



**Dar : from the Spanish meaning to give**

*Verb*

1. A gift, an endowment,

*Noun*

1. something given, a present
2. a special aptitude, ability, talent or power



**It Will Rain . . .**

London, England

*She is  
The sword that reaps  
The arm that protects  
You are the light that guides  
Never doubt*

Roland SOLOMAN

**PROLOGUE**

She and Archer met at Mildred's in the centre of a bustling SOHO on a wet Wednesday morning in June.

Inner-city London was blanketed in that cold dreary light of the modern world, ensuring everything appeared uniform grey and unwelcoming. Concrete and glass were cold, hard, dead things; nothing like the soft red brick and wooden structures of the past. Of her past. Those had breathed palpable life and warmth into the streets they'd surrounded, but, despite the ever-increasing, ever-imposing urban sprawl, coming to London was like coming home and the coffee in the unassuming little cafe was unexpectedly good.

Other patrons talked quietly over their steaming mugs. They shook umbrellas as they entered, sprayed water droplets in arcs that landed on her arm and chest, leaving darker circles on the already dark fabric of her pullover. She had chosen the table closest to the entrance, and he had walked in a few minutes later, acknowledged her only with a nod as he'd passed and headed directly to the counter, under the familiar thrall of caffeine and sugar.

They hadn't spoken.

Now only the silence and a sturdy wooden tabletop, laid with a red and white checked tablecloth and two salt shakers, no pepper, separated them. Outside, the rain swept down the glass in a network of rivers.

She watched.

Her eyes were everywhere and nowhere, gaze often intense, sometimes empty, sometimes focused and sometimes somewhere beyond the world that they could see,

occasionally she fixed on him; on the melancholy beads of moisture, which still sparkled like diamonds on the shoulders of his overcoat.

This silence was normal.

Archer's presence was comfortable and familiar, peaceful even, as he nursed his double Americano. Whatever needed saying would be said eventually, it was not Archer's way to rush things.

Archer Soloman was a Seer, like his father and his grandfather before him; the latest in a long line of famous *Soloman Seers*. They were legend, a fable, whispered about in the hidden back rooms of secret societies the Otherworld over.

Her gaze found him again, landing gently, as light as air and as heavy as stone. His soft artisan hands wrapped firmly around his delicate porcelain cup, like a python suffocating a prey far weaker than itself. Archer was made of steel and wire, but he had the hands of a scholar with fingers both long and thin and nails that were perfectly manicured. Nothing like the worn calloused hands held lightly together in her lap.

He sensed her attention. A short, sharp breath of assertion and his eyes lifted from the dark liquid of his coffee to seek hers. He looked at her with his pale gaze, eyes like quartz-lined well shafts, as deep and unfathomable as the ocean. Archer. Her closest and most trusted friend and he told her in no uncertain terms, "It's time to get the boy."



*Suddenly  
I was swimming  
in her deep waters  
and my feet  
could no longer  
touch bottom.  
It was terrifying  
and exhilarating.*

John Mark Green



**Her In My Head . . .**

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

*When the storm comes  
Take heed and listen to its roar  
The storm can keep no secrets*

Benjamin SOLOMAN

**JON**

His name was Jon Miller, and he was eighteen years old.

In his small room, surrounded by a childhood's collection of objects and clutter, he sat hunched over his artwork like a warlock over a grimoire, carefully etching the intricate lines of her face in the soft morning light. Today she had a look of melancholy. He imagined she had misplaced something valuable and long since given up on finding it, though she was thinking of it now; or perhaps it was her that was lost and she was simply waiting to be found.

He wanted to be the one to find her.

If anyone ever got a look at his sketchbooks, there were more than you could imagine piled on shelves, stashed in drawers and crammed under his old metal-framed single bed, he'd look like a complete creeper, though, perhaps it only counted as stalking if you were actually following someone around or had seen even a trace of them in the last fourteen years. If it wasn't for the thick metal chain clinging to his neck with its familiar weight, he'd be concerned that she wasn't anything more than the product of a child's boundless imagination.

A sharp horn blared outside his window, cutting through the silence of the room like a reaper's blade. Grudgingly he set down his pencil and stretched out his back, long frail arms waving in the air like brittle twigs on a windy day. Mrs Trigger, his ninth grade art teacher, had warned him about the perils of his posture as he drew. That had been ten different art teachers at ten different schools ago, but she had been his favourite.

Life was different now. They were settled. Whatever incessant urge his mother had felt that had kept them continually on the road, hopping from town to town, state to state, had

disappeared overnight a year back. Instead of scouring an atlas and shady internet realtors she now spent her time reading cookery books and attending residents' meetings, where they talked about neighbourhood holiday decoration ideas and the ungodly height of Mrs Patterson's conifers.

Yes, life was quiet now.

The horn resounded again, and he stood, grabbed his sketchpad in one hand and his backpack in the other. Today wasn't his first day at a new school, or his last day at his old school. Today was just another day as a freshman at Louisiana State University, studying Fine Art. Everyone had been new. Everyone had been just starting out in a different place when he'd rolled up on the first day. He wasn't the weird new kid, at least not the only one, and he could spend all day in the studio surrounded by paper and pens and artists and colour.

Perhaps his life was finally perfect.

The street was quiet. Their house, a squat wooden one storey with a thin wraparound porch, was in a secluded cul-de-sac directly opposite the Jones's with their pink and blue begonias and next door to Mrs Patterson with the skyscraper evergreens which she obstinately refused to trim. It was nice that he knew this stuff; Nice that he could wave at David from number three who was collecting the morning paper from his porch as Jon crossed the sidewalk and pulled open the door on Miles's yellow VDub camper.

"Dude," Miles greeted.

"Dude," Jon replied as he climbed in, throwing his backpack into the footwell dismissively but continuing to clutch his sketchpad to his chest like a lifejacket. *Dude* was not something he used to say, it still felt alien on his tongue.

Miles was on the same programme, as passionate about art as Jon was, though he had a very different concept of creative beauty. Miles called it his living art.

His best creations, the stuff Jon admired most, vivid, colourful images, had been permanently inked onto every part of skin that Miles could reach . . . though Jon hadn't, obviously, seen every part; Perhaps there was some blank skin left somewhere.

Miles had an unbridled passion for animals, the rare ones, like he thought he could preserve every endangered species on the planet if he immortalised them in tattoo. There was a gilded cobra which wound itself tightly around Miles's right arm, with detail so intricate that it seemed to move and shimmer in the light. His left arm was dedicated to his love of the aquatic, a full coral reef of fish stretching from shoulder to knuckles which he was so proud of that he only ever wore short-sleeved T's. Today he had on his favourite, a ripped black *Nirvana* T-shirt which clung to his chest like a second skin. Underneath, Jon knew, Miles had

recently finished the big cat, a Siberian tiger, that he'd been working on since long before they'd met. Like Jon, Miles obsessed over perfection.

"Nice outfit," Miles smirked as they sped toward campus.

Jon rolled his eyes. "I'm classic cool nerd."

Miles nodded, studying him for a moment too long. "Yeah, you are, Jonno."

A horn blasted behind them.

Jon had never applied for a driver's permit, but he considered it most mornings; *Maybe I should just take up the dorm they offered me on campus and kick the commute altogether*, he thought again. There would be less chance of dying on the way to campus if he lived there, or hiked along the centre of the freeway, or, come to think of it, if he hitched a ride there in the back of an illegal ammunition truck as it headed for Cuba. But at least Miles got them anywhere quickly and Jon could stomach reckless endangerment with a motor vehicle if it gave him more time to draw in the ghostly light of morning.

Miles cursed and gave the driver behind the finger, then grinned over at Jon, daring to be chastised. Jon didn't bother. With a withering look in the wing mirror, he simply closed his eyes and prayed to the gods of art and sculpture in silence for the rest of the journey.

They had their classes together but, as usual, Jon jumped out when they pulled up and Miles drove off to do whatever he did that made him regularly miss first period. They'd developed a routine over the last few months, which Jon felt especially comforting after a childhood of his mother's spontaneity. He depended on Miles, despite his lack of driving skill, to just be there when he needed him. They were friends, best friends Jon supposed, but they weren't inseparable like the other cliques and clichés on campus.

Speaking of . . . In the quad the cheerleaders were chanting in their kid-sized purple miniskirts, creating a frantic swarm out of both the sport and girl fanatics, not necessarily mutually exclusive groups, who hovered around them like bees on a rosebush. He avoided the jostle of the crowded space, skirting the rim like he would the crater of an active volcano, as he made his way to the design building for the morning seminar.

His sanctuary from the buzz of Uni life was a large square brick building which he'd always found welcoming in its simplicity. He took his normal seat in the midsection and opened his text to quickly revise last week's notes. Typically, he was the first to arrive, so when he heard the scraping sound of a zipper behind him he flinched and turned with little thought.

A hooded figure, a girl he thought though her face was obscured, sat reclined in one of the chairs at the back of the room, both knees up and resting on the seat in front. The sound

echoed from the silent walls as the zipper slid slowly up and down the black jacket one more time. The subsequent silence was more eerie than it should have been in the familiar space.

Jon watched, uncomfortable and unmoving, expecting her to do it again, or to do something, anything else, for longer than was necessary in any social situation. She must have been new, he realised, otherwise she'd have known it was widely considered not cool to arrive before the popular student body, a category in which he most definitely did not fit. Still, it took conscious effort to turn away and take a breath.

His neck prickled and his chest felt heavy.

It was ridiculous, he knew. Apprehension. Anxiety. Fear. He was an adult now; he didn't need to freak out over every stranger that he shared space with, and he definitely wasn't the stereotypical idiot who gawked moronically at the new girl . . . mostly. He set his books across his lap, straightened them with unnecessary accuracy, and drummed his fingers. He had no rhythm but they moved of their own accord while his nervous eyes scanned the art on the walls. Some of the drawing there was his. The stuff he did for class, the stuff that got displayed around campus, was never the intricate portraits of *her* which he spent hours or days over. His public work fit well within the fantasy realm: images of mythical creatures and landscapes, blurs of shapes and colours, things born of the dreams that often manifested from his obsession with the supernatural.

He heard the door open with a quiet sigh drawing his attention to the front, where he supposed someone else not cool was coming in, but the door swung shut again with a dull thud leaving nothing but dead air in its wake. He frowned. The room felt oppressive with silent expectation, instantly, like a full house on opening night right after the lights dim and before the curtains rise. He glanced behind, to see if the girl sitting there had noticed the entrance of the phantom, but Jon was alone.

The back row was empty now.

He hadn't heard or seen her move, but she was gone, silently, like a ghost.

He gripped his books with graphite stained white fingertips, making his hands as grey-scale as the static on a TV screen. His fingers were perpetually tinted with some sort of art material; he often imagined his veins ran with paint and pencil lead instead of blood. Now that mixture was pumping around his body at twice its normal speed. He didn't know what to do, other than to keep sitting alone with the cold bite of dread slowly constricting his lungs; a feeling which was incredibly unwelcome in a place he'd considered safe. The door opened again, and again and again as his cohort began making their way in, whispering and giggling and generally ignorant of Jon's escalating anxiety.

He tried to reason.

Perhaps there hadn't been anyone behind him at all. Hallucination wouldn't be new but would be worrying; He hadn't seen things that weren't really things for a really long time. Haptic hallucinations, the therapists had called them, caused by post-traumatic stress. But they were gone. He was better.

Still, he spent the entire seminar glancing behind him to the empty seat, his peers seemed to have subconsciously avoided sitting in that one chair as though an echo of the ghost girl remained, which meant, incidentally, that he missed the content of the entire seminar. The Jon of this morning would have been hyperventilating at the thought of not listening to and making notes of every word Professor Rich said, but now-Jon had more pressing concerns, like was he losing his mind?

Something was definitely weird, and it was spreading. The girl next to him, the one with the glasses too big for her face, kept making an annoyed clicking sound with her tongue each time Jon turned around, always searching in vain behind him, and the clicking annoyed the big guy in front, Matt, the jock with the sensitive streak and aspirations above and beyond College football, who kept looking back and sort of growling at them. In fact, the whole class seemed unsettled. There were hushed whispers and nervous giggles each time the tension became unbearable. Kerri, a demure girl with long mousy hair who Jon thought was phenomenal with watercolour but who was severely lacking in self-confidence, not that he'd ever spoken to her to let her know, kept sneezing uncontrollably and then apologising with a dazed expression on her face. Claire Harken, blonde with a birthmark just below her right ear, hadn't opened her eyes for five straight minutes now and seemed to be whispering to herself. Jim Stoodley, or maybe Sudley, had dropped his pencil on the floor so often that he had to keep re-sharpening because of the fractured lead, the guy was covered in shavings and writing with a stub the size of a paperclip now. Yeah, his name was Sudley, Jon decided.

It was a wonder the professor was still persevering with his description of French Impressionism and Jon only knew that this was the topic because it was on the syllabus timetable, not because he'd absorbed a word. There was a vibe. It was like cows laying down before rain, or birds finding shelter before a blizzard, dogs going crazy before an earthquake; This was students before something but Jon couldn't imagine exactly what that something might be. He rubbed the silver pendent between his fingers nervously, the one *she*'d given him, the one he'd worn every day. He'd looked after it like she'd asked.

It felt warm.

With the toll of a bell the class finally ended, the room emptied like an upturned bucket leaving the dowdy Professor Rich staring after his usually engaged and considerate students in disbelief, like that kid at the beach whose ice-cream cone had just been stolen by a hungry flock of gulls. Jon almost apologised as he left the class, following the exodus a few paces late as usual, but he didn't find suitable words before the Professor himself turned and scurried off along the corridor as though he hadn't seen Jon hesitating in the doorway. Jon asked himself what there was to apologise for anyway, none of it was his fault. He let it go and headed outside, fresh air might solve the feeling of claustrophobia that had tightened uncomfortably in his chest.

Lunch on campus was solitary, very rarely did Miles appear, so Jon most always spent the time sketching, but today he hadn't opened his sketchbook – which wasn't just rare it was unheard of. The closed pad lay abandoned beside him, close enough for comfort and far enough away that he felt it couldn't judge him for neglecting it. Jon supposed he saw his work as living art too, in its own way.

It was a nice day, hot even. Jon had parked himself on the grass outside of the Design building; his salami sandwich eaten, he still held the greasy wrapper balled in his fist. He felt uneasy with no obvious explanation, nothing outside gave him the creeps but the slight tingle in his neck had continued to spread around to his chest. The air around him seemed charged with the static that arrived before a thunderstorm, he half expected lightening to strike at any moment.

“You're talented.”

Startled by the soft voice, he looked left and blinked. The girl in the zipped black jacket was sitting much closer than he could have expected, given that her voice was the first and only indication of anyone's presence. It's funny how sometimes your brain catches on certain details, he thought, making them the most prominent. Jon's brain focused on her accent; British, sharp despite her soft tenor. Her face was turned away as though she was talking to someone else, but he couldn't see anyone in listening distance; she was either talking to him or to the phantom from first period. Her large hood was up, obscuring her face, only the tendrils of dark hair which spilled down her slender chest were visible. In her hands was his sketchpad. Open.

He froze, not sure which was more of a shock. Realising she was sitting beside him, her talking to him or possibly to a ghost, or her looking at his private artwork.

Definitely the art.

“Don’t!” he finally yelled, but he was almost certainly a few minutes too late, she was studying an image on a page well into the middle of the pad. It was one of his favourites, a closeup of *her* in portrait, her harsh lines softened by the medium of charcoal. “Where did you come from?” he asked, half annoyed, half apprehensive, as he tried to retrieve his pad. He could feel heat rising from his neck like he’d just been submerged in scalding water. His attempts to snatch the pad failed, each time, though she barely seemed to move.

“You should be more observant.” Her voice was still light but her words sounded sombre, as though she really meant for him to heed them, and she stubbornly gripped his drawings in her hands. “Strange, isn’t it?”

He ceased his grabbing at empty air; something in her voice had given him pause. He had no idea what to do, or say. “What’s strange?” My drawings, he wondered, or the fact his already hopeless hand-eye coordination had completely absconded? How about his slightly obvious obsession with sketching the same girl or his rational, he felt, reaction to the invasion of his privacy?

She turned her head then, stalling the rest of his thoughts completely, and looked at him with crystalline blue eyes as light as a precious stone. “How the pendant reacts.”

In that brief millisecond where the world stopped jarringly on its axis, when Jon’s heart missed its next beat and his lungs forgot their purpose, her hair shone with the neon rainbow he remembered before settling swiftly back to dark walnut.

Her slender lips quirked up at the edges before she spoke. “It’s been a while, Jonathan Miller.”

Jon was mute. He did blink, but it was a subconscious endeavour. She waited, and continued to study her effigy on the page. It appeared she hadn’t aged a day in the last fourteen years.

When he finally reanimated, it was with an embarrassing noise of shock that stuck in his throat and caused him to choke and cough. “It’s not what you think,” he garbled, words which soon stuttered into silence. He wasn’t sure what anyone would think, seeing page after page of their own likeness. She had been staring intently at his drawings, his drawings of *her*, for the last few minutes. In fact, she still was. He was mortified; give him another minute and maybe a trace of fear or elation might have crept in, but she didn’t give him a minute. Her eyes found him.

“What am I thinking, Jonathan Miller?” Her hair seemed to darken to black as she spoke. An unearthly energy surrounded her, pulsing in the air, encircling her like a cloak. Maybe he was imagining it. He blinked again and the shimmering haze vanished.

“Call me Jon.” He decided, amidst the turmoil of her appearance and the fact that she was looking at what was effectively her own shrine in graphite, that this was an illusion, a complete psychotic break, a fresh phantasm pulled from his memory. She’d manifested as a delusion.

Yes, he was delusional.

“Please,” he added when she, his delusion, didn’t respond.

“You remember me.”

It wasn’t a question and Jon faltered for a second. He nodded slowly once. How could he forget? She had burst into his life like a dark avenging angel, him just four years old, her a super hero, saving him from two of the ugliest men he’d ever seen and then returning him to his hysterical mother with little fanfare. She had made such an impact on his developing mind that she was a part of his psyche now; and if he didn’t remember her she wouldn’t have materialised, anyway. Obviously.

She waited, as if she was expecting more. Perhaps, if she’d given more warning before showing up he’d have been quicker, more verbose, less dork-like in his inanity, as it was, he was lost for words.

“Well, Jonathan Miller, the necklace is no longer enough. It’s time for us to go.” She handed him his sketchpad, which he took robotically, and she stood, snatching up his backpack in the same motion. She had the lithe grace of a cheetah. Jon was on his feet, which must have happened without his knowledge and she was so enchanting to watch and be in the presence of that he almost followed when she tried to lead him away.

That was until he registered what she’d said.

“Go? Go where?”

There was no going to be done. He couldn’t wander off and get himself institutionalised today, he still had afternoon studies; his creative arts class was last period, and he only had a few more weeks to work on his final piece; submission was at the end of the semester.

“It’s the middle of the day,” he stammered in explanation, or as reassurance. Yes, reassurance, proof that he was orientated. It was another phrase his therapists had used a lot – Jonathan is orientated to time and place, or not.

She looked briefly perplexed, in a snubbed goddess kind of way. “Is that significant?”

He scoffed with borderline hysteria. “The Dean would probably think so.” Sarcasm wasn’t something that came naturally and his tone didn’t pull it off. She blinked but said nothing. A heavy animosity settled. His denim backpack was currently hooked over her

shoulder and her slender fingers massaged the canvas of the strap while she considered him. His backpack was on her shoulder . . . should delusions be corporal enough to hold a backpack? “Maybe we could hang out after college?” he offered instead, mostly out of politeness, partly to break the tension. He didn’t really have any plans today, anyway. She could sit for him while he sketched. It suddenly seemed like the perfect idea and he smiled. Maybe he *was* insane.

Her head shook, she was looking at him like she might think the same thing, prompting another awkward silence which seemed to suck everything away like a vacuum. He nervously fingered the metal resting against his sternum, which was white hot against his skin. The pendant vibrated at his touch, like speakers on a bass, something it had never done before. “What is this?” he blurted out involuntarily.

He’d spent years researching the necklace, trawling libraries and then internet sites that claimed to be linked to the occult, or written by witches, or run by experts on all things paranormal/supernatural/generally freaky and he’d found nothing. When he’d moved to Baton Rouge the previous year, a mere three hour Greyhound trip away from New Orleans, bona fide birthplace of Louisiana Voodoo, he’d immediately bought a ticket, eager to find some sort of Sharman who could tell him something about the necklace. When he’d gotten to New Orleans, he’d been disappointed to realise that Voodoo wasn’t the hocus pocus he’d assumed it was, that books and movies had convinced him it was. Like many others, he’d been duped. There were no animated corpses or zombies roaming the Quarter, there were no small talking heads hanging from doorknobs, no sacrificial pyres with the rusty stained remnants of blood offerings to the spirits. Instead, there were numerous small, tourist orientated shops selling trinkets with the idea of spirits and magic but no answers. He did find a small shop in the Bywater owned by a Priestess who actually seemed like the real deal, but who knew more about spiritual healing and Haitian art than his apparently non-voodoo charm. Still, he’d enjoyed the art, and he’d picked up some brimstone and dragon’s blood which were now stashed in his room in case of emergencies, though he hadn’t decided yet what type of emergency would require either.

Now, however, he was possibly maybe staring at the one person who would have the answer to the necklace question, and perhaps she’d have a use for brimstone or dragon’s blood too.

She, the apparition from his memory, seemed to hesitate before answering his question. Her focus wasn’t wholly on him any longer though he wasn’t sure when he’d lost it. “It’s a talisman,” she said, “connecting us. It acts as a conduit for my gift.”

She was being deliberately jaded, he decided, as her gaze drifted off toward the Tiger Stadium; the purple and gold of the LSU insignia were just visible from where they stood. Jon moved, for the first time in too long, so that he blocked her view.

“How?” He didn’t understand what she meant. Perhaps to her this was common knowledge, for all he knew she gave them out to every young boy she rescued from ugly, frog-like men.

Her attention went back to him slowly, but not fully, as she pulled up her right sleeve and held out her slender arm as if to request the pendent, but, instead of clasping it she placed her forefinger gently against its silver surface and as she did, her sun-kissed skin began to move. From somewhere deep inside her, Jon didn’t know where, a shimmer drove itself to the surface. He watched as something formed beneath her skin, an image which rose into a shape. He recognised it, of course. It was the same type of lizard that was on his pendent.

He’d long since discarded his fantasy that it was a dinosaur or a fire-breathing dragon, which was an idea he’d entertained for a short period as a ten-year-old.

It was a chameleon, a relatively common breed of lizard, but he’d never seen a chameleon under someone’s skin before. No, this was new and disturbing. The lizard zigzagged its way down her arm like a scarab, dashing along and briefly pausing again.

Dash.

Pause.

Dash.

Pause.

Dash.

They both watched it, Jon in horror, her with soft eyes, as it shrank in size on the back of her hand, *under her skin*, he repeated silently with the stirrings of nausea, so it could transcend her finger until it finally stopped, its nose pressed firmly against the pendent with only an epidermis separating them.

“This is Soul,” she stated, and the little lizard seemed to glow with warmth. “He is my Dar.”



**What If This Storm Ends . . .**

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

*We each have our moment in the sun  
It's endless for some, brief for others  
The length of time doesn't matter  
What matters is how we use it*

Benjamin SOLOMAN

**MILES**

When Miles saw them Jon was sitting with his head tucked awkwardly between his bony knees, he appeared to be fighting off some kind of stomach sickness.

Miles had long, stilt-like legs which carried him everywhere with outlandish speed and minimal effort. He reached them quickly, clasping a half-eaten cone of Butter Pecan from the Dairy Store in his colourful left hand. She watched him approach through narrowed eyes and the surrounding temperature seemed to cool in correlation, but he paid her little attention because Jon looked so deathly sick. The weather was changing for the worse. It had been hot with little cloud cover when he'd decided on ice-cream, now the sky was a murky ash gray and the breeze was picking up.

Jon looked up briefly when Miles arrived, his face a sickly putrid green. Miles was so distracted by the pallid tone of Jon's skin he didn't register the significance of her posture until he was flying. She'd lifted him by his throat and slammed him down, back first, into the hard ground. He watched in bewilderment as his own long legs seemed to follow him like the tail of a kite until they hit the earth and splayed and twitched like fresh road kill. He barely opened his mouth in protest before she pressed something that glinted into his snake arm. Then everything seemed to slow down again, and he was clawing at his throat and at the hand that she had clamped there.

He heard Jon shout "Miles!" Late, as usual.

Things had taken such an unexpected turn that Miles couldn't think straight. She was letting him breathe, just, but he couldn't get enough air into his lungs to speak and now Jon

was above her, pulling at her arm like he was trying to free an iron girder from a concrete block. He still looked green; *Hulk*-like but with less muscle.

Miles's eyes were bulging, he was sure the little crimson vessels in the whites were rupturing. He didn't know her; he was sure. He'd remember someone so astoundingly hostile, and hot, like *scolding* hot. She obviously had some ancestry from the East, but were her eyes red? No. His mind was wandering. The sky around her face had darkened to black, or perhaps it was his eyesight, and the clouds above were beginning to swirl.

Jon was shouting, "*What the hell are you doing? Let him go! Let him go! Let him go!*" but Miles couldn't really understand any of it.

He'd dropped his ice cream, which was insignificant in the grand scheme but, Jesus, it irritated him. Now he was thinking about ice cream. He was probably hypoxic, not enough oxygen to maintain brain function and he was thinking about ice cream. And beautiful Asians. Together.

Nice.

She wasn't even looking at him as he struggled. He tried to place her features, to remember if he'd wronged her in a past life, or this life, but they were almost fluid, changing before his boggled eyes; she didn't even look Asian anymore, now she was more Nordic, and she was looking at his arm.

He tried to speak but only managed a small croak.

There was a growl from the clouds above which vibrated though the ground at his back, his chest rumbled with it. She glanced up at the sound, and then briefly at Jon who had taken a wobbly step back.

Miles writhed, instinct of self-preservation kicking in. He felt it grow and for the first time ever he really wanted to bite, not just a friendly nip, it was uncontrollable. The snake stirred.

She hissed and stabbed it.

It was lightening fast.

The blade pierced the cobra's body and pinned Miles's arm to the ground. He screamed, visceral and irrepressible, until he could make no more noise. The pain would never be comparable; his world was suddenly a burning, searing, all-consuming agony. It was all he'd ever known; all he ever would know, it was an eternal, unending anguish. The shock of it squeezed the remaining air from his lungs but even suffocation wouldn't end it, not while his snake endured.

Only when she seemed sure Miles was restrained did she stand.

He curled instinctively like a ball of cotton, the only movement he could manage, around his skewered arm, protecting it with his body, his lungs demanding oxygen but not able to inflate through the agony. She watched him writhe with a look of scorn.

Raindrops, as fat as marbles, started landing on his face, his legs, the blood-soaked skin of his arms; they fell like milky pearls tumbling from the broken necklaces of a thousand ham-fisted giants who each bellowed their angst at the loss with a thunderous roar that made the earth quake in fear.

The rain broke through the pain, reached for Miles on the other side and pulled him back to the world. Pain was no longer all he felt, he felt wet and cold and sick with it; he felt his lungs expand with air.

She turned to stare at Jon.

Miles tried to reach for the dagger, to pull it out, but she had still been watching him too.

She was back in his face, her voice drowned by the sudden storm which had appeared, consumed them whole and cut them off from campus, from the world, from reality, so that only they and the wrath of god existed. He was still feeling, feeling everything at once, his skin itched like fire ants were swarming him, in him, pouring through him like sand through an hourglass, dripping its last drip. The world was going dark.

“You will die unless I save you,” she shouted above the violent wind. Miles nodded and took a ragged, shaky breath. He didn’t have to hear to understand, he knew without a doubt that he would die, he could feel it in his bones. “Why are you here?” she demanded. He could still hear her, but only faintly.

He tried to answer but dying made it difficult. He had to focus around the torture inflicted on King, his voice was too quiet, but at least he had a voice. “A . . . Art . . .” She stood on his hand. Something popped. It was more of a sensation than pain; it didn’t hurt as much as feel wrong. The agony was disappearing, replaced by something even more terrifying, a cold numbness that crept over him like a winter fog, probing at him, wanting to be let in. He pushed it back with his will. “Art degree.” That’s what he was doing here.

She knelt. “Why are you here?”

Perhaps she couldn’t hear him, his voice was just a whisper into the wind. “I told . . .”

“Why are you here?” she repeated, her voice was lost now in the raging airstream that hit them sidelong and made her sway.

It frustrated her, which seemed ironic somehow. He spit out his soundless reply, “Art. Degree. Student.”

She hesitated.

Miles's eyes rolled back. He fought to regain control and succeeded. The numbness spread further, taking the power from his limbs to feed its own icy heart. She was definitely changing colour which meant that he probably knew who she was, whether he could believe it was up for debate.

Jon was moving, struggling forward like Scott of the Antarctic, obviously speaking, but Miles couldn't make out words anymore. She watched Jon approach and Miles got a sudden vision – a satiated lioness alone on a ridge, a kill at her feet, watching a lone and injured antelope amble past. Hers was a look of life changing indecision.

To kill or not to kill.

Miles finally caught the words, "*He's my friend!*" which Jon was yelling over and over again as he forced his feet forward through the driving force of the storm, his shoulders drawn in against the wind. It was a small distance, but he made it look like a marathon. Streams of water ran from his head and shoulders, soaking him so that his clothes clung to his angles. Miles watched in a daze as Jon's button-down shirt adhered itself to his thin chest, going from white to peach with the tone of his skin.

Miles felt her searing hands on his frozen face then, grasping his chin as they moved it side-to-side, studying him with piercing eyes as white as a camera flash and reflecting the churning storm above them. Her hair had turned the deep smoke gray colour of the sky and was thrashing wildly around her face. She looked like an avenging angel, or demon perhaps, perched above him with her knife impaling his arm. Maybe that's what she was, a servant of death, come for a reckoning. "He's not," she mouthed. It made no sense, had no context in Miles's disorientation. He didn't know what she wanted him to say. He tried to remember what they were talking about. Ice-cream, was it? She lifted her glare to the sky, and then between him and Jon like they'd both infuriated her.

*What did I do?* he wondered. King was starting to wither. The cobra didn't have long and if his Dar died, Miles died. There was another clap of thunder, the heavens sparked with light shortly after.

He watched the sky with bemused curiosity, his whole body now numb to the world. He'd never seen anything like it. A bolt of electric blue lightning struck the ground at her feet, close enough to startle them both, yet only she flinched because he could no longer move. The scorched ground sizzled and steamed like the abyss of hell and above the sky crackled, readying itself for another strike.

She looked a little shaken. Jon, however, was catatonic, a marble statue trapped under the power of Medusa. Miles focused on him and time seemed to stand still around them. Jon was so obviously lost and scared and looked a little like he would hurl. Miles wanted to tell him it was okay, to make him laugh so he wouldn't look so damned sorry for himself.

And then it all changed.

The next thing Miles knew, the knife was out of his arm but her hand was back at his throat. His snake withdrew instantly, leaving his arm bare and flaccid, but improving his condition immediately, King was safe. He relaxed as the warmth in his core started to push the cold away, stinging and tingling like nettles as it did.

It took a while, each of them unmoving, but things finally began to calm. The thunder departed with a final, aggravated rumble. The wind died slowly to a whisper. The rain turned to mist which enveloped them all like a watery shroud.

It was all very strange.

Jon looked somewhat out of his depth.

She was expressionless.

Miles was exhausted, but alive.

They all took a few seconds to recover. In the ensuing quiet her eyes transformed from white to crystal blue and her hair darkened, losing all trace of its recent smokey colour. She cleaned the blade of her knife against the sodden fabric at her thigh methodically, recovering her composure. Flat on his back, Miles watched her apprehensively. Her dark combats and thick-soled, heavy boots gave her a dangerous mercenary vibe. His blood was smeared ominously across her leg and now he was even surer that he knew who she was, though it was so ridiculously unlikely that she'd be here . . . watching him with her hawk-like stare. She changed her question and spoke slowly now that she could be heard. "Who are you?"

Miles's answer was sleepy, his limbs were still heavy but at least he could feel them again. "No one." The words were almost a sigh.

She didn't seem to appreciate his response. She dropped to her knee, landing squarely on his arm, pressing her weight onto the wound she'd inflicted. It hurt, pain like a scorching poker burning through muscle and bone, but it was nothing like the pain he'd already endured. It helped to wake him up, though, and so he gasped his next words. "I'm no one. My . . . name's . . . Ardamile . . . Kentwood. I'm a Naja." She already knew that though, because she'd tried to kill King. He was shivering now with the arctic chill of his wet clothes, or with shock.

"Oath?" she snapped.

“None.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He wasn’t bothered what she believed. Whatever had caused her to attack him so ferociously and without provocation, he wasn’t sure he wanted to find out.

He needed to recover and then he needed to get himself and Jon away from her. He was alive and she wouldn’t get another easy shot at him ever again, he’d make sure of that. “I need food,” he said with a bravado he didn’t wholly feel as he tried and failed to stand. His ice-cream cone was a slushy mess on the ground beside him, such a waste. His legs wobbled like a newborn foals as he finally achieved vertical.

Food would help King heal.

He didn’t expect her to agree and so was mildly surprised when she sheathed her knife, snatched up Jon’s very wet backpack and a ruined drawing pad from the boggy grass and nodded. “We eat off campus.”



**And I Will Fall . . .**

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

*I've seen the end . . .*

Archer SOLOMAN

**JON**

They pulled into the parking lot of Ichiban Sushi a little after two o'clock. Jon was missing afternoon classes, which was the least of his concerns. Miles was too sick to drive, honestly he looked close to death, Jon didn't have a drivers permit and so that had left *her*, further proving she was probably not a murderous apparition, who drove the VDub smoothly, not fighting with the gearshift, not accelerating with Gforce, not having horns blared by other drivers, not speaking, not looking at either of them, not appeasing Jon's prominent and valid fear that she was a very real and very homicidal psychopath.

The parking lot was half full as they climbed out, still wet like they'd come straight from a swim meet where they'd all competed fully clothed. Jon kept glancing at Miles's right arm. The wound had gone, healed without a mark, and the rain had washed away the trail of blood. The only thing missing was his tattoo. To be honest, Jon was one more moving tattoo away from completely losing his mind.

It was still drizzling half-heartedly, a light mist clung to everything it touched like silk. Jon followed her, stumbling slightly over his own feet, and Miles lingered behind, keeping his distance. Miles hadn't spoken since declaring his need of food after the baffling events at campus and neither of them had picked this place. It was all *her*.

She chose the table by the door, ignoring the sign that said *'Wait here to be seated'* and ordered crab salad and a beer from a prompt server who appeared equal part flustered and irritated, with no challenge for ID and without waiting for Jon and Miles to pick up the menu. She didn't answer when Miles asked sardonically if she came here often.

Jon looked at the letters that should, he knew, form words and that were today failing to perform their basic function. He'd already eaten his lunch but he loved seafood, rarely got to have sushi, and now he couldn't even bring himself to look at the pictures. It was a relief

when Miles ordered a steak and a soda because Jon just said, “Same for me,” and then they waited in silence. Jon’s fingers nervously tapped the table until her glare seized his knuckles.

They must have looked suspicious, the three of them, because the staff behind the bar were whispering and glancing in their direction cynically. Jon’s anxious eyes scanned the restaurant, looking everywhere except at *her* because if he couldn’t see her she was still a fabrication.

There were people scattered throughout, talking animatedly over their meals or soothing irritable toddlers. The clatter of plates and cutlery was like the scrape of a chalkboard, eating into his bones and making them ache. The smells in the restaurant were nauseating so when their meals came and while Miles ate like he’d never seen food before, Jon pushed his steak lethargically around the plate. He really wasn’t hungry.

Eating had a miraculous effect on Miles. “So, Jon,” he started, mouth not yet empty, “I know you’re not much of a talker which is one of the many things I like about you,” he wielded his fork like a baton, “but I can’t believe you still haven’t called me out.”

Jon ticked his head. He’d been content with the silence, it made the entire day less existent. Still, he wanted answers and Miles seemed ready to talk. “You’re uneven now,” he commented, nodding at Miles’s once-upon-a-cobra arm.

He’d met Miles the first day of school, the only day Miles had attended every period like a model student. When Miles had approached him, made conversation with him, given him his phone number and offered to be taxi driver whenever, Jon hadn’t exactly been that pleased. Thinking about it, Miles had cultivated their friendship. Jon’s history had made him a loner and he’d grown accustomed to it, maybe even liked it.

Miles guffawed as he glanced at his arm. “Yeah, I guess. Can’t believe you never said that you knew, I mean, it’s not like I hid King from you.”

Jon was lost again. “King?”

She scoffed. “Original.”

Miles ignored her. “Yeah, my Dar.” His cheeks flushed a little as he spoke.

If Miles was uncomfortable with all this then what did that make Jon? He’d fallen into an alternate dimension where people kept their exotic pets under their skin. “Where is it now?” He was afraid to ask but he couldn’t help himself.

“He,” corrected Miles, “is hiding from your friend,” he flicked his head to the other side of the table without looking, “to heal. Not used to him being quite so internal.” He lifted his bare arm and shook it. “He hasn’t been for a long time. I kept waiting for you to say

something, but dude, can you keep a secret.” He seemed to calm then and think about his next question carefully. “So how did you meet another of the Darovit?”

Jon puffed out his cheeks with a frown. They were both staring at him, Miles expectantly and *her* slightly amused. He didn’t know how to answer. The truth was, he had no idea what a Darovit was, or that Miles was one, or who this girl really was. He didn’t even know her name. What could he say? He opted for evasive. “How did you know I knew?” *Except I didn’t*, Jon thought.

“Your Tilsam,” Miles pointed at Jon’s chest, “you play with it constantly.”

Jon was playing with it now, teasing the vibrating metal with his fingertips. She’d called it a talisman but Miles had just said *Tilsam*. Jon latched onto the word like he would a floating buoy on rough seas. If it turned out Miles knew what it was this entire time, which he probably did, then he would be so damned pissed. Instead he mumbled, “She gave me this.”

“I figured.” Miles was watching him patiently.

The other students on campus accused Jon of being remote and unapproachable but Miles had once told him, whilst drinking beer in the back of the van so Jon had taken it with a pinch of salt, that he thought Jon seemed composed and self contained and not distant. He’d compared getting information from him to milking a feral cat, though.

“So, how did you meet?” Miles repeated.

Jon looked to her for guidance but her focus was on the back of the restaurant. The necklace burnt against his skin and like in college he got the ‘*student before something*’ feeling. He grimaced, “What is it?”

“Time to go,” she hissed.

Jon was about to protest, he wasn’t ready to leave, except he was already being pulled to his feet, by his arm, which was connected to Miles, who was almost lifting him from his navy-blue suede boat shoes. He stuttered his surprise. Miles was faster and stronger than he’d ever expected, and why was Miles even listening to *her*? Before Jon knew it he was being dragged from the restaurant, across the lot toward the van and he had no idea why.

He blinked. “What . . . ?” Miles immediately cut him off, shoving a hand across his mouth. Jon’s question was distorted to incoherent mumbles. He’d have panicked but he didn’t have time before Miles’s hand was gone and he was thrown into the van and then they were peeling away from the restaurant, Miles behind the wheel and her looking grieved in the passenger seat with her glare set firmly on the wing mirror. Jon squirmed between them, the gear stick battered his knee as the van swerved back and forth. “What is going on?” he asked

for a second time, coherently now. Had they even paid for their lunch? He got the feeling he'd missed something again, another fight maybe.

She pretended not to hear.

“Dude,” Miles grinned manically, which Jon found familiar and therefore weirdly comforting, “What have you gotten yourself into?”

Jon had absolutely no idea. He shrugged. They swerved again, serenaded by car horn and screeching rubber. She swore beside him. “Why’s Miles driving?” Jon wondered.

The look she gave him cut to the bone.

Maybe that was the fight he'd missed, hadn't she still had the keys? No, she'd returned them at the restaurant, thrown them across the table, actually. *She's probably regretting that now*, he thought, Miles's driving had to be witnessed to be believed. Were they really just dodging a bill?

The rain had started back up; it was pelting hard against the windshield, a thousand raping fingers searching for a way in. The wiper blades tore back and forth, wailing in desperation as they failed to keep up with the torrent. “We need to get off the street, I can't see,” Miles complained.

Jon had a million questions, but she spoke before he could decide which was the most pressing. “I have a place in Port Allen, head there.” She didn't offer an address, nevertheless, Miles turned toward the I-10 at the next intersection without commenting, which was unusual for Miles. Jon was lost. They had sucked him into a hellish alternate reality; one where no one else thought running from a restaurant without paying and then drag racing the streets of Baton Rouge in the pouring rain with a couple of human terrariums in a vintage yellow campervan was completely insane.

He tried to remain calm. Thanks to the hours of forced therapy his mother pioneered post abduction he had coping strategies for most situations. This was pushing it. He couldn't see any reason for their erratic behaviour; not to mention the weather, which seemed to be mirroring how utterly wretched he was feeling. Miles was driving with one eye forward and one back, not good, especially for Miles who kept adjusting his rear-view mirror and cursing. Something finally clicked and Jon turned to look behind. There was a squat, dirt and water streaked window in the back door and beyond that there were blurred streets, pedestrians running for cover, headlights and taillights and neon shop lights. “Is someone following us?” He couldn't see anything strange. Well, anything stranger than their VDub rocking toward the Mississippi at warp speed.

“Yes,” they both replied simultaneously.

Jon felt himself shrink back into his seat, like he was four years old again. “No sweat,” Miles continued, “they’re eating my backwash.”

“Who are?” Jon’s voice seemed to have regressed too, it came out timid and hesitant and child-like. She looked at him then, candidly, for the first time since he was bundled into the van and he shivered as he correlated the similarities of the past and present. He felt like he did when he was a boy. “You’ve rekidnapped me,” he blurted.

Miles heard that and turned to stare at Jon in surprise.

“I’ve never kidnapped you,” she replied, unmoved. There was an impassive set to her jaw, like none of this concerned her. The only time she seemed to produce any emotional response was when Miles did something life-threatening with his vehicle. They were travelling along the I-10 now, though the rain made it difficult to orientate. In the distance, distorted by the conditions, Jon could just make out the *K’NEX*-like structure of the Horace Wilkinson Bridge. The interstate was congested, as usual, but at least the traffic wasn’t completely backed up. Miles’s driving calmed vaguely as they joined the steady flow of traffic heading west, though he continued tailgating like his bumper was made of superglue.

“Miles,” Jon finally snapped, “What the hell is going on?”

Miles wasn’t concentrating fully on the road. His eyes were darting in all directions. “Not the best time for questions,” he snapped back, uncharacteristically abrupt.

All Jon had was questions.

Miles swore again and seemed to flick his eyes between all three mirrors at once. Jon had always admired how Miles seemed to take everything in his stride but that seemed a distant memory now. “Lost them,” Miles mumbled, which sounded like it should be a good thing but his movements were getting frantic. “Where’d they go? You see them?”

Jon didn’t. “They’re trying to get alongside,” she answered, then to Jon she said, “Stay in the van.”

Where else would he be going?

“Who have you got me in to, Miller?” Miles asked in both dread and exhilaration.

While Jon wanted to give an answer he didn’t manage it, because as he focused on Miles beside him, his friend started to glow. It took Jon too long to realise that the glow wasn’t ethereal energy from Miles’s shoulders; it was behind him, outside the window, and it was approaching them fast. Jon let out one long squeal as the headlights smashed sidelong into Miles’s door, glass exploded around them as Miles was catapulted heavily into Jon’s shoulder. Hands and blood and spittle went flying, joined by rain and noise and shrapnel. Far too much stimuli to process. Jon could feel the force of the van spinning, jarring his neck, his

back, battering his temple as Miles's head smashed against him. There were sounds, screeching and wailing of metal, the smell of rubber. The lights were still coming, aiming for them, pushing the van like a snooker ball toward the barrier, they were on the bridge now, Jon realised, as they were shunted up and over the metal railings. The van lurched and swayed, it might have stopped, but the black army style SUV, the one that had rammed them, kept coming, kept pushing, until they weren't skidding anymore, they were falling.

It was brief and eternal, the falling.

She had him by the shoulders, hauled him over the seats into the back where she left him. He was almost standing, like a kid who'd hurled himself over the rim of a drop slide at an amusement park. He was alone, and then he was with her and an unconscious Miles who she held like a rag doll across her arms. He had no time to think about her, or Miles, or the river below them, although time was moving like flip book images. He was seeing in pictures, short bursts of HD photographs: the view through the windshield, the length of his body, his feet dangling in the air as he clung to the wall of the van, Miles sleeping like a grown child in her arms, the splash of water which seemed to swallow them whole.

The back of the van gaped, the door had been thrown open, the rain and river blended into a whirlpool that filled the VDub like a bucket dumped into a well. They were swirling and choking and the light was fading. It was cold, so cold, and wet. There was something very wrong with being this wet and this cold again. Jon didn't want to be wet anymore.

And then he wasn't.

The van sank quickly, and them with it, until it thudded onto the riverbed like a toy car dropped into a bathtub. Jon was on his back, looking up at the bed of the van. He frowned as he took it in, the inverted view. He was lying on blankets, Miles's ghastly hook-up blankets but he was completely dry. He blinked. Beside him, she was moving. Jon turned his head to find her working over his friend, pushing the water out of Miles's lungs with her hands. Jon was doing it again; being the spectator while something monumental happened beside him. She was saving Miles, he realised. She was actually resuscitating him, after she had stabbed him not an hour ago.

Nothing made sense.

Only when Miles spluttered and moaned did Jon pull himself up onto his knees. Relief flooded him as Miles regained his breath and irritably tried to bat his saviour away. In a dream Jon looked around. The van door was still open and beyond it the river flowed along its course happily. A wall of water, held off by some unseen force, protected them from a

million gallons per second of the Mississippi. Jon stared at it with wide eyes and a rock in the pit of his stomach.

Still nothing made sense.

The van seemed to be trapped in a soundproof bubble and the raking breaths coming from Miles echoed from the metal walls like the snarls of caged animals. All three of them stayed, dumbfounded, staring at the unnatural phenomenon until Miles seemed sure he could talk without coughing.

He broke the quiet with two raspy words, “Well, Damn.”