

“...the entire, swirling, beautiful mess tumbling my inner cynic on her ass.”

—*Bookslut*

## THE CITY OF PORTLAND (WARE THE GUID NEIGHBOURS)

“*City of Roses* is an absorbing read that many fantasy fans will enjoy immensely.”

—*the Guardian*

Jo Maguire, a highly strung, underemployed telemarketer, has been knighted in the mysterious Court of Roses. Her roommate, Ysabel, is a Princess of the Court, and the intended Bride of the King Come Back (whomever that turns out to be). Together they must face the threats of bad dreams, changelings, surly exes, jealous lovers, intemperate peers, shabby magicians in ill-fitting suits, abstruse oracles, unemployment, eviction, and the nothing-time of three in the morning, when dawn seems so far off.

*The Dazzle of Day*, volume two of *City of Roses*, collects the second eleven chapbooks of the critically acclaimed webserial.



THE  
DAZZLE  
of  
DAY



KIP  
MANLEY

City  
of  
Roses

VOL. 2

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# City of Roses

by Kip Manley

VOL. 2

## THE DAZZLE of DAY

## A DUEL

JO STOOFS, her sword still in one hand, and begins to gather up the duffel and the box. She stops when the point of Roland's sword presses against the bag before her, then lifts, slowly, toward her face. She lets go of the bag and stands, slowly, and his sword follows her up. "Princess," he says. "I can still defeat your champion. Take up the keeping of you, once again."

"You might try," says Ysabel. "You'll lose. I've seen it."

"Do *you* think I'll lose?" says Roland to Jo. "A month with even the notorious Erne is hardly enough to make you a creditable swordsman."

Jo spares a glance over her shoulder for Ysabel in the shadows, then takes the hilt of her sword in her hand. Steps back, and back again. "All right," says Roland, "a single pass, as I proposed," as she yanks the scabbard from her blade and settles in a stance side-long to him, the scabbard in her left hand held behind, her blade up and at an angle before. His left hand tucked against his chest leaning back just, his sword arm canted up the blade angled down a little and a little to the left and sliding his foot forward kicking the duffel to one side his sword-tip lazily swinging toward her when he flicks his wrist and it leaps up and over her blade a looping cut she catches with a jerk of a parry, clang. "There," he says, and steps back, lowering his blade. "Put up." Shaking out his left hand. "You've fought for her, and we can both agree I've won. Honor's satisfied." And then, "Gallowglas."

Jo's blade's still there between them, up, and at an angle.

"I would not hurt you, Jo Maguire," says Roland.

"You're gonna have to," says Jo. Her hand settling and resetting itself about the hilt.

"You can't win," says Roland. Lifting his sword somewhat. "Put up your blade."

"If you were in my shoes," says Jo, and she takes a deep breath, "would you?"

And behind her, in the darkness, leaning against the railing over the water, Ysabel is smiling.



KIP MANLEY

City of *Roses*  
VOL. 2

THE DAZZLE of DAY



SUPERSTICERY

PORTLAND • POINTS WEST

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## *Previously*

ONCE UPON A TIME, a young woman named Jo lived in a small apartment in Portland, the City of Roses. She was employed as a telemarketer, and had recently broken off relations with a rather hapless young man.

One day Jo's friend, Becker, was promoted, and Jo went with her co-workers to a bar to celebrate. An argument erupted at the next table, and Jo leapt to what she thought was the defense of a woman unchivalrously pressed by her companion. The woman, Ysabel, invited Jo to a party on the other side of the freeway where the music was loud, the dancing furious, and Jo insulted Ysabel's companion, a man known as the Chariot. He challenged her to a duel, and Jo went along till it became quite clear it wasn't some mad prank. She dropped her sword, ceding the fight, and the Chariot, stung by another insult, stabbed her in the back.

Jo was taken to Ysabel's house, where she was healed by the Gammer and told that, having thus beaten the Chariot, she now had the keeping of the Princess, Ysabel. She would be brought before the Queen and offered a chance to give it up. Before the audience, Jo received a call from Becker, who didn't remember the party, or the duel, and wanted to know why she wasn't at work. Jo then met the Chariot once more: he sneered at her presumption; she refused to relinquish what she'd won.

Jo brought her new roommate to work, telling Becker that Ysabel was fleeing a dangerous ex, and could not stay alone. Meanwhile, news spread quickly of Ysabel's new circumstance, and two knights banneret, the Stirrup and the Mooncalfe, presented the Duke of Southeast with a simple plan to seize Ysabel from her new guardian and wed her, thus cementing his claim to the Throne. They struck as Jo and Ysabel left work, chasing them to the steps of a church. Before Ysa-

bel could give herself up, the Chariot appeared, drawing his sword to fight Stirrup and Mooncalfe at once. But Jo stepped onto the sidewalk just as the Chariot struck the Duke's boon companion, Tommy Rawhead, and thus she learned of her terrible power: as a Gallowglas, her mere presence on a field of battle made blows mortal. Tommy Rawhead was destroyed.

Furious, the Duke planned revenge: he proposed a hunt in honor of the Bride, a hunt for a monstrous boar, to be held within the Lloyd Center Mall in Northeast, demesne of the outcast sister of the Queen. As the Bride's champion, Jo was expected to participate, and it fell to the Chariot to determine whether she could. He took her to Vincent Erne, who taught stage actors how best to fight with mock swords. The Chariot arranged for the Axe to stay with Ysabel while Jo was training, and Ysabel and the Axe took the opportunity to resume their relationship, even as Ysabel began to work on the phones alongside Jo.

The Stirrup and the Mooncalfe, to make amends, assisted the Duke by kidnapping Jo's ex, Frankie. The Queen determined Jo shouldn't participate in the hunt; the Mooncalfe, acting for the Duke, picked a fight with the Anvil, Southwest's champion. Thus, the Chariot and the Axe stepped up, along with the Duke's chosen champion: Frankie. The hunt was interrupted by the Queen's sister, who threatened Frankie, and was threatened by Jo in turn. She laughed; the boar escaped.

Mr. Charlock, and Mr. Keightlinger, two men who had been surveilling Ysabel and Jo, were tasked by their employer, Mr. Leir, with hiding the monstrous boar. The Duke was tasked with destroying the boar, as he'd promised, by the mysterious man in grey. He called up two of his own knights, the Dagger and the Helm, and waylaid Jo and Ysabel, along with the Axe, to join him on this hunt. They rode to a point on the freeway where the boar might be driven to them, and the boar threw the Duke from his horse, breaking his leg, before succumbing to its wounds. The Dagger, furious at the Bride's dalliance

with the Axe, made to strike the Axe from behind, and was fought off by the Chariot.

Jo, in a foul temper, left work early one night with Ysabel to visit the site where the boar'd fallen. On their way back they were attacked by mysterious hollow men, and Jo fought them, defending Ysabel. The Queen was forced to recognize her heroism by creating Jo a knight. At the dinner where this was announced, the Axe tried to break up with Ysabel, only to be rejected in turn. Ysabel was then approached by the mechanicals, to attend one of their union meetings, where she met with their leader, the Soames. Ysabel gave them the last of her dust, and was given a vial of dew in return. Becker and Guthrie, at the behest of the Thrummy-Cap's oracular warnings, crashed the meeting with the Anvil, just as it was assaulted by the Dagger and the Helm with a flotilla of ghost bicycles. Jo was able to lay the ghosts to rest, and the Anvil destroyed the Dagger.

Ysabel convinced Jo to go shopping by herself one night, and took advantage of her solitude by trying to turn the dew she'd been given by the mechanicals. Jo encountered the Mooncalfe at the grocery store, and he drew his sword on her, but she was able to win past him, and ran back to her apartment only to find Ysabel fallen and unresponsive. Frantic, Jo called to the Chariot for help, and he determined Ysabel'd drunk the dew, and it was churning in her. He cut it out, and gave Jo dust to heal the wound he'd made.

The Axe, in a bid to win back Ysabel, told Jo she would challenge her to a duel at her dubbing. The Mooncalfe, one eye now lost, kidnapped Frankie. The Duke found a strange briefcase somehow linked to the mysterious hollow men. The Chariot took it upon himself to execute the Soames for giving the dew to Ysabel. Becker had to let Jo and Ysabel go from their jobs at the end of a run of surveys, and because Ysabel was considered her roommate, Jo was to lose the assistance she received for rent. But her dubbing as a knight was a glorious

spectacle, and before the Axe could challenge her, a mysterious knight wearing the Huntsman's mask challenged the Axe.

At the party afterwards, Ysabel danced with the Axe, Becker laughed with the Anvil, and Jo kissed the Duke, who gave her an unlimited bank card. The Chariot drew his sword on the Axe, who drove hers into the floor and walked away. Ysabel asked Jo if she loved her, and Jo, confused, apologetic, said no, and it started to rain.

Jo bought a number of new things with the card before Ysabel asked if she knew where the money came from, or where it went. They confronted the Duke in his demesne, and he took them with him on his rounds about the city as he portioned out the last of his dust to some of his subjects, but not others. They were followed by Mr. Charlock and his old friend from the Army, Bottle John Wesson, while Mr. Keightlinger tried to find who'd been interfering with the construction of new condominiums in Southwest with the help of someone who might or might not have been Bottle John's brother, Ezra. Their various paths all converged on the Next Thursday Teahouse, a folly built by the river in Sellwood, where Bottle John drew a gun on Mr. Charlock, Ezra summoned what looked like an angel, Ysabel kissed Jessie, the Duke's driver, and the Duke told Jo where the money came from, and then disappeared.

Our story resumes as Jo closes her eyes.

—*Kip Manley*  
*Portland, Oregon*  
*2011 – 2014*



NO. 12

*Innocency*

A SMALL ROOM – WHERE ELSE, WHAT ELSE  
CROUCHING NAKED – MR. KEIGHTLINGER REFUSES  
“I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH LONGER IT’LL HOLD” – JASMINE REFUSES  
A JUMP; A LANDING – WHEN THE ALARM CLOCK BUZZES  
HOW IT IS – WHAT SHE SHOULDN’T HAVE DONE – THE WRONG DAMN HATCH  
TINNY MUSIC – A KNIFE IN THE BACK – ONE GOES ALONE  
 FILLED TO THE BRIM WITH GIRLISH GLEE – HOW IT SHOULD BE  
“WHERE ARE THEY?” – WHITE FEATHERS IN HER HAIR

A SMALL ROOM lined with books from floor to ceiling on dark wooden shelves lit by unobtrusive spots. More books in roughly neat piles on rugs by a couple of wing chairs and narrow end tables bearing up under the weight of yet more unshelved books, leather-bound and dust-jacketed some wrapped in clear plastic, paperbacks tucked here and there and some books blankly featureless in wraps of plain brown paper. A stretch of rug, ankle-deep arabesques where it isn’t cluttered by more stacks of books ragged and angled and tumbled into a wave that’s broken against the broad high oxblood back of a tufted leather sofa pulled before the dying flicker of a fireplace. A bare foot edges up above the back of that sofa, toes pointed, clenched, the bottom of it dark with grime, a gasp and a grunt and it shivers toes unfurling with a glottal, a guttural, a long low groan that judders into a word, “ – *God* – ” and then relaxes, lowering, settling, the heel of it hooked over the back of the sofa, the nail of the big toe a dead grey ridge.

“Yeah?” says someone, a man. A rustle, a squeak of skin on leather, a sigh. A woman laughs, “That’s, that was,” and then she gasps and her foot on the back of the sofa jerks up and draws back lifting her shin her quivering calf, “sorry,” she says, and “after-shock.” More squeaking and rustling that’s her head there against

the arm of the sofa short brown hair dark in the firelight. She's looking off to the side, her foot braced for leverage, she's tugging something. "Wait," says the man. "Jo, just," and, more rustling, "leave it," he says.

She says, "I need a minute," and he says, "I want to look at you," and she says, "don't," but the rustling stops.

"What is this?" he says.

At the other end of the sofa in his soft brown vest the Duke's leaning over on his elbows his shoulder under Jo's upraised thigh his arm about her hip his hand splayed over her belly, stroking the harsh, green-black lines of a tattoo along the swell of it from navel to the edge of dark curled hair, an angular thing, abstract, a suggestion of beak and eyes.

"A tattoo," says Jo. Lying back looking down the length of herself at him. Soft heathery dress drawn in ruffled waves up past her hips up baring her belly up to lap under her breasts, straps askew, black bra still in place beneath. One arm tangled in the folds of it not tugging it down. "Well, yes, a tattoo," says the Duke. He kisses it. "What's it of?"

"It's, a reminder," says Jo. She sits up, she scoots back, she pulls her foot down from the back of the sofa. "Wait," says the Duke, sitting back, as her dress falling into her lap she takes his face in her hands and kisses him. "Oh," he says. On the floor by the hearth a cane topped by a rough-hewn hawk, a sword in a plain black scabbard, a tossed-off red and brown striped jacket, a wadded pair of grey boxer briefs. "That was," says Jo, and then she kisses him again. His hand on her knee, his hand on her hip under her dress. "It's been a while," says Jo. "I can't believe I'm asking you this. But tell me you have a rubber in your pocket."

"In my," says the Duke.

"A condom," says Jo.

"I know what," says the Duke, "you have to trust me, Jo, I could no more get you with child than I could bring you down the moon."

"That's not," says Jo, "that's not all I'm." She's frowning. "The music."

“There’s no,” says the Duke, and Jo says, “It stopped.” Reaching down for the hilt of the sword when from somewhere else in the house a great crack of sound that shakes the sofa and tumbles the books piled all about them. Someone’s screaming. Jo stands abruptly banging into the picnic table rattling the liquor bottles lined across it, five or six of them round and square, clear glass and green glass and deep deep brown. In her satiny black slip, her skinny black jeans, her hands splayed flat on rainbowed graffiti. “Duke?” she says. “Leo?” Someone screams.

“Shit.” Jo jerks herself free of the picnic table, toppling a bottle. Whisky slops to the floor. “Is anyone,” comes a call from deeper, further in, “is anybody, where’s, is anyone? Here?”

“Jessie?” calls Jo down the cramped hall lit by ropes of white lights.

“Hello? Who’s that?”

“Hang on,” says Jo, “I’m coming,” but behind her something thumps and someone gruffly says “Hey!” and Jo catches herself as white lights clatter with the heavy footsteps behind her. “Hey, lady!” Jo turns arms wrapped tightly about herself in a puffy sky jacket some filthy color impossible to name in those shadows under the bridge. One arm of it slashed leaking tufts of white down fill. “Where else am I gonna go?” she’s saying. “Huh? Tell me that.”

“Anywhere,” says the man in the long dark coat, more of a boy, narrow shoulders hunched up around his ears. “Anywhere but here.” A truck booms over the bridge above and he scowls up and waits until it’s passed. “They weren’t all out looking for you they’d be here. They’d be drawing you a circle in the dirt.”

“But not you, huh, Christian?” She sniffs, she gulps. Her hair’s long, dark, the tips of it stiff with dirt patter the shoulders of her jacket as she shudders. “Smart enough to know I’d come back here.” Her Chuck Taylors digging into the gravel, scuffed white toe half torn away, the sock within spotted dark. “I been taxed,” says Jo. “What else she gonna do to me?”

“Lady, what the hell. You hear me? You okay?”

One hand braced against a bare wood rafter Jo's frowning at the man in the grey suit and the white shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat. He's got her wrist in one hand and a gun in the other, a snub-nosed revolver pointed at the floor between them. "Let go," she says, and he does. "Leir," he says. "I'm looking for Leir."

"Damned if I know," says Jo, taking a step back. He takes a step forward. Strings of light clatter. She's looking at the gun still pointed at the floor and takes another step back. "I ain't gonna shoot you," he says, taking another step toward her. "This is for him." Another step, boards creaking, lights clattering. "Ain't neither of us got time for this."

"I don't *know*," says Jo, taking another step back. He doesn't. He isn't looking at her, he's blinking rapidly, his gaze jerks about, gun-hand dangling. Jo steps toward him, bending low, looks up at his dark face. He's mumbling something turning his head chin brushing the shoulder of his suit. Her eyes on the gun now forgotten in his fist. His face jerks tendons in his throat jumping like he's yelling at something far away. "Jo?" cries someone from further, deeper in. "Oh God are you gone too?" and the man in the grey suit shudders and blinks and Jo cringes, the hand that was reaching for the gun closing in a fist stepping back and back again she turns on down the hallway stumbling through a door down the one low step beyond crashing to all fours on the rugs laid one over another on the unfinished planks. Lifting herself and starting back suddenly one hand still on the floor the other over her mouth. Not looking away from the puddle of puke on the black-and-white tiles between her bare knees.

Chairs scrape back. "Oh *God*," says someone, a blond girl at a desk beside her. Jo looks up to see all of them staring at her and at the end of the aisle of desks before the whiteboard a man in an argyle sweater, cheeks reddening over his thick brown beard.

"What have you *done* to me," says Jo Maguire.





CROUCHING NAKED under thick white smoke that's rapidly ceiling the room he flips open the scorched grey jacket and the yellowed shirt inside collapses white ash soughing from placket and collar and the blackened bow tie and he's saying "No, no," poking the ash-dusted skull, "how could you, how," as flames rush up the curtain over across the bed and billow the smoke that's hung above the upended table. He slaps the skull clenches his face runs his hands over and over his bare bald head until the curl of lank grey hair that's left is standing stiffly straight. "It's not, it wasn't, it shouldn't have *done* that." He stands, fingertips digging in the corners of his eyes. "Stupid, *stupid*. What were you after what were you even *doing* here you dumb sonofabitch." Bumping into the bed behind him he sits heavily. Over behind him one of the table legs falls in a splash of flame. The armchair in the corner's smoking. "You blew up," says Mr. Charlock, jerking to his feet again, "you stupid motherfucker, you *blew up!*" and he kicks the skull tearing it loose from a blackened patch of carpet rolling wobbling clacking against the night-table between the beds its jaw askew.

"You blew up," he says.

Outside the smoke-smearing window there's movement, shadows. A pounding on the door. Mr. Charlock stands and steps carefully over the body, stoops to pick up the skull. "You blew up," he says, jabbing his middle finger into an eye-socket, wiggling it, poking, pulling it out, thumbing his fingertip clean of nothing but a little soot. Turning the skull over in his hands. Someone's yelling "Hey! Anybody in there?" Fire sprouts in a corner of the armchair and rapidly blooms.

"You been dead a while," says Mr. Charlock to the skull in his hands. "Hadn't you. Here's me thinking it was you fucking with my old buddy and all along it was him. *He's* the one." He closes his eyes and kisses the top of the skull lightly, then sets it down in the middle of the smoking bed. Steps back over the scorched grey

suit on the floor past the beds towards the alcove in the back, the sink, the overturned wheelchair. Someone outside's still pounding on the door. He stops in the doorway to the bathroom, one hand resting on his hard round belly, the hair furring his arm, his belly, hanks of it at the tops of his skinny thighs all gone a ghost grey in the bright clean slash of light. "For what it's worth," he says, looking back, "I'm sorry." He steps into the bathroom and gently closes the door. The flames in the corner have reached the ceiling now and the smoke there boils away. Outside a siren's wailing, coming closer.



The black car growls too quickly down the narrow residential street, jerking to a stop at the corner with a yelp from its tires. The driver's door's yanked open with a popping squonk and Mr. Keightlinger's shaggy brown head pops up, looks left, looks right over the roof of the car lined with hand-painted cramped white shapes like letters. Quiet streets lined with parked cars and houses lit up against the deepening night and nothing moving, no sound, not even rain. "Yeah?" says Mr. Keightlinger, falling back into the driver's seat. "Vacant lot, vacant lot by the river, where'd the river go." He leans out over the pavement, hawks and spits. Patting his lips and his beard he looks down at the whitish blot gleaming in the streetlight, a tendril spattered away to the left. He slams his door, guns the motor. The black car wheels neatly to the left and leaps away.

The next corner's much the same as the last. He's about to open the door but looking off to the right he doesn't. It's bright down that way, wet pavement gleaming in a warm and yellow light. "Huh," he says, spinning the wheel, working the gearshift and clutch.

It fills a simple intersection, the pavement of it painted in a great circle stretching from corner to corner in yellows and whites a sunflower burning bitterly in all that light, light glaring from the blankened windows of the houses that sit at three of the corners,

sunlight gushing from a jagged hole in the night air filled with feathers and eyes, wings lapping wings unfolding and lazily flapping, wings shivering, stretching, eyes that blink and look about, eyes the color of shadowed earth and polished wood and dead dry grass and the high white blue of desert skies. The black car sails under that hole, the spidery white lines of the letter-shapes whorling its hood and roof flaring with a coldly furious light of their own. It squeals to a stop before the fourth corner, where instead of a house there's a high red gate freshly painted and old paned windows suspended to either side. The driver's door opens with a popping squonk and Mr. Keightlinger climbs out, scuffing the old yellow and white paint with a black shoe. "Fortuitous," he says. "Nothing to see here." Putting on a pair of classic black sunglasses. "Nothing to see here, nothing to see." Stamping one foot, then the other, shaking out his arms. The left lens of his sunglasses covered with spidery words painted in white ink. All those wings and eyes towering above him shudder and pull together like a great breath taken in and then there is a sound, a monstrous blare of eagle-screams, of lions, of a phalanx of trumpets as they surge toward the gate, the car, only to be brought up short by Mr. Keightlinger standing there unmoved arms up crossed before his face two fingers extended from either hand.

"Oh I don't think so," he says.



"*Shit,*" says Mr. Charlock, sitting up abruptly in the back seat face in his hands. "Oh fucking *fuck* me hell I do *not,*" rolling up onto his knees, heels of his hands tight against his eyes, sobbing for breath slumping against the back of the driver's seat. "Have *time* for this," he whispers. Trembling reaching for the black suit laid out on the seat fists knotting the pants and dragging them out from under himself, working them open belt buckle jangling, wailing once as he sits back, a high thin keening through clenched teeth as he lifts his outsized feet toes

curled knobby knees jackknifed and jams them all at once into the pants legs. “*God!*” Chest heaving belly bouncing with fast shallow breaths. Hands clumsily fumbling with zipper and button and belt. “*Fuck!*” He pounds the back of the driver’s seat and again, and again. Pounces on the black jacket, rips it open, roots in the buttoned white shirt beneath it, yanks out a sleeveless T-shirt and fights his way into it.

Mr. Charlock falls out of the orange car to his hands and bare feet scabbling on the damp pavement pushing himself up into a stumbling headlong run out into the intersection painted with a great circle of yellows and whites dulled by weather and traffic a sunflower barely visible in the darkness lit only by streetlights at three of the corners. “No,” he’s saying, “no, no, *no!*” Spinning in the middle of the intersection running his hands over and over his bare bald head. More steadily now he heads for the dark fourth corner, the high red gate, the empty paned windows, the dark vacant lot behind it filled with trees and junk, bare wood, discarded doors, sheets of tin and translucent plastic. “Already gone,” he’s saying to himself, “already fell out of the fucking *goddamn* hell.” Wiping his mouth with the back of one hand. “Oh this is gonna. Oh I am gonna take someone apart joint by joint for this.”

Over across the intersection a yapping there’s a dog a little shaggy thing tugging at a leash a woman in sweatpants and a raincoat peering at him. “What?” snarls Mr. Charlock. “The fuck *you* looking at?” Slapping his feet against the sidewalk, clapping his hands. “Fucking pants for no fucking reason,” he mutters, and then he throws back his head eyes wide and bel-lows, “Wissenkunst, motherfucker! Four walls can’t hold *me!*”

A jangle of belt buckle, a flutter of white. The woman in the raincoat frowning lets the little dog tug her out into the inter-section, across it, toward that dark corner, the red gate. There on the sidewalk a pair of black pants, a white T-shirt, crumpled, empty. The little dog sniffs at them and starts back, growling.



“I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH LONGER IT’LL HOLD”

JASMINE REFUSES – A JUMP; A LANDING

“I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH LONGER IT’LL HOLD,” says the gaunt man sitting at one end of the long low sofa.

“And then it’ll start happening again?” says the man with the gun, standing in the low wide doorway to the porch. Outside the wind’s a low and constant wash of sound unbroken by any patter of rain. The woman huddled at the other end of the sofa says, “What was it you said you had parked outside?” Her shoulders bare she’s wrapped in a particolored quilt, her long hair straight and black and loose.

“An angel,” says the man with the gun, and Jessie says “Oh God.” She’s sitting on the floor to one side of the doorway under stained and faded snapshots of various angles and corners of the room about them, each one hazed by wisps and tendrils of smoke that seem to eddy in the uncertain light. Her grey chauffeur’s jacket unbuttoned, sagging open, a scrap of black lace stuffed in one clenched fist. “Ain’t about you,” says the man with the gun. “We here for the sorcerer. Soon as I get him, soon as we’re gone.”

“He isn’t here,” says Jo. Still in her satiny black slip and her black jeans by the porch railing, leaning against one of the peeled and polished branches that serve as columns, arms wrapped about herself.

“He *is*,” says the man with the gun. “You.” He waves at the gaunt man on the sofa, who says “Michael St. John Lake.”

“Okay. You his wife?” waving it at the woman at the other end of the sofa.

“No,” she says, and the gaunt man says “I’m not married.”

The man with the gun says, “This your place?” to Michael.

“Yes.”

“The fuck *is* it? What did it do to me?” His arms folded now, the gun in his hand tucked away under an armpit, grey jacket rucked open over the white shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat. “To us, right? I mean you saw, we all saw,” looking around the room.

"It's a teahouse," says Michael. "A place to be alone with your memories. Or make new ones, with friends."

"That wasn't no memory," says the man with the gun.

"Your – rather *precipitous* arrival, unbalanced things," says Michael.

"An *angel*." The woman at the end of the sofa snorts.

"Oh," says Jo, gripping the porch railing. "We're there. We aren't here anymore."

"I would take great care in putting names to things," says Michael. He takes in a deep breath, stroking his forehead under the cuff of his black watch cap. "This house was always – perched." His hands in black knit gloves with the fingertips removed. "Now, for want of a better word, we're falling."

"Falling," says the man with the gun.

"The gate," says Michael. "The piazza. They're still there. Here. But your angel's stopped that up."

"So give me Leir," says the man with the gun, as Jessie blurts "Leo!" and then, huddled back against the wall, "Ysabel." Not looking at the man with the gun. "Where are they?"

"And our Lauren," says the woman at the other end of the sofa.

"Out there," says Jo.

"I suppose they're falling, too," says Michael, "further," and he shakes his head suddenly, "up, further in. For want of better words."

"Shut *up*," says the man with the gun. "Already. Dammit." His cheeks gone ashen, yellowed, held tightly stiff, as if his face might break. "You're a wizard," he says to Michael.

"A poor one, if at all," says Michael. "I was once an architect. The best word for me now, perhaps, is host?" He looks up at the man with the gun. "I know of Mr. Leir, but only by reputation. He's never set foot in this house, I can assure you."

"That was no. *Goddamn*. Memory," says the man with the gun, and he's pulled it out, he's pointing it now at Michael. "I saw my brother being put in the *ground*." The gun dips. He lifts it again. "In a goddamn wooden *box*. We are about the Lord's

work. *All* the signs pointed to here. *Here*. He *called* that angel down, his own. Damn. Self. So tell me! How come it's *there*, if he's dead and buried? How could it be?"

The sound of the wind hasn't changed at all.

"I don't know, John," says Michael, looking down. His hollowed cheeks salted with stubble. "If it wasn't a memory, it has nothing to do with this house."

"Sinjin," says the woman at the other end of the sofa.

"Not now, Jasmine," says Michael. The gun's wavering jerking toward her, then him, back to her again. "On me, John. Tell me more about Ezra."

"Ezra," says Bottle John, and the gun swings back from Jasmine past Jo to point again at Michael. "How did you know that. Ezra."

"A poor wizard indeed who couldn't hear it," says Michael. At the other end of the sofa Jasmine's getting to her feet, the quilt clutched tightly about herself. "Take it away from him, Sinjin," she says. "We haven't the time."

"She doesn't have anything to do with us, John," says Michael, sitting up, standing slowly. "None of them do. On me, John. Just you and me." His hands in those black knit gloves held out to either side, his spindly arms swallowed by the wide loose sleeves of his pullover. Jasmine's stooping, one hand holding the quilt in place, scooping something up from the floor, a T-shirt dress, a blond Batgirl printed on it, purple and grey. She lets it fall. Bottle John's saying "No, wait" and the gun jolts from Michael to Jasmine her quilt dragging on the bare plank floor as she walks up to Jo by the railing and the blank dark beyond and the hissing wind.

"John, John don't," says Michael, stepping along the sofa, putting himself between the gun and Jasmine. "On me, John." At Bottle John's feet Jessie's drawing her feet under herself, leaning, pushing herself down the wall under those snapshots away from him as he lowers the gun in fits and starts. "Leir," he's saying. Wiping his eyes roughly with his free hand. "Give the sorcerer to me. The angel's satisfied and this is over."

“We’ll talk about that, John,” says Michael. “I promise.”

Jasmine’s gripping the porch railing, giving it a shake. It’s solid. She’s thickset, short, a head or so shorter than Jo. Jo’s back is to the railing, watching as Jessie slowly, carefully stands, rustling those snapshots behind her.

“Will you let the others leave?” says Michael, his hands still out to either side, his voice gentle, calm, loud enough just to be heard over the wind. Bottle John’s wiping his eyes again with his thumb, his gun now pointed at the floor. “Jasmine,” says Michael. “Take the girls. Head back to the Heart. Wait there.”

“No,” says Jasmine.

“On me, John, on me,” says Michael as the gun comes up. “Please, Jasmine, for their sake – ”

“I am not going to huddle away somewhere while you try to save whatever you can reach, Sinjin.” She aims a small sly smile at Jo beside her. “What do you think? Shall we go get our neighbors?”

Before Jo can answer, Michael says, “You’ll lose yourselves.”

“And you can’t say how long this house will hold,” says Jasmine. The wind tugs at the quilt down by her ankles. Her calves streaked with dark hair.

“The sorcerer!” roars Bottle John. “Give me Leir! And all this ends!” Jasmine’s grabbed Jo’s hand in hers, and Jessie’s shrinking back against that wall, and “Keep it on me!” cries Michael, coughing. “I’m completely at your mercy,” he says when he catches his breath. “Let them go. Keep the gun *on me*.”

The gun’s pointing squarely at his chest.

“All right,” says Bottle John.

“Girl,” says Jasmine after a moment. She’s looking up at Jessie. “Come on over here.” Jessie’s looking at Jo, and Jo her hand still in Jasmine’s nods quickly, jerkily. Jessie takes a slow small step away from the wall and another, longer, and another, faster, and another, half-running by the time she makes it to the railing. Bottle John doesn’t watch her go. He doesn’t look away from Michael. Michael doesn’t look away from Bottle John.

“What’s going to happen?” says Jessie, taking Jo’s other hand.



"I don't know," says Jo to Jessie.

"Three of us, three of them," Jasmine's saying. "Those are good numbers." Still holding Jo's hand in hers she tugs the quilt loose from about her shoulders and unwinds it. The wind hauls it up in her grip like a flag snapping over the railing. She lets it go.

Yanked and fluttering dropping tumbling rising up again it falls away from them further and further into that hissing darkness. Jo one hand in Jasmine's one in Jessie's mouth open watches it, a scrap of color beating like a moth against the black.

"Well?" says Jasmine. One hand on the railing pulling a leg up to balance awkwardly sitting on it still holding Jo's hand in hers. Jessie's looking back at the low wide doorway, at Bottle John standing in it, blowing great bullish breaths in and out through his nose. "My shoes," she says, looking down at her bare feet.

"Leave 'em!" cries Jasmine over the wind. "Take nothing you can't stand losing!" Jo's already kicked a leg up and over the railing, sits a-straddle, black boot dangling over the edge. "Come on," she says to Jessie.

But Jessie's leaning back toward the sofa, toward Michael and John, and she opens the fist she's clenched about the scrap of black lace, and she tosses the underwear onto the T-shirt dress left crumpled on the bare plank floor, Batgirl's face smiling up from a wrinkle. She turns and sits up on the railing, still holding Jo's hand.

"Come back," says Michael Lake.

"Keep the lights burning," says Jasmine, and she jumps, and Jo jumps, and Jessie jumps.



The drop of light far off shapes a sound, the sound shapes a shout, a letter, the letter a mouth, the mouth stretched wide and straining shapes a face, a pale face, squinted eyes glinting among the wrinkles crimping the bridge of its nose, a single curl of lank grey hair sprung atop the empty furrows of its forehead. That

face drags in its wake a body small and sinewy arms spread wide fingertips fluttering in the wind of his passage falling flying head-long down the length of a narrow residential street past cars all unremarkable, grey sedans parked in shadows before houses with dim white walls and the same blank windows over and over and over again, and the light grows about him bright and white and his shout is answered by a blast of trumpets and the roar of a host of soldiers saluting the dawn. He draws his arms in tight against the force of his fall and tumbling rolls over into himself, covering his shout with his hands.

The freshly painted red gate rings and quivers like a bell setting the old paned windows hung to either side of it a-sway and something falls to the brush at its base with a howl and a thump.

“Huh,” grunts Mr. Keightlinger, standing still by the black car, arms still held up crossed before his face upturned in the glare from all those feathers and eyes hanging ponderously above him. Sprigs of hair have worked loose from the club of his ponytail and float gently about his head in the still air. His sunglasses still in place. He doesn’t look to see what fell.

Mr. Charlock lurches to his feet staggers to one side then the other fetching up against a gatepost clinging to it with one hand clutching his head. “My *skull*,” he bellows. Mr. Keightlinger’s black shoe scuffs gravel against pavement as he shifts his stance. The only other sound the far-off hiss of rushing wind. “Fucking *tectonic*,” says Mr. Charlock, pushing off the gate to blunder onto the path beneath it. He is quite naked. Swaying a little blinking thickly at Mr. Keightlinger’s back. “Hello to you too,” he snorts.

The cords stand out in Mr. Keightlinger’s neck. Inside his beard his lips part and he ducks his head with the effort.

“No, no, don’t mind me,” snaps Mr. Charlock. “Can’t even manage to keep it together until I get back here, third fucking jaunt in ten minutes and *this* one – you have *any* idea how cold it gets out there?”

“Hello,” growls Mr. Keightlinger.

“You? Were right, by the way.” Mr. Charlock brushes a leaf from his shoulder. “John Wesson *did* have a brother. So I forgot.” Stretching, working his head back and forth. “But he’s been dead for years so I’m still gonna have to call that one for me. On a technicality.” Turning on wobbly feet to look back through the gate. A luxurious confusion has gathered itself from windows and doors and polished wood, roofs of gleaming tin and glass lit up by dozens of warmly gold lamps, trees winding in and out of the rooms built around them. “Whoa,” says Mr. Charlock.

Mr. Keightlinger’s shifted back another inch or so more toward the car with another gravelly scrape.

“So he went in there, right?” says Mr. Charlock. “Bottle John. After something, something he could find quick, because Junior here,” jerking a thumb over his shoulder, “is primed to wipe this place off the map. Something quick, something obvious, something that wasn’t anywhere else we went today...” He shrugs. “Fucked if I know.”

“Pants,” spits Mr. Keightlinger.

“Well I couldn’t fucking bring them *with* me, could I?” says Mr. Charlock. “Or my glasses neither. I gotta go in there shorn of arms and armor, *I’m* the one has to rescue the Bride so our boss doesn’t eat us for breakfast, I gotta go tell an old friend I accidentally killed his dead brother, and all you have to do is wrestle with this sorry excuse for an angel.” He stalks toward the open door of the teahouse. “Have a little sympathy, would you?”

Groaning with the effort Mr. Keightlinger forces one foot forward an inch or so, leaning into the step as the angel above shrinks back eyes rolling. “Collar,” he manages to say. Hanging his head shaking it turning to spare a glance over his shoulder he says it again, “Collar,” but Mr. Charlock’s already inside.



WHEN THE ALARM CLOCK BUZZES – HOW IT IS  
WHAT SHE SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE  
THE WRONG DAMN HATCH

**W**HEN THE ALARM CLOCK BUZZES the rumpled blankets jerk and twist and spit out a hand. It fumbles about and finds the clock and slaps the snooze button. A head pops out, blinking, befuddled. Mousy brown hair maybe down to the shoulders, tangled with sleep. She kicks herself free of the thick down comforter half-tumbling naked from off the big broad bed to stand there a moment, scratching herself under her breasts. Sunlight shines vaguely behind the drawn curtains. The sound of a shower running somewhere down the hall.

The kitchen's long and narrow, empty, dim. She's pouring steaming water from a kettle into a carafe of ground coffee. She's pulled on a faded yellow work shirt with the sleeves rolled up and only a couple-three buttons fastened. She sets the kettle on the gleaming white stovetop and picks up a plunger, fits it to the top of the carafe. Looks up at the round clock over the stainless steel refrigerator, toying with one of the undone buttons on her shirt. Quarter of nine.

There are two doors at the other end of the kitchen.

One of them stands open, a small dark room beyond, coats on the wall, a couple bicycles leaning together, the corner of a clothes-dryer stacked on top of a washing machine. A pair of rubber boots. The other door is closed. Like the first it's tall, skinny, paneled and painted white. She walks toward them, bare feet pale against the red and black whorls of the linoleum, reaching for the closed door, its crystal knob set in old greened brass.

“Coffee?”

Jo spins, hand to her mouth. “Jesus, Duke,” she says. He's by the sink in a long dressing gown crowded with paisleys of purple and maroon and gold and brown. He stops drying his hair with a towel, head tocking back, struck by a little smile.

“You haven’t called me that in a while,” he says. Draping the towel about his neck. “Is there coffee?”

The clock says five of nine. “Oh hell,” says Jo, rushing back down the length of the kitchen. “I don’t know what happened – ”

“It’s okay,” says the Duke.

“It’s only been ten minutes, it should be okay,” she’s saying, grabbing the plunger, leaning on it, pressing down into the carafe, and “Not so hard,” says the Duke, “you don’t want to,” leaning over, peering around her, “pop it, like last time,” as Jo says, “It’s not gonna break.” Hiking up on her toes to force the plunger down. “You want to get down a couple of cups?”

“I dunno,” says the Duke close behind her. One arm snaking about her waist. One hand on her bare hip under her shirt. “Maybe I don’t need the coffee.”

“Leo,” she says, letting go of the plunger as he kisses her neck. “That’s it,” he says, both hands on her hips now, bending his knees a little leaning back. “Jesus, Leo, not so – ” and her eyes get wide and she takes a quick sip of air and grips the counter.

“Well?” says the Duke, leaning forward over her back, kissing her neck again, her ear. “Go on,” she says, still gripping the counter, “if you’re gonna, go on,” and ducking bracing himself hands on her hips again his dressing gown falls open towel slipping from his shoulders belly tight against her ass bared shirt ridden up to the small of her back slapping as he rocks back and forth and she winces hand slapping grabbing the rim of the sink face clenched she bites her lip “Jesus” she says, “Leo – ”

A rattling bang his knees against the cabinets and “Shit,” he says, faltering. “Oh,” says Jo, “hey,” and he leans back jerking her hips back bucking against her again and again a bang. “Fuck!” says the Duke, “hang on,” but Jo’s leaning forward against the sink pushing him back a step and then another staggering vaguely confused his gown slipping from his shoulders his cock bobbing, foreskin drawn back, the swollen purple head of it glistening. “No I can,” he says, reaching for her, but she’s swarming over him grabbing his face her mouth glued to his and they spin about her hair

swinging his wet hair pasted to the back of his neck. She pushes him down and down to his knees still kissing him down and back to sit on the floor as she straddles his lap. "There," she says, one hand on his shoulder, one hand down between them as she settles herself, and "Oh," he says, "oh that works too." A phone's ringing.

"I guess it has, hasn't it," says Jo, sitting in a low flat armchair, a glassy black phone to her ear. "We've been busy." In her faded yellow work shirt and a pair of brown jeans. "Well there's a lot to do, you know? A lot of things to do."

It's a wide white room filled with blue shadows, wheat-colored drapes drawn over an enormous picture window. At one end a big white unadorned fireplace, cold and dark, the wall above it darkened by old smoke. There's an orange couch, long and low on spindly aluminum legs. "I want you to meet him too," says Jo. Hanging over the couch a sword slung from a red leather strap, the scabbard plain and black with a beaten metal throat and chape the color of thunderclouds, the hilt of it simple and straight, wrapped in dulled wire, swaddled in a basket of wiry strands. "He's a, well, there's a lot of things he does. I guess you could say he's an entrepreneur. But that's what I mean, he's always, there's always – " Jo leans forward, one leg drawn up, her foot resting on the cushion. "Well, openings, things like that, going out to support this or – " Rolls her eyes. "I don't really need one anymore. Actually, I'm thinking of going to school." Leans back a little. "Yeah. I was thinking maybe art history or – well it doesn't – well it doesn't have to be – it doesn't *have* to be practical, Mom." Leaning forward again, elbows on her knees, both feet swallowed by the thick white carpet. "That's just how it is." Anger flashes across her face. "Well, I did." She squeezes her eyes shut, dips her head. "What, I was gonna keep Dad's name? That would have made you happy?" She leaps to her feet. "Well I did, it's done. Okay? It happened. It's done." Listening, her eyes shutting again, shaking her head. "Mom." With aimless steps she walks away from the chair, past the front door white in a white frame, high windows filled with reflected white light. "Well – "

she says, biting off the word with stern lips set in a grimace that shivers, softens, melts into something almost concerned, almost a smile. She leans in the doorway to the dim narrow kitchen. "We both said stuff we didn't – " Ducking her head again, tucking a wave of hair up behind her ear. "Well I'm – I'm – well, I, I'm – thanks, Mom. Thank you." Turning in the doorway, folding her free arm about herself. "I'm, I'm sorry, too, Mom."

There are two doors at the other end of the kitchen.

"What?" Frowning, blinking. Stepping into the kitchen. "I, I missed that. What – "

One of them standing open, a small dark room beyond, coats, a couple bicycles, washer and dryer and a pair of rubber boots. The other door is closed. Jo's walking toward them both her bare feet pale against the red and black whorls of the linoleum. "I'm sorry, Mom, can you hang on just a – " Reaching for the closed door, its crystal knob set in old greened brass. From the front of the house a pounding, a doorbell bonging, and again.

"Mrs. Barganax?"

"What," says Jo, the door opened just a crack between them.

"Joliet Kendal Barganax?" says the one with the shock of pinkish orange hair. He's holding up a badge in a brown leather wallet. "I'm Detective Fox." Tucking the badge back into his black leather jacket, nodding at the man next to him, both hands in the pockets of his black wool greatcoat. "This is Detective Tassick. We have some questions for you, if we could come inside?"

"Here's fine," says Jo, lifting a cigarette to her lipsticked mouth. Blowing smoke past them. The little entryway screened by a high green hedge.

"Bit chilly," says Fox, shrugging. He pulls a manila envelope from his jacket. "You know a Jasmine Chavda?" Showing her a black and white photo, a woman looking away from the camera, a strong nose, long hair straight and black and loose.

"No," says Jo, letting the door open a little more. She's wearing a brief black slip with simple ribbon straps and her hair's done up in curlers, pink and minty green and baby blue.

Her toenails painted red and black, except the dead grey ridge on the big toe of her left foot.

“Lauren Yallowshot?” says Fox. “Jessie Vitaly?” More photos, a teenaged girl laughing, one hand on the oversized headphones she’s wearing, a blond woman in a white T-shirt staring expressionless at the camera.

“Jessie, yes,” says Jo. “She used to work for my husband.”

“You know she’s an exotic dancer,” says Tassick. His voice is deep and roughly worn. He wears a salt-and-pepper Van Dyke, neatly trimmed.

“I didn’t know she’d gone back to it,” says Jo.

“But she and your husband, had a relationship?” says Fox.

“So?” says Jo.

“You said she *worked* for him,” says Tassick.

“Guys,” says Jo, “if everybody with a, a stripper for an ex in this city’s suddenly police business, I mean, *damn*.”

“We have reason to believe these women are involved in a matter of notional security,” says Fox, reaching into his jacket again. “If you see any of them, or hear from Ms. Vitaly at any point, in the next few days, Mrs. Barganax,” he’s handing her a card, “we’d appreciate a call?”

She takes the card in her free hand, saying, “My name’s Jo – ” Looking down, past the card, her feet in mismatched Chuck Taylors, one of them black, one of them white, the toe held on with duct tape. “This is bullshit,” she says, and lets the card drop from her fingers.

“Mrs. Barganax,” says Tassick.

“I didn’t get married!” screams Jo, and for a moment no one says anything, the detectives outside, Jo clinging to the door. “I’m not the one getting married,” she says, and she ducks back into the house. “Mrs. Barganax!” calls Fox, and Tassick shoves him.

There are two doors at the other end of the kitchen.

Jo cigarette in her hand marches down the length of the kitchen and puts her hand on the crystal knob set in old green brass. “Please,” she whispers, and she opens the door.



A gleaming white bathroom lit by coiled fluorescent bulbs around a mirror over the sink the floor of tiny black and white hexagonal tiles stretching the length of it to a clawfoot tub ringed by clear plastic curtains.

“Ysabel?” says Jo, setting her cigarette on the edge of the sink.

Through the curtains blurry vague the tub’s filled almost to the brim with filthy water clouded brown and grey a greasy sheen to it jackknifed knees upright at one end a hand floating limply thumb just breaking the surface. “Oh God” says Jo, ripping the curtains open hooks ringing, “oh God no,” plunging heedless hands into the tub pulling splashing slippery torso an arm flopping a chin a woman’s face foul water the color of old blood pouring from the slackly open mouth black hair heavy a thickly soaking sheet of it clinging to shoulders breasts as Jo hauls twisting falling back one arm wrapped about the weight of the body half out of the tub now, “Ysabel,” she says, sluicing black hair from that face, “Ysabel!” the half-open mouth, the green eyes dull in the harsh flat light.

“Jo,” says someone, the Duke, a flat question. Ysabel in her arms she turns halfway to see him in the mirror over the sink, his red and brown striped jacket, his face obscured by a streak of something smeared across the glass. “I wish you hadn’t done that.” A drift of grey ash falls from the smoldering cigarette to mar the white bowl of the sink. A tearing retching gasp and Ysabel begins to breathe heaving in Jo’s arms sloshing water from the tub squeaking one arm caught in the shower curtains pulling rings popping ripping loose as Ysabel slips from the tub and they fall back to the tiles hacking coughing spitting rustling in all that clear plastic. “Ysabel?” Jo’s saying. “Ysabel are you okay? Are you there?” and Ysabel, slowly, nods.

Gasping, laughing, Jo pulls her close, “Oh God,” she’s saying, Ysabel clinging to her still nodding, still coughing, and Jo scrapes away more hair to find her mouth her eyes her forehead which she kisses, holding Ysabel calming gentling to her. “Hey,” says Jo then, “Leo.” Struggling with the plastic. “A little help here? Leo?”

He's standing in the doorway, leaning on his cane, the rough-hewn hawk at its head caged in his fingers. Staring at the tub, the wall beyond, his brow faintly creased by some quizzical concern.

"Christ," mutters Jo, kicking at the plastic. "Ysabel," fighting her way upright, "are you, can you," and Ysabel curled on her side lifts a hand weakly shaking her head, then nods, pushes herself up to her hands and knees, shivering. Jo to her feet now grabs the Duke by his lapels. "Hey!" She slaps him. Blinking, his mouth working, he lifts a hand to his cheek. "You in there?" says Jo.

"Of course," says the Duke.

"Well fucking help then or get out of the way," says Jo, pushing past him, wet shoes slapping the kitchen floor.

In the bedroom she hauls open the frosted glass doors of the closet at the foot of the big broad bed to find a row of red and brown striped jackets and little black dresses one after another all the same. Hangers rattle as she shoves them back and forth. "This has got to be *your* dream house," she mutters, pulling out one of the jackets free, turning to the bed. Shoving the down comforter to the floor she yanks a woven blanket loose and bundles it with her.

In the living room Ysabel's crouching on the carpet wrapped in the Duke's red and brown striped jacket. The Duke in his cream-colored vest propped on his cane leans over her. Jo looks at the red and brown striped jacket in her hands, shrugs, tosses it to him, then kneels by the shivering Ysabel, wrapping her in the blanket. "I have other clothes, you know," says the Duke, pulling on the jacket.

"Not here you don't," says Jo. Ysabel's squeezing water from her hair with a corner of the blanket.

"You should pay more attention."

"I should," snaps Jo. "Where'd you get the idea I'd be wearing slinky little cocktail dresses?"

"We need," says Ysabel, "to go."

"Couldn't agree more," says Jo, getting to her feet.

“Jo, no,” says the Duke, as she heads to the front door, “not that way,” as she pulls it open. The entryway’s gone. The doorway’s walled off by the high thick hedge. “Shit,” says Jo, shutting the door, heading for the wheat-colored drapes. “Jo, don’t,” says the Duke, we have to, don’t!” as she yanks them open.



The Duke’s gently pushing her back from the window, pulling the drapes shut without looking. The hissing rush of sound dies away. “It’s pretty raw,” he says.

“How do we,” says Jo, shuddering, “is there, what, a back door?”

“We need to go up,” says Ysabel, standing now, wrapped in the jacket and the blanket.

“Or down,” says the Duke. He lifts a hand but doesn’t brush her cheek.

“Up’s good,” says Jo, pointing back toward the bedroom. “I think this place has an attic.”

“Lead on,” says the Duke, and limping after her offers an arm to Ysabel. They follow her into the hall.

Then Jo jogs back into the living room jumps onto the orange couch grabs the sword hanging there. Wet shoes on the orange cushions she takes the scabbard in her left hand and the hilt in her right and tugs free half a foot of blade. The surface of it polished but within deep waves of dark and light steel chase the spine of it. “Okay,” says Jo, sheathing it with a whisper and a snick, slinging the red strap over a shoulder, stepping down off the couch.

In the hall the Duke’s unfolding a stepladder from a trapdoor in the ceiling, Ysabel beside him, huddled in the blanket. “So what’s up there?” says Jo.

“The attic?” says the Duke, his hand on one of the rungs. “Let’s go find out,” he says, limping around to the foot of the ladder, tucking his cane under an arm. “No, no,” says Jo, “let me go first,” a hand on the other side.

“Barganax,” says Ysabel.

“You need to help the Princess,” says the Duke, pushing gently but firmly against Jo, and “Dammit, Leo,” says Jo, pushing back.

“Gallowglas!” says Ysabel sharply. “Southeast!” They both stop and turn to look at her. She’s resettling the blanket about her shoulders. “Jo, you go first. Duke, I’ll follow after you.”

“Princess,” says the Duke, stepping back. “This is hardly the time for modesty.” Jo starts up the ladder.

“Your leg, Barganax,” says Ysabel. “This is no time for pride.”

The Duke looks down, puts a foot on a rung. “No need to be so formal.”

Jo puts her head up through a hatch, works a shoulder then another up and through shimmying to get her elbows up on the floor of a small room framed and paneled in dark wood. Her sword thumping as she hauls it up. Two other hatches open in the floor, one to either side. Oil lamps sway from slender chains. In the corner there is Jasmine, sitting on a pile of folded cloth, robes in richly clashing colors folded one atop another. She’s wearing a greyly black wetsuit, her hair pulled back in a long tight braid. She’s cradling a girl in her lap, all knees and elbows in a schoolgirl’s sailor suit, her face screwed up and ugly red with weeping. “You made it,” says Jasmine. Snuffling the girl looks up.

“Yeah,” says Jo, and from beneath her the Duke’s voice, muffled, “You okay? What’s up there?” Jo shifts, trying to peer down through the narrow hatch, “I don’t know,” she calls, pulling herself up and out. “Not an attic.”

Almost immediately a hand grips the edge of the next hatch over, another hand hoisting up a wooden cane, a stern, rough-hewn hawk at its head. Grimacing the Duke’s pulling himself out of the hatch on the far side of that small room, and “The fuck,” Jo’s saying, “Leo, Christ, that’s the wrong damn hatch – ”

“The hell are you,” grunts the Duke in his red and brown striped jacket, sitting himself on the edge of his hatch, rubbing

his thigh. "It's the only one – " He stops, seeing her hatch beside his, the hatch beyond, at Jasmine's feet.

"Can I come up?" says Ysabel somewhere below.

The Duke's lifting his legs out of the hatch as Jo scrambles over to him, grabbing his shoulder. "Are you you?" She jerks him around to face her. "How do I know it's you?"

"What kind of question is that?" says the Duke.

"Where is she?" says the girl in Jasmine's lap.

A wadded-up blanket's pushed up through the middle hatch, followed by Ysabel in her red and brown striped jacket, her damp dark head turning to take in the hatches, Jasmine and the girl, the pile of robes, the Duke and Jo.

"Where is she?" says the girl, sitting up.

"You found both the Duke and the Princess?" says Jasmine.

"I," says Jo, leaning over to grab the blanket, "yes." Wrapping it about Ysabel's shoulders. "Yes I did." Watching the Duke all the while, leaning on his cane now in the corner. "Where are we? Back in the teahouse?"

"We'll *never* get back!" wails the girl in Jasmine's lap, and "Hush, Lauren," says Jasmine, stroking her hair.

"I think we're on a ship," says the Duke.

"Never?" says Ysabel.

"What?" says Jo.

"A ship," says the Duke, pointing to the swaying lanterns.

"We're somewhere between," says Jasmine. "It will be much harder to move on, without all three of us."

"Between, between what," says Jo.

"Here," says Jasmine, "and, well, there."

"You never," Lauren's saying, as Ysabel says "No," and the Duke's saying "Well, there are nuances – Jo, dammit, *wait* – "

Jo's leaning over the hatch at his feet. "What?" she says. "Three hatches, three of us." Swinging herself around, her feet a-dangle. "You came out of that one, right?" she says to Jasmine and Lauren, pointing to the hatch on the far side of the small room.

“Yes,” says Jasmine, and Lauren, wide-eyed, nods.

“And we came up out of the middle one,” says Jo, turning to the Duke, “and you came up out of this one. Alone. I think she’s down here.”

“Wait,” says the Duke.

“For what?” says Jo. “I’m just gonna take a look. What’ll happen if I go down there?”

“I don’t know,” says the Duke.

“Anybody?” She looks around at them all in that small room. “Ysabel? Can anybody tell me what’ll happen if I go down there?”

“No,” says Jasmine.

“We need her,” says Lauren.

“Okay then,” says Jo, and she pushes off the edge and drops through the hatch and is gone.

“Oh,” says the Duke, “I wish she hadn’t done that.”

“Well, she did,” says Ysabel, and then someone raps on the door. “Are ye ready?” says a rough voice, hushed, trying to be heard through that door but not much further. The Duke looks at Ysabel, Ysabel looks at the Duke, and Jasmine looks at them both. Lauren’s looking at the door.

“Well?” says whoever it is. “It’s almost time!”



TINNY MUSIC – A KNIFE IN THE BACK – ONE GOES ALONE  
FILLED TO THE BRIM WITH GIRLISH GLEE  
HOW IT SHOULD BE

**T**INNY MUSIC from the speaker of a shortwave radio lashed to the beam above them with an orange bungee cord, a carillon peal of notes plucked from a guitar, a man’s voice rendered thin and reedy, *Tu m’as manquer mon amour, ne ni cherie willila kan be tama yala en sera Ouagadougou*, and Bottle John’s saying “I can’t explain it to somebody who wasn’t there.”

“But I am there, John,” says Michael. “I have been all along. Can I show you something? It’s in my pocket.”

Bottle John’s shoulders shift but he doesn’t look up. They’re sitting side by side on the bare plank floor by the porch railing, their backs to all that wind. Bottle John’s hands are in his lap and the gun rests small and dull in his hands. Michael’s pulling a small flat plastic baggie from a pocket in his loose sweatpants. He holds it out between them lying limply on his black-gloved palm, a corner of it weighted by a smidge of dust. “What is that,” says Bottle John, putting a hand to his chest, his white shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat.

“Leo brings it to me, from time to time,” says Michael. “I take a pinch of it every couple of days. Have for the last four years.” Bottle John’s hand sliding up to his shoulder there under his grey suit jacket. Michael closes his hand over the almost empty baggie. “I was going to tell him tonight that enough was, was enough. That I wanted to stop. That I was *tired*.” Leaning back Michael reaches through the railing between them and Bottle John lurches back, watching intently hand on his neck as Michael tips the baggie over pinched between thumb and forefinger shaking the dust loose and out and away. As it falls away from them the dust becomes sparks, the sparks become drops of light, the drops grow brighter and brighter, stars ripped loose from their moorings, tumbling about them. “Open your shirt for me, John,” says Michael, letting the empty baggie flutter away.

Bottle John pushes away, to his feet, one hand wrapped around the barrel and the trigger guard of the gun. “It’s too clear out here,” he says, and then, “too cold.”

“You don’t need to hide anything from me,” says Michael, still sitting by the railing. Behind him the stars settling now into lines and shapes that tremble and jump and freeze and tremble again. “Tell me how your brother died, and then open your shirt for me. You shot him, didn’t you.”

Bottle John’s taken a step or two back toward the sofa, away from the railing. “He asked,” he says. “The pain was too much for him.”

“And then you went to the ice.”

“I can’t talk about that.”

“Look, John. Look.” Michael’s standing, leaning on the railing, pointing out at the stars that have fixed themselves against the blackness in regular rows and lines that limn blocks and towers, sparks of light caught in the corners of a thousand thousand windows all about them. “It’s almost time. I’m doing what I can – ” Swooping arcs and nets of light define bridge after bridge marching along the river each grander and more glorious than the last. The radio above him squawks and the chiming guitar dissolves into static and someone, a rich contralto says *estoy defendiendo la apuesta de una persona* and then a banjo, someone, a couple of adenoidal voices sing a path the blind can use to return, for now the way’s blocked by an inferno, everything’s on fire and I don’t think it rains – Michael reaches up to snap the radio off. “It’s your angel, John. It pushes us further and further away as it tries to get in. I’ll lose my grip soon. They’ll never find their way back,” and Bottle John still not looking back is shaking his head, “No,” he’s saying, “no,” and Michael says, “but you can help us all.”

“We are about the Lord’s work,” says Bottle John, looking at the gun in his hand.

“You can set it aside now. You came here looking for help.”

“No,” says Bottle John.

“You came here looking for a doctor. Doctor Cee. Charley. Charley Leir?”

“No, no,” says Bottle John, looking back, “Charley, he’s no doctor. That’s just what we called him in the service. I thought, I thought maybe he could help.”

“It doesn’t want that, does it,” says Michael, as Bottle John turns away again. “It gave you back your brother, but it’s asking for something, and you, you’re still saying no, John. Open your shirt.”

“He’s a good man, Charley,” says Bottle John, stooping to set the gun down on the long low sofa. “He don’t know what he’s doing, working for Leir.”



“And Leir’s a bad man,” says Michael.

“The worst,” says Bottle John, undoing the first button of his shirt.

“What’s he done, John?” says Michael. Bottle John ducks his head and undoes the next button, and the next. “Open your shirt,” says Michael, stepping away from the railing, and Bottle John does. Whatever it is it’s barely there at all, a glistening streak against his dark skin, a swath gone indistinct, out of focus. “It’s almost over,” says Michael, stepping closer to Bottle John.

“What are you,” says Bottle John, swallowing, throat jumping, his jacket and his shirt sliding from a blurred and indistinct shoulder.

“I’m going to take it from you,” says Michael, hooking his fingers, pressing them against the stuff. Grunting. “It came from the ice, didn’t it.” His face set with the effort. “I’ll give it to the fire, and your angel – will be *satisfied* – ” Michael tugs and Bottle John looks up and howls. In and among the glittering towers lights swoop and slide, and something very like a zeppelin looms, nosing its way toward the ziggurat at the top of one of the smaller towers.

“What is that,” says Bottle John, eyes lidded, runnels of sweat pasting his shirt to his skin.

“Very old,” says Michael, looking at the cloudy nothing in his hands. “Let’s go. It’s time.”

“Cute gun,” says someone else.

Behind the sofa in the low wide doorway to the porch stands Mr. Charlock, barefoot, wrapped in a white trench coat, one hand lifted, thumb cocked, two fingers curled back, two fingers pointed at Bottle John and Michael. He’s looking down at the snub-nosed revolver in his other hand. “What’s it loaded with? Silver hollow-points?” Sniffing the cylinder. “Ampoules of holy water? Did you dip it in mistletoe oil? Smudge it with sage? Christ, John, you going Catholic on us?” He points the gun at them alongside his fingers. “Shoulda played more D and D growing up. All it takes is a knife in the back to seriously cramp any wizard’s style.”

“Don’t,” says Michael, wobbling, staring intently at his trembling hands full of glistening nothing.

“Sorry, man,” says Mr. Charlock. “Sorry about your brother.” He uncocks his thumb and lowers his empty hand. “Sorry about what went down with Echo. Wish I coulda been there. Woulda told you fucks to run like hell.” The gun’s still pointed at Bottle John, who shivering closes his eyes and nods.

“Stop,” says Michael, “I’ve already pulled it – ”

Three gunshots, loud flat cracks that punch neat little holes in Bottle John’s grey jacket, his white shirt, his wet dark chest. “What?” says Mr. Charlock, lowering the smoking gun as Bottle John sits heavily, slumps, falls over on his side. “Already pulled what?”

Michael’s looking at the last thready wisps of nothing wafting from his empty hands. “You goddamn fool,” he says.



Wet shoes squelching Jo steps carefully through darkness bare sword in one hand scabbard in the other. Up ahead a pool of light, a low-hanging lamp over an overstuffed armchair, a low table, a hand reaching out to set down a steaming mug. The sound of a jangling piano, a man’s voice pattering through it’s wining and dining me, with memory and love the only clothes I let confine me, and break the rules of anyone who thinks they’re really signing me, it’s time again, time again, time again, time again –

“Jessie?” says Jo.

Kicking the tombstones from the middles of my eyes, out to the corners where and the song’s cut off with a heavy click. A blond head peers around the side of the armchair, dark eyes framed by narrow square-lensed glasses. “Jo?” says Jessie. “Your hair. You grew it out?”

“Yeah, well,” says Jo, hurrying up to the pool of light, pausing careful of the sword to fit the tip of it to the throat of the scabbard. Driving it home. The chair’s surrounded, the edges of

that pool of light walled in by stacks and piles of books, cheap mass-market paperbacks with curled white-wrinkled spines stacked atop bulwarks of trade paperbacks and here and there foundations laid from thicker, broader hardbound books. There are books splayed open on either thick round arm of the chair, and books piled on the knitted afghan laid over Jessie's tailor-fashioned lap. A book's closed about her left index finger holding its place and a book's held open in her right hand. Her T-shirt says Book Lovers Never Go To Bed Alone. "Let's go," says Jo.

"Where," says Jessie.

"Back," says Jo, holding out a hand. "C'mon."

"You go," says Jessie, looking back down at her book. "I think I'll stay."

"You," says Jo, "you can't, it doesn't, it doesn't work like that."

"Why not," says Jessie, turning a page.

"We all," says Jo, "we went in after them, and we all have to –"

"Three from the circle," says Jessie, not looking up, "three from the track. Anyone missing? Leo? Ysabel? Whatshername from Seattle, or Lake's little girlfriend?"

"What?" says Jo, and then "No, we're all, we're stuck, getting back. The Duke thinks we're on a ship or something."

"The Duke," says Jessie.

"We all need to go back together, or we won't –"

"Five shall return," says Jessie, "and one go alone. You ever read Susan Cooper?"

"I," says Jo, "no. Come on, Jessie."

"You ever read any fantasy? Ever?" Jessie turns another page.

"What?" snaps Jo. "I read, whatsit. Earthsea? And some of those dragon books. I read Dune."

"That's not," says Jessie, "that's science fiction, not fantasy –"

"It's got dukes and barons and witches –"

"It's got spaceships, Jo."

"That fly with magic spice-powers, what is this? We've got to go, Jessie."

"There's always a sacrifice." Jessie sets the one book on the arm of the chair, splays the other open on the table by the steaming mug. "In this sort of thing. Has to be."

"One goes alone," says Jo.

"Might as well be me."

"Jessie," says Jo. "Fuck the books for a minute. The others, the ones who actually live with this shit, they won't say it but they're scared out of their minds." The scabbard of her sword gripped tightly in both hands. "You have got to come back with me, Jessie. We all have to go back together."

"Did they *tell* you that?" says Jessie, her voice rising sharply. "Did they tell you that, exactly that?"

"Jessie –"

"Did they say to you, Jo, you must bring her back, she's our only hope?" Jessie picks up the splayed book from the table. "Because I gotta tell you Jo, these people?" Turning a page and then another with quick sharp jerks. "Who live with this shit? Hang out with them long enough and you figure out they know a hell of a lot less about it all than they let on."

Jo turns away abruptly. Shadows and hints of reflections hung before the chair suggest an enormous window stretching away off and up into the darkness. Jessie slaps her book closed, tosses it to the floor. Plucks up another from her lap. The White Tyger, says the bent spine. "Shouldn't you be getting back?" she says, flipping through to find the first page.

"This is pretty nice," says Jo. "You've got books, you got tea, you got a view." Somewhere out on the other side of the glass lights like stars begin to pick out the edges of blocks, of towers, and sparks glint in the corners of a thousand thousand windows. "You know where I was?" Jo turns back to Jessie, who isn't looking down at the book in her lap. "Some anonymous ranch house somewhere in deep Southeast. I don't know. I never got outside of it. I was, married, to the Duke."

"You love him," says Jessie, flatly, and Jo lets out a bark of laughter. "No," she says. "Christ no. I *like* him, but, I never

left the house, Jessie. I spent all day just, waiting around, for him to come home from wherever it was he was, you know? I was putting my hair in curlers, for fuck's sake. I was, painting my toenails." Outside the light is shifting, growing, firming up into a softly greyish whitely glow of mist that laps about the buildings below, wisps of it flaring with orange and gold and smoldering into red. "I was bored out of my mind. *You* were supposed to find the Duke, Jessie. I went in for Ysabel."

"So you love her," says Jessie.

"I don't love anybody," says Jo. She looks down at the sword in her hands. Far off beyond the wakening city a great sharp tooth of a mountain rears itself above the mists, its snows blushed rose and gold and palest blue and a hint here and there of faint green light. "I made a promise," says Jo. "I will keep that promise. I found her," looking up at Jessie now, "and I got her out of –" She looks down again. "She's not going back there."

Jessie's looking away, at the cup of tea still steaming, at the little cassette player on the table beside it. At the books ringed all about her. "You get to have them both," she mutters.

"I don't *have* anybody," says Jo. "Jessie, please." She holds out a hand. "We need you." The light filling the window doesn't touch the darkness behind the chair, but away off back there up in what might be the ceiling there's a small oblong of warmly glowing light, a trapdoor, a hatch.



A scrape of gravel, a black shoe shifting, pressed against denting the rubber of a tire. A black pants leg quivering with effort, a grunt. Mr. Keightlinger's arms crossed before his blank black sunglasses fists clenched tightly as feathers straining bulging eyes press down against him and the very light that soaks the air is trembling at the point where they don't touch. Mr. Keightlinger suddenly lurches back as the angel surges toward him. He's pressed against the car, the powerful black car whorled over

hood and roof with meticulous lines of spidery hand-painted letters glaring with a chilly blue light. Mr. Keightlinger blows a long sigh from his bushy beard and shifts his arms holding one upright before his face and drawing the other back, "This," he grunts, "will hurt me," that arm drawn back the hand beside his face unfolding from a fist, held flat, rock-steady, "far more," and grimacing he curls that hand back into a fist, "ah, fuck it." He throws a punch into the enormous dust-brown slit-pupiled eye before his face.

The eye collapses wings snap open scudding yanking the angel back and up into the air away from Mr. Keightlinger buffeted by the sudden winds. Howling shrieking the angel throws its wings all wide and falling from the air on him as ducking he pulls himself over the hood of the car through thickening curtains of cold blue light. Sparks erupt white and blue as he falls onto the other side showering bouncing splashing about him as he scrambles for the freshly painted gate. Behind him the groaning shriek of twisting metal and the pop and clatter of breaking glass and the ripping whump of gasoline igniting.

"Well, hell," says Mr. Keightlinger, bulling his way through the front door of the teahouse.



In its scabbard a sword's thrust up through the middle hatch of three in a row in a small wood-paneled room. It wobbles and topples over in Jo's hand and she lays it on the floor her elbow shoulder brown-haired head following it up and out. "Can you," she says, squirming her other arm free, hanging a moment there half in, half out, looking at the hatches to either side. There's no one else in the room.

"Jo?" says Jessie's voice muffled from below, "Jo, could you," and Jo says "Yeah, yeah," pushing herself up and out of the hatch, then crawling thump-dragging the sword to the far hatch as Jessie's calling "Jo! Jo! Where are you - " Jo leans over,

reaching down, inside. “Oh,” says Jessie, her hand in Jo’s, coming up into the small wood-paneled room. “Why’d you – ”

“Don’t ask,” says Jo.

“Where is everyone?”

“Working on it,” says Jo, crouching, headed back along the line of hatches to the other side of the room. The stack of robes is gone. Jessie’s looking down the middle hatch. “They didn’t go that way,” says Jo, and there’s a thump of a drum outside somewhere, a thinly dervished skirl of fiddles and flutes and a low round horn of some sort struggling to keep up. Stepping over the hatch Jo listens at the door to the room as the music settles into a thumping melody and there’s muffled laughter and applause, a whoop of delight. “Come on,” says Jo, opening the door.

A low short narrow hallway paneled in white-painted wood, a door opposite, doors at either end. To the left the doors have high-set panes of clouded glass. Jo in her satiny black slip and her mismatched Chuck Taylors, one hand on the throat of her scabbarded sword, one hand reaching back, tugging Jessie in her wake, Jessie in her T-shirt and sweatpants, her flip-flops, her narrow square-lensed glasses. Falsetto voices roughly singing three little maids who, all unwary, come from a lady’s seminary, freed from its genial tutelary –

Jo opens the doors.

On the deck below them lit by smoking torches empty wooden chairs in haphazard rows pushed this way and that under a towering mast, a tautly strung welter of rigging and shrouds. “Three little maids from school,” sing Ysabel and Lauren and the Duke in stumbling off-beat high-pitched trills, “three little maids from school,” wrapped in richly clashing robes, kimonos loosely belted, and the Duke bouncing steps up to the rail singing, “One little maid is a bride, Yum-Yum,” and to either side Ysabel and Lauren bounce up beside him, singing to those empty chairs, “Two little maids in attendance come,” and off to the side sits Jasmine on a stool under an oil lamp, sawing away at the fiddle tucked under her chin. “Three little maids is the total sum – ” and Jasmine

looks up to see Jo and Jessie and the fiddle squawks and she nearly falls from her stool and turning fluttering faltering Ysabel and Lauren and the Duke, “three little maids – ”

“The hell?” says Jo.

“It is,” says Jasmine, the fiddle in his lap, “the latest from Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Sullivan. We thought it might prove entertaining to have the boys done up to sing some selections – ”

“Snap ’em out of it,” says Jo to Jessie, hurrying down the short flight of steps to the deck, past the empty chairs to the high broad gunwale. “If we have offended – ” cries the Duke after her, and Jessie moving to stand between them trying to catch his eye says “Leo, Leo – ”

Dark water below and no gangway or dock or boat. Away beyond the great dark bulk of the shore a bluff looming the pulsing rustle of trees in a low wind and above and beyond and around all that buildings and towers sketched in light, windows gleaming, the arcs of bridges busy with teeming crowds of light passing back and forth, all of it under a lowering red-black sky. Jo her free hand up to shade her eyes points with the hilt of her sword, “There!” she cries. “Look!” Flickers of warm lamplight up there, back among the dark tree-shapes. A porch, a railing of peeled and polished branches. “The teahouse. That’s the teahouse, right?”

“Leo,” Jessie’s saying, “Leo, please,” and he’s standing not quite looking at her as he says “We should resume, sir, we shouldn’t like to disappoint the gentlemen from Oregon City,” and Jessie grabs him her hands on either side of his face trying to look him in his eyes that keep sliding away. “Jo!” she cries. “Jo, he’s not – ”

“Slap him!” says Jo, crossing the deck between rows of empty chairs. “Kiss him! Do something!”

Jessie slaps the Duke, lightly, and then draws her hand back and slaps him again, a loud crack as Lauren shrieks and Ysabel starts forward. Jasmine drops her fiddle with a twang and a crunch. Blinking the Duke looks at Jessie, looks her in the eye, and with a sobbing laughing gasp she pulls him to her and kisses him. The Duke’s hands spring up but he does not push her



away. "Oh," he says as she draws back. "That's where I left you." Jessie turns with another half-gasping laugh and grabs Ysabel's hand. "Rain," says Ysabel as Jessie pulls her close, "it's okay, I'm here, it's me," as Jessie wraps her arms about her, as Jessie kisses her, and kisses her again.

Jasmine steps up to the railing, her greyly black wetsuit gleaming in the torchlight. "That was," she says to Jo coming up the steps, "unpleasant."

"That's the teahouse, right?" says Jo, pointing. "I think we're just anchored or whatever in the river."

"Yes," says Jasmine, "yes, I think it is." Lauren beside her twirling with the force of trying to whip her kimono from her arms. "He kept them lit. All right then." Jasmine heads for the steps.

"There's no way off this boat," calls Jo.

"Yes there is," says Jasmine, as Lauren hurries down the steps after her.

"You're gonna swim?" says Jo.

"I'll swim, I'll climb, I'll hack my way through the underbrush." Jasmine grips the gunwale, gives it a shake. It's solid. "If we stay, I think you'll shortly end up a gentleman from Oregon City. And we'll all be spellbound by your Duke's rendition of the sun, whose rays are all ablaze." She takes Lauren's hand.

"I'd rather we didn't," says Ysabel, her forehead against Jessie's. "If it's all the same to you."

The Duke's taking off his kimono. "It's chilly," he says, offering it to Jo, who's watching Jasmine help Lauren up onto the gunwale. "What?" says Jo. "I hadn't noticed." She doesn't take the kimono. She's still holding the sword. He drapes it over her shoulders. "Hey," he says, leaning over her, and she turns to look up at him, and he kisses her. "Thanks," he says.

"Sure," she says.

And then as Ysabel and Jessie hand-in-hand head down the steps, and the Duke before her follows them, she says, "Wait."

"Jo?" says the Duke.

Clutching the kimono about her shoulders with one hand looking down, away at the sword, then back up at the Duke, she says, "I, should go with Ysabel. You should go with Jessie."

Jessie and Ysabel stop there on the steps, looking back at her, the Duke's frowning. "Let's go," calls Jasmine from the gunwale.

"I mean," says Jo, "it's how we went in. After you. With the, the hatches and everything." Looking down at her sword, then back up again. "We should go back the same way."

"No," says the Duke, "she's right, she's right, that actually," as he's turning back to head toward the steps, but Jo grabs his red and black sleeve the kimono slipping from her shoulders pulling him to her for a kiss, and after a startled moment he settles into it his arms wrapping about her. "I'm sorry," she says to him, as he kisses her cheek, her jaw, her throat. "I made her a promise."

"But," he says in her ear, "it's me you're kissin' on."

"Something like that," she murmurs, and she kisses him again, and he stoops to pick up the kimono and then he drapes it about her shoulders again.

Jasmine and Lauren sitting on the broad gunwale, Jo handing up her sword to Lauren, hoisting herself up beside them. The Duke in his red and brown jacket hands up his cane to her, and Jo takes his hand as Jessie's pushing up from below. Grunting, gasping, he folds himself over the gunwale and rolls over, sitting up, rubbing his thigh. Jessie pulls herself up beside him, and Jo's reaching down for Ysabel's hand. "Shoes," says Jasmine. "And jackets." Lauren's standing carelessly balanced on the gunwale beside her as she undoes the girl's skirt. Her stockings and shoes already kicked to the deck. Jessie lets her flip-flops fall from her feet, then leans over trying to open the Duke's jacket. "Nuh-uh," he says, and she reaches for his cane and he holds it away. "If I'm drowning," he says, "I'm gonna do it with my sixty-dollar Nunn Bushes on."

"Leo," says Jessie.

"We're not going into the drink," says the Duke.

“Oh?” says Jasmine.

“Seven to three,” says the Duke. “Any stakes you care to hazard.” He points to the lights up there in the trees. “We’re walking on air the whole way.”

“Suit yourself,” says Jasmine, unbuttoning Lauren’s jacket.

“What,” says Jo to Ysabel, who’s watching, eyebrow cocked, as Jo ties the laces of her mismatched Chuck Taylors together. “I left these in the bathroom of that damn Starbucks,” says Jo. “I’m not losing them again.”

“Ready?” says Jasmine, hoisting herself to her feet, taking Lauren’s hand in her own. Lauren shivering in a thin pink camisole and underwear dotted with cartoon hearts.

“I’m not standing,” says the Duke, tucking his cane under his arm. “We can just, you know. Push off,” he says to Jessie.

“Well?” says Jo to Ysabel, who’s still wearing the kimono over the red and brown striped jacket.

“I agree with the Hawk,” says Ysabel.

“We’re gonna walk on air, huh?” says Jo.

Ysabel shrugs. “Besides. It’s a nice robe.”

“Let’s hope we do,” Jasmine’s saying. “We still have to deal with the thug, and the angel, when we get back.”

“The what?” says the Duke, but they’re jumping, they’re jumping, they’re jumping –



“WHERE ARE THEY?” – WHITE FEATHERS IN HER HAIR

“**W**HERE ARE THEY?” screams Mr. Charlock in that white trench coat, brandishing the gun up over his head.

“Shoot me or put it away,” says Michael, squatting by Bottle John laid out on the bare plank floor. “I’m out of patience for threats.”

“He’s dead,” says Mr. Charlock, lowering the gun.

“Dead as his brother.”

“He was dead when I got there,” says Mr. Charlock. “Hell, he was dead before they even showed up.”

“I was starting to piece it together. You’re not Leir, are you.”

“What? No,” says Mr. Charlock.

“So you’re Doctor Charley. Only you’re no doctor.” Sitting back on his heels Michael’s looking up at Mr. Charlock. “The aloosh? Duende? Echo Force. But you didn’t go to the ice – ”

“Hey,” says Mr. Charlock, his empty hand up, two fingers pointed at Michael. “That’s a terrible fucking idea.”

“Shoot,” says Michael, pushing himself to his feet, “or put it away.”

After a moment Mr. Charlock shakes out his hand. “Okay,” he says. Tossing the gun onto the long low sofa. “Wrong foot. We got ourselves a situation that’s rapidly approaching the point of oh my fucking God, so it behooves us maybe to put our cards on the table, see what game it is we’re playing. He told you what he was after.”

“Leir,” says Michael.

Mr. Charlock whistles. “No shit. And the thing you pulled off him?”

Michael shakes his head, his face impassive. “Something qliphotic. Scale of Thamiel, maybe. I was going to feed it to the angel.”

“That thing out there?” Mr. Charlock points back over his shoulder. “Don’t worry about it.” Footsteps are clomping somewhere up away behind him. “My partner’s got that,” turning to look back up that way as there’s a rattle of clattering strings of light, “covered – ” The black-suited form of Mr. Keightlinger bursts into the low wide doorway to the porch, his hair undone in a frizzy halo about his head, sunglasses clutched in one hand. He coughs into the crook of his elbow. “Tell me,” says Mr. Charlock, “tell me that damn thing’s upped and gone.”

“The,” says Mr. Keightlinger, coughing again, “car – ”

“Christ you let it eat the *car*?” shrieks Mr. Charlock, and Mr. Keightlinger shrugs.

“That isn’t enough, is it,” says Michael, looking down at his hands in their black knit gloves.

“Fuck no,” says Mr. Charlock, running a hand over and over his bare bald head. “Not if that thing’s gunning for a wizard. You couldn’t hold it off just a little bit longer, could you?” he says to Mr. Keightlinger. “Fucking apocalypse breathing down our necks, *again*, just you and me to hold it all together, *again*, only I’m fresh out of baling wire this time you sonofawhat are you looking at?”

Mr. Keightlinger’s arm’s coming up, pointing away past Mr. Charlock out past the sofa the railing out into the hissing darkness where bright light picks out figures, six of them hanging motionless, arms outstretched, a sword, a walking stick with a stern hawk at its head, a red and brown jacket, kimonos fixed mid-flutter. “That’s,” says Mr. Charlock, stepping heavily past the long low sofa, “you,” past Michael, and Bottle John’s body, “that’s what you, that’s,” across the porch, up to the railing, “you, you let the Bride, of the King Come Back, you let her *jump* out into the goddamn *void*.” He throws his hands in the air. “Well hell,” turning, rounding on Mr. Keightlinger, “we might as well march out the front door right the hell now, because that thing up there’s got a fuckton of mercy compared to what Leir will have in – ” He stops dead looking up past Mr. Keightlinger at the bare wood wall by the low wide doorway.

“What?” says Mr. Keightlinger.

“Wasn’t that wall like, covered in old photographs and shit?”

One end of the sofa collapses in a cloud of dust. A twang of metal a whipping of loose cord a black and silver radio falls to the floor cracking open an empty plastic husk as rattling clattering echoing all around white strings of light stretched taut jump loose fall to the floor go dark with pops and fusillades of sparks. Mr. Charlock scuttles over to Bottle John’s body, pokes it with a bare foot. The tin roof above them shivers. Mr. Keightlinger flips open his sunglasses and jams them on, looking about, then with long lumbering steps down the length of the sofa he hurls

himself on Mr. Charlock knocking them both to the floor as one of the porch poles lurches listing bursting in a shower of splinters bouncing and a squeal of tearing metal. There is a sound –

Riding the crest of that rippling crash Jasmine hurtles into the room trying to get her feet under herself as she careens into the sofa turning managing just to catch Lauren before the girl flies headlong over the back of it. Jo and Ysabel hit the sofa side by side Jo's arms upflung the sword still in her hands. Jessie's feet clip the railing the Duke reaching for her twisting brushing the floor rolling arms flopping stick flying loose slamming into the base of the sofa as Jessie pinwheels end over into the settling clouds of tufts of down. A clatter of falling boards. Wrenching squawks of twisted metal. Pops and fizzles here and there as lightbulbs explode in the spitting fitful rain.

In the darkness groaning Mr. Keightlinger shifts and lifts himself brushing splinters clattering to the floor. Reaching down he helps Mr. Charlock to his feet as the Duke sits up abruptly and says "Oh, hey." Wiping down and rain from his face. Mr. Keightlinger's carefully heading for the doorway but Mr. Charlock grabs his arm. "His shoulders," says Mr. Charlock. "Get his damn shoulders!" Pointing to Bottle John. Jessie's moaning as Ysabel pushes her up and over and Jo's struggling in the drifts of down to pull herself free the sword still in her hands. "Okay," the Duke's saying. "The angel. Lemme at 'im."

"It wasn't no goddamn angel!" snaps Mr. Charlock as he backs up out of the room, Bottle John's feet clamped under his arms.

"Michael?" says Lauren. "Are we there? Michael?"

"Sinjin?" says Jasmine.

"Who the hell are you?" says Jo, twisted around on the sofa, spitting white feathers from her mouth. In the low wide doorway Mr. Keightlinger and Mr. Charlock pause, Bottle John in his grey suit slung between them. "Nobody," says Mr. Charlock. "It's gone, okay?" He spares a glance for the ruined porch, the rain coming down, the trees outside black against the red-black sky. "It weren't, you wouldn't be here."

“Where,” says Jasmine, standing, looking about the room, “is Michael St. John Lake?”

Mr. Charlock hunched over in that white coat looks at Mr. Keightlinger, who shrugs. Mr. Charlock opens his mouth to say something but shakes his head instead. “Lady,” he says, “I do not have the time.”

And Lauren begins to wail.



The car’s a reddish brown, a black stripe down the side, pulling up to the sidewalk before the apartment building. Behind the glass a harsh-lit lobby, imposing blocks of mail lockers. The driver’s door opens and Jessie gets out, her chauffeur’s cap on her long blond hair, her T-shirt, her sweatpants. Her feet bare. Before she can reach in to lever the seat back up Jo’s worming her way out, wrapped in a purple and black kimono, her sword in one hand. Jessie stands back and lets Jo past, then reaches a hand in for Ysabel climbing out, a pink and green and yellow kimono wrapped about a red and brown striped jacket, white feathers still caught in her long black hair, limply damp. She smiles at Jessie and lightly kisses her knuckles and then her mouth.

“Hey,” says Jo, leaning against the passenger door. The Duke cranks down his window. “You’re sure I can’t talk you into it,” he says.

“Nah,” she says, looking up at the windows towering above her. Closing her eyes against the misting rain. “We need, I need someplace – stable. Safe. After all that.”

“Call me,” says the Duke.

Jo turns, leans into the open window. “I gotta get a new phone,” she says. “I left my old one in the pocket of some pants I’ve never seen before.”

“Look in the coat Ysabel’s wearing,” says the Duke. “I saw it on the couch, in that house? While you were getting a blanket.”

Jo's looking at her sword, her mismatched shoes. "This is getting fucking spooky," she mutters.

"Call me," says the Duke.

"Sure," says Jo, "if the phone bill out of limbo doesn't break me." He's leaning up a little and she leans down and then she kisses him, and then kisses him again.

"I thanked you," he says, a smile on his face. "I owe you a favor. That's a dangerous place to be." Jo starts up, looking at him. He's still smiling. "I like your hair like this," he says.

"What?" says Jo, but he's cranking up the window, Jessie's climbing into the car, the engine's growling. Ysabel's by her side. "Let's get in out of the rain," she says.

Jo presses the button for the elevator. "So. He's, well. He's dead, huh."

"I think," says Ysabel, "it'll turn out he was dead for a while. And the teahouse never was built. Or never was as – beautiful, as it was. And it blew down in a storm. And we'll all forget."

"Forget?" says Jo.

"Do you remember your dreams?" says Ysabel, taking Jo's hand in hers.

"Sometimes? Ysabel – "

"Like that, then," says Ysabel, pulling Jo close to her.

"Ysabel, I – "

"Just hold me, Jo," says Ysabel. "Please. Just hold me."

The sword still in one hand Jo puts her arms about Ysabel and Ysabel pulls them together, tightly, those richly clashing kimonos folding one over the other, Ysabel's face buried in Jo's shoulder, Jo leaning her head against Ysabel's, eyes closed, and then, after a bit, the elevator behind them softly dings.



And there's no waiting worth the misery  
And there's no wanting worth the tears  
And there's no searching for a mystery  
And there's no innocence at the heart of me

—*Martin Swan*



NO. 13

*Changel*

A BEAUTIFUL GUITAR, AND EXTRAVAGANT – “YOU CUT YOUR HAIR!”  
WHO WERE THOSE GUYS? – THE RAIN BENEATH HER – WHAT IT (HE) DID  
PUSHING A DEAD LAWNMOWER – A SOUND SLEEPER – CABBAGES & STORKS  
“SUCH A NOTHING TIME” – DRAWING THE CIRCLE – WHAT’S LEFT BEHIND  
A COAT TO A COBBLER – THAT STERN AND ROUGH-HEWN HAWK  
EGG WHITES & ESCHATOLOGY – SKY FALLS; MOUNTAINS CRUMBLE  
THREE ANSWERS – A SCREWED-UP TWIST OF PAPER

**I**T’S A BEAUTIFUL GUITAR, AND EXTRAVAGANT, a second soundbox like a swan’s neck swooping above the fretboard for another ten strings or so, and the red-headed man’s right hand leaps up to strike shimmering sheets from them to punctuate the rollicking tumult hammered and plucked from his left and right hands, notes sharp and clear as peals rung from bells tumbling out of the small black speakers on the stands to either side. Green fluorescent ink on a glassy black board at his feet says Live Music Every Night the Guitarp Stylings of John Wharfinger. Beside it a balloon snifter with a handful of change and some limp dollar bills. A woman all in black, a black apron about her waist, a loaded tray up above her head, a plate of pasta, a couple of burgers, the fish, squeezes between him and a table full of raucous laughter, one of them reading something from the phone in the palm his hand. The red-headed man chases the melody up the fretboard ringing and chiming until it suddenly, irrevocably ends, and his hands leap away, his head down, a long flop of hair hanging over the guitar. The table before him’s still laughing. A desultory flutter of clapping here, there, over in the back. His hands settle on the guitar again, his left hand curled about the neck, his right hand hovering over the soundbox, fingers wiggling. They strike a chord and another, letting it ring, then a third, and someone by

the bar drops a tray of glasses with a shattering crash. The room erupts in applause and whoops and laughter.

Later, as he's wrapping the guitar in a soft brown leather case, a woman scrapes a chair up by his side. She sits in it heavily, her bulk wrapped in an enormous black coat, a little grey snap-brim fedora at a jaunty angle on her head. "New gig?" she says.

"You have me," he says, working one end of the case carefully around the shoulder of the harp, "at a disadvantage."

"Really?" she says. "I thought everybody knew me." He starts zipping the case closed around the guitar's elaborate shape. "Anne Thorpe," she says, "I write for Anodyne? Among others?" and the zipper stops for a moment. "You know *of* me, anyway," she says.

"I don't have anything to say," he says, tugging the zipper closed, securing a couple of velcro straps.

"Not even hello? How's it going? Sure I'll let you buy me a drink?"

He sets the case to one side of the stool, frowning.

"That means I'd buy you a drink," she says. "Because you'd be the one? Saying sure, I'll let you – anyway. Not a gift, mind. Strictly tit for tat."

"But I have nothing to offer in return," he says with a shrug.

"It's not a story," she says, "if that's what you're worried about. I'm nowhere near a story yet. I just have to know, you know?"

He shrugs again.

"You guys," she says. She rolls her eyes. "You bow with a blast at the Acme like a month ago and suddenly it's all anybody can talk about, this album y'all are gonna do that nobody's heard anything from. You start racking up high-profile gigs at a rate I've never seen before in this town, all on good will and word of mouth, until bam!" She slaps one black-draped knee, and the hat slips from her head with the force of it. "Three shows, the last ten days or so. Nocturnal, the Woods, La Luna." She settles the hat back on her head, her dark hair short and swept back, shot through with grey and

white. “Y’all no-show all three, nobody’s calls get returned, nobody’s emails, and here you turn up playing a brewpub on Powell. And Deke,” she jerks a thumb at the bar behind her, careful of her hat, “has no idea he’s got the fiddler from Stone and Salt serenading his dinner rush.”

“Multi-instrumentalist,” he says, looking at the case at his feet.

“What?”

“I don’t just fiddle.”

She sits back in her chair, looks over at a busser clearing one of the last tables. Looks back at him. “What the hell happened, man? You’ve got something to say, all right, and it’s worth at least a couple shots of Macallan, you know?”

“Redbreast,” says John Wharfinger with a wry smile.

“What?”

“It’s Redbreast you’d be buying,” he says, “but I’ll tell you for free. Sometimes, these things? They just don’t work out.” He stands, tugging his long green coat into place. “Don’t,” she’s saying, “don’t, don’t do me like this. Don’t send me back out into the rain with nothing but a measly scrap like that.”

“What do you want from me?” says John Wharfinger, scooping the money up out of the glass. “It’s November.”



“YOU CUT YOUR HAIR!” – WHO WERE THOSE GUYS?

THE RAIN BENEATH HER – WHAT IT (HE) DID

“YOU CUT YOUR HAIR!” cries the Duke as he opens his white door.

“Well, yeah,” says Jo, standing there hand-in-hand with Ysabel, Jo in a black leather reefer jacket, Ysabel in a short white parka lined with thick white fur. Jo’s hair cropped very short and dyed a deep wine red.

“Your coats?” says the Duke. From down the dark hall behind him a burst of music, someone singing wake at night al-

ways the same, I call your name but you sleep right through and love is the light in your face!

“Why don’t you go find Jessie?” says Jo to Ysabel. Letting go of her hand.

“As you wish,” says Ysabel, slipping out of her parka.

“Huh,” says the Duke, watching her head down the hall, her grey cardigan dress quite short and tight, her matching thigh-high socks.

“Yeah,” says Jo, taking off her jacket. “She’s loaded for bear.”

“It’s a look,” says the Duke, turning back. “Whoa.” Jo’s in a bright red strapless dress also quite short over black leggings. “You’re, ah,” says the Duke. “You’re wearing lipstick.”

“I figured ducal function meant formal,” says Jo. “Ysabel picked out the dress.”

“Well, there’s formal,” says the Duke, “and there’s, well.” His blousy pyjama pants paisleyed in purples and browns and greens and a very pointed pair of Persian slippers and a silk shirt in some nameless harvest color. “C’mon. Let me get you a drink.” Jo heads down the hall and he follows, their coats draped over an arm. “Did I, did I mention I like your shoulders?” he says. “Because I like your shoulders.” Jo’s smiling.

The big room lit by rows of dim red-shaded ceiling lamps and the flicker of torchlight from outside through the high narrow windows, and all the vicious games we play, sings a woman’s voice from speakers here and there, they mean nothing to me, all I know is your touch and the way love should be. A makeshift bar, mismatched wineglasses and tumblers and bottles spread along a couple of folding tables and some crates, a boy in a brown leather jacket and an enormous set of headphones setting up a fresh album on the turntables, people here and there dancing, talking over the music, laughing, falling silent, turning to watch as Ysabel marches across the floor toward the corner by the windows where three men are laughing at something that Jessie has said, her yellow hair swept back in a mane. As her smile falls away and she looks beyond them with shining eyes they turn, the three

of them, they bow deeply, they step back, and Ysabel sweeps up to take Jessie's hands in her own, smiling at her gown, a fall of sequins in golds and browns draped from either shoulder, tied at her hips with brown ribbons. "For me?" says Ysabel.

"You see anyone else?" says Jessie.

"Can I have," Jo's saying, "another one of," twirling the tumbler in her hand, "ah, whatever, this, was?" The bartender eyes the red streaks clinging to the melting ice. "You're drinking with His Grace," he says. "A Negroni." His face is fleshy, his brick-red hair flops from a high widow's peak. He scoops ice into a tall straight glass and pours gin and dark vermouth. "You're the Gallowglas," he says. The music a swirl of strings over rattling percussion. "Yeah," says Jo.

"It was nothing personal," he says, pouring thick red Campari.

"What?"

"Nothing personal!" Shaking a couple of drops of bitters. He stirs the drink with a long gold pick. "I just wanted you to know."

"What wasn't personal?" says Jo.

"When we went after you!" he says, straining the drink into a glass of fresh ice. "I didn't think you'd care."

"Holy shit!" says Jo. "You're that, that guy! You're one of those guys!"

"The Stirrup," he says, twisting a sliver of orange peel over her drink, letting it drop.

"Stirrup?"

"Gaveston!" He hands her the glass.

"Well," she says, hoisting it, "nice to meet you, Gaveston!"

At the edge of the dance floor leaning against each other laughing Ysabel tugging up one of her long long socks and Jessie wiping sweat-damp hair from her face and "Oh," says Ysabel, straightening, "now where did you get that." Held up close between them in Jessie's hand a glass vial no bigger than a little finger, inside a slender thread of golden dust.

"Leo said you'd like it," says Jasmine.

“How generous of him,” murmurs Ysabel under the thumping beat. Someday baby, an old deep voice is singing, you ain’t gonna trouble me, anymore. Ysabel brushes the vial, and Jessie’s fingers. “Ever played with it before?”

“It’s,” says Jessie, “it does different things, every time.”

“I think,” says Ysabel, “Rain,” plucking the vial from her hand, “we both know what it will do to us tonight,” and Jessie smiles, and Ysabel laughs. “Go get some vodka for us. Neat.”

Jessie leans in and kisses Ysabel. “I should,” she says, and, “my,” and then, “it’s Jessie. My name’s Jessie. Not Rain.”

The vial in one hand one hand on Jessie’s hip Ysabel closes her eyes and kisses Jessie. “All right,” she says. “Jessie. Go get the vodka.”

“I know I’ve seen the one guy before,” Jo’s saying. She’s sitting on the broad flat arm of the Duke’s chair. Had a good time, got beat pretty good, runs the rap over the chugging guitar.

“What, the one stole Ysabel’s coat?” says the Duke, picking up his drink from the low brass table before them. Had a good thing going got more than you gave, goddammit now, give it to you, girl you got game.

“No, the other one. I’m pretty sure.”

“That was weird, the thing with the coat.”

“You didn’t poke around?” Jo drains her glass and leans over to set it on the table. “Ask anybody who they are or what they’re doing?”

“Did you?”

“You’re the one with people,” says Jo. The Duke chuckles. She reaches down to grab his hand before he can lift his glass for another sip, and reddened ice clinks. “They could have seriously fucked things up,” she says. “They could have gotten us killed.”

“They did fuck things up,” says the Duke. He gently works his glass free. “They did get people killed.”

“Well,” says Jo, “yeah. So.” Whoops and a smattering of applause away off over the dance floor.

“They’re contract players,” says the Duke, and he tosses back the rest of his drink. “The two of them, anyway. Work for a guy

who operates in a, a consulting capacity, for various downtown developers. Pinabel,” and he looks up at Jo leaning over him, takes her hand in his, “the Axehandle, I mean, not the Hound himself, has been trying to get this guy to go exclusive.” He kisses her hand, then shifts, sitting back against the other arm of the chair. “Sum total of what is known to me. Other guy, their friend? The first one? Utter mystery.”

“He wanted Leir. Thought we were hiding him or something.”

“Leir?” says the Duke, frowning. “That’s the consultant.”

“Said he was a sorcerer.”

“Tomato, tomahto,” says the Duke. “As ever, I know even less than I thought.” Wincing he pushes himself to his feet, rubbing his thigh. “Let me freshen these up and when I get back let us speak of other things.” He limps away toward the bar. The music a pounding strut now stabbed by synthesized horns. “Two more,” he calls to the Stirrup, and he turns leaning against the bar looking back over the dance floor, at all the people here and there milling and talking and laughing and dancing, all the way back to the chair by the low brass table, and Jo draped over the back of it, smiling back at him.

Turning back to the bar where the Stirrup’s stirring the cocktails he reaches into a pocket of his pyjama pants and pulls out a small tin box dotted with chipped enameled flowers in pink and gold. Sozodont Powder, it says, For Cleansing The Teeth. He thumbs it open. Inside a spill of golden dust glitters barely in the dim red light.

“What,” says Jessie, laughing, “are you doing?” as Ysabel leads her to a chair over by the windows. “Sit,” says Ysabel, kissing her. “Sit.” Pushing her into the chair. “Ysabel!” cries Jessie, hands leaping to resettle her gown in her lap, over her breasts. Ysabel tocking her hips to the strutting beat, dans les mouvements d’épaules, sings a forceful laughing voice, a plat comme un hiéroglyphe Inca de l’opéra! She leans over bending at the waist and runs her hands up Jessie’s thighs and down



again, then straightens and spins and kicks up a foot, planting it on the chair between Jessie's bare knees. "Take it off," she says, and Jessie takes Ysabel's foot in her hands and works the knot in the laces loose and peels the low grey boot open and off. Ysabel spins again and kicks up her other foot and Jessie takes that boot off, and Ysabel hands braced on the back of the chair over Jessie's head hikes herself up, over Jessie, against Jessie, letting her body slip down and down along Jessie's body until she's kneeling on the ground before her, tight cardigan rucked up about her hips, and a man in a tuxedo whistles and claps. Pushing up turning around Ysabel tugs her cardigan back down, smiling at a man in a peach-colored Nudie suit dappled with rhinestones. She sits herself sideways in Jessie's lap, lifting a leg and then peeling the long grey sock down and down her thigh, over her knee, bunching it bending her leg down her calf, working the thick sock awkward a moment over her ankle, face impassive, mouth a moue of vague amusement, as Jessie watches and giggles and a big man, shirtless, frowns over the shoulder of a woman in a long diaphanous gown of uncertain color. "Well?" says Ysabel to Jessie, letting her empty sock dangle from her hand. "How'm I doing?"

"Not bad," says Jessie. "About a forty-dollar dance."

"Forty!" cries Ysabel, letting the sock drop. "For five minutes' work?"

"You have to split your take with the house," says Jessie, "but I might tip a little extra, you know? For a little something-somethin?"

"So what should my name be?" says Ysabel, lifting her still-socked leg, running her hands along it. "Princess? Or is that too cliché?"

"Lady," says a man stepping out of the little crowd around them, and Ysabel shakes her head. "Goodness, no!" she says. "Cliché *and* generic."

"Lady, please." His shoulders broad under a tight brown T-shirt, his hair a dark black cap. He offers up a hand, his fin-

gers thick and stubby, a leather thong tied loosely about his wrist. "Luys," says Jessie, and "Oh, the Mason!" cries Ysabel. "I *knew* you seemed familiar."

"The Duke has many rooms, Lady," he says. "Perhaps you might both wish to retire to one?"

"Oh?" says Ysabel, leaning back against Jessie, looking pointedly across the room to the Duke and Jo, swaying together much too slowly for the beat. "His Grace doesn't seem to mind."

"Lady," says the Mason again. "Let 'em alone!" calls someone from the crowd, and "Go on!" and "Take it off!" The Mason turns to look at them all, saying, "Go on yourselves, go drink, go dance. Enjoy the party."

"I think," says Ysabel loudly to Jessie, "*he* thinks dallying with the Duke's doxy is beneath me. Are you beneath me, Rain?" Looking up at her. "Well I am in your lap. Would you rather I were beneath her?" she says to the Mason. "We are quite flexible."

"Perhaps, Mason," says the man in the peach-colored suit, "you should go get yourself a drink."

"Cater," says the Mason. "You object?"

The man in the peach-colored suit with a glitter of rhinestones sweeps an arm to encompass the little crowd. "Not a one of us would quarrel with a countercheck, Mason. Yes." He draws himself up fringe rustling his arms akimbo. "If you say, these women should remove themselves, then yes. I would object. Directly."

"Then I will oblige, and call for steel," says the Mason, and Cater smiles. "Blades!" cries the Mason, turning away, pushing through the crowd, the Cater unzipping his jacket as he follows. "I would toy with this knight!"

"Come on," says Ysabel to Jessie, grabbing her hand. "Let's go." Clambering out of her lap. Jessie shaking her head tries to pull her hand back, "What?" she's saying, and "No, wait – stop – " as Ysabel takes her face in both her hands and kisses her hard. Leaning her forehead against Jessie's she murmurs, "If your fingers aren't inside me within the minute I will explode."

"Oh," says Jessie.

“Shit,” says the Duke, as the Mason marches into the middle of the dance floor followed by the Cater, his jacket slung over one bare shoulder. “Blades, Your Grace!” cries the Mason, and “Sweetloaf!” bellows the Duke. “See to the man!” The boy in the brown leather jacket at the turntables looks up, looks over, bends down, lifting a long bundle draped in dark red cloth. “Come on,” says the Duke to Jo.

“What?” says Jo, swaying a little, half-finished drink in her hand. The Duke seizes her other hand and drags her in his wake, toward an anonymous door at the end of the room, until she plants her feet, pulling back. He comes in close to her and kisses her and says, “I’m getting you off the damn floor.”

“Off,” says Jo.

“Lest a fatal misstep lose me yet another knight,” he says. She leans back shaking her head, “I wouldn’t,” she starts to say, and smiling he says, “I mean we’re also gonna fuck our brains out. Might as well kill two birds while we’re stoned, right?”



“Gloriosky,” says the Duke, blowing the word out like a candle.

“Oh,” says Jo. “Def, definitely.”

And after a moment he rolls over away from her, dragging the dark brown sheet off her, and she doesn’t try to pull it back, her arms at her sides knees up head lolled back on the mattress. He tugs at something, reaches out from under the sheet, a pinkly gravid condom dangling from his fingers. He lays it carefully on a saucer on the floor by the wide low bed in the middle of that dark room, lit only by the low white lamps to either side. “For you,” he says, his voice rough, “I girded my loins.”

“Worth it?” says Jo, stroking the angular tattoo on her belly.

“Not done yet,” he says, rolling back over winding the sheet about himself, kissing her and kissing her again, his hand at her chin, her throat, her breast, tangled momentarily with her hand on her belly, and down and again and down between

her thighs and she sucks in a breath around their kiss and shakes her head loose, “No,” she says. “It’s okay, you don’t,” and “Yes,” he’s saying, and “I must,” and she bites her lip and looks away, and he kisses her throat and then “Oh” she says and “There, right there – ”

Naked he sits up to one side of the wide low bed against a mound of pillows, red and brown. Over across the bed wrapped in the sheet she’s curled on her side her back to him. “If you think about it,” he’s saying, and “I *am* thinking about it,” she says. “I *have* to think about it.”

“If you think about it,” he says. “It makes the most sense.” He leans back, looks over at her wine red hair against those dark browns, and he brushes her bare shoulder with his fingertips. She takes his hand in hers and squeezes it. “Sense doesn’t even figure,” she says. “I barely know you. I only just, slept with you. Just now.” She lets go of his hand. “You’re asking me to move in with you.”

“It’s not so much asking as suggesting,” says the Duke, “and it’s not as if you’d be, I mean, you’d have your own suite. Your own apartment, practically. It’s a flexible space. Best that way anyway, for the sake of appearances.”

“Right,” says Jo, hiking up on one elbow to pick up her glass from the floor by her tights and her puddled red dress. “Can’t be living with your mistress when you’re marrying a princess.” She drains the last of her drink. The ice in it long since melted away.

“No,” says the Duke, and then, “okay, yes, but the Queen will be displeased no matter what is done. Still. We should strive to give her as few legitimate legs to stand upon as possible. If it’s an open agreement, with fair compensation, that’s much better than if it seems I’m in your debt, or putting you in mine.”

Jo rolls over on her back. “This is about how it’s dangerous, if you owe somebody.” Resting her glass on her belly.

“It’s mostly about how you’re soon to be evicted,” says the Duke.

“You said you could fix that.” The bottom of that glass streaked with sticky redness that glimmers weirdly in the sharp bright light of the lamp.

“I said I’d have a word,” says the Duke.

“And?” Tilting the glass she peers at the stuff, pokes at it with a finger.

“I’m not so persuasive as I might have been, were you living this side of the river.”

“Can’t you just,” says Jo, peering at her ruddied fingertip in the light.

“Just?” says the Duke. “Just what? Jo? Just what?”

There in the whorls of it small grains of dust quite golden in all that red. “You know,” she says, “I know what this stuff does when you’re hurt, and I know if a bunch of you hold it up and sing it lights up a whole damn block. What I *don’t* know is what happens when you put it in somebody’s drink.” She rubs her fingertip against her thumb and folds her fingers together and closes her hand in a fist. “Well?”

“Jo,” says the Duke, “just, hold on a –”

“No, Leo. Tell me.” Looking him in the eye now. “What the fuck did it do?”



The elevator doors open and Jo bursts from it in her black leather reefer jacket, her legs bare beneath her quite short bright red dress. Ysabel stumbles after in her white parka and her grey cardigan dress only somewhat buttoned, her long socks bunched below her knees. “Wait,” says Ysabel, “not so fast,” tugging back against Jo’s hand until Jo stops suddenly, grunting as Ysabel runs into her, catching her by the shoulders. Ysabel clings to Jo’s lapels. “Just a, just a minute,” she says.

“Come on,” says Jo. “We’re almost home.”

“Not one step. No. Not until.” Ysabel leans back, settles herself, smoothing Jo’s jacket. “I was warm. I was comfortable. I

was curled up, with some I wanted to be curled up with, for the first time in,” and she frowns, biting her lip, “a while, and then you came in and dragged me out and not a word, and I am not taking one step more until you tell me. Why?”

“You are blitzed,” says Jo.

“That too,” says Ysabel, with a wide wide smile.

“You need a bath.”

“Oh stars above a long one, and hot as I can stand.”

“So come on.”

“No.”

“What happened,” says Jo, “to as you wish?”

“Why,” says Ysabel, her smile smaller now, and tight. “What was it. The Duke? What did he – ”

“He drugged me,” says Jo, quiet and quick, looking down at that awful orange carpet.

“He,” says Ysabel, blinking, “what?”

“He drugged me,” says Jo, “and then he fucked me, and that is not something I’m gonna stick around, okay?” Stepping back away from Ysabel, pulling a ring of keys from her jacket.

“Jo,” says Ysabel, “Jo, was it, did he,” as Jo’s unlocking the door, “look, we’ll get in, out of these clothes, you can have the first bath, please, I insist, we can talk about it or,” as Jo’s opening the door, “we can sleep on it, whatever, in the morning I think – what? Jo? What is it?” Ysabel steps up behind Jo still standing in the doorway staring at the apartment beyond. “Jo?”

The floor of the little hallway kitchen littered with dead leaves and shards of broken crockery and glass. Curtains billow in the main room beyond where the glass-topped café table’s over on its side in drifts of clothing, T-shirts, skirts, dresses, more dead leaves, shreds of stocking dangling from a spindly wrought-iron chair, all of it lit by a weird blue light. “What,” says Ysabel, and Jo shushes her, reaching back for her hand. Something’s rustling, something that isn’t the curtains, something around the corner. Stepping carefully through the debris Jo leads Ysabel slowly through the little hallway kitch-

en. A knife and a couple of forks have been driven into the wall by the bathroom door at about knee height. Something dark's smeared on the wall over the head of the futon. More dark smears on the wall along the side of the futon, and post-cards and post-it notes and pages from magazines ripped from the wall litter the rumpled blankets, and everything lit by the blue light shining from the flat-screen television tuned to the auxiliary channel. Something's under the blankets, something rolling over, rustling, something sitting up, short and stubby, a big head. "The fuck are you doing in my apartment," says Jo. "Mommy?" it chirps, lifting stubby arms, "Mommy?" its voice rising, arms shaking, bouncing, a shriek, a wail, "*Mommy!*"



PUSHING A DEAD LAWNMOWER — A SOUND SLEEPER  
CABBAGES & STORKS

**P**USHING A DEAD LAWNMOWER along the verge of a rolling field of dying grass an older man in a charcoal-stripe three-piece suit unbuttoned over a sunken bare chest, his head quite bald, the skin of him dark with old grime. The only sound the rustle of the grass and the squeak of the lawnmower's wheels. Up ahead in the darkness a cul de sac, a crumbling concrete pad under a broad flat gas station awning, a big roadside sign whose unbroken panel says Leathers Fuels. An old maroon sedan on four flat tires.

He stops pushing the lawnmower, steps around it, minces carefully toward that sedan arms out hands a-dangle, his last few steps a sudden waddling rush until he's squatting by the trunk. The maroon of the sedan is scaled with rust, orange and white and grey, mottled with moss and lichen, grey and green. The windows dark where they aren't streaked with green and blackish red. His back to it he scoots along careful with his bare feet toenails long and jagged sharp, clicking absently against the gravel. The handle of the passenger door is clean and almost

gleaming, but he's looking past it at the knob of the door lock just visible through the smeared glass. He lifts a hand to brush aside his collar and touch the polished silver torc that's clamped about his knobby neck.

He stares at that lock.

He stares at it wide eyes buckling under his heavy brow, his jaw and throat, his shoulders trembling, his whole frame quivering with some motionless effort, staring at it until with a click the door lock pops up and he catches himself, doesn't fall, one hand on concrete, one hand on the door. He pounds the concrete once and lifts his hand closed about the handle of a push dagger, the wide stubby blade of it sprouting from his curled fingers. He gently, gently pulls the door open.

Inside both front seats laid back as far as they might go. A man asleep in the passenger seat wrapped in a blue tarp and a felt furniture pad over a grimy blue windbreaker. A woman in the driver's seat asleep on her side naked, her flesh a chilly bluish white but for splashes of some dried mud in tannish, beigeish streaks that flake over the cracked vinyl seat. Gleaming about her neck a polished silver torc.

The man in the suit lifts his push dagger to his lips but frowns before he kisses the tip of the blade. He looks down. Grunts in surprise. There's a hand wrapped around his ankle, a small pale hand, knuckles rough and dark. The hand tightens, pulls, he topples forward foot yanked under and twisting scabbling on the concrete he's trying to pull himself free, whining then shrieking as slavering gnawing sounds erupt and he's jerked and pulled inch by scraping inch deeper under the belly of the sedan. "Christ," the man in the passenger seat's saying, "fucking hell, oh, fuck," tangled in the tarp and the thick felt pad. "Linessé," he's saying. "Linessé!" The sedan shakes as the driver's door's wrenched open.

Planting his free foot against a tire the man in the suit's pushing himself back out and with a gasp and a roar of frustration he pops free rolling away from the sedan dragging the



one foot behind him a mangled wreck, shining wet and twisted, the leg of his pants in shreds, holding his dagger up before him pointed at the thing crawling out from under the sedan, a little man with small, rough-knuckled hands, his wet smile full of very long teeth that snag the dim light about them. "I advise you," says the man in the suit voice ragged with pain and effort, "to restrain your advances," and the little man opens that mouth much too wide around those teeth and leaps.

With a sound like an axe in oak the woman's pale bare foot hits the little man's head knocking him out of the air pinwheeling across the concrete pad. "Stay put," she snarls at the man in the suit, in her hand a short sword pointed at him, short and broad, a battered round guard rattling loosely about the hilt. She's striding toward the little man who's up on his hands and knees now, shaking his head, dazed. "Cearb," she says, "I told you. Keep away."

"Assassins," pants Cearb, "come in the middle of the night," he coughs, "and who keeps safe the Gallowglas?"

"Dear Linessé," says the man in the suit, his voice stretched taut, "you must be wrung out, emotionally, morally, from the effort of keeping that mortal *thing* in meat and drink. I find in general it is better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, but if I must, I shall – please, please permit me the signal honor of putting you out of its misery. For all our sakes."

"Chazz," she starts to say, looking back along her sword at the man in the suit, and then she shakes her head. "Frankie!" she calls. "Frankie, step out of the car."

"You sure?" says the man still tangled in the blue tarp in the passenger seat of the sedan.

"Frankie, set foot upon the field," she says, and then as he fights his way out of the sedan, "gentlemen, in a half-minute's time I intend to lay about with my blade. If either of you remains in reach, so be it."

Cearb's already scrambling off the concrete pad. Chazz begins to drag himself away toward his lawnmower. "What holy justice have I wronged?" cries Cearb. "Shut *up*," says Linessé, watching

them both go. Cearb calls out, his voice falling away in the night, "In our wretchedness, why should we still look up to the stars? Which one am I to invoke, when my reverence is so easily disabused?"

Chazz is pulling himself upright on the lawnmower his foot dangling, a useless wreck. "I'll be some little time," he says, "recovering from this indignity. Use it wisely – as I hope I might – consider carefully what you would gain, by granting my request." And he hops away, leaning on the lawnmower, wheels squeaking in the darkness.

"You can't stay," says Linessé to Frankie, half in and half out of the sedan, and she starts walking away, off the concrete pad, out into the cul de sac, her bare feet heedless of the gravel.

"I can't," says Frankie, "I don't *want* to stay, I never," turning, stuffing the tarp and the pad into a couple of shopping bags on the floorboard that say Thriftway and Trader Joe's. "Linessé, hey, wait up! Some clothes? Maybe? This time?" Half-running as he leaves the sedan, shopping bags in either hand bouncing against his legs. "Linessé! Who was that? What the fuck was that about?"

She stops and turns to look back, at him, the sedan, the abandoned gas station, the big broken sign. "Once," she says, "before? He was the Devil."

"Seriously," says Frankie, catching up with her. "Seriously?"



Threads of smoke drift up from the cigarette by Ysabel's knee, a half-inch of ash dangling from its tip. She's sitting in a cleared spot on the floor by the windows in an oversized sweatshirt that says Brigadoon! The wrack of torn and shredded clothing has been mostly poled before the bulky blond armoire in the corner. The glass-topped café table now upright. In the stir of blankets on the futon Jo lies back in the ruins of her red dress eyes closed, mouth open in a gentle snore. Her cheeks criss-crossed

with welts, a bruise darkening a temple. Curled against her side a young boy maybe two, maybe three, swaddled in a Spongebob Squarepants towel, his head a tangled thicket of mud-brown curls. One short arm's flopped over her chest. In his chubby fist a tatter from her dress.

Ysabel sighs and taps the ash into a butt-filled saucer at her feet. "She sleeps pretty soundly, you know," she says, and she takes one last drag, then stubs out the cigarette. "So we can talk." Standing, stretching. "Assuming you can do more than shriek." Jo still lightly snoring. The red tatter still clenched in the boy's fist. "You worked us over pretty well," says Ysabel, rubbing her face. The walls over the futon still stained were something dark and wet's been scrubbed away. "But she's asleep for now, and we both know I know you aren't what you are." Jo's breath hitches, she turns her head to one side then the other, settling back into her snore. The little fist on her chest doesn't move.

"Okay," says Ysabel.

Fluorescent lights flicker to life in the little hallway kitchen and careful of the cardboard box filled with swept-up debris Ysabel's opening drawers, cabinets, rattling dishes and utensils. "Coffee," she says to herself. Opens the refrigerator, closes it. Opens it again. Opens the freezer.

She lays an awkward armload of stuff on the glass-topped table, a bowl with an egg in it, a coffee cup half-filled with water, a box of matches, a couple of spoons, some tongs, a red can that says Hills Bros. Coffee with a drawing of a man in a turban and yellow robes. Kicking through the pile of clothes she comes up with a short red crumpled candle. Sitting in one of the spindly wrought-iron chairs, hands hovering indecisively over all these various things.

She lights the candle with a match.

She plucks the egg from the bowl and then timidly taps it against the table. Looks at it. Taps it again. Tries tapping the narrow end lightly against the table. "Shit," she says, bringing the egg up higher hand trembling then slamming it down and the

egg's smashed, splattering yolk and albumen and bits of shell along the glass, her hand, her sweatshirt. "Shit," she says again.

She sits back down with some paper towels and two more eggs and mops up the slime and shell. She takes one of the eggs and holding it carefully between thumb and forefinger taps it gently against the edge of the table, and again, a little harder. It cracks.

She holds it gingerly over the bowl, eyeing the clear slug oozing down its side, and pries it open, wincing as it cracks apart and the yolk pops out. She shakes out the last of it, then sets the smaller butt-end down and picks up the tongs. She clamps them carefully on the jagged rim of the longer narrow half of shell, then scoops up some water from the coffee cup and holds it over the candle flame. When the water starts to bubble, she pours it back into the coffee cup. She scoops up some more, holds it over the flame again. And again. And again.

"What are you doing," says a small and piping voice.

Ysabel smiles, watching the water in the eggshell as it starts to bubble. She pours it into the coffee cup, scoops up some more. "I'm making coffee for Mommy." She looks over at him sitting up on the futon, big eyes blinking, his little hands on Jo's hip. "Want to be a big boy and help?"



"Hey." Ysabel sitting on the futon by Jo stroking her scratched cheek with the back of her hand. "Hey, wake up." Smoothing the flaps of the torn red dress. "Wake up, Jo."

"Boobies," says the boy. He's standing naked on a spindly wrought-iron chair, using the tongs to hold an eggshell full of water over the candle flame.

"Coffee ready yet?" says Ysabel, pulling a blanket up over Jo's breasts.

"Toil! Trouble!" says the boy, pouring water into the cup, peering at it. "No damn bubble." Scooping more out to hold over the flame.

“Come on, Jo,” says Ysabel, and she starts to lean down, then does, over Jo, closing her eyes, softly kissing Jo’s cheek. “Kissy kissy Mommy kissy,” sniggers the boy. “Wake up,” says Ysabel in Jo’s ear, and Jo opens her eyes. “Ysabel?”

Ysabel sits up.

“He’s still here, isn’t he,” says Jo.

Ysabel nods.

“I have a kid,” says Jo.

“I wouldn’t put it – ”

“Make out!” yells the boy. The water in the eggshell’s starting to bubble. Jo starts to sit up but Ysabel pushes her gently back down, lying down next to her, “It’s busy,” she says. “It’s okay. Just – ”

“Get me a shirt,” says Jo, wrestling with the ruins of her dress.

“It’s *okay*,” says Ysabel, trying to still Jo’s hands. “We need to take a – ”

“Just get me a damn shirt?” says Jo.

Ysabel rolls over to crawl down the futon, and “London! France! Underpants!” cries the boy.

“What?” says Jo, twisting her dress around to get at the zipper. It’s stuck. “Shut up, you little troll.” Yanking the zipper apart until it rips loose, then working the red rags over her head and off. “*Mommy’s naked, Mommy’s naked*,” sing-songs the boy. “Shut *up*,” snaps Jo.

“Don’t egg it on,” says Ysabel, rummaging through the clothing heaped around the blond wood crates under the dark flat-screen television. One corner of the screen’s now webbed with cracks, a crooked line jagging all the way up to the top. She sniffs a black T-shirt, drops it, sniffs another one, tosses that one at Jo.

“The fuck is he doing?” says Jo, working the shirt over her head. A wide-eyed anime girl with pink hair drawn upside-down across it, surrounded by bits of armor cracking open like a carapace.

“Making coffee,” says Ysabel.

“Mommy likes *stupid* coffee,” says the boy. “Stupid stupid coffee.”

"It's not breaking anything." Ysabel scoots back up the futon. "It's not smearing shit and snot all over the place. It's not kicking the hell out of you. Or me. Let's take what we can get." Jo's shaking out a cigarette, then hands the pack to Ysabel. "We need to figure out how it got here."

"Cabbages in the celery patch!" cries the boy. "A stork's as good in a pinch through the window."

"It's obvious," says Jo, striking a match, lighting her cigarette. "The Duke." Shaking out the match she hands the matchbook to Ysabel, who shakes her head, taking Jo's hand in hers, her cigarette in her mouth. She leans forward to light it from the coal at the end of Jo's. "Kissy kissy!" chirps the boy, and Jo scowls. Ysabel takes a drag, shakes her head, "Too weird," she says. "The Duke prefers his vengeance raw and right away, or very, very, *very* well-done."

"Vengeance?" says Jo. "First of all, anybody gets to be pissed in this situation, it's *me*. At him."

"Jo," says Ysabel, "I tried to explain, it's – " and then she stops. "Never mind," she says. "Number two."

"Number two?"

"You said first of all." Ysabel lies back on the futon. "I assumed you had a second point?" Blowing smoke at the ceiling.

"Yeah," says Jo. "Right." Lying back next to Ysabel. "Well. We had sex."

"So I gathered," says Ysabel. "I'm doing it! I'm doing it!" The boy's dumping another eggshell of bubbling water into the cup, scooping up more.

"Not tonight," says Jo. "I mean, yes, tonight, but what I mean is, last week. When we were at the teahouse? When we were," and her hands come up, searching in the wisps of smoke above them for the right word, "*there*," she says, "we, well, him and me, we – "

"Had sex," says Ysabel.

"A *lot* of sex," says Jo. "I think. It was, like a dream. You know?" The boy's chanting "The worm goes in, the worm goes out, the

worm goes in and out and in and out!” and Jo says, “Jesus. Anyway.” Looking over at Ysabel beside her. “If we, I mean *because* we did it there, could he have – ”

“It,” says Ysabel, “and no, I don’t think that’s how it works – ”

“Billy!” says the boy, and Jo sits bolt upright. “What about him,” she says.

“Billy Billy Billy Billy Billy,” says the boy.

“Who’s Billy?” says Ysabel, sitting up on her elbows next to Jo.

“That’s my name,” says the boy. “Billy Billy Billy Bill.”

“The hell it is,” says Jo, not looking away from the boy as he pours another eggshell of water into the cup.

“Jo,” says Ysabel. “Listen to me. Jo.” Her hand on Jo’s shoulder. “This, *thing*, was sent to us. *By* somebody. Has nothing to do with you and the Duke. We really should start trying to figure out who, and why.”

“Billy Billy Billy,” says the boy.

“We gotta do that to get rid of it?” says Jo.

After a moment, Ysabel says, “No.”

“Then fuck it,” says Jo.

“I’m Billy,” says the boy.



“SUCH A NOTHING TIME” – DRAWING THE CIRCLE  
WHAT’S LEFT BEHIND – A COAT TO A COBBLER

“SUCH A NOTHING TIME,” says Becker, “three in the morning.” He snaps the little phone shut and lays it carefully in the worn leather shoe on the floor by a discarded pair of jeans and a big plaid empty shirt. “You stay up till one, sure,” he says, sitting up in the dimly greenish streak of light from the louvered windows lining one long wall of the narrow room. “Two, even, you can go back to sleep for three or four hours. That’s like a full cycle. Enough to keep you going.” His knees tenting the crazed tangle of quilts and blankets and sheets.

He scratches the dark hair scattered sparsely across his chest. "Four o'clock, you can give up, get up, go make some coffee." Folding his hands behind his head. "But what the fuck can you do with three in the goddamn morning?"

Pyrocles his head laid on one arm folded like a wing eyes closed smiles sleepily beneath his crookedly drooping mustaches. "You can keep everyone else around you awake."

Becker shifts on his side, looking down at Pyrocles. "It's not insomnia," he says. "It's not misery loving company. I just don't want to miss any of this."

"I know," says Pyrocles.

"When I was a kid," says Becker, and then, "a kid, ha, in high school, which was *so* long ago – I was obsessed with this idea. I would try, I would do everything I could not to fall asleep." He worms his way a little deeper under the blankets, closer to Pyrocles, hands tucked under his chin. "Because, sure, I'd wake up in the morning, but it would be a, a *new* me. Like rebooting a computer. As soon as I closed my eyes and let go, that would be it, for this me." He taps his forehead. "Like blowing out a candle. Doesn't matter to the flame that the candle can be relit later."

Pyrocles hikes himself up on an elbow, a quilt of blues gone black and grey in the dim light falling from his bare shoulder. He leans over to kiss Becker's forehead. "I did not take too well to sleep at first myself," he says. "But there are dreams. The candle gutters, but it's not extinguished."

"I don't," says Becker, rolling onto his back, "I don't really remember my dreams. Once in a blue moon. But yeah, that's sort of what I ended up telling myself. There's like a pilot light. I was obsessed, yeah, but I was also in high school. I was worried sick about reports and tests and grades and getting into a good college, ha, look what *that* got me." Running a hand through what little of his hair is left. "And worrying about whether Brian Peake had any idea how gay I was for him. I couldn't possibly not sleep. And I was way too chickenshit for drugs." He squeezes his eyes shut, squeezes his whole face shut, shivering. "I should have gone



home," he says. "I shouldn't have stayed. I'm gonna wake up in the morning, I'm not gonna remember who you are, I'm gonna think I got too drunk again, hooked up again," and he rolls over on his side again and there's Pyrocles, head still pillowed on his folded arm, blue eyes half-open, his smile sleepy and sad behind those mustaches. "I'll run out of here again," says Becker, "like an idiot. And make excuses at work again." A hand on Becker's shoulder Pyrocles draws him close. "And you'll have to," says Becker, "come find me, again," and they kiss. "Maybe you shouldn't," says Becker.

"Shouldn't?"

"Maybe you shouldn't come find me again," says Becker. "Maybe you should just let me go, on my merry, oblivious way. Maybe you shouldn't start this up again, and again and again – " and then Pyrocles kisses him again, and again.

"If I thought," says Pyrocles in his deep rough voice gone soft with sleep, "this was you, asking me this, and not three in the morning, I would do my best to do as you ask. But Becker, you must know that I am weak. The light that shines in your eyes, the way you blush, and duck your head, every time you see me, for the first time – forgive me, Becker. I could not help but seek you out, for another glimpse of that."

Becker sighs and closes his eyes, and then after a long long moment opens them again. "Not yet," he says. "Not just yet."



It's not rain so much as haze too heavy and wet to be fog, blurring streetlights, drifting slowly down about them. When they stop under the bridge Jo heaves the big duffel bag from her shoulder and sets it gently on the ground, then brushes water from her forehead and the sleeves of her leather jacket. Ysabel in a yellow slicker shakes out her big clear umbrella, then furls it, wiping her eyes. There's a long narrow cardboard box strapped to the side of the duffel, and it rattles and

thumps as the duffel rustles. There's a muffled whine. Jo looks over at Ysabel.

"That way," says Ysabel, pointing past the railroad tracks, down the long dark aisle of pillars holding the bridge up above them. "Further in."

Jo stoops and hauls up the duffel, careful of it and the skinny box, and follows Ysabel into the darkness under the bridge. Buildings shoulder close to either side of the bridge as it slopes gradually to the ground ahead. There are things painted on the pillars about them, a hermit holding aloft a lantern shining sketchily, a black-faced lion awkwardly savaging an antelope under criss-crossed branches, a chalky bird perched on the enormous nose of a face grown from the scraggled outline of a tree, that same bird or one very like it with an elaborate tail sitting on a drawn plinth that says *God Is Love*, and a scroll beneath that says *Light Hope Truth April 7 1948*. Something large, a truck booms by overhead. "Ysabel," says Jo. "Ysabel. How much further. We're running out of, out of – bridge – " Ahead the shortening pillars stop as the deck of the bridge above meets a thick blank concrete wall.

"I thought it would be enough," says Ysabel, looking about.

"I can't exactly open this damn thing if we're still here," says Jo.

"I know, I know," says Ysabel.

"Oh, I think – I think I have an idea."

Jo kneels by the duffel as it rustles again and opens one end of the cardboard box. Reaches inside with one hand, both hands, tugs and yanks then pulls with a ringing scrape of metal free her sword. She steps back away from the duffel, out into the space between the last of the pillars and the wall, her sword-tip pointed at the dirt, but she stops before she touches the ground, and lifts it, a little. "I wouldn't," says Ysabel.

"Yeah," says Jo. "I get that." Overhead a car passes a bit of something popping under its tires quite loudly in the stillness. "Get him out of there."

Ysabel kneels by the duffel and begins unknitting the strings that hold it shut. "I think drawing your blade was enough," she says, looking up at the bridge now silent above them.

Jo's shaking her head. "We need a circle," she says. She starts to drag the duct-taped toe of her white Chuck Taylor after her through the dirt and the muck.

"You've done this before."

"No," says Jo. "Not this."

Ysabel tugs the duffel open and down. The boy's head pushes up those curls flopping as he twists his head back and forth, stretches his neck. There's something, a washcloth wadded in his mouth, tied in place with a white terrycloth belt. Jo still dragging out the circle says, "Undo it."

"I am," says Ysabel, working the duffel down past the boy's shoulders.

"The gag," says Jo. Ysabel looks up at her. "No one's gonna hear now," says Jo. "Right?"

Frowning Ysabel unties the belt and pulls the cloth from his mouth and he hacks up a cough or two and spits and says, "Mommy, Mommy! Mommy!" and "Shut up," says Ysabel, working the duffel down his chest swathed in plastic wrap, his arms pressed tight against him folded in front of him and tightly wound about with layers of the stuff. "Mommy!" he calls, twisting around in the duffel bag, and Ysabel cuffs his head, "Shut up," she says.

"Ysabel," says Jo.

"You wanted it undone," says Ysabel.

"Don't hit him."

"No no," says the boy, "no, no no, not again, I gave at the office."

"Just," says Jo, and "What," says Ysabel, "what?" Jo's stepping away from the half-done circle, into it, toward Ysabel and the boy in the bag, and Ysabel stands, backs away. "Just let me," says Jo, stooping.

"Mommy," says the boy.

"Shut up," says Jo. "Hold still. Hold very still." Holding her sword both hands on its blade one of them gingerly close to the

tip she pierces the plastic wrap and pushes and twists until it pops and starts to rip. "Oh no it's time to go," the boy's muttering. "I hate to leave you'll make me though." Jo the sword laid across her lap tears the plastic wrap away until he can wriggle his arms loose and crawl half out of the duffel bag. "Hold still," says Jo, wrenching the plastic wrapped around his legs down and off.

"Jo, what are you," Ysabel starts to say.

"Go on," says Jo, as the boy crawls all the way out of the duffel. "Get out of here."

"You can't, Jo, you can't," says Ysabel.

"It's dark," says the boy, squatting in the dirt by the duffel, arms folding about himself.

"Where's it going to go?" says Ysabel.

"It's cold, Mommy," says the boy.

"I don't care," says Jo. "Just get out of here."

"You don't care you don't care," the boy's saying, "you don't care," as Ysabel says, "It doesn't have anywhere else to go, Jo. It can't go anywhere else. It's not a kid, it's a, a thing, a monster that was set upon us, by somebody, and if you let it go it will just – come back –"

"You don't care, Mommy," says the boy.

"What, Ysabel," says Jo, looking from the boy to her in her yellow slicker, the clear umbrella planted like a walking stick, shaking her head a little, her mouth open around something she's almost about to say. "*What,*" says Jo.

"Something," says Ysabel, tilting her head, "something my Gammer said to me, the very first night we met. I didn't think it meant anything at all at the time. Just her – babble –"

"I want to go home," says the boy. "Shut up," says Jo. "What was it. What did she say."

"Jo," says Ysabel. "Who's Billy?"

"Billy," says the boy, "Billy, I'm Billy," and Jo slaps him. Then puts her hand to her mouth and closes her eyes. Lifts her hand away. "My father," she says.

"No," says Ysabel.

“The hell he isn’t!” snarls Jo, standing, taking her sword in her hand. “Bill fucking Maguire, you ask him – ”

“Bill,” says Ysabel. “Not Billy.”

“I’m Billy,” says the boy.

“I,” says Jo. “Ysabel. Don’t. Ask me that. I can’t, I can’t tell you – ”

“Yes you can,” says Ysabel. “Billy. That’s how it was fixed on us.” Stepping closer, taking Jo’s free hand in hers. “Please. Tell me who he is.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” says Jo.

“I want to go home,” the boy’s saying, and Ysabel says, “Yes, I do.”

“No,” says Jo. “You really don’t. I can’t tell you, Ysabel. It would change – a lot – ”

“You can trust me,” says Ysabel, pressing Jo’s hand to her breast.

“That’s not,” says Jo, tugging her hand back, “that’s not what I’m – ”

“I want to go *home*, Mommy,” says the boy, “it’s cold,” and wailing Jo turns and steps and lunges punching a hole through his chest. The edges of that wound flutter about the blade as his head lurches back and he opens his mouth, letting out a long sighful of breath arms up fingers wiggling legs wobbling his head collapsing and his torso in on itself slithering off the sword as shivering he sinks down and down to the mud. Jo stands there over what’s left sword unmoving. Rubbery folds of skin, an empty hand, a foot stuck upright at an angle drooping, that curly mop of hair.

“Jo?” says Ysabel after a moment.

“Don’t,” says Jo. Stepping back. Pulling in her sword, lowering the tip of it. Something large, a truck booms by overhead. A car alarm’s blaring and whooping somewhere blocks away. On the ground before her in the darkness a little stir of something, garbage, a screwed-up twist of greasy paper, a burger wrapper, a yellow dish glove ripped half inside-out, the fingers of it flopped

at odd and broken angles, a scrap of some threadbare old stuffed animal with hanks of tangled, curly fur. "Leave it," says Ysabel.

"Oh, yeah," says Jo, shaking her head. "Hell yeah." Kneeling by the duffel she works the sword back into that narrow cardboard box and drives it home. "I could eat a horse," she says.



The storefront's lit up yellow and warm in the blue-grey dawn. George's, it says in red and yellow letters in a curve across the big front window. Shoes Repaired. Inside a half-dozen or so men and women in the little space between the front door and the counter and as many again in the marginally larger space beyond, bounded by a worktable mounded high with shoes of every shape and color, jogging shoes and sneakers in every garish color lapped open, laces undone, hightop basketball shoes and boat shoes, brogues and wingtips, pumps and slippers in jeweled dye jobs and faded dusty blacks, lurking stilettos, slingbacks and cork-soled clogs, monk and gladiator sandals, spectators and Oxfords, flats and mules and flip-flops printed with the filthy soles of bare feet long since gone, stern little Mary Janes, galoshes and Uggs, jackboots and hiking boots and chukkas and Chelseas, winklepickers, shitkickers, a long black shining knee-high vinyl boot laid crinkled and empty along one side of the mound, forlorn without a foot, and not one of any of them a match for any one of the others. To one side of the mound a couple of cardboard boxes with spigots and little running coffee cups printed on the side. An old man's pouring coffee from one of them into styrofoam cups on the counter before him. He's wearing a worn plaid shirt in greens and blacks with threads of yellow and his hair's a crisp circle of curls from one ear around the back of his head to the other in a white that's almost yellow against the reddish blackness of his skin. "Unleaded," says a woman in blue coveralls, holding a stainless steel travel mug, and he sets the first box down and fills her mug from the second.

“An Apportionment,” someone’s saying, and “since the Samani,” and “not since two *weeks* before,” and “a thimbleful she’s promised twice now,” and “you’ll set up shop as a tailor if she,” and “oh, a *supplier* to tailors, a veritable *thimblesmith*,” and there’s laughter, but it’s bitter, muted.

“Yet you all keep on working for them,” says the man behind the counter.

After a moment a man in an olive work shirt says, “What else is there to do?” The name tag sewn on his shirt says Turlupin.

“The work must get done,” says the woman in blue coveralls.

“I think we ought to have another run at the basics of the thing,” says the man behind the counter, sipping coffee from one of the styrofoam cups.

“Oh, no,” says someone by the door, and they’re all turning, craning to look out the window. A woman naked her hair quite short and gunmetal grey a polished silver torc about her neck is marching across the dim and empty street toward the store. Behind her hurries a man in a grimy blue windbreaker, shopping bags in either hand bounced about by his churning legs. The bell over the door to the shop rings, and someone’s slipping out, walking quickly away down the sidewalk as that naked woman her pale skin splashed with something here and there that’s dried in white and crusted swathes crosses the narrow median stepping into the street again without looking either way. The bell dings again, and again, men and women in work shirts and coveralls, jean jackets, paint-splattered sweatshirts and medical smocks make their studiously unhurried way to the left and the right along the sidewalk away from the lit storefront. By the time she steps through the ringing door the man behind the counter is alone, and the little trash can on the floor is filled with empty styrofoam cups.

“Good morning,” says Linese.

The man behind the counter doesn’t say anything. His eyes wide staring at her and his mouth open just he’s gone quite grey. “You can see her?” says Frankie, setting his shopping bags down on the floor.

“Of course I can, boy,” says the man behind the counter, after a moment.

“Well, good,” says Frankie, sourly. “There’s three or four people and a big-ass bus driver on the number six heading downtown who couldn’t at all.”

“Hollow and hive, boy, she’s dead,” says the man behind the counter.

“Dead but not forgotten,” says Linessé. “Why was your shop filled at daybreak with clods and urisks and domestics who should be about their business, Gordon? Do you mean to turn them all to rabbits?”

“You ain’t come here to talk politics,” says the man behind the counter.

“No,” says Linessé, looking from Gordon to Frankie, and back to Gordon again. “I must ask of you one last boon,” she says.

Gordon looks then at Frankie for the first time, head to toe, then shaking his head looks down at the cup of coffee in his hands. “Well,” he says, “I never said no to you before.” There’s a smile on his face now, rueful, wistful, as he looks up to meet her still stern eyes.

“No matter that I’ve turned my coat?” she says.

“What’s a coat to a cobbler?” says Gordon.

“What’s, what are we doing here?” says Frankie Reichart.



From unseen speakers somewhere up among the maze of ductwork painted white and struts a growling voice is chanting I had money, yeah, and I had none, over a churning organ riff, I had money, yeah, and I had none, but I never been so broke that I couldn’t leave town. “Another one?” says Ysabel.

“Go get some coffee or something,” says Jo. She’s headed for the squat grey shape of a cash machine there under the switch-back of the access ramp, by the florist stand, pulling a wad of money from her jacket clamped in a medium-sized binder clip.



“She isn’t,” says Ysabel, looking down the aisles of groceries at the unlit green sign that says Starbucks, down by the deli counter, “they aren’t open.” Jo’s plucked a gold credit card from the binder clip and runs it through the reader on the cash machine. “Jo, what do you need all this money for?” says Ysabel.

Jo’s running her fingers along the options listed on the screen, twenty dollars, forty dollars, sixty dollars. Jo presses the screen by the last one which says Oh the heck with it three hundred. “I’m hoping I don’t,” says Jo. The cash machine starts whirring. It spits out twenty dollar bill after twenty dollar bill, and Jo scoops them up, counting through them quickly, folding them, stuffing them into the duffel bag.

“Jo,” says Ysabel, grabbing her hand. “Please – ”

“Don’t,” says Jo. “Don’t ask. I’m telling you.”

I’m the air you breathe, food you eat, growls the voice over the speakers. Friends you greet in the sullen street, wow.

Outside in the wet grey light Jo rushes ahead across the empty intersection, Ysabel trotting behind, “Jo, wait,” she’s saying. Catching her at the corner. “What are we doing. What’s happening.”

“I don’t know?” says Jo. “I need to, I’ve got to get some sleep, I’ve got to think – let’s just,” lifting both her hands to rub her eyes, her face, Ysabel stepping closer, her hands on Jo’s arms, “let’s go home, let’s clean up enough to collapse. I’ve *got* to get some sleep.”

“Whatever it is,” says Ysabel, ducking her head to catch Jo’s eyes as Jo looks down, away. “*Whatever* it is. You can trust me, Jo. Jo, please. Jo.” A hand to the side of Jo’s face, leaning closer. Kissing the bruise above Jo’s eye, then kissing her cheek. Jo standing stiff and still, breathing quickly, trembling. “Whatever,” says Ysabel. “So you had a kid – ”

“*Don’t*,” snarls Jo, pushing away, “Christ, Ysabel, just, just *stop*, you have *no idea* – ”

“You can *trust* me, Jo,” says Ysabel. “I trust you, I, I – ”

“It has *nothing* to do with that,” says Jo, turning, walking away. “Oh. Oh fucking hell.”

“Jo?”

Jo’s pointing, down the street, toward the bulk of the apartment building, toward the cars parked along the street before it, toward the reddish brown car parked at an alacritous angle among them, a black stripe painted down its side.

“Oh,” says Ysabel.

“I *just*,” says Jo, “want to get some fucking *sleep* – ”



THAT STERN AND ROUGH-HEWN HAWK

EGG WHITES & ESCHATOLOGY

SKY FALLS; MOUNTAINS CRUMBLE – THREE ANSWERS

**T**HAT STERN AND ROUGH-HEWN HAWK caged in his fingers the Duke’s leaning on his cane by the glass-topped café table, still in his long and camel-colored topcoat, a red-brown derby on his head. “Was there a riot in here?” he says as they open the door. Behind him by the bulky blond wood armoire Jessie arms folded in a double-breasted pinstripe coatdress, her hair in a tight bun, her lips carefully red.

“Get out,” says Jo, unshouldering the duffel bag and laying it and the narrow box on the floor. Ysabel behind her still in the little hallway kitchen.

“I came here out of concern,” says the Duke, “and frankly, I’m even more concerned, now – ”

“Get out,” says Jo, laying a hand on the glass table-top.

“Words were said,” says the Duke. “In haste. By both of us, I’m not gonna deny it, but in all that heat I had a little light in mind and I’m worried it didn’t articulate in a fully appreciable manner. So maybe – ”

“Get. Out,” says Jo.

“Breakfast,” says the Duke. “I can get us a private dining room at the Heathman, full spread buffet, we can talk, undisturbed – ”

“We already ate,” says Ysabel, as Jo’s saying, “Dammit, Leo, get the fuck out of my apartment.”

“Jo!” snaps the Duke, and he tumps his cane-tip on the carpet. “Listen to me. This is important. If you cannot keep a roof over her head then all bets are off.”

Ysabel steps up close behind Jo then. Jessie’s looking down at the pile of clothing by her feet. “The fuck is that supposed to mean,” says Jo quietly.

“You ever stop to think why nobody’s been coming at you?” Braced on his cane leaning over the table at her. “They’re all wary of the special understanding between me and the Queen, as regards the two of you.”

“Special,” Jo starts to say, as Ysabel’s saying “You don’t *have* a special understanding with my mother.”

“Precisely,” says the Duke. “And the minute you two get kicked out of this,” sniffing, looking about the small main room, “this shithole,” the mounds of clothing, the broken television, the filthy walls, “the very *instant* they get a whiff of any instability in your furlough, Princess, they all tumble to that very fact. And they will come a-running for you, Gallowglas. Swords out.”

“Is that how it’s supposed to go down,” says Jo, her voice still tightly quiet. “You graciously offer to do what you can to help us with the eviction, then do not a goddamn thing until it’s too fucking late. When there’s nowhere else to turn but you.”

“He called,” says Jessie, and the Duke tumps his cane again. “He *did* call,” she mutters. The Duke’s saying, “She didn’t say I didn’t, Jessie. We’re strictly in the realm of the hypothetical, here.”

“Hypothetically,” says Jo, both hands on the table-top closed in fists, “it might have worked.” Her eyes locked on his. “Only you went too far last night.”

“Too far?” says the Duke. “When I threw a party for you? That’s somehow – ”

“When you raped me, you sonofabitch.”

Ysabel lifts a hand but does not lay it on Jo’s arm. Jessie’s head snaps up, she’s looking at Jo, at the Duke gone suddenly pale. The

thump of his cane-tip clanks this time and rings and he tilts the head of the cane to one side in his left hand, his right twitching his longsword the tip of it in a savagely quick little circle over the carpet. "Have a care, Gallowglas," he says, "how you bandy that word about. You'll force me to name you a liar, and then we'd have to test the merits of our quarrel." Bringing his hands together again, resting them both on the hawk at the head of his cane.

"Liar?" says Jo. "You drugged me, then you fucked me. What else would you call that?"

"Jessie," says the Duke, "did you enjoy your rape of our Princess?"

"Leo – " says Jessie, and Jo roars, "I didn't know it was in the goddamn drink!"

"Jo," snaps the Duke, and then, gently, "all it does, in this, this context – I told you. It enhances, your sensations, your mood, your – "

"Turns maybe," says Jo, "into yes."

He closes his eyes, purses his lips. Opens his eyes. "It does nothing to change your mind, Jo, or – "

"I'm never gonna know that am I?" she says. "You should have just told me. You should have said something, Leo. Just, please. Just go."

"Jo," says the Duke, "I'm not about to walk out of here and leave it like this. *Listen* to me – "

"Southeast," says Ysabel, and the Duke closes his mouth, looks down at his hands on the head of his cane.

"Hawk," she says, and he looks up, eyes dark. "Hind," he says.

Ysabel puts a hand on Jo's shoulder. "My champion has asked you to leave," she says.

"Very well," says the Duke, turning, holding out a hand to Jessie, letting her looking down the whole time lead the way as he limps out past Jo and Ysabel through the little hallway kitchen. One hand on the doorknob he turns, licks his lips, says, "I take my leave of you." And then, "I wish you hadn't cut your hair."

He closes the door, gently.

“Jo?” says Ysabel, stepping to her side, both hands on Jo’s shoulders. Jo’s eyes are closed and she’s tipping her head back slowly, slowly, her mouth tightening, her breath gone shallow and quick. “Jo?”



The kitchen yellow and cream with glossy granite counters brightly lit against the gloomy morning light outside. Standing at the counter using a fork and knife to cut an egg-white omelette into precisely tiny pieces she’s wearing black, black jeans, a plain black T-shirt, a dark grey cardigan. “Well,” she says, cutting the tip from a triangle of toast. “Send him in.” Spearing a bite of omelette, a bit of toast, biting them both from her fork. The woman wearing the narrow black-rimmed glasses nods and turns and signals to someone in the hall.

“Chariot,” says the woman all in black.

“Ma’am,” says Roland. He hands a small jar half full of something viscous, milky, touched with just a hint of warm yellow gold, to the woman in the narrow black-rimmed glasses. His track suit’s a pale yellow with green stripes down the sleeves and legs.

“Thank you, Anna,” says the woman all in black, and the woman in the glasses nods and leaves, the jar in her hands. “How is my daughter?” says the woman all in black, slicing more strips from her toast.

“Ma’am,” says Roland, “I have not seen the Princess in almost a week.” His hands in fingerless bicycle gloves are clasped behind his back.

“Almost a week?”

He ducks his head. “It will have been a week ago tomorrow,” he says. “Afternoon.”

“And yet,” says the Queen, taking another bite of egg-white and toast, chewing, swallowing, “I saw her last night.” She lays her fork and knife to either side of the plate. “I managed a few hours’ sleep, Chariot. Not only that, I *dreamed*. Do you dream?”

He nods. "Yes, ma'am."

"Singularity unpleasant," she says. "I was suddenly in a *filthy* little bathroom, quite disgusting. Used wads of tissue littering the corner, grime between the tiles, you couldn't begin to see your reflection in the mirror. The toilet? Was a horror. A girl lay on the floor, utterly naked, soaking wet, shivering so hard I could hear the teeth clattering in her head, and as I realized it was my *daughter* lying before me, Chariot, she opened her eyes, and she opened her mouth, and she clutched her belly," and the Queen's hands fold themselves together under her breasts, over her belly, "and it," she says, "and her, it, she – it – " She pushes her plate away across the counter, the omelette half-uneaten. "I woke up," she says. "How is my daughter, Roland?"

"She has given herself to the Gallowglas," says the Chariot. "Who has, in turn, been seduced by Southeast."

"How is she physically?"

"Physically, ma'am?" he says, looking up to meet a piercing scowl.

"Is she hale? Whole? Ill in any way?"

"She has," he says, and he looks back down, "assured me, ma'am, that she is well."

"A week ago."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then it is not as bad as it could be," says the Queen. "Merely worse, far worse, than we feared. I'd thought to distract her, by indulging her predilections. I never dreamed the Duke would, would *stoop* to such an oblique angle."

"Ma'am," says Roland, but she's put both hands squarely on the counter, is looking at him frankly, head tipped back just, "Six weeks exactly," she says, "isn't it? He'll try on the Solstice, don't you think? It would appeal to his sense of the dramatic." Her mouth smiles but her eyes do not. "The Hawk fancies himself an oak, and for me with all I've done it's to be Gammer-hood, or worse." Her hands on the counter rippled and ridged with thick veins and dotted the left especially with liver-colored spots.

"If the Bride is well," says Roland.

"*If* she is well?" says the Queen. "You said she *is* well, all else considered."

"She *said* she is well, ma'am." His bicycle gloved hands clasped before him now, fingers fiddling with a velcro strap. "But what if she isn't? What if she is no more a Princess than, than –"

"Do you mean to say, Chariot, that she has *lied* to you?"

His hands freeze there before him. He slowly shakes his head. "What if she were wrong, ma'am?"

"She would know," says the Queen. "We would all know. It would be the end, of everything."

Roland walks back alone through the darkened house, rubbing his hands together before him. He stops to knock at a half-closed door, the room beyond lit only by a blue-shaded banker's lamp on a long library table. Sitting at it the woman in narrow black-rimmed glasses looks up from a thick ledger filled with tiny, handwritten figures. By the ledger a wide-mouthed jar hashed with lines in white ink down the sides denoting ounces, gills, mutchkins, a thirddendal. A drift of golden dust along an arc at the very bottom of it. "My audience is done," says Roland.

"I have nothing for you, sir," says the woman, setting aside a glass nib pen.

"Nothing?" says Roland.

"There is to be nothing for anyone this week," she says, looking back down at her ledger.

"What am I to tell –"

"That there is to be no Apportionment this week, sir," she says, taking off her glasses, looking up again. "This last batch was – off. No telling how, or from whom."

"I see," says Roland.



"Are you awake?" says Ysabel.

Curtains drawn sunlight thin and grey seeping around the edges. Side by side on the futon under the black and red and orange-brown blanket Jo and Ysabel neither of them eyes closed staring up at the dingy popcorned ceiling.

“No,” says Jo.

“Can I tell you something?” Ysabel shifts a little, turns her head to look sidelong at Jo.

Jo closes her eyes. “Sure,” she says.

“You said,” says Ysabel, “you don’t believe in love, and I said that was because you’d fallen out of love.” She shifts back, looking up at the ceiling again. “And I said I only knew love because I’d seen it in what other people do. I’d never been in love myself before. But seeing yourself like that, seeing what you do, from outside yourself – if I *were* in love, well, I wouldn’t know, would I.”

“Ysabel,” says Jo, and Ysabel turns on her side, “Shh,” raising a hand to lay a finger against Jo’s lips. Jo jerks her head to one side out from under it, “Don’t,” she says, and “Sorry,” says Ysabel, “I’m sorry,” and “Please just, let me finish.” Settling on her side head on the pillow both hands folded now and tucked beneath her chin. “You’re the first person,” she says, “you’re the only person, ever to tell me no.”

Jo turns her head at that, frowning at Ysabel. “The only, what?”

“You know what I mean,” says Ysabel. “The question, that I asked you. When it started to rain?”

“No, I, I,” says Jo, looking away back up at the ceiling again, “I do, but, Ysabel, I – ”

“Shh,” says Ysabel. “Had you said yes, you would have been bound to me.”

“Bound?” says Jo.

“Like,” says Ysabel, “the Chariot, and the Axe, Rain, a dozen, dozen others.” She swallows. “You said no. Which bound me to you, a link of toradh that will not be broken till, oh, till the sky falls, or the mountains crumble that are made of the dust of the mountains about us now.”



“Bound,” says Jo, shifting to look at Ysabel again.

“I am yours, Jo Maguire,” says Ysabel, as Jo’s saying, “That’s, that’s not love, that’s – ” and Ysabel shushes her again, presses a fingertip to Jo’s lips again, “Please,” she says. “Let me finish.” Stroking Jo’s cheek. “I knew you would say no. When I asked I knew you would say no.” Brushing Jo’s chin. “I am many things, but I’m not stupid. It’s *why* I asked you. I knew what you would say.”

“That’s,” says Jo, “that’s insane.”

Ysabel smiles. “I know.” She shifts onto her back, looking up again, and takes a deep deep breath. “It’s why I think it’s love,” she says.

Not a sob so much as a choked-off breath, a word maybe, as Jo curls over face clenching, Ysabel saying, “No, no, Jo,” reaching over, pulling her close, “Jo, it’s all right, I’m here, for you, whatever you need,” and Jo’s trembling, shaking in her arms, leaning back, wet eyes half-closed, biting her lip as the sound boils up again in bubbling yelps of laughter. “Jo?” says Ysabel, letting go, sitting up, as Jo rolls over hands to her face saying “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” in among the gasps.

“This is *important*,” says Ysabel, and Jo’s laughter redoubles and helplessly squeezing herself legs kicking up under the blanket “I know,” she says, “I *know*, I’m sorry, if I don’t,” catching her breath, “oh God if I don’t laugh I’m gonna fucking break down and cry for a fucking week, oh Ysabel, oh, oh,” wiping her eyes, “that was, I think that was the sweetest thing you’ve ever said. I’m sorry.”

“I just wanted you to know,” says Ysabel, arms folded in her lap.

“I know,” says Jo. “I know.”

“Whatever you did. Whatever you have to tell me, it doesn’t matter.” Shrugging in her oversized yellow nightshirt, her black curls snarled about her head. Looking down, away from Jo, a bit of a pout to her mouth. “Or not tell me, whichever.”

“There’s a price,” says Jo.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Ysabel.

“Don’t say that yet,” says Jo. “I mean I can show it to you. It’s a very concrete price.”

Sitting up in her black tank top Jo plucks from the white shelf behind them a wad of money clamped in a medium-sized binder clip. She undoes the clip and rifles through the bills, teasing out a gold credit card, which she lays on the pillow between them. MasterCard, it says. Bank of Trebizond. Joliet K. Maguire. Good thru 13/99. “That bank,” says Jo. “They have offices, in the Meier & Frank building, don’t they, or some kind of partnership, arrangement or something?”

“That’s the Duke’s card,” says Ysabel.

“No,” says Jo. “No. I mean he gave it to me, yeah. But it’s mine. All mine. The secret, that I gave them? When you sent me in there? Was worth a hell of a lot more than a couple of dresses and some underwear.”

Ysabel folding her arms about herself, smaller somehow, huddled in that baggy nightshirt, looks down at the card, then back up at Jo. “Billy,” she says.

“For about maybe a week?” says Jo, looking away over Ysabel’s shoulder, the dark sheets of the curtains, dull light leaking around the edges. “I was going to keep him, carry him and have him. I was going to name him after my father. William. Bill, Bill Maguire. Billy.” She closes her eyes. “But,” she says. “I wouldn’t have finished high school. And I – *tested* well. There were maybe some scholarships, there was some family money we could maybe, I had *options*, I had things, that I could do, places to go if I just, if I could just – ” She shakes her head, looks down at the gold card on the pillow between them. “I made an appointment, I got an abortion.”

“Oh,” says Ysabel, and then, leaning forward, “oh, Jo, I – ”

“I’m not done,” says Jo, her hand on Ysabel’s knee.

Ysabel looks down at the gold card. Her hand on Jo’s hand there on her knee. She looks back up, and she nods, once.

Jo swallows. “She asked me three questions, the woman with the bank. Whether I missed him. If I still loved him. What I would

tell him, if I could. And I said, I said. Yes, I said. Yes. And I'm sorry." Leaning forward elbows on her knees head down hunching in on herself. "Because it was all for nothing," she says. "Because look what all I did with all those *fucking options*. I'm sorry how *badly* I fucked it all up," and with a splintery crack the gold card splits into three sharp jagged shards. Ysabel jerks back. Jo puts her face in her hands.

After a moment, Ysabel reaches out to lay a hand on Jo's shoulder. Lays her other hand on Jo's other shoulder and leans forward, tugging Jo toward her until Jo buckles her head against Ysabel's chest, Ysabel's arms folding about her. She kisses Jo's wine-red hair, then tilts, leans down a little to kiss her cheek. Her nose against Jo's temple. "That's it, then," she says.

"Yeah," says Jo, muffled by Ysabel's nightshirt, sighing, pulling her arms out from between them, settling them around Ysabel's hips. Pulling her close, a sudden fierce hug, and Ysabel lifts her head blinking, looking down at Jo and opening her mouth a word there trembling which does not fall. She shuts her mouth firmly, closes her eyes, lays her head against Jo's.

"I got," says Jo, "twelve hundred on the way home." Sitting up, pulling back a little, leaning back in Ysabel's arms. "With what we've got here that's seventeen? Eighteen?" Looking over her shoulder at the cracked television hanging over the foot of the futon. "We sell what that thing didn't break or ruin? We can maybe clear two thousand." Leaning back further as Ysabel lets go. "It's not enough, not nearly enough. Not for first, last, security – we've gotta find new jobs – shit."

Ysabel says, "The Duke offered us a –"

"The Duke," snaps Jo, "is out of the question."

"I know!" says Ysabel. "I, I know. I'm just trying to catch up."

"Yeah," says Jo. "Yeah, he offered. Now I wouldn't be surprised if we go outside and find he's sent his boys after us again, whatsisname, the Stirrup with his sword out to take you back, for your own good."

“The Mason,” says Ysabel.

“Or that scary-ass motherfucker,” says Jo, looking down, then suddenly back up at Ysabel, “Oh, hell, Jessie. I’m sorry, Ysabel, I didn’t even – I mean, are you gonna be, do you need to – ”

“Jessie,” says Ysabel, “*Rain*, well. If I need, if I want something like that, there’s this – ”

“A dozen dozen others?”

“Well,” says Ysabel. Smiling. “Not *all* of them.”

“Okay,” says Jo, “that settles it. Our next place, we’re definitely getting separate rooms.”

Ysabel laughs. “I’d like to request a proper tub,” she says.

“Why stop there? Full-on jacuzzi. Only way to go.”

“Walk-in closets.”

“Hell, that’s a given. Underwear drawers as high as you can reach. And a fireplace.”

“A ballroom,” says Ysabel, laughing, “a fully stocked wet bar.”

“A decent goddamn kitchen,” says Jo.

“Oh yes.”

“Ysabel,” says Jo, her hand on Ysabel’s knee. “When I find whoever it was who did this, who sicced that thing on me. I’m going to kill them.”

“I know,” says Ysabel, her hand on Jo’s. “I’m going to help you.”



#### A SCREWED-UP TWIST OF PAPER

**A** SCREWED-UP TWIST OF PAPER on the scarred wooden table before him, yellowed in a pool of streetlight from the tall wide windows. He contemplates it a moment, tilting his head this way and that, long black glossy hair slithering over a shoulder as he leans a little to one side, and then with both hands careful-

ly carefully begins to pick it open, this corner, that fold, gently smoothing it bit by bit against the wood, careful of the spots of old grease here and there, wiping his fingertips from time to time on the thick white napkin to one side. Burger Chef, it says over and over again in pink letters under a stylized orange chef's hat. Super Shef, repeated again and again. Unfolding the last bit with a crinkle he takes up an edge of it and with a sweep of his hand turns it over. Scrawled letters in purple crayon say BILLY.

He sits back in the high wooden booth with a gentle smile, lifts a glass of water in a little salute to the wrapper and takes a sip. He scratches his cheek by a black eyepatch, tugging at the skin, and there is a glimpse of something wet and ruined underneath. "Excuse me," says a woman, and letting the eyepatch flap back into place Orlando looks up at her with his one good eye.

She's quite fat, in a black high-waisted gown and black and white striped arm socks, and her jet black hair's threaded with white ribbons and silvery spangles and gathered in two great hanks over either shoulder. Her bangs cut short and dyed a virulent pink. "You are," she says, "striking, and I just wanted, to tell you that. Because men aren't often told, that they are beautiful, and I think it would be a better world, if they knew, they were." Her eyes painted black behind thick black cat's eye glasses. Orlando leans back, looking past her, about, at a table over by the bar, three or four people dressed all in black, white collars here and cuffs there, black net gloves, a black top hat, leaning together, laughing together, looking away from him too quickly. He looks back up at her, quite still, not smiling at all, and she swallows as she meets his eye. "Please," he says. "Sit down."

"Gloria," she says, as she squeezes into the booth across from him. "You can call me Gloria. Gloria Monday."

"And I," says Orlando, "am the Mooncalf. Why are you here?"

"Oh, the show? Bellamy Bach? She's just, well. She's just fantastic."

"No," says Orlando, "why are you at my table?" He looks over at the table by the bar again, and they all look away again,

too quickly. "They dared you to come over here, didn't they. You didn't think I'd ask you to sit down."

"I," she says, "I didn't –"

"You want the world to be a better place," he says.

"Well," she says, "yes. Who wouldn't."

"Better for whom?" he says. "You may find it better that men know they are beautiful, but perhaps beautiful men would rather be left alone. Don't get up." She sits back in the booth. "You're here now," he says. "You might as well stay a moment. I forced my enemy to do a terrible thing tonight." He folds the crinkled wrapper carefully in half, and half again.

"Your enemy," says Gloria Monday.

"She is in great pain, now," says Orlando, and "She?" she says, and he looks at her with his one dark eye, and her black-painted lips snap shut. "She does not know who has done this thing to her. She does not know whom to trust, whom she can depend on. She will lash out. She will do many more terrible things to the people about her in the days to come. Her world is not a better place tonight. But mine is. If you are still here," he says, as he tucks the folded wrapper away in the pocket of his loose white shirt, "in half an hour's time, if you have not gone upstairs to the show with your friends," and at that she looks over her shoulder quickly at the table by the bar and then back to him, "then," he says, "I will take you by the hand and lead you to a place where we will not be disturbed. Where you will not be heard. And I promise you this will be the best, last night of your life." He lifts his glass of water and she watches him drink it down. "When the big hand is on the three, then?" he says, setting it back on the table between them.

All we can do to comfort one another,  
To stay a brother's sorrow for a brother,  
To dry a child from the kind father's eyes,  
Is to no purpose; it rather multiplies.  
Your only smiles have power to cause relive  
The dead again, or in their rooms to give  
Brother a new brother, father a child:  
If these appear, all griefs are reconcil'd.

—*Thos. Middleton*

KIP MANLEY lives in Portland, Oregon, with a cartoonist, a toddler, and at last count two cats.

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The text has been set in Tribute, a typeface designed by Frank Heine from types cut in the 16th century by Françoise Guyot; specifically, a specimen printed around 1565 in the Netherlands.





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