

“...like a rich, dark brocade embroidered
with gold thread and rare gems.”

—*Web Fiction Guide*

THE CITY OF PORTLAND
(WITH MORE SWORD FIGHTS)

Jo Maguire, a highly strung, underemployed telemarketer, meets Ysabel, a princess of unspecified pedigree, and rather unexpectedly becomes her guardian and caretaker. Now Jo must make her way through the strange new world of Ysabel’s decidedly odd family and friends (which involves rather more swordplay than she’s used to)—while Ysabel must adjust to a diet of frozen pizza and a job that requires her to call strangers on the phone and ask them how satisfied they are with their banks.

“Wake up...”, volume one of *City of Roses*, collects the first eleven chapbooks of the critically acclaimed webserial.



“WAKE UP...”



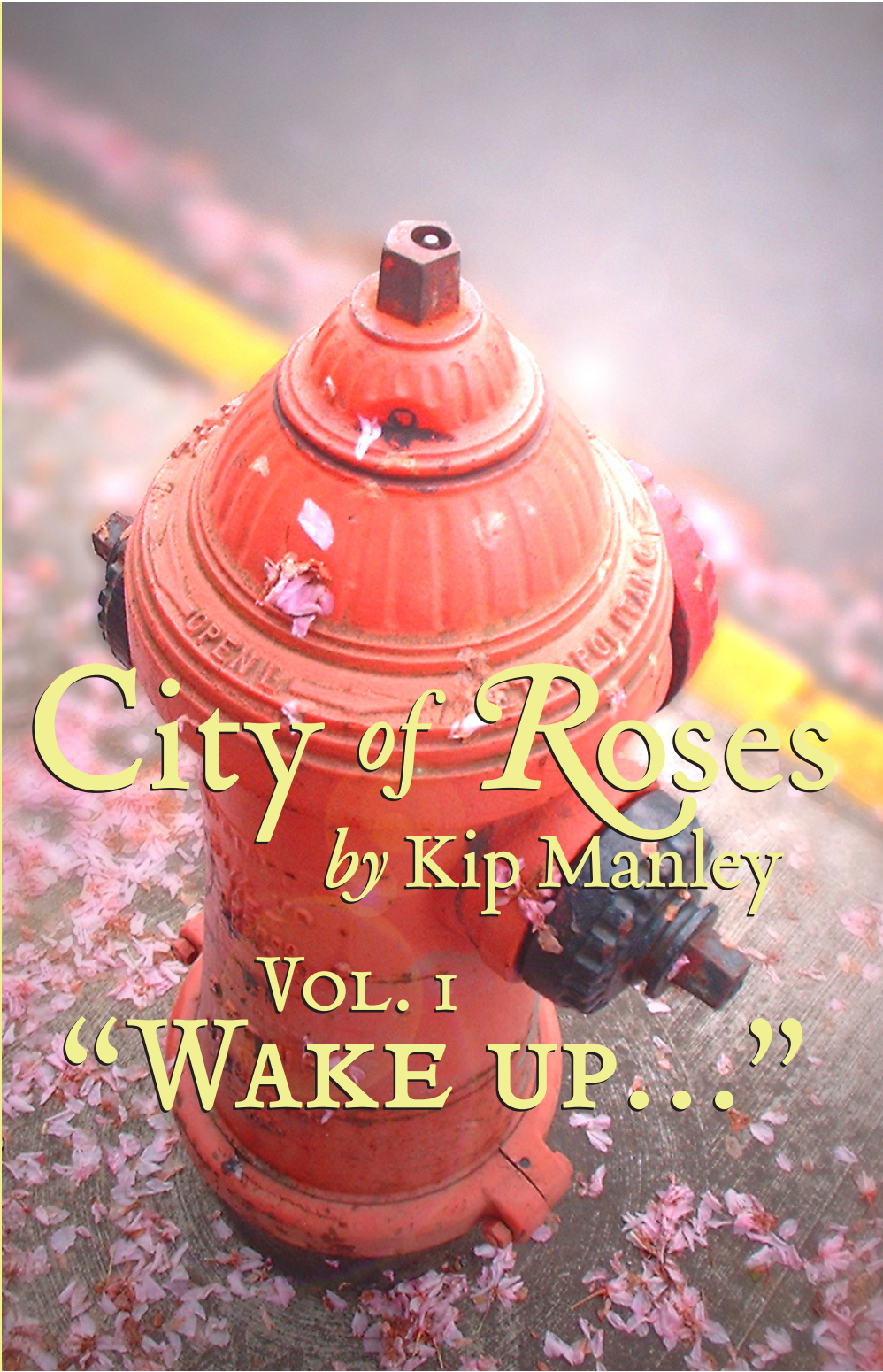
KIP MANLEY



City
of
Roses

VOL. I

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FOUR FIFTHS

"PORTLAND," says Ysabel, spreading marmalade on her toast, "is divided into four fifths."

"Four," says Jo. "Not five?"

"Four," says Ysabel. Leaning over her plate she takes a bite of toast, careful of her sleeveless peach silk top. "There's Northwest, Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast." Her finger taps four vague quarters on the purple tabletop between her plate and Jo's coffee cup.

"What about North?"

"What about it?"

"It's a whole chunk of town," says Jo, leaning back. The jukebox under the giant plaster crucifix on the back wall is singing about how you're all grown up, and you don't care anymore, and you hate all the people you used to adore. "Isn't it one of the fifths?"

"There's no one there."

"There's nobody in North Portland."

"But few of any sort," says Ysabel, shaking pepper on her omelet, "and none of name."

"Okay," says Jo. Stirring her coffee. "But it's still there. It's still a part of Portland. It's still a fifth."

"If you wish to be finicky, you might also note that there's no one technically 'in' downtown, either," says Ysabel, cutting a neat triangle from the corner of her omelet. "Or Old Town. So you might speak of six fifths. Or seven. But." She forks it up, chews, swallows. "I'm trying to keep things simple. For instance: the whole city is, technically, under my mother's sway."

"Because she's the Queen."

"Also, the Ban. Sometimes. But. Her power is concentrated in Northwest, and that fifth represents the practical limits of her demesne. There's too many mushrooms."

"What?" says Jo.

"In the omelet. There's too many mushrooms. And she *still* hasn't brought my soda."



KIP MANLEY

City of Roses

VOL. I

“WAKE UP...”



SUPERSTICERY
PORTLAND • POINTS WEST

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ART IS A GIFT.

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INTRODUCTION

AT THE END OF THE NINETIES I spent a lot of time walking back and forth, between an office on Park between Washington and Alder, and an apartment next door to what would eventually become Robin Goodfellow's house, catercorner to that bright green house with the white columns where the Queen was going to live. And a lot of the time when I was walking back from the office to the apartment it was midnight, it was one in the morning, it was two. The route I took to avoid busy (even at that hour) Burnside took me through what we were only just derisively starting to call the Pearl, through the heart of what would one day become the Brewery Blocks, when it was all still, y'know, a *brewery*, and at midnight or even one or two a line of glass bottles would be clink-clinking against each other on a conveyor belt that ran high overhead across the street, from one stage of the brewing process in that anonymous white corrugated metal building there, to the next stage in the process, in that anonymous white corrugated metal building yonder. And somewhere on the side of that building long since dismantled was this thing, and I don't know what it's called, where the main power line comes in and down the outside wall in a sort of pipe that ends in several up-curved horns from which sprouts a thicket of much thinner cables that branch out to carry the power off hither and yon through the building. And sometimes there's one that isn't in use anymore, or yet, no cables sprouting, just those horns, empty, upturned, waiting. And walking past one night or early morning, the bottles clinking by overhead, I saw them and I stopped and I said to myself, I said *snakes*, I said *pythia*, I said *oracle*—

—and there she was, all of a sudden, sprung fully if not finally formed into the pinkish-orange glow of the streetlight: this Lori Petty-looking kid with spiky yellow hair and goggles pushed up on her forehead and black jeans and a white T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off that said, I dunno, maybe The Rodney Clock? And the mis-matched Chuck Taylors with the duct tape on the toe, and one work-gloved hand on her hip and a glimmering baseball bat in the other, and she's staring at those horns, and she very obviously expected them to stir and turn and *talk* to her—

Our protagonist, Jo Maguire, ladies and gentlemen.

Oh, the baseball bat was swapped out soon enough for an actual sword, and Guthrie got the T-shirt; the goggles went to my own iteration of Those Two Guys, Messrs. Charlock and Keightlinger (though they do different things than they did then); Roland got the gloves. I gave my hair to Becker, though it's my hair then, not my hair now; much as the Duke's drinking whatever beer I was drinking at the time; much as the Danmoore Hotel's still standing, and there's still an Indian restaurant in the Masonic Temple,

City of *R*oses

and Macy's never came to town, and Henry Weinhard never left, and those bottles still clink-clink by overhead at all hours. —But some things are forever: the nail of my left big toe's still a dead grey curl of a thing, so I gave it to Jo, to ground her.

And all of it made up of nothing more than words upon words: words sparked and suggested by, overheard and stolen from Emma Bull and Ellen Kushner and Peter Beagle, John Crowley and Joanna Russ and Joss Whedon, Patricia McKillip and William T. Vollmann, John D. MacDonald and Christ I don't know, but also: words supported by Lisa Spangenberg and Barry Deutsch, picked over by and bounced off of Nick Fagerlund and Brenna Zedan, loving and loved by Jenn Manley Lee and Taran Jack, words that couldn't possibly bear up under the debt they owe, or contain their gratitude. And yet: here we are.

—*Kip Manley*
Portland, Oregon
2003 – 2011

(Ysabel? Come now. That would be telling.)



NO. I

Prolegomenon

WHEN THE PHONE RINGS – WHAT IS NEEDED – A NARROW OFFICE
 AN UNWANTED PROMOTION – WAITING, WATCHING
 IT'S RAINING AGAIN – WHAT SHE SAYS IS TRUE – IN CARCOSA
 "IT'S LATE" – THE MERITS OF A QUARREL – A WICKED THING
 AWAKENING – "AN UTTER DISASTER" – AN UNEXPECTED CALL
 NONE OF HER CONCERN – "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

WHEN THE PHONE RINGS the rumpled blankets jerk and twist and spit out a hand. It fumbles about and finds the alarm clock and slaps the snooze button. The phone rings again. A head pops out, blinking, befuddled. Blond hair cropped close to the skull, a couple of locks here and there left long, dyed black, lank. The phone rings again. She falls on it, half-tumbling off the futon, snatches up the handset. "What," she croaks.

"Frankie," she says. She grabs the alarm clock. "Frankie. You have any idea what time it is. It's – " peering thickly at the clock, she frowns " – it's a quarter of eleven. Fuck.

"Well, my alarm clock didn't go off. I –

"Frankie, I'd have to catch a bus, I'm gonna be late as – "

Listening to the chirpy voice on the other end of the line she fumbles about for something in the litter of unopened junk mail and discarded clothing by the futon, comes up with a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Fine, fine." She shakes it. It's empty. "Let me just – yes, Frankie.

"Yes.

"I said I would, dammit."

Jo Maguire hangs up her phone and puts her face in her hands and takes a deep breath in through her nose. "Fuck," she says.



It's raining. Under the bus shelter eyes half-closed leaning against the frame she coughs a thin little cough into a fist she jams back into the pocket of her careworn jacket, army-surplus green. One of her Chuck Taylors is black and the other is white and its toe is held on with duct tape. She wears khakis hacked off below the knee over grubby once-white longjohns. She doesn't have a hat.

In the window of the salon behind the shelter is an enormous poster filled with a dim watery light that is neither green nor blue. A waifish model wrapped in a white towel floats in the middle of it and looks supremely unconcerned at nothing in particular. Her red-gold hair spreads out behind

her and above her, the only source of warmth. About her are gathered little emblematic piles of this or that, a sprig of something herbal, a mound of chalky stuff, a puddle of goo the color of molasses, shavings of some yellowish root or clay. Beneath her dangling feet the words, dripping with photographed water: Reinterpret the day off.

A number fifteen bus pulls up to the stop. Digging in her cavernous pocket for change, Jo ducks through the rain and climbs on.



It's a thirty-year-old apartment complex, small, maybe eight units in two two-storey buildings making a haphazard U around a small pocket of badly patched parking lot. Yellow siding and peeling brown trim and a sign that says The Bedevere in faded Old West letters. Jo dodges a torrent from a broken downspout and trudges up a flight of cantilevered steps to a second-floor apartment. The door pops open almost as soon as she knocks on it.

"Well?" says a skinny guy, with dark hair down to his shoulders.

"I'm here, aren't I?" says Jo.

"Yeah, but you want to maybe come in out of the rain?"

Inside it's dark. One of those ubiquitous halogen torchieres stands unlit in the corner at a slight angle. There's an old vinyl couch like something out of a dentist's waiting room and a litter of dirty dishes and take-out boxes on the carpet in front of it. "Hey, uh," says the skinny guy, kicking an empty 2-liter bottle out of the way, "I hate to ask, but can I bum a smoke?"

"I'm out," says Jo, in the doorway.

"You're out." His voice flat, his head turning to kick a sidelong look at her.

"Yeah, Frankie, I ran out last night and I haven't had the chance to pick up any more because I had to run all the way across town to find out what the hell you wanted and –"

"Geeze," Frankie's saying, "oh, geeze, Jo, I didn't mean you had to just run out, I mean, you could have had some coffee or something –"

"Oh. Thanks."

"– or picked up some cigarettes, you know, I mean, it's not *that* important – And I'm trying to quit anyway, you know? So maybe it's a good thing, you know? Maybe you should, maybe think about it too, I –"

"I've got to be at work in ten minutes. Which is a physical impossibility from this side of the river. Can we hurry this up?"

Frankie looks away. "I, uh. Got fired. A week, a week and a half ago."

The rain is loud through the open door.

"That's not exactly my problem anymore," says Jo.

"Don't," says Frankie, "don't be like that. The past few days, I mean, I've been trying, you know? Calling people, and looking, but – well, it's been hard, and I just –"

"Frankie," says Jo. "Just stop it."

"What?" says Frankie.

Jo looks away as he turns to face her there in the gloom. Her hands in her pockets. She takes a deep breath.

"Stop what?" says Frankie.

She lets the breath out, deflating. "What is it you want, Frankie?"

He makes half a chuckle like it's too much effort to bother finishing. "What, what do I want? I want things to be like they were. You know?" His hands swing up in two arcs before his face, his fingers sketching a little starburst in the air, poof. "And maybe they were only like that for ten minutes, fifteen minutes, but still. I want. I..." His hands drop to his sides, his shoulders slump. "I want a lot of things. What I need, is. What I need is fifty bucks. You know?"

His eyes on hers, hers on his. The rain, falling. She's the first to look away.

He smiles. A little. Enough to bring out a dimple, there and there.



Leaning against the side of the bus shelter on Morrison and 20th, a wall of greenery behind her, the rain steady. Pulls her hand out of her pocket and shakes down the sleeve of the jacket so she can peer at her watch. 11:35.

"Shit," says Jo.

She lays her head against the scratched plexiglas. Closes her eyes.

Which is when the rain stops. As she opens her eyes, frowning, the light starts flickering, a little, as if – it's like the clouds above, the low solid milky grey ceiling, all that is breaking up, scudding away, a movie in fast-motion. Standing, frowning, she ducks her head out, looks up. Her hair shining. A fat drop of water hitting her shoulder unnoticed, sinking in, a dark splotch.

A short man in a dry peppermint seersucker suit comes walking down Morrison, whistling tunelessly, reaching into his jacket and pulling out a small cellophane-wrapped packet with a bright red circle on it. He has ruddy cheeks and a thick brown mustache and a summery straw porkpie hat. Jo looks down at him, her mouth framing a word she isn't yet speaking, as he shakes the packet once, deftly. A couple of cigarettes leap to attention and he plucks one, offering it to her with a courtly little bow, an exaggerated dip of his head.

"I, uh. Thank you," says Jo, and then after a moment she reaches up to take it. She smiles. It's a wrinkled little thing, an off-white ivory color, and it has no filter. She lifts it to her nose to sniff. "Nice," she says. "Flowery. What's –"

But the man in the peppermint seersucker suit isn't there.

She looks up and down Morrison, steps out to the corner to look along 20th. The daylight is changing again, re-murking. The movie running in reverse as a drop of rain falls striking the puddle that drowns the backed-up storm sewer, and then another and another and another. Jo runs back under the bus shelter. Laughing. The rain coming down as if it had never stopped.



A NARROW OFFICE — AN UNWANTED PROMOTION
WAITING, WATCHING

A NARROW OFFICE on the sixth floor of a building on the west end of downtown has indecisive cream walls interrupted by kelly green carrels, a couple dozen of them set up on top of long folding tables against that wall and the back wall. Each of them has just enough room for a computer screen, a keyboard, a telephone. There's maybe thirty stations, all told, and just about every seat is full.

"Is there someone home I *could* speak with? Your mother or father, maybe?"

The front wall has a bulletin board and a doorway into the office kitchen, startlingly white: formica and linoleum and fluorescent lights, refrigerator and white-handled microwave oven.

"Does anyone in your household work for a bank, an insurance company, a financial services company, or a market research firm?"

The other side wall, the one without a line of tables and carrels and dialers working phones, has a couple of tall windows and through them, past the last outriders of downtown's tall buildings, mostly older brick, a refurbished hotel, a stark new-build apartment block hanging over the highway's gully, past all that there are the west hills, suddenly close, soaked in shreds of low wet clouds like dirty grey cotton.

"And how would you rate that on a scale of very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?"

Up at the front of the office is a desk, an actual desk with a computer on it and a big harried guy in a lurid red-and-black plaid shirt who's running his hand through what little of his hair is left as Jo walks in, dripping. "Ahem," says the big guy, pointedly.

"Hey yourself, Becker," says Jo. "Where's Mike?"

"Quit."

"Quit?"

"Gave two minutes' notice." There's something on the screen that is apparently deeply puzzling to Becker. He frowns at it. "Apparently, Tartt was yelling at him."

"Tartt's always yelling at him."

"This time it actually sank in."

"Which," says Jo, "doesn't explain why *you're* sitting in the hot seat."

Becker looks up with a grin. It's a sour grin. "Hi, my name is Becker, and I'll be your supervisor this afternoon."

"You're kidding," says Jo.

Becker's eyes are back on his screen again. "If there's a joke, it's on me, and it's in terribly poor taste." He twiddles his mouse, clicks one of its buttons, pokes a couple of keys and definitively stabs Enter with his middle finger.

"You've been promoted," says Jo.

"So it would seem."

"Well, that's great! Congratulations!"

"Lucky me. The Peter Principle still works. Look, just sit down and start dialing so my first official act in a supervisory capacity isn't busting your late ass." He looks up again. "I just freed up a batch of Central phone numbers. Go bug a little old lady in Duluth, would you?"

"Power's gone to your head already," says Jo. "I like it."

"Shut up and dial," says Becker.

Jo shrugs off her coat and hangs it on the back of an empty chair. She spins it around so she can straddle it and leans her elbows on the back of the chair and boots up the survey on the computer. As it's pulling up the first phone number, she settles the phone's headset over her ears and adjusts the mike. She takes a deep breath.

"I assure you, ma'am," the thin young man next to her is saying, a thick clump of mascara smeared in the corner of his left eye, his rough-knuckled hands black-nailed and glittering with silver rings – ankhs, skulls, snake-heads, dice – "everything you say is held in the strictest of confidence." His voice is deep and silky smooth and as gentle as his smile, his little nod hello to Jo. His black T-shirt in white letters says Necrophiliac, M.E. "Your phone number was randomly generated. None of the financial information we gather is in any way associated with your name and address, which we don't even know, and won't ever ask for."

Jo punches her first number into her phone.

"Good evening," she says, into her mike. "My name is Jo Maguire. I'm calling from Barshefsky Associates, an independent market research firm. We're not selling anything; I'd just like to ask the person in your household who makes most of the financial decisions a few questions."



"You think you know what's going on," says Becker. "You think you've got it sussed." They're sitting at the table in the back, in under the bal-

cony by the video poker machines. The jukebox is singing about those strangers who pass through the door and cover your action and go you one more. "I mean," says Becker, loudly, "sure, you're overqualified, but you're underambitious. So you put in the minimal amount of effort. You call out sick often enough so you can kid yourself that you don't really do this for a, for a *living*. That you're really between life-stages or you're finding yourself, you're working on your book or getting the band ready or whatever the fuck. It's just a way station. But. But. You don't fuck around so much that they have an excuse to *fire* you, God knows, because you can't afford to lose this, this *job*, and you do this, you walk this line, paycheck to paycheck you are the epitome of mediocrity, and what do they have the nerve to do?"

"They promote your ass to supervisor," says Jo.

"They promote my ass to supervisor," says Becker. "Why? Why me?"

"Scraping the bottom of the barrel," says the thin young man with all the rings, dumping a third spoonful of sugar into his coffee.

"Maybe," says Jo, "Tartt figures you already know all the tricks, so you're ready for whatever the rest of us will try to pull."

Becker's face sours contemplatively. "Tartt's not that smart," he says. "Is she? Do you think - " He smacks his forehead. "Shit. Here we all are getting fucked-up drunk and you people are all going to call out sick tomorrow and expect me to cover for you."

"He catches on quick," says the short, older woman with the loose wattle under her chin and the whiskey sour. "For management."

"I'm not getting drunk," says the thin young man with all the rings.

"Shut up," says Becker.

"I will *not*," a woman says loudly enough that they all look up. She's climbing out of the booth by the video poker machines, small black shoes kicking awkwardly at the end of long pearly grey stockings up to a short slip of brownish mushroom grey hemmed with yellowed lace. Black hair glossy in artful tangles swings as she reaches back for her coat.

"Sit down," says whoever's still sitting in the booth, and she looks away, and sighs, and then sits.

"Damn," says the thin man, appreciatively, and then, jerking back, glaring at Jo, "Ow." Jo smirks over the rim of her glass at him. "For that," says the thin man, "you owe me dinner."

Jo downs the last of her rum and Coke and thumps the glass down. "You keep that dream alive," she says, leaning forward, scooting her chair back.

"You aren't *leaving*," says Becker.

"Bathroom," says Jo, standing. Grinning. "I'm not nearly drunk enough to pull off an epic hangover tomorrow."

"You guys," says Becker, and he sighs, heavily.

Jo snorts a laugh and steps away from the table, turning, colliding with the woman in the mushroom slip, who's climbed back out of her booth. "Whoops," says Jo, reaching out, catching the stumbling woman's upper arm. "Whoa."

The man who swarms out of the booth isn't tall but he is lanky, slick green track suit flapping as his long arm quickly plants a bicycle-gloved hand on Jo's chest. He leans into a shove that sends her pinwheeling into the back table.

"Hey!" barks Becker, as the thin man kicks back his chair, standing.

"Don't," says the lanky man in the green track suit. His voice is thin, reedy. He's young, for all that his hair is silvery white and closely cropped. Green sunglasses with jagged, sporty lenses ride up above his forehead. Blue and white headphones cling to his neck. "Do not touch her."

"The fuck?" snaps Jo, shaking her head.



"See," says the little guy in the dark suit. He's holding a flashlight and a book with some 19th-century-looking man on the cover, all pointed mustaches and ludicrously mesmerizing eyes. "Your problem is your diet."

"Really," says the big guy in the dark suit. He's sitting behind the wheel.

"Yeah," says the little guy, who's sitting in the passenger seat. What little hair he has is lankly grey, clustering around his ears and struggling in vain to launch a curl almost precisely midway between his brow and the top of his skull. "The mucus and stuff. Builds up from your diet. Meats and breads and stuff, it gets all, you know. Sticky. Mucus. Clogs up the entire pipe system of the human body."

The big guy has a beard the color of rich mahogany furniture, bushy enough to bury the knot of his skinny black tie. Most of his hair straining against the leather thong that pulls it taut into a clumsy club of a ponytail. "Mucus," he says. He wears a pair of classic black sunglasses. The left lens is covered with spidery words painted in white ink.

"Listen to this." The little guy flips back a couple of pages in the book that doesn't so much tremble as vibrate, thrum almost, in his jittery hands. "We took a trip through northern Italy, walking for 56 hours continuously without sleep or rest or food, only drink. This, after a seven-day fast and then only one meal of two pounds of cherries – ' Uh..." He turns the page, runs a finger down it. "After a 16-hour walk – "

"Cherries," says the big guy.

"Yeah," says the little guy. "See, he eats only fruit, right? Because it doesn't have any mucus. Mucus, see? Clogs you up. So. Cherries. Apples. Figs."

"I hate figs," says the big guy. "Heads up."

Halfway down the block out from the door under the red neon sign comes the woman in the mushroom slip, struggling into her camelhair coat. The big guy takes off his sunglasses and opens his door with a popping squonk. The little guy drops the flashlight and the book and fumbles for a pair of sunglasses. The owl's feather tied to one side hangs them up on his jacket pocket. "Friggetty fuck," he says. "It's her?"

"It's her," says the big guy.

"She's alone?"

"She's alone."

"Persistence," says the little guy sliding his sunglasses onto his face, owl's feather dangling to one side, "pays – shit."

"I see him."

The door under the red neon sign pops open and out at a stalking half-run comes the lanky man in the green track suit.

"Damn," says the little guy, one hand brushing the owl's feather away from his cheek.

"A knight?" says the big guy, pulling himself back into the car.

"Yup."

"The Chariot?"

"Who else?"

"Damn," says the big guy.

"Wait and watch," says the little guy. "Watch and wait."



The door under the red neon sign pops open one more time, and out comes Jo Maguire, Becker on her heels, the thin man bringing up the rear.

Halfway to the corner, she's stopped. His bicycle-gloved hands are on either shoulder, clenched under the faux fox shawl of her coat. "This is none of your concern, miss," he's saying. They're both looking at Jo, who says, "I just made it my concern."

"She's going to get our asses kicked, isn't she," says the thin man.

"Shut up, Guthrie," says Becker.

"You do not understand," the man in the track suit starts to say. The silver stripes down his sleeves and pants shine unearthly in the pinkish orange street light. He wears outlandishly puffy running shoes, strapped and gusseted, spotlessly white.

"I understand just fine," says Jo. "She said 'No.' And that's it. That's the end. You let go. You walk away."

"Is this, this guy bothering you? At all?" says Becker to the woman.

"Yes," she says, simply, and steps back away down the sidewalk from his hands left hanging there in space.

"Lady – " he says, stricken.

"Back off," says Jo.

"Would you like us to walk you somewhere?" says Guthrie. "Bus stop, maybe?"

"Would I," says the woman, looking down, away. "Would I."

"Your car, maybe?" says Becker.

"I would," says the woman, looking up at Jo.

"That's that," says Jo.

"Lady," says the man again, as she says, "There is, you see, a party. I'd like to attend."

He takes a step closer to her, hands dropping. "Lady, *please*."

"Of course," says Jo, her eyes on the man in the track suit.

"We'd have to walk," says the woman in the mushroom slip. In the windows of the jewelry shop behind her fantastically encrusted eggs glitter, hard greens and reds, brash golds, in the bright hard beams of little spot-lights. "It's up in Northwest – ten, fifteen minutes away? If any – or all – of you would like to come?"

"I, uh," Becker starts to say, as the woman smiles at him and says, "I insist. To thank you for your chivalry."

"We'd love to," says Jo. Her eyes still on the man in the track suit, who steps back now, hands at his sides. Guthrie shrugs.

"Fuck it," says Becker, looking at his watch. "*I'm* calling out sick tomorrow."

"You are wrong, my lady, to do this," says the man. "But I will accompany you."

"Not if 'my lady' doesn't want you to, you won't," says Jo.

"Your mother," he starts to say, as the woman says, "He may tag along. I don't mind."

"I cannot leave your side," he says. Looking back along the cars parked on both sides of the street. The red neon of the sign above the bar's door gleams from the drops and streaks and puddles of fresh rain on windshields, hoods, chrome trim, the dark wet pavement.

"Shall we?" says the woman in the mushroom slip, brightly.



IT'S RAINING AGAIN – WHAT SHE SAYS IS TRUE
IN CARCOSA

IT'S RAINING AGAIN, pattering softly unseen through the branches of the trees down Everett Street. Candles and Christmas lights wink and flicker from every window of the big white ramshackle house on the corner. The thin young man, Guthrie, pushes open one of the two front doors

and staggers onto the porch, letting out a burst of music, a fiddle, sharp popping drums. Rings glitter from his fingers as he points, peering along the front of the house. Frowning. "See?" he says. There's a woman with stubby dreadlocks and baggy jeans, a plastic cup in either hand, leaning against the half-open front door behind him. "See? Out here the window is *there*," and then he drops his unsteady hand, ducking his head back inside. "While in here, it's further down that way. See? See that?"

"Is it?" she says, holding out a cup for him. He takes it.

"Yeah," he says. "I mean." He frowns.

Inside the big front room the drum kit is set up between the fireplace and the keg. The drummer's head is ruddy. The singer, or at least a woman in a bulky fisherman's sweater and jeans who dangles a microphone from one hand, sits on a folding chair on the other side of the fireplace. The fiddler works the room, snarling himself in a jig, his red hair bobbing up above the circle of people stomping along and down again, his bow leaping into the air. There's someone up in the shadows at the top of the stairs, playing something of a rhythm line on a guitar. "Remind me never to play poker with you," says Becker in his big plaid shirt, leaning up against the wall, as the woman in the cat's eye glasses pulls a neat royal flush in hearts from behind his ear.

"You was the one hiding the cards, pal," she says. "Not me." She lifts her bangled wrist up, peering at a loosely buckled watch. "Now, if you'll excuse me –"

"That's, ah," says Becker. "My watch."

She cranks her eyebrow up higher but smiles a little nonetheless. "You maybe want to keep an eye on it next time," she says, reaching to take it off.

"I think you've maybe got the wrong idea," says Becker.

The drummer cracks his sticks three times over his head and rattles out a sharp popping parade-ground roll, syncopating as the guitarist sends a carillon lick ringing down the stairwell. The singer smiling twirls her microphone once wrapping the cord around her wrist catching it with a pop and as the fiddle picks up the lick flawlessly she stands and launches a song about how us Amazonians know where we stand, we got kids, we got jobs, why do we need a man? The room roars and kicks into a staggeringly varied assortment of dances. Jo leans against the corner under the stairs and lifts a hand to her mouth to stifle a rather large yawn.

"Enjoying yourself?"

Jo jerks her head to one side. It's the woman in the mushroom slip, holding two glasses just thicker than a finger and almost as long. She shakes a black curl out of her eyes as she holds up one of the glasses to Jo.

"Well?" says the woman, leaning close to be heard over the music.

"I'm, I'm sorry," says Jo. "It's just – you look familiar, somehow. Except I think I'd remember you. If I'd ever met you before, I mean." She takes the little glass almost full of something pearly shimmering in the dim light, just on the cusp of transparency. Lifts it up and tips half of it down her throat. "Damn," she says, blinking.

"Damn?"

"Good hootch. The booze," says Jo, in response to the woman's quizzical look. "Liquor. Moonshine."

"Our host brews his own."

"Does he."

"Though he doesn't use moonshine. Too common. He prefers ingredients less readily available. A maiden's virtue, say."

Jo grins and downs the last of her drink. The singer's singing about boiling up rice in a satellite dish.

"What's your name?" says Jo.

"Pay your quid, first."

"What?"

She's smiling, the woman. "Quid pro quo. Tit for tat. What are *you* called." A slim man in a blue sarong and a white shirt nods to her as he comes down the stairs, which she acknowledges with a quick smile.

"Jo," says Jo.

"Joe," says the woman in the mushroom slip. "Joe. A boy's name?"

"Nah, it's short for –"

"Don't," says the woman, raising a finger as if to shush her. There's a short man all in black behind her, talking to the man in the blue sarong.

"Don't?"

"You don't like it, do you."

"Well, it's," Jo shrugs, "it's kind of a dumb name."

"So don't tell me."

"Okay," says Jo. "I won't. So."

"So?"

"I've paid my quid. Now it's time for quo."

"Ysabel," says the woman in the mushroom slip.

"Ysabel," says Jo.

"More often than not. He's still watching me, isn't he."

Jo cranes her head a little looking over and past Ysabel's shoulder. By the front door the fiddler sawing his way between them stands the man in the slick green track suit, running a bicycle-gloved hand over his white-furred scalp. His jagged green racing sunglasses down over his eyes like pieces of broken bottle. "What's his story?" says Jo.

"Complicated."

"What is he, an ex? A stalker? The father of your love-child?"

Ysabel looks down, her lips pursing around a half-swallowed smile. "He watches over me. A protector."

"A bodyguard."

"Of sorts."

"I presume," says a short man, the man all in black, dark-haired, his beard neatly trimmed, a whisper of tamed curls just past stubble along his jawline blending flawlessly into his close-cropped sideburns, "that we are discussing the good Roland, Miss Perry?"

Ysabel turns. He smiles and ducks his head, a little. "You make me a liar, Robin," she says.

"Never, Miss Perry," says Robin, sipping from his tall black mug.

"Did I not just tell Jo that most people more often than not call me Ysabel? And up you step as bold as you please to prove it a lie." She smiles as she says this, sipping from her own thin glass.

One of Robin's shoulders lifts as his head tips down and away, his eyes looking over to crook a smile at Jo: an elaborately ambiguous shrug. "What she says is true, miss." Looking up. He is quite short, not even as tall as Jo. "Whatever that may be." The song clatters to a halt, the drummer rattling his toms with random rolls and fills, the guitarist wandering off quietly down a minor scale, the fiddler scraping a long droning note out of the guts of his fiddle.

"Robin is our host," says Ysabel.

"*Humble* host," says Robin, smiling.

"And this," says Ysabel, "is Jo. Who rescued me."

Jo nods. Then shrugs, smiling uncertainly.

"A pleasure, Jo," says Robin. "Rescued? From what?"

"A dreadfully dull evening," says Ysabel, frowning a little. Looking up at nothing in particular. A set of pipes has begun to drone somewhere further in the house. Coming closer. The fiddle scrapes into a new note and begins to wrap a slow pulsing melody around the unseen pipes. "Is this..?" says Ysabel.

The corners of Robin's mouth turn down, arching his little mustache up and out. "I merely asked them to play. I didn't tell them what."

The piper, pale, her clotted yellow-white curls swept back from her face, steps a measured march into the front room to the squeezing of her little pipes. The crowd – varied, lycra and fleece, glittered cheeks, khakis and sweaters, army pants and a black sports bra, a floppy mohawk, a tuxedo, a glittering minidress, a bared chest under swirls of bodypaint, pegged jeans and garish T-shirts, Roland's green and silver tracksuit as he makes his way across the room, sliding through them all standing quietly now, watching, waiting. The singer smiling as the piper slowly picks up the fiddle's melody over her drone. The drummer wiping sweat out of his face, swigging something from a red plastic cup.

"It is," says Ysabel, grabbing Jo's hand. "Come on."

"What?" says Jo.

"Lady," says Roland, there beside them, reaching out to almost but not quite take Ysabel's arm. "It is perhaps time we got you home."

"Not yet," says Ysabel, turning her back to him, her hands on Jo's upper arms. Her eyes closing. "Listen," she says.

There's been a shift in the song, gears changed. The guitar ambling forward now in a rickety rhythm line as the melody takes a breath and repeats itself, strong, assured. The drummer waiting, sticks still. Nodding to someone, hey. The singer looks out over the little crowd there in Robin's front room and lifts her microphone to her lips and says, half-singing, "Along the shore the cloud waves break, the twin suns sink beneath the lake, the shadows lengthen – in Carcosa..."

Jo frowns. "It's not hooked up."

Ysabel, her head tipped back, hair hanging heavy as she sways left foot to right and back, her hands still on Jo's arms, smiles. "What?"

"The microphone," says Jo.

"Strange is the night where black stars rise and strange moons circle through the skies – but stranger still is lost Carcosa..."

The drums pop then, once. Someone whoops. The piper's playing two lines over the steady heartbeat of her drone, one marching a slowly quickening lockstep with the grinning fiddle, the other skirling after the guitar, each chasing the other, looking for the monstrous beats to come. The whole room tensely waiting, almost, almost.

"Songs the Hyades shall sing, where flap the tatters of the King, must die unheard in dim Carcosa..."

Jo closes her eyes. Ysabel's hands fall away. Jo takes a deep breath.

"Song of my soul, my voice is dead – die though, unsung, as tears unshed shall dry and die in lost Carcosa..."

The fiddle and pipes are pruning, boiling the melody down as the guitar and pipes settle and under it all the drone and the threat of the drums.

"In Carcosa... lost Carcosa... dim Carcosa..."

A grizzled man pauses his bobbing head to shove his white-taped black-rimmed glasses back up his nose. Robin pinches off a blissful little smile and downs the last of whatever's in his mug. A dark girl in patched overalls throws wide her arms her hands swallowed by bulky work gloves. Becker catches his breath and looks eyes shining at the singer as the woman in cat's eye glasses eases a hand into the hip pocket of his jeans. The dervish melody has spun itself tighter and tighter until it's almost nothing more than two notes pulsing on-off one-oh in-out *da-da* as the singer wails. The drummer lifts his sticks and hangs there, waiting.

"In Carcosa... lost Carcosa... dim Carcosa..."

Jo opens her eyes.

That first brontolithic beat unleashes something monstrous. The room whirls snaps leaps kicks stomps into motion, heaving as one with the avalanching rhythm. Jo is in the thick of it now arms high above her head yelling, yelling, Ysabel beside her, head down, hair flying, all of it so loud the music is almost lost, the band redundant all of them, madly now chasing some driving jig just barely out of reach. The fiddler's spinning widershins in a circle of tossing people dancing about him, the piper's on her knees, cheeks blimped, pipes jerking; the guitarist still cannot be seen up in the shadows on the stairs but can most definitely be heard. The singer's head's thrown back, microphone lifted high above her, howling the wordless melody up into it, a drawn-out hopeless nameless vowel, and the drummer's making up for lost time. But Ysabel is gone.

Jo puts out her hand, stumbling, shoved to one side by the grey-haired woman in the Frankie Say T-shirt. Turns against the dancing crowd, bumping against the lumbering boy with the wispy beard and the black leather trench coat. Ysabel's there at the foot of the stairs yelling something at Roland whose bicycle-gloved hand is clamped around her upper arm. Jo looks away rolling her eyes and is knocked two staggering steps towards them by the whipcracking arms of the man in the glittering vest. The band suddenly and out of nowhere hits a spattering of notes as one, a clarion, a fanfare, and falls back as suddenly into its churning driving almost-chaos. "Carcosa..." moans the singer, and Jo pushes her way between a woman in a white fur coat and a man whose long brown arms are fishnetted in hot pink. Roland pulls Ysabel after him towards the door. He's saying something about her mother.

"Do not mention my mother again this night," snaps Ysabel. "As a favor. To me."

"Hey," says Jo. Planting her feet.

Roland purses his lips and looks away from them both. Lets go Ysabel's arm and she steps back once toward the stairs as he lifts his hand to touch the bridge of his nose lightly, closing his eyes. He peels the green sunglasses from his face and his eyes are mild as he turns them again to Ysabel. "Lady," he says. "Enough. You have made your point." He holds out his hand for her to take. "But now we must be off."

"I'm not here to make a point," says Ysabel, just barely to be heard over the music. She smiles sweetly. "I'm here to enjoy myself."

"Okay?" says Jo. "So just go. Leave her –"

"Who are you?" says Roland.

"What?" says Jo.

"Who are you, that you should care about this?" He turns to face Jo now, and his eyes are no longer mild. "That she should be a concern to you?" He throws out a hand, encompassing the dancing room. "You don't belong here. Who *are* you, to interfere?"

"I don't know," says Jo. She shrugs. "I guess I don't like bullies."

"I am her guardian!" says Roland. "She is *my* charge. My responsibility –"

"You have a funny way of showing it," says Jo.

"Are you," says Roland, quiet now under the stomping feet, the roaring band, "impugning my honor?"

Jo snorts. "Honor?"

The band driving up out of nowhere hits its spattered unison again; and again – the syncopated, punch-drunk fanfare. In the moment of silence between the last note driven home and the first whoops from the suddenly motionless dancers the rip of velcro is shockingly loud. As applause breaks out all around them Roland strips the bicycle glove from his right hand and throws it at Jo's feet.

"Well?" he says.

"Well?" says Jo, frowning.

"What say you?"

"What say me?" says Jo.

"What say I," says Ysabel. Smiling. "Pick up the glove."

Jo, still frowning, not taking her eyes off Roland, kneels slowly. Picks up the grubby glove.

"Name your terms," says Roland.

"Terms," says Jo. Standing up.

"As the challenged. What weapons? Where? When?"

"Weapons?" says Jo.



"IT'S LATE" – THE MERITS OF A QUARREL

A WICKED THING – AWAKENING

"IT'S LATE," says the little guy in the dark suit, ticking off a point on his fingers. "It's trying to rain." He leans against the front of a black car. Meticulous lines of hand-painted white letters whorl up and over the fender. "There's, what, a half-dozen knights in there?" He begins counting off on his other hand. "The Chariot, of course. The Axe. I'm pretty sure the Mooncalf. The Mason and the Helm. You said yourself you saw the Shield. And a dozen more in shouting distance." He looks up, frowning. "Did I mention the rain?"

"Swords," says the big guy in the dark suit. He stands on the hood of the car, both feet primly within concentric rings of cramped white letters.

"Yes, they have swords," says the little guy. "That's another problem right there."

"They're *bringing out* swords." The big guy peers through a pair of black sunglasses at the ramshackle house on the corner across an intersection

clogged with traffic waiting on a red light. The left lens of the sunglasses is covered with spidery words painted in white ink.

"So I have to ask why they're bringing out swords to find out why they're bringing out swords?" says the little guy. Somebody's trunkthumping stereo kicks up a rattling bass line.

"The Chariot has gotten himself into a duel."

"All the more reason to ske-fuckin'-daddle. It's the Calfe again, isn't it." The light changes. The trunkthumper recedes down the street.

"It's the girl."

"The girl." The little guy looks up, alarmed.

"The girl from the café."

"You're shitting me. The Bride? He's going up against his own god-damn –"

The big guy looks down at the little guy over the rims of lowered sunglasses.

"Oh," says the little guy. "The girl. Right. The what, the gutterpunk. *That* girl." And then, "Oh," he says. "*Oh*."

"Precisely," says the big guy, peering at the house on the corner.

"She can't win," says the little guy. "There's no way she can win."

It starts to rain a little harder.



"Let the record show," sighs Robin, "that your body has entered the lists to make proof of your appeal, and so your pledges by law are discharged. Will you have grease, ash, and sugar?"

"I will not," says Roland.

Ysabel leans against Jo, one hand on her shoulder, murmuring in her ear. "Don't worry. He can't hurt you. It's against the rules. He won't let you hurt him. It's only a game."

"And who will stand as your second?" says Robin, looking up at the ceiling.

"I will have none here in that office," says Roland. Robin nods perfunctorily. A brief flurry of whispers and titters sweeps the room.

"And do you swear," says Robin, taking a deep breath, "you come no otherwise appointed, with naught but your body and the merits of your quarrel, that you have not any knife, nor any other pointed instrument, or engine small or great, no stone or herb of virtue, no charm, experiment, nor other enchantment by whose power you believe you may the easier overcome your adversary?"

"I do so swear," says Roland. His eyes calm and mild.

"A game," says Jo. Swallowing. "Great."

The party crowd has raggedly ordered itself along the walls, leaving clear an aisle that crosses diagonally from the foot of the stairs where Jo and Ysa-

bel stand next to the door into the bright toothpaste-colored kitchen, held open by the piper, sitting on her heels, offering up a bottle of something-or-other to Roland. Robin's walking down the middle of that aisle toward Jo, passing the barefoot boy in bone-white khakis holding two crossed rapiers on a fat velvet pillow. "Jo Maguire," he's saying, "save your honor and come in to your action which you have undertaken this day. Will you have grease, ash, and sugar?"

"She waives them," says Ysabel. "It's okay," she says to Jo. "A formality."

"And do you swear you come no otherwise appointed, naught but your body and the merits of your quarrel, not any knife nor other pointed instrument, no engine, stone, herb of virtue, no charm, experiment, or other enchantment?"

"Yes?" says Jo, as Ysabel says, "She does."

"And who stands as your second?"

"I, uh," says Jo.

"I will," says Ysabel. Another flurry, of whispers and gasps, and not so brief. Ysabel shrugs. "It's as good a way to discharge my debt as any."

"You may choose your blade," sighs Robin, snapping, and up comes the barefoot boy with the fat velvet pillow. Jo stares at the swords. "They are of a length," says Robin.

"Yeah, they're long," mutters Jo. "And sharp."

"It's only a game," says Ysabel.

"It's insane," says Jo.

"Don't worry," says Ysabel. "You'll lose. But he won't let you hurt him."

"That's *not* what I'm worried about," says Jo.

"I told you: he can't hurt you. It's against the rules. It's for *honor*," says Ysabel. "Your honor, nothing more. Which you hold lightly enough." Jo frowns, looking sidelong at Ysabel, who smiles. "Trust me," she says, as Robin says, "Your blade, Jo Maguire?"

And Jo picks up a sword, looking down at the candlelight and Christmas-light winking and chasing the basket of steel ribbons woven around the hilt. "This is," she says, "insane."

"Duelers!" calls Robin from the center of the aisle, and up comes Roland in his green track suit, blue and white headphones still clamped around his neck, planting his soft and spotless white shoes one before the other, his hips edge-on, his left arm up and back, bent so his fingertips brush the air behind his head, the tip of his blade fixed to a point in the air before his eyes. "Salute!" cries Robin. Jo in her plain black T-shirt, her hacked-off khakis, her grubby longjohns, fixes her duct-taped Chuck Taylors one before the other, her left arm back and out, her sword held up before her like a stick. Roland fluidly swirls his wrist and his blade in a circle, his head dipping. Jo nods in return. "Engage!" cries Robin, throwing up his hand, and everyone begins to cheer. Roland lunges. Jo leaps back, stumbling, ducking her head,

yelling "Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa!" She drops her sword clattering to the floor, arms crossed over her face, crying "You win! You win!"

The cheers wither into whispers and mutters.

"Pick up your blade!" says Roland.

"No!" says Jo. "You win! I yield, I surrender, that's it. Uncle." There are giggles at that. A stifled guffaw. Jo peeks out from under her crossed arms. Roland still in his stance has pulled his sword back to fix the tip at that point in the air before his eyes. "Congratulations, big fella," says Jo. "Way to go."

"You insulted me," says Roland, pulling up out of his stance, his arms relaxing, his blade dipping.

"And now I'm leaving," says Jo. "Deal." She turns her back. Becker and Guthrie and Ysabel stand waiting at the foot of the stairs. "Where's my coat?" There's a collective gasp as she catches herself mid-step. Arms up and out suddenly, grasping at nothing. Frowning, she looks down. The tip of Roland's blade has ripped a hole in her black T-shirt. A good two inches pokes out of her chest, a little to the left of center. "I," says Jo.

With a twist and a jerk Roland pulls the blade back out of her body.

Jo turns unsteadily to look back at him. One knee threatens to give but she does not fall. "I," she says. "Jo?" says Becker. She puts out a hand for something, anything, for balance. It isn't there.

"Ow," says Jo. She falls.



The outer office is dark except for the spark of a halogen desk lamp. The woman behind the desk wears a shapeless linen dress and narrow spectacles on a fine chain draped around her neck. She looks up from a yellow legal pad when the big guy in the dark suit opens the outer door. "Mr. Charlock and Mr. Keightlinger," says the little guy in the dark suit. "To see Mr. Leir."

"He's expecting you," she says.

The inner office is dark except for a white-shaded banker's lamp shining on a leather-topped desk. On the desk a silver pen and an ivory-handled knife with a wide blade of tarnished bronze. The man looking out the window at the street below has thick, unruly white hair, and wears a white shirt and a white tie. A cigarette is pinched unnoticed between the thumb and forefinger of his pale right hand. The window is open. Up from under the drip of the rain comes the washing susurrus of a street-sweeper.

"Well?" says Mr. Leir. His face is quite young under that white hair.

"Well," says Mr. Charlock, "the Chariot went and got himself into a duel. With a girl. A *mortal* girl. Which, well. He lost."

"Lost," says Mr. Leir.

"Struck her from behind. Yeah. He lost."

"There is now," says Mr. Keightlinger, idly twirling a lock of his beard, "a Gallowglas."

Mr. Leir looks over his shoulder at them. Frowns. Looks down to discover the cigarette in his hand, which he lifts. Takes a drag, blowing smoke out the window into the rain.

"Well," he says.



"You," calls the old woman over her shoulder, her eyes on her fingers running along a brightly lit shelf of orange plastic prescription bottles, "have done a wicked thing." Finding the one she wants she plucks it down. Wrestling the top off she taps two pills into a mortar. "Sit up straight. You're indecent."

Ysabel does not sit up straight. Out in the darker bedroom she's curled up sideways in a wing-backed chair by the fireplace, her head leaning back against one wing, her legs folded up and tucked against the arm opposite. "You should concentrate on waking her up." Still in her mushroom-colored slip rucked carelessly up revealing the dark bands at the tops of her pearly stockings. "Assuming you can, of course."

"Oh, I can," says the old woman, huffing into the bedroom from the bright white bathroom, holding the marble mortar and pestle in both hands. She wears a heavy pink robe with a tangled garden of tea-roses embroidered on the thick shawl collar. Glossy white hair hangs loose before and behind her shoulders. "She's just shocky, is all. You'd be yourself, if you was her."

On the bed pillowed in a deep down comforter lies Jo Maguire, naked, asleep. An old scab mars one knee. The nail of her left big toe is a dead grey ridge. A tattoo down the swell of belly from navel to the edge of dark curled hair, an angular thing, abstract, a suggestion of beak and eyes. Her right arm folded, hand on her chest, fingertips touching a dull red welt just to the left of her breastbone. The old woman sits on the bed beside her brushing a lock of black-dyed hair from Jo's forehead. "I don't know why you picked this one," she says. On the nightstand by the bed is a glass of water. The old woman pours powder from the mortar into the water, which turns several colors too quick to be named. "She's in your mother's world, not yours. Or mine."

"I didn't *pick* her," says Ysabel. Fussing with the lace that hems her slip. "I didn't *do* any of this. It all just – "

"It just happened?" says the old woman.

One of Ysabel's narrow black shoes dangles half off a twitching foot. The other is on the floor before the wing-backed chair. "Yes," says Ysabel.

The old woman dips her fingers into the glass of water and then flicks them at Jo's face. Jo sits up suddenly gulping, the hand at her chest now a fist against

that welt. The old woman sets the glass of water on the nightstand and picks up a small jar, a baby food jar with the label half-picked away. Jo doubled over heels kicking left hand clutching the deep soft comforter sucks down a ragged breath and another, her right fist grinding into the welt. There is another welt, larger, more diffuse, as red, on her back. The old woman sniffs the baby food jar and nods, then scoops out a two-fingered dollop viscous and translucent which she plops on the welt on Jo's back. Jo jerks upright crying out, arms flailing, eyes wild. The old woman shushing her clamps one hand on her shoulder holding her still as she smears the rest of the stuff on the welt on Jo's breast. Jo screams. Shushing her all the while the old woman holds Jo's shoulders as Jo kicking tosses her head back hands digging into the comforter firmly in the old woman's grip. And then with a hitch Jo stops. Opens her eyes. Takes a deep sobbing breath. Sinks forward, curling around herself.

"Fucking hell," she croaks.

"There there," says the old woman. "You don't go through *that* every day."

Jo coughs and shivering pulls up one end of the comforter she's sitting on to wrap herself in. "My clothes," she says. Coughs again. "Where are my clothes?"

"Burned them, dearie," says the old woman. "Filthy things. You couldn't possibly appear before the court in *those*."

"There were holes in your shirt," says Ysabel, who does not look up from the lace in her lap.

"You," says Jo, seeing Ysabel sitting sideways in the wing-backed chair. "You. You lied. You said he couldn't hurt me. You said. He – " Jo frowns. "Stabbed me?"

Ysabel's looking up and glaring at Jo as "There, there," says the old woman. "I spoke the truth," says Ysabel. "Roland made me a liar." She looks back down at the lace in her lap. "There *is*," she says, "a difference. I don't see what you're so upset about."

"You don't," says Jo. Huddled under the awkwardly rucked-up comforter. "You don't see." Eyes closed. Deep breath. "I was stabbed. You. I have no idea where I am. Where am I?" she says, as the old woman says "There, there." Jo shakes her head. "What time is it? What do I – need to – I was *stabbed*. He – " Another deep breath, and something that's half a chuckle. "Do you," says Jo, and swallows, "have any idea how hard it is to find a decent plain black T-shirt for less than ten bucks?"

"You won," says Ysabel.

"What?"

"You won," says Ysabel. "You bested him."

"It's true," says the old woman, peeling back the comforter to peer at Jo's back. "Struck you from behind – a grievous breach of honor and decorum. To say nothing of your skin." The welt is gone.

"I won," says Jo.

"You proved yourself against his honor," says Ysabel, "and all his offices are forfeit for his blow. Including," and she looks up to meet Jo's eyes, "me."

Jo blinks.

"Rather, my keeping," says Ysabel. "He was my guardian. Now you are. I was his charge, his responsibility;" she shrugs. "Now I'm yours."

Jo closes her eyes, and when she speaks her voice is quiet and steady. "I want my clothes. Any clothes. I want a cigarette. I want some coffee. I want – I want to go *home*. If you," and she looks up at Ysabel, her voice rising, "think I am going to go along with this, with this – game – for even one minute, I – I –"

"Well," says the old woman, pushing herself with some effort to her feet. "*That's* a relief, and I don't mind saying so."

"I –" says Jo, frowning. "You. A relief?"

"Dearie," says the old woman, leaning against Jo's shoulder, "we were rather worried you'd accept."



"AN UTTER DISASTER" – AN UNEXPECTED CALL NONE OF HER CONCERN

"AN UTTER DISASTER," says the woman with the pince-nez perched at the tip of her nose. She purses her lips. "We may well be forced to raze it to the very ground and start from scratch." She adjusts her pince-nez with knob-knuckled fingers taloned by sharp black-painted nails. "Perhaps," she says, "some sort of wig?"

"You are not," says Jo, "touching my hair." She's standing on a faded burgundy footstool wearing a short white chemise, lifting her arms so the old woman in her heavy pink robe can wrap a tape measure about her chest. Ysabel smiles, sitting on her bed in a short white robe, her hair heavily damp, one bare leg crossed over the other.

"Your first address to the Queen should be as 'Your Majesty,' which thereafter ought be scaled back to 'Ma'am.'" The tall man's narrowly somber face is lit by extravagant gin blossoms applying two-thirds of his nose and his sunken cheeks. His chin is restless behind the high white gateposts of his upturned shirt-collar. "*Never* avail yourself of that horrid redundancy, 'Your *Royal* Majesty'; it smacks of arse-kissery."

"I'm stumped," says the old woman, folding the measuring tape into her fist.

"As am I," says the woman with the pince-nez.

"She may well refer to herself via the accepted fiction of the royal 'we,' or may just as well stoop to the first-person singular; our Queen is rather charmingly erratic on this point of protocol. She has as yet shown no proclivities toward the *third* person, for which I suppose we ought give thanks."

"There is the dress the Princess wore to her cotillion. We could take in the bosom – "

"Too much crinoline," tuts the woman with the pince-nez.

"You, however," says the tall man, "must keep in mind you address not merely a person but the people she rules. When addressing our Queen directly, restrict yourself to the second-person plural: 'you' and 'your' as decidedly opposed to 'thou' and 'thine.' I do *not*," and his face cracks then into a small wry smile, "anticipate *this* point, at least, proving difficult for you."

"Whatever," says Jo. "Look, I'm not about to turn down a free outfit. But maybe you could keep it simple. You know? Jeans? A pair of pants, a nice shirt?"

"Out of the question," says the woman with the pince-nez.

"Couldn't possibly, dear," says the old woman.

"*Not* before the Queen," says the woman with the pince-nez.

"Actually," says the tall man, "it's not *entirely* without precedent, but I should advise – "

"The new girl, the amanuensis," says the old woman, snapping her fingers. "She ought to have a skirt and jacket that – "

"I think," says Ysabel, "you'll find what she's asking for in my brother's trunk."

A moment of silence follows, broken by a quiet "Your brother?" from the woman with the pince-nez.

"Also," says Ysabel, "a pair of boots."

The woman in the pince-nez turns abruptly then and mouth moued stalks out the door, followed after another silent moment by the old woman, bustling in her heavy pink robe.

"Thanks," says Jo.

"Cigarette?" says Ysabel.

"Dear God yes," says Jo, stepping down off the hassock.

"If I might be permitted to pick up the thread of my instruction from the moment I was forced to leave off?" says the tall man with the narrow face. "When the presence begins, Miss Maguire, you will wait in the back of the room until you specifically are called before our Queen." Ysabel opens a rattling drawer in a cluttered dresser on spindly legs and roots around, pulling out a small wooden box. "Allow her to direct the conversation where she will; she may well wish to make small talk." The tall man allows himself another narrow smile. "It is *not* without precedent." Ysabel opens

the box and plucks out a slim brown cigarette, which she tosses to Jo. "Answer whatever questions she might have with candor, discretion, and wit, and you shall do fine."

"Clove?" says Jo, sniffing the cigarette.

"We are not entirely unpredictable," says Ysabel. "Majordomo, if you don't mind?"

"Actually," says Jo, "a light?"

The tall man turns his back on them, facing the bay window looking out on a small green yard, a lightening street. Ostentatiously adjusting his black frock coat. "A light?" says Ysabel. "Of course." She unbelts her robe and lets it fall, then fishes a matchbook out of the wooden box and pads across the room toward Jo. Clear crystal catches the dim light and flashes from the gold pin piercing her navel. The match pops into flame. "Where was I?" the Majordomo is saying. "Yes. She will broach the subject at hand in, ah, whichever way she chooses." Ysabel smiles as Jo leans forward to touch the cigarette to the match. The cloves crackle as they light. "Said subject, the matter upon which all this hullabaloo hangs, being the question of whether or not you accept the keeping of the Princess." Ysabel blows out the match and lets it drop, walking back across the room to the dresser as Jo takes a deep crackling drag. "That answer, of course, will be, 'No.'" Ysabel opens another drawer and pulls something filmy out of it, a handful of lingerie. A teddy. She lifts it over her head and shimmies into it. Tugs it into place. "The Queen will then exile you, and that will be that." Turns, arching one leg tiptoed bending a little awkwardly to snap the crotch.

Jo, blowing smoke, frowns. "Exile?" she says.

"Of course," says the Majordomo. "Refusing the office *must* be taken as an insult. But: the Chariot will be returned to his rightful place. The Princess will once more be held by someone who can keep her. And *you* will be free to go wherever else you may wish: that, as I said, will be that."

"Okay," says Jo.



In the long narrow office with indecisive cream walls and skinny green carrels each with a computer screen and a telephone and most with a waiting or chattering or yawning dialer, Becker sits behind the big desk up at the front, a cup of coffee in one hand, a telephone handset wedged between ear and shoulder. "What I'm seeing," he says, "is a room where Rob's here, and TJ, and Dorfman and Denice and Christian's here. Guthrie's here. Hell, *I'm* here. What I'm *not* seeing, Jo, is you. You aren't here. Why is that?"

On the edge of Ysabel's massive dark bed on the deep white comforter sits Jo, wearing a pair of tight black trousers and black knee-high motorcycle boots and an open white shirt with billow sleeves and a wide flat

collar. "Um," she says, into the gold and ivory handset of a princess phone on a silver tray held by a boy half-swallowed in an off-white tabard edged with gold braid.

"Um?" says Becker.

"Yeah, see, there was this thing. You remember the party? Last night?"

"Yes."

"And the fight?"

"You got into a fight."

"Yeah. With the guy? In the green suit? You tried to, ah, anyway. I have to sort some stuff out, this morning, which is why I'm running a bit late, and, um. What time is it, anyway?"

"Eleven thirty."

"Oh. It's later than I thought. Um." Jo frowns. "Can I, just – how did you get this number?"

"From the schedule."

Jo blinks. "The schedule."

"Yeah, Jo. We tend to keep all our employees' phone numbers on the schedule. So we can call them, if they don't show up for shifts."

"Oh," says Jo.

"Are there, are there cops involved? Do you have to see the cops about this fight?"

"What? No. The guy. You remember the guy? Who wouldn't leave that girl alone? And there was a, um. There were swords?"

Becker rolls his eyes. "Jo, just. Stop. I don't appreciate being screwed around with like this."

"I'm not trying," says Jo.

"If you can't make it in here by noon, then don't bother to come in at all today. Okay?"

"Becker, listen to me, I'm not – " Jo sighs, then reaches up to drop the handset back onto its gilded cradle.

"But five minutes remain until the presence, Princess, Miss Maguire," says the Majordomo.

"Yeah," says Jo, "thanks. Could you guys just, ah, leave me alone? For a minute? I mean, not Ysabel, obviously, it's her room, but – "

The Majordomo is holding the door open for the woman with the pince-nez, who sweeps out, full burgundy skirts clutched in one black-taloned hand, followed by the pudgy page with the phone on the silver platter. "I will send someone to fetch you both," says the Majordomo, closing the door behind him.

"Well?" says Ysabel, sliding a dark red chopstick into the base of her ponytail.

"What the fuck is going on?" says Jo, tugging her blousy white shirt closed. "Becker doesn't remember the duel. At all."

Ysabel adjusts her tight black blouse, checks the fall of her somber grey skirt in the three-way mirror.

"Well?" says Jo. "He calls my number and reaches me here." Running a hand through her short, short hair, ruffling the random dark locks. "Are you forwarding my calls or something? And it was daybreak, what, an hour ago? Tops? And now it's almost noon?" Tugging the shirt again. "What is all this? Who are you people? And how the *fuck* do I keep this shirt on?"

"The ribbons," says Ysabel.

"Ribbons?"

"At the bottom. Wrap them around your waist and tie them off."

"Oh," says Jo. She reaches for the long ribbons trailing from the shirt's tails and ties them into a floppy bow over her left hip.

"How's that?" says Ysabel.

"I feel like a pirate." Jo looks down. Reaches up to touch the skin between the folds of the blousy shirt still hanging open. "A T-shirt would be nice." There just to the left of her breastbone. "Or a button, up here. Maybe a bra?"

"I've got it," says Ysabel, stepping into the closet. Coming out with a black vest, the front of it heavy with dense gold embroidery. "Put this on and button it up. You look fine."

Jo slips into the vest. "Your mother's a queen," she says. "And you're a princess."

"Yes," says Ysabel, adjusting the Jo's collar as Jo begins buttoning the vest.

"Of what?"

"The city," says Ysabel. "Well. This much of it, anyway."

Jo looks up into Ysabel's eyes. "So what is this? Some kind of family thing, some kind of old-country thing, like the Mafia? Or gypsies?"

Ysabel steps back. Folds her arms. "'Who are you people?'" she says with a faintly mocking lilt. "'What the fuck is going on? What is all this?'"

"Pretty much," says Jo.

"It's *none of your concern*, Jo Maguire." Ysabel reaches out tuck a wayward black-dyed lock of Jo's hair behind one ear. Smiling she says, "Just go out there and say no and that will be that. Over and done. As if it had never been."

"Yeah," says Jo.



The music wherever it's coming from shimmers like falling water. Cascades of quiet fluting bells ring changes on a simple theme that's lost in all its mirroring roundelays. Jo stands to one side of the big back room, eyes closed, listening. Down two shallow steps on a soft white leather jetty

of sectional sofa sits a wiry woman all in black with long black hair in glossy, artful tangles. A small black pillbox of a hat cocked at a jaunty angle. The Majordomo leans with some dignity over the back of the sofa to murmur in her ear as a big man straining the shoulders of a shiny blue suit waits patiently. By French doors opening on a small shaded garden stands Ysabel picking at the gauzy curtains. "You," says Roland, quietly, "are a disgrace."

Jo opens her eyes. Roland stands beside her, arms folded, his eyes on the Queen all in black. He wears a white shirt and a yellow tie and blue jeans and he looks down at Jo's gold vest, her blousy white shirt, looks up to meet her eyes. "In those colors," he says. "Do you know what it takes to wear those colors?" Jo says nothing. "To do what I do? To be what I am?" He does not raise his voice. "You must with shield and rod save yourself from nine spears cast at you all at once. Could you do that? You must shake off the hunt in a forest and come from among the branches unwounded, without a loosened strand of braided hair, and you must while running leap over a branch the height of yourself and stoop under one the height of your knee. You must be able to tune a poem by the rhymes and rhythms that make the worth of it." His smile is thin. "Can you do any of that?" he asks. "Mortal?"

"Comes now before you," says the Majordomo then, "Jo Maguire; and your knight, Sir Roland, the Chariot," and Jo pushes off the wall ahead of Roland, past the big man in his shiny blue suit, his face beaming, on his way up and out, down the shallow steps and around the white sofa to stand before the Queen. Jo frowns, looks over her shoulder to see Ysabel there by the French doors, her hands now clasped behind her back. "Miss Maguire?" says the Queen.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Your Majesty. I just – "

"The resemblance is remarkable," says the Queen, her head tilted just so towards the Majordomo's murmur. "Still. She *is* my daughter. What else would one expect? Thank you," she says to the straightening Majordomo. "I trust our Gammer Gerton has you fully recovered?"

"Ah," says Jo, "yes. Ma'am. Unless there's some side effect to that goop she used." Jo reaches up, touches the top button of her vest. Pinches it. Lowers her hand.

"Roland," says the Queen.

"Your majesty," says Roland, "I was intemperate – "

"You were a fool. Were it not for the prowess of your sword, we might grow tired of cleaning up your awkward messes."

"Ma'am," says Roland.

"Nonetheless, here we all are, and I have a lunch to attend. Miss Maguire. Through no fault of your own, you find yourself with the charge and office of our daughter's safety. This is yours to accept or reject." Wherever

it is, the music trickles slowly to a halt, like a wound-down music box. "What say you?"

And Jo says, "Yes."

The Queen looks up to the Majordomo, whose Adam's apple bobs in a swallow behind the upturned gateposts of his collar. "You accept," she says, to Jo.

Jo looks at Roland, who stands unmoving, eyes closed. Ysabel behind her has covered her mouth with her hand. Jo takes a deep breath and looks the Queen directly in her dark, dark eyes. "I accept," says Jo.

The Queen sighs a short sharp sigh. "Very well." Roland shakes his head. Behind her upraised hand, Ysabel is smiling.



"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

"**W**HAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

Ysabel stands on the sidewalk arms akimboed, angry eyes half-hidden by narrow black sunglasses worn against fitful, threatened afternoon sunlight. Jo still in those black boots, that floppy white shirt, the black-and-gold vest, comes down the steps from the porch of the old green house. "I don't know," she says, shifting a big black bag hung from one shoulder. "That you couldn't possibly fit all those shoes in this bag?"

"This is entirely *your* fault, Jo Maguire."

"I had no idea she would kick you *out*," says Jo, dropping the heavy bag at Ysabel's feet.

"*Us* out," says Ysabel. "Us. You now have the keeping of me. You can't very well do that from halfway across town. And you can't stay here." She folds her arms, looking down the street. Mouth pinched. "So I go where you go," she says.

"Lucky me," snaps Jo.

"We told you how to get out of this, Jo." Ysabel turns to look at Jo over lowered sunglasses. "*You don't belong here*. We showed you the path out." She pushes the sunglasses back into place. "And you refused to take it. What were you thinking?"

"Maybe that I didn't want it all to go away," says Jo. "As if it never was."

"Lucky," says Ysabel, "me."

Jo jerks the heavy black bag up off the sidewalk and slings it from her shoulder. "It's going to rain," she says. She starts marching toward the corner. After a moment Ysabel starts after her. "Where are you going?" she says. "Jo?"

"Huh," says Jo, at the corner. Across the intersection is Robin's ram-shackle house.

"Where are you going?" says Ysabel, catching up with her. The afternoon sunlight is changing, drowning in fits and starts. The trees down Everett Street begin to shiver their leaves.

"You go where I go, right? Well, I'm going to get you a hotel room. Get you situated, and we can maybe start trying to figure out a way to make this right."

"A hotel room," says Ysabel. "That's generous of you. With your ten-dollar T-shirts and your bummed cigarettes."

There's a break in the traffic. Jo doesn't start walking. "You," she says, "have money. Right? She said. Hopefully."

Ysabel says nothing.

"*Shit*," says Jo. Then, "Your mother. She's got to come up with something for you –"

"Do you want to go back in there and ask her for it?"

The light one block up changes, and a wave of traffic starts down the street towards them. The first fat drops of rain are starting to fall.

"Her temper will pass," says Ysabel, looking back toward the old green house. "They'll come up with something. Have Roland challenge you, perhaps. And this time, you'll make sure you lose. Pass the office back to him."

"Great," says Jo. "Until then, you can sleep on my futon."

"What," says Ysabel, "I don't get the bed?"

Jo starts laughing.

Also he knew something about writing, for when wandering the city he had visited public libraries and read enough stories to know there were two kinds. One kind was a sort of written cinema, with plenty of action and hardly any thought. The other kind was about clever unhappy people, often authors themselves, who thought a lot but didn't do very much. Lanark supposed a good author was more likely to have written the second kind of book.

—*Alasdair Gray*

The visible world is merely their skin.

—*William Butler Yeats*



NO. 2

Fidessa

“JULY, JULY!” – GANESA’S SMILE

PORTLAND, DIVIDED INTO FOUR FIFTHS – BRAZILIAN BEER, THAI NOODLES

SHOOTING THE MOON – LIGHT FROM FLUORESCENT CEILING PANELS

A DUSTY HOLLOW – GOING HOME – WHAT IS SO DANGEROUS

“CHICKIE CHICKIE?” – SCATTERING THE HOUNDS – UNEXPECTED VIOLENCE

SANCTUARY – THE MUSIC’S LOUD – AS GENTLEMEN SETTLE

THE SECOND THRUST – THE NIGHTTIME CITY, FILLED WITH LIGHT

FARELESS

“JULY, JULY!” sings Jo in the shower. “It never seemed so strange, it never seemed so strange!”

Ysabel sitting in the open window lights a cigarette and takes a drag. Shaking out the match she blows the smoke outside. Stretches one long bare leg onto the skinny white faux balcony. She’s wearing an oversized blue sweatshirt that says Brigadoon! She reaches up to pluck a crumb of tobacco from her lip.

“And the water rolls down the drain,” sings Jo, opening the bathroom door. Her wet hair is plastered to her skull, black tufts smeared back against yellow fuzz. She’s wrapped up in a Spongebob Squarepants towel. Jo plops herself on the foot of the futon and starts digging through a tangled nest of laundry. “Aha!” She yanks a pair of black tights free and holds them up. Sniffs them. Shrugs.

“You live in a pigsty,” says Ysabel.

“What?” says Jo, standing up, tugging the tights up over her hips.

“You live,” says Ysabel, “in a pigsty. You should have someone in here to clean it.”

Jo looks up at Ysabel. Coughs up a single snort of laughter. “Yeah,” she says. “I’ll get right on that.” She unwraps the towel and ducks her head into it, ruffling her hair.

It’s a small studio apartment. There’s a narrow kitchenette along the wall opposite the bathroom. The sink is filled with dirty dishes, empty Ramen wrappers, a half-empty ashtray, the remains of a case of Diet Coke. A petri-fied sprawl of old, dried spaghetti clings to the wall above the little electric range. Jo’s futon takes up most of the open floorspace. In the corner by the window is a big black bag overflowing with shoes: high-heeled sandals with thin straps, high soft limp brown leather boots, spotless black and yellow and white athletic slip-ons. A small television set sits on a milk crate up above a welter of potato chip bags and more Diet Coke cans and a stray shoe or two.

Ysabel primly moues her mouth and looks out the window, at the green hills to the west, sweeping north. Past the scatter of highrises and apart-

ment buildings, the great curve of the highway bridge looms over the river. The sky is high and white. It's going to be a hot and humid day.

"Damn," says Jo. She's pulled on a black T-shirt. There's a big red devil's face on it, sticking out his tongue. "I wish it would make up its mind and start with the rain already."

"It will," says Ysabel. "Soon enough." She leans back against the window frame, then looks up and over at Jo. "I'm hungry," she says.

"There's still some pizza left over."

Ysabel lets a mouthful of smoke leak out the window. "I don't want cold pizza," she says.

"So we can heat it – "

"I don't want *hot* pizza, either."

"Oh," Jo's digging around in the pile of laundry again, and comes up with a black denim miniskirt. "There's ramen," she says, wriggling into it.

"You know what I want, Jo."

"And I'm talking about what you can have."

"I *want*," says Ysabel, "to go to a restaurant. And have a proper meal."

"And I want a million bucks," says Jo, pulling on a couple of mismatched tube socks. "Isn't gonna happen anytime soon."

"You can't possibly expect me to survive on a diet of noodles and those," she shakes her head, "those *flavor* packets!"

"And Diet Coke," says Jo. "And cigarettes. And pizza."

"Jo," says Ysabel, grinding out her cigarette butt on the slatted floor of the faux balcony.

"I mean, you're perfectly free to go wherever you want." Jo fishes up one big black battered boot. "As far as a restaurant or whatever. Hell, *I'm* not stopping you."

"Jo," snaps Ysabel, swinging around to stand up.

"What?" says Jo, and then, waving off Ysabel, "*Don't* tell me, I know, I know. I have the keeping of you."

"You do," says Ysabel, folding her arms across her chest.

"Like it was my idea," says Jo, sighing.

"It's not *my* choice, either," says Ysabel. "Nonetheless. I'm your responsibility. And I want to go to a restaurant and have a nice brunch."

Jo stands up, her leg canted a little, one boot on and one boot off. "We'll go to the Roxy," she says. "You can have an omelet."

Ysabel opens her mouth and then stops, frowning. She nods. "At least it gets us out of this – *apartment*," she says.

"Whatever," says Jo, bending over to scoop up her other boot. "You might want to put on some pants first."



The man in the linen suit stands on the corner looking up at a big, blocky brick building. The cornerstone is marked with a Masonic compass and square. Signs advertising an Indian restaurant and a head shop hang over the front doors between green-capped white columns. The man in the linen suit ducks under a bouquet of tie-dyed shirts sales tags fluttering and steps into the hemp and bead and world crafts shop.

"Hey," says the kid behind the counter. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," says the man in the linen suit. He picks up a small statue, a whip-thin figure coiling into an improbable, prayerful pose. He smiles at it. His face is fleshy, and his rich red hair flops from a high widow's peak. He carries a long black artist's portfolio tube slung over his shoulder. "Tell His Grace the Stirrup is here to see him."

The kid behind the counter picks up the phone and says something into it. The Stirrup looks up at a wall papered with overlapping Hindi religious posters. Ganesa looks down at him with soft dark eyes. If he's smiling, it's hidden behind his pink trunk.

"Go on up," says the kid behind the corner, hanging up the phone.

"Gaveston!" cries the young man who opens the door.

"Your Grace," says the Stirrup.

"Come in, come in." His Grace is barefoot. He's wearing pyjama pants and a floor-length dressing gown crowded with paisleys of purple and maroon and gold and brown. He leads Gaveston down a dark hall into a room filled with sunlight from tall, narrow windows. A low bed stretches across the middle of it. On the bed lies a woman, on her stomach. She has long blond hair and wears a pair of black lace shorts and has a pen in her teeth. She's frowning at the crossword puzzle in a newspaper.

"Please excuse the mess," His Grace is saying. "I was just getting ready for the morning staff meeting."

"I had hoped," says the Stirrup, "that we might have a word in private?"

"Oh, don't mind Tommy," His Grace says, sitting on the edge of the bed. He points to the squat man, wearing a black T-shirt and black jeans and standing to one side of the door. His long dark hair gleams in the light. "Tommy hears everything. That's his job."

Tommy grunts. The Stirrup looks at the woman on the bed, then looks back at His Grace. Who winces sheepishly, and leans back next to her. Strokes the small of her back. Kisses her shoulder. "Darling?"

"What," she says, "is six letters long and means 'the magic word'? It starts with P."

"I have no idea," says His Grace. "Maybe you could go look it up? Give us a minute, to talk business?"

Sighing, she rolls out of bed, scoops up her newspaper, and pads past Tommy down the dark hall.

"Well?" says His Grace.

The Stirrup takes a deep breath. Shifts the weight of the portfolio tube hanging from his shoulder. "Your Grace," he says. "If you will allow, I shall see to it that – by this time tomorrow – you will be a married man."

His Grace frowns. Points at the doorway. "To *her*?" he says.

"Oh, no, Your Grace," says the Stirrup. "To the Bride."

"Oh," His Grace says. He looks over at Tommy, who shrugs. He looks up at the Stirrup. "Go on," he says. He smiles. "I'm listening."



PORTLAND, DIVIDED INTO FOUR FIFTHS
BRAZILIAN BEER, THAI NOODLES – SHOOTING THE MOON

"PORTLAND," says Ysabel, spreading marmalade on her toast, "is divided into four fifths."

"Four," says Jo. "Not five?"

"Four," says Ysabel. Leaning over her plate she takes a bite of toast, careful of her sleeveless peach silk top. "There's Northwest, Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast." Her finger taps four vague quarters on the purple tabletop between her plate and Jo's coffee cup.

"What about North?"

"What about it?"

"It's a whole chunk of town," says Jo, leaning back. The jukebox under the giant plaster crucifix on the back wall is singing about how you're all grown up, and you don't care anymore, and you hate all the people you used to adore. "Isn't it one of the fifths?"

"There's no one there."

"There's nobody in North Portland."

"But few of any sort," says Ysabel, shaking pepper on her omelet, "and none of name."

"Okay," says Jo. Stirring her coffee. "But it's still there. It's still a part of Portland. It's still a fifth."

"If you wish to be finicky, you might also note that there's no one technically 'in' downtown, either," says Ysabel, cutting a neat triangle from the corner of her omelet. "Or Old Town. So you might speak of six fifths. Or seven. But." She forks it up, chews, swallows. "I'm trying to keep things simple. For instance: the whole city is, technically, under my mother's sway."

"Because she's the Queen."

"Also, the Ban. Sometimes. But. Her power is concentrated in Northwest, and that fifth represents the practical limits of her demesne. There's too many mushrooms."

“What?” says Jo.

“In the omelet. There’s too many mushrooms. And she *still* hasn’t brought my soda. Her colors,” says Ysabel, “my *mother’s* colors,” before Jo can ask her question, “are gold and white. Also, black and red. Sometimes. The rest of the fifths are parcelled out to those who owe her fealty.” Ysabel takes another bite. Jo sips her coffee. “Southwest is the Count’s, Count Pinabel. His colors are white, blue, and rose. He doesn’t go over the hills much anymore, and most of downtown is open, unclaimed, so his is the smallest fifth, and the weakest power. The largest fifth belongs to Duke Barganax; he has the most knights enfeoffed – ”

“Enfeoffed?”

“Sworn to him.” The waitress in a tight black T-shirt that says Mer-ry Fucking Christmas sets a tall glass on the table next to Ysabel’s plate. “Orgeat Italian soda with cream. Anything else?”

“Actually,” says Ysabel, looking up, “this omelet – ”

“Is fine,” says Jo. “The check?”

“Sure,” says the waitress.

Ysabel drops her fork clattering on the plate. Sits back. “I must,” she says, “*constantly* remind myself that you know nothing of who I am and what your proper place is.”

“Right,” says Jo, leaning forward, her elbows on the table. “So you were saying? About this Duke, with the biggest fief?”

After a long moment Ysabel picks up her fork. “He has the most knights,” she says. “Were it not for my mother, he would most likely have seized the Throne by now. His colors are red and brown, though sometimes he affects black and gold.”

“Okay,” says Jo. “So. Northeast.”

Ysabel chews thoughtfully. “Some colors are rarely if ever seen,” she says.

“And?”

“We almost never go to Northeast Portland.”

“Yeah, but who’s there? It’s the fourth fifth. Who has it?”

Ysabel looks down and away, her heavy dark curls slipping from behind one shoulder to spill in front of her lowered face. She lifts them up and back with one hand. “The hair of her head hanging down to the ground,” she says in a quiet voice. “Her eyes like stars, her hands of iron. The nails of her hands and feet like sickles. She changes herself to a dog, a cat, a fly, a spider, a raven, an evil-looking girl, and she enters the houses of the people and hurts the women and brings trouble upon the children. She brings changelings, and she has nineteen names.”

“What the hell was that?” says Jo, after a moment.

“Northeast Portland,” says Ysabel. “Black and grey and cold moon silver.” She smiles brightly. “You might want to pay the woman, Jo.”

The waitress is setting the check on the table. Jo digs through her black backpack and pulls out a folded wad of bills held by a medium-sized binder clip. Peering at the check, she peels off a five and four ones, then a fifth. "We should have just had the pizza," she mutters.

"Yes, but how much more pleasant was this?" says Ysabel. Polishing off her toast.

"And here I'd thought the deal was you go where *I* go," says Jo.

"Because *you* end up going where *I* want to go." Another bright smile. "See how easily it all works out?"

"Well," says Jo. "You damn well better want to go to work with me now."

"Indeed," says Ysabel. Sighing.



A boy in a brown bomber jacket sprints through the front doors of the former Masonic temple and takes the stairs to the second floor two at a time. His brown hair pops in a matted pompadour. He carries a brown paper bag. At the top he cuts around a humming bright Coke machine and comes up short before a white door hidden on the other side. He knocks a rollicking tattoo with one hand. There's a rustle behind the door and a deep voice booms, "Duncan will be one man."

"And Farquahr will be two, motherfucker," says the boy. "Open up."

The door opens with a burst of bright music and a bark of laughter that doesn't come from the man holding the doorknob. He's short and powerfully built. His eyes are big and wet. His long black hair gleams. The boy in the bomber jacket pushes past him and down the dark hallway into the bright room at its end. The music has a rolling bassline and a hard flat sliding pop, someone chanting *I gotta pay respects to my posse from the West*, and the laugh's from the young man in the gold silk shirt leaning back in the airy mesh-backed office chair. He wears a gold bracelet and monk's sandals. "Sweetloaf!" he cries. "What news on the Rialto?"

"I got your fucking beer," says the boy in the bomber jacket. "Your Grace." The floor is covered in sunlight from two tall windows. He crosses it quickly brushing past the Stirrup in his linen suit to hand the brown paper bag to His Grace, who sets aside a white takeout container with a couple of red chopsticks jutting out of it. He pulls a six-pack of dark bottles from the bag. Holds up a bottle for Sweetloaf, who shakes his head without looking away from the big flat television hanging on the wall. On the television two girls in school uniforms kiss in the rain.

"Brazilian beer," says His Grace, flipping the bottle through the air to the Stirrup, who just manages to catch it. "Bhangra music. Russian videos." He works another bottle free and holds it out to the short man with the long lank

hair. "Thai noodles on a whim." He works a third bottle loose and holds it up, his thumbnail under the lip of the cap. "Cell phones and cable modems. Japanese porn. German cars. Italian shirts." The cap pops loose spinning into the air. "The world keeps getting better, every day and in every way. And it all shows up on my doorstep with a phone call. So tell me," and he tosses back a swig, "why I should fuck it all for your dumbass idea."

"Because it will bring you the one thing you do not have, Your Grace," says the Stirrup.

"The Bride," says His Grace.

"The Bride," says the Stirrup. "She and the Queen have had a falling out. This is indisputable. The *only* person watching the Bride these past few days has been the girl."

"*Mortal* girl," says the short man with the long lank hair.

"Who can't fight," says the Stirrup. "And I do not think your own knights will have cause to strike one another?" His swigs some beer. "The Bride left the Queen's demesne Sunday afternoon, Your Grace. Since then she's crossed neither river nor highway. You won't step on anyone's toes."

"So how does this work?" says His Grace. "I walk up to her, hey, baby, how you doing, you wanna come back to my hideout?" He leans forward in the chair his elbows on his knees. "I don't think so."

"Let us presume," says the figure leaning there, in the shadows between the light that spills from the two tall windows. He has a long thin nose and the edges of his face are sharp. His eyes are pale blue and his long black hair is gathered in a single thick braid. He wears a blue and black sarong and a loose white shirt half-unbuttoned. "Perhaps the Bride is threatened? A gang of ruffians, shall we say, sets upon her as they leave this building tonight. A not uncommon threat, in any area of this city not held tightly by a strong lord." He inclines his narrow head toward His Grace. His voice is highly pitched, rich and gentle and smooth. "Luckily, some knights happen to be passing by. They quickly put paid to these ruffians, but a problem presents itself: her current guardian obviously cannot keep the Bride safe. Whatever is a responsible knight to do?"

"Of course," says His Grace. "So you think it's worth the risk."

"Risk?" The man in the blue and black sarong spreads his hands in a magnanimous shrug and smiles. "Who could fault you for taking her under your protection?"

"How about you, Tommy?" says His Grace.

"I mislike it, m'lord," says the short man with the long lank hair with his deep, growling voice.

"I *pay* you to mislike it."

"It's too neat, m'lord. Too easy. Her Majesty is no fool."

"True enough," says His Grace, and then for a moment no one says anything. The stereo pops with tablas and rumbles with bass. Then he stands.

"Sweetloaf," he says, "crack some petty cash and roust us some hounds. The usual places: under bridges, shelters. Enough to make Orlando's gang of ruffians."

"Fuckin' A," says Sweetloaf.

"M'lord, you shouldn't," says Tommy.

"They've already got a mortal on the field," says His Grace. "Won't change the balance. Gaveston."

"Your Grace," says the Stirrup.

"You work with Orlando here, and take Tommy with you. Just make *damn* sure the hounds don't fuck this up. They are *not* to touch her. Got it?" He claps his hands together. "Make me proud, boys. Tonight you're going to bag me a Bride."



"Actually, Jo," says Becker from his desk at the front of the phone room, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," says Jo, her hand on the back of her chair.

"Let's use Tartt's office," says Becker.

Tartt's office is the same indecisive cream as the phone room. It's just big enough for a desk and a couple of chairs. Tacked to the bulletin board above the desk along with Post-it notes and phone messages is a big blue card that says Of course I don't look busy, I did it right the first time. Becker in his big plaid flannel shirt half-sits on the edge of a desk piled high with stacks of paper. Jo folds her arms and leans back against the closed door. The poster over her shoulder is a big picture of the full moon and says Shoot for the moon... Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.

"It's not that I have a problem," says Becker.

"So why are we here?"

"Jo, is she going to be hanging out here every night?"

"Who, Ysabel?" Jo is looking directly at Becker, who's looking down at one of the piles of paper on Tartt's desk. "I told you. She has evil ex-boy-friend issues. She just doesn't feel safe by herself right now."

"Doesn't she have someplace else she could go and, uh, not be by herself?"

"It's just until we get stuff sorted. What's the deal, Becker? I mean, it's not like you have a problem with it or anything."

Becker looks up. Nets his fingers together in his lap. "She's a distraction."

"She stays in the kitchen reading a goddamn book!"

"People ask questions. Tartt is asking questions."

"So that's Tartt's problem."

"Jo - "

"Dammit, Becker, you said it would be okay!"

"I said it was okay on Monday. It's Wednesday. Jo, it's great you want to help her and all, but –"

"Shut up, Becker, okay? Just don't."

"Jo." Becker looks down at his hands. Up again. "I know it's only been a couple of days, but *try* to remember that I'm your boss now?"

"I'm sorry," snaps Jo, "was I not respectful enough?"

"Jo, dammit, just –"

"Sorry," says Jo. Looking down. "Sorry."

Becker takes a deep breath and blows it out in a sigh.

"If you're kicking her out tonight I have to go with her," says Jo, still looking down and away. "I don't have anything set up to take care of her tonight."

"Yeah, well, your numbers, it might not be such a bad thing."

Jo looks up, startled. "I got you five completes per hour last night –"

"Four point eight. And five's the expected. Some people, Guthrie, Lee, are hitting sixes and sevens. You're slipping, Jo."

"So I'm slipping –"

"She can stay here tonight," says Becker, standing up from his lean on Tartt's desk. "But tomorrow I want her gone and you here. A hundred percent." Jo's still leaning back against the door, her hands at her sides. "Jo," says Becker, "I have a job to do. Just like you. Okay?" Jo doesn't say anything. She doesn't nod. "I mean, it's great you want to help a friend and all. But," says Becker, and he lets it trail off.

"But what?" says Jo.

"Are you guys," says Becker, "I mean, is everything going to be okay?"

"It'll be fine, Becker," says Jo, opening the door. Not looking at him. "It'll be just fine."



LIGHT FROM FLUORESCENT CEILING PANELS

A DUSTY HOLLOW – GOING HOME

WHAT IS SO DANGEROUS

LIGHT FROM FLUORESCENT CEILING PANELS careens about the white kitchen. At the small table under a darkening window sits Ysabel in a white plastic chair. Tortoiseshell sunglasses, a can of Diet Coke, and a small plastic baggie lie next to the small thick book she isn't reading. Her eyes are closed. One corner of the baggie holds a pinch of something golden.

A thin man whose dark-nailed hands glitter with silver rings pushes open the door, letting in the mutter of an active phone room. She doesn't look

up. His black T-shirt says *Elegant Casualty*. He yanks open the refrigerator, takes in a deep breath, blows it out half-heartedly. "You smoke?" he says.

"Who," she says, looking up at him. "Me?"

"Do you?" he says, closing the refrigerator. "Because the idea of warmed-over tempeh goulash is *not* revving my motor."

"Sometimes," says Ysabel. "Did you want a cigarette?"

"No," he says, looking down at his hands, over at the coffeemaker. "I don't smoke. I just thought you'd maybe like to have something to do. When we go outside to talk."

Ysabel looks at the closed door leading to the phone room. Uncrosses her legs. She's wearing tight blue jeans that flare at the ankles. "We're going outside," she says.

"Yeah," he says.

"What are we going to talk about?"

"How's Jo?" he asks. He brushes something from his black jeans.

"Jo's, ah," says Ysabel. She sits up a little, uncrossing her legs. "Jo's fine." She looks at the door to the phone room. "Is something wrong?"

He's looking over at the employee posters spelling out overtime rules, state-mandated lunch breaks, a busy spot of color on the blank wall. "It's all working out for you? Crashing at her place?"

"Her apartment is much too small. And it's wretched." Ysabel's smile is small and wry. "I take it we're *not* going outside?"

But he's brushing at his jeans again. "How's your boyfriend?"

"What?"

"Your boyfriend," he says, looking down at her book, at the little baggie beside it. "That's what Jo said. You're staying with her because your boyfriend is a mean sonofabitch."

"Then I'd say," says Ysabel, sitting back in her chair, "he's still mean." She crosses one leg over the other again. She's wearing leather thong sandals. Her toenails are painted gold. "You're Guthrie, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he says, his head canted to one side, still peering at her book. "What's that you're reading?"

Ysabel pulls the book into her lap and flips through to a page toward the beginning. "She turning back with ruefull countenance," she reads, "cride, Mercy mercy Sir vouchsafe to show on silly Dame, subiect to hard mischaunce, and to your mighty will. Her humblesse low in so ritch weedes and seeming glorious show, did much emmoue his stout heroïcke heart, and said, Deare dame, your suddein ouerthrow much rueth me." She closes her book and smiles at Guthrie, who's frowning at a corner of the table. "Spenser," she says.

"And see," says Guthrie, "that's the thing. That seeming glorious show. That was some party Saturday night."

"Yes," says Ysabel. "It was."

"Do you," says Guthrie, taking a deep breath, looking up at the bright ceiling, "have them often?"

"When we," Ysabel starts to say.

"Because," says Guthrie, looking down, looking at her, squinting a little, "I think I remember more than you think."

Ysabel's face is still for a moment. Then she says, "I don't know what you're on about. But if you're trying to secure an invitation to the next one —"

"I don't want an invitation to the next one," says Guthrie.

"What *do* you want?" asks Ysabel.

Guthrie reaches up and runs a hand through his thin hair. Bites his lip. Topples forward suddenly, hingeing at the waist, looming over Ysabel, catching himself on the back of her chair, the edge of the table. "I want to make sure," he says, in her ear. "That you get it. Jo's not alone in this. Okay? Whatever it is."

There's another burst of phone-room chatter as the door's pushed open. A blond girl with a coffee cup squeezes past Guthrie, headed for the coffee-maker. Guthrie straightens. "I should get back to the phones," he mumbles, reaching for the door.

"Guthrie," says Ysabel.

He stops, halfway through the open door.

"I do appreciate everything she's doing for me," she says.

"Good," he says, with a little shrug. The door swings shut behind him.

"Do you have any idea where the creamer's got to?" says the blond girl.



From the sidewalk the ground slopes steeply to an old cyclone fence. Beyond that a retaining wall drops twenty feet to the four-lane highway full of sixty-mile-an-hour traffic. Sweetloaf in his brown bomber jacket picks his way past a neatly trimmed shrub toward a dusty hollow tramped down in the weeds where the fence meets the concrete buttress of the bridge over the highway. On a flattened cardboard box squats a man wearing a grimy check sports jacket and a brown wispy beard. Next to him a filthy girl, grease smeared on her cheeks, her blackened hands wrapped in rags. An old mohawk sprawls across her stubbled scalp. The man standing by the bridge holds an empty bottle like a club. The others stare at Sweetloaf stepping carefully in his moccasin boots. The man by the fence doesn't look up from the traffic.

"Got a proposition," says Sweetloaf, his hands held out and away. "Fuck-in' simplicity itself."

"Everything goes by the co," says the bearded man in a rusty monotone. "You know that."

"Of course I know that," says Sweetloaf, smiling. "And your co said whatever, fuck it. Run it by the jefes, do it fucking ad hoc, he doesn't give a fuck. So now I'm running it past the jefes. So." He hunkers down next to the bearded man. "Jefe. You want to make some fucking money?"

"Sure," says the bearded man. There's a long roll of industrial felt, grey, flecked with dark colors, wadded up against the concrete buttress. Twitching. It rolls over. There's a wild-eyed face poking out near one end. "Shut up shut up shut up," it says.

"These two girls," says Sweetloaf. "One of them has blond hair with these little fucking black bits in it. Can't miss her. She's wearing a black T-shirt with a devil on it and combat boots. They're going to come out of that building –" he leans back and points up at a modest skyscraper looming over them – "at a little after nine o'clock. That gives you a couple of hours."

The roll of industrial felt sits up and whoever's inside it wriggles half out of it, a torso and a couple of arms in a puffy, dirty, pink ski jacket, that face tucked in under its hood. "Shut up I'm trying to sleep goddammit." Sweetloaf looks over at it and back at the bearded man. "Yours?"

"No," says the bearded man.

"Okay," says Sweetloaf. He looks at the girl with the mohawk, who's still staring at him. "You getting all this?" Sweetloaf snaps at her.

"The other one," says the girl with the mohawk.

"Yeah," says the man by the fence, who's more of a boy. His cheekbones hunch like shoulders under his squinting eyes. "The other girl."

"You said there was another girl," says the girl with the mohawk.

"I did," says Sweetloaf, looking down at the dust. "Shut up shut up shut up," says whoever's in the pink ski jacket. "You might be familiar with her," says Sweetloaf.

"Yeah?" says the girl with the mohawk.

"The Bride," says Sweetloaf.

"Fuck that," says the boy, pushing off the fence. "Fuck it. No way the co signed off on this shit."

"You're just fucking hounds on this," says Sweetloaf, jerking to his feet. "You scare them. That's it." The boy isn't looking at him. "You don't get your hands dirty because you don't even fucking *think* of touching them. Just put on a show so His Grace's men can rescue them. And *only* His Grace's men. Nobody else. You have my word."

"Shyeah," says the boy.

"Shut up shut up!" shrieks whoever's in the pink ski jacket. It might be a woman, standing up, kicking loose from the heavy felt. "No peace no goddamn peace! Fucking niggers! Fucking goddamn slope niggers sand niggers spic niggers slit niggers fucking goddamn trying to fucking sleep!" The bearded man doesn't look away from Sweetloaf. The girl with the mohawk

is looking up at the building. The boy is looking back out over the highway with his arms folded.

"None of your Queen's men?" says the bearded man.

"Fucking goddamn pixie niggers!" she yells, kicking the felt.

Sweetloaf grabs the woman pinning her back against the concrete with one hand. "Boo!" She flinches. "You know what I just did?" says Sweetloaf. "You know what the fuck I just did to you?" She's looking down, holding up a hand as a shield. "I just took a fucking year of your life, that's what I did!" he yells. "I took a filthy fucking year of your worthless miserable life!" She's panting, shallow, whooping breaths of air. "You want to try for more? You want to say it again?"

She says nothing. Coughs.

"Well?" snarls Sweetloaf.

Her hand still up as a shield.

"None of your Queen's men?" says the bearded man. "We're not getting caught in the middle of another skirmish."

Sweetloaf lets go, steps back. "No," he says. The woman in the pink ski jacket slumps down to sit with her back against the concrete. "You have my fucking word."

"And?" says the girl with the mohawk.

"Twenty dollars." Turning, Sweetloaf fishes three crisp new bills from his shirt pocket. "Each."

The bearded man smiles. "You have your hounds."



The door to the phone room swings open. Jo ducks her head around. "You ready?"

Ysabel looks up from her book.

"Let's go," says Jo.

"Where to now?"

"Home," says Jo. And as Ysabel opens her mouth to respond, "Don't even," says Jo.

"Just for a drink," says Ysabel. "One song."

"You can go wherever you want," says Jo. "I'm going home." She ducks back into the phone room. Ysabel slaps her book shut and stands.

In the hall, Jo punches the down button for the elevator. "It doesn't have to be a bar," says Ysabel. "Or a club." Jo doesn't say anything. "It," says Ysabel, "we could go –"

"Where?" says Jo.

"I don't know."

"Where, Ysabel? Where's the free drinks? With no cover? Huh?"

Ysabel looks back at Jo. "We don't," she starts to say.

"You blew the last of our cash on lunch." Jo kicks the elevator doors. "Slowest goddamn elevator in town, I swear."

"Second-slowest," says Ysabel.

The elevator dings. The doors jerk open. As Jo steps on, Guthrie and a short, older woman come out of the office down the hall. "Hey," says Guthrie, "could you hold..?"

"Oops," says Ysabel, pressing the close door button. The doors close. The elevator judders into motion.

"What did you," Jo starts to say.

"Is he," says Ysabel, "a friend of yours?"

"What does that have to do with – "

"Does he talk to you? Did you talk? Tonight?"

Jo leans back. Dozens of dim Jo reflections lean back with her in the tarnished mirrors lining the elevator. "We're on the phone all the time," she says. "We don't exactly hang out and chat."

"You're tired, aren't you," says Ysabel. "You don't actually do any *work* at this job, but – "

"People telling you to fuck off gets a little draining after a while," says Jo.

"So just," says Ysabel, lifting a finger, "*one* drink – "

"We can't!" snaps Jo. "Christ. Just take off by yourself." She's looking Ysabel up and down, her hip-hugging jeans, her peach tank top. "You wouldn't have to pay for a goddamn thing." The elevator grinds to a halt.

"If I go anywhere," says Ysabel quietly as the doors jerk open, "you have to go with me. You *know* that."

"Well," says Jo, stepping out, "I'm going home. There's your options."

"It's your *duty*," snaps Ysabel, following her.

"Fuck that," says Jo, storming across the brightly lit lobby.

"You said yes!" calls Ysabel, click-clacking after her. "You *agreed*!"

"Wish to hell I hadn't," says Jo, rearing back, aiming a big black boot at the crashbar of the glass outer door, kicking it open. Outside, sunset smolders behind the western hills. The sky is a deep blue shading into indigos and blacks in the east, where only a few of the brightest stars can be seen. There is still more light in the air than what's put out by the streetlights and the bright hotel sign on the corner. Jo catches the closing door and holds it open for Ysabel. "Look," says Jo, who takes a deep breath, and then in a rush says "You can't come here tomorrow."

"What," says Ysabel flatly, stopping there in the doorway.

"You can't come here tomorrow," says Jo, looking down. "Becker said." She's still holding the door open for Ysabel. "You have to stay at my place."

"And you," says Ysabel, still standing in the doorway.

"Will go to work. Just like today."

Ysabel takes a deep breath. The street is empty. The only real sound is the susurrus of traffic on the highway two blocks away, hidden in its great gully. "You still don't understand," she says.

"*You* don't understand," snaps Jo. "I don't know what it was like, hanging out with Roland. Maybe he had some magic credit card, I don't know. I don't have that. Okay? We don't get to do that. I have a job. I *have* to have a job. And my boss is giving me shit because of you and I am *not* going to get fired."

"None of that matters," mutters Ysabel. She starts walking down the street, away from the highway behind them.

"So you can stay home tomorrow," Jo says as she lets the door close. She heads after Ysabel. "Or go wherever the fuck you want. I officially do not care."

"None of that *matters*," says Ysabel. Jo leans out, catches her arm. Jerks her to a halt. "The fuck?" she says, as Ysabel's saying, "I am your *responsibility*. You have the keeping of me." Her eyes are wide, her mouth in a frown. She's trying not to breathe heavily. "You can't just leave me in that *pigsty*. Alone. You must keep me safe. No matter what."

Jo blinks. "Can you stop with the pigsty cracks?" she says.

"Dammit, Jo!" Ysabel jerks free. There's a weirdly distorted, glassy clink, somewhere away behind Jo.

"What?" says Jo. "What am I keeping you safe from?" There's a clank, and another.

"Jo," says Ysabel.

"What is so dangerous?" Another clink. "That you need a freaking body-guard, twenty-four seven." Clonk.

Ysabel points. Jo turns.

Down the street from the bridge over the highway come four people: a girl with a limp mohawk, her hands wrapped in rags. A man in grimy grey and black camouflage, his shoes a pair of disintegrating Nikes. A tall boy in tight black jeans. A boy in an old grey sweatshirt, his face twisted in a scowl. He's got three empty glass bottles in his right hand, his fingers and his thumb jammed in their necks, and he lifts them and clinks them together, and again. "Chickie chickies," he says. "Boo," says the tall boy. They're a block away and spreading out, into the street, and the girl with the mohawk is holding her hands wide, grinning. "Chickie chickie," says the boy with the bottles. Clink. Clonk.

"We'd better," Ysabel starts to say, as Jo, frowning, takes a step towards them. "Christian?" says Jo.

"We'd better *go*," says Ysabel.

"Aw, shit," says the boy, dropping the hand that holds the bottles. The girl with the mohawk says "Come on!"

"Christian?" says Jo again. "What's going on?"

"Shit," says the boy. "The fuck *you* doing here, Jo?"



“CHICKIE CHICKIE?” – SCATTERING THE HOUNDS
UNEXPECTED VIOLENCE – SANCTUARY

“CHICKIE CHICKIE?” says Jo, laughing.
“Shut up,” mutters Christian, tugging a bottle off his thumb. He tosses it up the sidewalk, spinning sideways. It smashes against the doorstep of a diner. “Would have worked. Would have scared the fuck out of you, you didn’t know me.”

“Christian, man,” says the girl with the mohawk, digging her toe into the groove of a trolley track.

“Shut up, Mel,” says Christian.

“You *know* these people?” says Ysabel. She’s looking up toward the bridge over the highway, back down the street toward the unseen river.

“I know Chris,” says Jo.

“*Christian*,” he says, throwing the last bottle down the street to pop against the curb.

“Jo,” says Ysabel.

“How long’s it been?” says Jo. “Almost a year?”

“What are we doing here? Huh?” says the tall boy in tight black jeans.

“More than a year,” says Christian. “Not since the trip to Sauvie’s Island. Last August. How you been?”

“About,” Jo starts to say.

“Come *on*, Christian,” says the girl with the mohawk.

“Shut *up*, Mel,” he says.

“About the same,” Jo’s saying. “Still working. Christian? What the *hell* are you doing?”

“Scaring you,” says Christian. “Boo!”

“This ain’t right,” says the man in grey and black camo. “I ain’t letting your friend put me wrong with the neighbors.”

“Yeah,” says the tall boy. He chops the air with one hand.

“*Fuck* that,” snarls Christian. “The neighbors want to go at each other, trust me. Twenty bucks ain’t enough to stand in the middle of that.”

“Twenty?” says the tall boy.

“We said we’d do something,” says the man in camo. “We got to make that right.”

“Jo,” says Ysabel, tugging at her arm. “We really – ”

“Boo!” yells Christian, throwing his arms wide. Ysabel flinches. “We said we’d scare them,” says Christian to the man in camo. “We tried. We failed. Fuck it.”

“I didn’t get twenty,” says the tall boy.

"Jo," says Ysabel, grabbing Jo's arm. Tugging her back up the street toward the bridge over the highway. "We really should go."

"But," says Jo.

"*Now*," says Ysabel.

"The apartment," Jo starts to say, pulling back against Ysabel.

"We're not going back there," says Ysabel. "Over the bridge. We're going back to my mother's house."

"Ysabel?" says Jo. Frowning. Taking another step after her up toward the bridge. "These guys, they don't –"

"These guys aren't the only ones *here*," says Ysabel.

"*Hounds!*"

The word bells out around them in a loud clear voice. The man in camo throws up his hands. The tall boy yelps and runs away down the street. "Shit!" says the girl with the mohawk. Ysabel turns. On the bridge over the highway stands a slim figure in the shadows between the pinkish orange streetlights. Dressed in a blue black skirt, a white shirt, holding to one side a Japanese sword pointed lazily at the street.

"Too late," says Ysabel. "Too late."

"Run, hounds!" cries the figure. Walking toward them, slowly, raising the sword. "Flee! And pray we do not find you when our business here is done!"

"Fuck you!" yells Christian, stumbling after the man in camo.

"He's got a sword," says Jo.

"I see that," says Ysabel.

"He's got a fucking *sword*."

"I *see* that. Jo." Ysabel tugs on Jo's arm.

"Right," says Jo. They're backing away together, turning, walking quickly, breaking into a jog, Jo's boots thumping, Ysabel's sandals flip-flapping. Ysabel pulls them out across the street toward the corner under the big Danmoore Hotel neon sign. "If we get across Burnside," Ysabel's saying.

"Hold, my lady!"

This voice is deeper, though not so loud. In the middle of the street before them as they turn the corner is a man in a pale linen suit. A long black portfolio tube is slung from one shoulder. "There is no need to run," he says. "We will keep you safe." Three blocks behind him, traffic rolls quietly up and down the cross street.

"I was in no danger," says Ysabel. There under the buzzing hotel sign she takes Jo's hand. "I have my guardian. Go now, with my thanks." Jo's looking back and forth, up Morrison, along 12th, the man in the linen suit before them, the figure in the blue-black skirt still stalking towards them, the sword now held in both hands. "*Ysabel*," she hisses.

"It would seem your guardian, my lady, is not up to the task," says the man in the linen suit. He unshoulders his portfolio tube and rests the butt end on the pavement. "There's no telling what else might beset you."

"Like you, perhaps?" says Ysabel, loudly. "You think you will lay hands on your Princess? Call off the Mooncalfe, Stirrup." The figure in the blue-black skirt has made it to the sidewalk on their side of the street. He crouches and takes long slow steps so that his head and shoulders and arms and sword remain smooth and steady. His feet are bare.

"Where the hell *is* everybody?" says Jo.

"My lady," the man in the linen suit is saying, "it need not come to that – "

"Call him *off*, Gaveston!" snaps Ysabel.

The Stirrup flinches. "Hold a moment, Orlando." He lifts his chin, scowling, so that he can loosen his red tie. "You're frightening our Princess." He unbuttons the top button of his shirt, then blots his brow with his forearm. The Mooncalfe glides to a stop, still in his crouch, his sword angling to point directly at them. A couple of blocks away, unseen, a trolley hoots.

"*They're* here," Ysabel murmurs to Jo.

"What?" says Jo.

"They're here. So we aren't exactly *there*, anymore."

Jo frowns. "I, um," she says.

"All we ask is that you come with us a moment, my lady." The Stirrup unzips the top of his portfolio. "Our master would have words with you."

"Do you have any ideas?" says Ysabel quietly to Jo. "At all?"

Jo, looking at the Stirrup, at the Mooncalfe, at the two empty streets, shrugs. "Scream," she says, out of the corner of her mouth.

"Scream?" says Ysabel.

"Hope it rattles them? Gives us a head start?" She glares at Ysabel. "Jesus. I don't know."

"Well?" says the Stirrup. "My lady?"

Ysabel squeezes Jo's hand. "What if," she says, and she swallows, "I didn't *want* to have words with your master?"

"I would be sorry to hear that, lady," says the Stirrup. He leans against the portfolio. "Truly sorry."

"In that case," says Ysabel, and she screams.

"Oh, fuck," says Jo, turning and starting to run, dragging Ysabel after her. The Stirrup flips back the unzipped top of the portfolio and frees the pommel and hilt of a sword. There's a scrape of metal as he draws it. The portfolio and the scabbard hidden inside drop with a clatter. "Orlando!" he bellows. "Tommy!"

Along 12th, crossing Morrison, Jo's boots clomping, Ysabel gasping, hand in hand. The Mooncalfe leans into a run at them, his feet slapping, but they're past him, across the street, hitting the sidewalk, running past the long blank wall of windows, posters advertising gold bank cards and low mortgage rates. He curls into their wake. The Stirrup huffing and puffing follows after. Barrelling around the corner ahead of them a short thick man with long hair roaring, long arms spread to catch them up in a crush-

ing hug, his face broken by a hideous snarling grin. "*Gotcha!*" He howls, throwing his hands into the air. Ysabel lets go of Jo's hand and staggering with her momentum turns her head jerking to look behind at the Mooncalfe half a block away bowed low at a dead run sword swept up and back, at the Stirrup behind him, his sword like a baseball bat up over his head. Ysabel calls, "Jo, we –"

But Jo put her head down when Ysabel let go of her hand and arms pumping boots stomping runs straight at the short thick man with the eyes suddenly going wide as he tries to sidestep. Jo's shoulder her arm up slams into his chest sending the air whoofing out of him and he takes a stumbling step backwards and then another, those long arms waving for balance as Jo headlong running loses her footing and tumbles to the ground rolling. The short thick man sits down heavily, gasping. Retches up a cough. Jo sits up hands scraped tight ruined ripped around one bloody knee. Ysabel hands up over her mouth her eyes wide stands still in the middle of the sidewalk. The Mooncalfe stands upright waiting his sword held out away from his body, head cocked, alert. The Stirrup slowing lets his arms relax, his sword point drop. Tommy leans back on one elbow, holding his chest, noisily sucking air.

"Ysabel!" says Jo, reaching out.

And Ysabel takes a step and then another, past Tommy, faster, as Jo kicks herself to her feet catching Ysabel's hand. They're running. They're at the end of the block. They're pelting across the next street. The Mooncalfe patters after them, crouching low again, his sword up and back again, past Tommy without looking back. The Stirrup, his sword on his shoulder, jogs up to Tommy. Bends over. Slaps his shoulder, chuckling. "You okay?"

"Bitch," says Tommy, gasping. "Bitch knocked the breath. Out of me."

"Well," says the Stirrup. "You're getting it back. Come on!"

Tommy glares. The Stirrup helps him to his feet.

"The parking lot!" says Jo, pointing, and halfway across the street she jags left tugging Ysabel after her. Past a shuttered Indian food cart the parking attendant's booth is lit up, empty, a small chunk of bright indoor light trapped behind glass. They run past the far side of it. Jo winces as she slows, peering down the long dark rows of cars anonymous in the dim pink and orange streetlights. "Damn," she says. They have just come through the only entrance to the lot, which stays level as the street rises past it. Its far end is a wall chest-high with a railing above it. Behind them the rapid fluttering shuffle of the Mooncalfe's feet, the loudly hollow tocking of the Stirrup's shoes. Tommy, growling, huffing and puffing behind them.

The Mooncalfe stops suddenly beside the empty attendant's booth, struck by the spill of white fluorescent light. He closes his eyes and the city around him grows quiet. The rolling surf of tires on pavement fades. No horns honk. No alarms shrill. No puling compact engines accelerating away from

stop lights, no deep-throated rumbles of idling trucks, the brakes of the busses blocks away don't hiss and sigh as they stop. No one shouts. No music leaks from open windows. The white noise of rooftop ventilation fans washes away, and the wind doesn't toss the leaves of the trees before the church across the street. His sword dips and points slowly toward one aisle of parked cars. He takes a deep breath, and turns, slowly, pointing now toward the next aisle of cars.

"Well?" says the Stirrup, standing behind him.

Sighing, the Mooncalfe lifts his sword. "Be quiet," he says.

"We should," Tommy starts to say.

"Be *quiet*," says the Mooncalfe.

"It fell apart," says Tommy. "We should cut and run."

"It has gotten a little out of hand," says the Stirrup.

"We told the Duke we'd deliver a Bride," says the Mooncalfe. "We will do just that." He closes his eyes again, and levels his sword. "Now shut. Up."

Tommy glares at the Stirrup, who shrugs. He holds his sword lightly in one hand, resting on his shoulder, where the blade rumples the collar of his jacket. There's a scrape of gravel as someone deep within the parking lot shifts weight, and the Mooncalfe leaps suddenly onto the hood of the hatchback parked in front of them, his blade sweeping back, his bare feet slapping as he takes two steps and then over to the sedan and then to the Jeep, from hood to roof and hood again. Aggrieved car alarms whoop to life. A third of the way from the far end of the lot Jo's running out from behind a minivan, Ysabel ahead of her. "Go!" yells Jo, looking back over her shoulder at the Mooncalfe leaping lightly toward them, the cars left rocking and wailing in his wake.

The wall at the end is too high. Ysabel jumps up her blue-jeaned legs kicking to grab the railing, but she can't pull herself up and she loses her grip and falls back to her feet. She's calling out to Jo shaking her head as Jo runs up to her and hoists herself with both hands onto the back of a parked pickup truck and from there bounces once and catches the railing of the sidewalk above. She kicks the wall with her boots as she worms her way under the lowest rail.

"The church," Ysabel says, gasping.

"Come on!" says Jo, still on her belly, reaching back under the railing for Ysabel's hand. Ysabel shakes her head, saying somewhere under the yowling alarms, "I'm just in the way. Go on. Get out," as Jo's yelling over that "Come on, goddammit! Get up here!" Jo catches Ysabel's hand. "Step up on the bumper!" The Mooncalfe leaps from the curved roof of an Audi to delicately step along the top of a convertible's windshield once, twice, and from there up to the roof of the minivan. Ysabel's wincing her feet kicking as the bare skin between her top and her jeans scrapes against the top of the wall. Jo squirms around and plants a boot against the railing

pulling. Rolling over on her back Ysabel hunches over the edge of the wall and Jo pulls her through onto the sidewalk. A leather thong sandal kicked loose falls from Ysabel's foot as the Mooncalfe's blade strikes sparks from the concrete behind them.

"The church!" Ysabel says again, pointing.

Across the street is the bulk of an old stone church. The side door is tucked into a neat little porch blocked off by a metal gate. Jo helps Ysabel to her feet. Tommy's rounding the corner coming at them at a run. The Stirrup's pounding down the aisle of parked cars headed for the wall. The Mooncalfe steps lightly from the roof of the pickup truck. On the ground he takes four quick steps back away from the wall as leaning on each other Jo and Ysabel limp quickly across the street to the steps of the church. As Tommy slows to a walk looking up and down the empty street, as the Stirrup runs up behind, as Jo grabs the bars of the side-door gate, rattling the sign that says No Loitering Church Business Only Police Enforced, the Mooncalfe squats.

Then he jumps.

Jo turns in time to see him floating in the air, arms holding his sword up above his head, his blue-black skirt flapping, his half-opened white shirt billowing as one foot brushes the top of the metal railing. He lands crouching at the edge of the street.

"Don't let go of the gate," says Ysabel. Who has not climbed the steps after Jo. Who stands at the bottom, hugging herself tightly. "Leave her alone!" she cries.

"Ysabel?" says Jo.

"Leave her out of this," says Ysabel. "If you let her go unharmed, I will go with you wherever you wish."

"My lady," says the Stirrup, still in the parking lot. "We have no intention of harming either of you." He drops his sword ringing on top of the wall and pulls himself laboriously up after it.

"I want your word," says Ysabel. "As knights. As *gentry*." The Mooncalfe putting a foot forward stops at that, and does not take his step.

"Ysabel!" says Jo.

"Don't," says Ysabel, turning to look up at Jo. There at the top of the stairs, holding onto the gate, one knee an angry red behind the sagging tatters of her ripped tights, her black T-shirt leering its red devil's grin. "Don't let go of the gate," says Ysabel, quietly.

"My lady," says the Stirrup. Bowing his head. "As gentry, we cannot but honor your request." He holds out his hand.

"*Halt!*" someone cries, and they all turn.

A man in a green track suit with silver stripes is running up the street. His yellow jagged sunglasses shine weirdly in the dim light, and in one hand he holds a long sword with a heavy golden pommel.

"Roland," says Ysabel, and she closes her eyes and sags in on herself. She smiles, just a little, as she takes a deep breath.

"The Chariot!" yells the Stirrup, and he scrambles for his sword.

"Oh, *shit*," says Jo.



THE MUSIC'S LOUD
AS GENTLEMEN SETTLE — THE SECOND THRUST
THE NIGHTTIME CITY, FILLED WITH LIGHT

THE MUSIC'S LOUD. Jo in her leering devil T-shirt slumps in the dark red booth, laying her head back against the pillowy vinyl. Ysabel slides in next to her, her heavy black hair swinging as she leans over the table. Roland leans his sword against the table and slides into the booth across from them, ripping open the velcro of his fingerless gloves. A woman's voice is singing about how you can make dew into diamonds, and pacify the lions, but you know you can never love me more. Roland tugs his gloves off and lays them flat on the table. Looks up at Ysabel. Lifts his eyebrows, tries on a smile. Her expression doesn't change. "My lady," he starts to say.

"You really killed him, didn't you," says Jo, her head still lying back against the booth.

Roland looks down at his gloves on the table and tries again. "My lady. I am sorry I have not been with you directly these past few days."

"It's no longer your office," says Ysabel. She holds one of her hands in the other, her thumb absently stroking a wet red patch, rubbed raw, on her palm.

"It is no longer my office," says Roland. He looks directly at her again. "And, I am sorry I was not with you sooner tonight."

"We got by," says Ysabel.

"You really did kill that guy," says Jo, glaring at Roland. "He's *dead*."

"You should not be forced to 'get by,'" Roland's saying. "My only defense is that it should have been inconceivable for the Duke to act so openly, so quickly." He looks down at his gloves again. "A sad excuse, I know."

"What will you guys be having?" says the waitress.

"Vanilla Stoli and Diet Coke," says Ysabel crisply, putting her hands in her lap.

"Water for me," says Roland. "Thank you."

"And you?" says the waitress, turning to look at Jo and knocking Roland's sword over. "Oh," she says. "I'm sorry!" bending down to pick it up.

"That's a real sword, you know," says Jo.

"I'm, um," says the waitress, propping the sword back up against the table. "What?"

"That's a real sword. That's why it's so heavy. If you pull it out there's blood on it. *He* just *killed* somebody with that sword."

The waitress looks over at Roland, who's looking down at his gloves on the table. "You know," she says to Jo, "state law won't let us serve anybody who's visibly intoxicated."

"I'm not drunk," mutters Jo. "Yet."

"Well?" says the waitress.

"You buying?" says Jo to Roland.

"I suppose," he says.

"Then bring me one of those fishbowl drinks," says Jo. "Whichever one has a lot of rum in it. And umbrellas. And those little plastic mermaids."

"Okay," says the waitress.

Let the rain pour down, the woman's singing, let the valleys drown, still, you know you can never make me love you more.

"Look," says Jo suddenly. "I want out."

"You want out," says Roland. Ysabel's looking away, over at the bar, a dim confusion of shadowy people and light-struck glass.

"Yeah," says Jo.

"You were warned," says Roland. His eyes are a pale blue that washes away to nothing in the dim light.

"I don't *care*," says Jo. She covers her face with her hands and digs at her eyes with her fingertips. "I don't care," she says, her hands falling in on themselves to rest on the table. "I'll just, challenge you to a duel or something. I'll lose, I'll let you win. You can have her back. Take her back. I'm sorry," she says to Ysabel. "But." Ysabel doesn't say anything.

"It doesn't work like that," says Roland, looking up. The zipper on his jacket flashes, pulled up to his chin.

"Why not?" says Jo. "It's how I got into this mess."

"The Queen would never – "

"*Fuck* the Queen," snaps Jo.

Roland's hands curl into tight fists on the table. Ysabel blinks and turns her gaze slowly on Jo.

"Okay?" says Jo. "I mean, what's going to happen to us? To me?"

"Happen?" says Roland.

"With the cops!" says Jo. "And," she frowns, "and the cops!"

"It's none of their concern," says Ysabel.

"None of their," says Jo. "He *killed* that guy!"

"No, Jo," says Roland. His voice is gentle. He looks down at his fists, pursing his lips. Looks up at Jo. "I didn't," he says. "*You* did."

"What?" says Jo.



The Mooncalfe runs to meet the Chariot's charge as car alarms wail and yowl around them. The Stirrup scrabbles for the sword he'd left under the railing. The Mooncalfe swings his Japanese sword with two hands, hunkering low, his hips twisting this way, that. The Chariot takes his stand sideways, head leaning back and away, his off-hand tucked against his chest. Every now and then a straightforward cut is blocked by a solid parry ringing like a great bell cracked and sinking out of tune. More tentative ripostes and probing thrusts swatted aside sound like someone banging to clear the pipes of a steam radiator. "Roland!" cries the Stirrup, hefting his sword. "Roland! Surely we can settle this as gentlemen?"

"We *are*," snarls the Chariot, his blade scraping against the Mooncalfe's as they push and shove.

"Ysabel," hisses Jo from her perch at the top of the steps leading to the church's side door. Still clinging to the gate there she leans out, calling to Ysabel at the foot of the stairs. "Get up here!"

Ysabel looks up at Jo and shakes her head. At the corner on their side of the street stands Tommy, arms folded, his eyes on the fight. The Mooncalfe stumbles against the curb behind him. Ducking under the Chariot's slash sends him almost to his knees. "No quarter!" roars the Chariot. "Come at me as you like!"

"*Surely* we deserve to hear the nature of our crimes?" says the Stirrup, shifting his weight so one leg leads, his sword held low at his waist, away from the Chariot. "We only sought to protect the Princess!"

"*Liar!*" bellows the Chariot, backing away from the Mooncalfe. "I call you a liar, sir. And I *will* make good that claim upon your person." And as the Chariot lifts his blade and takes his first running step toward the Stirrup, as the Stirrup crouches, his sword still down, waiting, as Tommy stands there on the sidewalk, halfway between the corner and the church steps, his arms folded, watching the fight, the Mooncalfe steps up on the fender of a little round compact car and launches himself twisting into the air, his sword up above his head for a final blow. The Chariot's second step buckles as he ducks, rolling onto his back, his sword up.

"Hurk," says the Mooncalfe.

He crouches over the Chariot. Stuck on the blade passed clean through his body. His Japanese sword clatters dully as it falls to the pavement.



"Are these the Nazis, Walter?" says the nervous little guy on the big flat television hanging on the wall.

"They're nihilists, Donny," says the big guy. "Nothing to be afraid of."

His Grace on the brown leather couch in his paisleyed dressing gown chuckles. The blond woman at the other end of the couch sits under the only light in the room. She's wearing black stockings and a black teddy, and she's reading a thick yellow paperback book. There's a muffled shout outside. Footsteps pounding up the stairs. "Baby?" says His Grace, scooping up a remote. The television freezes on the image of a man doubling over, clutching his crotch, his face a cartoon mask of pain. The blond woman doesn't look up from her book. "You might want to," says His Grace, and then down the hall the door bursts open. His Grace leaps to his feet. The blond woman rolls her eyes and fiercely turns the page.

"Gaveston?" calls his Grace.

It's the Mooncalfe who's first into the room. The Stirrup, his tie loosened, his shirt open, is next.

"Well?" says His Grace. "Is she here?" He looks from one to the other and back again. "Well?" He frowns. "Where's Tommy?"

The Stirrup looks over at the Mooncalfe, who isn't really looking at anyone.

"Where the fuck is Tommy Rawhead?" says His Grace.

The Stirrup reaches into his rumpled linen jacket and pulls out a bone. It's a good-sized bone, thick and long, the tibia of a short man. It glitters.

"Oh," says the blond woman, peering over the back of the couch. "Oh, no."

As His Grace takes the bone in a trembling hand, gold dust shivers into the air, sparkling. He lifts the bone in both hands and rests his forehead against the knobbed flange at one end, his eyes closed. The Stirrup looks away. The Mooncalfe is still looking at no one in particular. Then with one hand His Grace brushes up some of the gold dust still clinging to the bone. His eyes still closed he touches his fingers to his lips and murmurs. Then he opens them.

"Who did this?" he says.



"Hurk," says the Mooncalfe.

The Chariot reaches up to plant one hand on his chest and pushes him up as he pulls the blade down and out of his body. The Stirrup's running up, lifting his blade –

"Hey!" yells Jo.

– and the Chariot rolls to one side as Ysabel looks up startled at Jo at the top of the church steps and Tommy standing beside Ysabel reaches up to grab her arm and the Stirrup's blade swings down in a mighty blow to clang against the pavement where the Chariot had been lying. The Chariot on his feet blade up backs away. The Mooncalfe clutching his belly stomps angrily over to the curb. "Fuck!" he yells up into the pink-hazed night sky over the piercing car alarms.

"Let me go," Ysabel's saying. "Let me go!"

"Hey," says Tommy, easily holding her arm in his big hands. "Roland."

The Stirrup and the Chariot circle each other, blades wary between them.

"Hey," says Tommy.

The Chariot suddenly breaks for the church steps as Jo lets go of the gate. Startled, the Stirrup starts after him, as Jo runs down the steps toward Ysabel. Tommy hauls Ysabel over to one side away from the Chariot's wild lunge, throwing up one long arm to protect himself, as Jo scrambles on the steps to turn, reaching out for Ysabel's hand. Tommy knocks the first thrust aside letting the Chariot's blade slide along his forearm as Ysabel takes Jo's hand and then looks up to see her there and then cries out, "Oh, oh no. Jo – Roland!"

The Chariot's second thrust hits home, and everything is suddenly quiet.

Tommy looks down at the metal that's stuck in his chest. Opens his mouth. Something dark and wet falls out of it to spatter onto the sidewalk.

"Gallowglas!" bellows the Stirrup.

"I didn't," says the Chariot. He pulls his sword out of Tommy's body, and Tommy sinks softly to his knees. The front of his black turtleneck is stained with something that glitters in the streetlight. "I didn't know," says Roland.

"*Gallowglas!*" The Stirrup is marching toward the sidewalk, toward Tommy falling onto his side, toward Jo, holding Ysabel's hand. The Moon-calf on the other side of the street is climbing to his feet.

"Ysabel?" says Jo. "What's –"

"Run," says Ysabel.

"Gaveston," calls the Chariot. The Stirrup doesn't hear him. Doesn't look down at Tommy as he marches past, headed after Ysabel, and Jo, running now for the corner. The Chariot swings his sword and knocks the point of the Stirrup's sword down. "It's over!" He grabs the Stirrup's shoulder slamming him back against the church wall. The Stirrup gasps. "It's over," says Roland. An SUV jerks to a stop in the intersection, honking as Jo and Ysabel hand-in-hand run across the street in front of it. "Take him with you and get out of here," says Roland.

"You will pay," says Gaveston.

"Go," says Roland.



"I'm a Gallowglas," says Jo. With fumbling fingers she manages to get the miniskirt unzipped but working it down her legs she stumbles and falls onto her futon. She rolls over on her back. "I'm *the* Gallowglas. Hey. Hey. How come the other guy didn't die?"

Ysabel sits on the edge of the futon with a glass of water in one hand. "You should drink some," she says, holding it out for Jo.

"Need a towel." Jo tries to sit up and rolls over on her side. "Just in case. How come?"

"You weren't on the field of battle then," says Ysabel. She sets the glass of water down and picks up the Spongebob Squarepants towel. She smooths it out on the futon by Jo's head. "It's only when you're actually fighting that, well."

"I make them. I can kill them. They can be killed," says Jo. "Makes no sense."

"It's not supposed to make sense," says Ysabel.

"It makes perfect sense," says Jo. "I fuck everything up." She pulls her knees up to her chest. Worrying at the ripped knee of her tights. "I fucked up the fight. I fucked up that guy. I'm fucking up my job. I fucked up my life. I fucked up high school. I could have, I would have gone to Harvard. Did you know that?" She reaches out for Ysabel's hand. "If I had the money. I would have gone to Harvard. Or maybe Berkeley."

Ysabel strokes Jo's hair. Smiles, a little. "You should drink some water and get some sleep," she says.

"But I fucked that up," says Jo. Closing her eyes. "And I'm fucking you up," she says. She opens them, looking up at Ysabel. "I'm fucking up your life," she says. "I'm fucking up your life, and I'm really sorry about it." She closes her eyes again.

"Shh," says Ysabel. Setting the glass down on the floor by the futon she stands up and steps carefully around the piles of dirty laundry and shoes, past the sink full of dirty dishes, to the front door of the apartment. Out in the hallway stands Roland, his hands in the pockets of his green and silver track suit, looking down at his spotless white shoes.

"Do you need anything, my lady?" he asks, quietly.

"Well," she says.

"Anything I can bring you?"

"No," she says.

"My lady," he starts to say.

"Answer me this, Roland," she says. "Did my mother set you to watching me?"

"Well," he says. "I mean, well –"

"Did she?" says Ysabel.

Roland shrugs. "Yes," he says.

"In that case," says Ysabel, stepping back into the apartment, "I'll be seeing you around."

"My lady," says Roland, "I –"

She shuts the door.

Inside, on the futon, Jo snores.

Ysabel stands there in the middle of the cluttered apartment, in her hip-hugging jeans, her peach tank top, the nails on her bare feet glittering with gold paint. She swallows. She closes her eyes and bites her lip and briefly, just for an instant, shudders.

Then she reaches out and snaps off the light.

She makes it to the windowsill without stumbling. Jo mumbles at the stiff croak of the window as Ysabel cranks it open. She sits on the sill, working one long leg out onto the faux balcony. Plucks a cigarette from a crumpled pack and lights it with a match. Jo starts snoring again in great bubbling snorts. Blowing smoke out the window, Ysabel looks out over the nighttime city, filled with light: the pink and orange haze of the streetlights, white-hot spots of arc light at a construction site, here and there rectangles of yellow still burning in buildings all around, neon squiggles in primary colors hanging in dark shop windows, billboards lit up like giant television screens. The spotlight below changes from red to green and with the change in color the whole world subtly shifts. Engines rumble and growl. Headlights and taillights start to move. A thumping bassline slides past. Ysabel leans back against the sill and closes her eyes.



FARELESS

“**F**ARELESS,” says Christian to the bus driver. His hands are jammed in the pockets of his old grey sweatshirt, tugging it low. He doesn’t flash a transfer or a pass. He doesn’t drop quarters in the fare box. The driver shrugs. “Lloyd Center?” she says.

“Yeah,” says Christian. “Whatever.”

The bus is nearly empty. He swings himself into the seat just behind the back door. His reflection glowers at him in the black window-glass.

“Running to Northeast,” says one of the men sitting in the very back seat to the other one. “Now that seems pretty smart, first time you look at it.”

The other man, the big one, doesn’t say anything.

“Nobody’s going to look for you up that way, at least not right off the proverbial bat,” says the first guy, the little one. “Certainly not the people you pissed off. And not the people *they* pissed off, neither. You’re out of the middle of them, and yay team for that. Plus, you’re crossing water.” The bus changes gears, surging up and around an on-ramp onto a bridge. “Always good to get some running water between you and your troubles. Not that it necessarily has any practical effect, mind you. Come to think of it, it doesn’t have much of any effect at all, does it? But it’s what everybody does, they hit a patch of trouble too big for their britches. Makes you feel a little better to be doing it. It’s *something*. You know?”

The big guy doesn't say anything.

"And see," says the little guy, "you start looking at this plan, this whole running to Northeast plan, with that attention to detail, well. It all starts to look less like a home run and more like a bunt, and maybe not even a base hit, you know? I mean, hell. Northeast. Here there be monsters. You don't know the signs and signals, the ways and means, you're gonna end up as lunch, make no mistake."

"What you need," says the big guy, "is a friend."

"And that is *precisely* what I was about to say, Mr. Keightlinger. Hot damn. Hot damn indeed. Who *wouldn't* want a friend in times like these? The other fellow has somebody to back his play, what do *you* need? Somebody to back yours. But not just a friend, no. Not any old friend will do. You need a friend with britches big enough to stand up to your troubles. You need a friend with deep pockets to back your play. What you need, Mr. Keightlinger – "

"Dude likes the sound of his voice," says Christian, loudly.

"What you *need*, Mr. Keightlinger," says the little guy, "*especially* if you're a loud-mouthed pushy little sonofabitch like Christian Beaumont here, what you need is a goddamn *patron*."

"Make no mistake," says the big guy, who has a thick beard the color of mahogany furniture, bushy enough to bury the knot of his skinny black tie.

"The fuck are you?" says Christian, who's spun around on his seat to look at them.

"Me?" says the little guy, who's wearing a black suit just like the big guy's. "I'm Mr. Charlock. My associate is the aforementioned Mr. Keightlinger. And I'm assuming that you are in actual fact Mr. Christian Beaumont. If you aren't, what I'm saying probably makes no sense whatsoever. But if you *are*, my friend, well, you just stood yourself up between two houses of the gentry who are determined to butt heads and none too particular about what happens to the little folks stuck in the middle. Hell, you've got one or two of 'em ready to see to it *personally* you end up flatter than not. The kind of trouble you're in doesn't come any bigger. You *need* a patron. And we can fulfill that role, my associate and myself."

"And what if I told you to go fuck yourself?" says Christian.

"Well," says Mr. Charlock. "You have a couple of options, all of which involve running out of town. But! That costs money, doesn't it?"

"Quite a bit of money," says Mr. Keightlinger.

"More than Mr. Beaumont has, anyway."

"Fuck you," says Christian.

"He could hitchhike, I suppose," says Mr. Charlock, "or hobo his way south or east. Or he could sign up to fight forest fires! 'Tis the season, after all, and the commercial outfits aren't too picky about who they sign up. He could be out at the Three Sisters burn in a matter of days."

"He doesn't have days," says Mr. Keightlinger.

Christian rolls his eyes.

"Oh, you're right there," says Mr. Charlock. "That Mooncalfe is a *vicious* bastard. Murderous. What was it again he did to that obnoxious cowboy in the parking lot of the Red Lion?"

"Bet he didn't talk his motherfuckin' ears off," says Christian.

"No," says Mr. Charlock, his voice suddenly flat and quiet as the bus pulls into a stop. "No, he didn't."

"Lloyd Center," calls the bus driver. "End of Fareless Square."

Christian hauls himself up out of his seat. "So what do you want from me?" he says.

Standing, Mr. Charlock says, "You see, Mr. Keightlinger?" They follow Christian out the back door and onto the sidewalk in front of a dimly lit park. "The street is a harsh mistress, but her lessons are taken to heart. The invisible hand of the marketplace is hard at work, ensuring that services are rendered for value received. A patron is no mere friend, after all, to flee when the fair weather turns; a patron, after all, is a *mutual* obligation. So let's by all means cut to the chase: we will, Mr. Beaumont, keep you safe from the Mooncalfe and the Stirrup and anyone they might send to effect their revenge. In return for which, you will educate us in the ways of one Jo Maguire."

"Jo?" says Christian.

"You *do* know Miss Maguire, don't you? Mr. Beaumont? Otherwise, I'm afraid this has been a dreadful waste of everyone's time."

Christian jams his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt. He looks away from the two men in their black suits up the sidewalk toward the parking lot of a movie theater, filled with a slowly churning traffic jam of people and cars working their ways home after the last show. A number eight bus pulls up to the stop, opens its doors expectantly. He waves it off. "Buy me a burger," he says. "Let's talk about it."

"By all means, Mr. Beaumont," says Mr. Charlock. "By all means."

In this sad plight, friendlesse, vnfortunate,
Now miserable I *Fidessa* dwell,
Crauing of you in pittie of my state,
To do none ill, if please ye not do well.
He in great passion all this while did dwell,
More busying his quicke eyes, her face to view,
Then his dull eares, to heare what she did tell;
And said, Faire Lady hart of flint would rew
The vndererued woes and sorrowes, which ye shew.

—*Edmund Spenser*

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