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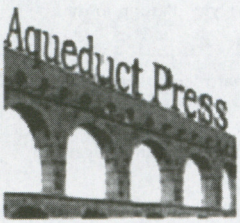

Miss Emily Gray
Theodora Goss

I. A Lane in Albion

It was April in Albion. To the south, in the civilized counties, farmers were already putting their lambs out to pasture, and lakeshores were covered with the daffodils beloved of the Poet. The daffodils were plucked by tourists, who photographed the lambs, or each other with bunches of daffodils, or the cottage of the Poet, who had not been particularly revered until after his death. But this was the north of Albion, where sea winds blew from one side of the island to the other, so that even in the pastures a farmer could smell salt, and in that place April was not the month of lambs or daffodils or tourists, but of rain.

In the north of Albion, it was raining. It was not raining steadily. The night before had wrung most of the water out of the sky, and morning was now scattering its last drops, like the final sobs after a fit of weeping. The wind blew the drops of water here and there, into a web that a spider had, earlier that morning, carefully arranged between two slats of a fence, and over the leaves, dried by the previous autumn, that still hung from the branches of an oak tree. The branches of the oak, which had stood on that spot since William the Conqueror had added words like mutton and testament to the language, stretched over the fence and the lane that ran beside it. The lane was still sodden from the night's rains, and covered by a low gray mist.

Along this lane came a sudden gust of wind, detaching an oak leaf from its branch,

detaching the spiderweb from its fence, sweeping them along with puffs of mist so that they tumbled together, like something one might find under a bureau: a tattered collection of gray fluff, brown paper, and string. As this collection tumbled down the lane, it began to extend upward like a whirlwind, and then to solidify. Soon, where there had been a leaf and a spiderweb speckled with rain, there was now a plain but neat gray dress with white collar and cuffs, and brown hair pulled back in a neat but very plain bun, and a small white nose, and a pair of serious but very clear gray eyes. Beneath the dress, held up by small white hands so that its hem would not touch the sodden lane, were a pair of plain brown boots. And as they stepped carefully among the puddles, sending the mist swirling before them, they gathered not a single speck of mud.

II. Genevieve in a Mood

When Genevieve was in a "mood," she went to the nursery, to sulk among the rocking horses and decapitated dolls. That was where Nanny finally found her, sitting on a settee with broken springs, reading *Pilgrim's Progress*.

"There you are, Miss Genevieve," she said. She puffed and patted a hand against her ample bosom. She had been climbing up and down stairs for the last half hour, and she was a short, stout woman, with an untidy bun of hair held together by hairpins that dropped out at intervals, leaving a trail behind her.

"Evidently," said Genevieve. Nanny was the only person with authority who would not send her to her room for using "that" tone of voice. Therefore, she used it with Nanny as often as possible.

"Supper's almost over. Didn't you hear the bell? Sir Edward is having a fit. One of these days he'll fall down dead from apoplexy, and you'll be to blame."

Genevieve had no doubt he would. She could imagine her father's face growing red and redder, until it looked like a slice of rare roast beef. He would shout, "Where have you been, young lady?" followed by "Don't use that tone of voice with me!" followed by "Up to your room, Miss!" Then she would have brown bread and water for supper. Genevieve rather liked brown bread, and liked even better imagining herself as a prisoner, a modern Mary, Queen of Scots.

"And what will Miss Gray think?"

"I don't care," said Genevieve. "I didn't ask for a bloody governess."

"Genevieve!" said Nanny. She did not believe in girls cursing, riding bicycles, or — heaven forbid — smoking cigarettes.

"Do you know who's going away to school? Amelia Thwaite. You know, Farmer Thwaite's daughter. Who used to milk our cows. Whose grandfather was our butler. She's going to Paris, to study art!" Genevieve shut *Pilgrim's Progress* with a bang and tossed it on the settee, where it landed in a cloud of dust.

"I know, my dear," said Nanny, smoothing her skirt, which Genevieve and occasionally Roland had spotted with tears when their father had refused them something they particularly wanted: in Roland's case, a brown pony and riding crop that Farmer Thwaite was selling at what seemed a ridiculously low price. "Sir Edward doesn't believe in girls going away to school, and I quite agree with him. Now come down and make your apologies to Miss Gray. How do you think she feels, just arrived from — well, wherever she arrived from — without a pupil to greet her?"

Genevieve did not much care, but the habit of obedience was strong, particularly to Nanny's comfortable voice, so she rose from the settee, kicking aside *Pilgrim's Progress*. This, although unintentional, sufficiently expressed her attitude toward the book, which Old Thwaite had read to her and Roland every Sunday afternoon, after church, while her father slept on the sofa with a handkerchief over his face. When she read the book herself, which was not often, she imagined him snoring. More often, when she was in a "mood," she would simply hold it open on her lap at the picture of Christian in the Slough of Despont, imagining interesting ways to keep him from reaching the Celestial City, which she believed must be the most boring place in the universe.

As she clattered down the stairs after Nanny, speculating that her father would not shout or send her to her room in front of the new governess, she began to imagine a marsh with green weeds that looked like solid ground. From it would rise seven women, nude and strategically covered with mud, with names like Desire and Foolishness. They would twine their arms around Christian and drag him downward into the muddy depths, where they would subject him to unspeakable pleasures. She did not think he would escape their clutches.

III. The Book in the Chimney

It was not what she was, exactly. She was not anything, exactly. Genevieve could see her now, through the library window, sitting in a garden chair, embroidering something. Once, Genevieve had crept up behind her and seen that she was embroidering on white linen with white thread so fine that the pattern was barely perceptible.

Her gray dress was always neat, her white face was always solemn. Her irregular verbs, as far as Genevieve could judge, were always correct. She knew the principle exports of Byzantium. When Genevieve did particularly well on her botany or geography, she smiled a placid smile.

It was not, then, anything in particular, except that her hands were so small, and moved so quickly over the piano keys, like jumping spiders. She preferred to play Chopin.

No, it was something more mysterious, something missing. Genevieve reached

into the back of the fireplace and carefully pulled out a loose brick. Behind it was an opening just large enough for a cigar box filled with dead beetles, which was what Roland had kept there, or a book, which was what she had kept there since Roland had left for Harrow and then the university. No fire had been lit in the library since her mother's death, when Genevieve was still young enough to be carried around in Nanny's arms. Her mother, who had liked books, had left her *Pilgrim's Progress* and a copy of *Clarissa* in one volume, which Genevieve read every night until she fell asleep. She never remembered what she had read the night before, so she always started again at the beginning. She had never made it past the first letter.

Out of the opening behind the brick, she pulled a book with a red leather cover, faded and sooty from its hiding place. On the cover, in gold lettering, Genevieve could still read the words *Practical Divination*. On the first page was written,

Practical Divination for the Adept or Amateur
By the Right Reverend Alice Widdicomb
Endorsed by the Theosophical Society

She brought the book to the library table, where she had set the basin and a bottle of ink. She was out of black ink, so it would have to be purple. Her father would shout at her when he discovered that she was out of ink again, but this time she could blame it on Miss Gray and irregular verbs.

She poured purple ink into the basin, then blew on it and repeated the words the Right Reverend Alice Widdicomb recommended, which sounded so much like a nonsense rhyme that she always wondered if they were strictly necessary. But she repeated them anyway. Then she stared at the purple ink until her eyes crossed, and said to the basin, as solemnly as thought she were purchasing a railway ticket, "Miss Gray, please."

First, the purple ink showed her Miss Gray sitting in the garden, looking faintly violet. Sir Edward came up from behind and leaned over her shoulder, admiring her violet embroidery. Then it showed a lane covered with purple mud, by a field whose fence needed considerable repair, over which grew a purple oak tree. Rain came down from the lavender sky. Genevieve waited, but the scene remained the same.

"Perfectly useless," she said with disgust. It was probably the purple ink. Magic was like Bach. If you didn't play the right notes in the right order, it never came out right. She turned to the back of the book, where she had tucked in a piece of paper covered with spidery handwriting. On one side it said "To Biddy, from Alice. A Sovereign Remedy for the Catarrh." On the other side was "A Spell to Make Come True Your Heart's Desire." That had not worked either, although Genevieve had gathered the ingredients carefully, even clipping the whiskers from the taxidermed fox

in the front hall. She read it over again, wondering where she had made a mistake. Perhaps it needed to be a live fox?

In the basin, Miss Gray was once again working on her violet embroidery. Genevieve frowned, rubbing a streak of purple ink across her cheek. What was it, exactly? She would have to find out another way.

IV. A Wedding on the Lawn

How, and this was the important question, had she done it? The tulle, floating behind her over the clipped lawn like foam. The satin, like spilled milk. The orange flowers brought from London.

Roland was drunk, which was only to be expected. He was standing beside the tea table, itself set beside the yew hedge, looking glum. Genevieve found it in her heart to sympathize.

"Oh, what a day," said Nanny, who was serving tea. She was upholstered in brown. A lace shawl that looked as thought it had been yellowing in the attic was pinned to her bodice by a brooch handpainted, entirely unnecessarily, thought Genevieve, with daffodils. Genevieve was "helping."

"The Romans," said Roland.

Genevieve waited for him to say something further, but he merely took another mouthful of punch.

"To think," said Nanny. "Like the woman who nursed a serpent, until it bit her bosom so that she died. My mother told me that story, and never did she say a truer word. And she so plain and respectable."

Miss Gray, the plain and respectable, was now walking around the garden in satin and tulle, on Sir Edward's arm, nodding placidly to the farmers and gentry. In spite of her finery, she looked as neat and ordinary as a pin.

"The Romans," said Roland, "had a special room where they could go to vomit. It was called the vomitorium." He lurched forward and almost fell on the tea table.

"Take him away, won't you, Nanny," said Genevieve. "Lie him down before he gives his best imitation of a Roman." That would get rid of them both, leaving her to ponder the mystery that was Miss Gray, holding orange blossoms.

When Nanny had taken Roland into the library — she could hear through the window that he had developed a case of hiccups — Genevieve circled behind the hedge, to an overgrown holly that she had once discovered in a game of hide and seek with Roland. From the outside, the tree looked like a mass of leaves edged with needles that would prick anyone who ventured too close. If you pushed your way carefully inside, however, you found that the inner branches were sparse and bare. It was the perfect place to hide. And if you pushed a branch aside just slightly, you could see

through the outer leaves without being seen. Roland had never found her, and in a fit of anger had decapitated her dolls. But she had never liked dolls anyway.

Miss Gray was listening to Farmer Thwaite, who was addressing her as Lady Trefusis. She was nodding and giving him one of her placid smiles. Sir Edward was looking particularly satisfied, which turned his face particularly red.

The old fool, thought Genevieve. She wondered what Miss Gray had up those capacious sleeves, which were in the latest fashion. Was it money she wanted?

That did not, to Genevieve's disappointment, seem to fit the Miss Gray who knew the parts of the flower and the principle rivers of Cathay.

Security? thought Genevieve. People often married for security. Nanny had said so, and in this at least she was willing to concede that Nanny might be right. The security of never again having to teach irregular verbs.

Genevieve pushed the holly leaves farther to one side. Miss Gray turned her head, with yards of tulle floating behind it. She looked directly at Genevieve, as though she could see through the holly leaves, and — she winked.

I must have imagined it, thought Genevieve a moment later. Miss Gray was smiling placidly at Amelia Thwaite, who looked like she had stepped out of a French fashion magazine.

She couldn't have seen me, thought Genevieve. And then, I wonder if she will expect me to call her mother?

V. A Meeting by Moonlight

Genevieve was on page four of *Clarissa* when she heard the voices.

First voice: "Angel, darling, you can't mean it."

Second voice: Inaudible murmur.

First voice, which obviously and unfortunately belonged to Roland: "If you only knew how I felt. Put your hand on my heart. Can you feel it? Beating and burning for you."

How embarrassing, having one's brother under one's bedroom window, mouthing banalities to a kitchenmaid.

Second voice, presumably the maid: Inaudible murmur.

Roland: "But you can't, you just can't. I would die without you. Don't you see what you've done to me? Emily, my own. Let me kiss this white neck, these little hands. Tell me you don't love him, tell me you'll run away with me. Tell me anything, but don't tell me to leave you. I can't do it any more than a moth can leave a flame." A convincing sob.

How was she supposed to read *Clarissa*? At this rate, she would never finish the first letter. Of course, she had never finished it on any other night, but it was the principle that mattered.

Genevieve put *Clarissa* down on the coverlet, open in a way that would eventually crack the spine, and picked up the pitcher, still full of tepid water, from her nightstand. She walked to the window. It was lucky that Nanny insisted on fresh air. She leaned out over the sill. Below, she could see the top of Roland's head. Beside him, her neck and shoulders white in the moonlight, stood Emily the kitchenmaid.

Except, thought Genevieve suddenly, that none of the maids was named Emily. The woman with the white shoulders looked up.

This time it was unmistakable. Miss Gray had winked at her. Genevieve lay on her bed for a long time, with *Clarissa* at an uncomfortable angle beneath her, staring at the ceiling.

VI. The Burial of the Dead

"I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord."

"He was so handsome," whispered Amelia Thwaite to the farmer's daughter standing beside her, whose attention was absorbed in studying the pattern of the clocks on Amelia's stockings. "I let him kiss me once, before he went to Oxford. He asked me not to fall in love with anyone else while he was away, and I wouldn't promise, and he must have been so angry because when I saw him again this summer, he would barely speak to me. And I'm just sick with guilt. Because I really did think, in my heart, that I could love only him, and now I will never, ever have the chance to tell him so."

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; even so saith the Spirit, for they rest from their labors."

"There's something behind it," whispered Farmer Thwaite to the farmer standing beside him, who had been up the night before with a sick ewe and was trying, with some success, not to fall asleep. "You mark my words." His neighbor marked them with a stifled yawn. "A gun doesn't go off, not just like that, not by itself. They say he was drunk, but he must of been pointing it at the old man for a reason. A strict enough landlord he was, and I'm not sorry to be rid of him, I tell you. The question is, whether our Ladyship will hold the reigns as tightly. She's a pretty little thing in black satin, like a cat that's got into the pantry and is sitting looking at you, all innocent with the cream on its chin. But there's something behind it, you mark my words." His neighbor dutifully marked them.

"Why art thou so full of heaviness, O my soul? and why art thou so disquiet within me?"

It was inexplicable. Genevieve could hear the rustle of dresses, the shuffle of boots, the drone of the minister filling the chapel. Each window with its stained-glass saint was dedicated to a Trefusis. A Trefusis lay under each stone knight in his stone armor, each stone lady folding her hands over stone drapery. A plaque beside the altar

commemorated Sir Roland Trefusis, who had come across the channel with William the Conqueror — some ungenerously whispered, as his cook.

"We must believe it was an accident," Mr. Herbert had said. "In that moment of confusion, he must have turned the pistol toward himself, examining it, unable to imagine how it could have gone off in his hands. And we have evidence, gentlemen," this to the constable and the magistrate of the county, "that the young man was intoxicated. What is the use, I put it to you, of calling it suicide under these circumstances? You have a son yourself," to the magistrate. "Would you want any earthly power denying him the right to rest in sacred ground?"

Nanny sniffed loudly into her handkerchief, which had a broad black border. "If it wasn't for that woman, that wicked, wicked woman, your dear father and that dear, dear boy would still be alive. I don't know how she done it, but she done it somehow, and if the good Lord don't smite her like he smote the witch of Endor, I'll become a Mahometan."

"By his last will and testament, signed and witnessed two weeks before the unfortunate — accident," Mr. Herbert had said, "your father left you to the guardianship of your stepmother, Lady Emily Trefusis. You will, of course, come into your own money when you reach the age of majority — or marry, with your guardian's permission. I don't suppose, Genevieve, that you've discussed any of this with your stepmother?"

Miss Gray turned, as though she had heard Nanny's angry whisper. For a moment she looked at Genevieve and then, inexplicably, she smiled, as though the two of them shared an amusing secret.

"There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High."

"I am quite certain it was an accident," the minister had said, patting Genevieve's hand. His palm was damp. "I knew young Roland when he was a boy. Oh, he would steal eggs from under a chicken for mischief, but there was no malice in his heart. Be comforted, my dear. They are in the Celestial City, singing hymns with the angels of the Lord."

Genevieve wondered. She was inclined, herself, to believe that Roland at least was most likely in Hell. It seemed, remembering Old Thwaite's Sunday lessons, an appropriate penalty for patricide.

She sniffed. She could not help it, fiercely as she was trying to hold whatever it was inside her so that it would not come out, like a wail. Because, as often as she thought of Mary, Queen of Scots, who had gone to her execution without hesitation or tears, she had to admit that she was very much afraid.

"For so thou didst ordain when thou createdst me, saying, dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia."

It must, of course, be explicable. But she had hidden and watched and followed, and she was no closer to an explanation than that day on which, in a bowl of purple ink, she had watched violet clouds floating against a lavender sky.

For a moment she leaned her head against Nanny's arm, but found no comfort there. She would have, she realized, to confront the spider in its web. She would have to talk with Miss Gray.

VII. A Conversation with Miss Gray

> ". . . and this prayer I make,
> Knowing that Nature never did betray
> The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
> Through all the years of this our life, to lead
> From joy to joy: for she can so inform
> The mind that is within us, so impress
> With quietness and beauty, and so feed
> With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
> Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,
> Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
> The dreary intercourse of daily life,
> Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
> Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
> Is full of blessings."

Miss Gray shut her book. "Hello, Genevieve. Can you tell me what I have been reading?"

"Wordsworth," said Genevieve. Miss Gray always read Wordsworth.

She was sitting on a stone bench beside the yew hedge, dressed in black with a white collar and cuffs, looking plain but very neat. The holly was now covered with red berries.

"In these lines, the Poet is telling us that if we pray to Nature, our great mother, she will answer us, not by transporting us to a literal heaven, but by making a heaven for us here upon earth, in our minds and hearts. I'm afraid, my dear, that you don't read enough poetry."

Genevieve stood, not knowing what to say. It had rained the night before, and she could feel a dampness around her ankles, where her stockings had brushed against wet grass.

"Have you been studying your irregular verbs?"

Genevieve said, in a voice that to her dismay sounded hoarse and uncertain, "This won't do, you know. Talking about irregular verbs. We must have it out sometime."

How, if Miss Gray said whatever do you mean Genevieve, would she respond? Her hands trembled, and she clasped them in front of her.

But Miss Gray said only, "I do apologize. I assumed it was perfectly clear."

Genevieve spread her hands in a silent question.

"I was sent to make come true your heart's desire."

"That's impossible," said Genevieve, and "I don't understand."

Miss Gray smiled placidly, mysteriously, like a respectable Mona Lisa. "You wanted to go to school, like Amelia Thwaite, and wear fine clothes, and be rid of your father."

"You're lying," said Genevieve. "It's not true," and "I didn't mean it." Then she fell on her knees, in the wet grass. Her head fell forward, until it almost, but not quite, touched Miss Gray's unwrinkled lap.

"Hush, my dear," said Miss Gray, stroking Genevieve's hair and brushing away the tears that were beginning to fall on her dress. "You will go to school in Paris, and we will go together to Worth's, to find you an appropriate wardrobe. And we will go to the galleries and the Academy of Art . . ."

There was sobbing now, and tears soaking through to her knees, but she continued to stroke Genevieve's hair and said, in the soothing voice of a hospital nurse, "And my dear, although you have suffered a great loss, I hope you will someday come to think of me as your mother."

In the north of Albion, rain once again began to fall, which was no surprise, since it was autumn.

A Beggar in Shadow
Holly Phillips

It was the night of the Duke's summer masque, and the public garden outside the palace wall had become a stage where the citizens of Lafontana could play at mystery. Desambouche and I, newly arrived from the north, hadn't known that the audience, as well as the players, were meant to go with their faces covered. During the interval after the first act, Desambouche bought us a pair of plain black dominos. I fingered the cheaply dyed cloth. It had a greasy feel, as if it had been worn before.

"I should have found you one on a stick, Julian," Desambouche said as he tied on his mask. "You could peer at the world over it like a coy maiden at a ball."

With the black strip covering his upper face, his loose curls, plumed hat, and the long velvet coat that had been elegant when I met him three years before, Desambouche looked like a highwayman from some widow's restless dream. I told him so and donned my mask. Desambouche laughed.

"You look like a pretty boy who's snuck out to find trouble when he's meant to be safe in bed."

I resettled my hat, smoothed the lace at my cuffs, and folded my frock coat back of the rapier on my hip. "I found trouble enough when I found you, but if you're still looking, by all means . . ." I made an exaggerated gesture towards the torchlit paths that led into the overgrown recesses of the garden.

Desambouche bowed and sauntered underneath the leaning cypress trees. I followed at his heels. It was hot there as well as dark, the still air heavy with the

perfumes of jasmine and sex. Couples embraced in the deepest shadows, while others strolled the paths, teasing the lovers and themselves with their pretended oblivion.

In an open space not far from the palace wall, Diana the huntress bent her bow at the moon, her cool marble skin glistening with the spray from a small fountain. Three women stood nearby, their gaudy dresses full in the skirt and tight in the bodice, their swan masks held carefully not too near their painted faces. Coy, perhaps, but hardly maidens. They looked us over and whispered among themselves. I was sweating under my velvet and linen, a little sick from the overripe stenches of flowering bodies and vines. As Desambouche prepared to begin the game with the women, a crushing boredom rolled over me. Desambouche swept his hat off and bowed.

The women were still coquettishly ignoring him when two masked men in the Duke's livery entered the clearing bearing lit torches. The plumes of fire shone off the silks and jewels of those who followed: three women as different from those others as wild swans are from the dyed canvas of the mummers' props. Real beauty, real pride. I took my hat off and bowed a courtier's bow, leg straight and hat sweeping the ground. I was peripherally aware of Desambouche following suit, and the common women curtsying by the fountain.

"La, your grace, 'tis a crowd!" one of the newcomers said.

Your grace. One of these women was the duke's new bride. Even so recently arrived, we had heard of her beauty. Curious, I straightened. The smallest of the three had a heart-shaped face and a black curling mass of hair threaded with blood-red ribbons. Her mouth looked soft as ripe berries, her brown eyes glistened with reflected flame. She wore no mask, nor carried one, and I had no doubt that this was she. Her husband's rank was all the shield she would need.

One of her attendants pouted. "There shall be no moon-magic here tonight, milady."

"And listen," the other said, more nervous than the first. "There is the fanfare for the second act. The Duke will already be in his place."

The two lackeys in their red tabards and lion cub masks might have been painted on the backdrop of night. Even their torches were still. Desambouche, hat in hand, stepped forward.

"A thousand pardons, milady, but your companion spoke you false."

I would have sworn she had taken no notice of us at all, but the young duchess looked at him without surprise. Also without interest. Still, she said, "It was you who misheard, sir. There are the trumpets even now."

A bright fall of brass notes, one instrument echoing the next, a call to arms, to arms. The next act would be the betrayal, and the death.

Desambouche smiled, his teeth a flash of white beneath the domino. "The fanfare is true enough, milady, but it was the magic of which I spoke."

She lifted a brow in perfect indifference. "Magic?"

"Your other most charming companion said there would be no moon-magic here this night. Yet I know she must be wrong, for your celestial beauty draws at the tides of my blood as does the queenly moon seduce the mighty ocean."

"Mighty ocean?" This time both eyebrows rose. She looked him over from his boots to his crown. "Sir, from the size of you I do doubt your blood would fill more than a chamber pot."

I laughed aloud. Desambouche stiffened. The duchess' eyes were dark with a wicked hilarity though her face kept its smooth indifference. Her gaze met mine and clung: an instant's recognition. Then she tipped her head at her companions, forgetting us, and the painted footmen came to life again, at least enough to light the way back under the trees. The fountain played. The fanfare rang out once more and died. Desambouche took my arm.

"Come on," he said lightly. "I'd hate to miss the second act."

So we went and stood among the sweating crowd to see the rest of the masque. I watched Desambouche as he watched the duchess, but she, at the side of her meaty lion-masked husband, never took her eyes from the stage.

Late, nearly dawn. Desambouche lay heavily against my back. My skin was slick with his sweat, my shirt was wrinkled and sodden, his breath was sour with wine. I spat a strand of his hair from my mouth and pried his arm from my ribs. He was heavy, and unhelpfully asleep. I dragged myself from under his weight and stripped off the shirt to lie naked on the edge of the bed. The slightest imaginable breeze slid through the window, but failed to cool my skin. Desambouche wound my braided hair around his fist.

"Pretty youth. You aren't leaving me, are you?"

"I thought you were asleep."

"Nearly." He let the braid slip from his hand. "No thanks to you." He stroked my arm, but it was too hot and I turned my back to him.

"Are you angry with me, Julian?"

Desambouche, drunk. I made a face he couldn't see.

"Julian? Because of the duchess?"

"Why should I be angry? Or do you mean jealous, sir Chamber Pot?" I snorted at the memory. The breeze was a little stronger, or else my skin was starting to cool.

Desambouche chuckled, surprising me. "Gods, she has a wit, doesn't she?" He raised himself to one elbow, energized by one of his sudden enthusiasms. "When I first saw her, I thought — of course, that kind of beauty, it kindles a man regardless — but I thought, why, of course she doesn't need a mask. Her own face, her whole being, it's all a facade. Pretty to look at, and all hollow behind."

"A succubus," I said. Sleep made my voice as heavy as my eyes.

"What?"

"That is what demon succubi are supposed to be. Seductive beauty and hollow inside."

"You aren't listening, Julian."

I closed my eyes. "Tell me, then."

He bent over me. I could feel the moonlight that came in the window to fall upon my eyelids. He said, "The point is, her face is a mask, but she is *not* hollow behind. She hides herself behind the beauty which is all most men would ever see, or ever want to see. But tonight, just for a moment, she let it slip. She gave us a glimpse of the wit — of the woman — underneath."

Half asleep, I couldn't summon the energy to respond. He leaned against my shoulders, his sour breath hot against my face.

"You saw it, Julian. I know you did. I was watching her when you laughed. There was something there . . ."

Something, I thought.

Desambouche lay back and folded his arms beneath his head. "There was something there. She'll know you when she sees you again." He yawned. "So will her women. Tomorrow you can find one of them, the one who spoke of moon-magic, and give her a note. Dames all love a handsome youth. They'll never refuse a message if it comes from you."

The breeze was stronger, drifting me to sleep. Dawn would not be long now.

I would argue with him tomorrow.

The gardens were a different place in the daytime. Aging formality going to seed, they circled the Duke's palace like a threadbare lace collar from an outmoded fashion. Grass was brown with summer drought and trampled by common feet, hedges and topiary sprouted with undignified abandon — even the pond was green with weed, its dirty water sullying the swans' white necks. I followed Desambouche across the patch of dirt that had been the mummers' stage and under the cypresses. It was as stifling as it had been that night a week ago, but yellow sunlight shafted through the green-black boughs, and the smell was more of cat piss and pitch than flowers and sex. Diana, though, was still cool and white in the shade of the ivied wall. We had the clearing to ourselves.

"No one." I strolled to the fountain and seated myself on the damp marble rim, dropping my hat to the crushed violets at my feet. The plants were long past flowering. I picked a broken leaf and dropped it onto the dappled surface of the water. I yawned. Desambouche paced. I said, "You didn't really think she'd come?"

He flashed me a suspicious look. "You delivered my letters, didn't you?"

"Oh yes." Indeed I had. Desambouche had been right. Where a grown man's advances would be a threat, a youth's romance was endearing. The duchess' chaperone had flirted with me, teased me until I blushed, and tucked Desambouche's note into her bosom. "Milady might even have read your poetry, but that doesn't mean — "

"She'll come. Married to that brute? Searching for moon-magic between the acts? She'll come, if only to see your pretty face again."

"My pretty face won't get her in bed with you."

He fanned himself with his hat, then tossed it by mine. He sat down beside me. "Play the innocent youth for me, Julian. Make her feel safely daring, let her think we are still chaperoned — let her pretend the seduction is only a children's game — and yes," he stroked his finger down my cheek, "your pretty face will indeed get her into bed." He tipped my chin up, as if I had been avoiding his eyes. "You are jealous."

Handsome Desambouche. He had been everything to me once, seducer, protector, guide. I yawned again. "Your coattail's getting wet."

He jumped to his feet and brushed at the spotted velvet.

"Your confidence is touching," I added. "I hope you're as certain of the Duke's indifference as you are of his lady's interest. If she's a good wife and shows him your letters . . ."

"My unsigned letters."

"'Bouche." I reproached him with a look. "As if the Duke needs a signature to act."

"Act on what? Tell me she doesn't get a thousand compliments a day."

"Tell me he doesn't have a thousand would-be lovers buried in his midden." He waved that off and turned back to watching the path. I went on. "For that matter, explain to me why your compliments should stand out from all the rest."

"Because she came here seeking magic, and she found me." He turned and gave me an arch smile, his eyes half-closed by the sun. "Just like you, Julian."

"I don't remember looking for magic."

"Escape, adventure." He shrugged.

"And I found you." My voice came out as dry as a northern wine.

Desambouche gave a theatrical sigh. "So bitter, and so young." He looked back at the path. Someone was coming.

Duke's men, I told myself, but I couldn't summon any fear. It was risk that brought any adventure alive, that roused the heart to beat in the mouth, that made one feel wholly alive, body and soul. Without that tension — For I truly did not believe the duchess would come. Why would she? — this 'plot,' this 'assignation' was as thrilling as feeding any of Desambouche's appetites. Buying a bottle of wine, say, or winning a silk stock at dice. I plucked the wet leaf from the fountain's pool and held it to my lips, biting down on another yawn. Hey ho for the Duke's men.

But it was the duchess who appeared through the trees, with the dame who had taken Desambouche's letters from me at her shoulder. Desambouche dropped into a bow, his chestnut curls shining in the sun. I sat, surprise weighting my limbs.

The duchess looked past the bowing Desambouche to me. "I had thought you meant to come alone."

"Milady," I stammered. She was so beautiful, her black hair barely contained by

jeweled pins. I felt unbearably clumsy as I stood and bowed, all arms and legs, my rapier an embarrassment at my hip.

Desambouche straightened. He could not have seen that she had been speaking to me. He said, "I came to worship, my queen, not seduce. I would never compromise — "

"You came to hide behind this sweet youth's innocent courtship," she said coldly.

I would have laughed — should have, to see Desambouche so soon stripped of his stratagem — but she looked at me and I was caught by what I had glimpsed the night of the masque. A strength, a wildness, trapped with no means of escape.

I felt I knew her.

Desambouche said, "Julian came to shield you, milady, not to shield me. I mean you every good, and no least dishonor, I swear it."

"Swear to my husband. No doubt he will be equally impressed." She gave me a final glance, a single dark flash of her eyes, and turned with a flare of skirts. "Come, Marguerite."

Dame Marguerite gave me a look of conspiratorial chagrin, Desambouche a look of frank appreciation, and bustled after her mistress through the trees.

Desambouche watched them until they vanished in the deep shade. Then he looked at me, his face shining with infatuation. "Didn't I tell you, Julian? Wit as well as beauty!"

"And a jealous husband to boot," I said, while my heart beat uneasily within my breast.

Desambouche brushed that aside with a flash of white cuff lace. "If he were jealous, would he let her wander the public gardens with only a single attendant?"

"If he isn't now, he will be soon."

"She won't tell him." He turned on me before I could argue. "Go after her, Julian. I told you it was your innocent face that would bring her. She'll take from you what she does not yet dare to hear from me."

"No."

He gripped my shoulders hard enough to bruise. "How much have I done for you? How many lies have I told for your sake? How often have you used me as your shield?"

Disbelief locked my throat. "You — how can you — as if I haven't paid!"

"With what? Bed? I haven't heard you complain." His hands tightened, his blue eyes fixed on mine. He looked, truly, a little mad. "I want her, Julian. I'm tired of the easy conquests. I want a challenge. I want a woman who can match me. Help me in this and I'll give you anything, everything I have."

Stark with fury, I said, "What do you have left that I might want?"

He raised one hand to touch my face. "Did you know you have lines starting, here by your eyes? You won't be a youth much longer."

I broke free and strode toward the trees. "You have nothing I want, Desambouche."

"Except your secrets," he shot at my back. "I still have all of those."

She stood at the end of the path as though she were waiting for me. I ducked my head and turned aside, wanting nothing to do with her. I was still raging at Desambouche in my heart. But behind me came the music of silk over grass, and her voice calling my name. Despite myself I stopped near the willows that cast their shade across the pond.

"Julian."

She stopped at my side, and I could feel her eyes on my face, though I did not turn to meet them. I bowed, stiff and still awkward, and only then realized my fingers were cramping on the hilt of my sword. She touched her fingertips to the back of my hand.

"Julian. Come. Speak with me."

Without waiting for yea or nay, she parted the thick curtain of willow withes and stepped into their shelter.

Full noon, in a public garden. It was Desambouche's madness doubled. The Duke and half his guard could be watching. I did not look to see. The sheltered space around the willow's trunk was a cool green room smelling powerfully of water and life.

She looked at me, the wildness in her eyes restrained, but not hidden. She said gently, "I have your name right? He called you Julian?"

"Yes, milady." I must have sounded the perfect sullen youth. I did not want to meet her eyes again.

"Will you tell me true, Julian?"

"Milady?"

"Was it your friend who wrote those letters?"

I said carefully, "I never intended that you should suppose otherwise."

"No, I can see that." She gave a light laugh. "He has a sweet way with words, I'll grant him that much. No doubt he has some reason to believe himself a great romancer."

"No doubt." She had sounded less contemptuous than amused. I sounded more sullen yet, and bitter with the fury still lodged beneath my ribs.

She put her hand on my sleeve. "He uses you badly. Do you owe him so much loyalty?"

I looked at her then — down at her, I was a head taller, all gawk beside her elegance. Her dark eyes saw so much they frightened me. I mumbled, "I don't know," and looked away.

Dame Marguerite, waiting on the path beyond the willow curtain, began to sing.

The duchess bit her lip. "Someone approaches. We must part. But Julian, I would speak with you again."

My heart gave a great lurch. "I cannot."

She looked at me shrewdly. "I think your friend will insist, will he not?"

"He can insist. I will not."

"Even if I ask it?"

Oh, gods. Up to my knees in the mire and I could not think. "No, milady," I said, and stupidly added, "Please."

"Bring me his letters. If he wishes it, and I do, how can you not? Bring me his letters, or I will take the ones I already have to my husband. You see I can be cruel, but it is crueler to be alone."

I could not understand her insistence. Dame Marguerite cleared her throat and began another verse. She had a pleasant voice. The duchess said, "You know the fountain where we met. On the other side of the wall lies my private garden. I will wait there tomorrow night, from moonrise to midnight. I know you'll come."

She swept through the hanging green and was gone.

It was too hot for wine.

I sat in some tavern's courtyard and drank barley beer cool from the cellars. The serving maid, a flat-chested girl, wished to flirt, but I had no great trouble discouraging her. Resentment embittered glass after glass. You see I can be cruel, the duchess had said, but it is crueler to be alone. Crueler still to have such friends as these. I should leave, I thought. I should go back to the inn, pack my things, find a berth on a river barge — walk in the heat and dust of the southern road if I must. Just go, escape.

Escape, adventure. Desambouche shrugged.

Bastard.

How many lies have I told for your sake? How often have you used me as your shield?

Too often, damn you! But still I sat, beer growing warm and flat in my glass as I watched a half grown cat chase the serving maid's broom. The summer afternoon slanted toward gold. Heat pressed down on my eyelids. I dozed, woke when my glass disappeared from my hand. My eyes opened to see a broad-brimmed hat on the table. My hat. Desambouche lounged in the chair opposite, downing the last of my beer.

"I should have known," he said. "Napping in the shade while I tramp the city searching you out."

He'd shed his stock and his shirt was limp, his hair dark with sweat at the temples. Handsome Desambouche. The heat suited him.

The maid brought a jug and another glass. Desambouche chased her away and poured for us both.

"Well? Aren't you going to say anything? Or are you still sulking?"

I drank a mouthful, then set the glass down and turned my hat on the table. "What is this?"

He'd had a new feather sewn into the band, an ostrich plume dyed an improbable blue. The small cat eyed it from an empty table nearby.

"A gift." Desambouche wouldn't look at me. "You see it matches your eyes."

I gave the hat another turn. "And yours."

He shrugged, but it was true. Our coloring was very like: blue eyes, brown hair, fair skin. Like enough to pass as cousins, if not brothers. My feelings were not fraternal, just then. I gave the hat a small shove toward the center of the table and picked up my glass.

"Don't be angry, Julian. It was only . . . You know how I am. When I want something, I must have it. I must."

I swallowed beer. "I know. If you wanted a kingdom they'd be fitting you for a crown."

He gave me a wary look, uncertain how that was meant. "You're still angry."

"I'm still angry."

He frowned into his beer. I tilted my glass, seeing how close to the rim I could bring the liquid before it spilled. After a while of that, Desambouche said, "If anything, I should be the jealous one. It was clear enough which one of us she was there to meet."

I said nothing, turning my glass. He cleared his throat.

"Did you speak with her? After you left?"

I shrugged. Beer ran cool over my fingers.

"What did she say?" And when I didn't answer, coaxingly, "Julian."

I set my glass down and leaned across the table to wipe my hand on his sleeve. "She says I might deliver another letter, if you care to send one." His pale eyes gleamed. I sat back in my chair. "In her garden, tomorrow night, on the wrong side of a guarded wall."

"We've done harder things." He stretched out his long legs and raised his glass to me in a toast.

With the entrances to the public garden guarded by city watchmen, we could not carry in a climbing pole or even a rope. That left me the ivy which, though ancient and deeply rooted in the soft sandstone of the wall, was thick with birds' nests and dead leaves. Impossible to climb without making noise enough for an invasion. I found myself thinking that my father would never have allowed any defense of his to be so overgrown, and cut the thought off with a practiced twist of my mind. What mattered was that there was a wind, the forerunner of a summer storm tumbling down from the mountains. The tall cypresses thrashed against a still-starry sky, sounding like an ocean surf, and even the ivy leaves hissed and rattled: loud enough to drown any sound of mine.

I waited by the fountain while Desambouche crouched at the edge of the trees to time the guards making their rounds along the top of the wall. I stripped off my coat and stock and laid them with my rapier and hat at the fountain's base, and the blown spray was pleasantly cool through the thin linen of my shirt. Even the strong wind was

hot. Above me, Diana was a ghostly form shaped of moonlight, and I was reminded to wonder what magic the duchess had been seeking the night of the masque. Not love, I was sure. Diana was a huntress, not a lover.

Desambouche laid his hand on my arm and I started. I hadn't heard him over the sound of the wind. He leaned close and murmured in my ear, "The Duke must count himself well-loved. It's a scant watch, and the sergeant carries a lantern on his rounds. If you start your climb now and wait just below the top of the wall, I'll signal you when to climb over. An owl's call, two and then one, as in Montalba."

Although I couldn't see his face, I could hear his grin. In Montalba, he had been the one to climb the wall, and it hadn't been merely to deliver a letter. I had the sudden feeling that we had been doing this forever, that we would go on doing it forever, climbing some variation of this same wall. And for what? A woman, a few coins . . . once it had been a horse . . .

Desambouche gripped my arm. "You have the letter?"

As if it mattered. I touched the square of parchment tucked in the waistband of my breeches. "Yes."

"Go, then. Remember the owl, two and then one."

I stood without replying and plunged my hands into the musty ivy curtain. There were stalks as thick as my wrist clinging to the wall. Dead leaves and twigs scratched me through my shirt. I began to climb.

Even with the wind, it was hard to believe the noise wouldn't draw half the guard to meet me at the top. Dead leaves crashed around me, ivy insinuated itself into my shirt, my hair was yanked loose from its queue. Higher on the wall, the ivy trunk grew thinner, and its hairy roots began to pull free of the stone. My fingers, scrabbling for purchase on the stone itself, were scraped and torn. A branch gave way under my foot and I grabbed for the top of the wall, frantic, certain in my gut of a fall. But the stone rim was there, rough and crumbling, solid enough to take my weight. To hell with Desambouche's signal. I'd rather be arrested than break my neck. I hauled myself over the top.

No hands reached out to grab. No voices shouted. The wind gusted and, riding its loud hush, an impossible perfume rose up from the lady's protected garden. Ripe apricots and roses. The sandstone beneath me was still warm from the sun.

An owl hooted in the cypresses.

There were torches inside the lady's garden, yellow flames like wind-torn lilies that hid more than they revealed. I stood at the base of the wisteria I had used as a ladder and studied the deep shadows. It was somewhat protected here, but even so everything was in motion, trees and flower stems swaying in a dance of confusion. Taking a chance on the darkness, I stripped off my shirt and shook it clean of ivy trash, then, tucking

it in again and making certain of Desambouche's letter, I stepped hesitantly onto a path and followed where it led.

There was a pond, and a gazebo heavy with white roses. Candles lit it softly from within, making of it a pavilion of flowers, and night moths brushed my face and hands as I climbed the shallow stairs. She was there, seated at the table that held the candelabra and a decanter of wine. Her loose hair spilled around her shoulders and onto the table as she sat, chin in hand. Waiting. She looked up when I entered.

"Julian."

I must have looked a wild thing, my hair half loose, in shirtsleeves like an errand boy. It seemed pointless to bow. I took the letter from my waistband and stepped near enough to hand it to her.

She took it, her lips pursed with amusement. Instead of opening it, she held it to her face, her eyes watching mine. The parchment was damp with my sweat, spotted with my blood. I shivered, though the gazebo was as warm as a palace room, out of the wind. She sobered.

"I did not think you would come, not truly. Why did you?"

"Why," I had to clear my throat, "why did you want me to?"

She let the letter fall to the table and said as if she were disappointed in me, "Oh, Julian, don't be coy. You can't be so innocent with such a friend as that."

I didn't know what to say. After a moment I managed, "I am only his messenger, milady."

This amused her, though she did not smile. She said, "You are far more than that, Julian. But I won't press you on it. Will you have some wine?"

Without waiting for an answer, she poured two crystal glasses full, the wine so dark a red it was nearly black in the dim light. When she held one out to me I stepped forward and took it. Her fingers brushed mine, deliberately. I drank. The flavor was contaminated by the perfume of roses.

She said, "You haven't answered me, Julian. Why did you come?"

"You said . . . You said you'd tell your husband."

"And you believed me? Julian, you wound me." She was teasing. "But you could have left the city. Why didn't you?"

My throat was dry. I drank again, then set the glass carefully on the table. "I wanted to know . . . what you know." I met her eyes. "Why did you ask me to come?"

She set her glass down so close to mine the rims kissed and rang. Then she stepped close, very close, and put her hands to my face, cupping my cheeks between her cool palms. "So smooth," she said, and lifted herself on her tiptoes to touch her lips to mine.

It was a shock, the softness of her mouth. Fear unfolded into desire. Gods knew she was no innocent. I melted when her tongue tasted mine. Roses and wine. It seemed an eternity before she let me go.

Her eyes were wide and dark, as if she too were shocked by the depth of her

response. I wanted to run. I wanted to bury my hands in her hair. I opened my mouth — the gods alone know what I would have said — and the wind died and we heard the footsteps on the path.

"Oh, Julian, run!" Her cry was a strained whisper. "I was wrong, I was wrong, I didn't know — "

I spun and reached for the curtain of roses. Before I could touch the hanging vines a man's hand swept them aside.

The Duke looked from his duchess, to the glasses of wine, to me. I had no doubt it was he, though I had seen only his lion mask the night of his summer entertainment. He might have been masked still, studying actors on a stage, his heavy face was so calm. He said to his wife, "You desert my bed for this? A stripling off the streets? Madam, you disappoint me. I had thought you had more discerning tastes." He flicked me with a glance like a whip, then turned to say to the men waiting on the path, "Bring him."

When the Duke held out his hand to his wife, she took it and let him lead her into the palace.

The Duke's men were not quite so courteous with me.

They bound my wrists at the small of my back and thrust me to my knees. The floor was soft, silk carpets in a room curtained in red and furnished with heavy mahogany. The Duke's room, it must be. A servant passed along the walls lighting candles, then drifted out unheeded. The two guards stood at the door. The Duke placed his lady in a chair and circled me like a cat with a mouse that may yet be alive. He took a fistful of my hair and pulled my head back, exposing my face to the light. The candles flickered in a draft, despite the curtains. The wind rattled the hidden windows.

The Duke said, "A pretty youth, I grant you. Was he very amenable to your desires?"

During the silence the wind rattled again. The storm was nearly upon us. The duchess said, "He is a messenger, my lord, nothing more."

She sounded like a different woman. Subdued. Caged.

One of the guards by the door said, "There was a sealed letter on the table, your grace."

"You have it?"

"Here, milord."

"Give it to my lady wife. She will read it to me."

She stood, walked past us to take the letter from the guard, carried it to a branch of candles just at the corner of my vision. The Duke's hand was an iron fist in my hair. Though he stood behind me, I could feel his stare on my face. In my mind he still wore the lion mask, and his eyes were a lion's, hungry and hot. I did not understand how his voice could be so calm.

The duchess cracked Desambouche's seal, crumbling the wax onto the carpet.

Her hands shook, or the candles guttered again. My eyes were tearing with the pain of my scalp.

"Read," the Duke said.

The duchess read. "My Queen, Celestial Majesty, Lady of Night. Though you came to me in daylight, I see you in my dreams radiant with darkness. Perhaps so I might hide my own shame from your eyes. Yet my shame is already yours, as everything I have is yours, as everything I am is yours. You accused me, lady, most falsely, yet I burn as if every stinging word were true. With your doubt, you lash the skin of my heart. I would never bring you harm, nor cause the least smirching of your honor, your fingertip, the very hem of your gown. Lady, will you not let me prove my love? I say love, for I have no worth to prove in any world wherein you reign. Yours, yours, and only yours. A beggar in shadow."

Silence, but for the wind.

Then the Duke said, winding his fist even tighter in my hair, till the scalp threatened to tear, "Does she speak truly, boy? Are you only a messenger? Or does young Mercury have a pretty pen as well as a pretty face?"

I thought of Desambouche waiting among the trees. Desambouche, who had brought me to this. Who had brought me . . . Escape, adventure. He shrugged again in my mind.

"Mine," I said. It was a whisper from the strain in my throat. "Lord, it was mine."

"Mercury the messenger," the Duke whispered back. "Mercury the thief." He untangled his fingers and let me go.

I reeled, my balance thrown off by the binding of my hands. When I had caught myself, he was at the duchess' side, the parchment in his hand. She huddled in his shadow, her hair like a hood covering her face. He read the letter to himself, then held it to the candle flame. When it was alight, he dropped in to the table, careless of the sweet stink of burning polish. This terrified me more even than the grip of his fist had done. To so casually mar such a finely made thing.

He walked back to stand before me. I could not bring myself to look upon his face. The sweat sprang out on my skin. He said musingly, "'I burn as if every stinging word were true. With your doubt, you lash the skin of my heart.' It seems a shame to waste such heartfelt verse. Sergeant, you have your whip?"

There was movement behind me, and a heavy, indulgent voice. "Aye, milord."

"Twenty lashes will do to begin. Madam, come, stand by me. Verse made real: it will be better than the masque."

Fragmented pleas scattered themselves across my mind, but my tongue was glued to my teeth. I could scarcely breathe. One of the guards coiled my braid around his fist, holding me steady, while the other took hold of my shirt collar. The duchess had come to stand by her husband. There was cold steel on my neck. No, please no. I still could not speak. The guard's cool knife slid like a trickle of rain down my back, slicing

my shirt in two. The linen, damp with sweat, fell down my arms as far as my bound wrists. I was bare to the waist. Against the grip on my hair, against my own desire, I lifted my gaze to the Duke's face, just as he lifted his from my naked chest. I have always been small-breasted, but he could be in no doubt that I was no kind of boy.

The Duke began to laugh. The duchess never took her eyes from her hands. Her face was too deeply shadowed to read. The two guards shifted uneasily behind me, but they did not let me go. Finally, the Duke's roar subsided to a rumble of mirth.

He said, chuckling still, "Madam, I scarce know whether to congratulate or commiserate. You appear to be a chaste wife still, whether you wish it or no." A last laugh burst out of him, a lion's cough. "Sweet women's kisses. I vow, I almost wish I had been there to see." He reached down and took my jaw in his hand. "Did I not say it, Mercury? A pretty face, and a pretty pen. Had you written to me, Mercury, I might have proved a more discerning audience."

I could not bear to meet his lion's gaze. I closed my eyes. He let me go and said to his guards, "Take her to the west tower. Leave her as she is. I'll deal with her once I've lessoned my lady in the difference between a pretty deceiver and her wedded lord."

The guards dragged me to my feet and turned me toward the door. I wanted suddenly, desperately, to look back and see the lady's face, but I did not have the courage. They pushed me out the door.

A bare room with a single candle on a shelf by the door. I lay on the floor, my face pressed to the dusty boards. Leave her as she is, the Duke had said, and so they had. My shirt in rags around my hands, my wrists tied at my back, unbeaten, unraped, alone. The storm had broken and rain slammed against the wooden shutters. I wondered how long Desambouche would wait in the shelter of the trees. I wondered what lessons the duchess suffered at the hands of her husband. I wondered how long it would be until he came to give me mine. There was a bed with a naked mattress in one corner, but I shunned it for the floor. At least there was a kind of certainty there, a solidity that ground against my bones. A splinter pricked my cheek. My shoulders ached. I was cold.

Never had I been so glad to be alone.

He came so late I had passed into a kind of delirium, an exhaustion of fear. The storm had passed, leaving a profound silence outside the walls. Desambouche would have gone back to the inn long since, wondering what had become of me. Perhaps imagining exactly this, who knows? An iron bar rasped in its slot and the door swung open. I did not move. My cheek on the floor, I could see the Duke's feet and the hem of his robe. His feet were bare, pale, high-arched, broad at the toes. By the way the shadows shifted, he carried a candle of his own.

He walked past me, leaving the door ajar, and set the candle down on the floor

by the bed. Then he came back and knelt before me, his black velvet robe pooling before my face. He stank of sweat, and sex. He touched the side of my throat and I flinched.

"Awake, then," he said. "That is good." He took my arm in a powerful grip and raised me to my knees. Revulsion twisted beneath my skin. His hands on my flesh, his breath on my face. The candles guttered. The door closed on a draft. He lowered his mouth to my throat and I shut my eyes, summoning the strength to fight.

Warmth poured down my front.

He sagged against me, his hands sliding from my arms.

I twisted away from him, half falling, trying to understand. His twitching weight on my legs. His hands gloved in scarlet at his throat.

The duchess in a pale robe behind him, a dripping knife in her hand.

We watched him die, she and I. Blood pulsed from between his fingers and slid across the floor, like spilled silk in the candle light. I could feel his struggle to breathe, see his clutching hands, his staring eyes, but I could not tell when awareness left him. He never looked at us, or gestured for help. Perhaps, dying, he thought he was alone.

His weight was numbing across my thighs. It was so quiet that when the duchess set the knife on the floor by his feet, the small sound jolted me like the crash of thunder.

"I think he's dead." I could not bring myself to do more than whisper.

She nodded, her black hair sliding across the paleness of her robe. I could not judge its color in the poor light. Apricot, perhaps, or peach. The flesh of some summer fruit. She had bruises from his fingers on her throat. I could feel his blood cooling all down my breast.

"Did you mean this?" I asked her. She didn't raise her eyes from the dead man's face. "When you brought me here, into your garden? Did you mean for this to happen? All of this?"

Her voice a murmur in her throat, she said, "I went to Diana on the night of the full moon to beg her to set me free of him. I wanted him dead, even then, but I did not dare to think that, or wish it. Set me free, was all I thought. And you were there."

"You knew. You knew what I was." It was a breath, but she heard. She shook her head.

"I thought it was you who knew. I thought you saw my need. I thought you understood about freedom."

I laughed, though it was just a twist in my throat. My body ached to stay upright with my hands bound, the dead man across my legs. I said aloud, "You brought me here to take the blame for his murder. That much I understand. Ask me about freedom when they draw out my guts and quarter me alive."

She looked at me then, dark eyes wide, and shook her head so her hair flew. "No. Julian, no! Look!" She scrambled to her feet and went to the door. A dark bundle lay

there. She picked it up and held it out to me. "Clothes, and money. Boots. Everything. They know he's not to be disturbed, they'll not even knock on the door until late in the morning." She pulled at the bundle with weak fingers. "There's even a messenger's token to get you out through the city gates. See . . ." She was starting to weep.

"Messenger's token." Something in me wanted to laugh again. A late panic made me start to struggle against my bonds. Freedom. Freedom! I sobbed for air. "Cut me loose, then, damn you. Cut me loose!"

She dropped the bundle, took up the knife, and slid the bloody blade between my wrists.

She should have gone straight to her chambers, but she guided me through the sleeping palace, sure-footed in the dark. The boots she had found for me pinched my feet. She took my hand and I let her, afraid of running into something I could not see. I was desperate to be gone, desperate to get shut of her, wishing I had never seen her . . . but her small cool hand holding mine touched pathways in my blood I had not known were there. Damn her. She took me to the top of a narrow flight of stairs and raised herself on tiptoes to whisper in my ear.

"The door at the bottom leads into the stable court. You'll see a lantern over a porte cochere behind the stables. There's a guard there, but you only have to show him the token, he'll let you pass. Julian . . ."

I waited, feeling her tremble, breathing the scent of her hair.

". . . Forgive me?"

I pulled away from her without answering and started down the stairs. And stopped. "You could come with me."

Her turn to say nothing.

I said, halfway to hating myself, "Do you really think you'll be any freer as his widow?"

"I can't." Her voice out of the dark. "I can't."

"You're brave enough to murder, but not enough for this," I said bitterly.

"You're right. I'm a coward. Julian, Julian, I'll never be as brave as you." She reached for me, found my face. I didn't respond, but still, she kissed me. Such softness. She tasted of salt, like tears, or blood. I turned and walked silently down the stairs.

The guard at the door couldn't have seen my face in the shadow of the hooded cloak she'd given me. He only looked at the messenger's token in my gloved hand. The Duke's seal on one side. On the other, Mercury, messenger of the gods.

The city had been washed clean by the rain. The air was cool and sweet, smelling of some distant mountain meadow unsullied by human stinks. By the stars in the clearing sky it was halfway between midnight and dawn. I would be miles from the

city by the time they found his body. No doubt his widow would be blameless in her bed, with Dame Marguerite to swear she'd never left it.

I snuck into a laundress' yard to steal a woman's gown to wear as a disguise, and for a moment thought of going back to the inn and waking Desambouche. In that moment, I wanted him desperately, quailing at the future in store for me. Hunted as a lord's murderer, every eye in the kingdom searching for a woman posing as a boy. But the messenger's token would allow only one of us to pass, and truly, he deserved better of me than to be made a murderer's accomplice. He hadn't made me climb that wall.

The guards on the city gate let me pass. Tomorrow's disguise hidden beneath my cloak, I stepped onto the road that stretched out before me, wet with puddles and shining in the light of the unveiling moon.

Sand Dollars and Apple Halves

Barth Anderson

His bed lying like a coffin behind him, Uli straightens in his chair, looking out at the dawn that has come to relieve his boredom. He watches three pelicans as they glide against a pink cloud and the half-risen sun.

"You are awake, wall builder?" says an unfamiliar voice outside his bedroom.

Uli stands and turns to the voice. The light in his skin casts a shadow from the chair against the door. "Who's there?"

"Your new chamber maid."

"Oh. Come in. I'm never asleep." Uli waves to the door. "I'm always waiting for everyone to wake up."

A young woman enters. She's eye-level with the door knob, and a deep red scarf covers her head. She carries a giant platter of ten sage-rubbed hens whose aroma fills Uli's bedroom and seizes his appetite. This will be the first of his three breakfasts. "Shall I place this on your desk, wall-builder?"

Uli rubs his eyes. "Please." He watches her as she unloads the tray, the pitcher of hibiscus tea, the golden birds. Her chin barely clears the desktop. "Where's the old woman?"

The chamber maid lowers her thin dark eyebrows, as she arranges the platter and silverware for him. "The landlord gave me her duties in this part of the tower. I'm her grand-niece. She — she died yesterday afternoon."

Uli stands nearly twice as tall as the chamber maid, and his shoulders are like the

shelf of a high cliff. But this news crushes that posture, dims the silver light from his skin. "What?"

The chamber maid holds out the chair in front of his desk for Uli, her nose sniffing back tears. She's no more than sixteen but she carries her mourning with grace. "Auntie Meduna was one hundred and seventeen, sir."

Uli quickly calculates how long he's known the old woman. Ninety-one years. Uli looks out his window at the wide basin sweeping three miles down from the old coastline to the vast ocean, hemmed back by Uli's great wall. Ninety-one years. Dynasties have toppled and nations have blown to the winds — and old friends have passed away — while Uli worked and worked. He tries to remember the old woman's face, but it's difficult now that she's not in front of him. What did this coastline look like when he was a boy? Winding oceanside roads. Lighthouses twinkling along the headlands. Didn't he used to hear sea chanteys bubble from fishing villages long ago? "What's your name, miss?"

"Rasu. Sir."

He nods. "I'm sorry about Meduna."

"She said she would come back again if the planets line up just so. I believe her." Hope and devastation brim in her bright eyes. "Auntie told me all about you, wall-builder. The strength of an army. Your sleeplessness." Rasu unfolds her hands and lifts her chin, as if facing a long-awaited moment. "Your story."

If ninety-one years blinked by so fast, Uli wonders how long it's been since he heard his story. "You know it?"

"Auntie Meduna taught it to me when I was twelve. All the desert tribes memorize your story."

He didn't know until this moment how much he missed hearing that story. After spending a day building one of his colossal sand castles when he was a boy, Meduna would tell Uli how she found a baby in the mountains and brought him to the sea-tower. *Your earliest memory is our dream come true*, Meduna always began. But that's a child's story. Uli listens to the rushing sea, his enemy and the measure of his success. The sun is up, he thinks, looking back at his twenty-foot long bed. I'm out of time. The landlord is waiting for him on the beach so he laces up his boots and turns his attention to the steaming hens.

Rasu seems spurned. She watches Uli as he sits before his breakfast. "Perhaps later, I'll recite the — "

"Will you bring the next breakfast? More of the same but twice as much." Uli picks up knife and fork. "And bread too please. Twenty or thirty loaves. And get a few people to help you. Meduna always did."

The girl backs out of his room with a miffed bow, showing him the crown of her head and the red scarf.

Through the maze of old tidal walls abandoned by the retreat of the sea, the landlord's workers carry bricks and rocks from the natural coastline down to the sea wall. As tribesmen from the desert, they have pale rite-scars carved into the backs of their calves — five-rayed suns, interlocked diamonds, and honeycombs — the markings of loyalty to the landlord and his wall builder. They pile their loads in the basin where the ocean used to be, where Uli can sort the rocks by type, shape and angle.

Uli stands at the foot of his wall, a three hundred foot high stack of flat grey stones, boulders of rosy quartz, the hulls and decks from a century of scavenged shipwrecks. It's holding well, though water bleeds through at one key point (a triangular rock where a cube shape would have been better), dampening the grey stones black and spreading a little lagoon behind his wall. He should pull the whole thing down and replace the one wrong rock — all seven hundred leagues of wall — but it's too late. He'll simply repair that leak as best he can and walk along the beach as he's done every day, it seems, since Old Meduna brought him here from the jungle volcano.

The landlord hurries toward Uli along the spine of the sea wall, like a sandpiper beside the tide, surveying his adopted son's work. He shouts over the roar of the ocean, "You have that same leak!" He clambers down the wall, scurrying over its face like a spider with his spindly ankles showing. When he drops to the sand, he's as tall as Uli. The landlord inclines his head and says, "That's one big sandcastle."

Uli smirks at the landlord's joke. Long ago, the landlord had delighted in his adopted son's sand mountain ranges and sand kingdoms. Those sculptures never lasted long, of course, and young Uli hated it that his castles vanished in the tide — as the landlord called it, that uneasy treaty in the war between land and sea. The sun, he claimed, arbitrated this disputed border. But before the incessant tide came, Uli's sandcastles were citadels with snail ramparts and whelk spires, made in the image of the landlord's tower. Then the landlord told Uli stories about raids from sea creatures creeping on land and taking chickens and children, leaving nothing but puddles of salt water. The Matriarch sent these warriors, said the landlord, under the command of her husband and regent, the tidal king. The sea hag longed to slake her thirst with dry land, so a fear of these stories became a fear of the ocean in young Uli, and as he grew, the sandcastles became small breakers. At the landlord's encouragement, the breakers became tide walls and tide walls became a great assault against the ocean, one that pushed the water back from the land. The appetite and labors of the wall builder made a desert of the fishing villages and rolling green coastal hills.

Uli looks down the coast, where land and wall seem fused together. "Ninety-one years of work."

"Ninety-one, eh?" Laughing, the landlord's smile looks like a hastily made fence, with teeth of ivory and oak. "I don't keep track of things like 'years.'"

Uli hasn't been able to shake the conversation with Rasu. Her words bled into his thoughts through breakfast. "I want to hear my story again."

"You're awfully existential today. Oh," the landlord nods his head in slow, sympathetic bobs, "you heard about old Meduna. I'm sorry."

Uli closes his eyes and lifts his face to the sun. He thinks of the frightening childhood nightmare that always cued Meduna to tell the story: his dream of being thrown through wind, across stars. "Did she ever tell it to you?"

The landlord shuffles his feet in the sand and broken shells. "We don't have time for stories. You have that breach to repair and I have to meet with the four chiefs of the mountain nations." He playfully pokes Uli's belly as he walks past, heading for the sea tower where a field of fifty pigs are roasting, sending up a column of dense smoke. "They're following suit with the desert tribes, vowing their entire crops to feed the wall builder — as long as he keeps the ocean at bay."

They vow loyalty to the landlord, Uli knows, not the wall builder. He watches the landlord pick his way across the drained tidal basin then begins sorting rocks for his day's work, trying to reconstruct old Meduna's story as best he can. But he can't remember what came next after the first sentence. Stone by slippery stone, boulder by ruddy boulder, the sea wall replaces the story in his thoughts. Willing the ocean from destroying this one spot, he repuzzles the rocks around his decades-old flaw. He fears that removing the one, odd triangular rock will bring the whole wall down. Uli's skin goes dark as the sun vaults to hot noon and glares down with furious pride. Uli's shadow lengthens against his wall. The first star appears. By then, Uli can think of nothing but platters of pasta, roasted corn, sauce-slathered ribs, the fat of the land.

"I can't," Uli says, sliding the plate of stacked meat out of his own insatiable reach. Outside the sea tower, a big wave hits the tidal wall and Uli feels it like a punch. "I shouldn't."

The landlord pushes the plate of ribs back again and hands Uli his napkin. "But you *asked* for pork ribs."

"I know, but — " Uli's sea wall is not the only thing that has altered the landscape. His voracious appetite has drained whole farming regions dry. "I can't."

"The mountain tribes brought you enough pork for the whole year," says the landlord happily. "Eat!"

Whenever Uli enters the sea tower after working all day, the smell of meat cooking enchants him. The first bite always dissolves in his mouth like chocolate, and after that, Uli loses count of how many plates he cleans in abject hunger.

"You've earned it!" beams the landlord, fanning a clean napkin for him. "Let's celebrate. Come on. Have some more!"

True enough. What's the point of working so hard if you don't enjoy the payment? Uli repairs his appetite, remembering how hungry he was when the ribs'

honey sauce smelled enticing. Around him, young Rasu and the kitchen staff keep hauling food to him. Pitchers of honey mead. Giant bowls of halved apples. Crisp-crusted loaves to sop up the meat juice. The staff's shock-rounded eyes just clear the wall-builder's dinner table, watching him as he tears bite after bite into his mouth. Uli's belly bloats beneath his fisherman's smock, bloating and mounding, dividing shirt from belt. Silvery light from his stomach shines out.

The landlord smiles at Uli's exposed navel. "You protect the land and so the land loves you! More honey for his pork ribs! More ribs, too! Fat, fat, wall-builder! Ha, ha, ha!"

The ribs never taste bad, so Uli can't justify a pause in his consumption. He gulps the food at an even faster rate now that the landlord has praised him, greedily sucking the fat and meat into his mouth. They bring another pig. And another. The tribesfolk carry in each roasted pig with reverence — for the wall builder, the landlord, or the pig itself, Uli can't tell. But he knows that one of these pigs would feed the whole staff for a week.

"Superb! Our brother the swine is honored! Bring in the next pig for the wall builder! Chop chop!"

Uli stands up, tottering. "No. No, I shouldn't."

"Shouldn't?" sneers the landlord.

"Can't," says Uli.

"Can't? *Can't*?" The landlord stands with the empty plate in his hand and blocks the door. "You aren't going to sleep, are you?" He asks this every night after dinner.

"I'm an orphan of dreams." Uli can't think straight, he's so tired. "I just want to go to my room."

The landlord looks into the pantry where several steaming rows of confections are cooling. "But you haven't even had dessert."

The thought of honey-filled doughnuts, cheesecakes dripping with strawberry sauce, and tart, lemon meringue pies make him feel like the pork ribs have transformed into a trotting herd in his stomach, and he feels heavy as a hill. "I can't. I need rest as much as I need food, landlord."

The landlord stands aside and lets him pass from the kitchen. As he does, he reaches out with his driftwood hand and pats Uli's bloated stomach. "We must keep you anchored so you don't float away from us!"

Every night of his life, Uli tries to sleep with all his might. He rests atop the quilts of his massive bed, or he meditates sitting on the floor cross-legged. He drinks vats of warm milk and cardamom, bucket-brigaded to his room, or he chants tribal prayers like a desert farmer praying for rain. But sleep is like a legendary land of which he's heard many tales, one that by midnight seems like a malicious, cosmic lie.

So Uli sits in the dark, bloated and tired, and looks at the sea wall in his mind's

eyes, picking apart that leak, the one that he knew would never hold when he placed the triangular rock there so many years ago. He let the landlord rush him with his eagerness to push back the ocean and earn the fealty of the desert tribes — back when they were tribes of fishermen. Cutting corners is for fools. The ocean will wear away at that weak point, night after night, tide in, tide out, until the wall falls in an avalanche of water and the ocean will pour across the dry basin, as the hampered sea hag stretches her legs. Her waters will flood across the tidal basin, over the desert beyond, until the ocean sloshes finally against the mountains in the west, and in those rushing, broiling, crashing waves what creatures will come with their lantern eyes and gaping gills and mother of pearl spearheads cutting through the foam — all because he was too hasty with that one, misplaced rock.

But the wall hasn't given yet, and it drives Uli mad wondering why.

Uli gets out of bed, body hot and bright from ignited thoughts. Shadows swoop around the room as he walks to the window. But then he turns. It's as if his bed (that constant, mocking companion) has suddenly called him. Something is beneath the bed, he knows. He gets down on hands and knees and sees

a little white circle.

Uli crawls forward peering at it in the shadow of his bed.

It's a sand dollar.

The old woman kept this room so clean that he couldn't find grains of sand in the floor board cracks. A sand dollar? Here?

He picks it up. The shell is like a tiny coin between his finger tips, and he gazes at the five-petaled mark on its surface. How like the arrangement of seeds in the halved apples at dinner, thinks Uli, struck that the ocean and land should have something in common. The shell must have ridden in his smock or maybe in the laces of his boots. The question is, though, why didn't the chamber maid remove it? Uli leaps to his feet, ready to snatch his bedroom door open and castigate young Rasu.

Then he reminds himself that he's not really angry, just exhausted. Besides, everyone in the tower is in bed and he hates waking people; they emerge from their dreams looking washed ashore and delirious, lids batting against the light, eyes sandy, and faces misshapen.

He can wait till the next morning. His whole life is always the next morning. Uli sits in his chair by the window overlooking the dry tidal basin. He lights a lamp, keeps the wick low, and remembers his story, pieces of it floating back to him now.

Your first memory is our dream come true, Uli.

The story flows back to him and the sister priestesses who cared for Uli before Meduna found him, a gleaming, silver baby. Breakfasts of sweet mangoes. Orchids growing on the side of a volcano. Uli looks down at his luminous skin. He always guessed that's where he came from — the volcano. Uli struggles to remember more,

but there isn't much to the story. Nonetheless, his mind is a midnight sun blazing with the tale's ancient elements and the night sky seems to cower back from his sleeplessness like a flickering shadow.

"You are awake, wall builder?" a girl calls from the hall.

"Come in."

It's the new chamber maid, carrying a tub of morning tea with a white towel on her shoulder. She looks at him with wonder and fear as she crosses the room.

Uli's anger has cooled to annoyance. He holds out the sand dollar between thumb and forefinger. "What is this?"

The chamber maid sets the ceramic tub on his desk, and turns her body toward his outstretched hand, looking at it under heavy, black brows. "A sand dollar, sir." She looks up at Uli like he's throwing a tantrum. "You found a sand dollar in your room."

"Yes, and I don't appreciate finding ocean litter on my floors," says Uli, relieved that he's finally getting through. "Your aunt kept my chambers immaculate for me, and if you — "

The chamber frowns in confusion. "My aunt?"

"Yes, your aunt. If you can't — "

The maid takes the towel from her shoulder and drapes it over the warm tub of tea as a makeshift lid. "I don't know who you're talking about."

Uli closes the little shell in his hand and grimaces at the chamber maid. "Your aunt. Your great aunt Meduna. Who just died —"

She wheels, eyes burning at him.

Uli looks closely at the chamber maid and suddenly realizes his ridiculous mistake. This girl looks nothing like Rasu. "Oh. Oh, I'm sorry. I — "

The girl watches him as if he is a door slowly opening. "Who did you think I was?"

"I wasn't paying attention," says Uli, ashamed.

"You thought I was Rasu, yes?"

Uli sits on the edge of his bed, sand dollar in one closed hand, which throws a pool of faint light on the floor. He nods to the chamber maid without looking at her. Rasu is an old woman. This chamber maid is young. How could he be so hasty and careless?

"You're so long-lived," says the girl. Standing before Uli she looks like a doll propped up before a sad little boy. "Old Rasu can no longer fulfill her duties, so the landlord asked for someone from her family to attend you." She adjusts her green head scarf. "I'm Yenala, her granddaughter."

"Granddaughter?" Uli turns his head as if unable to face this news. "How old is your — is Rasu?"

"One hundred and nine."

Adolescence to old age is nothing but a wave against my wall, thinks Uli. He clasps his hands around the sand dollar and whispers to his knuckles. "What is happening?"

Yenala leans forward on the balls of her toes, eager. "Would you like to hear your story now?"

After spending the night trying to remember all his story, the coincidence of her offer astounds Uli. "Rasu never got around to telling me. There wasn't time." He nods. "Yes, I'd like to hear it."

"Begin it, then," says Yenala. "Ask the question that you used to ask Meduna."

"'I'm frightened of my earliest memory,'" says Uli. "'Is it what people call a nightmare, Meduna?'"

"No. Your earliest memory is our dream come true," says young Yenala with the same airy wonder with which the old woman had said those words two centuries ago. "My family is a line of astrologers and seers, and our ancestors were blessed with transcribing the first great tale, the birth of the cosmos." Yenala keeps giving him that look as if she expects something to appear in his eyes. "My family has been waiting for you since before the mountains began to grow, since before Land and Sea drew their contentious borders under a settlement written by the Sun."

The breadth of time that this story describes used to scare Uli. Now it eases his mind to think that his story flows from one far more ancient than himself.

"My uncle," says the girl, who is far too young to have ever known the uncle, "predicted that in our lifetimes we would see a new chapter added to the creation story. He foresaw your arrival in his complex charts describing the morning and evening stars — "

Uli opens his eyes, betrayed. "Wait."

"He was the appointed astrologer for the navy and — "

"That's not how my story goes!"

"Yes. It is."

"No, it begins with Meduna finding me on the side of a volcano."

"There are always two stories. One for the child, and another for the adult. I'm telling you the latter. Shall I continue, or must you get back to building sandcastles?" young Yelana says, fixing him silent with a stern parent's voice.

Uli folds his hands. "Please. Go on."

"My uncle and our family made a midnight party on our roof the night that his charts said everything would change. I remember drinking wine for the first time and eating tart summer apples. I was a girl of fifteen, and I saw you streak across the sky like a meteor."

Uli grips his hands tight to keep from interrupting the girl. How did she learn this secret, other tale?

"You went streaking from horizon to horizon, from ocean to mountains in the span of a heart beat. I remember hearing someone in the street make a wish on you." She leaned against his knee. "Remember? Your earliest memory? A great arm. The shield of a chest muscle. Then you were thrown through sky and wind and stars?"

When Uli hears those words he knows this is not Yelana. Only one person knew his earliest memory, and she was long dead. Realizing he's out of air, Uli inhales, breath hitching.

"That night, my uncle told me, 'Meduna, go into the mountains and find the person you just saw.' So my brother and I got our best uphill horses and we rode into the mountain jungles. We rode to where the terrain is made of clouds, and after the second day we heard stories about a fallen god. We finally found you in a village of orchid growers at the slopes of a high volcano. You were a baby with molten hot silver skin, still smoldering from your passage across the heavens. Three priestesses fawned over you like the jealous sisters they were, feeding you papaya and sacred mango, their faces painted white because they believed you were a god." The girl raises a finger. "Though they didn't know who you really were."

Uli didn't ask the question he wanted to ask. Instead, he shook his head, annoyed. "But why would they give me up, then, if they adored me so much?"

"The tribes of mountain and sea consulted. We knew you couldn't be raised by human beings, since we might grow old and die before you even learned to walk. So it was decided that I would bring you here, to the landlord. We knew of no one else who could properly care for someone like you." Meduna frowned. "We didn't know then who you really were. But the landlord did."

"Meduna?" Uli finally asks the question that he's been burning to answer. "Who am I?"

Meduna gives him a serious glare before saying, "You do the Lord of Land's bidding in his war against your own kingdom, heir apparent."

Uli's mind whirls around these words. "Heir? War?"

"The landlord's hated Sea Hag is my people's Oceanic Queen," says Meduna. "She's the goddess you took from us with your great sea wall."

"Nonsense!" But Uli wonders if this is why a gale will blow ships over his wall, but not through it — if this is why weak configurations of rock will not give way to the sea. "Absolutely ridiculous."

Meduna smiles and indulgent smile at him. "Why?"

Uli scrambles for a reason. "Because I'm not a sea thing. I have no webbed hands or gills."

"That's exactly why you were cast out," Meduna says.

"Cast out? I thought I was 'heir' to the 'sea,'" Uli says with derision. "Why would I be cast out?"

"Sometimes astrologers learn most about the stars in hindsight. Looking at those charts now, I see that my uncle foresaw the tidal king's reaction to discovering himself — " Meduna weighs the word before giving it to Uli, "cuckolded."

Uli asks himself why he should believe this. He asks himself how he can ignore it.

"Usurped by the matriarchal line that put him in power to begin with, the regent was furious. Because you," Meduna's voice became a whisper and her face an oval of love, "you are a child of the passion between Sun and Sea." Meduna/Yelana reaches up and pulls her green scarf from her head. On her brow is a rite-scar, five-petaled, but Uli can't tell if it's a sun, typical of desert religions, or the floral tattoo of a sand dollar. "I've been waiting for lifetimes to tell you this because I'm your first high priestess, wall builder. I put the shell beneath your bed in hopes of breaking the landlord's spell on you, so you could finally join your kin in the realm of dream and water. It is my honor to reveal to you your — "

Suddenly the bedroom door slams shut. It has slammed shut with a body thrown against it. The chamber maid is across the room, lying against the door, her green scarf at Uli's feet.

And the back of the wall builder's hand stings.

Uli rages down the sea tower stairs, and as he enters the kitchen, Uli floods it with hot, white light.

Seated at a kitchen table loaded down with griddle cakes and watermelons, the landlord looks up at Uli. His face seems to say that he understands what Uli has learned this morning. "Wait! Uli, wait!"

The table overturns. The air is filled with cakes and melons. Uli picks up the table and smashes the landlord with it, sending him through the kitchen wall, and the building rains timber and bricks. Uli leaps through the dusty hole in the tower and out onto the beach.

The landlord rolls onto his back and crab-scrambles backward, away from Uli. "I guess you heard the whole story, eh?" Feeble laugh. "I hoped it would die with old Meduna."

Uli's mind is blind. He does not see the foster-father who feeds him. "You used me to build the wall!"

The landlord's hands work along the beach until he moves too fast and collapses in a heap. "I'm sorry, Uli, but you wanted to build it. You *asked* me if you could!"

Uli pounces, bright, scorching hands around his foster-father's throat. "You knew who I was. You kept it secret from me."

"I saved — I helped! Stop it!" God or no, the landlord can't pry Uli's burning fingers from his throat. "They threw you to me, their enemy! You think they care for you the way I do?"

Uli never wants to hear this voice again. He wants to wring the words out of the landlord's throat. "Liar!"

"No, you're right," the landlord wheezes, clawing at Uli's hands. "But your mother threw you. She got rid of you."

"More lies!"

"Well . . . she *let* it happen! She let her stupid husband throw you away!"

Uli clenches his eyes. He clenches his hands. He makes the words stop and the silence is soothing. Finally, Uli stands and lifts his clawed hands from the landlord's throat, wondering if he should fling the landlord across the sky so that someone might make a wish on him.

No. Uli leaves the landlord lay like a sun-dried conch and walks down dusty basin to his wall, to the place where the water seeps through, and sits waiting

cross-legged on the sand. Waiting for the sea.

But it doesn't crash through the wall, as he hopes.

So Uli fasts. He wants the cattle and cakes, the teas, hens, honeys, and pork to become mere memories — nothing of the landlord's in his body. Someone brings him food on plates. It rots. More food is brought. It too rots. Bringing Uli food becomes a ritual and after several months, the wall builder is surrounded by the detritus of many daily offerings. Old men with the five part sun/shell scar on their brows come and clean away the old plates, wipe sand brine from Uli's shining face. The rainy season comes, the ocean rises, but the wall holds.

In the summers, monks dressed in capes of heron feathers continue offering him food. Uli overhears that they call him the Watching God, and the undecaying corpse of the landlord behind him is the Sacrifice. The sea-tower is now a shrine that the monks keep in perfect order, and day after day, the sun circles overhead as if obsessed with what the wall builder will do next.

After many rainy seasons, the Revel of the High Priestess arrives in the dune-rippled tidal basin. Thousands swarm across the old coastline overlooking the Watching God and his Sacrifice, and a procession leads the veiled High Priestess, carried in a sea-green chair by two monks. They place her between the wall builder and the wall, right in Uli's line of sight.

The monks remove her silver veil, revealing a girl's face, painted white and freshly branded.

Uli blinks at her. Smiles. But she's afraid of him, it seems, or of this moment and looks immediately at the sand. "You came back," says Uli, "before my wall came down."

The girl breathes heavily, struggles to control it. For a moment, it looks as if this moment might crack her in half. "It's all true. It's all true."

"It's hard, isn't it? Coming of age?" Uli laughs. He surmises that Meduna must be born into her own family, over and over, because though not exact, each incarnation is similar to the last. Her thick eyebrows. Sturdy wrists and hands. Wise old woman and strong little girl. "Looks like it's my turn to remind you of who *you* are, Meduna."

"I remember. I understand now," says the young priestess, sun/shell/apple brand

freshly burned in her forehead. She watches Uli, eyes very wide, as if taking in far more than the movements of a long motionless god.

"I'm sorry," Uli says in a whisper, "for striking you, Meduna. I don't know why — "

"I'm your high priestess. You may take my many lives as you will." She sounds noble, courageous, but her chin trembles.

"I've been sitting here thinking for quite some time," says Uli.

The High Priestess gives a sardonic laugh. "Yes. I know, wall builder. What have you been thinking about?"

"I believe what you told me, the story. The landlord confirmed it to me. But why . . . am I still stranded on shore?"

She nods. "On the wrong side of your wall?"

"Yes. Why hasn't my mother torn it down?" Uli frowns. The salty wind shifts. He shakes his head. "Why does my father circle me at a distance?"

The high priestess' hands lay flat on her thighs. She raises her thumbs by way of a shrug. "Because they are kind parents, and this is yours."

"What is mine?"

"The land. It's yours now. They respect it. They — "

Uli makes an abrupt jump to his feet. The high priestess shrinks back in her chair with a small shout. On the old shoreline, the great gathering cries out in fear, joy, and amazement when they see the Watching God move.

"It's not fair what happened to me. Or to you," shouts Uli. "Or even the landlord. Or the fishing people who became desert people. Why don't the Sun and Sea make this right?"

For the first time, Uli sees Meduna's old hardness in the High Priestess. She leans forward, hands on the arms of her chair. "Because your wall is a terrible crime. If the Ocean comes ashore to rectify it, she'll drown the world. If the Sun comes down, he'll scorch the land to cinders. So it's you, Uli. You built the wall. You must take it down."

"But what I mean is, if it never went up in the first place, none of this — "

"But it did happen."

"If I'm the child of such powerful parents, why didn't one of them stop the tidal king?" Uli shouts, icy. "Or was I the price for their power? Maybe I complicated things too much," he says with sarcasm.

Meduna's laughter is far too droll for an adolescent girl. "Oh, you complicated things all right."

Uli eyes go instinctively to the wall, then to the corpse of the landlord. With his arms, he covers his face.

"But I think, in the end, after everything you and the landlord did to my people," says Meduna, "we inherited a better advocate in you."

Uli lowers his hands and, as he has for many years, he looks at the error in his wall, wishing the flaw, his wall, his story had never happened.

"Perhaps she tried," says the girl.

"Tried what?" says Uli, still angry.

"Maybe she tried to help you. Maybe they both tried. You'll never know. Unless. . ."

Uli waits for her to finish her sentence.

"They are both under the sea at night, you know. You could ask them all these questions yourself."

Uli gives Meduna a sly smile. He reaches toward the wound on her brow, the furious scab over the burn still damp with salve, and touches the top petal/ray of her brand. "Is this a sand dollar or a sun? Or the seeds of a halved apple?"

Meduna lifts her face to his hand, closes her eyes as he touches the mark. "You tell me."

Uli drops his hand and then walks to the place where the orderly wall is an unfortunate accident of stonework. He finds the culprit, the misshapen triangle of rock and removes it. Nothing happens. Uli looks up and down the length of the wall, expecting an operatic collapse.

"I feel strange," he says, groggy-headed. Uli steps back and holds his hand to his face. "My eyes feel funny. Heavy, or something."

The High Priestess rises from her chair and shouts to the mass of people by the sea tower, "He has awakened! The Watching God is ready to sleep!"

Feeling a little like he does after eating too much, Uli trudges back to the long abandoned sea tower, surrounded by the feathered and branded penitents of some desert-ocean cult. He climbs the broken steps to the top floor where his bed waits for him, quilts musty with age, but somehow, inviting now. Uli lies down on the dusty blankets and something like night in the middle of this day plunges over his shut eyes. He does not feel like the wall builder anymore. His self departs him, along with his worries and hates, as

the tower fills with seawater.

While Uli sleeps, the ocean seeps into the kitchen and upsets the arrangement of dilapidated chairs. Baskets and shelves and old clay pots bob even with high cabinets and the landlord's recipes fan out over the surface of the kitchen's little sea.

From his bed, Uli hears water coursing along the floor of his room. He pushes back the quilts that have somehow come to cover him and he stands up in bath-warm seawater. He looks out his window where he used to watch sunrises, but now the ocean has risen to greet him.

He wades to his door. Bubbles are rushing around his ankles, his knees, his thighs.

By the time he reaches the hallway and the spiral stairs, there is no more surface, the sea immerses him, and he takes giant steps under water.

The ocean lets him descend the tower's stairs, and the growing pressure around his body is like a comforting, motherly embrace. As he floats down down down downstairs into the warm and dark, Uli wonders if the desert tribes will retain their desert ways or build fishing villages and sing their chanteys in twinkling lighthouses again.

Already mussels attach themselves in diagonal swaths across the tower's curved walls, and purple anemones make come-hither gestures in the current. Uli slow steps as mantas glide across the kitchen floor. He puts his hand on the front door's handle, ready to leave one home for, perhaps, another.

The Venebretti Necklace
Sarah Monette

I

There were fingers in the wall.

I was lifting a box when I saw them, saw the gap between the bricks where the mortar had fallen away and then the whitish-yellow gleam of bone. I lost my grip on the box; it fell and broke, sending yellowing holograph pages in all directions.

"Really, Mr. Booth!" Mr. Lucent said crossly.

"Bones," I said, still staring at that crack in the bricks. "There . . . in the wall."

"*Bones*? The dust has gone to your head."

"No, really." I wedged my fingers into the crack, cringing from the possibility of touching the bones; all the mortar was cracking and weak, and the upper brick came away easily.

"Oh!" said Mr. Lucent in a sort of gasp. "There's a *person* back there!"

There, clearly visible, were the bones of a hand, clawed into the absence of mortar as if whoever they had belonged to had died trying to dig through that brick wall with his bare hands.

"There *was*," I said.

Mr. Lucent and I were in that storeroom only because of Dr. Starkweather's inventory, which had been eating the time and energy of the Samuel Mather Parrington Museum staff for months now. Dr. Starkweather had come in February and instituted his

comprehensive reforms amid a searing barrage of contempt and invective; it was now mid-June, and there was some faint hope that we could have a preliminary, albeit woefully inadequate, catalogue ready by his six-month anniversary. We had started at the top of the museum, in its extensive attics, the ballrooms of the bats, and worked our way down with desperate, slipshod haste, aware of Dr. Starkweather smoldering in his office like an unappeasable pagan volcano-god. At the end of May, we had reached the basements.

The Parrington's basements were an empire unto themselves, a sprawling labyrinth of storage rooms and sub-basements, steam tunnels and abandoned stretches of sewer. No one knew the full extent of them now, although there were rumors that old Mr. Chastain had had maps that he had burned in a fit of pique when the previous museum director, Dr. Evans, had forced him to retire.

It had been discovered years earlier that watchmen and janitors could not be paid sufficient money to make them include the basements in their rounds. They complained of drafts and dampness and strange noises, and it was beyond argument that the electric lights in the basements — installed by the stubbornest of all the stubborn men who had headed the Parrington — burned out at twice the rate of the lights in other parts of the museum buildings. People going down to the basements told the docents at the information desk — perhaps half a joke, perhaps a little less — to send search parties if they had not returned within an hour.

This particular room — long and narrow, more like a corridor than a room — was in the second level of the basements, as near as I could reckon it beneath the Entomology Department and its horrid collection of South American cockroaches. The unfortunate junior curator who had been detailed to scout the basements had observed that this room was full of books and boxes of papers, and so its more thorough investigation had fallen to Mr. Lucent and me, as the senior archivists of the Department of Rare Books. We had been down there three hours before I saw the bones, and were hot, miserable, and thickly coated in dust.

"Wh-what should we do?" said Mr. Lucent, staring at the hole in the wall, the handkerchief he had been using to clean his glasses pressed to his mouth.

"I, er, I don't know. I suppose . . . we have to tell someone, don't we?"

"God, yes — we can't just brick him back up and leave him there, Mr. Booth!"

"I didn't mean that," I said, mostly to my shoes, as I followed Mr. Lucent back up toward the daylight. We were climbing the stairs from the first basement to the ground floor before I realized I was still carrying the brick, and at that point there seemed no sense in setting it down.

In the storeroom where the basement stairs debouched, Mr. Lucent stopped. "Who should we tell, do you think? I don't . . . I don't like to bother Dr. Starkweather."

I had no more wish than he did to disturb Dr. Starkweather with the news that

we had found a skeleton in the basements. Dr. Starkweather did not like me. I said, "Major Galbraith?"

Major Galbraith was in charge of the Museum's custodial and security staff; he was a dour old veteran, no more in awe of Dr. Starkweather than he had been of Dr. Evans. And I was sure that even news of a body in the basement would not shock him.

"Yes, of course," Mr. Lucent said, beaming with relief, and we emerged from the storeroom, turned down a cross-corridor, and came to Major Galbraith's office. Mr. Lucent knocked quickly, as if to get it done before either of us could change our minds. I was strongly reminded of the nervous sensation of guilt I had felt whenever I approached a master's office at my prep school, regardless of the reason I was there.

"Come in!" called Major Galbraith. Mr. Lucent, the brick, and I entered his office.

He listened imperturbably, digging at his pipe, while Mr. Lucent explained our find. When he was in possession of what few facts we had, he sighed, put his pipe down, and said, "Suppose I'd better come have a look. Have you notified Dr. Starkweather?"

"We, um," said Mr. Lucent.

"I would, if I were you," Major Galbraith said, with a quirk in one beetling eyebrow. "You go do that, Mr. Lucent. I fancy Mr. Booth can show me what there is to see."

"Oh, yes, rather," said Mr. Lucent and left distractedly. Major Galbraith shot me a look I could not decipher and said, "All right, then, Mr. Booth. Show me your skeleton."

We made our way back to the basement room in silence. I had nothing to say, and I felt a greater and greater fool carrying that brick. It would have made more sense to take one of the finger bones, as proof that Mr. Lucent and I had not hallucinated the entire affair. I felt that Major Galbraith did not quite believe us.

But we came to the storeroom, and I pointed to the gap in the brickwork. Major Galbraith went across and took a look. "Hmmph," he said. "Finger bones, sure enough."

After a moment, I said, "What do we do now?"

"Wait for Dr. Starkweather," Major Galbraith said and pulled his pipe out again.

"Er," I said.

"Yes, Mr. Booth?" he said, his eyebrows shooting up alarmingly.

"The . . . the paper," I said apologetically.

"Oh, yes. I'll wait outside then, shall I?"

He went out. Since he had not invited me to join him, I stayed where I was. After some time — I hope that it was less than a minute, but I do not know — I pulled myself together and began collecting the contents of the box I had dropped, at last putting down that ghastly brick. The papers were letters. As I picked up the fourth one, I

placed the signature as that of Jephthah Strong, a particularly obscure visionary and poet of the previous century. Another time, I might have tried to deduce the identity of his correspondent, but I was having trouble merely keeping my mind on my task. I kept catching myself looking at that unpleasant gap in the bricks, as if I were expecting the hand to reach forward, or the hand's owner to peer out at me. The latter fancy made my neck crawl, and I was relieved when Major Galbraith stuck his head in and said, "That'll be His Nibs coming now."

His warning gave me just time to put the tidied stack of letters on top of the nearest box, and then Dr. Starkweather was in the room, striding across to stare at the hole in the bricks, his expression outraged, as if someone had done this to him on purpose. Mr. Lucent came in behind him, along with Major Galbraith and Dr. Starkweather's secretary, Mr. Hornsby.

Dr. Starkweather rounded on us, demanding, "Who is it?"

"Er," I said.

"What?" said Mr. Lucent.

"Dr. Starkweather, don't you think — " began Mr. Hornsby.

"Well, clearly that's the most important question," Dr. Starkweather said. "Who is this fellow, and how did he get bricked up in our wall?"

Major Galbraith coughed. "I myself was wondering what we were going to do with him."

"I've sent a message to Dr. Ainsley," Dr. Starkweather said. Dr. Ainsley was the staff archaeologist. "He'll know what to do about extracting him."

"Should we . . ." I said and stopped under the bombardment of Dr. Starkweather's furiously blue eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Booth?" said Dr. Starkweather.

"The . . . I was only . . . that is, the police?"

"A cogent thought," said Major Galbraith.

"Nonsense," said Dr. Starkweather. "This clearly isn't a *recent* crime — if it is a crime."

"Oh, but surely — !" Mr. Lucent protested.

"*Yes*, Mr. Lucent?"

"Well, I just — I frankly don't see how this could be an accident."

"We will wait for Dr. Ainsley," Dr. Starkweather said with a fulminating glare at all four of us.

"Yes, Dr. Starkweather," said Mr. Hornsby, whose particular gift was for placation. We waited in awkward silence. Mr. Lucent noticed my stack of letters and moved across to pick them up, but I could tell he was not looking at them, even though his eyes were fixed on the top page. I edged away from the hole in the wall, away from the stiff and savage figure of Dr. Starkweather, and gave myself occupation by

examining the spines of a stack of books — although I was not looking at them any more than Mr. Lucent was looking at Jephthah Strong's letters.

In the end, it was not Dr. Ainsley who appeared. He was much occupied, and had been for weeks, by a box of Greek potsherds someone had found at the back of a broom cupboard on the second floor; he dispatched in his place his senior assistant, Miss Coburn. She was in her thirties, tanned from field-work, with curly, sandy-red hair that habitually escaped from its pins to hang in fine strands around her face. The common remark about her in the museum — apart from the usual, stupid calumnies about spinsters and bluestockings — was that she knew more about Dr. Ainsley's work than he did.

"Well, Dr. Starkweather?" she said. "Dr. Ainsley said he couldn't make heads or tails of your message."

"I should think the situation would be clear to a child of five," Dr. Starkweather said and pointed. "There."

Miss Coburn investigated. "Bones," she said pleasantly. "Human phalanges. Surely you didn't need an archaeologist to tell you that."

Dr. Starkweather said through his teeth, "What. Are. We. To. Do. With. Them."

Miss Coburn straightened up, looking surprised. "I haven't the faintest idea. Who do they belong to?"

"No one seems to know, miss," Major Galbraith said. "Bit of a mystery, this lad is."

"No," said Miss Coburn, "I mean, who do they belong to? Are they museum property?"

"They're in our wall," Mr. Lucent said.

"We've got skeletons in our inventory." Miss Coburn's face became thoughtful. "Do you suppose . . ."

"They're all accounted for," I said — except for the miscellany of vertebrae and skull fragments still waiting patiently in my office for me, in my semi-official capacity as the museum's "puzzle man," to have time to identify them. But there was nothing that could possibly explain this.

"Drat," she said.

"I don't want him in my wall," Dr. Starkweather said. "How should we go about extracting him?"

"Oh!" said Miss Coburn, clearly meaning, Why didn't you *say* so? "I can do that for you, if you don't mind me taking the wall apart."

"Please, Miss Coburn," Dr. Starkweather said with a grotesque little bow. "Be my guest." He looked around at the stacks of books and boxes surrounding us. "Will it disturb you if Mr. Booth and Mr. Lucent get on with their work?"

"Not at all," said Miss Coburn. She glanced at the hole in the wall and added in a lower voice, "Company will be welcome."

Mr. Lucent and I worked the rest of the day around Miss Coburn, her tools, and a steadily growing rampart of loose bricks. At one o'clock, Mr. Lucent fetched down sandwiches and lemonade from the museum canteen, and we ate in a cleared space on the floor.

After the first desperate attack on the sandwiches had slowed, Mr. Lucent burst out, "Who could he *be*?"

"I don't know," Miss Coburn said. She had been dismantling the wall starting from a point about two feet above the finger bones, hoping (she said) to make a hole large enough to get a photograph of the skeleton *in situ* before she disturbed the bricks around it. "They're old bones, but they're not *terrifically* old. I shouldn't think he's been there more than fifty years."

"But why," I said and stopped. Miss Coburn raised her eyebrows at me, and I went on, "Why would you brick somebody up in the basement of the museum?"

"It seems to have been a remarkably effective hiding place," Miss Coburn said, very dryly.

"Yes, but you'd have to . . . you'd have to think of it first."

"Oh. Yes, I see what you mean."

"I don't," Mr. Lucent said.

"If you're plotting a murder," Miss Coburn said, "what kind of person do you have to be for your plan to involve bricking up your victim beneath the Samuel Mather Parrington Museum?"

"A seriously deranged one," Mr. Lucent said.

"Yes, granted, but you also have to know about the basements. You have to have access to them. And I should think you have to be fairly sure that no one's going to notice your new wall — so you have to know where to build it. When would you say was the last time anyone was in this room, Mr. Lucent?"

"Gracious," said Mr. Lucent. "We haven't come across anything more recent than eighty years ago — a little older than what you're guessing for the bones."

"Besides," I said, "it took us most of the . . . the morning to, er — "

"To reach that wall to begin with!" Mr. Lucent finished triumphantly.

"Yes, I see," Miss Coburn said. "A little judicious rearrangement of these several tons of paper, and no one can get near enough to the wall to notice there's something odd about it. How exceedingly clever."

We finished our lunch in dismal silence.

By five o'clock, Mr. Lucent and I had, after a necessarily inadequate examination, morosely divided our spoils, the books going to me and the holographs going to him. Miss Coburn had excavated a window in the wall that would allow her to use her photographic equipment and had taken several plates. She had then continued removing bricks, with a methodical neatness I could only admire. By the time we

started carting our new responsibilities toward the dumb-waiter that was all the Parrington had in the way of an elevator, she had managed to extract a double row of bricks straight down to the floor without disturbing the bones (the heap at the base of the wall, and the morbid grouping of finger bones still on the brick where I had first spotted them), and was preparing her photographic equipment again.

Mr. Lucent and I flipped a coin. He got the job of going up to the mail room on the first floor and unloading everything; I would stay in the basement and ferry boxes and stacks from the storeroom to the dumb-waiter's alcove. "At least," Mr. Lucent said glumly, "we have the satisfaction of knowing that neither of us is happier than the other."

When I came back into the storeroom, Miss Coburn turned to me from where she was kneeling by the tau-shaped hole, her face white. "It's a woman."

"B-beg pardon?"

"The pelvis — that's a *woman's* skeleton."

"Oh."

"Is that all you're going to say? 'Oh'?"

"Miss Coburn, I don't . . . I, er . . ."

"My God, he must have been mad!"

"Who?"

"The man who did this!"

"What makes you think it was a man?"

"Oh," said Miss Coburn and sat back on her heels. "Yes, of course, Mr. Booth. Let us have equal rights in all things."

"I didn't mean . . ."

"No, no — if there was anything nasty in that comment, it was directed at me. You're quite right." She pushed straying strands of hair away from her face, and her voice became abstracted, "Who was this woman, that someone had to brick her up in a wall?"

"Is there anything with her?"

"There's a thought," she said, and a distant thumping from the dumb-waiter reminded me of Mr. Lucent in the mail room. I grabbed up another stack of boxes and left.

When I returned to the storeroom, Miss Coburn said, "Hairpins, buttons, rotting cloth. And there's something else, off to the side, but I can't make it out. Some kind of bundle. That'll have to wait until I've gotten her out, and *that* will have to wait for tomorrow." She stood up, putting her hands in the small of her back and stretching her spine. "Can I give you a hand with the boxes, Mr. Booth?"

"That . . . that's very kind of you, Miss Coburn. Thank you."

With the two of us working, it took less time than I had feared to transport enough material to fill the area in the mail room set aside for the purpose. We returned to the

ground floor, whereupon Mr. Lucent emerged from the mailroom and said, "What took you so long? I was beginning to wonder if you'd died."

"Sorry," I said.

"It's my fault," Miss Coburn said. "The skeleton is a woman."

After a stunned moment, Mr. Lucent said, "Well, *that* isn't your fault."

"I distracted Mr. Booth."

Mr. Lucent waved it away. He was contemplating something else. "But who could it be? Really, you'd think she'd be the museum's great *cause celebre*, the patron who came in and never came out."

"She doesn't seem to be," Miss Coburn said.

We stayed together, nervously and without discussion, as Mr. Lucent and I locked our offices and Miss Coburn collected her handbag. The knowledge of that skeleton, huddled in her darkness somewhere beneath our feet, was not something any of us was eager to contemplate alone in the Parrington's echoing halls. We came out the back door; I locked it behind us. Then I went one way, toward my apartment, and they went the other, to the street-car stop.

I went home, where I did not sleep, but spent the night searching my books for reasons that one might brick a human being up in a wall. There was an unpleasantly large number, testifying to the ingenuity and malice of the human mind.

When I arrived at the museum in the morning, Miss Coburn was standing at my office door, as if she had been waiting for me. "I think it must be a woman named Madeline Stanhope," she said as soon as I was within speaking distance.

"Madeline Stanhope?" I said, unlocking the door.

Miss Coburn leaned in the doorway, explaining as I went to put my morning's mail on my desk. "I went and talked to my Aunt Ferdinanda — not her fault, poor thing. My grandfather was dead-set on having a Ferdinand Truelove III, which you can't do when you only have daughters. Aunt Ferdy's memory for gossip, rumor, and scandal is unequalled. She told me all about Alderman Stanhope's wife, who was supposed to have run off with — wait for it — the Venebretti Necklace."

"Oh," I said weakly and sat down.

"You thought it was just lost? So did I. Apparently Mr. Stanhope forked over a remarkably generous contribution to several different civic institutions to get the thing hushed up. Aunt Ferdy said there was a fairly substantial minority who thought he'd murdered his wife himself, but they could never explain how the necklace was involved. And that was when Aunt Vinnie came in and said that a friend of hers had sworn herself blind that she'd seen Madeline Stanhope in San Francisco in 1905, covered in ostrich feathers and dripping with diamonds. But that seems unlikely at the moment."

"Rather," I said.

The Venebretti Necklace had been the property of Maria Vittoria Venebretti, a

seventeenth-century Milanese witch and poisoner. Some stories said that she was the daughter of the Pope by a Spanish witch, others that she was the daughter of the Devil. She had been spectacularly beautiful, and as amoral as a serpent. She had married three times before she was thirty, each time to a husband wealthier than the last. When her third husband died, and clearly not of natural causes, Maria Vittoria Venebretti was tried and convicted of murdering all three of them.

The accounts of her life that I had read suggested strongly that most of Milan had known exactly what Signorina Venebretti was doing with her husbands but had feared to bring her to trial because of the influence of her father (whether papal or diabolical) and her own reputation as a witch. Even when convicted, she was not executed, but confined to a cloister, where she died three years later of unknown causes.

The Venebretti Necklace was given to her as a wedding present by her third husband, Signor Cosmo Baldessare, who would scarcely two years later die in a spectacularly grotesque fashion. It was lavishly described, both by her contemporaries and by Samuel Mather Parrington in his day-book: a massive thing, made of gold and pearls and thirteen emeralds like great baleful eyes. The numerologists had, of course, worked themselves into a frenzy over those thirteen emeralds, and they were counted proof positive in some circles that Maria Vittoria Venebretti had been a witch and a devil worshipper as well as a poisoner. Others scoffed at this idea, along with the notion that Signorina Venebretti had cursed the necklace when it passed out of her hands. The necklace had been owned by five persons between Maria Vittoria Venebretti and Samuel Mather Parrington, and whether there was a curse or not, it was certainly an odd coincidence that the two of them known to have actually worn the necklace had both died by violence. Samuel Mather Parrington himself had famously been careful never to touch it with his bare hands.

"Do you think . . . you said there was a . . . a bundle . . ."

"Oh, I surely do," said Miss Coburn. "Are you and Mr. Lucent continuing your salvage operation?"

"Yes. That is, when Mr. Lucent gets in."

Mr. Lucent was notorious for his erratic time-sense. Miss Coburn grinned and said, "Will you leave him a note? I want to get to work, but I don't . . . I don't want to be down there alone with her. Or it." I could see her blush, even through her tan, but her eyes were steady and unapologetic.

"You want, er, me?"

She tilted her head a little. "You are good company, Mr. Booth. You don't *prattle*."

"Oh." Now I was blushing, and I turned away in a hurry to find a spare sheet of paper. "I'll write Mr. Lucent a note."

We walked through the morning bustle of the museum, Miss Coburn exchanging waves and greetings with her friends. I shoved my hands in my pockets and tried not

to think about Madeline Stanhope. It made things no better to know the skeleton's name; it seemed somehow worse to imagine, not merely a collection of flesh and bones and hair, but a woman named Madeline Stanhope, trapped there in the stifling darkness. Had she known who had murdered her? Had she known why? I felt as if I walked inside a cold shadow, a shadow cast by bricks and mortar.

No one else was in the basements yet. "Fortifying themselves with a third cup of coffee," Miss Coburn remarked.

I opened the storeroom door. We both flinched back; then Miss Coburn caught herself and managed a laugh. "I suspect that both of us have overly morbid imaginations, Mr. Booth."

". . . Yes," I said and followed her into the storeroom.

The empty tau in the wall looked even more horrid this morning. I could see the sad jumble of bones on the floor, the great dark emptiness of the eye-sockets.

"Yes, well," Miss Coburn said and took a deep breath. "No point in putting it off." She knelt down again among her equipment and leaned forward into the hole.

I could not help her and did not wish to watch; I began the work I would have to do in any event, jotting in my pocket-sized notebook a rough catalogue of the books still in the storeroom. As I worked, I became more and more aware of how carefully judged the collection was. Like the letters of Jephthah Strong, these books were all obscure without being rarities — collections of sermons, histories of various regions of the state, tedious genealogies of prominent local families. Someone had chosen the contents of this room with an eye to books that no one was likely to seek out.

I must have made some kind of a noise, an indrawn breath, a click of tongue against teeth; Miss Coburn said, without looking up from her collection of vertebrae, "What is it, Mr. Booth?"

"Oh, just the books."

"Anything in particular about the books?"

"It . . . it rather looks like they were chosen carefully as . . . as watchdogs."

"What do you mean?"

I explained about the bracket into which the books and holograph manuscripts fell, between valuable for their rarity and discardable for their irrelevance. By the time I was done, she was staring at me, two vertebrae forgotten in her hands. "You mean this whole *storeroom* was premeditated?"

"Well, it might be, er . . . *post*meditated. That is, they mightn't have had the books and papers here first."

"But pretty damn quickly thereafter."

"Yes."

She hunched her shoulders, as if against a sudden draft. "Someone must have hated Madeline Stanhope very much indeed."

"Yes," I said, and we each went back to work.

It was about half an hour later that Mr. Lucent finally showed up. He looked ill. Miss Coburn said, "Hard night on the town, Mr. Lucent?"

"Well, I couldn't just go *home*," Mr. Lucent said. "I mean, really! Are you ready, Mr. Booth?"

"Yes," I said, and we returned to our labors; I felt rather like the Danaides, condemned forever to carry water in sieves. We had to start by clearing the mailroom, which took longer than it should have because we were both clumsy with lack of sleep. Then I returned to the storeroom to carry things to the dumb-waiter, while Mr. Lucent waited in the mailroom to carry things from the dumb-waiter to our respective offices.

"Thank goodness you're back," said Miss Coburn. She now had most of the skeleton — Mrs. Stanhope's skeleton, I reminded myself and looked away — laid out on the floor. "This is not a pleasant place to be by oneself."

"I'll be in and out," I said.

"Yes, I know. But if something jumps out of the wall and grabs me, at least you'll hear the scream."

". . . Yes," I said and picked up an armload of books.

I had been in and out twice and was on my way back for the third trip when I found Miss Coburn standing outside the door, pressed up against the wall as if it were the only thing keeping her from falling down.

"Miss Coburn? Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, although her voice was faint and breathy. "I'm fine. It's just . . . there . . . there are shackles."

". . . Shackles?" I said, feeling my body contract as if with extreme cold.

"One of them was broken," Miss Coburn said, her voice still small but very steady. "I had been wondering, because building a wall — even a narrow one like that — it isn't the sort of thing you whip together in five minutes. It must have . . . it must have taken hours. And we know she wasn't dead, because of the hand. So I thought, maybe she was unconscious, or maybe she was tied up with ropes that have disintegrated. But she was . . ." She stopped and swallowed hard. "She was chained to the wall. I don't know how I missed them last night, except that they're old and rusty and don't . . . they don't catch the light. She must have sat there, with whatever's in that bag, and watched her murderer building that wall."

"But why?" I said helplessly. "Why would anyone do that?" My books had suggested reasons, but not the sort of reason I needed now. They did not talk about how one might nerve oneself to do such a thing, to mix the mortar and lay the bricks with one's victim watching. Had she begged for her life? Had she cursed? Wept? Screamed? Had her murderer gagged her?

"I don't know," Miss Coburn said, and she sounded as cold and helpless as I felt. "I just don't."

Our eyes met for a moment, and then we went back into the storeroom together.

Although her morbid and unwilling curiosity must have been as insistent as mine, Miss Coburn was unwaveringly methodical. She assembled the entire skeleton plus its collection of earthly detritus and then spent the rest of the morning carefully documenting that much of what she had found.

"I'm treating it as if it were a real archaeological site," she said to me at lunch, when I brought her sandwiches and a bottle of water. "Just in case Dr. Starkweather is wrong, and we ought to have notified the police yesterday, at least they'll know where everything was."

"Do you think . . . that is, will there be trouble?"

"I doubt it," she said, taking a generous swallow of water. "The Police Commissioner's sister is a docent. Come to think of it, Commissioner Harmon probably already knows. And he's probably just as glad to let the museum handle it. I shouldn't be surprised if we were asked to lose the body."

"What?"

"Scandal, darling," she said, amused. "If this gets made public, half the city is going to find itself embroiled in a very sticky and embarrassing mess. Vernon Stanhope paid once to have it all hushed up, and I imagine his heirs will do the same. And the police aren't going to want to trumpet it to the reverberate hills, either. Too many questions about how come they didn't find her fifty-five years ago. Old incompetence is incompetence still."

"But Mrs. Stanhope . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Booth?"

"I don't know. But she *was* murdered."

"You are an idealist, I see," Miss Coburn said and raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"I . . ." My nerve broke. I mumbled some disjointed excuse and fled back to the dumb waiter to find out if Mr. Lucent was ready for the next load of boxes.

At two-thirty, Miss Coburn announced her readiness, at last, to retrieve the mysterious bundle; neither she nor I was willing to mention our speculations as to its contents. Mr. Lucent insisted that he had to be a witness, and when he arrived, it was in the company of several of his bosom friends, who also apparently had to be witnesses. Although Miss Coburn was deeply annoyed, to judge by the look she gave Mr. Lucent, in the end I think it was probably for the best.

We all watched, clumped around the storeroom like a particularly odd set of statuary, as she crawled halfway into Madeline Stanhope's *de facto* tomb. I could see now why she had refused to go after the bundle until the skeleton was properly accounted for — she put her hand in a spot initially occupied by a random assortment of ribs and vertebrae. She stretched, with a noise midway between a grunt and a gasp, and then came back out, holding a moldering linen bag, its drawstring tied shut with

a knot of Gordian complexity. She produced a man's penknife from her skirt pocket and cut the bag open with the ruthlessness of a pirate.

"Oh!" said Miss Coburn, and, a moment later, "Oh!" said all of the watchers.

It was the Venebretti Necklace.

II

I went with Miss Coburn when she took the necklace to Dr. Starkweather and explained to him everything we knew about its finding place, including the hypothetical identity of its grisly keeper. I said nothing, but I saw and heard, a witness and a bulwark against Dr. Starkweather's anger. Miss Coburn had, after all, done no more than what he asked of her.

I emerged from Dr. Starkweather's office feeling rather as if I had just rounded Cape Horn in a typhoon; judging from her face, Miss Coburn felt the same.

"Well," she said. "What now?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Are you just going to leave it there? Woman, necklace, wall — how nice and pass the cucumber sandwiches?"

"Actually," I said, "I was going to the stacks."

"The stacks?" Miss Coburn echoed, then she smiled wryly. "Of course. Trust an archivist. May I come with you?"

". . . If you like."

"'Satiable curiosity, like the Elephant Child. Come on, then."

And somehow it ended up that I followed her into the stacks, although it had been my idea.

The stacks — officially the Mathilda Rushton Parrington Memorial Library Annex, dedicated by Samuel Mather Parrington's daughters to the memory of their grandmother — were truthfully a part of the museum in which I was just as glad to have company. The Annex was a square tower, extending three stories above the ground and three below, with two levels of stacks per story, each floored with an echoing iron grill: twelve levels of dark, cramped, overpoweringly musty and labyrinthine shelving. The electric lights were even more unpredictable here than in the basements, although the bulbs rarely burned out. It was simply that sometimes the switches worked and sometimes they did not. And sometimes, if one happened to be alone in the stacks, the lights would go on, one level above or one level below, and then after a minute, as one stood there, clammy-handed, debating whether one ought to investigate or flee, the lights would go off again — leaving one with nothing to do but return to one's researches, no matter how much one's hand-writing wobbled. Although perhaps that only happened to me, just as no one else had ever confessed to hearing footsteps not their own echoing in the empty stairwell. But the other archivists hated the stacks, even though they tried to pretend they did not.

The stacks were emphatically off-limits to the public and always kept locked. Miss Coburn had a key, as did I; there was no way to do any kind of research in the Parrington without visiting the stacks. Individual departments were strongly discouraged from keeping separate collections, although a certain amount of hoarding had always been politely overlooked by Dr. Evans. We were all dreading what would happen when Dr. Starkweather noticed.

Miss Coburn locked the door behind us, again following the museum's strict policy, and then raised her eyebrows at me. "Where to?"

"Bottom level."

"It *would* be. What's down there?"

"The, er, meta-archives."

"The what?"

I opened the door to the stairs and waved her ahead of me. "Inventories, directors' memorandum books, notes of departmental meetings . . . et cetera."

"I had no idea we *kept* things like that."

"The museum may lose things," I said, "but it never throws them away."

Our voices echoed eerily up and down the shaft. I followed Miss Coburn down the stairs, both of us gripping the handrail; the stairs twisted in a tight, steep corkscrew, and it was lethally easy to lose your footing. When I had been hired, and Mr. Spaulding had been showing me around, he had told me that ten years previously, a junior archivist had slipped and fallen down the stairs, breaking his neck along with a generous assortment of his other bones. The corpse had lain at the bottom of the stairs for two days before anyone found him. It was the sort of story that was impossible to disbelieve, whether it was true or not. Another reason I hated the Annex.

The levels were labelled with Greek letters, the lowest being the appropriate ω, rather than the correct μ. It was not a comfort. I opened the door, and Miss Coburn and I stepped into ω; I flipped the light switch. The lights went on, and I was able to breathe again.

My memory always insists that ω is dank, even though my intellect knows that the first observed drop of water would have every curator in the museum baying for blood. It is not dank, merely musty, the air stale and thick with dust.

"All the charm of the family crypt," Miss Coburn muttered, but she did not suggest retreat.

I knew what I wanted, and I knew roughly where to find it. It was Miss Coburn's turn to follow me; the aisles were too narrow for two people to walk abreast. They were almost too narrow for two people to pass each other, even if they both turned sideways. The obese and jovial Mr. Paulson from Armor and Weapons could not come into the stacks at all.

"Spend much time down here?" Miss Coburn said.

I stopped and glanced back at her. ". . . No. Why?"

"You seem to know your way around."

"Would you rather be lost?" I said waspishly, and then was appalled. "I beg your pardon, Miss Coburn. I didn't mean . . . that is, I shouldn't have . . ."

"Why not? I was asking for it." She laughed at my expression. "Clearly, Mr. Booth, you have no siblings."

"No."

"It's all right. I'm not offended. Let's get this done, though, shall we? I'm not enjoying the ambiance."

"Oh. Yes. Yes, of course."

I found what I sought two aisles further in. Samuel Mather Parrington had had a mania for documentation; he had insisted that each director of the museum should keep what he called a log — vaguely akin to a ship's log — a notation of the museum's day to day business. I had no idea what purpose Mr. Parrington had intended for his logs, but they served in practice as a kind of rough index to aid the hapless researcher in determining which of the boxes of archived material he needed. The system was far from infallible, but it was better than no system at all.

I knelt down to scan the row of ledgers, each with the director's name and the dates, inclusive, of the ledger's contents. "Fifty-five years ago?"

"Yes."

The director then had been one Havilland DeWitt, a relative nonentity in the history of the Parrington. I found the appropriate ledger, noting that the one after it was labeled "H. Catesby-Stanton." I was not exactly surprised to learn that the end of Mr. DeWitt's tenure had coincided with the loss of the Venebretti Necklace, but it sent an unpleasant frisson through me all the same.

He was probably just dismissed, I said to myself.

It took me only a brief perusal of the ledger to find the disappearance of the necklace. Mr. DeWitt had boxed that entry off with a black border, as if it were a funeral card, and it began, "A very black day for the Museum indeed." I read the entry through, frowning, then handed the ledger to Miss Coburn and said, "Does this seem . . . *overdone* to you?"

She read it. "It's certainly over-*wrought*," she said, "and there's distinctly a note of suppressed hysteria. But what do you mean by 'overdone'?"

"Nothing," I said, flipping to the last few entries, some three-quarters of the way through the ledger. There was no mention of tension, of conflict, or even of dissatisfaction. Havilland DeWitt had not, it was clear, left the museum with any kind of warning. I was liking this less and less, if such a thing were possible.

I put the ledger back and stood up. "We want his memorandum book."

"We do?" Miss Coburn said doubtfully, following me. "I suppose . . . it had occurred to me that the person most suited to the particulars of this murder would be the person running the museum. No one he would have to account to for his

movements; the run of the building — and the keys; the ability to, for instance, designate that particular room to hold the collected letters of Jephthah Strong . . ."

The directors' personal memorandum books — another of Mr. Parrington's ukases — were kept in rows and rows of boxes. Some directors, I knew, disliking the idea that all of their day-to-day concerns would be preserved for posterity, kept two memorandum books, one for the museum and one for themselves. Dr. Evans had been one, but from the florid bombast of Havilland DeWitt's log, I was guessing he was not.

"Here," I said, pulling out the box labeled DeWitt. "Maybe I'm wrong, but let's start with — I'm afraid . . . that is, this may take a while."

"I asked for it," said Miss Coburn cheerfully, as she had said earlier, and settled herself on the floor.

I found the memorandum book covering the period of the necklace's disappearance and handed it to Miss Coburn. "If you'll start here, I have one other . . ." Two cases down and across the aisle were the scrapbooks of press cuttings, the first assignment of each junior curator the museum hired. I wanted to see what had made the papers when Havilland DeWitt left the Parrington.

The week after his last entry in the log, I found his obituary. I skimmed it, but was jarred to a stop by the second to last paragraph: "Mr. DeWitt was known for his tireless devotion to the museum, and his dedication is exemplified by his death. His assistant, Mr. Roland Laughton, explained that Mr. DeWitt was contemplating a 'massive reorganization and inventory,' beginning with the museum's basements. Mr. Laughton said that Mr. DeWitt must have descended to the basement after the staff had left for the day, and thus he died alone, surrounded by the artifacts to which he had devoted his life."

"Oh dear," I said.

"What?"

I read her the paragraph.

Miss Coburn ticked the salient points off on her fingers. "By himself, in the basement, after hours. I'd like to believe there's an innocent explanation for that, but I'm finding it difficult."

"It does suggest guilty knowledge, at least, if not . . ."

"Actual guilt? When did he die?"

"About a year after the necklace disappeared."

"And Madeline Stanhope."

". . . Yes. I'm sorry. I wasn't . . . that is, I didn't mean to be callous."

"And I didn't mean to sound as if I was rebuking you. It's so much easier not to think of her that I have to keep reminding myself. This isn't really about the necklace."

"No," I said. I returned the scrapbook to its proper place and came back to where

Miss Coburn was sitting with the memorandum books. I sat down, feeling even gawkier and more awkward than usual, and said, "Have you found anything?"

"This man could bore a stone to sleep?" she offered. "Other than that, nothing except some gloating remarks about the museum's good fortune in acquiring the necklace."

"Hmmm," I said. "Keep looking."

"Yes, sir," she said, just enough under her breath that I could pretend I had not heard her, although I am sure my blush betrayed me. I picked up Mr. DeWitt's last memorandum book and started reading.

He was verbose and, as Miss Coburn had remarked, monumentally dull. For some time, we both read in silence; I was straining my ears for footsteps, tapping, or the other strange noises that I sometimes heard when I was in the stacks by myself, but heard nothing.

"That's interesting," Miss Coburn said.

". . . What?"

"He says he doesn't think the necklace is safe."

We sat for a moment, considering the implications of that. Then I said, "Does he say . . . that is, is there a . . . a reason?"

"No. It seems to come out of a clear blue sky. No recorded incidents, no comments from the trustees . . . just all at once he says he doesn't think the necklace is safe. He's worried that it's 'vulnerable to the general public,' and he's planning to assign another guard to that gallery — which can't have made him very popular."

I thought of the skirmishing between departments to get guards assigned to their particular treasures, and had to agree.

"Maybe we had it backwards," Miss Coburn said. "Maybe DeWitt is the hero in this little drama."

"Then how did Mrs. Stanhope end up . . ."

"I'll keep looking," Miss Coburn said.

The memoranda for the last months of Mr. DeWitt's life were almost oppressively normal, and relentless in their tedium. He was planning a buying trip to Europe, arguing with the trustees about the museum's budget, waging a campaign to educate the docents in the niceties of French and Italian pronunciation. The first two times I saw a reference to his "plans," I assumed it meant one of these concerns, but the third time, it was at the end of an entry full of self-congratulation over his progress on all three fronts. The "plans" had to be something else.

While I was puzzling over that, Miss Coburn said, "Oh dear."

"What?"

"He's been reading about Maria Vittoria Venebretti."

"Oh." I thought it through, and asked, "*What* was he reading?"

"My Italian isn't very good, but off-hand I'd say the word *diavolo* is a bad sign." She handed me the memorandum book, open to the relevant page.

I scanned down the list, my stomach becoming a harder, colder knot with each entry. Then I turned the page.

"He . . . he wasn't just reading *about* Maria Vittoria Venebretti. He was reading the books she would have read."

"Which positively begs the question: *why*?"

"I can't . . ."

"I fancy we can put Mr. Havilland DeWitt firmly back on the villain side of the equation."

We sat in grim, cold silence for a moment; I did not know about Miss Coburn, but my mind was full of images of Madeline Stanhope's bones, her vertebrae like gruesome counters in a children's game, that sad clump of phalanges I wished I had never seen, her skull. Hamlet had been disgusted by the solid heft of mortality; I was filled with a vast, hopeless desire to protect a woman who had died before my own birth. But I could not reach her, just as Hamlet had not been able to reach the man he had once loved.

"He must have been trying to *do* something," Miss Coburn said, jerking me back from my morbid reverie.

"Beg pardon?"

"The evidence we've got so far doesn't so much as mention Madeline Stanhope, but it has quite a lot to say about the Venebretti Necklace. If there was a plot here, it wasn't aimed against her. If DeWitt's our man, then this wasn't about her at all. She was just . . . inconvenient."

"Or too convenient to waste," I muttered, still transfixed by that neat, methodical, and entirely insane list of books.

"What?"

I handed the memorandum book back to her. "While you were . . . talking to your aunt last night, I was . . . that is, I have read many of the same books as Mr. DeWitt, and, er, there are . . . there could be *reasons*. If he bricked her up alive . . ."

"Which certainly appears to be the case. What sort of reasons?"

"Nothing I want to talk about here or . . ." I looked at my watch. "Oh God."

"What?" she said, scrambling to her feet as I did.

"It's six o'clock. The museum's closed."

She did not ask me why that mattered, either because my fright was infectious, or because she had heard the stories for herself. Even those employees, such as myself, who habitually worked late hours did not go into the stacks after the museum closed. We all knew that the next time it might be us lying at the bottom of the stairs for two days before we were found.

When I opened the door to the stairwell, I heard the faint, echoing tap-tap-tap

of footsteps even before I reached for the stairwell's light switch. One glance at Miss Coburn's white face told me she heard them, too.

There was no way we could climb the stairs stealthily enough to avoid being heard — even if we could have done so in the stairwell's stygian blackness — and a gibbering voice in the back of my head pointed out that the slower and more cautiously we went, the more likely we were to encounter . . . it, whatever it was.

I found the light switch with fingers that felt as cold and brittle as icicles. "Run!" I said, flipping the switch, and we threw ourselves up the stairs like a pair of demented mountain goats. It was only much later that night, lying in bed staring at the patterns the moonlight made against the venetian blinds, that it occurred to me to wonder what we would have done if the light had failed to go on.

We made enough noise for an army, maybe two — the clatter of our shoes, Miss Coburn cursing breathlessly in French, the air sawing in my lungs, and the echoes clamoring and wailing and clawing at our ears. But always, underneath it, I could hear that tap-tap-tap, unhurried, unemphatic. I could not tell if it was ascending or descending; after we had scrambled around two full turns of the stairs, I could not tell if it was above or below us. With the echoes, it was equally impossible to know if it was drawing nearer or moving away. There was just that sense of menace, filling the air like choking dust.

Whatever it was, we did not encounter it. We burst through the stairwell door at ζ, both of us already fumbling for our keys. I found mine first, wrenched the lock mechanism over, every second expecting to hear the stairwell door open behind me, and shoved the door open. We both got through it somehow, and I locked the door again with feverish panic. And then we both simply sank to the floor where we were, panting for breath. I was intensely, absurdly grateful for the cold marble pressing against my knees and ankles, for the dusty, slightly sour air of the Parrington's back hallways.

When we were both breathing more normally again, Miss Coburn caught my eye and said, "Dripping water."

"Yes, of course," I said. "But . . . I'm not going back to turn the lights off."

She laughed and got to her feet with a leggy athleticism I could only envy. "Come on," she said and held a hand out to help me up. "Let's get out of here."

I do not like to be touched. I got to my feet without taking her hand; I felt her puzzled look, but did not meet her eyes.

After a moment, she let it go, and we walked together toward my office. As with Mr. Lucent the night before, we found ourselves unwilling to separate. Neither one of us spoke; anything we said would only have made more crushing the reality of the dark, deserted museum around us.

Then we turned a corner and nearly collided with Dr. Starkweather.

"Mr. Booth. And Miss Coburn." His heavy eyebrows drew together into a scowl. "Were you in the Annex?"

"Er," I said. "I . . ."

"Yes," Miss Coburn said, unfazed. "Mr. Booth was helping me with some research."

Dr. Starkweather seemed to contemplate her disheveled hair, then gave me a look I could not decipher. "I would suggest you conduct your . . . research somewhere else after hours," he said finally. "Good night."

He continued on his way; Miss Coburn grabbed my arm and dragged me in the opposite direction, disregarding my reflexive attempt to shake her off. She let me go as soon as we were out of earshot and, unbelievably, started to giggle.

"What is it?" I said.

"N-noth — " But she could not get the word out. I stood and watched as her giggles deepened to whoops of laughter; she ended up leaning against the wall, snorting and panting for breath.

"Miss Coburn, please, is it something I did?"

She shook her head. "Starkweather . . . Starkweather thinks . . . oh God!" But she suppressed her giggles sternly and said, "He thinks we were necking in the stacks."

She met my eyes for a moment and then dissolved into howls. I could feel my face burning and wondered if anyone had ever gone off in an apoplexy from sheer embarrassment. Perhaps I could be the first.

"I'm sorry," Miss Coburn said, finally composing herself. "Really. I understand that it's not funny, and I'm not . . ." She fought her giggles down again. "I'm not laughing at you. I swear."

"Good night, Miss Coburn," I said stiffly.

"Good night, Mr. Booth," she said, and I felt her amusement behind me all the way down the hall.

Again, Miss Coburn was waiting at my office door in the morning. I was rather later than usual in the hopes that this craven ploy might allow me to evade Dr. Starkweather.

"I finished with the memorandum books," she said abruptly.

"You . . . went *back*?"

"Dripping water," she said impatiently. "Nothing more. We spooked ourselves."

"Yes," I said, because I did not want to argue with her. "Did you find anything?"

"No. Nothing useful. If he was up to something, he must have realized he was incriminating himself. The most specific he gets after that entry with the books is all that talk of 'plans' just before he died."

"The books must have shown him what to do."

"You still think he killed her?"

I had not meant to say that out loud. "I . . . I need to do some reading," I said,

hastily unlocking the door and entering my office. "Good morning, Miss Coburn." I closed the door, locked it again, and made my way unsteadily across to my desk to sit down. I saw the outlines of what Havilland DeWitt had done, like a silhouette cast against a screen; I did not want to know more. I could not help Madeline Stanhope now, and there was no point in unearthing the details of this sordid, lunatic crime. Havilland DeWitt had gotten his comeuppance; the Venebretti Necklace had been found; and I was sure that word of Madeline Stanhope's innocence would trickle out in the same way the original scandal had.

I honorably added Havilland DeWitt's unpleasant library to the list of my obligations and made a mental note to avoid Miss Coburn as well as Dr. Starkweather for the next several weeks.

And there matters rested for quite some time.

III

Miss Coburn leaned around my office door one afternoon in early September. "Are you going to the Museum Ball, Mr. Booth?"

"Er," I said, looking up from an odd little Hellenistic statuette that no one quite knew what to make of, and felt the immediate weight of guilt across my shoulders. I had avoided Miss Coburn so successfully for two months that I had almost entirely forgotten my half-promise to follow up on Havilland DeWitt's reading. "Yes, I suppose." Dr. Starkweather had made it clear that attendance at Museum Balls was mandatory for all curators.

"Excellent." She came in and shut the door behind her. "I need an escort."

I stared at her. Her mouth quirked up, and she said in the simpering accents of a society debutante, "But, Miss Coburn, this is so sudden! Why, we hardly know each other at all!" Then, reverting to her normal voice, "You needn't look so unnerved. Think of it as a favor."

"Oh," I said. "That is . . . what sort of favor?"

She laughed. "I have just lied shamelessly to Cameron Larkin and told him that I cannot attend with him because I already have an escort. You perceive the immediate necessity of making that lie a retroactive truth."

". . . Yes."

"And I am confident that you will neither become vulgarly drunk nor make a pass at me at two o'clock in the morning."

"Not at all," I said, probably too hastily and too vehemently.

She smiled again, but ruefully. "If you really dislike me that much — "

Oh God, worse and worse. And I could not escape the feeling that I owed her a favor. "No, I don't dislike you, Miss Coburn. Truly. I just . . . I . . . I will be happy to, er, escort you to the Museum Ball."

"You are too kind, sir," she said with a mocking curtsey.

"Miss Coburn, I meant no offense. I just . . ."

"I know. I took you by surprise. You remind me powerfully of my Aunt Ferdy's cat Fortunato. He greets any change in his routine with that exact horrified stare." She opened the door. "I will come to your apartment at eight on Friday. I believe we can walk from there?"

And somehow she knew that I did not own a car. ". . . Yes. Yes, if that's — "

"Good afternoon, Mr. Booth." She shut the door briskly behind her and was gone.

I had never had a sweetheart, never so much as escorted a young lady to a dance. My prep school was boys-only, and contact with girls, either from the nearby girls' school or from the town, was strictly forbidden. Many boys defied that prohibition, but I was not among them. In college, my friend and roommate Augustus Blaine had held sole sway over the department of romance; even if I had been brave enough to wish to attract the attentions of a young lady, I could never have done so with Blaine in the room.

This was not, of course, a date in any proper sense of the word. Miss Coburn was merely using me as a shield. But I still felt horridly like the gawky, shabby boy I had once been, too shy to say anything to my guardians' goddaughter when she was kind enough to ask me how I did.

Gawky I still was, but shabby I was not, freed from the Siddonses' parsimony; I bought Miss Coburn a corsage. It took all my courage to go into the florist's, and I nearly fled when the young woman behind the counter asked if she could help me. But I held fast and managed to explain the situation — that I needed flowers for a lady with whom I stood on amiable (I hoped) but not romantic terms, and that, no, I did not know the color of her dress — and she provided me with some delicate white flowers and attendant greenery which, she said dimpling, would do charmingly. I suspect that she found me more than slightly comical, but my determination carried me through. I did not want to be any more of an embarrassment to Miss Coburn than I had to be.

Miss Coburn arrived promptly on the stroke of eight. I had been ready and waiting since six. I opened the door to her knock. ". . . Good evening, Miss Coburn." She was wearing a black dress, long and unadorned and austere, under a plain and slightly threadbare black coat. Instead of its usual bun at the base of her skull, her hair was arranged in a coronet of braids, as stark and becoming to her as the dress. Her only jewels were a pair of diamond earrings and an antique signet ring on her right hand.

"Oh, God, is it going to be 'Miss Coburn' and 'Mr. Booth' all evening long? My Christian name is Claudia, and I beg you will use it. And yours is . . . Karl? No."

"Kyle," I said, "but no one calls me by it."

"What do your friends call you?"

I bit back the instinctive honesty of, I have no friends, and said, "Booth, mostly."

"Then I shall call you Booth, and you will call me Claudia. All right?"

"I . . . I got you flowers," I said and dove into the kitchen to fetch them.

"Booth," she said when I reappeared, "I promise that I am not going to bite you." She smiled a little. "But I must admit the flowers are lovely." She accepted them and pinned them deftly to her bodice. I felt a great glow of relief, as if some dreadful barricade had been passed; I had been afraid she would be offended.

"We . . . we should go."

"I suppose we should."

We left my apartment building and walked together from one streetlight to the next. She made no motion that would suggest she expected me to offer my arm, and I was grateful. But after a block and a half, she said, "It is quite appalling how little I know of you, Booth. Where are you from?"

"Oh, er, here. Well, about twenty blocks north, to be accurate."

"So you *are* one of *those* Booths."

"The last one, yes."

"You certainly don't put on side about it."

"There's nothing left to be particularly proud of."

"Oh, don't be silly. You're the last scion of one of the Twenty, and I don't think anybody knows you exist."

"Considering the scandal of my mother's death, I prefer to be forgotten. Are you a . . . a native?"

"My mother was a Truelove who married beneath her. I don't know whether I ought to be counted as a 'native' or not, although I suppose I must have spent about half my childhood here, all told. My parents' marriage was rather stormy."

She did not sound as if she wished to say anything more, and we walked for some time in silence. Then she said, "You ditched me, didn't you?"

"Miss Coburn, I . . ."

"I recognize the plumage. I just want to know why."

"I, er . . . I didn't . . ."

She waited.

"I didn't want to know any more," I said.

"You?"

"I . . ." She was right. It was not like me; I was known in the museum for the terrier-like tenacity of my pursuit of facts. It was why I was the person to whom all the mysteries were sent.

"It wouldn't help to know," I said, looking away from her into the darkness. "Havilland DeWitt stole the necklace. He murdered Madeline Stanhope. Does the rest of it matter?"

"I'm an archaeologist. I don't like theories. I like proof."

"But what good does it do to prove it?"

"*You*'re the one who wanted justice for Madeline Stanhope."

I did not look at her and did not answer.

We walked without speaking until we came in sight of the museum's brilliantly lit front entrance. Then Miss Coburn stopped and said, "Do you dance?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Dance. Do you?"

"No . . . that is, not — "

"Then I'll lead." She put one hand up to touch her hair, a gesture which recalled my mother to me in a painful momentary flash, and then said, with the hint of a sigh, "Well, Booth, let's do the pretty, as my Coburn grandmother would say. Give me your arm. And just to prove you can do it, will you call me Claudia? Once?"

I could not tell if she was still angry at me or not. ". . . Yes, er, Claudia," I said and offered my arm. I had braced myself and did not flinch when she took it.

"Very nice," she said. She smelt of verbena. "And now I will stop baiting you. On all fronts. You are, after all, doing me a favor, and I appreciate it."

She was not still angry; I let my breath out, relieved, and dared, "Is Mr. Larkin so very awful?"

"Horrid. I've met *cows* with more personality."

"Oh." I wondered how I compared to cows in Miss Coburn's estimation.

"There's nothing worse than a garrulous bore. Oh, look, a limousine. That'll be Reginald Dawe and his fifth wife."

"You seem to know a great deal about . . ."

"High society? You may thank my Truelove aunts. Mama was the only one of the three who got married, and so Aunt Ferdy and Aunt Vinnie have no one but me to lavish their expertise on. They don't count my brother. They say men don't notice things anyway."

She gave me a bright, sidelong look, as if daring me to respond. I said nothing. We came to the steps, proceeded up them. Miss Coburn was looking very grand, as if she did not take these same stairs two at a time when she was in a hurry. The rotunda was full of men in tuxedos and women in dresses that shimmered and swirled, the Foucault's pendulum swinging in their midst, the clock of the Titans' mother Gaia. As we crossed to the coat-check counter, I could feel the stares and whispers; in all the years I had worked at the museum, this was the first time I had escorted a woman to the annual ball. I could imagine the rumors starting and felt a cold quiver of dread in the pit of my stomach.

When Miss Coburn had surrendered her coat, she gave me a doubtful look. "You don't want to mingle, do you?"

"No," I said.

"Then I'll find you when the doors open. Just don't hide."

"I — "

"You do stand out in a crowd, you know," she said and swept away, as stately as a swan.

I knew I stood out; I was six-foot-three, and my hair had gone entirely white when I was twenty-four. The combination made me horribly visible. The best I could do was to stay back near the wall, in the shadow of one of the columns, and pray that no one noticed me.

I had been standing there for maybe five minutes when I saw her. I do not know how I recognized her as Madeline Stanhope, but I never had the least doubt of who she was. She was a small woman, wrapped toga-fashion in something long and white and trailing, like a bed-sheet or a shroud. She was standing very straight at the top of the museum's main staircase. She did not look like a ghost — she was neither transparent nor insubstantial to the eye — but she was clearly not a living woman. Her face was too white and too still, with her eyes burning like the promise of eternal damnation. She was staring straight at me.

Miss Coburn had accused me of "ditching" her; that was nothing compared to my crime in ditching Madeline Stanhope. I did not know why she had appeared here, now, but I knew I could not ignore her.

Madeline Stanhope gave me a very slight nod and turned away, walking into the long Contemporary Art gallery that ran the length of the museum. I understood; I followed her.

Three-quarters of the way up the stairs, I heard a clatter of heels behind me. I had been trying with all my might to ignore the assembled wealth and dignity of the Museum Ball, but at that noise, like Orpheus, I could not forbear to look back.

Miss Coburn, clutching her skirts carelessly in one hand to keep them out of her way, caught up to me and said, in a low hiss, "Booth, what are you *doing*?"

I kept climbing. There was nothing I could tell her that would not sound even less likely than the truth. "Following Madeline Stanhope."

"Foll — " Automatically, Miss Coburn kept pace with me. "Are you out of your *mind*?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe."

We reached the top of the stairs; Madeline Stanhope was halfway down the gallery. She moved with neither hurry nor hesitation, not drifting but walking with firm, even steps, although her feet made no sound. When she looked back and saw that I was following, her smile revealed small sharp teeth — certainly not teeth belonging to a living woman, nor like the teeth I had seen in Mrs. Stanhope's skull.

"Can you see her?" I whispered to Miss Coburn.

"No." She looked up at me. "You lead."

My spine was being replaced, vertebra by vertebra, with cubes of ice, but I followed Madeline Stanhope into the Contemporary Art gallery.

Halfway down the gallery, Miss Coburn whispered to me, "Where do you think she's going?"

". . . I'm afraid she wants to show me something."

There was a pause. "Oh," said Miss Coburn, "I see what you mean."

Madeline Stanhope turned from Contemporary Art into Medieval, walked through Medieval into Renaissance, and from there into Decorative Arts. She came to a halt in front of the case containing the Venebretti Necklace.

I heard Miss Coburn's breath hiss in. Then she whispered, "I can see her now."

The revenant of Madeline Stanhope walked slowly around the case, as if inspecting the necklace from all angles. Then she turned to us, placed her hand on top of the case, and stared at us with the dark conflagration of her eyes.

Miss Coburn caught at my elbow. "Look!"

I could not help my flinch, but I followed the direction of her pointing finger. Clearly visible on Madeline Stanhope's wrist, dark and ugly against the glass case, was a shackle. I felt faint and queasy and cold. Together, Miss Coburn and I backed away until we could sit down on the nearest bench. Madeline Stanhope's burning eyes marked our progress, but she made no movement either to stop us or to follow us.

"Booth," said Miss Coburn, very quietly and calmly, "I think perhaps now would be a good time for you to tell me what Havilland DeWitt did."

"I, er . . . yes, I suppose so." I glanced uneasily at Madeline Stanhope.

"She'll wait," Miss Coburn said. "She'll wait until the end of time if she has to. *Talk.*"

"It was the curse," I said, because everything was fitting into place in my head, all the pieces lining up as I had known they would as soon as I let myself think about it. "At least, part of it was the curse."

"Go on."

"He wanted the necklace. You could see it, couldn't you? In his memorandum book? It's no very large step from wanting the necklace kept safe from museum patrons to . . . to wanting the necklace kept safe from *everyone.*"

"No, but you haven't proved he took that step."

"That's the books. That list of books."

"Wasn't he trying to break the curse?"

"No. Not with those books. Maybe he started there, but the books in Latin — those were all necromantic texts, and the necromancers of that time had some — "

"Booth. Spare me the lecture on Renaissance necromancy, and tell me what he did."

"Havilland DeWitt had a plan, and . . . and I think I know what it was. He wanted the necklace for himself, because that's how the curse works. But he was the museum director — important man, important friends, reputation to maintain. He needed a . . . he needed someone else to take the blame."

"All right," Miss Coburn said, although she still looked dubious.

Madeline Stanhope stood by the case, watching us, her eyes full of hunger and rage. I was grateful that she was not coming any closer.

I went on: "And I believe he was quite sincere about wanting to keep the necklace safe. After all, he was planning to keep it in his own house — "

"How — "

"Wait. Let me finish. It was going to be vulnerable to burglars, inquisitive servants, prying house-guests. I guess that what happened . . . that he asked himself how Maria Vittoria Venebretti would have solved his, er, problem — "

"And thus the works on her and on Renaissance magic."

"Yes. He found his answer in the *Imperium Orbis* of Carolus Albinus. Albinus talks about how to command all sorts of things: Hebrew golems, spirits of fire and air — "

"Booth."

"Sorry. Right. Albinus also talks about how to command the dead."

"*Merde*," said Miss Coburn.

". . . Yes. Mr. DeWitt found that the two halves of his problem solved each other. He needed a . . . a suspect who would never show up to prove his — or in this case her — guilt, and he needed . . ." I realized I was staring at Madeline Stanhope and looked away. "He needed a dead body."

"But chaining her to the wall?"

"I haven't read a great deal . . . that is, I don't like this kind of spell. But this sort of . . . of guardian needs to be . . . it's an avatar of fury, is how I understand it."

We were both looking at Madeline Stanhope now. She was staring back at us, her lips pulled away from her sharp teeth. One hand was resting on the glass case, and I could see the tension of the fingers, yearning to reach through the glass to touch the necklace itself.

"And it worked," I said, distantly amazed at how level my voice was when most of my mind was screaming. "She was bound to the necklace just as he desired, and the hue and cry went up after her — all the way to San Francisco according to your aunt."

"Yes."

"And then Mr. DeWitt was hoist by his own petard."

"What do you mean?"

"He waited a year. Then he offered a perfectly innocent explanation for wandering around in the basements at all hours and went down to take the necklace back. But he was a stupid man, and he didn't understand . . . that is, he forgot to tell her not to guard it from *him*."

"So the heart attack . . ."

"I don't think it was coincidence."

"But why — nothing happened to us!"

"Philip Burney — who is also on Mr. DeWitt's list — says that the dead see only by moonlight. And I think she must be limited . . . she must have a radius of influence, with the necklace as its focus. Or else why wouldn't she . . . that is, I'm often in the museum after moonrise. But people just aren't in the galleries at this time of night."

"The watchman's supposed to be," Miss Coburn muttered.

"Yes, well . . ."

The revenant was still standing, still staring.

"Miss Coburn," I said, "what happened to Madeline Stanhope's bones?"

"I don't know. Why does it matter? Shouldn't we be figuring out what she wants?"

"Oh, I know what she wants. I'm just afraid to give it to her."

I felt Miss Coburn's swift glance, but I could not take my eyes off Madeline Stanhope; I was too frightened.

"She wants the necklace," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Quite sure."

"We can't give it to her. Starkweather will *slay* us."

"She wants it," I said, looking at the predatory teeth, the strong angry hands. "It's *hers* now. And I can't help thinking Maria Vittoria Venebretti would be pleased."

"What are we going to do?"

"What choice do you think we have?"

"Oh," said Miss Coburn in a very small voice.

As a senior archivist, I had the master key for the display cases. I took out my key ring and got to my feet. I could feel my hands shaking, but I advanced to the case. Madeline Stanhope watched me come, her eyes like the pits of Gehenna. I unlocked the case, opened the door. I could not bring myself to touch the necklace. Madeline Stanhope's white hand snaked in past me, seizing the necklace in a grip like a vulture's claw. As she pulled it out, her arm brushed mine; even through my coat and shirt, I could feel the burning cold of her flesh, like dry ice. She smiled at me, a terrible smile, full of teeth, and fastened the necklace around her throat. As I watched, sick and petrified, her eyes slowly filled with an unearthly green light, the same color as the emeralds that now gleamed on her chest and shoulders. I lurched back a step, unable to stay near her, consumed with terror that she might touch me again.

Then my eyes clouded, or the room darkened, for she was gone, and I did not see which way she went. Mechanically, I reached into the case and flipped over the placard, so that the side reading, REMOVED FOR CLEANING, was uppermost. I closed the case again and locked it.

I turned back to Miss Coburn as I put my keys back in my pocket and found her sitting with a white-knuckled grip on the edge of the bench. "My God, Booth," she said faintly. "Did you see her leave?"

"No. Did you?"

"No." She shuddered convulsively, ending with a shake of her head as if it were something she wished to dislodge from her spine. "I understand now why you didn't want to open this particular Pandora's box."

"Come on. I don't want to stay here."

"No," she agreed, getting to her feet. "We'd better sneak back and look normal."

"Normal?" The reality of the Museum Ball crashed back in on me. "How can we . . . we . . . the staircase . . ."

Miss Coburn grinned at me. "They'll just think we've been necking."

"Oh, God, no."

"If we go back right now, they won't think we've done anything worse."

I stared at her for a moment before I realized that she was not joking. "Then, please, let's go."

We went, hastily, furtively, both of us glancing back nervously over our shoulders.

"Where do you think she went?" Miss Coburn asked.

"Where have they put her bones?"

"Oh. Oh dear. Do you think . . ."

"Yes," I said.

"God help me, I do too."

"She has the necklace," I said, trying to comfort us both.

"Yes," said Miss Coburn, "but what worries me is what she may do to *keep* it."

And to that I had no reply.

The loss of the Venebretti necklace was not realized until nearly six months later. Neither Miss Coburn nor I fell under suspicion, since the two persons with the legitimate authority to remove the necklace — Dr. Starkweather and Mr. Browne, the head of Restoration and Repairs — hated each other with a passion that would have made the daughters of King Lear proud. Each assumed that the other had taken it, and when it came out that no one in the museum knew where the necklace was, Dr. Starkweather insisted furiously that Mr. Browne had squirreled it away, and Mr. Browne maintained, apoplectically, that Dr. Starkweather must have damaged it — Dr. Starkweather's rough and clumsy hands were the bane of Restoration and Repairs — and then hidden it rather than confessing to his crime like an honorable man. In the miasma of their mutual venom, no one thought to ask any of the simple questions, such as when the necklace had last been seen and who had the keys to its case, and the idea that the necklace might be genuinely lost never arose. The new inventory pleased Dr. Starkweather, but it did not change the fact that many things lost in the Parrington are never found again.

And so all was serene, although I confess that to this day, when my mind turns to Madeline Stanhope and the Venebretti Necklace, I cannot help imagining her,

somewhere in the darkness of the museum basements, stroking the emeralds with her cold white fingers and smiling, smiling.

Sour Metal
Amber van Dyk

Pennies. I carry them in my pockets, in my purse, in the space between my stocking and my heel. My pennies are dirty, like all good money, and in the dark I roll them in my palms, cover their copper in the oil of my fingerprints and savour the taste of metal on my tongue. Some girls prefer bills to coin, but not me. I'd take a sock full of silver dollars over a fold of bills any day.

Mostly because bills won't leave bruises, and out here black and blue is as good as gold.

So I come home and it's October. I've got this piñata, all metal and crypt and swamp, and I thought I might break it open and lick clean its insides, but the second I crossed the state line, all the black of the desert sky went emerald, amethyst, gold like fireworks and I knew the city'd already been opened wide.

So now I'm back, silver dollars clanking in my pockets and metal on my tongue and the air smells different, new words on the breeze.

I hear they're telling our stories now and the storyteller's line forms in Jackson Square at midnight.

Bet I can cover the city at least once before the witches wake.

Didn't make it — twelve miles under my shoes, and I was caught tossing pennies in

the river and making wishes when the stars struck and I realized it was already *that time*.

They were still in line when I got there, some blonde creature talking, accent like nothing like I'd heard in years, but Marie had an Aunt that talked something like that, like she might have come from far away. I remember her going on, and Marie rolling her eyes and taking in the smoke from our fire, her voice rough and French and sounding like wishes as the smoke of her breath turned into horses and ran off into the swamp.

Marie had died, years ago, when I was away. I always thought I'd feel it, but the desert was like that. It made you dry. Sure feel her here, though, something in the air smells like rosemary and the skin of a brittle-dried snake.

I'm sitting on the steps of the library. It's quarter after and the tour guide is still talking; he uses his hands like a magician, but like any good illusionist all he shows are lies. I'm not in his lineup, his crowd, but I'm sure he hears me laughing. He glances over, shoots me a sharp look and I stick out my tongue, flip the penny on its tip.

When he starts talking about *Ursaline*, I start really listening, and although I haven't paid him for his trickery, I follow along anyway.

I'm gone before we make it half-way there.

Guess I wasn't ready to go back after all.

I follow him for three nights. His rats change and the way he tells his stories stay the same. He's got all of his lines memorized, and me too, perhaps, even though I'm hidden in the middle of them, and I've not worn the same thing twice. Trouble is something about me is bound to become familiar. I'm like air.

We walk through the French Quarter and if I see a penny, I pick it up. Don't even have to wash it; don't mind the dirt and I'm not palming it for luck, just for *later*. For the iron. For the taste of sour metal on my tongue.

Last stop of the night and his rats run off, scared of the dark, but I'm still standing, waiting, not afraid in Jackson Square, in all of its open spaces.

He reaches out, grabs onto my elbow and I lick my lips. Red as poppies but I don't wear makeup. It's something in the pennies, Marie told me. It calls the blood.

He tells me his name is Simon, but I hear it first as *Simone*, in French, no matter I can't recall a boy of either name.

So I call him that, *Simone*.

He smiled like I was flirting, and I guess I was, and boys his age were just so *easy*. I stared at his pockets and figured them empty.

I'd already decided he'd get me into *Ursaline*. I just hadn't decided why.

But pretty boys like kisses from pretty girls, and I toured the edge of his neck,

trembled just above his vein, and caught his earlobe between my teeth before I told him.

"The third floor of Ursaline Convent."

He pulled back, finally asked me my name, and I lied and told him, "Delphie."

Maybe he screamed or something deeper, a sound like his insides might have snapped and I could hear myself laughing, a horrible far-away sound, and it sounded like me, and it sounded like Marie Laveaux, like both of us, and I could feel her arms around me and she was whispering *ma cherie.*

It was a lie of course, but I'm a mystery and it doesn't matter, he knows the full tale of the LaLaurie's, how they tortured the slaves, experimented on their skin. He still thinks it might be true. I might be her. I want him to fear me, just a little bit.

Instead he straightens his shoulders and tells me I'm so pale I might as well be dead.

I shrug and invite him for coffee. It's 2 a.m. and the air smells of chicory.

And maybe just a little like fear.

We take a table inside, but there are no true walls holding up the roof of the Cafe du Monde, just some wood, some paint. White and green, reminding me of Polo matches and plantations. Of slaves and of coffins.

Simone thinks we should go for a walk by the river, full moon and we'd be able to see the stars in the still of the water, and thinking about it I do pale, steady myself against the weight of his body. He asks what's wrong and I tell him that I am seasick.

I take him in Pirates Alley, ask him to draw his sword and I'm laughing the whole time, we kiss and I pass a penny onto his tongue. Ask him what it tastes like and the best he can come up with is *metal.*

"Iron." I whisper into the wave of his blonde hair.

"It's like blood," he says and I can feel his fingers curling into the small of my back like he's trying to find a way in. Then he's up against the brickwork and I'm holding him still, my knuckles knead at the hollows of his shoulders and I wonder how much I should take.

But it's not my purse that's empty.

The next night I don't go back to Jackson Square, I don't meet Simone. I'm on the corner of Chartres and Ursalines, I look up, reading the street signs. Ursalines wasn't a one-way, not on the day I left, not on the day they drove the last nail in.

I heard Marie Laveaux cried that day, but it seems awfully sentimental.

I don't even remember how long it took them with their paper bags and borrowed hammers, but I remember our sister, Evangaline, how she screamed, how she didn't make it through the night.

The nuns thought we were devils, thought that with the boats had come disease, a thirst, a sickness. It wasn't the rats, but the men, the sailors with their ancient curses; we were not their passengers, but their wares.

On the night of the first full moon, I stared out the window of the third floor of the Ursaline Convent, my face warmed by the light of night. I pressed my hands against the glass, and although the oils of my skin left their marks, I could not fake a reflection. Evangaline had died, and all of us knew we would suffer that same fate: ashes to ashes.

I shake my head to clear the cobwebs and go back to Jackson Square where I know Simone is waiting. I dump my purse into his lap, silver dollars falling like stars, and tell him how I came to be so wealthy. It's a joke of course; I'd never had more than a hundred dollars to my name since we'd docked. There'd been promises to our families, of marriage and wealth and children, but we'd known our place, known what we were destined for: the beds of men and women.

He tells me he loves me anyway, and I laugh and pull five pennies from my pockets. I line them up, across the steps of the library in Jackson Square, and say, "This is all I will ever give you."

And walk away.

A week later we're in the St. Louis Number One. Simone is naked, his knees all curled up to his chest as he leans back, against her tomb. He says we should knock, carve our X's, make our wishes. I tell him Marie had already granted mine, and I didn't dare ask for another. His voice is shaking, and yet I know he is not afraid here, among the tombs, among the thieves. "But what else is there for her to do?" he asks.

I consider telling him but instead just shake my head. "What if all of our wishes came true?"

"We'll bring her King Cakes."

"There's no coming back for me, Simone."

He raises his arms, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, his hands in the length of his hair. I think of Mama and her white cakes, frosting like ice and snow.

"Why does it hurt to be around you?" He asks me then, and I think he might be crying.

I speak, in French, although I know he will not understand.

He sighs, says my name, *Cosette*, and I can feel him aching.

"I don't feel anything," I say again, in his language, although I know he will not understand. "I am sorry."

Simone pales, takes on the colour of my skin. He shudders, reaches for his shirt, the pants that are the same dark velvet as the sky.

"No," I say, and reach for him. "I was not always this way."

"How?" he says, as if I can possibly explain it.

I remember the streets of Calais, of Paris, the voices of my father, my mother. I remember her screaming *non! non!*, and still Father loaded me on that ship headed for the new world. I had long stopped wondering if they knew what came of us, of the sailors that had turned us all to casket girls.

"Ask Marie Laveaux," I say instead, and although I am not angry with her, my voice claims otherwise. "We need to get to the Convent, it's time to go inside."

"But no-one..." he starts, and I knew why he was protesting, because the stories he told the tourists were true.

And that would make me *true.*

I had asked him why he didn't mind who I was. I didn't mean inside, in my veins, but out, with my bag of silver dollars and my eyes all rimmed black. But I had not slept with another man since that first night with Simone. I never told him; of course, when we parted he assumed I went back to the street, and I could not bring myself to tell him different.

Although I could not feel love, I knew its machination.

It took him twenty minutes to answer me, his hands across my belly and although he must have known I did not breathe, he never questioned why I was cold like the dead.

I didn't feel dead, not with him.

"I'm still there," I whispered, in the dark, in his bed.

"Where?" he mumbled, his voice full of sleep.

"In the Convent. On Ursalines."

"Silly," he kissed me, "you're right here with me."

But I wasn't, half-dead in more ways than one, I held a penny in my hand, smelled its metal on my fingertips. I'd stopped feeding. Perhaps I was preparing.

183 iron stakes impaled the windows of the third floor of the Ursaline Convent, and it would take only one to kill me, one sharp point through a heart I hadn't felt in years.

It seemed a strange trade; something I didn't need, for exactly what I wanted.

I'd escaped the Convent with nothing but the clothes on my back, my insides as empty as a ransacked grave. My heart, and perhaps my soul, if I still warranted such a thing, hadn't made it past their wards. I imagined the nails and my spirit, hanging there, spectral white, like a flag of surrender.

I had wanted to be free, that much was true, to see this New World. And I had seen it, and I was done with it.

But not yet with Simone.

We stand on Chartres, looking at the Convent, its whitewash wood form, old, yet cared for. A tiny wooden cross protects the window peak, and I remember how its

spine felt in the curve of my hand. The windows I stared out of for thirty nights stare back at us, empty and vacant.

I ask him if this is what it is like, looking at me, not even a reflection, just the same dead cold. He says no and kisses my cheek, laces his fingers through mine. He is warm and when I press my thumb to his wrist, I feel his blood, the pulse. I kiss him then and bite his lip and the flesh tears as he bleeds into me.

I pull back, "You taste like pennies."

"Is that all I'm worth?"

I don't know how to answer him. Instead I ask again if he will help me, if he will break into the third floor of the Ursaline Convent so that I might visit the ashes of my dead sisters.

So that I might reclaim my soul.

He nods yes, as I knew he would. Smart enough, he knows to ask why I need him at all. He knows I am cold and that means I am dead, and yet I need him, his warmth.

"The iron," I say, "doesn't recognize the living."

"Only the dead," he says and I think I feel like crying. Or I might, if I felt anything at all.

Instead I tell him what we both know. "I might hurt you." He nods again. "But not by choice."

"And I'll let you," and his voice comes out cracked.

"Simone." His name tastes like flowers on my tongue.

I think I want to tell him I love him, but of course I do not, or can not. Instead, when he turns to face me I hold out my hands, palm over each as if inside, I hold treasure, and when he holds his own hands below mine I open my palms and copper falls like tears, like rain, like blood.

He might not understand, but it is the most I have to give him.

Passing to the Distant Shore
Dale Bailey

From atop the broken tower, the witch watched a man mount the long hill. Behind him, a mule picked its way among the tumbled stones. Still farther below, the hills fell in ranks, pink-edged in the spring dusk, down to a broad clear river and the village beyond.

They had sighted him from the battlements at daybreak, she and the raven. The stranger had been merely a shadow then, ill-defined in the fog that curled from the river as he led the mule across the shallow ford. As the sun burned the mist away, his figure became clearer, hard-edged. He paused only twice as he ascended: once, in mid-morning, to peer up at the ruined tower from beneath his slanted hand; again, in the afternoon, to adjust the mule's burden.

The day passed slowly, broken only by an inconstant wind, and the witch's husky litany of names. "Snakeroot and spurgeflax and hemlock," she would say, and fall silent for long minutes, until the spirit moved her tongue again, and the words rose to her lips unbidden: "Larkspur and serpent's tongue and wort of adder." Occasionally the raven glided away to hunt the bright emptiness or to swoop down over the man on the path, but the witch remained still and watchful, rapt. The bird shifted now, horny toes clicking against the stone, and she smoothed his dark feathers with knotted fingers.

Her familiar.

So said the rare villager who gathered the courage to climb the long hill. The witch

had lived among them once, in a time so long past that she hardly remembered it at all. In the years since, the rumor of her magic had grown. She had no magic, though, or none such as they imagined, and what she did possess was stranger than they could know, and more terrible.

As for familiars? The raven was nothing of the kind. Years ago, the witch had mended its broken wing, and it had stayed with her of its own accord, feral, but faithful in its way. Now, however, she found herself wishing that the thing *was* her familiar — that she could peer into its glittering and untroubled eye, see there the image of the man climbing up to her, and judge for herself his desperation.

She had been waiting so long.

"Come," she told the bird, her voice like stones in a dry well rattling. "It's time."

She turned to the door, and screeching, the bird glided before her down the curving stairs. The cavernous central chamber was cool. The witch kindled a fire, listening to a scurry of mice as the raven hunted the lofty dark. A faint spicy scent of herbs, suspended in bundles from the rafters, drifted down to her.

She catalogued them, worrying the names like stones as she stood, smoothing her filthy robes. "Horsemint and cramp weed and bitter-root," she said, fidgeting. "Moon-blossom and sweet balm. Toadflax."

Hooves clattered in the courtyard.

The witch crossed the room quickly and passed through the heavy wooden door. Outside, red light lay against the mountains. Her shadow clawed the earth at her back. The man stood at the far end of the courtyard, his thick shoulders knotting as he worked to free the mule of its burden.

"Passion flower," the witch said, sudden as a hiccup. She smoothed her robes and shaded her eyes with one hand.

The man did not turn or speak. A heap of blankets and burlap twine slid from the mule's back, raising a mushroom of dust. Someone moaned. The stranger turned then, bearded and blunt-featured. She heard that moan again, rising from the bundle of filthy blankets he cradled against his chest. An arm dangled from the wrappings, an arm so thin and emaciated that she could see bones beneath the flesh, backlit in the falling glare of sun.

"I've travelled weeks to find you," the stranger said.

The witch stood silently, uncertain what to do or say.

"I'm Simon," he said. "Do you have a name, then?"

The witch gasped as if she had been struck. Names fled through her mind: gipsywort, starflower, cockleburr.

No use.

She'd forgotten her name centuries ago.

Dreams haunted her, dreams of shining cities glimpsed from afar, of bearded lips

pressing firm against her own, of raven shadow speeding ever before her and always out of reach across a sun-stroked sea of slate.

She dreamed of water.

Last night it had come to her again, a dream. Last night it had troubled her sleep: a dark speck circling, the shadow of an outstretched wing, a lone and level expanse of sun-parched sand. Incorporeal, she hovered in the scorching air, gazing downward at her upward-gazing self, this shrunken, staring, naked thing, this loathsome bag of desiccated flesh, and then, somehow, she was flying, she was falling, she was hurtling toward a fast and flowing river as it broadened to receive her. Fathoms deep she plunged in black and freezing water, a froth of raven-bubbles flying up before her startled eyes.

Some survival instinct, long atrophied, surged inside her breast. She kicked wildly for the surface, up and up and up until the air burst from her lungs, until her muscles screamed and the blood thundered at her temples and the lure of the dreamless dark sang in her soul like the sea.

And then the surface sheared apart before her. She wasn't drowning. She was swimming, smooth and strong, her seamed and ancient skin sloughing away like the husk of a newly molted snake. Pink fleshed, her muscles bunching, the witch drove herself through water.

The cry of the raven drifted down to her.

Looking up, she saw it, arrowing before her toward a green and distant shore. A crystal city glimmered down upon her, spires burning in the sunlight, and in that instant of stark and shining beauty, the raven broke off suddenly, diving toward the wave —

— *no*, she thought, *no*, her heart seizing within her —

— and from the sparkling geyser of its impact strode a man, dark-bearded, smiling, his arms flung open in welcome. He shouted a greeting, and as her name —

— *what was it* —

— rang out across the water, a cresting oily wave interposed itself between them.

She fought.

For a single moment she fought.

And then a current, powerful, remorseless, swept her helplessly away.

"My wife died when the boy was born," Simon said. "He's all I have now." He sat hunched in a chair by the fire, his shoulders bowed, his elbows resting on his knees. His hands knotted and unknotted, broad flat hands, large-fingered. The hands of a workman.

The witch said nothing. She sat across from him, dry as a bundle of broken sticks. Her hair fell across her face in greasy strands.

"He's sick," Simon said. He raised his head. "He's dying."

"There is a price."

Simon looked away. "I am a mason. I am a poor man."

The witch stood, moving slowly. She studied Simon, massive and unbending and still, so still that he might have been chiseled from the bones of the earth. His beard was gray, his features broad and crudely hewn.

"Come," she said, and together they crossed the room to the straw pallet where the boy slept, the raven dropping like a stone to perch atop the wooden headboard. Ten, maybe twelve years old, the boy looked like an old man. Yellow flesh hung loose about his cheeks and arms. His eyes were dark-rimmed, bruised-looking, his hair lank. On his breath, the witch could smell the sweet rot of some bone-deep decay. She placed her hand against his forehead; it was like touching the side of a boiling kettle.

The raven butted his head against her. She reached out to caress it, and the motion triggered something in her mind, some grand procession of names. Wormseed and adder's-wort.

Heart's-ease.

Simon sighed. The witch turned to face him.

"He's near death," she said. "He has a day perhaps, no longer."

"Is it hopeless, then?"

"Not hopeless. Doubtful, yes, but there is a chance."

Shrugging, she returned to her place by the hearth. The fire had burned down. She bent arthritically to place a few faggots in the grate. Wood snapped, spitting constellations of sparks. The heat felt good against her skin. The fireplace had a pleasant smoky fragrance. The witch settled in her rocker, muttering constantly to herself, half unaware. "Woodbine and nightshade. Snakeweed."

With a flutter of wings, the raven alighted on the hearth beside her. She smoothed his rumpled feathers, and for a moment — a moment only — she let herself hope. Closing her eyes, she thought of the city, the dark-bearded man of her dreams.

When she opened them, Simon had folded himself into the chair opposite. "A hope," he whispered. "Lords, I haven't hoped for years. He's been sick for so long."

"Up there, in the rafters," she said, "where it's cool and dry, I keep the secrets of the forest. Bloodroot and wormwood, stinking fennel. I can cure your boy."

"And the price?"

The witch's mouth worked soundlessly, empty of words. "There was a man," she said at last. Simon sat unmoving. The flames chased shadows across his features. In the flickering light, the witch saw what he would look like as an old man, his thick body withered, his eyes muddied with years. Then the flames shifted, and the years dropped away.

"He was sick, this man," the witch said, rocking, her hands perpetually in motion, smoothing her robes. "There was no price so high I would not pay it. Afterwards, we had many years together. Good years. But in the end even my art failed him."

"And what is it, this price?" Simon asked, but the witch could tell from his careful manner that he knew.

She leaned forward, she peered into his face.

His features were stony, uncommunicative.

Across the room, the boy's breath had grown shallow.

He leaned forward, his voice hoarse: "Tell me, witch, what is your price?"

"A death," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "The price I paid these thousand years gone. If you would save your son, you must surrender it to me, your death. You must pay my passage to the distant shore."

It had been storming the night she found the raven: thunderheads brooding over the mountains, lightning in sheets of blistering incandescence, rain the likes of which even she had seen only once or twice in her endless span of years: wind-driven panes of the stuff, glassy, stinging. And there, staring up at her from the shelter of the parapet, this small screeching thing, this huddled mass of sodden feathers, this bird. She could have turned away. Any other night, she would have. But that night, that one night of all the long nights of her long, long life, with the rain whipping at her, needling her, tearing at her with a thousand cold and clawing fingers, something in her —

— *what?* —

— had for a single moment relented.

She had snatched the thing up. Cradling it against her sodden robes, she had fled for the shelter of the curving stairs. So it had begun, this thing between her and the bird, and it, too, haunted her dreams.

In the dreams, as the bird squirms against her breast, as her fingers track the racing pulse of its heart through a scrim of feathers, a single terrifying stroke of lightning rends the darkness. The battlements loom black and depthless against the purple sky. And in that shining moment, as the rain slams down and thunder shakes the battlements, she sees them.

Birds.

Hundreds of them — thousands, black wings beyond counting — sweeping out of the bruised sky like wind-blown scraps of night. In the dreams, they plunge toward her, raucous, screaming. She turns to flee, still clutching this one raven, wounded, helpless to her breast, its heart beating in sympathy with her own —

And then it twists free, hurling itself into the storm. Its companions plummet toward her in legions, numberless and shrieking, their claws extended. Snatching at her arms, her legs, her wind-torn knots of hair, they seize her, bearing her aloft, into the teeth of the storm.

A chill mist gropes her, and then they burst above the ceiling of cloud. The storm, the tower, the world she has known for all these countless years drops away beneath her — lost, all of it lost in the darkness below. Westward then, chasing dawn, the sun

gleaming like a copper coin, attended by a ceaseless clamor of wings, and her robes, saturated, rotten with age, whip around her, snapping like pinions before the tempest sweeps them utterly away. The clouds clear, and the barren landscape unfurls itself beneath her.

Far below, in the bright haze of morning, the sun strikes spangles from the turbulent mirror of a river. Screaming, the birds descend. The water draws nearer, fast-moving and iridescent, and as the purple edge of a distant shoreline rises before her, something like hope or terror blooms in the witch's heart. With a guttural chorus, the ravens release her.

The wind snatches at her.

Naked, she plunges into the heart of a green and distant country, toward the spires of a shining city.

The witch waited.

Embers glowed in the fireplace, casting a ruddy halo across the hearth. The boy had fallen silent.

The witch did not stir. She sat shrunken and ancient, staring myopically at her twisted fingers, listening to that unceasing litany of names.

After a time, she heard the creak of rusty hinges, the sound of boots against the stairs. Simon appeared in the archway. Without speaking, he knelt to stack fresh wood atop the coals. It popped and spat, summoning the raven out of darkness to bask in the momentary blaze of warmth.

Simon lowered himself into the chair across from her.

"Time presses," the witch said.

"I've been watching the sky. You must have seen a great deal in your life. Even the stars may have changed."

The witch shrugged. "Everything has changed. The world has passed on and come round again."

"Why must you say these things? There are those who would prize your fate."

The witch laughed mirthlessly. "That, too, is part of the price. I could not lie to you even if I wished to."

The boy cried in his sleep, solitary and despairing.

"Time is short," the witch said. "Soon now, the sickness will surpass my power."

Simon groaned. His massive frame shook.

Even before he spoke, the witch knew.

"I cannot," he said. "My wife. She awaits me."

He was silent for a long moment. The raven squawked. Stretching its wings, it hopped to the arm of the witch's rocker. But she did not move.

"Better that the boy should join her there," Simon said. "Someday, we both shall join her there."

The witch did not speak.

Simon stared at her, his shoulders rigid. He was like some enduring sea-washed rock, poised at the moment before the endless wear of elements brings it crashing beneath the waves. He seemed suddenly to crumble into himself, somehow reduced. Eroded and tired-looking.

She saw this, and she did not see it. She gazed past it, into the void.

His anguished voice summoned her back.

"Please," he whispered. "I have no strength to beg you."

Deliberately, the witch set her rocker in motion.

Yet he had some strength after all, and to drown out the din of his entreaties, the witch fell back on her catalog of herbs. "Calamas and oxlip. Madweed, monkshroud — "

At last he stood.

The witch fell silent, blood singing at her temples.

"I curse you, then," he said, and his voice reminded her of the injured raven that night atop the battlements, its fear and numb complaint.

She gripped the arms of her chair until her knuckles turned white. She began to speak again, her husky inventory of names, and still speaking, she watched him cross the room and bundle the boy carefully in the blankets.

Only when he had gone from the tower, slamming the wooden door behind him, did she allow her voice to subside. The last word she had spoken —

". . . heart's-ease . . ."

— hung sibilant in the silence

The raven fretted. The witch closed her eyes and dreamed of that green and distant shore, those crystal spires, the man, dark-bearded, who had stridden out to greet her. Lost, all lost. Nothing before her but this solitary procession of days.

Even the raven would die.

An image pierced her and was gone: birds like wind-blown scraps of velvet, sweeping endlessly from a bruised and brooding sky.

From the courtyard, she heard the rattle of hoof and stone, and she thought of the last word that she had spoken, the name that seemed to hang still in the vast tomb above her.

Heart's-ease.

The witch stood and went to the door. Outside, the first pink light lay against the mountains eastward. Simon stood by the mule, tightening the knots which bound the boy there, in his blankets.

"He has a name, this boy?" the witch said.

Simon turned to look at her. "Daniel," he said. "His name is Daniel."

She repeated it, "Daniel," the syllables strange on her tongue, and they stood there

staring at one another, she and this stranger, Simon, in the long pale glimmer of the dawn. They stood there for a long time. She didn't know how long they stood there.

"Come," she said at last, and her voice sounded strange in her own ears. "Come in. I'll do what I can."

Slowly, the boy, Daniel, grew stronger. During the days, his high ebullient voice filled the vast chamber. At night, when he slept, the witch sat with Simon by the fire.

There came a time when summer inundated the valley below, a green wave.

Daniel was well.

"Tomorrow we must leave you," Simon told her one night. "We have troubled you too long."

"And where will you go?" the witch said, rocking.

In the mercurial gleam of the fire, Simon shrugged. "I do not know. I have my hands. I can work the stone. We'll settle somewhere, in the village below perhaps. Who knows? We'll make a life."

The morning broke cool and clear. They stood in the courtyard, the three of them. The mule waited patiently, munching on a few lone spears of grass. The raven watched from the battlements. Morning sun slanted through the still air to fall golden on the steaming river and on the village, restful in the green embrace of summer.

"You could come with us," Simon said.

The witch gazed out across the wide country and watched the light draw down over the land.

"There is no place for me down there," she said at last, and Simon nodded, as if he had known from the first what she would say. She supposed he had.

Still, all that long day, she watched them from above. Occasionally, the raven lifted its voice into the bright and flawless silence, but the witch did not speak. She leaned against the decaying stones and watched them descend the long path to the river. In the soft glow of twilight, with the sun a red smear above the western rim of the world, she saw their dark figures cross the water to the green and distant shore.