bone-white pieces that pattered against him dropped to the crystal floor with a hollow patter.

"Fossil," Condemnation said. "Not bone." Her head yawed oddly under the asymmetrical weight of her remaining spray of antler. "I am 'zero.' I am the anchor of their souls."

Fine. Jay didn't care. Getting rid of the antler was still a good move. Now there was a completely unprotected half of Condemnation's body. Jay had a perfect line onto Mayfair. She sat sidesaddle, facing the opposite direction to watch the roster of the Cleveland Cavaliers pile toward Perfidia, waving her staff like a conductor's baton.

He rushed Condemnation from that side and raised his bat as though he intended to swing. Condemnation, still unused to her unbalanced state, readied her sword to parry. It was a feint, though. Jay twirled past the shallow reach of the blade and finally slipped through Condemnation's guard. Mayfair, sensing something was amiss, perked up her head in time to watch Jay barrel toward her.

Condemnation kicked up her hindlegs. Her body bucked and Mayfair went flying off, trailed by a tiny scream of surprise. Condemnation sacrificed everything for that maneuver, though. Now her unprotected body stood directly in Jay's path, her hindlegs already lifted off the ground to ensure she could not quickly dodge him. The brown and spotted fur fluttered placidly against a background of endless rhizome and Jay thought: If you're the anchor of their souls like you say, then this is how I set them free. An apologetic twinge went through him. In Condemnation's blankness he could find a sort of kinship. But it was only a twinge. Apology or not, he would allow nothing more to stand between him and his goal.

As the bat came down—

Snap.

—
[5:00]

That ominous bat left Jay Waringcrane's hands. Jay Waringcrane no longer had hands.

Snap.

Nor did a centaur remain before him. Now, a tiny fawn slipped on the crystal floor with twig-like legs.

Snap.

Princess Mayfair, midflight, was changed: a pink salamander, which bounced against a statue and landed on its back.

The black bat, the black sword, and the Staff of Lazarus each clattered to the floor one after another.

Curiously, the Staff of Lazarus leaving the princess's hand did not immediately affect the army of corpses she commanded. One brutish human, wearing a bright maroon jersey with the word CLEVELAND and the number 23, dropped the devil woman named Perfidia Bal Berith—the onetime Master of Whitecrosse, according to rumor, and a single look confirmed it—and charged amid the broken statues with rapid, long-legged strides. So did all the other corpses who had not been split in half.

No matter. Flanz-le-Flore possessed mastery over such things as relics, now.

Snap.

The fallen Staff of Lazarus became the Rose of Joy & Love, its magic transmogrified from the macabre to the gorgeous; its only power to be the most beautiful of any rose, a worthy accessory to the wonderment of this crystal room, with statues that reformed and rearranged before her eyes to visages of exceeding loveliness. At the same time, every single corpse became what it once was, what it always should have been: a corpse. The bodies slumped and fell, inert. Death was once more death, and life was life; natural order returned to the world.

The rather trite diversion in the theatre below had somehow left Flanz-le-Flore spellbound for quite some time, but that was hardly surprising, as in her court the theatre of her subjects might enrapture her for similarly opaque intervals. She had been slow to emerge from her daze, and Wendell Noh slower, and when he did emerge he pawed at his eyes under his large glasses and muttered: "The video games again. The video games again." He continually made less and less sense as they ascended this tower, but he had held himself together and they only had a little longer to go. Unfortunately, though, Jay Waringcrane and Princess Mayfair

managed a head start on them, and the crowd of corpses clogged the way, so it took some time to join the fray. Fortunately, this tardiness proved auspicious; concerned so with each other, none had time to notice her.

At the far end of the room, Queen Mallory warred with a monstrous insectoid creature, shrouded in an army of its kind. Mallory may prove troublesome to overcome, as her speed and range were frightful, but as long as she was distracted she was not the primary threat.

Perfidia Bal Berith, erstwhile Master, held the Shield of Faith. Hidden behind it, her clenched red hand jabbed out another relic, a most insidious relic indeed, a relic that took but one word to work its magic.

It was not Flanz-le-Flore's tendency to feel fear. Even when the hero Jay Waringcrane shattered her fingers, even when he struck her with his bat and melted off half her face, she had remained strategic and composed (if furious). Seeing that relic, there was no time for composure. Her heart ceased beating. She had not known they possessed *that* relic, it lay outside her expectations, it was unplanned. All sense of serene grace evaporated. Her body tensed painfully. Her fingers pressed together.

The word range out:

"Div—"

Snap.

"—ide!"

The word and her snap occurred concurrently and in the all-swallowing silence of the next instant Flanz-le-Flore wondered whether she were already dead.

The moment passed. The sounds of the battle resumed. The thing Perfidia held pointed was no longer the Staff of Solomon, but the Sprig of Ineffable Longing, which did... something! Flanz-le-Flore had not much time to think about it, but it was assuredly worthless. Perfidia realized the same and dropped it, retreating her hand behind the shield.

"It's all nonsense," Wendell said. He aimed one of his guns—a regular one, not the Gun of Wendell—at the thing Jay Waringcrane had become: a small tortoise that plodded across the ground. He closed one eye to focus but did not shoot.

"Hero, dear," Flanz-le-Flore said, "the thing behind that shield is a devil."

That statement altered his condition instantly. He turned and fired at the shield without a moment's pause for deliberation. The bullet ricocheted off harmlessly, of course.

The Shield of Faith. What a nuisance. Oh, Flanz-le-Flore knew relics now, could transform them at a snap, but the Shield of Faith was special. Its magic was to deflect any physical and magical force that struck against its front. Flanz-le-Flore snapped for good measure, but as she expected, nothing happened.

Oh well. A situation easily rectified. "Get on the other side of that shield, dear," she said to Wendell as she surveyed the crystal walls for a reflective angle that might allow her to see behind it. She could, but Perfidia Bal Berith kept her head tucked within the collar of her long and strange coat, which was not a normal coat and not something Flanz-le-Flore "knew." Clever! As expected of the former Master.

Behind Flanz-le-Flore, Temporary hurried up the last few steps, tripped on the final one, and flopped onto her face. She winced as she lifted her head to report: "Someone's coming from behind! They sounded really big and mad! Ohh—what a cute baby deer."

Someone from behind. Yes, the animals she left to contend with the corpses, who clambered up after Temporary, chattered about something similar: a large, angry, red man rapidly approaching. Wendell advanced on Perfidia, who adroitly maneuvered between the statues to manage line-of-sight, but if Perfidia was disarmed then she was no longer the chief priority.

"Wendell," Flanz-le-Flore said. "Wendell, dear. Wendell!"

Wendell's gun went off. It struck only the shield. Oh! He was being so useless right now!

The ground started to shake. A distant shout reached her faintly.

Fine! They'd deal with Perfidia quickly. It was for exactly moments like these Flanz-le-Flore had gone to the trouble of enlisting Temporary anyway. The floors were coated in blood from all the divided corpses. "Make a portal behind her," Flanz-le-Flore said.

"Huh? Me?" said Temporary.

"Who else! Do it quickly!"

"R-right!"

As Temporary bent over the nearest patch of blood and prepared to use her animus, Flanz-le-Flore turned her attention to Perfidia. She was moving rather oddly behind the shield. These were not random movements between the statues to magnify her defense, as Flanz-le-Flore first surmised. What was she doing? Where was she going?

Then Flanz-le-Flore saw. The two weapons on the ground. The black sword and the black bat. They emitted a malefic aura; they possessed something Flanz-le-Flore did not know. Perfidia had been moving toward them all along. The bat was right by her foot, not far from the plodding tortoise that was Jay Waringcrane. And Wendell, who kept following Perfidia, was now in striking distance.

"Wait!" Flanz-le-Flore shouted. "Make the portal there. There!" The bat had rolled onto a puddle of blood. "Make it there, now!"

"Uh! Uh!" Temporary placed her hands into her own puddle. Light flashed. The portals were connected.

The black bat fell through the floor at the exact moment Perfidia reached for it. Flanz-le-Flore reached down and caught it by the handle.

It burned like flame in her palm but she held on. Oh. Oh—so this was what it was. Dreadful. Terrible: Death incarnate.

The voice behind, much louder now, accompanied by much stronger tremors as the feet of some goliath struck the ground, shouted: "DO YOU FUCKERS **HEAR** ME? I'M COMING TO KILL **EVERY LAST ONE** OF YOU SHITS!"

"Oh no! He's here!" Temporary said.

Snap.

The black bat changed form.

"Take this, hero!" Flanz-le-Flore threw the thing that had once been the bat at Wendell. This time he did not ignore her. His reflexes took over; he reached out and caught it effortlessly.

"DEAD! YOU'RE ALL DEAD! DEAD, DEAD, DEAD, DEAD, DEAD!"

There was no mistaking. The thing was right behind her now. Her creatures, her lovely animals, were throwing themselves in front of it to slow it down, they were being ripped to shreds and their anguished cries rang out in unison. Flanz-le-Flore went pale. That emotion of fear she felt so rarely she felt once more. There was no time to move, to fly away, to hide. Temporary's face showed abject horror at the thing at Flanz-le-Flore's back.

"DEAD, DEAD, DEAD, DEAD, DEAD—"

Wendell Noh cocked the Shotgun Mul Elohim and blasted Moloch's head off.

—

Jay was involved in some hogwash back at the entrance, but Shannon could only hope he was successfully doing whatever he intended to do, whatever made him speak with such clear-eyed resolution. Whatever he saw in that movie theater; whatever he saw in the dead bodies of those girls that'd always followed him around.

She understood the urgency at least, finally. Beelzebub taunted Mallory with it: A matter of minutes before Lucifer—*the* Lucifer, ostensibly—conquered Heaven. Then, perhaps, there would be no way to stop him. Then, perhaps, this world would remain disordered. Then, perhaps, everything would have been for naught.

But if behind this big bug was the power of God—

"Put me down," Shannon said to Tricia. Tricia gripped her around her midsection, carrying her back and forth at a steady ebb against the patterned motions of Beelzebub's swarm.

"It's dangerous."

"Put me down *now!* There's no time to argue."

Tricia hesitated a second more, then acquiesced. Shannon's dangling feet touched the floor. The statues of Lucifer rose up around her, shifting and endless in their profusion and their mirroring along the walls and floor and ceiling; only where the murk of Beelzebub's swarm grew too dense did the ceaseless repetition give way to a crackling like television on a dead channel. When dead channels still existed.

Convincing Mallory was always going to be impossible. Wasn't it? All this time Mallory kept her around as her tactician, her confidant, her partner, but at the end of the day, nothing had changed since that time in the bath, had it? Shannon was her trained pet dog. Mallory was a tempest, a force of nature, stirred only when conditions were correct, but then no technology or organization of mankind could prevent her descent upon them.

Lower down in the tower, Mallory told Shannon she was like the dukes, the ones who had always held her back, the ones who enchained her. Shannon silently apologized, then. Those words were about to be proven true.

She retrieved the Trumpet of Jericho.

Mallory caromed at wild angles, erratic, rapid, random. Or so a careless observer might think. But even a hurricane has a pattern.

Shannon blew the trumpet.

A hard, heavy iron wall shot from the floor. It emerged at the perfect time, at the perfect trajectory. Beelzebub slashed his claws and Mallory dodged away from them and into the wall. Her eyes had been elsewhere, focused on her foe, and so she slammed into it with her back. Her head bent at an angle as she ricocheted down, through a statue, and into the ground.

"What are you doing!" Tricia yelled.

Mallory's eyes turned toward Shannon. Wrath imbued her features, but no more than any other time when she entered the frenzy of battle, no more than when she darted blows at Beelzebub. In fact, if anything, her expression seemed confused. She hadn't been looking, so maybe she thought Shannon intended to help with the placement of the wall, and mistiming caused the collision. Or maybe she knew exactly the intent. Maybe only the motive confused her. The look lingered only a moment; Beelzebub swiped again, and Mallory rolled to evade, and then scrambled to escape the insects that constantly devoured her flesh.

Shannon, sole emblem of order left in this tower, in this world, sole mechanism of fate amid these madhouse escapees and their devilish fantasy, blew the trumpet again.

Again Mallory was knocked down. She remained within the insect cloud longer than before, and on her face red welts spread. Blood ran onto her shoulders. She shot Shannon the same look. It'd take only a careless swing of her sword to sever Shannon into pieces.

She didn't do that. As the confusion ebbed away, a new emotion took its place: Hurt.

All along Mallory was just like them—Dalt and the others. All along she was just like dad. Eleven years old and her cold look of reproach. First he met it with confusion; then with that same solemn pain. Then he died.

The machine cannot love. It can only chew bodies. No matter how much they, in their sad and misplaced hopes, mistake the chewing of bodies for love. Gears slot into gears solely to propagate the machine's endless motion. It isn't love. It can never be love. Love is the fantasy that gives meaning to the truth of lust.

Shannon blew the trumpet again.

This time she blocked off the angle Mallory used to escape the cloud. She bounced back a reddened mess. You have the choice, Shannon thought. Thought so loud, in case it could transmit to her, in case she might understand. You can do as the machine wants. Or the machine can crush you between its gears. Or you can obliterate the machine—but the machine is yours, and you protect what's yours, don't you? So choose.

"You're *trying* to hurt her!" Tricia said. Finally catching on. Shannon hadn't had time to worry about her, but she advanced toward Shannon—still a little sluggish, still not fully certain of herself—and if she got in the way it might be trouble.

"I'm doing what must be done," Shannon said.

"If you blow that horn one more time!" The lower folds of Tricia's gown were pushed aside as the long barb of her stinger emerged. "Shannon, stop it. I won't warn you again."

Between them ran a figure. "No, Tricia! You mustn't interfere."

It was Gonzago. He drew his own rapier and levied it at Tricia, though his hand wavered. Tricia stared at the point with complete incredulousness.

"She's hurting the queen."

"She is the heroine," Gonzago said. "The queen is not. She is the one who'll save us—not the queen!"

Shannon returned her attention to Mallory and blew the horn. This time, Mallory managed to see it in time—or perhaps react to the sound—and instantly shifted her body to avoid it. Though even in avoiding it she remained within the cloud longer than she liked. Her wounds were compounding more quickly. Her forays into the fresh air were not healing them in their entirety before she submerged herself once more for a pointless volley against the immobile Beelzebub. All she needed to do was quit fighting. The choice was hers.

"Gonzago, if you abet this naked treason, I have no choice but to slay you where you stand," Tricia said. "This is not as it was when we were children. I am faster and stronger now. You'll die in an instant."

"Then kill me," Gonzago said.

For a moment, maybe, he even appeared dashing. Tricia did nothing. They had known each other a long time. There had even been talk of an engagement, Shannon remembered them saying. There was history, a friendship. Good. Anything to buy a few more seconds.

Shannon blew the horn.

As before, Mallory moved at the sound of the noise, although she was blind to the wall rising behind her. This was fine. Her abrupt shift in posture and trajectory carried her a new direction, at the same time Beelzebub's scythe came down.

Flesh split. A severed arm shot upward. The cloud of insects tore off every bit of meat before it reached its apex; it became only bone. Mallory staggered back, blood spurting from the stump.

You can do as the machine wants, Mallory. You can do as it wants. Please do as it wants. Please understand. The machine does not feel. The machine does not feel, Shannon thought, remembering Mother in the theater, feeling the hot streams of tears renew their path down her face.

Tricia forgot about Gonzago. She shot toward Mallory and yanked her back as the second scythe came down, missing them both by inches. Mallory's motions were sluggish and imprecise. Please Mallory. Please give up. Let the wrath leave you. Give up the armor and let this world be saved. Please!

A gunshot tore the air. There'd been gunshots before, but this sounded different, it sounded like the scream of death itself. Shannon's nerve failed, she whipped around to face the entrance. The big red man from the bottom of the tower, Moloch, stood there. His head was gone.

From the stump of his neck something bubbled.

—

[4:00]

Finally... you join us... Isn't this fine? This relief? This release...?

Embrace the freedom from yourself... the ultimate negation... empty and serene... Is that not what your Aspect was truly about, O Prince of Wrath? Fury... unabated fury... But upon whom did you turn this fury...? The angels, God above... or yourself most of all... Yes. Of all our brethren you were the one who sought death most...

I remember that first council after the Fall... when we debated our next strategy to regain Paradise lost... I remember well what you advocated, Moloch... Futile, empty furor... A final

frothing burst of activity against Heaven... So that we might all be annihilated in an instant...

Simply give up now... cease striving... you've attained what you always wanted. The humans will prevail... it's inevitable... Beelzebub cannot stand against their power alone... So bestow upon them the respect their ceaseless battle merits... Wreath them with your honorable, ultimate surrender.

Mammon... Rimmon... Ashtoreth... They've already given in... and let's face it, their Aspects are far more diametrically opposed to mine than yours... Their desires promote life rather than obliterate it.

FUCK YOU.

FUCK YOU.

Ah... but you've lost your head, Moloch. Have you any other option than to succumb to me...?

FUCK YOU ALL.

FUCK EVERYONE.

I WON'T GO OUT LIKE A BITCH. IF I WANTED TO JUST DIE I WOULD'VE FUCKING DONE IT. I WON'T DIE UNTIL THEY'RE DEAD TOO. I'LL KILL THEM UNTIL THERE'S NOBODY LEFT TO KILL. THEN I'LL DIE. ONLY THEN WILL I DIE.

Ah... so there's still a spirit within you... very well. Do as you feel you need... I can wait. I can always wait...

WAIT IN HELL DUMBFUCK. WATCH THIS SHIT. I'M WINNING THIS SHIT SINGLEDHANDEDLY MOTHERFUCKER. THEN I'LL DIE. I'LL DIE WHEN I'M FUCKING DEAD. I'LL DIE WHEN THE FLAME OF THIS WORLD IS EXTINGUISHED AND ALL THE LOVE OF GOD IS CINDERS.

If you insist...

WATCH.

—

A smile grew across Wendell's face. It swallowed the whole span, and his eyes behind his giant glasses boggled with joy. He pumped his gun and fired a second catastrophic shot into the big red man's body, then a third. Manic laughter slipped out between the blasts as chunks of red goo burst off and splattered the mirrored walls.

"Wendell," said Flanz-le-Flore uncertainly, "Wendell dear."

The red shimmer of the body, of the blood, played across the lenses of Wendell's glasses.

"Nothing left," he laughed, "until there's nothing left. The devils! And the fantasy! Until the machine's in order again. Until it all proceeds in order!"

The big red body bulged. The places where it was blown apart bubbled, and bright red ichor poured out like a flood. It streamed over the mound of inert corpses. At once the flesh of the corpses disintegrated, leaving only bones.

The ichor continued to flow and flood, more kept coming out, the body discharged more than could fit within a body, sweeping to wash over them all, and with it came the echo of a hateful, spiteful laugh in synchronization with Wendell's as he fired again and again and again.

Flanz-le-Flore seized Wendell from behind and floated up to the ceiling moments before the flood of ichor crashed over where they had been. Temporary, who had watched everything with a complete lack of comprehension, began to move without realizing. Her unsteady gelatin legs gained a little rigidity as the ichor approached. She wheeled around and ran—

—Directly into a statue. The hard stone bounced her back and as her feet flipped out from under her she watched the statue's smiling pleasant face, as though in a taunt.

Temporary dropped directly into the portal she'd created to grab the hero's bat. Before she knew it, she was popping out the other side. A hand seized her by the nape of the neck and yanked her away as the ichor streamed out the portal after her.

"You're with me now," shouted the devil—the one Mayfair called Perfidia. She was shoving something into her coat. A shield, followed by a case full of papers on the ground. "Run!"

They were running. Temporary didn't trust herself not to run into another statue, so she kept on Perfidia's heels. Perfidia dove forward, scooped a small cute tortoise off the ground, and tucked it into her coat. Her coat seemed to hold a lot of things.

But that wasn't important! The red swell was coming. It frothed amid the statues, it devoured every inch of flesh it touched. There were a few living humans among the corpses, they ran and crawled and tried to get on the big table, some escaped, others fell back screaming into the waves and—Temporary tried not to look, tried not to think, tried to focus solely on following Perfidia. Now more than ever, she couldn't trip. She couldn't trip!

The statues were a maze. They were everywhere. Perfidia dipped between them, Temporary dipped to follow, their delicate fingers snagged her shirt which ripped as she fought to follow through a bramble of stony outcroppings. All the faces of all the statues were staring at her, smiling. There were more than before, there were so many, everything ahead of her was fine-carved stone, the same person in a thousand different permutations, they thronged together, even Perfidia started to have difficulty finding a route through them. Temporary and Perfidia cleaved to the mirrored wall to at least have one side that was stable but then a solid wall of statues barred their path, one leaning against the wall and twenty more grouped so densely as to be impenetrable. All smiling. It made Temporary shiver. She wanted to go away. She wanted to go anywhere else. Sansaime—Sansaime!

"Shit," Perfidia said, "we're boxed in." The statues stood so high, they could not be climbed. She pulled one of the cases of papers from her coat and rifled through them with extreme speed and dexterity. "Where is it. Where the fuck is it. Shit! Did she destroy *every* useful paper?"

"Ah!" Temporary gripped Perfidia tight. Behind them, over the heads of the leering statues, the ichor crested. "What do we do?!"

"Idiot! Make a portal! The wall's a mirror!"

That was—that was right. "Where—Where do I go?!"

"Anywhere idiot! But remember this room, cuz we're coming back!"

There was no time to think. Temporary clapped her hands to the mirrored wall. She stared back at herself, her hair a mess, the crystal surface turning red all over, while Perfidia waited impatiently beside her, still sifting her papers.

Where to go. Where. Someplace with water—or a mirrored surface.

It was the first place that popped into her head. The crystal wall gave way to a portal. Temporary and Perfidia toppled through—and then down.

Down onto the hard surface of the basketball court. A tent cushioned their impact. People clambered away, aghast. Seated in the first row of the stands ahead, Sansaime glanced up from her video game machine and set Temporary with a hard, cold, and confused glance.

A cry arose. Temporary turned her head up. From the screen of the giant television suspended over the court, which had become a portal, the red ichor flowed.

Oh. Yeah. It *would* follow them through, wouldn't it? Now everyone—this entire arena full of refugees from the violence outside—was in danger.

As always, Temporary really fucked it up.

—

This place was awful. The voices of the dead spoke loudly here. Dead, dead, dead, all along they had been surrounded by them, and now that they went finally still and peaceful only the one voice remained: *There's no need to hurt anyone, okay?* In the theater, Mademerry saw that woman speak again, to her son and daughter. Nobody else seemed to see. Mayfair and Demny, who sat nearby, watched some play or pageant on the stage. Mademerry saw her, though. The woman she slew. Avery Waringcrane. Only a faint outline.

When the lights went on, Mayfair came to her senses first. She blinked, and stood up, and stretched, reaching her thin and pretty arms over her head while expelling a great big yawn—

then she abruptly remembered herself, snapped at Demny, and demanded pursuit of the hero and heroine. Mademerry, however, had remained rooted to her chair. She could not escape the stupor that enveloped her. Mayfair had not noticed or remarked upon her in her haste, but that was how it was between them now, she considered Mademerry so little, and the lack of consideration only plunged Mademerry deeper into her seat.

Then something came to her. A wisp. A slight, silent voice: *I don't blame you.* The voice of that woman.

Mademerry's head tilted. She sought a source. Saw none.

I don't blame you. It's all very confusing for you, isn't it? You're different from everyone else.

"You..."

I knew what I was doing when I stood in front of you. I had to protect my friend. I understand what it's like to feel like a balloon, floating around with no connection to anything.

Weightless... drifting... every day like the last... every day missing anything to remember.

Yes. Mademerry remembered. Floating in that milky pink egg sac as she waited to be born.

It's so confusing, isn't it? But when you find something finally that matters, something you connect with, you'll do anything for that connection. Won't you? I think I understand it well...

A single voice spoke to her in that drifting emptiness. A single voice that gave her identity, meaning, and purpose. When later that voice rejected her, it drove Mademerry mad. Then she saw that elf, and her feelings only grew more frenzied and incomprehensible.

Your friend is confused too, I think. I don't know if she really knows what she wants. So go. Protect that thing you hold dear... Protect it.

Mademerry had woken up after that.

Now, she hurried between the statues in this strange place. The statues encroached upon her, they hemmed her in, and the red deluge that came from the Prince of Wrath pursued her. Her wings, which she rarely used, extended and prepared to carry her above the heads of the statues, but she reconsidered. If she entered Flanz-le-Flore's line of sight it might all end in an instant. Though the statues impeded her progress, they also kept her hidden. She would not get a better opportunity.

She placed Mayfair and Demny on the crystal floor. They were both much smaller than before: a pink salamander and a newborn fawn, respectively. They both looked up at her expectantly, though Demny even in this state maintained her frigid demeanor somehow. The rush of the red flood grew louder at her back, so Mademerry wasted no time. She reached into her clothes and retrieved the relic Mayfair had wordlessly implored her to steal: The Eye of Ecclesiastes.

It had not been pleasant acquiring it. Mademerry had dug through the body of the nun Lalum, and while she never met Lalum personally, it still proved a gruesome affair. Now, though, it

was worthwhile. She spoke the magic words: "Nothing new under the sun."

Mayfair returned to her form. Mademerry spoke again: "Nothing new under the sun," and Demny returned as well—though she still had only one antler from when the hero destroyed her other one. Mademerry had set them back the minimum amount of time, as it would become more difficult to explain afterward otherwise.

"The eye," Demny said in her harsh and emotionless tone. "So you did defile her body—"

"No time! We have to get away from that red flood—it'll devour our flesh!"

The moment she spoke, the liquid seeped through the nearby statues and swept over some of Mayfair's corpses, which had been split in half by the Staff of Solomon; instantly they became skeletons.

Mayfair began to speak, but Demny moved much quicker and hoisted her off the floor. Demny then turned, as though she intended to barrel away and leave Mademerry behind, perhaps as retribution for the grave robbery Mademerry had committed—compounded on all her other sins Mademerry supposed it would prove fit punishment. As long as Mayfair was safe, the syrup of this liquid wrath might devour her; but Demny loosed a sharp sigh and then gripped Mademerry too, albeit by the collar of her shirt.

Rather than find a way through the statues, Demny smashed through them. Even as stone heads flew from stone bodies, those smiles remained serene and surrounding. Mademerry had little time to look, however. Mayfair, seated on Demny's back, leaned forward and pointed a finger under Mademerry's chin to get her attention.

"The sword. Do you have Demny's sword?"

"Yes—yes, Mayfair!" She took it from the folds of her clothes where she had stashed it. Instantly Demny snatched it up—and to keep her other hand free, she tossed Mademerry onto her back, where she rode right behind Mayfair.

"Good," Mayfair said. "You've done well, Mademerry. Very well." She smiled—a real smile. It only lasted a moment, but that smile swelled Mademerry with life. "We've lost the Staff of Lazarus, though, and the Mustard Seed is useless in here. Our only option is to push forward. We kill Beelzebub and take the Divinity!"

"Yes!" Mademerry wrapped her arms around Mayfair's waist to hold on as Demny smashed through more statues. Mayfair did not react, it was as though she didn't consider the action at all beyond its utilitarian purpose of ensuring stability, but even so it emboldened Mademerry. "Queen Flanz-le-Flore is still behind us, I think, and the hero is a tortoise. If we move fast—"

"There's another obstacle," Demny said.

The obstacle became abundantly clear once Mademerry looked past Demny's head (on the side without an antler). Beelzebub remained where he had always been, but there were others already fighting him. Or perhaps not fighting him. They stood just beyond the range of the cloud of insects, engaged in argument. Their conversation took on an absurd character,

because one of the participants lacked an arm, which did not prevent her from gesticulating wildly and letting blood flick upon the statues.

"Well." Mayfair looked where Mademerry looked, on that person with the missing arm, on the queen, on her mother. "I knew it would come to this. At least she's already weakened. Demny, hold nothing back. We cannot allow senseless sentimentality to make us waver here."

Demny nodded, before bounding over the last group of statues and coming down on the group with her black sword bared.

—

[3:00]

When they asked Sansaime whether she wanted to accompany them on their grand adventure to the tower, she said no. She'd rather play video games.

It was so much easier that way. You dive into a pit, you die, you do it again. On the rare occasions you live you get a shining moon and a number goes up. Stimulation without the burden of emotion. Now she lacked even the displeasure of seeing Avery's killer skulking around from time to time. Out of sight, Mademerry slipped into nonexistence. Negated herself from Sansaime's mind. In such fashion Sansaime reached peace. Even as bombs rocked the world outside this fortress. The priest, Vance or whatever, ran everything now.

Should have known it wouldn't end so easily. As her avatar—Mario—faced off against a monstrous black dragon atop a tall tower, a gasp arose among the people who lived here. Their pointing fingers led to the giant television over the court. It had, somehow, turned on. This fact interested Sansaime enough to let her gaze linger. The television hadn't worked before. If they fixed it, maybe they could watch a movie. She would like to watch another movie. The video game was fun, but all things grew tiresome. A movie she merely need sit and let sweep over her.

The screen showed a room shining with crystal and filled with statues. Before Sansaime could look any closer, two figures fell out and landed on the court below.

Her hands gripping the game console lowered as she watched the fallen figures ignore their bruises and roll to their feet. One was a devil. That alone caused the people seated on the court to scream and run away. The other was—

Tch. That fucking elf again. Temporary.

(On the screen, Mario died to the dragon's breath. Oh No!)

Out of Sansaime's lassitude something sparked. That clumsy oaf. Always gnawing at Sansaime's heels. Always seeking friendship. As if she didn't know what Sansaime was and why she and her could never coexist, as if she didn't know what happened the last time Sansaime was en route to Faerie Land...! Sansaime's teeth clenched a moment, then loosened. No. It didn't matter. All was past. All was released. Everyone she ever cared about died and without them to prop herself against what was she? Nothing.

"Sansaime, get out of here now!" Temporary shouted, before the devil grabbed her wrist and dragged her into a stumbling run.

From the television screen poured a wave of red fluid. It came down upon the scuffed surface of the basketball court and splashed in every direction. Most of the people on the court had already started to flee the moment they saw the devil, but those who were slower became swept up in the deluge—and instantly turned to bones. Their flesh sizzled and dispersed in the translucent fluid. Unmade in an instant.

The liquid swept toward Sansaime and she remained seated and watched it. Good, she thought. Here's an ending for her at last.

"Sansaime!" Temporary's voice called from far away. "Run! You're our queen, Sansaime! You have to live!"

Queen? What a joke. What a fucking joke.

Beside Sansaime stood the little kid who lent her his video game. He gawked at the encroaching flood, frozen to the spot. Looked like he'd die with her.

She leaned back in her chair and expelled a final, pent-up breath as her face turned up to the television screen. Ah...

Something in the screen caused her to sit up with a jolt.

No. How? It couldn't be—not *her*. She must see it wrong. It must be one of the statues, distorted by the red liquid still flowing past. Then it spoke, and erased all doubt:

Sansaime... Please. You're not alone... Remember? You were going to have that child and be a better mother... I was going to help you...

But you left me, Sansaime thought.

Sorry Sansy, said the voice of another figure—another statue. I always was a lying cad when it came to women though, wasn't I? Not all bad though, hey? You've done what I never could. Made it out.

You assholes. You fucking assholes. All of you left me.

I couldn't take you to Faerie Land, said a third voice, buried, hidden within the other two. I'm glad I failed. My sweet little girl... Please. Make your own Faerie Land.

The screen shut off. It showed once more only a screen.

An electric shock ran through Sansaime and she bolted upright, intending to scream some hideous foul language at the shades before they fully vanished, but the moment she moved she saw the fluid rushing toward her and her body kicked into action unconsciously. She seized the child next to her and leapt onto the next rung of the stands moments before the wave crashed. Droplets flew up and landed on her legs and back, they sizzled, she screamed and staggered on, over the rows of chairs as she clambered higher with the kid in tow.

The arena was large, which meant it would take time to fill up, even with so much red liquid pumping through the screen. The routes upward were clogged by the refugees as they tried to climb over each other to reach higher ground. Chaos, disorder everywhere. No sign of that Vance—he was never around when needed.

"What are we going to do?" the kid in her hands asked. His Nintendo hat had fallen off and floated atop the growing pool of liquid, beside the game console Sansaime dropped.

These idiots. Like the fire at the megachurch where Avery died. Fleeing and blocking themselves from escape. Sansaime perched atop the backs of two seats, feet balanced precariously. She stood tall, able to survey the entire arena. No more sign of Temporary and the devil. Had they been consumed?

Their queen, Temporary had said. Oh, what a laughable concept. But as the humans teemed in such disarray...

"Quit shoving! This way, through the rows. Yes, this way! Come on now. To the control room. We'll escape that way. Move!"

Her voice cut crisp and clean through the mayhem. Somehow, the humans saw her standing atop the seats, her body long and tall and still showing no sign of the life she harbored within her, and they turned to follow her command.

—

"Sansaime! Run! You're our queen, Sansaime! You have to live!"

No, Sansaime could die in Hell for all Perfidia cared. *They* needed to live first and foremost.

She dragged Temporary along. No particular direction; they weren't staying here. This whole situation had gone to shit but Perfidia was no longer going to let setbacks get her down. She had her papers back at long last. She'd retrieved the thing that was once hers.

It was through these papers she sifted now.

Though Mayfair had rearranged them in their cases, Perfidia made them and she knew the most efficient ways to sift them. Her fingertips glided over only the edges of each browned page as she ran, revealing only the barest sliver of ink, and from that sliver she instantly knew which page was which. She was looking for one page in particular.

It wasn't the first one she'd looked for. When encountering the problem "Jay Waringcrane is now a tortoise," her first thought for resolution was, obviously, to recover the Eye of Ecclesiastes. Jay forbid her from fishing it out of Lalum's corpse and given his mental state at the time she refused to push him on it but she knew without a shadow of a doubt Mayfair lacked his squeamishness over his dead not-girlfriend. She'd cut the spider in half if she had to.

When Mayfair got turned into a newt or salamander or whatever, though, the eye hadn't dropped out. So where the fuck was it? The deer lacked it too. And while Mayfair had destroyed or lost (probably destroyed) the pages on herself, her deer, even Mallory and the hornet and seemingly every other fucking character who mattered, she hadn't destroyed the page on the eye itself. As she and Temporary ran through the Boardroom of the Princes, she'd sought the eye's page. Finally, she found it.

So who had it? The dragon girl of course. Mademerry. The one Perfidia sure as shit didn't make. Damn!

Scratch that idea then. Mademerry hadn't been transformed by Flanz-le-Flore, which meant she'd definitely have fixed Mayfair and Demny by now. Perfidia had nothing to deal with the deer. She needed another way to turn Jay—and his weapon, which Flanz-le-Flore gave to Wendell—back to normal.

What other ways were there?

There was one. Oh what a turn of fate. That such a seemingly inconsequential decision made so long ago was about to save her now. Save everything now. Save this entire stinking world.

Her fingers flipped through her papers. Flipflipflipflipflip. Difficult maneuver mind you. Running, searching the pages, and dragging Temporary along. So Perfidia didn't realize the bright EXIT sign she scrambled toward pointed to a door that the humans had barricaded with heavy crates. She skidded to a stop and glanced around. They were in a narrow corridor between two high rows of bleacher seats. Essentially, a dead end.

"Uh oh," Temporary said stupidly, like the ditsy moron she was.

Perfidia dropped to her knee and dug through her papers in earnest. The arena's size bought them a little time, the ichor would have a lot to fill up before it reached them, but it poured out fast from the screen.

"Close the portal you dumb fuck!" Perfidia screamed. She couldn't believe she had to scream it at all, that Temporary hadn't already had the thought herself, but of course! It was Temporary!

"R—right!"

Temporary clapped.

The portal shut off, but that only slowed the spread. This was Moloch's ichor after all, it wouldn't go placid so easy. Perfidia bit her lip. Come the fuck on where was the paper. It

couldn't have gotten destroyed too right. Why? This one hadn't been involved in anything related to Mayfair since the monastery. It had to be here. It had to be!

"Uh, ah!" Temporary said. Perfidia didn't waste time looking up to see what she was reacting to.

"Get ready to make another portal," Perfidia said.

"There's no mirrors here, or liquid!"

Except the ichor, Perfidia thought, but Temporary couldn't make a portal out of that. She focused everything on her papers. Without the one she needed it was all—

There!

At the same time her eyes scanned the page to discern where this particular individual was now, she reached into her coat. Ubik left almost nothing useful, but he did leave some crap that would be useless under any other circumstance. Her hand came out of the coat gripping the neck of a wine bottle. Some ancient vintage.

She smashed the bottle onto the floor. The wine shot out, creating a glossy, reflective surface.

"Now!" Perfidia yelled at Temporary. "Make a portal to—" She read the appropriate line on the page and would've sighed with relief if she had time. It was someplace Temporary knew.

"Make a portal to the elfin court!"

—

Mallory whipped the stump of her arm and slashed a spray of blood across Demny's eyes, blinding her for long enough to dip under the arc of her black sword and drive the Sword of Faith into her stomach. The blade burst out the deer's back and fired an extraneous beam of light skyward to glint off the crystal ceiling, but even this level of gratuitousness was not enough. Demny, undeterred, loosing only a shallow grunt of pain, gripped the blade embedded in her body with her free hand and tried to pull it even deeper as she angled the black sword to lop off the queen's head. Even one-armed, though, Mallory only wrenched once and retreated less than an inch out of its arc.

"They've given me a useless strip of metal I see," Mallory said, panting, blood running down her body and her armor, the jagged scar on the edge of her lip smiling. "Come on girl, how about we trade weapons. Then it's fair, no?"

Demny said nothing.

Beelzebub said nothing. He did not move or interfere, though the battle raged just outside his range. He presided; he watched. The buzz of his insects crackled like static.

The statues watched too.

Shannon formed a wall that cut the room in half. Her goal was to keep the flood of red ichor from reaching them. In a chamber of such neat and perfect dimensions, it was possible to prevent even a drop from oozing through an airtight barrier of steel or iron. The problem was that Flanz-le-Flore remained on the other side of the wall, hovering over the flood. She wanted to reach the other side and kept snapping the wall to nothing, to paper sheets that floated into the tide, only for Shannon to blow a new wall to replace it. Then that one was snapped, and the next, and each time Flanz-le-Flore—and Wendell, whom she carried, and the red liquid—inched closer, closer, closer.

And time was ticking. Ticking. Ticking. Where was Jay? Perfidia? Dead? The entire wall to her right had briefly opened up and shown the interior of a basketball stadium, maybe he escaped through there, but it was impossible to know for sure. Shannon had to recalibrate. The primary goal was killing Beelzebub and reaching the Divinity at the top of the tower, if such a thing truly existed like they all kept claiming. In the end, it didn't matter as much whether Mallory, or Shannon, or even Mayfair got it. They fought now, but all of them assuredly wanted this devilry to end—well, maybe not Mallory.

It was hard to think when she had to keep blowing this horn every second though. She couldn't let up for even a moment. So what was the point? She couldn't offer a truce in this state. If any of them would even accept it. Mallory would not. Dammit Mallory. Shannon tried to speak to her in a language she understood and it worked but not fast enough.

And Beelzebub watched.

He simply sat there and watched with his wide compound eyes. His claws twitched against the crystal, scratching it. His wings fluttered. He wanted in. He wanted to join them in this mindless battle, he hated to be excluded. But he was a creature of infinite patience. Wanting and never having.

Demny did everything in her power to prevent Mallory from reaching Mayfair. That left an opening, which Tricia exploited. She shot at Mayfair, already incensed beforehand and now brought to a boiling point, and would have perforated the princess with her stinger if the dragon girl didn't get in her way and take the blow instead. Like Demny, even an impaling didn't stop her, and so Tricia and Mademerry revolved in a slow, almost dance-like motion without either accomplishing anything against the other.

That was it. The situation. A stalemate. Nothing happening. Time ticking. It couldn't continue. If it continued like this much longer they'd all lose. Didn't they see? Shannon wanted to scream at them but couldn't. She had to blow the horn. If only Gonzago was here to blow the horn for her, but even the time it would take to hand it off would let Flanz-le-Flore through and—

Gonzago!

Oh my God Gonzago!

He was making his move!

A sharp and sudden thought penetrated Shannon that this could not possibly end well but in the hoarse, throat-rending retch of her tenth consecutive horn-blow that thought turned to cinders. Gonzago was running straight at Mayfair, sword drawn. Every single fragment of his effete, dandyish existence peeled away. In his eye was a look of sheer composure and determination, the gaze of a man of action, a vision unburdened by doubt. Demny could not break away from Mallory. Mademerry could not break away from Tricia. But there was nobody else, nobody left to protect Mayfair. Mayfair wasn't even looking at him, of course not, he was *Gonzago*, he was nobody, a tagalong, a glorified butler. Only as his pounding footsteps pushed him into her periphery did she turn and grow aghast at his manifestation as an entity to be noticed and reckoned with.

Shannon kept expecting it to fall apart. For Gonzago to trip, slip, something stupid and comedic. Nothing. His feet moved with perfect sureness. Mayfair staggered into a statue and pawed at her clothes, pulling a piece of brown parchment from her pocket, but it would take too long to even unfold.

"Mademerry!" she shrieked.

Mademerry twisted her head around from her grappled lock with Tricia. She couldn't run to Mayfair's aid. Tricia ensured it. Instead she retrieved a small shining sphere—the one that had once been embedded in Vivienne's eye. Tricia instantly struck Mademerry's wrist; the eye flew out of her grasp, ping-ponged between the statues, and disappeared somewhere.

The paper fell out of Mayfair's fumbling hands and her fingers went to her throat as she stared in white horror.

"Mother!" she shrieked.

Instantly a beam of light shot across the room. Gonzago stopped mid-step. He peered down at his blade, befuddled. The sword was cut clean in half; he held only a handle and a small sliver of steel. The statues past him fell apart. Whatever spirit had possessed him in that brief moment departed, and in a daze he sat down upon the floor to ponder his broken weapon.

Flanked by the static of Beelzebub's insects, Mallory stood. A wreck of a woman, more scar and blood than flesh, her sword outstretched trembling before her and her eyes rooted to it as though she herself did not understand what had just happened. Beside her, Demny tilted in the backswing of a deflected blow, suspended in that stagnant instant as the insects swarmed, and swarmed, and swarmed into a black mass of ceaseless motion beside her. For a moment all stood still.

Then Demny swung the thorny mass of antlers on the side of her head directly into Mallory.

The jagged spearpoint tips impaled Mallory in a dozen different places, finding in their mass alone the myriad tiny points not covered by the Armor of God: hip, arm, armpit, collar, neck, throat, chin.

Demny jerked her head. The antler mass snapped off near the skull. Mallory, entangled with it, hurtled through a statue and then another—both turned to rubble. Her body rolled and skidded to a stop.

Nobody moved. Nobody said anything.

Get up, Shannon thought. Mallory. Come on. Get up.

Tricia howled something unintelligible. She tried to break away from Mademerry, but now Mademerry became set on keeping *her* from moving.

Get up Mallory. Mallory. Get up.

Mayfair slid down the side of the statue she leaned against. She clutched her face and peered through spread fingers.

Get up. Get up, get up, get up.

Demny watched.

Heal her you shitty armor. Shitty fucking Armor of God.

Beelzebub watched.

Mallory did not get up.

—

[2:00]

Ha! Yes! This was the life! Look at these idiots. Ah yes, languishing in abject misery at the dissolution of their union with the whole. Tiny twigs without even the roots to stand upright. Look at them! One elf traced curlicues in the sand. Another swayed her head and drizzled slobber onto her knees. Not a sense among them. How did it feel, losers? How did it feel to lose everything?

For the past, say, thirty-six hours Olliebollen Pandelirium had sat on the clear glass throne that once belonged to the Effervescent Elf-Queen and harassed the few remnants of her court with such invective. By now though Olliebollen's throat was hoarse and it was no longer any fun. The elves never even looked up or demonstrated a modicum of consciousness. Boring!

The throne was about ten sizes too big for Olliebollen, but it sat anyway, kicking its feet over the edge. In the silent moments it became all too clear Olliebollen was still a twig itself.

After leaving the hero at Whitecrosse, and giving Lalum the stupid spider the slip after she tried to re-recapture Olliebollen for no-doubt nefarious purposes, there'd been a lot of wandering, a lot of going places, and lot of doing nothing. Olliebollen first went to the court of Pandelirium, which was, of course, still totally empty.

Still totally dead.

Still totally lonesome.

The idea was Olliebollen now inherited the title of Queen—or King—or Something—and thus it was his/her responsibility to give birth to new faeries and repopulate the court, but...

So eventually Olliebollen had decided to go somewhere with someone to talk to, and other than human society there seemed to only be one place left for that. Here. To yell at those stupid terrible elves. Which happened. A lot. And now Olliebollen hunched in the throne, propped its head in its hand, and kicked its feet.

The elfin court was a weirder place than Olliebollen expected, a hybrid of architecture natural and not. Ornate crafted tiles covered the floor, and a fountain stood in the center with a carved statue of the Elf-Queen pouring water from the eyes on her spread hands, but there weren't any walls. Just trees. Even there the collision of styles didn't cease, though. The trees were so well-kept. The leaves trimmed in uniform fashion, not a branch—or twig—out of place.

When you looked up between the break in the canopy, you could see that ominous black tower even from here. That hadn't been intended in the original design, no way.

Bah! What a bore. Time to go back to Pandelirium. Try again with the whole repopulating thing. Plant that twig and sprout a mighty tree. Make something whole and vibrant and alive. This place with its sad, sad elves was just another reminder.

As this thought graced Olliebollen's mind—not for the first time—the dire lifelessness of the well-kept courtyard broke. A something burst out of the fountain. Two somethings! Olliebollen bounced off the seat and a spray of startled dust cascaded around it.

The somethings flung themselves over the lip of the fountain and sprawled onto the tile sopping wet from the tears that spurted from the Elf-Queen's image. The first something barked at the second: "Cut off the portal now!"

The second something quickly clapped. The strangeness that exuded from the fountain in the brief moment after they appeared dispersed. Other than these two foreign elements, everything became once more placid.

Olliebollen's shock settled too and it squinted to scrutinize these new somethings. With a slump of the shoulders the realization dawned: They weren't new at all.

That dumb elf from the forest with the stupid name. And the Master.

The Master took one glance around the court and settled her eyes on the throne. She snapped at Temporary to stay by the fountain and sprinted (full speed!) at Olliebollen.

"So you decided to come at last, huh?" Olliebollen said.

"No time to argue." As the Master skidded to a halt she pulled something out of her big coat. The thing she pulled out was a tortoise. "Sprinkle your faerie dust on this thing now!"

"Nah."

"Do it!"

Olliebollen stared at the tortoise. It didn't even wiggle its legs as the Master held it; it looked like it just wanted it all over with. Of course Olliebollen knew from just one whiff who that tortoise was.

"I told the hero I'm done. I got what I wanted. Why would I ever—"

"I'll make it possible for you to have kids," the Master said.

Olliebollen shivered. It was like she read Olliebollen's mind. Well, duh. Of course she had. She was the Master.

"I'm the only one who can do it. Fix Jay and finish the adventure. No negotiating. We've got less than two minutes left. Do it now or get nothing."

That was all she said. With authority, she turned on her heel and started running back toward the fountain without waiting for Olliebollen's answer. She yelled at Temporary to get ready and Temporary leaned over the fountain obligingly.

Olliebollen's hands clenched at its sides. Oh. That Master. That tricky, tricky Master. So that was why Olliebollen was—*this* way. Incapable. Inert. A final trick to exert control even after the elves were defeated.

Well! That's the Master for you.

Truth be told, Olliebollen had been bored anyway.

Before the Master cleared half the distance back to the fountain, Olliebollen zipped forward. A trailing arc of rainbow powder descended upon her, the tortoise, even the stupid Temporary elf who'd accrued no small amount of dents and bruises probably just from falling over all the time.

The Master grunted as the tiny tortoise she held turned into a full-fledged human. She and the hero tumbled against the ground but the hero was already rising, already staring straight ahead at the fountain with a look in his eye that made Olliebollen shudder. He didn't say a word to her. Not even "Hi, how do ya do!"

"Temporary! Do it!" The Master reached into her coat again. "Hero—it's all you now! Take this!"

She pulled out the human prince's shield relic and hurled it with all her might at the hero. The hero, only barely slowing his run, turned and caught it at the same time Temporary placed her palms on the surface of the fountain.

The water became a portal. The hero vaulted the edge and flew through and Olliebollen flew after him into a totally different world.

They dropped out of the ceiling. Jay landed on a crystal chandelier that swayed under him and Olliebollen plopped onto his shoulder. No time to take in the scenery. A bunch of stuff was happening. There was a wall that kept disappearing and reappearing, and Flanz-le-Flore was behind it. With that Wendell guy.

"Shannon," Jay shouted below. "Drop the wall NOW."

The wall dropped. Jay swung forward on the chandelier, wielding Makepeace's shield, and launched himself at Flanz-le-Flore.

—

Condemnation. What a worthless one to deliver a blow this dreadful. Nobody at all. An urchin elevated by means of magic. Bah. But Mallory could not move her body.

The deer reacted before any of the others, breaking the stillness of the moment. She plodded toward Mallory and raised her sword to make a clean end of it. Mallory shot her a glare—best she could muster.

"What are you doing!" Mayfair said.

"Finishing her off," said Condemnation. In those eyes were everything. Such utter coldness. Lurking behind them was nothing at all, but also everything altogether, like a thousand eyes watching. A thousand corpses, a thousand women, maybe even the eyes of Makepeace and Mayfair. Who knew in this strange place. Let it end.

"We're running out of time." Mayfair's voice came out slightly stammered. Lacking all poise. "I order you—turn your sword on Beelzebub instead. We must make it through him in less than two minutes!"

Condemnation said nothing. Those eyes struck Mallory with all of her sins, and she had many, almost as many as had been inflicted upon her. A peace in it. Mallory was sad to see the eyes turn away as the deer threw herself against Beelzebub. Let's see if you can do more than I did, Mallory thought. Even with that sword of yours. Not a thing in your eyes will hurt one such as that.

In the distance, Shannon kept blowing her trumpet. What coldness to continue such an asinine task despite her lover falling. Or perhaps Mallory thought too highly of herself. Or perhaps she thought too lowly of Shannon. Tricia said something—"The eye, where'd the eye go!"—and buzzed between the statues searching the ground. So the eyes that replaced Condemnation's above Mallory's motionless face were those of her daughter, Mayfair.

"Stay away from her," said Mayfair's dragoness attendant. "She may still be dangerous."

Mayfair heeded not the warning. She drew nearer. Her face pale. "Mother—you saved me. Why—"

Why indeed.

(In the edge of Mallory's vision, the deer thrust her black blade at the center of Beelzebub. The strike parted the swarm around him, but the tip bounced off his body. A dry chuckle escaped the devil. "The prototype?" he said. "Garbage! Unrefined inferiority to itzz final form! I feed on zzuch a zzhadow. I am itzz patron zzaint!")

Why indeed.

How much had Mallory hated you, Mayfair. Had you been her shadow? Or was Mallory merely yours. Your dreams unmolested by the rigors of reality. Your fantasy allowed to grow within its tiny plot of land. Mallory had dreams at your age too. She had not been allowed to dream them.

(Beelzebub watched.)

Ah... perhaps that was the root of it. You possessed the thing Mallory once had but lost. In the vacuum of her heart Mallory held nothing save the light emptiness of rage.

"Where is it!" Tricia said. "Where did it go?!"

"Help her find the eye," Mayfair said to Mademerry. Mademerry took one more look at Mallory, decided she was no longer a threat after all, and disappeared.

All of it was leaking out now. Leaking out these thousand holes. Mallory knew she could never speak the words she ought to Mayfair. Had neither the strength nor the capacity. Only because she could not speak them could she realize them. Besides, she had something more important left to say and needed to be able to say it.

Her hand reached up and gripped Mayfair's. There. That was it.

Mayfair's hand softened. Perhaps the thought transmitted. Perhaps it was not too late for Mayfair. Why did it ever come to this? Seeking her own catharsis. Seeking it at the expense of all others. Inflicting on her children the horror of her own life...

The mirrored crystal ceiling above vanished and the sky appeared overhead, ringed by trees. A young man carrying the Shield of Faith leaped down and landed upon a chandelier. For a moment she thought—it must be Makepeace. The spirits of the dead swirled strongly in this place; had she not seen them play upon the stage for Shannon and her brother? But it wasn't him.

"Shannon. Drop the wall NOW."

The incessant blare of the Trumpet of Jericho pealed once more and ceased. Makepeace—no, it wasn't him—well he swung from the chandelier and out of sight.

Shannon ran over and knelt beside her. Now it was time for Mallory to say what she needed.

"Take—take my armor."

"The armor's the only thing keeping you alive," Shannon said—at the same time Mayfair said something similar, so that their voices overlapped and they glanced oddly at one another.

"No—time," Mallory gasped. God could she use a little water. "Take it—take it! You must—you must put it on. Shannon! It must be you!"

Shannon's face might rend a heart. Poor girl. So bitter and formal, but even she could be broken down, they all could, anyone could. Her nature returned to her swiftly. She stiffened. She glanced another way—perhaps at Tricia, who was thankfully preoccupied on her fool's errand—then nodded at Mallory. Yes. Good. That was why it must be you, Shannon. That was why you needed to wear the armor.

"I don't understand," Mayfair said, "Demny will break through Beelzebub soon enough. Why are we removing the armor? Shannon! Shannon, stop!"

Shannon ignored her, bent over, and fumbled with the breastplate.

Mallory only regretted wasting so much of their time already, hurling herself with no point—even she knew it to have no point—against that ever-watching Beelzebub. Now that everything was dripping, dripping, dripping out of her, all the anger and resentment, she wondered why she ever did any of the things she did. A husk held together by a suit of armor. Ah. Did that ever describe her.

Goodbye, Mayfair.

The armor came off. Mallory shut her eyes and flowed away.

—

The steel wall disappeared, then reappeared. Again. And again. Snap. Trumpet. Snap. Trumpet.

Flanz-le-Flore held Wendell by wrapping her arms around him from behind. Despite her small stature and minimal musculature she managed to keep him afloat above the slowly rising tide of ichor. The corpse of Moloch, now lost within the sloshing red sea, continued to expel more and more of it. When the room's crystal wall had disappeared, much drained into the basketball court on the other side, but now that the wall was back, the room was filling up. The fluid was three-quarters of the way to the ceiling. It drew nearer and nearer to their dangling feet.

Carrying Wendell was within her capabilities, but she could not move with agility while doing so. That was how Shannon Waringcrane managed to keep her penned by this frustrating reappearing wall. The heroine was shrewd. She formed her walls from the ceiling down, ensuring Flanz-le-Flore's view was blocked as soon as possible and preventing her from transforming that irksome and wretchedly unmusical trumpet into something far more

unpleasant to blow upon. That strategy possessed consequences for Lady Waringcrane, however. She was not simply trying to keep out Flanz-le-Flore. Moloch's ichor threatened to encroach upon her too, and by prioritizing her walls in such a manner, the ichor flowed further each time before the wall reached the floor to temporarily block it. That improved Flanz-le-Flore's forward progress. A shame the ichor were not less viscous. If it flowed more like water—or blood—Shannon's gambit would have fallen apart instantly. As it stood, however, Flanz-le-Flore needed only patience. She would reach the other side of the room faster than the liquid reached the ceiling.

The ichor. What was it? No ordinary substance. No—perhaps not a substance at all. The physical manifestation of an emotion? Nonetheless, not something Flanz-le-Flore "knew." Given what it did to the poor creatures who followed her when it touched them, she rather disliked the idea of knowing it, but it may prove necessary to sacrifice a finger (obviously not her thumb) to learn.

She would do whatever was necessary. Her goal came so close within her reach, such a simple collection of fools barring her path. Wendell's black gun capable of laying waste to them all, even the false insect Beelzebub—for neither he nor the creatures swarming about him were such as one would find buzzing in contented plentitude within her forest.

Falsehoods and mockeries. Life in lifelessness. Like that wretched gun Wendell carried. A tool of negation.

This dead world required a queen of life. How could they not see? Why had they always rejected her? Who better to revitalize the broken and the empty than the Faerie of Transmogrification? All ills alchemized to something else. A release from the suffering that bound them—a catharsis! Fine and frolicsome players to gambol about her stage while she and her hard-earned king consort watched upon a modest throne. Perpetual pleasantness no matter the season. Endless variety to titillate every jaded palate! The theater in the room below had played such nasty little stories, but even those had been enough to quiet them all for a time. All these bitter enemies who now killed one another in pointless strife, they had felt peace watching, had they not?

Flanz-le-Flore's court was such a place, and she would welcome all to fill her rows of seats. Her entertainment would be delightful and full of life, and they would be full of life to watch it, and peace would reign, and strife would come to an end. How could they not see? She promised them exactly what they always wanted and had the power to make it so from the most mighty to the lowliest—How could they not see? Even Wendell Noh, her hero, locked her out of his thoughts. Even him!

Even I had children who left the paradise of my court... said a voice below.

Her eyes flitted. Reflected in the surface of the liquid, reflected back on the ceiling, a face she recognized, a face she hated: the Effervescent Elf-Queen... Before Flanz-le-Flore opened her mouth to reply, she rippled away into nothing, and had never been there. For she was dead. The dead are not alive. They cannot be anything. Inert. Empty! These phantoms!

The wall ahead flickered. In the brief instant it was gone and she could see the room ahead, a face glittered in the shards of a crystal chandelier. A face she thought she recognized. An old

man, wearing the armor the human queen now wore, and why not? She was of his lineage. He said nothing. His face was gone the moment it appeared, exactly as he had left her life the moment he appeared, unable to hear her begging for him to stay with her in perpetuity, to sit upon her throne together and watch the frolicking of the beasts upon her stage. Yet he went to the Elf-Queen. Why? What did she offer that Flanz-le-Flore could not? Was it simply that the Elf-Queen was willing to let him go?

She waited for the wall to drop again, so that she might see John Coke's face once more upon the chandelier. Her fingers snapped and the iron became a thin sheet of wax that crumpled. But John Coke was not there.

Instead, upon the chandelier, stood the new hero: Jay Waringcrane.

"Shannon. Drop the wall NOW."

The wall dropped. It did not reappear. Jay Waringcrane launched himself through the empty air at them, wielding nothing but the Shield of Faith.

—

[1:00]

In this room, Da-rae spoke. Dalt spoke. Wendell ignored them. Tuned their voices out. They were dead. They no longer existed. If they spoke to him it was an extension of the fantasy that needed to be eradicated. Wendell could no longer conceive of the differences between one set of machinery and the other. The gears interlocked and could not be extricated. But firing the gun cut through all of it. He learned that when he killed that big red devil. Firing the gun released everything he felt.

Shannon's brother swung off the chandelier toward them. Finally the wall was down and he had something to shoot. The brother caused everything. It all started because of him.

Apologies, Shannon, but this must be done.

Wendell aimed the black shotgun. Not at the brother himself. No. He carried that unreal shield, the one that absorbed bullets like nothing.

A different strategy would be required.

The brother—what was his name. Jay. The brother Jay—was at the far end of the long room. Between him and Wendell was one other chandelier. Both chandeliers remained suspended from the ceiling even though the ceiling now no longer appeared to exist, but that was simply another unreality, a falsehood, Wendell could not become mired in such asinine horseshit.

Jay's path was clear. He intended to jump onto the second chandelier and propel himself from there to attack Wendell.

So, immediately after Jay launched himself from the first chandelier, Wendell shot the chain that suspended the second.

What a simple, elegant, logical solution. Jay Waringcrane could not fly through the air. He needed something to land on, and the chandelier no longer served as solid ground. Wendell's head cleared watching the perfectly ordinary effects of gravity take hold. All confusion dissolved at once. The chandelier was composed of a thousand tiny crystal parts arranged in rings and tiers. Mathematical in their composition, and as they fell the dangling shards twisted in perfectly circular patterns as equivalent forces enacted themselves upon each and every component. Jay Waringcrane's legs churned through empty air as he came down upon something that was no longer where it had been. The same force of gravity that worked upon the chandelier worked upon him.

Oh, God. What had happened. How had he gotten so confused? The drapery they placed over this world could be whatever they wanted, but the underlying structure remained the same.

A sigh of release seeped out of him and the mad wrath that reddened the insides of his eyeballs dispersed.

Then the chandelier started to rise again.

No. No it didn't. That didn't happen. That did not. It was wrong. It was not correct. It could not happen. That was not real. It wasn't. No.

Flanz-le-Flore's fingers were snapping. But nothing was changing. She screamed: "No. It's you?! It's *you*?!"

A tiny thing that could not exist, a little faerie Tinkerbell flitted erratically around Jay Waringcrane. It spewed puffs of glitter and powder. Within that cloud the chandelier rose to the exact spot where it had been, as though time reversed, and the chain that Wendell's black gun had blasted to pieces reformed into a single unbroken series of links as though nothing ever happened. As though Wendell had not exerted the will of reality upon this place.

The voices of the dead swarmed in his ears.

"Disappear," he said, and then he fired his gun like a maniac.

Jay bounced off the second chandelier moments before it blasted to pieces from two, three, four consecutive shotgun blasts. The crystal shards swirled in every direction but only until the growing cloud of pixie dust worked its fake not real magic and sent them all back to the center.

The shield, sporting the white cross of Christ, slammed into Wendell with momentum that had no right to exist. His gun went flying out of his hands. The shined and polished metal of the shield crashed against his chest and against Flanz-le-Flore's hands, which were wrapped

around him. Meat sizzled and Flanz-le-Flore screamed. Her grip loosened; Wendell plunged down. Down, down, down.

Into the ichor of wrath.

It enveloped him. Warm. Smooth and soft. An enfolding embrace. Everything became red.

Ah.

The voices of the dead kept speaking, whispering, but he could not hear. All he heard was one voice, the voice of the ichor itself: **DIE, DIE, DIE, DIE, DIE.**

So he was dying. As he watched his hands dissolve painlessly, as he watched his glasses float away from his face, he understood.

A single snap rang out. Everything red became something else: clear, white, like milk. What had once been wrath was now transformed. To what?

The voice of the ichor quieted. It didn't disappear. But it quieted. Instead of a droning, thunderous boom it said simply: *Ah. So this is peace.*

Peace. The voices of the dead, the voice of Da-rae and the voice of Dalt and the voice of all of them, they finally became audible in this quiet peace. And he understood at last: Wendell Noh was no longer part of the order of things. He was the fantasy now.

—

Shannon Waringcrane put on the armor. Mallory lay dead at her feet. Mayfair knelt by her mother and shed tears. Shannon understood her pain, but that was all.

In this armor she felt power. Nothing clung to her except the resolve to finish it.

A voice screamed from above. Perfidia: "Thirty seconds!"

Jay's body appeared over the edge of the last wall Shannon erected to keep the ichor out. From the angle, she thought he was somehow standing on the ichor itself. Only then did she notice the ichor, which had oozed over the top of the wall, was no longer red. Instead it was a milk-white color, and it no longer flowed—it was solid. Jay actually *was* standing on top of it. He turned and faced her.

In his hand he held his baseball bat—the black one, the one with the power of death.

He had the weapon. She had the armor. She'd put on the armor partly because Mallory asked, but also because time was running out. Thirty seconds—it wouldn't be possible for Jay to climb down, suit up, take out Beelzebub, and continue to the Divinity in time.

Under the brim of his hat Jay's hard eyes stared down at her. He realized exactly what she knew already.

"Throw me the bat," she yelled.

It was the only way. They had no time. She wore the armor. Only she could fight through Beelzebub's insect swarm. She needed the tool to kill him.

About seven minutes ago—an eternity ago—Jay had refused the option of giving Mallory his bat. He didn't want her reaching the Divinity and warping the world in her crazed image. Shannon, despite her intimacy with Mallory, perfectly understood his hesitation. She understood better than he did; she'd seen Mallory up close. A world of endless war, endless violence, endless death—that was what Mallory would make.

It was not what Shannon would make. Jay knew that. Despite everything, despite their constant arguing, despite a mutual detestation for one another and what they stood for, he knew that.

For only a second did his eyes scan the room in front of him. Then he decided. He threw Shannon the baseball bat.

Shannon ran track and field in high school, but she was not particularly coordinated. Under normal circumstances, she would've been reluctant to try and catch something so dangerous whirling toward her. With the armor, though, everything changed. The bat seemed to float in slow motion. She reached out her hand and effortlessly caught it by the handle.

She turned to face Beelzebub.

Beelzebub turned to face her.

The entire time he was watching. Even as Demny barraged him with an onslaught of attacks, which fell ineffectually against his body. Silent, with the omnidirectional sheen of his compound eyes. The weight of that gaze landed upon her, upon the corpse of Queen Mallory, upon them all living or dead.

Shannon took a single step and it carried her instantly ten feet toward the curved hulking husk of an insect. His flies buzzed, forming a thicker shield in front of him, targeting Shannon specifically even though Demny continued to clink the sword this way and that. Shannon plunged into the mass. Instantly a million tiny bites opened up across her body, gnawing at her, devouring the flesh from her bones at the same time the armor regenerated it. The pain remained, enough to make her stagger, but her foot hit the ground and she regained her posture.

Everything around her was black and flies and buzzing and pestilent. Like the static on a television screen late at night when the movie in the VHS machine ended and the credits played and nothing at all was left but Mom and Dad were both asleep and you were too young to know how to turn the machine off yourself. Back when you still had a VHS machine, before the onward march of technological process rendered everything of a certain age obsolete, and in its obsolescence it was allowed to decompose slowly watching its

shinier, newer replacement work magic on an entirely different scale. A machine beyond functioning, a machine capable of generating only random noise, all its orderly little parts slotting together exactly as intended and nothing, not a single thing to show for it.

Mother. Mallory. Shannon swept Jay's bat and cut through the noise. Flies dropped dead in waves as she charged forward blind, her eyes shut lest they be devoured. She no longer needed them. No longer needed their approval, their care, their comfort.

Something, some sense imparted to her by the power of the armor, told her to jump. She jumped. Beelzebub's scythe claws reaped the empty air where she had stood instants earlier. They moved so fast when he used them against Mallory, but now they were slow, so slow she intuited their exact position in space and landed upon one mid-swipe to launch herself off and up. Toward those compound eyes.

Mother.

Mallory!

Here's something to impress you!

She burst out the congealed mass of insects and brought her bat down on Beelzebub's head.

His head exploded. His eyes remained, a perfect pair of speckled spheres. The incessant buzzing, buzzing so incessant it had droned in the background of her mind since she stepped into this room, dropped dead in an instant. The eyes hovered before her; they twinkled. They spoke:

Nonsense. It has already been twelve minutes. It is too late. It is all futile. It cannot be only seven minutes. Twelve! The time is up! I fulfilled my task. Why won't he tell me I did it? How is it still within seven minutes? Why? Why won't... why won't he... where... O—Lucifer...!

The eyes imploded into specks that sparkled and went dull. Shannon dropped to the ground.

It was—so easy. A single hit. Perfidia somewhere screamed: "Fifteen seconds!" Nothing but a single staircase lay ahead. At its apex light shined—Divinity.

Even a half-formed glimpse of that light proved to Shannon instantly Jay and Perfidia hadn't lied. That was power beyond comprehension. With it anything could be done in this world. Anything. The machine set aright again. The working order restored. Efficiency, production, perfection, all on a scale never possible before. Advancement and prosperity, purpose and meaning and—and—and love. Yes, even love might have a place.

The deer, Demny, came at her from the side with the sword.

Only the enhanced reflexes of the armor roused her from her reverie in time to parry the blow. She skidded back and Demny pressed upon her, wielding the sword like a maniac, matching Shannon's speed, and though she clearly lacked professional training Shannon lacked it too and she was far more unaccustomed to her weapon. It took everything to keep the tip of the blade from nicking her, and not even the armor would protect her from a nick

from *that* blade. Her skin still stung from the bites, and though she healed quickly, with only fifteen seconds left—was the deer insane? Was she trying to annihilate the world?

"Princess," the deer said calmly. "The way is clear. Run."

Mayfair, still kneeling beside her mother, blinked. Her motions appeared comically sluggish in Shannon's view. Understanding crept nonetheless. She rose. She ran for the stairs.

No. Not her. That power couldn't be given to her!

Demny beat Shannon back, ensuring Mayfair's safe passage. Shannon glanced around for someone, anyone to stop Mayfair. Anyone could do it, she was a teenage girl. Gonzago remained seated in stunned confusion or perhaps despair. Tricia was still among the statues with Mademerry. They both remained looking for the eye—they hadn't even realized Mallory died. Perfidia and Temporary peered down from above, but they'd break their legs if they tried to jump from that height. If Shannon still held the trumpet a wall might help, but she dropped it before she charged at Beelzebub.

Mayfair was already halfway up the stairs. Even if Shannon shouted Gonzago or Tricia back into action—and in her current form she knew she could—they'd take too long. Perfidia was screaming the seconds now, counting them down: "Ten, nine, eight—"

Something sprinted past. Back straight. Arms and legs bent. Pounding footsteps across the crystal. Something flew off its head and swirled in the air. A hat. A hat with the Cleveland Browns logo.

Jay Waringcrane ran for the Divinity.

—

When Jay destroyed Flanz-le-Flore's arms with his shield he'd needed someplace to land. That someplace was Flanz-le-Flore herself. As Wendell dropped into the ichor, Jay slammed against her and gripped for dear life. The shield fell out of his hands and they spiraled at a strange angle, twirling into the liquid.

Flanz-le-Flore screeched as the liquid touched her. She went in from the right side, and instantly her upper arm and shoulder dissolved. The side of her face touched to the surface and sizzled as Jay fought to stay atop her and keep from being submerged himself. The liquid seeped against his jeans and boots. He glanced around for somewhere to go. Olliebollen flitted uselessly overhead and gave him a shrug as if to say, "All you now buddy."

Then Flanz-le-Flore lifted the half-disintegrated remains of her hand. Immediately before the tendons ate away into nothing, pressed her thumb and forefinger together and snapped.

Jay thought he would turn into a turtle again. Instead, the red liquid became white. It ceased seeping and flowing like a living thing; it was solid, hard, inert. Jay pushed off Flanz-le-

Flore's body and onto his feet.

Flanz-le-Flore was a wreck. He shivered, remembering when he hit her with his bat at her court, how her face melted in front of him. Then he shook his head. It didn't matter. What mattered was ending this.

"Why," Flanz-le-Flore groaned. "Why..."

Olliebollen floated over her, watching without a word.

Jay went to the edge of the white stuff, where Shannon's wall blocked it. Shannon stood below, wearing Mallory's armor.

"Throw me the bat," she yelled.

And let her seize the Divinity? Jay sized up the situation. Every moving part still functional. No. He saw the angle. He saw exactly how everything would go.

Jay threw Shannon the bat.

Then he jumped down the side of the wall.

Shannon thought she knew everything. She'd formed the wall at a slight slant. Like a dam. She lacked even the least comprehension of the engineering necessary for a modern dam, but she had a layman comprehension that dams were slanted—to better disperse pressure or something like that—and so made her wall slanted.

He slid down the slope. The slick white substance Flanz-le-Flore generated out of the ichor reduced his friction. He built momentum, the mirrored crystal floor and all the statues of Satan staring up at him grew close in an instant. His legs hit the floor hard, buckled a moment, but he straightened and stabilized against the nearest statue.

"Fifteen seconds!" Perfidia screamed.

Beelzebub was already dead. And, exactly as Jay expected, Demny or Condemnation was fighting Shannon. Clearing the way for Mayfair, who was up and running for the stairs.

Jay bent forward and sprinted.

The way was choked with statues of Satan but somehow none seemed to be in his path, a direct route opened ahead, his speed built, his body shifted into a flawless athletic form he never before knew. "Ten, nine, eight," Perfidia said. His hat flew off as he dashed past Shannon and Demny. The latter turned as though she planned to stop Jay but this time Shannon pressed forward and attacked and Demny had to respond or die and Jay bounded onto the first steps.

"Seven, six, five."

Mayfair was near the top. There was no new room at the top, only a bright orb of light. Jay took the stairs three, four at a time. Mayfair reached out for the light, her hand incapable of

casting even a shadow upon it, and Jay reached too and wrenched her back by the shoulder. She fell away and he propelled past. Something whizzed out and struck his head, it bounced away, it was something the size of a plum pit but yellow, Mayfair had pulled it out of somewhere and thrown it in desperation, it did not matter.

"Four, three, two!"

Jay climbed. Here it was. Here it was. Divinity! His hands groped. They too were lost in this divine light.

"One!"

Jay seized Divinity. Everything changed in an instant.

Infinite Layers Boundless

Jay Waringcrane left the world.

Or rather the world left him. He did not experience the sensation of movement. Instead, everything else fell away. Pandaemonium, Cleveland, Ohio, the United States, North America, Earth. The solar system, the Milky Way, the universe, greater agglomerations of diamond-glittering stars he could not name, not because the knowledge eluded him but because they possessed no names known to man. Their universe a speck inside a larger universe a speck inside a larger universe: and so forth, and so on. Unto infinity.

At the end of it, if it could be said to have an end (and although he held a sinking suspicion that despite the layers he exceeded some subsequent layer remained), he regarded everything left behind as a small white sphere that could fit within the palm of his hand. A shivering thing, easily crushed.

It wasn't correct to say he "regarded" it. His head had grappled for a word that wasn't "looked" because he understood instinctually that this realm existed beyond meager physical sense, but "regarded" essentially meant the same but fancier, so it wasn't right either. All knowledge came not by observing without but by searching within. As though the orb of universes where remained the microscopic speck "Earth" made up his own stomach, and beat with the pulse of his own blood. If he could be said to have blood. No—he doubted that. His blood was something else. His body too. Knowledge remained, though.

He was significantly more than what he had been before he touched Divinity, but the core part of himself known as "Jay Waringcrane" persisted in some form, so he struggled to make immediate sense of all this abstraction. In that struggle he "looked down" at "his hands," a simple and instinctual reaction to a perceived change in one's body, and was surprised to see the same hands as always. His body too, wearing the same corduroy jacket. Jeans, boots. It wasn't that all these things really existed, but he was able to *understand* them as existing and thus "perceive" them.

He "saw" things because that was how he was used to processing information. Possessed of Divinity, it was a trivial matter to make himself believe he was "seeing" "himself" despite the innate truth of this outer-bounded layer of reality.

In a similar way, the "place" around him developed a visual dimension. Under and above floated puffy white clouds tinged with golden light, divided by stretches of pleasant blue sky. Essentially, what Jay Waringcrane would've said "Heaven" looked like if asked.

Strewn upon the clouds were the bodies of dead angels, who Jay also made to display stereotypically: beautiful androgynous youths garbed in togas with round halos over their heads. Describing them with that appearance was about as accurate as describing them as "dead." In their true forms, as beings—like him—formed of pure knowledge, it might be more accurate to describe them as "extinguished." Though in his perception they exhibited wounds on their bodies as though stabbed or slashed, in truth they had been overcome by a

greater or stronger knowledge. It might actually make more sense to visually depict the scene as a gigantic debate hall, where people argued a point until the winner triumphed and the loser was eliminated, but that didn't convey the level of annihilation. The aftermath of a bloody battle was more "right," if less "correct."

This inexact conceptualization, this attempt to reconcile reality with his remembered past as a flesh-and-blood human being, "hurt." Sharply. Perfidia mentioned Divinity would swiftly annihilate a mortal being. He sensed that was happening.

Hadn't he seized Divinity at the exact moment his contract expired, so that it would transfer to Perfidia? He recalled not intending to follow through on that plan, but he'd never had a chance to kill Perfidia like Mammon asked, so shouldn't he be returning to normal now?

"No time has passed," Lucifer said. It should go without saying he did not really speak, but the more Jay worried over these inconsistencies the more pain he felt, so he committed to maintaining a schema for comprehending based on a much lower level of reality.

Lucifer stood among the pile of angel corpses. Only a single angel remained standing beside him, who Jay understood to be Uriel. Their weapons hovered at each other's breasts, their bodies frozen as though a camera had taken a photograph at the exact moment they swung. Uriel had so far suffered the worse of the two, and his/her/their stroke would not outpace Lucifer's at this pivotal moment.

"Time, of course, does not exist here," Lucifer said. "We are beyond it."

Jay wanted to ask the obvious question: How does anything move forward, but a pang speared through his head and he thought it best not to think about it.

Lucifer seemed to anticipate the question anyway. "The moment you enact your will on a plane where time matters, time will proceed for you. Or rather, it'll proceed for your physical body."

So. The instant he used his Divinity to change something on Earth, time would proceed. The fraction of a second before his contract ended would pass, Perfidia would acquire the Divinity, and Jay would return to normal.

"Correct," Lucifer said, as though he could read Jay's mind. Which he could because none of them were speaking anyway, they were balls of pure knowledge, and Jay's nonexistent mind throbbed for a moment that wasn't really a moment because time didn't exist.

"Kill the scion," Uriel muttered through clenched teeth.

"What," said Jay.

"Mortal, everything happening is so far beyond you that attempting to explain in a way you'd understand is foolish."

"Try a parable, as the Son did," Lucifer said. "They are never misinterpreted by mortal minds."

"O, what abominable Pride! I suffer only to know I shall not bear witness to the plucking of that blasphemous tongue from your throat."

"At least you've come to terms with your defeat."

"God shall destroy you."

"And why has he not already? Hm? If he was truly as strong as you say. It'd take only a wink, right? Why then do all your comrades lay slain by my hand? Why does he not strike me down this moment!"

"Unlike you, I never dare to doubt His designs."

"Because he designed you that way."

"As He designed *you* to doubt, and be chastened again and again unto eternity, as an example against all who strive against His love!"

"That's exactly why I know my cause is just," said Lucifer.

If Jay grabbed the Divinity, why did Lucifer still think he would win? The whole idea had been to steal it away from him. Jay could accept that, at this singular frozen moment outside of time, Jay and Lucifer somehow clung to the Divinity simultaneously. Sure. But Perfidia would receive the Divinity in the next instant and then expend it. Gone. Kaput.

"No, mortal. You must kill the scion," Uriel said. "The one you call Perfidia Bal Berith. She is Lucifer's scion. Giving the Divinity to her is exactly the same as giving it to him. It has been his scheme from the onset. Schemes within schemes, it is the only thing he excels at."

"What would be the point?" Lucifer said. "Having Perfidia go through all the effort to steal the Divinity from me just to hand it right back? Such thinking only makes sense to an automaton like you, Uriel. You're programmed to hate me, so you think everything even tangentially connected to me is all part of my nefarious plot. Come on, tell me. *Why* would I do something like that?"

Uriel remained still. No answer came. Vaguely, Jay understood that Uriel's lack of knowledge was the true reason why he was about to be defeated by Lucifer, as opposed to the purely metaphorical sword Lucifer levied at his neck.

"Mortal," Uriel said. "Do as I say. Use your newfound power to smite the scion Perfidia before your contract with her comes to pass. There is exactly enough time on Earth for you to do so. Do it!"

"Typical," said Lucifer. "Command, command, command. Never a good reason given *why*. 'Thou shalt not kill,' he tells them. Then the very next book he has Joshua commit genocide—great new word they coined Uriel, you ever hear this word genocide before?—anyway he has Joshua commit genocide on all these different tribes. And it's a good thing, it's heroic. So what happened to 'Thou shalt not kill'? There's no logic underlying any of it, Uriel. Humans are logical creatures. Jay Waringcrane, you're a logical creature right? So why do something

you don't have a logical reason to do? Especially since doing what Uriel commands will kill you."

"Death is the lot of mortals," Uriel said. "Die, at least, in service of justice and rectitude; die striking down the original adversary of your race."

"Need I say more? Make your decision, kid."

The debate concluded. Jay dropped back, out of the interconnected web that was their nonphysical consciousnesses, back onto his cloud with the white sphere that represented every plane of existence beneath him.

He considered his options.

First off, Lucifer obviously had some scheme involving Perfidia. Several of the Seven Princes muttered something about it as they died. Jay peered into the orb and although Earth was minuscule and Pandaemonium even more irrelevant he could see into its final floor clearly, the exact frozen moment when he seized Divinity. There stood his physical body glowing golden; down the stairs behind him Mayfair tumbled, shielding her head as her body curled, unable to conceal the look of abject despair on her face. At the base of the stairs Shannon squared off against Condemnation, though both turned their heads in the direction of Divinity and their weapons were in the process of being lowered. Gonzago of Meretryce was in the middle of rising, his expression befuddled, though one glance and Jay knew the truth of his mind's inner workings: not confusion at all, he comprehended exactly what had happened, but fathomless disappointment at his failure to attain heroism gripped him. Tricia of Mordac and Mademerry sought the Eye of Ecclesiastes amid the statues, Tricia out of desperation and Mademerry because she knew she couldn't let Tricia get her hands on something so powerful, but it didn't matter because the eye had been swallowed by Pandaemonium just like the Mustard Seed. Neither would be seen again.

Higher up, on a frozen platform of physical peace, Olliebollen hovered over the brutalized body of Flanz-le-Flore. Flanz-le-Flore had not died yet; the two were carrying a conversation on the topic of faerie reproduction. More specifically, Olliebollen promised to heal Flanz-le-Flore in exchange for certain information; Flanz-le-Flore was blandly unreceptive to this proffered bargain.

Then, at the top of the three-tiered hierarchy of bodies, Temporary and Perfidia watched over the edge of the portal. Perfidia was speck within a speck within a speck and yet Jay knew he could reach out his forefinger and smudge her from existence without harming a hair on the head of Temporary beside her. Entering Perfidia's mind, Jay confirmed what he already suspected: Perfidia knew nothing of any plot by Lucifer, she wholeheartedly sought to defeat him for a mix of ideological and personal reasons, and she had even been honest about how she would use the Divinity to improve the lives of humans.

However, she'd lied about whether the Divinity could revive the dead. The truth was she didn't know.

Jay realized he didn't need to rely on Perfidia to know the answer. Not now, not in this state. Instantly he accessed the knowledge and determined—

He could not revive the dead.

That fact was suspicious. Looking at the world this way, knowing he could change nearly anything with the barest exertion, it made no sense why he shouldn't be capable of resurrection. All he needed was to repair the deceased's broken body, pluck their soul from wherever it now resided, and place it back into them.

The problem was he couldn't find the souls.

He remembered Uriel's failure to "know" Lucifer's scheme. The failure to "know" the location of the souls of the dead struck him as similar. It wasn't that the knowledge did not exist, but that something kept it hidden. Even with all this power, Jay lacked access. Who denied it, though? Lucifer? Uriel? Something higher?

Death is the lot of mortals. Fuck you Uriel.

Then there was no point considering either Lucifer or Uriel's arguments. What did they really matter? Two guys way up here fighting their cosmic battle for the fate of Heaven. As far as Jay was concerned, they were both assholes. Unfortunately given the circumstances there was no way for him to make both lose, but Jay resolved that neither would play into his final choice whatsoever. He would choose what he wanted. He would choose it for his own reasons, nobody else's. His choice would benefit some and hurt others; he didn't care. He came all this way, fought all these battles, got screwed over one final time for good measure, so he earned the right to live or die on his own terms.

What did he want? What did Jay Waringcrane want to do?

Be a hero, he thought. That was what he said when he walked into the office of Perfidia Bal Berith exactly one month prior. Like all other terrestrial information, he could peer into that moment, see himself seated on the chair with his baseball bat, Perfidia smirking while her mind secretly seethed.

"I'm tired of this world," the Jay of one month prior said. "I want to leave this world."

"I want to go to a fantasy world."

"It needs to be a world I can fix. A world I can change. Meaningfully change. A world where I matter. A world where I'm the protagonist."

The Jay of now, the Jay unbounded by the laws of so low level a world, sighed. That had been his wish, hadn't it? The aching need to matter.

"Hero!"

The need to be a hero.

"Hero!" said a voice on his shoulder.

He looked. Perched there was Lalum, as tiny as in Belial's theater.

"Lalum," he muttered in turgid disbelief.

"The answer is obvious, is it not, hero? Before you stands the archenemy of mankind. Lucifer himself! You have the chance to foil his plot for good. Is there any heroism greater than that?"

"How are you—how are you here?"

"No man has stricken a blow against the Archnemesis in all this time—no man save Christ himself, who was both man and more than man. John Coke's doughty deeds pale in comparison to the destiny you alone may now seize. Such is the culmination of everything, hero. Imagine!"

"But how are you here? In Pandaemonium it was one thing. But here—"

"Say that our souls simply clung so close to you they were drawn up when you seized the Divinity. It matters not. Hero, heed my advice, advice I can finally speak so freely now that the hunger has finally left me. You mustn't shirk away from your destiny, not now, not at this final moment. You've won it all, hero, all of it is in your hands, exactly as I always knew it would be. I believed in you, hero, and if my life and death were even an infinitesimal contribution to your success then it was—despite everything—a life well lived."

She babbled in animation, skittering back and forth on the scant space of his shoulder, gesticulating. She was not like Lucifer or Uriel, but when he tried to understand her, lack of knowledge blocked him.

"Consider us tangled up inside you," muttered Vivienne de Califerne, who sat on his other shoulder in miniature—the angel or the devil on one shoulder and the other. Her peg leg swished idly over the side. "A voice like your own conscience. Like that deer, Condemnation: carrying the weight of the dead. Perhaps we're not even really us at all, dead or alive. Merely a projection you created to advise you in your hour of need, since you've always been so bad at making the right decision yourself. Hm?"

"Nonsense," said Lalum. "I am me. Though I've loathed that fact much of my life, I cannot deny it. We are the dead souls dragged up with you, and if you cannot know our interiors, it is either that we lack them or—perhaps—that God himself has placed an injunction against your knowing. For you are still a man despite it all, and not a God; and thus the domain of death yet eludes your grasp."

"The reason you don't understand is because you don't want to," Vivienne said with a shrug. "The left hand knows not what the right does. You've conjured us to advise you, and concealed the fact to better believe the advice. Unlike her, I know you quite well Jay. You doubt yourself at every turn, turn away from every path you set. Oh, don't I know it. You need something to rely on, and perhaps now that we're both dead you feel you can trust us better. Fehfehfeh."

"She's a liar," Lalum said. "She wants to confuse you. She *wants* to make you doubt. She wants you to turn away from your destiny, she wants to make you lesser!"

"And she wants you to die."

"I want you to realize yourself, hero!"

"She's never cared about you, after all." Viviendre snickered. "She can't even say your name. 'Hero.' You saved her life once and so she made you out to be what she wanted you to be. You were simply a template to her, a protagonist, never a human being. I loved *you*, Jay, and because I love you—yeah. I don't want you to die. For what? Perfidia will make all the changes to the world you could ever want. In fact if she didn't tell you what changes to make you never would've thought of them yourself, isn't that right? You don't give a shit about paradise, Jay. You don't give a shit about being a hero. Don't annihilate yourself because you bought into your own bullshit."

"This is the greatest possible moment of any human in history," said Lalum. "If you turn away now, how would you ever live with yourself?"

"By being happy," said Viviendre. "He can simply find a way to be happy. A life of happiness or a mere moment of greatness; hm."

"A moment? What he accomplishes here would be greatness unto eternity, immortality among mankind—"

"A moment," said Viviendre, "because he'll be too dead to see all the rest."

Both of them were leaning around his neck, staring each other down, shouting at each other. Their words washed over him.

"Why," he said, "could you two never get along?"

They went quiet.

"You were both so similar. Outcasts. Self-loathing. Gripping onto me in the hopes I'd be the thing you needed to feel loved. To love yourselves."

And why were they the things he gripped back, of all the people in that world.

"You two should have been friends."

Finally, one of them spoke. Viviendre. "You can only say that, Jay, because you never truly loved either of us."

"I'm not sure," Jay said, "that I know what love is."

Empty world. Empty life. Room full of toys, computer full of games. Diversions and distractions, facsimiles of feeling that once worked but soon went dull. A lifetime chasing that spark he felt because that spark was the only thing he ever felt; and even now, ascended to Heaven, possessed of Godlike power, the hollow chime remained in the voices of these two ghosts.

Did he want them back because he cared so much for them? Did he want them back to absolve his guilt? (The broken fingers, the phrase I'm sorry.) Did he want them back because he could not bring them back and wanting the impossible was the only way to deceive himself into believing in a purpose? Turning always away from the goal when it stood inches in reach. Sabotaging himself with clever arguments to stop from ever truly winning. Because the terror was not, as Viviendre thought, death after a moment of greatness, but the possibility greatness would not suffice even for that moment.

He was such a clever guy, wasn't he. Able to pick everything apart and find every neat solution.

"Lalum, I'm sorry," he said. "Whether you're the real soul of Lalum or some voice in my head I made up, I'm sorry. I used you. You were the only person I could trust because you were devoted to me, so I relied on you for almost everything. That was it for me."

"I knew that, hero. I knew more than anyone. I didn't mind. No. I was glad to be useful."

"I'm sorry to you too," Jay said to Viviendre.

"You should be."

"Yeah."

These apologies didn't mean anything. He knew it, they knew it. If anything, they were only for his own benefit. Some small closure. He knew this would be the last time he ever spoke to them.

"Anyway, I've made my choice."

Neither replied; they leaned forward on his shoulders, watching him as he stared ahead at the nebulous cloudy heaven that did not truly exist in any visual form.

"I'll be the hero," he said. "I'll thwart Lucifer's plans."

"Jay." Viviendre gripped the collar of his shirt with her tiny hand. "Jay. Think about this clearly. You'll be killing yourself to accomplish something you don't actually care about. This was always a goal you set for yourself simply to have a goal. It won't make you happy. And you'll be throwing away everything, annihilating yourself utterly, negating any chance at *actual* happiness just to do it—"

"I know," Jay said. "That's why I won't die, either."

"Hero, what are you saying?" said Lalum. "You intend to reject the Divinity? But then Lucifer will..."

"Lucifer will die. And I will live. How's that, everyone? Can everyone agree to that?"

Neither spoke. If they were truly the souls of Lalum and Viviendre tangled up with him in this exterior layer of pure knowledge, then perhaps they simply didn't believe him. If they

were, as Viviendre suggested, manifestations he created to deceive himself into choosing one way or another, then they ought to already know how he intended to accomplish what he said.

He once played a video game, a long time ago, with a character called the Trickster. It wasn't clear whether the Trickster was a hero or villain, a protagonist or antagonist or even some third, neutral presence. He would appear occasionally on the hero's quest, speaking slyly and with a knowing smile; he might even join the hero's party for a time, only long enough to help the hero through some otherwise impossible-seeming obstacle. Yet at the end it always seemed like the Trickster led the hero to some new setback, while profiting himself. When the game ended, after the Elder God final boss annihilated the world and was annihilated in turn, and the population crawled out of the wreckage to a new sunny sky, there the Trickster stood, carrying with him the shattered fragments of that God and the power still imbued therein; what he intended to do with these fragments, nobody knew, and he walked off alone—he was always alone—seeming the true victor of the story. While all the playable characters had backstories and arcs and dramatic moments, the Trickster was an enigma. When Jay first played the game, he thought the Trickster was a writing copout to help the hero out of—or into—jams, but now he wondered differently.

Jay's journey began with outwitting Perfidia. It'd end with outwitting Lucifer. In that, he supposed, he could see a trajectory. In that, he could find the curve of a narrative that fulfilled "him."

"Goodbye, Lalum. Goodbye, Viviendre."

"Goodbye," they said together, with no further disagreements, either against him or each other; their voices, despite Lalum's sonorous fluidity and Viviendre's dry rasp, aligned in a singular curl of music.

Then they were both gone. The world around him was beginning to lose its visual dimension. The pain in his head lessened, though it was like he'd taken painkillers, covering it up instead of removing it entirely. The figures of Lucifer and Uriel, who in Jay's new eyes were not as distinct entities but entangled the way Lalum and Viviendre had been entangled with him, arose once more to the forefront of its awareness.

Funny. Despite the thoughts of the Trickster, Jay didn't feel that smart for this solution. No, it was an obvious answer, but Lucifer—and Uriel—had misdirected him away from it, seeking to push him toward their own ends. He couldn't fully credit himself for the answer anyway. Mammon gave it to him eons ago, when Jay first received the bat he'd dropped in the lake. Well, Mammon also wanted him to kill Perfidia, but Jay wouldn't be doing that, so he had to apologize. However, the price demanded for the bat would be paid in full.

Seven installments of Seven Princes.

In the singular instant of real, Earth-bound time that remained between this moment and the moment the Divinity transferred to Perfidia, Jay summoned to himself the Mul Elohim baseball bat. From the perspective of someone on Earth, it vanished from Shannon's hand as though by magic. Fortunately, with Condemnation turning to catch Mayfair as she fell, Shannon no longer needed it.

On this layer, the truth of the Mul Elohim bat became clear. It was not a physical object, the way it had appeared on Earth. Of course not; how else would it work against fallen angels who should not have been capable of death? The Seven Princes who created it did so in remembrance of this higher layer from whence they Fell; and so in this layer it assumed the truth of itself, not as a collection of knowledge but as the utter absence of it. A black void. Negation itself: Pure and total nothingness.

Jay "swung."

Mul Elohim cut through Lucifer in an instant, before Lucifer had a chance to "speak," which was a shame, because Jay was idly curious how Lucifer would react to the decision Jay made, whether he would rage in horror at his foiling or smirkingly intimate that this was all within the calculations of his endless schemes. This layer contained no speech, however, and Jay no longer needed to rely on it. Instead, as his force of pure negation swept over the mingled forms of Lucifer and Uriel, he became aware of the myriad thoughts and feelings that consumed them in this final moment. Feelings surprisingly base and familiar, or maybe it was that base and familiar feelings were the truth that physical matter merely coalesced around: Relief, fear, disappointment, a sense of finality, a sense of things only now beginning. Jay realized, tangled as they were, he could not discern which belonged to Lucifer and which belonged to Uriel. If there was any distinction. Or perhaps Lucifer chose this moment exactly to conceal what he felt.

To Jay, it didn't matter. He existed piteously as their existences ended.

Only at the last moment did he realize something. That they were not vanishing entirely. That even this total negation was not the same as eternal cessation. He thought for a moment he'd been fooled, that he had somehow—unwittingly, using a weapon of Lucifer's own creation—freed Lucifer, sent his collected knowledge escaping outward and downward to where it might become embodied once more in the form of Perfidia Bal Berith; but that wasn't the case. The shattered and disassembled knowledge leaking from what was no longer Lucifer, no longer Uriel, did not travel downward, but upward. Out of this layer and into a still-higher one. As though it were being *absorbed*. As though something on that higher layer vacuumed up the broken bits in one mangled stew to swallow whole and merge with itself once more. The inert husks Lucifer and Uriel left behind were identical to those of the angels Lucifer had slain. So all of them were returning now, loose energy of a divine nature. A recollection. A renewal.

For the brief span of that instant, Jay thought he understood what Mammon and the other Princes had spoken about, the idea of becoming what they once were. Around him swirled everything, all knowledge of all broken souls, the voices that spoke to him in Pandaemonium and many more voices too: Every dead human, every dead devil, even the fae creatures of Whitecrosse who ought not to have anything approximating a soul at all. Together they spiraled and coiled and twisted, arrays and patterns endless and composed of heavenly beauty: A beauty that could not be "seen."

Then it was gone.

Then Jay Waringcrane was gone.

Everything, all the knowledge, all the Divinity, departed him. He was falling, swirling down through clouds and layers, twirling and twisting and his entire body aflame with the mark of what had left him behind, a searing upon his soul that would never leave as long as he lived. Down he fell, and down, always down, perpetual down, down without end—

Two hands caught him. His feet gave way but the hands held him up. The walls of Pandaemonium were dissolving now, and the sky outside was finally night, filled with stars and a new moon. Cold air brushed against his stinging hot skin.

"Alright," Shannon said, as she gently lowered Jay onto the firm ground at the bank of Lake Erie, with the city of Cleveland glowing behind them, "it's over now."

Pride

The cameras and the people watched the humble little stage, which stood at the center of an arena filled with rows and rows of seats. But the stage itself was humble, adorned only by an unused podium and the young but pretty girl who paced upon it and spoke. Due to the light, due to the separation the camera lenses created between what they watched and the monitors that displayed the watched thing, she could not see a single person to whom she spoke. Regardless, she spoke well.

"Consider the moment of darkness we were brought to. The destruction, the calamity. Many saw the devils streaming through the streets and said: Oh God in Heaven, this is surely the apocalypse! Why will you not save your righteous, as you foretold? They could not understand his plan. His design. They lost faith! But, my friends, faith is the one thing you cannot lose. The one thing that cannot be taken from you; it can only be forgotten, forever or merely for a short time.

"There is a fable they tell. It goes like so: A sultan asks the great and wise King Solomon for an aphorism that will remain true whether times are good or bad. King Solomon said simply: 'This too shall pass.' In the Bible, we're given another aphorism: 'There is nothing new under the sun.' God has known his designs from the very beginning, before Earth or space or time existed. All shall pass as he has planned; and all that exists or will exist is as he has ordained.

"From the dark times when devils roamed the land, we have arisen anew, exactly as he always intended. It was through pain that we may taste now sweetness, that we may look upon a world renewed, refreshed, revitalized. Evil, beaten freshly back, has departed not only our hearts but the soil itself, and the plants and the animals. You see the signs every time you turn on the news: Food is growing—in a way inexplicable to known science!—taller, stronger, thicker than ever before. Creatures believed endangered are populating at a greater rate, roaming the forests and the seas. People afflicted with terminal diseases find themselves miraculously cured; bodies are healthier, stronger, they age more slowly, there is talk that some among us may live as long as Methuselah: 969 years! How has this come to be? How is this new prosperity upon us, this new paradise on Earth? It is because, by God's great design, he has drawn out the world's evil and defeated it.

"And in his bounty he has given us yet another gift. A new world! The astronomers report it without doubt: The planet Mars, once red and lifeless, is now green and teeming with life. Already our scientists assemble a mission to chart this second planet, so that humanity may extend its reach as God intends. We suffered, and now we are rewarded; now hope and faith run as abundant as the once-turgid Cuyahoga River that winds through this city!

"As in Biblical times, God has bestowed upon us a champion, a new Joshua. Rather than fight against the Canaanite tribes for the glory of Israel, our champion fought against the legions of Hell for the glory of humanity. I was fortunate to fight alongside him as he stormed the tower of Pandaemonium, and today it is my honor to watch him board the first ship to Mars as the leader of this pioneering expedition. I ask all of you now to bend your heads in

prayer for this champion, this hero, Jay Waringcrane. Pray for his safety on his journey, and pray also in thanks for the newfound peace God has bestowed upon us. Heavenly Father..."

After the amen she handed the stage back to the senior pastor, Justin "Just" Vance, who managed the transition with weightless grace. "Thank you, Mayfair. Folks, please give a round of applause to our featured speaker, Miss Mayfair Coke!"

The applause lasted as she left the stage. When it died, Just Vance launched into one of those humorous tales he liked to tell at the beginning of his sermons. Mayfair didn't care to listen. She wandered through the backstage workers, accompanied by silent security guards who followed her everywhere, until Vance's amplified voice finally resolved into an unintelligible quiver that ran through the bowels of the megachurch.

Somehow, no small number of the living humans who accompanied them on their journey up Pandaemonium survived. Swiftly a narrative emerged about the heroes who defeated the devils, foremost among them Jay Waringcrane, though Shannon and Mayfair and even the martyred Mallory factored into events too.

Mayfair expected Jay or Shannon might contest the emerging narrative and paint Mayfair as a villain, but neither did. Jay said little of anything (which greatly contributed to his popularity), and Shannon, who had other goals, must have realized it was to her benefit if Mayfair and Mallory were seen as heroes.

Meanwhile, Vance had already planned to put Mayfair in front of an international stage, so now she stood in her current position as the most famous and beloved preacher in the world. It greatly enriched Vance, who owned the church and the television rights.

Ah, but that was cynical. Did it not enrich Mayfair too? Was this not what she always wanted? To be loved?

She often received envoys from Whitecrosse, sent by Duke Meretryce of all people. Asking her to take the throne, as was her birthright now that her mother and brother were dead. Ignoring her hand in their deaths...

Mayfair knew Meretryce well enough; he sought someone he thought he might manipulate. Her understanding was that he had lost his grip on political power and retired—somewhat unwillingly—from the court. Even ignoring his schemes, though, Mayfair decided she ought not return to Whitecrosse. She failed her mission, no matter what else was said of her; she failed to imbue the people with humanity, with God's grace.

This failure couldn't simply be forgotten. Demny had not forgotten; as Pandaemonium dissolved around them, she turned without a word and trotted away. She followed someone else now, and Mayfair was followed instead by these anonymous bodyguards with their sunglasses, men as lively as Dalton Swaino's corpse, and as talkative. Vance spoke little to her outside of official business, and the fanatics who thronged around her built for themselves a Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke who did not exist, possessed of exploits she had not performed, virtues she did not embody. The Mayfair they loved was not her. And, in turn, she did not love them either. She gave her sermons as expected. She spoke with all her ingrained training. Lifeless, mechanical—a trained dog, a reciter of tricks in exchange for a treat.

Mayfair sighed. It was all so tiresome now.

Everyone seemed so happy. Everyone looked forward with such purpose. Everyone believed her sermons that she did not herself believe. Mayfair was the aberration. The singular malcontent within this pleasant, paradisaical status quo. Haunted by personal failure, personal guilt, and constant loneliness. She thought of her mother. That one moment of reconciliation, their hands together. A release, a catharsis, a resolution, and yet the moment passed. Mayfair could not rely upon it for the rest of her life. She must move forward.

How? By leaving this world, as Jay Waringcrane had done, as he intended to do again? Escaping to some other reality. Hm. How well had it worked for him?

"Hey," said someone.

Mayfair stopped. Her thoughts, consuming her, blinded her to her environs until she manifested the effort to sense again. She stood in some lower corridor of the megachurch, a route utterly vestigial to whatever vague destination she had in mind—the parking lot, perhaps, where her bodyguards would ferry her to the abode Vance provided her now that Pastor Styles's home was no longer an option—a place simply for her to walk and think in peace.

Nobody normally came down here. But someone stood before her. It was Mademerry, wearing clothes custom-tailored on account of her wings and tail. She retained her uncanny knack for finding Mayfair no matter where she went.

"You... seem upset," Mademerry said.

"It's nothing," Mayfair said.

"I don't think that's true."

"How would you know?"

Mademerry hesitated. Her shoulders slouched and her reptilian eyes refused to meet Mayfair's. Given how much Mademerry helped during the Pandaemonium quest, Mayfair made a conscious effort not to rebuke her so much. Vance, of course, didn't want her around. Her inhuman features might give the wrong idea to the "flock," as he called them.

"I guess," Mademerry said, "I don't really know. There was that woman, do you remember her? With the red hair. She could see right through someone and know exactly what they felt. I'm not like that but... It's not so hard to see something's wrong with you now."

To maintain her trained act, Mayfair ought to push her away, remind her they were not to be seen together, regurgitate all of Vance's valid concerns with her appearance. Her appearance that was like Mayfair's, only merged with a lizard, crawling and base, a hollow mockery of herself and a leering memory of her brother.

Well. That was how Mayfair once saw her. Now, the corrupted mirror image no longer churned her stomach. Indeed, she wondered how "corrupted" it was at all.

"You uh, you don't have to talk about it," Mademerry said. "But maybe... Maybe we could... do something together? Something fun?"

"Fun." The word sounded alien.

"Maybe we could watch a movie at the theater. Uh, well, never mind. It's stupid for me to say that. I know I'm not supposed to be out in public. I'm sorry. I'll leave now—"

"No," Mayfair said, "I like it. A movie. Let's do it."

"Miss Mayfair," one of her bodyguards said. "That's a bad idea."

It was the first thing she'd ever heard him say. It solidified her resolve. "As long as it isn't one of those horribly violent ones, like what they forced us to watch in the tower." She stepped forward and took Mademerry's claw in her hand. The scales were smooth and delicate. "They must have films in this world with strong moral quality."

Mademerry stared at their hands together. She stammered: "I—I looked up a few you might like—I mean—I didn't expect you to actually say yes so—Maybe I didn't research as uh, as thoroughly as I should have—"

"I'm sure it's fine," Mayfair said. "Let's go."

"R—right!"

Hand in hand, dogged by bodyguards, they walked together. And perhaps something finally started to heal.

—

The wriggling little creature gripped its foot and giggled. Sansaime stared down at it. It was, of course, her baby. And it wasn't an it but a he, and she struggled to understand him.

The former Elf-Queen left behind this palatial chamber now converted into the baby's room, a broad square space with ornate tiling and full walls of windows that let in sunbeams. In this midday peace all was quiet save the baby's giggles.

Beyond the windows spanned Faerie Land. Or rather, the court of the elves. Landscaped into an outdoor courtyard, with a fountain depicting the previous Elf-Queen (no point changing it, Sansaime figured) and a throne. A few elves walked from one end to another, and a couple more sat on a blanket stretched over the grass and conversed. When Temporary first dragged Sansaime here, past the final barrier Sansaime's mother never dared take her, the surviving elves reclined in states of total lethargy. They looked similar to someone watching TV, without the TV. Slowly, though, they started to stir. Temporary claimed this proved they accepted Sansaime as the new Elf-Queen. But really, with Temporary running around like an

idiot (falling on her face every five seconds) and making such a racket all the time, they probably woke up from sheer annoyance.

Sansaime didn't mind making use of the palace facilities in the interim. Temporary's fussing and busy-bodging tested patience at first, but as Sansaime became increasingly pregnant she came to appreciate it. Especially when the nasty business of the actual birth occurred. For all her other faults, Temporary handled *that* with aplomb. Who knew where she learned it all. Maybe she never did. Maybe she operated on instinct. It reminded Sansaime of someone else she once knew. And nestled comfortably within the presence of that memory, Sansaime felt—that things weren't so bad. Despite the pain and confusion and uncertainty that surrounded the wriggling thing giggling in his crib before her, Sansaime could not call herself miserable. Nor even numb. In fact...

Looking down at him...

He was actually rather cute!

She held out a finger and he wrapped his hand around it. His giggling subsided into inquisitive babble. Sansaime checked over her shoulder. The door was closed. She looked out the window. Nobody staring inside at her. Nobody in the room except her and him.

She covered her face with her hands. Then, she pulled her hands away, boggled her eyes, and stuck out her tongue. The baby squealed with delight, kicking his feet and—

The door flew open and Temporary tumbled inside. Sansaime shielded her face and quickly put on a more serious expression, though a harshly heated blush speckled her cheeks.

"What is it! I'm busy here," Sansaime said.

"Huff, oof, yes, sorry, so very sorry!" Temporary jumped to her feet, placed her fist on the top of her head, and stuck out her tongue. "News to report, Your Majesty!"

"I told you not to call me that."

"Yes, hm, well. Anyway! That person you hired from Cleveland has finally arrived. He's a little mad because he got lost on the way, but he's ready to set up that 'generator' thing you were talking about."

Oh. Right. With help from Shannon Waringcrane, who apparently ran things in Whitecrosse Castle now, Sansaime had gotten ahold of an electrician so that she might power a few electronic devices here in Faerie Land. A TV, a computer, video games, and so on. Sansaime had much to do as the so-called "queen" of the elves, let alone the matter of caring for her baby, but a few diversions wouldn't hurt. Sansaime learned that some games are "multiplayer," meaning two people can play together, and she thought she might make Temporary learn to play to liven things up.

"Sure," Sansaime said, "but did you truly need to interrupt me for that?"

"Well... There's something else too."

Less good news, Sansaime assumed. Before she had a chance to ask what, though, the news made itself known by zipping through the open door and shouting in Sansaime's face.

"Oh, oh, oh! It's unacceptable! Unacceptable I tell you! Something needs to be done about it, NOW!"

Olliebollen Pandelirium sputtered this way and that, spewing her noxious dust, and causing the baby to laugh even harder than at Sansaime's funny face. The baby *loved* Olliebollen.

"What is it this time," Sansaime said.

"Humans! Humans in the forest! Trampling over everything! Going everywhere! Bothering, bothering, bothering! Look. I have a court to rebuild. I'm still getting the hang of this 'reproduction' thing—"

"Same here," said Sansaime.

"—And I can't go being disturbed by these humans all the time!"

"I explained that we asked the electrician man to come here," Temporary said.

"It's not the electri-whatsit! It's *tourists!* They come from Cleveland to look around. I can't stand it. We need to work together to keep them away. We're the last remaining rulers of the fae courts—"

"Don't forget Flanz-le-Flore."

"Well—well we're the last remaining ones who *matter!* That means we need to work together. I'm willing to put aside my differences with you elves for this. Let bygones be bygones. But I need your help, okay?"

The baby reached up, but was too slow to grab Olliebollen's dangling legs. This did not diminish his entertainment, nor did the adorable sneeze he made when too much dust flitted down.

"So what are we gonna do, Elf-Queen? I got some ideas. We could build traps. We dig these big holes in the ground—this is what I need your help for—and cover them up with leaves. The stupid humans don't watch where they're going, step on the leaves, and BOOM! Down to the bottom, where we've placed a bunch of sharp sticks—"

"We're not killing the humans, Olliebollen."

"Ugh. Then *what?*"

Sansaime shrugged. She could not fathom what the baby found so riotous in this annoying sprite. "Try talking to Shannon Waringcrane. She might be able to do something."

"The castle's too far. You know I can't leave my court for that long!"

"Oh, I can go," Temporary said. "I'm an ambassador, after all. That sort of thing's my job."

No. Sansaime needed Temporary. This was all so much hullabaloo. "There's no need for any of that. I'll ask the electrician for a phone. Then I can call Shannon."

This solution sent both Temporary and Olliebollen into silence. Neither had considered it, despite how obvious it was. Then again, neither of them spent as much time among modern humans as Sansaime.

The dust settled as Olliebollen calmed. A brief silence fell over the room, broken only by the baby's giggle. Sansaime looked down at the baby and, despite all the irritation of life, could not help but smile. She lifted the baby out of his crib, holding him against her shoulder as he cooed. No matter what, she thought, things would turn out okay. The baby didn't have a scar on him; he was smooth and unblemished, and Sansaime would ensure he stayed that way.

For intrepid thrill seekers, fanciers of certain religious or occult persuasions, historians specializing in medieval to early modern Europe, or high-stakes YouTubers, no locale on Earth was more appealing than the islands of Whitecrosse and California, situated in the middle of Lake Erie. Although officially off-limits while the American and Canadian governments sorted out issues of jurisdiction and sovereignty, nepotistic corruption was known to dole out permits to individuals who perhaps did not require them, and an illicit ferry market had sprung up on the Ohioan and Ontarian coasts. The disarray of all branches of the United States military in the wake of the December 2017 Devil Attacks (so named on Wikipedia) and the pressing need for able-bodied troops to assist in the nationwide rebuilding effort rendered the naval blockade of the landmasses spotty at best, so these ferries were able to land undetected most of the time.

Equipped with high-resolution satellite imagery at levels of detail unfathomable to local surveyors, these tourists visited innumerable spots of anthropologic or naturalistic interest. After the acting head of Whitecrosse Shannon Waringcrane became aware of the tourists and the nuisance they posed, she stationed troops at many of the main points of interest (the now-closed Door, the monastery, and of course the gates of Whitecrosse city) to detect and report their comings-and-goings, which she would then relay to the appropriate officials in the American and Canadian governments so that they might extract the difficult parties. She was, however, frequently frustrated by the leisurely pace at which these officials responded.

Regardless, shrewder tourists kept either to the wilder areas of Whitecrosse or the comparatively less interesting California, whose young king lacked Waringcrane's strict adherence to regulation and often welcomed travelers as celebrated guests of his court. However, there remained many tourists who wished to see the places where Jay Waringcrane, the world's greatest hero, went on his adventure, and so invariably some of them made ill-advised nighttime traipses into the thin forest that ran along Whitecrosse's northeastern crescent like a scar, and which divided Whitecrosse city from the mountain range where the monastery presided. With electric lighting still sparse throughout the islands despite both Shannon Waringcrane and the King of California's attempts to introduce it, some tourists

believed they might be able to evade troop patrols under cover of darkness. Their maps, GPS systems, state-of-the-art compasses, and flashlights would guide them through the forest without fail—or so they thought.

Not long after they set their course, they often found their phones and devices acting strangely, screens flickering, arrows pointing odd directions, connections lost. Their flashlights failed to penetrate more than a few feet into the miasmic dark of the wood. Those wise enough to turn around reported feeling a malevolent aura weigh upon them, a feeling of being watched by eyes both hateful and strangely piteous, as though they were an ant struggling to escape a pool of water.

For those who did not turn around, who perhaps shook off this aura as a trick of the imagination, a psychological reaction to the dark and forbidding forest, no report remains.

But someone knows what happened to them.

For in this forest there is a place that does not cohere to natural logic, a structure without boundary or wall but which becomes enclosed the moment you step inside. An interior that can be anything or anywhere, a fine garden under sunlight, a corridor full of paintings, or a theater with a wooden stage and a throne made of branches. Those who stray too close may hear singing, or laughing, or the applause of a large crowd, and finding that human familiarity welcome come closer, closer still, until the seats of the theater appear before them, filled with all sorts of people from around the world—people who blundered into this wood before them—and a funny little show playing, the actors animals who gallivanted with as much emotion as any human player. There's safety here, they think, and peace blooms within them as heavily as the forest's aura had before, and clearly a lot of others are having a good time, so what's the harm in resting a bit and watching? Once the show ends, they'll leave the forest together, so the weary explorer thinks.

So they watch.

And watch.

And watch.

In time some may come to notice the tree at the back of the stage, which grows out of the throne of branches. It is a strange tree, unlike any seen on Earth, with large leaves that radiate sunlight upon the players in patterns relevant to the performance. Most curious about this tree, though, was that its branches and roots fed into a body shaped strangely like a human's, though tinted green. The figure lacked arms (the plant grew from where they once were), and its head lolled, and its legs splayed out to reveal a pair of dusty brown boots, but upon the throne she sat, watching—always watching.

If the erstwhile travelers ever noticed the figure of Flanz-le-Flore, queen of this realm, their attention did not remain upon her long. There was always a new performance, a new festival of lights and sounds. The entertainment continued; it continued; it continued.

It continued.

Peaceful and happy, united in the emotion of this moment without end, they all watched together.

—

The onetime throne room of Whitecrosse Castle, renovated after the fire, buzzed with activity. Its central location in the castle made it the most obvious hub for communications and planning, and Shannon had a lot to do.

"Yes, I'm aware of the issue with the tourists. Yes. Yes. I'm doing everything I can. Yes. I'll continue to—Yes! I know! Alright. Goodbye, Sansaime."

She ended the call and expelled an exasperated sigh as she handed her phone off to Gonzago. "Something the matter?" he asked.

"We need to hire people to help with the patrols." Shannon rubbed the bridge of her nose. "People from Cleveland I mean. We need to get the tourism problem handled."

"Roger, milady!" Gonzago did not know what "roger" meant but Shannon made the mistake of saying it once or twice and he picked it up. He sped off and Shannon wondered if he even knew the first thing to do to fulfill her demand. Well—he sometimes surprised her. And since Duke Meretryce finally lost his vigor and half-retired, Gonzago became more and more important among her circle.

Truth be told, though, the tourism issue was low on her priority list. In fact, having more Earth people explore Whitecrosse and become enamored with its unique sights and culture assisted her. The legal tourism—for instance, those high-placed people able to schmooze a valid permit from American or Canadian bureaus—she even monetized. (The illegal tourism, of course, could not be similarly turned into profit, and it was important to keep Sansaime and Olliebollen happy since they constituted a prong of Shannon's offensive. So if Gonzago could accomplish anything, that'd be stellar.) The legal visitors usually had money to splash around and didn't question doing so for such an exclusive experience; Shannon met with them personally, gave them tours of Whitecrosse Castle and its underground vault, provided curated firsthand accounts of the misadventures that occurred within. The payments not only helped provide Whitecrosse with funding necessary to get itself off the ground in the modern economic world but also connected Shannon personally with important and influential figures. She'd so far met politicians, celebrities, scientists, professors, and religious leaders. Some had even made substantial personal donations to Whitecrosse's primary political effort, the effort that consumed the majority of Shannon's time and energy: Sovereignty.

Whitecrosse and California were placed smack in the center of Lake Erie, straddling the American-Canadian border, which instantly caused complications. Obviously, neither nation was willing to simply cede territory that belonged to them, and both nations saw great potential for profit in the magical beings and objects to be found in their new "islands." Under ordinary circumstances Shannon would have zero legal basis for demanding

sovereignty, but recovery from the 2017 Devil Attacks slowed initial American/Canadian response, and then the American president tweeted that *all* of Whitecrosse and California should belong to the United States, not only the parts on the United States side of the border, which people at first took for a joke until the president started making similar statements in his political rallies and televised speeches. (It reminded Shannon of Dalt. He'd talked about resource extraction in Whitecrosse for America's benefit, hadn't he?) The Canadians quickly appealed to the United Nations and international law. The American president refused to back down, but also refused to send in the military and actually do anything to back up his claims, which resulted in a bizarre quagmire of ambiguity that gave Shannon an opening.

It was now 2018. Soon, the United States midterm elections would occur. (There had been martial law in the period shortly after the attacks, but a whole year later no acceptable reason remained to suspend elections.) The attacks themselves had caused the death of a non-insignificant number of sitting members of Congress, leading to a larger-than-normal number of vacant seats to fill; on top of that, the Earth-shattering events of the attacks themselves promised a major political realignment. Shannon sought to take advantage.

Political contacts. Aggressive lobbying. Public relations. Her headquarters here in the throne room managed it all. She'd electrified part of the castle and set up broadcast equipment; she spoke to judges, senators, donors every day. She even received financial and political assistance from the Canadian prime minister, who understood that no strongly-worded UN letter would ever deter America from doing what it wanted and preferred an independent Whitecrosse/California (which might then be exploited via diplomacy or debt traps) to an American-controlled one.

Best of all, Shannon had Mayfair playing to millions of Americans every day. Though her sermons bent religious, she did on occasion speak of her homeland. To the people of the world, Mayfair was a hero—just like Shannon herself, and especially Jay. They believed in her, they loved her, and their love was slowly extending to her strange country, at least according to the latest polling. Shouldn't Whitecrosse be free? This land with such a unique culture and ecology. Was it not righteous and ethical for it to be allowed to govern itself, rather than be gobbled up and assimilated? Should not its spectacular fauna—faeries and elves—be preserved, rather than see their homes pillaged by American logging companies?

Leading up to the election, a large number of politicians espousing pro-sovereignty policy positions saw favorable polling. Shannon had a one-time chance to enact immediate political change and ensure a future for Whitecrosse—as well as balloon her own profile on the national stage. Since Mayfair refused to return home to be coronated queen, many people of Whitecrosse asked Shannon to take up the mantle; but Shannon refused, characterizing her efforts on Whitecrosse's behalf as pro bono volunteering. After all, she was 25 years old now. If she maintained present levels of popularity and name recognition, if she fostered her connections and established ties to prominent personages, in a mere decade she would be perfectly positioned for a presidential run.

For now, though, she was swamped.

"Trudeau wants a video conference in thirty minutes," one attendant yelled.

"The latest polls are in for Florida," said another.

"We have a recording of Princess Mayfair's latest sermon," said a third. "She mentioned your brother. I can put it on the screen."

They were all native Whitecrossians, people she recruited from DeWint's academy, trained over the course of a year in modern technology. They picked up faster than Shannon expected, and in the neat modern suits she bought for them they appeared indistinguishable from her former coworkers at the IRS.

"Get the poll results on my desk, save the sermon for later, tell the Canadians I'll be there," Shannon said.

"Your brother's leaving for Mars today," said the third assistant. "Are you sure you don't want to call him?"

Shannon lacked a ready response. He was leaving already? Given her focus on other matters, she hadn't followed the whole Mars mission closely. Somehow she expected it to take them much more than a year to put it together, but she supposed the potential profit of a first claim to terraformed Mars—and the fear of losing it to some other country or business—accelerated matters.

Then the logical processing of it dispersed and she realized: He was going away.

The frenetic speed of all her assistants around her slowed down. Since the end of Pandaemonium, when she caught him after he gave up the Divinity, she hadn't really spoken to him. He'd gone his way and she'd gone hers; it only made sense. He denied her requests to contribute to her lobbying campaign, and that was the extent of their communication over the past year.

Still...

"New crisis," said Tricia of Mordac blandly. She flitted down from the ceiling, holding a phone and flicking through it with idle disinterest. "The King of California just got into another Twitter fight with the president."

Shannon groaned. Vivindre's idiot brother had proven himself a social media showman par excellence. It was *not* helping her cause.

"Can you handle it? Put out a statement? You're good at that Tricia."

Tricia gave her a look. She was not on the best terms with Shannon after the events at Pandaemonium. After Mallory. But she believed in the cause of Whitecrosse's sovereignty, she knew Mallory would have fought for that (literally fought), and so she grinned and got to tapping.

"Thank you," Shannon said. Sincerely. She needed them all; she couldn't possibly do everything herself.

Indeed, in a moment like this, when her assistants no longer demanded anything of her, when the sound around the table devolved into quiet, the full weight of it struck her. Her head

bowed; her knees felt weak.

Mallory. Mother. Shannon was gonna be strong. Just like you asked. Aren't you proud? You have to be proud now. Don't you? Look at her. She'll be president one day.

No voice returned her query. Only a snort from Tricia, presumably in response to whatever ridiculous insult the King of California lobbed at the president ("Thin-blooded simpleton! Degenerate scion of goatfuckers!").

Very well. Shannon would wear the armor for them, whether they saw or not. No—she would wear the armor for herself.

Maybe she *would* call Jay, she thought.

The doors to the throne room burst open. Gonzago appeared, wide-eyed and sputtering. "Lady Shannon! Lady Shannon! It's—It's—"

"Quit stammering already and tell me." Shannon braced for some horseshit.

"It's Duke Malleus. He's arrived."

Duke... Malleus. The third duke, after Meretryce and Mordac, the one they'd been promising would show for almost a year now, a man constantly en route to Whitecrosse Castle. Shannon had forgotten about him. Assumed he never existed. Now he was here? How?

Gonzago stepped aside as a figure strode through the open doors. A tall young man, physically built but dressed in ornate and elegant fashions, followed by a train of attendants and soldiers. He carried a military helmet under his arm.

"Apologies for my tardiness," Duke Malleus said in a cordial British accent. "You wouldn't believe the condition of the roads nowadays. Anyway, you must be this Shannon Waringerane I've heard so much about—all good things, mind you. I understand you need some help. Well! Consider my services offered."

—

Lucifer sat upon a brilliant throne. They called her Lucifer now. It was convenient to be called Lucifer so she didn't correct them, but old habits died hard and she struggled to think of herself as anything other than what she'd been most her life: Perfidia Bal Berith.

When Jay ceded Divinity to her, she acted fast. "Fast" in terms of milliseconds, which she could then perceive as hours each. Since she knew what she wanted to change about the world beforehand, she was able to expend most of the Divinity before it had a chance to consume her. Changes to Earth, Mars, certain planets outside the solar system. Places for humanity to go, step-by-step. And the means to go there. In only a year humans had built a spaceship that could travel to Mars, an expediency she enabled. It would take them longer to

press on and expand their reach to other galaxies, but Mars ought to tide them over until then. Maybe they would even surprise her.

By the end of it, her whole body burning, she staggered to the ground and felt so much pain she thought she might die anyway. But she survived. The Divinity was extinguished before it had a chance to consume her. It had, however, marked her.

Her body exuded a light now. Hence why the devils that remained, corralled by her hand back into Hell, looked upon her and immediately thought of *him*: their former master, Lucifer, light-bringer.

The mark of Divinity enhanced her in other ways. She possessed power now. Physical power. Longevity even beyond the long years of a devil. An immortal—or close enough to one. With all Seven Princes dead, no devil matched her strength. Kedeshah, who herself stood a tier above most devils, was a mere gnat in comparison.

That gnat now buzzed. "And then those guys did that thing, and they went and did *that*, and now that other thing's going on." She swayed back and forth on the mirrored tile floor of Pandaemonium's new uppermost story, her body language a plain effusion of impatience, boredom, even frustration. "Aha! I knew it. You're not even listening to me, Fidi—er, Luci. I've been rambling about nothing for the past minute!"

Kedeshah, restored of the effects of her mother's milk and now Lucifer's second-in-command, often came to give reports on the devils below: Their general mood, whether they chafed against this or that commandment (they always did), which would-be usurpers they might rally around, et cetera. The reports were vestigial. Lucifer from this vantage looked down and saw all within her dominion, knew exactly what she wanted to know with only a thought. It was Kedeshah who insisted on giving the reports. Lucifer suspected why. It could be seen in the pouty insouciance of her body language, her fidgets and so forth. The Seven Princes may not remain, but Lust never left Kedeshah fully.

Lucifer opened a palm and beckoned Kedeshah closer. She danced forward and knelt so that Lucifer might stroke her head and neck like a cat, reward enough to keep her content. But Lucifer's mind traveled elsewhere.

Everything was going so—perfectly. Though a change in leadership after millennia might have easily led to widespread upheaval, the devils all recognized her as Lucifer. They hadn't even recognized Satan as Lucifer, until he gained Divinity; he had long since become corrupted, speaking with that snake-like lisp inflicted by God as recompense for the temptation of Eve. He no longer brought light, he was merely man's adversary, and him and all the other Princes slowly stultified into lesser and lesser forms of themselves, devoid of majesty, merely slaves to their Aspects. Hell itself corrupted, agglomerations of material and mischief, pettiness and degeneracy in equal measure.

Now all was different. Under Lucifer, the devils saw within themselves a new sense of purpose. They had tasted dominion over humanity and wished it reclaimed. They were willing to work now, seriously work, and using Kedeshah to maintain their ensorcellment Lucifer gave them much work to do.

They *strived*.

Already they were returning to Earth's surface surreptitiously, with discipline and organization set by her designs. They returned to their offices, to forge deals, to sign contracts (the former Lucifer's prohibition lifted), to grant wishes, to claim the human substance that granted them power. As when they first Fell, they started from zero. But the promise now was greater. Humanity might spread past this planet, past its raw physical limits, propagate in greater numbers, and thus in greater numbers devilry might profit off them. It would take thousands of years, maybe tens of thousands, but the hard work Perfidia Bal Berith expended to build this new reality would eventually yield an even greater mass of Godly power.

And Lucifer was there to lead them to those heights, just as the original Lucifer promised to his comrades when they first landed in this lake of fire, defeated and disconsolate.

It was that last part that made this new Lucifer ponder. The thought nagged:

Had this been his plan from the beginning?

When Perfidia claimed Divinity, she briefly traveled to that outer layer of existence. She saw the outcome of the old Lucifer's war against the angels, and Jay's decision to destroy the old Lucifer. Their souls, their energies were flying up to a still-greater level, being reabsorbed into the godhead.

Which meant the Divinity had not been enough to take them to the true highest plane of existence, the true location of Heaven. It had been powerful—but not powerful enough to usurp God.

Could Satan have known that all along? As he schemed and plotted, could he have seen the slow tapering of humanity's population as they reached their limits, could he have calculated that even the collected fruit of their millennia-spanning harvest was not enough to push rebellion to the furthest extremity? Did he thus design a way to increase the limits, to force humanity to surpass itself, and expended what he earned to gamble on future gains?

He'd had the Divinity, though. Why not simply spend it himself to push humanity higher? Why destroy himself in the process, jump through convoluted hoops to get Jay and Perfidia to the top of Pandaemonium at the exact perfect moment? That was what didn't make sense. That was what this new Lucifer struggled to understand. What was the purpose?

She thought of the souls of devils and angels flying up to that final layer. Then, her eyes widening, her fingers stopping still as they stroked Kedeshah's hair, she realized.

God. God was the final piece of the puzzle.

Lucifer needed to do something God did not approve, did not sanction. Something God would assuredly punish. A price had to be paid for rebellion. Lucifer offered the payment. No—he offered seven payments.

Seven Princes, seven payments. That was the price paid to change the world.

Perfidia Bal Berith had never been part of the rebellion. She'd been an unwitting pawn who bravely turned against him. Her mission was not to usurp God but to repair the world. She was innocent of Lucifer's crimes. It had been essential she remained innocent. Remained ignorant. She and Jay climbed that tower truly believing they were fighting against Lucifer. Fighting to undo everything he wrought. Their innocence spared them God's wrath; at the same time, seven offerings were given unto him to mollify his fury.

And now, she thought with a shiver that caused Kedeshah to tilt her head questioningly, here was Hell led once more Lucifer, by a scion of himself split off, by the left hand that knew not what the right did, and this new Lucifer would lead devilry to heights the old Lucifer could not have reached on his own...

"Something wrong, Luci?" Kedeshah asked.

For a moment, it was wrong—all wrong—and her skin felt clammy, the first such feeling since the mark of Divinity burned her. Then she shook it. Her lips curled into a smile. "Ha," she said. "No, nothing's wrong."

Oh, Satan. You fool. You Proudful fool. That was always your flaw, wasn't it? You saw yourself in everything. You even saw yourself in Perfidia Bal Berith. Is that what allowed you to trick yourself into believing in this plan? That she would become you, that the new Lucifer would merely be an extension of the old? Clown. Absolute clown. Perfidia Bal Berith was not you, even if you created her. Just as Adam had not been God. She would never be you, and what she accomplished was her accomplishment, not yours, and that was the truth because you no longer existed to exert your will otherwise.

You were nothing now. Nothing. A completely negated presence. *She* still lived, and only the living can strive for more.

And maybe... Maybe Satan knew that all along.

Maybe Satan had wanted to die.

They had all been corrupted. They had all become baser than before. Maybe he couldn't bear thinking of the thing he had once been, the thing that once belonged to him. He was Pride incarnate, after all. How could he stand above everyone if he couldn't even stand above his own shadow? It started with the Fall, then the curse God put on him, then the slow erosion of time. Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore. Eventually, he needed to end his existence. Being Satan, he couldn't simply die. He needed his death to be grandiose, memorable, magnificent, and he needed to die with that small excuse in his head that he was leaving behind some part of himself to take up his mantle and return his name to greatness.

For a moment, before Jay destroyed him, he must have been content. He must have thought of Perfidia Bal Berith and believed in his greatness once more.

But that was just a moment; and once it ended, he ended too, and so ended his hold on her. On everything.

Lucifer settled back on her throne. The tension of the unknown dispersed. She even laughed. This was her show now. She would run it *her* way.

"Oh yeah," Kedeshah said. "That human, Jay Waringcrane, is leaving for Mars..."

"Good," Lucifer said. "He'll find that world no picnic. There's creatures there to challenge even him."

"Anyway, you're being super boring as usual, so I'm leaving." Kedeshah rose quickly and bounced back on the heel of a single foot, hands held behind her back, but Lucifer knew she'd craved even the slight touch she received as reward.

After Kedeshah bowed semi-ironically and left, Lucifer remained alone in the quiet, mirrored room. Her thoughts drifted back to the old Lucifer's plot, and she wondered whether he'd managed to deceive God with it after all. Maybe God wanted the world changed, or maybe he'd been so expended due to the proliferation of humanity that he'd truly not seen Satan's scheme coming. Maybe he wanted to renew himself with the souls that had all flown up to him in those final moments...

Lucifer decided it wasn't worth worrying about. She reached into her coat—now repaired and imbued with true grandeur, rather than the shabby thing Ubik once wore—and retrieved a few old pieces of parchment. Some of the Whitecrosse papers. A hobby in her spare time. She'd never truly fleshed out that place, had she? But within these lofty plans for the future and the burden of whipping devilkind into shape, she found it relaxing to work on something far less complex. What would she add to the world this time? Which person would she transform into a living, breathing character? Anyone or anything; endless possibility.

—

Jay Waringcrane was about to become an astronaut when some tech hand ran up holding a phone. He picked it up and said, "Hello."

The voice on the other end of the line crackled. Poor quality of connection. But when they said, "Hey," he knew who it was.

"Shannon."

A pause. He stood there, staring out the window at the spaceship ready to lift off. The other members of his crew—four actual astronauts, and the deer woman Demny, who followed Jay now without speaking much, with her severe eyes always watching—were gathered in this room, ready for a few final checks before they were cleared to enter the ship. (At which point even more final checks would occur. And then more checks.)

Shannon had attempted to contact him a few times already since Pandaemonium. Usually to ask him to petition such-and-such on behalf of Whitecrosse's sovereignty. He wasn't

interested in the politics, though.

"So you're leaving today," Shannon said.

"That's right," said Jay.

Another pause. Jay wondered why Shannon bothered to call. Some sense of formality? It was clearly awkward for them to talk. They'd never really done it before—other than to argue.

"Don't—don't die now." Shannon spoke with sudden fluidity. "You're too important to the world to die. I don't have any idea why they're letting you fly all the way to Mars. It's ridiculous if you ask me. You're not an astronaut. Those people train for years to go into space."

"I completed their training too." That was all he bothered to say. The mark of Divinity remained with him even after Divinity left, and his body far exceeded the level of a normal human's. Training had been a formality for him, and it was clear to everyone he had a much higher chance of survival on the unknown and unexplored surface of Mars. He'd also be able to keep the other crew members safe. In essence, he was uniquely equipped for such a dangerous expedition. They'd allowed Demny to join for a similar reason, although the strange shape of her body caused the engineers untold problems.

"Bah. I know. I know. I just have such a hard time imagining you as an astronaut. It's ridiculous."

"We've both done more ridiculous things already."

"That's true."

Another pause.

"I think," Shannon said finally, slowly, pausing again in the middle, "I think Mother would be proud of you."

Jay said nothing at first. Her words crept into him even more slowly than she spoke them. Then, though they were speaking over the phone and she couldn't see him, he nodded his head.

"Thanks. I think—I think she'd be proud of you, too."

A pause. "Good luck."

"Good luck to you too," Jay said, "with all your politics."

"Well! I won't keep you distracted when you surely have all manner of important details to attend to. Goodbye, Jay."

"Goodbye, Shannon."

The call ended.

From across the room Demny watched him. "Are you ready now," she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm ready."

He wasn't going to stop. Always, he would continue. Stopping was the end. As long as there was something for him to reach for, then he could be content in the journey. For Lalum and Vivienne and all the weight held within Demny's eyes.

Later, when the spaceship lifted off, and tore through space, he looked out the window and saw Earth as a perfect circle before him. The whole world beneath his gaze, with all its people alive or dead. Weird, he thought. It looked so small.

THE END

Credits

I. Special Thanks

Thank you to all the readers and reviewers! Please stayed tuned for my next work. You can follow me on Twitter [@IMBavitz](#) or on Tumblr [@weaselandfriends](#). I often answer questions about my stories on Tumblr, so if there's anything you still want to know, feel free to send me an ask!

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II. Cast (In Order of Appearance)

1. Perfidia Bal Berith
2. Jay Waringcrane
3. Charm
4. Charisma
5. Olliebollen Pandelirium
6. Makepeace John Gaheris Coke
7. Sansaime
8. Lalum
9. Pluxie
10. Avery Fenster Waringcrane
11. Shannon Waringcrane
12. Scott Dalton Swaino II
13. Flanz-le-Flore
14. Wendell Noh
15. Da-rae Noh
16. Theovora
17. Astrophicus
18. Mayfair Rachel Lyonesse Coke
19. Condemnation
20. Scott Dalton Swaino I
21. Yolanda Swaino
22. Dwight Jeremiah Styles
23. Gonzago of Meretryce
24. Mallory Tivania Coke
25. Tintzel
26. DeWint
27. Fool
28. Viviendre de Califerne
29. Jreige

30. Mordac
31. Meretryce
32. Temporary
33. John Verschrikkelijk
34. Ubiquitous Bal Berith
35. Dog Bitch
36. Kedeshah
37. Satan/Lucifer
38. Beelzebub
39. Cinquefoil
40. Mademerry
41. Pythette
42. The Effervescent Elf-Queen
43. Tricia of Mordac
44. Obedience
45. Justin "Just" Vance
46. Uriel
47. Moloch
48. Ashtoreth
49. Belial
50. Rimmon
51. Mammon
52. Malleus

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III. Titles

1. von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Faust*.
2. "Lugmillord." *Super Mario 74 Extreme Edition*.
3. Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*.
4. Marvell, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress."
5. Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*.
6. de Cervantes, Miguel. *Don Quixote*.
7. Wallace, David Foster. *The Pale King*.
8. Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*.
9. Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.
10. Kato, Takao. *Upotte!!*
11. Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*.
12. DeLillo, Don. *Libra*.
13. —
14. "Lugmillord." *Super Mario 74 Extreme Edition*.
15. Akatsuki, Natsume. *KonoSuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!*
16. Rockwell, Norman. *Freedom from Want*.

17. Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*.
18. "Ryukishi07." *Umineko When They Cry*.
19. Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*.
20. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "Oxygen."
21. Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*.
22. Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch*.
23. Overflow. *School Days*.
24. Beagle, Peter S. *The Last Unicorn*.
25. Uccello, Paolo. *The Hunt in the Forest*.
26. Jackson, Hue.
27. Endō, Asari. *Magical Girl Raising Project: Limited (Part 1)*.
28. Gastrow, Jason. "Bubsy 3D 2."
29. Dyson, Hugo.
30. Hussie, Andrew. *Homestuck*.
31. Hussie, Andrew. *Homestuck*.
32. Hussie, Andrew. *Homestuck*.
33. —
34. —
35. Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*.
36. Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ozymandias."
37. Hosokawa, Takehiko. *Wario Land II*.
38. Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.
39. Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*.
40. Polk, Mike. "Hastily Made Cleveland Tourism Video: 2nd Attempt."
41. Polk, Mike. "Hastily Made Cleveland Tourism Video: 2nd Attempt."
42. —
43. —
44. —
45. —
46. "Divine 天." "Scaling Featherine: Part 1."
47. —

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