

THE FUTURE FIRE

SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBERFICTION

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“We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.”
--Anaïs Nin

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We’ve been very excited for a while about the issue that you hold in your hands (or more likely are reading on your computer or mobile device) now. The first couple of stories had already come in when we published the last issue in June, so we’ve known about some of the wonderful content we had lined up for about three months. This is another very strong issue, full of beautiful stories and artwork (starting with the absolutely stunning cover by long-time TFF supporter Cécile Matthey), with political content including student protests and civil rights, climate change, women empowering and freeing themselves from male patronage, colonialism narratives and fighting back. In fact that’s the one thing that everybody in this issue has in common: fighting back.

Whether monsters, superheroes, traitors, lovers, parents, children or cyberpunks, our protagonists or antagonists are struggling, kicking out, running away, hacking the machine, staying alive, making love, blowing things up, remembering the past, not giving up on the future, and finding endless new ways to fight back against injustice, oppression, exploitation and marginalization. We could all learn lessons from them.

Enjoy the stories.

Djibril al-Ayad, September 2012

‘JE ME SOUVIENS’ Só J. Sokol

There are nine police cars. I count them again just to be sure and because counting usually calms me.

Arielle watches to see if I’m freaking out. I smile but she’s not reassured. She reaches up to place her hand on my shoulder, asks if I want to leave. I tell her I’m OK. She’s still concerned so I try a sexy smile this time. If she would kiss me now, I’d have somewhere pleasant to channel my beating heart. She leans towards me and I see that she’s used her superpowers to read my mind again, but then another police car arrives, drawing her attention away.

Now ten police cars face two hundred and thirty-six demonstrators. We are peaceful, banging pots and chanting slogans. Our numbers include children, old people, commuters on bikes, dogs wearing red bandanas. A cop is speaking through a bullhorn but no one can hear him because of the clanging and chanting. Will they arrest us now? My heart beats like the wings of a falcon, trying to escape the prison of my chest.

I tell myself that this is Québec. They will not put a black bag over my head. They will not throw me in the trunk of one of their cars. They will not burn me with cigarettes after beating me. No, this doesn’t happen here... I am pretty sure. They have granted me permanent residence and have even hired me to teach their children math. So I will stay here and demonstrate for my students.

The police open the trunks of their vans. I’m concentrating on my breathing, on not blanking out, when a little ball of energy in a red cape flies into my legs.

“*La policía*, they are here to



Illustrations by Soussherpa © 2012

catch the bad guys, Papa?” he asks me, his speech the usual jumble of French, Spanish and English.

Before I can speak, Arielle answers. “No, *mon petit chéri*, this is not why they’re here today.”

“I will catch them, then! But first Papa must fly me home so I can eat my supper.”

“*C’est correct?* Can we go home now?” Arielle asks me.

I shrug, hiding my relief, and lift Raphaël high over my head. I run full out towards our home, fast enough so that his cape flies out behind him and fast enough that my own need to run is satisfied. Our four-year-old superhero has come to the rescue.

The next morning, despite a sleep fragmented by nightmares, I’m energized, thinking about being a part of something important again. This was not my first demonstration in my new home, but the first of *this* kind—spontaneous, focused, a little confrontational. And joyous. Even more so than the mass *manifestation* when our numbers first surpassed 250,000.

That day, I stood at the overpass by rue Berri, Raphaël on my shoulders, watching the street below swell with a current of demonstrators wide as the Rio Grande. I’m good at counting, my eyes instinctively grouping people into hundreds, thousands, tens and hundreds of thousands. Surely they must listen now, I thought. Surely they will see the beauty, the rightness of our cause!

Our euphoria was short-lived as we watched the news and listened to the lies about our goals, our numbers. Last night, with our pots, with our “casseroles”, we banged out our anger and turned it into music. We felt our connection to the other Montréal *quartiers* out in the street from Parc Ex to Pointe-Saint-Charles, Snowdon to St. Michel to Villeray to Verdun. I am proud, too, that *les casseroles*, “los caserolazos”, are borrowed from the political traditions of my own people.

This morning, standing at the front of my high school math class, I feel an even stronger connection to my students. And I feel in control. Numbers—they do not lie to you; they do not let you down. I explain the first problem, my eyes scanning the classroom, counting students. Someone is missing. When I’m presenting the second problem, Xavier stumbles in, limping slightly and with his left eye blackened.

I don’t ask him for his late pass nor for his homework. I even let him read whatever it is he’s awkwardly hidden behind his math textbook. A large oval bruise on his upper arm is already aging, turning from black to green. As I answer a student’s question, my mind goes through a familiar set of choices: the police, youth protection, the *directrice* of the school... When the authorities were called in last time, it did not end well: denials by Xavier and threats of legal action by his politically connected family, followed by months of unexplained absences and hidden punishments.

I ask Xavier to remain after class is over. He approaches my desk, giving

me a sullen look from under his long hair. There seems little point in asking him what happened, so instead, I ask him what he's reading. He hesitates, then shrugs and places it in my hand.

"What is it?" I ask.

"*C'est une bande-dessinée.* 'Comic book' in English."

"I am not anglophone," I say.

"Yeah, but you're not from here, are you?"

He says this like I might be from Mars or some other planet.

"Why do the people in the *bande-dessinée* have the heads of animals?" I ask. "Are they superheroes, these animal-headed people?"

"I'm not ten years old. I don't believe in superheroes."

"I would like to help you, Xavi."

"I don't need anyone's help. And I can't stay. There's a student union meeting. To vote on the strike."

Enthusiasm has replaced his precocious cynicism.

"*D'accord.* I will see you in class tomorrow."

He taps my raised fist with his own, smiling indulgently, like to a younger or more naive brother. I watch him try to hide his limp and immediately feel depressed.

The end of the day finds me in the teachers' lounge. Luc joins me, compositions from his students clutched in his big hands. I gaze up at my best friend and he quickly drops down beside me.

"*Qu'est-ce que tu as?*" he asks, reading me as always.

"Xavier came into class today all beaten up. I don't know what I should do."

"If you suspect something..."

"It is beyond suspecting. I *know* what's happening and it's not just beatings."

"Are you sure of this?" he asks.

I simply look at him. He knows about my past. Not just the torture but the rapes as well. Luc was able to get this information out of me in a coherent way when even the tribunal could not.

"The only thing I'm not sure of is *who* is doing it," I finally say.

"Don't worry, Gabriel, we'll figure this out, I promise you. I have friends at youth protection. I even know a cousin of Xavier's mother. We'll find a way to help him."

I feel a little reassured. I move closer, so that my leg is touching his and I can lean against him. He lets me, even puts his arm around my shoulder. Some of the darkness leaks out of me.

If Arielle were here, she would be happy, seeing how I can still take comfort from other men. She was my lawyer at the refugee hearing and knows my past, accepts me as I am. She tried to prepare me for their questions, but I failed her. On such and such a date, they asked me, had I been tortured for my politi-

cal crimes or for the crime of being queer? It seemed important to be precise about this, but I was confused. Maybe I was tortured for the former and raped for the latter. The fear of disappointing the officials, of making them angry, made my words flee. Perhaps that's why, in the middle of the hearing, I blanked out. When I came back, I was standing on a chair without any clothes on, turning around in circles as though to model my scars.

"I should go home," I say to Luc. "To cook supper. Arielle is counting on me."

"How is Arielle?"

"She is good. We had very hot sex last night. Do you want to hear about it?"

I feel happy thinking about this while leaning against Luc's shoulder. It was when Arielle and I made love for the first time, on the floor of her office, that I realized she had superpowers. I hadn't been sure before, even though she'd rescued me from the hearing, helping me to dress myself before bringing me to the hospital. Arielle might even have won my case, but instead, she found a way to spare me the pain of the hearing. She offered to marry me. Her colleagues teased that she didn't want to risk a blemish on her perfect record, but Arielle explained it all in logical, lawyerly terms. She'd just gone through another in a series of unreliable roommates and untrustworthy boyfriends. She wanted someone who shared her political values to also share, on a longterm basis, the household expenses and cooking. And one other thing. She wanted a child.

Luc tells me maybe another time, after a few beers.

"Will we go somewhere that has 'Maudite' beer?" I ask him. "I like the picture on the label, of the flying canoe, *la chasse galerie*."

"You're such a child sometimes. And speaking of children, I have that book for Raphaël. Of old Québécois tales, including a few *chasse galerie* stories." He hands me a large volume, the edges soft with use.

"It's beautiful," I say, running my fingers along the expensive binding.

"My parents gave me this collection. Keep it as long as you need it."

"*Merci beaucoup, mon cher ami,*" I say, kissing him on both cheeks and then once on the lips for good measure. He accepts my shows of affection with his usual aplomb.

That night, I tell Raphaël my own version of a *chasse galerie* story.

"Once upon a time, some men were chopping down trees deep in the winter forest. They were sad because they missed their children and partners."

"Where were the children and partners, Papa?"

"In another forest... planting trees to replace those that had been cut down. So one day, the men boarded a magic canoe to visit their loved ones."

"Were they superheroes?"

"*Claro que si.* They were very good friends who could... they could mix their powers together into one big superpower. That's how they made the canoe

fly. But there was a super villain too, and he... he sprinkled forgetting dust into their eyes so that they could not remember who they were, and their canoe started falling down to the earth.”

“Oh no! What happened?”

“Flying boy came to the rescue. He brought the boat down safely and used a magical washcloth to wipe the forgetting dust out of the men’s eyes.”

“Was Flying boy wearing his red cape?”

“Yes. And now it’s time for superheroes to go to sleep.”

“Papa? Why did the super villain make the men forget things? Why is he bad?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a bad thing happened to him, something he needed to forget. Good night, Flying boy.”

“Good night, Papa.”

I tuck him into bed, trying to ignore a growing darkness. I make myself think of the night Rapha was born. The moment I held him, I knew he’d been gifted with strong powers and that it was my job to protect him until he was old enough to use them safely. This responsibility is what has kept me from ending my own worthless life.

Arielle is watching the nightly update on the student strike that reignited this fall. There’s a late-breaking development about a student who’s in critical condition after a plastic bullet struck her in the eye. I pull Arielle onto my lap and hide my face in her curls while counting to myself. Maybe Arielle will use her gifts tonight to make me forget things that strike and burn and tear into tender flesh. Maybe, at least, she can help me get a few hours of sleep.

On Facebook, I learn that this week has been declared “*une semaine de résistance*” for secondary school students. Our school votes to go on strike, but staff must report to work as usual. I stay in the teachers’ lounge, not wanting to be alone, but I’m restless, so I go down the hall and stand at the entrance. At nine o’clock, the police arrive in full riot gear and declare the students’ picket illegal. They open their trunks and pull out shiny yellow vests and canisters of malevolent substances. I walk back into the teachers’ lounge.

“We should be out there,” I say to the others.

A debate ensues but many teachers are missing, waiting in their classrooms.

“I’ll get them,” Luc volunteers. He turns to me. “Stay here until I get back.”

I wait for a while, then go to the front entrance again and see the beginnings of trouble between a group of students and the riot cops. I wonder where Luc is and turn to see him right behind me.

“*Venez dehors! Nos étudiants se font embêter!*” he shouts to the others.

I run outside and Luc catches up to me, his hand closing around my upper arm. I pull him with me as I throw myself between the students and the riot police. We’re shoved but keep to our feet and Luc is saying “*Calmez-vous, calmez-vous,*” making eye contact with each of the cops in front of us, patiently explaining that we are teachers, a French teacher and a Mathematics teacher, and

that we must all remain calm to set a good example.

After a few tense moments, more teachers come outside. We join hands, forming a barrier between the students and the police. The students chant slogans like “Education is a right” and “À qui nos écoles? À nous nos écoles”. Luc pulls *L'Étranger* from his back pocket and begins reciting from it. I spot Xavier. He's focused and intense, a courageous smile on his face. By the end of the morning, almost all of my colleagues have joined us and the police have retreated to their cars. I grip Luc's hand tighter and think about kissing every single teacher standing with us. With these heroes beside me, I feel invincible.

The next night I have a beer with Luc at a café on rue St. Denis. I finish five ‘Maudites’ and am feeling a nice buzz from that, with its higher alcohol content. I told Arielle I'd eat something with Luc. I can't lie to her so I steal a handful of his fries. He offers me his burger but I shake my head, too keyed up to eat much.

“Shouldn't we be going?” I ask. “The *manif* is scheduled to begin at 21 hours.”

“It's not like the theatre, my friend. We don't have to be there when the curtain rises. You sure this is alright with Arielle? There's more risk of being arrested at night.”

“I have promised to be careful.”

At Parc Émilie-Gamelin, I'm in my element. It's hot for late September. A thick darkness envelops me. There's an aura of unpredictability that I appreciate because deep down, I'm an optimist who believes that whatever happens next has got to be better than the shit we have now. My lips move to the chants. An anarchist marching band playing circus music draws me in deeper, to where the park is filled with magic.

Luc introduces me to people he knows. After a while, I wander off as he gets into conversation with one of his ex-girlfriends. There's a group of men wearing dark clothing on the fringes of the *manif*. They're rowdy and loud and exude a dangerous energy. I'm drawn to them. I also want to run from them. I find myself a couple of metres closer to the group, though I don't remember deciding to approach them. In fact, I remember deciding the opposite. My feet are taking more steps in their direction and I can't make myself stop. The men are carrying something in their hands. Their eyes flash yellow in the darkness. I'm terrified and mesmerized as I come closer still. One raises his arm with a look of gleeful malice. Someone grabs my shirt from behind.

“*Câlisse de tabarnak*,” Luc shouts. “Can't I turn my back on you for a minute?” My collar is bunched up in his fist as he guides me, not gently, out of the park.

“Who are those guys?” I ask. “They looked like skinheads with hair.”

“*Agents provocateurs* or just assholes. What difference does it make? You know to stay away from them.”

“They have evil powers. I couldn't pull away.”

“You’ve had too many beers. It’s time to go home.”

I leave with him, but I know I’ll be back tomorrow night and all the nights after. I’ve found another activity where it feels right that I’m still alive. I count through the list in my head: Taking care of Raphaël, teaching my students, making love, being drunk or stoned, going to *manifs* with a certain type of energy. I’ll just have to be careful, to resist the evil power. It’ll be worth it if we succeed. It may even give me back some of the life force stolen from me when I was a teenager.

Arielle and I are watching the news. She’s become a news junkie in the same way that I’ve become a junkie for demonstrations.

“Our government makes me ashamed to be *Québécoise*,” Arielle says.

“That is not Québec. The real Québec is in the streets, marching and chanting and demonstrating. Come out with me more. You would feel better,” I tell her.

She touches my cheek. “*You* reassuring *me*. It should be the other way around.”

Of course the police violence and new repressive laws frighten me. But conditions in Québec, politically and socially, are still better than in the country where I was born. It’s for this very reason that whenever things become worse here, I feel nauseous, like the world is spinning in the wrong direction.

“Let’s go together to the flashmob nude *manif* tomorrow. It will be fun. I can put *fleur-de-lys* pasties on your nipples.”

She smiles and I know I’ve convinced her.

The next day, Arielle calls me at school to say that they’re concerned about Raphaël at the *garderie*. He’s telling everyone that he’s a superhero and trying to fly off tables and playground equipment. They’ve asked for a meeting.

“I can go, Arielle.”

“They’ve asked that I come, specifically.”

“That is sexism.”

“No, it’s more that...”

“What?”

“It’s because of what you told Raphaël, last time this happened. That he needed to wait until he was older to use his superpowers. And to only use them when they’re needed... and other things they’ve heard you say.”

“Are you angry with me?”

“No, not angry but.... We’ll talk more later. Are you still going to the *manif*?”

“Yes.”

“There’s usually less police violence at the nude ones. You’ll be careful?”

“Of course. I love you.”

Without Arielle and Raphaël, the apartment feels a little sinister. It’s better in Raphaël’s room where I can sense him in his toys and clothes and artwork. I hold on to one of his superhero figures and draw strength from that.

In our bedroom, I lay down and wrap my arms around Arielle's pillow and breathe in her familiar odour. It's not enough. On the shelf in the back of my closet, I find the box that I haven't opened since my uncle smuggled me out of my country. I take out the red cape, red feathered mask and calf-high red boots. The cape against my nose, I smell the streets of my childhood and adolescence.

My mother sewed this costume, but she did not bring me up to believe in superheroes. My parents were university professors. Both were politically active, proud of my work for the student newspaper and tolerant of my sexual explorations. Their openness and support encouraged me to finally tell what my uncle did to me.

No, my parents did not believe in superheroes. Nor did they believe in super villains. Just because you don't believe in something doesn't mean it can't kill you. They never should have gone to the police about what my uncle did. They thought they could protect and avenge me but he was too powerful. Their so-called accident deprived me of protection. Thoughts of vengeance are like cold ashes in my mouth.

I hold the costume in my hands, remembering when I wore it so proudly. It was after "los casserolazos", after the occupation of the campus library, and after the kiss-in, but the taste of my classmates' lips was still fresh in my memory. The superhero demonstration was the last one before I was taken. Like me, only parts of the costume survived, but maybe some traces of the powers that were stolen from me remain in the material. I shove it into a bag and head for my bike.

I'm marching down rue Ste-Catherine wearing my cape, my boots, my mask and nothing else. The breeze ruffles my pubic hair. My boots protect my feet and my mask protects my identity. It's almost like having the power of invisibility.

Everyone is friendly, many people talk to me. A few ask for my contact info, take my picture. I know I'm good looking but I take no pride in this. I did nothing to earn my looks, yet, it's something I've had to pay for, repeatedly. "Excuse me," I say to the person who's been chatting with me for the last kilometre. "I have to stop here." On the side street under a circus canopy stands a man wearing a red kerchief who has the dark eyes and quirked smile of my country of birth. He's holding a six-inch tall toy polar bear banging a miniature pot with a tiny, perfectly formed wooden spoon. The bear is wearing the flag of Québec as a cape.

"How much, *monsieur*?" I ask.

"Just take it, *hermano*."

"I couldn't."

"Yes. It is for your child. Take it."

I hold the bear, sensing in its erect posture and soft gaze a desire to protect. I look up to thank the man, wondering how he knows about Rapha, but he's gone.

At home, I give Rapha his gift. I let him turn it on so that he can hear the pot banging, a sweet, high pitched clang clang... clangclangclang. I tell him to keep it safe because of its magic, then kiss him goodnight.

That evening, on Facebook, I see the first photo of myself at the nude *manif*. In the next couple of days, more photos follow, including one where my back is to the camera as I look over my shoulder. I'm holding up the toy polar bear with its flag-of-Québec cape. My other fist is raised as well. This is the photo that goes viral.

Wednesday, I arrive early at school and, uncharacteristically, so does Luc. He comes into my classroom with a copy of a popular glossy magazine in his hand. He slaps it onto my desk.

"Please tell me this isn't you."

I look at the cover photo—a close-up shot of me at the *manif*, fist in air, my more private parts artfully photo-shopped. It's difficult to answer him, the power of his verbal request at odds with the truth.

"He's wearing a mask," I finally answer. "You can't tell, for sure, who he is."

"*Je n'en reviens pas*. You can't be that stupid."

I hang my head thinking, 'Yes I can.' He hears my thoughts.

"*Écoute*, you're going to be called into the *directrice*'s office this afternoon. Don't say anything. Let me handle it. *D'accord?*"

At the meeting, Arielle is there too. Luc must have called her. They sit on either side of me, protecting me as they answer concerns about propriety, judgment, reputation, regulations. My head is pounding from the force of the words in the room. I try to count how many hours of sleep I've had this week. If I strung those hours together, would it be equivalent to one full night's rest?

In the end, I'm told that I've gotten off lightly. I'm told this by the *directrice*, by Luc and again by Arielle on the way home. I get to keep my job, without even a warning in my record. But I cannot come to work for ten days. The first day is without pay and those following are sick days for me to rest and "find my equilibrium". I am not to give interviews.

Still, the news is full of information about me—that I am a teacher with a four-year old son, that I am a refugee which, strictly speaking, is not even true. But this is the excuse used for why my school is not identified, nor my name used. The real reason is that Arielle and Luc have created a shield of partial invisibility.

Nevertheless, there are photos of me—far away, obscured, fully clothed. And quotes in support of the movement and against police violence, not attributed directly to me but said to be "summaries of my position" as communicated to "friends". I learn that the fact that this message comes from a good-looking, naked teacher who is also a political refugee and father has earned me, and the movement, "a great deal of new popular support." Arielle tells me that this has earned me a lot of enemies too—principally, the government and the

police—and insists that I lay low for a while.

I try to do as Arielle says. For the first forty-eight hours, I actually do not leave my bed. Arielle suggests I start seeing my therapist more frequently. Luc comes by with offers of bike rides, soccer games, a film. The problem is that I am not teaching, not with my students. When Raphaël is at the *garderie*, I feel useless. Finally, I tell Arielle that I must get out, if only to bike around the city.

The next day, I participate in three separate demonstrations and a teach-in organized by professors. Afterwards, I go to a public *assemblée générale*. The meeting is held in Parc Lafontaine where, just metres from us, a woman in black fishnet tights and stilettos is being taught to wield a whip by a huge bald man in leather. Every few minutes, I'm distracted by the sound of the whip cracking accompanied by a sharp burning pain on my back, but when I look around the assembly, no one else seems bothered. It occurs to me that I may be the only one who can perceive these two super villains. I leave and, biking very fast, attend seven different "*casserolazos*" before heading to the night *manif*. When I return home, Arielle asks me what I've been up to. I tell her everything, which of course I must do. She seems deeply disturbed and insists that we both stay home the next day.

It's a good day. We make love, nap, drink red wine. I feed a little off her life force—I cannot help myself—but I don't think it hurts her because she's so strong. In the evening, I put Raphaël to bed while she listens to the news. She's turned the volume low but I can tell there's been a report of some super villainy. I know this by the staccato rhythm of the words, the erratic, fractured images. As I enter the living room, Arielle turns off the television. I walk towards it as though to a cooling corpse.

"What happened?"

She hesitates. "Some arrests, police violence. There were... injuries, that's all."

I know that I'm to blame. I either caused it or... or maybe if I had been there, I could have lured the evil towards me.

"I'm going to the demonstration tomorrow," I tell Arielle.

"Gabriel..."

I cut her off, steel myself against her power.

"Please," I say, putting my fingers on her lips. "Please," I whisper again.

She sighs. "Then I'm going too."

On the way to the demonstration the next morning, we drop Rapha off at his friend's apartment on avenue Mont Royal. He's disappointed that he can't come, but we tell him to watch for us, that the march will pass right by his street.

After last night's events, the mood at the grand *manif* is somber. The numbers of police and the way they are armed seem more a provocation than a way of keeping the peace. Nevertheless, the demonstrators remain positive. I march between Arielle and Luc in a bubble of safety. Something in the mood still

doesn't feel right, though. I'm glad that Rapha is safe at his friend's home.

It's after crossing St. Laurent that I realize the super villains are trying to take control of the demonstration. I can see them, just off to my right, but whenever I turn my head, they're gone. Arielle asks me what's wrong, so I mention my nervousness for the students. Luc thinks I mean *our* students and says that he saw Xavier and other kids from our school marching with a youth contingent behind us. He offers to try to find them for me and to talk to Xavier if possible.

Now there is only Arielle beside me. This is the moment when I must leave. I kiss her hard on the lips and make a run for it. I find them easily, instinctively, the evil calling out to me. I can taste the violence in the air as it draws me closer. Suddenly, I see Xavier in front of me and feel a sense of mounting panic.

Everything happens at once. An arm is raised. People are running. A canister bursts in the air. Riot police appear from nowhere, weapons already in hand. Arielle calls me from a distance, Luc's head and shoulders appear above the crowd far behind me. The mass of humanity is rumbling and reforming. Xavier's eyes meet my own.

"Run!" I yell to him and his friends, and they do.

The next instant, the first *matraque* cuts across my hip, taking my legs out from under me. My head hits the pavement. Everything goes dark. I remember.

We were all standing under the night sky, a mass of students dancing in our superhero costumes. The evening was hot and full of motion, my arms tight around the shoulders of my two best friends. We sang and danced while we waited for the government to finally see that we were their children and that the things we fought for were good and right and pure.

I was almost too happy, too excited. Almost, I was a little bored. My two friends agreed to leave with me and we found our way to my old home. Someone had placed a new lock on the door I used to enter. I was seeking my parents' ghosts, hoping they were watching over us, yet I did not heed this obvious warning from the dead. I smashed the window, my parents' murder a shard in my heart.

We were inside, kissing. I went from one set of lips to the other, my hand under the girl's superhero skirt, the other rubbing the boy through his superhero tights. It was all very innocent—cuddles and caresses, seeking warmth in the ruins of my childhood home. I thought about returning to the demonstration, guilty about convincing my friends to follow me to this dark and sad place. This was the power that I had—to make people love me, to make them see my love for them, to make them follow me, heedlessly.

And still, It might have been alright, if I hadn't taken off my costume.

My eyes snap open. The cop's face is snarling above me. "It's you, the magazine star. Let them take your picture now," he says, punctuating his words with a blow across the chest. I taste blood in the back of my throat.

They arrived with their guns, pulling me from my friends. The beating be-

gan at once, the force of the blows seeming to flow from an exterior power. I fought back at first, scanning the street outside for help. When my uncle stepped forward from the darkness with a look of anticipation about to be satisfied, I stopped fighting.

“Run!” I yelled to my friends. And they did.

I don't want to fight back this time. But my body doesn't listen to me. It's trying to stand. The next blow takes me and I'm on the ground again, the pain exploding behind my eyes and trying to spread itself more evenly throughout my body. I look up, hoping they'll finish me off quickly. It's then that I see Rapha leaning over his friend's balcony, the little bear clanging away in alarm, my son's mouth a big “O”.

Pain. The stench of death and decay. In the prison, my only comfort was that my friends were not also taken. I balanced this against my agony. Snatches of sleep are brief, dreams of warm lips and smooth limbs. I began to imagine that I could see my friends flying over the prison in their costumes, planning to save me. I waited for rescue as minutes/hours/days became lifetimes endured. My uncle always came after the pain, speaking to me of loyalty to government and family and God, his hands on my body, gentle as a poisonous eel. Bled and pumped dry, I could no longer hear my own cries. They'd stolen my life force and I was fading. I finally realized that my friends' superhero powers must have been stolen as well. That this is why they never came for me.

Raphaël has climbed over the balcony railing. With horror, I realize that he's seen me. I sense Arielle's presence coming nearer, Luc's as well. My death is coming too, but not soon enough. I will still be alive to see my child jump from the balcony.

“Rapha!” I cry as he becomes airborne, his cape flying out behind him. The police baton is raised again. I close my eyes and wait for it.

I'm flying through the air, holding on to Raphaël. We're moving very fast above the streets of Montréal. Am I dead yet? I don't want Rapha to be in a place of the dead. “No,” I moan and realize that, after all these years, I can hear my cries of pain again.

“Shh,” a familiar voice says. “*Ça va aller. I've got you.*”

Luc's face is above mine, his arms carrying me swiftly through the streets, the crowd opening before him. If I could, I'd ask him to care for Raphaël in my place. My hand rests against Luc's chest, his shirt wet and sticky with my blood. I try to touch his lips with my fingers so he can read my mind, but my fingers reach only his chin, slipping down again on its rough wetness. My hand drops to my own mouth. I taste salt, feel Luc's chest heave with his sobs, with the strain of carrying me and running. I press my hand against his heart and he runs faster.

In the ambulance, Arielle holds my hand. Her voice cradles me. “*Lâche pas, Gabriel. Lâche pas.*” Hope hurts more than giving up, though, and I don't think I can take any more pain. Then she puts my hand on her cheek and I feel



her tears. I absorb the salt through the tips of my fingers and hold on a little longer.

Awareness slips in between longer periods of confusion. I see the friends from my student days beckoning me to dance with them. I see them pass the missing pieces of my costume to Arielle and Luc who hold fast with their powers of reason and

strength, of goodness and loyalty. Above them all is my precious Rapha, flying and free. I remember now how he jumped from the balcony, landing squarely on the policeman's back, how he passed his red felt square across the cop's eyes, and how the man backed away from me in shock, as though only now seeing what he had done.

I wake and wake again. Luc or Arielle are always beside me holding tightly to my hand. When I ask for Rapha, I am told not to worry, that he is fine. I sleep and heal.

On a day when my head is clear, I open my eyes to Arielle sitting beside my hospital bed with Rapha on her lap. He clutches a newspaper, on the front page, a photo of his exploit, his red cape flying out behind him. The headlines reads: Boy superhero leaps to the rescue. Negotiations resume, student leaders hopeful.

"What happened?" I ask.

"It's a long story," Arielle says. "What did you think you were doing?"

"My students were in danger. I saw Xavier, told him to run."

"Well he ran and found Luc, which probably saved your life."

"Papa," Raphaël whispers. "Maman made me promise not to fly anymore until I am grown up. I said *d'accord* but only if you come back to life."

"Well I have, so you must do as you have promised."

"I also promised not to tell any more newspaper people about how I can fly. And about the magic forgetting dust."

"Forgetting dust?" I ask.

"Yes. Like you told me. I used the red square to wipe it from the policeman's eyes. And I said the magic words."

"What words, Rapha?"

"*Je me souviens.*"

The Harpy'

Laura Heron



Illustrations by Rebecca Whitaker © 2012

I drop my cup of tea and shriek. The harpy at my kitchen window shrieks back. The mug bounces on the lino floor and I am glad we chose lino over the harder and more expensive tile. Hot tea splashes my leg, soaking into the trouser fabric. It burns, forcing me to jump back out of the puddle and bump into my pine dining set.

The creature peers into my kitchen, head cocked to one side like a bird. Her enormous tattered wings block out the dull light from the close. What am I going to do? Should I ring my daughter? The police. Of course. I run round the table to the wall-mounted phone and dial 999.

“Hello, emergency service operator, which service do you require? Fire, police, or

ambulance?”

“Police,” I say.

“I’ll just connect you now.” The woman on the phone sounds very brisk and no-nonsense. My mouth goes dry.

“Hello, where are you calling from?” If anything, this woman sounds even fiercer. Fiercer than the monster, who doesn’t seem to have moved after that one cry. I cannot get enough breath, and my heart is too loud.

“Home.”

“Do you know the address?”

“Er, 23 Juniper Way, Coventry.” Stupid, of course she would need my address. The direct stare of the bird-woman must be getting to me.

“Thank you, Madam. What is the nature of your emergency?”

“There’s a harpy outside my window.”

Silence.

“Hello?”

“Excuse me, Madam, I must not have quite understood, can you repeat that please?”

“There is a harpy outside my window.”

“Can you describe this, um, harpy for me?”

“She must be nearly seven foot tall, with long hair that doesn’t seem very clean and very large wings. They are beautiful. Oh, and she’s naked and quite old.” My mind catches up with my voice. She must think I am crazy. A crazy, hallucinating old woman. How can you tell when you’re hallucinating anyway?

“Madam, what is the harpy doing at the moment?” She sounds kind, as if humouring a small child, or talking a madman off a ledge. What do I expect her to do exactly? Other than send me to the loony bin.

“I am so sorry to waste your time, I was mistaken. It’s just a big crow. Sorry. It won’t happen again. So sorry.”

I put the phone down very quickly, hoping that they don’t arrest me for wasting police time.

I push my shoulders against the wall, trying to make myself small. I want to get away, but I am scared she might get into my kitchen if I am not watching her. She still has not moved. She is just staring at me. I raise my hand to pat my hair back into place and check that my clothes are still neat. Stupid to care what a monster thinks of my personal grooming. I jump when a claw strokes my face. The creature can reach me even through the glass. It is oddly comforting. When was the last time anyone touched me like that? The last time anyone touched me at all?

I walk up to the window above the sink, pulled by an invisible string. In a dream, I open the window a little bit. The harpy shifts to accommodate the wooden frame, but otherwise is still. The stink of it washes over me, a strange mix of old female sweat and the sweepings of a birdcage. It should be deeply unpleasant, but it is not.

Her eyes don't seem to have pupils. Or any white. They are just black and shiny like a bird's. Her wrinkled face is framed by a dark grey tangle of hair. I touch my own sagging cheek and my sensible, clean bob of greying brown hair. She looks at me, sees me watching her. She doesn't seem to mind, so I stare as much as I want to. To tell the truth, I cannot look away.

I lean forward, and the obsidian black of her eyes is all I see. The blackness engulfs me and sends me back to that day last March.

I am watching myself and Tom from above. He was wearing his old blazer and pale trousers, the ones I bought him from Marks and Spencer's, before they tried to be trendy and the quality went downhill. He was standing in our living room, in front of the television, rocking back and forth on his heels, hands clasped behind his back. Secretly, I knew he thought he looked impressively martial. I knew because I once caught him pretending to acknowledge salutes from imaginary soldiers in the bedroom mirror. I never told him I saw him.

I was sitting on the sofa, looking up at him, and I wasn't listening. I was worrying about the roast I was cooking. Tom didn't like dry meat. I nodded at what he was saying, and realised from his response that it was the wrong answer. I shrank back a little; I couldn't help it.

"That's what I mean. You always do this, Emily. Are you even listening to me?" His voice was raised, and his cheeks flushed an ugly red. "You have never really understood me. The fact is, well, I've met someone else."

What was he saying? I felt dizzy, even my hands and my feet went numb.

"I love her. I'm sorry..."

I doubted it. I stopped listening to him when he started to talk in clichés. I focused on the pink rose pattern on the wallpaper border behind his head. I had never really noticed the way you can see mocking faces in the spaces between the petals before. When he seemed to be finished I stood up and said the first thing I thought of.

"I must go and check on the chicken."

"Damn the chicken! I cannot believe you, even you, can be so..."

It is here that I return to my kitchen and the black eyes in front of me.

It is ridiculous to think that something so alien can show emotions I can understand. Despite this, the birdlike eyes seem to be sad and angry all at once. In their inky depths I see my own feelings reflected. Feelings hidden so deeply inside myself that I thought I didn't have them. When I was a girl, it wasn't acceptable to be angry. "Don't stamp and shout like that, it isn't ladylike," my mother used to tell me. After a while I learned not to be angry at all, but now I am shaking with it. Tears prickle my eyes. I don't want to cry. Tom used to tell me that crying was manipulative and it made my skin blotchy. I believed him.

On my cheek I feel a slight pressure, a light scoring across it. I open my eyes as a rush of spicy air flutters my hair back from my face, leaving my skin cold and tingling. The wings beat loudly, and the harpy leaves me.

The kitchen is a mess. I pick up the mug, mop the liquid and re-wash the

whole floor in bleach. Harpies do not exist. It must have been a bird, a crow maybe. I've been alone a lot recently, and perhaps it is getting to me.

The mechanical action of the mop and the bleach across the beige floor of my kitchen soothes my nerves. I stop crying, and my hands become steady. I go to fill up the kettle, and I find a solitary bedraggled feather. Disgusting thing. I throw it away. It must have been a pigeon. No, a crow; that was it. No one sane sees legends in daylight, not in suburbia.

My afternoon continues as Sundays normally do. I pop out and do a bit of shopping for my neighbour; the poor dear cannot manage anymore. She likes me to have a cup of tea with her a few times a week. I am too distracted to feign much interest in her extended family today, but she doesn't seem to notice.

That evening I put on the radio and do the ironing. I like to have my shirts ready for the week. I work methodically, pleased with how the pale cotton becomes tidy and starched. The hiss of the iron and smell of the hot cloth soothes me with its familiar scent. Monday is always a little busy; my employer often thinks of things over the weekend and needs meetings arranged, notes and letters typed, and stationery ordered. I reach for another shirt to iron, a white men's shirt, before I remember. Does that woman put enough starch on the collar and cuff?

The phone rings.

"Mum?"

"Rebecca? What's the matter?"

"It's Dad. He's in hospital. Daniel and I are there now. I thought you should know."

I fall onto a wooden chair.

"What's happened? Is he alright?" I cannot bring myself to say his name.

"He'll live." Rebecca is having trouble with the words. Her normally brisk voice is hesitant. "He was set on by a gang... of kids, I suppose. No one saw them and Dad can't remember much. But it must have been kids, animals they are. He's been beaten badly. The doctor said he'll live, but, well, his testicles, they seemed to have... they've had to be removed. Can you look after the kids while I stay here tonight? I've left them with the neighbour, but I can't put her out for too long."

"I don't know what to say. Of course, I'll be over in ten minutes." I wonder if I should buy him a get-well card.

I should be sad, or upset, or worried. I am not. Instead, I think about the harpy and her black eyes and pale skin. I wonder where she comes from. Was she a woman before a creature? What changed her? I think I will get him a card, maybe one with footballs on it. He always liked watching sport on the TV.

A week or so later, I wake up early. I roll over and look at my electric alarm clock. Its pale green face tells me it's four in the morning. I feel bone tired, but the soft comfort of my duvet feels like it is trapping me. I don't sleep much at

the moment. Mainly, I chase worries instead of sheep. At dawn I feel that I am allowed to stop pretending, and at least go and get a cup of tea.

I push back the curtains and look out at the familiar view. Small grey cars parked on driveways leading to neat redbrick houses, next to patches of green lawn. Every other lawn seems to have a bicycle or plastic toy nestled in the grass. It is alien this morning. My eye is caught by movement in the small playground at the end of the close. I open the window so that I can stick my head out.

In the playground is the harpy. She is dancing, her ungainly stumpy legs and ugly arms following a complex rhythm of their own, her great tattered wings moving as a gentle counterpoint. All the breath in my body leaves all at once. The shouting of the birds serves as a musical accompaniment to the lone figure. There is a swing set, and a stump which used to be a see-saw; it has been removed as it contravened health and safety. The ordinariness of the council-maintained equipment highlights the numinous nature of the dancing monster. I can feel my heart pounding and I gulp, hungry for the cold taste of the dawn. The harpy whirls faster and faster, swooping with her body, snaking her hips, throwing her ruined face up to catch the sun. I pant as if it is me dancing. I cannot look away. The creature is glorious, her wrinkled flesh and dirty feathers adding a texture that no smooth nymph could hope to match. She is fierce and proud, and her rage is righteous.

I turn and run out of my bedroom, unlocking my door hurriedly. Ignoring my bare feet, I race to the end of the close. I see the deserted playground, but still I run until I am in the circle of the equipment. My lungs are on fire, and I have no more breath, but still I turn around and around. She isn't here anymore. I slump onto a plastic swing, and ignore the wet dew soaking into my night-dress. I close my eyes and hang there. The rest of the day is grey and lonely by comparison.

Rebecca will not stop talking about Tom's accident. She thinks that I should visit him, so I go to the hospital. The place smells of institutional food and disinfectant, and there are liquid hand wash dispensers on every wall. I cannot find a nurse to ask where his ward is, so I have to check a map and follow an orange line painted on the wall. He has a small room to himself. I knock.

"Come in."

I slip through the door. Tom is sitting up in bed, propped up against the wall. He has put on the blue pyjamas that I bought for him two years ago from BHS. Did he wear them on purpose, to remind me that I used to take care of him? They are missing a button at the neck and are fraying slightly at the cuff. That shade of blue seems to wash him out. He might have done better to wear a pair that he looked good in.

"Emily, I'm so glad you came." He smiles at me, and puts his hand out, an invitation to embrace him. Instead, I hand him a card and sit down on the hard chair next to him. I put my handbag on my lap as a shield.

“How are you feeling?” I say, when I cannot take the hurt silence anymore.

“Alright. The infection has cleared up; this lot of antibiotics seem to have done the trick. I was worried that it was MSRA, but no, nothing so glamorous.” Tom laughs a little. My lips thin into the approximation of a smile. “Good for me, anyway, they didn’t have to take off any more skin. The area is healing well; Doctor Thompson is very pleased. The stitches are coming out next Wednesday. They say I can go home soon.”

“That’s good.” I say.

“And you? You’re looking well. Is that a new dress?” Tom is pathetically eager to compliment me.

“No.”

“Ah. Well, it looks nice anyway.”

I don’t respond. Tom has not managed to shave completely, and there is a little tuft of hair on the side of his face. I cannot believe that this little man has hurt me so much. When I close my eyes the harpy dances for me in the dawn.

“Emily, love,” Tom starts to say.

“You are not allowed to call me that anymore.” My eyes jerk open. “Not now.”

“Look, I made a mistake.” Tom reaches out to grasp my hand. I stand up to get away from him so quickly that the chair scrapes against the floor. “Emily, please. I made a mistake. In here, it made me realise...”

“Shut up, Tom. I know she left you.” Rebecca told me. She seemed to think that I should care.

“Oh. But I wanted you back before that. I missed you. Do you think, with time...”

“No.” I walk to the door.

“But I have nowhere to go!”

I turn and look at him. I pity him.

“No.”

I shut the door behind me. My hips swing a little as I walk, following the orange line back outside.

I dance through my chores that day. I put the radio on and sing along to Bruce Springsteen. That evening, although I get ready for bed at my normal time, I don’t go to sleep. I wait.

There it is, a tap at the window. I am not sure what I am expecting when I open the curtains.

That’s a lie; I know what I am hoping for.

“What do you want?”

The harpy says nothing, but her eyes lock onto mine. Tonight, the rage seems banked, a glowing ember rather than a flame. My breath becomes shallow and rapid. I open the window and let her in.



Illustrations by Rebecca Whitaker © 2012

Having a harpy as my lover has changed me. There are stubs on my back. They will grow full and strong, but for now they are working their way through tendon and muscle and skin. My lover seems to think that they are sweet. She strokes and grooms them often. My nails are turning into claws and already can rip into meat. My feet are crooked, tearing themselves apart, the soft skin sluicing off to become hard scale. It is a painful process, to become harpy. I talk less and feel more. My guilt at leaving the children is beginning to pass, and I watch them and the grandchildren from a distance sometimes. I will protect them if necessary; and their children, and their children's children.

I miss ironing, but at least I no longer need to cook; flesh is better dripping and warm and fresh. And my lover is with me. We dance in the dawn, and raise our ruined faces to the sun.

'Safecracker, Safe'

J.C. Hryu

Running, again.

The night flashed by in a blur of blackness and pale: shadows looming, stretching and fading; street lamps bleeding sepia light sideways.



Illustrations by Chris Cartwright © 2012

“Max!” he shouted, still somewhere back up there, but a little closer than before.

She willed her legs to move faster, down through the winding bends, past the homes lit warmly from within.

“Max!” Even closer now. He was gaining.

Jagged breaths tore through her throat, in sync with the throbs of pain in her head. Her head was about to split in two. She belonged in Schism skies, with glowing lines of vault arrays beneath her fingers. Not in this physical, painful real-time fuckery.

“Goddamnit, Max!”

Another ragged inhale and up ahead, past the sign on the median, she saw the river of asphalt that was Laurel Canyon Boulevard, snaking its way down the Santa Monica Mountains into West Hollywood.

She waded into the rushing river flow of lights and con-

crete. Stopped in the middle, when one foot landed on a raised, round bump: a white pavement marker, streaked nearly gray with dirt and rubber. Tri-cars and monocycles honked and swerved around her.

Her feet were the only things not moving in the flow of the asphalt river. She wanted to root her feet to the bottom and stay still. Stop running, and let everything pass over her, as long as she could stay in one place.

In Schism, though. Not here.

She could hear Levi's voice, graveled and grim, in her head. He said that he loved her and that they couldn't live without each other. "Dammit, Levi," she whispered, closing her eyes.

"No no no—" A voice broke through, immediate, and urgent, above Levi's murmur. He was nearby, somewhere at the edge of the river, and coming closer. Then the tri-car hit her and—

She opened her eyes and drew in a long, ragged breath. Light filled her vision, piercing; warmth suffused her face. Sunrise, against a steady tempo of mechanical beeps.

"What the..." The man in the chair next to the bed jolted awake, sitting up straight.

She was blinded by the sunlight; when she moved to cover her eyes, she felt the dull painful pull of the needles in her hands and arms. An IV stand squeaked closer, into focus.

"Easy, Max," the man said, standing up and leaning over her. Gently, he put her hands back down at her sides. "It's okay. Take it easy." He touched her face, lifted long strands of black hair away from it. "You're awake. Thank god, you're awake," he said hoarsely. "You've been in a coma, baby."

That voice. She knew that voice. He had said he loved her. "Levi," she said slowly. Her fingers unclenched against the thin sheets. She knew that long face, the blunt chin, steady brown eyes under heavy lids.

"That's me, baby," he said, and smiled.

She could remember most of the long-term. Her childhood, surrounded by uncles. Cracking her first safe, the green metal money box safe with the coin slot in the top, rattling with quarters. Running away to the bright lights of New Angeles. Her parents, and the accident they had died in.

And now, Levi said she had been in a terrible accident of her own which had wiped her short-term memory, about three months out from her revival. "Tri-car hit you, in broad daylight, at the bottom of Mount Olympus. I had you airlifted here. Hospitals in New City are better than any of the shitholes in New Angeles."

She shook her head, put the uneaten pudding cup back onto the tray. Most of the needles and machines were gone, but the scars were dark and livid. "I

thought it was at night.”

He glanced out the window, at the afternoon sunlight laying across sharply sloping neighborhoods. “All I know is, I couldn’t stop it. That fucker wasn’t even looking.” Then he looked back at her, shoulders and head turning in the same motion, and she froze in sudden, remembered anxiety. When he was angry, Levi’s eyes stopped moving in their sockets; the pupils and irises became still, fixed points in the middle of the corneas, and his head and body moved with them. “Just so happens it was his third strike. He might even be nearby, in San Quentin, where I can keep an eye on him.”

She twisted strands of hair between her fingers. She could not recall exactly what Levi did for a living, not yet, but she knew, through and through, that bad things tended to happen to people around him.

And that she used to help him. “Safecracker, safe,” she whispered, looking at her fingers.

The doctors kept putting her back under to run scans; she balked on the second day, anxious to leave, to access Schism. Levi said it was necessary to make sure all the swelling in her brain was gone. “And come on, Max,” he laughed. “You spend all your time in Schism anyway. And I just got you back. Can’t you spare me another day, baby?”

She had relented, at that. Some things were more enjoyable the second time around. That smile, bright and even against his dark olive skin, was what had hooked her in the first place, over a year ago.

Levi had bought a multi-story loft south of New City’s financial district, near the water. He said they had just moved to the Bay Area, and that her accident happened during a return business trip to New Angeles. She took in the clean lines of modern white furniture, the bare concrete walls and exposed pipes against the ceiling; she peered at the shadow planes of high-rises and the scaffolding of the Bay Bridge restoration efforts, looming at her from outside the floor-to-ceiling windows. She did not recall any of it.

Levi’s hands covered her eyes. She walked forward with arms outstretched, taking little steps. “What is this fuckery, now? C’mon.” It was her first time in this little office, tucked away behind the kitchen. Levi had just given her the key.

“Surprise,” he laughed, taking his hands away.

Memories blurred into focus, slid into place with a ghostly click. She knew *this* in her bones. A Real-time User Transcription Hardware set-up. Sleek, stacked modules rose from floor to ceiling, taking up nearly the entirety of the small, windowless room: racks of drives and processors surrounding the control deck, with its split-level keyboards and vector ball. The Ruthie was brand new, custom-built; she recognized components from Sony, Toshiba, LG, Ono-

Sendai models. The Aeron recliner—plush and contoured, with a small dock in the headrest for the cables and a mesh pocket on the back for storing the 2skinsuit—was modded for black hats like her, who needed to spend hours at a time in Schism.

She thought of her old Ruthie, covered in stickers and dust, and wondered what had happened to it. “Thank you,” she whispered, rooted to the floor.

“Well, you’ll need it for our new gig,” Levi said quickly.

“Oh.” She looked at him from the corner of her eyes. “So that’s why we moved up here, right?”

His eyes went still. “Did I need to make that clear?”

“No,” she said meekly.

“Your Entity’s loaded. Get to know Schism City like you know Schism Angeles. Case some vaults in the financial district.” Levi squeezed her shoulder on the way out. “You’ll be cracking safes again in no time.”

She tugged at the collar of the 2skinsuit. No time to break it in, wear it out, re-wire it for maximum output. Then she ported the cables from the suit and the Ruthie to the hub module in the headrest, and lay back in the chair. Closed her eyes, held her breath and slotted the main cable into the jack between her axis and atlas vertebrae

<click>

and opened her eyes to a sunny, brisk, wind-blasted day. Ruthie fed the Schism to her senses through the cable and the suit: she inhaled fresh air, the green scent of leaves, and brine; she saw thick, gnarled red branches with leaves the size of houses, and pure white cumulus clouds racing above blue-gray waters; the choppy micro-climate winds gave her goosebumps.

She was standing in a world tree set upon an ocean.

In the Shared Continuous Sensory Matrix—the Schism, a clever Slovenian philosopher had dubbed it, the new divide in human interface—the New City construct was an enormous suspension bridge, a living echo of the submerged Golden Gate Bridge. The north and south towers were Japanese maple trees, each the width of a mountain, rising from the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean and disappearing among the ever-moving clouds. Massive vines formed the cables, and millions of branches wove through and about them, forming terraces, canopies and trellises. Private domains, businesses and public spaces flourished beneath enormous red palmately lobed leaves. New City locals called it Schism City.

Her fingers moved across the keyboards, and brightly glowing code began to scroll in the left corner of her vision, each line disappearing as it ended. An overlay of nodal points appeared in her view, with markers and flags identifying the corresponding districts of New City in the branches and towers.

She had materialized in the SoMa node, a public clearing on one of the flatter, wider branches, located near the center of the northern tower. According to the overlay, the FiDi node was up higher, near the top of the northern trunk. She flexed her fingers, moved them across the deck, shifted the vector ball. Her Entity stepped off the branch and lifted into the air, up through the branches and leaves.

She felt the vault constructs before they came into view; her nerves lit from within, waking up to the weight and thrum of quantumware. Only banks had this presence in Schism, they were the only federal institutions granted military-grade encryption programs utilizing quantum resonance. They sculpted their security protocols into old-fashioned bank vault doors that could only be opened in Schism, and threw away the physical keys.

And she was one of the few people who could sense them, resonate with them, read them and *crack* them, by taking advantage of their imperfections. Like an old-fashioned safecracker, with her ear to the dial and her fingers fluttering back and forth, feeling for contact points. And once she cracked the vault combination in Schism, the microcontrollers in the electro-mechanical locks were vulnerable to real-time theft. And that was where—

Levi was waiting, dressed as a businessman, sweating beneath his body armor. “Fuck’s sake, Max,” he growled over the short-range comm. “Security’s taking notice.”

“Almost there.” Max grimaced in her warkitty as her Entity flew along the Harbor Freeway in Schism, and swerved up onto the eastern face of the US Bank Tower. In the corner of her vision, the sun raced after the clouds in time-lapse bursts of motion, casting flickering shadows across the downtown skyline of Schism Angeles.

The bank’s façade shimmered beneath a silvery encryption shield; she loaded the packets destined for the vault and punched through the shield like a pencil stabbing through paper. And came face to face with the vault door, impossibly tall, its sleek radial array humming and glowing as it cycled through quantum superpositions. The pressure and the workings of its q-ware was palpable, like a mask of heat across her face. She closed her eyes and raised her hands, palms out, to feel, to find the weakest quantum state that she could manipulate—

“Max.”

Her concentration broke, dislodged from recall. She became aware of her surroundings again; her Entity had floated to a stop in the midst of traffic along a large forked branch. A bank construct, slipping in and out of visible states, had been built into the join, with a large marble plaza at its base to mark its location. She had been drifting towards it while lost in memory, like a moth to a flickering flame.

“Over here.” A tall stick figure stood in front of her. It was the most basic—

and anonymous—Entity available to the public; its lines were black, thick and grainy, as if it had been sketched with rough charcoal. The head was bent forward towards her; its arms were held out in front of it, in a vaguely supplicating gesture.

She tapped out a decryption algorithm; the Ruthie could not ID or trace the Entity's signal.

But she recognized the voice. She could not recall a face, but the voice, deeper and harsher than Levi's, was real, and true. It spoke again. "I can't believe it. Are you alright? Tell me you're alright, Max."

"Who are you?" she stammered.

"Oh god. He did it," the stick figure's arms fell to its sides. The downward vee where its arms connected to its torso seemed to slump. "He washed you. Fuck. Fuck!" The circular head bobbed up and down; Max stared dumbly through it. "Okay, listen to me, Max. You need to get away from Levi. That wasn't a coma, do you understand me? You've been washed."

"What? What are you talking about?" She looked around in desperation. Entities moved and jumped and swarmed about her, mostly humanoid, with a smattering of real and imagined creatures. A strong gust of wind whipped through her hair; she saw that her Entity was a redhead. Remembered that her Entity wore the face paint of a Beijing opera character, the angry old man with ghostly white skin, a fierce gaping mouth, and long red hair. The *hongsheng*.

"You don't remember me, Max, because Levi had your memories washed. But you will. It's Sand, I'm Sand. You can trust me."

"I don't..." she stammered as a group of foxes ran through, and she dimly remembered that clan members took on animal identities. Then a clear memory surfaced, of an eagle perched on a rooftop gargoyle in Schism Angeles, reciting the model numbers of the latest microcontrollers in use among the New Angeles downtown banks.

"Fuck. This channel isn't secure," the stick figure called Sand said, sidestepping the foxes. "Get out of Schism, now. I'll find you, Max. In real-time."

Baffled, she watched the stick figure fade from sight without another word. She thought of telling Levi but nixed the idea immediately, wondering if the stick figure had even been real, or just a figment of her memory-starved imagination. Then, with a start, she realized she could not remember what Levi looked like in Schism, which clan totem he took on. It wasn't a fox, she was sure of that.

An insect? No. But it was small, and deadly, and had killed many other animals.

A spider.

That night, in her dreams, she remembered pain. The head-splitting, throat-

tearing pain from a mad flight down Mount Olympus. New details emerged: that sharp turn, the dogs barking, the moon's crescent smile in a starless night. She woke with a start, sweating. Sat up and clutched at unfamiliar white sheets in her lap, peering over the railing at the open, echoing space around her. At night the loft was blue-lit, the curtains glowing from the skies and the City; outside, engines and exhausts purred and growled and echoed into the night.

Levi got up with her, put his arm around her shoulders. "Hey, ssshhh. It's okay, Max." The other hand on her hair, petting, soothing. "Just a bad dream, baby."

She lunged at him, covering his mouth with hers. Rose up and straddled him, scrabbling at his shoulders and back. With every touch and point of contact, she drew him closer, reclaimed what she knew of him. He licked sweat from her collarbone and she closed her eyes—

as she reached down, shifted her hips, pulled him inside of her and they began to move, rising and falling, together. When she opened her eyes again, digging her fingers into his arms, she looked out of their window, towards the Pacific Ocean. A trail of dotted lights moved along the water line: the coastal highway curving through the roadside homes of Malibu. The dots floated in darkness, close enough to touch if she reached for them. She closed her eyes again and rode every breath.

Levi made a noise in the back of his throat, lifted her and laid her on her back—

and she smiled into the darkness when he licked her stomach. She had always loved that move.

She twisted long strands of red hair between her fingers. "I don't remember liking this the first time."

"You sat in the salon chair for four hours back then, and you liked it."

"I just sat in the salon chair for four hours again, and I didn't like it this time either."

Levi smiled. The limousine hit a pothole; he swayed slightly. Bars of light and shadow from the window passed over his best suit. "I thought it'd be a good idea. Help with recall. It's your trademark. Your handle."

"I know that. It's why you brought me, right?"

"Yes." He did not stop smiling, but she broke into a sweat nonetheless. The limo slowed to a stop, and he straightened his lapels. "One last thing. You still have some influence here. Use it." He put his hand on her knee, and his grip was painful. "We need this, Max. I'm counting on you."

She nodded. Her fingers were leaden; she pressed them together in her lap. A knuckle cracked with a sharp report.

There were two Chinese men in dark suits waiting at the curb. One of them opened the door; she followed Levi onto the sidewalk. The chill wind of the

winter morning blew leaves from one side of the street to the other. They stood in front of a two-story, crumbling brick façade; there was a single door with a dirty red awning, no signage and no visible street number. Next door was a dingy hair salon with a frazzled-looking matron putting curlers into an elderly lady's white hair. Across the street a tall, thin man in a hooded sweatshirt lit up a cigarette, in the doorway of a liquor store. A pretty young woman in a trench coat walked a scrawny dog.

The plaintive, high-pitched strains of a *jinghu* rose against canned instrumentation blaring from an old amplifier, somewhere on the next street over. The squawks of seagulls and the dings of passing cable cars filled the crackling gaps between songs.

She knew this narrow tree-lined street, embedded in the steep, cluttered slopes of New City Chinatown. Where the Chinese gangs ruled, and where she had grown up. Waverly Place.

"Mister Solvyev," the first Tong member said. "It is an honor. We were most sorry to hear of the spider clan's, ah, misfortune in New Angeles."

She had never seen Levi bow before; he looked as stiff and uncomfortable as she felt.

"*Xiao Hóng*," the second Tong member said to her directly, enveloping her hand in his large square ones. Little Red. "The Hop Sing Tong welcomes its sister back with open arms."

They needed capital to start a new venture. Their last one, an insider trading scheme, was on its last legs. The Hop Sing Tong wanted millions in cash to launder into a private gambling hall, and Levi was offering to help.

"Your fee is 15% of the take, and a bonus upon completion. We can also provide weapons, equipment and back-up as needed, Mister Solvyev," said The Liaison Officer, hands neatly folded on top of the desk. The Administrator sat in a small folding chair nearby, smoking; behind them stood The Enforcer. The three of them represented a tier one level removed from the top, the Dragon Head. Straw Sandal, White Paper Fan, Red Pole: Liaison, Administrator, Enforcer. The Enforcer took up most of the room in the tiny, dingy office upstairs from the Hop Sing Benevolent Association's assembly hall.

"Do you have a target in mind?" Levi said. She sat next to him, fidgeting in a wicker chair, drinking lukewarm jasmine tea.

"No, Mister Solvyev. We thought it best if we left the details up to you," The Administrator said, blowing smoke in twin plumes from his nostrils.

"Are you sure?" Levi chuckled. She covered her mouth with her hand as she grimaced at his tactlessness. She had assumed Levi had enough experience with the Tong to observe the delicate protocols of accountability, but perhaps it was a trick of her diminished memories.

"Please accept it as a token of our trust in your abilities, Mister Solvyev,"

The Administrator replied smoothly, crumpling his cigarette in a cracked white plastic ashtray on the edge of the desk.

Levi straightened. “Anything else?”

The Liaison Officer’s black eyes, magnified by the cheap plastic glasses, turned to her with a deliberate slowness that made her skin crawl. She wanted to scream. She did not know any of this. Her parents had always made her stay away from this office, under threat of punishment. “We cannot forget anything your black hat may need. Though we like to call her the red hat.” He smiled, and she squirmed.

Levi scrawled something on a piece of paper. “Right. And Max will need—” he stopped abruptly, as The Enforcer held out a large, hairy, scarred hand.

“*Xiao Hóng?* What will you require?” The Administrator asked, waving The Enforcer’s hand aside.

Levi’s eyes, dark and motionless, lay in her periphery. She felt blood rushing into her cheeks, thudding in her ears.

But he had, after all, told her to use her influence. “False ident with biometrics, uniforms. Utility companies are best. And a cargo van with the corresponding logo on the exterior, with a mini-Ruthie and a back-up generator. A warkitty.” Her voice came out steadier than she expected. “Programs, like detectors and sniffers, to access the quantum signatures. Crackers and injectors, to punch through encryption. Rootkits, to hide my trail. I can provide details as needed.”

Levi gave the paper to The Administrator. “*We* will also need a contingency plan. I’ll need C4, remote detonators. Any old mobile phones will do.”

She dropped her teacup—

as she pulled the cable from the jack between her atlas and axis vertebrae; lines of code against the Schism Angeles skyline faded from her vision over several blinks. Just five more minutes, and the rootkit would finish uploading. Five more goddamn minutes would wipe the rest of their tracks from the process tables of the US Bank’s countermeasure programs.

But Levi had told her to abandon her position. She left the mini-Ruthie running, pulled the transponder technician coveralls back on, threw open the double doors in the back and climbed down to the street just as Levi passed by on the sidewalk. She turned to close the doors; he didn’t look her way at all as he pulled something from his pocket. She headed in the opposite direction, adjusting her cap. “Safecracker, safe,” she mumbled into the mic in her collar. Her heart raced; her fingers were freezing despite the heat of the Southern California summer.

“Hey!” someone shouted from behind her. “You, with the van!” It was a man’s voice, above the rhythm of heavy boots hitting pavement.

She made it five steps before the bank security guard grabbed the back of her coveralls. She struggled, and looked for Levi, and saw him running, down

the street, holding up an antique cel phone. She cried out—

and Levi's hand was on her arm. "Are you all right, Max?"

She got on her knees and retrieved the teacup, gathered sodden black tea leaves from the dirty linoleum with her fingers. "I'm so sorry."

"Please, it is all right," The Liaison Officer chuckled, waving his hands. The Enforcer helped her to her feet, took the cup from her and handed her a tissue. Levi remained in his chair, with a frigid half-smile on his face.

"Sorry," she repeated.

"Ai-yah, *Xiao Hóng*." The Liaison Officer took his glasses off and rubbed the lenses with a cloth. His eyes were actually quite small, bordered with crow's feet. "This is your home. You do not apologize for such things when you are at home."

Her heartbeat slowed. "Thank you," she said.

"I still have a bad feeling about this," she said, twisting her hands in front of her. "The last job didn't go so well."

Levi poured red wine into balloon glasses. The night sky behind him, outside the windows, hung dark grey, obscured by heavy fog. "Don't be stupid. We have the Tong at our disposal. And escape routes in the City are better." He held out her glass.

She refused to take it. Crossed her arms. "*You* didn't get caught."

Levi put the glass down on the windowsill. "It comes with the fucking territory, Max. I got you back, didn't I? This is our chance to do it over, and do it right."

She exhaled, and trusted what she did *not* know. "You're not telling me everything." She shook her head slowly. "I'm not... I don't think we should do it." Realized all too late that these things had never been her decision as Levi closed in, fast, and hit her—

and her head rocked to the side. She stumbled, and caught herself on the edge of the bed. Her cheekbone went numb first; then the stinging began, and the dull throbbing. She sat down, holding her face. Stared at the dots of light moving along the Pacific Coast Highway, small and distant.

"Look what you made me do," Levi said, wringing his hand. "*Why'd you have tear me down like that, in front of the clan.*"

She rubbed her cheek, and wondered how long it would take her to reach the ocean from here. "It was just a joke, Levi."

"Baby, you can't do that. Not if we want them to trust us with the US Bank job. They gotta know you're with me." He stepped forward, out of darkness— and touched her shoulder gently.

Max flinched away from him.

He grabbed her arm, grabbed the back of her neck with the other hand.

“Don’t you even try.” His eyes looked half-closed, but the pupils were dead steady beneath the eyelids.

Max didn’t know this place, another clean and temporary place in a string of clean and temporary places she had lived in for most of her life; but she recognized what had passed between herself and this man who had said he loved her, then and now. Even if it had been a coma dream, she had been running from *something*.

And whoever she was—and had been, and would be—did not wake up from the coma for *this*.

If it had even been a coma.

“Fuck you,” she said past clenched teeth. She twisted and struck out at him. One hit landed true, against his chin, enough to make him stagger.

“The fuck... do you want?” he rasped, swiping at her.

She grabbed her wineglass from the windowsill and slammed it against his ear.

Levi fell over, bellowing, in a spray of broken glass and red wine. Blood ran down his face and neck as he reached for her legs. Max hit the back of his head with the wine bottle, twice, and three times; he dropped to the ground and lay still.

The parking garage on the ground floor was dark and hushed. Max crept along the wall slowly, to avoid setting off the motion sensor activated lights. She backed into the push bar, and stepped out into the busy street. Icy wind tunneled down the street from the Bay, chilling her to the bone. Tri-cars rushed by the sidewalk; police sirens wailed in the distance.

The tall, thin man was waiting for her. The one watching her from the liquor store, on Waverly Place. He flicked his cigarette and started towards her. “Max.” His face hidden in the shadow of the hood.

She managed to bolt ten steps before he was on her, hands on her shoulders, twisting her to face him. “Hey, hey. Max. Calm down, it’s okay.”

It was the stick figure man’s voice. She stopped struggling. His eyes were purple. She knew this face, how did she know this face, the planes and curves of it—

as he stepped forward from the shadows. He was tall and thin, mostly unremarkable but for the solid kind of presence you noticed out of the corner of your eye.

“This is Sand,” Levi said. “One of our best tails. He’s going to follow you for a few days, watch out for you. Your rootkit did the job, in the end, but we have to lay low. Until the DA stops looking in our direction. Spider’s orders.”

Sand put his hand out, looking down at her over the cigarette hanging from his lips.

Max didn’t take it. Instead she—

slammed her palms against his chest, pushed him back a step. “What is this fuckery,” she said. Levi was lying in his own blood upstairs. She exhaled raggedly, with her hands on her face. There was too much to process, without enough memory.

Then Sand took hold of her hand, and she let him because of the scrape, the callus beneath his fourth finger, across her palm. She had felt it before. When he had tried to help her leave Levi Solvyev the first time.

It was another marker from the past, and she had to take it without question for now, or she would lose her tenuous roots on the present completely.

“You’re safe now,” he said. “I’ll tell you everything.”

They began to run.

Max did not say anything as Sand drove into the night; she did not voice an opinion on where they were going. She was too busy watching the stars that had appeared south of the fog-blanketed City. Wondering if they twinkled because they were resonating in and out of quantum states.

They checked into a cheap hotel on the outskirts of Santa Barbara County, as the sun began to rise. Max followed Sand upstairs, along the peeling paint of the railed walkway overlooking the rectangular pool below. Muffled voices, and the smell of bacon frying in the dank morning air; half of the hotel was residential. Sand stopped in front of a door with a noticeably large boot print on it, and inserted the card into the reader. Max followed him inside, closed the door behind her and breathed in. The curtains were closed, the room nearly pitch black, still and stale.

He lunged at her, covering her mouth with his, pushing her back against the door with a dull thud. His hands rucked her shirt up, his palms sliding across her skin. Max did not remember these lines of contact on her body, before or ever. There was nothing to reclaim.

It was awkward, and frenzied. He fumbled and grabbed at her until she touched his face with her hands. Then he let his arms drop to his sides, and stood still, and let her take his clothes off. Only the sounds of their breathing in the darkness. She pulled him down, on top of her first, into her. He pumped into her slowly, and built up speed until he was pounding her against the floor, solid, relentless; she hit her head against something at one point, the door or the sofa chair.

It was real, and it was all her own. There was no layer of memories on it, above or beneath it. No ghost images or fragments of memories floating to the surface, or disappearing beyond reach.

When she wrenched him to the side with her knees, rolled him onto his back and climbed on top of him, she pulled his hands onto her waist. Made him hold onto her, rooted her to the floor, as she came.

“The security guard grabbed me and I looked for Levi, and saw him running away. He was holding a phone in his hand. And that’s all I remember from that day.” Max lay on her stomach, feet hanging over the edge of the bed. The sheets lay in a tangle on the floor.

“A remote detonator. He panicked. Blew the van before you were out of the blast range.” Sand ran his fingers along the scars on her back, tracing ghostly pale ridges in the fading gloom. The curtains were barely holding on against the specter of the rising sun; brilliant ambient light spilled from the edges of the tattered fabric. “The security guard bought it. You made it, but you were in bad shape. Levi dropped you off in surgery at the House of Love—do you remember that place? Black market clinic, the best one outside of Chiba. Anyways, he came back to the compound and laid low for weeks. But even after you recovered, and the DA pulled the case without sufficient evidence, he was still worried.”

“Worried that I would talk. So he brought you in.”

His hand stopped moving across her back. “One night you found out I was reporting to him, and you ran.”

“And got hit by a tri-car.” She yawned into her fist.

Sand lay down next to her, pulled her against him. “Then he disappeared with you after the spider clan went to shit. Took me weeks to trace his steps back to the House of Love. He had them wash your memories. There’s targeted damage in your hippocampus. Nanomachines. Chinese military grade, I’ll never know how they got their hands on it. And then he had the nerve to show up with you at the doorstep of the Hop Sing Tong. Ready to put you back to work. I couldn’t stay away.”

Her eyes drooped. Her mind drifted, to red trees sprouting from the ocean, disappearing into the clouds.

His voice continued, deep and sonorous. “We’ll get you fixed. I promise...”

Max opened her eyes and breathed in the dirty motel air, savored it more than the pristine cold air of the New City loft. The room was dark; they had slept the day away, and the curtains were now open. The stars were coming out. Sand paced the walkway outside the window, talking on the phone. He waved his arm in the air, the one with the cigarette. Thin wisps of smoke trailed in his wake—

as he said, “Target will be ready for extraction within the week. She’s agreed to leave Solvyev. I let her know I was reporting to him, so she’s having a cigarette and a cry outside. Yes, the Mount Olympus safehouse. I need more time with her, though, before I can bring up testifying.” He was standing with his back to her, looking out the window. One hand pressed to the remote phone jacked into his atlas/axis, the other waving smoke patterns in the air with the cigarette.

Max backed away slowly, silently, away from the door that had been barely cracked open. Then her heel connected loudly with the opposite wall.

“Max?” Sand said loudly.

She turned and ran down the hallway, out the front door.

The night flashed by in a blur of blackness and pale: shadows looming, stretching and fading; street lamps bleeding sepia light sideways. A dog barked as she ran down the street, along sharp turns on a precarious slope, around parked tri-cars and hanging tree branches. Gravity pushed and pulled her down the switchbacks. She had not felt that strange pressure at the ends of her limbs in a long time. It was less obvious in Schism.

“Max!” Sand shouted, still somewhere back up there, but a little closer than before.

She willed her legs to move faster, down through the winding bends, past the homes lit warmly from within. No one else outside on the street except her and him and that damn dog and the ancient asphalt showing her the way down the mountain along its cracked, sun-baked skin.

“Max!” Even closer now. He was gaining.

To the left, a window lit up, a silhouette parted a curtain. A second dog joined in the twilight bark.

Jagged breaths tore through her throat, in sync with the throbs of pain in her head. Her head was about to split in two. The wind whistled past her ears and her legs pumped higher, faster. Her fists clenched so tight she couldn't feel her fingers. She belonged in Schism skies, with glowing lines of vault arrays beneath her fingers. Not in this physical, painful real-time fuckery.

“Goddamnit, Max!”

Another ragged inhale and up ahead, past the sign on the median, she saw the river of asphalt that was Laurel Canyon Boulevard, snaking its way down the Santa Monica Mountains into West Hollywood.

Max waded into the rushing river flow of lights and concrete. Stopped in the middle, when one foot landed on a raised, round bump: a white pavement marker, streaked nearly gray with dirt and rubber. Tri-cars and monocycles honked and swerved around her. The acrid smell of burning brakes filled the air. Pale gaping faces, glossy helmeted heads passed by within inches; an m-cycle's rear-view mirror nicked her forearm. Numbness gave way to stinging and then pain.

Her feet were the only things not moving in the flow of the asphalt river. She wanted to root her feet to the bottom and stay still. Stop running, and let everything pass over her, as long as she could stay in one place.

Botts' dots. That's what they were called. A design meant to be felt, instead of seen or heard. She was paid to know these kinds of things, to apply them. To feel, to resonate, to find the weakest quantum state. To manipulate. To crack.

In Schism, though. Not here.

Her breaths slowed, and her senses began to fade—the vehicles, the faces, the smell of burning, the fractured arm, they all dimmed—but she could hear Levi’s voice, graveled and grim, in her head. He said that he loved her and that they couldn’t live without each other. “Dammit, Levi,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

“No no no—” A voice broke through, immediate, and urgent, above Levi’s murmur. Sand was nearby, somewhere at the edge of the river, and coming closer. Then the tri-car hit her and—

Max sat upright in the bed. She turned on the lamp, pulled on her clothes and searched through his until she found the keys, the badge and the gun in its ankle holster, buried deep in his pants leg. She held the gun in her hands, and sat on the bed.

“Hey,” he said when he came back in. “You’re awake.” He stopped when he saw the gun, and his smile faded.

“No, it’s alright, leave the door open,” Max said.

“I wasn’t going to take you in. I told them the damage was too extensive, that you wouldn’t be able to testify. But you and I—”

Max stood up. “Doesn’t matter.” The stars shone bright, past the doorway. “I’m okay with this. Really.”

“Don’t.”

“Goodbye,” she looked down at the badge. “Agent Sandoval.”

They made her wait under the red awning for a few minutes. Sweat chilled her neck. The gun was warm against the small of her back. She rubbed her arms, looked up and down Waverly Place, at the good-looking young woman walking two small dogs. Weak sunlight filtered through a dissolving ceiling of fog.

“*Xiao Hóng*,” said The Liaison Officer at last, blinking at her from the doorway. “This is a most pleasant surprise. You are always welcome, of course, but we were uncertain, after the terrible news of Mister Solvyev’s sudden passing, whether we would hear from you again.”

Max stopped twisting her black hair between her fingers. “We won’t need him to finish the job. And I thought, afterwards... I thought you might want a safecracker on staff.”

The Liaison Officer smiled and motioned her inside. “Welcome home.”

'ARROW' Barry King



The day I was chosen by Fletcher, I had killed Civet. Sango and Chelo and I were playing with our *barbañas*—the small bows given to boys to play at hunting. Papa had been unhappy with me for killing the small sparrows that cluster like mice on thin branches. Like mice, they have no wisdom, no breath-spirit, he told me.

That day, I was leader of our little hunting-party. I wanted to take away the shame I felt, so I called the hunt in the early hours, and we went, barefoot in the cool damp of early morning. I remember us being very serious, as only boys can be when they play at being men.

Civet was coming home to sleep. We smelled him first. We trod the path lightly, the swish and crackle of leaves under our feet quieter than Leopard-Cat's wake. Pulsing choruses of shrieking birds and hissing beetles masked our breathing. We were dark and invisible in the canopy-gloom, where dawn comes late in broken blue fragments from above. I took care to keep the clearing behind me, and well that I did, because when Civet returned to his home, dawn light filled his eyes with a blue-green glow and I saw him.

I think it was because of that meeting that Fletcher chose me. There, beneath the slender bone-arms of the Batam-bush, Civet and I met for the first time as equals. I could see his shape against the broken sky above. One hand was raised, poised to take another step along the branch, and that's when our eyes met, and he knew me and I knew him. He stopped for me and offered his breath-spirit to me like a mother gives her child nutmeats she has chewed herself. The spindly shaft, iron-tipped, sped true from the rickety little *barbaña* and caught him just below his chin, but he was already dead, having given his spirit to me with his eyes.

I picked up the shaft, and Civet hung from the end. That is how I carried him back to our longhouse, holding him by the arrow buried in his neck, an ugly gap of red around the wound marring the pattern of his coat. His smell was strong like smoke, but animal and potent, and it surrounded us like the morning chorus, giving us the strength of his blessing. I was thrilled at my first real kill, and was looking forward to Papa's praise, mother's stew, and basking in the respectful gaze of Sango and Chelo, who were already looking to me as if I was Headman.

Fletcher was waiting. We did not see him until he was right there in front of us. He was sitting on a rock in the clearing, his knees up under his chin, his old, creased face the skull of Death himself. Like Death, he watched me with cold, dark, patient eyes, and for a space of a few breaths, I felt apart in the world from the others. Only Civet, myself, and the arrow that joined us were real beneath the gaze of Fletcher. He stood slowly, unfolding from his seated position until he stood above us, looking down from the rock. He stepped down lightly and made a brief gesture to the others. Sango and Chelo ran back to the longhouse without a word.

Fletcher looked at me, his head bent down, studying me and Civet. He

paced around me, and I felt his eyes all over. I didn't dare move. Then he squatted down and examined the arrow, running his finger along the shaft and touching Civet where it pierced his coat. He ran his finger through the blood. Then he looked up and asked me, "Did you make this?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

He touched me, then, right at the breastbone, where Civet had been pierced, making a small circle. I had never seen Fletcher this close. I looked into his headdress, which swept up over his head. His hair had been woven with feathers from the Red Macaw and the Orange Pangpang. His brow was bound by a bright cloth into which thin wires of gold had been woven. They shone in the early morning light from the mist above the canopy.

He led me back, behind the thick stilts of the longhouse, to the small hut outside where he lived apart from the others. His two wives were outside the hut, coaxing the fire back to life from the embers. He waved them away and told me to take the arrow out of Civet while holding him over the fire. I did. The arrow was barbed and did not come out cleanly. A trickle of blood fell from the wound and hissed on the hot coals. The smell of cooking mixed with the musky smell of the animal, mixed with the smoke from the fire. He took Civet from my hands and gave him to his older wife, a woman almost as ancient as himself, telling her to prepare a feast with her own hands and her hands alone.

Then he broke my arrow. He did it quickly, snapping it like a twig and throwing it into the fire. I wanted to stop him, but I knew I should not. Fletcher is the master of arrows, and all arrows are his, even the ones I make for myself.

I listen, as I always do in the night. Maybe the liquor hides the Little-Men from me. Maybe there are no Little-Men. But I am still afraid in this millhouse. I feel them, I think, sometimes. I feel they are angry with me. Or maybe they are just angry.

Someone is crying. It is Chelo. He cries because his mother is dying. The missionary said it is because she lived a bad life, and she must accept it. He must accept it. But it is the old logger that is to blame, I think. He put his death into her before it killed him. A woman should not outlive two husbands.

It only takes a day, now, to reach the village by truck. With five days off from work, we decided to stay two days. Now I wish we had not gone. Yalai was there, still, with her shop. She will not speak to me anymore. But she will sell me rum. She is still cold in her eyes, as before. Cold and strong like the river. She will outlive me. She will outlive all of us.

I don't remember coming in last night. Chelo and I started drinking before we reached the logging-camp. He is mourning his mother. I can't say what I'm mourning. But it was I who bought the rum.

I raise myself on my elbows. "Chelo," I tell him in our own tongue, "be strong. She will live. You'll see. You'll be paid again next month, and then we

can buy her more medicine.”

“The medicine doesn’t work. The Murphy said so.”

The Murphy—the missionary in the village—would know. He is a healer, one of theirs they call “Doctor”. He knows about their illnesses.

I roll over, facing away from Chelo. He still follows me, like he did years ago. Maybe there is a Little-Man in him that wants to remind me how I have failed. Maybe it is Fletcher’s death that waits in him. Waiting for his time to strike me from behind, like the arrow you never see, never hear.

Fletcher never taught me to make arrows. But he showed me how to make the hunter’s bow. While his wife was preparing Civet for the feast, he took me to the longhouse. Mama was weaving on the boards of the high room where the morning sun came in. She was sitting in the sunlight, the weaving stick between her feet, humming a weaving-song. She did not see me enter with Fletcher, but kept pulling the cords and knotting them back and forth. Fletcher touched my shoulder and nodded his head at her, so I went to her to show her I had come back from the forest. First she touched the spot on my neck.

“Did you cut yourself?” she asked me.

“No.”

“It looks like blood.”

“He put it on me,” I said, and pointed to Fletcher.

She squinted at the shadow behind me. Fletcher was quiet. Mama was quiet, too. She stood up and rolled her unfinished cloth around the weaving stick. She did not look at Fletcher.

“Where is your husband, Ayani?” Fletcher asked.

She would not speak to him. Instead, she thrust an arm towards the hills.

“Tell him I will take the boy to the hill. He will go to the tree now.”

She looked down at her feet and said nothing. Then she turned away from us and disappeared into the gloom of the rear.

“Mama?” I called for her, but she did not answer. I went to follow, but he stopped me with a touch on my shoulder.

“Come. You must come with me now. We have a thing we must do before you can return.”

I was too scared of him to say no. We walked a long way, along the ridge towards the high *lauan* trees. I watched his feet as he led the way. This I learned about Fletcher from walking with him that first time: when he walked, he moved with perfect precision. His feet thought for themselves, like the feet of Leopard-Cat. His legs placed every footfall exactly where it was best to step, like the legs of Mouse-Deer. His arms swam through the underbrush, gliding smoothly through the thicket like long-tailed Macaque goes through the branches above. His head scanned the forest, taking in all sights and sounds like wide-eyed Tarsier. But his body he held like a man, his torso and his chest never rising or falling, never tilting this way or that, always in balance. He

must have been older than any man of the village, but he moved like a man half his age and twice as strong. He took me to the highest *lauan* tree that stood on the top of the hill above the longhouse, and had me sit. He gave me water from a gourd at his belt, and he gave me a leaf to chew. He called it *kampar*. It was strong-tasting and made me gag, but he had me swallow it all with small sips from his gourd. I coughed many times, and my nose began to run and my lungs hurt like I had breathed in smoke. I squeezed my eyes shut to stop the burning.

Then he showed me how to make the Little-Man. He began to tap me on the chest where the blood was. He was singing, and my ears were ringing as I coughed. I thought I was coughing up a bit of stuff from my lungs, trying to clear them, but it fluttered in my chest like a live thing. Like a butterfly.

When his song ended, he whispered in my ear. "Let the Little-Man out. The Little-Man that you trapped today."

I tried to cough it up, but it wasn't in my lungs. It was in my chest somewhere, and just as I felt I couldn't gasp another breath, something came out of me. It seemed to come out of my chest, not out of my mouth, but in my mouth there was a taste like blood.

"Good, good," he said, and patted my back until I could breathe again. My eyes stopped stinging, and I felt a calm come with the end of my coughing, like falling into your hammock after you have walked all day, toe-to-heel, on the forest-tracks. He made me sit on a root of the tree and rest.

Sitting with him there up on the hill in the sunlight, the biting flies were at my hands and feet, and I swatted at them while we talked. He said that before he could teach me to hunt properly, I had to have the Little-Man taken from me.

"Today, you think you killed Civet. You did not. He gave you his life. So you took his death as well."

I told him I didn't understand. The flies were distracting me, though they didn't bother Fletcher.

"When a thing, whether fish, or bird, or beast, gives his life, he also gives his death. The death must be spoken for, or it will always look for a chance for vengeance."

I slapped a biting fly. "Even flies?"

"No. You do not understand. Listen to me. When a thing *gives* its life. *Chooses* to give it. Civet gave you his life. You are a man, so his death is a man for you. A Little-Man that waits for you, waits for a chance to pierce you like he was pierced by your arrow."

"Where did it go?"

"I put him in the tree. You will learn to do this."

"Why?"

He looked at me with those eyes. I stopped slapping the flies. Under those eyes I felt like a fly myself. He could just swat me down, and my death would take me away just like that. It would mean nothing to either of us.

"I understand," I said slowly, because I did. This pleased him.

We talked for a while. He spoke slowly, in a gravelly voice. I asked him about the tree. He smiled and touched it, both of his dry dark hands clasped around the rough grey bole before him.

“Many deaths live in this tree. Fletcher before me filled it with deaths. And Fletcher before him. It is full of deaths, this *lauan*. You will fill it with your deaths when you return from the hunt. And one day, if it is your fate, you will know a Little-Man has come to a youngster, and you will teach that one to put his deaths into this tree.”

“Do all the hunters do this?”

“No, only the Fletcher.”

“Why?”

“Why should flies matter? Come. Before the day is over, we must plant a *panaka-vine*.”

Everyone knew what the *panaka-vine* was for. “To make a bow?”

“Yes.”

“For who?”

“Who do you think? Your mother?”

“But it will take years to grow!”

“Of course. And when you are ready, it will be ready.”

Soon the yellow-cap men will come out of the mess-hall and start up the great yellow machines. They are building again. This means they are first tearing down. Clearing.

For now the rhythm of the birds and the hissing of the crickets and the cicadas and tree-frogs weaves around me. The music swells and fades like a vast pair of lungs, breathing in sleep. My heart stirs with their song, and I feel the spirit of Leopard-Cat still there, crouched in the darkness of my chest.

I breathe deep the musty scent, and catch a whiff of pig, reminding me of why I'm out here.

Balthazar the cook gives me a two-handled stock pot, deep and heavy, filled with tailings and mash for the pigs. His back hurts him as he leans out of the back door and lowers it down to me. He complains, grinding his golden teeth as I take the pot off his hands. The dogs under the kitchen floor get up and follow me, but not all the way to the fence. I don't think they like the smell of pig. I don't, either, but it is better than diesel-smoke, which robs the body of its strength.

I look around, but nobody is watching. Behind a board by the sty I have a cracker-tin. Inside I keep some money and my cigarillos. I can't keep them in the dormitory, they get stolen, so I keep them here with some dried meat and a fire-piston. Only I feed the pigs, so my secret is safe, even the other tin, the new one. Before I dump out the pig-swill I light a cigarillo from the piston's burning punk and blow the smoke into the roof of the sty so it doesn't show in the mill-windows.

The smell of tobacco wakes the pigs. They come running up, tails and ears bobbing, their little black eyes hungry. They remind me of someone, but before I can think who, Chelo calls me. He is calling me up the hill. I point to the stock pot with my chin. He shakes his head. He looks angry. No. He looks worried. He hunches forward and begins to run down the hill to me with little quick steps, his hands out, jiggling in the early light. He has grown fat here, in the mill camp. His chin wobbles. I know who I was thinking of, now. But that thought makes me worried, and I do not laugh. I stub out the cigarillo and pick up the pot as he reaches me.

“Did you hear about Raul, big-brother?”

“The foreman?”

“He is in the infirmary, getting bandaged up.”

I chuckle. “Did he cut off his pee-pee?”

“No, big-brother, I am serious. He has been beaten.”

The pigs are pushing each other aside to get at the peelings. “Who by?”

“Villagers, he thinks. It was dark. He was locking up and saw people in the shed.”

“Does he know who?”

“No, big-brother. It was dark.”

He calls me big-brother now and sometimes I call him little-brother, just like the villagers do. But it upsets me. More than Raul being hit would upset me, I know. Raul is a liar and a thief. I tell Chelo I suspect he has been selling the yellow-hats’ things to the villagers and maybe this time he was cheating them.

“Is he hurt?” I ask.

“Not much. They hit him on the face. But they took everything.”

“Everything in the shed?”

“Yes.”

“We’re lucky, then.”

“Big-brother?”

“No work today. Not until they replace what was stolen.”

Chelo grins and snorts with laughter. More than ever, he looks like a pig. I am afraid for him. *Run, little-brother. Run away.* But he does not.

Seven years it took to make my bow. Fletcher and I tended the vine and made it grow into the right shape. When he and I hunted together, we would always go check on my vine before going to the hill to fill the spirit-tree. I had learned to make the Little-Man without *kampar*-leaf. I could feel each death in me. I had learned how to keep them in place so they would do me no more harm than the biting flies and I learned how to put them into the tree.

But the days became harder. We had to walk further, then, to hunt. There were more villagers coming, and they often went into the forest, chasing away game with their boots and their rifles and their stupidity.

Sometimes the villagers would come to the longhouse. Not often, but often enough that they learned the trade words: one, two, three, rice, knife, saltfish, yam, pork, cassava, taro, gold, glass, venison. Words like that. At first they had little to trade except gold coins and gold teeth. They were a poor people, and their hair was red and brittle because they were hungry and had nothing but millet.

Later on, they had meat again because they brought their black buffalo from the down-lands. But before, during the hungry time, during those first years while I was waiting for the vine to grow, the down-landers were at war. The warriors of the North had killed them with great machines like dragonflies, and the villagers were afraid to go down to their old lands or to clear fields to raise cattle on.

Chelo learned their tongue. He told me they were poor because there were too many of them to live in the village, and not enough for everyone to eat. They were bad hunters. We traded meat with them, because they were so bad at getting it themselves. That way, I gained a good steel knife that I used to make my bow. They said it was “steel from the legs of the sledge that moves itself”. Now I know they mean “spring-steel”, but then I did not understand.

When I cut the vine and made my bow, I made it alone in the woods. I made several bows in the seven years before that. Each was better than the last, Fletcher said, but only the last one mattered. This bow was made from only one piece. It was cut with only one knife, and Fletcher warned me that if I should break it, or break the knife in making it, that I should never make another. That is how the Little-Men tell us our fate. Fate is for only one man at a time.

That year, I almost took a wife. Or I should say she almost took me. Living with Fletcher, I did not go with the girls like the other boys did. So when it came time for me to take up my new bow, I had no woman to make the *patum*, the wrist-guard, from her hair. Yalai made mine and she came to me when I was alone with the knife and the bow was almost finished. Her footfalls were quiet, but not timid, and she kept her eyes high. I put down the bow and she knelt in front of me, tied on the *patum* to see if it fit. It did, and she laughed at her cleverness. “You must keep it now,” she said and went away smiling. The strength of her spirit warmed my heart.

Yalai was always the only one for me, and I courted her with gold, but I did not win her over. We ran out of time for that.

Chelo and I do not want to be drawn into some other kind of work, so when Foreman tells us we are not working today, we go up onto the hill to watch the yellow-hats bring down a big *lauan* tree. When the charges go off, there is a flash of fire that fades before a huge crack like thunder shakes the air around us. Every bird for as far as the eye can see rises up into the air at once. It looks as if leaves from every tree are falling up into the sky. For a second, the whole forest holds its breath.

Fletcher used to say that Death comes with every breath. Every time we breathe out, the breath-spirit waits for a sign from Death. If we do not die, we breathe again. And again. And again. But one day, Death nods, and the breath-spirit leaves forever. I waited for the forest to breathe again.

“Was that one of them?” Chelo asked.

I know what he means. “A spirit-tree? No. No Little-Men in that one.”

The tree starts to fall. Its shaft is perfectly straight, shattered on one side from the dynamite. I think of a feather, drifting softly down to the forest floor. But when it strikes a lesser tree, there is the shimmer of splinters flying, then the sound of smashing and screaming of wood.

The cracking and shifting dies at last and the drone of chainsaws begins, great flies buzzing in the woods. We turn away.

“Hey you. You guys. Hey!” says a voice from behind. It is Tommy Dos Santos, from our work-gang. He is the only down-lander in the camp, tall and yellow-skinned. We watch him approach and say nothing.

“Raul told me to find you,” he says, out of breath, when he comes close. I’ll never get used to how the villagers smell. Sour and bitter. Fletcher used to think it was from eating beef and palm-oil. But we all eat the same now, out of cans. Tommy still smells like a villager.

“There’s going to be some company-men,” he says.

“You mean more yellow-hats?”

“No, big men. VEE EYE PEAS. Foreigners. From the head office.”

“Why are they coming here?” said Chelo. I was worried, too.

“I don’t know. Maybe they want to see what’s going on.”

Chelo wrinkles his brow, but I am curious. “Why did Raul send you to tell us this, Tommy?”

He has the goodness to look embarrassed. “He wanted me to say that you are not to talk about what happened last night.”

“You mean we are not to let them know he let the shed get robbed.”

“He didn’t let it. They beat him.”

I say nothing.

“Besides,” says Tommy, “it’s Boss who says don’t tell. He doesn’t want the Company Men to be worried.”

They must be important, then, if Boss is also afraid of them.

“You’ve told us, then,” I say. I suspect something. I say, “You want to stay? I have smokes.”

He looks tempted. I think it might be him who had been stealing my cigarillos, but he doesn’t give away enough in his face for me to be sure.

“No, I need to get back. You should get back, too. They need people to help with the visit.”

“Not me,” said Chelo, and looks up to me for confirmation.

I don’t give it. “I think I will come. I would like to see these VEE EYE PEAS,” I say.

Chelo puts a sulking face on, like the boy he will always be. "You can stay, Chelo," I say to him. *Stay, little-brother. Please stay.*

"No, I want to see, too," he says, lying.

Hunting became very bad after I had my bow. The villagers had taken far too much game and we had to make a long trek every day. There was trouble, then, among our tribe. Some wanted to move the longhouse up past the Spirit-Tree Hill, closer to where the game was. Some wanted to hunt the villagers, and to chase them from the forest.

Fletcher would not say one way or another. I did as he did, and remained silent.

One day, as we rested, Fletcher said, "If the tribe goes upland, we will find other tribes, other villages, and we will soon have to go upland again. And again. Then we will reach the green mountains where game is sparse. In your life, maybe your child's life, we will be gone. We need to stay where we are. But if we fight the villagers, they will hunt us with rifles." A long time he thought about this. All night and into morning.

The next evening he announced to all the people in the longhouse that he and myself would hunt Pig together, just the two of us, and there would be a feast, because we would bring back the game that had gone away.

We went over Spirit-Tree Hill to the plateau and found a run where a great old boar had been rooting. We put cooked yams on a banana leaf on the ground every day. Every day, we placed them closer to the longhouse. "When hunting Pig, you must draw him to the place where you will kill him," said Fletcher.

On the seventh night, his wives led the dancing. We dug a pit down near the village, where the villagers hunted. He showed me how to knot the bark of the *panaka*-vine into rope and from rope into a net strong enough to hold Pig. He told me this was an up-lander net. Down-landers only made nets for catching fish.

"The up-landers are good hunters, but they are foolhardy. When they hunt Pig with the arrow, too often the hunter is killed. Pig will hold on to his life until he has put his death into you. Then he will tear you open and take his death back. Unless you hit him just right, an arrow will not kill him, and he will not give you time for a second."

"So we will shoot him in this hole? That does not seem right."

"No. No shooting. The bow will bring the death only to you. You must not use a bow with Pig. Only an arrow."

He did not explain more. Instead, he sat me down on the other side of the track with the yams in the pit between us.

We waited for Pig. Quietly, so quietly I could barely hear him, he spoke. "Today's hunt is different. We will not take a Little-Man to the tree. Instead, we will make him work for us."

I waited for the racket Pig makes when he come through the thicket. No-

body is stronger than Pig, and he moves without fear.

“Game will no longer come here because the Little-Men swarm like biting-flies,” he said, “they are chasing away others of their kind. Pig will clear the Little-Men away. That is how Pig dies. Then the game will come back.”

“Pig too?”

“No, Pig will never come again to where he was killed. He is too wise for that. Kill him, and you drive him away forever.”

When Pig did come, the netting wrapped him tight. It took all our strength to drag him out. Fletcher showed me how to kneel on his shoulder and to push the arrow into the vessel in his neck. All the while, Pig kicked and screamed. It was the loudest scream I have ever heard in my life. My ears rang, even after Pig’s last blood drained out, taking his death with him. Fletcher told me this is why you must bleed a pig. To let the death out.

“He is so loud. I wanted him to stop,” I said.

“No,” he said, “the scream chases the Little-Men. Nothing is stronger against them!”

And for a while, the game did return and the villagers stayed away. But I never saw Pig again this side of Spirit-Tree Hill.

Emmanuel the houseboy is missing, ever since last night. Balthazar swears he was in on the robbery, but I can’t believe it. Emmanuel is a calm man, young, and slight of build. When we left the longhouse he was half my height and he grew taller but not strong. There is no strength in him to swing a club, no fire in his heart to want to.

“So why is he gone, then?” Balthazar asks me. I try to imagine Emmanuel striking Raul with a club and I can’t. Emmanuel always apologizes, even when he has done nothing wrong. I remember being harsh with him when I was drunk. He just looked down, said no word. I told him to go away, to get out of my sight. He kept his head down and ran, like a little boy, away from me. We have neither seen nor spoken since then. I wish we had. I want to tell him I’m sorry for making him run. I don’t know why I did it. I think of what Yalai told me, and I think I am becoming a wicked man.

One of Boss’ helpers catches me in the hallway as I am headed for the kitchen.

“You have good clothes you can change into?” he asks.

I say “yes, I do,” which is true. I bought them before I came to the camp, although I never wear them. I have a fine shirt and some good pants and shiny good shoes. I don’t want to say how I got them.

“You need to wash up, though,” he says to me. This is also true. I smell of rum and sweat from the hillside. I ask where I am to go. He says, “Kitchen duty. Go to Balthazar. He’ll tell you what you need to do.”

“No, you tell me.”

He tells me. I laugh. “They can’t serve themselves coffee?” I ask.

Boss' man looks at me sternly. "They are too important!"

I am about to say that he can find someone else. But I don't. I want to see these Company Men.

There are no dances when one hunts Leopard-Cat. Leopard-Cat is wise, and he listens at the edge of the firelight and listens to people talking. When Fletcher told me what we were going to do, he whispered it in my ear through his cupped hands. Then we made loud talk about how tired we were and how we were going right to sleep. That is how you fool Leopard-Cat.

We met him by the stream that runs down from a seep on Spirit-Tree Hill. The moon was half-full, which is the right time to be hunting him. When the moon is full, he can see everything in the forest and will stay away. When the moon is dark, you will never see him, even if he walks beside you. But at half-moon, you can see him in the water and that is the only time you can kill him, because his Death is blinded by the sight of the moon on the water. It is like looking into the sun is to us, but when Leopard-Cat is thirsty, he will risk blindness for water.

Fletcher and I had hunted so many years together that we no longer spoke. He knew what I was going to do before I did it, and I could feel him move before he moved. When we moved through the forest, our thoughts were mingled like breath, and like breath, we felt the other's movements without seeing them.

So when Leopard-Cat came to the water, I knew it was I who would be taking him. And then it happened the second time. I saw right into Leopard-Cat's eyes and he knew me, and he gave me his life with his eyes. The shaft struck him between the ears, and like Civet, he was dead before the arrow pierced him.

Fletcher saw what had happened, and the cold light of the moon on his face was terrible to see. And I understood something, then, that he never had to explain. Death was in Fletcher, like a Little-Man that had not been purged. Death had grown steady and patient and fat in Fletcher. His time had come.

Right there, he skinned Leopard-Cat with my good steel blade and put the bloody skin over my head, the fore-claws knotted under my chin.

"Now you will carry the Little-Man of Leopard-Cat in you. Like Leopard-Cat, you will walk unseen and silent. No one will see or hear you, and you will deliver them their death."

"Am I to be Fletcher now?" I asked, but he said nothing.

The last arrow I will ever make had already been broken and burned.

Balthazar shows me how to hold the tray.

"Remember," he says, "always come from their right. Let them fill their cup on the tray and put in sugar or milk. Let them do it for themselves. That is what they prefer."

I nod. I almost want to laugh at how serious he is treating this. He sees my

face, and he is troubled, more frightened than angry.

“Don’t laugh. It will go badly for us if you laugh.”

“I won’t laugh. Don’t worry. Why so serious?”

“These are big men. Very powerful men.”

“I know. VEE EYE PEAS. You said.”

“Listen to me. Without these men, there would be no camp. There would be no logging. These are the men that began this camp and many others. I have children, brother. I need these men. They feed my family, and without them, we would starve.”

“You could hunt,” I say.

He looks down and it shames me. It was unworthy to show him his weakness.

“There are a hundred camps like this,” he says in a whisper, “a hundred Balthazars. If they decide that they don’t like this camp, they could close it. Like that,” he says and snaps his fingers. “Don’t get me in trouble. Please.”

“Don’t worry, Balthazar. They will not hear or see me.”

This much, I know, is true.

I heard the noise of the helicopter coming from below; I thought it was a night-spirit coming to take me to the house where they live. I had heard that noise once, in a dream. A Little-Man grabbed me once while I was sleeping and the noise was everywhere around me, like I was caught in a drum being played. I was terrified, and he shook me a long time before he let me go. Fletcher told me it was just a mischievous ghost and I should ignore it.

But after that, I was frightened of the night-spirits, so when I heard the noise again, I got up quickly so he could not catch me. Then I noticed the noise was coming from outside the longhouse, not from a dream. I had just made it down into the light of daybreak when the first rockets hit.

I am a logger. I have grown used to the sound of wood being torn apart by explosions, but this was the first time I had heard that noise. I believed the world was over. The world was over, in a way. I could not tell the difference between the scream of wood and the scream of the dying.

Again and again the rockets came. Each one a burst of flame and a noise so loud I thought my bones would shatter. The longhouse was ripped apart behind me. Mama was screaming. Papa was screaming. Fletcher’s wives were screaming. Only Fletcher was not screaming. He stood at the mouth of his hut and looked up at the helicopter. He raised his arms to it and I think he was calling his Death. The hut around him burst into a ball of flame and I saw the old man fly from the door like a broken sheaf of branches.

I ran to him. To *him*. Not to my mother and father. Not to the longhouse. I did not try to save anyone but *him*. I ran to the broken body of Fletcher and knelt by him while the helicopter flew off, happy and fat with our deaths.

He was burned on one side and one arm was a broken tree-stump. But one

eye was clear and one hand reached out to touch me where Civet's lifeblood had been put on me. I leaned in and he whispered in my ear to tell me what I am. That's when I learned I was never to be Fletcher. There would be no more Fletchers.

Yalai found me there, long after sunrise. She had been calling for help, but no one came. She cursed me. She told me I was worse than an old woman. While I sat there, her little brothers had burned alive, and I had done nothing. Her shouting brought me to motion, but not to life. I helped her to get whoever was left out of the collapsed longhouse. Her mother was alive in there, but her father was not. I found my mother and father as well, but they had died. Sango was gone, too. Half of his face was smiling, the rest was cut away as if with a fine steel knife. I fainted to see this. Yalai kicked me awake again. Then we got everyone together and walked to the village.

Coffee is over. I am waiting in the bar, pretending to wash glasses in the small sink there. Boss is with Chelo, speaking the yellow-hats' language to a Company Man. The Company Man smiles. He looks satisfied and kind, but his eyes are small, black and shiny like Pig's. He says something and walks across the room to another Company Man. Chelo and Boss step aside and start to talk quietly.

Without looking at anyone, I step out of the room. But only partway. There is a small dark space near the door where I can stand out of sight at the edge of the room and listen. I listen to Boss.

Boss is speaking the villager's tongue, because he does not want the Company Men to know what he is saying. I understand most of it. He is happy I served coffee so well. He thanks Chelo for bringing me. Chelo does not say anything.

Boss then says something I never heard before. He says that maybe all the logging camps will soon shut down, and the company men are here to decide if this will be so. They came here today because this mill is better than the others and they want to know why. Boss knows why. He says the Company Men think we are down-landers. Everyone knows down-landers are lazy.

So he asks Chelo to have dinner with them. He needs Chelo to tell the Company Men that people from our tribe are happy the mill is here. Boss says it's important that Chelo and I show that we are better men. Maybe Chelo will go back with the Company-men to their country, where he can tell everyone how happy our tribe is to have the camps. Then, when their countrymen all see we want the logging jobs, they will decide to keep the camps going.

Boss then says maybe Chelo will be boss himself someday, with a mill of his own. But first he must show how happy we are that the Company Men are here. One tree at a time, Boss says. "One tree at a time clears the forest", he says.

Chelo says he will help. And he says he will get me to serve at dinner to

show we are good workers and how happy we are that the camp is here for us.

He will not run. I won't ask him again.

I walk back into the room and Chelo and Boss stop talking. But they look at me. They are the only ones. I walk through the room and pick up the empty cups and put them on my tray. Nobody sees me, nobody notices I am there. Even in my white shirt and my shiny shoes, I am invisible.

There were twelve of us left, and three were children. Of these, I carried one, and Yalai carried another and Chelo led the third by the hand. Everyone came out to see us. They stood in their doorways and watched us, eyes wide.

When we explained what had happened, the big man of the village did a strange thing. He opened his mouth as big as it could go and bent over like he was going to be sick. Then he wiped tears from his eyes and welcomed us. He went to the main square and told everyone there to make us welcome and to spare us what they could spare, and to take us in if they could.

Then he went back to his house and did not come out for some time. I wondered at that, but by nightfall, I understood from what I heard from the women talking with Yalai. The helicopter had made a mistake and thought the long-house was the village. They had been spared, and now they owed us a debt that they did not want to pay, but they also could not refuse. For a while, we were given food and we were given shelter, but not happily and not for long, except for the Murphy, who took in the children.

Yalai sold her gold bracelets, even the two I gave her, and bought a house for her and her mother to live in. Chelo's mother left and married a logger only two days after we arrived. She told Chelo not to come to the wedding; not to the logger's house. Chelo was not to be her son anymore. The logger was jealous and did not want a stepson.

We lived on the street in the village for a while, me and Chelo and the other men, until the winter rains came. Yalai invited Chelo to live in her house for a while. She had heard how he tried to see his mother, but his stepfather beat him and his mother did nothing. Yalai did not want me there, but Chelo did, so she let me sleep on the floor in the main room and let the other men stay, too. Chelo slept by my side. He clung to me close like a child for the first few days, and then he stopped talking for a while. None of us spoke much.

Many people came through the village that winter. The war was ending, they said. They said that everyone was now "Citizens of the Prosperity Zone". And when the New Year Moon was new, the villagers lit firecrackers and made the beast they call Dragon, which is their way to chase away the Little-Men that the war had made.

Yalai gave the dragon-men money to do this in her house. Also, she only cooked beef now. No pork. No civet. I understood. She was telling us that she did not need us anymore.

But I know she really meant me. She wouldn't tell me to my face. She

would only talk to me if I was with Chelo or someone else, and then she would talk to all of us at once. She never spoke to me as a person. Bile sat in my throat when she talked without looking at me.

I left. We all did, but only Chelo stayed with me afterwards. After that, Yal'ai turned the house into a shop with rooms to rent. She bought and sold with the boat-men and she made a place for people to eat and sleep, but only if they had money. People were traveling again.

Then there was talk of yellow-hat men in the forest. Even when people began to talk about the new logging-camp they were building, I never saw one of the yellow-hats until I went to their camp. They flew in with their helicopters and began logging. I sold my bow and I sold the skin of Leopard-Cat, and I sold my good knife. I bought good down-lander clothes and I hired a truck and I took Chelo with me to the new camp.

It was the hardest thing I ever did, walking into that terrible mill. That mill made of white planks of the *lauan* tree cut from the tallest tree on the hill. From Fletcher's tree.

Walking through the doorway, Chelo behind me, I could hear the Little-Men buzzing like biting-flies. All those deaths, all those vengeful spirits. They filled the air. They filled me. But I was dead; just as dead as they were, and it no longer mattered. They did not see me and they did not hear me. I had become nothing more than an arrow, flying blindly in the dark.

"Keep the cover down until you're ready to serve it. I don't want any flies getting on the chicken," says Balthazar as he hands me the tray. I nod. He trusts me now, and doesn't watch me as I go out the door.

Between the dining-room and the kitchen is the pantry. There is a door there to the outside, to the garbage-hut and the path down the hill to the pigs. Instead of walking past it to the dining-room, I turn into it with my shoulder. It opens out, the long spring chiming against the frame. Flies are so thick they darken the air. They swirl around me in the hot afternoon sun like Little-Men in the darkened dormitory. I run, holding the cover on the tray with my thumbs.

Halfway down, my polished leather shoes skid on slick roots in the track. I fall, but catch the ground with one hand. Sauce slops out of the side of the tray and the lid nearly comes off. I remember who I am. I rise, balancing against the weight of the tray. My next footfalls are clean, precise, quick as Mouse-Deer's, stepping from root to root until the track flattens out and I am again by the sty.

I empty the tray over the fence. The pigs come running, crowding together, jostling as they wolf down the chicken-parts whole. I hear the little bones crack as they try to fill their mouths, trying to keep one another from getting any. Their squealing is the squealing of beasts proud of themselves, glad to be taking their fill.

From behind the board, I get out the other tin, the one I put there last night. Everything is in it and ready. All I need is the lighter, the one Raul dropped

when I hit him. I try it out. It is small, but the flame is high, and I feel the flame bite at the callus on my thumb. I am ready.

By the time I make it back, Balthazar is looking for me. He is coming out the door, wiping his hands on the towel in his belt. When he speaks, his voice is a whisper so loud it might as well be a shout. His eyes are wide with anger and fear. His open hand quivers in the air like the head of a snake about to strike. I know he wants to hit me, but he is afraid to.

My grin is fixed. I say, "Sorry, brother. I must go. I will explain later." Cursing, he lets me by. He does not see the flies swarming around me, blacking out the edge of my vision. I go in. I push the tray through the double doors into the cool air of the dining room. I turn the bolt and pull out the key, letting it fall to the carpet. I turn and almost lose my nerve when I see Chelo. He is there, saying something to a Company Man. He looks like a boy at missionary-school, talking sweet to the Missus Murphy. There is a smile on his face that falls when he sees me watching. But it is too late to save him.

I let the lid fall as the lighter flares in my hand. I rake the flame across the detonators and throw the tray onto the table as Leopard-Cat springs into the room. Sparks fly from short fuses. Dynamite scatters, rolling on the table, falling into the company-men's laps. They rise, but they are caught here in my net.

I close my eyes and I breathe out for the last time. Around me, Pig is screaming as Fletcher's last arrow strikes its prey.



Illustrations by Cécile Matthey © 2012

'Secrets of the Sea'

Jennifer Marie Brissett



Photograph © 2010 Samuel Mann

His son watched as he prepared for the day of fishing. He was one of the best in the village. He had to be. Fishing not only fed the family, the catch needed to be extra to sell in the market. He had been saving for a long time to send his boy to school and he finally had enough. The boy would begin in the next term. It would be expensive, so he had to work even harder to pay for the coming fees.

They did this little ritual every morning before the sun rose and the day became hot. The boy sometimes woke up before him to help prepare the equipment for the boat and then to wave a sad little goodbye at the dock. The child so badly wanted to go out with him. His father always refused. It could get rough out there and the idea of losing his son to the water haunted his dreams. Now that the boy was ready for school he had to admit that the boy was also old enough for the sea.

He wanted to be out on the water before dawn so that the ocean air could cool him from the sun's heat. He could stay out longer the earlier he left. He knew of a place where the best fish swam. It was way out by the metal pole that stood like a giant spear in the water. People didn't go there because they said

the place was full of ghosts. They said those things because it was the past that haunted them, not spirits.

He spread his sun-cream thickly over his brown skin. It felt cold to the touch and had a chemical smell that didn't go away until after a good wash. He looked in the mirror at a face surprisingly old, his skin dark and leathery. It seemed like only a little time ago he was still a young man. The boy sat quietly observing every movement of his father's hands, every item placed in his pockets, and listened to every unconscious grunt.

"Pass me the thing over there," he said and pointed. His son jumped down to get exactly what he meant among the many little items on the shelf, his pocket knife. He was a smart boy.

His father liked to rub his graying head when he was thinking which he was doing right now as he looked off into the distance. After a long time he asked, "Have you heard the weather today?"

"Yeah, Dad. No storms."

"No storms. Hmph. Okay then." He tightened his belt buckle around his skinny frame and picked up his gear.

"You're coming out with me today."

"I am?" the boy said with glee.

"Yes, it's time you learned something useful." He tossed the bottle of lotion to his son and watched the boy rub it onto his arms, neck, and face, nice and thick. He applied some himself to the places where his son missed. The boy's skin was still soft to the touch. Luckily for him he took after his mother and would be good-looking.

An education, that's what his son would have. The knowledge of this world would not escape his child like it did him. He never had the opportunity to go to school. The thickness of his calloused hands spoke of the labor he had to do just to survive. The boat was all he had to show for his many years in this world, that and his son. The boy would have better. He often pictured his son in his school uniform looking like a real gentleman with a shirt and tie. The child could read a little already and made his father proud when he sounded out the letters. He would also learn of the maths that told of the future.

He saw the maths in action once long ago when he was in the market selling his fish; he watched a young man doing his calculations on a piece of paper. The young man said that he could tell the tides and when the sky would darken with storms and accurately predict the heat for a month. He determined then that his son would know this mystery.

Those who knew the maths could work on the big projects in the inland cities. They were building something important out there, something that they were not telling the public about yet. But there were lots of rumors. The old men who couldn't work anymore and sat around all day on the chairs by the dock spun tales of them building structures that only the elite could enter. Environments where it would always be cool inside and clean water would flow in a

fake river and gold-leaf would cover the walls. He didn't take what they had to say too seriously. He concerned himself more with the things he knew for sure.

Outside appeared like night though the moon had long dipped back into the ocean and the stars still faintly shone like broken pieces of glass. At the horizon a rising tangerine-pink spoke of the break of day. They passed the strangers with the heavy-lidded eyes who stood at the corner and waited for the man to come and choose some to do construction work for the day. The men had illegally crossed the border to the north and their language sounded like soft pausing drums.

Father and son hurried to their boat. Others prepared to go out as well. No one spoke. It was considered bad luck to talk at dawn. Fishermen believed that it would scare away the fish. Polite hand waves acknowledged the others' existence.

They loaded the gear onto the boat then he gestured to the boy to put on his life jacket and to clip the tether on the loop around his waist. If a storm did come this would make sure that the boy stayed with the boat. The maths said no storms and he respected their predictions but understood their limits.

There were times when the maths said that it would be a clear day and by the time his boat sailed to the middle of the water the sky had darkened to a deep gray and the sea bucked like an untamed animal so that he could barely pull back to the dock in one piece. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard at the thought of his son floating away in the sea. The vision of his child's body bobbing on the waters sent a cold prickling feeling down his forearms. He shook his head and reminded himself why he was doing this today. It was time.

The day indeed looked calm. The vastness of the ocean spread out before them, the oil-slick brown water lay flat except for the occasional ripple. It was as if nothing and no one else existed. All was just dank water and salt and spray sprinkling their faces. They sailed northwards while the other fishermen went south. The others would catch a good harvest. But to the north he would catch bigger healthier fish. And he wanted his son to see the pole.

"Put on your sunglasses," he whispered to the boy as he put on his own. It would be piercing hot today, the heat already coming through.

They sailed until the dock was so distant that it disappeared into the water. The chug-chug of the motor sounded loudly. Water splashed against the hull. A yellow haze peered behind a sky of unforgiving gray. In the distance, the marker of the great metal pole speared out of the sea, solid and thick.

"Here," he said and he stopped the motor.

He showed the boy how he laid out his nets, carefully tossing them over the side. Then he showed him where to sit on the boat and how to wait for the fish to come and how to tell the location of home by the direction of the wind.

"You know, there used to be these things called birds. I used to see them when I was your age. They were still around then. They flew in what we used to call flocks. You will learn about them in school."

The boy nodded and looked up at a sky empty of sound.

“In school they will teach you many things. You will learn the maths.”

He touched his father’s weathered hand. The boy’s soft unblemished skin contrasted with the swells and breaks of his father’s whitened knuckles.

“I’d rather learn from you, Dad. Maybe I don’t want to go to school. Maybe I should be a fisherman like you.”

This made his father smile inside.

“No, my son. This is not for you. To be working hard and getting nothing. To age before your time under the hot sun, your skin becoming thick like mine. No, no. Not for you. You have a good mind. That’s why I send you to school. So you will learn the maths and make the world better.”

“You smell that?” he whispered.

The boy whispered back, “smell what?”

“The past,” he said. He pointed to the pole in the water. “You know what that is?”

The boy nodded no.

“No one likes to talk about it. No one likes to come here either. Which is good for us. We get to catch the fish.” He smiled and the boy smiled back at the wisdom of his father.

“I want you to see something,” he said to his son. He went to the side of the boat, the side where there were no nets and said, “Look into the water and tell me what you see.”

The boy did what he was told.

“I don’t see anything,” the boy said.

“Look again.”

The boy stared into the ocean and tried to see past the murky water. Schools of fish swam deep beneath the waves. Then he saw rectangular dark shapes all neatly squared going down down down. Fathoms lower he saw pathways criss-crossing in all directions and the broken remains of structures. How he could see this far down the boy wasn’t sure.

And then he was there together with his Dad. He looked up at the skyscraper that appeared to sway for the size of it. High above the spear which was its pinnacle, a flat gray sky spoke of rain. The air was humid and sick with the smell of the ocean. There was no break for the sun, only a stillness, a menacing calm. The immense city surrounded them as if they were inside a cavernous valley.

The boy held his father’s hand as they walked on the flat unmerciful concrete. His feet ached. Mannequins stood frozen in storefront windows positioned in everyday activities, their clothes colorful and sharp. The boy stopped to study the form of an artificial child posed as if it would soon throw a ball. His father pulled him on. The place where they needed to be was around here somewhere and they were going to be late. His father held a map and studied the numbers on the doors, counting the distance to their destination. He

mouthing the names on the stores as they hurried onward. He asked his father, "How did we get here?"

His father turned to him and said, "What do you mean?"

A piercingly shrill siren blasted. It seemed to come from all corners. Down the avenue that was crossed by streets and filled with cars and people and lights, a wall of sheen appeared, clear like glass, high as the highest building. A wave of water wide enough to encompass the city, solid as if built by human hands, stood still and silent. Maybe it had always been there and the boy had never noticed. He was unsure and pointed to it.

"Look," the boy said. His father turned. In a mad panic he picked up his son and ran. People ran with him, knocking into them as if they weren't there. The shadow of the wave covered everything in its path in an eerie dark light. The water moved over their shoulders. His father's strong arms held him close as it enveloped them. The boy gasped for air.

"Easy," his father said and tightened the belt around his son's waist. "You will be okay." The boy coughed hard to clear his lungs then stared into his father's concerned eyes. The boat gently swayed in the water.

His father left him and went to the side of the boat where he bent over to cough water as well. Then he proceeded to take in the day's catch. The boy watched as he did what he did every day alone out here in the middle of the sea. The silvery fish as big as a grown man's arm flopped on the floor of the boat caught in the net. He maneuvered the catch into the hold where they swam about confused. When the last fish wiggled inside, he spoke again to his son.

"What you experienced is why people don't come here. The sea remembers everything."

His father unhooked the net and wheeled in the ropes. The pulleys squeaked and clicked.

"You will be going to school soon and they will teach you many things but I know that they will not tell you of this place. But I am your father and I want you to know. Learn well from your teachers. Learn the maths. But remember what I show you today."

The boy swallowed hard. His father said no more and turned on the motor. The chug-chug of the boat rhythmically echoed as the water splashed the sides, sending the spray of the sea to cool their faces as they sailed towards home.

‘Courtship in the Country of Machine-Gods’ Benjanun Sriduangkaew

In the shadow of machine-gods I tell wayfarers of a time where my people was a nightmare the color of hemorrhage and glinting teeth.

There are other narratives, but this is one they want to hear most, the one they pay with their adoration and bright-eyed want, for they’ve never known us for anything but peace. Conflict juts out from the skein of Pojama’s history, broken glass-shard, rupturing and ruptured.

I smile; I oblige. Though the story is for me there are parts that I share simply for the reality of speaking it out loud, for the virtue of being heard.

My mouth moves, output for one of my cranial chips. My fingers sketch,



autopilot, the forms of our heroes and enemies from a continent whose name and life have now been lost. My voice murmurs the tragedies and sings the heroics of Kanrisa and Surada, rising for climax, falling soft for denouement. The visitors' district is machine-dead. What thrill it must be to hear the thunderclap notes of my gloves, behold the psychedelic fires that pour from my nails.

Once, they interrupt. The figures of our enemies do not seem real. They are right: with sagging eyes the hues of cheap jades and faces like skulls, even for villains they are too fantastical, too unhuman.

"My great-grandmother told of them so," I say and shrug. "Perhaps she was senile." With a motion I turn the figures into shapes more familiar, shapes more like ours.

Inside the vessel of my thought—a garden of sliding intelligences who whisper to me, childhood mates grown to adults next to my ventricles and lungs—a different story unfolds.

I met my betrothed Kanrisa in our second cycle.

A garden festooned with lights, on a day of the scythe. I was in academy uniform, narrow skirt and sigil-carved sleeves, surrounded by girl age-mates. I tried to look severe, and mature, and to be taken seriously. I can no longer remember what the gathering was about, albeit I recall that someone was terra-sculpting on the fly. The earth twitched and jolted, forcing us to hover. For an hour or so I tolerated this, making stiff comments to my age-mates. The ground eventually stilled—I thought the mischief-maker had simply had enough; the hush that fell on everyone told me otherwise.

A garden patch smoothed into an impromptu landing pad. The craft touched the grass quietly, which was not extraordinary until I realized that the engine had been off long before it touched the ground. It had shed altitude with nothing save clever maneuvering and air resistance. Brave. Reckless.

Its hatch lifted, and out came echoes in training, each fitted in muted flexskin, their throats metallic with Bodhva implants that'd let them synchronize with machine-gods. The last of them, pilot, stepped out. She stood taller than most.

My age-mates rippled, whispering. "Oh her—" "The prodigy, my sister said." Breathlessly. "Graduating soon, at our age." "No she's a little senior... look how she moves."

I looked, compulsively. Kanrisa dressed no differently than the rest, but she set herself apart in the sinuous fluidity of her steps. Where other echoes were soft and pared, she was hard and full-figured.

Now I remember why I was there, that day.

I moved through the wave giddy students on tiptoes at the sight of rarely-seen echoes, basking in reflected prestige and exotique. Most of us had been taught the theories of Bodhva training; few saw it in person, and even close observation told little. How did one stretch a mind to accommodate the multi-

threading of machines?

“She’s lovely, birthed to echo, I think.” “Oh no you don’t, that’s not legal anymore—the molding matrices, surely not!” Someone sighed. “It was legal when she was made. Is she even entered into the Abacus? I’d guess not, a shame...”

One last line of young ambigendered and I was through. From her angle I must have looked as though I’d materialized out of nowhere, scandalized susur-rus given flesh. Kanrisa glanced at me, over her shoulder, over a tight little smile: she wasn’t pleased to be here, preferred to be back in meditative spheres or else out flying. For that was the privilege of Bodhva.

We surprised each other. I didn’t expect to catch her; she didn’t anticipate anyone to touch her at all, let alone to clasp her hand and say, “I’m Jidri. You are to be my wife.”

A few heard, her fellow echoes mostly. One or two behind me, part of the academy crowd.

Kanrisa’s smile didn’t change, though she didn’t dislodge me or pull away. “You must be mistaken, student. The Abacus doesn’t rattle my name.”

“It will.” Courage or unreason moved me to draw closer. “Put your name in. It’ll match us.”

Until that day, I had never met her: had no personal knowledge of her, let alone desired her. All she’d been to me was a name, output to me by a modified copy of the predictive algorithm that gave the Abacus its sapience.

Kanrisa submitted her name, out of either curiosity or an angry impulse to be proven right that the exercise was pointless, and within the week we were declared matrimonial potentiates. We would make a union of two, against the average match of four point five.

The land of our enemies had a name. But we called it Intharachit.

For centrids untold it was an enigma, first the preoccupation of dreamers then that of physicists: a spatial distortion cordoned Intharachit, locking it from sight and opening it to imagination. And then the Intharachit turned up, leaving us speechless, which said much—as a tribe we were tremendously difficult to shock.

It was a vast continent, with a long history. Not a gentle one, for in their memory-paper I read the eradication of another indigenous group followed by a theological scourge—born of some snake-woman-fruit myth—that swept through their states, incinerating reason as it went. Eventually recovery happened, but they’d spent so long in that quagmire it was a wonder to me, to us, that they overcame the barrier that kept them from the rest of the world.

I imagined myself in that first voyage with its crackling heat, the air just breathable, oxygen supply kept low against spontaneous combustions. And then, emergence into the unknown. A horizon stretching without end.

To this day historians debate the why. Why it is that they were drawn to our

shore; why they made first contact with us, and not with any of the other city-states or sovereignties... there are entire disciplines dedicated to this question. Some are determined in their belief that, had they met Tisapk first, or Mahuya perhaps, conflict could have been elided. (Elision, not avoidance, a distinction of some importance.)

All moot. The foreign ship landed on our shore, and there we were under the shadow of our machine-gods. We offered them hospitality, seeing no threat in them beyond their extreme alienness, and my elders took a portion of them into our home. We were curious.

One day I came home—back from a week in Umadu where I learned matrix-splicing—and found two Intharachit navigators housed with us. Like empty canvases their skin stretched, open to sun-stains that reddened their cadaverous cheeks and pointed snouts. Hair in thin yellow and dried-offal red clung lank to their skin, which poured salt and sick-smells. They did not look human.

Among the children of the house I reacted least badly to them: our elders, then, tasked me with the aliens' care. "Aren't they grown?" I asked sharply. "They aren't children. I am."

"The female has seen less than a cycle, and the male under half that. With great care do treat them," one of my ungendered parents told me. "For they are infants who think themselves complete."

I didn't hide my aversion, but the aliens didn't remark on it, having opted to take our hospitality at surface. They were eager to believe us welcoming, eager to explore any corner large enough to admit their ungainliness. We didn't consider it necessary to inform them that we restricted them to the visitors' quarter.

"I've never seen anything like your city," the female said as we went through the artisans' street. She spoke her own tongue, which our software had been compiling into a lexicon through analysis of physiological cues. "Most—unique."

Her fellow navigator said something in another language, one dialectically related to hers. My chip picked that up. *Most primitive more like*, he corrected her.

"Speak your home to me." I enunciated the syllables carefully: it wasn't pleasant, this barbaric syntax. They mistook my formulation of it, in as near a form as I could draw to Pojami, for inarticulate stupidity.

Regardless this request launched them into a double-voiced monologue. "We have such machines—" "To warm us in winter, and cool us in summer." "Our records are carried in contraptions the size of your finger." "And in one of them alone we can store an entire library ten times the size of your home."

By their gesticulations I understood that I was to be impressed. I didn't oblige, but I did have the courtesy not to inform them that what they had listed were nothing to be proud of. It didn't do to tell a toddler that perambulating on two legs was no accomplishment to adults.

The Bodhva compound was visible in the distance; having decided I wasn't fit for language the aliens flapped their hands to indicate interest. I consulted my linguistics. Nothing in their languages answered the connotations of *Bodhva*, *machine-gods* or *echo*. "A temple to mathematical faith, where acolytes train to be god-speakers mediating between us and our deities."

They looked at each other. "This institution is important to you?"

"The very most. For the gods make our skies what they are."

It was not my intent to deceive; again the matter was one of linguistic disparities. In retrospect perhaps I should have communicated in kennings.

"May we see this temple?"

"No," I said. "I haven't the authority with which to permit you. Even if I had, I would not. You are not to go there. This is definite."

Again they shared that glance, but did not press the issue.

That night they tried to breach the Bodhva compound; summarily drones executed them. I'd warned them—the entire expedition was cautioned against certain entries, certain acts. Still it could have been written off, if we cared to, the deaths smoothed over in the diplomats' laps. We did not try: we reported the pair's demise to them, stating that they'd violated one of our few rules. The expedition anticipated apologies, some efforts to compensate and reconcile.

By this point it was evident we would gain nothing from them, and our engineers had collected what they needed from the Intharachit ship, to replicate and refine the spatial compensation.

Other indiscretions happened. We hadn't yet perfected hematocyte synthesis, and a number of outsiders had come to Pojama for education, paying for tuition with their blood. One such student—to whom I'd taught a class in haptics—told the expedition what she did, as amicably as she discussed her studies.

But more than that discovery, it was the hairline crack in their story that they couldn't bear. Their records were littered with moments of first contact that'd proceeded predictably: trade, abjection, conquest. We did not desire the first, had no interest in pretending the second, so what was there for the aliens to do but seek the third? They had to refit us into a narrative they could understand; we must be made to exist in relation to them, ciphered in their language.

The expedition went home carrying what they believed were our secrets, and what they thought was a schema of our architecture and small limited sciences.

War, then, two segments in the making.

To their credit the Intharachit deliberated, presenting arguments and counter-arguments among themselves. Nuptials dictated by lottery-engine, lives shaped by primitive worship, and sustenance from the arteries of thralls. What came to be known as the League of Intharachit determined it their duty to erase Pojama, liberating the peoples of our continent to freedom under Intharachit

rule. They would be benevolent and generous. Tisapk and Umadu and Mahuya would bow to them in gratitude.

Intharachit first struck Sitembru, one of our few offshoot cities. Damage was little, their force eliminated, but we'd suffered civilian casualties. Even so we tried to moderate our response; we ran analyses and plotted out the trajectories of their actions. We eavesdropped on exchanges not only between their military and rulers but also between family, friends, lovers united against a city they had never seen or breathed.

More than that they needed land. It was this that drove them, when all pretensions were cast aside. It was this that would make them try, and try again, until they had removed us and claimed this continent for their own.

Their biotech was little. They never detected the monitoring symbiotes that we had put in each member of that first expedition. It must be said: they weren't entirely backward. In their fact-finding mission they detected an absence of a certain element in our city and, noting that there was no photosynthetic life within our walls, arrived at the conclusion that this could not be without reason. They set to manufacturing reactors and explosives that would bathe us in artificial sunlight.

But for this, even in spite of their flailing assaults, we might have let them alone.

During that time I graduated, making frequent contact with Kanrisa, who remained careful around me: negotiating a space, circumscribing terms she could work with. "Do you find me intolerable?" I asked one day in the sanitarium as, lying side by side, we each received our portion of hematocyte.

"I find you intriguing. It's only—I've never been courted before, not properly." Kanrisa frowned. "How can you be so blunt? You don't look it. You're just *academy*. I'm the one who's supposed to be forward."

I smiled up at the ceiling which, itself a mirror, let me smile at her too. We shared a bed large enough that we didn't have to keep close. Nevertheless we did, our outlines overlapping. "Academy girls are more than we look."

"How did you predict the Abacus?"

It was the sanitarium, and we were taking sustenance. Privacy was ours by right. "I didn't."

"Are you telling me it was a lucky *guess*?"

At this I turned to her, lips to ear. "I recreated the Abacus in miniature; I just needed the matchmaking protocols. I input names. Mine, that of my age-mates and a few within the range, including the ones whose names weren't in the system yet."

"Copying the Abacus—"

"I said recreate, not copy. Copying is easy. Recreating... I approached it from a different angle, really. Accelerated the evolution process. Admittedly it's easier when you know how the end result should look like."

Kanrisa's lips tightened. "That's dangerous. You insane girl."

“My name was floating in the system for a while. Nothing. Then I tried that, to see if I could, and it gave me just the one match.”

“Me.”

“You.” Our fingers curled, twining thumb to thumb, as of two hands belonging to one body.

Raising Kanrisa nobody ever thought to ask: What is she? Much of the information behind her conception was first classified, then diluted into gibbercrypt, then buried so far under it might as well have been scourged clean. It did not cross the mind that she mightn't have been made to flex; that she could function only as part of a unit, piece of a whole, in the teams that formed through Bodhva regimens. They didn't know what to do with Kanrisa, so why not put her to a purpose for which she was made? It was a kindness and, at the same time, useful. She exceeded expectations when integrating with her machine-god; no questions were put forward. Her compatibility indices were sub-zero in the Abacus, but what did that matter? Her happiness was beside the point.

I miss her. I miss our shared time, which lives in my breast flickering like the last pulses of dying cortices.

“Are you coming to Viraya's wedding?”

I sit down at the edge of a fountain. Ice crystals tinkle and shatter in my lap, unmelting. Half the city is in the throes of winter, the other enjoying a rainy spring. Meteorologic manipulation has become the rage this last segment. It won't last. We all know it's unhealthy and pointlessly ostentatious, but our current council is led by a whimsical woman rarely content with any one temperature. “I'm very bitter about weddings, Manop. Padon.”

“You can tell which one I am,” he chides. “I learned to like you that way, you know, even if it took some doing.”

“Would it have helped if I'd hit you? Physical contact is the syntax of romance.” I sweep aside flecks of ice. More fall to replace them, grazing my cheeks with knife facets. “Why did you go along with your brother?”

“That's not—”

“My business, not that either of you ever respected it when I said that.”

He rocks back into the fountain, turning his face up to the harsh-soft fall of frozen drops. His tongue darts out, catching the cold. “My brother was convinced you'd keep us together.”

“Ah.”

“He also liked you as a person; still does. You aren't doing *that* for a living, are you?”

I draw off my gloves, the little performance paraphernalia, and tuck them away. “No.” My work as a data savant pays more than enough, even if a quarter goes toward Kanrisa's care. The light-marionette show merely helps me relive the story, externalize it beyond the confines of my datasphere. “You've just

come back from Umadu. Did you see... her?"

"I visited. She's up and walking so there's something in that. They are making progress, but—haven't they been sending you reports?"

"My chip goes through them for me. Notifies me if there's anything of note." I can't make myself read them, not anymore. The same repetitious nothing, over and over.

"They are trying. Last month this one splicer made a breakthrough."

"Until they can do something for Kanrisa I don't want to hear about it." I stand. Icicles fall from my clothes and my skin. "How did it go so wrong? I should have noticed, shouldn't I? I was there; I was with her."

"You aren't an echo. What would you have known?" He puts a hand over mine, briefly. "Have you had any luck with authorization?"

"I'm a nobody. Her engineering was illegal to start with and who likes to admit a mistake?"

"If you ever need funds—"

"Thank you." I wipe away the rime that's formed over his brow, the way you would a child. "You're a good friend."

A number of solutions were put in metaphor-bowls, and sampled across diverse palates. Many tongues flicked, and their opinions were recorded.

We would send out echoes, and the machine-gods would go to war for the first time in centrids. Incharachit infrastructure would be destroyed, along with their armaments. Once they were set back to a pre-industrial stage, we'd have time to decide what to do further, if any.

On the day this was announced Kanrisa came to my home. Our households are little alike—hers a suite in one of the Bodhva towers, mine a sprawling ancient beast in a compound shared between our extended family. It tilts at an angle, finial-tipped, built like a heart where each ventricle is divided between siblings. "I can see myself living here," Kanrisa said as she entered what I used as my study. "Maybe."

"Well, I certainly can, no maybes about it." I held her hand, just as I'd done that first day we had met.

Her fingers gripped mine. For a moment I wondered if she might bring them to her mouth. I thought of that often, her mouth. "Is this where you grew your version of the Abacus?"

"Maybe," I said, mimicking her timbre. Around us screens and cortices hummed in standby, processing, calculating, dreaming the curious dreams of pure mathematics. They made the room cramped; made us sit knees to knees, so close we breathed upon one another. I thought, *This is where we will kiss for the first time, and learn the secrets of each other's skin.*

"You heard about—it."

"Yes." Murmuring, not declaring, war. I watched the pulse jump in her throat where the implants hadn't yet covered flesh.

“Because this hasn’t happened since... since anyone can remember, they’ll be collecting data in real time. Each cadre is taking specialists with them to monitor the voices.” That’s what echoes call the machine-gods: voices. “To keep up diagnostics on the fly. Our voices won’t have any processing power to spare in combat.”

“You can choose just anyone?”

“If they’re qualified.” Kanrisa was very close, now. “Would you like to? I’d understand if you don’t. It could be dangerous. You’ve never been near the voices before.”

Laughing I threw my arms around her. “What do you think? Of course I am. I’m coming with you.”

That was the first time that I saw them. Not the titans which stand guard over Pojama but smaller, sleeker machine-gods crafted to synchronize with echoes.

The sight of them filled an absence in me I hadn’t known existed.

Five shared space with Kanrisa’s voice (her terminology already transmuting mine), each a chassis of gleaming ceramic alloy with six gaunt limbs clad in rippling permutative metal. At each machine’s center sits its armored face, where the Bodhva would sit enclosed, folded into its system like a fetus in the womb.

I stood close to her as she introduced me to other echoes, and shivered. Excitement and something else that set my veins to a slow scalding heat. Coiled tight around this, I replied in monosyllables, remained quiet throughout the back-and-forth between Kanrisa and her fellows. They hadn’t picked other field analysts yet it seemed, so among them I was the sole unbelonging presence.

“They are so...”

“There’s no need to whisper, Jidri. And yes, I know what you mean. Overwhelming. You’ll be spending most of the time in the carrier, though, which we will take turns piloting.”

A young man named Tephem jabbed an elbow at her. “But we all know Kanrisa’s the best at it.”

“Only because she cheats.” Viraya, this. Half-joke, half-honest. I glanced to see whether Kanrisa had taken it badly—whether it was meant as derision, or just something between friends. A little of both. Rivalry underneath thin surface tension.

The preparations were brief. Within days I was abroad the carrier ship *Khrut*. “Carrier” makes it sound smaller than it is: the *Khrut* harbors a river cortex, sustaining an ecosystem of three hundred interdependent intelligences. Excluding analysts and echoes the crew numbered eighty-nine. It was made expressly for war—as a people we didn’t believe in everlasting peace. Species-wide cynicism perhaps, but we keep our battle engines refined and updated. Echoes grow up running battle simulations. The only addition the *Khrut* required was spatial compensation and thicker armor.

It was the first time that I socialized with data savants outside the academy. There were Manop and Padon, twin brothers from the same house as Viraya. Tephem's aunt Pattama was in her fourth cycle and the oldest of us. A few others. Not a large group. In a crowd I could have faded, but in a setting this small I had few excuses to keep to myself. I retained my distance, but the brothers were undeterred.

One of them approached as I sat down to lunch. "Is it true," either Manop or Padon said, "that you're engaged to... that girl?"

I looked up from my rice. "Which girl would that be, Manop? Or Padon. Whichever of you it is."

The boy cackled. I had intended to pique him but, as I later found, the twins loved nothing more than to be mistaken for each other. By birth their genes were identical; by efforts their predilections, mannerisms, and diction were as near alike as any two individuals could be without abusing virtualization. To them this similarity was a performance and, like bad actors convinced of their own greatness, they played it loud and blunt. "The girl! The prodigy. Kanrisa of course, did you know we might have become colleagues? My brother and I were echo material early on. When we were toddlers. Only by then they were up to their teeth in potentiates. What a generation that was—what a generation *we* are."

"Are you a geneticist?"

"Just a data-glutton, like you. Though Kanrisa's case is pretty fascinating, isn't it? Tailored just so. Ancestors bless, but what intricate work. Made to echo; born for a voice. Engineering made poetry."

To this day I don't know what impelled me. An act like that wasn't in my nature.

Barely knowing how to do it, I punched Manop/Padon in the face. Knuckles to nose, my fist tightly shut.

He pitched over, the back of his skull thudding against bulkhead. Others abandoned their food; his twin came running and Viraya shouted above the din. Somewhere in all this Kanrisa stood staring, wild-eyed, lips fluttering like gills.

"No, no!" The brother I'd hit was flinging up his hands, pushing away his twin and older sister. "I'm fine! I'm fine. It's all right, everybody please disperse, no Viraya be quiet, I'm not pressing charges. Also—" He paused, raised his head and stretched wide his arms to make the moment what it was: theatrics. Despite the blood streaming from his nose. "Also, I'm in love. Brother, we're in love and this is the woman we are going to court. The Abacus can go hang."

My knuckles bloomed bruises afterward.

Kanrisa came to see me in my cabin which, contrariwise to my preference, I didn't share with her. "Why did you do that?" was the first thing out of her mouth.

"I'm sick of hearing you referred to as some mad geneticist's pet project.

Aren't you?"

"I am. I'm the one who's had to live with it so what do you think? But I *am* a mad geneticist's pet project. The perfect match for my voice." She laughed, brittle. "I got over it, as you do, growing up. So why did you think it was a fine idea to do what you did? Did you suppose you were defending my honor?"

Behind my back I folded my hand, which had acquired shades new and strange. Blue-black and purple soon to make acquaintance with green. "That's what suitors do. Are you embarrassed?"

"Viraya is enraged. She is my closest friend—not DNA-knitted but at least a... an institution kid. We grew up together, as much as that means anything."

"Oh," I said, reading her half by instinct, half by familiarity grown from absorbing data detritus. My chest ground, like old reactors, like archaic hardware unable to breathe past debris and overheating components. "You have an interest in her."

"Long past. The Abacus has decided."

"It only suggests." I scuttled on my bed, making myself small, and rested my head against the viewport. Outside the sky raced by. "I didn't think."

"Not just the Abacus. I like you. It's just... with Viraya it was simple. But we were never going to wed or even have anything like a sustained relationship; two Bodhva are like two mirrors set opposite—endlessly reflecting. I'm not going to hide the thing with Viraya from you, Jidri. Please let me see your hand."

"I'll use a patch. It'll heal before the day's out."

"Even then."

I let her have it, the bruised hand. She cupped it and I contemplated the differences between us. Her fingers were blunt-rough, some of them tipped with implants that let her handle her voice; mine were long and thin, empty unmarked skin. Kanrisa pursed her lips, very lightly, on each darkened knuckle.

"Do I get a kiss?" I said, pushing. "A real one."

Her nod was almost shy; her mouth tasted of coconut, plum sugar, and implants. When I breathed her my head turned bright with information overlays.

Alarms thrummed through our arteries. We were almost there, on the edge of Intharachit's field.

Before she was gone Kanrisa would tell me about her training.

Bodhva immersive simulation sharpens the mind and opens it to thinking in, perceiving, six dimensions on its own. With augments that enlarges to eight. The perception of an echo, and the potential that arises from it, cannot be matched. Being firmly outside both process and subculture, I couldn't comprehend it.

But there are other courses, where a Bodhva in training would be given the task of spinning permutations of herself. Living different lives, not echoes at all but ordinary Pojami—sometimes not even that. Kanrisa reimaged herself a

weaver in Mahuya, a queen from the chronicles of Dakkhu, a general of Immarad, a hundred thousand variations of herself placed in a hundred thousand contexts. When she found one she thought useful, she would absorb pertinent information from it.

Any simulation is permitted, but some are less permissible than others. Kanrisa ran a version of herself as an Intharachit resident to gain a better understanding of them. She said she came away feeling soiled and ugly: theirs was a short life, choked by *do not*.

In the safety of my processing ecosystem I'm doing as she did, my bare skin open to cold metal and optics. Without the necessary software assisting me I've had to put on more links to facilitate the procedure. They bud in a line between my breasts, flourishing on body nutrients. I've been eating more lately, and increased my sanitarium visits. No one asks, much.

I gave in to the temptation, once, of creating a model of Kanrisa and putting her inside the same reality as one of my simulacra. Not long after—days in real time, segments in virtual—I killed the entire instance and banished it from memory.

Yet somewhere in this is a path to her, a way to reverse-engineer her genesis. The original plans may be gone, but within me there are imprints of her, facets of her. Sufficient for associative algorithms.

All is numbers; all is data. From me the cortices keep no secrets.

The periphery of Intharachit was a ruin where nothing would grow. Passing through the field my teeth rattled. Colors tinkled against my gums.

Drones flitted out of the *Khrut*, hissing into chameleon state. We waited and watched. Other carriers were in range; each ship pulsed communications to the next on organic frequencies that, shifting in constant flux, matched no League signal.

The League had built machine-gods of their own, in the forms of long-legged, earthbound automata with graceless armed heads and hammerhead sharks that flew on rotating blades. No echoes. Our drones found one of the factories where the bombs and reactor cores were assembled, and Kanrisa's cadre followed.

Starbursts shredded the night, laying it bare: in the wake of this I breathed shallow, so thinly my lungs trembled with need. I had seen the voices in still life—in motion they were something else.

League constructs were ugly. The voices were beautiful, and sang. Engineering made poetry, I thought, sounding out the brothers' phrase in spite of myself.

Kanrisa's voice spread its limbs, anti-grav wingblades fanning wide to let her hover as she coordinated other echoes. Mindless airborne drones rushed at her, and were swept away under disruption signals from the voice's vast mouth. They fell in a hail of dead metal and whirring mandibles.

Some semblance of order, now, in the factory. The larger machines lumbering into combat, sighting down ours. They were cumbersome, their targeting sluggish. Viraya swooped down, her voice's arms a blur of brilliant edges, and tore them apart.

Between all this I was tuned into Kanrisa's channel. My heart beat to her rhythm—I felt invincible and could have forgotten what I was meant to do had the instruments not reminded me. I mightn't have made friends among the crew, but I had made plenty among the cortices. Panels thrilled to my touches, loops of machine-ghosts whispering within me as I hoped Kanrisa one day would. In my hands the data streams knitted, flowed into a sea that washed over me in blue-white waves.

I was with her.

And so, well before anyone cupped in cradles that let us swim in the river cortex, I felt the anomaly. It made me shout with my physical mouth—and therefore useless—a warning that nobody ever heard.

It surged from beneath the mass of fabricators and generators, a matte-gray blur. None of our symbiotes had seen it, and later I would learn that the expedition had never known of it. Some of their engineers had been paranoid enough, vigilant enough, to keep secrets from the first contact party.

This construct was humanoid, four limbs, a head, and nearly as large as the machine-gods that stood guard over our home. A scan told me it carried life signs. Its arms wound tight around its torso as it rose; its face was an oval of gold.

Hardly any reason to panic. On the *Khrut* we were shielded, well away from the battle. In the voices each echo was secure. If the League thought merely the sight of an artificial sun would drive us insensate they would be disappointed.

Then the construct reached out and caught Tephem's voice in three long, prehensile fingers.

He fought back with cold contempt; in one swipe he severed crude wrist-cords, but it held on. With its free hand it tore off one wingblade. Permutative metal shifted rapidly, cycling through probability alloys, each invulnerable. But Tephem's voice was not entirely armored in that. All this creature needed was a puncture wound.

The League machine's face blazed. A soft, wet noise somewhere in my head and Tephem's data-stream went black, unraveling from the sea. My horror left my lips in a thin scream.

But he had been overconfident. Others darted out of reach and chipped away at the monstrosity's gray shell. It was welded in the same material that let League ships withstand spatial distortion; in the face of sonic-flux bursts it was useless.

As it died in cascades of sloughing shrapnel I heard the wails, subliminal, of the League men and women that piloted it.

It wasn't the only such machine—three had been successfully made, three unleashed against us. During that first foray we lost four voices, four echoes.

In those days Kanrisa spoke to no one, carrying out each attack as the orchestrating focus with precision matched by few other cadre leaders. Under her guidance generators were torn into shockwaves that destroyed Intharachit cities. One factory after another unseamed into pulped flesh and melted slag. The League had tried for cycles to bring their growth under control, crowding more and more thickly into slivers of land, building upward and downward: ugly spires thrusting into the sky and stabbing roots deep into the earth. In five turns of night we quartered, then halved, their residential density.

Still I did not know peace.

Tephem had been a stranger. I don't believe we ever had a complete conversation together. To me he existed in sideways correlations—Pattama's nephew, Kanrisa's colleague, a lover on and off of Viraya's. Even so his death gripped me and would not let go. Perhaps entrenched in Kanrisa's channel at the time, I assimilated her grief for my own. Even apart from that I couldn't comprehend that an echo was gone, so quickly and simply. Whatever else Manop/Padon had said Bodhva who successfully integrated into a machine-god were rare. It was such a precious, intricate process. And now four had died, together with their voices. Irrevocably they had died. I relived, each time I slept, that one moment and imagined that I could reach across the ships and touch the other echoes, too, as they fell.

A communiqué was broadcast on League bands in stammering, erratic stabs. It found us, as it was meant to, and in their staccato language told us this: *We will not surrender. We will break your god-speakers. We hide, we rebuild, and while we live we will not share this earth with you. You are few; we are many.*

The twin brothers sneered, jointly. "Like ants are many, and us crushing them underfoot by the colony. Don't they realize they're outgunned, outmatched, that they're barely more than shit-slinging apes? All that bluster."

No one laughed with them.

"Can they do that?" I had never seen Viraya show fear. A flicker of it crept down the roots of her hair, to limn the corners of her eyes. "Where did they get our forensic samples?"

Pattama shook her head. "They didn't. An idle threat, a bluff. There wasn't enough left of my younger sisters' son. Even if there was, I doubt they can manage the most elementary manipulation—let alone bioweapons. There's been no evidence they are capable."

How desperate I was to believe that she was untouched, impervious to loss. We all needed that.

Kanrisa stared at the screen where the words shimmered and said nothing. I was behind her, centimeters away. In a gesture as personal as I could ever make myself perform in public, I wound my arms around her waist. "They aren't all

wrong, Pattama-elder. Number to number there are thousands of them to each of us. In time they will rebuild and try to make good their promise. One way or another.”

“What would you, then?” Pattama looked at me.

“Kanrisa,” I whispered. “What do you want?”

She turned to me, my intended, and the honed point of her gaze made me ache. “I want them gone.”

It contradicted our original objective, but none protested. In that we were aligned, as voice to echo.

The cortices wanted to soothe me out of mourning and my chip purred equilibrium protocols, webbing me in childhood fractals and haptics. I ignored them—the only time I ever did—and pored over League censuses: physiology metrics, mortality rates and life expectancy. In the last I found sharp drops. Their population was still growing faster than could be sustained, but for some age brackets there were psychological fractures that culminated in random violence and suicide. In one of their administrative divisions nine out of ten adolescent males had died of marrow poisoning. Within a capital city, there had been a period just before their exploratory mission where all infants born had emerged with tumors lodged deep within their cerebra.

I investigated further. There were genome models and a veritable library of DNA samples we had downloaded from their quaintly obsolete servhosts.

Their phenotype spectrum was vanishingly thin and their gene pool had diminished to a puddle. Each generation carried diseases and gave them to the next, conditions more and more hardcoded. The League was dying a protracted, incestuous death. They were inbreeding into extinction because they’d extinguished any genetic material not precisely like their own.

Knowing this made it simple. The analyses I ran after that were some of the most uncomplex I had ever done: cross-referencing the indices, diagnosing the common links and afflictions. I sent them to Pattama, who pinged back almost immediately requesting an optimal target.

“The northern city,” one of the twin brothers said from a cradle adjacent to mine. This was the one who’d made acquaintance with my fist. “They are the healthiest. It’ll be demoralize them best.”

“Yes.” I sent that back to Tephem’s aunt, remembering the female I had guided through Pojama. She had died painlessly.

“Where’s Kanrisa? This is her idea. I thought she’d be looking over your shoulder.”

“She is resting.” Kanrisa hadn’t slept much. When I could I would go into her room, climb into her bed, and she would cup my body with hers, one hand closed over my stomach. Only then did she fall into dreams.

“Hey. I’ve always wanted to know, why Kanrisa? I know, the Abacus, but you don’t seem like the type who’d just walk up to her and make such a scene—all those people, that day—just because the Abacus gave you a name.”

“You were there?”

“I was landscaping.”

I frowned. “You are such a child. And I didn’t take her hand simply because of the algorithms. I saw her and chose.” *I couldn’t not have*, I did not tell him. Her pull had been gravitational, sun to my star.

“What about me then? I’m not that incompatible.”

“I have Kanrisa. What do I want with you?”

He blinked, then widened his eyes. “You’re a monogamist?”

My face must have colored. “None of—”

“My business, yes, but it’s just I’ve never actually met... I swear I’ve found more spontaneous cohesion in gibbercrypt than monogamists. So you’ll live in your own household?”

“Sharing with my siblings. Why am I even telling you this?”

“Because you want to tell it to somebody. Honestly, though. Monogamy.” He unlinked and threw up his hands. “Unbelievable. Are you sure?”

“Kanrisa and I are content with just one at a time. Now shut up before I punch you again.”

A long sigh of bliss. “See? You can tell me apart from my brother after all. That’s why I wish you would consider us. Maybe in half a cycle? People do change, you know.”

I have decided to attend Viraya’s wedding, after all. That is what friendships are like: a net of obligations and social niceties.

The old faces are all there, the familiar names. Both twin brothers, Pattama, Surada, the crews of the *Khrut* and the *Samutthevi*. I have even brought some of the *Khrut*’s cortices, which I’d adopted as part of my compensation, and they chatter away in my wrists, at the back of my neck: recognizing and regaling each other with tales of this or that ship hand. It keeps me calm and reassured, to be surrounded by their dialogue.

It’s a modest wedding. Viraya is marrying a man, an ambigendered and two women. As matrimony went it isn’t a large union (my parents began with six and over time the conjugation grew to nine) and out of the would-be partners I know only Viraya and another, a quantum navigator recently instrumental to solar-systems crossing. These new ways of traveling, in leaps and bounds through space-time, make me feel old. I could be up there; affinity-class data savants are always in demand. But much keeps me earthbound. Out there in the beyond communication can get tattered, too slow to catch up with vessel speed. Too many uncertainties, and these days I want the solidity of sureness. Of knowing where I am, what I do.

Most would be hard-pressed to believe I was part of the force that destroyed Intharachit. I’m so much less. Just another administrative worker with a monthly salary.

I don’t dream of past glories. I don’t dream of exhilarating voyages through

doors spun out of herded probabilities. In my bed surrounded by the susurrus of cortices, I dream merely of her.

“Life is more than that,” one of my sisters would say. “Find another, younger sister, and laugh again.”

“This is the life I’ve chosen. I won’t laugh until she is well.”

The earth shudders; would-be spouses giggle, arms linked, as grass and soil swell.

“Life is more than that,” one of my mothers would say. “Seek the stars, penultimate daughter, and smile again.”

“This is the life I’ve chosen. I won’t smile until she is well.”

I watch the brother who didn’t visit Umadu as he brings his arms down and the ground cracks open, thrusting up a bounty of persimmons and chrysanthemums. I watch him as he accepts congratulations for a job well done and, disentangling, strides toward me on feet that don’t quite touch the grass. “Jidri. I didn’t think you would come. What a sight you are! So long unseen.”

“Our careers branched apart.”

“That they did. You don’t belong there, webbed in those antique cortices, rerouting old tech. Up there is where you should be. Finding out just how many dimensions comprise our universe. Be part of the cutting-edge.”

Life is more than that. “I like doing what I do.”

He shakes his head. “You have changed, but then who hasn’t. Have you reconsidered?”

“I’ve been told you only wanted me to keep your twin from individualizing himself.”

A disbelieving chortle. “My brother and his dog’s mouth.”

“For the record, I’d sooner marry him, if he didn’t already belong to four spouses.”

“Not sharing well even now?”

“I never will. A monomaniac, remember? That’s what you called me after you were done with ‘monogamist.’”

“You are, though I’m sorry for the tone I used then.” He sighs and newly blossomed flowers rustle with him. “Please, Jidri. Life is more than Kanrisa.”

“Kanrisa is the life I’ve chosen for myself.”

From the strands of my indices and extrapolated models Pattama teased out an answer to Kanrisa’s question.

The northern city was the wealthiest on the continent. I expected more from them than the swarming anthills of other Intharachit states. But what I saw was scarcely better, a riot of squalor and starvation. The air churned with disease, dust, despair. Pattama’s cultivar wasn’t going to be a retaliatory strike after all, but a mercy. A way out.

We introduced the strain into their rebreathers, which vainly tried to purify the filth it inhaled from the city’s throats. We put it into the tanks that processed

fluid waste and recycled it into a semblance of water.

During the first week little happened, and in this lull I spent my time with Kanrisa. We were past the negotiation stage and, ignoring nominal protests about chain of command (which barely existed and hardly mattered), she migrated to my cabin. We kept a touch of resistance so infinitesimal it couldn't be expressed numerically even as we stretched it out: testing its tensile strength, its elasticity. Anticipation of what we'd set in motion made it hard to think of anything else, even while we slept skin to skin. It was good to do so, all the same, each shared touch piquant. Tense.

(There were warning signs. A look in the distance. Fleeting instants when Kanrisa was not with me but went somewhere else, chasing Tephem's ghost. Back then I hadn't realized the extent of her unique nature. Why the way she functioned as echo was unlike anyone else's.)

"I can't stop thinking how it might have been different."

"If you keep doing that you will end up like Zhuyi," I told her as I undressed and climbed into bed. She was warm from a fresh hematocyte intake and smelled of psychometric links. Intoxicating. With her I never needed simul-input bombardment, my addictive of choice, to fall delirious and trembling. "All his time spent in simulations, running that one moment through fifty, a hundred, a thousand scenarios."

"Who's that?"

Sliding my hand under the gap between her spine and the bed I frowned. "One of my brothers? I must have told you about him—the one whose marriage fell to pieces, so he keeps replaying a sim to find out what he did wrong. It's all very sad and he refuses to put his name back into the Abacus."

Kanrisa tickled my collarbone with her tongue. "You might have mentioned him in passing. I forgot. Do you think I will regret this? Calling for what I did."

I wrapped myself tight around her. "Never. And if there's ever regret it will be mine too. I won't let you carry it alone."

Our monitoring cortices went into a frenzy when the infected city came apart. I listened to some of the chatter. Cries for help. Emergency dispatches. Pattama's virus had targeted their arteries; out of everything it was what we knew best. It thinned their plasma, and thinned it again, until what went through their veins was like water. From their pale, diluted mouths they retched pale, diluted hemorrhage as they clawed themselves open. This fluid, not blood anymore, puddled in their streets and soaked the tiny rooms in their beehive houses. It lapped at their windows and gave life to frail weeds in the interstices of their walls. They wept it in deep, wracking shudders, and died in throes of asphyxiation as their lungs drowned.

In the midst of this, one of the other ships—the *Samutthevi*—pinged us with a set of coordinates and a message: *We have found them.*

What remained of League military command had submerged themselves in radio silence after broadcasting that one challenge. No communication of any

kind, minimal power usage: they'd retreated, as deep as they could, into a pre-tech state. Only through chance did one of the *Samutthevi*'s drones catch a glimpse of an engineer out to obtain food supplies. From there it divided itself, splitting into transmitter and receiver. The first latched onto him, integrating into his nervous system; the other returned to the *Samutthevi*. In discreet pulses it sent back schematics, an inventory of equipment and personnel.

"There's not much to them," said Surada, their cadre's commander. "Some two hundred holed up in a cave network underground. You will coordinate with us?"

"What do they have? Apart from—" Kanrisa motioned at the imaging of their tools, furniture, miscellanies. "These. They can't possibly hope to fight with that."

"I have good reasons to think they're culturing a strain that'd work against us. Of course, they haven't any sample—unless somehow they do. Our casualty..." Surada's expression flickered. "We collected her. There's no chance. It's best to proceed with caution regardless. We could bombard the whole area, which would be my preference, except the tunnels go deep."

"How about gas? Their ventilation can't be much good. Two of my people developed an agent that bonds to their circulation. It's been effective."

Surada gave a curt nod. "I've seen the footage. *Brutally* effective. Take a look at this, though." A shape sharpened into focus on the viewport. "Thermal take from the symbiote. That's a biomass right there."

"That," I said, measuring it against a scale in my head, "is very huge."

"And very dense. Estimates say a hundred fifty tall, eighty wide, and five to eight hundred heavy. What do you say to that, savant?"

"Her name is Jidri, Surada."

"They're cloning muscle tissue—too dense to be anything else. There's no organ, no anything except for a skeleton, also extremely dense and likely metal. They want to make..." I paused, remembering the makeup of the creature that had killed Tephem. "No radio, no anything. So it's all grown in a vat, organically, without machinery or circuits or electricity. And maybe... here, where it thins. A cavity, I think. Waiting to be filled."

Surada nodded. "With what, Jidri?"

"This is pure educated guess. This construct isn't running on conventional energy—it's going to be powered by one of their own. A crude transplant." My rambling flung up a spume of disparate suppositions in my private sphere. I filtered them through my chip. "They are making another killing machine out of their own materials, controlled by a brain or a collective of brains. It will carry not a miniature sun but an anti-Bodhva weapon: physical, toxin, something. If we are to believe their threat."

"In line with my savants' conclusions. Yes. What are the chances of your viral agent working on this biomass? So far as my probe's been able to determine, what runs through its veins is crude fuel or possibly liquid alloy."

“Another approach then.” Kanrisa ran her fingers over the displays. They rippled, briefly projecting imprints of her hands that chased the real ones. “I have an idea. It’s not something I ever wanted to do. Circumstances have changed. Just to be sure we’ll flush them out first.”

We flooded the tunnels. Redirecting the nearest reservoir proved more trouble than anticipated—so few natural bodies of water existed in Intharachit—but there was enough. Their shelter was old and, though chambers were armored and sealed, structural integrity had been eroded by time and neglect. That first rush killed fifty who hadn’t fled behind blast doors in time. Circuited synapses fired, machines coming awake under emergency routines.

A sudden spike in neural electricity. Their callsign; our warning.

Pulsating flesh so hot it flashed white on thermal take, stitched together by artificial sinews. Each ungainly piece must have been grown individually. Its head was distended, its torso a gaping red wound. From each pore it oozed oil, pus, blood. Veins throbbed underneath its shell.

“Ancestors,” one of the twins breathed. “What did they put into that thing?”

“Brains locked in sync.” I ran a scan: whatever made up the skeleton blocked several of our sensors, but I could still measure neural voltage. “Twenty, no, sixty. Sixty brains transplanted, feeling in conjunction.”

The other brother reared up from his cradle. “In a month they perfected that?”

“No,” I said, “they perfected nothing.” We brute-forced our way into what passed for its mainframe. A composite hastily thrown together without regard for compatibility or efficiency, orienting as fast as it could to new senses, new realities expressed in synesthesia. And what it felt, through ink-stain drops infiltrating its liquid consciousness, was pain. Each sensory input overloaded it, converting to agony until it knew nothing else. It found its level in the biomass, erasing intellect and sanity, channeling it into one single pinpoint purpose: to lash out. At us.

Kanrisa did not allow this. Once the biomass emerged she began.

She was—is—a centrifuge; her age-mate echoes belonged to her, operating as her adjuncts. Over their voices’ output she wielded a fine control, able to reach in and weave, plait, and transfigure. That is the purpose of a Bodhva focus.

What she did that day hadn’t been seen before and seldom since. Today we continue trying to replicate it, gnawing at the process with augmens, a cortex biosphere greater than the Abacus, and the best minds of our age. Progress is slow, with rare successes so miniscule they hardly count.

Kanrisa seized the voices’ chorus and shattered it into sixty-five permutations of itself. It punctured situational probabilities where the laws of physics were rewritten for an instant.

When it ended the biomass was gone, each particle threshed into nonexistence. The tunnels became a crater. So did twenty nearest cities within range of

the blast. Half the spatial storm that enclosed Intharachit coiled and released under Kanrisa's guidance. Most coastal regions were drowned under tidal waves.

We still had to spread Pattama's virus to the surviving population, but it was a nominal gesture. Kanrisa had ended the war.

We came home with more diagnostics than anyone knew what to do with.

The aftermath was incandescent: as one we breathed, drinking in one another, as the city celebrated us not as heroes but as living stories. What we had done—decided by Kanrisa, mediated by me, brought into being by Pattama—was like nothing in living memory, and our living memory is immense in breadth and length. Pojama wanted for nothing but novelty, and we were that magnified many times over. Nothing seemed impossible. Kanrisa's stigma vanished overnight. Through centrids we had grown in peace, and that was stagnancy. This was the first occasion after so long that conflict would jolt us forward.

We were so much wanted back then, pulled this way and that, sometimes parted. Great bursts of advances were made. Optimizing the voices, evolving deep logics of our cortices at exponential rates, leapfrogs in cybernetics. Though Intharachit lay in ruins each savant had brought back libraries of DNA samples we would append to our biodiversity projects and assimilate into our virtualization programs.

Kanrisa and I didn't find time to marry properly, but we did put aside nights. Just as I had thought—had wanted—we secreted ourselves away in my cortex nest. I discovered the stretch marks on her breasts and thighs; I counted her epidermal implants, where they ridged her flesh, where they hardened the texture of her stomach. Her fingers digging into my hips, my nerves alight with her augmens output: a hundred compressed Bodhva songs.

I...

I can't recount this, even to myself. Even to my cortices, who already know; who understand and record and dream with me. It is difficult. It is impossible.

But when all else is gone there is the wreckage of our story, and within that, there is us. When I am done playing a small piece out for an audience and whispering it to myself, I will be able to begin again. I will go back to when we were young, and whole, and perpetual: a day of the scythe, in a garden festooned with lights.

It is hard to pinpoint where the disintegration began.

Minor lapses. She met my mothers, my siblings, and then she misplaced their names and their order: who was elder, who was younger. I told myself she had not been reared in a family but in an institution where no one claimed kinship to her. Why should I expect her to adjust overnight?

One morning she woke up not quite sure where she was.

The next she woke up unable to remember Viraya, Tephem, any of her unit.

After that she could not remember me, and finally her implants went dormant: she could no longer echo.

(I can't speak this aloud. I can't include it for my audiences. I do not discuss it with my friends, my family. It is taboo to speak Kanrisa's name in my earshot.)

Perhaps she was built to function only once. Perhaps she was so centrifugal that without the orbit of other echoes she could not exist, and losing Tephem mid-chorus it damaged her. Or perhaps what she did to shatter her age-mates' song, to manipulate Intharachit's spatial storm, broke something within her that made her Kanrisa.

Perhaps.

Today I think of my brother Zhuyi. The lost one, the tragic one.

I lie in my cradle, in an obscure division of the complex that cares for the city's network. It's dim and quiet, so as to least disturb previous-gen cortices that haven't yet made the leap and joined the great ocean of the Abacus. Most of my days are spent here, persuading them to become part of it, to join it in the tasks of monitoring the shields, maximizing compatibility, the processes that complete Pojama and keep it in constant growth.

Some are reluctant, others afraid. A few refuse and those I shepherd into lesser systems, where they can serve and know simpler joys. Regardless of their destination it's necessary that their owners' signature is erased first: their original information will only weigh them down unnecessarily.

Nearly a cycle and a half have passed since I came to this division. My wait has been so long and precisely planned that when *it* finally shuffles into one of my arrays there's no surprise. Existence is a series of coincidences. One may stand still until chances collide and result. I choose otherwise. I calculate, predict, and attain. Opportunity must be plucked out of, and strained from, churning randomness.

Tephem's personal cortex drifts into my lap. It's been in a protracted hibernation and will probably acquiesce to whatever I suggest. In spite of that my breathing lurches and my heart palpitates uneven, now sharp and exquisite, then dull and empty.

This will work.

It has to.

With delicacy—my physical fingers shake, even as the ones I've made in the administrative subreality move with surgical accuracy—I extract fragments of Tephem's memorabilia, consumption habits, training permutation back-ups, all the things that can be found embedded in any private chip. It's unambiguously, incredibly illegal. If found out I will be punished, my chips and cortices purged, some of my links disabled. It'll blind me, shackle me, halve my self. There are data savants who, so deprived, can't maintain sanity.

I don't care.

Once my shift is finally ended I leave, bloated with thieved data. Through the scanners I step, nearly on tiptoes, as they skim over my heart-rate, neural activity, blood pressure. None of which is in its regular state and I get past only by fooling the sensors with prefabricated readings I installed a week ago in anticipation of today.

For this my brain would be emptied, my genes scrambled until I'm no longer me; until the being known as Jidri is reduced to if-else strings.

I am not afraid. The tightening of my larynx, the hammering of my heart: they are biological reflexes.

Out in the streets crowds buffet me, vendors trying to draw me in with flashes of sculpted light and funneled sound. A woman more cybernetics than flesh, her skin all facets, touches me with a jolt of seduction memes: inviting me to make love with her, glass to glass. I shrug her off and very briefly wonder if she's an overseer agent. They can be anywhere and my crime—

Kanrisa would have spat out her fear, as one would a morsel of spoiled food.

On the edge of the visitors' area is a small octagonal storeroom in a small octagonal building.

I pass into that room, where a cortex sleeps. It's had no contact with any other for two full segments. Gently I bring it awake but not online, wiring myself into it without tapping into a network. It comes out of standby with reluctance, only faintly recalling who I am.

To reconstruct a person is hard, to reconstruct a stranger long dead almost impossible. Even with a fully-powered, cognizant cortex with the latest ware. But I can't take the risk of using my own—I need to be anonymous, as far offline as I can go.

Over these last two cycles I collected snippets of surveillance, records from sanitariums and trails left across the net, piecing together a picture of Tephem. With the personal data I've downloaded the result is, theoretically, at least half-complete. Nevertheless a whole life is not easy to transliterate into code. There's much to reconcile, a host of contradictions and phases I can't easily put in order.

The reconstruction is agonizing. I install updates to the cortex a little at a time, but it remains sluggish and unwilling. I persevere and coax. I can't return too often; sometimes I would manage three visits in as many days, sometimes almost none, and each can be measured in minutes. My nerves fray and I would keep away for fifteen, twenty days. I don't know if my theory is anywhere near correct or functional. This is all I have left, to reconstruct Tephem and that moment in Intharachit. To recomplete her inner system and make her the center of that unit again.

Unnatural winter persists over Pojama. I've been told they have found a way to localize the weather patterns. How quickly the world hurtles by.

When it is done, finally, I purge all remnant information. There would be

no trace. A copy of the reconstruction lives in a partition of my chip, but that is the only one. I send it off, behind multidimensional proxies and the best encryption I can do.

“What is in it?” the splicer asks, when the packets have passed through dead drops in pieces and reassembled on his end.

“You don’t need to know.” I hold many secrets of his, and now have another: he would be my accomplice. “Put it in her treatment programs.”

“But—”

“Please do it.”

I cut contact and wait for word from Umadu.

It is the first day of summer and the city is festooned with lights.

I wander my family’s home, where the trees are fruiting heavy and red, where the roofs are gestating blue pearls in each tile. It feels strange to be leaving, I’ve been in one place for so long. My work at the op-net is done with and I am at last entering newer, stranger fields. Umadu continues to send reports, each emptier than the last.

Two cycles. It’s time to be elsewhere, be someone else.

“It is good,” one of my sisters said as I miniaturized my cortices to fit a single chip, drinking down protocols and matrices that would hibernate in my implants. “You will be holding stars in your hands, and how many dream of that?”

“Sister, I don’t dream of stars.”

She wound a mercury chain around my wrist. “Second best is not so bad. It is a life. I will think of you and hope you find peace.”

There are gold-and-black fish in our pond, a hybrid Zhuyi has cultivated in his spare time. It has eyes like one of his former wives’, he said, and in its swimming patterns he claims to see the imprint of her body. Above me something sings with a human mouth, the favorite song of one of Zhuyi’s once-husbands. He’s turned our home into a memorial. We all indulge him, glad that he no longer spends all his time running those simulations. I’m on speaking terms with Varee, one of his erstwhile wives, and when Zhuyi isn’t home she sometimes pays us a visit.

“It is good,” one of my mothers said as I folded sheets of shiftcloth to fit into a single case, smoothing the permutative fabrics that would regulate my temperature up in the cold of satellite stations. “You will be conquering dimensions, and how many dream of that?”

“Mother, I don’t dream of conquest.”

She clinched an electro-carbon cube around my throat. “Second best is not unacceptable. It is a life. I will think of you and hope you find joy.”

My contract is valid for half a segment; beyond that I will be free to renew it, or enlist as part of the force. It will be some time before I’m physically here again. I’ve already begun arrangements to transfer guardianship of Kanrisa to me officially—she has no one who can claim genetic relation to her—and cryo-

genics will be needed to slow down her aging. Where I'm going time will move at sporadic paces.

My transport is here, a spindly thing running on sub-routines so unintelligent they spare me no acknowledgment. The research ventures I'll be a part of are secretive and I'll have scant opportunities to speak to my family, most of them monitored. But if there's a way for her, a way to her, it is in the probability crossroads—the noiseless impact between invisible dimensions—that I will find it.

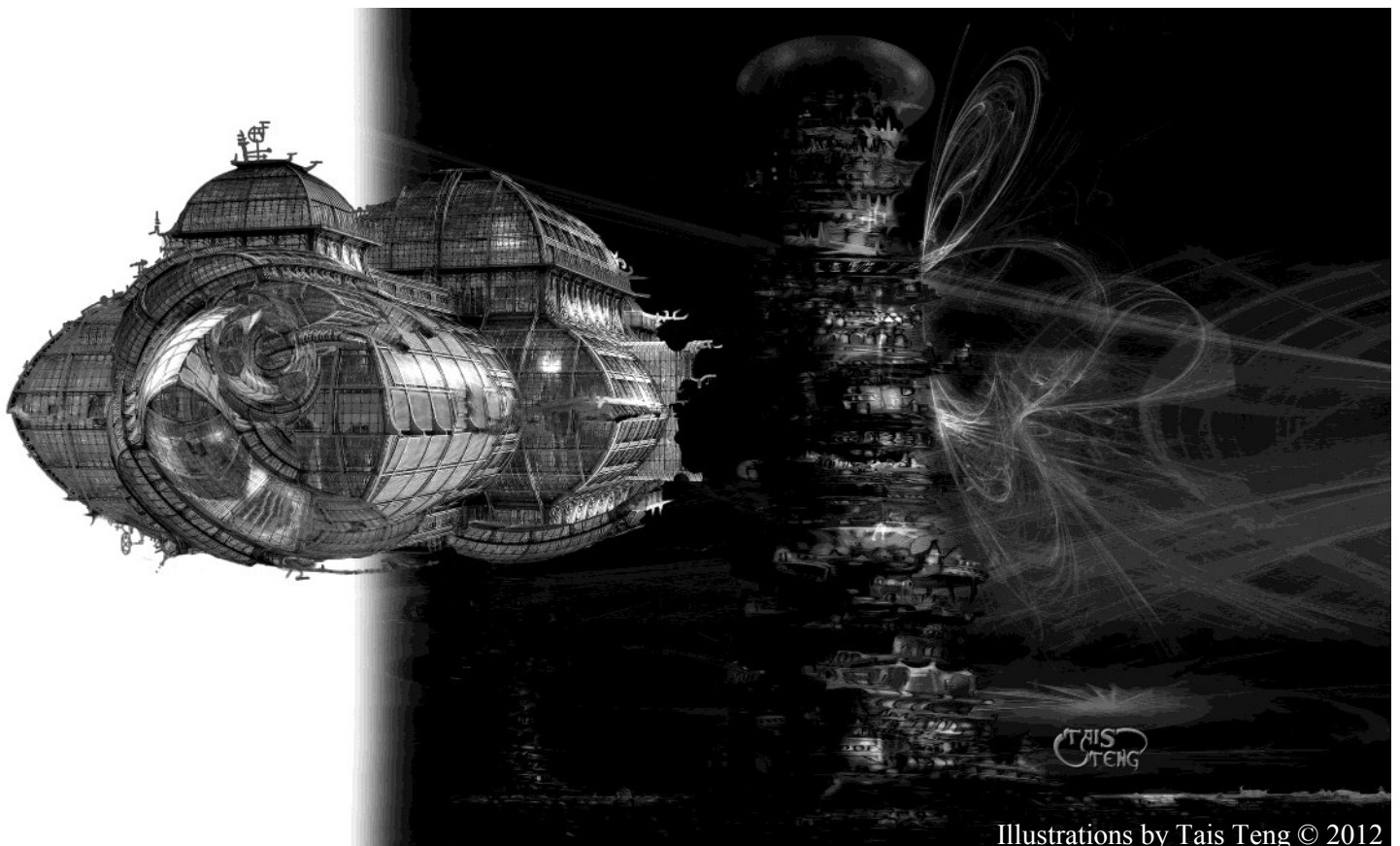
Someone's trying to open a comm channel. I mute it. The vehicle irises open and I think of the worlds beyond, of what our world looks like from far above. Of being unfettered by the sun.

Footsteps behind me, bare feet pattering on pavement. A shadow falls, overlapping mine.

It is the first day of summer and the city is festooned with lights.

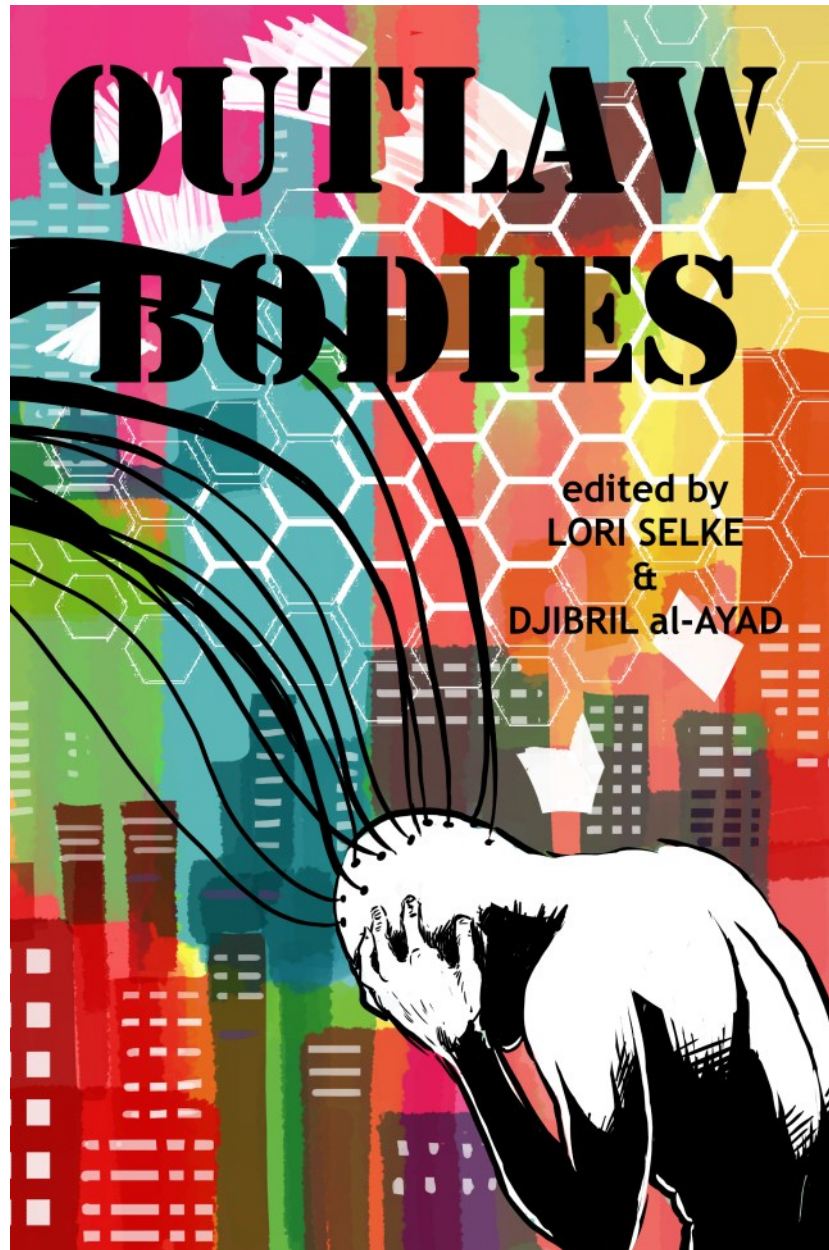
I turn.

“Your name is Jidri,” she says, bringing my hand to her lips. “And you are to be my wife.”



Illustrations by Tais Teng © 2012

Coming soon...



"In this anthology, you will find artists, mothers, and academics; bodies constructed of flesh and of bone, of paper and metal and plastic. Bodies formed of bouncing, buzzing electrons, waves and particles of light. Bodies grown and bodies sewn, glued, folded and sutured. And all of them standing in defiance of the rules and regulations designed to bind them."

"The images of gaping mouths, hard steel torsos, and outstretched synthetic arms taunted me. I could easily visualize the fantastic and strange bodies, both virtual and real—a credit to the writers."

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