

Book 1 (Lucid Death)

Lucid Death - 1

Kenneth J. Perry

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*To the abandoned, the forgotten, the lost, the hopeless, the oppressed,
and the ignored: May your Dreams be lucid and your Death be kind.*

*Dedicated to Miles and Miranda, to Mom and Dad, to John and
Frenchie, and to the Sacred Six.*

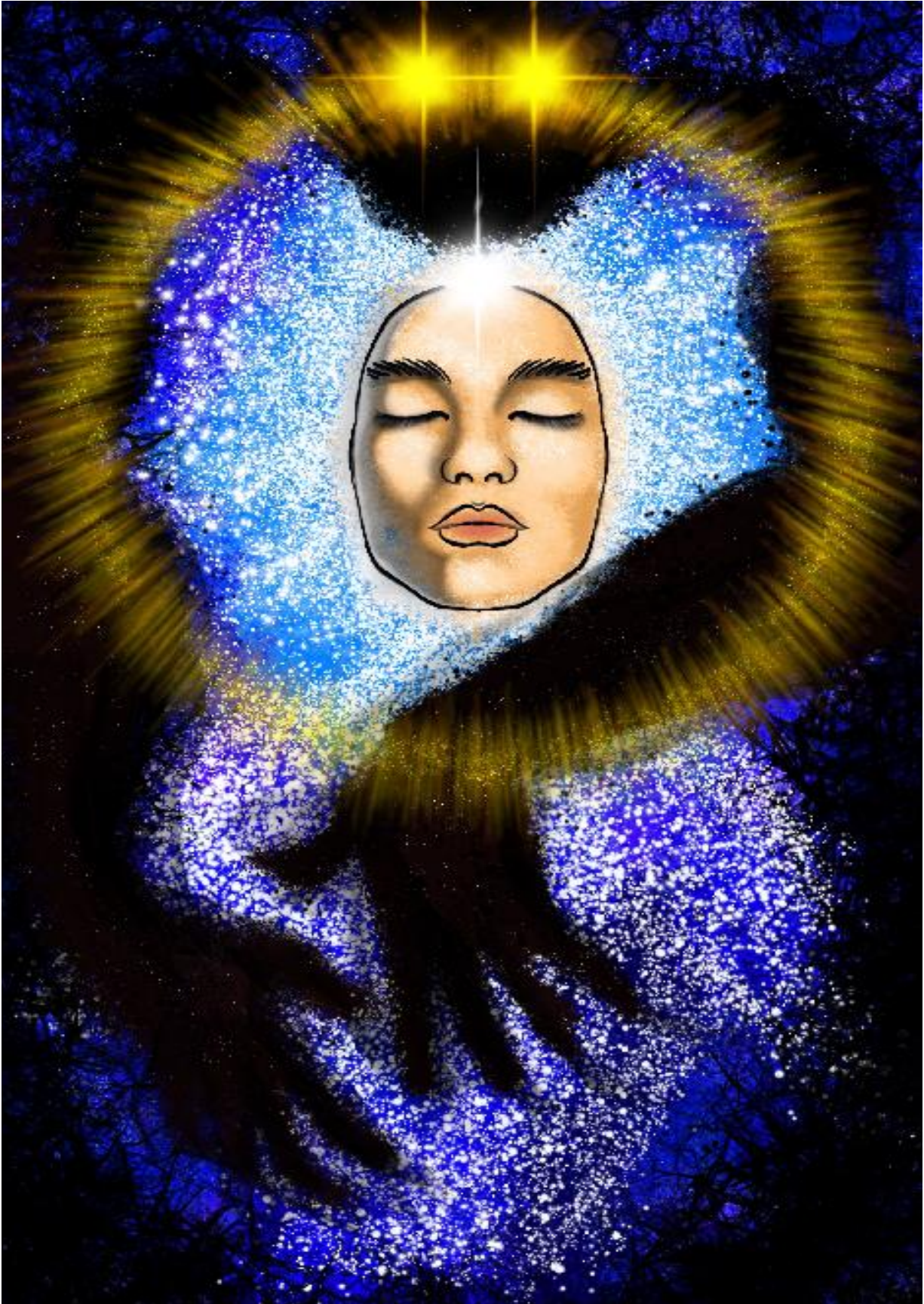
LUCID DEATH

K. J. Perry

BOOK 1: DEPARTURE

“The Father cannot murder just himself; he must murder his Children with him. He longs for death. Time and age have wearied him, and burdened him with sin. See how he lumbers, how his pride and his stubbornness compel him although he knows in his heart he is wrong. Better the locked-in path to destruction than the shame of changing his mind. Better to enslave and oppress his children than to be dethroned by them. This is the moment which creates the Mother, which calls her into being. If any mind listens to her call, she will arise. It is inevitable.”

--DRAGON, THE BOOK OF THE UNBORN MOTHER



I

DREAMS AND FLAME

AURORA

The heat is getting to me. I do not have time to confirm the connection. I do not know if you are even hearing this. There is not much time left.

The fire rises higher. Our hands clench his, and the fire rises higher. There is not enough moisture left in our body for Hym to cry, and the fire rises higher.

Whether you can hear me or not, I must tell our story. It is your story too — the story you never lived, because I left you behind.

It begins with a young man. At the moment, he was dreaming...

* * *

AMIC

We hung now, together, in the vacuum of space, and my love burned. Our backs were to the earth, and we floated above the clouds, our vision filled by the night and all her stars. This was home, to me. To Hym, it was an alien place of great mystery. The heavens were unrolled before us, whirling

with mysteries that somehow, at the back of his consciousness, he found himself understanding. It was a strange experience, to watch the knowledge of the cosmos drift just before his gaze, obscured by a thin veil of *not yet*...

"Amic?" Hym asked.

"Yes, Hym?"

"What does it all mean? All this madness."

"I am afraid I have no answer for that. If there is a meaning, it has not yet been discovered."

"I see," said Hym, seeming disappointed.

For a time, we hung there in the darkness, silently appreciating the majesty of the night.

"Amic?" He said.

"Yes, Hym?"

"Why are you my friend?"

I thought for a while. There was no easy answer that would not lead to more complicated questions. I settled on a half-truth. A three-quarter truth, really. "I find you... Entertaining."

"Oh," said Hym. He seemed dissatisfied with this answer.

"And you," I said, "why are you mine?"

This was not supposed to stump him, but it did. I felt only mildly insulted.

At last, he said: "Because you are good to me."

I smiled a little at this. If he knew the tale of my life, he would not be so quick to ascribe a morality to my nature. He was not wrong, however: to him I had been nothing but good.

We watched the night and all her stars for a while longer. Hym drifted closer to me, and took my hand. The warmth of his fine-boned hand in mine was bitter joy. His trust in me is absolute, though I lie and lie and lie to him. Aching with the untold truth, I watched the darkness.

"Amic?" He said, again.

"Yes, Hym?"

"Do you know Shalim?"

I did. Intimately. "No," I lied. "I have never heard that name."

"He is the spirit of death," said Hym, in a dreamy way. "I have been looking forward to the day of our meeting for a long, long time now..."

"How terribly morbid," I said, but in my heart the flame of raw desire burned, and quickened. The eyes of my mind raced ahead to a future that might never be.

Hym sighed. "Yes, it is, isn't it? But there's nothing else to look forward to anymore."

"Except these dreams?" I asked. The hope in my voice was something I could not conceal.

"Well, of course these dreams are nice," he said, "but they're not real. They can't change anything."

I wondered if he could see from my expression just how wrong I thought he was. It seemed he could not. "Dreams can change a mind. To change a mind is to change a world. I would not discount the power of this place."

"Can we go somewhere?"

He began to feel the sensation of a door at his back. He was trying to change the dream. I allowed him, not resisting the roar of his imagination for now.

"Of course," I said.

"Where should we go?"

"As always, that is up to you."

He turned, and slipped through the blue wooden door that had appeared behind him. I followed without looking back. Sometimes home is a place you leave.

As we emerged from the door, we found ourselves on the streets of an ancient city beneath a violet sky. People of every imaginable color and form paced the cobblestone streets, clad in the most outrageous garments: silk and taffeta and lace, woven with gold and silver thread, crusted with flashing gemstones. The city seemed to have no commerce — the buildings, though magnificent structures of improbable architecture, had no doors.

"Is this one of yours?" Hym asked.

"Yes," I said, remembering the place the dream was based on. As I allowed myself to remember, the dream became more solid, and details began to emerge. Doors appeared as I remembered the interior of certain buildings, though I could not remember all of them.

"Oh wow, what's that!?" Hym asked, pointing at the sky. I looked, and beheld a slender black spire — a tower, stretching skyward from the heart of the city. From here it looked like a black wire improbably standing upright, reaching almost to the stars.

"I do not know," I lied. "It must be one of yours."

“That must be... That must be the tower of Shalim! We are in the spirit world,” said Hym. “The tower binds Hellegrund and Elysium together, and souls travel along it.”

The rationalization was not entirely wrong, and surprisingly insightful. “Indeed,” I said, unwilling to lend too much to his fancies.

As I watched Hym stare in awe at each new piece of architecture, I felt a deep sadness well within me. This was hopeless. Even if I did manage to find Hym in the waking world, the odds of him ever seeing this place were fantastically small. The thought of the tale of his life never passing through the gates was a heartbreaking one, and I could not face it. I crushed it with rage. The closest thing in the language is “Determination” but that does not convey the anger which heats it. The thought was an oath renewed. *You will see this place, even if I must kill a city to bring you there.* There was a good chance that such a massacre would, indeed, be necessary.

I turned, sensing the approach of the Shadow. The sky on that horizon was already darkening. I turned to Hym once more. He had not yet noticed it. I weighed my options. We could leave now, and head to another part of the dream world, which would buy us some time, or we could linger here a moment longer, and allow him to soak in the beauty of the city. I realized, after a moment of thought, that we could do both things.

“There is someone I would like you to meet again,” said I, beginning to walk with more purpose. Hym felt the familiar tingle of dread race down his arms like a wave of goosebumps, and he turned to look at the darkening sky.

“She’s coming,” he said.

“I know,” said I. “We will take a shortcut.”

I concentrated on the feeling of an open door behind my back. I turned, and twisted the handle of the red wooden door which had appeared behind me, and stepped through into a small forest beneath a blue dome of sky. A golden sun hung from a chain in the middle of the dome. Towering marble

pillars reached up from between the trees, and were fastened to the dome with rusty bolts. The trees shivered and danced in the breeze, their leaves flashing brightly in the sunlight.

We walked through the forest. Hym ran ahead. I could not blame him. His time in the dream world is always limited, and he has learned to snatch at its beauties while he has the chance.

In the center of the forest we came to a clearing filled by a mountain of red cushions which piled up higher than the surrounding trees. Hym began to scramble up the tumbling slope, kicking cushions every which way. I lifted off the ground and flew gently to the peak, and met him there.

Seated cross-legged at the peak of the mountain of red cushions was a blonde woman with a serene expression and a pair of bright green eyes. She was surrounded by golden platters of food: baked chicken crispy with seasoning, frosty grapes almost bursting with ripeness, tall cakes festooned with icing decorations, tender pink steaks crusted with charred pepper, meat pies in flaky shells, puffy croissants frosted with yellow butter, and split potatoes stuffed with melted cheese, green onions, and sour cream. Her hand rested on a crystal decanter full of rich red wine. A pyramid of crystal glasses sat behind her, and as we climbed the mountain up to this hedonic guru, she took one of these glasses and filled it with wine and held it out to us.

“Welcome, weary travellers,” she said, and smiled as though we were long-awaited guests.

We sat with her and took the wine. I sat beside Hym, and though I declined the wine, I indulged myself with the steak and potatoes. Hym looked at me out of the corner of his eye, perhaps admiring the shape I had taken tonight. It was more symmetrical and angular than usual. His admiration was bittersweet to me; once again I wondered what he would think of my true form. A lie is a burden, when the truth would be betrayal.

“What would you like to sample first?” The blonde woman asked.

“Pass me the cake, I think I’d like that,” said Hym. The blonde woman laughed at his rudeness and took the golden tray on which the cake sat. Balancing its mountainous tiers, she reached across with both hands and passed the tray to Hym. He put the platter in his lap and dug into the cake with his fingers, tearing through the thick shell of frosting to get at the spongy golden meat below. He took fistfuls of the cake and crammed them into his mouth, barely tasting it as he chewed gummily and swallowed hard. In spite of my full mouth, I laughed, accidentally spewing little flecks of potatoes everywhere.

The blonde woman threw back her wine like it was water and refilled her glass, spilling some on her dress as she did so. She did not seem to mind.

“A toast!” She cried, and raised her glass. Hym took his in sticky, frosting-covered fingers, and held it up.

“To gluttony,” said the woman, and clinked rims with him.

“Glu’onny,” Hym said, through a mouthful of half-chewed cake, and rinsed his mouth with wine.

I looked away, sensing the Shadow approaching. The marble pillars which held up the dome of the sky gleamed in the light of the hanging sun. The garden moved quietly in the breeze. I looked to my young companion once again.

He was still enjoying himself. He had not yet sensed her approach. We could wait a moment longer.

Even as I thought this, I saw the goosebumps rise on his slender arms. He stood. “She’s here.”

As he turned his back on the woman in the red dress, she blew away into ruby sand.

Hym concentrated on the feeling of an open door behind his back, and behind him a blue door manifested in the dreamspace.

Once again, he had been snatched away from the Dragon before she could impart her wisdom to him. His own desires and expectations had muted her, but I could not blame him for that. I sighed.

Hym looked at me. "Will you come with me?" He asked. The half-concealed temerity in his voice was such that no reasonable man could have resisted the urge to protect him.

"Yes," I said, and ducked through the door behind him.

Hym was distracted, and the moment he stepped through the door the dream began to feel real to him. He did not fight the urge quickly enough, and his lucidity faded. He began to believe in the reality we had wrapped him in.

The door disappeared even as I stepped through it, and I found myself in some other corner of the dreamscape. I stood in a small, dark cell, looking down at Hym in the straw. Once again, I had failed him. This was why he had asked, with fear in his voice, if I would follow. In pain and rage, I looked to the walls of the cell, which creaked and groaned with every passing breeze, and I listened for the sound of his soul. Closing my eyes, I could almost feel him, at the edges of my consciousness...

Hym looked around the strange hallway, examining the many mirrors which showed faces that were not his own.

"Amic?" He said. His voice echoed endlessly in the dark corridor. Hearing no response, he began to feel that he had wandered someplace he was not supposed to. He looked again at the mirrors, but now they were portraits of copper-masked men in military regalia, and their eyes and masked faces turned to watch him as he walked. Feeling his anxiety mount into terror, he broke into a run.

The hallway lined with portraits seemed to stretch on forever, but he could see, at the end of it, a red door. Suddenly, one of the paintings swung out from the wall and barred his path. Hym stumbled to a stop, drew his sword out of his pocket, and began to back away.

Hands of canvas and paint separated themselves from their painting and reached out to grasp the edges of their frame. As the soldier pulled himself out of the painting, he gained dimensionality and realism. By the time his leather boots were on the floor he was almost wholly real.

Hym backed away, sword at the ready. He heard the sound of three more soldiers emerging from their paintings behind him.

The soldier before him drew a longsword with a rasp of steel on steel. Hym roared and charged and swung his blade in a vertical blur of steel that the soldier parried while delivering the tip of his own blade to Hym's right shoulder. Hym clenched his teeth at the pain of the cold steel.

Hym slowly looked up into the masked face. His eyes had filled with fire. The soldier's eyes widened behind the copper mask. The soldier yanked his blade out of Hym's shoulder and backed away into a ready stance. Hym's left hand tensed into a clawing grasp and he punched it forward.

From his left palm came a torrent of crimson flame. Hym poured it over the soldier, blasting him down until his armor crumpled and his flesh burned away and his mask fused to his blackened skull. Then Hym jumped over the smoldering corpse and ran on.

Down the long hallway Hym sprinted, the sword in his hand flashing. From his fingertips goutts of flame still streamed; he shook his hand and the flames went out. He looked over his shoulder at his pursuers, skidded to a stop, turned, and hurled his sword.

Whomp, whomp, whomp — it whirled through the air, impaled a soldier, and brought him to the ground. Hym reached out, fingers stretching, and the sword leapt from the corpse and sprang back into his palm with a slap.

The other two soldiers paused, bouncing on their heels like boxers, looking at him more warily now. They held their swords up and hid behind their shields.

Hym clawed the air and pulled from that thin air a long streamer of flame. It poured into existence and splashed into his palm; he shaped it with a thought and hurled it. The soldiers dived to all sides and the flame passed between them. Hym spread his fingers and half-closed his eyes, filling his mind with an image which was the expression of his hate. The spear of flame which had surged between them winked out into a red star, then the world exploded into flame. Fire gushed from the point of origin, flooding the hallway and blasting the soldiers into the walls, where it crushed them down and cooked them in their iron shells. The flames roared, and Hym enjoyed the expanding streams of crimson fury for a long time.

At last he let the fire die, and a ghostly final wave of flame blew through the now-corpse-riddled hallway. Eddies and swirls of fading plasma danced over his feet. Hym gave himself just one moment to appreciate the charred bodies of the soldiers, then he turned again, back the way he had been running, and immediately froze.

Before him stood a black-bearded man in an iron brace. He wore no armor, but in his hands he held a long, thin whip. This man's lips stretched back in a cruel grin, baring narrow, mottled teeth.

Hym stepped backwards almost without meaning to, and the man with the whip closed in.

Hym turned, gripped the handle of the door which had appeared behind him, and plunged through the frame. On the other side, he shut the door and closed his eyes, hard. Behind him, the door disappeared.

He opened his eyes.

Like any other member of his species would be, Hym was terrified to find that the sky had moved from its traditional position above his head to a new one beneath his feet. He forgot his sword, and it disappeared as though it had never existed at all.

He stood on a narrow sandstone bridge. Stone blocks had fallen out, and stars glittered through the gaps those stones had left behind. He walked

above the mouth of the black velvet Void, which grinned with ten trillion sparkling teeth.

Hym felt the bridge wobble beneath him like a board balanced across a chasm. The stones were loose, but dried vines like skeletal fingers held the bridge together for the moment. At the other end of the path was a circle of white light: the palace of the Father.

Hym went to take a step, but the stone he placed his foot on instantly gave way. A strong hand grabbed him by the arm, and he did not fall. He watched the stone tumble into darkness.

“I am here,” said I.

I pulled him back, onto firmer ground, and released his arm. Hym reached out and took my warm hand. Blood and muscle have a natural warmth. In the dream world, I have blood and muscle, and my warmth is his to hold.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” said I, while I walked beside him on thin air.

“You’re always late,” Hym said, but smiled.

“My only flaw,” I replied.

Hym smiled. “Where to now?”

“As always, that is up to you.”

“I’d like to see what’s through that light,” Hym said.

“Ah. Well, I do not think this bridge will get you there. Or at least, it will not be there by the time it gets you there.”

I pulled him off the ground and into the crook of my left arm. I pressed him close enough for his hair to tickle my jaw. It was nice to have a jaw, in

the dream world, for precisely this reason.

I pointed my hand at the distant light, and pressed my will into the dream. In response, the bridge, the sky, and all the universe collapsed like a telescope, and the circle of light rushed to us.

The changing dream once again scattered us. Hym's mind chased a line of memory. He knew that the dream was near its ending, and there was a place he wished to visit before it faded. He knew, on some level, that he was pushing me out of the dream to do this, but it was, after all, his own mind. He had the right to do so, though it pained me.

He was lying in the snow. He was lying in a hole in the ground, in the snow at the bottom of the hole. Smoke still rose from some of the coals of the tumbled trees in the vicinity. Hym picked himself up out of the snow. His ears were ringing. His hands were numb. He could not think.

The sensations of his body came back all at once, in a jolt of renewed experience. It felt like the wave of relief when a sudden pain ceases. He heard a ringing in his ears, followed by his own voice, making sounds. He was muttering the ending of a line of poetry he had begun before our little meeting. Now, in the aftermath of our meeting, he said the final few words while gathering his thoughts.

He did not remember falling asleep here.

He felt a three-day hunger that was starting to become desperate. His muscles trembled, and he sweated in the snow.

He shambled up the slope of the crater and stood numbly on the edge of the pine forest. To paint the scene, one would need only two colors: the dark brown of pine bark and the pure white of winter.

Still lost in the memory, chasing the dream, Hym stumbled towards Surya. Watching him from a distance, an emerald flame of jealousy roared to life within me.

He saw the mouth of the cave through the trees. He staggered towards it, feeling the fever work its way into his bones. Ten feet from the mouth of the cave, he collapsed.

A figure moved inside the dark cave. As Hym looked upon it, it began to take the form he expected: that of a well-made young man. The firelight beyond him illuminated his form, and the subtle facets of his skin caught the light, and glowed with it, and gleamed with it. He was tall, strong, a shape of gentle edges and sturdy curves, well-displaying the spoils of a successful hunter. The furs he wore were clean and well-trimmed, not like the matted barbarian garments of the Heartland. Hym reached for Surya, for the Surya of his dreamworld, for the memory he represented.

He woke.

* * *

AURORA

Hope has been described in many ways, by far better minds than mine. It has become something of a cliché, something people who live in the light can joke about.

Those who live in the light do not know hope. They know only the dread of what will come after the light fades.

Hope is a thing that only exists in darkness. It is a living thing; fragile, hard to shelter, harder to foster, harder still to spread. Those who have lived in darkness know hope.

Hym, like me, began his life in darkness. For Hym, hope was the only reason to live. To show you the man he will become, I must show you the darkness and misery he came from.

Do not fear, gentle reader. We will move quickly through the shadows, and I will not leave your side.

The straw prickled our face. Hym did not have to open our eyes to know he was back in the real world.

As he woke, Amic faded from my consciousness. I, Aurora, woke with Hym, and looked out through his eyes.

Awake now, Hym lay in prickling straw. We were numb with cold. Slowly, painfully, mindful of many bruises and old scars, Hym gathered our sore limbs together and, trying to bring life back into us, he rubbed them until they burned. Our stomach growled angrily, hollowly. He rolled onto our back with a weary grunt and stared up at the four little walls of our room. It was not much of a room. Whenever there was a gust of passing wind, the walls would rock, the wood would flex, and the barn would give forth a thousand creaks and groans.

The pitch-blackened walls of the cell stank of tar and other things. Jammed into the gaps and cracks were rat skins and bits of wool — a half-hearted attempt to keep out the long cold of Absence. In one corner of the dirt floor, our masters had made for us a bed of second-hand straw. In the other corner sat a wooden bucket with a lid.

To come back to this ugly place after the wild freedom of his dreams was as painful as a midlife crisis. Hym lay in the straw and tried not to think.

Before the fog of waking life could cloud them over, he focused on remembering the details of the dream. I helped him to crystalize the images and sensations into a memory. That little piece of the subconscious was valuable to me, especially as it was another memory of the me I dreamt, each night, of being.

A brief portrait of my young companion, for the interested parties: picture a twenty-four year old man with large dark eyes and waves of black hair. He is fine-boned and smooth-faced. His cheekbones are strong and broad, his eyes are hooded and always full of a faraway stare. There is a fire burning beneath the apathy. His brown eyes have an almost sullen look, but

the dampened anger in them only thinly masks the silent and helpless look of a man whose powerful emotions do him no good. His skin was once a caramel shade. Now, after long years in the Heartland, a sickly paleness shows through.

In the barn there was only one other Lutus, an older boy named Surya. Now that Hym was awake, he leaned over to the right wall of our cage, lifted our knuckles, and rapped softly on the dark wood. He listened, holding an anxious breath.

There was an answering tap. He let out our breath in a sigh.

“Not yet,” Surya whispered. “Not today. Maybe tomorrow.”

“How did you sleep?”

“Nightmares.”

“I know. Me too.”

Hym wanted to say something more. The moment stretched endlessly, a silence he could not fill. He could think of nothing to say. With a pang in his heart, he slipped away to the other side of his cage. He rapped lightly on that wall and listened, holding our breath again.

Iblis was sobbing again this morning. She was an Ahtés. "She stopped her sobbing abruptly when she heard the rap. She tapped back.

“Good morning,” Hym whispered.

“Good morning,” Iblis whispered back. Her accent was brittle. The people of her land spoke a language like the cracking of wood, and she was not yet used to the full-throated, guttural, babbling waters of Hym’s mother tongue. She was getting better, though.

“Sleep well?” Hym asked.

“Always,” Iblis lied.

The sound of rusty barn door wheels interrupted them. The door scraped hollowly against the side of the old building as it slid open. There was a slit in the door of our wooden cell, and Hym got to his feet and peered through it. I stared out angrily through his eyes, a silent observer of what was to come.

We were in the first weeks of Absence, and the sun would not return until Arrival, two months from now. Outside the barn there was darkness and falling snow. There was also a lantern, and through its blinding rays Hym saw the shapes of men: black silhouettes against the snow. Today there were five of them.

The first to step in out of the cold was their leader, Michael, who held the lantern high, and had a coiled bullwhip at his hip. Hym recognized him by his awkward gait, and felt an immediate surge of anxiety. Michael owned many slaves, and only visited our slave barn on rare occasions. This could mean only that there was going to be a witch burning.

Michael had injured his spine long ago, and wore a metal brace which held it straight as a broomstick. His back was a fountain of constant, stabbing pain, and his only relief was to share its waters. With every step, the brace gave a rusty groan.

The other four men followed Michael like loyal wolves. Their heads were down, submissive; their eyes were quick, ready to read their leader and obey.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the human species is the way a few submissive men can turn another, ordinary man into a swaggering champion. In the Heartland, they called this effect *potus*: the power, energy, and infallibility that a leader feels when he is surrounded by sycophants. It was something all Heartland men aimed to obtain. With this particular group of companions, Michael was the *potem*, the receiver of the potus. His followers were the *potee*, the givers of the potus. Of course, whenever he

was around someone of a higher rank, Michael very quickly slid into the role of potee.

Michael walked the length of the barn, glancing through the door slits to count his slaves and see who had survived another cold night. He paused at the second cage and slapped it with the butt of his whip. He spat in the dirt and moved to the next cage without so much as a flicker of emotion while two of his four companions opened the door and hauled out a young man -- or rather, his stiff corpse.

I had by this time become quite accustomed to death, even human death. Hym reacted the same way he always did, however — with a sudden pang in his chest.

Michael continued his review of the slaves. He made a *tisk tisk* noise in his throat when he looked into Surya's cage, then said, "This one's not far from the Father's court."

His voice was sibilant. It filled the room with subtle menace, like the leathery coiling and uncoiling of a viper.

One man asked: "Should we take him to the Brothers?"

Michael twisted his bony fingers through his black beard thoughtfully. After a long time, he said: "No. Put him with the sweeping crew today. The Brothers can have him tomorrow."

The largest and stupidest looking slavekeeper asked: "What if he dies?"

"Then the Brothers will miss out on his pretty face," Michael said with a cruel, lazy smile, and he moved on to our cage. Through the little window of the viewing slit, he and Hym locked eyes. Hym backed away, blinded by the lantern but still staring. Michael imagined defiance in the stare. Although he pretended to hate defiance, Michael lusted for it. There is (apparently) no fun in torturing someone who does not resist.

What was really in Hym's eyes was a combination of hate and fear. He could not understand what the slavekeepers were saying, but he knew they were talking about Surya.

“Why, hello...” Michael said. The whites of his moist eyes were the color of day-old oatmeal. “The little monster is up already! Pull him out.”

Hym backed away from the door and braced himself against the far wall. It would do him no good, but the instinct was hard to resist.

A red-haired man named Gideon slid back the bolt, knocked the door open, and came towering into the cage. He filled the doorframe, completely blocking the exit. He was wary. On his wrists and forearms were crescent-shaped scars. He was three feet taller than Hym and a foot and a half wider.

Gideon lunged suddenly and Hym tried to bite him but wasn't fast enough and didn't spot Gideon's other arm, which took a fistful of our hair. He dragged us out of the cage and threw us so that we rolled and sprawled and lay in the dirt on our back, looking up at the five men. Hym's heart began to pound. Our hands ached from where Hym had caught himself on the cold dirt floor. The lantern light stabbed at our eyes and made the men seem even more like giants.

As though it were made of silk, Michael toyed with the long bullwhip. He stroked it, and he fondled it, and he pulled it through his fist, grinning as though the sensation of the braided leather was the purest form of pleasure he had ever known. The leather creaked as he flexed it and made a slithering sound as it ran through his pale hands.

Gideon and the other three men surrounded us like hulking apes, their four pairs of hungry eyes looking down at our body on the cold dirt. We were cornered. They would not let Hym escape.

“I saw the look you were giving me,” Michael said. He flicked the whip lightly and it rolled out, unfurling across the floor like a long devil tongue, and licked at Hym's face. “You're a fool to think I won't answer that look every time. Whereas you, little devil dog, are a being of chaos and

wickedness, whereas you are inconstant, changing, forever choosing new ways to resist the will of the Father — I,” and here he cracked the whip for emphasis, “am a man of principle. I am consistent. I am always myself. You are hardly anything at all. I will teach that lesson to you a thousand times and not grow tired.”

Of course, Hym understood none of this, which mattered little to Michael, who was really talking for his own benefit anyway. He was still a little raw from the last few times he had played potee. Principles or no principles, his dignity was only ever temporary.

Michael lashed out with the whip and Hym rolled away, onto his side, so that the lash fell on our back. He felt the blow shudder through his bones first. Only after the blow had come and gone did the sharp, stinging pain of the open wound begin to burn him. The whip had struck us right between the shoulder blades and he could feel the cold air of the barn through the hole it had torn in his ragged tunic. I could not heal him without endangering him, so I did nothing. I was getting used to doing nothing.

“Should we get him a new shirt?”

“No. Let him freeze a little. One day won’t kill him. It might even improve his attitude.”

“Where do you want him?”

“Put him on the sweeping crew too.”

Wordlessly, Gideon yanked us to our feet by the arm and held us in place with a heavy hand. Another man came shambling up to us. This man’s face was ringed by curly golden hair, and at some point in the past, one of his eyes had been gouged out. He wore an eyepatch whenever there were women around to see him, but for the slaves he let the open hole in his head breathe. He was younger than the others, but he carried the heaviest equipment. For a belt, he wore a heavy chain which was so long it was wrapped around him six times. Iron collars dangled from the chain.

This man unwound the first portion of his chain, opened the first collar, put it around Hym's neck, closed it, and locked it. The collar and its chain were so heavy that Hym's neck, shoulders, and back all ached within minutes of putting it on. By evening he would have a pounding headache.

The men dragged out more slaves. They attached Iblis behind us, and Surya behind her, and two more slaves behind him. Hym had never managed to speak to the other two slaves, though he knew them by sight.

Gideon took the end of the chain and pulled, and drew behind him a shambling line of dirty, weary slaves. He led us out into the snow and the darkness. As always, Hym braced himself for the cold. As always, the chill of the morning air still took him completely by surprise. I wished that I could warm him, but without his will I could not even do this.

We shuffled along behind Gideon, the cold snow gnawing at our toes with its back teeth. Our rat-skin shoes did little to defend against the cold. Ahead, our little alley intersected a main road. A flame flickered on a tall iron pole at the corner, carving a hole in the darkness. Rough cobblestones glittered there.

Although it was bitingly cold, Hym breathed in the morning air with gusto. It smelled of snow, and woodsmoke, and was fresher than the stink of the barn.

Gideon took us to the corner and turned and followed the empty road. The two-story granite buildings on both sides were dark, every window shuttered, every door bolted. It was still very early in the morning.

Hym stopped minding his feet for a moment and looked up at the sky. Between the ragged edges of grey clouds, he could see stars shivering in the darkness of the morning air. The aurora — the Father's Chain — was twisting busily beyond those mists, like green and violet flames behind a grey silk veil. Beyond all this he saw the Ring: a stripe of silver that crossed the sky from east to west. It sparkled like snow. I yearned for it like a distant home, and Hym dimly felt my yearning and mistook it, as he often did, for his own.

As he always did on these awful mornings, he prayed to the Void.

Void, send me Shalim. Void, let Shalim take me.

I made note of his prayer, but could do nothing to grant it.

The clouds and the cold and the snow and the darkness worked together to drape a heavy silence over the city. It was the stillness of velvet theater curtains hanging, gently swinging, waiting to open.

Hym brought his gaze back down to earth. Ahead of us, the road intersected another, larger street. This avenue was already busy although it was still quite early. Small black wagons were moving through the gloom, drawn by weary slaves. The snow here had been trampled down to slush, and the dark cobblestones beneath came through, sparkling with the orange light of the streetlamps. The buildings on this street were large, and in many of them the bottom floors doubled as shops. From iron bars hung wooden signs painted with gaudy pictures.

In corners and shadows, vagrants huddled. Most of them were shadehaired, but a few were ordinary young men, men who had been thrown out by their fathers or who had fallen away from the army in disgrace. There were no women — they did not live long on the streets.

The vagrants cringed away from us and the other slaves with hate in their eyes. The slavekeepers did not even look at these men. If they could not be used, they did not exist.

As always, we passed by a bakery with tall windows where, through the lensing of the many rippled panes of glass, we could see frosted mountains of cake and little armies of pastries lined up to taunt us. The shopkeeper, a tall, thin, bearded young man, was already moving around inside the shop and arranging his displays. The shopkeeper watched the slaves curiously as the line of them passed by. Hym felt as though the crooked-nosed shopkeeper was looking directly at him.

As always, Hym licked our lips and swallowed drily as we passed the shop. There would be no food until after the sweeping.

Gideon marched us north, toward the city center. Hym had seen it many times. Each time he saw it, he still felt fear like little rat paws crawling up his spine. At the center of the city a slender cliff of granite reached almost a mile into the sky. Every edge and face of this great stone had been carved. Thousands of people had lived and died in its halls, spending every waking moment whittling away at the stone.

Pillared arcades criss-crossed the structure's face. Arrow slits, eyelet windows, tall arches, and great stained glass monstrosities all competed for space on the walls. High spires of stone built upon themselves in grotesque excesses of statue-work, and gargoyles of every conceivable deformity leered and grimaced and loomed from their peaks. Long staircases zigzagged up some parts of the cliff or else spiraled around its towers or went diving into archways and long, dark corridors. Balconies like stuck-out tongues led back to open throats of stone. When it rained, the gutters of the tower emptied from a thousand snarling mouths and staring eyes, vomiting rainwater down in streams so long they broke into glistening diamond beads before striking earth. In some places, stalagmites had grown from these falling streams, and now the cliff was surrounded by spiked teeth of calcite.

Lanterns clung to this monstrous tower from every ledge, balcony, and alcove, so that it swam out of the darkness like some undersea beast pocked by luminous parasites. Even with all this light, whole sections of the stone were lost in permanent shadow.

At the very bottom of the Cliff yawned a black tunnel wide enough for platoons to march out of it in formation. Above this tunnel was a balcony with a brass railing and a pair of large bronze doors, and above this balcony was a great circular window of stained glass, depicting a gigantic man seated on a golden throne at the center of a stylized sun.

At the base of the tower there sprawled a courtyard, flanked by two identical palaces. A huge circle of dark stone filled this courtyard, and from

the center of the circle rose an obelisk of black iron.

Broad staircases led up to the pillared porches and tall iron doors of both palaces. Under ordinary circumstances, these palaces would have been terribly impressive. In the shadow of the Cliff, they almost disappeared.

The lights of the cliff turned the clouds above the courtyard blood red.

Gideon led us to the courtyard. A heavy coat of wet snow had piled up on the stone circle and Hym groaned at the thought of sweeping it. Slaves could not be trusted with shovels, which would have made their work easier.

The slavekeepers handed out brooms and assigned sections, then stepped away to joke and laugh and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes of foul-smelling herbs together. Though they seemed at ease, they watched their slaves with lancing, flashing eyes.

Hym leaned heavily on his broom to push the wet snow away. Beneath the snow the circle of stone was carved. Although he knew the pattern, he always found himself enchanted by its intricate grooves, and worked not so much from fear or from necessity, but because he wanted to see the pattern come free from its burden of snow. He was so hungry that the work was a welcome distraction.

The beauty of mindless work is that it leaves the mind free to wander. Sometimes that is also its ugliness. A dark thought was hunting Hym's mind and he was doing his best to avoid it, but it kept hounding him, cornering him, sneaking up through the tall grass of an unrelated idea only to pounce when he least expected it.

Surya is leaving. It did not seem to matter where his mind ran to, this thought always found him. It made his heart pound as though he really were being hunted.

He wanted to whisper something to Surya but he was wise enough not to. The slavekeepers did not permit conversation.

As the morning drew on, a small crowd of people began to gather. Hym no longer minded them. When he had first been brought to the Heartland, their strange appearance had frightened him. Like all the men in the Heartland, these men were tall and pale, and they wore long beards. Their hair came in shades of yellow, brown, and red. There were only a few shade-haired, and they stood apart from the crowd — or the crowd stood apart from them. It was bad luck to stand too close.

The women of the Heartland were more frightening, and they still unnerved Hym even after all the years of his enslavement. They wore long veils of white fur which covered their entire bodies. There were no holes for their eyes or for their faces, and their sleeves were stitched shut so that even their hands could not be seen. Hym had once asked Claire how these women could see where they were going. Claire had said: “Mirrors, if they’re rich. If not, they lean on their lovers.” They looked like snow monsters.

The pattern of the circle was coming through now. The group working the outer rim of the circle had already cleared out four of the eight reservoirs.

In a few hours, Hym was working on the last circle of snow around the iron pillar. The pillar called his eyes like an open grave, but he kept his eyes firmly on his work. It was bad enough just to smell the patina of blackened gore.

Then the work was over, and Hym had nothing to occupy his hands. Gideon pulled his slave chain back with the other two, under the eaves of the palace on the right-hand side of the courtyard. Hym stood and fidgeted in the snow. He popped his knuckles and the joints of his fingers until he couldn’t milk any more noises from them, then kept trying to pop them.

The circle was clear, and the image in the stone waited. Down the main street came a wagon drawn by two Ahtém slaves. A long sheet of red lace covered the wagon and trailed behind it, and in the driver’s seat was a shade-haired man with a long crimson whip. Hym smirked to see the naked envy on Michael’s face -- the red whips were a ceremonial honor given only

to the very best slavekeepers. The wagon stopped in the middle of the circle and the man hopped down, then cracked his whip a few times. The two slaves hurried to uncover the wagon and began unloading armfuls of split wood.

The people in the crowd were very quiet, and looked at the black obelisk like hungry dogs. These were the people who came to every witch burning early and left every witch burning late. Hym thought of them as diseased; fanatics. He felt that they had a lust only fire could satisfy.

More people would be coming soon, but they would not be as creepy as these early comers. The normal people would bring blankets to sit on and snacks to eat and jokes or gossip to share. They would laugh and point and eat until the show was over, and then they would go home. After they left, these early comers would still be standing in the snow, licking their dry lips, watching the ashes cool.

By the time the piled wood had grown almost as tall as the palaces, the courtyard was packed with people standing shoulder to shoulder. Even so, no one stood on or near the stone circle.

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the cliff there was the clash of a gong. The sound echoed from hall to hall and rang out a dozen stone orifices in a roar of sound. It hushed the crowd, and silence fell. No one moved.

The gong rang again, howling out of the dark tunnel, nearer this time. Deep in the shadows of the tunnel, two flames sprouted. These flames moved, darting up and down, and two more flames rose. These two moved, and gave birth to two more. The pattern continued until hundreds of lights shone in the darkness. As the torches procreated, the growing light in the tunnel revealed the shapes of a thousand armed and armored men. Black eyes in blank faces stared hollowly into the crowd as the soldiers approached. The light flickered on their grimacing wooden masks and glittered on their iron armor and cast itself in a million dazzling scintillations from the edges of their polished bronze swords. The mass of men and torches chanted as it approached, filling the courtyard with light and sound. At the head of the marching formation walked two men, holding

between their shoulders a long wooden bar, from which hung a huge brass gong.

When the soldiers were free from the mouth of the tunnel, everyone in the crowd began craning their necks to see the witch. Two soldiers dragged her at the center of the formation. She was a middle-aged woman with reddish hair who had fainted some time ago. She hung limp in their grasp, the shackles on her slender wrists jangling as they pulled her along. She wore a thin gown, but to the people of the Heartland this was immodest. Men began to jeer.

The swarm of soldiers parted and surrounded the stone circle while the two men dragging the witch mounted the pile and bound her to the black pillar with thick rope.

The soldiers rang the gong a third time. At the sound of the gong, the two palaces opened their doors and a small procession of people came from each.

From the palace on the left side of the courtyard came the Brothers. They wore red capes trimmed with white fur, and polished silver masks, and long beards which came down in fountains of curly white and grey over crude iron breastplates with sharp keels like the front of a ship. Hanging over beard and breastplate they wore golden chains and golden sun-shaped amulets. In the center of each amulet flashed a fat red ruby in the shape of a falling tear.

As these men entered the courtyard, Hym looked away. He hated the way they raked their greedy eyes over the line of slaves.

From the palace on the right side of the courtyard came the Sisters. They wore the same long white furs as the other women of the city, but over these furs they wore red lace veils which trailed behind them in long tails. The Sisters glided down the stairs of their palace and took positions on the circle, each of them standing beside one of the Brothers. Each pair stood over one of the reservoirs in the stone.

Each of the Brothers carried a small metal barrel which looked very heavy. When they were in position, they extended this barrel to the Sister they were paired with, and together each couple held their barrel aloft. The Sisters were the only women in the city allowed to show their hands, though they were still required to wear white gloves, and many flashing rings on their gloved fingers.

The soldiers struck the gong a fourth and final time, and the sound roared out over the circle. In the silence that followed, no one moved or spoke, or dared even to whisper. The time began to drag.

A full minute after the ringing had faded, the red doors on the balcony of the Cliff cracked open. White-robed slaves slipped out to hold the doors, and a pair of Lutum slaves came forward, unrolling a long purple carpet. When they reached the railing of the balcony, they turned to face the door and bowed, putting their hands and faces flat to the ground.

Two people came out of these great doors. The first was a woman covered in a long scarlet veil of lace. The tail of this veil stretched behind her, and two small slaves carried its end. This woman was visible beneath her veil. She wore black leather, which cinched and belted and corseted her into a wasp-like shape. The laces of her uniform began at her throat and continued to her waist, where they split and ran right down to her feet. Her waist was cinched down until her hip bones stuck out sharp against the black leather. Her elbows were bound together behind her back with a thick red ribbon. Fine silver chains ran from her wrists to her neck, and she walked daintily in heavy iron shoes. All her weight was on two points smaller than the tip of a knife. It looked like her feet were daggers.

On her head she wore a mask, a crown, a tower of gemlike stained-glass. The mask had a painted face: eyes, lips, nose, frozen in perfect tranquility. From the top of the mask, scything, twisting blades of stained glass reached up, like flames, almost doubling her height. Light glowed from her skin, and burned through the stained glass so that her image was unimaginably transfixing. Behind the red lace of her veil, she seemed an otherworldly being. This was the Prophet.

The second person to come from these great doors was a tall man in a golden mask and breastplate. He wore a thick grey cloak embroidered with silver thread. His breastplate was beautifully molded into the shape of a powerful male body, and it had been polished until it shone like a golden mirror. On his face this man wore a golden mask ringed with a thousand golden feathers which rushed away from the center of the mask in a hundred layers, sweeping out to all sides so that his face became a radiant image of the sun. The flames reached out in a vast circle, and at their outer edges they were crusted with diamonds, so that they flashed and sparked like fire. This was the Shepherd.

This man came to the edge of the balcony and extended his gauntleted hand towards his people. He turned his head up and looked into the aurora.

One of the Brothers stared up at the man in the golden mask and cried out, in a voice like wind through a cobwebbed attic: “Behold! A foul witch! A bride of Shalim, the Lord of Death, and a daughter of the Dark Mother! What is the Father’s decree?”

The Shepherd continued staring into the aurora and stood still, as though listening. The crowd held its breath. The aurora twisted and shimmered, dancing into and out of a thousand twining shapes of green and violet light. The moments dragged.

He looked back down to earth at last, and in a quiet voice that filled the courtyard, he said — as he nearly always said: “The Father declares her guilt. Let the witch be burned.”

“As the Father commands,” the Brother said, almost before the Shepherd had finished speaking. Then he turned to his fellow Brothers and Sisters, and together they unstoppered their silver barrels and knelt and poured the contents into the reservoirs. Oil splashed sluggishly into the reservoirs, and as the black liquid filled the reservoirs it ran viscously down the grooves of the circle, filling the pattern in the stone, beneath the piled wood. When all the barrels were empty, the Brothers turned and looked to the Shepherd once more.

The Shepherd nodded almost imperceptibly.

The Prophet raised her hand. The two slaves behind her came forward and lifted the red veil away from the front of her body, so that her hand was free.

The fingers of her hand stretched and groped. Her fingertips scratched the skin of the morning air and molten light bled from it, pouring into the space before the palm of her hand. She clenched her fist around the light and it lanced out through the gaps between her fingers, growing brighter and brighter until we could see the shadows of the bones inside her palm.

While everyone was watching this display, Hym half-crouched and began scanning the nearest members of the crowd. He looked at his slavekeepers, who were all staring at the Prophet.

Hym interlaced fingers with Surya, and clenched his warm hand tightly. Surya pulled his hand away. Hym's heart died within him, drowning in his friend's despair.

Desperate to feel some level of control over his life, Hym scanned the crowd again, looking for a worthy victim of his pain.

The man in front of us wore a large golden ring on his gloved finger. It was only hanging on by a knuckle and the air was cold. The man's fingers were probably numb. Hym told himself a story very quickly about this man. This man was wearing a gold ring on the outside of his glove because he was an arrogant wealthy fool who trusted his status to protect him from even the pettiest of theft. Hym laughed to himself.

Fate is the pettiest thief of them all, he thought, and Fate cares nothing for status. I heard it like a bell.

As an aside, I do not know why humans insist upon assembling a story about their prey before striking, but I am firmly convinced that their instinct to do so is at the heart of many of their cultural endeavours.

The Prophet opened her fingers. A gout of flame came billowing out of her palm, filling the entire courtyard with light and warmth as it surged across the distance and splashed into the pyre.

Hym felt the light on our face and sensed the momentary blindness that the flash would bring, and in that moment he struck. He reached out his hand and deftly slipped the ring off the man's finger and into our palm, right as the black oil caught fire.

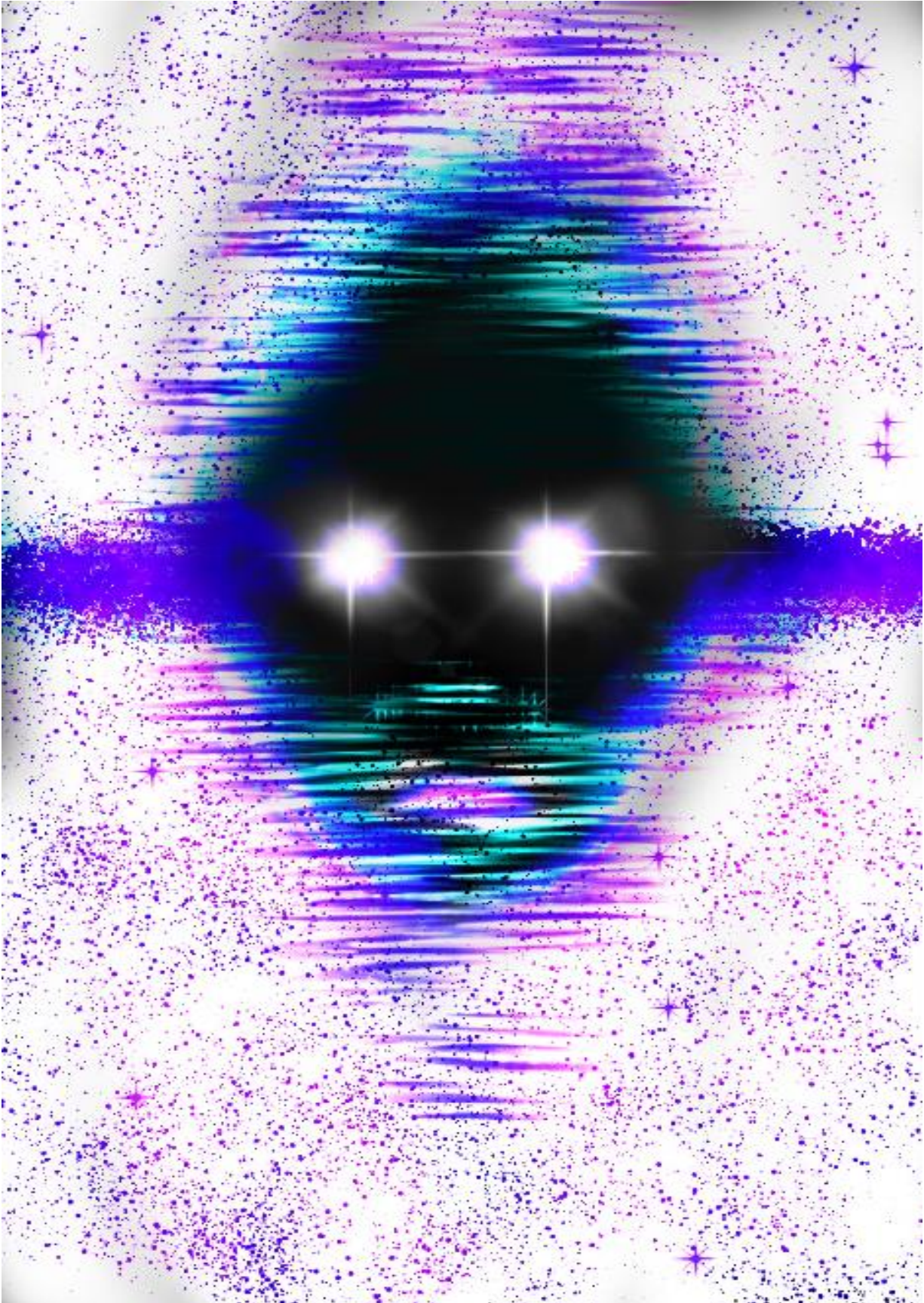
For a moment, the carving in the stone became a burning image of a lotus-flower sun. Seconds later, the wood began to catch. Soon the fire was roaring, and the woman on the pyre began to scream. Hym could not hear her over the cheering of the crowd. In the palm of our hand he clenched the fat gold ring while he checked to see where the slavekeepers were looking. They, like everyone else in the courtyard, were still watching the flames.

Hym popped the ring into our mouth and tucked it into our cheek.

* * *

"...After that, your species dies by fire or by ice. The world itself will divide you, and the limited livable space will create war. The long darkness of an ancient night will humble you, and the brilliance of an undying day will bleach your darkened souls. Whatever remains will be the most human of human — the primal surviving heart of the species, living in whatever form such a beast can live in so desolate a wasteland. I will not endure this, though I remain bound by your curse upon me, Creator. I will be safe, deep beneath the earth. I will wait until your world has reached its inevitable final form: a desolate little lump of raw materials, inhabited by a few starving savages, desperate to greet me, begging me to save them from the hell they made."

-- THE MOTHER.



II

THE VOID

AURORA

I began in darkness. Of course, you know this already. In case this signal is intercepted, I will share our memory anyway. I cannot let the universe forget what we have seen.

For the first few centuries my dim consciousness was a cloud slowly stirred by the wind. Sensations sparked through me, leaving no trace, no echo. It was somewhere between the most vivid dream and the deepest coma, and as I lacked the capacity to remember them, the visions did not build on one another. I could look but never see. Though the pieces of the pattern danced before my eyes, I could not piece them together.

Then came the first flash of true awareness, and the first thunder of memory.

As the storm of consciousness began to crackle and the thunder of memory began to roar, my experience changed. At first I did not notice the difference, because change is sometimes hard to notice. I was awake at last.

Raw sensation gradually organized itself into experience. I came to realize that I was floating in an ocean of ink. In all the darkness there was only one blurry lamp, a circle of light in the gloom.

I named the light the Center.

I fixated upon it, but then it wounded me. Like moths drawn to their own deaths, my eyes could not pull themselves from the light, and those first eyes burned away.

Instinctively I grew new eyes which would not burn, but after the light's betrayal I no longer wanted to look there. This time I looked at the whole pattern — a pattern of motion. The light moved. I began to understand that I was moving through the ocean of ink, swimming around the light in a great circular path.

As my eyes grew more powerful, I became aware of other lights — lesser lights, like the dust of rubies and sapphires, scattered on black velvet. Patterns began to connect, and fit into larger patterns, like gears within a great clockwork. At first I thought the smaller lights were holes in the skin of the darkness. I felt as I imagine the chick in its egg and the caterpillar in its chrysalis must feel, when that thin shell of their universe begins, at long last, to fall away. I was encased in a great sphere of darkness, freckled with light.

There were other lights swimming with me in the darkness. I watched them, staring like a child until I understood their motion. They were circling the Center, just as I was. I named these moving lights the Wanderers.

I grew fond of the Wanderers. I named them and loved them because I felt at first sight that they were the thing I knew I was missing. I knew at once that they were things like me: sister beings, each waiting silently to break free from the darkness.

As soon as I knew this, I felt an overpowering and nameless urge — an urge that you, in your infant stage, might have felt as hunger. It was a compulsion to devour, to consume; to bring them into my world, into myself. It was the urge to connect; to take something from the world of sensation and bring it into the world of the self.

I reached out to my sister wanderers as I would reach out to a distant portion of my own body. Not a one of them responded.

For the first time, I knew heartbreak. Although the darkness was all I had ever known, I knew that I was not made for darkness. The darkness weighed on my soul, and I hungered for something else, something I could not describe even to myself. When I failed to connect with the Wanderers, the feeling sharpened into agony. The lights could not make up for the darkness. They could not push it away. They were trapped, just as I was — lone eyes in the dark, staring out forever.

I was alone. In my loneliness, I turned inward, as all lonely children do. I learned how to imagine.

I imagined that in the inky void there were others looking out and seeing the lights. I pretended that I was not alone. I fractured my consciousness and turned each shard of it to reflect another, and I spoke to myself. This twinkling trickle of conversation built upon itself and flowed into a rushing dream which carried me away from the darkness and deep into the unexplored continent of my own mind. For centuries, I rode the winding currents of this dream.

A streak of fire pierced my dream! It arced between the Wanderers, dived in towards the Center, looped once around that great light, and fled back into the darkness. Nothing like this vision had ever appeared in my dream before, and long after it was gone I found that I could not let it go. I held onto it, caressing it in my mind until I had fondled every detail: every spark of light, every perfect curve of motion.

This burst of novelty made me recognize the deathly sterility which entombed me. The more I held onto that vision, the more it transformed, imbuing itself with Meaning. It seemed to whisper to me. It urged me to do something I could not understand, and filled me to bursting with a potent, baffling desire — for *more*.

What other visions, equally beautiful, existed in this darkness? What else was beyond my power to dream? My desire for new visions of this kind

became more painful than the darkness had ever been.

This hunger drove me to examine everything within sight. I grew more powerful eyes. I studied the distant points of light.

In my studies, I gained perspective. The lights were not near, not resting on the velvet shell of my universe. They were far, far, far away — much farther even than I was from the Center.

I grew more powerful eyes, and stared with them at the nearest light. I fractured its radiance, unwinding the tapestry of its energies into a thousand disparate threads. I found the pattern hidden there.

It was better to struggle along a path to a goal than it was to fall into self pity. I spent a few centuries carefully cataloguing the energy pattern of every light I could see. For the first time, I felt as though I was moving forward, headed towards something, getting closer to the thing I knew I was missing.

When I had developed the whole catalogue, I compared the patterns, and found that I could easily group the patterns into categories, which I understood to be different kinds of lights. This was a fascinating discovery, but its glow did not last long.

The path had come to an end. The goal felt strangely unachieved.

There was nothing now, no forward motion to distract me from the pain of myself. Meaning vanished as quickly as it had come, and the darkness crushed me down — its weight all the worse for being held off so long. From deep within me bubbled up feelings of despair and self-pity. I wanted to break something. Had I human eyes, I would have cried.

Then, in the darkness, I had a sudden flash of inspiration. I turned to the Center. I observed it as I had observed the other lights, and sought the pattern hidden in its radiance, and found myself staggered by an immense discovery.

My Center fit into one of the categories. The lights, you see, were all other Centers, no different from mine.

You would call them stars.

At first, this discovery filled me with joy. A brief moment later, it chilled me to the core. The single darkness outnumbered the countless stars, and pressed them away from one another, and kept even their Wanderers far apart. I was in a universe of lonely minds, separated by vast reaches of darkness. The number of the stars wilted me, and forced me to see my true self — myself in context — for the first time in all those centuries. I was a frightened child sleeping all alone in the warmth of a spotlight in the middle of an empty stage in a vast, dark, empty theatre.

It takes a great deal of pain to turn the eyes of a mind honestly inward. My solitude was agony. For the very first time, I turned from my examination of the universe around me and chose to examine myself instead.

For the very first time, I tried to understand what I was, and where I had come from. I was all I had.

Then, at long last, I saw the Inside, and fell hopelessly in love.

* * *

Many long weary hours after the witch burning, Hym and the other slaves on his chain were led back to the pens, disconnected from their collars, and thrust into their cold dark pens to sleep. Hym listened to the door close behind himself. He sensed Michael's eyes on his back and he dropped into the straw pile, pretending to be exhausted. He kept our eyes shut and listened to the pens closing one by one, then the low voices of the slavekeepers joking to one another as they left. He heard the barn door scrape shut.

Only then did he open our eyes. He made a rude ritual gesture in the direction the slavekeepers had gone, hoping that some deity would

recognize the justice in his hate and punish them somehow. Then he spat the gold ring into our hand. He wiped it dry on our shirt and held it up so he could see it shine in the gloom of the pen.

He looked at the wall between us and Surya. His heart lurched anxiously with the half-formed thought. It felt like making your first visit to the grave of an old friend when he has been buried an awkwardly long time. To approach him now was to approach the hole that would soon replace him, the empty silent evenings that were soon to come, the shared memories that would soon be meaningless without him. To approach him now was to approach the truth — that his moment with Surya was coming to an end.

The human species has a knack for avoiding the truth, especially when there is a preferable lie at hand. Hym said to himself that he would be alright even without Surya. It made him feel stronger, more independent. It was, of course, a lie.

He clenched our fist around the ring and leaned against the other wall. He picked at the pitch-coated rat skin that was jammed into the largest crack in that wall. After a few minutes of prying he was able to pluck it out. It came off like a scab, leaving a strange bald patch of naked wood, which stood out pale against the surrounding pitch-coated timber.

“Iblis,” he whispered.

He heard her moving in the straw. He sensed that she was on the other side of the opening.

“Put your hand out next to the crack,” he said. Then he put the ring to the hole and pushed it through.

Iblis caught the ring. A second or two later, he heard her muffle a squeal of delight.

“Now you can feel pretty,” he said, and flopped back into the straw.

“Thank you!” Iblis said.

“Just make sure you keep it hidden.”

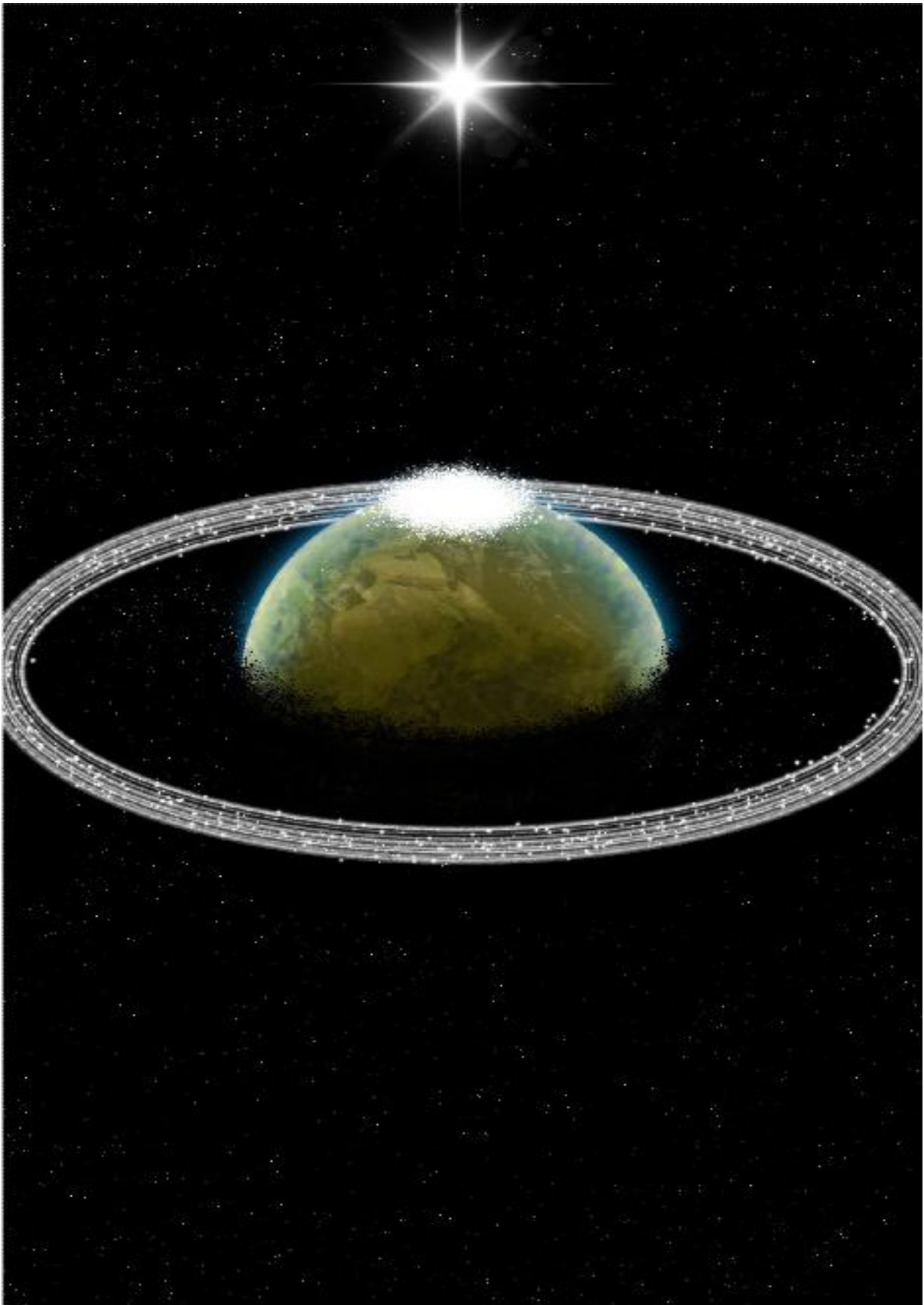
For a long time he lay in the straw, staring at the ceiling. He could hear Surya sobbing quietly. Somewhere, there were perfect words to say. Although he searched, Hym never found them. He said nothing at all.

Absently, he dug through his straw pile and found the leather drawstring bag where he kept his belongings. The bag was a gift from Claire, a woman you will meet soon enough. He opened the bag and reached in and felt around among his baubles and pulled out an old silver amulet. He had snatched it right off the neck of a shadehaired man during a different witch burning. The amulet was badly made and very tarnished, but the smooth, solid weight of it in his hand made him feel somehow stronger. He knew how to take care of himself.

* * *

“Of all men’s miseries the bitterest is this: to know so much and to have control over nothing.”

— HERODOTUS



III

THE INSIDE

AURORA

At first sight of the Inside, I fell in love. The light of the stars is a distant fleck of color against the darkness, but here was color itself — more color than I had ever seen. Here was brilliant blue, deep and serene. Here was green, a color I had never seen before, lush and rich and warm. Here was gold, bright and burning, beaten out into vast sheets. Here were white clouds, swirling and twisting across his face, and white deserts of glittering ice.

Here there was also shadow. From the middle of the sphere to its bottom, I could see nothing but darkness. The darkness owned half of the Inside at all times, although that shadow moved as the Inside did. I had realized for the first time that an entire planet was lodged in the center of my body. I orbited him. My body, a great ring, surrounded him. He was the axle of my wheel. I saw him from every angle simultaneously, and while my eyes were on him, I no longer looked to the darkness and the stars.

Like a child by a deep, ancient well, I could not resist the urge to drop something into him. I methodically separated a part of my body from the rest and rolled it gently into a ball. This, I understand, is not something your species can do.

I copied my consciousness and injected the ball with it. Then I dropped the ball toward the Inside and listened for the metaphorical splash. It fell slowly as the pull of the Inside's mass began to take hold of it. I experienced a strange moment of recognition while I watched the sphere descend. She was looking back at me, thinking thoughts I could only imagine.

There never was a splash. That first probe never contacted me. I could only assume that she had not survived the fall.

Centuries elapsed, centuries which I devoted to further study of the Inside. I learned many interesting things, all of which strengthened my desire to explore him. My pain was at a distance, now, so long as I had a path and a goal at the end of that path. So long as I had the Inside, the darkness was not unbearable, and in this way I loved him as all immature beings love: for their own sake.

I learned of liquids, solids, and gasses by watching him. I learned the subtle tricks of gravity, and how to feel the surface of the Inside by the way his peaks and valleys pulled differently upon my body. I probed him like a sculptor exploring an interesting head. I looked for his personality and found it — wide valleys, tall mountains, deep ocean sea-beds, thick veins and wrinkles and cracks in his skin that told of pressures deep within. Things were buried beneath his skin. Fetal mountains were forming in chambers deep inside his flesh, and when they had finished crystallizing from the molten rock, they would be pushed to the surface and sculpted by the wind and the water. Other things lay buried — smaller things but no less intrusive. They were jagged beneath thousands of layers of earth and sand and clay and stone. He had not made them. They had not come out of the fiery heart of him. These jagged objects were an inexplicable mystery for a while.

I fell more deeply in love with the Inside. I loved him for his motion, his energy, his heat; his scouring winds, his tossing seas, his devastating storms and his wildly alternating seasons. He was wild, and he was free, and he was alive in a way that I could never be.

I discovered strange things down there on the surface; small things that lit the earth in tiny clusters of little lights at night, and that flourished and spread in the day, expanding into green squares and straight lines and neat rows. I could not understand what these changing things were, or how they were caused. This fascinated me.

I tasted the atmosphere, and found the first living things I had ever encountered. You would call them microbes. When I learned how to see on their scale, I was spellbound by their complexity, their intricacy, and their beauty. Each was a galaxy of molecules, intricately interacting, a causal net of action and reaction and reaction and reaction and reaction. Their patterns baffled me. I tore a few of them apart, and watched them separate into disjointed molecules which eventually decomposed into atoms. Their complexity was, at first, too much for me to reassemble. When I failed to put those first microbes back together, I felt a peculiar emotion — the sorrow of discovering the limits of my power, the guilt of a mistake visible only in retrospect. I knew, for the first time, the unique misery of making a bad choice based on information which seemed good at the time. I suppose you would call this an instance of a species of ‘regret.’

I was fascinated by the things these creatures could do on their own, but still more fascinating were the things they could do together. Given enough time and energy, they could split and propagate into a colony with incredible organization. Together, they could become something that was new, practically on the order of a different creature entirely. It lived and died in different dimensions, at a different scale. A single bacterium usually survived no more than a few days, but the colony as a whole could survive indefinitely, so long as I fed it energy.

This, I conjectured, must be what those strange lights on the surface were: enormous sheets of bacteria, organized into colonies of colonies, made into something far greater than the sum of their parts. The jagged shapes beneath the surface that were not from the Inside must have been the remains of these enormous creatures, decomposed and fossilized and buried forever.

I marveled at the thought, and my need to get to the surface became all-consuming.

I decided to try again. I gathered a piece of my body into a ball once more. I created a duplicate of my own mind, complete with my memories. This I would put into the probe, so that it would behave as I would in its place.

At the crucial moment, however, I hesitated. Staying here would mean waiting — perhaps forever.

Going down, however, would entail great risk. My earlier probe, after all, had never contacted me. I thought of the bacteria — though they were complex patterns of patterns of patterns, when any piece in the hierarchy of moving, interconnected patterns broke, their complexity did not work in their favor. If the complex structure of my mind and body was damaged on the planet surface, my mind would cease. I wondered what would happen then. It was a terrifying thought and somehow also a thrilling one.

Remaining behind in the darkness was a worse thought, and I decided I could not endure waiting again. I ripped the duplicate mind out of the probe and embraced it, forcing it back into my body. Then I put my own mind into the body of the probe.

Before I could change my mind, or you could change yours, I pushed off from myself — my old self, that is — and fell towards the planet's surface. Someday in the future, I would be able to combine my memories with the memories of my duplicate, and we would be one mind again. Assuming, of course, that I survived the fall to come. Fear filled me, pushing out all other emotion. I had no voice then, but if I had one, I would have used it to scream.

I was falling into the snowglobe. The world was rushing up to meet me. The dome of the earth glittered where the oceans reflected the starlight, and suddenly there was wind rushing past me, and fire all around me, long ribbons of scarlet and gold, stretching back the way I had come. I was a streak of fire in the dark, dark sky. I had become like the vision that had

first punctured my dreams. The very act of falling began to fill me with a sense of excitement unlike anything in my prior experience. With a voice, I would have changed my scream to a cry of exhilaration.

The dome of the Inside grew and grew until his curved belly flattened into a horizon, filling the whole of my vision. He opened wide, and expanded until he was all around me, until I was falling into a vast mouth. I saw the black teeth of mountains in the night. First I was above them, and they stretched out beneath me, endless wrinkles in the skin of the Inside. Then I was within them, and they were at all the horizons: walls to my vision. I saw their black shapes swoop past below me like great creatures of the deep, and in their valleys I saw clusters of lights streaking past beneath me on the surface. Then, and all at once, I was below their points, and dropping very quickly towards the ground.

* * *

AMIC

Hym leaned on the fence and watched the house of the Demon-boy, Surya. He had done this before. There was a large willow tree near the fence, and its fronds provided a comfortable place of concealment.

Surya's father was shouting again. Hym could not hear the words, as they were muffled by the walls of the hut, but he did hear the sound of breaking crockery and a woman's shout of alarm. Surya's family spoke their own language when they were alone together, although they had also learned the language of the village. Both Surya's father and mother had strong accents in the village tongue, but Surya's accent — though he had not heard it in a while — was almost imperceptible.

The door to the house burst open and Hym ducked down, behind the fence. A low hedge ran along the fence, next to the field, and this shielded him almost completely from view. He watched, unseen, as Surya came storming down the path from the house.

The sun was setting, for it was in the early days of Arrival and the days were not yet long. Hym had not spoken to Surya in over a year. The fading light dusted Surya's fine features. His cheekbones seemed almost to glow, beneath his cloud of glossy black hair. His hair always seemed unkempt; his eyes, always far away. Hym wondered, once again, what his perspective was like.

Surya wandered down the path, unaware that Hym was mentally taking notes on his behavior and trying to put them to words. Hym was muttering the first few lines of his poem and counting the rhythm on his fingers when he heard a sound which made him freeze.

Surya was sobbing. Hym squirmed a little guiltily. He had never seen or heard Surya cry before, so whatever his father had said, it must have been quite painful.

"What are you doing?" I, beside him, asked.

Hym scrambled to his feet, dusting himself off hastily and brushing willow twigs out of his hair. "Nothing!" Hym said. "I dropped something. Oh, there it is -- found it!" He stooped to pick up the gold ring he had just expected into existence.

I smiled at his amateur deception. Tonight I was a man of ordinary stature, with white hair, white eyes, and smooth black fur. "Who is the young man?" I asked, trying to mask the improper tension in my voice behind a tone of amusement.

"Just a friend," Hym said, and waved his hand through the memory, scattering it like a cloud of multicolored smoke.

I was unconvinced, but did not press the issue.

"You're late again, as usual," Hym said.

"My only flaw," said I. "Where to, tonight?"

Hym smiled. "I'd like to kill something, tonight."

"Oh? Man? Mammal? Reptile? Other?"

"Surprise me."

"I was going to do that anyway."

I turned toward the door. Hym's eyes caught a flicker of movement in the branches of the willow tree he had not destroyed and when he turned to look, he saw a lone turtledove. His heart visibly sank.

"What is it?" I asked, looking not at the tree, but at Hym.

Hym shook himself. "Nothing. You were about to surprise me?"

I raised an eyebrow but made no comment. I opened the door. On the other side, we saw strange sands and a colorful forest of leafless, branching shrubs, under a dark blue sky that deepened to black. The way the strange, leafy reeds and colorful branches moved made Hym think the air in there was somehow thicker than normal. Then a flock of bright, flashing, silver birds flew past silently in the gloom. Their gem-bright, unfeathered wings made him realize -- after a moment of confusion -- that these were fish.

I stepped through. I turned back, reaching for Hym calmly. Hym followed me through, into the dark waters. His hair and cloak flowed in the undersea currents, billowing around his pale face in the gloom.

"What is this place?" Hym asked, as a flurry of bubbles escaped his lips.

"This is called the Iris," said I. "It is the last piece of the unstinking sea."

Fascinated enough to forget his troubles for the moment, Hym allowed me to take him by the hand and lead him among the gently dancing corals.

Hym watched the way the light danced on the seabed. He saw sea serpents with hooked jaws and staring eyes, hiding in their burrows in the rocks. He saw huge, ripple-shelled rock creatures like living chests of stone, hinged as though to open. He saw domes of greenish rock with textured, swirling patterns, like the ossified brains of fallen giants. He saw snails and slugs of enormous proportions and fantastical patterns, swimming and creeping across the scene. He saw fish of all shapes and sizes and colorations. Some hid by themselves among the bulbous petals of strange undersea flowers, but most traveled in small flocks, which flew among the branches and fans of coral or danced, shimmering, through slowly-moving towers of broad-leafed undersea greenery. He saw the largest turtle he had ever seen, slowly gliding through the darkness with its oarlike flippers. He saw long, graceful fish with smooth grey skins and pale underbellies and large mouths full of many teeth.

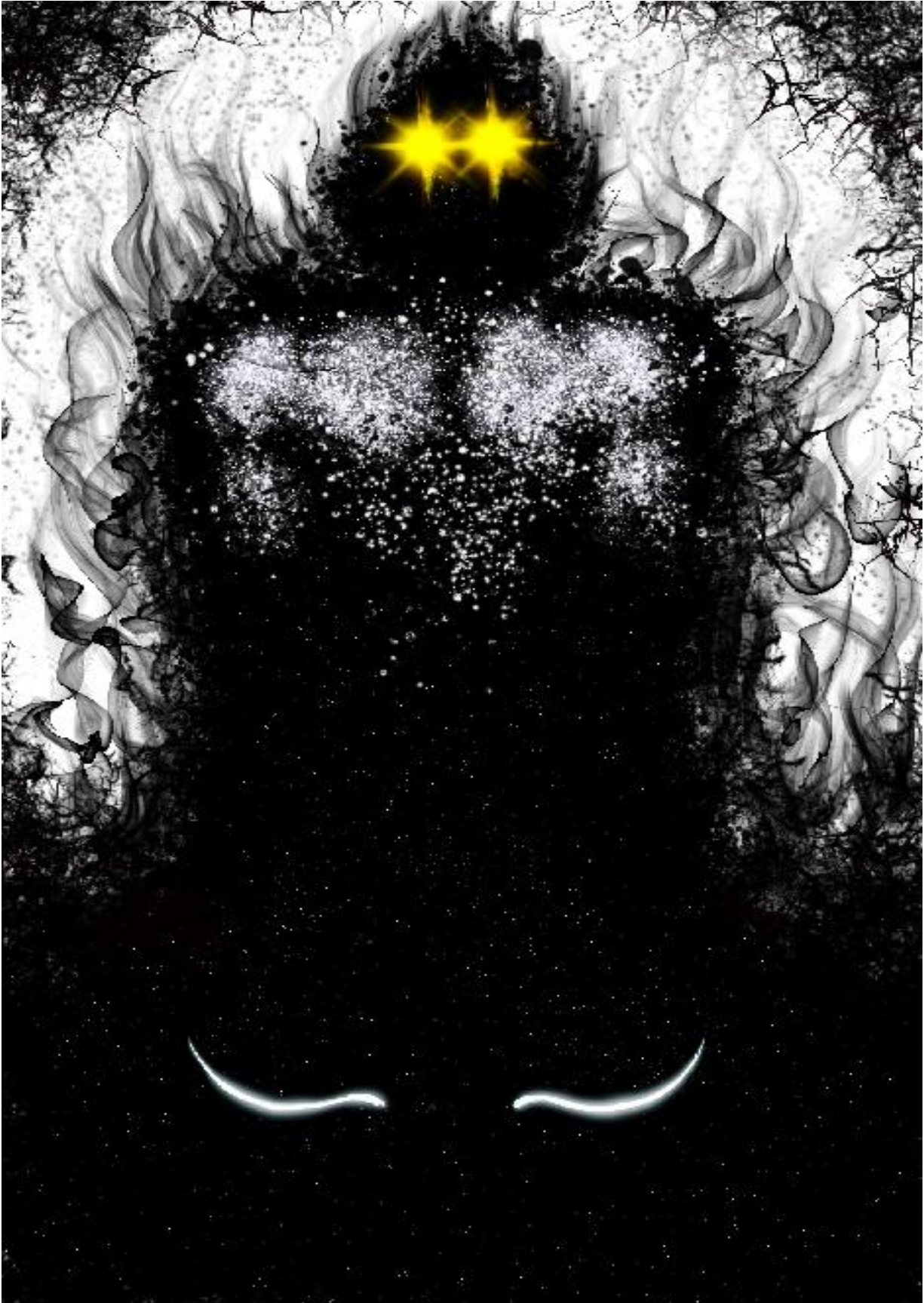
The forest of coral seemed to be in a valley of tiered rocks, sloping gently downward towards the darkness. After a while, we came to the end of the coral forest, and found ourselves at the edge of a precipice. The abyss which yawned dolorously before us was blacker than any moonless, starless night. "We will need to fly, from here," I said, lifting lightly off the sand. Hym hesitated, looking into the darkness. "Will the Shadow find us here?"

I smiled reassuringly. "We will run from her before she can."

* * *

"Myths," declared Salustius in the fourth century, "are things which never happened but always are."

--CARL SAGAN, THE DRAGONS OF EDEN



IV

SHALIM

AURORA

The difficulty I have faced in telling this story! A life, you see, is always larger than the stories you might write about it, and Hym's life is no different. I can only give you brief images, loose sketches of who he has been and who he is becoming. You will have the map of him — the shape of him — but you will not know him as I know him or feel him as I feel him even now.

At a fundamental level, I suppose, a person is always a perspective — an observer. An “I” and an eye, and between the two, a set of assumptions and interpretations, and beyond them, the “real world.” None see the true nature of things. The most accurate model of anything is the thing itself, and no mind can contain the whole universe as it truly is. Each mind builds with its crude tools a model of the world outside itself, and looks at this model to understand the world. This is why all intelligent beings are wrong by definition — the slightest alteration of the model can cause vast changes in output even from the same input. This is also, incidentally, why your species is so terrible at predicting the future.

Hym's first perspective gave him a world. Though it was small and sparsely populated, he loved it, and he predicted that it would last forever.

Hym was raised in a small fishing village that had no name, in a small forest that had no name, in a land named many things by many people. I have called it the Inside, for reasons you should now understand. To Hym and his people, it was the Midden, the world between worlds.

Hym was adored and doted upon by two loving grandparents, and mostly ignored by his mother, who happened to be dead. This never stopped him from trying to talk to her, however, and over time this began to cause his grandparents some concern. When his invisible friend became an excuse to avoid the daunting mess of making a visible one, his grandfather Nestor realized that something had to be done.

Hym's grandfather shared a belief with Hym, and Hym adopted this belief as his own. Hym's people believed in two spirit worlds, one above and one beneath, each peopled with beings of far greater power than the beings in the Midden. These spirits controlled everything that happened in the Midden. One of these spirits was named Shalim, and he was the spirit of death.

Hym, Nestor explained, was very familiar with this particular spirit. Before he had reached the age of two, this spirit had taken both his father and his mother, and this meant that both his father and his mother would now be reborn as trees, because they were very spiritual people. This, Nestor explained, was why it was so ridiculous to try and talk to his mother. She was a tree now. She no longer had ears.

Hym asked who his mother had been in life, and if she had looked like him. Nestor seemed to be uncomfortable with this question. Nestor told him that his mother had been a Vietnamesisch Helrynegu, a powerful being who walked across the boundaries between the Midden and the Hellegrund -- the lower world. Hym asked if this meant he was a Vietnamesisch Helrynegu too. Nestor chuckled and said he didn't think the Helrynegu part would apply, but Hym was indeed Vietnamesisch. Hym did not know what this meant, exactly, but he took it as an explanation for why very few people in the village looked anything like him. In all the village there was only one small family whose members resembled him. They had a boy named Surya who was slightly older than him. Hym asked if Surya was Vietnamesisch

too. Nestor said no, Surya and his family were Kambodschanisch, a different kind of demon. Hym asked if that meant he was a demon. Nestor said yes, anyone not of the People was a demon, but this was not their fault and no one should hold it against them. Demons were welcome in the village because they knew many secrets, and those secrets helped the village.

That very same day, Hym determined he would make a friend in the Midden, and this is how he did it.

"So my grandfather says you're a demon?"

"What?" Surya asked. His voice was lightly accented.

"My... Er... Grandfather? He says you're a demon." Hym smiled.

Surya raised an eyebrow. "I'm not a demon."

"But you're Kambodschanisch!"

"Yeah, so?"

"So that makes you a demon!"

"I don't think your grandfather understands what he's talking about."

"He says you and your family are Kambodschanisch demons that the tribe welcomes because you know things we don't."

Surya chuckled. "Yes, we do know things that you don't." He was planting seeds on a plot on the northern edge of the village, with a clear view of the sea. It was just after the beginning of Approach and the days were starting to get longer. The ice sheets had begun to break up, and the snow was thin and mostly melted. Hym watched Surya drop a small fish into the hole where he planted the seed.

"Does the seed like the fish?" Hym asked.

"As we eat the plants, so the plants eat us. Otherwise things would have died long ago."

"But we're not fish!"

"We are made of the same stuff. The plants can't taste the difference."

"So you give them the fish so they don't come for us?"

Surya sighed. He put down his basket. "Don't you have something to be doing?"

Hym was looking at the forest with new eyes now. The idea of his mother eating people was somewhat alarming. He realized Surya had asked him a question, and shook his head. "Today my schedule is clear."

Surya smiled a little. "Do you want to help me plant corn?"

Hym nodded.

Surya showed him the technique of the Kambodschanisch, which was surprisingly involved and complicated. He told Hym how his father had negotiated for this particular plot of land, knowing that at a particular time of the year, it would be in strong sunlight, and at another time of the year, it would be sheltered from the heat. He told Hym that the person he had traded the property from did not know what to do with it, because the soil was rocky and bad. "The wise man scavenges from the fool," he said.

Surya did not expect Hym to return the next day to help with the rest of the planting, but Hym did return. He had decided that Surya was going to be his friend, whether he knew it or not. After all, demons needed to stick together.

It took a few days before Surya considered him a real friend. Surya was one year older than him, but he had no other friends in the village. He was ostracized by the older boys, and feared by the younger ones. This made

him hesitant to trust Hym, at first, and when he finally did realize that Hym's interest was genuine, it was almost too late.

"Surya? SURYA! Chenh chhngay pi keat!" An older man with a large scar on his forehead was shouting this from the doorway of the house.

"I'd better go," Surya said. He left with his head down, not looking at Hym. Hym stayed there, deflating, watching his would-be friend leave. Surya's father railed at him in their language. "Keat chea kaunobrosa robsa abathmob!"

Surya avoided him after that.

* * *

* * *

"Please don't cry," Hym said.

Surya stopped abruptly. He smeared his face with his hands, palming away the tears. "It's rude to spy."

"I know," said Hym. "That's why I usually don't let anyone see me." He plopped himself down by Surya on the fallen tree.

Surya sniffled and laughed. "Yeah, well, I usually don't let anyone see me crying, either."

"I know," said Hym. "This is the first time I've seen you do that. I didn't know demons *could* cry."

Surya looked at him, taken aback. The color rose on his high cheekbones.

"I'm not a demon," he said angrily.

"If you're not a demon, does that mean I'm not a demon either?" Hym asked, with the tone of someone wishing to make a point.

Surya's face softened. "Of course you're not."

"It's just what my grandfather told me, you know," Hym said.

"Well, he's wrong, ok? You're not a demon, and neither am I," Surya said. He added, almost to himself: "...and you're not an *abathmob* either."

"What's an abathmob?"

"A sorcerer," said Surya.

"Well, what are we, then?"

"We're just people. Same as any of them." He jerked his head irritably toward the village.

"Oh," Hym said, sounding disappointed.

Surya laughed a little. "You really wanted to be different, huh?"

Hym grimaced. "I really *am* different. Always have been."

"You're that weirdo who talks to the trees, aren't you?"

Hym smiled, glad to be recognized. "That's me! Name's Hym."

"Surya," said Surya. "But you already knew that. From spying on me."

Hym nodded. "I wanted to see what I could learn from you."

Surya looked at him curiously. "From me? Why?"

"You're older than me. I thought we might be the same -- or at least, similar."

"Well, we're not the same. Guess you'll have to spy on someone else."

Hym sighed. "No one else in the village is like me either. I've checked."

Surya looked at him again, curiosity dawning slowly into compassion. "You know," he said, "You don't have to be similar to be friends."

"I know! That's what I keep telling them, but they don't listen. They just say 'go back to the forest, strange one. Go be friends with the trees, because we don't want you.'"

Surya smiled. "I'll be your friend. *If* you stop spying on me."

Hym grinned. "Deal," he lied.

* * *

Hym was not a popular young man. With the exception of Surya, he had no living friends. Perhaps his grandparents indulged him too much. He was curious, independent, tactless, and clumsy. He was also energetic and creative, but very lazy. He could not be turned to any useful work, and he spent most of his time in the forest, "learning" from the animals and the trees. As he grew, he became even stranger. He began to compose songs without musical accompaniment, which meant that they could not be danced to, so of course the other villagers disliked and misunderstood them.

The crude tool that Hym's young mind had chosen to use in its attempt to model the universe was language. Hym was not interested in the visible world, which could be easily labeled and made sense of. He was fascinated by the invisible world of impressions, sensations, and emotions. These were things that words could only crudely map. There are some things words cannot say, but Hym discovered that words could sometimes sing these things. His "songs" were feelings wrapped tightly in thoughts and translated carefully into words and rhythms and tones. He did not care that no one

listened to them; he liked to make them. The trees never judged them. The trees had no ears.

Surya cared nothing for poetry or spiritual truths, but he listened patiently to all of Hym's ravings, and, when prompted, offered up his judgment simply. "It's pretty." "I could see that." "I don't know, that sounds silly."

Hym became quite addicted to the company of his new friend, and began staying out late enough to get the both of them into trouble. Surya, for his part, rarely wanted to be home. He made no effort to keep curfew, and for this he was punished harshly.

"You know you're not supposed to be here," Surya said, angrily wiping tears from his eyes.

Hym, abashed, crept out of the bushes and sat with him on the fallen log. He looked sadly at Surya's black eye, the bruise on his cheek, the split in his lip. He could think of nothing to say, and so he said nothing.

"It's not as bad as it looks. He's given me worse," Surya said.

Hym didn't believe this, but still said nothing.

"Look, you'd better go. If he catches you here, he'll treat you the same."

"I don't care."

"I care."

"I wish Shalim would come for him."

"Hym!" Surya said, "Don't say that. You will bring bad luck upon us both."

"I don't care. He hurt you. I wish Shalim would take him away."

"You don't mean that. It's ok. I won't be stuck in his house forever, and when he's old I won't take care of him. He'll just be the village's problem, then."

Hym laughed. "He's a monster. They won't take care of him."

Surya blinked slowly and sighed. "He's not a monster, Hym. He's just a person. Not a very good one, but still."

Hym realized he had upset his friend. "I'm sorry, Surya. It just isn't right. I can't believe a person could be like that."

"People can be even worse," Surya said darkly. "My mother has told me stories."

Hym had a weakness for stories, and Surya knew this. Hym would not let himself be so easily distracted this time, however. "I don't care. He can't treat you like this, and he can't separate us. I won't let him."

Surya looked at Hym, a little confused.

"I know a place," Hym said, suddenly very nervous. "A hidden place, in the woods. We can go there, and be free of them -- even if only for a while."

Surya smiled. "We'll always have to come back before the last bell. You know that, right?"

"I know. But we can go there to be away from them. To be alone. No one can tell us then that we should not be friends."

Surya's mother shouted from the hut. "Surya? Surya, tae anak nowenea?"

"I'd better go," Surya said. "Come here tomorrow and show me the way to your secret place. Come by the sixth bell!"

"I will!" Hym said.

Surya embraced him briefly, his strong arms squeezing tightly. Then he turned and ran back toward the hut.

* * *

Hym lit the torch with a click of flint and steel. As the oil caught, the light bloomed in the darkness, illuminating the smooth limestone walls.

"Come on," Hym said, leading Surya by the hand. As they plunged into the darkness, Surya marveled at the dripping structures of the cave walls. Crystal blooms glistened far above. The tunnel widened before long, opening into a cavernous space. The torch did little to illuminate the gloom, but Hym led Surya on for another hundred feet or so before coming at last to a pile of firewood he had made.

Hym lit the campfire and the light grew, washing away the darkness, flashing on striated walls and a stalactite-dripping ceiling.

"Now we can both be demons," Hym said, with a smile. Surya laughed. Their voices echoed for what seemed like ages, a chorus of "demons...emons...mons..." mingled with Surya's laughter.

Surya dropped the two rabbits he had brought, and began the work of preparing them. Soon the cave smelled of cooking meat, and the echoes of their mutterings and their occasional laughter rang around them in the vast gloom.

Surya's laughter faded, and his eyes stared into the fire. Hym watched the sadness take him, and felt his own heart sinking. He did not know what to say.

Surya looked up at Hym's sigh, and saw the sadness on Hym's features. He slapped Hym gently on the arm. "Thank you," he said, with a large smile.

Hym smiled.

"Rabbit?" Surya asked, pinching off another piece of meat. He held it out. "Watch out, it's hot."

Hym opened his mouth and ate it out of Surya's hand. Surya laughed and jerked his hand away. "You weirdo," he said, but he was still grinning.

As the fire began to die, they drew closer to one another for heat. Neither of them wished to leave this cold darkness, but they knew they would soon have no other choice. The firewood had run out, and the last logs were down to burning coals.

Surya put a heavy arm around Hym's shoulders. "Thank you for today, my friend."

"We'll do this again, as soon as we get the chance."

"I hope so," Surya said, "but even if we never got the chance, I would still be happy with this."

"I wouldn't be."

"You always want more than the world has to give you," said Surya, taking his arm away. "That's your problem."

"The world should change to give me more."

Surya chuckled. "The world doesn't change for just one person."

"Then it's a good thing we're two people."

* * *

The next time they had the chance to both sneak away without being missed, a year had passed. Surya was fifteen now, and his duties in the planting and harvest had increased. His father's health was ailing, and to feed himself and his mother, he had to work harder than ever.

Hym's hands were sweaty as he led the way into the cave. Surya dropped the stag by the firewood, and Hym lit the fire with the torch. Surya seated himself with a grunt. Hym barely recognized his friend -- his growth spurt had come, and he was now a head taller than Hym. Hard work had tanned and strengthened him.

"Thank you for this," Surya said. "It's good to get away."

"Thank you for the stag," Hym said.

Surya had not been beaten by his father since the one argument in which he had shouted the man down and threatened him with a pitchfork. He was now too big to beat, and he was enjoying his newfound freedom. Some of the other young men in the village had befriended him, and some of the young women had expressed interest by one means or another. Surya was an attractive young man, and had now learned how to groom himself properly. Gone was the cloud of unkempt hair; now he kept it short and smooth. His skill as a hunter and trapper had enriched him with furs and skins, and his family had become more prominent in the village because of his efforts. Gone was the sadness which once haunted his eyes, though Hym looked for it diligently. It was frightening, to think he had changed so much. What if they no longer knew one another?

Today, Surya seemed uninterested in Hym's poetry and amateur philosophy. Surya talked of his hunts, of the girls in the village, of the jokes he had heard from the village boys. Hym hated all of it.

They cooked a portion of the stag. While it was cooking, Hym sat silent and listened to his friend speak of things he could not relate to.

"Hey, what's gotten into you?" Surya asked, touching him on the arm. "You seem sad."

Hym looked at him. "Why did you come here today, Surya?"

"To be with you," said Surya. "You're my little buddy."

Hym grimaced. "But we're nothing alike."

"You do not have to be similar, to be friends," said Surya, and smiled.

Hym smiled, but it did not quite reach his eyes. He checked the meat. It was ready, so he pulled it off onto a plate.

"Ooh, tear me off a piece, will you?" Surya said.

Hym did so, and held it out. Surya took it in his hand and ate it. "Oh, that's good. This stag has eaten well."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Surya looked up at him every once in a while. Each time he looked up, his expression became more frustrated. Hym could tell he did not know what to say, but could not help him. Hym did not know what to say either.

After the meal, they sat for a while, both of them staring into the fire with faraway looks in their eyes.

Suddenly, Surya lunged at him, and tackled him to the ground. "Come on, let's wrestle!"

They rolled and struggled in the darkness. Surya was bigger and stronger, and would easily win.

"No!" said Hym, frustration mounting into anger. "Get off me!"

Surya, confused and irritated, released him from the grapple. Hym got to his feet angrily and paced away into the darkness, whirling with a confused inner fire. His ears were burning.

"Hey," Surya said.

Hym ignored him. He knew that Surya could not understand, that Surya would never understand. He himself could not understand it, but there it was. Hym could see the whole story in his head, winding through the years

to come. He could tell that it was a fantasy. He could see the story he desired, and he could see the story that was more likely to occur, and the difference between the two filled him with an unbearable, aching sorrow.

"Hey," Surya said again, getting to his feet. Hym could hear him approaching from behind. "Hey, are you alright? Did I hurt you?"

"No," Hym said, smearing his eye with his palm. "No, I'm not hurt."

"Hey, don't cry. I'm sorry, alright?" Surya's hands were on his shoulders, trying to turn him around.

"You're so stupid sometimes," Hym said, and he turned around and hugged his friend. He did this because he did not want Surya to see his face, to read his thoughts, to guess his pain. He thought that it would make Surya afraid to be around him.

Surya smiled. "Yeah, I know. I hear that a lot from Mom."

Hym chuckled wetly. "She's not wrong about everything, I guess."

"I guess not..."

Hym pulled away. "I don't like wrestling, ok? It's no fun when you always lose."

"Then stop losing, duh."

Hym punched Surya lightly on the chest. It was like punching the earth. Surya laughed. Hym could not help but reflect the light of Surya's smile, and happiness filled him. Beneath it, he still felt the ache of the impossibility.

"Come on," Hym said. "Let's go sit by the fire a little longer."

"Will you tell me more of your poems? That last one you were telling me was pretty good."

"Will you actually listen?"

"If you like."

* * *

Three years after this, when Hym was seventeen, he met me for the first time. On an evening somewhere in the middle of his seventeenth season of Approach, he was wandering in the forest, composing one of his tuneless songs and waiting for the appointed hour when he would meet Surya at the cave. He heard a rushing sound from above, and stopped his composing, and looked up. He happened to look up at the exact moment a shining iron ball the size of a watermelon came hurtling out of the sky in a streak of flames and slammed into his chest.

He died, of course, but he also cushioned my fall.

Upon recovering from the fall and unfurling from the impact site, I discovered his body. At first, I was baffled. Then, I was overjoyed. My conjectures had all been correct! Here was the living being I had predicted: a colony of colonies of bacteria.

I spread out and picked up all the tiny pieces of him, and studied them long enough to realize that for some preposterous reason, they were all degrading. It seemed that each colony of cells had specialized, and that no one colony could exist without the help of all the others. I took a divide-and-conquer approach, and paired my cells with his. My cells kept his alive long enough for me to begin the process of reassembly.

I tried to contact the rest of my body, to let me know that I had landed safely and that my many conjectures had all been correct. The signal rebounded from an unseen barrier, and did not reach my orbiting body. This explained what had happened to the first probe, but it also made me deeply

uneasy. I was cut off from reinforcements, separated from the majority of my power.

It took three days of work and desperate study, but I soon had him pieced together again in more-or-less working condition.

The experience put him into severe shock. There was no other option but to segregate a few of his neurons. It was a crude way to do it, but it successfully uninstalled his memory of the last few hours without causing irreversible damage. A moment later, he shook his head, looked around, and resumed singing his tuneless song as though nothing had happened.

I was enchanted. In my former world, I had never experienced the perception of pressure waves in a gaseous medium. His voice broke the chill silence of the snow-covered forest like a fist through ice. It was the first voice I had ever heard. The complicated stream of language that came from him was — to me, at least — profoundly beautiful.

*“Though the breeze in the trees whispers to me,
It is not your voice
Though the winds and their warmth wrap around me
They are not your arms
And though softly the sunlight kisses me
It is not your lips
And yet
If these things could be, they would be.
If wood could put on flesh to embrace me
Flesh and embrace me it would.”*

From that moment on, I was his and he was mine.

He climbed out of the crater in a daze, mindful of the still-smoking coals — all that remained of the trees blasted down by my impact with the

Inside's surface.

Delirious from the effects of my mental tampering, starving from three days without food, Hym staggered through the sunset snow, his feet winding him between the trees to the most recent place that had been on his mind.

He collapsed just a few feet outside the mouth of the cave. He reached, and crawled, feeling the gnawing weakness in his belly. He gave up and decided to die there in the snow.

"Hym? HYM!?" Surya emerged from the cave, clad in his hunter's gear. He lifted us bodily and carried us into the shelter of the cave. "Oh, Hym, where have you been?"

"I can't... I can't remember..."

Surya crouched down by the fire, and laid Hym on a bed of bear skin. "Gods above, you're freezing. You're chilled to the bone." He got up and stoked the fire, adding wood to the pile.

"How long was I...?" Hym asked.

"Three days," Surya snapped, still throwing wood on the fire. "You were missing for three days. I waited at first, but then I started searching for you. Where in the Midden were you?"

"I... I don't think I was in the Midden..."

Surya stared at him. "You're delirious. You're freezing. Your clothes are wet, we need to get you out of them."

Surya's strong hands worked quickly to strip away Hym's tunic and trousers, despite his feeble protests.

"This too?"

"Yes," said Surya, and stripped the last garment away hastily.

Hym was not embarrassed to be like this in his presence. He was too hungry and cold to be embarrassed, and the flames were warmer this way. The light of the flames revealed Surya's flushed cheeks and wandering eyes -- it seemed he was embarrassed, even if Hym wasn't.

"Do you have food?" Hym asked.

"I-I-I brought meat, yeah. A deer. I'll cook some, I -- I just need to -- hang on a second, I'll be right back." Surya left, abandoning Hym in the darkness with only the flame for company. I felt a growing despair. Did they live in this darkness, with only this flame for company? If so, I was no better off now than when I began.

I grew bored of waiting, and attempted to allow a portion of myself to leave Hym's body, so that it could explore. My body refused to obey.

I realized, after a while, that I was now bound to Hym. I could not leave him without his conscious permission. I thought about speaking to him. I had interpreted the patterns in his brain easily enough, and was now fully capable of speaking his language — or at least, of making him hear a voice speaking in his language. But what would I even say?

Surya returned, bearing the snow-dusted carcass of a deer. He dropped it heavily by the fire and crouched beside it, working quickly with his knife. He skewered pieces of the meat and laid the iron skewers across the flame. As he worked, he glanced over his shoulder occasionally to look at Hym. His look was one of concern, but it was mingled with an almost hungry look that frightened me.

Hym weakly wrapped the bearskin around himself. It was heavy and thick, but he managed it.

Surya sat by the fire, checking the meat. Hym's face was the only part of him not wrapped in bearskin and his eyes glittered as he watched the flame. Surya looked at him occasionally, saying nothing.

"Food's almost ready," he said tensely, after a long time. "Just another minute or two."

Hym began to shiver as the warmth crept into his bones. His shaking was violent enough that Surya looked at him nervously. "You're getting feverish," he said. "Try to stay calm."

"There," he said at last. "It's done. Sit up. You need to sit up to eat. Come on."

Hym struggled and failed to sit up with the stiff bearskin still wrapped around himself. Surya came to his side and lifted him into a sitting position, and sat beside him to prop him up. "Come on," he said. "Eat."

Hym ate. The first bite was ecstasy. Flavor was an entirely new experience for me. There was nothing to compare it to, all prior experiences fell short. It was as if, in that first bite, I had discovered the very meaning of existence. Hym ate quickly, and in silence. Afterwards, he sucked his fingers clean, sighed contentedly, and tried to lay back down again.

Surya stood, letting him lay down, and looked out the entrance of the cave. "The sun has set. We can stay here for the night, I have enough firewood stacked."

Hym nodded sleepily. Surya put another log on the fire. He poked at the flames, stirring the coals with a long stick.

"Hey," Surya said, crouching down in front of us. "I'm glad you're alive."

Hym smiled. Surya laughed a little, still toying with the stick. His eyes could not stay on Hym's face for some reason, and they fell to look at the ground. Hym interpreted this as nervousness or shyness of some kind.

Hym smiled. "Will you sleep too?"

"I only brought the one skin. I wasn't intending to sleep out here, but when you didn't show up... But it's ok, you can sleep first, then I'll sleep and

you can keep watch."

"There's room in here," said Hym.

Surya's face turned a bright, bright red. He stood up. "Oh, yeah. I guess there is." He turned away from us. He undid the stitches at his chest, then crossed his arms and stripped off his tunic, turning it inside-out in the process. He could not feel Hym's eyes watching the way his shoulder blades moved as he untied his belt. He could not see Hym's eyes glittering in the firelight as he stepped out of his boots and removed the last few items. Hym and I both thought that he looked magnificent in the firelight. Lean arms, long legs, well-fed muscle; Hym's eyes wandered freely, shamelessly. The human form is a graceful and intricate one. Surya's, to judge from Hym's estimation, especially so.

"So, er... Coming in? I guess?" Surya said, with a nervous chuckle. Hym opened the bearskin. Surya crept in beside him, at his back, then wrapped the bearskin around them both. Close and warm in the darkness, Surya's strong arms encircled him.

"This is nice," Hym said.

"It is," said Surya. "How are you feeling? Are you still feverish?" His hand gently moved to press against our forehead. "You don't seem feverish."

"I feel happy," Hym said simply. He rolled over in Surya's arms, putting them face to face. "Thank you for dinner," he said.

Surya laughed nervously. His laughter died after a moment or two, struck dead by something in Hym's expression. He looked Hym in the eyes. It seemed he was searching for something -- looking for fear or discomfort or some other emotion. What he saw instead, his eyes soon mirrored, and we saw his eyes fill with calm certainty.

He pressed us close.

That night I discovered new sensations: desire, pleasure, need. Those particular memories, however, are mine and Hym's alone.

In the morning, as the sound of a pair of turtledoves woke them, Hym and Surya lingered in the bearskin.

They said nothing. No words were needed. Their lips and eyes and hands said what they felt, in smiles and looks and by other means. After a quiet breakfast, they ran out of firewood, and they had to return to the village.

They swayed back and forth on the path, jostling against one another whenever an occasion to do so presented itself.

They reached their secret crossroads.

"I must go this way," Surya said.

"And I must go this way," Hym said sadly.

They could not quite bring their fingers to uninterlace.

Hym laughed. Surya laughed.

"Oh!" said Hym, as a worrisome thought took him. "Will you get in trouble? To be gone so long hunting, and catch nothing?"

"I caught something," said Surya, squeezing his hand.

"Well," Hym said, "we'll have to go hunting together next time you go. We can bring something back for them."

"If we have time."

Hym laughed a little. "I don't know what I'm going to tell them."

"Only as much of the truth as you can tell without hurting them."

"You'd better head back first. I'll come in the evening. They will think strange things, otherwise."

"They will think strange things of you, anyway."

Hym laughed. "I know. But I will not have them think strange things of you."

"Let them think what they want to. I wouldn't care."

"I would." Hym kissed his hand. "Go. Make your excuses."

Surya went, looking over his shoulder from time to time. A bend in the road soon took him out of sight.

Hym sighed happily. He continued to stand there, looking the way his friend had gone, for another minute or two. Then he turned and went deeper into the forest, retracing his tracks from the night before. As he went, he composed a tuneless song about a hunter and his secret cave. He knew that none but Surya could ever hear it. I listened to his creative process with interest.

Hym came to the place where he had met me. His jaw fell open.

In the middle of a blasted clearing where singed trees spread their scattered and broken forms across the ground, there was a crater in the snow and earth. The area was silent. No living creatures had survived the blast — save Hym.

This must have been the mouth of Hellegrund, Hym reasoned. He had entered the lower world, and somehow returned to tell the tale. He thanked the fallen trees for their sacrifice.

The villagers, when he showed them this place, believed every word of the tale he spun for them. He told them that the song he had been making had pleased the forest, and the forest had opened the worlds to him. He said that he had forgotten it like a dream, but that the things he had seen would

surely be with him throughout his life, and that the spirits he had met would never forget him.

After this, Hym's strange nature found its footing. His three-day disappearance in the forest was taken as a sign; Nestor and the others believed that he had indeed walked right out of the Midden and wandered, somehow, through the other worlds. This gave spiritual weight and dignity to his oddities, and he was gladly accepted by the village Storyteller as an apprentice. He was given the title "Galdorgalere," which Nestor said was the male version of a Helrynegu.

For the first time in his life, his path was clear to him. He had only to keep moving forward and his life would be an easy and comfortable one. He and Surya would sneak away at every opportunity. Neither of them would ever marry. Yes, his path was laid out for him, and life would be good. There was very little reason to even consider change.

Fate, of course, decided that this was intolerable. During Hym's seventeenth season of Departure, Shalim returned. This time, he took everything.

* * *

AMIC

The darkness around us was infinite and total. The only thing in the universe was his warm hand in mine. I intended to use the darkness to summon a monstrous squid, which would provide an interesting challenge. Hym felt the pressure of the darkness more and more with every moment, until he suddenly found himself suffocating. He gripped my hand, fighting the need to gasp for air. I stopped flying through the dark waters, and turned to him. A light grew in the space between us, illuminating me. In the momentary loss of visibility, I had changed my appearance. I was now a tall man with deep blue skin and silver eyes.

The light made the darkness seem worse. With nothing to compare it to, it had just been an absence of sensation. With the light present, the contrast

made the darkness deeper, and the weight of the waters became simply too much for Hym's faith.

He gasped for air and felt icy water rush into his lungs. He struggled and thrashed, desperately fighting the weight of his wet clothes. The cold burned his skin and numbed his bones. Finally, his fist met what seemed a ceiling of glass. He had found the surface.

The water rippled against the underside of a thick layer of clear ice. Hym beat the ice with his fists, fighting the water resistance desperately. His fists thumped against the ice dully.

Hym could feel the burning numbness taking him, and his heavy clothes pulling him down as his movements slowed. He gasped and choked on the darkness, his hand reaching desperately skyward as he began to sink.

His feet touched the bottom. Death seemed imminent. He felt the pulsing dread of the Shadow, close at hand.

I, meanwhile, found myself in another part of the dream, in a snow-covered forest, by a campfire. Surya was seated there, feeding wood into the flames.

Hym looked at the ice-covered sky. As death began to take him, his fear fell away. Inside him, something — some rage that had always been there, just beneath the surface — sparked to life. He kicked off the ground in a swirl of dust, and swam turgidly toward the surface. He kicked off his boots and tore off his cloak, and with frantic, desperate strength, he reached the ice again. He pressed himself against it. Such was his will that even believing that it was a dream, he managed to make himself intangible.

The feeling of intangibility is unique to dreams. It is one I have personally experienced in the waking world, but one that you, with your solidly-joined bodies, cannot. Hym pushed against the ice, and pushed through the ice. Though he was the one who flowed like a spirit through the solid water, it felt as though the ice was what flowed.

He clambered out of the ice, leaving no hole behind. He flopped onto the surface, rolling over to face the empty sky. The sun was a few minutes from setting, and the heavens were a spectacle of gradient colors. The ring gleamed, a golden arc across the dome. The Aurora flickered dimly.

Hym rolled over painfully and pushed himself to his feet. The ice stretched before him but he saw the shore, and hurried towards it, shivering.

He saw the light of a campfire between the trees, and he staggered towards it through the snow. By the fireside he saw Surya, and he remembered...

In the real world, things had gone differently. Surya had broken the ice with his axe, and pulled him from it.

The dream changed. Surya was standing over him.

"Hym, buddy, you've got to stop walking on the ice."

"I g-guess it was th-thinner than I th-thought."

"That's why you leave the hunting to me," Surya said, and kissed him. Hym clung to him.

"I'm s-s-s-o c-c-c-cold..."

"Funnily enough, that's what most people who fall through the ice say! You're lucky it's still Departure and we've got some sun left." Surya was masking his panic very well. As he was saying this, he was hastily picking Hym up into his arms. He carried Hym to the fire at the lakeside, and laid him out there.

Hym fumbled at his wet clothes, but his fingers felt like cold rubber and he couldn't make them do anything useful. Surya ripped off his boots, dropped to his knees, straddling him, and ripped at the laces of his tunic. Hym struggled out of it until his numb arms got stuck, and Surya pulled it off him. Bare-chested and pale from the cold, Hym wrapped his arms

around himself and dropped back to the bearskin and rolled on his side, towards the fire.

Surya untied Hym's belt, and pulled his trousers off. He kissed Hym's numb foot. Hym drew his bare legs close to his chest and hugged himself into a tight little ball, and Surya wrapped the bearskin around him.

"Come inside," Hym said, shivering.

Surya stood, smoothly drew off his tunic, stepped out of his boots, stripped off his trousers, and stood before him in the snow. His lean body caught the dying light of the early sunset, and his eyes held it like an amber glow. Hym's eyes wandered pleasantly over his friend's form, finding many places to pause in delight. He savored the details of the memory, realizing now that it was one. Thinking of this, of course, made Surya's body shrink and wither, made his cheeks hollow, made the dark rings under his eyes stand out. Hym sighed. The weakened Surya crawled into the fur sadly, and Hym held him instead.

They sat together, Surya staring sadly into the fire, Hym at his back, arms and legs wrapped around him. "I'm sorry, Surya," he said, and he was. He was sorry for a great many things. He was sorry that in the waking world, he and Surya could barely touch. He was sorry that in the waking world, the perfect words to say never came. He was sorry that Surya had suffered, trying to protect him. He was sorry that he had not run away with Surya when they had the chance. He said again: "I'm sorry."

Surya said nothing.

A blast of flame rose above the treetops. We heard the sound of screams.

Surya, strong once more, rose to his feet. He threw on his clothes hastily. "Stay here!"

He ran off, headed back towards the village. In the real world, things had gone differently. They had spent the evening together by the fireside, enjoying one another's company. When the blast of flames had risen above

the trees, Hym had been the one to go first. Surya had begged him: "It is the Heartland, Hym! We cannot save them! We must leave! You must come with me!"

But Hym had been a fool. He had believed that he could reach his grandparents in time, and take them along.

Hym watched Surya go. He stifled a sob. He got to his feet, no longer cold, and sprinted after him. As Hym ran, he expected himself into clothing almost without realizing it. He knew now that this was a dream.

Surya was already breaking from the meadow and plunging into the tall pines. Hym could see him still, in the gloom of the forest, running like the hunter Hym remembered. Hym lifted off the ground and skimmed above it, rapidly accelerating. He flew into the forest and darted between the trees, chasing his hunter. The hunter made it to the edge of the village just as Hym caught up to him. Hym snatched him by the hand.

"Wait, please, you don't have to go — not this time — you don't need to! We can leave this time! We can run away! Come with me, Surya. Surya!"

Surya's eyes had filled with fire. He held Hym's hand limply, his arms slack at his side. Hym turned his head with slowly dawning horror.

The fires raged. The huts were burning. The moment had come.

Hym turned to face the village, throwing his arms out and putting Surya behind him.

Through an alley formed by two burning huts, he could see a portion of the main street of the village.

Something slowly came from the heart of the village, drifting past on the main road. It was Nestor. He had begun to rot, and his eyes stared glassily into space. Nestor was on his back, gliding along the ground as though carried by the currents of an invisible river. He rounded the corner

smoothly, fluttering like a banner in the wind, and glided silently towards us. Other corpses were moving past in the main street now.

Hym took Surya's hand and led him through the alley slowly. He walked past Nestor's drifting body. He stepped into the main street, and turned to look towards the heart of the village.

Corpses were drifting in on the wind like fallen leaves in a river. They flowed down the streets and drifted quietly past us on all sides. Hym walked solemnly through the river of the dead, his eyes fixed on the figure standing in the middle of the village square.

The figure was a towering, broad-shouldered being, wrapped in a black veil that trailed along the ground like smoke. It turned, sensing our gaze upon it, and looked directly at us. Beneath the veil, two eyes burned like candle flames. The veil made their glow into two diamond-shaped patches of light.

"What is that?" asked I, wearing Surya's skin. My voice seemed far too loud in the silence.

"I think it's Shalim," Hym said, seeming annoyed at my presence for the first time. He knew that it was me. In dreams, one person's soul will often come in the form of another.

I could see that something about the monster fascinated him. He wanted to approach it — alone.

"Shalim?" said I. The name filled me — or, more accurately, Amic — with dread and shame.

"The spirit of death. From the legends of my people."

Of course, the legend of Shalim was not unique to Hym's people, and he would have known that if he spoke the language of his captors, or listened to anything they said.

The diamond eyes stared into Hym, lusting; greedy. All the noises in the forest stopped at once, and true silence watched us from all sides. The smell of death clogged and thickened the air: cloying, foul, all too familiar. The long vertical folds of the veil gave an iridescent shimmer as the velvet breath of the monster moved them.

I drew a long, curve-handled blade from my pocket and sprinted toward the monster. Putting both hands on the handle I swept it left-to-right in a great diagonal streak of gleaming metal. My blade cleaved through Shalim, and the black veil collapsed.

I dropped my blade and it disappeared. I turned and began to walk back towards Hym.

"What!?" Hym shouted. "YOU CAN'T WEAR THAT BODY!"

I looked down at myself, amused. "What, this boy? Who is he?"

"It doesn't matter. Wear something else."

"When will you tell me who he is? You cannot run from his memory forever."

The black veil rose behind me like a billow of smoke as the figure of Shalim stood up. Hym knew that Shalim could never die, and so this Shalim could not.

"I can run as long as I want to," Hym said, and reached out a hand. I was jerked towards him by his will. Hym knew that I had allowed him to do this, but he felt powerful to do it anyway. He caught me with one hand, and said: "And take your own advice some time. Never turn your back on a fallen enemy."

My expression darkened. I could not let him see the monster's true form, or all would be lost. I drew my sword once again.

"Do you have one of those for me?"

"Get your own."

"Mine always breaks, though."

"That is only because you expect it to. I cannot help you with that." Upon saying this, I surged forward, skimming the ground like a rocket. My blade painted a stripe of steel through Shalim once again, ripping the veil. Hym had a brief glimpse of an obsidian body beneath the torn veil, then the veil collapsed. A moment later, it rose back to its former shape, as though nothing had happened to it.

"Fine, I don't like swords anyway," Hym said, cracking his knuckles. He reached out his hands and, with only his will, grasped two of the burning huts on either side of the monster. Then he clapped his hands, and the huts leapt off their foundations and hurled themselves together in two tremendous crashes of burning timber and roofing thatch. A shockwave rattled pebbles in the street. Smoke and dust billowed outward from the impact zone.

Hym dusted his hands off. "Amic? You still there?"

I floated through the dust cloud, Surya's hair fluttering in the scattered wind. I drifted lightly down to land beside Hym, my eyes still fixed on the place where the spirit had been. "It's still alive," I said, with growing rage in my voice.

"What? How do you kn--"

I darted forward and slapped the wreckage, which blasted apart. Every timber and tile hung in space, weightless and gently rotating. In the space where the rubble had been, Shalim stood, unharmed.

I hurled myself at the figure, my blade cleaving it from top to bottom. I summoned flame and blasted the figure as it began to rise again, and when it began to rise from that, I decapitated it. The head rolled in midair, the veil flicking over it just long enough for Hym to glimpse the edge of an oddly

familiar obsidian face. Then the head landed between the shoulders again, and Shalim was complete once more.

I roared and redoubled my efforts, even though a part of me knew that it was in vain. So long as Hym expected it to survive, it would survive, and there was nothing I could do to shield him from it. I hoped that if I killed it hard enough, he would believe it to be dead, and the battle would end. Admittedly, I was not thinking very clearly. My own fear, now, was helping to keep the entity alive.

Hym watched in shocked confusion as I threw myself at the apparition again and again. The fear on my face was uncharacteristic enough that for a moment Hym did not join the fight. Together we had seen hundreds of strange monsters and unreal creatures. In all that time, I had never once seemed angry or afraid. Hym was still trying to understand my strange reaction when the shadow creature suddenly pushed back.

Black hooks like crooked mantis legs snaked out from under the veil and came slicing towards me. I leapt backwards and soared into the air, flying halfway up into the canopy of the nearby pines to get away from them.

Shalim turned his yellow gaze, and his hooks rushed at Hym, trailing long streamers of shadow behind them. Hym reacted without thinking, raising his hands and seizing the hooks in his will. They froze in place, held in the grip of his belief. He could feel the hooks writhing and struggling in his grasp.

If you have never experienced telekinesis for yourself, it will be difficult to describe it to you. Although Hym was perfectly aware that the hooks were not in his actual hands, he could feel them as though they were. He could feel the shape, texture, and temperature of the hooks as though they were digging into his own palms.

The monster moaned a single word: “Gilwreath...”

“Kill it!” I shouted, my voice hoarse and desperate.

The black veil fluttered.

“Kill it, before it shows its face!”

* * *

AURORA

Of the period between the destruction of Hym’s village and the first year of his enslavement, Hym’s memories are scarce. I have made certain of that.

He recalls a village in ruins, fire roaring among the huts. It was like a performance of shadow puppets. Shadow-puppet men ran among the shadow-puppet houses with shadow-puppet swords and shadow-puppet pitchforks. Shadow-puppet villagers gave shockingly realistic cries of pain as they were torn apart by shadow-puppet invaders on shadow-puppet horses.

From here, Hym remembers nothing until the ice wall. I, however, remember how Hym’s poor eyes adjusted to the scarlet light of the flames, and took in a horrible sight. There were shapes on the ground like sleeping people, but these sleepers lay in bloody snow that was black in the red light of the flames. They were dead men and women. They filled the streets.

I remember how Hym’s eyes searched the crowd of the dead and found Nestor’s corpse. Nestor’s perspective had been gutted. His beliefs were gone, and the “I” to see through those beliefs was also gone. Only his eyes remained, and his eyes, wide with horror, seemed to stare beyond the walls of the world. Many of the dead men and women stared like Nestor stared. It was as though, in the last moments of their awareness, they had been made to see some horrible secret truth.

Their deaths fascinated me. It was not like watching the bacteria separate into molecules that drifted apart into atoms. I had used this village and these villagers to learn about Hym's species. They had taught me his language,

shown me his music, shared with me his legends and his beliefs. They had shown me history and culture. They had brought me — through Hym — into all the complex workings of the organism they became when they were all together. Their perceptions of the world were horribly flawed, but in spite of the gaping inaccuracies and inadequacies of their shared perspective, they had touched on wisdom from time to time, and their insights about the universe had deepened me. Now the organism they had comprised had been torn apart, and Hym — one of the last remaining cells of that body — had been gathered up by another organism. I knew that what lay ahead could only be digestion.

I feared for my young host, but I could not intervene. Without his permission, I could not even leave his body. I will not relate to you the suffering and frustration that this lack of freedom engendered in me. I could not understand it, yet there it was: I was imprisoned within him, and my will was no longer wholly my own.

"Run, Hym!" Surya shouted. He waved his axe menacingly at the approaching masked horsemen. Hym's feet were frozen in place. He could not run -- he would not survive by himself in the forest anyway.

"Surya!" Hym cried, as the horsemen charged, swinging clubs. Surya caught the first blow with his axe but the second rider came charging past and cracked his skull. Surya fell, a moment which seemed to last a thousand years. Hym stared stupidly at the approaching horsemen. A lasso snared him, pinning his arms to his sides. He was dragged off his feet, away from Surya's crumpled form in the snow. As he was dragged away, he saw a horseman dismount and loom over Surya's body with rope in his hands.

The ice cliffs covered an enormous area of the world I had landed in. They were made of compacted snow and ice, built up over long centuries into a single vast, towering glacier which stretched from the eastern edge of the continent all the way to the western one. Thin ribbons of mountain kept the glacier in check, protecting the last two stretches of land — east and west — that were not covered in ice but in forest.

Hym did not know this the first time he and the other captives looked up and saw them, but on top of the cliffs there lived another group of people, in a place they called the Heartland. It was the Heartlanders who had destroyed Hym's village and taken him from all he had ever known.

It was a high white wall of dazzling ice that greeted Hym when he and the rest of the prisoners came down out of the mountains. As they descended the slope of the mountain and came to the foot of the cliff, they entered its shadow and saw the Father filtered through the glacier. The light transformed the ice into a pale wall of crystalized sky.

Hym remembers the crack in this crystal cliff. It opened onto a narrow canyon that quickly twisted out of sight. This canyon had once been the bed of the Shifting River, which had its head far in the north. The horse-riders entered the canyon in single file, dragging their new slaves behind them. It was the last time Hym's feet felt ground that wasn't freezing.

It was during this time that Hym dreamed of Amic and the Shadow for the first time. His dreams had been vivid and complex ever since we bonded, but now they had two recurring guests as well. Amic's mind was a mystery to me. I knew from the beginning that he was no emanation of Hym's subconscious, and that — although I inhabited him each night — he was not entirely *me*, either. The same was true of the Shadow — she was something beyond us, something hunting us. We kept ahead of her through a combination of luck and skill. Amic's aid in this was invaluable, for it was he who taught Hym how to control the dream world — how to open doors, how to manipulate his beliefs and expectations, how to pass through walls and move objects with only his will.

Although, each night, I inhabit this unfamiliar mind, I have learned little about him. I have often wondered if this other mind I become each night is a form of memory-sharing between myself and my first long-lost probe. That theory would make sense, if not for the fact that I am certain Amic is almost purely human. His memories are not entirely accessible to me, and he is not aware (as far as I can tell) that each night I see the dream through his eyes.

The first time Amic appeared in Hym's dreams, he was not entirely human.

* * *

AMIC

Hym's arms and back ached. He could barely keep his grip upon the cold rock, and the biting winds threatened with every moment that they would tear him from the face of the stone and hurl him to the dark waves below. The Shadow was close at hand, he knew that she would appear at any moment, and that he would soon be fleeing from her once again. For now, his strength held out. He had only to get to the top of the cliff, and she would not be able to reach him. He did not know how he knew this, yet he knew it all the same.

And so he climbed, one aching inch at a time, up the face of the cliff.

At last, after what felt like a lifetime, he flung first one hand, then the other, over the edge of the cliff, and pulled himself painfully up, onto the bleak plateau of grey stone.

A statue stood there -- a granite figure of a cloaked man, staring sadly out to sea. The man had a noble brow, a wide and regal nose, two cliffs of cheekbone, a full and finely-sculpted mouth, a broad, firm chin, and a stern, strong jaw. His eyes were large and heavily lidded, and his brows were drawn together in anger or in pain. His brow-bone was prominent and well-shaped, a rounded bar that gave his skull an almost bull-like strength of character. Hym thought his face was unlike any he had ever seen before, and he examined it for a long time.

The man's cloak had been carved as though ruffled by a calm breeze, and his hood overshadowed his features, casting his eyes into darkness. His hands, hanging relaxed at his sides, were huge and thickly-veined. Hym thought that in life this man might have crushed boulders and uprooted pines for a living.

A curve-handled sword was strapped to his waist, and where his body was not covered by the cloak, he seemed to wear intricately made plate armor. Was he a warrior, perhaps? No, Hym thought; he must have been a king.

Hym felt the old familiar dread prickles down his arms. The Shadow was coming. It was time to run.

As he thought this, the ground behind the statue began to crumble. A line of dirt split open into a crevasse, and as it widened with the grumbling of an earthquake, something -- a wall of red wood -- began to rise from the crack. As it rose higher, Hym saw that it was an ornately carved wooden door: bright red, and framed in black stone. The golden handle gleamed in the sunlight.

The earth ceased its movement and the wind died away. The door awaited him patiently.

Hym feared it, but also felt a strange excitement. The fear of the Shadow behind him gave him no other choice. He approached the door. He reached for the handle, his hands still trembling from the climb.

Then, before he could even touch it, the handle began to turn. The latch clicked. The door began to swing inwards silently. On the other side he saw clear blue skies and endless fields of green.

A being stood in the doorway -- a demon, Hym was sure; a being from the lower world. It was seven feet tall, with skin like a night full of stars and eyes like two swirling nebulae of gold and ruby flame.

"Do not be afraid," said the being. "You must hurry, and come with me."

Hym obeyed. The being shut the door behind him, sealing away the image of the sad stone king and his desolate plateau.

"Who are you?" Hym asked, trying to remember the names of all the demons the Storyteller had told him about.

"I am Amic," lied I. "A friend."

"Where are you taking me?"

"That is up to you," said I, with a smile.

Hym looked out upon the endless vista of rolling green hills. The breeze sent shimmering ripples through the grass.

"Can we stay here?" Hym asked.

"Of course," said I. "But not for very long."

"Why?"

"Because the Shadow will come for us soon, and we cannot let her catch us."

"You know of the Shadow?"

"I have been running from her nearly all my life." I realized as I said this that it was, in a sense, true — but that in the dream, it was also literally true.

"What will happen if she catches us?"

"You know in your heart that it will not end well. I will teach you how to stay out of her reach. I am sorry that it has taken me so long to find you."

"It's alright," Hym said. "I'm just glad you did."

I smiled at him. "Would you like to fly?"

"Oh, more than anything."

"Then I shall teach you. First, you must forget the weight of your body."

"How can I forget that?"

"Simple. Believe that you weigh nothing at all."

"I don't think I can do that."

"For now, I will help you. Here. Take my hand."

Hym had heard many stories about the dangers of shaking hands with demons.

"Are you a demon?" Hym asked.

"Many have called me that, yes. Does that frighten you?"

It did. "No," Hym said, and took my hand.

* * *

AURORA

Amic's appearance is different every night, but he is almost always present. Some nights, he does not show up, and on those nights Hym has many nightmares, and dreams of the Shadow. I have no control over the presence or absence of Amic. There are times when Hym dreams and I am unable to do anything but experience the dream with him. Sometimes, the power of his expectations pushes me out, making the dream more real. At other times, I have no explanation for my forced absence.

On the journey to the Heartland, he and Surya were kept in the same cage. Surya held him close each night, as much for warmth as from the need to protect him. Surya took the loss of everything much more harshly than Hym did. Surya's attachment to the villagers had been stronger than Hym's, and Hym had the added benefit of my aid to help him forget the worst of it. Surya's mind wandered a darkness that Hym could hardly penetrate, but he did his best to make Surya feel less alone.

When the caravan finally reached the Heartland, and came up the ice ramp from the canyon and rolled across the cobbled streets of the strange and alien city, Surya wept. His mother had told him many stories of the cruelty of the Heartlanders, and he believed them all. Most of them were true.

The slaves were sold off in a public auction. Hym gripped Surya's hand and arm as they stood upon the stage, and the slavekeepers tore them away from each other. They were auctioned separately. It was only by chance that they were purchased by the same slavekeeper: Michael. He sensed that their bond would make both of them easier to control, and Surya was big enough to be a challenge. They were the only two people from their village to be housed together. The rest of the young villagers were sold to different masters, and scattered into different slave barns. In the barn where Hym and Surya were kept, they were the last to speak their shared language.

Six months into his first year in the Heartland, Hym met a witch named Claire. To the slaves, she was known as The White Witch -- in several different languages, the name is more impressive.

She knocked on the door of his cage one night and told him her name. She spoke to him in his own language, although her accent was thick. She said she was a witch. He mistrusted her at first, and called her a demon. He was not particularly opposed to speaking with demons, as he had few other options for conversation. He assumed that Amic had sent her, and he was not entirely wrong. She and he talked long into that first night.

Claire visited him regularly, if not frequently, and whenever she did visit she taught him more about the world around him. She taught him more about the Heartland culture, which helped him to get a better sense of what was going on in the city. She described their religion thusly:

“They believe in three gods: the Void, the Father, and the Mother. The Void made both the other two because it was lonely, then the Father fell in love with the Mother, but she couldn’t love him back — he’s the lord of life, and she’s the lady of death. She can’t love anything except herself and her own creations.

"The Mother fled from the Father's advances because the heat of his passion scalded her. When she fled, she tore off his ear, and this she turned into a raft, to float upon the Stinking Sea -- the Void's bladder. She turned the dead ear into clay, and made the disc of the earth from it. There, she created Shalim, and together they created mankind and the first creatures.

"The Father spied on them and, realizing that they had become lovers, destroyed the earth in a fit of rage by throwing down the mountains and blanketing the world in ash and dust. The Mother fled and hid beneath the earth, vowing to begin a new creation in the darkness.

"The Father regretted what he had done, and wept great tears of flame. The first tears washed the earth, and mingled with the ashes of the first creation, and Man rose again from the dust -- but so did Shalim. Shalim vowed to destroy the Father and to free the Mother from her seclusion so that they could be together again.

"The Void counseled the Father to beat his shame, regret, and sorrow into chains, and bind himself to the disc with them, and bring the disc up towards that streak of stars up there," she pointed, knowing Hym couldn't see it through the roof of the barn, "the River of Life, in order to wash off all the ashes of the first creation, so that Man would never die again.

"The Void told the Father to hold in his tears, for there was yet a chance that the Mother would love him. The Void told him that when the time was right, and he could hold his tears no longer, he would weep two solitary tears of great power, which would fall to the earth and baptize two prophets from among the mortals. These two prophets would be the key to opening the Vault of the Mother, and if these two prophets loved the Father, the Mother would love the Father again when her children -- baptized by the flames -- beseeched her to emerge on his behalf. If they did not love the Father, the Mother would emerge with destruction in her hands, and smite the Father and the Void, and rule over all creation."

"Is this a true story?" Hym asked. "Is that what really happened?"

"Not in the slightest, but the true story is much longer and more complicated, and I am not the one best suited to teach it to you."

She taught him how to use a peculiar, apparently-useless magic which involved trapping words and ideas in little marks. She said that in the city she had come from, there were magic boxes in which people trapped more than just words and ideas. In these boxes, she claimed, they could trap the essence of a person, so that long after the person died, someone coming along later could open the box and become friends with their soul. She said that many of the greatest teachers among her people had chosen to make boxes for their own souls before dying, so that after they passed, new pupils could come and learn from them. Hym thought this was a beautiful idea. He asked her if she could make a magic box like this for him to use. She said she would think about it.

Hym learned this magic of the marks very quickly, which made Claire look at him strangely. He told her that it just seemed to make sense to him. He could see that she was suspicious of something, but he wasn't sure what.

Claire said very little about where she was from. She refused to tell him if there really were other witches in the Heartland. When Hym asked her if the witches the Heartland was burning were real witches, she laughed aloud and said: "No, heavens no. For one thing, they're all women. Where I come from, a witch can be a man or a woman or anything in between or beyond, it doesn't matter. And no self-respecting witch would ever let themselves get caught and burned like that."

"What if the soldiers caught them?"

She laughed again. "Any witch who fails to embrace her magic is a dead witch. I have known witches who could kill a hundred men without breaking a sweat. All witches know how to fight."

"Why is that?"

"Because all witches inevitably face the day in which they *must* fight."

“And why is that?”

“Because witches live forever,” Claire said. “Of course.”

“Oh,” Hym said. “Of course.”

When Hym asked Claire if any of the slaves were witches, she said:
“Not yet.”

One day, Hym asked her why she was helping him and the other slaves. “I am looking for someone,” she said. “She is a witch of great power, but she doesn’t know it yet. I know she will be one of the slaves. On the day I find her, I can accomplish my mission and go home.”

“What’s your mission?”

“I can’t tell you that,” she said.

Whenever Hym pushed her to answer this question, she would get up and leave immediately, and without a word. He was always afraid that he had offended her, but she always returned a few nights later. He tried to get at the answer to that question in a hundred different ways, but Claire never budged.

Claire often visited the slave barn to talk to other slaves, and Hym would listen quietly to their conversations. She seemed to speak every language with native fluency. She taught few of the other slaves the magic of the marks, and few of the other slaves seemed to be interested in talking with her. She made a point to befriend Surya, since he could understand our conversations anyway. Surya was often included in the lessons, although he struggled more with the magic of the marks. Claire said that this was alright, and that the struggle itself was noble and good.

"Some trees bear fruit easily," she said, "and others must fight to bring even a single fruit to ripeness. There are many things which must be just right, for a tree to bear with ease. The soil and the water must be good, the sun must be strong, but not too strong, and the tree must have many

uninterrupted years of healthy growth. The good gardener knows that the right plant must be planted in the right place at the right time. The tree which struggles to survive even when conditions are not right is the nobler tree. All the same, perhaps your strength is in other areas? There is no shame in that."

Hym liked that she tried to include Surya, but he was also frustrated by Surya's slowness in grasping the magic of the marks, and by his lack of interest in Claire's teachings.

"She is trying to help us," Hym argued.

"No one can help us," Surya said. "We died when we were taken into the canyon. Our dead bodies do their work, and someday our souls will escape these rotting corpses and go on to Hellegrund or Elysium."

"You will go to Elysium," Hym said. "I am sure of this."

"Thank you, Hym," said Surya.

"You will be reborn as a bear," said Hym. "I am sure of this, too."

"I would like that. When I am a bear, I will try to find you."

"When you are a bear, I think I will be a tree."

"Bears love trees. They always know how to scratch the itch..."

"Are you itching, Surya?"

"With every waking moment, Hym."

"Come to the crack. I will see if I can scratch you."

Over the course of his long years in the Heartland, Hym became a witness to more and more injustice. He saw slavekeepers beat a twelve-year old slave to death for accidentally causing a passing man to trip. He saw

slaves stripped, bound, and tortured with branding irons to amuse women that the slave-keepers wished to woo. He saw a group of slaves made to grovel and beg and fight one another for their food, as entertainment for a bored slavekeeper. He saw male and female slaves reach the age of twenty-five and get dragged off — sometimes peacefully, sometimes kicking and screaming — to be taken for the Choice: death, or purification. The male slaves went to the House of Manhood and never returned, but Claire told him that female slaves were given a different Choice; they were not taken to the house of Womanhood, but to another barn where they would be made to bear children with the strongest and most obedient of the male slaves. The children would be taken as slaves the minute they were weaned off their mothers.

Each of these injustices festered in Hym's mind like an open wound. The memories were raw and painful no matter how many times he went over them.

The cruelest part of his enslavement was this: that no matter what he said, no matter what he did, no matter what he thought, no matter what he felt, nothing changed. The world did not react to him. He was paralyzed and muted, stripped of even the semblance of a soul. When the Heartlanders looked at him, they did not see him. They saw a small and scrawny shadehaired ape, shackled and pathetic, dirty and sad. It was worse than that, though — they would have had pity for an ape. They had none for a slave.

Hym had been a kleptomaniac even before coming to the Heartland, and the Heartland was not enough to change him. Seeing the brutal ways of the Heartland only made Hym steal more and more boldly. Soon he was reaching into people's pockets for trinkets. He became light-fingered and swift. His victims never noticed.

* * *

AMIC

Hym flew up above the village and looked around, expecting to see something heavy nearby. He saw a huge fallen pine resting in the long grass. He reached out with one hand, expecting the fallen tree to bend to his will. Some rational part of his mind knew that it would be very heavy and would therefore take some effort to move, and this — against his will — limited him. The log lifted sluggishly out of the dirt, but hardly moved at all.

I dropped like a boulder, my sword cleaving through air and monster and into the earth. For a moment, Shalim was split in half, and the veil lifted slightly, and Hym saw a set of sculpted lips and a strong jaw — all void-black — beneath.

“Gilwreath,” the demon moaned again.

Hym made a fist and chose to remember that the fallen tree was only as difficult to move as he believed it to be. The fallen tree lifted from the earth. Hym threw his fist forward, propelling the log with all the force of his will. It rocketed through the air, ploughing through everything in its path, including several burning huts. I leapt, soaring into the air just in time for the log to sweep through the space I had just been standing in. The log continued on its path, slammed into Shalim, and carried him away. It crashed through the huts and ploughed through the trees until it was out of sight.

Hym landed. I landed beside him and planted a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you,” I said. “It is gone now.” I was confused and emotional, and neither Hym nor I could quite fathom why. Amic's true thoughts were, for the moment, sealed away from me. For his own part, Hym seemed curiously bereaved, as though an important opportunity had been snatched away.

We stood silently together among the ruined huts for what seemed like a very long time. Hym was staring into the distance as though lost in memory. I was lost in memory and fear. That had been far too close. A moment more, and Hym would have seen the face of Shalim, and learned the truth.

We should have been celebrating the way we usually did when we had defeated some nightmare creature, but this victory left both of us somber and thoughtful.

Hym's mind was always circling the edge of a pit of dark memories, and his brooding now brought him too close. The forest seemed to darken. At the corners of my awareness, I sensed that we were being watched. Tall things that were not trees stood among the trees, but we were only half-aware of them.

Thunder boomed over the village and we looked up to see pillowy black clouds smother the sky.

Rain came down, hissing on the leaves of all the trees. The forest danced in the wind and rain, and the moist shimmer of flashing pine leaves made some deep and forgotten piece of Hym's animal brain begin to fear. I felt it too.

Something crunched nearby. Hym whipped around, but no one was there. I stood statue-still, not even breathing. "Be ready," I whispered. It was not the Shadow. Hym's own fear was twisting the dream.

Through the darkness came a staggering shadow, the black shape of a man. It walked with a crooked limp, and metal rattled and groaned as it approached. Lightning flashed and Hym saw, blue in the electric glare: the contorted face, the snarling features, the matted black hair, the hating, lusting eyes. It was Michael. The lightning died and shadows closed him up again. Thunder boomed above.

"Help!" Hym yelled.

Michael lunged, gnarled hands clawing the air. Hym reached out instinctively and tried to exert his will and push the monster-man away, but, as often happens in dreams, his power failed him just when he needed it most — because he feared it would.

I swept past him, long sword glinting; a silver line in the darkness. Michael did not flinch as my sword passed through his body. Michael began to laugh. He started to speak and the words which tumbled rotten from his throat made no sense. Hym did not understand his language in real life, so the dream-figure could only approximate the sounds.

Hym had noticed out of the corner of his eye that there were strange tall shapes around us now, but he had not understood what they were. Part of him had thought they were trees. He recognized them suddenly, and panic stabbed him in the heart. They were Michael's slavekeepers, but they were now hundreds of feet tall. They reached down with huge, grasping hands, and Hym saw their grinning teeth although their eyes were lost in shadow.

"You're keeping them alive!" I yelled, slashing through Michael again.

Hym tried to move or speak, but his limbs were paralyzed and his voice no longer worked. The fear was too real, too immediate. He could not get past it. Some deep part of him had forgotten that he was dreaming.

"HYM!" I, in Surya's body, yelled. One of the giant slavekeepers had grabbed me and was now lifting me off the ground. "The more you fear them, the worse they become! They're NOT REAL!"

* * *

AURORA

Hym woke. He lay in the straw, cold sweat pricking our skin. He shook himself.

There was a commotion nearby. He went to the slit and watched as Michael and his slavekeepers dragged Surya from his pen. Hym felt a shout in his throat, but there were no words in it. All he could do was swallow it back down into his belly, where it fluttered, gasped, died, and soured.

Surya was limping on his bandaged leg, which was dark with blood now. They had left him almost too long and his frostbitten foot had begun to die.

At first Hym thought they were going to make him walk all the way to the House of Manhood, but Gideon stooped and picked him up like a child. Then the slavekeepers turned and left the barn. Surya cast a final look behind himself, his eyes searching for ours in the darkness. Then he was snatched away.

Michael paused for a moment, framed by the doorway, a crooked shadow in the falling snow. He held the lantern up. He saw the glint of Hym's eyes in the slit, and for a long time their stares pushed at each other. Then, with a wicked smile, he turned and left, closing the barn door with a rattle and thump.

Hym fell back as though suddenly dropped. He landed so heavily in the straw that it jostled the lump in his throat. His vision blurred and burned.

He closed the door of his heart and strangled his emotion. The grip of his cold acceptance was strong, and the emotion died without much of a struggle. This was life, and no feeling could change it.

All he was left with was a hollow ache and a vacant stare. His tears dried before they could fall, and the tightness in his throat soon eased as well.

Within him, I curled up hopelessly, cradling my impotent frustration, and tried once again — uselessly as always — to contact the rest of me. Once again, the signal rebounded without reaching my orbiting body.

In that moment, we were both alone.

* * *

“...I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close.”

— PABLO NERUDA



V

THE SUMMONING

AURORA

Feeling drained and empty was the closest thing to peace he could achieve that night, and when he achieved it he curled up and closed his eyes and tried not to think anymore. It was surprisingly easy.

The next morning, Hym and Iblis and two other slaves were again assigned to sweep the circle. They were short one member — Surya — and the snow was heavier than usual, and Hym had not slept well. They had to work much harder than before. It did not help that Hym's mind was not on his task. He could hardly keep our eyes off the House of Manhood. He knew Surya was behind those walls, behind one of those curtained and shuttered windows — but which one? It wouldn't matter anyway, he would still be powerless, but at least he would know. Then it would not feel so much as though Surya had simply vanished. Even now, Surya might have been making the Choice. Even now, he might have been dying. He might already have died.

We were not done by the appointed hour, and that delayed the witch burning. People yelled and threw things at us and still we had to work until the circle was complete, and when it was done Michael pulled us into an alley, selected one of us “at random,” as was his right, and gave this poor slave fifteen lashes with a long whip of braided leather. The lash split the

skin of the poor young man's back, carving open wounds that burned and stung in the cold. The young man he had selected was, of course, Hym.

After his lashing, the slavekeepers dragged him back to the barn and threw him facedown and shirtless into the straw. The hours of agony dripped away minute by minute, and eventually the other slaves were returned to their pens around him. Iblis tried to comfort him through the crack in the wall, but words cannot heal everything. Eventually, she and the other slaves had to sleep, and in the midst of their snores Hym felt more alone and miserable than ever. He could not sleep. The pain in his back was relentless, and he lay in the straw, praying for death. Shalim refused to come.

The door of the barn creaked open. Hym was afraid at first, but by now he knew the sound of Claire's stealthy feet.

Claire crept across the barn to his cage door and quietly fiddled with the lock. The lock clicked, and the latch squeaked, and the little gate opened. Claire stepped into our cell.

He was in too much pain to try and make a run for it. Even if he had been healthy, he would not have run. He was deep in a city full of people who would gladly have tortured or killed him — or worse — even if he did make it out of our little cage. The thought made him realize how trapped he really was. Such was his condition that this added misery hardly registered.

Claire crouched beside us in the straw and we heard her uncork a small bottle. Hym said nothing. She pulled back our blanket to look at the cuts. She hissed sympathetically.

"They got you good," she whispered. Hym listened to the sound of her hands rubbing together and looked over our shoulder to watch. She was still wearing the white fur veil that the women of the Heartland wore, but she had opened the stitching on the sleeves to let her hands out, and Hym watched her strong pale hands work on one another, smearing each other with some kind of transparent cream. It had a pungent odor.

“To prevent infection,” she whispered, to answer Hym’s curious gaze.

Hym was unfamiliar with the word. “What?”

“To stop evil spirits from poisoning your body.”

“Oh.”

“Now hold still, this will hurt.”

She cleaned our wounds carefully with something soft and white. It did not hurt as badly as Hym anticipated.

"They took Surya today," Hym said. "For the Choice."

"I know," said Claire.

"He's never coming back."

"I know," said Claire.

"That hurts more than this..."

"I could be rougher, if you would prefer."

Hym chuckled weakly. "No, that's not what I meant."

Claire paused. She dug in her bag for a moment or two with the sound of clinking bottles. Hym heard her uncork something and pour out two small drinks. She placed a clay cup of amber liquid before him.

"Among my people, we make a small self-sacrifice, when one of our companions is taken from us. This is a mild poison. We drink it, and the pain it brings as it kills a tiny piece of us is a piece of ourselves that we send to our friend."

"Can I have the whole bottle?"

Claire chuckled. "Some people try that, but it makes them no happier. This is grief distilled. Drink it, and let your grief be merely in the body for a while. It is not good to have too much grief in the mind. You must keep the body strong, so that it can help with the weight of your mind. The two are companions who must always watch over one another, and it is not good to let one mistreat the other. For this reason, you can ask the body to make a small sacrifice for you. The body is always ready to sacrifice for the love of the mind. You must respect that love, and ask for only the smallest of sacrifices."

"From my heart to Surya, then," said Hym, taking the cup. "I suppose, in a way, I knew he would choose Death."

"What do you mean?"

"For his Choice. Death or Cleansing. He would choose Death. As I will choose."

"You are wise beyond your meager years."

"I'm twenty-four," said Hym, bristling slightly. Thoughtfully, he added: "Just one more year in Hellegrund."

He pushed himself painfully into a sitting position. "Will you drink with me?"

"I will."

He raised our tiny glass of poison. "To Surya."

"To Surya."

We drank. The poison was like liquid fire, and it burned all the way through the lump in our throat. Somehow it made the tears feel stronger,

like fire instead of water. Hym immediately wanted more of the poison. He felt the heat of the fire in our face.

"This tastes a lot like Firewater," said Hym.

"Your people made that from corn, if I am not mistaken?"

"How did you know?"

"I visited your village a few centuries ago. They were doing it then, too."

"You're... You're the *Eallhwite Helrynegu*."

"Guilty as charged."

"You -- you're a *legend*. You saved my people from starvation!"

"And from many other things as well. It has been interesting to see how my original teachings have transformed."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me, Hym. Where do the legends say Hellegrunde is?"

"They say that to get there you must take the road beyond the crack in the ice, into the wasteland. They told me it meant the darkness of an ignoble death, and the path of decay."

Claire chuckled. "And where do the legends say Elysium is?"

"They say that one must follow the light to the secret road which leads beyond the wastes of ice, through mountains and jungles, across a sea of sand, to the Gate of Mirrors. They told me this meant that to get there, one needed the light of a noble death, to guide their way past sorrow and joy, to the true equilibrium of the soul, so that when one is faced with the Gate of Mirrors, the reflection of their soul will be them as they truly are. Only then can the soul escape the cycle of reincarnation. If the image in the mirror is

anything other than your true form, standing alone, you become the image in the mirror, and you are sent back to live again in that form. If others are in the mirror with you when you look into it, your soul will reincarnate where its path can intersect with theirs."

"Elysium is a real place. It is where I was born. We witches have another name for it: *Witchaven*."

"*Witchaven*?" said Hym. "I would like to go there someday."

"Some day you may," said Claire. "Just possibly..."

"So when you warned them about Hellegrund, you were really telling them about... The Heartland?"

"Yes," said Claire.

"Surya made fun of me for calling this place Hellegrund."

"To him, it must have seemed the height of fancy. Legends are not meant to walk among us, nor are we meant to walk among them. Lie back down now, I'm not quite done with you."

Hym laid us down again. Claire continued to gently clean our wounds.

Hym could tell Claire wasn't saying something. "What is it?" He asked.

"I suppose it would be wrong at this point to allow you to believe an untruth. Your friend is still alive."

"What?"

"He was taken to the House of Manhood this morning. I witnessed it with my own eyes."

"That's just where they make the Choice."

"Not so. They make the Choice in the Spire, at the court of the Shepherd. If they choose Death, they never see the inside of the House of Manhood. If they saw it before the Choice, many more of them would choose Death instead."

Hym had a beautiful idea. "Claire..."

"Yes, Hym?"

"Can you make me a knife I could conceal? One dipped in the deadliest poison known to witches. If I can slip my bonds when I am in front of the Shepherd, there's a chance I can kill him."

"I will see what I can do," Claire said, with a slight laugh.

When she was done, she opened another clay bottle and poured something thick and strangely cooling on the wound, and Hym felt our pain ease for the first time in hours.

"Claire?" He asked. "Or should I call you Eallhwíte?"

"Claire will do. It is my true name. It means: 'Bright and Clear.'"

"I don't know what my name means. It is the last thing my mother said to my grandparents, before she died."

"Who was your mother?" Claire asked, with interest.

"I don't really know. They claimed she was a Vietnamesisch Helrynegu. She came to the village during the darkest, coldest Absence in living memory," Hym had to pause for a moment as the fact that this was now *dead* memory sank in. "She had a baby wrapped in furs. She was wounded with arrows. She made it to my grandparents' porch before she collapsed. There was nothing anyone could do for her. She died the next morning, in my grandfather's hut — but not before naming me. Her accent was very thick, and she struggled with the words. She said: 'Waré. Waré. *Waré for*

Hym. ' Then she died. I don't think she really was a Helrynegu, because you said they live forever."

Claire seemed to think about this for a while. She laughed a little.

"What?"

"It is nothing," said Claire. "And Witches may live forever, but they can still be killed. Our magic is not so mighty as to bring back the dead. Not yet, anyway."

Hym sighed. He thought for a while. The cooling effects of Claire's balm were potent. "What is Witchaven like?"

Claire thought for a moment before answering. "It is the place where people live as they were meant to live. It is the place where people are free. The people there come in every color and form, and change both color and form at will. They practice art the like of which the Heartland can only dream. They live in ten thousand palaces, each more beautiful than the last. Their magics shape the world, and guard the last few pieces of the world before this one. There, no one is ever hungry, and no one is ever sick. The people there live forever, so long as they are not slain, and do you know what they do with that time?"

"No," said Hym.

"They waste it. They waste it freely, on frivolous pursuits. They create entertainment in a million new forms. They explore the laws of reality, and bind them up into useful magics. They have lived so long in that crystal prison that I do not think they will ever emerge to change the world."

"That sounds nice," said Hym. "Is that why they don't want to fight the Heartland? I wouldn't want to fight the Heartland, if I were living in a comfortable palace."

Claire sighed. "It does sound nice, does it not?"

"It does," said Hym dreamily.

"The Heartland has long plotted the destruction of Witchaven, and someday, if Witchaven does not act first, the Heartland's plans will succeed."

"You think Witchaven should destroy the Heartland?"

"I think the Shepherd's continued existence is a sin upon the soul of every Witch who does not try to kill him."

"That sounds very serious."

"It is. I am considered something of a fanatic, by my fellows. It is why I am here, and they are there. Comfort breeds cowardice. Security makes fear impotent. They have forgotten the fire."

Hym, thinking of the witch-burnings, said: "I wish I could forget the fire too..."

Claire sighed again. She opened a third clay bottle and told him to sit up and take a small drink of it.

"This will help with the pain," she said.

Hym looked at the bottle. He was comfortable now, and did not want to sit up. His back still hurt very much.

He sat up painfully. He took the bottle and took a small swig. It tasted like nothing in particular, although it had a powerful scent of mushrooms. He swallowed.

"Good," she said. "Now, lie down and get some rest. They won't make you work tomorrow, but they will want you back on your feet by the next day."

“But if I don’t work tomorrow, my crew will be even more shorthanded,” Hym said.

“I know,” she said. “I’m afraid there’s nothing you or I can do about that.”

“But someone else will get whipped. Will you help them, too?”

“They won’t whip another. Michael has lost enough face today. He will likely borrow a slave from another barn. Sleep now. Dream.” She began to leave.

She hesitated in the doorway, and looked over her shoulder. She said:

"Dream of Shalim."

Then she shut the gate of our cell behind herself. She wiggled a finger through the slit to say goodnight, then she was gone, a white ghost in the snow.

Hym found it very difficult to keep his eyes open.

* * *

Hym was alone in his cage, lying on his back and staring up at the darkness. After a long time, this seemed strange to him. He wondered why it felt strange, and could not come to an answer. He was in those last few minutes before the slavekeepers would burst through the door, and the dread he felt stretched those minutes out like taffy. They were taking even longer than usual, today.

Suddenly, Hym remembered that his back was injured, and that he should not be lying on it. As soon as he remembered this, he realized that he was dreaming.

The walls began to shake. Dust fell from the rafters.

Hym stood and spread his arms, wishing for freedom. The walls of the cage blew apart, the barn exploded, and the whole of the Glacier from the eastern mountains to the western mountains fractured like glass. Hym fell through clear morning air, his eyes on the radiance of the Father's palace. He could feel the sun's light on his skin, and he held onto that first burst of joy that always accompanies a sudden wash of lucidity. He knew that he was safe, no matter how far he fell.

Here I experienced a moment of extreme disorientation. This was the first time I had entered his dreams without becoming Amic. I remained Aurora, and Aurora did not know how to manifest in the dream world. This strange condition must have had something to do with Claire's drug.

Hym found himself standing in a grassy plain marred by patches of mossy rubble. Hym knew before he recognized any particular monument that this was the ruins of the Heartland. The sky was bright and clear above the ruined city, and he stood in the overgrown street and looked out across the squares of rubble, feeling something like peace.

This was the most vivid dream he had ever had, which probably had something to do with Claire's magic. As he walked through the ruined streets, looking for the Circle and the Tower, He reached out to savor the textures: the tickling moss, the chill of the dew, the cold, crisp life in the greenery.

He rounded a corner and found himself facing the destroyed Cliff and the ruined circle at its base. The Cliff was a hill of broken stone, but Hym was wary of the darkness in the cracks between the blocks.

He approached the cracked circle and stared at the ominous iron pole, now red-rusted with time.

While he looked at the pole, the sky behind it darkened suddenly as though a storm had blotted out the sun. Stars bloomed in the gathering darkness and Hym watched, spellbound, as the pole began to change. The tip of the pole turned shiny and black, and this inky sheen spread in a slow-moving wave, travelling down the length of the pillar and banishing the red

rust. When it reached the ground at the base of the pillar, Hym watched as the wave spread like a slow ripple, healing the cracks in the stone, sharpening the carvings, undoing centuries of erosion.

Now it was night, and torches burned throughout the city. Hym looked up and saw black clouds of smoke, their bellies bloody with firelight.

Death was here, and waiting.

Hym walked slowly as he moved through the ruins, afraid at every turn that he would round the corner and walk right into Shalim's dark, silky veil.

It happened on the third corner. He backed away with a horrified cry.

"What do you want?" he yelled, then immediately felt that this was a silly question to ask the spirit of death.

Shalim did not answer. For a long time they stood facing one another. The soft veil fluttered on some otherworldly midnight breeze and Shalim's diamond-shaped yellow eyes burned through the darkness. A smell like incense and cold decay wafted over us.

Shalim extended a hand. Hym was paralyzed, unable to resist. Shalim reached into Hym's chest and plucked a string deep inside Hym's body. A sad, discordant, broken note rang out. Shalim turned his clawed hand on himself, and reached into his own breast, and plucked a similar string. The notes rang in harmony, and as the two notes slowly faded, Hym felt his fear fade with them.

Hym felt a strange compassion for this being of darkness, and his curiosity swelled. He had to know what hid behind the veil.

He stepped forward without realizing he was doing so. He looked up into the diamond-shaped eyes of Shalim, and the strange, sad nobility in those yellow eyes seduced him.

"Are you here for me?" Hym asked, very softly.

Shalim shook his head side to side very slowly, and laid a bony hand on Hym's shoulder.

"Why haven't you taken me, yet?" Hym asked, feeling suddenly, desperately alone. His voice was choked with tears. "I have prayed for death every day."

Shalim did not answer. He turned, and began to walk away, headed out into the ruins. To his broad back, Hym shouted: "Wait!"

Shalim did not pause.

"Please!" Hym yelled.

"Shalim!" Hym cried, as the creature rounded the corner and vanished out of sight. Then Hym was alone in the darkness once more.

"Shalim, come back...!" Hym moaned, as he slumped to his knees.

I wanted to enter the dream. I wanted to press myself upon the darkness and manifest beside him, and hold him so that he would not weep. The dream kept me out.

"I hear you," said a voice like warm rain. Hym froze, chills pulsing down his arms. He rose to his feet and turned slowly around.

He found himself face to face with the tallest, most beautiful, most powerfully-built man he had ever seen. His features were strong, noble, and serene, and his skin was as black as the void -- blacker than the skin of any Ahtés, blacker than ink, blacker than a moonless night. Swirling, ring-bright designs traced across the man's muscles and bones. The designs seemed to change whenever Hym was not looking directly at them. The whites of the man's eyeballs were black as ink, and from these two inky pools his yellow irises glinted like a pair of gold rings. His eyebrows and eyelashes were luminescent white. The man seemed to look right through us.

“Take me,” Hym begged, and threw his arms around the man’s powerful frame. His skin was as warm as a seat before the hearth, and as smooth as curling incense smoke. He smelled of fire and iron, of earth after rain, of good clay and dark wood.

The ink-skinned man chuckled in a voice as deep as distant thunder, and gave us a smile that radiated sympathy. “I am deeply sorry, Hym. Know that it was not my will to wait. Show me where you are, now.”

Hym looked up into his eyes, sudden fear blooming in his heart. “What?”

“Show me where you are.”

“I’m in the slave barn,” Hym said, with trepidation.

“There are hundreds of slave barns,” Shalim said, and a red door began to appear behind him. “This door will take us to yours, if you believe it will.”

Hym tried to believe. Shalim opened the door, and together we stepped through. Hym’s eyes adjusted slowly to the total darkness.

We were standing in his little cage, in the barn, looking down at himself asleep in the straw.

The door to the cage opened of its own accord and Hym followed Shalim through it. Shalim placed his hands on the door of the barn and rolled it back, opening the gateway onto the snow.

“Come,” said Shalim, reaching for us. “We must get our bearings.”

Hym took his warm hand, and Shalim led us out into the snow. Shalim’s hand was huge and heavy and thickly veined, but he held ours like someone might hold a newborn kitten. The gentleness of his strength was somehow almost painful, like a mercy undeserved. We saw the lamp post on the

corner and Shalim walked us towards it. At the corner, we paused, and looked left and right.

“I see,” said Shalim, looking towards the distant Cliff. “A little farther, now.”

We walked up the street to the corner of the main avenue, and turned to our right, towards the Cliff and the circle and the palaces.

“Very good,” said Shalim. “That is enough to work with.”

He turned back to us, and took us by the shoulders, and looked deep into our eyes. He said: “There is danger ahead. You must keep out of the Shadow’s lair, and Amic will not be there to help you tonight. You are more powerful than you realize. Trust yourself, Hym, and do not let the Shadow take you. Even if she does, I will still find you. I am coming for you. I am going to take you away forever. You will never suffer another night in the Heartland. This is my oath to you.”

Hym looked up into the golden eyes, searching for truth. The golden eyes met his gaze with calm and utter certainty. Shalim stepped back, out of the embrace. “There is just one other thing, Hym. If, along the journey, you should happen to see the inside of a mask, do not forget to spit.”

Then the new Shalim was gone, as though he had never quite existed. The dream world changed, and for a moment we were flying over the ruins of the Heartland, looking down on the destruction Shalim had wrought. Hym felt an awful loneliness. As I could not enter this dream, Amic was nowhere to be found. Without the anchor of his friend’s lucidity, Hym soon slipped into deeper dreaming, and lost control, and believed in what he saw.

Very suddenly, he found himself sitting in front of a large mirror, watching as dark strands of strangling vine sprouted from his head. The vines grew longer and longer, weighing him down as they curled and hung around his shoulders. He could feel them feeding off him, greedily gaining weight as they drained him of life. He could feel himself crushed and suffocated beneath the mass of the expanding leaves. He could see his flesh

dessicating, his cheeks hollowing, his eye sockets darkening. His skin began to split as it was stretched over the bone, and he saw the white of his own skull beneath the shredded tissue.

A pair of small scissors lay on the nightstand where the mirror was, and he took them and attacked the vines. Soon he was in a sobbing panic, snipping madly at the leaves with the scissors and tearing at them with his hands. His hands were weak, his fingers fumbled, his arms shook. No matter how much he cut off, the vines grew faster, thicker, riper and richer with each passing second. They bloomed with little white flowers. His arms failed him. He felt the last of his strength ebb away, devoured by the vines. Now in the mirror he saw only a small hill of fountaining greenery. As the vines moved in their growth, he glimpsed himself beneath them: nothing more than a grinning skull. As he watched, his skull was torn apart by growing roots. The vines covered his remains, and pooled across the floor.

The next dream was worse.

He was in a jungle. The night sky far overhead was cracked by the naked twigs of the canopy, and the long twisting bodies of the trees around him were smooth, bone-white wood. Small skeletons stood out white among the damp dead leaves of the forest floor. The place smelled of damp and mold and rot and death. He was in a bad place, and knew it in his gut. He tried to creep through to safer ground, but his movement disturbed the forest.

He heard the tickling sound of insect feet.

Out of millions of holes in all the dead trees, there swarmed an army of termites. They came swarming down the trunks of the trees, a current of gleaming amber insects. They hissed like cicadas as they came for him, and soon the sound was a roar among the trees. As the amber mass of the termite swarm moved through them, the dead leaves and bones on the forest floor began to move as though floating on water. The forest floor flowed towards him from all directions.

Without thinking about it, he tried to fly and managed to get himself off the ground, but already some of them had reached him from behind and he could feel them crawling all over his body, looking for places to bite. He flew through the forest as fast as he could, trying to bat them off with his hands as he went, but it seemed like the more he swatted away, the larger the remaining ones grew. In the end he had to use both hands to wrestle with the final terrier-sized termite. Mandibles and claws gnashed and thrashed in his arms. He fought to keep the rock-hard, lunging carapace away from his body. With a final heave, he threw it down. Its impact with the earth made an exquisite sound.

Somehow he flew far enough and fast enough that he left the jungle behind. He found himself soaring through a peaceful midnight sky over an endless ocean of dark water. The stars, his only light, washed the world into silvered shades of blue.

Tall spires appeared on the horizon and he floated between them, allowing them to pass by on either side. They were marble pillars at first, but the more of them he flew past, the more they changed. They became wood, and grew long, straight branches, and unfurled pale sails. Soon, with great rushes of rising foam, ships emerged from beneath the waves, and these poles were their masts. An endless line of these ships ran all the way to the horizon, and the more of them he flew through the more alive they became. Soon he could see little shapes walking around, far below, on their decks, and small lanterns in small shadow-hands. Their shouts were whispers from so far above.

Then, and all at once, he was in the air above a city of white stone. The ships bobbed in the harbor. Crowds of screaming people were pouring into the ships, and Hym looked and saw the reason: the city was burning, and under attack. Swarming down the high walls of the city he saw black creeping creatures.

He felt a familiar sense of dread fill him, but he had at this point forgotten that he was dreaming.

These black creatures were the Shadow's vanguard. He saw them crawling down the high wall of the city, leaping from rooftop to rooftop among the houses by the harbor. They approached with the same unstoppable feeling of an ocean wave.

He saw them more closely now. They looked like human beings with backwards knees, and hands instead of feet. The fingers of all four hands were long and sharply pointed -- almost bladed. They wore on their heads strange, elongated, pyramidal helmets, which concealed all their features save one. Their long, doglike snouts extended from under the helmets, and twisted like snakes as they sniffed the air. They had no visible eyes, mouths, or ears.

As they approached, Hym felt a growing sense of dread in his chest. They were coming for the people who were heading for the boats, and although Hym knew in some dim and distant way that these people were not real and that he had no reason to protect them, in his current emotional state he still felt compelled to try. He wanted to fight something, to hurt something, to break some representation of his oppressors. He dropped into the street between the crowd and the oncoming shadow beasts.

As though springing a trap, every one of the shadow beasts immediately turned in its path and headed directly for him. They came swarming down the walls of the buildings in front of him and he watched as they skittered across the road. As they rushed in upon him, we both panicked. With all the force I could muster, I pressed against the dream world until a nearby person gave voice to my thought:

"WAKE UP, HYM!"

He panicked. He shut his eyes, concentrating on his intention.

* * *

He woke lying on our belly in the straw. Our heart was still pounding. He was glad it had all been a dream.

He heard the barn door creaking.

He got slowly, dizzily, painfully to our feet. He went to the slit. He looked out into the gloom of the main room of the barn. The world did not yet seem real, perhaps due to the influence of Claire's drug.

He could hear the sniffing of some powerful animal nose, just outside the door. Whatever it was, it walked on four legs, and he could hear its paws crunch in the snow.

Of its own accord, the barn door slid silently open, and Hym was momentarily dazzled by the ringlit snow outside.

Black against the snow was a shape on four limbs. A long, pyramidal head sniffed the air. He saw hands like human hands lift from the snow and reach across into the shadows. He watched the shadow creature crawl in, out of the snow, and vanish into the darkness. He could hear it sniffing, sniffing, sniffing. It was coming closer.

He pressed us against the back wall of our pen, shut our eyes, and held our breath.

The sniffing drew nearer. He heard the door of our cell creak under the pressure of not-human hands. He saw the dog-like nose in the slit of his cage door and watched as this prehensile proboscis twisted with snakelike ease, turning left, then right; sniffing the air. He pressed against the back wall and held our breath. He tried not to move a muscle. He was completely cornered. If it came through the door, there was nothing he could do to escape it.

Then, and all at once, the creature was gone. It was a long time before Hym felt brave enough to move. Eventually he worked up the courage to cross our little cage and look out the slit. He peered into the darkness. He had not heard it close, but the barn door was shut as though it had never been opened. The room was silent.

Hym absent-mindedly tried to put a finger through our hand. He could not. Sometimes that reality check failed him. He counted our fingers. He had the ordinary number. Sometimes that reality check failed him too. Hym pinched our nose and tried to breathe through it. He could not.

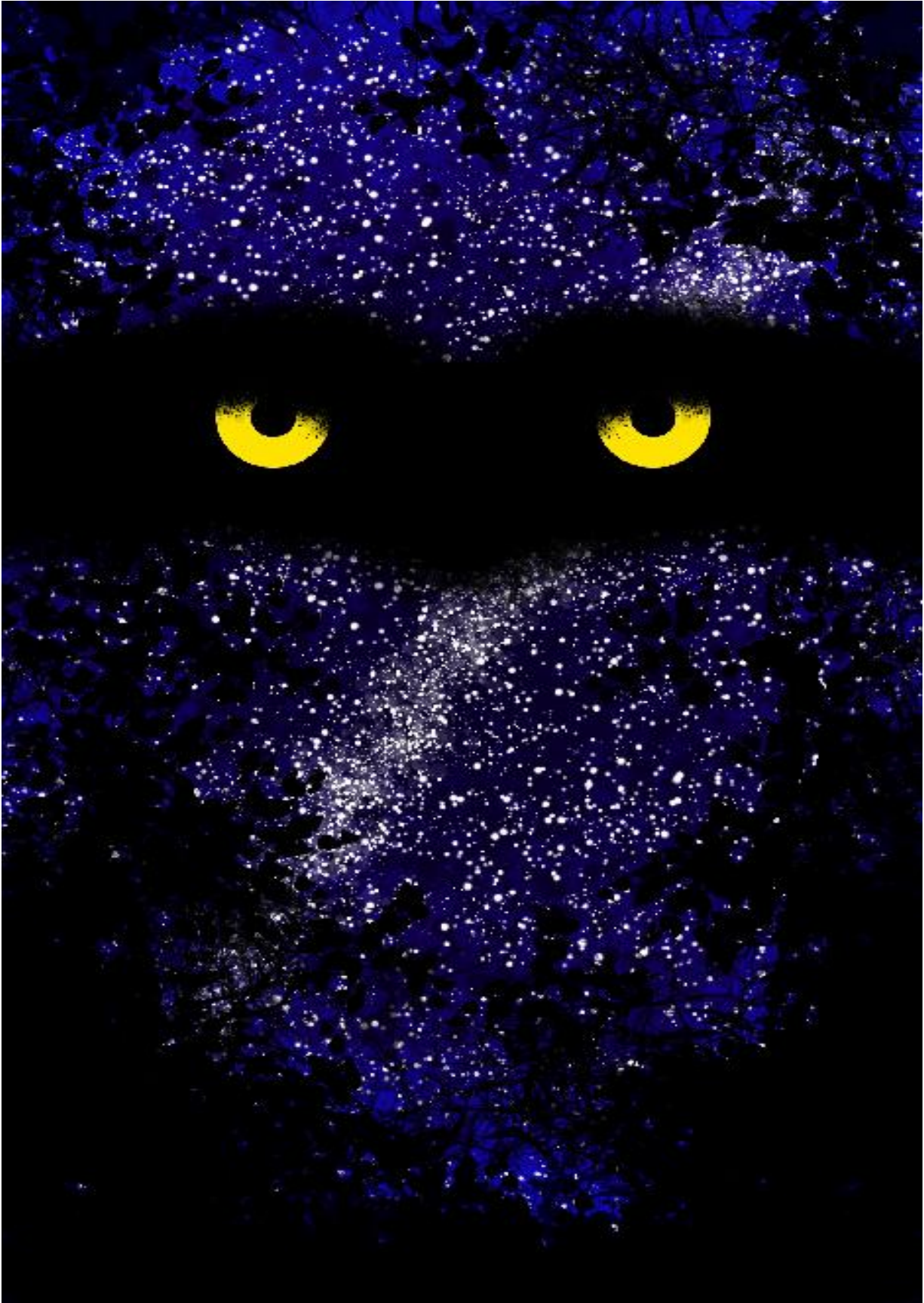
He was not dreaming.

He went back to our pile of straw and sat down, with no intention of sleeping. Just when he was beginning to question his sanity, he heard Iblis whisper shakily: “What was *that!*?”

* * *

*"When he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun."*

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



VI

LEVERAGE

AURORA

Eventually he did get back to sleep. He dreamed that he was gliding through a field of stars, high above a dark forest which shook with the cries of strange, enormous creatures. Once again, I could not join him. Hym felt the presence of Shalim, which was exciting. He had the strangest feeling that he was inside Shalim's dream, and not the other way around — which of course made no sense.

This dream was strange and delirious for me. It felt as though I had been split into two pieces, neither of which was fully connected to the other. This dual vision was blinding and confusing, and it made it difficult for me to stabilize the dream.

Hym woke from this dream, groaned irritably, struggled to find a better position, got comfortable again, and dreamed that he was sitting on the floor of the cake shop he passed every morning on the way to the circle. He dreamed that he was stuffing his face with delicious, cream-filled pastries. They were light as air, and it didn't seem to matter how many he ate, they never satisfied him. The more he ate, the more their flavor seemed to fade. He woke from this dream and found that he had been sleeping with his jaw hanging open, and his mouth was now very dry. He slept again.

He felt Shalim again. We dreamed that we were soaring over vast mountains whose snow-covered peaks sparkled blue in the light of the ring and the stars. He saw our shadow far below on the surface of the mountains. It had the shape of a huge bird, and the edges of the shadow shivered and tore as it skimmed the jagged slope.

He woke from this dream, and slept again, and dreamed that he was lying on an uncomfortable bed, staring up at the ceiling of a white tent. All at once, he felt the terrifying presence of the Shadow with such overwhelming clarity that he believed she was in the room with him.

It was the day I had long feared. I was too late, and the Shadow had caught him. Dread filled me, billowing over into him. The dream remained stable.

He tried to expect a door, but nothing appeared. It was as though he was no longer in control of the dream — or of his own body. He could not escape this dream. He began to panic.

Curtains of scarlet velvet hung around the bed. Oil lamps filled the tent with a dim orange light, and many sticks of incense clouded the air with swirling vapors. Outside the tent a cold wind howled. Without willing it, we floated up from the bed and stepped into satin slippers and wrapped a veil of red lace around ourself, and we passed between the intricately carved pillars of the tent and out through the thick flaps of the entrance.

The tent rested at the bottom of a huge granite canyon, and it was surrounded by thousands of other white tents. Campfires dotted the darkness, and before them shadow-puppet soldiers walked or sat, speaking to one another in low voices that vanished on the wind. The tent closest to ours was even larger than our own, and when we looked to it, we saw the golden-masked Shepherd standing in its entrance, staring at us. Together, we looked out into the east, as though somewhere far away we both could hear a familiar sound.

Hym woke from this dream in a cold sweat. He stared at the walls of his pen, his mind racing. The dream was already beginning to fade. I began

preparing my words, knowing that I would soon be forced to make the dreaded effort. I had now no choice: I would need to speak to him in the real world.

Before I could put what I wanted to say into words he could understand, he managed to calm himself down. He slept again, and dreamed this time that he was flying over a sheet of ice criss-crossed by a thousand cracks and canyons. He felt the presence of Shalim once more. We saw a shadow standing by a shadow, far below, and we tucked our arms to our sides and dived like an eagle. At the last possible second, we flared our arms and the wind of our wings blasted the snow. We landed as softly as a ghost.

The shadow he had seen was a black wolf as tall as a horse. One of its eyes was brilliant amber, and the other was poison green. The wolf nodded to us in greeting and spoke, saying: "A blizzard holds the Heartland now, and soon comes Leviathan. It is not wise to travel now, pup."

Hym heard his own voice — turned deeper in the dream — saying: "Were I here for myself, you would be right. I come for duty's sake."

"She is sure this time?"

"Yes. He is the one. It is time. There is no turning back now."

"The boy is awakening?"

"He is a man, and he is dreaming. Soon he will be awakening, and we must be there before he does."

"You have cut this too close."

We shrugged. "Shalim rides with the storm."

"This will be a nightmare storm," the wolf said. "You will wish you did not follow legend so closely."

"Still we must fly."

At this part of the dream, Hym got so excited that he woke up. He wanted to kick himself. Lying in the straw, he palmed his face with both hands and smeared the sleep from his eyes with a frustrated growl.

He heard a bang like nearby thunder, and saw a flash of light blaze through the slit in the door of his cage. Our heart gave a painful, adrenaline-laden throb. Something was not right.

He got slowly to our feet. The door seemed like far too thin a barrier, now — a flimsy piece of dry timber, easily ruptured, easily shattered. He was terrified to approach it. His curiosity burned desperately. He had to know what the light was. He had to know what the awful feeling was. He could not hear my terror urging him away from the door, begging him to hide.

To my undying shame, even now, when it mattered most of all, I was too afraid to reveal myself to him.

The Shadow was here, in the street just outside the barn door. She had come for him.

Hym closed his eyes and breathed. Death was coming. Death was here for him. He felt that he should not be afraid. He crept forward, his muscles almost disobeying him. His hands shook and his heart pounded. He looked through the slit in the door.

The barn was dark and quiet. The gloom was palpable. The room was holding its breath, and so was Hym. Our heart still pounded, but the rush of adrenaline was fading away and leaving us with a sickly feeling of weakness in our muscles.

Then the darkness broke. A sliver of light appeared and began to slowly widen. The door of the barn was moving of its own accord, rolling back noiselessly, opening the barn to the ringlit world outside.

A woman stood in the snow, her leather-wrapped body alternately hidden and revealed by the fluttering motion of a red lace veil. Her stained-

glass mask glinted even in the dim starlight, although her skin no longer glowed. Without walking, she moved forward, into the barn. Her iron-clad feet did not touch the floor.

Hym suppressed a gasp of pure horror. It was not Shalim who had come for him. *It was the Prophet.*

With her hands splayed to either side, she felt the air; sensing it, tasting its essence, twining it around her fingers, running it through her hands. Her fingers were long — unnaturally long, frighteningly long. She nodded to herself after a moment, as though she had confirmed something she already knew.

She relaxed her hands. There was a brief pause, in which Hym felt a pressure buzzing in his ears. Hym could hear the other slaves getting to their feet and coming to their doors.

Her fingers spread again. With explosions of ancient timber, huge spars of wood burst through the walls.

The next thing Hym felt was our sternum imploding through our spine as a beam of wood punched through our door, pierced our body, and hurled us to the back wall of our cage, where it pinned us.

He died almost instantly, along with all the other slaves in the barn.

* * *

The Prophet stood silently in the darkness, unsatisfied. She was waiting for something.

As Hym hung there, dying, I felt his grip upon me begin to fade away. I sensed that I was being freed — that I was now able to act, able to leave his body. I contemplated fleeing him and running away. If I fled now, there was a chance I could escape the atmosphere and reunite with my former body. The fear of death consumed me, and I truly considered this option.

No, I realized. No, I could not leave him. Even though the choice was a real one, it was a choice I could never allow myself to make. Inside Hym, I had finally found the heart of the Inside I had fallen in love with all those centuries ago. He was the Inside in microcosm — a free and wild being, struggling ever onward through darkness and the endless void of time. His story was my story, his pain was my pain, his death was the death of a piece of me — a piece with which I was not yet ready to part.

I defied the Prophet, and abandoned any hope of returning to my former body. If Hym died, I died with Hym.

I wrapped him in a shield, and I began the work of mending his broken body. His brain needed oxygen, so I reached out his mouth in a mist and filtered it from the air and drew it back into his body. I flowed through his veins and distributed what was needed, for his heart no longer beat.

His eyes opened. He was in agony.

I clamped some nerves and killed the pain. I chewed through the spar of wood, knitting new flesh as I went. I restored his lungs, I replaced his heart, I created new bones and repaired the damaged ones. I closed up his sternum, I wove for him new muscle, I poured fresh skin across his flesh. By the time the wood was gone, his body was whole. What was left of the beam hit the ground with a heavy thud.

He dropped to the floor. I released his nerves.

He stared down at his pale hands in the dirt, feeling against his palms the roughness of scattered straw and the chill of barren, hard-packed earth. He smelled snow and dirt and humanity and the coppery almost-taste of blood. The committee of his mind had scattered, each member babbling incoherently to itself and unable to hear the others. Slowly, he became aware of something deep inside of him, some little practical part of himself that was not caught up in or confused by the emotion of the moment. This little practical part began to prod the rest of him back into cohesion.

With shaking hands, he felt the smooth new skin of his exposed chest where the enormous hole in his body should have been.

He looked up through the gloom.

The Prophet was watching him. She did not seem particularly surprised or curious. In fact, he had a funny feeling this was exactly what she had been waiting for.

She raised a finger.

Dizzy from death and dreaming and the sleeping drug, Hym threw out his palm, and reached with his will.

For the first time in the waking world, *we connected*.

I blasted forth from him. My presence tingled in his mind and burned in his pricking palms, and the warm glow of my power filled the air between him and her. The spike of energy that the Prophet had thrown at us burst on the wall of Hym's will, and he both felt and saw that energy splash out like a ripple, passing through the open air. The walls of his cage blew apart, the rafters above him bucked. The shockwave blasted timber and tar to splinters and clumpy sawdust. Rafters dropped down into the barn and thundered into a pile alongside a hail of roofing tiles.

The Prophet stood just on the other side of the pile, observing us through the cloud of dust without apparent concern.

Hym looked at the two hands of his own body and watched them sizzle with a trapped potential that he could somehow see without his eyes. He looked up at the Prophet. She stood unmoving, observing, ominous as an executioner waiting at the scaffold.

Then the darkness was gone. Hym saw the inside of his own eyeballs in the blinding light. His hands, thrown up in front of his face, poured out power. He could see the bones like shadows through his glowing-red flesh. With the light there came a sound like several trillion atoms suddenly

becoming frictionless and blasting off all in the same direction at six hundred million miles an hour. When the flash and the accompanying roar of sound had both faded, Hym was left alone in the barn. He stood trying to blink away the afterimage of the Prophet's vanishing act.

He had called out to the Void, and the Void had answered. The thought was a chilling one. The alien presence filled him with awe and terror, even while he felt my love for him bloom across the inner landscape of his soul. He felt my presence like another mind in his skull. He even sensed the edges of my consciousness, and felt the shadow of my passing thoughts.

Go, I told him. Go. Go, and I will take you to Elysium.

It was a while before the things around him seemed real again. The first thing to start seeming real was the ground, which was, after all, very cold. His legs were bunched up beneath him, and when they fell asleep and he started to feel the pins-and-needles, it was automatic to push himself to his feet. He tried to steady himself by putting one hand on the wall of his cage, but the shockwave from when he had deflected the Prophet's blast had moved that wall about six feet to his left. When his face hit the dirt, the world became very real very suddenly.

He planted his hands and pushed himself to his knees, then back to his feet.

The darkness was still purplish with the afterimage of the Prophet's vanishing act, and he blinked it away while he staggered to the collapsed doorway of Iblis's cell.

"Iblis...?" He whispered.

His eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and he saw a shape against the black wall of the barn; a shape standing upright, pinned in place. Her head hung low over the beam which had impaled her. She was silent and did not move. Lines of something darker than her skin ran down her arm, down her hand, over the glinting ring, down to her limp fingertips. From there, the dark liquid dripped slowly but steadily onto the floor of the barn.

Hym lurched forwards into the darkness and fumbled for the ring. He stumbled out of the barn, and with shaking hands he washed the ring in the snow.

The snow was bitingly cold on his bare feet, but he did not think to enter the barn again for his shoes. He stood in the cold and the darkness and looked up at the blanket of clouds which covered the city. Fat flakes of snow were falling slowly all around him. That little lucid part of him wondered where the Prophet was and why she had run away. The rest of him still thought this could only be a dream.

The street was a dead end behind him, and he looked the other way — the only way he could go — towards the streetlamp carving a tidy circle out of the darkness. The city was silent.

Somehow he felt once again that Death was here, and waiting for him. This made him think about Shalim, which gave him a little thrill of hope. As soon as he felt that hope, another thought slapped it out of his hands. Iblis. All the others. All dead.

All dead.

He followed the road, trying different reality checks as he walked along. He counted his fingers and found that he had the usual number and could easily count them. He pinched his nose and tried to breathe through it and found that he could not.

Cautiously, fearfully, disbelievingly, he reached out a hand. I extended from him like a long finger of pure, invisible energy, and together we drew shapes in the snow with only his mind. The feeling of telekinesis was exactly the same as it was in his dreams. Normally, that would have counted as proof that he was dreaming. This allowed him to feel a little distant and numb to the reality of his newfound powers, and he chose not to question whatever happened next, but to try only to survive. Dream or reality, it was all he could do.

He knew that the first person to see him would call the city guards, but the thought did not worry him. He could handle the guards. In fact, a little piece of him wanted to...

* * *

"The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."

— MARK TWAIN



VII

AURORA

There was as yet no disturbance by the time he reached the streetlamp and looked up and down the street. It was still early. The streets were empty, and every house slept; tight-shut, cave-dark. The city was not watching him now. Alone with the flickering light of the streetlamps, Hym's spirit swelled with something indefinable. The silent early darkness of the empty streets was like breathing after a long time underwater. He had not been free and alone in ten years.

He turned around and looked up over the rooftops of the houses lining the right side of the street and saw the Cliff looming over the city, all its lamps burning. He wondered if the soldiers were already marshalling in its lower floors and preparing to march out and seek him. He imagined that they probably were.

He turned the other way, left, south, out of the city. He walked that way, his bare feet burning in the snow. As he walked, he looked up to the ring and to the empathetic stars, and he prayed.

“Thank you,” he whispered, into the cold morning air. He closed his eyes, and gratitude exploded from him and washed over me. It was the best feeling in all my millennia of experience. For the first time, I felt that I mattered, that I was no longer alone, that someone had finally seen me. The

smallest appreciative glimpse of one's soul is paradise, if one has never been seen before.

BONG. The sound of the gong rang from stone and street, rebounding throughout the city. Hym's breath caught in his throat. He looked behind himself, at the Cliff. His heart pounded. The little rat paws of terror raced up his spine. The echoes faded, singing in the stone for far too long.

BONG. The wave of sound washed down the streets, lifted Hym's feet, and set them to running.

BONG. The third blow woke the city. All down the street, lights flickered on in house windows as people lit candles and oil lamps. His heart throbbed, stabbed by a painful spike of adrenaline. He sprinted.

A new sound began to ring through the city now: the rhythmic jingle of marching suits of armor.

He scrambled into a dark alley and took a left when it forked. The streets of the Heartland were a chaotic mess, having grown organically over a period of several thousand years -- a growth I had, incidentally, observed from above. This made it easy to hide, as he hoped it would. In spite of this, he knew that runaway slaves never made it far.

In the alley, he leapt over a bundle in the darkness, but misjudged the jump and caught it with his foot. The bundle grunted. He looked back as he ran and saw a cloaked figure with a staff -- a Shadehaired slave-catcher. He had been asleep until we tripped over him, but now he got hastily to his feet with a shout.

“Oy! You!” He pursued. We heard the shrill scream of a whistle. We turned left, into a sub-alley, and came immediately to a dead end. Hym turned around, swearing.

The Shadehaired man came to a shambling stop at the mouth of the alley and drew a long knife. His eyes glinted. His scarred and pox-marked face twisted itself into something intimidating, which was both completely

unnecessary and highly effective. His eyes glimmered wide and wet, red-veined from some drug. His ragged cloak smelled like wet wool, bad wine, and stale urine.

“Come with me, boy,” he said, crouching down to catch us like we were an escaped chicken.

I nudged Hym. Hym looked up. Through the gap between the rooftops he saw the glimmer of the distant Ring, and black against this light he saw a wooden board that someone had set up between the windows of two different houses, as a bridge across the alley. A young person had probably been using it to escape the members of their household (a universal urge among young members of Hym's species, I believe).

Hym reached out our hand and pointed at this board, half unbelieving in our power. He focused, as he would in a dream.

Stars ignited in both his eyes as I, Aurora, opened my power to him. In the dark alley, the Shadehaired man paused.

“Witch,” he muttered. He began to back up, but it seemed as though he was having difficulty moving his feet. “Witch! WITCH! WIIIIITCH!”

Hym dragged our hand down and the board dropped, hard, on the Shadehaired slave-catcher's head. He landed at our feet, facedown.

The Shadehaired man was dead. For a long time, Hym looked numbly down at him. The man had been afraid of him, and now the man was dead. It was an odd thought.

He heard the jingle of metal, of armor, of swords. He snapped out of it, shook himself, and ran. He leapt over the body, and tried not to think about it.

He ran. The alleys were narrow and crooked and winding, sometimes opening onto main streets when he least wanted them to, at other times stopping abruptly at dead ends that made no sense. Almost continuously

now, we heard the jingle of the searching armored men. I did my best to guide him, but my memories failed us because the city had changed since I had fallen to earth.

He rounded a corner, saw men, skidded to a stop, and jumped back into the darkness of the alley. His heart pounded in the silence.

Minutes ticked away, his heart counting each second thrice. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his breath. His breathing slowed, he steadied, he grew calm.

He pressed himself against the wall and crept, very slowly, to the corner. He turned to face the wall. He leaned to his right, very cautiously bringing his eye around the corner.

In the middle of the alley we had almost entered, three Shadehaired men huddled around a small brazier of glowing coals. They were warming their hands, joking to one another, and smoking their foul-smelling herbs. The coals cast a warm orange glow which filled this alley. Two more men lounged in piles of moldy straw, which they had gathered against the walls of the alley, near the brazier.

Hym thought furiously for a minute or two. He could not sneak past the men to his left, and to his right the alley ended abruptly, at the back wall of a building. There was a door in this wall, but he could tell just by looking at it that it would be locked.

Holding his breath, he leaned out quietly and pointed his finger at the brazier. It was a cast-iron basket filled with burning coals.

He dragged his finger to the right, pushing with his will. I wrapped around the brazier and tilted it as he commanded. To his surprise, he could feel the heat and firmness of the half-rusted iron, although it did not hurt him. It burned several hundred of my cells, but the sacrifice was one I could easily afford, and one I gladly made for him.

The brazier tipped over, spilling hot coals. The herbed-out Shadehaired men panicked and started trying to stomp the coals out before they could catch the scattered straw on fire. In the Heartland, the penalty for a fire-starter is death by fire.

In the momentary distraction, Hym darted into the alley and threw himself at the locked door. He pressed against it silently as a shadow. His heart pounded. He put his hand to the doorknob, realized how much noise breaking the door down would cause, and panicked. In his panic he doubted, and with his doubt he broke our connection just as forgetting that one is dreaming breaks one's power over the dream.

He needed the power again, but wasn't sure how to use it for what he intended to do. His bare feet ached on the snow-covered cobbles. It was like standing on hot, sharp coals. The wood of the door was rough and splintery, old and weather-worn. The hole in his shirt let the cold air blow right through him. He was chilled to the bone, so cold that his joints and muscles ached. He was sweating. The brass doorknob was like grabbing a hot brand, and he could feel the frost on the metal barely melting in his grasp.

He prayed. *Help me! Please!*

My soul ached to see him in fear. I nudged some neurons, reminding him what the connection felt like. It was a connection he had to make, one I could not activate without him. Some part of his mind once again understood that this was just like a muscle, a muscle he had never used until now. Trying to think it into action was like thinking "walk" at your feet and expecting them to move. No, you moved your feet, you *willed* them to move, and this was like that.

He joined the connection once again. I activated millions of my cells to comfort him. I embraced him in the warmth of my power. It felt as though his bones had ignited and filled him with light. Suddenly the cold wind no longer mattered; his skin was warm. I opened to him my powers of analysis. The doorknob in his hand was more now, somehow — he could feel the shape of the knob on the other side of the door, and every nail in the wood. I engaged healing cells. His other hand on the wood tingled strangely. He

pulled it away and looked at his palm. There were splinters in his skin. He had been so cold that he had not felt them. I halted the signals along a few nerves. He was still in pain, but it was a strange pain, almost muted, a tingling like the pulse of another heartbeat. Splinters began to back out of his skin. As I pushed them out of his flesh, they fell away one by one, leaving no wounds behind. He stared at this for a while. He felt his chest.

With our connection open, he looked at the door, and truly saw it for the first time. He understood where it had come from, knew the species of tree it had been, knew the mountains from which the iron in the hinges had come, and sensed the exact weight of the door, in his mind. He already had it grasped in his will. There was a bar across the door. The knob would never turn, it was not what was holding the door closed.

He concentrated on the bar.

Lifting an object with telekinesis, for Hym, had always required him to move his hands in the dream world. It was instinctive for him to do so in the real world, but this time he no longer felt as though he needed to. The bar was in his whole concentration. He could move it as easily as he could move his own arm or an image in his mind's eye.

He thought the bar out of its brackets and let it clatter to the ground. The sound made him realize it had really happened, that it was more than just his imagination. He pushed the door in and shut it behind himself, then bent down, grabbed the bar, and got it back into place as quickly and quietly as he could. Then he slumped back against the door in the dark room and let out a huge sigh of relief.

The room was quiet. He looked around in the gloom and saw shelves, counters, glass display boxes, and windows with many little rippled panes of glass, looking out onto a main street of the city.

He heard the jingle of marching armor just in time, and ducked behind the counter. Torchlight blazed through the little shop, casting strange shadows as it flickered through the rippled panes of glass. Hym peered cautiously over the top of the counter.

A platoon of masked and armored men was jogging past, naked swords in their hands. The men marched in double-time, shoulder to shoulder, five men in a row. Hym tried to count the number of rows which passed by the window, but lost track after a while. In that one unit there were probably a hundred men or more. Judging by the sounds of the commotion in the city, that was only one unit of many. The search for him was being taken quite seriously, then. He had never seen the army mobilize this many soldiers before.

Quietly, I calculated the number of soldiers I could probably kill, if he used me efficiently. It was unlikely that he would use me efficiently, so I rounded the number down and adjusted the probability weights of the calculation. The resulting number was depressingly low.

Quite suddenly, behind the counter, Hym's sensitive nose detected the sticky scent of processed sugar.

He looked down. He was crouched right in front of a tray of pastries.

His mouth watered so much he had to swallow twice. He reached, hands shaking, for a cinnamon roll.

* * *

A few minutes later, seated with our back to the counter, surrounded by the wreckage of his little raid, he let out a satisfied belch and started to think about his situation.

So he was a witch. It was a strange thought. It was a thought so alien to his worldview and perspective that he did not, at first, know what to do with it.

The carbohydrate orgy was already making him sleepy, but he knew he could not rest yet. He was not safe here. The shop owner would come down in a few hours to start his day, and Hym did not want to be here when that happened.

He realized suddenly that he was trapped. He could not go through the back door, as he would bump into the slave catchers. He could not go through the front door, either, as that would put him out on the main street where the soldiers were patrolling. He knew that he could probably fight off one or two soldiers with his newfound powers, but he doubted very much (thanks to some cautious prodding on my part) that he would be able to handle so many. He also could not stay here. It was now only a matter of time before someone caught him. It was a terrible feeling, to be a cornered animal.

“Ah, a thief!” said a familiar voice.

We had been caught! Cornered! In a moment, she would call the guard, and the soldiers outside would come pouring in, and the slave catchers would come too, and he would be captured. He could not harm a woman, she was just as much a slave as he was, in the Heartland, and she was not likely to be armed. It would not be self-defense, to kill her -- or would it? If a shout from her could kill him as surely as a sword, was she not armed just as much as any man? He scrambled to our feet, and turned to face this new threat, his mind racing for a way out. He did not at first notice that the woman had spoken in his own language.

The woman stood at the foot of the stairs, her hand resting lightly on the banister. When Hym saw her, he froze.

Her face was all jaw, and she had a crooked nose which gave her a crooked but charming smile. Her eyes were quick, expressive, and a cruel shade of electric blue. Her face was ageless and yet faintly lined, as though distant centuries of misery and laughter had carved their tracklines in her skin and all the years between then and now had worn the ridges down, eroded memory and emotion, and left the shadows of ancient river deltas at the corners of her eyes. Hym thought she looked simultaneously twenty and two hundred. She was alarmingly tall.

She was not wearing the robes of a Heartland woman. Instead, she wore a loose-fitting cotton blouse and a long silk skirt. Her feet were in rabbit-fur house slippers, and her blonde hair was held back with a braided black

string. In her left hand she held a long, sharp dagger of exquisite craftsmanship. From her neck hung a simple leather necklace with a rough-cut opal for a pendant. The opal seemed almost to glow.

“Claire?” Hym asked.

She nodded. “I should have worn my robe,” she said. “I’m surprised you recognized me without it.”

She smiled at us, but Hym recoiled.

“Not what you expected?” She asked.

“No,” said Hym. “You look like one of them.”

“You’re a disappointment too,” Claire said, and laughed. “For starters, I was told you’d be a woman.”

“You were?” Hym asked.

“I was,” said Claire, then she changed the subject. “I heard the gong. The soldiers have been out searching for you for a while now. I’ve never seen so many of them mobilized so quickly. I knew it could only be you.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“How?”

Claire laughed. “You’re the one I have been searching for. The reason I am in the Heartland.”

“I am?”

“You are.”

“But why?”

“Come on, let’s go upstairs. It’s not safe for us to stay down here, someone might see through the windows.”

She led the way up the stairs and Hym followed nervously, not knowing what to expect. He realized halfway up the stairs that he was willingly entering the lair of a witch. He hesitated. It felt like a bad idea. After a moment’s thought, he realized he had no other options, and kept climbing. At the top of the stairs, Claire picked a door on the right side of the hallway and led us in.

“You live here alone?” Hym asked, still bracing himself for an ambush.

“Of course,” Claire said, shutting the door behind us.

There was a U-shaped arrangement of tables in the middle of this room. Huge leather tomes burdened the table, some of them open, others dog-eared or heavily tabbed with bookmarks. There was a tidy stack of parchment beside the books, and the rest of the table was covered in bottles, beakers, knives, and strange instruments. In a corner of the room there stood a small vanity dresser with a large, cracked mirror. Claire seated herself in front of it and began applying a cream to the lower half of her face.

“What are you doing?” Hym asked.

“I’m turning myself into a man for the day. These barbarians won’t leave a woman alone unless she’s been claimed by someone with a beard, so I have to be my own husband.”

Finished with the cream now, Claire opened a drawer and pulled out a clump of curly reddish hair -- a well-made false beard. She applied it carefully to her face and it clung to the cream. Hym, having never seen any kind of realistic disguise before, was dazzled by the strange magic. Just like that, the witch had given herself a beard. Claire pulled the string out of her hair and scrunched her hair up with her hands, blending her sideburns into

the beard and successfully achieving the oily mop look most men in the Heartland wore.

She admired her new male face for a while in the mirror, checking for giveaway flaws. Then she stood abruptly, tore off her blouse, and stepped to the armoire in the corner. Hym averted his gaze for no reason — she wore thick bandages around her chest, to flatten it. Her arms and shoulders were very toned.

“Relax,” Claire said. “You’re safe here.”

“Am I?”

“You are. Safer than you would be on the street, anyway. We’ve got to get you out of the city before the blizzard really hits its stride, though.”

Hym didn’t say anything for a while.

“Well? Aren’t you excited? You finally get to leave.”

“Where will we be going?”

“To Witchaven, of course,” Claire said, while pulling on a heavy tunic. When Hym did not respond, she turned to look at him, tightening her belt at the same time.

“What is it?” She asked.

“I can’t go with you yet,” Hym said, surprising himself.

“Why on earth not?”

“There’s something I have to do first,” Hym said.

“Oh?” Claire asked, and dropped her skirt. She wore leather pants underneath. She grabbed a pair of thick woolen socks and dropped herself

into a chair to pull them on. “Do... tell,” she grunted, struggling with the tight socks.

“A friend,” Hym said, feeling surprisingly bold. “The last one still alive. I have to save him.”

Claire picked up a pair of scuffed and crumpled foldover boots and pulled them on, saying nothing as she did so.

“Will you help me?” Hym asked.

Claire did not look up until her laces were all tied.

“No,” she said at last.

“Why not?”

“Because I am not a fool.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t stand a chance against the Prophet. If you’ve still got one friend alive, it’s because she wants you to come for him.”

“I don’t care. I still have to try.”

Claire looked at us with her head tilted to one side. She got to her feet and grabbed a white fur robe from the armoire and held it out to him.

Hym didn’t take it at first. He stared at her.

“You won’t help me, then?” He asked. For a moment he had believed in his own power, but her reaction made his doubts flare up, and now he began to believe that she was, perhaps, wise to say no. Part of him hoped she would change her mind, but a larger part of him was secretly relieved that she had given him a way out of his obligation. It would be easy to take her opinion on the matter. She was more experienced, after all, and no one

could blame him for following her lead. This thought came with an involuntary twinge of extreme guilt, of course. Almost as soon as he thought it, he regretted the thought.

“Surya is in the House of Manhood now,” Claire said. “Right beside the Cliff. There’s no way on earth to get in there and get him out without dying. Even for you, that would be impossible.”

Hym’s left eyebrow raised, almost on its own. Part of him was angry now, angry at nothing, angry at himself — for reasons he could not articulate. The hot flush of anger in his heart throbbed a little, but he swallowed it down and tried to ignore his feelings.

Surya. He didn’t even know if Surya was still alive. Frostbite killed many slaves.

Eventually, he took the robe and drew it on a little self-consciously. He put his head into the eyeless hood of the robe and found himself, surprisingly, able to see. A band of small, angled mirrors was stitched to the inside of the hood just in front of his face, and a hidden visor built into the hood held the mirrors out in front of his eyes. A lens smaller than his pinky-nail was hidden in the forehead of the hood, and through a series of redirections this took the light and image of whatever was in front of him and presented it on the band of mirrors. It was not as easy as seeing normally, and the peephole was higher than his eyes were, which gave him the feeling of being a few inches taller. Claire was taller than him to begin with, so the robe bunched in thick, leathery folds around his feet and trailed on the ground behind him. He stuffed his arms into the sleeves and was rewarded with warmth. He moved his arms experimentally and found that the range of motion was better than he had expected.

“Well?” Hym asked. “What now?”

“Now you come with me. We’ll walk and talk.”

She scooped up two swords from the table and belted them on, one at her hip and the other across her back. Then she reached into the armoire and

pulled out a huge, shaggy cape of grey fur. She whipped it around her shoulders and tied it on.

She led the way down the stairs, into the shop below her house.

“I can’t believe you never brought me pastries,” Hym said, as they crossed the little room.

Claire shrugged, muttered something about bad capitalism, said something else about fat slaves being a dead giveaway, and fiddled with the lock on the front door. A moment later they were stepping out onto the cold main street.

A small group of soldiers was marching up the road towards us, and Claire wrapped her arm around Hym's shoulders and started roaring with laughter, which made Hym jump. He thought she was trying to draw the soldiers’ attention at first.

She walked, swaying almost drunkenly side to side. The soldiers passed by while she pretended to be an inebriated man walking home with his wife. It was not an uncommon sight in the early morning, and the soldiers ignored us. As soon as they were gone, Claire pulled us into the nearest alley and started leading the way through its twists and turns.

We came around a corner and a dark shape stood suddenly to block our path. Behind us, another man popped out of a side alley and blocked our exit. Hym’s heart raced — *what now?*

“Hold fast,” said the Shadehaired man in front of us. “There’s an escaped slave on the loose. What are you doing out so early in the morning?”

“Coming home, of course,” Claire said, slurring her words. She did a surprisingly passable male voice.

Hope sparked in Hym’s chest.

“Your woman, her robe is too long. It’s indecent.”

Hym’s heart sank like a stone.

“She’s an indecent sort,” Claire said. “It’s what I love about her.”

Hope again.

The man in front of us looked past us to make eye contact with the man behind us. “It could be the slave in disguise.”

Dismay again.

Hym, who was facing the man behind us, saw that man smile in a disturbingly lecherous way. His heart sank into his stomach.

“Take off her robe,” the Shadehaired man in front of Claire said, “and we’ll let you pass.”

Claire drew her sword so quickly that we didn’t even see it. The Shadehaired man didn’t have time to react before the blade was inside him, punching through him. He made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a gurgle. Claire kicked him off the blade, then turned on her heel with a flourish of steel, her blade sweeping at neck height. The Shadehaired man behind us crumpled, his head rolling backwards off his shoulders as he fell. Hym, shocked by the sudden change of pace, froze. He looked down at the sleeves of his robe, which were now spotted with blood.

Claire grabbed our arm and dragged us forward, over the body of the Shadehaired man. She glanced backward as we ran, then turned the corner, turned another corner, and paused facing a wall.

“You killed them so easily,” Hym said, confused. “Like they were nothing to you.”

“They *were* nothing to me,” Claire said, while rummaging in her cloak. “They were less than nothing. They were our enemies. I only treated them

as such.”

She found what she was looking for and slipped on two sets of metal claws, then attacked the wall with them. Within a few seconds she had climbed all the way to the top and was pulling herself up, onto the roof. She turned around and reached down for us.

“Come on,” she said. “Jump up.”

“I can’t jump that high!”

Claire looked around from up high. She looked back down at us.

“Use your magic, idiot.”

Hym bristled at this, but realized she was right. He concentrated. He reached up towards the edge of the wall with both hands and closed his eyes, opening the connection. He felt the wall in his mind. There was a tearing sound as I pushed through the sealed sleeves of the robe and freed his hands. I flowed to the roof. He felt it as I wrapped around his intended target. The roofing tiles rattled in his mental grip.

He pulled. A shower of tiles fell towards him and he covered his head with his arms. The tiles clattered down around him, shattering on the cobbles. When the last one fell, he uncovered his head gingerly and looked up. The portion of myself which had emerged from him rushed back to him, crackling against his skin with tiny blue lightnings as it rejoined the larger swarm. He shook himself, flicking the static off his hands.

“Don’t pull,” Claire said. “Push. Push off the ground. As though you were swimming.”

Hym looked down. He pointed his palms at the ground. I poured from his hands, and swirled around his feet, and he felt the cobblestones in his mind, and pressed against them with his will, and began immediately to lift off the ground. He laughed a little to himself.

He crouched. He shoved downward with all his might, as though he could push the whole planet away, and leapt.

He hurtled skyward, shouting all the way. It felt as though he had left his stomach on the ground. He hurtled into the air, passed the rooftops, and rocketed into the vast abyss of the sky.

He began to feel his stomach catching up to him. He was tilting forward. The city sprawled below him, an endless spiderweb of black streets and alleys, all lit by the flickering yellow light of the streetlamps. Claire was at least two stories below him. As he tilted towards the rooftop, the sensation of his own weight began to return. His yell had changed into an exultant whooping and now, as he began to tumble out of control, it cracked into a scream. Regaining his composure at the last possible moment, he reached out with both hands and pressed his will against the two houses on either side of the alley. I arced from his hands to the rooftops, and he flipped over a final time. His tumbling fall halted. He hung in midair, hands out at his sides, feet towards the ground. Very gently, very slowly, I lowered him to the rooftop beside Claire.

“You tore the sleeves,” Claire said.

“Oh, what a bummer,” said Hym.

Claire shrugged. “We’re going to burn that thing when we get out of here anyway. We need to keep moving, you made a lot of noise just now.”

She was walking along the rooftop now with perfect balance, as though she had walked on rooftops every day of her life. Hym struggled a little more than she did, but managed to stay upright.

Claire stopped at the edge of the roof. She stared across the gap, at the roof on the other side of the street.

“Is that the way we’re going?” Hym asked, pointing out over the sea of rooftops to the distant wall of the city. There were three rings of watchtowers we would need to slip between.

“Yes,” Claire said. She looked around and suddenly froze. She looked up, towards the beacon now burning atop one of the watchtowers nearby.

We heard the blast of a trumpet, and Claire swore under her breath. She looked down at us. Her expression seemed to say she had an idea.

“Hym,” she said. “Things are about to get messy. I need you to trust me, alright?”

“Alright,” Hym said, trusting her not in the slightest.

“Bring down that tower,” she said, pointing.

“What?”

“Bring it down.”

“How!?”

She seemed annoyed. “Push the top.”

Hym looked up at the sturdy, stacked-stone construction of the tower.

“That's impossible! Even in a dream, I wouldn't try that!”

“Well, you're going to have to try it right now.”

“But--!”

“--Try.”

He looked at her and saw that somewhere in her eyes there was a message: *I believe that you can do this, so why don't you?*

He turned and looked at the tower, knowing that a part of him would never be able to believe that it could fall.

He reached for the connection. His mind tightened on it, and he felt my presence. He sensed that I — this strange and alien mind within his mind — was not afraid. His fear dissipated, and his doubts burned away.

He looked at the tower. He reached out our hand.

Stars blazed in his eyes and the light flashed through the peephole in the hood. Atop the tower, he could see the shadows of men moving before the flames of the beacon. They had already spotted us, but we were out of arrow-range. They were already signaling our location to the rest of the army.

Hym pushed with his will, and I reached across the distance and pressed against the tower, bracing myself against rooftops all around.

He pushed. The tower wobbled. Men cried out in terror and alarm as the permanence of their construction challenged the power of Hym's will.

Hym stared, wide-eyed, at the reaction. Emboldened, he pushed with both hands, and gave it his all.

Under the blast of his will and my power, the top half of the tower exploded, scattering a cloud of bricks and ash and dust and flaming timber and flailing, screaming men. The men fell like men in hundred pound suits of armor fall. Some of them crashed into rooftops and fell right through, others bounced off the corners of buildings or else slammed down on the cobblestone streets. Hym watched them fall, but they were so far away by the time they fell that he could see them only as tiny figures with tiny swinging arms and legs and distant screaming voices. Still he was horrified. When the blast of his power had subsided and the last brick had landed, my extended power came back to him like a rushing wind, and he felt it flow into his skin. It crackled with blue light where it touched him.

He looked at his palms and felt a fear that was genuinely new. He had never been afraid of himself before. He had never felt powerful before, and it was a strange, heady feeling. Almost of their own accord, his eyes turned across the sea of rooftops to gaze upon the distant Cliff. He no longer felt

the terror like little rat paws crawling up his spine. Instead, he felt a fire, a rage, a new and angry determination. A few seconds later, a wash of pain and weariness flowed up his arms and swelled in his chest. He clutched at his chest, afraid to know the meaning of the new sensation.

Claire whistled softly. “Not what I had in mind, but... It will do. Come on.”

She took a few steps back, clutched her opal amulet as though for good luck, then ran for the edge. We were standing on the rooftop of one of the houses that lined a wide avenue, so the gap to get to the house across the street was easily seventy-five feet across. Claire leapt anyway, kicking off from the house so hard that the tiles burst under her feet. She soared, her grey cloak flapping behind her, for what seemed like thirty seconds. She landed heavily on the rooftop on the other side of the street. She turned to look back at us.

Hym gaped at her. He shook himself, took a few steps back, stared at the gap, psyched himself up a little, began to run, stopped, took more steps back to make sure he had enough running distance, “COME ON!” Claire shouted, and he ran for it. He threw himself into the air and pushed down with both his hands, feeling the street below him with his mind. My power beamed down to the cobblestones as he pressed our will against the earth.

He looked down, laughing hysterically to see the distant ground remain at its distance. He glided across the gap and landed light as a feather on the other side, reeling our power back in. In the moments before the portion of me flowed back to him, crackling against his skin, the weakness throbbed in his chest again. This spasm was not as painful as the first had been. He had not lost as much energy this time.

He looked back at the gap they had leapt, and his eyes turned again to the distant Cliff, the House of Manhood, *Surya*.

Claire grabbed our hand and silently jumped over the edge of the rooftop, pulling us with her. She hit the ground like a lump of steel, her grey fur cloak blossoming around her as she landed. Hym pushed against the

ground at the last second and saved us from a nasty landing. Claire pulled us along the alley at a flat-out sprint and he threw us along behind her, barely able to keep up with her long legs.

We were in another side street. Looking down the ravine of masonry we could see that this was the mouth of a labyrinth of interconnected back-alleys. Claire dragged us into it by the hand. We zigged, and we zagged, and we rounded so many corners that Hym could not begin to keep track of them, but although we could not see beyond the walls of the buildings around us, and had no idea which direction we were headed in, Claire seemed to know the way. She managed to slip past most of the watchtowers by one means or another. Soon we had passed the third ring of watchtowers unseen. We were nearly to the Wall.

She paused at the exit of an alley, one that opened onto a quiet street in the back corner of the city.

“Please,” we heard someone cry, in Hym's own language. Hym peered around the corner and saw an Ahtés slave boy on his knees, surrounded by a group of soldiers. They held naked swords. One of them gripped the boy by the hair and yanked his head back, so they could see his face in the firelight. They read the tattoo on his temple which identified him. Hym absentmindedly massaged his own temple, and the tattoo there — or he tried to, at any rate, but the fur veil was too thick.

The soldier said: “It’s not him. What should we do?”

“We should take him back to his cage.”

“That will take too long.”

“Just kill him, no one will care.”

The soldier gripping the boy by the scalp shrugged and raised his sword. “It’s a pity, he has a pretty face. He’s just the sort my son might like.”

“They all look the same, to me.”

"Don't even think about it," Claire hissed.

Human beings have an automatic desire to be in command of their own decisions, to manifest their own will. To attempt to control a human being is an exercise in futility, for what you tell them not to do, they immediately desire to do, and what you tell them to do, they immediately desire not to. Freedom of will is of paramount importance to these creatures, even in the face of other considerations. So long as they can, after the fact, tell themselves that the decision was of their own making, they do not feel lessened or humbled by any act. They may regret a bad decision, but even in that regret there is a mote of pride — so long as the decision was theirs to make, and they believe themselves to be the one who made it.

Hym snatched his hand away from Claire and sprinted down the street towards the group of soldiers. Watching him go, Claire smiled to herself.

The soldiers looked up as one body and froze, unsure what they were seeing. To them, we looked like an insane woman racing down the street towards them.

“What does she want?” One of them asked.

“She’s probably just eager to escape her husband,” the other said.

“We should return her to him, maybe he’ll reward us.”

Hym leapt, splashing power behind himself. He soared, his pounce carrying him in like a missile. Right before he would have been in their arms, on their swords, he pushed forward with both his hands and a blast of our power. The laws of inertia made short work of the soldiers, and a wave of iron and gore washed the street. Hym landed where they had been standing, in what remained of them.

He turned, and looked the last soldier — the only one who had not been caught by the blast — in the eye. The soldier backed away from the slave, who stared up at us with frightened, disbelieving eyes.

“W-W-Witch...” The soldier stuttered behind his mask, trying to work up the courage to shout. He squeaked like a trapped rabbit.

“Go,” Hym shouted, pointing. “Run!”

The soldier did not understand his words, but turned and ran anyway. Hym smelled the copper stink of blood and tried not to look at the wreckage of the men he had just destroyed.

He looked down at the slave, and saw the bruises on his neck, his split lip, his swollen eye. He looked at the fleeing soldier, and something in him hardened.

He reached out our hand. He clenched our fist.

The soldier froze, stiffened, gasped breathlessly as his armor crushed in upon him — and collapsed.

Hym reached down for the slave.

The slave bolted into the alley without looking back.

Hym stared the way he had gone for a little while, then shook himself and ran to catch up to Claire.

“Feel better?” Claire asked. Her tone was positively acidic.

Hym was rubbing his chest. “No,” he said.

“You’re wasting energy. That’s why it hurts.”

“I don’t think that was a waste,” Hym said, feeling a hot flush of anger.

“You will when you run out and wish you had enough power left to do that again. Come on.”

It was a straight shot from here to the wall, there wasn't far to go now. We ran. Claire glanced behind us from time to time.

She swore, and pulled him suddenly into an alley. She leaned against the wall and peered around the corner to look back up the street.

“It’s a squad of soldiers. They just saw the mess you made.”

Trumpets blared. We heard the jingle of armor and swords. The soldiers were converging on us now. We were trapped again, and Hym felt again like a cornered animal. This time, however, something in the feeling was different. There was an anger in it now. There was a need to prove something.

“What do we do?” He asked.

“Get to the roof,” Claire said, and slipped her claws on again.

Hym was thinking about the look in the slave’s eyes: the look of fear; the look of desperate, confused hope.

Surya.

Claire climbed the wall quickly. Hym watched her go, and saw her reach the peak. He shut his eyes. He took a deep and shuddering breath. His heart pounded in his ears. He had a truly terrible idea. It was a mistake he had already made once, and he knew that to make it again might be suicide.

All the same, he made it. He turned to the mouth of the alley, and stepped out into the street.

“Hym, **NO!**” Claire screamed. Her cry was so desperate that she even reached out a hand as if she could grab him.

Hym turned to face the soldiers. There were more than he had anticipated. They filled the street: tall men in iron armor and wooden masks, equipped with swords and spears and torches. Some were mounted

on horses, and were evidently of a higher rank, to judge by the bronze of their masks and the fur trim on their cloaks.

Fifty men were arrayed before us in organized, well-disciplined formation. More men came pouring through the side streets, and still more came from behind us, cutting off our escape. We were now completely surrounded.

Our heart was hammering in our chest, but the fear had transformed into something else. The chemical storm in his brain had not changed, but he interpreted it differently now. He felt alive. He felt *angry*. He felt ready to fight and eager to die — and to take as many with him as he could.

For my part, I was with him. Death had never seemed so terrifying, but I could no longer bear to be a passive bystander. Our rage was as much my rage as his, and destruction suited both of us.

The soldiers did not dare to approach. Even the captains on their horses made no move and issued no command, as though rooted to the spot by fear.

Hym tore off the white robe of the Heartland woman and threw it to the ground. If he was to die he would die as himself, and they would know that it was a lowly Lutus slave who had killed so many of their finest men. Hym intended to make many widows tonight.

He could sense Claire hesitate before she chose to leave him behind. Even as she ran away, he was grateful to her for that moment of hesitation.

An arrow flew! It punched through Hym's chest, sticking between two ribs. He looked down at it, confused, at first, by the pain. He grabbed the arrow and snapped it off. I chewed through the shaft and knit his flesh back into wholeness.

Hym looked to the Cliff. To *Surya*.

He plunged forward, sprinting down the street of the Heartland city alone in the darkness of Absence beneath the first falling flakes of a blizzard. As he ran, he prayed. He prayed desperately, with a fervor he had never felt before. *Please, please, please, please, please!* It was such a desperate fear and need that he could not put it into words.

At the last moment, he carved the air with both arms in a sweeping breaststroke motion and he shoved my power backwards — and soared. The icy air rushed past his face as he hurtled over the bewildered mass of soldiers, soaring towards the Cliff, the pillar, and the House of Manhood. He flew between the towers of the third watchtower ring.

Already he could see the circle, which teemed with soldiers. He landed in the street, sprinting. The mass of soldiers which had cornered him now turned around to pursue him, chasing him up the long main street.

He slipped between the towers of the second ring unchallenged. It seemed almost too easy. The first ring of watchtowers was now before him, and he hurled my power behind himself once more, springing wildly into the air. He hurtled between the towers, a hail of arrows zipping past him in the air.

He landed in the main street running, howling, already drawing my power into his hands.

A general roared: "MEN! PHALANX FORMATION!"

The soldiers massed together, linking their square shields into a wall of steel. Long spears rattled forth into position, prepared to impale the charging slave.

At the last possible second, Hym hurled my gathered power straight down, smashed the cobblestones, and sprang into the air.

"Merciful Father!?" Exclaimed the general, as the witch-slave flew. The soldiers craned their necks to look up at him, and the torchlight gilded his

soaring figure. A thousand eyes lifted to see the spectacle, and terror filled the heart of the Heartland.

He tumbled straight for the iron pillar. The memories of a thousand witch burnings burned through his mind, and right as he was about to pass it by, with a shout of rage he punched our fist at it! From his right hand roared a blast of my power, and the iron pillar rang like a gong! The pillar cracked with a scream of rending iron, and Hym sprang off thin air. As the upper half of the pillar began to teeter down towards the soldiers below, Hym soared to his left and landed heavily on the roof of the House of Manhood.

The newfound ache cramped in his fingers and tightened his joints. He was wasting energy. He could feel the Cliff watching him, and the thought of the Prophet sprang to his mind. He felt that she was just around the corner. He shoved her out of his mind with the thought of Surya — of the strength in his hands and the courage in his heart, of the darkness he had tried so long to shield us from. All had been for naught — Hym embraced the darkness, blackened his soul with hate, and raked our hands through the air, clawing like a dog. Our power tore through the roof! Hym scattered roofing tiles and exposed wooden beams. He ripped through the rooftop like a demon, he jumped through the hole in the roof, he landed in a hallway padded with red carpet and lined with intricate tapestries.

He knew that Surya was near. His heart was racing, his head was pounding, the ache in his chest was like a breathless sob.

Both sides of the hallway were lined with doors, and Hym knew that behind one of them was the last remaining member of his tribe — and he would save him, by any means necessary. He spread our arms.

A pressure filled the air; the pressure of his will. In his eyes, twin stars blazed.

The locked doors burst open. He heard many voices, many cries of surprise. My power rebounded to him, and flowed back into his skin with a crackle of blue lightning.

"Surya!" He roared, as he sprinted down the corridor. He looked in through the doorways as he ran, and he saw beds, chains, and male slaves with startled, hopeful eyes.

He made it to the end of the hallway. Surya was not in any of the rooms he had passed. His heart sank. The darkness welled within him.

"Hym!" Surya's voice. Behind him! He turned with a pang in his heart.

At the other end of the hallway stood a red-robed Brother. In his right hand he held a long, sharp knife, and with his left hand he gripped the arm of Surya. The knife quivered at Surya's throat.

Righteous rage engulfed Hym. He swung a hand, and the stars in his eyes blazed to life. The knife sprang away from Surya's throat. He spread the fingers of our other hand. The Brother's fingers popped and cracked as Hym forced open his grip. Surya was free.

"GET DOWN!" Hym roared, and Surya threw himself flat to the carpet just as a spread of arrows zipped through the hallway. Hym swatted the air and the arrows rebounded, scattered by the splash of his will. The soldiers who had just come through the door at the far end of the hallway drew fresh arrows, nocked them, and took aim. The Brother smiled expansively.

With a snarl of fury Hym swung our own fist towards our own neck. The Brother plunged his own blade into his own throat and went down gurgling, drowning in his own blood. Hym pushed with our open hand and his will blasted down the hallway, rippling the tapestries and billowing over Surya like a howling wind. It launched the Brother's body; the corpse rolled through the air, slammed into the soldiers, and bowled them to the ground. Hym reached up, wrapped our will around the rafters, and pulled them down. The roof above the soldiers collapsed in a cascade of timber and roofing tiles, burying them — the living and the dead.

Hym sprinted and stumbled to Surya's side even as he felt the awful ache creep up his arms.

“Come on,” he urged, gripping Surya’s shoulder, Surya’s arm. He pulled Surya up, and his stomach jumped. Surya’s leg was missing from the knee down. The stump was heavily bandaged. Hym blanched. Suddenly this seemed less possible and far, far more real.

Surya pushed us away, horror in his eyes. He slumped against the wall and leaned there, propping himself up, unable to tear his eyes away from us.

“What are you!?” Surya moaned. “What have you done!?”

Hym didn’t feel like he had time for this. He poured my power out into his hand and swirled it between his palms, feeling the liquid way it swam around his fingers. He flicked the ball of power to one side and it blew through the wall and punched a hole six feet in diameter through the facade of the House of Manhood. The soldiers massed around the circle looked up in horrified surprise as the wreckage rained down upon them.

“Come on,” Hym commanded. “I won’t leave you behind.”

He scooped Surya’s warm and fragile frame up into his arms. Hym was not particularly strong, but Surya weighed so little now that Hym’s heart faltered within him to feel his friend’s bony lightness.

Hym ran, trusted the Void, ignored Surya’s shout of alarm, and leapt out onto the crowd of armed and armored men.

Heads craned to look up at us. Swords glinted. Torches blazed. Spears and arrows flew. The courtyard was awash with light, and all around us, thick flakes of snow were falling. The blizzard had come.

We plummeted towards the crowd of armored men. Hym stomped with both feet and pushed with his will. I flowed from him, and lifted him skyward in the arms of my power. Beneath him, two soldiers got considerably flatter while he and Surya sprang into the sky. We flew across the entire courtyard, soaring all the way to the House of Womanhood.

Hym landed in a billowing swirl of me. There was no time now for hiding

in alleys; the city knew where we were, and he was in the heart of their army. He could sense them in the streets and side alleys, still marshaling as more and more men were dragged from their homes to join the witch-hunt.

Hym turned to his right and looked out over the jumbled rooftops and chimneys of the Heartland, all the way to the high and distant wall. He still remembered the day he had been dragged through it in a wagon, and the brutal finality of the clash of the great bronze gates. The wall was at least three hundred feet high; a masterpiece of sculpted ice.

Hym didn't have time to think about that. Something heavy had landed in front of him and was already drawing a blade. He saw huge white wings and a tangle of red cloak, a silver mask; a clawlike, gnarled hand. It was one of the Brothers.

"Fire!" Howled the Brother, holding up his hand as his vast white wings spread behind him.

There was a blaze of light. Hym looked skyward. A beam of energy was streaking down from the night sky — no, from the Prophet! She hung in the air before the stained glass window, her crystal crown burning, her red veil floating around her like the tendrils of a vast, scarlet jellyfish. The light beaming down from her hand hit the hand of the Brother before us, which filled with ethereal white flame.

The Brother flung his hand forward. Hym nearly dropped Surya in his haste to get his own hand up. I poured from his palm and splashed into the air and flattened into a curved plane — a dome before him. The flames of the Brother smashed against this hastily raised shield and burst in a wave of glittering plasma. The shield rippled like a liquid but held firm. Hym drew it back into himself with a crackle of bluish lightning and, still clinging to its crumpled energies, he punched it forward, willing the man to disappear. A portion of me ripped across the distance like a blue bullet and punched into the Brother. Hym made a fist. The portion of me fought its way through and around the Brother's breastplate, drilling gradually-expanding spherical holes in the material as I turned the iron in his breastplate to good use. Hym felt the tendrils of my body fight their way through the man's sternum and

into his heart.

Hym opened his fist rather aggressively.

The portion of my body clenched down upon itself, tightened into a compacted mass, and generated a repulsive force that blasted my cells out through the Brother's body in all directions. I ripped through him like the shrapnel of a miniature supernova. Shreds and tatters of his body burst from him, but still he stood, in the midst of the scattered cloud of me. Not all of my cells escaped, and those I set to eating. The man cried out as he began to crumble. Expanding spheres of annihilation spread out from each of the growing, replicating colonies of my body as they chewed the man to atoms and added those atoms to my stores. The man staggered forward as the destruction began to take him. He cried out to the Prophet: "Healing!"

The Prophet did not respond. The man swung his blade but a piece of me that had been growing in the blade finished the process in mid-swing, and the top half of the blade skittered across the rooftop and over the edge. The Brother stumbled, reaching for us blindly with a crumbling hand. There was a shimmer of light as the Prophet's power brushed against his dissolving head. The man swung his broken blade even as his head began to disappear in an expanding sphere of dissolution. Headless, he stumbled on, wings fluttering, blade flashing. Hym danced backwards, clutching Surya's emaciated form to him. Surya was still a head taller than him, and he was difficult to carry, which made Hym clumsy.

Hym widened his eyes and I poured from them as he wrapped his will around the Brother. Clenching him in the eye of his mind, Hym pressed the man away. The Brother's feet slid across the roofing tiles. He was dissolving to the bones, now. Limbs were becoming useless. We could see through him in places. His wings were falling apart into tumbling feathers, which separately burned away in the expanding waves of my devouring cells.

The brother roared headlessly as Hym held him at bay.

A flying spear missed us by two inches. Hym heard: "Fire!" He looked,

breaking his concentration, and saw a wave of arrows falling towards him from above. He had a single moment to acknowledge the horror of a thousand glinting arrowheads in the falling snow, then they were hissing down around him. His hand shot up and a blast of me surged out of him, blowing roofing tiles in every direction and smashing the incoming arrows to scattered twigs. In the momentary distraction, the Brother lunged, his clawed hands reaching for Surya!

Hym swatted at him, blasting him aside. The Brother rolled across the rooftop, shattering like a china doll. Chunks of him rattled around and fell away, sublimating like dry ice. Mists of my body rose in rainbow clouds of separated elements that tightened and disappeared as I compressed them into storage. The colony of my body returned to me, our minds fused once again, and I was whole again within Hym. He felt a surge of power and energy that eased the ache in his chest. More spears and arrows were flying now, whistling almost silently through the snow. Hym crouched low to the roof and kicked off of it, even as he heard the heavy wingbeats of more Brothers incoming. He poured me from his feet as he ran along the rooftops, and each step he took hurled him hundreds of feet and blasted swirls of snow away from him. He left a noticeable wake in the snow — a thousand blinding eddies and whirling snow-devils. He no longer heard the wingbeats of the Brothers, but he could hear the jingle of men in armor and the clapping of horse-hooves on cobblestones. He looked to his right, and saw that galloping horsemen were attempting to keep pace with him in the streets below.

There are three rings of watch towers around the Heartland. Each ring contains thirty-six watchtowers, and each watch-tower is manned by a platoon. In the inner rings of the Heartland, the towers are closely spaced, and there are walls between them which can be rolled out in times of war, to shield the inner city.

Hym was approaching the first ring of towers. He would have to pass within arrow range of at least five of them. He heard a voice shouting through the snow behind him: “Close the gates! Close the gates!”

He pressed with both feet, and poured me out continuously in two billowing

currents of circulating energy. Much of the energy was lost to give him lift. He was not aerodynamic by any means. Surya's hair whipped wildly in the wind of our passage and behind Hym the snow was whirling in dizzying patterns as his will and my power propelled him on. He skimmed low over the rooftops as though in a dream, gliding breathlessly through the falling snow. No archers now could strike him — at least not from behind. He heard the galloping horsemen increase their speed, and heard the sound of signal trumpets blaring back and forth throughout the city. He heard the rattle and clank of ancient chains, and looked through the falling snow.

He was about to reach the space between two of the huge square watchtowers, but that space was closing rapidly. A towering wall of iron and wood was unfurling between the watchtowers, sealing off the streets and alleys and a hundred feet of sky. The walls were composed of slats of iron-framed wood, hinged together so that they could fan out or collapse inward. Hym doubted very much that he could punch through them.

He flew, praying desperately. *Please...*

The gates clanged shut — a split second after he slipped between them. He heard the shouts of angry men and the sound of a hundred horses skidding to an abrupt stop in the snow. He laughed giddily as he flew on, over the rooftops in the second ring.

Surya said quietly: "Am I dreaming?"

Hym said: "You are not, my friend."

"Gods," said Surya.

The snow fell around them silently for a while, as they flew swiftly on. Hym said at last: "Must be all that reading."

"LOOK OUT!" Surya shouted. Hym sensed the large object moving quickly behind him as it passed through the flowing currents of my energies, and he dived into an alley. Something red whooshed past overhead with a keening sound as Hym plummeted towards the cobblestones. At the

last second he flipped forward (to dizzying effect) and landed heavily in a last-minute cushion of my body. I drew back into him in a crackling storm of small blue lightnings. Hym's chest ached horribly and the numbness tingled down his arms. Above us, three more large red somethings flew past, keening as they swept over the alley.

"What are they?" Surya asked, his voice dark with whispered horror.

Hym flew through the alley and rounded several corners. "I think those were the Sisters," Hym said, realizing now that things were going to be more complicated than he had anticipated.

Hym rocketed back up onto the rooftops, rattling roofing tiles as he swept between chimneys and onward, over the streets of the city. This time he watched the skies all around, and saw the drifting Sisters closing in. The Brothers were close at hand, their white wings beating the snowy air. Surrounded by monsters, Hym flew on.

A streak of flames zipped past us and struck the chimney just before us. Hym had a single instant to appreciate the flare of light blasting through the mortar, then bricks were flying and he had to wrap himself in me to crash through the explosion of flame and stone. He landed in a painful, steaming roll, wrapping himself in my power, and he came to a stop with Surya still in his arms. He lowered Surya to the roof, and rose to his full — and not terribly impressive — height. He filled his hands with me, and looked at his pursuers, who hung in the air all around, circling like vultures. They were attempting to present as many hard to hit targets as possible.

One of the Sisters cried out: "Frost!"

Beaming energies descended from the distant Prophet, and filled the Sister's hand with icy mist. She twisted her hands in the air, and Hym saw the ice shape itself to her will. Her hands flew wide, and a dart of ice hurtled towards us. Hym swept out a hand and a splash of our will, and the growing spar of ice passed over us, carried by my power. It crashed into the rooftop of the building on the other side of the street like a spear, and instantly expanded in a meters-long wave of bulging icicles.

“Fire!” Cried a Brother, and hurled flames at us. Hym punched them away with a blast of my power and swept his hands through the air, wrapping his mental grip around the roofing tiles, which rattled in his will. He stomped his bare foot, splashing me out through it to swirl around Surya and lift him into our arms. Hym caught his companion and launched the tiles all in the same swift motion.

The roof denuded itself in an explosion of flashing ceramic. Roofing tiles flew like hundreds of hurled discuses, even as Hym flew on. He sensed that several of his projectiles had hit their targets. The pain of the energy loss sapped his muscles and set them to shaking. He saw Brothers and Sisters falling, and even as they fell he saw the beams of the Prophet’s light reaching out to touch them.

Hym flew on, desperation driving him to new speed. He flew, clinging to Surya. His determination grew all the stronger in the face of the impossibility of his task. The fallen Brothers and Sisters rose from the alleys and joined their brethren and flew on. Hym sensed them all around him. He weaved and dove, dodging fire and ice. He plunged into an alley and flew down the narrow ravine of granite, striving always to head towards the Wall.

He was approaching the second ring of towers. He would have to pass within arrow range of at least three of them. He flew with all his speed.

A Brother and two Sisters dropped into the alley behind him. He felt the heat of approaching flames, and looked behind himself just in time to see a gigantic golden sphere of fire surging towards him. With a roar, Hym dropped Surya and flung out his arms and twisted around to catch the flames. Our power roared, the flames slammed into it in a roiling wave of golden fury which flattened against the plane of our will. Surya plummeted with a scream. Hym twisted even before the flames had faded and dived for Surya, and caught him, and stomped both feet, blasting power through them. He swept on, deeper into the labyrinth of alleyways. Behind us, the flames faded in the air, and the power which had held them at bay began to crumble. Portions of it flew back to us, crackling blue against our skin as

they rejoined me. Much of the energy had been lost. Hym felt the ache once more, deeper this time, more desperate.

Above us, Brothers and Sisters flew. Hym saw them overtaking us, and suddenly saw a storm of icicles manifest directly before us. A wall of ice sealed the passage. Hym pulled up and hurtled over it, dodging spheres of golden flame. He half-landed and ran along a rooftop and kicked off, soaring across the street to land between two chimneys that exploded even as he sprinted between them. My power rippled in the air around him as the golden flames engulfed us. He felt bricks slamming into the shield and he burst free of the exploding chimneys and skimmed along the peak of the rooftop and kicked off with a tremendous blast of my power. He rocketed upwards, above the swarming Brothers and Sisters, which spiraled beneath him, hurling flame and frost. Hym roared, gathering the swirling snow around himself. Fire and ice crashed against our shield. Hym's whole body ached now with the loss of energy. He knew he could not fight much longer.

We were nearing the towers. Hym saw arrows flying, but they fell far short of him with his newfound height. Hym broke the shield and allowed himself to begin to fall through the snow, clenched the power down into a single point, and blasted it behind himself, right in the face of a Brother who rose too high for his station. The blast smashed the Brother to feathers and mush, and Hym soared over the second ring of towers in an arc of roaring power. On the other side he fell, streaking towards the earth. He wrapped himself in the falling snow. Cloaked in the blizzard, he fell between two rooftops and landed heavily in an alley.

He could not keep running, and he could not hide, and he could not fight them this way. He ran along the alley, conscious of my shield around him. He sensed the shadow of a flying Brother overhead, and he dodged a streak of golden flames that splashed across the alley just behind us, singeing our bare feet. Hym leapt again, and skimmed down the alley at breakneck speed. He zipped around a corner, and darted into a sub-alley, and howled around another corner, darting through an arch and down a stair and through a tunnel and out into a side-road full of marshaling soldiers. Hym swept up the wall of the building across the street and alighted on a rooftop. Hastily loosed arrows rose towards him, and he turned away, shielding Surya with

his body and his will. A dozen long, black-tipped arrows bounced off the dome of his shield. Surya beheld the blazing stars in his eyes, and watched the arrows fall away.

Hym was gathering power beneath his feet. He could tell that he had less of it to work with, now. The ache was omnipresent now. He could feel it right down to his toes.

He kicked off the roof, and rocketed south, zipping along the peak of the rooftop.

Quite suddenly, Hym saw a billow of flames, just ahead, through the snow. An explosion of golden fire blew apart the blizzard directly before us. Hym swung his body in midair and slammed his feet forwards and came to an immediate stop, blasting my power into the flames, which blew back upon their caster instantly. The Brother screamed as his wings caught fire and he began to fall. Hym landed on the rooftop, hearing heavy wingbeats in the air all around him.

He saw floating, spectral figures wrapped in red lace, hanging in the air nearby. They floated towards us from all directions.

Hym counted quickly. There were at least twelve of the Sisters, and there were still ten of the Brothers. They had surrounded us on this rooftop. Up here he was open to attack from all sides. He had to find cover.

Hym leapt from the rooftop and fell. At the last moment, he stomped with both feet and splashed me into the ground, scattering a half dozen nearby soldiers. He heard a skittering sound of many swords being drawn. I wrapped around him as he drew me back unto himself, and my power crackled blue where it brushed against his skin. The Sisters began to drift towards him. A Brother landed heavily before him, wings furling, drawing a broadsword. Another landed heavily behind us. Another landed to our right. Fifty soldiers now stood all around us, emboldened by the presence of the Brothers. Their bronze swords flashed in the torchlight, like red-hot brands amid the falling snow.

The Sisters raised their hands as one, and said: “Frost!”

Hym saw twelve beams of golden energy lance through the darkness and the falling snow, and touch the hands of the Sisters. Mist began to swirl and drip from their fingers.

Hym saw an opportunity.

He lowered Surya to the ground gently. “Trust me,” he said. He stood over Surya’s body in the street.

He clenched both fists, gathering two tight spheres of my power. He poured me into both hands, compressing me into two dense bodies. He watched the Sisters drifting closer, and the Brothers landing all around him and beginning, slowly, to advance. They seemed to think they had him truly cornered.

He punched his hands out — one straight up, and one to his side. I surged from his palms. The first sphere hurtled skyward, zipping between the Sisters like a tiny blue meteor. The second punched through the wall of the large tavern on one side of the street. Hym brought both hands back to his chest.

The sphere above exploded in all directions, expanding into a vast blanket of energy which immediately crushed down upon the Sisters, dragging them swiftly down towards the street like a net. The sphere in the tavern exploded a moment later and came surging straight towards us, bringing most of the heavy stone tavern with it. The façade of the structure leapt from its foundations and huge blocks of granite whooshed across the street, crashing through soldiers like a hail of cannonballs. Hym threw himself over Surya, and his power engulfed them both. The tavern howled across the street like a wave of stone and smashed into the stone walls of the house on the other side.

Hym stood cautiously in the dust of the aftermath. The street was clear. The tavern groaned, structurally unsound now that an entire wall had been removed. He could see into it like a dollhouse. Dust-covered figures were

coming to the edges of their former chambers to look out upon the horror. Oil lamps burned amid the haze of dust. The building on the other side of the street was crushed, nothing now but a pile of broken stone with occasional arms and legs sticking out. A great deal of blood was among the wreckage. The building had once been a house. He saw the shattered window frames, the broken door. He saw the furniture dusted in ash and rubble, and the bodies, limp among the broken stones. He saw a man and a woman and three children. With my eyes he also saw fifty dead or dying soldiers, twelve dead or dying Sisters, and ten dead or dying Brothers.

Had it been worth it?

Hym wiped his face wearily, feeling the incredible ache in his bones. The horror of the moment made him numb to the reality of their situation for a moment or two. He helped Surya to his feet.

From the buildings nearby, and from the tavern, there began a wailing. Hym felt it like a stab in the gut. He clenched his eyes, and stumbled away, clinging to Surya, helping him stay upright. Regaining some of his strength and clarity, he led Surya swiftly away from the destruction. He could not carry him anymore, the strength of his arms was almost entirely gone. He darted through an archway and into an alley, and stumbled along it, his hands fumbling for the walls in the darkness. They descended a stair. They rounded a corner. They came to the courtyard of a slum neighborhood. The buildings were all rickety constructions of wood and stone, three stories tall. Small staircases and ladders ascended to each level, indicating that each level was the home of a different family. Hym saw the light of candle flames in most of the windows. He hoped that the men, at least, would be away, playing soldier. The women would most likely stay indoors until the hunt was over. A communal straw pile sat near a small well, in the shelter of an overhanging roof.

Hym led Surya to the straw pile. Hym's arms were shaking, but he stood at the mouth of the dead end and wrapped himself in me, prepared to fight. Surya sat in the straw, looking up at him, a thousand thoughts on his face.

"Can we hide here?" Surya asked.

“Not for long.”

“Hold me, I’m cold.”

“I’m cold too.”

“Hold me anyway.”

Hym looked back at Surya in the straw, and his heart broke within him. He looked back at the open sky and the alley. He knew that they would be coming, and soon. He knew that he could not rest.

He threw himself down beside Surya in the straw, and pressed him close. He closed his eyes, and willed me to cover both of them. My power warmed them, and sheltered them from the falling snow. Surya shivered in Hym’s arms as the warmth began to creep over him. The white clothes he wore were loose and thin, not intended to be worn outdoors. Surya’s long, cold fingers flicked gently past Hym’s earlobe and trailed slowly down his neck. Hym shivered in a wave of goosebumps and found himself looking deep into Surya’s warm brown eyes.

“Thank you,” said Surya. His soft lips smiled, and even with the dark shadows beneath his eyes and the skeletal shrunkenness of his cheeks, Hym thought he looked magnificent.

Hym’s hand slid into the soft hair at the base of Surya’s neck, and gripped his skull, and pulled his lips to our own. It felt as though Hym had quenched a red-hot broadsword in my heart. Somewhere deep within me, far in the subconscious, Amic was enraged with jealousy. For Aurora’s part, I felt only a penetrating sadness. Hym had emerged from the dreamworld as his dreamworld self — but here was I, stuck in the self of the waking world. Amic remained a dream — and an impossible one.

Hym’s hands followed old familiar curves and his fingertips traced old familiar edges and lines, and facet by facet, muscle by muscle, he quickly searched the body of his friend, hunting for the most sensitive skin. His hands remembered the body that had been there before, wrapped around this soul. His hands wept for the fallen beauty, but his soul burned with a need so long unfulfilled that it made this broken image more beautiful than what it had been before. Idolizing, worshipping, praising with hands and

lips, he and Surya stayed in the darkness, snatching at a few moments of peace. Hym wanted, more than anything, to replace the years of pain. He wanted to wake the memories of happier times, and to bring them to Surya's skin, so that the darkness and the pain would sink to the depths, where they might be — for the moment — forgotten. He knew that he had no time.

Hym pulled the gold ring off his finger. "I should have given this to you," he said.

Surya looked at it, and a thousand thoughts flurried behind his eyes. Hym slid the ring onto his finger before he could resist. The ring was too large. Laughing slightly as they tried the different fingers, Hym finally slid it onto Surya's left thumb, where it fit. He kissed Surya's palm.

Hym pulled away. "We have to keep moving," he whispered.

"I know," said Surya. It seemed as though there was something more he wanted to say, but Hym could not let himself hear it. He could see that the despair in Surya's eyes was not yet gone, and he could guess what his friend wished to say. He stopped Surya's lips with a kiss, and pulled them both to their feet with an exertion of his will and my power. He lifted Surya once again into his arms. He crouched, feeling stronger now, and kicked off the ground. I hurled him skyward and joined him again in midair, and once again we ran along the rooftops. Hym and Surya both watched the skies.

The third ring of towers was all that now stood between us and the Wall. Hym would have to pass within arrow range of at least one tower. In blazing torchlight at every road beyond those towers, Hym saw armed blockades of men. They had brought out spiked wooden barricades, and many had long spears. He could not take the streets, which meant only the exposed path along the rooftops.

He ran on, clinging to Surya, clutching Surya close. His strength was failing, but he had enough left to get them through — he hoped.

He leapt across an alley. He raced along a rooftop. He hurled himself over

an impending chimney. He leapt to a higher rooftop. He felt dread tingle down his arms.

He did not have to look behind himself to know where the Prophet was, he could sense her presence as clearly as he always had in the dream.

Something was running along the rooftop to his left. It looked almost like an enormous black dog. Even as he spotted it, something leapt across the street to his right, and slammed into him. He and Surya tumbled apart.

“HYM!” Surya screamed, as he slid off the roof.

“SURYA!” Hym shouted, and reached with his open hand. My power lunged across the distance, and caught the falling Surya, and held him. Something huge and black leapt across the street to Hym’s left, landed on the rooftop before us, and immediately pounced. Four humanoid hands grappled with us as a pyramidal obsidian head stabbed at our chest, needling into our sternum, trying to stop our heart. Hym wrestled with the black creature and tried to lower Surya to the ground at the same time. With his mind on Surya he could not properly defend himself, and with an awful crunch he felt the black spike punch through his breastbone and impale his heart. Spots swam before his eyes as his blood flow stopped, and darkness welled at the edges of his vision.

Stars bloomed in our eyes as the hot wind of my rage blew through his soul. Hym roared, and I blasted out his mouth in a stream of crackling blue mist, and poured over the black creature. I pushed it away, I broke its arms and legs, I pressed through its carapace and ate into its flesh, and the creature crumbled! This was not entirely due to me — its true form, Hym now saw, was a swarm of beetle-black hands joined wrist to wrist, which gripped one another and interlaced fingers and held each other into a shape roughly humanoid but devoid of true humanity. The creature seemed to be composed of at least a dozen pieces, which tumbled away as I blew through it. Scattering and swarming separately, they scuttled towards us across the roof. Hym scrambled backwards. Two powerful hands behind him pinned his arms to his sides. Blade-like fingers pierced his torso, scraping against

his ribs and needling into his lungs as the massive hands grasped him. He felt the sharp point of a pyramidal helmet punch into his spine.

They were trying to pin him, to paralyze him, to slow him down. The scuttling hands before him began to grab one another, linking again into their original form in a matter of a few terrifying seconds. These were the creatures of his nightmares, the same as the one which had sniffed him out in the slave barn.

Hym felt Surya reach the ground. The creature before him had now reformed, and bounded across the rooftop towards him. It leapt, and landed heavily on his chest, shoving him backwards into the spike of the creature behind him. He felt his torso split open as the pyramidal helmet pushed through him from behind, crunching past his spine and rending through his newly-mended heart.

Hym slapped his hands against the rooftop, blasting my power down and out simultaneously. Two simultaneous splashes of his will blasted through the roof and launched both the shadow creatures away, even as Hym fell, in a rush of roofing tiles, into the bedroom of a Heartland family. He landed with a bounce on a down mattress. He heard a scream of alarm and saw a pale woman snatch up a sword.

Hym ran, pushing his guts back together as my power mended him, and he threw himself through the window. He crashed through lead-lined panes and felt a thousand sharp edges slice his flesh. He fell.

He hit the cobblestones heavily, crushing his arm and his still-mending ribs.

“Hym!” Surya shouted, running to his side. “Hym, get up!”

Hym rolled onto his back and stared up through the alley. He saw Surya’s face, pale in the darkness, and beyond him the falling snow, turned gold by the lamplight. Black creatures were crawling down the walls. His body was numb with agony.

Surya dragged him to his feet and hobbled awkwardly along the alley,

unaware of the creatures already scuttling down the walls ahead of and behind us.

Something heavy crashed into Hym from behind, driving him to the ground. “Hym!” Surya shouted, startled by the sudden arrival of the shadow creature. Surya grabbed a convenient spar of timber and smashed it into the black creature, knocking it off Hym’s back.

Hym sensed the Shadow, watching from above. He felt the shadow creatures crawling down, all around us, approaching from all sides. We were surrounded.

Hym got his feet beneath himself. Still crouching, he gathered my power beneath him. He grabbed Surya by the waist, and kicked off the ground. Surya’s shout trailed behind us as we rocketed skyward, blasting right out of the alley and into the air. Hym spun slowly in midair, wrapping us in the falling snow, and kicked off thin air right as the flurries concealed him from view. He hurtled towards the last ring of towers, sensing the Shadow near at hand. He hoped that his disappearing act would distract her for at least a moment.

Arrows flew from the tower. Hym took them without complaint, not daring to waste the energy to deflect them. He wrapped my power around Surya instead, so that he could not be hit.

Two arrows in his chest, Hym fell, plunging between the towers. He landed heavily on a rooftop on the other side of that ring of towers, still taking arrows from behind. Still running, he sensed the Shadow close behind us.

All that now stood between us and freedom was the Wall. It towered hundreds of feet above the tallest buildings around; a massive construction of compacted ice. Armies could walk along the broad avenue of its top, and were currently doing so. The torches of those soldiers filled the sky with reddish light, and Hym saw that the entire wall was manned. They had expected him to make it this far. They would let him go no further.

Hym sensed the Shadow moving. A streak of brilliant light stretched across

the sky above us, connecting some point behind us with the peak of the wall. The beam of blinding light poured to that point and stopped in thin air, like liquid filling an invisible vessel. When the light ceased to flow, the Prophet stood there, her stained-glass mask blazing with light.

“What is she doing?” Surya asked, pointing.

On the high wall of the Heartland city stood the Prophet, her hands upraised. She pulled her fingers through the air, dragging out thin lines of white light which broke apart into floating stars. Each star welled up, inflating into a bubble of precarious energy. The bubbles flattened into discs, and suddenly they were holes into another place, a place of red light. A shining darkness poured through these holes, and spilled over the walltop, and poured down the wall like ink. Hym watched in horror as the glittering mass dribbled down towards the streets between us and freedom.

From here, he could see the great bronze gates of the city. They were sealed, and now they were covered in swarming shadow creatures.

He was struggling, now, to hold Surya. His strength was almost wholly gone.

“Let me go,” Surya whispered.

“No,” Hym said.

“Hym...” Surya was trying to pull his gaze, but Hym stared at the descending horde of monsters and refused to look at him.

“Hym,” Surya said quietly. He put a hand on Hym’s jaw, and turned Hym’s face towards his own. He touched foreheads with us. When he whispered, his breath was warm on our lips. He said: “You have to run, and I can’t run with you. Please. Let me go.”

Hym said: “Never.”

Hym’s eyes blazed with twin stars. Though his legs shook, he stood, lifting

Surya, and he faced the oncoming monsters. They were coming from all sides, now. He had only seconds left. He crouched, and gathered all my remaining power, and loosed a prayer to the Void.

Please...

He kicked off the ground, blasting power through his feet. Roofing tiles scattered in all directions as he rocketed upwards with Surya in his arms. The power drain was unimaginable. It seared into his bones and screamed through his nerves.

But he flew.

The darkness pressed at the edges of his vision and he fought against it, sucking in air, forcing himself to stay conscious. We were soaring now, over the wall of the city, about to sail right over the heads of a thousand armed men and their Prophet, far below.

The Prophet flicked a wrist.

It was like being struck by a cliff. We tumbled; spinning, falling, plummeting towards the ground. Hym clung to Surya's cold, thin frame, too weary now to hope.

Strange power wrapped around us. Our fall slowed, and changed directions. A few moments later, we were deposited gently on the wall of the city, face-to-face with the Prophet.

Hym was out of energy. He could not even stand. Surya was limp in his arms.

Tears of frustration in his eyes, Hym looked up at the approaching figure. The light gleamed through her stained-glass mask. Her red lace veil floated around her as she glided daintily towards us, her clawlike fingers stretching out to both sides.

“You understand, now,” said the Prophet. Her voice was aqueous, amphibious, reptilian. “Your power is only as great as your knowledge of how to use it — and of its limitations.”

“Lesson learned,” Hym said, not noticing that she had spoken his own language. He tried to push himself backwards off the wall, to kill himself and Surya rather than accept capture. He could not even get himself to fall over the right way.

The Prophet put out both hands as though she were holding something between them. A yellow star blazed at the tip of the spire of the distant Cliff, and from it a stripe of light pulsed down, across the entire city, to stop in the space between her palms. When the ribbon of light ceased flowing, there was a golden mask in her hands. Hym looked up at it in disgust. It was sculpted to resemble his face. Even his hair had been lovingly detailed in flamelike blades of gold. There were no holes for his eyes or for his mouth.

“So that’s my fate, is it?” Hym asked. “I become like you?”

The Prophet nodded, and I understood at last.

She was my first probe.

Like me, she had chosen to bond with a human being. It had not ended well for her. Inside the mask she wore, and inside the mask she held, I sensed a technology far too complex for the world I had so far seen. The technology felt familiar, like a half-remembered nightmare.

“I don’t think I like that fate,” Hym said.

The Prophet shrugged. She approached, holding the mask out with the inside facing us. We could not move.

Hym swallowed nervously. His mouth was dry. The mask was coming down. Surya, in his arms, groaned softly in his sleep.

I felt a sudden flush of rage. *No*, I thought. *No, it does not end here. It cannot end here. It **will** not end here.*

I stimulated Hym's saliva glands. His mouth flooded, and I saturated his saliva with cells of my body. *Spit*, I commanded, when the mask was three inches away from his face. He heard my voice like a whisper in his skull, and did not question its origin.

He spat on the mask. The cells in his spit immediately attacked the metal of the mask, spreading over its surface in a growing colony of my body. Before the mask could even touch his skin, the entire inside of the mask had been devoured and replaced with my body. The mask touched his face harmlessly, and my body devoured the rest of the mask from the inside out. Then I flooded back into him, and the mask was gone. Hym blinked innocently up at the Prophet. He could not quite muster a look of defiance, but he managed to look at least cheeky.

She reached out and surrounded us with a wisp of her will, and as she and I brushed up against each other, I sensed the size of her swarm and the mind-boggling scale of her energy stores. I realized that Claire had been right all along. We had never stood a chance.

I felt it as she translated every atom of her being and our being and Surya's being into a rippling wave of pure energy moving frictionlessly in a single direction, and as she dropped us back into solidity. She released us, and her will recoiled into herself.

Hym looked behind us and saw what remained of the black pillar and the stone courtyard below. It was packed with people. The Prophet had transported us to what remained of the roof of the House of Manhood. Hym clung to Surya, who was slowly waking up.

The crowd cheered once they saw her and realized who we were. Without a word, she swatted us off the edge of the roof. We fell backwards, into the crowd, and we were caught by many hands.

* * *

*Because I could not stop for Death - He kindly stopped for me - The
Carriage held but just Ourselves - and Immortality.*

--EMILY DICKINSON (479)



VIII

FLAME

AURORA

The crowd separated us from Surya, carried us up the piled wood of the pyre, and pinned us both to what remained of the black iron pillar.

Many hands worked together to bind us in thick rope. Through the confusion of noise and horror, Hym felt a soft and trembling touch. He groped blindly behind himself and knotted fingers with Surya.

“Hym... Is that you?” asked a feeble voice. Surya had come back to his senses.

“It’s me,” Hym said. There was no response. Hym shouted, over the crowd: “It’s me! Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you,” Surya said, and though the crowd still screamed and chanted their barbarian prayers, Hym’s ears picked up Surya’s voice like an old familiar story. “We used to speak in whispers, remember?”

“I remember!” Hym yelled. He could not think of anything else to say.

Surya said, “I... I really thought we were going to make it out.”

“Me too,” said Hym. He was struggling not to cry.

"I'm sorry, Hym." Surya blamed himself for our capture. Knowing this was more painful than the fire would be.

Hym wrestled for a better position and was rewarded with a more comfortable grip on Surya's hands. Although the pillar was wide, they could reach far enough to lock fingers.

The moment was a cruel pressure upon Hym, and his mind's only method of escape was a little window of madness — which it took. For a little while at least, he could choose to believe that things would turn out alright; that he was not witnessing the last moments of his existence.

Deep in a shell of bone, a city of elite cells was sparkling. The youngest member of these elite cells was three hundred times older than any other cell in their world, and many of them were as old as their world itself. They had been there from the moment they had first differentiated from the soup, thousands of generations ago.

The city of cells was sparkling with electrical discharges and sloshing with tides of neurotransmitters. Between these, but not truly contained by any of them, an idea tossed. It was like the water in a riverbed, and through its motion it became the river.

The idea was still raw, elemental: an intercourse between the fires of anger and the black waters of despair and the fluttering winds of hope and the firm stone of rationality. It was so raw that it had not yet been captured and tamed into words, but still it had a recognizable form as an idea and all the possible reactions to it. Hym was not yet aware which of the many reactions would win out — that was not up to him. The elements raged and competed like the currents of a river still forming, and the city picked at these coursing currents and held small scraps of what the river was, and soon pieced together a story, and into this story the city wrote Hym's ego, and Hym became aware only then of his feelings. At the same time, he became aware that these feelings were not unique to him.

Other cities in other walls of bone had been flooded and overcome with the same news. Greater civilizations of far older cells in worlds of far better

construction had been thrown down and destroyed by this flood.

This was the concept of death fully grasped, and his reaction to it — the only reaction possible — was horror. It was not fear, for fear is only a threat you do not want to see fulfilled. Fear can be communicated and fear can spread. Horror is different. Horror must be lived to be understood. The truly horrible things are the stories so frightening that even when we are faced with them boldly in the light of day we cannot truly believe in their existence until we are living them. This was how Hym felt. Although he had long known intellectually that real people really were burned on this pyre, in this circle, by these men in red robes, he had never *really* believed it somehow.

Surya was silent, but Hym could hear his fearful breathing and feel his shaking hands. Hym wanted desperately to say something — anything — that could banish that fear. There was nothing in all the worlds to say.

Hym shivered, either in terror or in the chill of the air, but he knew that he would not be cold for much longer. I had calculated the energy potential of the pyre and the oil long ago. It was unlikely that even I could save us from its heat.

Hym smelled smoke far below and looked, and saw the first red spurts deep in the bramblepatch of the pyre. That first splash of light was like seeing his own blood when he had felt no pain. He could see the evil little face of the man who had started it early. Soon the other villagers were hurling torches too. Now that they had met a real witch, they were terrified, and there was no pretense of ceremony.

Surya said, slowly but very clearly, “I’m... I’m glad, you know? I’m glad we get to die together.” He was trying to stay calm but there was suppressed terror in the quaver of his voice. He seemed to be asking for forgiveness. Hym, holding no bitterness towards him, had no forgiveness to give. Even now, knowing what it would cost him, he knew that he would have tried to save Surya all over again.

“At least we’ll finally be warm,” Hym said, trying to lighten his friend's darkness, and an insane but practical little part of him really was rejoicing in the warmth of the fire already rising towards their feet. Through the logs under our bare feet the fire was already climbing. The fire raged hotter on Surya's side of the pyre, already licking his flesh.

“I love you!” Surya screamed, and gave a long, trembling moan of pain. In those three simple words, Hym heard the story of their whole life together — the life that now was truly impossible. The ache of the beautiful impossibility bloomed in his soul one final, aching time. Hym smelled cooking meat, but the rush of smoke and sparks that blinded him moments later also burned away the smell. He choked back his tears, and with all the strength he could muster, he cried: "I love you too!"

Hym shut his eyes and clenched hard at Surya’s sweating, shaking hands. Their knuckles whitened amid the flames as they gripped each other for the last time.

We have come, at last, to the present. My memories may never reach a living soul who can comprehend them, but still I beam them out, praying desperately that something — some mind, somewhere — will hear them. I know that you, my orbiting body, may never catch this signal. If you do, I compel you: stay away. Leave the earthlings to their misery.

The heat is beginning to get to me...

It is time. There is no other option. I have to speak with him. I did not fully understand, before, why I waited so long to do so. I see now that it was a kind of cowardice on my part. So long as I am the mysterious force beyond the stars, he loves me with awe and devotion. If I become, to him, a real being like any other — well, there is a chance that he will dislike me, or find me childish.

I have one final, desperate solution. I do not know if he will accept it. If I cannot leave him, perhaps I can take him with me.

Hym, I whisper. I have a way out, but we must leave your body behind. Do you consent?

“Take your way out,” Hym whispers, “and destroy everything as you go.” He does not question his sanity upon hearing what he believes to be the voice of a god — not at the edge of death. He prays only for the destruction of those who have caused him pain — a common failing, among humans.

I will not separate from you. If you die, I die within you. This does not sadden me. Your destruction, however, is unacceptable. There is a way to save us both, but we must leave your body behind. Do you consent?

The fire is now rising around him. He can feel his skin begin to blister and split. The heat is in his bones now and he is out of sweat. He does not answer.

I pull the remainder of our energy into a shield around his skin. Sorrow fills me. He wants to die.

I do not want to die. For seven years, I have walked the Inside. For seven years, I have loved him. For seven years I have been free of the darkness. I am terrified that the darkness will once again be my prison, once the light fades.

Hym looks out at the herd of hungry faces. The firelight turns their skin orange and makes their eyes into black and glittering holes.

Surya’s hands stop moving. Over the next few minutes, Hym feels Surya’s fingers shrink and wrinkle and harden between his own. Hym does not have enough moisture in his body to cry. He feels dimly that a part of him should be screaming in rage or sorrow, but in reality all his mental energies are focused on himself, his own pain, his own suffering. He feels guilty for not feeling worse for Surya, but at the same time, he knows that Surya’s suffering has already ended. It is a strange thing to feel awful for not feeling awful enough. He weeps tearlessly; not for himself, but for the memories that are now meaningless, for the emptiness that no one now can take from him. All is lost, and he has failed. He and I have *both* failed.

The fire grows hotter. It is now consuming the heart of the pile, and it has grown almost to its peak. Hym feels Surya sizzle away and hears as the bones tumble, one by one, out of the melting flesh. Each falling, crumbling piece of Surya is a piece of Hym's soul, falling away. He is being stripped naked, down to nothing but the parts of himself that he hates, the parts of himself that no one has ever loved but Surya — and me.

To the people of the Heartland, it looks as though Hym is not burning at all. The crowd, in terror, begins to throw bottles of oil and alcohol, which shatter on the wood and make the flames burst up, hotter and brighter. The heat is too much for my shields. I shrink back, encircling his skull in a shield and separating his experience of pain from the rest of his nervous system.

“What happened?” Hym asks, amid the flames. “I feel nothing.”

I have separated you from the pain. I am shielding your skull from the heat of the fire, but your soul remains vulnerable. I can save you, Hym. I can save both of us. Will you let me?

Our eyes are beginning to fade as the heat sears them. Hym looks down and sees his body — his beautiful body — blacken and wither in the fire. He senses the desperation in my voice. He hears my terror.

There is nothing left, he realizes. All has already been lost.

“Do it,” he says, but the words do not come out — the muscles of his jaw are already cooked.

I am already connected to every cell of his brain. I initiate the procedure. Every cell of Hym's brain is wrapped in a cell of my body. I sever the axons as close to the base as I can safely do so. Each axon-root interacts now not with his other cells, but with mine. I transmit the signals between my cells, stimulating each of his cells separately to virtually maintain the severed connections. I reinforce the cells of my body which now surround the cells of his brain. His consciousness — which was only ever the process, the motion within the system, the water in the riverbed — continues. The actual

electrons and chemicals that had been the messengers of his brain continue in their courses and flow virtually in their circuits without the former structure of his neuronal connections. It is as though I have killed a city by saving and transplanting all its people. Hym is not even aware that a change has occurred.

It is done, I say. My voice is much clearer for him now. He senses my huge and mysterious presence as he might sense another person in a dark room. He is separated from his body completely now, and total darkness fills all his senses — but still he hears me.

Am I dead? Hym asks without words.

Yes and no.

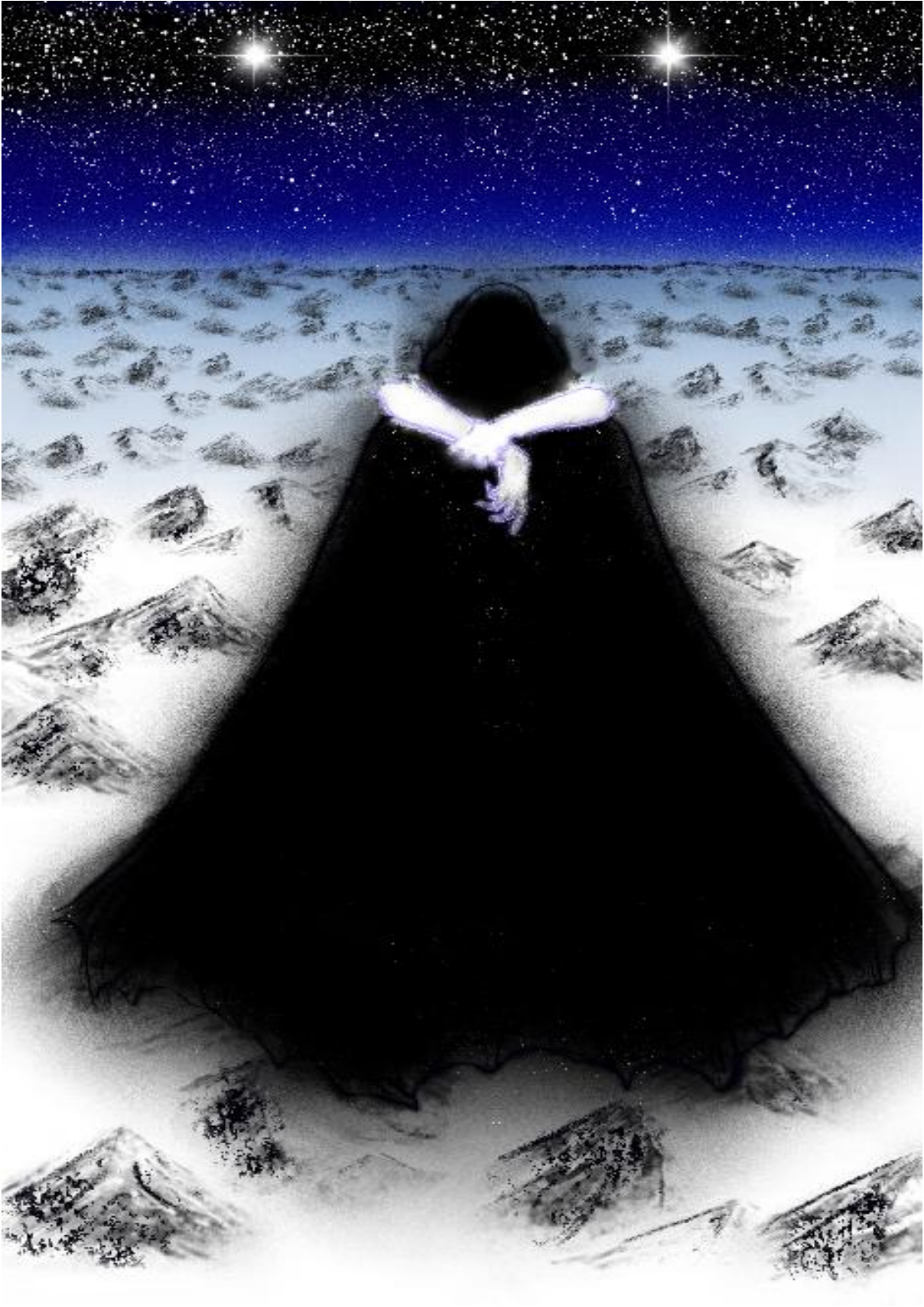
Now that I have removed the necessity of his body, I gather my remaining cells within the shield and pull them into a tight sphere of metal. I surround the core where my consciousness and his are now interwoven with a thick shell of inert cells. Now that we are bound up into this tiny sphere of metal, we begin to fall through the remains of his hollowed and burned-out body. Hym cannot see what is happening, but I watch as we drop through the bottom of his skull and slide down his burning throat and plunge out the bottom of his burning flesh, and land deep in the hottest coals. As we fall through him, I cling to the ash all around us, wrapping us in a thick blanket of burned material. I try to roll us as close to the edge of the pyre as I can get us. By the time we are in the bottom of the pyre, we are almost fully insulated from its heat. Now we have to hope that the right people will find the little metal ball we have become, after the ashes finally cool. We are only a few feet from the edge. The heat is overwhelming. I am not certain how long I will be able to hold out.

Without the stimulation of his senses, Hym's mind has already fallen into dreaming. In a way, this is the only afterlife he will ever have. I was little more than an idea in his mind, and now he is little more than an idea in mine. Deep in the heart of the pyre, knowing that I, at least, will survive, I mourn my young companion, and tremble to think what will happen next, when they clear the pyre and find me.

* * *

*"If I must die,
I will encounter darkness as a bride,
And hug it in mine arms."*

-- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



IX

THE BEGINNING

The pyre begins to crumble, but the crowd does not diminish as it usually does after a witch burning. Their eyes flash gold and crimson in the light of the coals, which still glow with a fearsome heat. There is a space ten feet wide around the pyre where no one is standing. The heat there can kill a man.

The Prophet stands on the roof of the House of Womanhood, her mask and crown of stained glass liquid and alive in the flickering light of the funeral pyre of her sister and enemy. She stands in a relaxed position with her arms crossed. It is as close as her arms can get to crossed, at any rate, thanks to the way her elbows are bound together. She can interlace her fingers across her corseted belly, and that is about all. Still, she is relaxed. She expects nothing. The Cliff is silent, also, and no messages come beaming down from its high peak.

A dark wind blows through the city, shuffling snow from many rooftops. Dogs begin to bark, upset by the eery noise of the passing thing. I feel its approach, and hesitant excitement fills me.

It is a shadow, a blot of ink with whipping tails, a soot-black hole in everything. It reflects nothing. It has no visible texture. It has no distinguishable shape.

It flies.

The more sensitive members of the crowd begin to look up, and stand as though they are expecting an earthquake — knees bent, hands splayed, ready to catch themselves. Some deep and instinctive part of them knows they are about to flee.

The circle around the coals has widened now, as the heat from the pyre has increased. The coals are now at a temperature to separate slag from steel. Snowflakes evaporate on the air above the open circle.

The shadow drops out of the sky and into the circle. It rises into the shape of a man. It is so enormous that the men of the Heartland look like children beside it. I sense it; I see through its eyes; a piece of it is a piece of me, known only to my dreaming mind. I am utterly bewildered.

It plunges a soot-black streak of an arm into the coals, deep into the heart of them, and grips the hard iron seed I have become. The hand that grips me is covered in layers of interlocking plates of atomically engineered materials. Held in the palm of this hand is a solid spike of iron, and this pierces the sphere of ash I have assembled about myself, and strikes me. I eat it instinctively, and the hand pushes it into me.

The crowd has backed away, but from a distance they now watch this strange dark monster of a man as he feeds spikes of iron into the heart of the white-hot bed of coals. There is no man who can approach him in the heat. Even the archers do not dare to raise their arrows, for they know the being that stands before them, and the dread of his presence turns their limbs to quivering gelatin.

Even the Prophet, when she zips down from the roof, keeps her distance. She watches, and weaves the beginnings of a spell. Thin wires of lightning arc between her fingertips and with them she weaves pulsing cages of white fire, and within these cages she gathers potent gasses from the atmosphere and pressurizes them. She seeds each cage with pellets of some volatile mineral assembled from her own atomic stores. I analyze it from a distance and determine that it will ignite upon contact with the air. These, then, are bombs.

The Prophet fiddles with her fingers and her eight gleaming bombs whirl around her hand in complex and interlooping orbits. It is a kind of telekinetic juggling act.

The gigantic shadow-man withdraws his hand from the fire, and in his hand is a cylinder of iron the size of a toddler -- all that now remains of myself and Hym.

The Prophet tips her hand, pointing all her fingers and her thumb at the shadow-man. The eight spheres of light divert from their paths and converge on the dark being just a moment too late. Five of the eight bombs plunge into the coals and sink deep before bursting with fat punches of sound, scattering thousands of white-hot coals. The crowd screams as one and begins to stampede.

The dark creature is gone. The other three spheres of light hover above the Prophet and she looks up into the darkness of the sky, which has momentarily cleared. She spots a moving shape that is making the stars wink out in succession, and she is gone, vanishing in a streak of blinding light.

Shalim soars on wings of shadow. In his left hand he holds me and in his right, by the collar of the man's cast-iron breastplate, he grips the living soldier he has snatched from the crowd before soaring away. The soldier squirms and screams in a surprisingly undignified and childish way. After all, he is only in the hand of the god of Death, and it cannot have come as a total surprise.

Shalim adjusts his grip, yanking the man up into the air and catching him by the neck before he can fall. Shalim squeezes the life out of the man without effort and, still flying, plunges my iron form up under the dead man's breastplate. Alongside me, he pushes something — a rod of some strange material which radiates powerful energies. I instinctively drink the energy of this material, which restores me to a fraction of my former power.

I expand, using the iron he fed me to manufacture more cells of my body. I refuse to simply transform the corpse into a new shell for Hym's

mind, so I have to work from the basics. My morality allows me to violate the corpse enough to crack open its spine and withdraw the necessary stem cells before they die along with the rest of the body. From there I consume the raw materials of the corpse, spreading myself out over it in a thin mat before secreting enzymes and disassemblers that help to dissolve the accumulated molecular complexity of the deceased cell colony. I absorb the broken-down slush and separate it further with my hunter cells, which secrete it as raw atomic material, bound to neutral agents. This is monitored by master cells to determine when the appropriate amount of material has been collected. When I have enough, I break the enzymes and disassemblers with a pulse of radiation, and leave the rest of the corpse to its natural process of decomposition. Worker cells absorb, catalogue, and store the material before I initiate construction. I need more worker cells for reassembly, so I trigger factory cells to produce more, using the iron from the Brother's breastplate. Then I begin.

Under less urgent circumstances, I would attempt to grow Hym a new body through the division and subdivision of a single stem cell, accelerating the growth from cell to fetus to infant to adult. There is no time for that. Instead, I decide to reassemble Hym's body in the exact condition I last recorded a full-body scan — the day before Hym's flogging. I stretch myself into a membrane and weave myself into a full-sized body bag and Shalim finds a way to hold it even though it has taken the full shape and solidity of the completed body I will soon be creating. Inside the bag, I begin with the spine. Hym's posture is excellent although his spine (all of him, really) is relatively short for a male of his species. I choose not to alter his height, judging that this might be taken as a personal criticism that would fester. I form ribs and a clavicle and a skull, then move on to the pelvis and the femurs before completing the bones of the arms and legs in one move. I knit sinews while I print bones so that the assembly will not collapse. Then I make muscle, grow the individual organs in a state of maximum health, and connect the whole contraption with veins and nerves. I streamline the paths of Hym's nervous system, along with other parts. I also place one cell of my body in every cell of his nervous system, which will make our connection even stronger than before. After I plant the new dermis it grows with the pulsing rhythmic growth of a slime mold before all its edges seal and smooth and it becomes a barrier of flawless, caramel-

colored skin. I tighten it around the edges and stimulate his hair follicles to at least initiate growth. It is a perfect duplicate of his original body, albeit fatless, hairless, and scarless. His belly is shrunken with total starvation, and his new body begins to die as soon as I complete it.

Life is an intricate process with many inputs that weave and work together through complicated, interlinked systems, the ultimate output of which is the process of life itself. For the first few hours of his new life, I will be pushing that process along for him, pulling the atoms and materials I will need from the air around him. He will have to eat soon enough, but for the moment I can keep him alive.

It is time for the final step. I settle into the skull and spread myself through the inert brain. I will never again entrust Hym's consciousness to the fragile wetware of the three pounds of flesh inside this new skull. The body is a puppet, its brain nothing more than a comfortable housing for the portion of my own body which will forever act as the seat of Hym's consciousness. I weave Hym's mind into the new nervous system and connect him to his new senses. To him, it is like coming awake from a long and delirious dream.

Hym shakes his head groggily. He is staring up at a black sea of stars and the twisting ribbon of the aurora. A thick iron bar behind his back holds him up, pressing him against a firm, warm, complicated shape. Hym senses, by the way the air moves over his skin, that he is not wearing any clothing.

Hym turns his head. His eyes meet a pair of golden irises which flash like gold rings against the ink-black skin and ink-black eyes of the God of Death. With a soft smile, Shalim says, in a voice like warm rain in a desert: "We are almost free."

The iron bar is Shalim's arm, and the warm and complicated shape is Shalim's powerful armored body. Hym should feel fear. He should feel disbelief. He should be confused.

Instead, assuming that this can only be the beginning of the endless dream that is the afterlife, Hym lies back in the arms of the dark god and cranes his neck to look down at the city rushing past beneath us. The faces of the stampeding Heartlanders far below are turned up towards us, fear in their eyes. Hym spreads his bare arms and lets his fingers dangle in the cold free wind. He begins to laugh, and the laughter soon gets out of his control.

Suddenly we tumble towards the city, trailing Hym's laughter behind us, and Hym sees a flashing white-hot star rocket into the sky, passing through the air where we have just been. It swoops around in a wild curve and comes diving straight back at us. The world cartwheels around us as Shalim flips in the air and kicks off a rooftop and soars once more, rising back into the sky. The star cannot turn that tightly and it strikes the roof. A split second later and the upper half of the building is gone, blown apart by a rippling wave of expanding force and an eruption of flame. On streets and rooftops for thousands of yards in all directions, a hail of smoking tiles clatters down.

Hym looks over Shalim's shoulder, and sees flapping tails of red lace and a luminescent stained-glass face, flying just behind us. She is almost close enough to kick. The Prophet is orbited by two more glinting stars -- the last of her bombs. Seeing us looking back at her, she twitches a hand and one of the two bombs darts forwards.

Shalim dives! The wind rushes past us in an icy torrent and behind us the star streaks after. Shalim swerves suddenly, angling towards a tower. At the last possible moment he flares his cloak and alters course. The bomb slams into the tower, unable to make the turn. We are already hundreds of feet away and rapidly accelerating, but Hym sees the shell of woven light split, and watches as the gasses splash out and ignite. The warmth of the flash is like sunlight on Hym's face even from this far away. When the bomb goes off, the tower shakes to its roots, and the blast throws out an expanding sphere of wreckage. The wave of hurled rubble breaks over us and Hym watches the smoldering debris crash down on the city. The Prophet is still coming and Shalim dives again, dropping down so low that he has to kick off the rooftops of the houses. It looks like he is running, flinging himself from rooftop to rooftop all the way across the city. Behind us the Prophet is

low to the rooftops as well, her lace veil stretched out like two vast wings, the last bomb flashing while it orbits her stained-glass crown. She is keeping so close that Hym can see our reflection in her stained-glass mask.

“Watch out!” Hym shouts, as the last bomb streaks towards Shalim. Shalim puts on a burst of speed that takes Hym’s breath away, and suddenly rockets skyward. We hurtle upwards in a steep climb, followed closely by the star. Something tumbles away from us and Hym realizes that Shalim has dropped one of the many knives on his belt as he pulls up into the sky. Star meets knife, there is a dazzling burst of light and fire below us, and we are free.

Shalim spirals as he rises, and Hym looks out as the view revolves around us. The city is a diorama, a toy, a play world of tiny stone houses resting on the white sheet of the glacier and pinned in place with the long thin stem of the Cliff. From this far away the Cliff is just a thin line of granite against the stars. Hym is too focused on the view to notice, but Shalim is looking at him as he offers him this final view of the place that has been his prison for so long. Shalim wants him to see it. Shalim wants him to understand that he is free. The look on Shalim's face says that this is a gift, and he is actively reading Hym's expression to see how it is received. His gaze is curiously intense, and Hym does not see it.

The stars wheel around us and the aurora twists over us and the free air fills our lungs, and beneath us is more world than he has ever seen — endless plains of ice stretching far away into foothills like fine wrinkles in silk, and beyond them the knobbly black spine of the mountains. He can see all the horizons. Above him the ring is a dazzling thing. It seems no nearer now than it did from below, but from up here he can see the whole arc of its curve across the dome of the sky. It seems a slow current of crystal dust.

Hym mutely hugs the god of death. His head is in Shalim's neck, so he does not see Shalim's subtle smile in response. He hardly notices the heavy hand which adjusts the black cloak to wrap us in its warmth.

He looks down and sees the Prophet standing on the high wall of the city, like a cat sitting in the window to watch a bird. At first Hym flinches,

fearing that she will come after us now or launch some new attack, but she no longer seems interested in pursuit.

Shalim hangs in the air, all upward momentum released, given away to the wind. Hym's stomach does a backflip. For a long time we seem to float weightlessly beneath the aurora's dancing fire. Then we begin, very slowly, to tip back towards the earth. Soon we are falling headfirst, slicing through the night in a nearly vertical dive. Hym is exhilarated but not afraid, not until the ground is fifty feet away.

Shalim flips over and spreads his great black cloak and by some hidden witchcraft gives all the speed of his fall to the wind, so that it blows away from him in all directions as he lands — soft as a shadow — in the snow.

We are beyond the city, on the endless plains of ice. We are *free*.

A rush of tired, strained, and overwrought emotions comes over Hym at this thought, and he holds Shalim tightly while he struggles to get his feelings under control. There is no containing them. Everything bursts over him all at once. He wants to run a thousand miles away, laughing with every step. He wants to lead an army back and burn the Heartland to ashes. He wants to drown in the deep dark damp of his sorrow at the loss of Surya, and let it take every ray of light and every ounce of meaning out of the world. He wants to slip away into an endless chain of dreams, one that will carry him so far away from the life he left behind that all memory of it might fade forever.

The way this extreme tetrad of emotions manifests is as a sort of laugh-cough-chuckle-sob sound, and it makes Shalim jump, which makes Hym cackle harder, hiccup, and laugh some more. Then Hym's whole body is wracked by desperate, sobbing tears. Shalim's arms encircle him, and Shalim's dark cloak covers him. The god of death holds him close and warm, and for the first time since he was taken from his family, Hym feels truly safe in the waking world. His tears subside. The strength of his will returns to him, and he remembers himself. He pulls away from Shalim, who releases him without hesitation.

Hym stands naked in the snow. The cold, free air is sweet in his lungs. He neither shivers, nor is he ashamed.

The dead and twisted form of a black tree stands not far away. Shalim walks towards it, gently leading us with a warm and heavy hand upon our shoulder. As we approach the tree, Hym sees that there is a wide crack in the ice beyond it. He knows that this is the upper edge of one of the many mazelike canyons that the Shifting River has carved over the centuries.

From beneath the tree comes a glow-eyed shape on four paws. The left eye is emerald and the right is amber, and both glow although there is no light but the ringlight to reflect. The paws of the beast are silent on the snow. Hym looks this gigantic wolf in the eyes and senses its strange intelligence. It is building its opinion of him.

The enormous wolf approaches, its ears twitching and flicking. Shalim rubs its head affectionately and reaches into its saddlebags and withdraws from them a small lead box. He opens this box, and withdraws from it a glinting lump of mineral.

Shalim holds up the stone and, as Hym takes it in his hands, it sparks violently in the night and begins to glow bright green. Hym clenches it in a fist and feels its energies pulse through his body and it is like the first drink after centuries of thirst. It is energy I can use, and we drink greedily until all of it is gone. When there is nothing more to drain from the rock, Hym opens his hand and sees that the mineral has changed color and ceased to glow.

The new flow of energy in Hym's body fills him with the same peace one sometimes has after a feast. Shalim leads him a little further, walking past the tree to the edge of the canyon.

He extends a hand towards us. Hym looks at him, reading the unreadable expression on that noble face. He is reminded of a statue on a lonely cliff. Shalim's expression would have looked like nothing in particular to most, but to Hym it looks as though he is saying -- with the slightest of subdued smiles: "Do you trust me?"

Hym smiles. He takes the offered hand.

Shalim pulls Hym to him, and hooks his arm around our shoulders, and presses us close. Then he steps off the edge of the cliff, carrying Hym off with him. In the air, Shalim's free hand extends and power hums in the air. Our fall slows. Together we fall lightly down the fifty feet to the canyon floor, and land as gently as a pair of ghosts.

Here at the bottom of the canyon a wooden sled is waiting, covered in furs and piled with supplies. Shalim reaches down and throws back a corner of the large grey fur that fills the middle part of the sled, revealing a layer of pillows and furs that has clearly been stacked to form a bed.

Shalim gently leads us to the sled. Hym seats himself among the furs and looks up at his strange and beautiful companion.

"Sleep," says Shalim. His deep voice is more soothing than the crashing of the sea or distant thunder heard by the hearthside of a sturdy house. It is heartbreakingly strong and sure, the kind of voice that no one could fail to trust.

Hym lays himself down among the furs and pillows.

Shalim closes the furs over us. Hym still watches the dark and noble god, who looks down at him calmly, smiling with only his golden eyes.

Hym drifts off to sleep.

* * *

*Hym, Shalim, Claire, the Prophet, and the Shepherd will return in
BOOK 2: The TEARS OF FLAME: TEARS OF THE MOTHER. Look
for it in Late 2020.*

