

Bachelor of Magic

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[1]

The first time I met her, I remember thinking that her eyes were the colour that emeralds ought to be. Which is how you know you're in trouble; when you start wanting the world to be other than what it is because you like the way somebody looks.

This was some hours into a dusty night at an art gallery sitting just on the wrong side of the kernel of the city center, shabby enough that the rent wouldn't cut too deep into anybody's profits, not so shabby that the patrons would suffer anything more than the impression of venturing into the wrong part of town.

The patrons in question were - well. Young rich people, who else. People who'd been forming their first words in the last days of the revolution, people with the appearance of money and poise and the easy shrug you needed to have a good time there, or anywhere, outshining whatever was hanging on the walls by a wide margin. Students, of one stripe or another. It was a university thing, of course they were there. There was an open bar, so of course I was there too.

I'd been in the city long enough to know all this, but not so long that I didn't get a kick out of knowing it; of recognizing the limp, hanging waves between theatre students, their stiff collars and appraiser's stares, and knowing too the furtive name dropping of the photography class, or the chain-smoking magic students, their faces forever drawn like they'd just been let in on a disappointing secret. It didn't occur to me to consider how much I was giving away, standing there in coat and tie, looking like I had my face pressed to the outside of a window.

The face I was giving all and sundry away to, on the other hand, was a distractingly good one.

I'd seen her smiling distantly at something in stained-glass, and she was upsettingly beautiful, and even more upsettingly she'd accepted my offer of a drink. And there was girl with the emerald eyes – which were green, really, and nothing like emeralds, not even under the forgiving gallery lights– taking the paper cup from my hand, bringing it slowly to her face and quickly away again.

“What do you think this is?” she asked, mouth quirked in distaste.

“House red,” I said, swigging mine with an enthusiasm I couldn't account for. “It's from a good year.”

“Oh yes?” said the girl, her gaze moving past my shoulder to take in some fresh, new, art. “What year was that?”

“Well I tried to ask him,” I said, jerking my thumb in the direction some freshman shanghaied into bar duty, “but he said that time was an arbitrary system attempting to forestall death, and that dating conventions were in bad faith.” “Really?”

“No,” I said. “But wouldn’t it have been nice?”

I took another swig of the foul, free wine, and noticed I was leaving wine stains on the cup’s rim. The girl with the emerald eyes laughed, lightly. It was a nice laugh, probably the nicest thing in the room, I thought, looking around at the half-hearted artists talking about their half-hearted art – blown-up portraits of rotund boys in whiteface, children’s swing sets turned into gallows, some black-and-white photos of a security estate.

“I think I might hate this,” I said, turning back around in time to see that the girl was on her way to the door. She probably had a name, but I didn’t want to trouble her for it right then; instead I watched her go, dark jeans, darker boots, and a jacket that was a generation out of date. There had been a dark-blue shirt, too, with stars or polka-dots or something, but I had been too busy with the eyes to notice, and now the girl was past the glass doors and with the small furtive crowd outside, hunting for a cigarette.

Have you ever known a beautiful person to have to hunt for a smoke, or anything else, for long? After a while loveliness gets to be an imperative, like a tide or like gravity – pulling in lovers and catastrophes and cigarettes as a matter of course. In this case the cigarette came along with a young black guy in an old black jacket, and white v-neck; he grinned at the girl, and in the gloom of the narrow street behind him, I could just make out his teeth and his shirt. It was then that I realized that I was watching the girl with more intensity than I could excuse, and so turned away, pushing through some gently bleating patrons to get at the bar.

I set my cup on the cloth table, and waited until I caught the bartender’s eye. This took no more than the usual amount of ice ages.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“The house red,” I said. “What year is this?” I asked, bringing the cup up to my nose.

“What are you, a time traveller? It’s 2015.”

The drinks were free, so I moved off, leaving the appropriate tip.

I did a few of laps of the gallery, greeting people I didn't especially recognize and trying to see the value in a photo of an artist taking a photo of her parents, but the art was bad, and so were the people, so I went outside, where the girl and the eyes and the cigarettes were.

Stepping outside, it dawned on me that there were other things there, too; the wind, for one, which threw dust at my face in fistfuls, and didn't stop. And the man in the jacket for two. Which was plenty. I popped a cigarette in my mouth.

"Sam!" said the green-eyed girl, pushing through a small circle of people to grab at my elbow. "I was about to come looking for you." My heart did the appropriate things, and I let myself be guided past the same furtive smokers, to the tall dark etcetera that I'd had seen earlier. The green-eyed girl stepped back, and smiled. "This is Damien."

"Hey," said a deep voice. "I like your waistcoat."

"Christ," I said, then "sorry, hi. Sam. I got grit in my eyes."

"Don't worry about it," said the man in the jacket, putting out a dry, wiry hand. I took it, squinting, and clicked my lighter.

"Christ," I said. "Sorry. Again. Wind. Christ."

"It's the south-easter. It depresses everybody," said the girl.

"Let me get that for you," said Damien.

I clicked my lighter.

He stepped back, a practiced smirk already getting carved into his face as he worked through a series of convoluted hand movements, other smokers backing up to give his wild contortions space. He stopped abruptly, and a thin blue flame sprang up from his thumbnail. Two young men, shivering in leopard-print vests, applauded.

Damien brought the flame of his thumbnail – which didn't seem to react to the wind at all – to my cigarette, and then to his own unlit smoke, which had appeared in his mouth.

I inhaled. "Huh," I said, regarding my cigarette.

"Don't worry about it," said Damien.

"Oh, sorry. I'm grateful for the light, thank you, it's just – do you know that these things taste

like burnt hair when you light them like that?”

“What?” said Damien, extinguishing his thumb with a flourish and a small puff of smoke.

The green-eyed girl broke in. “Well – I mean, you’re using Loyola’s Second Order Flame, right? It’s fueled by your skin, so it smells a little like burning flesh.”

I took a drag, shook my head, flicking the half-smoked thing into the road. “Sorry. Not my thing.”

Damien narrowed his eyes, rolling the smoke in his mouth. “I stopped taking magic back in high-school, so I suppose –“

“Sure,” said the green-eyed girl, “your technique’s a little off, the flame’s meant to be orange.” I smiled at her, then. She smiled back.

“Anyway, thanks for the light.”

“No problem,” said Damien, before turning to somebody else.

“I didn’t know you did magic,” I said to the green-eyed girl. A monumentally dumb statement, in hindsight, but there you are.

“Among other things,” she said, and the fact that I let that slide ought to be indication of just how fun she was to look at. Be looked at by. I made the gamble – the desperate, lose-the-farm gamble.

“I’m headed home. Do you want to come?”

“Okay,” she nodded.

We moved off to the street, the girl pausing to wave at the crowd, or at Damien, all faces obscured by the lights in the gallery, while I found a cab willing to take us the five minutes across town.

Later, when she had her shirt back on, she was gazing out of my window, at the portion of view allotted to us. The fog had come in, so she was looking out at a soup punctuated by distant, moving lights. Somewhere, a band was playing.

“I think that’s my cab,” she said.

“Stay,” I said. Spoiling things by being honest. “You’re drunk,” said the girl, pushing the curtains closed. I had curtains then. And she was right; the room was swinging. “And I have to do some work tomorrow.”

“Lies,” I said.

She stretched in the darkness. “I can send you a dream, if you’d like?”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I said.

“I told you. Twice. I’m studying oneiromancy – dream magic. I can’t stay the night, but I could sort of – have you dream that I did? If you’d like?”

“Fine,” I said, rubbing my face. The angry child dealing with compromise. And then I said, “I’d like that,” because I suppose I did.

“Sam,” said the girl.

“Yes?”

“What’s my name?”

I stared for a second, and knew then that it was too late to make the face that I’d need to make to salvage matters, and so simply dropped onto my back.

“Does it matter?” I asked the ceiling, which rotated slowly in response.

The girl laughed, and looked out the window again. “No. But wouldn’t it have been nice?” She pulled on her jacket, slipped over to the bed and kissed me lightly, quickly enough to evade my arms. Then she was gone.

I lay in the dark for a time, trying to listen for the sound of a car pulling off, feeling vague guilt for a number of small lapses and trying to remember whether or not I was required to do anything about them now, before allowing myself a mental shrug and succumbing to alcohol, and silence, and the cavernous embrace of my bed.

And then I dreamt of her.

Later I would learn that her name was Emily; that her eyes were flecked with brown, that she left toothpaste in the basin, that she didn’t like my drinking. And once we had done the appropriate amount of damage to one another, she left, and I arranged my schedule to keep from seeing her, or her friends, or friends of her friends.

I mean I didn’t leave the house much.

The dream kept happening, though. The dream of her staying the night. And sometimes, shamefully, that’s what I wanted – she was gone, and I wanted to keep owning some lingering part of her – but mostly I woke up to a world different to the one I’d spent the night in, and that meant starting my days with a knife-deep hurt, which was...it wasn’t great.

And I don't want to say that that's where my troubles started, because those are roots you can trace as far back as you have the will to go – but I began to have a dream of a girl with eyes that weren't the colour of emeralds, and there my troubles began to take a new and interested pleasure in their work.

Because the last time I saw Emily Hardwick before she died was in that dream, or one very much like it.

[2]

I paid a magic-school dropout handsomely to make the dreams stop. Well. I say handsomely. Not-too-bad-lookingly, anyway. You-wouldn't-say-no-in-a-darkened-room-ly.

The thing to understand is that memory scrubbing is very illegal, which is to say very expensive, and while I had some funds trickling in here and there, I wasn't in a position to cover that kind of project. And I had the name of a freelance sorcerer tucked into a book somewhere in my apartment, so when the dreams became unbearable, I had dug it out and drawn out the runes for getting in touch with 'Oliver Starnes, Freelance Magicks.'

I'd met Ollie, god, I don't know. Maybe about a year before that? Odd relationship. I could usually count on being able to contextualize somebody within two or three connections – I slept with your cousin's former schoolmate, you went to my ex-girlfriend's exhibition, whatever. But Ollie knew nobody, or knew nobody that my bodies knew, which amounted to the same thing. We'd met at a bar. He'd hit on me, and to make up for his embarrassment or discomfort, he'd given me a business card.

So I explained my situation, in broad strokes, and eventually he came to my place with a box of cheap yellow chalk and a second-year textbook on Icelandic wards that he'd copied pretty much verbatim in the process of securing my bed from dreams and other nasties. It looked like a cheap hack job, but what did I know? And anyway it was supposed to be cheap, and it had worked, until very suddenly it didn't.

Because after a couple of weeks of – let me not call it *blissful* sleep, but bearable sleep; the effect of the runes was to scrub my mind of any dreams at all, to the extent that I'd collapse on my bare mattress and let the tide of booze carry me off into the dark, and then jerk my eyes open hours later without any sense of timing have passed, except that now the sun was up. All the way up. And obviously my waking hours weren't much improved – but I could go to sleep without fear of being assaulted by the various absences poking into my life. For maybe half a season, things weren't terrible. And then, as is the way with these things, they were again; one grim evening, when autumn was beginning to let itself be known in the quality of light punching through my filthy windows, I fell asleep from a long day of avoiding doing or thinking much of anything, and found myself holding, being held by, Emily Hardwick.

And so natural was it for me to be in that position, so easily did I fall into the old patterns of touching and of being touched, of kissing cold lips that gradually grew into something else, that it didn't occur to me to be unhappy. At the time.

But dreams end. We take this as a point of faith, I think. Dreams end, and so I found myself in my underwear, face wet with tears I hadn't been awake for, my terrible single-room apartment lit up by bland yellow light barging in without concern for the knives twisting behind my eye-sockets, or the tide-lines of liquor ringing my throat. And then somewhere the noon gun went off, to let me know how much of the day I'd squandered.

It wasn't a happy beginning to the day. And so, very much in need of something other than myself to be unhappy at, I dug around in last night's discarded jeans for the cheap, dented thing that served as a phone in those days, and called my extortionist magician.

"Hello? S'Ollie," he said, picking up after the eleventh ring and absolving me of any guilt over having woken up in the middle of the day.

"Hey, Ollie," I said. "It's Sam."

“Oh,” said the deadbeat, his voice dropping another octave. “Hey. What’s um, what’s up?”

“I dreamt a dream last night,” I said, moving away from the window to pick out a shirt. It seemed important to sound busy.

“Oh, sweet.”

“Not really, Ollie. You told me this kind of thing wouldn’t happen anymore.”

“Oh. Yeah?”

“Yeah, Ollie. And I quote: ‘Once I’ve put these dudes in, this shit will not happen to you any more.’ Ollie Starnes, almost exactly two months from today.” I was lying, about both the word choice and the date, but that seemed beside the point.

“Ah, shit.”

“That’s what I said when I woke up this morning, Ollie,” I told him. “And since I’m still under your warranty...”

“Shit,” said Ollie again, sounding more or less awake now.

“When can you come over?” I asked, phone pressed to my shoulder while I wriggled into jeans, for no reason other than the fact that I liked to multi-task when conducting business.

“In like an hour, I guess?”

“Great. I’ll put the kettle on.”

“You have a kettle now?”

“Don’t be crazy. See you in an hour.”

When he showed up two hours later, I’d had the time to do all those morning ritual things that seem important when you’re young and wanting to look attractive to everything. I’d even had the time to stare gloomily out my apartment window; the place was terrible, but it had something of a view - half of it obstructed by some tall blue-glass monstrosity that nobody had had the heart to demolish yet, but the rest looking over the gradual curvature of the coast. It wasn’t the worst thing in the world to look at, right then. I’d thrown up, showered, exfoliated, and dressed, feeling very nearly like a million dollars. By which I mean, feeling spent.

So; I unlocked the security gate outside my front door, which I never quite managed to get used to, and stepped aside to let Ollie Starnes stoop under the threshold. He had his backpack slung over a thin shoulder, which slipped to the ground when he tried to brush his hair out of his face, surveying the room and exposing his ongoing attempt at facial hair to the afternoon light. I

greeted him, and blue, heavily-bagged eyes gazed back at me with a look that only the wilfully naïve could interpret as fatigue or myopia.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” he said, staring past me at the indifferent kitchen table, half-made sleeper and filthy window without seeming to notice anything in particular.

“Nothing, you mean?”

“Well, sure. The renovation that does not seek to renovate. Very zen.”

He grinned like a dog that had done something clever.

“I’ll tell my decorator. Shall we get to it?”

“Absolutely,” said Ollie, “got no time to waste on pleasantries. Early birds, worms, saves nine.”

“You’re a credit to your profession,” I said, walking over to the bed. I gestured vaguely at the pattern scrawled around it, and then placed my hands on my hips. Then I noticed that I had my hands on my hips – I was always doing that, noticing things I did – and I jerked my arms around my chest, all assertive and in control.

“Alright,” said Ollie, standing next to me. He stared the runes for a time. “What am I looking at?”

“Damned if I know. You’re the magician.”

“I’m a designer,” said Ollie, who was neither designer nor magician, having flunked out of both courses in his final year.

“You told me this would cut the dreams out,” I said, and walked over to the kitchen table to pull out my one chair and sit on the edge of it. “And it worked fine until last night.”

“Did you mess up the chalk, maybe?” asked Ollie, his gaze drifting past me and slightly to the left of a small collection of empty bottles piled next to my trash can.

“I checked,” I said, “nothing looks smudged. And I’ve had them for a couple of weeks, so I’m used to stepping over them.”

“A guest, maybe?”

I sighed. “Please, leave being coy to the people who know how to do it. Take a look, see if anything seems wrong, would you?”

The big dog-face frowned, set his bag on the floor beneath the window, and started walking

around the bed, muttering to himself as he moved from symbol to symbol. You know how this goes - his voice changed, slightly shriller, the cadence almost songlike. It's always strange hearing people do magic. Even when they're bad at it. By the time he finished his circuit, I was nodding along to the words, and when he stopped I discover that my heart was racing a little.

"Um," he said, and cleared his throat. "It, uh. It seems okay. I mean - you're sure you were sleeping inside the circle?"

Insufferable, I looked around the apartment, from the corner where my suitcase was crammed to the two-meter strip of unoccupied floor in front of my doormat. "Pretty sure," I said.

"I don't - hang on," said Ollie, reaching for his backpack and pulling out a battered textbook. I recognized the title with a slight wince; *Jones & Schuster's Magic and Society*. There'd been a copy in my apartment not too long ago. We'd integrated our bookshelves. But, indifferent to my distress, Ollie flipped through it, muttering again, and - finding the desired page - walked around my bed.

"You know you nearly look the part," I said, reaching across the table for a pack of smokes.

"Long, glossy hair, spellbook in hand." Ollie ignored me, wisely, checking between symbols in the book and symbols on the floor. When he eventually finished, he snapped the thing closed and looked up at me with something approaching triumph. "Look, it's exactly the same as in the textbook."

"Hell," said I. I lit a cigarette, took a slow, bored drag, and watched the blue smoke turn golden in the afternoon light. You learn to take pleasure in that kind of thing when you're hermitting.

I scowled at him, and his book, and his magic that had let me down. "Surprised you haven't tried to sell your textbooks on to some freshmen. Spread the disease."

Ollie ran a thumb over the thing's spine, and returned it to his bag. "I would've," he said, "but they came out with a new edition last year. Nobody's buying these anymore."

"What's in the new edition?"

Ollie shrugged, which was a complicated process to watch. "So far as I can tell, it has a different cover and more colour pictures. Otherwise it's the same deal. The dream wards wouldn't be any different, anyway."

I tapped at the kitchen table, twice, then stood up abruptly, moved to a shelf with big clear bottles and little clear tumblers. “I’m making a drink. What’ll you have?”

“Isn’t it a little early in the day?”

“Are you going to have a drink, or just tell me things you hear people say on television?”

“I’m fine. Maybe some water.”

“Well. It’s 7am somewhere.”

“I feel like I’ve heard you say that before. Alright. Fine, whiskey, if you’ve got it.”

“I’ve got it,” I said, pouring out a couple of jiggers into two not-entirely-filthy tumblers and setting them on the table. Ollie came over to take his; we did the thing with the eye contact and the clinking, and we drank.

“Christ,” said Ollie, choking.

After a breath, I replied: “I didn’t say it was good whiskey.”

“Well no, that’d make you a bloody liar. Jesus.”

I smiled, then frowned. Flexible face, those days. “So what - am I immune to this thing now? Did I build up a resistant to dream blocking?”

Ollie shook his big dumb head, both to clear away the taste and to disagree.

“That is the exact opposite of how this works. It’s not a wall that separates your dreams from yourself, it’s sort of a – it directs all the psychic build-up from your dreams outwards, instead of letting it circle around in your brain. It makes you feel a little low, but if you’re dreaming stuff you don’t want to dream...”

“Sure,” I said.

I’m lying about this, by the way. I don’t know what exactly he said, since any discussion about how magic worked tended to bore me more or less instantly, and I don’t know how much of the mechanics he really understood. Dream magic wasn’t his thing, though I’m not sure what was. I looked this stuff up, because it seemed important to know, afterwards, and maybe these were things that Ollie knew. He wasn’t a complete idiot; not really. This part really happened, though:

I had poured myself another finger, and dodged Ollie’s attempt at covering his tumbler and poured him another finger too. He was talking:

“So I mean there’s no way to build an immunity to it, it’s like a sewage valve. So long as the thing’s in place, it’s a one-way stream. Your retaining dreams in that circle is like plumbing going backwards.”

“And hitting me in the eye?” I said, regretting the image and the words.

“I guess,” said Ollie. He sipped his whiskey. “Gross.”

We sat there for a while, with our thoughts.

The question, when it came, was inevitable. “So what did you dream, anyway?”

“I didn’t know you did divination too,” I said drily, because that’s the sort of thing you can only really say drily.

“Call it professional pride,” he said. “In there,” he gestured at my bed, “dreams shouldn’t be able to happen. It’s meant to be a vacuum. So I’m a little curious about what can survive in a vacuum.”

I sipped at my whiskey. It really wasn’t very good; I bared my teeth for a moment at the taste and at the sunlight. Then, eyes still focused on the world outside, I told Ollie the failed designer and failed magician about my dream.

[3]

How much of the dream I explained to Ollie, I don't know.

I mean, I had to have told him something substantial, enough to trigger the realization that his little circle of runes hadn't glitched, that I wasn't suffering from a recurring sex dream that some half-drunk magician had put in my head and neglected to remove, that someone was trying to get a message to me. I'd like for it to have been the case that I didn't say too much: talking about sex and talking about dreams are both terrible in their own ways, so I can only assume that talking about sexy dreams doubles up. I'd like it if I reminded him that Emily-of-the-green-eyes had studied dream magic, and that it was this that made him sit up, and snap his fingers, and say,

“Oh, Jesus, I've had some serious problems with the oneiromancy students; there was this one I met at orientation week who, for like the whole of that first semester, would get shitfaced and fire off drunk sendings into my dreams. I'd be in my childhood bathroom trying to stop the tub from overflowing with teeth, or you know, dream stuff, and then there'd be fucking Arman yelling 'My man Ollie! Wake up and come to Finn's, bro, there are some fine things out tonight,' scaring the shit out of me, waking me up, and reinforcing my desire to never go to that terrible bar again. And he'd keep doing this, three or four times a week. Everyone hated him. And the only way to block out sendings was to stuff your ears with this foul-smelling eggy dough with rosemary worked into it...the guys in the department got really good at that very quickly. Except for the one vegan guy, who couldn't follow any recipes with animal stuff in them, which made him, first, a continuing target for Arman's drunk-dial sendings, and second, a really shitty magician.” Here Ollie paused, and poured back the last of his whiskey, which had numbed enough of his mouth to be consumed with something like pleasure. “Although I think he's a lecturer there now. So there's that. And Arman switched to music, and met his boyfriend pretty soon after, so I suppose things did sort of work out.”

And I responded, a little buzzed, “It’s probably for the best that I don’t know how to do that. Not working things out part – I mean, sure, I don’t know how to do that either – but the thing with calling people in their dreams. I’d have a whole new way to make a fool of myself at three in the morning.”

Ollie, slumped forward a little against the table, shook his head.

“It’s actually pretty hard to do, even when you’re not drunk in some terrible, loud, bar. There isn’t a recipe or anything, you’ve got to sort of visualize a sequence of runes, and visualize them strongly enough to, I don’t know, register as dream stuff. All very hippy-dippy, and what, ‘essentialist’? Old-fashioned. It’s a little hard to articulate. Hard to teach, hard to learn.” He laughed. “Which is why practically nobody does it. Arman was a goddamned prodigy, and even he didn’t stick with it – because, and I think I quote, he wanted ‘nothing further to do with the patriarchal colonization of the symbolic order.’ Christ, what an asshole.”

“Emily stuck with it,” I said, wincing a little. I didn’t want to get any drunker, but my body tensed with an empty want when I said her name, so stood up to open a window, swayed and sat down again.

Ollie laughed at this, and I laughed too, after a little while; I think about half of my smoke burned out without my drawing on it, so funny was the fact that I had jumped straight back into being drunk. It was a good, unfamiliar feeling, laughing like that. It’s not the kind of thing you could do in bars in the city, because it’s vulgar to show your teeth or to be having too good of a time without some irony to lace it with, or the kind of thing you could do alone, because at some point you’d notice and worry that you were crazy, but in an apartment with someone who wasn’t too shitty, a little drunk, there was room for that. I laughed until my sides hurt, and it was a different hurt from the retching.

Ollie wiped his eyes and stood up, slinging his bag on his shoulder. “Go back to bed, you’re not going to get anything done today. Go to sleep, wake up early, shower, and meet someone nice. Bring them to this bed – maybe after changing the sheets – and see if that doesn’t fix your dream thing.” He looked askance at my mattress, smiling a little, and I began to feel that I didn’t terribly want this dog-faced boy picturing me and whatever ‘someone nice’ looked like to him, doing whatever he thought we did, in there. I looked down at my cigarette, and started figuring out which words would make him leave the quickest and still do the thing I wanted him to do.

“Oh, shit,” he said, and I looked up quick, ready to accept the flustered apology and defuse the discomfort that would follow, by murdering him if necessary, but he was looking past me and saying, “we’re so fucking dumb.”

“What?” I said, “You’re dumb.”

“This is a new low,” he said, dropping his bag to the floor.

“This is the same low as always.”

“No, listen here – your dream. That was your girlfriend trying to call you. That’s why it got through; the chalk suppresses stuff coming from your brain, but nothing from the outside. Her thing boosted the signal beyond what the runes could dampen, so you had the regular dream, but she slipped her sending in there. Like Patrick with the teeth. You just didn’t notice the difference because you were dreaming of her already.”

“So – you’re saying she drunk-dialled me?”

“I’m saying the runes work perfectly, and my reputation as freelance sorcerer is untarnished,” he said, grinning. I started to smile back, then stopped, quick.

“Oh, shit,” I said.

“What?”

“She’s calling me, man. I don’t love that.”

“Oh, is this new shit going to interfere with your life of getting drunk and not writing your thesis?”

“Be nice,” I snapped, and tossed my burning cigarette filter into his whiskey tumbler.

“This is probably good for you,” said Ollie, pacing the room, still excited at the evidence of his magical adequacy. “The Cold War is over, communication between East and West can resume, with closure for all.” He paused. “Was that insensitive? Are you from Berlin?”

“Munich,” I said, “and not so much insensitive as wildly uninformed. About everything. Can’t you give me the recipe? The fennel and columbines or what have you.”

“It’s rosemary. And – are you sure you wouldn’t rather just work out your issues with her?”

“I don’t have any issues,” I said, and cut off whatever knee-jerk and entirely accurate rebuttal he had in store by adding, “and I’ll pay.”

“Well fuck,” said Ollie. “Suit yourself.”

And he pulled out his textbook, looked the thing up and scribbled down a fairly straightforward recipe – egg whites, flour for the binding, rosemary, to be mixed in a bowl while singing a short Slavic chant – and I thought about arguing over payment, because all he'd known was where to look for the recipe, instead of actually knowing it, but I conceded that knowing where to look for a thing counted for a lot. And I wanted him to leave.

So we solved the mystery of the recurring dream, and I had a way to block out Emily's sendings, and he left, and I had the rest of the day to myself. Probably to go and buy rosemary. Success for everyone.

But it didn't go like that. Not quite, anyway; yes to Ollie's story, yes to the booze and the laughter and the epiphany. But the only reason the epiphany happened at all was because I realized the dream from the night before hadn't been the recurring dream, or not exactly.

And I only noticed that difference between the sending dream and the thing Emily had put in my head that first time because I was describing the dream to Ollie. And in terrible detail. Out of spite or fear or a need to get it off my chest, I spelled out, with close attention to choreography, how the dream-Emily and I had made love, or fucked, or both. And in the telling, Ollie hunched over and looked interested in a way that both revolted me and spurred me on, I realized that the dream I was recalling wasn't quite the same as the others; that by the time we were nearly done she was crying. And even in the strange underwater calm of dream logic I knew that this was wrong, and took her in my arms and asked her what had happened. And she looked at me, and smiled a little tightly, and said, "I was calling to see if you could come get me; I'm in a little trouble tonight, and I needed your help."

"Come get you?" I said, because I didn't think I needed to be clever in dreams, "I've got you. You're right here, with me. Where you belong." I said those words.

"No, Sam," said the girl in my dream, hardening, pulling away. She brushed hair out of her eyes. "I'm across town, with some – some bad people. And you're lying shitfaced on a mattress in Sea Point; you're not going to wake up for hours. It'll be – anyway. You can't help me."

"What? I – I'm sorry," I said, hearing the familiar crack in my voice, "just tell me what I can do."

"Just lie there, Sam," she said, "you're good at that." And she looked at me for a few seconds longer, her face folded in a way I hadn't seen before; one second furious, and then resigned,

staring glassily past me at where I suppose I had dreamed the window of my apartment. The newness and the cruelty of the dream threatened to tip over into the fever of nightmare, but then something in the light changed, and the girl in my dream moved against me again in the old familiar pattern, and the sounds she made were no longer words.

And it was this information – the changing of the contours of the dream – that had led Ollie to figure out that Emily had been trying to get in touch with me; that made him scribble out a recipe for his rosemary-egg-paste. And it was this information that had him call me, a week later, when the newsletter had gone around to everybody connected to the university that the body of Emily Hardwick, final-year magic student, beloved daughter, well-liked by all etcetera etcetera, had been found in a hotel back alley in the city, with injuries consistent with a fall of ten to twenty meters, and bloodwork suggesting complications arising from a large intake of alcohol and heroin, with condolences to her parents in some small town up north followed by some truly unbearable words about drug culture and stress at university and office hours for state-funded counsellors – that had Ollie call me, and ask, “what are you going to do?”

And then, because he had asked, I had to answer.

I couldn't just lie there. Even though I was good at that.

[4]

I mean, the newsletter wasn't how *I* found out; this is just how I figure Ollie did, and what spurred him into contacting me.

I found out maybe two days after it happened; a friend of Emily's, whom I'd thought I could reasonably rely upon never to contact me again following an extensive mutual analysis of what a stuck-up bitch *she* was and how far up my own asshole *I* was, called me.

Back then, there were a half-dozen different ways of remotely getting in touch with another person at any given time; the usual fistful of electronic routes, and since I still travelled in circles populated by disaffected magicians, among other disaffected things, there were the things you

could do with mirrors, or with shadows, or with smoke. Unless you went out of your way to be out of touch with someone, you were always a little in touch.

Yes, *I* still called people, but that's because I was a walking bag of affectations calling itself a personality. I might as easily have used a typewriter, or given myself a kooky haircut. I called people, and they, in turn, sent smoke signals and sendings and familiars to me. That way, I got to remind them that their small black electronic devices containing the sum of all human knowledge were actually for talking with, and they got to remind me that they didn't care. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

So I was already on my guard when my phone started humming at me. Have you ever received that call that starts with "I'm not sure how to tell you this"?

I don't even know what I was doing when the call came. Smoking at the horizon? Moving dust around my apartment? I mean I knew I was home.

So Hannah, or Anna – I'm joking, I know perfectly well that her name was Aynur –called, with the opening "I'm sorry to have to get back in touch with you in this way," at which point I was already sitting down, blood pumping loud enough to nearly muffle the sound of Aynur telling me that she wasn't sure how to tell me this, but Emily had "passed" the night before, that they'd found her in an alley behind a hotel, five stories beneath the window to room she was staying in, that they didn't know if it was the fall that did it or the drugs in her blood – she neglected to mention what Emily had had in her system, and my jaw was locked, so I neglected to ask. She said that she thought I'd want to know, and I think I managed to prise my teeth apart enough to mutter "thank you" before she hung up.

No, I didn't dive for the gin just then. Hand to god. Alcohol was the last thing I – well, no. Alcohol was the first thing I wanted, but I was aware that if I started drinking just then, I wouldn't stop drinking until either the world ran out of booze or out of me. To have started drinking right then would've been to agree to kill myself, even if it took a week to do it properly.

I don't know why I didn't, exactly. Things weren't looking great for me right then. The weather was a little shitty, rent was due in two weeks – it was a great time to speed up the downward spiral. Maybe it would have been too obvious? Too expected. Girl dies from some kind of

overdose, her ex-girlfriend kills self a week later; I've heard that story before. I've heard someone start that story and sighed with relief knowing that I wouldn't have to pay attention to them for a full minute.

And she'd asked me for help. Emily, I mean. Or, she'd wanted to ask me for help; she'd been lucid enough to get into my head, and talk to me, and talk to me without yelling or sticking anything through my gut or reminding me of the damage and I don't know a soul in the world that can get high and not talk about their hurt. That didn't fit right; that didn't gel with the girl whom I had come to care for.

Whom I had loved, I suppose.

May I just pause here to state what a fucking relief it is that postmodern magicians have destroyed the notion of a truth spell? Not that I have any particular intention of lying to you, you understand – more, I'd be terrified about having to confront the fact that I might be lying to myself about these things. I've been reading some extracts from Ginzburg, about the werewolf trials they had in Italy around the fifteenth century, and there'd be these mostly harmless peasants strapped to a chair, swearing wildly that they were the hounds of god, that every full moon they'd turn into wolves and do battle with hell's agents to ensure the fertility of their crops, or whatever – and in would come the official, ecumenical Magus, and he'd set his stuff up on a nearby table, light those horrible candles – I think they keep a couple in the Vatican archives – and make them go over their entire sworn testimony again, aloud.

And if the candles went out, he'd look up, and smile, and say, "No, sorry, you're not a werewolf, you're just an insane peasant." Except, you know, in medieval Italian.

The poor bastards would be let go, made to do a couple of Hail Marys for being insane, and sent back to their backwater hamlets, their lives suddenly less meaningful.

Which is frightening.

Granted, they had a better time of it than the real werewolves, obviously – I'm just saying it would be upsetting if I found myself talking about loving some girl, and had to watch the candles go out and prove me wrong.

She was big on that, Emily. The death of objective truth and what that meant for magic – now that there was no longer an intrinsic relationship between muttering certain words in High Old Aramaic and causing there to be light, now that there was no more room for Major Arcana, for the Great African Magic, where did that leave the practicing thaumaturge?

‘Thaumaturge.’ Sorry. It’s like calling yourself a scrivener if you write – horrible, pretentious, but not necessarily untrue.

But I’m padding.

Even after resolving not to drink myself to death immediately, I kept my head down low after Aynur’s call – not wanting to face the news cycle as it started its cannibalistic dance, smearing walls and streetlights with headlines like WOMAN CAUGHT BY HEROIN DEATH-TRAP, or STUDENT CLAIMED BY DRUG WAR, or, I think my favourite, FLEDGLING WITCH PLUNGES TO DEATH; not wanting to catch my own reflection in store windows or car doors after months inside living on a diet of nicotine, booze and despair; not wanting to run into people I had once known, who would hurl their sympathy at me at the first available opportunity.

All of which was cowardice, but not imprudent, given the unpleasantness that followed once I finally did leave the house.

What motivated that particular exit was the appearance of a starling on my window-sill. It was fairly early in the morning, the light getting to my apartment was still of that yellow, self-indulgent quality – the kind that you enjoy whether you’re up and out and in the world already, or still stretching off the night before abed, because either way you think everybody else is a sucker. So the starling, usually kind of unsettling between the beady eyes and harsh beak, was honestly kind of a nice thing to look at – its plumage looking like stained glass, the ocean behind it. It wasn’t exactly a Snow White moment, since I was standing there in boxer shorts with a cigarette in one hand and coffee in the other, but it was as close as I got. It seemed like a good way to start things.

Then the bird started screaming at me.

Or not – screaming, exactly. Hissing? It opened its mouth, emitted a series of harsh, syncopated sounds like a microphone suffering from reverb, bashed my window twice with its beak, and

then screamed again. Loudly, impossibly loudly, it seemed, for a bird that size, with a street beneath it gradually beginning to fill up with morning traffic.

The morning light began to become just regular light, its beady eyes becoming beadier still, and the terrible screams remained terrible screams. I didn't have curtains. I really wanted curtains.

I moved to the kitchen to see if I could find a broom, or something; when I got back there were two starlings, both screaming and tapping the window. They were shortly joined by a third; the three birds would scream and strike my window twice, each emitting somewhat different sounds, and hitting the window at slightly different intervals.

Did you see the Hitchcock? It's fine, you don't need to see the Hitchcock. But know that I saw the Hitchcock – and my feeling here was that either these birds were going to pile up indefinitely, break in, and kill me for that one time I tossed a rock at a seagull on the promenade, or else they would carry on doing this for a while and then get bored and fly off. Either way, something interesting would have happened, and I wasn't likely to be able to stop it. So I went back to get my coffee, and waited.

Another bird came, and started screaming too, but that was the last one.

It took maybe a minute for the birds' glass-knocking to synchronise, when they'd all tap my window twice at the same moment; then they'd fall out of sync again, tapping and screaming horribly – I think I heard an upstairs neighbour cursing at them, but maybe she was just kissing her kids awake – and it'd be another minute or so before they lined up again.

When they screamed together, I could make out a voice; not too easily, and I had to squint a little to be sure that it was saying what I thought it was saying, but by the third time around it seemed clear enough:

“What are you going to do?”

Human vocal chords are far, far more complicated than the apparatus given to most starlings.

You need to either modify their throat pouches – difficult, and painful – or use about a half-dozen of them in concert to communicate a sentence articulately; they're dumb, common birds, though, so they're a common vessel for experimental voicework around magic campuses.

Usually they're abandoned by third or fourth year, acknowledged as being less reliable and more

expensive than trying to talk with tin cans and string, but there are still a couple of users in the city – die-hard fans, who acquire whole flocks to do their talking for them, and underachieving magic drop-outs, who never learned how to dominate the will of anything smarter than a gutter bird.

“Alright,” I said to Ollie’s ridiculous, screaming menagerie. They stopped their routine at once, their breasts rising and falling by accelerated heart-rates or rapid breathing, or something – I don’t know how bird chests work.

I scratched my neck.

“I’m going to head to campus today for the memorial, ask around a little, and see what sticks. You can’t come – you need to rest. Because tonight you’re going to help me break into her apartment.”

The birds stared, first at each other, then at me, their little raptor heads bobbing back and forth. I shrugged, and moved to the kitchen where I had some kind of roll pastry thing a drunker version of myself had thought worth purchasing. I cracked open my window, dislodging paint and filth, and lobbed the pastry out; the four starlings took off after it, hung around in the alley where it landed for a couple of minutes and then flew off, presumably in disgust.

It would take Ollie at least an hour to figure out what his reduced choir was trying to communicate to him. This gave me some small satisfaction as I moved off to the pile of clothes I called my wardrobe, and got ready to return to the world.

[5]

I walked to the university. I didn't have to, there were cabs running along that whole route, shuttling folks in and out of the city bowl, and I wasn't so broke that they were beyond my means – but it was a clear morning, and I was on the way to a room full of grieving people, so I wanted to walk in it a little.

And I had a stop to make along the way.

It's not too long, or too bad, a walk, all told. I gather the ebb and flow of gentrification means there's probably been some rearrangement, but at the time the stretch from my place to the city centre was nearly enjoyable; the old stadium to my left, the mountain to my right, hands jammed in coat pockets, cigarette in my mouth, oversized shades to block out the sunlight bouncing off the stream of cars flowing into town beside me – all of this was practically pleasant. Granted, the coat and the shades were also there to make bearable the gauntlet of mangled pleas for alms and catcalls and low-browed stares that walking in that city entailed, but this was, I think, largely taken as a given. It was understood that being out in the world meant allowing myself to be eyed by the gargoyles that perched outside chic cafes, smirked at by youths being driven to school, hailed by beggars who seemed okay with spoiling their chances of guilt-tripping me into losing some change in their direction if they could make unimaginative gestures in mine. This was all fine.

I mean I remember trying to be this philosophical about it at the time.

So; past the shuttered-up church where they keep the golems and that gay bar where you could drink all night because the cops were terrified of coming off homophobic, past the expensive deli and the coffee shop built over the slave burial ground, punctuated by maybe a half-dozen little altercations – the truck driver whistling through a gap in his teeth, the guy in a suit giving me a long stare over his macchiato, me ducking behind a pair of dog-walking moms in tights to try and divert attention, and probably catching myself staring at the dog-walking moms, so where does that put me?

Or something like that – I mean naturally I can't remember exactly how I was made to feel like less than a person on that particular morning, it was years ago, and those are the kinds of memories one tries to suppress. But that is the kind of thing that happened. Happens.

My stop was at an Ethiopian place on Shortmarket that I'd once liked to go to, *Dabtara*. It was enough of a hole-in-the-wall that taking people there bought you instant street credibility, but not such a hole that your clean, new clothes and clear – not to say pale – skin made you stick out. I'd taken Emily there once, when things were starting to unravel. She'd had the wat, I'd had the kitfo; then she said something and I said something, and she left to stay at a friend's apartment. At which point Mammo, the place's jowled owner, shuffled out from the kitchen with a bottle of vodka and two glasses; naturally, he'd heard everything. Not that we'd been shouting, the place was just that small.

Maybe I'd been shouting.

So we'd bonded over vodka and heartache, Mammo having left a wife and two kids back in Addis Ababa, or anyway near there, who had decided they didn't want to come down and live upstairs of a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, and I guess I'd told him about Emily studying magic, probably en route to calling her – well. A rude word. And he told me about the stint he did working for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which I hadn't even known was a thing, exorcising folk and curing livestock and offering inventive explanations for unexpected pregnancies all up and down the countryside –

No. No I suppose he isn't exactly central to the events as they played out. But I knew him, and I liked him. Mammo was chubby, and had glum eyes, and he gave me vodka. Never learned his surname. And he's probably dead now. Not from anything special – not from anything to do with

me. With any luck he just got old and died, without getting any more or less wrapped up in my story. People can do that.

Anyway. Since Mammo had been ordained, however unofficially, however temporarily, by the EOC, he'd figured he could set up a racket on the side selling minor magics to those folk who needed it – nothing too fancy, nothing too expensive, just a bible verse in your pocket and a splash of blood on your head to keep you warm on a cold night, or to take the edge off of a bad withdrawal. There wasn't much research going in that direction, since all of the EOC guys were still deep in their Old Time Religion and didn't want to admit that they had anything to do with magic, which was either pagan or decadent or anyway wasn't holy in the ways they wanted to be, the Modern Magic researchers didn't want anything to do with spiritualism or 'traditional practices' that didn't conform to models of magic they'd already put together, and the department of African Magicks didn't want to play with any traditional spells that had been 'corrupted' by colonial or missionary motives. The upshot being that prayer scrolls and indigenous talismans were largely ignored by the academy, which meant there wasn't much regulation, which meant Mammo could make a decent living on top of the hole-in-the-wall-business.

I knocked, hard, on the hole-in-the-wall's door. A street-sweeper, the only other person on the block, looked up and grinned at me, and said something in Xhosa that I didn't understand – a greeting, a come-on, a polite observation about the weather, I don't know. We looked at each other, puzzled, for a beat, then the guy's gaze slid over to the sigils scratched next to the door where I was standing, and turned away, resuming his work. I knocked again, and the restaurant's door opened, but not by much.

Mammo stared down at me; he looked exhausted, but maybe that's just how his face went. What little I could see of the room was dark behind him.

"What do you want, Canada?" he asked, deep and nasal. I gather I'd told him I was from Montreal, without really thinking about it.

"Morning," I said, and lit a cigarette; I held the pack out in his direction which he accepted, squeezing around the half-closed door and into the light. He looked around, blinking and tugging at his worn cotton apron, my lighter dwarfed in his hands. He sat down on his restaurant's front step, bringing us nearly eye to eye, and handed me my cigarettes, minus one.

“What you want?” he asked, bleeding smoke.

“I need to hide my face for a couple of hours,” I said. “Nothing too strong – just so that nobody who sees me today can be entirely sure that they saw me. Do you know what I mean?”

Forehead creased and eyes on the paving before him, Mammo nodded, inhaling thickly.

“If they’re just seeing, they won’t see – but if they’re looking? You want to stop that too?”

“Out of my price range,” I said.

He nodded again, and stood up, turned towards the door. “Okay. Wait here.”

“Hold up,” I said. “How much?”

This split his face open like a Rorschach; what I had yet to learn at this time was that the way you haggle with Mammo was he says a high price, and you say a low price, and he says the same high price, and you say a slightly less low price, until eventually you’re saying the price that Mammo first offered, which he condescends to accept.

I ended up agreeing to – well. It was a lot of money for the kind of person who relied upon government grants to keep her in her cups.

He went back inside, and I stood on the curb trying to look bored and interesting while people with jobs and lives walked past; after a couple of minutes Mammo returned, and I pulled out a moneyclip and counted out enough notes to make me feel sick, and handed them over, watched them vanish in the folds of his apron; he handed me a small square of paper, Bible-thin, folded three or four times.

“Put that in your pocket,” he said. I did. “Six, maybe seven hours. Burn it when you’re done.”

“Okay,” I said, and now he was reaching into his apron again, pulling out a small, opaque jar.

He nodded his head to one side, gesturing at his cheek; I leaned my head forward, and Mammo reached out and dabbed at my face with his thumb, smearing it with something cold and slick. Immediately there was the dulled underwater sensation that comes with masking spells – the slightly giddy disorientation that comes of not being entirely yourself anymore. It’s a hard thing to balance out right: mask someone too well and they practically forget who they are, unrecognizable even to themselves – but try and be too subtle about it, and they end up attracting more attention than they normally would’ve, for looking terribly familiar but difficult to place.

God alone knows how many people they lost trying for absolute invisibility, that holiest of holies, back in the Cold War.

This was all running through my mind that morning as I stood, neither looking nor feeling quite myself outside some hole-in-the-wall in the city centre. Mammo brought me back to where I was:

“Canada. You patch things up with the girl?” he asked.

I don’t think he knew, and I didn’t feel like telling him just then, so I grinned, or showed my teeth, and said, “I’m working on it.”

And then I was off and faceless in the awakening city.

[6]

Up and through the gardens, along the road where they sell the tourists peanuts to attract pigeons, and squirrels mutter to themselves as they tend to their errands, and bums rest shattered on benches either side of you, and statues of dead white men shift slightly every time you look away, while before you the mountain does whatever it is that mountains do. Looms, I guess.

It was a good kind of day; clear, almost warm, a handful of couples sitting on the lawns, a couple of buskers – not many, though. Whatever noise-reducing spells the Dutch had laid down umpteen years ago still worked for the most part; nobody knew exactly how, or why, but sound just doesn't really travel, there in the old Company's Gardens. And the place feels like a greenhouse, even when your thermometer and your shivering muscles tell you that it's cold, your brain says otherwise; a lot of folk end up dead there, in the winter. About a dozen PhDs had been written on the topic at the time, and I imagine there are more now. More dead folk, too.

So, feeling clammy and hungover for no good reason, I came up to the big stone lionesses that perched alongside the campus gates; way, way back in the day they'd used to ask incoming students riddles to get that Grecian academy feel, but when one drunk undergraduate too many got himself eaten, the powers-that-were had to pour some time and money into turning them back into regular statues. I didn't mind too much; they were nice statues.

Even so, I mouthed "Rumplestilskin" when I passed them.

At the time, campus security was lax enough that the light face-blurring spell I was carrying wouldn't set anything off – they had various wards and things built in, but the threshold was pretty high; they had to be, otherwise every undergraduate rapidly trying to prepare for a practical they hadn't studied for would have the alarms going off. I nodded at the security guard perched on a chair next to the lions, who ignored me, and walked in.

You learn how to do the nod pretty quickly – the one that doesn't so much acknowledge people as imply that you're consenting to their presence there, like they're an idea you don't necessarily disagree with. The old money nod. Learn how to do a thing like that, and people are unlikely to question your right to be anywhere.

I entered into the large forecourt where those students and lecturers who could afford cars put cars; it was about half-full. You know how that goes - magicians, like the actors and artists, tend to be poor, so the people who want to become magicians, and actors, and artists, tend to come from families where they don't really know what poor is. A row of beat-up old machines in colours that don't get sold anymore, interspersed by a few newer, shinier things with bumper stickers and dented doors.

To my right was the little theatre that the acting students used to blackmail friends into going to, until the ceiling collapsed, to my left was the thing they called the Egyptian Building for reasons I could never really figure out, and ahead of me was the big hall with the high ceiling and the windows looking out over the parking lot; normally I felt exposed in front of windows like that, watched through glass with a history that I didn't especially like. But that day the windows were open, and I could pick up the muted echo of speeches being made. They'd started with the memorial.

Well, obviously you've been to funerals. I'm sorry, maybe that's a little indelicate – but I mean you know how it generally goes. Friends and family throw a body in the ground, or in a kiln, say a couple of words, maybe pray some, maybe cry some, grab a drink at somebody's house, promise to see each other again soon, then drive home exclaiming over how fat everybody got. Or maybe that's just how it goes for me.

In any event: this wasn't like that.

Big hall, like I said – a stage up against those oppressive, open windows, and a woman in a suit on that stage making a backdrop of the gardens and the mountain behind those, and the sky behind that. Seated before her were tight-packed rows of – what, spectators? Mourners? People, anyway. And behind those were the people who couldn't find chairs but wanted to be there anyway, shuffling a little when their feet got tired, but mostly keeping still. A couple of convulsions that looked like people sneezing before I saw the tears.

I sidled in towards the back, near the windows, where there was a view of the stage, and enough people to keep my obscured face from snagging anybody's attention; in a crowd, everybody's face is half-blurred anyway. A tall, teary kid next to me blew his nose on a handkerchief, and folded the thing back into his pocket. Nobody seemed to mind.

About two hundred people were there for the public mourning bit - not all of them in black, so maybe they'd just heard there was a reason to skip class. I wasn't wearing black either, mind. Not on the outside, I mean.

The woman on stage I recognized as – somebody. Head of the faculty, performer turned administrator, strong jaw-line, faint freckles shining through smooth mahogany skin, dark hair close-cropped but showing signs of grey along the sides, apparently pulled in the kind of salary that got you tailored suits. She was reading a list, the same list they trot out every time this kind of thing happens, though this was the first time I'd heard it; the names of every aspirant actor or painter or sorcerer or playwright or sculptor who'd gone to that school and ended up as so much unrealized potential buried in a pinewood box. Some of the names I recognized – either because I'd heard about their work, or, more often, I'd heard about their not working anymore – but most of them were unfamiliar to me. It was a long list, and beyond the occasional sob floating up to echo dully against the ceiling, they let her get through the thing without interruption. When the woman – who, I now know, was named Maya Reddy, was forty-seven and would go on to a decent political career – got to Emily's name, the only reason I noticed was because her voice shook a little. It sounded out of place to me, having Emily's name in that list full of strangers, in that room full of people who were unlikely to recognize me, even without the obscuring spell; like she was part of some story that had nothing to do with mine.

Which, I don't know. Maybe that's how it could've played out, if it hadn't been for guilt, or anger, or something.

Reddy walked off the stage, the room loud with the noise of people reminding themselves not to applaud, to be replaced by a brace of Emily's fellow magicians – the guy from the night we met at the studio, Damien, Aynur, a chubby blonde kid named Steph who looked mournful even on good days, and Miriam, who'd been her roommate for a while.

There followed the speeches, and the tears, and – because this was a school full of people who made things, or wanted to make things – the poems, the interpretive dance, the sad boys with their acoustic guitars, the magical light shows, the video clips. I don't know how I felt about that; I assume I was angry because I felt like they were taking some girl's death and making it an

opportunity to perform, to be seen, but maybe I was feeling kinder than that, and I thought they were just mourning in the only way they knew how.

And then again, these were people who had put in hours of work, years of money, into developing a set of skills that maybe one in a hundred would ever be able to make a living out of; the rest would have to put other people's drinks on bars and other people's plates on tables, and maybe teach their hopeless foreign craft to another batch of naïve would-be-magicians in between the crises and climaxes of being a person, conscious of the fact that they could be training the one-in-a-hundred that they were slowly coming around to realizing didn't mean them. And after a while of that, most of them would switch to a career where the family dime would be of more use – those who didn't have a family dime would go silent, and be asked after at parties in bewildered tones – or marry, or both, and they'd have handsome children with the best magic instructors money could buy, so that when the well-heeled offspring aced their first sorcery exams in prep school they could warm themselves with the thought that, after all, the gift was clearly in the blood. Some of those kids would end up at schools like these, so the great wheel could keep turning. Their parents, now in their autumn years, would look back on the two or three times in their lives when they really got to let loose and *cast a spell, you know?*, and so of course the funeral was a big day for them. They needed all the fond memories they could get.

I don't know. Either way, the service got great reviews.

After the penultimate act – a prose poem with some kids doing back-up harmonics – four figures shuffled onstage in some kind of group hug, two men in the black suits and black ties, two women in dark dresses and veils, plain-looking enough to make all the other mourners look gauche in their choice of colours. I stared at the four for a moment, trying to figure out if they were actors or singers, and then I recognized a shade of green in the older woman's eyes and a hardness in the younger man's jawline that made me jerk upright, catching some irritated mutters from the people behind me before their attention slid away again.

When I'd asked Emily about her family – at a bar, where else – she'd smiled into her wine, brushed her hair out of her face, and said: “They don't like that I'm here, they don't like that I'm studying magic, and they don't like that I'm gay. I don't talk to them, and I don't talk about them, are you sure you want to order another round?”

So they didn't come up much after that. Maybe because the excommunicated runaway song felt like it had been played out, maybe because I didn't have room for anybody's sob story that wasn't my own, maybe because I respected her desire to keep my nose out of it. Your pick. But still – she had photos of her younger brother and sister, and conversations about home came up here and there, before she'd go quiet and change the topic.

And this was the topic she veered away from hardest: Old Man Hardwick.

A tall guy, standing a good head above his wife and daughter, slender, close-cropped hair, tanned in that way that most people have to pay a lot of money for, jaw line and cheekbones standing out like rocks in the sea and eyes so blue and pretty you'd think they got the assembly instructions wrong. He had his hands on the shoulder of his kids, his almost-as-tall son looking like an ox in a pantsuit and his daughter thin, red-headed and sharp-angled.

Emily's sister's – Laura? Lauren? – face was set. Not exactly mourning, but clearly not having the best of all possible days.

Which I mention because her parents and surviving sibling were smiling. Grinning, practically.

Old Man Hardwick – Jonas – leaned down a little to get his face near the microphone, and started his spiel:

“We would like to begin by thanking you all for your beautiful offerings here. In Emily's memory. It has been truly a blessing to see the talent and the effort that was available to her while she was here. It has been a kindness. Thank you.”

A pause here while he, then his family, then the entire hall break into a brief, confused round of applause. Hardwick's eyes twinkled, and if I were of a more cynical frame of mind it would be because he'd tricked a room full of people into self-congratulatory applause at his daughter's funeral within ten seconds of taking the stage.

He had a good voice; sturdy, deep. A vaguely European – German? – inflection, but not enough to lose any vowels over.

“I think – anything that can be said about Emily's time here, and her effect here, has already been said. But I would like to take a moment to consider what's happening to Emily right now.”

A glance over in his wife's direction. Madeline, I think.

“For a long time we'd been afraid that our baby daughter was lost to us – taken away by poor choices, distancing herself from the true ways. She had gone astray, and those of us on the path of the righteous were afraid that she was out of reach, beyond our help – but through her own desire for purity, or divine intercession, or just luck, our daughter has rid herself of her soiled earthly frame, and rejoined with the great, cosmic conflagration, to be reborn in fire and resume again the journey towards enlightenment.”

He grinned, his knuckles tight on his children's unprotesting shoulders, and it's a testament to the man's charisma that nobody made a sound then, nobody made eye-contact with anybody else.

“Our Emily is being born into a new body as we stand here; she's been given another chance, to inspire this kind of beauty in a purer environment, and we could not be more grateful. Thank you so much.”

He grinned again, looked at his family, bowed to the audience, and walked off, his wife and kids trailing behind.

Maya Reddy hopped onstage to remind us to applaud the apparently mourning family, which we did, some of us with the slightly hesitant timing of a person realizing that they're applauding madness.

I think about this every now and then – about why it was that Emily never mentioned that her family came from a reincarnation cult, why she'd taken active steps to keep that kind of insight into her background from me. Because, sure, it's a difficult thing to unload, a difficult thing to ask somebody else to carry, but we'd lived together, we'd spent time playing you-show-me-yours-I'll-show-you-mine with our various cruelties and softnesses and rough edges. Why not this? Initially I'd thought it was a betrayal, on her part – that she was keeping parts of herself closed off, in spite of promises to the contrary, and that this, and maybe explained the way I closed myself off from her later, with the drinking and the silence and the absence. But that was because I would've done anything to excuse myself there. Now I think of Em's silence as a kinder, if more damning thing. I think she decided that I'd run off if I found out about the world

she'd come from, and that she didn't want that to happen, so she kept thing hushed up – choosing a relationship where there was some withholding over no relationship at all. I can't be sure she was wrong to do that.

Not that it matters. Easy enough to concede an argument to a dead girl.

For a last act – because it was still in part an act – they had the drama students do a choral performance, a slow funereal dirge that sped up into some kind of gospel medley as they led a procession out of the hall, a couple of magic kids throwing up phantasmic birds and flashes of light every few beats.

We started walking out. The sad handkerchief carrier caught my eye before I could put it somewhere else, and, falling into step beside me, asked, “Did you know her?”

“A little,” I said, trusting my voice to be unremarkable.

He snuffled. “We took an English seminar together.”

“Do you know how it happened?” “Bad choices,” he said, his eyes far away – and then suddenly very near. “You look familiar. Did we – where are you from?”

“Stockholm,” I said, and stepped past some teary lecturers and away from him.

There was a photo of Emily by the door – I'd missed it coming in, and I wished I'd missed it going out. Some professional shot, her leaning against a balcony, laughing, city lights blurred behind her and to her right. She looked happy. She looked like a memory, already. Whoever had taken the thing had opted for a black and white print, so I had to fill in the green eyes myself; I found that I couldn't exactly. Maybe that was for the best – letting the room full of hurt people grieve together, in one big push, so that they could get it out of the way and start the healing, or the forgetting. Part of me would've liked that, even as it would've felt like a betrayal.

Up ahead, Emily's father seemed to be joining in with the magic procession – throwing up great big gusts of fire above and before him in huge arcs, the shapes of birds and snakes just fleetingly visible in the white-hot glow before they burned themselves into the retina and ghosted into indistinct greens.

Given the way folks flinched away from Emily's family, the flames were real, and military-grade; normally there'd be a disapproving security guard swooping in on this, but hey, you get a free pass when your daughter dies, right?

Even if you don't seem too unhappy about it.

I saw Aynur a couple of feet away – Aynur who, if she didn't exactly look like she was keeping it together, was still doing a better job of it than her immediate company. Wincing a little at having to stride quickly through the procession, I sidled up alongside her.

“Hi,” I said, voice low, using the dirge as cover.

She looked up, quickly; confusion shifted into annoyance once her gaze pierced through the cheap blurring spell I was wearing, and then settled into sympathy. It took three slow steps of the procession before she settled on an approach.

“I'm glad you came,” she said, which was an olive branch of sorts, so I grabbed it quick before she beat me over the head with it.

“Thanks for calling me. That must've been hard.”

Two steps.

“It's been a hard few days. For everyone.”

She was good; she was too good to let a minor thing like broad-spectrum disgust let her be petty at a funeral. I looked at her, in her taken-in-at-the-hips cotton dress, and sensible shoes, and tightly-coiled dark hair, and wondered what that was like. Being good, I mean.

“Who was she buying from?”

Two steps.

Two steps.

Two steps.

“I don't know what you mean.”

“Don't bullshit, I want to know where she was getting dope from.”

Two steps.

“The booze isn't cutting it anymore, Sam?”

Two steps.

“Well, if it was good enough for her...”

Aynur snapped her dark, dark eyes in my direction, then snapped towards the back of the boy in

front of us, looking unsurprising in tweed. She shook her head. “You’re fucking unbelievable.”  
“Sometimes I have a hard time swallowing it too. Just give me a name.”

“And wearing that thing at her fucking funeral.”

Her voice caught a little there, and I realized that I’d torn something more than I’d be able to patch up later, but it was a realization that I’d become accustomed to.

“Tell me who it was, and this thing and I will leave her fucking funeral to you and your good tastes.”

Two steps.

“You know Krishna’s?”

“Not biblically.”

“There’s a mirror in the bathroom – you order it there. Ask for Terrence. I’d tell you that you shouldn’t mess with him, but right now I’d rather like you to try and mess with him.”

“You’re a prince,” I said.

She said some very rude words, and I quit the line of mourners, heading back to the building we’d left; one or two pairs of eyes flickered towards me and my exit, but they were like the drifting gaze of bored commuters, soon refocused on new frames of scenery. Behind me, the movement of the walkers continued, and the sound of fire, the smell of ionized air.

The crowd would pool together at the parking lot, where they would release balloons and sing and cry and then come back to the hall for coffee, biscuits, and a return to normalcy. They looked like nice enough kids, rude words and insanity notwithstanding. I was glad that they were there; I was glad that there were enough faces around that seemed to care about this dead person I hadn’t known as well as I should have.

But there was a face I hadn’t seen in the crowd, or on the stage – a face I’d wanted to see the way you want to see a shark in the water; so you’d know where it was. And since it wasn’t there, I ducked back into the main hall to take another look at the photo that didn’t quite look like the girl I dreamed of every night, and then I went upstairs, to the office of the man who’d taught Emily how to build herself a house in my head.

[7]

‘The Irma Stern Gallery’ is what they call a smallish house in the middle of Rosebank, perched on the base of the mountain separating it from the art and magic campus. Which is, in its way, a little unfortunate. Stern was one of those painter-magicians of the Blake tradition, when you could be good at more than one thing in the same lifetime, and probably the majority of her magics and portraits were on display there, hidden between a football field and the southern suburbs’ main road.

In all likelihood, the place was hidden for a reason – Stern’s stuff was good, but it wasn’t nice: a lot of skinny naked Eves with contemporary ideas about body hair, Salomes with abundantly Jewish heads on platters, thick-lipped black men and woman in leaves hanging out in the background. She was German and working in the middle of the twentieth century – her work probably wasn’t the worst thing going at the time, but it reminded people of the other bad stuff that was going on then, and nobody liked that.

The magic had its own problems: the big yellow studio with windows that always looked out into the garden in high summer light, no matter what the weather was actually like, was remarkable, but sometimes shadows lingered at the edges that worried the eye. If you opened the windows, what you saw was just the garden as it was – some municipally funded art installation, crabgrass – but the glass kept showing something else. Most of the wooden carvings in the house had been animated to run through a series of gestures, and one or two would follow your movement around the room – which was politically a little tricky, since most of these had been carved by indigenous tribes. We don’t know which tribes, because Stern didn’t seem to discriminate when she collected the stuff, and archiving the acquisitions of a lesser-known German sorceress is understandably low on the post-liberation to-do list – but still. The little paste-board write-ups next to the carvings, which had probably been put there in the seventies, talked about the pieces as if they were found objects that Stern had turned into art by working a little Kabbalist animation spell into them, regarding whatever existing magics the carvings might possess – insect repellent, fertility, protection from enchantment – as the quaint superstitions of a less developed people (and I quote,) if they regarded them at all. Between the grim and grimly familiar politics and the stuffy ventilation and being off the beaten path, people didn’t visit it much. It was unsettling, and unsubtle – but still. Stern had died half a century before and her magics were still running. There was something there.

I'd left the main hall with the rest of Emily's mourners, but zigged where they zagged, heading up a flight of stairs instead of down; nobody had called after me. There were two doors on the landing, one marked as a restroom, the other as a supplies closet. I'd opened the door to the latter, stepped inside, and arrived in the back office of the Irma Stern Gallery, maybe five kilometres away.

It was a small room, as the rooms in that place went, but it still had the high ceiling, the light coming in from sources that weren't there. The walls were covered with art – mostly portraits of surly kids, their faces daubed with greens and reds that could've been makeup, and could've been bruises. On either side of the room were clawed glass cabinets stuffed with books, and before me a desk stacked high with various official-looking and unopened documents, a small armada of coffee cups – and behind these, a man sat working his jaw and writing at something. “Hello, Patrick,” I said.

Nobody likes the Narnia thing. It's unbelievably expensive, it's inconsistent, it makes time flow funny and it's easy to hijack. If you want to get from point A to point Z while skipping some of the intermediate steps, better to use mirrors, or stone circles, or a no-nonsense twinned portal, my chalk circle to yours. Best of all use a car.

But, tasteless and unreliable as it is, the Narnia gateway is sexier than all of the above. Which is why Patrick Hoffmann had one leading to his office.

“Love what you've done with the place,” I added.

Watery blue eyes looked up at me over half-moon glasses, and then rapidly away. Patrick grimaced, or maybe that's just how his face went. “Would you close the door behind you, please? We've been having leakage problems.” His voice was hoarse to start with, but slid into something smoother once he got going – the rolling cadence of someone who was used to lecturing, whether he had a willing audience or not.

I kicked the door with my heel, and was gratified to hear it click shut.

“Thank you,” said Patrick. “And hello. Would you like a seat?”

“I'm fine,” I said, less because of any particular distaste than because the two sagging chairs before his desk were covered in dust and papers.

He nodded, and put the sheets before him aside, making no discernible difference to the chaos of

his desk. He was a short, slightly pear-shaped man, skin cracked and wrinkled by some mixture of alcohol, sun, magic and time – in which order, I’m not sure. His short, curly hair, and short, curly beard did what they could to hide the damage, but there were limits.

“You’ll have come from the memorial, then,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

He scratched at the side of his ear. “I don’t mean to be indelicate, but could I ask you to take off the glamour you’re wearing?”

“Oh,” I said, “right,” and began working at the patch of blood on my face.

“No offense, it’s just quite rough magic, which’ll play hell with the exhibit we’ve got upstairs.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said, “I just didn’t want to get made on the way here.” The blood came off, and with it, the glamour – I was surprised, again, at the sudden clarity of my senses. The smell of the place, the temperature, the light, the vanilla smell of old books had all been things I was aware of, but distantly, like a friend had told me about them once – with the glamour removed, I got to know them firsthand. It was like coming up from underwater – which, it suddenly struck me, was a damned vulnerable place to be in. I took a step back, zooming back into the situation at hand in a hurry, but Patrick didn’t seem to have moved, just sat on his high-backed chair, watching me.

“It’s been too long, Samantha,” he said.

I said nothing, just watched him back – then looked beyond him, at the wide, tall canvas behind his desk, one of Stern’s bigger works. Undulating blue-green hills spread across it, punctuated by old, collapsed stone buildings too dilapidated to guess at their original purpose; a path was moving between them, a little overgrown but still discernible, and a figure walked along it in simple asexual dress, holding a stick, or sword. Behind everything, mist, and the jutting silhouette of what could be a mountain, could be a face. Maybe both. *Dreamscape XVII* was scribbled on a card pasted beneath it.

“Care to smoke?” said Patrick.

“It’s not gonna hurt your pictures?”

“No, it’s fine,” he said, leaning back in his chair to get at one of his drawers; “we’ve got preservation charms working on all of these, on top of whatever she did to them.” He pulled out a fat, brightly-coloured carton and tossed it across the desk.

“Um,” I said.

“Try them, they’re Indonesian – nothing idiotic, they just have cloves, and they’re a little thicker than regular smokes.”

I picked up the box; within the curlicued frame and beneath what I took to be the brand label was a green-faced, red-lipped lion, with a cigar in its mouth. What the hell, I thought. “What the hell,” I said.

I took one of Patrick’s smokes and lit it before tossing the carton back to him.

He lit up too.

“Well now,” he said. “You’ve told me where you’ve come from, you’ve taken off your little glamour, and you’ve accepted a gift – so if you’re trying to Hero’s Quest this thing, you’re off to a poor start.”

“You’re shooting a little high there,” I said, “try it again.”

He shifted in his chair, and we both ignored the sound of his weight on the leather surface.

“Well. You’re here to see about avenging your lady love, right?” He was sweating.

I drew on the cigarette, and said nothing. It was a little sweet.

“So, one imagines that this is the story of the grieving lover, visiting her dead paramour’s mentor, teacher, the one who set her on the arcane path – because even if he’s not precisely the agent of her destruction, or self-destruction, he is the vector by which she reached it. This big, bearded fellow had over the dead girl a power that her lover could not help but resent, and mistrust. And how right she was to mistrust it. So she goes into that monster’s cave, equipped with her cloak of invisibility, and she’s supposed to do the thing that people do to monsters. She’s not meant to tell him where she’s coming from, she’s not meant to smoke his cigarettes, she’s just supposed to avenge.”

Patrick’s cigarette had acquired about an inch of ash; he tapped at it convulsively, and let the grey dust settle on his desk.

I sighed, and sat down on the arm of one of the sagging plaid chairs.

“Any particular reason you’re the monster in this situation, Patrick?”

He smiled, and didn’t meet my eye. “Who else?”

I smiled too. “Of course. God forbid that Emily ever do something without it being, ultimately, because of you.”

Patrick shrugged. “Clearly you blame someone – or why else would you be here?”

I sat back, and smoked. “Can we go outside?” I said.

He sighed, spun a little half-circle in his chair, and said: “Fine.” He rose with a grunt. “It isn’t much of a cave, anyway.” I stood too, and let him lead out of the smoky office, past the shifting paintings of naked women and carefully dressed men, and out to the small, unremarkable back garden where Stern’s magic seemed to have dried up. Weeds sprang out against the security fence, and I was for the first time aware of the sounds of heavy vehicles trundling by, folk calling for cabs and cabs calling for folk, or each other, or just calling. Patrick, who spent most of his time in the museum and its hermetic layers of insulation, flinched at this, but said nothing. The light was thinner outside, too. We stood and smoked.

I waited for the sound of a truck to fade before I asked, “So why weren’t you at the service?”

He scratched at his face. “Part-time staff don’t have to attend official university functions. We’re not trying for tenure.” He blew a smoke ring, scowled, and wrecked it with his hand.

“Alright,” I said. “Why weren’t you at the memorial service for the only student you’ve had this year?”

“It’s my turn first,” he said. “Did you ever know her to take drugs?”

I shrugged, and looked at the end of my cigarette while I cast back over memories I’d been avoiding. “She drank. Smoked a little pot, but it made her feel stupid. Some of her friends were into hallucinogens, but she could get the same returns with dreams with less damage. Nothing else while we were together.”

Patrick nodded. “She wasn’t a junky.”

“You’d know,” I said.

“Yes.”

I put my smoke out on the heel of my boot so I wouldn’t have to look him in the face. While I did that, he continued; “to answer your question: I didn’t go to the service for much the same reason you went wearing a mask – I didn’t want to get folded into some kind of public act of mourning. The bright, promising young woman that they’re currently busy toasting across the city is not the student I taught, or the girl you loved. Not exactly. I understand that not being there must look bad, but ...” he shrugged. “I’ve looked far worse, far more often. What are you here for?”

“Guilt,” I said, “and anger. Like most people. Do you know why she died?”

“No,” he said. “If you find out someone was responsible, are you going to do anything about it?”  
“I don’t know,” I said.

I know this must sound naïve, now – nobody plays the question game anymore, not really. There’s no way to be certain of honesty, or to ensure reciprocity – easy to cheat, easy to get cheated by. But at the time there was a kind of ritual to it, and people took it seriously. Lying didn’t come up as an option.

We stood outside for a minute or two longer, our ears buzzing a little, and then Patrick turned back towards the house.

“Drink?” he called over his shoulder.

“I’m off the sauce for a little while,” I said, following him inside into a small kitchen, off to one side of the hallway that connected office, studio and entrance hall.

“Well, I’m off the sauce for the rest of my days – or else I risk dramatically reducing the amount of days I have, so we’re in similar boats there. Tea?”

I said sure.

We sat on either side of a low, oppressively modern kitchen counter, and watched steam rise from delicate porcelain cups that I’m fairly sure had been Stern’s. It was the least charming room in the house: linoleum floor, tiny fridge with a tiny kettle on top of it, all visible by light coming in through the window that accurately indicated the weather outside. And the air smelled like other people’s cooking.

“How’s business going?” I asked, because what the hell else do you ask of a curator at a suburban gallery? Other than what crimes they had committed, to end up where they were.

“Oh, the same as it ever was,” he said, rotating his cup on its saucer; “less visitors than we need to turn a profit, but still, more visitors than I want.” He quirked his mouth a little, and flashed his eyes up at me.

The nausea came from two directions at once – disgust, and grief. The grief was the more nebulous, and the more easily suppressed. I knew, in that moment, that where I sat, Emily had sat, probably not more than a week before, discussing whatever oneiromantic projects she’d been working on. I’d been to the Stern museum with her exactly once, and I’d waited outside, but still – the awareness of the fact that I was sitting in a void that she’d left nearly wrecked me just then.

I swallowed a mouthful of near-scalding tea; it helped keep the thing down. I wasn't ready to mourn her just then – and I wouldn't mourn her there.

The disgust, on the other hand, I was happy to let loose – because of course, not only had Emily sat where I was, but Patrick had sat where he was, leaning over the table to look at her the way he was looking at me now.

The man was flirting.

“Christ,” I said, and pulled my coat more tightly around myself.

“What?” said Patrick, setting down his cup delicately. They looked expensive – bone-coloured things, with simple blue patterns running along them – but among my many pretensions, learning how to judge china never really came up. I put mine down like I'd just emptied it of bourbon so I could see him flinch.

“How the hell did you end up here?” I asked. “I know Stern did dream stuff, and Emily had her own reasons for wanting to take that further, but what's your justification? Curating a room full of aggressively imperialist art, without even a gesture towards social utility, or an apology. Do you even let school groups in here?”

He frowned at me, leaned back a little to adjust to my interrupting whatever strange ritual of mourning he'd been trying to involve me in.

“Where did you say you studied again?” he asked. “Emily must've told me, but...”

“Quebec,” I said.

“Ah, of course,” he said, which offered me some small relief. “Then you'll know that magic, probably more than any other creative art, took a huge knock when the linguistic turn happened.” I nodded, because that was expected of me.

“Those heady times some thirty years ago when that horrific contingent of – excuse me – French scholars had gotten together and, following Wittgenstein, shown that language was arbitrary; that there was no inherent link between this cup,” he said, pointing, “and the *word* cup, either on a page, or in my mouth.” He took a sip, and began speaking again before he'd done swallowing. “Which was fine for the poets, who were already insignificant, and for the novelists, who were more concerned with money than with meaning, and for the visual artists, who didn't care what language was so long as they could still put on exhibitions. And they could. But the magicians! Ah, the magicians. Those who practiced the art, not only of representing the world, but of re-

writing it – those who knew the true names of things, and had power over them for that reason – what were they supposed to do, now that they knew the true names were just arbitrary symbols?” He had to stop for breath, so I jumped in – just to let him know that I was still in the room – “magic still works, though. It’s not like it went away because of Saussure.”

Patrick nodded his head side to side in a way that had probably looked thoughtful when he was a younger man, with less to his neck.

“Yes, and no. The signs and words that summon light still summon light –“ and at this he ran through three short gestures and said a word in deeply accented Aramaic; I knew this trick, so had time to duck my head away and close my eyes – even so, my retinas went pink for a second while deep white light filled the room, blaring from Patrick’s upturned palm. I came up blinking; the room looked moonish and pockmarked in the suddenly grim afternoon light.

Patrick sat there, apparently unperturbed. “But they summon light in quantities that no-one can control. I used that spell when I was on my gap year and wanted to see to put up my tent; now it’s nearly military-grade. Other spells have grown weaker. That doesn’t make any sense to me. Why should magic change? Not our understanding of it, but the thing *itself*.”

He looked at me then, his expression no more or less manic than I had come to expect of an unhappy, middle-aged magician, the motion of his hands still leaving ghost impressions on my vision, and it occurred to me that the question wasn’t entirely rhetorical.

I shrugged. “Don’t you read the papers? Magic’s always in crisis. Same as the economy, the novel, and human rights. It’s one of those punches you’re meant to learn how to roll with.” I sipped my tea, and waited. Patrick was a bore, but he was also a well-spring of information, if he didn’t know you were pumping him. Which is a metaphor he’d have particularly enjoyed.

“You’ve got a bad analogy,” he said. “The economy is driven by ongoing expansion; novels need crises to work, and human rights... That isn’t quite my area of interest. But they’re all dynamic, in flux by their very nature – and magic was our one stable resource, the one true thing in a changing world. And now... presto chango, as the lady said.” He paused. “But the lady said something else, too: that magic is the art of representing the world to itself in a way that it can’t ignore. Actually, she called it, ‘*on parle au monde dans le temps impératif*,’ but if De Beauvoir

had said it in English she'd have said it my way. And that's getting close to Wittgenstein again, because after he'd proven to the world that language was arbitrary and that we were trapped in our own skulls, without direct access to reality for the rest of our existence – he changed his mind.”

“Risky,” I said. “They were bad about tenure, even then.” But Patrick had gotten onto his hermetic line of thought by this point, and so ignored me; that way I didn't feel too bad about lighting a cigarette in his dingy kitchen.

“He wrote his *Philosophical Investigations*; and he proved that language was still arbitrary, and we still didn't have access to the real world through it, but we had access to each other – that indeed, language only existed if there were two more intelligences between which it could operate. So we were all still horribly alone in the world, but at least we were alone together.” He looked at me, or the space I seemed to occupy for him, and delivered the lecturer's grin. “Which means that if magic is a language, and it's being spoken by the magician or sorcerer or whatever – it has to be spoken to someone. But to whom?”

I didn't have any training in philosophy. Christ, no, that makes it sound like some kind of boot camp where people might actually have gotten something done: I mean, I never studied philosophy. Enough of it trickled through in the course of my extended undergraduate career that I could bullshit well enough in coffee houses and grant applications, but having genuine conversations about it bored or distressed me. So I didn't really know, or care, where Patrick was going. I was hoping for some nugget about Emily, but the goose was looking sort of stopped up, just now.

The goose was also staring at me silently, because I'd failed to make any response to his leading question; I knew how to field these, again thanks to the collegial etcetera, but I was tired and Patrick's chairs were of that unbearable wicker variety, so instead I stood up, and said, “I hadn't taken you for the religious type.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Patrick, which, in hindsight, was as close to a reconciliation as we were ever to come.

“You're setting up magic as some kind of prayer, right? God, or something, being the intellect that magic is spoken to?”

“Oh,” he said, and then “no,” and tried laughing, but he wasn’t used to making that kind of sound and had to stop. “Not god – not really. Stern thought she was tapping into the collective unconscious, you see? Like a – a shared dream space, which she could enter into, and depict. Some of her letters suggested that she drew her talent, or inspiration – and this for the paintings and the magics – from that collective unconscious. I had thought that perhaps that’s where the language of magic was being addressed to – the zeitgeist, the communal dreamscape. I wrote my PhD in the mid-nineties, when the powers-that-were on campus were asking us to accept the arbitrary nature of magic and at the same time promote the intrinsic value of African magic in particular as a site of struggle and colonial resistance. I didn’t have the mind to do that, so I wrote the thing on Stern and Dream Magic, and that got me a job teaching half the year, and pretending to do research here the other half. I didn’t really believe it, but I liked it, and some of my students bought into it quite seriously.”

I nodded. “Emily?”

“Emily for instance, yes.” He looked at me. “Didn’t she tell you this?”

I shrugged. “We didn’t really talk about her work.”

“What did you talk about? I’ve wondered.”

I smiled nastily, by which I mean to say, I smiled. “Me, mostly. It was all we seemed to have in common.” I knocked back the last of my tea, and looked at my bare wrist. “I should get going, there’re errands yet to run.”

Patrick nodded slowly. “No problem – we’ll just need to set up a scrying pool to make sure the coast is clear back whence you came.” He led me out in the hall, and we were wrapped, again, in the comforting warmth of an afternoon from many years ago.

“It’s fine,” I said, “I’m meeting a friend for drinks on this side of the world. I’ll get a cab back to mine later.”

“Will you?” he asked, the raised eyebrow already implied in his voice. He looked me over, again, in a way that I could not help but feel soiled by. It took me a second, before I could respond. “Well, you know. Have to get back on the horse some time.” I slapped him on the shoulder with someone else’s grin on my face and strode past him to the front door.

There was stuff for sale there, amongst the neglected visitor’s guest log and the home-printed posters for other, even smaller galleries and studios; monographs, tacky calendars, post-cards

and coasters lay in indifferent assortment. I stared at a poster of a boy on a tyre-swing without really seeing it while I waited for Patrick to catch up with the keys. It was overpriced and grainy, and I only noticed that it was strange after Patrick said, "It's a bit of a freak painting, isn't it?" "Is it?" I said. I looked closer; the boy looked normal, young, his face hidden by longish hair, bony shoulders and arms, red shorts hiked up a little by the swing - but reminding us of prepubescent sexuality was one of the biggest tricks in Stern's bag, so I didn't look at that too closely. The tyre itself was strange, lopsided. Looking closer, I could make out a snake's head, biting its own tail at the meeting of the boy's thighs. The rope looping it against a tree was intricate. Covered in faces or made up of tiny people, I couldn't tell, but it was made to look more complex, somehow more painful, than regular rope binding; it swelled around the young boy's grip. The tree was just a tree; behind it though, the mountain's flat-topped silhouette was just a black absence, and the stars beyond it were less stars than they were pairs of eyes, glaring past mountain tree and boy to look at me. "Yeah," I said, "freak painting. Was this one of the zeitgeist pieces?"

Patrick pulled open the door, and regarded the poster; the disconnect between the warm light within and the darkening haze outside hurt to look at. "Yes," he said, "although I think I read someone argue that all Stern ever did was break into the dreams of the boys and girls in the neighbourhood and paint what she saw there; but the only evidence they could come up with was a high incidence of mental diagnoses in kids who grew up here around the mid-40's. Still, it's a nice theory."

Yes, the word he used was nice.

"Thanks for the tea and the smokes, Patrick," I said, and stepped past him, out into the world. I heard traffic, and felt cold, and was comforted.

"Absolutely," he said, "come any time. Not that many people are still interested in this stuff anymore."

I sighed. "Can you blame people for getting bored when you talk about your dreams, Patrick?"

He said nothing, just stared at me from his strange, enchanted little cul-de-sac, backlit by an ambience stolen from a dream of Vienna before the rot started to show. I yanked at the corner of my mouth, waved, and walked away, down to the sounds of the main road.

[8]

Rondebosch Main Road was not then, nor has it ever been, a happy place.

Understand – it was in the afternoon, because Patrick, and Emily’s thing, and, my own fecklessness had whittled away most of the day, which meant that to even start with I had the shadow of Devil’s Peak getting thrown over everything; the day wasn’t exactly shortened, it was just suddenly cold, dark. The mountain squats there like someone sitting on your chest after you’ve lost a fight. You try and keep your head down, try to keep the your hackles from raising,

but those big floating islands of rock bob up and down above it and drag your gaze right back up to that big, dull rock.

This was, maybe, ten years after Khois had tried to flatten the mountain altogether. They were this guerrilla art group, hanging outside Parliament in khaki suits, editing billboards so it looked like they were advertising for call girls instead of gyms, that kind of thing. Mostly small scale, but then they tried the thing with the mountain and now you get Khois calendars. Surprise. The group very nearly got locked up for that stunt – the bigger names managed to hightail it up to Namibia, and off the continent from there, once they'd figured out that the spell had gone wrong, and the jig was up. Jinx. Whatever. The German arts and culture outfit that had funded the project without knowing that it was going to be – what did the folks at prosecution call it, 'eco-terrorism on a monumental scale' – got kicked out of the country as a matter of course, and German artists were still having a hell of a time getting papers to work there a decade later. This was at least partially because of the ongoing, obvious, visual reminder of Khois' shenanigans. The mountain was still intact, but the supplies they'd built up with German funds were potent enough to tear out a couple of mansion-sized rocks, and hurl them into the sky – where they stayed. Five, six, gigantic boulders, some with trees and bushes on them, floating in that once-familiar skyline...well, you can imagine the postcard people weren't too pleased about it. Obviously they've made do since, with the bridges and the guided tours, but people were unhappy about it at the time. *The New Yorker* had a thing with some of the former members a while back, where they said that the real 'point' of the thing had been to disrupt the demographic division that had been reinforced by apartheid-era urban design, which – I don't know. Maybe? Maybe they were just angry kids with an obvious target.

Anyway. Rondebosch was being loomed over, and walked on. I hit the main road and turned right. The crush of minivans and beat-up cars filled with beat-up people flowed in the other direction, an ongoing avalanche back to the city, back to the sunlight, back to where, indecently, I lived, but I had to go look at a dead ex-girlfriend's apartment in the crummiest neighbourhood in town before I could join them. Well, not the crummiest, exactly, just the most depressed and irritable. Something in the poured-concrete buildings and the shade and the eroding tide of rush-hour traffic cutting through the middle of it has everybody who lives there looking raw-faced and sour. I practically blended in.

Patrick's thing about scrying had me feeling a little exposed, but there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do about that except keep walking. Magically spying on a moving object is almost as difficult as it is illegal – if he knew I was headed to Emily's, and wanted to keep an eye on me, and knew how to bring it off, well. So be it. I was prevented from thinking about this too deeply by the ongoing syncopation of cabs bopping their horns at me and screaming their destinations; you'd have to be the worst kind of asshole to say you find that birdsong soothing, but it kept me out of my head as I walked. That was actually kind of nice; I could take in the surface of dog-walkers and home-goers, students and joggers and bums and kids in restaurants. For however long it lasted.

Even so. The shadow of the mountain was bleeding out all over the place as the sunlight began to shift to a nicer part of town – an uneven bleed, though. I couldn't see it from where I was, a bad twenty-four diner to the left of me and overstuffed graveyard to my right, but that mountain light bent a little around the far eastern corner of Rondebosch, of Salt River and Woodstock. Just the slightest refraction, like looking through the suggestion of a window, the light bending in different directions as it fell on different neighbourhoods, under the influence of old boundary spells – solid, long-lasting Teutonic wards that were laid in fifty years before by efficient state magicians who had been tasked with keeping certain neighbourhoods in a semi-permeable bubble – in the event that economics and brute force wouldn't keep be enough to keep the undesirables out. Or in. Obviously, by the last decade of the century, obscene amounts of money had been poured into dismantling or disabling the wards, with some success. In any event, they didn't actively prevent entry or exit. The big rune-etched mehnirs were still there, marking the boundaries someone had once drawn on a map, and then on the world, but they were filthy, covered in graffiti, built around, like old gallows in the middle of town squares; they didn't keep people out anymore. But they still bent light strangely, and filled my nose with the smell of atmosphere whenever I went through them, and sometimes stray garbage could be seen piling around the outlines of old circumferences; and the white neighbourhoods hadn't gotten any less white, and the previously 'non-white' neighbourhoods weren't terribly previous. It was a swell old time. I watched a bum stoop behind a gravestone to try and get a joint to light in the wind.

I don't know why they couldn't quite get the wards to switch off. The magicians who'd put them together were mostly dead, or mostly unwilling to offer comment at this time, but their magics kept going. Like Stern's stuff; like the Dutch gardens. The fact that nobody had any idea why, or for how long, a spell would operate past the lifetime of its caster bugged me more than any of the stuff Patrick had been riffing about. Some ceased at the moment of death, others gradually decreased in strength for years, before becoming practically undetectable; others kept going. Why? Who made that rule?

Which, let me be honest, wasn't really what I was worried about – bigger existential questions like that I tend to leave on the side of my plate. More immediate to me was this: Emily was dead. How long would her spell echo in my head for? And what would I do if it stopped?

By the time I'd run through that circuit of thought enough times to get tired of seeing my own footprints, I'd passed the stadium, and the pools, and the houses had become more expensive and further apart, the neighbourhood underwent a name change, and became, if not more bearable, then at least differently unbearable. There was a shopping mall here; there were bad people in nice cars.

It was still a little while before I'd need to start getting in touch with Ollie, and I hadn't eaten, so I found a little place where they let me do that. Time passed, and I didn't have anything to drink, but I still flirted with the waitress. Her name was Kerry and she wanted to go to Thailand; my name was Catherine and I was a teacher, new in town. Kerry liked photography, and music played by sad bearded young men with guitars, and the way the city got all quiet on Sunday afternoons so you knew it wasn't really a city, just a big town. Catherine liked whatever Kerry liked. I don't know; maybe I could have stuck with the lie and lived out my quiet Sundays in the company of Kerry or, once that went sour, people like Kerry, and things would've turned out fine and easy. I knew that was a lie, but it was a comforting one, so I took my time picking over runny eggs while I thought about it.

There was a bar across the way – well-ventilated and clean, mostly frequented by retirees and suburban mothers getting sauced on chilled wines to make the day go by faster; later would come the pre-made meals and the silent recriminations and the weather report. A leathery old guy in a foul tunic sat outside on the curb and played some tunes on a beat-to-hell reed flute, while a

couple of squirrels danced a little jig at his feet. It was a neat trick; probably the squirrels weren't delighted about having their wills dominated, but they twirled and bowed and made rapid figures-of-eight pretty smartly. Every now and then the old guy would call out to passers-by, or try and catch one of the retiree's eyes – looking for money, or food, I couldn't tell through the window. He gestured to the squirrels once or twice; maybe he wanted nuts. The point became moot pretty quickly though, once the bar's bouncer– a big, vein-necked type, shoulders bulging out of the oxford shirt they had him wear to try and get him to fit in with the establishment a little more – noticed the old man. The heavy didn't even bother shouting at the flautist, just strode over and laid into him – an open-handed blow at first, but when the old guy was slow to make tracks, he got landed a kick in the ribs that would've made people look away, if they weren't already looking away. Scowling, the guy limp-ran away, yelling predictable slurs over his shoulder. The bouncer yelled after him, then just stood there for a while, looking tough. Kerry caught me looking at him while I dug out some money to throw at the table. “Those people are terrible, hey?” she said. I couldn't decide which ones she meant, and I couldn't decide which ones I wanted her to mean. I over-tipped, and left.

Outside, most of the squirrels had run off too, except for one pair that had been dominated a little too heavily – they kept on dancing in a tight circle on the side of the road, tiny squirrel chests moving up and down too fast. Cars rolled by and missed the show. I stayed and watched for a little while.

Maybe too long a while. By the time I got to Emily's apartment building, Ollie was leaning against the gate, shoulders hunched like he was a teenager again, broad-spectrum scowl visible from a block away.

The building was squat, slate-grey, hidden between the kind of building that probably housed a real-estate agency and some species of brand-consulting firm, and an old house that had been turned into a medical practice. The road was a good one, as semi-suburban roads go; enough blocks away from the main thoroughfares to keep the sound out, or at least at bay, most of the streetlights looking functional, a strip of old, thick trees tall enough to start threatening the power lines. Two such trees jutted in front of Emily's old place, hiding the apartment from the world and the world from the apartment.

“Hey, guy,” I said, drawing close, and nodding.

“Running a little late there,” he said, but nodded back all the same.

“Don’t you live around here?”

“Does it matter?”

It didn’t. I stepped past him, feeling around the mail box for the corner where Emily used to tape her spare keys – which took a little longer than I’d have liked it to, since the thing was glamoured to blend in with the metallic surface.

“Doing okay there?” asked Ollie, over my shoulder.

“Great,” I said, coming up with them. “How’re you and the birds?”

“Yeah, so-so. It took me a while to figure out your message, so my mother’s not too happy with me – but maybe I’ve myself to blame for that.”

I slipped the key into the front gate, fiddled it open. “Not a fan of birdsong in the suburbs?”

He moved past me, shrugging. “Well, sure, birdsong can be nice. Birds screaming slightly criminal instructions a little bit less so. Birds screaming criminal instructions repeatedly while crapping all over my mother’s car still less.”

“Ah,” I said, mounting the staircase with a pang of – not nostalgia, exactly. I hadn’t been there often enough for nostalgia. But when I saw Emily there last, I’d known that things were over, or pretty much over, and so had taken the time to drink in the thick layer of filth that coated the once-white walls, for the ridiculous smell of the linden trees at the parking lot out back, the flyers advertising sushi, fertility, and credit, drinking these things in as if they were sad and precious and important, as if paying close attention to the new state of affairs would somehow make up for the indifference that had brought them into being in the first place. Magical thinking, I know, but I figured it was worth a shot; all that really happened was that I found I had few tangible recollections of what things were like when we were together, but an eidetic recollection of the building she’d left mine for.

“Ah indeed,” said Ollie, jarring me out of whatever reverie I was indulging in. “Is there any particular reason you want me here for this?”

I considered the question. I had, in fact, already considered the question at some length; all told I probably didn’t need Ollie for muscle, of which there was none, or for his magic – I already had the key. What, then?

“An extra set of eyes couldn’t hurt,” I said. “As a look-out, if nothing else.”

He stiffened, gaining another couple of inches on me. “Are we expecting company?”

I shook my head. “The family’s in town, and they might have a key, but they aren’t too likely to show up after dark – grim prospect. But neighbours might hear somebody in the dead girl’s apartment and raise a ruckus, which I’d need you to look out for.”

“Ruckus?” he said, as we came out on the second floor.

“Whatever,” I said. We reached the third door, avoided each other’s eyes while I went through the muscle-memory procedure of opening a lock that had once been more familiar to me.

We stepped into the cool, dry air of the apartment where my ex-girlfriend had been living until recently.

What I had told Ollie was nearly convincing – convincing enough for him to stick around, anyway – but still a little ways from being the truth. The neighbours wouldn’t raise a ruckus; they wouldn’t raise an eyebrow. Emily had maintained the natural relationship that tenement neighbours have with one another, that one where they pretend not to notice one another’s existence. Her absence wouldn’t be a blip on the radar, and neither would our presence. I don’t know. Moral support, maybe? Now mostly I think I just wanted an extra set of eyes on me – so somebody would know that I was reacting to the death, was doing something about it.

Some years later, quite drunk, I would ask a friend what it was that he looked for in lovers; whether he topped, or bottomed, that kind of thing. Joking, but only half-joking, he’d told me, “I just want to be looked at.” I think this might have been something like that.

I dropped the keys on the kitchen counter, and stepped past it into the open-plan living room-cum-bedroom. The curtains were open, and it was starting to grow dark outside; it was with some difficulty that I resisted the urge to close them.

Ollie picked up the keys and brought them up to his face.

“This is actually pretty neat work – it’s meant to go nearly-invisible when you put it down on stuff, right? Which would’ve been a bitch if you’re out drinking, but still.”

“It was,” I said, pacing along the bookshelves. “There are whole families of spare invisible keys to this place floating around the city, mostly in bars and bathrooms. She lost them the way you lose lighters. So she got very good at the spell, with all that practice.”

“Security-conscious?”

“Not really,” I said, pulling out a copy of Fowles’s *The Magus*. Birthday gift. Sentiment on my part, and nothing at all to do with the task at hand – which I had only a vague idea of – but I decided to let myself be that person just then. “She just sort of liked the idea of a magic lock. For a while you could only get in by whispering ‘friend’ into her front door lock.”

“Oh, nice,” said Ollie, and turned to go look at the formerly magical orifice before turning back to look at me. “So what are we doing here, exactly? Other than memory-laning?”

“Not much memory to lane,” I said, putting the book back where it belonged. “She moved here after we split up.”

“Oh,” said Ollie, coming to stand beside me. “Then how did you know where to find the key?” I smiled, not at him. “What, you’ve never had a relapse?”

“Oh,” he said, again, in a different voice. After a few seconds he walked back to the kitchen, and started opening cupboards.

I had wanted – well. Any number of things. To find this place bare of ornament, bare of any signs of a life lived without me, the way it had been those two or three times I’d come here – let me not pretend to be inexact. I’d been there twice before; the first time to drop off her heavier stuff – work-desk, side tables, bookshelf, which god knows why she wanted to keep them, beyond not wanting me to have them, because they were without any charm at all, literal or figurative – with a pick-up I’d convinced a vague acquaintance to loan me. Well, coerced. Well. Blackmailed. Emily had been loud with her ignoring me, arms crossed as I hauled the things onto the chalk circle she’d scrawled on the parking lot floor; if she’d done this in my apartment she could’ve had them shifted to her place directly, but my floor was, and two of my walls were, still littered with glass from the last time she’d been there, so that was out. Among other things.

“Be sure to step over the line,” she’d said to me as I dragged the second, off-white side table over; this would have been the first thing she’d said to me that day, past telling me where to find the key, and where I could park.

“I would think that by now,” I’d said, still not quite able to look her in the face, “you’d know that I can be relied upon to step over the line.”

In hindsight, she was more or less obviously setting me up for the joke; at the time it felt like I was bravely poking at some freshly healed scar tissue.

If I caught a flash of something other than concentration in those green eyes while she walked around the small pile of furniture, chanting it out of the circle of runes (Hittite, in this case) and into the matched circle drawn in the middle of her new apartment, well – then I didn't recognize it. The pile of shitty, unremarkable furniture that used to live with me shrank into a horizon that wasn't there, only completely vanishing when Emily's sing-song circumlocution broke my line of sight; when she passed, it was gone. I looked at the magic circle, the lines of it blurred a little now that it had been used, and at some length I looked up at Emily. She was in an old, bad, grey t-shirt and denim dungarees covered in paint and chalks, and her hair was done up messily. I say this like that would matter; still with the cheekbones and still with the eyes. That hurt a little, though, so I looked back at the circle, jangled some stranger's keys in my hand, and made to go. "Would you like some water?" she asked.

I stopped hard, turned, and looked at her, then found myself saying "Sure, that'd be nice," before she had the chance to take it back or I had the chance to really think about it.

We'd gone up; the apartment was bare, dusty, no curtains, nothing on the walls, a calendar two years out of date stuck to the fridge that had come with the place. The stuff she'd just teleported up stood in a pile in the middle of the open-plan space, her new mattress still unwrapped in the corner by the window, suitcase beneath it. When she moved to the cupboard, she had discovered, or realized, that she'd only taken the one cup, with a cat on it. She had shrugged after a second, and passed this to me, so I could fill it at the kitchen tap. The closing of the cupboard door had echoed in that new space, and the plumbing moaned and filled the cup with rust-flavoured water. I thought then about the place I'd be going back to, where you could see ocean, and talk without hearing your voice echo, and for a second I forgot about the glass and the smell of someone I was no longer entitled to smell, and thought that I'd come off the better of the two of us, that I would have somewhere happier to go to. I'd rinsed the cup and stacked it upside down beside the basin, turned to face her, dust motes dancing around her in afternoon lighting that I can't be certain wasn't deliberate, and said,

"Do you need a hand moving the furniture?"

"It's fine, thanks," she'd said, looking at the space that would, shortly, become home for her.

"I'm having – some friends over tonight who'll help me with it. Ayn's better at the physical magic, so she won't mind rearranging things if they don't work." She smiled a little at that; this seemed too casual, too reasonable a comment to me, because I wanted the awkwardness and the

pain and sensitivity still, that would tell me that there was still something living between us. The ease with which she could assemble a pained formality, like we were friends or something – anyway.

“Alright,” I’d said, “then I’m gonna go. Let me know if you...anything, I guess.” I shrugged.

“I might do that,” she said, and was kind enough not to bother disguising the lie. She had fished her new keys out of a front pocket, and opened her door; she had offered a sort of one-armed hug as I moved past, the kind you save for fresh acquaintances. The only thing crueller that I could think of, other than ignoring it, was returning the gesture like this was the natural way of doing things; like we were strangers now. The old knife-twisting one-upmanship game. And then as I made to pull away and win, her other hand, muscled and calloused from moving in directions and over surfaces that weren’t always entirely real, had closed around my back, and drawn me close, so tightly it hurt. It would’ve hurt anyway. And she’d smelled of paint and dirt and of herself, and her lips were dry, at first, and our bodies knew what to do, in the short term anyway, and we didn’t even take the wrapping off of her new mattress.

Afterwards, she was the first to speak; not looking me in the eye, she’d said, “You should probably go now.”

And I’d let myself sigh, and said, “Yeah,” and started pulling on clothes, trying at once to move quickly and look like I wasn’t trying to move quickly. I left a bra there, though, and was wearing one of her socks when I got home, so I guess that didn’t work too well. I didn’t look back as I walked out; I nearly t-boned a taxi coming off Strand, and I don’t remember how I got the car back to the guy who owned it. I went home, let myself cry a little, let myself drink a little, then sat and read until my eyes blurred over, from either the crying or the drinking or both.

The second time was maybe a month later. So far as I can tell that was just sex. Not much to say about that.

The place looked different now, but not different enough; clearly a life had been lived here that I hadn’t been directly part of – there were pieces of paper, books, photos of mountain hikes that meant nothing at all me – but the end table, and the work desk, and the bed were all still there, still the ones I remembered. I’d hoped for either a rush familiarity or complete estrangement and was disappointed twice over.

I shrugged, at nothing in particular, and headed to her workdesk, where sat the glittering tools, rings and knives of Emily's line of work. "Looking for dope, first and foremost. Obviously you don't need to have used before to OD, but – it would make the thing a little easier to believe, y'know?"

I looked over my shoulder; Ollie remained in the kitchen, staring at me.

"Beyond that – anything out of the ordinary. If this wasn't just a creative kid doing something catastrophically dumb, then why would anyone try and make it look that way? For which I guess your particular familiarity with magic and stuff could be handy."

"You flatter me," said Ollie, opening the undecorated fridge door.

I dug around. I had, obviously, snooped through Emily's stuff before, so I had an okay idea of what to expect – and what to be surprised by. The ginger root with strange knots tied around it, the notched ring, the compass with an inexplicable third leg jutting out to one side, the bobby pins, the hazel sticks, the knife, the mirrors, the clay, the numerical chart that went by no progression a mathematician would recognize, the quills, the ink, the jars of things, the lumpen notebooks, the stale bowl of nuts, the tiny vial of brandy, the neat row of quartz, a small leather bag, a bronze magnifying glass – I don't know if they were the standard-issue tools of every sorcerer's apprentice, or if they were just what she worked with, but when I think of a magician's work bench, hers is the one I think of. I didn't understand them any more than I understood internal combustion engines, but I knew how they were supposed to look.

Or I mean, so I thought. The table was thick, heavy, padded with rubber along the surface, and scored with any number of cuts and burns, either from boredom or neglect; I moved my hand along its surface, trying to pick the odd thing out. In the background, Ollie seemed to be making a sandwich; upstairs, I think I could hear sex, disappointingly brief. I had no idea what I was doing; I shrugged, and picked up the ring, which was heavy, and warm to the touch – surprisingly so. So surprised was I by this that I didn't notice the window behind me exploding inwards, showering my back and hair with glass, nor the sound of something caught fire.

I say 'something' because I don't know what caught fire first – the rug, the desk, the couch. Not that it matters; while I stood there, feet glued to the spot by adrenaline or something, the whole back of the room went up in flames. No, I'm sorry – what happened was that flames went up the whole back of the room. The fire didn't look magic, for whatever that's worth; it didn't have any particular smell, or colour, or shape that set itself apart from regular fire. But it was there –

everywhere – and hot, and sputtering all around me. The broken window meant that the smoke wasn't too bad, but it gave the fire plenty of air to work with, so it spread rapidly, eating up a couch I'd had sex on, a coffee table I'd bumped shins on, and a carpet I'd spilled drinks on without stopping to notice.

*This is going to be hard to explain*, I thought, while something snatched at my arm; I turned slowly to see Ollie, his eyes wide with panic and red with smoke, saying something I couldn't hear, and dragging me towards the door.

“But we didn't find anything,” I said. He pulled again, and I tasted burnt carbon somewhere at the back of my throat. “Hang on!” I shouted, jerking my hand free and slapping at the kitchen counter until I found the key. I grabbed it, and ran, Ollie right behind me. I slammed the door the second he was out, locked it, and looked around. A middle-aged woman with fog-blue hair had peeked her head out of her kitchen window to peer down the hall at us. I waved, and she turtled back in, rapidly. Despite the noise we'd made getting out, and the building roar of fire in the room, nobody else made an appearance. I offered a silent prayer of thanks to suburban indifference, and started down the stairs, gesturing to Ollie to follow.

In the distance I could hear a siren, but if that was for us for some other small catastrophe, I didn't know. We ran.

[9]

In my defence, I hadn't taken Emily's ring with any intention of using it. I hadn't even taken the thing because it was important, or familiar; I'd taken it because it was something of hers. Then again, I hadn't taken Emily's ring with any intention of triggering a self-immolating booby trap, either, and intended or not, her apartment was by that time a charred cube burnt out of the side of a building. So that's what you get for sentiment.

And rings of power are – well. The one I'd pulled from Emily's place wasn't as bad as it could be. It sapped your strength and will to live for as long as you wore it with the little notch pointing inwards; it's a hell of a thing if you're depressed already. Turn it outwards once it's charged up, though, and you have a couple of minutes of immense strength, speed, and general will-to-power. Which, obviously, sets you on a deeply unhealthy pattern of highs and lows if you get too attached to your speed and nastiness, to the extent that you're willing to endure months of dulled existence in exchange for a few hours of superhuman vitality – and, equally obviously, it was dumb of me to swipe the thing and dumb of me to have it on my person. When you carry a hammer everything looks like a nail, and when you carry a ring of power, everything looks like a good excuse to indulge in a damaging power fantasy.

Which isn't to say that hammers don't have their moments.

Ollie and I had run from the apartment block, smoke already venting visibly out of the second story – and then realizing that this was the kind of neighbourhood where running without looking like you were doing it for fitness was to solicit suspicion, we walked. Briskly.

He stayed in a cottage not too far from where Emily's apartment was – or had been, I guess, depending on how efficient her arson spell was – but not so close that the fire would be on anybody's radar. Maybe it would show up in the village newsletter a week later and people could fret about the real estate market over coffee, but ripples didn't get too far in a neighbourhood like that, where there was old money for breakwater.

It was one of those places right up against the street, with the cheery fountain and the brightly coloured street numbers by the door, only faintly distorted by the three or four layers of security spell wrapped around it. The lights within were dim.

“Nobody home?” I asked, because we hadn’t spoken since the thing with the running away from a fire, and I wanted to see how shook up Ollie was.

“Nah,” he sighed, “Mom’s at her coven pretty late most nights.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know what to do with that one, which is fine because then he said, “Listen, wait out here for a moment, I’ll be right back with some stuff.”

I mean – I had no overwhelming yen for hanging outdoors alone, with the darkness coagulating about me, but Ollie had slipped around the side of the place before I could say anything about that.

I sighed at nobody in particular, found a clump of shadows beneath the ivy growing along the neighbouring place’s wall, and stood there, waiting.

Three guys walked past while I waited, two pretty clearly rushing to get trains home, or in the direction of home, the last maybe looking for something else. I don’t know. I stayed where I was, out of sight – at that moment I didn’t have the will in me to navigate whatever maze of interpolation and doubt these evenings threw up. You’re taking a walk in the night and some figure looms out of it to speak to you; is it a threat, a plea for alms, a meaningless gesture, a thirst for human kindness? Everybody’s got a thing, and half the damned time you’re wrong. I stood in the shadows and Ollie came back a couple of minutes later with a broom, and two helmets, one on his head. “Alright. Let’s grab a drink?” he said, when he saw me, flashing some teeth. He looked stupid, but not more than usual.

“Sure,” I said, looking down the road where the men had disappeared while I hid against a wall.

“You want to try Krishna’s?”

I thought about giving Ollie a hard time about the broom – at least mention that in the good old days, or anyway the old days, witches used to fly around with the brooms backwards, with the handle shoved somewhere uncomfortable (no mention of where wizards put it) – but I was tired, and he was tired, and again with the burning apartment building. I pulled on the goofy helmet,

waited for him to get the thing hovering around waist height, which took a few tries, then swung my leg over behind him, grabbing onto his hunched shoulders as we lifted off the ground.

It was uncomfortable. Of course it was uncomfortable; they – who even makes brooms anymore? Spalding? ‘They,’ anyway – bend the handle as best they can, try and charm it into feeling a little more like a cushioned surface, but all that means is a slightly numb set of inner thighs while you try not to clip any power lines or birds, or get swept into a building by the wind. Nobody buys a broom for the comfort – or even the speed. People buy brooms because it’s the easiest way to tell someone you’re a magician without coming out having to actually say the words. Painters wear filthy overalls, actors wear sweatpants, and magicians carry brooms. Writers – well, with writers you have to look for the jaundice around the eyes. Actually, if you want to spot a writer worth a damn when you’re out on the town, you can tell someone’s a writer because they’re not there – they’re at home in their caves, writing. So are the real painters, and the real actors, and the real magicians – but the people who want to *look* like magicians, they’re the ones with the brooms. Sure, broom owners will tell you about the carbon emissions and the convenience, about how great it feels to be looking down at the city under your own steam late on a summer night – but it’s posturing. They never talk about the blisters, or the interference from strong magical fields, or what the hell they do when it’s raining or windy, which it is a little over half the year.

Sorry, venting. I didn’t say any of this to Ollie that night. The trip was a short one; past Rondebosch, lit up now with the headlights of folk coming home from the city, past Mowbray, grim in the absence of its daytime foot traffic and street stalls, and veering mercifully off of the main jag and into Observatory.

Observatory. That would be where astronomer-cum-astrologer Sir John Herschel had hit upon the meal ticket of casting horoscopes for cities, ensuring civic funding for at least one decent telescope and viewing station in every two-bit town in the hemisphere. That had been some two hundred years prior, but the old stargazing rig was still there, if hopelessly old and nearly blinded by the surrounding city lights. Some of the local art kids did make use of it from time to time, casting nativities or playing shenanigans during the solstices – I don’t know how much of that was from genuine interest and how much of that was portfolio-building by kids who wanted to take advantage of the Royal Society’s John Herschel Scholarships. It was an odd situation; nobody really cared about astrology, or genuinely believed in astrology, beyond the need to be

aware of a couple of celestial positions for the timing and inflection of specific spells – but whoever had set up the funding for the Herschel scholarships *had* believed in astrology, which is why the university still taught it, sort of, and why students still kept it up. Sort of.

Ollie set us down gently enough outside of Krishna's without too many heads turning around. It was a little place just off the main strip of bars and – well. There must have been other places there, too – bookshops, maybe, one or two of those shabby corner stores with the bruised fruit and the neon-packaged potato chips and the unkind lighting, probably a backpacker's or two – but mostly my memory's flagging bars. It wasn't a part of town Emily and I had spent much time in, back when we were still spending time. Not because we didn't know anyone in the area, not because we couldn't deal with the rougher edges of the place – the girlfriend who could set things on fire with her hands was a great leveller, there – but Christ. I was a soundly middle-class sociologist with the wrong accent and the wrong interests; she was from a hick town in the middle of the country and was learning school magic. We were squares. People would talk revolution without rolling their eyes, about the suppression of African spiritual traditions, about the history of violence that underwrote the Western magic of the past two centuries, about the witch trials that still took place up north without any noise from the government because they were the wrong *kinds* of witches, and they would look to me or to Emily for input – and we'd suggest another round or try for an urbane change of topic, and that would fall apart, and pretty soon I'd be scratching at the back of her hand, suggesting we go to a little place we liked, closer to home. Arm in arm, tails tucked where they belong, we'd flee to the city centre, where we could be the liberal ones waxing postcolonial, where the windows were too high for the bums to watch us through, and we didn't have to scrutinise ourselves with too much honesty.

This is either background information, or an apology for failing to describe a neighbourhood which has since been facelifted beyond all expectations by the rising tide of the gentry. Your call, there.

We went inside; it was just a little after dark, so it wasn't too busy – just a smattering of regular-looking types perched around the bar, and at one of the tables a pair of just-out-of-the-shower blonde girls talking around a pair of waistcoated kids, passing a joint around. The girls were either Scandinavian or, more likely, from the parts of America that Scandinavians had gotten to first and hardest; the boys looked local. I couldn't tell whom was baiting whom.

The manager's wine-dark face didn't change any when Ollie asked if he could stow his broom behind the bar, which I was grateful for; I bought the first round, ensuring that there would be more rounds, and we took a seat near a window where I could burn my lungs some more.

I drank the drink and smoked the smoke and looked through my reflection at the better-looking silhouettes traipsing past towards their better-looking nights. I wasn't trying to resent them, but that's sort of my metier.

"So," said Ollie, after a little while.

"So," I agreed.

"So are you going to tell me what exactly happened just now?"

"What the hell do you think happened?" I asked, not because I was angry, or even that faux angry that hides a guilty conscious, but because I had the impression that I was going to be apologizing to Ollie a lot in the next few days, and I didn't want my mouth to get tired of forming the words 'I'm sorry' too soon.

He looked at the table, angrily. This is a thing with pushovers; even when they get good and mad, legitimately mad, they push it on to something else. It's fine when there's a handy table around, but I worry about innocent bystanders some times. When I'm not bystanding myself.

"I think that you might have fucked up, a little bit. I think that you walked into that apartment like an old lover snooping, and not someone suspecting actual foul play – that you were just jumping at the chance to dig over her old junk, now that she's gone. To rake over the ashes." He took a drink. "I think that you jumped without really considering where you, or anyone else, might land."

I know, I think I'd suspected him of just being another pretty face too.

"If you're going to insist on being honest with me," I said, "I'm going home."

This didn't get me the laugh I felt it deserved, so I pressed on. "Fine," I said, "I don't know what happened, except that it happened because I wasn't careful. Alright? I know to be careful now.

I'll be taking better care all the way home; especially for this next part."

"What next part?"

"Honest and obvious, do less of both. Where do you get your drugs from, Ollie?"

Let me skip past the denials and the bullying, they bored me even then. On top of the weed – and does marijuana even count as a drug anymore? – Ollie kept up a pretty tidy supply of tranquilizers. To take the edge off, he said. The edge off of what, you ask? Everything.

Something that Emily and I used to argue about now and then, when we were in a place where arguments could be held without any collateral damage: the relationship between art and suffering. I figured if you were actually suffering, you'd be too busy doing that to make anything worth a damn; she thought that if you were happy, you'd be off doing the things that make you happy, instead of making art. So it goes. What we eventually sort of managed to agree on, though, was that it's ridiculous to suggest that suffering is a necessary component to art; that's a lie that unhappy people tell themselves in an attempt to make their unhappiness seem worthwhile – ignoring that many of the greats would only ever approach the pen, brush or wand with a smile. Although I guess if you're going to suffer, you might as well use it for something.

Whatever the relationship, it would be disingenuous – more to the point, it would be wilfully stupid – of me to ignore the high incidence of depression, self-harm, eating disorders, alcohol abuse and suicide amongst magic students. I know, what's my excuse, right? Because sure, this mixed bag of symptoms was a pretty common feature of any postgraduate student's curriculum vitae – but the magic kids, by virtue of irregular hours or indifferent supervision or a slightly more nuanced will-to-self-destruct, were the gold medallists for 'antisocial behaviours.'

So I mean obviously drugs came up a lot; there were bored kids in the city singled out by the ability to twist the weft and warp of reality, leaving them cut off from mundane society, bound together in company they wouldn't have chosen, theoretically in touch with the very roots of the world and yet unable to get even an internship at a mediocre alchemy firm. Substance abuse, in this substantially disabused demographic, can't be a surprise.

For what it's worth, there were a couple of spells that could induce altered states of mind. A Malay Dutch cantrip that needed four contrapuntal singers would leave three giddy and energetic as if they'd taken amphetamines, without the risk of death or dreary comedown, though the fourth would be passed out for the next few hours; both Greek and Latin versions of the chthonic initiation rites had been shown to generate mild, pleasant hallucinations, even when performed away from their the stygian contexts; there persisted a range of medicinal and magical herbs which weren't controlled, and which could, with even an undergraduate herbology textbook, be used to cook up a range of mild uppers, downers and anaesthetics; and the ring I'd swiped from Emily's had a little kick to it.

But the Malay cantrip took an hour and was written in Arabic; the Dionysian rites took months of preparations and an audience; nobody took undergraduate herbology if they could help it, and what would they do with a cauldron full of Fancy's Brew anyway? And the ring had its own complications. It was always easier to speak to one of five or six men in the city, slap them some notes, get some pills in return, and proceed with the night.

At the time, I had a drunk's contempt for drugs other than alcohol – which was, I suppose, a rather obvious attempt at misplacing contempt for myself. Em, who never quite managed to shake the sense of sin her upbringing had left her with, her fear of somehow corrupting a soul she didn't entirely disbelieve in – well, she never used. Not while I knew her. So not until the very end.

Still, you hear things.

“So what, are you looking to get high? Is that the next part of your big plan?”

“Don't be –“ I paused, to think about it “no, I'm not planning on getting high. There's a guy operating out of here who mostly deals to the art kids - I want to see if he knows anything about brown getting sold to recently deceased witches.”

Ollie winced. “Are you sure these are the kind of people you want to try and pump for information? Usually you give him stuff, and he gives you stuff, and then you leave feeling grateful for not having your teeth kicked in. Even assuming this guy and Emily's guy are the same guy.”

“Please, catering to the medication of nervous middle-class is a small slice in a bigger racket. Most of that trade's happening in the city centre and along the coast; if there's anybody peddling anything harder than hash in these godforsaken suburbs, they know about each other and they're working from the same supply.”

“I don't get it.”

“Surprise. I mean that either she OD'd by accident on her first go-round, more or less sober, or the stuff she took was messed with – stepped on a few times too many, at some point along the line. Or something else.”

“What do you mean, like – suicide? Death by lethal injection?”

“Not like suicide. Like – I don't know, something that would make her ask me for help. So something desperate. So I'm going to call the guy.”

Ollie drew back. “I don’t know, Sam. These are – this is a serious guy. There are toes you don’t really want to step on.”

“Huh,” I said. “I’ve been a little heavy on my feet lately, I’ll give you that.”

“More than a little.”

“So you can call him for me?”

“That’s not what I said! I’m not going to interview your dealer for you –“

“You just need to set up a meet! Come on, you know how to call him with the mirror, right? And we both know you’re more charming than I am with stuff like this.”

“I’m not really...” he started, leaning back, trying to pull out the downward spiral, so I scooted my hands across the table and said “C’mon, Ollie, I wouldn’t ask you to do this if I thought there was another way. This is all I’ve got.”

Frowning at the stained wooden table top, at my hands on top of it, Ollie started nodding. Christ, but the truth can be a weapon sometimes.

“Fuck,” he said. “Okay. Like – tonight? You want to talk to him tonight?”

“This very night. Ask for Terrence. Tell him I’m looking to buy off the brick, set up a meet, and we’ll go from there.”

“What? If you go in telling him you’re buying –“

“I’ve got the money for it, if we have to buy. And then you’ll have something to play with. But we need face-time with this guy.”

Notice the ‘we.’

“I’m regretting this already,” he said, standing up. “Could you cover the bathroom door for me?”

He walked over to the restroom, pulling a squat piece of chalk from his pocket. I followed, and stood outside with my back to the door.

I’ll say this for the Observatory crowd; if you tell them they can’t use the bathroom because your friend’s busy in there, they’re very understanding.

A couple of minutes later, Ollie came out, pale and sweating. More than usual, I mean.

“All okay?”

“Yeah! Yeah. Uh let’s sit tight for another drink or so, okay? He wants to meet at the river in about half an hour.”

“How Dickensian.”

“What? Listen, you need to be sure you have the funds for this. And don’t – don’t try and be smart at him, okay? That’s – this isn’t the place for that.”

“I’ll let you do the talking,” I said.

We sat around for a little while longer, trying out small talk and finding it a poor fit. We were saved from too much in the way of silence by a biggish troupe of folk coming in to celebrate an opening night, or a closing night, or some other thing that wouldn’t make it into the papers. Ollie was tense, and I was tired. I played with the little ring, and he tried unsuccessfully to catch the eye of a girl whom neither of us would later have been able to describe.

After enough of this, Ollie drained his drink, looked at his watch, and said, “Let’s get going.” We got going.

The wind had started to pick up, gently nudging us along our parabolic path towards the river; where it came through Observatory there was a little smear of green called a park where some folk went running, or dog-walking, and other folk found a place to sleep on the warm summer nights. And still other folk picked up product. We walked in silence, our footfalls echoing on the quiet suburban streets and squelching on the damp riverside grass. It was chilly out, which meant that I couldn’t be sure if my slight shivering was a consequence of cold, or fear. Didn’t have to be sure.

I scanned the slow, muddied water for signs of disturbance; there was just enough light coming in from Pinelands to the east that I could make out the wavering reflections dancing on small, windblown ripples. I’d assumed that our guys had us meet at the banks so they could make the Lady in the Lake appearance, popping out of the surface with a single brick held aloft – but this is because I had spent far too much of my time in the company of magicians. Magicians aren’t practical.

Drug dealers are practical. Two figures emerged from the north, from the shadow of the freeway, from the industrial expanse beyond it; they walked quickly, and quietly, slowing a little as they approached, but not so much that you’d think they were here for us, like we were just a stop on a longer trip. Which we probably were.

The one in the lead was short, with close-cropped hair stubbling around his head and face; his clothing was loose, a little scuffed, but didn't look hand-me-down. His boots had nasty metal toes, which, while equally unlikely to have been handed down by anyone, had visibly handed out some kind of punishment. He nodded at Ollie.

"Alex," he said.

"Hey," replied Ollie.

The one talking – whom I figured for Terrence – didn't look at me; his friend did, though, if only briefly. The friend was – well. Big, wide, dark and bored-looking. For a second I thought maybe it was that thing where fighters size each other up without looking like they're sizing each other up – but I think maybe I'd be genuinely bored too, if I had to run chaperone to take some stupid white kid's money.

"You're looking to buy," said Terrence.

"That's what we're here for," said Ollie.

I turned the little ring around, so the notch faced inwards. Terrence nodded, and said a number. And here, I think, we see one of the consequences of a society with deeply entrenched divisions of class; anybody with even a crash course in magical artefacts would've picked up on the rotation of a ring as a threat no less overt than pulling out a knife. But magical artefacts are expensive, and tightly controlled – which means that those who can afford to pick them up on the black market go for the big, obvious magics, the burning gloves, the cloaks of darkness. Little things like a ring of strength doesn't really register on that radar.

I stepped forward and punched the lackey in the face, hurting my knuckles and snapping his saddlebag neck back like he'd accelerated too fast; I had time to watch his legs crumple beneath him while I gently slipped inside Terrence's grabbing right arm, took him by the throat and slammed him into the ground once or twice. Or more; you lose focus a little when the ring's on. His left hand grabbed at my face; I took it away. I knelt down and pinned the man by the neck, my free arm swatting away renewed attempts to claw me. Ollie was talking, but I was listening to the river, and how the flow of cold dark water resembled the steady thrumming of blood in my eardrums, and how different that was from the weak, frightened pulse I felt flagging beneath my thumb and forefinger. I could change the course of that river and I could change the course of that pulse, and -

“SAM!” shouted Ollie, trying to shove me aside and succeeding only in slipping and muddying his jeans. And in getting my vague attention.

“What?” I said, then “oh, sorry. Hi, Terry. I need some information from you.” I loosened my grip slightly, so the gasping, writhing thing in my hands could start breathing again. Even before his lungs were half-inflated, he tried to choke out,

“Kill you.”

“Ah, no Terry. Not only is that inaccurate information, but it’s not the information I want.”

He used some sexist language then, which gave me the excuse I wanted to pull him up by his shirt, spin him around, and twist his right arm up and high behind his back.

“Please stop hitting the drug dealers,” moaned Ollie, behind me; I told him to go attend to the lackey, so that he’d have something to do.

Terry and I looked out over the Liesbeek; or at least Terry was facing that way. It’s a nice view, in the dark; there was a floodlit field some way behind us, so our shadows cast over the gurgling river, and the sparse trees were turned into a forest of greys, behind which the starry night was a series of pinpricks against a comforting dark.

“Every second I spend doing this is a second gone from my life, Terry,” I said. “I would rather be doing literally anything else in the world than this. So let’s be quick. Have you been selling to anybody new lately?”

He tried to ram the back of his shaven head into my face and swear again, but I tightened my grip on his wrist until there was a cracking sound – my knuckles or something else, I don’t know – and he stopped.

“I won’t hurt you any more if you tell me what I want to know. I promise.”

“Fucking WHAT,” he said, in a rush of released air, voice whining. Annoying.

“Have you been selling brown to anybody new?”

“I get a lot of customers –“

I squeezed again. “Stop acting like this is a situation where you have room to negotiate. Have you been selling to anybody new?”

“Man, fuck – just my usual guys, the old junkies, street work, some music types. Nobody’s taking it up if they haven’t already. Fuck.”

“No new kids? Art students, magic types?”

“What? No, man, they buy coke and molly, if they buy anything. They’re looking to party, not,

you know, chill.”

“No green-eyed girls?”

“Fucking what are you talking about?”

“Sam,” said Ollie from behind me.

“No names,” I said.

“He doesn’t know.”

“I don’t know!”

I took a step back, scowling, Terry’s wrist still in my grip. “Fine,” I said. “Ollie, you take care of the extra?”

“He’s out.”

“You’re going to want to scrub his brain.”

“What? That’s – that’s *insanely* illegal, Jesus-“

“We’re hanging out with drug dealers! We’re past the limits of legal. Or do you want him to find you?”

“I can’t – where do I put his memories? I can’t get picked up holding them.”

“The river?” I suggested, regretting the upwards intonation.

“That’s insane, the river spirit would kill us both. Or just me.”

“Just pull out the memories, I’ll deal with them.”

Ollie stomped off. I watched him for a second, then returned my attention to TG.

“Hey, know what arms and promises have in common?”

“Huh?”

“Both astonishingly breakable.” I jerked up and to the left, and the man’s arm cracked midway between shoulder and elbow. He squealed, once, and fell, jerking slightly.

“Although obviously promises are easier to make,” I added, to the suddenly empty night. And since there was nobody else listening, while Ollie whispered the short, damning nursery rhyme that would burn away the last twelve hours from some stranger’s memory, I muttered to myself, “get that fucking ring off,” and obeyed.

I looked down at the trembling man at my feet and wondered what had happened, and why. A warm brass ring lay in the palm of my hand.

Ollie was right, of course. Memory-wiping was more-than-the-usual-amounts of illegal, the right to autonomy of recollection deeply enshrined in the constitution as a consequence of some nasty gaslighting played by the old regime on political prisoners. Some reparations had been attempted, but there were still a couple of dozen men and women, not all of them that old, who didn't know who they were or what they had done, because their names had proven inconvenient for some white men in hats and coats. So if we were in the kind of place where the constitution protected everybody equally, we'd be in considerable trouble. But.

Once Ollie was done with Terry, he held the small black clots of memory out to me; he was right about the river spirit, too. River guardian. People didn't actually know what it was – we largely assumed dragon or something, but nobody had seen the thing and survived the incident, or survived the incident and felt inclined to talk about it. About three years before, some ambitious young idiot had tried to conduct a study correlating the relationship between the river's relative acidity and the behaviour of river's guardian, and vanished for six months, before showing up on the far shore looking like an old man, prone to weeping. He lost his funding from the national sorcery council, and switched to library sciences.

So not knowing what else to do, I balled up the warm, damp memories, and swallowed them, retching once, but managing to keep from vomiting them up again.

“Bloody Christ,” said Ollie.

“Shut up,” I said, steadying myself on his shoulder for a second, and then standing up.

“Are you alright?”

“Shut up,” I said, and headed in the direction that we'd come from.

The memories, I knew, would take a while to filter into mine – and since they consisted of maybe an hour, two hours of lives not my own, I probably wouldn't suffer any psychotic breaks. Even so, I was already conscious of the numbness of trauma tingling along my chest and spine, as I began to recall broken bones and contusions not my own. But let me not overstate that - they were not my lacerations, and to speak for other people's suffering as if it is your own is a strange and new kind of awfulness I would rather not explore. And anyway, if I had hell to pay for it, I wouldn't be paying for it that night.

We went back to the bar. He needed to wash up and get his broom; I needed to sit down for a little while.

I leaned against the inside of the bathroom door handle, pushing back every now and then against would-be visitors, while Ollie scrubbed at his hands and jeans under the harsh fluorescent lighting, pausing every now and then to wash away the tell-tale marks of chalk scrawled against the mirror glass. Catching my eye in it, Ollie muttered, “I can’t fucking believe you.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“It wasn’t that ba – Christ, Sam, you just went ballistic on a pair of strange, bad men *who know how to reach me*, because of a hunch.”

“They don’t know how to reach you anymore – we took care of that, remember?”

“Yes, and for what? All you know is that the dealer line’s a dead end, which we could have figured out without risking lives and limbs.” He spat into the basin.

“Bullshit,” I shot back, “he and every other idiot with two ideas to rub together think they can Scheherazade my time away – and I will be goddamned twice over if I’m going to run through the ‘what do you know, what’s it to you, seamus’ spiel with every dealer in the city. And now we know that whoever Emily got her stuff from had to have been someone familiar to –”

“Would you please stop it with Emily for a moment, okay? This wasn’t fact-finding, this was – this was you self-destructing and bringing me along with you. Again.”

He shook his head, and went back to washing hands that were already clean.

“Look, they’re going to wake up on the side of the river, hurt and confused, but with their junk and their money intact – and no way to trace this back to you. You’re clear, so long as you don’t talk to anybody about it. Which you won’t. And I won’t.”

The problem with Ollie was that he lacked imagination. He wasn’t even that bad of a magician, as I hear it, so long as the situation at hand exactly resembled the situation described in a textbook – but since most of his textbooks were written in East Anglia half a century ago, he couldn’t help but fall apart when he was faced with the new and particular cruelties the world has come up with since then.

Me, though, I’ve got imagination spilling all over the floor. There’s no unkind deed I can’t put together a reasonable argument for. Then again, there’s no kindness I haven’t been able to find a

mean and nasty motive for either; not so imaginative I can think of a sword that doesn't cut both ways.

I waited for him to poke a hole in my little story, and it didn't come. He turned around.

“So do you want to tell me about with that ring?”

“Ah,” I said. I took the thing out of my pocket. “The ring of power. An old Hardwick heirloom that Emily gave me maybe a month into our thing and reclaimed when things fizzled out. Due to the ambiguous nature of its ownership, I grabbed it when we were in her apartment.”

Ollie's forehead creased. “But you returned it to her though. How is the ownership ambiguous?”

“I thought we might need it later. Which made it ambiguous enough for me.”

He stared. “You only needed it because you took it along. Jesus fuck, Sam,” he said, “those things are – they're insanely addictive, and insanely damaging. You know that, right? That's common knowledge. Lives and homes and careers have been ruined with those things. Last year that guy in New Zealand –”

“I know! I know. And I'm not planning on using it again – I mean, hey, I'm no stranger to ruining lives with addiction, right? But it worked out okay this time.”

“Says fucking you,” said Ollie, pushing me aside to wrench the door open, into the warmer light of the bar.

I followed shortly on his heels, grasping for – I don't know, absolution, or something.

“Look you're right, okay? I messed up. Come out with me tomorrow, and we can talk it through – figure out how to do this right.”

He ignored me, and walked up to the bar. “Can I get my broom back?” he said to the guy working it.

I put a hand on Ollie's arm while he reached over to pick the thing up. “Hey,” I said, “I'm sorry. You're right, that was stupid. That's why I need your help on this, alright? I'm not looking at this straight. You're maybe the one person I can trust on this.” I gave the scrawny forearm a little squeeze, and watched Ollie look away quickly. What, you think I don't recognize a crush when I see one?

I took my hand away – the same hand I'd been strangling some guy with a couple of minutes earlier – and waited.

Ollie sighed. “Shit. I’m not happy about this, alright? This is – this was bad. Let me go clear my head or something. I’ll let you know about tomorrow.”

“That’s more than I deserve,” I said.

“Good night, Sam” he said, and walked out, hefting the broom and frowning at the middle distance, man’s best friend.

The bartender watched him go. “What’s his problem?” he asked.

“I think he was trying to intimidate me.”

“Huh.”

“Yup.”

“I can see how that wouldn’t work,” he said, polishing a glass that remained filthy. “Anybody walks in here with a broom on their shoulder has revoked their right to be intimidating,”

“You’re not wrong.”

“And the face?”

“What? Oh,” I said, leaning over to the bar mirror; I had a gash on my cheek, a purple mark on my jaw and a split lip. Ring of strength, not a ring of invulnerability. “You know how whenever folk get themselves beat up they say you should see the other guy?”

“Yeah?”

“Well I’m the other guy.”

That got a laugh. See, I’m still a good person.

“Can I get you anything to drink?”

“One of everything,” I said. Smaller laugh for that.

The night went on.

[10]

I took a cab home. I’d stayed for another drink, so it took a couple of tries to get my key in the door; “I swear to god this never happens to me,” I muttered at an empty passageway. Eventually

the thing swung open, and I swung inside, and the thing swung closed behind me – though I wasn't too concerned with that, on account of the chest-high dog made of shadows standing in front of me. Well, shadows and teeth.

Here I would really like to tell you that I said something pithy and acerbic, something about whether or not Tommy had fallen down the well again, or if it was looking for the Baskervilles or – I don't know, something. But I don't like dogs from a distance, and I don't like dogs bearing down on me indoors, so black and so close it might as well be a snarling cataract, so instead I said “son of a bitch,” which was probably half-right, and jerked back to grab the door handle. I missed on the first try, because I had my eyes tied up watching Fido's jaws open wide, impossibly wide, it was going to swallow a car in a corridor of teeth wide, and I didn't get a second try because then they closed.

And then I was floating in a dark, cold, damp space, my movement not restricted so much as suppressed. I couldn't make my arms want to flail, my nails to claw, my lungs to scream; all I could do was float in that void for however long I was there for. It wasn't much worse than my apartment, but it didn't have the comfort of home, so it was with some relief that I eventually found myself ejected onto a dark hardwood floor in a bright, high-ceilinged room. I forced myself to stay down for a breath or two, and stood up as slowly as I could – a little shakily, because the adrenaline was only now free to start coursing through my system.

“Samantha Tiptree. I thought we should have a talk,” said someone behind me – a woman's voice, an older woman's voice, and a familiar older woman's voice, but I was focussing on keeping my breathing regular. I was in a foyer, facing the inside of a front door with a stained glass pater inlaid; there was a light on just beyond it, and as I swayed a little on my feet, bubbles of green and red twinkled vaguely at me. There were fading photographs of strange people hanging to my left, riding horses and playing pianos and alienating labour. The house was cold and quiet and smelled of pine.

The shock began to fade and I stopped needing to notice things so badly, and I turned around.

Before me stood Maya Reddy, her hair lining silverly against the blown-glass chandelier lights behind her, her hands clasped in front of her, gold metal glinting at her fingers. A small black dog, practically a silhouette, crouched at her feet, mingling with her shadow.

She looked older than she had on stage. Her hazel eyes still twinkled, but from far deeper in her skull than I'd expected, the scrutiny of her stare not needing the thin lines of kohl that underscored it. She was very lightly made up – the lines of her face muted, either by kind lighting or kinder years. Reddy wore a pale cotton blouse, charcoal slacks, flats and a cigarette; on the last point, at least, I felt underdressed. But then I figured she had the home advantage, so it counted for less.

“Did your dog just spit me up?” I asked.

“No, not quite. Sendings don't have mouths to speak of.” She smiled down at the black dog on the floor, where it curled into the shadows at her feet.

“I feel like you could've just sent me a note or something,” I said.

“Would you have answered?”

“After a fashion.”

“Then I've expedited your response – after a fashion. Follow me, please,” she said, moving through the dining room, towards a pair of glass doors leading into the kitchen. She paused at these, and took a quick step towards me. I was too sluggish to dodge away, but just quick enough to suppress a delayed flinch. Nose wrinkling slightly, Reddy leaned over to a sideboard, and picked out a gaudy purple stone goblet from among a miscellany of tumblers, carafes and decanters, the kind of things that accumulate in the houses of public figures. Or so I assume. What do you get the woman who has everything? Whisky.

Reddy strode over to a basin, killed her cigarette, filled the goblet with water, and strode back to where I stood, one hand on the doorway.

“Drink this down,” she said, handing me the cup with one hand. Her other hand, I noticed, had a long silver needle embedded in its thumb. I'd watched her running the taps, and as equipped as the kitchen appeared, hot and cold running hemlock seemed like a stretch - so I took the purple cup, and drank.

Everything became immediately sharper and louder, more painful, and more serious. My head hurt, my mouth tasted foul and my clothes stank; the room was no longer spinning. I held onto the doorframe for another moment anyway, for comfort.

It was a thoroughly well-appointed kitchen – cozy wooden table, stainless steel counter tops,

interestingly-shaped appliances, tall dark windows looking out at a lawn that sloped up towards the mountain. So I knew more or less where I was.

“Christ,” I managed. “And people feel like this on purpose?”

“It rather smarts to begin with, and you have my apologies for that – but there’s nothing better for burning off alcohol than amethyst. I bullied Gordon from classics department into donating his set to me some years ago.”

“Bullied?” I passed back the goblet.

“I find blackmail is rather an ugly word.”

I took a seat at the table while Reddy rinsed and dried her evil sobriety charm.

“Someone once told me that if the shoe fits...”

“Did they? How interesting for you. I have shoes made by a young man in Seville.”

“I sort of guessed. This is a nice place. Smart marriage or smart birth?”

“Thank you. Both, I suppose. And a fair amount of work, and debt.”

“How modern,” I said. “May I ask why I’m here?”

“You may,” she said, sitting down too, trying to light a cigarette and cursing proficiently when her lighter snagged the silver needle poking through her thumb.

“You know, I’ve always wondered about that; whether the wicked thing coming made thumbs prick, or the pricked thumbs made the wicked thing appear.”

“Try not to open conversations by asking about causality. It’s gauche.”

“Ontology, then. Why am I here, Professor Reddy?”

She sat back, legs crossed, faint outline of a dog faintly visible beneath her chair, and lit her cigarette with her relatively steady, unpierced hand. She ashed into the amethyst goblet, occasionally.

“You’ve put rather a lot of work into being inscrutable, Samantha. This would normally be the moment for me to lay down a folder with information about your recent history – mistresses or arrests or a secret abortion – and frighten you with my unexpected insight into your life, and so make you stop doing whatever I don’t want you to be doing.”

“We could pretend, if you’d like. Also, I go by Sam.”

“Don’t interrupt me,” said Reddy. “Please. There is no folder. Three different universities in three different countries, middling grades at each, and a series of lecturers willing to offer a fair

amount of hearsay about your extracurricular activities, but nothing on paper. You seem to have gone out of your way to leave as vague an impression as possible – which is irritating, and more than a little alarming.”

“Where’s the alarm?”

“You’re an unknown quantity. I run a faculty full of would-be artists, actors and magicians, which offers enough unknowns as it is; I don’t need you prancing about at memorial services in disguise, adding to that.”

“Sorry about that - my funeral wear was at the cleaner’s.” I really wanted a cigarette.

She looked at me coolly. I don’t know if she had any other way to look.

“There was a fire in Claremont earlier today. Would you happen to know anything about that?”

I sighed. “You’ll forgive me if I’m failing to see how this little interview is helping me any.”

“That is because we are not meeting for your benefit.”

“I see. Then suppose I got up and left? It’s a nice neighbourhood, I’m sure nothing untoward would happen if I walked home from here.”

“Then I’d have to send something to fetch you again. Possibly a little bit more roughly.”

“I could speak to the relevant authorities. The last time I went drinking with law students, abduction was still a crime.”

“Who would believe you? That you’ve been victim to an aging middle-management academic, and malevolent sorceress?” She took a long, slow drag. “And among those who would believe you, who would have the inclination to do anything to oppose me?”

I sat back. “Hell. What do you want?”

She spread out her hands. “I’d just like some data interpreted. That’s in your field, isn’t it? I want to understand why a young woman would show up at a former lover’s memorial service with her face concealed; why, in the middle of that service, someone should take the illegal portal from campus to the office of that dead lover’s mentor, and whether or not that has anything to do with the fire that engulfed the dead girl’s apartment some hours later.”

I waited for her to say something about a dealer with a broken arm and a scrambled brain, but it looked like she didn’t have any fingers in that particular pie.

When I was quiet a little longer, she asked, “Any thoughts?”

“Christ,” I said. “I hadn’t figured you for the Big Brother type.”

“This is because, as is becoming increasingly apparent, you struggle to conceive of minds that are not exactly like your own.”

“Oh, I get a free psychoanalysis too? Gosh. What trade aren’t you a jack of?”

“Do you imagine that people simply don’t notice you being evasive?”

“Fine,” I said, angry enough at being caught to feign anger at being misjudged. “Two out of three, so not too bad. Yeah, I was at the memorial wearing a blurred face, because things had ended pretty tensely between me and Emily and I could do without having to bump into any mutual acquaintances. And yes, I went to see Patrick. But I didn’t have anything to do with a fire at Emily’s place; I don’t have any keys, and I don’t get off on torching other people’s property.” Clear, short nails drummed along the table top.

“And why did you deign to visit Professor Hoffmann? I can’t imagine that you’re any fonder of him than you are Emily’s more immediate intimates. Nor is he an obvious source of comfort for those in mourning. Is he?”

I laughed. “No. That he isn’t. But – look.” I paused, trying to figure out if there was any way to keep from tipping my hand here. Or I paused to acknowledge that, if there was a way to keep from tipping my hand, I wasn’t going to be the one to figure it out. “They found drugs in her system.”

“Lethal amounts of heroin, trace amounts of – some other things. Yes. What of it?”

I shrugged. “That doesn’t gel with the person I lived with for a few weeks. And I mean we lost touch for a little while, but I have a hard time buying that she changed so much, so fast – and if she had, Patrick would’ve been around to notice. They worked pretty close. So I stopped by to see if he’d picked up on anything.”

“Did he?”

“He told me he didn’t.”

“And then what?”

“Am I giving you an alibi right now?”

“Stop rolling your eyes at the universe, please, it isn’t clever. What did you do after your interview with Patrick Hoffmann?”

“After interviews with Patrick Hoffmann what I generally want to do is take a wash – but since I had plans on that side of town anyway, I had lunch, mooched over to a friend’s place, and had

drinks in a little place in Observatory. My friend left, I stuck around for a few drinks more, then I went home and got kidnapped by some dog, where I got interrogated by this stuck-up old –“  
“That will do. Thank you.” Reddy ditched her cigarette, sat back, and pinched the bridge of her nose with thumb and forefinger, eyes squeezed shut. She looked suddenly old, when those hazels weren’t twinkling at you.

She stayed like that for a while. Either she was thinking carefully, or wanted very badly for me to believe she was thinking carefully. Not too deeply invested either way, I said, “So you know about Patrick’s little Narnia portal.”

She looked up slowly, and smiled. “Yes, I know about Patrick’s little Narnia portal. It takes so little to keep that man satisfied.”

“Patrick’s satisfied?”

I laughed, a little, and she laughed too. “Satisfied within acceptable limits for Patrick. There’s a man who’s spent more time planning his suicide than certain kinds of children have spent planning their weddings. He’s not happy, but he’s least unhappy when he thinks he has some control.”

“How benevolent of you.”

“Which brings me to the problem you pose, again; Patrick is chiefly motivated by a desire for control, which is to say he’s chiefly motivated by fear – which is fairly easy to manage. I still don’t know what you want.”

“I want to understand what happened,” I said, because the best lie is the lie that is drawn from the truth.

“But you do understand what happened. Emily Hardwick, like many bright, confused young artists before her, got tangled up in illicit substances – and, I’m very sorry, but demonstrably she didn’t get untangled in time. It’s tragic, but it does happen. Which I suppose makes it more tragic.”

I nodded. She nodded. We sat there quietly and if I was a little smarter I’d have let her take me around the shoulders and usher me home, convinced that I was behaving a little erratically because of a recent loss, and that was all.

But I opened my mouth, and asked, “And the apartment?”

“Oh,” said Reddy, lighting a fresh cigarette and waving a hand. “Forgive me. That was just

gaslighting. The Hardwick family – you would have seen them at the service – inform me that a burning of the deceased’s effects is traditional in their specific religious tradition. One of those fire and rebirth sects. I confess I’m not familiar with the details.”

“I didn’t know Emily had – well. Repented,” I said.

Reddy looked at me for a beat.

“But then clearly there were a couple of things I hadn’t picked up on,” I added.

“Clearly,” said Reddy. “Tell me, Sam, have you any religion of your own?”

I shook my head. “Once, at a friend’s place, but I didn’t inhale. You?”

“No. I tried Buddhism for a summer, but found I couldn’t bear the routine.” Reddy frowned at something just above my eyebrows. “You’d be better at this sort of thing if you weren’t so clearly avoiding being pinned down.” Her voice a little harder now.

“Maybe I’m just flirting.”

“Maybe you are. I’ve nothing on paper, as I’ve said, but I gather you’ve been – a colleague described you as drawing a pentagram around the city with ruined ex-lovers. Until Ms Hardwick came along.”

“Well, you know. Take enough rolls in the haystacks, you’re bound to land on a needle eventually, right?”

“As you say. Though it would seem she got tired of your charms, somehow, and extracted herself – and then walked into a needle of her own.”

I parsed that for a second. “Are you trying to put this thing on me?”

“I don’t think I have to put it on you; it looks like you’re wearing it already. A fragile magician gets driven out by a toxic relationship, turns to drugs, dies for it, former lover kicks up a lot of dirt trying to assuage guilt. I could be persuaded to believe that without difficulty. Or why else are you chasing up all of her old associates? Tourism?”

“Please, you can sell that to yourself if that’s what you want to hear, but it stinks and you know it. Emily was the cleanest one in her crew, had put together a stable life for herself, and was going somewhere with it – the ‘fragile artist dies tragically’ story doesn’t fit this girl. Anybody with a brain can see that – that’s why I’m chasing this up.”

I found that I was standing, and that my hands were tightly balled. A growling noise came from beneath Reddy’s chair.

“Not only are you barking up the wrong tree, Samantha, but you’re doing it next to a No Dogs

Allowed sign. I appreciate that you have some feelings that you need to work through, but the course you're taking to do so is running the risk of drawing attention to yourself, to the late Ms Hardwick, and to the school – which I'm afraid I cannot allow."

"I hadn't realized that this was something of yours to allow," I said.

"Then you are exactly as much of a fool as you sound," said Reddy, darkening for a second. She took a breath, and stood up, with about an inch of height over me.

More calmly, she said, "I have a school to run, Ms Tiptree – a school full of very bright, very neurotic magicians with just enough funding to keep their brighter, more neurotic teachers alive. I will be bloody damned if I'm going to let some jilted ex dredge up a pile of muck and jeopardize the reputation of that school, or those teachers, because she can't accept that there was something about her partner she didn't know, or couldn't control." She paused. "Although I must say – I find that story suspicious too. I don't believe that you're here to right some wrong, to fix some fundamental misunderstanding about this girl which you alone have insight into, although isn't it pretty to think so? I think you're bored."

I shrugged. "Who isn't, these days?"

She didn't smile. I'm not sure why I thought she would. She reached over to her right hand, and, wincing, began to draw the silver needle out of her thumb.

The last thing I heard, before dark jaws closed over me again, was Miriam Reddy saying "If you don't think that I'll be watching you, you haven't been listening to me."

Then I was in darkness again.

[11]

I needed to think. I needed to slow down and figure out what the hell I was doing, and to whom I was doing it. I needed, if only for a moment, a firmer set of shoulders to lean against. I had a headache and a bruised jaw and eyes that stung with the smoke of my burnt bridges, so I locked my door, ran a shower, and went to bed.

Before stretching myself over the sheets cooled by the night air, I walked carefully around the bed, erasing Ollie's runes that had been chalked around my mattress. It was a sober choice – which isn't to say it was any less reckless than anything else I did that day, but it's something I did more or less deliberately. Which isn't nothing.

I lay back, my head more or less clear, closed my eyes, and waited for the familiar laceration of dreams to come. And of course they didn't come, because a watched night doesn't mare; because when I couldn't remember the last time I went to bed without a maintenance drink; because I'd just been spat out by a dog made of the night.

And then, of course, once I'd given up on their coming, they did. Because as I rolled onto my back and swiped at my face to prepare myself for one of those long dark nights of self-evaluation, I found that the apartment was changed; the mixture of rust water and stale smell of the attic gave way to – well. Perfume, sex, the bitter tannin of mouths stained with wine. Warmer, too, as half-remembered, half-imagined arms folded themselves around me, stirring in me something like a thirst for salt. Which, though parched, I had to remind myself to ignore.

“Emily,” I said, pulling away.

“Hm?”

“We should talk, maybe.”

“Talk after,” said the green-eyed memory, moving in to kiss me. I let her, the way you let the sun set, the way you let a falling glass break, the way you let the tide drag you out to sea. And then I stopped. “There is no after, Em. There’s just this, and then I wake up none the wiser, none the happier.”

She lay back. “Oh? Are you accustomed to waking up wiser and happier than the day before?”

“It’s this new thing I’m trying. Listening.”

A laugh, then; not a nice laugh. “Listening to the echo chamber of your own head, you mean? You do that all the time anyway, Sam. Come here, I want you under me; come be happier and unwise.”

“Please,” I said, pulling away and standing up, trying to ignore the part of my brain telling me that I wasn’t standing up at all, that I was still glued to the bed, that I was still in there, where she was, or wasn’t. “There has to be something I can use - something that got through to me. Who you were seeing, what you were doing, anything. I wasn’t that far away. We were together for a while, and you were the person that would become the drugged-up girl in the newspapers who fell from a hotel window; you were carrying the seeds of that thing with you. I can’t have missed that completely.”

She smiled, and tucked her arms behind her head, resting on the pillow she’d taken with her when she left; her pale body lit up by some other moonlit night.

“This is very impressive. You’ve managed to take the investigation into my murder, and make it about whether or not you were a sufficiently attentive girlfriend.” The dream shifted on her back, to get a little more comfortable. “Maybe if you solve the mystery it’ll prove that you’re a good person.”

“I’ve missed our little talks,” I said, and looked out the window. The horizon looked wrong; the blue glass had been replaced by the burnt-out concrete skeleton that every would-be skyscraper carries within them, but which only tends to blossom in the grimmer districts, and where the sea was supposed to be sat rows of sheet-rock houses. “Your dream is starting to look a little different, you know that?”

She shrugged. “Nobody’s perfect. I’m just impressed the spell’s outliving me; that almost never happens these days.”

“How nice for you.”

She didn’t say anything then. I turned around to look at what kind of face she was pulling, and she was gone, and the bed was gone, and I was in a dark and different place that knew my name, and I woke up sweating and angry and trying to hold on to words that were already fading away.

“Christ,” I said, sitting upright and coming to rest my heavy, sweating face on my sweatier palms. The sun hadn’t shown up yet, but I couldn’t face another round of dreams that morning, so I got up, made coffee, cracked open a window so the cool pre-dawn air could waft its way into the place, and eyed the sea until it was light enough to eye me back.

I tried to build up some momentum and kill some time with the papers sitting on my desk - doodled meaningless notes beneath the last generation of meaningless notes so that I would have something to look furiously at if anyone ever asked me how the work was going. ‘An Adventure At The Cape of Good Hope, December 1672,’ a diary by Jan Cortemunde, lay open at the front page as it had for the previous six weeks; god alone knows how it found its way into my hands in the first place. The front page was the only interesting thing about it; it gave the story of a small-town Dane conning his way onto a trade ship as chief sorcerer in spite of having no magical qualifications whatsoever, getting shipwrecked in the Cape, and spending weeks hiding around the colony with a death-sentence over his head for failing to protect the cargo. The story itself was funny; the way it got told, by a moralizing half-literate racist, less so. I let Cortemunde stay where he was, and quit my apartment to go take in the sea air.

The sea air got tiresome pretty quick, so I found a café where you could smoke and read and look up and catch a sliver of ocean light if you really wanted to; it was a quiet place, dust on the floors and tinny music piping out somewhere behind the bored waiter pushing grit from one end of the bar to the other. Every now and then it looked like he was going to ask me to get out of his room, but there was tepid brown water in a cup and in front of me, and a moon-shaped attempt at a pastry on a plate, which meant I was a paying customer, which meant they couldn’t ask me to leave for a good hour or two.

I read the papers, because that seemed like an important kind of thing to do, but nothing that was important to me seemed important to them; nothing about dead magic students or beat-up drug dealers or painful dreams or the vague sense that everything everywhere was shambles. All they had were stories about zoning law graft and the crisis in education, about mines haunted by dead miners, about the Irish Queen's visit, about cops cracking down on informal traders, buskers, magicians with out-of-date licenses, about people hurting other people and how everyone involved felt about it. The usual stuff, for the usual reasons, with the usual mild distaste that would only harden into outrage if there was any name I recognized; there weren't any such names, so there wasn't any such outrage. I gave a stab at a chess problem on the back page, but I'm no good at chess when there's nobody in front of me to play against; either the prospect of beating somebody, or the need to perform under scrutiny, generates inspiration that the empty café and the bad news and the scowling waiter couldn't offer. I killed a little more time pouring creamer into the brown water, and smearing jam on the thing that might have been a croissant in a past life, dropped some money on the table and re-entered the world, for all the good it did either of us.

Money. I'd have to do something about that, at some point: teach a class, rob a bank, sell some blood. I thought about pawning Emily's ring somewhere – and began a faint smile at the thought of the abrasive closure that kind of gesture would offer, selling off a loved one's goods, but switched to a grimace instead. At the thought of the ring my hand had found its way into my coat pocket, where I'd placed the cursed piece of kitsch almost without thought. There was a bad sign; a cliché almost as tired as the uncle with a hip-flask, or the cousin whose nose was always bleeding, was the kid with the charmed ornament they couldn't bear to leave at home. I sighed and put the thing in a breast pocket – explaining to myself that it was to keep the thing away from my hands, knowing that it was because I wanted to feel it brushing against me as I walked.

Figuring things were about as grim as they were going to get that day, I gave Ollie a call, and asked him to meet me in a bar by the city that evening - my treat. Either it was the offer of drinks or the crack in my voice, but he caved in without too much work.

I had about four hours to kill, and I didn't want to spend them at my apartment – so I let myself play tourist for a little while, schlepping along the main jags, trying to find a way to hold my face so that it'd be hard enough to let the street kids know I wasn't worth their time, but soft enough

to take in the slivers of mountain that weren't obscured by cloud, the second-hand book store where an old man read *The Delta of Venus*, the sounds of people talking and drinking and laughing and going nowhere at all, but doing it oh so prettily. By the end of it my jaw was clenched and my eyes were sore and I didn't remember a damned thing. I got to the bar about a drink before Ollie did.

He came in looking about as strung out as he had the night before, ignoring the waiter's welcome – which I regretted a little, since it was the kind of place where they hadn't started giving me the stink-eye yet, where they let me sit and drink alone when it was early and quiet and clean and the fireplace was newly lit, and wouldn't ask about my day or tell me about theirs. But that was whining for another day, because Ollie reached my table, nodded once, ignored whatever opening cleverness I had prepared, and said, "There's something I need to talk to you about, and I want you to try and keep from interrupting me. I know you like the sound of your own voice, and I sometimes like it too, but right now, I want for you to listen." This came out breathlessly, so I figured it would be gauche to do anything other than nod my head, and signal the bartender for another round of drinks.

"Good," he said. He nodded, took a breath, and began: "I had my shadow stolen a few years ago."

"Jesus," I said, trying not to glance down at the darkness between his hand and the table, failing.

"What happened?"

He shrugged, and if there was a slight delay between his movement and that of his shadow, I couldn't be sure of it.

"I was drunk, and just out of high school. I was walking down Long Street, past midnight, trying to find a taxi, or a girl, or another bar, I don't remember so well. I was only about three blocks down, and the place wasn't too quiet. Like, you know, dangerous quiet. But this guy – Congolese, I thought, but don't ask me why – who clearly isn't on Long Street for the party comes up beside me, and says something, so I do the normal 'sorry man, I can't help you out,' but he keeps alongside me, and he sort of points at my shoes and says 'big feet.'"

Ollie swigged, and I watched him weigh the option of making the joke about big feet and discarding it.

He carried on; “And I say, ‘yeah, big feet, man,’ and carry on, really focused on where I’m going – and the guy jumps over and puts his foot next to mine, holding our legs together, saying ‘big feet! Big feet!’ and at this point I jerk away, and swear at the guy, because clearly this is some kind of scam and I am obviously a very drunk target, and the guy seems to get the message, and leaves, and I pat my pockets, checking for my wand, my wallet, my keys, and it’s all still there. And I walk maybe four or five blocks before I notice, as I’m passing the street lights at the corner of Long and Wale that – you know, that thing where your shadow swings past you and stretches back as you pass a source of light? That thing isn’t happening for me. That is an effect missing from my night, and that is because I have no shadow to swing and stretch.”

“Christ,” I said. “What is that, the oldest trick in the book?”

“I think it showed up in the second edition. So there I am, drunk, a student of magic, without my bloody shadow. Which I need, not just to perform a few quite important spells, but to get past the gates at any kind of magical building – because so far as they’re concerned, I could be anything without a shadow. Djinn, or vampire, demon or maybe a very pale tokolosh. The shadow’s the only thing that convinces people that I’m people too. So unless I only ever go out at high noon on clear days, I’m fucked – this is what I’m thinking about, drunk on Wale Street, trying to figure out what I’m going to tell my mother. I mean obviously I ask every bouncer, car guard and vague figure of authority on that road if they’ve seen anything, or know anything, I’m throwing twenty-rand-notes around like – like somebody who has more money than I actually do, but nothing. Huge buckets of nothing. So now I’m wondering, maybe I can’t steal someone else’s shadow, or make myself one – but look, I barely scraped through my matric magic project, and all I had to do for that was sketch some drawings of a mandrake. I didn’t know a fucking thing about what I was doing; I was drunk, and scared and stupid. I remember standing on a corner somewhere yelling at no-one in particular ‘give it back! Give it back!’”

“Hey,” I said. “Do you want me to get another round?”

“What?” said Ollie.

I’m not an idiot, I wasn’t just interrupting him so I could get another beer – he’d been shouting.

“You’re empty,” I said.

“Oh. Sure, yeah – thanks. Next one’s on me,” he nodded, having the forgotten that the last one had been mine too. Which is petty of me to mention, but.

The interval of going to the bar and making money disappear in exchange for beer was an unremarkable one; there was nobody at the bar I wanted to flirt with, sleep with, or fight with. All it was, was a moment to let Ollie cool down.

I walked back, noticing a little tightness in my step that was setting in faster than I’d expected. I clunked the beers on the table, and sat down.

Ollie looked cooler.

“So what did you do?” I asked.

He left a tide line of beer foam on his upper lip and didn’t wipe it off. “I did what all white kids with money who are in trouble do. I went to my parents.”

“Ah,” I said. ““Your mother’s coven?” (Let the record show that I, who find it difficult to say much of anything without smirking, said this without smirking.)

He shook his head. “No, no that all started after my dad left – and it’s not too serious, they just get together, drink a little, try for some of the mid-level arcana. Nothing that could have done me much good then. Cheers,” he added, belatedly clinking my glass with his half-drained one.

“My Uncle Teju, on the other hand – my aunt’s husband – is an honest-to-god mage. Had the little M on his identity card and everything, back when they still put qualifications like that on your identity card. A lawyer, by trade, because he isn’t the kind of guy to live in anything smaller than a mansion if he can help it, but he keeps his hand in – goes to the seminars, has a couple of projects going on in his garage most of the time. Even has an athanor, from Jordan.

“Most of his work was magical legislation, anyway – helping out kids who got caught using spells they weren’t licensed for, getting controlled substances through customs, untangling the mess of insurance claims when things, or people, got damaged by interfering magicks; good business. And you know how hard the cops come down on sangoma stuff – he has some family in Lagos that he funnels contracts through, where it’s a little more laid-back. So yeah, rich. And well-suited to helping out a kid who was shitting himself over getting magically ripped off.

“But anyway – he gets called in, because he’s the perfect one-two punch – magic lawyer. My father’s being pissy because some other man is cleaning up his son’s mess for him, he’s saying

that we should just go straight to the police, and my mom won't hear of it, she says we have to wait for Uncle Teju. And that starts its own familiar fight, but anyway we wait for Uncle Teju, who shows up later that night in a nice car, wearing his nice suit, and his nice cologne, kissing my mother on the cheek and giving my dad the firm handshake before turning to me, clapping me on the shoulders and saying, 'And what are we going to do with you, young man?'

Practically beaming; he doesn't even flinch at the way my body's movement doesn't make the light in the room change the way it does for everybody else. You notice things like that, without a shadow.

So I lay it out for him. What happened, how I got conned.

"When I'm done – and this is the second time my parents have heard this story – my dad asks, 'Is there some way we can destroy it? From here? So it doesn't get used for --?'

'Kieran,' says Uncle Teju, 'we must not be hysterical.'

Oh, did papa bear love that one.

'Ollie and I are going to go for a ride now. You two, don't wait up – I'll have him back with you in the morning, and in one piece.'

'Oh thank you,' says my mother, like this is all fixed up already. Dad's too angry to offer any kind of protest. Teju's hand clamps around my shoulder and – you know magician's hands. The strange muscles, the callouses. He was being a sweetheart and all, but it hurt. And his whole jovial act dropped as soon as I got into his car; his face went tight, teeth clenched, and he didn't say a thing the whole drive up to the memorial.

Because this is where we went; to Rhodes Memorial.

"You need to understand, it's late at night, there's next to no moon, the woods are thick all around us. I mean yes, you can see some of the city from up there, but distant light isn't an enormous comfort driving up the mountain with your shadow gone and your quiet, angry uncle. There isn't anyone else up there, so he pulls up to the middle of this giant empty floodlit parking lot, and switches the ignition off. He sits there for a minute, then turns to look at me, and starts talking in – just a really quiet, uninflected voice.

'You get one fuck-up in life that you can walk away from,' he says. 'After that, they start hurting. And this is it, for you. This is your fuck-up.'

That's it. Then he's up and out of the car, and I'm having to rush to undo my seatbelt and follow.

“By the time I catch him, he’s up at the giant statue of Cecil Rhodes, doing some kind of incantation, using a free hand to get me to hurry the hell up, which I do. And then I’m standing up there next to him, in front of that huge face – I mean you’ve seen it, right? Big thing, Rhodes sort of slouching on one arm like he’s in an author photograph, lounging up on the mountain and gazing over the lands he’s stolen. Except my uncle’s stopped talking, and the statue of Rhodes isn’t gazing at the horizon anymore, it’s gazing at me, and asking me what the hell I want. And I mean – I wanted a lot of things; I wanted not to be there right then, I wanted to be in better company, I wanted not to have a dead man’s statue staring through me. But, more than any of those, I wanted to have my shadow back. So I said that.” Ollie waved his hand, and watched his shadow hand wave beneath it.

I finished my beer. I scratched at the decaying wooden table for a little while, nodding absently to the Malawian showtunes they were piping in. “Are you saying Cecil Rhodes turned into a genie?”

“Don’t be stupid, the memorial doesn’t grant wishes – it’s just, they’ve got an oracle set up there. So you can ask it things – how to get your shadow back, say.”

“Christ,” I said. “I was really hoping your story was going to end with you calling your uncle to help us out.”

I was prevented from amending that last part into ‘help *me* out’ by the sound that Ollie made, the word for which is unfortunately ‘guffawed.’

“What, Uncle Teju? Christ, no, he’s in Mauritius. Government wants him for tax evasion. No, I’m saying we go up to the memorial and ask the oracle how to fix whatever it is that you’re trying to fix. Solve.”

“You’re going to need to say more words about this. Oracle?”

Ollie sighed for a pretty long time there.

“This isn’t something they tend to tell you about in the brochures. Because, you know, guilt. But, um – before his death, Cecil Rhodes commissioned the foundation of an oracle at his shrine. Grave. You know, like the Greek oracles – he wanted some symbol of the new empire he was building over here. Rhodes loved all that classical stuff. And his name – you know. The Oracle at Rhodes.”

“Wait, bullshit,” I said. “The oracle was at Delphi, there wasn’t anything like that at Rhodes.”

Ollie shrugged. “Old Cecil didn’t love the classical stuff enough to let them hamper his personal vision. Unexamined life and all that.”

And then I asked exactly the same question you’re asking:

“Why the hell does this thing still exist?”

Well - and this is half what I remember from Ollie, half of what I read up later. People have tried to get the thing to stop existing, obviously – I mean you do what you can to remove the artefacts of high imperialism, especially deeply magical, talkative artefacts of high imperialism. But that place was built by folk who had built public monuments up in England, where they had more or less mastered the art of keeping old stone intact; wrecking balls, crowbars, high explosives, nothing worked. Even graffiti disappeared overnight. And after an embarrassing amount of time and money got poured into crossing that particular monument off the list of historical sites, the powers-that-be gave up, and decided that it was a national treasure, lest we forget and all that. The fact that it was one of those unpredictably-functional magical sites helped this, a little; everyone who had helped build the thing was dead, but the protection spells and self-cleaning spells and giant-talking-racist-statue spells were all still in operation; that was probably worth studying, a little. Or at least this became the party line.

Ollie offered a flash of canine. “Look, I get the discomfort – I wasn’t exactly thrilled at having to offer a sacrifice to the ghost of a racist oligarch – but I was even less thrilled by the prospect of spending the rest of my life without a shadow. Which, hello,” he added, bringing his hands together and casting the brief, stuttering outline of an eagle in flight against the table’s lone candle. “Wonderful,” I said, “I’m glad that worked out for you. Do you get a cut of the burnt offerings, going around as a walking billboard for this guy?”

“Hey, look, if I thought you had any better ideas, I wouldn’t have said anything. But every lead you’ve followed up here has gone cold – or very suddenly hot, in the case of an apartment building we won’t mention again. There isn’t much else; you’ve got a magic ring that you should probably get rid of, you’ve got a dealer that’s just a dealer, and you’ve got a bunch of friends who look exactly as unhappy as they ought to be about a friend dying too soon.”

“Everybody dies too soon. Or too late.”

Ollie scowled at that; I scowled at that. Everybody scowled.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Not enough. And there’s another lead you’ve been avoiding.”

“I’m all ears.

“Why haven’t you spoken to her family?”

I sipped my beer. “I don’t know her family,” I said.

It was a couple of seconds before he broke his gaze and took a drink.

I tried again. “I’ve done a little digging there. I mean, I went to a library where they keep newspapers, and people know how to work through the newspapers quickly. Her folks... are not nice people. Emily was sort of excommunicated. And I mean that both in the sense that a parent can choose to stop having any kind of contact with their child, a choice that occasionally happens even while that child is still under that parent’s guardianship, and in the sense that a Pope might oust a priest for doing something unforgivable, like getting caught. Old man Hardwick has himself a fairly tight-knit religious community up north; four services a week, twice on Sundays. And he caters to weddings, baptisms and trials by fire at no extra cost. On top of the initial membership price, I mean. And annual renewal fees, which make sure that your soul continues to be earmarked for eternal salvation in the Great Conflagration, hand-wash only.”

“Huh,” said Ollie. “Are we talking like a cult, here?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said. “Maybe I meant it, and maybe that’s what any reasonably intelligent, reasonably informed human being would conclude from the evidence at hand, but I didn’t say it.” I hefted my bottle to swig, but it was empty, so I had to keep talking. “Emily got herself cut out of the loop between Hardwick and the good Lord by a couple of routes – lighting out to the city, learning magic from a bunch of pagans, or worse, secular liberals, getting her hair cut. Who she slept with was sort of the last straw.”

“You?”

“Others too, probably. I mean I know I wasn’t the only straw woman. Or man. Either way, though – I wouldn’t be too quick to get close to the cult of old-guard fire mages. Straw burns.”

“You’re ruling them out because you’re afraid of them?”

I shook my head angrily, because there is nothing more irritating than being called out for something you already know you’re guilty of.

“No, I’m ruling them out *and* I’m afraid of them. It doesn’t fit, Ollie – Old Man Hardwick on stage at his daughter’s funeral, practically grinning his head off at having his little girl safe from the big city’s corruption by means of being dead, and he maybe topped her himself? The man’s insane, maybe, and definitely a cruel bastard, but he’s not an idiot. Not that kind of idiot.”

“Could be a deep play, though. He could be counting on exactly that kind of –“

“I’m stopping you right goddamned there. The ‘it’s so crazy it just might work’ kind of thing, where you throw in a bunch of elaborate detail that’re uncharacteristic of your position, or your actual motives – that never, ever works. Scrawling stuff on the wall in German or severing parts of a body after the fact or – whatever it is, all you’re doing is giving more evidence of forethought and planning. Even the worst kind of cop still has a brain, and does the thing brains are designed to do - (“Have sex and die?” asked Ollie; “shut up,” I replied) – to spot patterns. You start messing around with the evidence, start getting stuff complicated, and you leave a bigger trace, a more obvious pattern. Usually the simplest answer is the one you’re looking for – if it looks like the butler did it, or the dame, without it seeming like somebody’s worked too hard for it to look like the butler or the dame, it was probably one of them.”

“Dane?” said Ollie.

“Never mind,” I said.

Ollie got more drinks.

“So you want to see the oracle or what?” he said, sitting down.

“It’s that or the cult leader.”

“That’s how it looks.”

“Fine, then. What’s the damage?”

“I already paid for the beers.”

“Not what I meant. You mentioned an offering.”

Ollie scratched at his neck. “Yeah...I can’t really talk about that. Part of the deal.”

“Christ,” I said. “I don’t like that much.”

He shrugged. “Do you have much choice?”

“I can choose not to like it,” I said. “That’s not nothing.”

“Isn’t it?”

I said a rude word, and we drank our drinks, and we left to go see a man about a remorse.

[12]

Two digressions here. Brief ones, since we need to get back to the unfortunate story, but necessary.

First: you know, as well as I do, that magical sites are a huge tourist attraction once they've been demilitarized. All those culling sites and ghettos and cemeteries pull in the usual annual tide of pilgrims, and their money – and one of the few things I know about money, beyond the sound it makes trickling slowly out of my hands, is that wherever it goes, advertising will follow, like a great incontinent sheepdog trying to get itself a herd together.

And an oracular shrine that persists in divination beyond the lifespans of any of the artisans involved in its construction is a huge, important magical artefact of the kind that ought to show

up in the first three-pages of the three-page magazine they give you when you get on a plane to anywhere. Paris has the singing skulls of the catacombs, Montreal the great vampire pits, Manila the grave roads where the dead walk on Old Saint's Day. They have flyers, they have tickets, they have merchandise. Magic, old or merely persistent, is lucrative; people like to look at it and sigh at the creative efforts of some other person.

So why the hell didn't I know about the animated, prophesying bit of tacky ceramic stuck halfway up Devil's Peak? I who had been in that city for maybe three years, and had nominally held an office, or at least office hours, or at least scheduled office hours, not fifteen minutes downhill? Well alright, fifteen minutes scrambling downhill past trees and rocks and stinking creosote, but still. It was right there.

Well the obvious answer would be that I was a piss-poor student of anything that required looking beyond the even horizon of my own inertia; there were pretty people to hurt myself with, and supervisors to avoid, and funding to squander, and a thesis about, god, I don't know – the effects of language extinction on my will to live? Something like that.

So that was the obvious answer; that I didn't know because I was a self-absorbed fool. And like most obvious answers it was at least a little bit true. But there was more, there.

When you're a new person in a small city – and depending on the size of the city you could be a new person for many, many years – and when that city's populace has grown tired of repeating its gossip to itself, you become something of a lightning rod for commonly-known secrets and intrigues, which can be repeated to you without the speaker worrying about sounding repetitive, or of offending you by discussing some close acquaintance of yours. It's a gas; everybody gets to wear the jokes that had gone out of fashion months before, feed you lines so worn with use you barely feel them sliding out of people's mouths.

So while I lived in that town, always earmarked somehow as a foreigner to that town – the wrong accent, the wrong name, the wrong high schools – I learned many things, none of them useful. People could never tell me where I might find an affordable place to stay, or where they made a decent gimlet, or where I might find a green-eyed personage who didn't want to see me anymore. But they could tell me who had slept with whom, and for what, who had been excommunicated for an unfavourable review, who knew where to score. On the anatomy of perfect strangers, I

was briefed and boxed. Never anything important, or serious, or useful – or anyway, nothing that couldn't be decently expanded into a comic monologue or letter to the editor. Only the vague, and only the trivial – but in this I was encyclopaedically informed.

It occurs to me now, obviously, that I was hanging around the wrong sort of people – but in all likelihood they were the best kind of people I could find, and even then I was punching a little above my weight class.

In any event: you'll see the problem.

There aren't very many ways to make a light-hearted bit of Wodehouse fare out of a thing like the Rhodes Memorial. Like the graffiti that gets sloughed off by invisible hands overnight, like the stone that hums colder and darker than anything around it no matter the ambient temperature or light, the memorial is a thing that persists, self-sufficient, in spite of the words we use to describe it or deride it. Jokes fall apart in the back of your throat; the thing is, and is real, and when your life is built on lighter, more trivial things, you don't really want to talk about things like that too much.

You might notice how small you look; you might have your precious mundanity briefly, but justifiably, shoved to one side by something older and crueller and harder and so much worse – but by that very fact more important. Who wants to talk about something more important than they are, and spoil everybody's fun? You could depress yourself far more quickly, and far more attractively, with a decent quantity of gin.

I knew about the memorial existing, obviously; I just didn't know that the various arcana it had been built around, and which had been built into it, were still functional. Because to admit that, in spite of the revolution and the democracy and the marches and the deaths and the costs and the new songs and the new badges and the new structures, there was still a functioning artefact of an era that everybody had worked awful hard to plaster over – well it was admitting a little much.

The funny thing about this being that it made the thing superfluous twice over; almost nobody was willing to use Rhodes Memorial as an oracle unless they were desperate, or quite sure they wouldn't be seen, and nobody needed to use the oracle at Rhodes as a memorial, first because nobody wanted to remember that kind of thing and second because – well. It was alive, or nearly.

It was a memorial which could remember itself, and still can, all things being – well. Not equal. All things being as they are. And this brings me to my second, necessary, and with many apologies embedded, digression.

Let's talk magic for a second. Specifically, let's talk about the schools of thought that were most prevalent in magical discourse in Cape Town around the turn of the century – because on top of the fairly hermetic nature of magic faculties in the academy in general, the particular cultural embargoes operating around the country up until pretty late into the 90s meant that the big academic upheavals in the rest the world, or at least in certain parts of the rest of the world, had to be processed and digested at impossible speeds by local scholars wanting to keep up with everybody else. The digestion was – uneven, I guess you'd say. Some stuff went through smoothly, some of it stuck around in spite of the best efforts of scholarly peristalsis; notice, for instance, how quiet and strained rooms get when you talk about the ongoing and effective use of apparently archaic or naïve magics in traditional and informal economies along the coasts - in spite of heavy suppression, both during apartheid and after liberation.

I mean the history of the theory of magic in South Africa is staccato where the rest of the world would try and sell theirs as a kind of regular, metronymic progression from Nominal Identification to Pagan Spiritualism to Cultic Elaboration, then the dark ages, whence Alchemy, then Christian Magic, skip ahead to Renaissance Magic and the Enlightenment, Romantic and Post-Romantic Experimentation, Modernist Magic with all its Godel-recursion, Postmodern Magic with the runic turn, and the golden age of present day, pluralistic magical expression and relation.

Which is horse shit, and even horsier shit in the area we're dealing with. Because nobody knew where magic came from then, and nobody knows where magic comes from now. We're not any closer to having any definitive, or Christ, agreed-upon answer, but – different schools of thought, you know? Now it's all about drawing on a collective, communal unconscious, to account for the wildly fluctuating strength of spells in the past, what, two centuries, but back then it was- well.

Back then the prevailing notion was that nobody knew where magic came from, and that the less said about that, the better. It was observed – with inconsistently dependable sources – that major researches had been undertaken into the origins of magic in such cities as Smyrna, Dresden and

Budapest, prior to their respective razings. Pet theories were advanced to connect researches by John Dee with the London plagues, any number of Kabbalist inquiries with the destruction of Jewish ghettos; one guy found evidence enough to argue that the mage Virgil was working in Averno before it went from being a city to a sulphur-smelling lake. Depending on which hand you held Occam's razor in, this either meant that researches into magical phenomenology invariably caused clean-sweep disasters, or that some shadowy force was at work to suppress this kind of arcane study through the ages.

Or, on the third hand, it meant that if you gave enough depressed, obsessive magicians, which is to say magicians, a little funding and a history book, they could claim to find evidence of magical research anywhere.

Either way; it meant there was a kind of don't ask, don't tell attitude about it. Not a few magic kids managed to get sort of superior about it, you know – 'if you have to ask about the origins of the universe, you'll never know' – but mostly they were scared and confused, and tried not to think about it too hard. Like poets trying not to think about where they got their lines from. (The answer is: their dealers. Sorry. My little joke.)

In the longer run, of course, this is a little funny; magical schools were started so that those talented boys and girls who could do things not everybody could wouldn't be driven out of society for it, wouldn't be made to prefer the company of things that rustled in the woods and stretched against the stars and smelled like deep old rivers, where they could do real harm. The schools were made to fold magicians into a system that served the community, so that the community would put away the pitchforks and the mobs and the cruel words, so that scared young mages wouldn't end up being eaten by some old and far-eyed thing in the woods.

But more than a few schools had been eaten up by old and far-eyed things, and newer things too.

Maybe not that funny.

Still, I laughed at the thought as we flew high over the university buildings, the wind playing hell with any chance of conversation or a steady journey; my thighs were killing me, and I have a medium-to-large fear of heights, so I figured I had to laugh at something. I laughed at the thought of the school beneath me going the way of those quiet, arcane research facilities where

they tried to figure out where magic came from and got wiped out for it; at the thought of the large domed building that hung on superfluous columns in the middle of the campus, like the centrepiece in a nouveau riche necklace, cracking down the middle and falling apart, the lesser pearls on either side of it following suit.

Don't worry, nobody would've been hurt. It was late at night, the place was pretty much deserted – a couple of lights on here and there in the smaller buildings, some postgraduates being feverish in the late-night labs, some live-in students doing whatever live-in students do – but otherwise the place was lit up by the sliver of moon available to us, and the reflection of the distant suburban lights bouncing off a thin layer of fog.

The magic school was on a satellite campus, anyway; I was just cranky.

Ollie finally tacked on to a point where the wind pouring off the mountain wasn't blowing us backwards, and we lurched on, past the main square and the two paths running off from it in either direction, the buildings looking like exhibits in a darkened museum. It was beautiful, of course, but maybe it said something that the place looked its best when it was dark and there was nobody there.

What did it say? It didn't say anything. Not to me, not that night. Ollie and I rode on, he pulling up with the incline of the mountain just in time to avoid clipping our ankles on the tops of the pine trees that kept everything looking nice and arboreal in the campus brochures, and leaked pine sap onto everything that might benefit from not coming into contact with pine sap. We overshot the narrow, indifferently lit tar road that ran around the back of the university, had to swing west and get carried away by the wind again so that he could circle down to it. Ollie shouted something over his shoulder, but that got torn out of his mouth by the wind well before it had any chance of getting to my ears. I said "What?" but that had much the same effect.

What happened next was a flash of three or four streetlights above, a scraping against my feet, and a sudden awareness that the streetlights were below me, as was the sliver of moon, and above was a blur of tar and pine nuts and one of Ollie's flailing limbs, and then a tree jumped out of nowhere and caught me with its trunk – but not too well, because I bounced off and got caught by the ground a second later. This was a little softer, on account of the inch or so of pine cones and mud between me and what I took to be a cement gutter.

I was scratched up and a little bruised, but I stood up about a minute after landing without anything feeling like it would never work again. Drunks are good at dealing with crashes; we know how to go limp.

And we know how crawl, so I did that over to where Ollie crouched over his broom, which looked like it had had a good inch of varnish torn off by the ground.

“You alright?” I called out. “I told you to lean back and put your feet out,” he said, not looking up. “Was that what that was?” I asked, feeling for cigarettes. “I thought you were just shooting the breeze.”

“When you disembark from a broom with heavy crosswinds at speed, you need to lean back and use your feet to brake without fishtailing and potentially crashing,” he said, which is probably what they said in a handbook.

That was a little sad, for me. Picturing the guy with his *How To Ride Your First Broom Handbook*. Although I’ve memorized the passage now too, so maybe that’s worse.

“No that’s okay,” I said, “this is my stop anyway.”

Then Ollie cussed at me. Maybe he was concussed.

“Your ride okay?”

He made one long, slow inspection of the thing, stooped over it with his hair dangling past the sides of his face and his shadow dancing back and forth between the two yellow streetlights above us; I didn’t know enough about how the things worked to guess about damage. Runes? Charms? Tiny invisible demons? I guess nor did Ollie, because he scratched at the roughed-up varnish, shrugged, and said “Whatever, I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out.” Then he stood up. His jeans were torn, and a little blood was showing up on his left elbow, but otherwise he looked pretty intact.

“I guess so,” I agreed, and lit up my cigarette. “Shall we?”

The smoke refused to draw; I frowned, and inspected the tip, which had melted into a plasticky white.

“Mean trick,” I said to Ollie, more impressed by the fact that he hadn’t done this to me before than by his apparently new skill.

He laughed, but shook his head. “That’s not me. This is a protected area here” – he gestured around us – “you know, with the flammable sticks, and flammable leaves, and flammable grass,

with all the flammable things living in them. They've got flame-retardant spells laced across the entire reserve.”

Then I cursed at him, because he was there.

Ollie laughed again, hefted the broom under his arm, and started walking north, towards the memorial.

Downhill and to our left, past a few thinly-spaced trees over a high security fence crackling with a couple of low-rent spells and high-voltage electricity, was the back of the campus – tennis courts, parking lots, buildings where people did things that probably won government contracts or cured illnesses. Below and beyond that, the phosphour lights of the suburbs twinkled at us, I can only assume in distress. We didn't hear anything but the wind. Uphill, and to our right, was the rest of the mountain; red sand and pine and shrub and grass, the smell of dry decay thick on the rapidly cooling air. The road's lights offered the odd circle of visibility, but for the most part we couldn't see a damned thing to our left; I could've taken three steps off the road and been lost to sight. Which is to say, there could've been folk three paces off the road watching us, and we would've been none the wiser.

But it wasn't that kind of place. Invisible hands scrubbed graffiti off of stones in the dark of the night; who knew what else hands like that might do? It wasn't a safe place, by any stretch, but it was a place where you know what it was that you were unsafe from.

The road ran on ahead of us like a parched river-bed.

You get those nights: the ones with a cool wind and a hazy sky, so not even the moon is there to bother you too much, and it's quiet, the kind of quiet they shouldn't have anywhere in the city that isn't rich, or in mourning. And when you're alone on nights like these – because you're always alone on nights like these – you look around you, and either there aren't any other faces, or there aren't any other faces that mean anything to you, and some small hopeful part of your mind says softly that, you know, this could be a dream. This thing happening right now might not be happening anywhere that isn't your head.

And how relieved you feel, for a few beautiful, and cruel and precious moments; “oh thank god,” you think “oh thank god if this is a dream, because then nothing I do here matters. Nothing matters at all.”

And then somewhere a car alarm goes, or you bump into an old friend or a pretty stranger, and the whole thing starts up again, causes start turning into effects, and someone slips the cuffs onto you and leads you back to the Great Chain of Being. And you have to smile about it.

Well. I get those nights, anyway. Maybe you don't.

"Let's go," said Ollie. We went, my hands behind my back.

Big, empty road, bigger empty parking lot at the end of it, both lit up with enough fluorescent lights to have our shadows dance around us in threes and fours, and then onto the concrete terrace that looked out over the muggy city lights, and lay at the base of the big stone memorial. After the brightness of the parking lot, I was half blind in the half-light there; I could distinguish between the darkened silhouette of the building and the dark silhouette of my hand in front of my face, but only just.

We walked quietly, the way you do when you're the only people at a place that was built to hold a crowd. Crowds. We didn't talk. The thing hung there above us, at the top of a stairway built for making your legs feel short and peppered with stone lions petrified in moments of disdain or boredom. The structure itself was square and stubby, mimicking the dimensions of the prefabricated houses that got built to populate mining towns and fishing towns and steel mill towns, so that there'd be somewhere to put the wife, the fridge, the two-and-a-half kids. No wife or kids here, though.

Ollie started up the steps. I tried to light my cigarette again, swore, and followed his echoing ascent.

I got to the top, and gasped.

The steps were uncomfortably high, and I was uncomfortably out of shape, which is why I gasped. I wasn't gasping at the big, bronze bust of a slouching, side-parted man the size of a fast-food mascot. I wasn't gasping either at the sluggish way it opened its eyes, or at the way those eyes flickered and began to glow. These I had been prepared for; these were unsurprising. Even the way those big bronze lips moved under that prissy bronze pencil moustache, faster than things that size should be able to move, left me largely unimpressed.

“What can I do for you, Samantha?” it said, in a clipped, reedy voice that broke a little on the sibilant.

That one caught me out. Not the thing about knowing my first name – I mean come on, that’s first-day stuff for all-knowing oracles. But the voice – the voice of a small British man speaking through a telephone and getting angry at it – that’s not so much what I’d been expecting.

“I thought you were supposed to be all-knowing,” I said.

“I was being polite, and trying to skip the dull part,” said the bust of Cecil Rhodes. “The one where you ask about your death, and I tell you you’re going to die of lung cancer, which surprises you because you expected self-annihilation. Then you say that smoking seems a lot like self-annihilation to you, then I say yes, except with smoking you don’t know what day you’re going to finish self-annihilating, and then you interrupt me before I tell you that you die on-”

“Jesus,” I said, “fine. I can see why people don’t invite you to parties anymore.”

Ollie stepped behind me. “Maybe don’t try and play clever with the oracular shrine.”

“Sure, sure,” I said. “Weren’t we supposed to light a candle, say a little prayer first?”

“Nah,” he said, “this guy’s on pretty much all the time, I think.” He reached up and rapped his knuckles on the lower part of the bust, producing no sound.

“And the offering?”

The big bronze imperialist looked at me, its eyes reflecting the dull glow of the city that extended far beyond and far unlike whatever its expectations would be, a fate that would only be sufficiently cruel if I could be assured of the statue’s longevity, and said, “You’ve already made your offering.”

“Oh,” I said. “What, you mean the walk up here? Like the sweat and effort of going up the steps was the sacrifice? Is that what keeps you going?”

“Is that what you wish to have revealed?”

“No,” I said, Ollie echoing.

“Then no. But you have already made your offering– and not knowing what it is that you’ve offered constitutes part of your loss.”

“Huh,” I said. “Does everybody get off that light?”

“Is that what you wish to have revealed?”

“No! Christ, are you unfamiliar with the rhetorical question? No, that’s not what I want to have revealed either.”

I turned away, and thought of nicotine.

“Do you want me to go?” asked Ollie. “This whole thing can be pretty –”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “It’s probably best to have a witness for this.” Spooked into honesty.

The cool wind of the mountain shuddered around us, hissing through the trees that bent and swayed like harvest wheat, and what lights were visible in the sky, and what lights were visible on the land, glowed with mutual benign indifference, and I breathed, and I turned around. “How do I fix this?”

The thing stared at me for a long while, head tilted to one side, leaning on a thin bronze wrist; I stared back, and I want to call it wilfulness but I was afraid to look away. Ollie was a shadow on my periphery. Slowly, those blind metal eyes began to close, to be covered up by no less disconcerting, no less reflective metal lids, the weak cleft chin sagging as the mouth drooped open.

A different voice – different in accent, in tone, a difference that I only managed to figure out when it became apparent that very many different people were speaking to me at once – rang out, and said.

“You leave. You go to the town where the girl was born. You see the family. You see the family. You leave. You go to the town where the girl was born, you see the family, you leave...”

The voices repeated themselves, the message becoming blurrier as it went, as some loud, deep baritone chimed the words slowly, sadly, a child’s voice read the words out without change tone, without drawing breath, voices that stumbled over each other, so I heard *you leave the girl, the town was born, you see the leave, the family was you girl where born town you see you see you leave the family* and all at once it was quiet and Ollie was pulling me back at the shoulders and I was bloodying my knuckles on a large bronze face that had stopped moving.

We sat at the bottom of the stone steps for a while, so that I could get my breath back, and Ollie could have a go at patching up my hands. They weren’t too badly hurt, but the scabs would be obvious to anybody who cared to look for the next few days; he succeeded in making both hands go numb, which either meant that it had worked, or that I should seek medical attention after a

day or two.

I thanked him, stood up, and started the walk along the floodlit road we'd crashed on.

At length, I asked, "So what, did they put his soul in the bust? Is that a thing people can do?"

Ollie shook his head. "You can bind spirits and stuff to material objects, but you can't make them live through the objects; if you could, everybody would be getting statues or portraits or whatever made so that they could live forever. You'd need a whole pack of ghosts to get a thing like that moving. That thing back there is – I don't know. Maybe a lesser demon that got tricked into thinking it was Rhodes because it's bound to a likeness of him? Maybe a really careful network of charms – and I mean like supercomputer level careful – that's been programmed to respond to things in ways that Rhodes would have done? I mean it's a gamble, with oracles; you want something with infinite breadth and depth of perception, but able to communicate on a human level. Who knows how they did this one?"

I nodded.

"Although," said Ollie, hefting the broom under his arm as we came out of the tree cover and could look out over the neighbourhoods that ran along the edge of the mountain, where they could afford to keep the sky clear and the stars twinkling, "if I was going to do it. Let's pretend for a moment that I'm an insane imperialist-type who wants to live forever, to make sure that his vision of how the continent ought to go is fulfilled. I'm a Christian, technically, though I suspect that the only real higher power is myself, maybe my queen – so even if I could get my soul bound to the statue in a way that would animate the statue, I'd worry about missing out on a heaven where everybody's white and English."

"And a handsome young man."

"And a handsome young man. What I'd do is...huh." We rounded the corner that put us on the long, narrow straight road projecting towards the gut of the suburban lights, blocked out only by the dense foliage and barbed wire fences that marked off Groote Schuur, the homestead where our megalomaniac, and then other megalomaniacs in succession, had lived. I felt for the people whose apartments and sad old houses had been marooned next to that place; it does not do to lead your small and usual life so close to people who are indifferent to it, and whose indifference can be felt.

"What?" I asked.

"I've had sort of a nasty thought. What if he really did use a pack of ghosts? There were enough

articles and books and interviews about Rhodes out in the world by the time he was on his back with heart disease, he could've hollowed out some minds and pumped them full of fun facts about himself, then bound their souls to the big bronze thing. It'd explain why he sounds so much like a caricature."

"Maybe he was just a big dumb caricature," I said, because I didn't want to think about how you'd go about binding souls to a thing like that. Because I had already thought about how you'd go about binding souls to a thing like that.

"Maybe."

We walked on, shivering a little.

"What're you going to do?" asked Ollie.

"Didn't you hear the man? It's all predetermined. Planned out in advance." We crossed the threshold of the national park, and I lit a cigarette, and it caught. "I'm seeing the goddamned family."

[13]

I sat on the edge of the bed in my darkened apartment, looking at the portion of ocean visible to me. The mist was beginning to roll in, a gossamer web diffusing the few distant lights I could make out shifting slowly across the water's surface.

You know how it is in dreams sometimes; you're running away from somebody, but your brain's busy constructing the likely path of the person you're running away from too, and sometimes you notice that – so you're busy running away from someone, and you're busy chasing someone at the same time. You're caught into two different places, running two different lines of thought, and it never occurs to you how strange it is that you're busy running away from yourself, and busy trying to catch yourself, at the same instant.

Or maybe it's just me, I don't know. Because, Emily melted into my dream and since I didn't have the will to ask any questions I might not like to hear the answers to, that proceeded in the usual fashion, with the teeth and the lips and the arms and the laughter that hadn't been heard or felt in weeks, the cruel and gentle sounds of the night filling up the space where my apartment would be – and at the same time, I knew, I stood in a street half a city away, my feet sore and my hands cold and my head thick with smoke, waiting for someone to finish with the call so I'd know where to go to deliver the message, for which I would have to cross river and highway and construction site and be wary, always of the predators that stalked the night to pierce the minds and flesh of those smaller and weaker, sometimes for sustenance and sometimes for sport. I knew because I had done it too. The call was finished and the signal was given and we two hunters and hunted moved out into the night, emerging from the bridge that was the closest thing to ours, and into the city which we knew, and which knew us, and in which there was no love lost, no love to lose.

And across that city I heard myself give out a cry at someone else's touch and jerk upright, shuddering, the bridge and the message evaporating under the glare of the midmorning light and my sudden unwanted wakefulness.

I jerked upright, already awake enough to be grateful for the absence of bedmates that might have heard my dreams and asked me about them, heat venting from my damp face and neck, bruised spasms of breath working their way up and out of my chest. The dream had changed – which, fine, there had been changes before. There had been nights when the prospect of melting into the dream of a girl who had forsaken my bed, who could've been in anybody else's bed right at the moment I was dreaming of her, wasn't something I could bear – so I'd get up and ignore the dream of her, sulk at the dream of her, plead with the dream of her. Other things. And the dream, or the spell, was flexible enough to accommodate that – always trying to reassert its own

cold structures, trying to put me on my back and warm and false, but there was room for change there. And there had been the night that Emily – the real Emily, the flesh and blood that would seem be leaking out onto a hard surface Emily – had broken into the dream to speak to me. So I knew about changes there; I knew that they happened. But it had never been like this; it had never changed the apartment, or the world around it, not that I'd ever been too motivated to explore the world around it. In the dream, either. And remembering the dream-Emily's words, it occurred to me that she had been gone for maybe a week, and that maybe this was the spell winding down. Maybe my nights would have less and less of the memory of her, and the rest of the world would rush in, the rest of my mind, and I would at once be free and bereft of her.

And it occurred to me that maybe I didn't have to do a damned thing the oracle said. Maybe the dream would begin to unspool by itself, and waking up in the mornings would slowly cease to be the stark horror of recognizing an absence in the world, in my world, and I could buy the story that everybody else had bought and sold again, and I would do nothing, and life would go on. And the world, no less flexible than the dream I'd slowly stop having, would adjust. And I'd be fine.

And more than anything else it was the possibility that I could do nothing and survive, that I could sink back into old habits and that there would be barely a ripple to recognize the passing of an opportunity, the acceptance of a dubious truth – the realization that I'd be forgiven, by the world and eventually myself, for letting this thing pass, because doesn't everything pass – that had me stamping my feet and scowling outside the train station half an hour later, waiting for the office to open so I could buy a ticket to the town where a dead girl's parents lived.

The last time I saw him before I left, which was also the second-last time I saw him at all, at a little place in town where the food's too expensive but the drinks aren't any more than you'd pay somewhere worse, Ollie said:

“You could've just gone to see the family without getting the oracle to tell you to do it, y'know. You could've saved your prophecy for something important.”

He was right, probably. But what would somebody like me do with something important?

I took the train up. This was either just before or just after people had started throwing bricks and bags of garbage and worse at the trains when they trundled through their beat-to-hell neighbourhoods – either way, it was a period when my person wasn't at much risk of anything on the train, except maybe being late. And I was kind of counting on being late.

Trains weren't the worst way of getting around the country, if you could swing it. People talk about being on the wrong side of the railway line, but most of the socio-economic carving up had been done with judicious use of multi-lane highways – so we tended to weave into the neighbourhoods that were meant for one kind of person, and out of the neighbourhoods meant for another. Just to the left, or just to the right, of where the boundaries were supposed to be – which always made for good television.

I had booked up a coupe to myself in a car otherwise filled with old white couples that I couldn't tell apart because they were all in beige dresses and trousers, and white cotton polo shirts. They'd probably been doing the same stretch on the same line for decades, staring through the windows in the daytime to mourn the urban sprawl and the rural decay, staring at their darkened reflections in the nighttime to mourn the liver spots and the burst arteries. They talked cricket, they talked about where this country was going, and they talked about sons and daughters who lived in Montreal, in Abu Dhabi, in Bangkok. They didn't look the Indian guy who was about their age in the eye when he came around with the gin cart, and they didn't tip. They looked me in the eye once, and not again. I like that about old people; you don't need to be too tough to scare them, just hard to recognize. Although in my case the bruised flesh showing through the skin of my face like underwear through a thin blouse may have done something to chase their lingering stares away too.

I looked the gin-cart guy in the eye the first couple of times, and over-tipped, but the thrill of feeling better than a bunch of old white folk sort of paled after a while. My little joke.

The trip took about twenty hours, give or take a couple here and there – partially because the trains were almost as old and beat to hell as some of the towns they chugged through, and partially because they had to stop in every second burb to trade a couple of hopefuls looking for seasonal labour in the vineyards at Wellington, or the overalled factory work in Worcester, or

harvesting in Laingsburg, for an equal amount of tired, broke ex-employees headed north to try their luck in the city. Here and there would be passengers less desperate than defeated, stopping in the Karoo towns before Kimberley where they'd be getting off and going home. Which meant that the people on the train with me were those who had either chosen, or had been forced to choose, a pace of life in which it was acceptable to lose twenty hours on a journey that would be twelve hours by car, three hours by air, and instantaneous by magic circle. Deadbeats and dinosaurs.

But it was cheap. But it let me watch the verdance of the winelands in summer punch a hole through my coupe window that gradually closed up as we came into the mountains, with their seams of green and red and black and the small nameless houses built into their shadows, and the streams running cold and clear like they belonged in someone else's periphery, and these sank away to reveal the oceans of wheat and grain at high tide, where school kids stopped in their commute to wave at the grim faces in the windows, and then there were less school kids and less farms and less everything, as the ground began to throw up red dust and dryness and was suddenly, shockingly arid. Every time I left the city it happened; every time I was surprised at how much there was, how different it all was, in such a tiny space – and I would make a promise to myself to see these things, and at length I would return to my apartment and spend the remainder of my days breaking that promise and many others like it.

In between all the landscape portraiture, of course, were towns, with people in them. These I liked less. Especially as we got deeper into the desert, where the things were put together according to the whims of city planners, instead of geology; they tended to be laid out so all you saw of them from the railway was the cemetery where the richer dead folk were buried, and the shanty towns where the poorer folk, dead and otherwise, were likewise. As the sun dipped, I had to concede that the shanty towns were better lit than the cemeteries, but more haphazardly laid out; the cemeteries were cleaner. At around this point I would find the nice man with the overpriced wine. It came in little bottles though, so I felt pretty fancy.

Another thing about going by train: it gave me time to sleep. And dream. I'd knocked myself out maybe an hour after sunset. Maybe not exactly as planned, but more or less as predicted. And again I dreamed of her. No magic circles on the coupe. You know how it is when you learn how to fly in your dreams? No, me neither. But it seemed like a place to start. So imagine you've

learned how to fly in your dreams – so much so that every night, you immediately pause the dream about your apartment being filled with rabbits which you have to hunt, except for one which has your heart inside of it, and step outside, and lift off into wherever you want to go. And I mean that’s nice – you fly with geese, you fly to the houses of old lovers, you fly somewhere where you were happy once, and just circle. All nice, all good, all unbelievably dull after a while. So you start doing other stuff – trying to fly underwater, taking the rabbit that has your heart with you for company, flying somewhere that might be dangerous to you. Because you realize after a while that having complete control of the nature of your dreams, having every wish of yours fulfilled without much in the way of work, or effort, or risk of failure, is dull, and moreover terrifyingly lonely. The way a god would feel, if there were a god; nobody else to hold responsible, nobody to complain to when things go wrong. So you start working against yourself, consciously or otherwise, working yourself back into the texture of the dream, making yourself forget that you could always just fly away from whatever problem comes up.

Except now imagine that you’re being made to fly every night, put on the same route, and you keep trying to land or crash or do something different, and even if it works it’ll only work for a little while – then you get dragged back into the air. And instead of flying you’re alternately fucking and being fucked by a former lover. Who is now dead.

What fun.

So I’m lying there on the barely-bearable coupe bunk, cold wind whistling by and getting chopped up by the occasional sign post outside. I’m just drunk enough to have difficulty differentiating between the momentum of the train and the spins, and vaguely moving into that dream state which most people would recognize by an increasing random jumble of images and words free associating their way across the insides of their skulls, and which I recognize by a cool hand sliding down my neck and shoulder, moving almost roughly past my breast before coming to rest at my waist.

I open my mouth – my dream mouth, I guess, because I am no longer on the uncomfortable mattress in a chilly moving room, but on the slightly-less uncomfortable mattress in my apartment back in the city – and another mouth moves against it before I can speak. The hand around my waist tightens, and for – what, seconds, minutes? I don’t know how time works in

dreams. For a while I let myself get carried away, to let the flying dream just be a flying dream. But maybe the coupe is just cold enough, or the vague knowledge that I'm also dreaming myself standing in a field somewhere, or something in me is solid enough to stop, this time, and take the pale white hand away from where it's probing, put it to one side, and sit up.

"Hey, Em," I say. I swing my feet to the ground, for whatever good that does.

"Hello," says – something. A thing that looks and feels and tastes like a person that had ceased to be a person. The girl of my dreams, sitting beside me and trying to put her arms around me. I stop her.

"How long has it been?" I say, looking around my dream apartment. There's pale dawn light seeping in mistily, which helps, but it still looks like a hole. I am briefly conscious of standing elsewhere in the city, regarding the sunrise from an even worse apartment, but this distracts me and I ignore it.

"Maybe I'd be by more often if you brightened it up a little. I could get you some plants."

"We'd forget to water them," I say.

"That's what they're there for," she says, and leans over to kiss me.

I kiss her, or let myself be kissed, and then stop. "This isn't real."

"No. But isn't it nice?"

"Is this - am I being haunted, right now?"

"Maybe," says the girl, lying back and rubbing her face. "You are quite a creaky old house. Or maybe I'm trying to hang on to life for just a little while longer in your head."

I sigh, or dream of sighing. "Heavy-handed."

"Maybe you're crazy," she offers. Drowsy.

"Maybe I'm crazy," I say. "That wouldn't be so bad; I'd get all the handicapped parking spots."

"You don't drive."

"Of course not. They don't let crazy people drive."

She sneaks a hand out and pulls me to her, and I want to let her, and I say,

"I'm seeing your parents. What should I tell them?"

She laughs. "I can't tell you that, stupid. You don't know anything about my parents."

And then the room dims and it's another one of those flying dreams.

I woke up tasting wine and Emily, both slightly sweet and slightly decayed.

It was dawn; I'd forgotten to draw the blinds, and the beginnings of what would become sunlight was stilettoing its way into the back of my head without the protective screen of smog I'd grown accustomed to. Old habit had me try and shut out the light and get back to sleep, but newer habit had me up on my feet again almost immediately. I could manage that dream once in a night, not much more. I sat in my cabin and looked out at the scrub that was rolling by, the occasional farmhouse, the occasional lake with its occasional birds. I got tired of that pretty quick, and dug around in my bag for a clean shirt; I figured being up gave me enough of a head start on the old couples to get first dibs on the ablutions. Small victories, right? The bathroom mirror was small enough that I couldn't ever get all of my face in view at the same time – just fragments of bloodshot eyes, bruised jaw, greasy forehead. I liked it a little better that way. I didn't have to acknowledge ownership of whatever was being reflected back at me.

When I emerged from the cubicle feeling very nearly like a person, it grew apparent that in addition to beating out the pensioners' bathroom rush, the early wake-up had given me a head-start on every other living person on the train. It was another three hours before the dining cart was open. I tried to read something – I'd brought a copy of Jung's stuff on alchemy in an attempt to have something to say at parties, but my eyes slid off the pages like I was trying to lie to them. I tried to smoke, but the gymnastics required to keep the window open and my face at an angle where the smoke would get pulled out without getting grit or sun in my eyes made the whole thing a little more Dantean than it needed to be. I washed my face again.

Read, smoke, wash. Read smoke wash. Eventually three hours passed, and the sound of a kitchen getting started up told me that the dining cart was open enough to feed me coffee and whatever else they had. Whatever else they had was crackers.

"Just the coffee will be fine then," I told the tall, wide woman with eyes like unexpected raisins set in a pastry. Her name-tag said Miranda, and I didn't have anything to say to that.

She shook her head, and the rest of her shook in sympathy. "You can't do that. You're in the dining cart, you must eat if you want to sit here."

I looked at the five other linoleum tables with their red plastic stools, all greasy with indifferent cleaning and all empty.

"There's no-one else here."

Miranda's raisin eyes hardened into sultanas. "You can't sit here if you aren't eating."

“Fine,” I said, rubbing at my head and scowling, then trying to reverse the scowl into something charming. It didn’t take. “I’ll have the crackers, please. And black coffee.”

She nodded, wrote a little poem about it on the receipt book she had embedded in her hand, and handed me the copy.

I looked at what I’d be paying for black coffee and crackers.

“How much is that in first-borns?” I asked, but she’d grown tired of me and had wandered off to the kitchen. I’d grown tired of me too.

I wasn’t hungry in any sense of the word that would be used in polite society, but the dining cart was the only place I hadn’t tried to sit in yet, and I didn’t want to go back to my coupe because something there had bitten me and given me a terrible headache. I sipped the coffee and chewed at the crackers. Worse things have happened to better people.

I left a cracker on a napkin and a swig of coffee in my cup so that I’d have something to show Miranda if she came bustling by, and opened up the book and stared at the pages without learning a damned thing. My coupe was right in front of the dining car, which either made it more or less valuable depending on your relative need for quiet and asbestos crackers. Right behind it began the interminable sprawl of second and third class seats, which I had slunk past the day before when I’d boarded the train; both looked like battery farms, but second class had seats that could tilt back a little, as a joke. There were a couple of backpacker-looking folk in second class in between the strung-out labourers and the sleeping old women – kids with money who had chosen to slum it and save some cash, maybe meet some local colour. Third class didn’t have any of that; nobody was in third class if they could afford not to be. Just ruined old men and women who didn’t necessarily have that many years behind them, yellow-eyed and leather-skinned, wearing the one good outfit they had for the journey, frayed at the sleeves and frayed at the cuffs and frayed at the edge of their lives. At one point the night before, becalmed at some station in the middle of god-knows-where while we waited for relief driver, I’d heard singing coming from the back of the train, loud and rhythmic and churchy. The singing was something else you paid not to have in second class, or the coupes; listening to people cheer themselves up with a song you didn’t know the words to.

A door behind me opened up, and the footsteps were too far apart for it to be Miranda brave new worlding me, so I didn’t turn around. Well – false note, there. A door opened behind me, and the

footsteps were light and far apart and I wanted to know who they belonged to, so I didn't turn around. This paid off, the way these things pay off; the walker took a seat at the table opposite mine, facing me. She was one of the backpacker types – in that she literally had a backpack with her, which she set on her lap and began digging through, after offering me a quick, tired smile. I smiled back, or did something with my face, anyway, looked at my book, gave up, and looked out the window. Something like a lake was coming up ahead to the left. The girl pulled out a cake tin, put it on the table, and opened it. There was cake inside. What are you, surprised or something?

I looked away – and found I had something worth looking away for. The lake, or dam, held the reflection of the low morning sun which the hurtling train pursued without ever making much dent in the distance; the reflection was interrupted, though, by a hundred, maybe a couple of hundred, of thin pink figures standing in the water. Flamingos. A flock of flamingos? That doesn't seem to cover it, exactly – these heart-pink birds with their lizard eyes and cruel beaks and the sun flashing around their wings and all around the water at their feet. This book I have here says 'a flamboyance of flamingos,' which is the worst thing I've heard today that hasn't come out of my own mouth. An inferno of flamingos, rather. They looked like a flock of phoenixes (phoenices?) just then – which was ridiculous, of course, because no phoenix would be caught dead flocking with another, and no body of water could sustain such heat...but I was tired, and it was a pleasant sight, so I let myself think some harmless pleasant things.

"They're beautiful," said the girl. More than a couple of hundred; we kept moving and more lake and more sun and more birds kept coming up to meet our line of sight.

My thoughts grew less harmless.

"They are," I said. What else was there to say? That they were associated with the Egyptian sun god? That their quills could be used to write with fire in the air? That they stank the hell out of your apartment if you tried to boil the flesh off of them?

I didn't say any of that. She asked me how the coffee was. I told her it was the worst thing that had ever happened to me, right up until the crackers. She laughed.

"Do you want some?" she asked, gesturing towards the cake. She was fun to look at, I thought. Her hair was damaged by an over-zealous dye job and tangled by a night on a sleeper seat, her

eye shadow bled into pores shiny from exhaustion, her blue cotton shirt had been worn at least once before and her jeans could've been stapled to her months ago, we were in a train lit by the morning sun and fluorescent lights, and I was enjoying looking at her. Steady, Tiptree.

"I'd rather not drain your provisions," I said, nodding at the tin at her knees and looking at her knees, then at my knees. My clothes were cleaner, so that was a point in my favour, but I hadn't given much time to my face. Hard to look a hangover in the eye on a moving platform. "You look like you're stocking up for a long haul."

"Oh," she said, and laughed, and the slow clockwise churning of my guts let up for a second. "My girlfriend," – she gestured behind her, to the cheap seats – "she was stressed out about getting everything ready for the trip. You know, bookings, and all that. And she kind of uses baking as a coping mechanism for stuff? So there's plenty."

"Huh," I said. "Now if only she could find someone who ate baked goods as a coping mechanism for stuff."

"She sort of has," said the girl, gesturing at her mouth and biting off a hunk of pastry. I glanced – maybe not *glanced* – at her skinny frame, and wondered if I was being kidded. I couldn't tell, and didn't ask. She chewed, and I looked out the window at horizon. It wasn't better looking, but at least it was available. For what, Sam.

Baking, I decided, was a singularly ridiculous coping mechanism. As was drinking. As was any kind of attempting to cope with the harsh, uncopable, uncopacetic realities of life in general. I inspected my thoughts for a moment, found that I was hungover, and had them confiscated. I turned to the girl. "Where are you headed to?" I asked.

Her name was Noor; her girlfriend's name was Tana; they'd met at a bar, they were travelling overland to Mali to meet some friends at an art festival near the lake. Very happy, very in love, we had some mutual friends back in the city. I say friends. In the end I took a muffin. It was better than the cracker. I'd wanted to buy it for a cigarette, but Noor had insisted that I treat it as a gift. "Pay it forward, right?" she said.

"To whom?" I said.

"Karma, I guess. I hear they trade publically now."

I smiled, she smiled, everybody smiled. Then Miranda, the bustling steamroller from before, told me that we'd be hitting Kimberley soon, and if I wanted to get off there, I had better get my stuff together. So I got my stuff together. Literally, not even remotely figuratively.

I got my stuff together, my Jung and my two clean outfits and the overnight bag I hadn't used for anything really euphemistic in months, and waited for the train to stop. It stopped; I walked out onto a platform that looked like a museum piece, or a college theatre set – old red brick, hand-lettered signs indicating ablutions and exits, and an old rusted-out steam engine standing on bricks and painted in colours that nobody in a mining town would've been able to afford back when it was still in operation. One of the old white couples stepped off with me and mewed approvingly; a couple of folks in second and third class stepped off and shuffled to the exits without giving the place a second glance. I was still staring at the old steam thing, its front plate a network of carefully carved runes for speed and luck and longevity – runes that didn't need to be on bricks in a small town's railway station – when the older, shabbier train I'd been on began to pull away. I spun around and waved at the girl in the dining cart; she was busy talking to another girl, and didn't see me. I didn't want to stop waving abruptly and telegraph my disappointment to the other four or five people who'd been offloaded with me, and I wanted to hang on to the brief distraction from what I was really doing in that town, so I waved at nothing a little more. There were a couple of more beat-up old engines left behind, but those were standing on rails, and not bricks. I don't know what their excuse was.

I waited for the old couple to toddle ahead of me before heading through the white-painted wooden doors with the calligraphed sign above them telling me, 'Welcome to Kimberley'.

The walk from the train station to the backpacker's took me past about a dozen monuments and Notable Sites commemorating the various ways in which people had died in Kimberley: wars, mining accidents and concentration camps predominated. It's a town smack-dab in the middle of the country, where a couple of people made immense fortunes, and many other people died helping. Like any other town, I guess, just a little more up-front about it.

I stopped at a tall white obelisk to light a cigarette and indulge a little in theatrics. What the hell, I was in a town whose only remaining export was theatrics; that and lemons, maybe. Loose garbage floated around the thing's base – not riot garbage, not the garbage of active scorn for some dead white guy's version of events, but the careless garbage left by people who wanted to stop holding on to their empty beer bottles and napkins, and this small park with an obelisk in it was as good a place as any. The plinth's copper lettering had been removed for scrap; whatever it was meant to remind me about was reduced to pale outlines against the dirt.

How does one grow up in a place that doesn't have any reason for existing anymore?

The dorms I was staying in were near the southern edge of town, all pretty lush and suburban, neighboured by districts that had names like Greenside and New Park. We were in a desert. The place had looked like a cheap dormitory setup on the brochure at the train station, but the building was one of those grand manors people had built once they'd decided that owning shares in a diamond mine meant they could pretend they were in Wessex. High sloping roof to deal with snowfall that would never happen, wide, long, porch along the front, red brick chimneys, double-width wooden doors. Initially I thought I had the address wrong, but the place to the left of it was a bar, and the place to the right was a museum. Eventually I rapped on the head of the bulldog-faced gargoyle at the front gate. It woke up lazily; it had been cast lazily, a recent security measure too kitsch to go with the outmoded vulgarity of the colonial manse. They were both in poor taste, but it seemed important to avoid anachronism in your tastelessness.

“Ullo! What do you want, then?” said the gargoyle in grade-school Dickensian.

“Anything but this,” I said.

“Eh?” said the stone thing, uncarved eyes staring into empty space. I was curious about the kind of security they'd have in a small-town hotel, but not that curious.

“Nothing. My name's Samantha Tiptree – would this be Thurber House?”

“Arsk me no questions-”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, planting one foot on the gargoyle’s face and climbing over the fence. Which - honestly, on the list of things that should have killed me but didn’t, that one’s sort of at the top. The kind of homeowner who shells out for a gargoyle isn’t terribly likely to buy the kind with the nonlethal safeguards worked in, any more than they’d take rubber bullets and low-alcohol beer with them on a hunting trip; deaths from clumsy, desperate break-in attempts were so frequent that people were no longer quite so deeply shocked when a piece of rock that had been charmed to move, made a person into something which could not because that person was in the wrong place. With hindsight, or hell, even foresight, ignoring that fact and clambering over the kitsch garden well was just left of suicidal. I twigged this as I landed on the scrubbed brick, and felt my pulse quicken at the prospect of being forcibly halted in the near future; I stayed crouched there for a long held breath.

Nothing happened; I let my breath out a little, and nothing continued to happen, so I let it out all the way. Nothing tried to stop me, and while I largely pleased, it seemed a little unfair. Still does. I don’t know. Sometimes you get breaks.

The garden didn’t work well with the house; the house wanted hedge walls and rose bushes, fifty hectares and grouse hanging out in the periphery, with a Rolls being polished by one of the earlier victims of colonialism – someone Welsh, maybe. Instead it had maybe thirty metres square, crabgrass, and a filthy Land Rover parked on an uneven brick driveway. From behind the car emerged a great sweating ham of a man, bound in a khaki shirt and jeans that had been baggy once.

“Haai!” he said, from too far away, then again once he’d closed the distance between us with remarkable efficiency for so absolutely spherical a man. “Hallo, Miss Tiptree – and welcome to the Thurber house. Very happy to have you.” He shook my hand, probably, but I was too busy being steamrolled to notice. “Please, follow me through here.” If he’d seen me hop the fence he’d let it go.

He did as neat an about-face as a planet ever did, and I followed him past the car without getting any dust on my shirt, or on the bumper, and walked into a neat courtyard with a little pool that wished it could grow up and move to Los Angeles one day, but for now was content to wait behind this faux-English manse. Behind the pool were the “Rustic mining dorms,” said the fat

man, smiling. “Built almost as they were during the diamond rush – although of course we’ve put in some extra comforts. Some comforts. They’re very popular rooms, for students, and for short-term visitors. So you’re lucky, since you get this one all by yourself.”

He pulled a key out of somewhere, and stuck it into the door of a squat, low building that looked like an oversized toolshed on the outside, and looked like an oversized toolshed on the inside. I tossed my bag on the bunk nearest the door, and grinned.

“Just like the brochure said.”

The fat man beamed back, but I don’t think he could’ve helped it.

“Thanks for letting me come over on such short notice, Mr. Thurber,” I said.

“Oh!” said the fat man, laughing. “I’m not attached the Thurber family – they were the ones who built the place. But I own it now. I’m Ignatius Marx,” he said, shaking my hand again. “Just call me Ignatius.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ignatius,” I said, and maybe let me just skip the bit where he tells me not to go to the park because of how black it’s gotten, or whether or not it would be safe for a girl to be out on the town at night, or why I was travelling by myself, and every piece of that bad vaudeville, and head to the part where I got the keys, took a shower, locked my terrible but terribly cheap forced-labour-themed dorm, and went next door to the bar.

It was a little early to be getting good and drunk, but the place had an okay crowd anyway – more than a couple of cars parked in the lot, a couple of tables filled out with kids still looking forward to making their first really regrettable decisions, a couple of bar stools occupied by older men and women building up to the next big one. I got a once-over from a couple of folk when I came in, but not much of one. It was a clean, well-lit place with the sorts of colonial trappings that typically trigger knee-jerk responses in us urbane types: cut-outs from old magazine features on mining magnates, faded photographs of the white men in waistcoats who used to own half the country, ubiquitous cast bronze lions.

There are bars like this in the richer, read whiter, parts of Cape Town, too. But here there were a couple of non-white folk ordering drinks, and that’s different. Granted, the crew-cut white kids were sitting at one table and the middle-aged black coworkers at another, but they were all in the same room. So maybe that was nice. Then again the bartenders were a pair of tired Zimbabweans

who responded unhesitatingly to three different names, so maybe I could stand to set my bar a little higher.

I had time for three whiskeys before Lauren Hardwick walked in.

You're probably going to want to hear the odds on this gamble from me instead of figuring them out yourself, because you're just going to get mad otherwise. How did I know Lauren Hardwick, or Kimberley, or Lauren Hardwick's relationship to Kimberley well enough to guess that she'd be at any bar, let alone this bar, and that she'd be there when I was there?

Maybe I know a little something about small towns, enough to know that even when there are several bars in a small town, there's only one place that everybody goes to. Maybe I know enough about drunks to have recognized a certain glaze in her eye or rock in her step that day at the memorial, or in Emily's photos, that I'd usually just recognized in the mirror. Maybe Emily's folks had kept closer tabs on her, and by extension me, than Em's silence on the subject would have suggested, and maybe Kimberley was a small enough town that a familiar stranger would provoke the Hardwick clan into sending someone to go scope out the scene. Maybe I was acting under the advisement of a low-grade clerical worker whose soul had been torn out and turned into an oracle with the face of Cecil Rhodes, and maybe that same face hovered smilingly beneath the bar's neon OPEN sign, and that seemed like incentive enough to me.

Maybe I'm lucky.

Christ. Who knows? The world is full of omens, pick the ones that work for you. I went to the bar and Emily's sister showed up a little while later.

Planned or not, lucky or not, I suddenly felt very stupid, and very exposed; I was an unfamiliar face in a small town drinking alone at the bar. There was no useful way to react to the appearance of a dead girl's sister that didn't immediately bring unwanted attention my way. I was lucky in that the rest of the bar seemed to feel similarly conflicted; the various actors huddled around the tables fumbled their cues, and then spoke too fast and too loud when the lines got fed to them, a whole swarm of gazes flicked past me and towards the door where she stood, and then too quickly away again. The bartender in front of me held his cool well enough, though I could see his neck muscles stiffen. I'd like to try and make an entrance like that, some day. A

younger table in the far corner finally made up their minds to greet her like an old friend, which she probably was, and Lauren strode towards them, coolly, heels clacking on the hard wood floors. I made a show of ordering something new and fancy so that I could eye her in the mirrors behind the bottles of things I couldn't afford.

She didn't look like her sister. She didn't walk like her sister, she didn't smile like her sister, and she didn't make my breath catch like her sister. No – this angry, this thin, perfumed, jacketed, blue-silk-dressed young woman was someone else's idea of a good time. Long hair loosely tied back, the self-assurance of a closed loop, one of those single pearl earrings that I have never even begun to understand how people manage to make look good. She was frightening as hell, and she was the only lead I had.

I drank my something fancy. I drank it slowly. My hands weren't shaking any, so I could do that.

I sat for a while, and drank, and thought, or at least arranged my face into something thoughtful, hoping that my brain might catch up. I thought a little about fires, and I thought a little about drugs, and I thought a little about small towns and the people who stay in them, but mostly I thought my way through the votive prayer of every child, woman and man who ever found themselves sitting alone at a long wooden bar made familiar by its shape and function, if not its specific location; what am I doing here, I thought, what am I doing here.

Laughter brought me out of it – not my own. The table of yokels that Hardwick junior had gone over to was cackling about something – a phrase I didn't catch got itself repeated – and that was either loud enough or sustained enough to jerk me out of the Mobius striptease I was treating myself to. Maybe I can't be sure they were yokels; maybe they were a table of radical artists and thinkers, maybe the slugs of cheap cane mixed with soft drinks and the frayed t-shirts were all some kind of performance art.

Blue silk shoulders materialized two stools to the left of me. I'd been too busy with my yokel spiel to notice her approach, and now I didn't have anything clever to say. Assuming that what was wanted was something clever.

“Two tequilas, please, Mike,” she said, to a bartender whom a weeping businessman had been calling Dave just previously. He poured them out, she picked them up in hands that seemed too muscled for the gold that decorated them, and reached over to place one before me.

“Cheers,” she said, making brief eye-contact and knocking the drink back. I found myself knocking mine back too. “Thanks,” I said, then “Jesus. That goes terribly with whisky.”

“It goes terribly with everything,” she said. “That’s the whole point.”

“Well. So long as there’s a point.”

“You’re new,” she said, swinging to face me fully; in the mirror, her friends very carefully ignored her absence. Friends, minions, darling let’s not fight.

“I guess knowing that makes you a local.”

“Good guess. And I guess that you’re not planning on staying here, if you’re making a point of picking out the locals .”

“I’d like to leave before my welcome does, and my welcome doesn’t stay anywhere overlong. It packs too light. Why? Are there any local attractions you’re afraid I’ll miss?”

She laughed, harshly, exasperated; in this, finally, I saw her sister.

“The local attractions? Well, let me count the ways.” She ticked off on her fingers; “there’s here, the only bar with a floor that doesn’t stick to you; there’s the bus stop which gets you out of here; there’s the historic Masonic Lodge, where some very sad men try every year to get one of the lower demons interested in their old, tired, souls, and which has some interesting examples of fin-de-siècle neo-fascist architecture; there’s that giant hole, the only vaguely convincing evidence that anything was ever happened in the history of here, the only blip on an otherwise flat horizon, and a major contributor to our suicide statistics last year. More self-annihilations than new jobs.”

“I heard about that,” I said; “it was neck and neck, but then the new cleaning lady quit.”

“And of course, there’s the poorly advertised, but locally quite renowned Roetz church and farm, current home of the Hardwick family. Which I assume is what you’d be here for, Sam Titptree.”

I finished my drink and didn’t taste it.

“Just once,” I said, “I’d like to be the one to introduce myself.”

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“Find a different line of work,” said Lauren Hardwick, settling back against her barstool and watching me in the mirror. She’d tried to soften her stare a little with eyeliner, but it didn’t take. I shrugged under it.

“If I had any qualifications, I would. I tried tending bar, once, but they let me go after a week. They didn’t care for my tendencies much.”

“Who would?”

“Who would. Your friends must be missing you.”

She shook her head like I was reading from the wrong script, dug into a purse so small I’d figured it was just dust in my eye the first time around, and pulled out a cigarette. She stuck it in the corner of her mouth, muttered something Greek around it and snapped the fingers of her left hand with a little jangle of silver. The end of her smoke lit up with a dull pop.

I didn't know if it was any more or less difficult than setting your thumb or apartment on fire, but from the distance of two stools and four drinks it looked impressive, and I said so. She smiled a little, and held the cigarette in her curled hand to look at the tip, blowing smoke over it the way you'd only if you were half-watching yourself in a mirror. So she was only human.

Poor thing.

"It's one of the first tricks my father taught us; remote combustion. It's almost useless on anything bigger than a five-rand coin, but it's good for getting your eye in. And it meant that we could all sit around the living room and take turns lighting our father's pipe for him – although Emily never really got the hang of it. She lit the whole right side of his beard on fire, once." She paused to work her jaw. "Although I'm not wholly convinced that that time was an accident. Still, it's why she never really took up smoking; we laughed at her every time she took out a lighter, and it was even worse when she got hold of the Loyola spells." Lauren took a long, belated drag of her cigarette, cheeks hollowing a little to show the distant cousin of a jawline I had once known, and looked at me looking at her. "This is what you're looking for, right? Memories of your dead lover's childhood so you can scrapbook them into a nicer set of recollections? For something to look at fondly in your autumn years?"

Someone, somewhere, decided it was night-time, and floodlights came on over the parking lot. The sun still had a good couple of inches lead, but the horizon was starting to gain. "I can't imagine she was too forthcoming about this kind of stuff," she said, and killed the smoke. I lit a cigarette of my own, to gain time, and to show her that I could light cigarettes too.

"That's a strange thing not to be able to imagine," I said. "I can imagine it easy; I can imagine her being forthcoming; I can imagine her blonde, I can imagine her a foot taller. I can even imagine her alive, on the bad days. But that's me; I have an overactive imagination. There's a report card somewhere that says so, even. So the fact that I can't imagine why you'd be speaking to me about this, or at all, is a little distressing to me." I paused. "Another round?"

"What the hell," she said. I didn't know which part she was talking about, so I stuck up two fingers, and two more drinks appeared, hey presto. So that was at least one problem solved. We clinked together our tiny glasses of foul fucking tequila, and drank.

She scratched her nose. There was a tiny red stud embedded in it; it suited her face like she'd been born with it, like there'd always been a glint of steel and crimson waiting for you to notice it. Without it, her button nose would've been the softest thing about her; with it, she looked – frightening.

Yes, maybe I was a little turned on, but you have to understand – fear and sex are kissing cousins to me. To a lot of people. I had been afraid of what Emily could do to me, and I was afraid of what her sister could do to me – although in different ways. At least nothing Emily did ever left visible bruises. Nothing I didn't ask for, I mean.

I was drifting; Lauren pulled me back by speaking up.

“I'm here to mourn my sister, Ms Tiptree. And since you knew her better than anybody else in this town did, I thought I'd do that with you. I can't do it anywhere else; my father can see everywhere else. This place – you know Cecil Rhodes built this place? Well, no, slaves built this place, but under Rhodes' direction. He wanted a nice bar, they built a nice bar. And since it was then illegal to drink outside of a walled area, he had a wall built underground all along the outside perimeter – there, just past the parking lot – so that gentry could get tanked outdoors without, legally, being out-of-doors. Bullshit, obviously, but who was going to bring the law down on the man who owns the city? Most folk assumed it was just Rhodes being childish, which was usually possible, but in this case the wall in question was also insulated with a pretty handy set of runes for keeping out prying eyes. And scrying eyes, in this case. So this is the one place in town that daddy doesn't have eyes or ears. Do bear that in mind once we leave here.”

“Oh,” I said. “We're leaving here?”

“We are very much leaving here– in a moment.” She pulled out a fresh cigarette. “But first I want you to do something for me.”

“Oh, sure,” I said, and picked up my lighter.

She gave me the look you give to a dog that doesn't know any better, then brought her gaze down to her nails. There wasn't anything wrong with them; I guess maybe she was just reassuring herself. “I know you can't be as stupid as you pretend to be, Samantha, or else you'd have trouble remembering to breathe – but I'm beginning to wonder if maybe you're half as stupid as you pretend to be, and you just play it up so people are impressed when you go from being an idiot to merely being a fool.”

“It’s as good a theory as I’ve heard,” I said. “What is it you wanted?”

She sighed. “Just a memory. Like the one I gave you; just some extra detail of her life that I can hold on to.”

I looked at the young woman in the blue silk blouse with the silver jewellery and the red hair and the hard eyes, and I thought nothing at all. “Maybe later,” I said. “Once we’re done with all this.” Her eyes didn’t soften any, but maybe they cracked a little. “Alright,” she said, voice quiet and steady as a knife in the dark, and stood up. “Maybe later. Shall we?”

“Probably,” I said, standing up and throwing an approximate amount of money at the bar counter. She nodded at me, and I followed her to the exit. She didn’t bother waving at her friends.

“For a second there I thought you were going to tell me that my money was no good here, and that drinks were on the house,” I said, when we were at the door.

“For a second there I was,” she said, pushing it open. “But then.”

“But then,” I agreed.

We walked out into a sky that was pinned in place by mutual consensus, the twilight extended maybe indefinitely by the phosphorescent lights that hung at every street corner, offering the eerie, claustrophobic glow of the hearth to the outside world.

“Who pays for these?” I asked, as we passed one of the lights.

“The willow-the-wisps?” she said. “I don’t know. They’re one of the mining-era enchantments—they’ve been here forever. Nobody really knows how they work. They’ve tried to recreate some of them in the newer parts of town, but with indifferent success. A couple of kids got blinded over in the township, trying to rig one together. The government keeps promising to send some state magicians, but,” she made a vague gesture with one hand suggesting futility, resignation, a recent manicure.

In the twilight quiet, I scrambled desperately for some kind of explanation that would give meaning or reason to the scene at the bar. Some justification for why I would impulsively refuse a girl a memory of her dead sister when she asked for it, when it would have cost me nothing. It was a pretty colossal faux-pas, given that she was to extend her family’s hospitality towards me maybe an hour later. I told myself that if she wanted to have more memories of Emily, she shouldn’t

have cut off all ties with her when she'd come to the city; that she was playing an angle that I couldn't see, and that I'd be better off keeping my cards close to my chest; that she was still on my list of people who maybe wouldn't have minded seeing Emily gone, for whatever range of reasons. I made enough excuses to just about justify chilling my shoulder in Lauren's direction.

Excuses which were not exactly convincing, maybe, but which were enough to throw some mud in the water. Although obviously they weren't the real reason I kept mum.

Because when she asked me about memories of Emily, all I could come up with while scrambling around my head for some tidbit, some stupid thing she'd said when she was still half-asleep, the way she clasped her hands across her knees when we kissed, or scratched at her throat when she was thinking over my latest inanity, or even some bad haircut – all I could think about was the last time I saw her. When I lay drunk, in a dream, and saw a thin and sad and desperate Emily ask me for help, when I watched her face tense in that moment between “Oh my god,” and “Oh, well, fuck it,” and then revert to the simulacrum she'd made of herself on our first night together. That's all I had to offer at that moment, and I couldn't share that.

Not because it would spoil the investigation, though it would have, not because I was ashamed, though I was. But because the last time I saw Emily I didn't know it was the last time, and that scrap of memory was the most precious thing I had in that moment. I couldn't really talk about it without cracking up.

I'm a little better at it now.

I let Lauren lead the way, because what the hell else was I going to do. The walk took us past a couple of middle-aged gents busy taking their evening constitutionals, a catalogue's worth of grand, or pseudo-grand, gabled mansions, more funeral parlours than seemed reasonable for a town that size. The roads were wide enough that tiny pools of darkness lay in the middle of them, between the wisps of light that hung above us. A tiny, leering man in a wheelchair appeared as if from nowhere on the twilight pavement, filthy singlet bunching up around his armpits as he rolled past us and ignored Lauren's greeting. On the other side of the road, a schoolgirl carrying a hockey stick quickened her pace.

“Are they afraid of you?” I asked.

“Just afraid,” she said.

I considered. “You’re cynical, for the daughter of a preacher-man,” I said.

She laughed; not a nice laugh. “You’d have a hard time finding a bigger cynic than my father. You’ll get it when you meet him. Idealists don’t last overwhelmingly long in his trade.”

“Is that where we’re headed?” I asked, as we turned into a slightly darker road, coming up alongside a large, belfried building.

“Isn’t that what you’re here for?” she asked.

Well, when was the last time you asked a question that wasn’t at least a little rhetorical?

We circled the building – a school, as it turns out – to come upon an expansive, desolate park. It was furnished with creaking swings, geometrically arranged flowerbeds and concrete structures without any clear purpose, surrounded by a filthy moat. It was entirely, unfathomably, deserted.

Lauren started towards it; I hung back. “On a scale of one to invading Russia in the winter – how smart is it to walk into this park alone, at night?”

She stopped, turned, looked at me, and then past me to consider. “Well,” she said, counting on her fingers, “it’s a quiet, dark, and largely abandoned space with an ensorcelled moat around it that would keep any cries for help from reaching the wider public, even assuming that they’d leave their houses to respond to such cries. Anybody choosing to lie in wait in such a park must be particularly desperate, or particularly stupid. So I’d say about four.” She stuck a cigarette in her mouth, and started walking again. “Also,” she said, over her shoulder, “while I admit that my insane cultist home schooling father’s style of education may have left my employment opportunities rather scarce, it does mean I can set things on fire from a pretty fair range.”

I sighed, and followed. Being aware that you are accompanied by the biggest shark in a sea does not make the waters much more comforting.

We stood in the darkened park; starlight that seemed more distant than usual illuminated the odd half-buried paving stone, the parched basin of what had once been a fountain.

“You’ll be staying with us tonight,” said Lauren.

“I’m not sure how I feel about that. Belly of the beast, and all.”

“You’re already halfway down the gullet. Besides, you’ll be fine. Dad meant what he said, at the service; now that you can’t degrade his favourite child anymore, he loves you all. He won’t hurt you.”

“He didn’t say anything about a favourite child.”

“Ah, sorry – that must have been in the first draft,” she said, and then turned away, I guess regretting letting the bitterness in her voice show.

“Who are the spooks?” I asked, nodding to a pale glow in the distance behind Lauren. She turned to look; a couple of ghosts in gabardine lingered around the northern edge, just beyond a merry-go-round that turned slowly and disappointed me by not creaking.

“Oh,” she said, giving a low chuckle, “I’ve no idea. Sebastian and I tried to lay them when we were younger – you know, local wizard’s kids lay spirits to rest, that whole thing. Except we didn’t speak any Arabic at the time, so we ended up with these two ghosts shrieking at us like banshees, throwing illusions left and right – and there we were, scrambling out of the park, trying to keep our balance with our hands clamped over our ears.”

“And now?”

She shrugged. “We could probably exorcise them if we wanted, I suppose. But I feel like they give the place a little charm, you know?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t quite understand the need to put every revenant spirit to rest, anyway – they’re not all omens of murder or doom. Sometimes they’re just a reminder of something that’s probably worth remembering.”

“Not all who wander, sure” I said. Surprising us both. We stood quietly for a while.

“Besides,” she said, “I had tinnitus for like a week after we tried it the last time.”

“You know when you have tinnitus, that’s the last time you’ll ever hear that pitch in your life?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The sound goes away when your ear drums heal and become a little less sensitive.”

“I didn’t know that. That’s a little sad.”

“A little,” I said. “But at the same time, who gives a shit, right? I don’t know anybody who talks up there, and I wouldn’t like them much if I did.”

She laughed. I laughed. We walked a little further along the park.

“Why are you still here?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t ruin a nice moment,” she said. “Don’t do the speech where you’re going to rescue me from this hick town and take me to the city where the people are thinner and smarter and better dressed; don’t be obvious.”

“Well not that the bush and dusty loam are entirely without their charms – but Christ. What’s here for you?”

“You were more interesting when you didn’t talk so much. Forgive me, but I’m not sure what Emily saw in you.”

“Well, clearly you lack her vision,” I said, and then before she could score another point, I added, “or any of your own. Since clearly you’re sticking around here to inherit daddy’s church business, maybe extend the franchise a little? Join the cult of the undying flame, six easy cash instalments? Since your brother’s too hot for the city to give the reigns to, and Emily’s well – no longer a candidate. Sure, you’re not exactly screaming piety but there’s nobody else. You’re here hoping the thing just sort of defaults to you, right? So you can be a sham preacher in a hick town in need of direction? Miss don’t be obvious?”

We were in a shaded patch when I finished, so I couldn’t see her face; that was, in all likelihood, a blessing.

She spoke quietly. “It doesn’t matter whether or not I believe in the fire-rebirth shit – the spells work, and they’re strong.”

If my blood felt like it was boiling right then, maybe it was fear, and maybe it was something else; probably it doesn’t matter. It was over in a second, and we were both standing a couple of feet further apart from each other than we had been, both holding our heads. She came up first.

“I have to take you to the house now,” she said, stiffly.

The walk back from the park disoriented me entirely, which I guess was the point. We exited through a concrete semi-circle on the far side from where we entered, and came upon a taxi rank flanked by Chinese clothing stores, traditional healers and sallow all-night sports bars; a franchised central business district populated by furniture dealers and banks; a formerly grand town hall wedged between an electronics repair shops and a Pakistani takeout joint; three blocks of cheap apartment blocks pressed up against too-wide streets; and finally back into the neighbourhood where unaccompanied old men strolled the avenues at dusk along manors designed by architects who had never left England.

It was outside one such that Lauren finally stopped, having been a pace or two ahead of me since leaving the park; a wide front porch, three stories, at least two chimneys, and a flagpole that looked like it probably still got used. The wall around it was low, suggesting a lack of concern about intruders. The windows were too many to count, and so far as I could see, they were all lit up by orange-yellow lighting. The front door was open; a man stood framed against it, his face hidden by that same light.

Lauren opened the low wooden front gate, and clicked it shut behind me.

“Welcome to the homestead,” she said.

[16]

The house was warm and creaky, and the air was rich with the memory of smoke, the sweet acid of old paper, dog stink and anise. Vaguely I heard sounds that could have been cooking or plumbing or both, though I couldn't tell which direction they were coming from.

The silhouette I'd caught from the driveway had retreated inside once Lauren and I got to the front door. We stepped inside and got bathed in that yellow light of homey entrance halls that trigger nostalgia for something that's busy happening. There was a closed door in each of the three walls before us, with a narrow staircase ran along the west wall – this Lauren immediately mounted, pausing midway to give me a cool look.

“I think I'm going to lie down for a while,” she said. “He'll see you in the visiting room shortly.”

“Alright. Which door do I take?”

“It doesn't matter,” she said, before tramping up the rest of the staircase, somehow briefly a teenager again. I couldn't hear a bedroom door slamming, but that was probably because of the size of the house; the slamming was implied.

I looked up at where she had been.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that Lauren Hardwick was insane. I mean – so far as critiquing other people's mental health goes, I have less than the usual number of legs to stand on. And history sort of bears out the assumption that she knew what she was doing; she took over from her dad when he died a couple of years later, ran the church about as smoothly as you could hope a church to be run – stayed out of headlines, which maybe doesn't mean all that hell of a lot now that I think about it, but I mean she never did anything so crazy that anybody felt the inclination, or the opportunity, to put her down.

Which is – not nothing, for a magician? I mean, even outside of the neurosis factory that is postgraduate magic study, you need to be a little, more than a little, unhinged to be in the position to continually create, recreate, and erase features of reality as you see fit. You can't be good at a thing like that and all the way sane.

I mean Christ, they practically tell you that you need to be crazy to stand a shot at magic in the schools; teaching you about Mad Merlin, about Joan D'Arc cleaving her way through English lines with a half-dozen demons strapped to her skeleton, about Lavoisier hurling fireballs down at the French country side after rediscovering the major levitation arcana. It's a romantic notion, and I don't like it much, but the correlation between sorcery and dubious sanity was a thing much-remarked upon.

But I'd trafficked with magicians before – had done so more than was healthy, really. And even compared to that august company, speaking to Lauren Hardwick was like talking to a house that was on fire. A nice-looking house, sure, cozy, split-level with all the furnishings, great place to settle down and raise the kids, once, but just a pile of prettily arranged combustibles now. A warning sign.

I stood in the empty entrance passage, shrugged in case anyone was watching, and pulled open the nearest door. It opened into a long, high-windowed gallery with a small family of low-slung overstuffed chairs gathered in the middle, punctuated by a couple of potted ferns. I stepped back into the entrance hall, closed the door, and strode over to the opposite wall to pull at the door embedded in it. It opened onto a long, high-windowed gallery with a small family of familiar chairs and familiar potted ferns. I glanced behind me, and contemplated opening both doors at once, to see if the spell was robust enough to have two doors pointing on opposite walls open into the same room by the same direction – but I was conscious of a gently unravelling sense of reality on my part, and let the thought go, stepping into the room that the house was magically shepherding me towards.

It was, in a sense, typical; I could no more expect a magician's house to be free of enchantments than I could expect a writer's house to be empty of books. Then again, I might expect a writer to own some books which they had not written themselves – whereas the spells at work here were all fairly clearly those belonging to Hardwick and sons. And daughters. I looked around the pale-walled room, a low shelf of leather bound volumes running beneath the windows and a huge round mirror eating up almost all of the wall space opposite, and thought about that.

Beside the door was a polished brass plate bearing a coat of arms of some description – a burning thorn bush, its flames maybe, maybe not forming the shape of some bird or reptile, an iron cross

superimposed behind it. There was writing beneath it in a heavy Gothic script that I couldn't make out; one assumes it read 'Home Sweet Home.' I puzzled over that for a little while; Boer magic doesn't get taught much in schools, for a whole host of justifiable reasons. Most of their stuff is weather magic aimed at pastoral communities, and is deeply unpredictable – unseasonal rain for one village tends to mean unseasonal drought for another, or worse – and largely useless to the urban magician. The spells have a lot in common structurally with those championed in Germany during their mid-century 'Teutonic Revival' – which was only natural, given Afrikaans magic's Germanic roots, but you can understand the discomfort. Add to this the fact that the few non-Germanic spells were once copied more or less whole cloth from existing Bantu systems, and as such bore out the history of white men stealing stuff from whomever they decided wasn't white, and you maybe get why they didn't show up much on the syllabus. I knew that Emily had been good at it, good at willing bread to rise and finding the ripest fruit and soothing burns and cuts, the usual pastoral mother stuff, and that she resented this about herself.

I stood where at least a portion of Emily's childhood had happened, and that kept making me feel like I ought to get sad and precious about being there, or extrapolate some idea of how it shaped her, but what the hell does anyone know about a thing like that? I've known monsters and saints from country estates and trailer parks both. Even standing in a room in which, for all I knew, she'd whiled whole seasons away, perched on the chilled leather couch with her knees drawn up tight and a copy of Mauss before her, it was clear that I'd never quite put my finger on what the place did to her. There are rooms inside other people you can't get to. Sometimes I think that's for the best, but maybe I'm an optimist. So instead of imagining the childhood of a late lover and beating that whole thing to death, I looked the place over, at the bright-patterned rug and the marble coffee-table with the inlaid chess board, at the empty waist-high ashtrays, at the small shelf of encyclopaedias and hand-bound classics – Franklin, Twain, Dee, Tesla – that could only ever have been ornamental. The walls were a matte pearl, thirstily drinking in the light radiating from two high chandeliers, redoubled by the mirror, and offering a diffuse glow in response.

It was a room designed to put you at your ease, and normally I'd get worked up over a thing like that just to keep from giving whomever the satisfaction, but it had been a long day. I felt my shoulders relax a little.

A door that I hadn't identified as a door on the first go-round opened, and Jonas Hardwick stepped out, his tall frame slightly stooped to get out from under the lintel; his eyes glinting blue behind a pair of half-moon spectacles, in a fitted white shirt, no tie, and charcoal trousers. He flashed a grin my way, to let me know he had a skull hidden behind the browned flesh.

"Miss Tiptree, sorry, my apologies – Lauren was a little slow in informing me of your arrival. Welcome." He stuck out his hand; not knowing if he was trying to shake or telling me to take a seat, I opted for both. That seemed to work okay.

"It's nothing," I said, "I've cooled heels in worse places."

That lighting-in-the-distance smile again. I smiled back, and we sat looking quietly at each other for a spell. He broke first. "Now," he said, nodding first at the middle distance, then at me, "what can I do for you?"

I let that one drift for a little while, before saying "I was under the impression that you had asked me here. Or, that you had your daughter usher me to your house, and your house usher me to this room." I gestured at the space around us – noticing the slight chill of the room, at the mirror's reflection of both the warm chandelier glow and the darkening sky beyond the frosted windows. So maybe it wasn't meant for easing after all.

"Ja, well, that's sort of true – but only sort of. I did not 'usher' you into Kimberley. And since you've come to this town without an invitation, I assume that you've arrived with your own agenda, which I think perhaps it is best to address promptly."

"Best for whom, Mr. Hardwick?"

He addressed the smile and gaze at the marble table between us. "Miss Tiptree – I think this will go more quickly if you do not look for hidden threats behind my words. I mean no offense, none at all, when I say this, but you are speaking to quite a powerful magician in his stronghold, very shortly after the death of his eldest. If I wished to threaten you..." He met my eyes, and spread his long rain-spider hands "I would be doing so quite openly."

"Fine. Then maybe I came here to pay my condolences to you and your family."

Thin eyebrows arched. "But you had ample opportunity to do so during the memorial, surely."

"I wanted to pay them away from all that – song and dance."

"I see. So these must be very expensive condolences indeed, if you plan on staying in this town through the weekend to pay them."

"Well, I didn't want to travel on the Sabbath." There we go, start mocking the religion right out

of the starting blocks.

“Oh, that isn’t a problem. We have here a long-distance portal– I could send you back immediately, if you’d like.”

“I’d hate to waste my return ticket,” I said.

“Of course,” said the man, pulling a folded sheet of paper out of a breast pocket. “You left on a Thursday. Wednesday would’ve been better; Woden protects his travellers.”

“I have travel insurance,” I said, which was a damned lie but all I could come up with in a pinch. And then “I’m sorry, Woden? I thought this was a um Christian home.”

He shrugged. “These are secular times, Miss Tiptree. One god hanging from a tree is much like any other. And where the Christ let himself get nailed to a tree to be mankind’s scapegoat, Woden plucked out his own eye and hung to the tree for nine days for wisdom, some of which he shared. One was there to rescue us; the other to give us the means to rescue ourselves. You’ll forgive me if I’m selective about my messiahs.”

“And anyway, I hear that other guy was a jew.”

“What are you doing in Kimberley, Ms. Tiptree?”

I was putting together a response to this when the door that Jonas had emerged from cracked open again, and a shorter, broad-shouldered figure stepped out.

“Is that Samantha?”

“Madeleine,” began the preacher, turning around and standing, but then shutting up because Emily’s mother had crossed the room in a number of very quick, very short strides, and was now hugging me. “So good to finally meet you,” she said.

I thanked her, and returned her sentiments, more or less gracelessly; I had just enough surprise left over to be struck by the force of her Afrikaans accent. She wore jeans and a cotton blouse and smelled faintly of turmeric.

“I’m sorry about leaving you alone with Jonas for so long,” she said, sitting down next to her husband, who now had his hands folded in front of him. “Wessel only just told me you were here, and we were in the middle of eating. I can offer you some leftovers, if you’d like.”

“Madeleine,” said Jonas, faintly.

“You must excuse my husband, he sometimes thinks that being the head of a religious community also means he’s the head a family – forgive him, he knows not what he does,” she

added, rolling her eyes almost as far as she was rolling her r's. "Please sit down, and feel free to smoke," she added, pulling a thin cigar out of I don't know where. Magicians.

"Thank you," I said.

"So what can we do for you, Sam?" asked Emily's mother, her shoulders back against the chair, spatulate fingers clasped over one knee. "Thanks," she added, when her husband lit her smoke with the same trick I'd seen Lauren do at the bar, with his low Germanic mutter.

"Sorry," I said, "this isn't what I'd – I'm noticing a certain discrepancy between your public appearance last week and the two of you right now." It's difficult to be clever and surprised and kind at the same time. "And – for whatever it's worth – I am, deeply, sorry for your loss. The loss." But then what did I want to be kind for? I busied myself with cigarettes then, suddenly furious at having been gamed into sincerity by the good-cop-bad-cop routine that parents had perfected long before the first watchmen.

"Thank you," said Madeleine. "And – yes, we do play up our roles a little bit when we are in the city. But you must understand, our kind of magic isn't so popular down there, so we need whatever advertising we can get. We rely on Jonas's charisma." She smiled, and touched his knee. "Which, between us, is just him copying my father's charisma. But it's fine so long as we don't let him copy my father's way of running a house."

The shepherd of the people smiled sheepishly.

"Ah," I said, both for the nicotine and the eureka. "So that's why Maya Reddy, and other interested parties, seem to think that Emily's apartment got torched for her rebirth? Because show business?"

There was something. Madeleine's eyes got a little harder and colder and more familiar, and Jonas' head, sunk until now in some kind of contrition or facsimile thereof, lifted.

"We had to tell them something," he said. "And you'll understand if the story of our lesbian drug-addled daughter whose apartment exploded because someone triggered her illegal ward spells doesn't quite fit with the message in our church circular."

"Maybe the Christmas letter," I said. But they had their poker faces back on.

Madeleine took a drag of her cherry-smelling smoke, legs crossed. "What did you steal, by the way?"

"How do you figure I was the one that broke in?"

Jonas fielded that one. “Why else suspect the immolation story? And who else would have enough familiarity with Emily’s affairs to be able to get in without force, but not enough to suspect traps?”

Madeleine nodded. “And also, you had this in your shirt pocket,” she said, bringing up the notched ring.

I swore, then apologized. “I brought the thing along with thoughts of returning it, if the moment came up,” I said. Which might have been true; I couldn’t think of another reason for bringing it along.

“Well you’d be stupid to do anything else with it,” said Madeleine, “the bloody thing hasn’t worked for years.”

“No?” I said.

“It turns the skin of your finger green, if I remember right – though I don’t think that was what the enchantment was supposed to do originally.”

She passed the ring over to Jonas, who brought it close to his face, suddenly interested in the room again.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “now this feels like something of a wasted gesture.”

“Ag, no, it’s fine, you couldn’t have known. Even in the community, we try not to advertise when artefacts stop working. It makes people start asking uncomfortable questions, you can imagine; magicians die and after a very short time their spells and enchantments start falling apart too, which makes people start wondering about the eternity of the soul, which is dangerous for our line of work.”

“Yes,” said Jonas, still not looking at us. “We’ve had to move away from interpretations of the texts literally equating magical capacity with the animating spirit – or else the contemplation of a dead relative’s wards gradually unravelling and falling apart would be rather more discouraging than it needs to be.”

I was about to ask whose needs were being referred to when Jonas spoke up again, holding the evil little thing to the light. “This is Prussian, it looks like. Seventeenth century – back when they thought a few strong men could make the difference in a fight. Your grandfather’s?” he said, nodding at his wife.

“I think so. Emily probably got it out of storage before she left – she was always digging around for trinkets like that.”

That one seemed to hit us all across the chest, and we were quiet for a while. Except - “I’d been led to believe that things were a little more tense between yourselves and Emily than you’re suggesting right now.” I said. “Now obviously, there’d be some desire to bury that hatchet in the wake of – of what happened, but I’m not seeing how it is that you’re not pointing any fingers at her, at the city, at me, or at yourselves.” This set off a glance between the two that could’ve just been a glance.

“Would it help you if we did that Sam?” Madeleine uncrossed her legs and set her feet on the floor, knees tight together, elbows leaning over them. “If we told you about the promise that our little girl was, and about how that promise has been broken? And how, from where we were sitting, you were helping to break that promise? How one of the finest, most fervent mages I have ever had the privilege of teaching – and I taught at the Kimberley School of Magic for as long as it stood – went to have her fingers broken by some bored academic, to have her mind pulled into the foolish study of unrealities, to have her potential squandered by bitter loves and dissipation, while I had to stand by and let that happen in the name of, what do you want to call it, of emancipation, of personal freedom, some other abstract ideas that couldn’t even begin to make up for the loss?”

“Please,” I said, “let’s not stand in a line and see who’s got the biggest grief. I want to know how it is that – what was your phrase, ‘a reasonably powerful magician’ would be faced with the death of his eldest and make *nothing* happen. No deeper inquiry, no questions asked, nothing. Who benefits from your inactivity?”

“From where we stand,” said Jonas, “you do, Miss Tiptree. I’m afraid that you might lack the correct framework for this, but you must see that so far as we were concerned, Emily was lost to us long before any of this happened. Her fire, her soul, were effectively extinguished, her gifts wasted, on these solipsistic navel-gazing researches, when she should’ve been here with us – even if she could not bring herself to keep the faith, she could have been doing good work here. By leaving, and by doing as she did, she was practically a suicide – a suicide which you assisted, however innocent or uninformed your decisions. Now that her soul is free of those poor choices, there’s room for salvation. I am *grateful* for Emily’s passing; I know that’s hard for someone with your baroque atheism to countenance.”

“I’m not totally sure about that” said Madeleine; “there’s more than a hint of the Catholic about her. Do you think maybe that this search for justice is just self-flagellation? Perhaps you are here because you want your chance to be judged by the *Boere magicians*. We’ve updated the church quite a bit since my father’s time, but if that’s what you’re looking for, we could arrange the trial by fire; we could have you walk through the flames that roast the impure and leave the innocent unharmed, if you’ll wait while we get the thing out of the basement. It would solve your problem, wouldn’t it? The problem of living with guilt.”

“Christ,” I said, “look, she asked me for help before she died. She contacted me, and said she was in trouble. It wasn’t suicide, it wasn’t an accident; someone willed her death.”

Jonas shrugged. “That is to be expected. So far as magicians, and Aquinas, are concerned, everything that happens is willed by somebody.”

Madeleine reached forward and squeezed my knee. “Of course, I can understand that you’d feel better if you could be certain that it was a death willed by someone else.”

I sat with that for a little while; on the low leather sofa, in that high-ceilinged room across an inlaid coffee-table from the people who had, at least in part, made the girl who had grown into the woman who had made the dream that came to me every night, and had, at least in part, made me come to this high, cold room. There’s the story about the mouse that planted the acorn that grew into the tree that got carved into the cradle that rocked the child that would grow into the warrior that would slay the evil king. Not a great story, they don’t let me tell it at parties anymore, but I’ve wondered at how the king would feel if he ever met the mouse. I was wondering it then, in front of these people with their discreet talk of souls and their hands that cast fire, their big house and their expensive magics in a small, cheap town, their church business and their family business. I shook my head.

“I don’t see the angle,” I said.

Jonas sighed. “With respect, you wouldn’t. We are operating with incompatible ideas about how the universe operates – or, if you like, we’re all telling ourselves stories to deal with existence, and ours doesn’t match up with yours very well. I’m sorry if you’re having trouble with our response to Emily’s departure, but there’s no other way for us to frame that without your accepting some ideas which, to be frank, I don’t think that you’d be willing to accept. For what

it's worth, we don't hold you in any contempt for what's happened. It's true that we preach a hard line and keep ourselves to a high standard, but there's no use in casting wrath over our shoulders, at things that are already in the past tense. Before we may have thought of you as she who helped lead our daughter astray, but now – now you were just one of her intimates, and we are privileged to have you in our company.”

“I – thank you, first,” I said, “but are you thinking that your other kids are above going stray themselves? Because Laur-”

“They're here, with us,” said Madeleine. “Where we can keep an eye on them. And they're doing the sort of work that they are meant to be doing. They're not doing perfect, but it's a start. I don't try to pretend my children are saints, Sam; Emily never was, even she we was with us, Wessel is a distracted oaf and Lauren's been the way of the mandrake root more than once, and these things hurt us, but we have faith that we can solve them as a family. We prioritize solving them as a family – instead of disturbing the memories of the dead for the sake of some unclear prize.”

“I still don't get it,” I said, standing up, “but I'm not going to get it any better by staying here.” Jonas and Madeleine stood too, although showing their age a little while they did so; that was a kind of victory. “You'll forgive me, Jonas, if I don't take you up on the offer of an immediate return to the city – there are some prizes I'd like to try and clarify while I'm here.”

“We wouldn't dream of it,” said Madeleine, not even bothering to cut her husband a look. “And I will have to insist that you come join us for dinner tomorrow. Eating at that horrible boarding-house you're staying in is out of the question, of course, and the restaurants in town are full of drunks and full of health code violations, so you don't have any other choices. Though it means you'll have to bear our company for the night. You may go out with the children later if you'd like, of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed, dully. Emily and Lauren's mother nodded, as if I'd said something clever.

“Till tomorrow, then,” I said.

“Till tomorrow,” agreed Madeleine.

I nodded, they nodded, and I started towards the door I'd come in by, keeping myself from trying to catch their eyes in the wall-length mirror. Mid-way there, I stopped, and turned.

“Is there any chance that you would know where to find the town library?”

“Roughly,” said Madeleine. “My grandfather built it.”

I got directions to the place, and got the rest of the way to the door – which led, on opening it, to the slice of road right in front of where my horrible boarding house was. Which was one of those ways in which people can be terribly considerate and also threatening; they teach you that in the manual for old money families. Or so I hear.

I stepped out into the night in a town that belonged to someone else.

[17]

I woke up feeling cold and fucked and my eyes were damp. It would have been the perfect time to try and shift the dream into something else – to talk to Emily, or to whatever stunted representation of Emily persisted in my head, to ask her about her family, about her work, to try and dredge up some old conversation we'd had where I'd have listened to her explain whatever theoretical approach she was exploring with Patrick while I looked at the way the thin, transparent hairs sat on her forearms, and watched her eyes for some sign that she knew whatever my latest unkindness or unfaithfulness had been, and was waiting to demonstrate how very badly I'd let her down. Anything that could be of use – but I didn't know what that might look like, and I didn't know what the use could be, and I was tired and cold in a strange town that rang with echoes of her, so I let the spell caress me into the usual contours of a half-remembered embrace. And again, that ambiguous intimation of a change within the dream – the brief illumination, in the midst of all that flesh, of my unfamiliar body standing outside a cinderblock building with the windows boarded up, a soggy cigarette dangling in my left hand.

When I sat up, my feet dangling from the top bunk, I tried to figure out if I could see any shadows of Lauren in the girl in my dream – but thinking it drove the fuzzy memory of the night

before against the foxed imprint of the dream into contact with one another, and I could no longer be sure that the dream made me think of Lauren, or Lauren the dream, because of a real association, or because I'd thought of one shortly after the other.

So it was going to be that kind of day. I had a lukewarm shower and a lukewarm coffee and walked out into the lukewarm town to find a library.

It was late enough that the people who had work to do were already at work, and the people who were staying at home were already at home – so I didn't bump into too much of my fellow man on walkabout. There was the usual thing – folk begging alms or selling curios by street corners, bored waiters smoking on their haunches outside greasy spoons, packs of little old ladies pouring their lives back and forth into one another over tables burdened with confection, affectless youths crouched beneath the town's many lemon trees looking for somewhere to loiter – but they made the roads wide up there, and the sky big, and for the most part the buildings were so low that I'd have to be right in the middle of a crowd up there to feel anything other than detached. Even when I was getting the stink eye for wearing the wrong haircut or having the funny walk or whatever unspoken small town etiquette I had failed to observe, I mostly felt alone.

Which was nice, actually.

Still. It was strange walking around in a town that only existed because of shiny rocks that weren't there anymore. Well, that's not quite right. The diamonds themselves weren't the sole reason for the town's existence – on their own they were worthless, hard, pretty rocks. The purpose of the town was the money that could be made in removing those rocks from the earth, transporting them, cutting them, and selling them, either to lovers of pretty rocks or to lovers of money. That was all; never mind the nomadic communities that had been forced to settle down there a century earlier by missionaries who got irritated when the markers in their maps wouldn't stay still, never mind the weird Heathcliffe houses that temporary magnates built in the middle of the Karoo, never mind the Mason Lodges and reformed churches and clashes between English and Afrikaans. It was a long con, a means of siphoning money, that fell apart a couple of years before it was expected to.

But by that point they already had the comfortable manors and the wide roads and the lemon trees, the parks and the town halls and ambitious-sounding suburban names – so they kept on

going, building squat ugly houses that deflected heat better for the next generation of miners, beefing up the railway so they'd at last have a hand dipped into the cool trickle of money flowing north and south, building a fence around the giant hole in the middle of the town's sick heart so that there wouldn't be as many sad old things wandering into it.

So, alright, I promised myself that I wouldn't spend too much time trying to figure out what it was like for Emily growing up there, and I didn't quite keep it. Just set it down over there with the other promises I didn't quite keep, would you?

I found the town library after about half an hour of wandering – Madeleine Hardwick's directions having evaporated soon after I heard them – and, after explaining to the nice lady with a lateral lisp that I was a student from the big city wanting to find out about the recent history of the town, managed to talk my way into the archives without too much friction.

It wasn't a great library – the hum of neon lights was like a buzzing always just behind me, and the shelves were narrow and the selection of books was haphazard, and the perfumed smell of decaying paper was almost overridden by that of dust and concrete and people. Even so, I look back at the place with a little fondness.

I don't know. People get sentimental about libraries the way they get sentimental about bars – it's just you don't hear about the libraries so much, because people never notice when a story's starting in a library the way they notice when a story's starting in a bar. The bar story starts when you meet a new person – which is obvious enough – but the library story starts when you meet a new idea.

Or at least this is how I was feeling about things when I walked in.

I didn't know what the hell I was looking for, the ceiling was too low, there was dust in my throat, the lighting was terrible and the carpet looked like it was trying to revenge itself on me for something, but none of that mattered too much. I was in a room full of books; that meant I was halfway home, however dire the rest of the facts might be. I had the words fire, and Hardwick, and Woden, and dream; I found an index and started browsing.

By the time I got out, my lungs were bags of dust, the sun was starting to dip in the sky, and I thought I'd met an idea worth knowing.

I stopped by at the hostel to grab a shower and get directions to the Hardwick place – reasoning, accurately, that it was the kind of place everyone would know about. It occurred to me as I was coming up the front steps that I should’ve brought wine or something, and then it was too late because I was getting ushered indoors, into a warm brightly lit kitchen with a table laid out and four painfully familiar faces looking up at me.

Dinner was – strange. Intimate evenings for two I could handle; better was dining for one, and best of all was eating in so large a crowd that you could be silent without even noticing it yourself, the rest of the room doing the work of speculation, of discussion, of interest. This was none of these; this was five people in a room trying to brute force the intimacy of breaking bread.

The table was the farm-style special, big fat rectangular affair that didn’t quite have the snootiness of your country-manor-table with hierarchal seating arrangements, but still clearly had an end for Miriam, and an end for Jonas, and a chunk in the middle for the kids and me.

I kept waiting for the family to fall into whatever their natural rhythms of speech might be – Madeleine asking after her kids’ days, some kind of brother-and-son banter between the silent, bull-wide Wessel and Jonas, sibling in-jokes, whatever – but nothing came. We sat in that warm kitchen-cum-dining-room, scratching at our heaps of rice, meat and potatoes, and our short glasses of sweet wine, and nothing got said. I was conscious of the fact that I was occupying the space, if not the literal seat, that Emily had when she still there, filling up an uncomfortable vacancy with the even-more uncomfortable reminder of what their daughter had become, before she had become nothing at all.

Maybe that was unintentional; maybe it hadn’t occurred to them. But the longer we sat in silence, the longer I thought it, and the worse it got, so I broke first.

“So, Jonas. Is that the same mirror you’ve got set up in the visiting room?” I asked, pointing with my fork to show country manners.

Lauren took a deep pull of her wine glass.

“It is!” said Jonas, looking pleased. “Good eye.”

“Well she could hardly expect two mirrors like that to exist in the world, Jonas” said Madeleine.

“She’s a pessimist, I gather, but there are limits.”

“Magic mirror?” I asked, wading through the family stuff. A quiet groan from Wessel.

“Quite the opposite,” said Jonas. “It is something of a rarity in that respect; a completely mundane, dispelled, unenchanted, regular mirror.” He paused to look up at the thing. “Although, I concede, a very large, quite expensive mirror.”

“And – it’s in every room for a reason? God’s eyes are on you always, kind of thing?”

Madeleine took advantage of a hunk of meat drying up in her husband’s mouth to cut in.

“It’s sort of a joke, actually – although, it’s the sort of joke you need to explain, which defeats the purpose. Do you know the Christian Andersen story, with the snow queen?”

I nodded, because what am I, a spoil-sport?

“Then you’ll know it’s about a child being kidnapped, or killed, by an ice witch, and his sister manages to bring him back with cunning or God or fire magic, depending on the version. And the ending is never clear about being a happy ending, because the brother is obsessed with math, with logic, he wants to try and express eternity – so he’s happy with the cold reason of the snow queen’s world. Fractals, calculus, that sort of thing. And the reason he loves infinity is - there’s this part at the beginning which everyone seems to forget, a dark wizard at the start of it, who builds this giant mirror that reflects, or highlights, everything ugly in the world, and none of the beauty, which somehow shatters while his servants are carrying it from one corner of the sky to the next – which means these tiny shards of ugliness fall all over, in forests, in cities, in some people’s eyes, and some people’s hearts. And it’s one of these shards that gets into the brother’s heart, that makes him fall in love with cold eternity.” Madeleine inclined her head towards the mirror.

“The idea is to do the opposite of the fairy tale – where Andersen has many different pieces of mirror in a unified world, Jonas has set up a single, unified mirror reflecting into the fragmented, uneven rooms of the house. I think the initial plan was to have had the thing extend to every house in the city, but that seemed a little too much like something a dark wizard would do.”

She smiled at her husband, who smiled back, the worn out smiles of couples who’ve heard one another’s stories too many times to even get upset about having to smile at them anymore.

Lauren rolled her eyes, but only once, and Wessel got more potato salad.

“Huh,” I said. And then, “I know a story a little like that. One of yours, actually,” I nodded at Jonas, “the Wotan thing. He was flying around in the shape of a giant eagle, as I guess your gods are wont to do, with the mead of poetic inspiration in his mouth, because he was stealing it from some giants or whomever one steals the source of poetic inspiration from. And here and there

he'd spill some, because I guess eagle beaks aren't watertight, and where the mead landed on people, there were poets created." I reached for water, my mouth gone dry after so many words without a quip.

"I don't get it," said Wessel. "I mean they're both origin stories, but –"

"Sam's being clever," said Lauren. "The poetic inspiration and the shard of ugliness are the same move, right? Because, what if you lived in a world where everything looked beautiful already, you wouldn't bother with poetry. Whereas if you had a piece of glass in your eye making everything look grim and unpleasant, you'd need to put together some poems and stories to make the grimness bearable. Is that about right?"

I shrugged. "If it fits, sure."

Madeleine sipped her wine. "And how is it that you came across the Norse story in – where is it you said you were from? I'm sorry, I don't think I asked before."

"Budapest," I said, "but I think I heard the story here. Or, Cape Town here."

"Very different heres," said Wessel.

"So they tell me."

After the meal, the older couple did the exaggerated yawning and stretching that I can never quite figure out as pantomime or the god-given right of the middle-aged, and said they'd be retiring. My train left the next night, so I got a firm handshake from Jonas and a lingering hug from Madeleine, and for a little while there we played at being well-adjusted. Although none were so optimistic as to promise to write, or call, or get in touch the next time we were in the same area. Then Emily's parents disappeared, leaving me with her surviving siblings.

"So," said Wessel, looking from me to Lauren, "drinks?"

Lauren shrugged. "Yeah, what the hell," I said.

"Great, then let's go."

We all got up. "Do these just sort of take care of themselves?" I asked, gesturing at the dishes scattered around the table.

"Ah, sort of – we pay someone to deal with them. Don't worry about it," said Wessel, opening a door out onto a starlit field, and standing to one side. Lauren smiled at me, and stepped through; figuring the worst that could happen was death, I followed.

The field was some ways out of town proper, all scrub and grass and dirt and low trees that all cut off at the same height like low-density clouds. My eyes adjusting to the starry gloom, I could just about make out the glow of an office block a couple of kilometres away. Behind me, Lauren was closing the door to the Hardwick kitchen, her hand reaching for and fastening on something invisible in the empty air before drawing shut the hole that hung over the empty field. Once closed, all she held was a portion of the sky in the silhouette of her hand, like we'd come out of nowhere.

"I thought you said we were doing drinks."

"There's a stockpile buried under the big stump over here," said Wessel. "It's nice to come here when we're not really feeling the bar vibe. Or the bar prices." He kneeled in the dust, bending over to scratch out a figure in the dirt. Almost before he'd stood up to dust the grit from his palms, the earth began to shudder beneath our feet, scattering a flock of silver-breasted birds from a camelthorn. Wessel had to spring aside as a wide metal crate rose tremulously out from the ground beneath him.

"Sloppy," said Lauren.

"Eat me," said Wessel, popping open the crate, and passing back a tall bottle of dubious brandy. A couple more bottles brownly warped what moonlight made it down to the bottom of the crate.

I took a pull. "Christ," I said, "were you saving this for the end times? To make them seem a little more bearable, I mean."

Lauren took the bottle from me one-handed, gesturing with the other to raise clumps of sand, forming makeshift seats. "We were teenagers when we buried this; we got Emily to buy the stuff, but she'd only just turned eighteen, and didn't have too refined a palate for liquor at the time."

"She never really got one," I said, as Wessel set himself down on the dirt chair. "She got picky about wine, but liquor was all the same to her – tequila or bourbon, vodka or raki, whatever."

"Good for her," said Wessel. Something moved in the dark behind him.

"We expecting company?" I asked, the old argument between fear and fatigue rising in me.

"Relax," said Lauren, passing the bottle over. "That'll be Tiisetso, if it's anyone."

"Tiisetso?"

"The other neighbourhood witch."

A tall, asymmetrical shadow solidified itself into a thin girl ridding side-saddle on an unhurried kudu. “Hey, Hardwicks,” she said, sliding lightly to the ground. “Hey, stranger,” she added, nodding at me. The kudu carried on walking into the darkness without her.

“Hey,” I said. “It’s Sam. That’s – sorry how were you dominating a thing that big?”

“Tiisetso, hi. And I wasn’t ‘dominating’ her. I just asked for a lift.”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m not great at magic.”

Lauren took the bottle from me and handed it to Tiisetso. “You’re doing fine, ‘Setso just doesn’t like the English name for it. It’s the same spell.”

“It isn’t the same spell – how could it be, if the Basotho ngaka were sending animals to do their work in the sixth century, but St. Francis of Assisi only perfected domination in the thirteen hundreds?”

“Seventeen seconds after you show up,” said Wessel, standing up “and you’ve already started on this shit. That has to be some sort of a record. Hi.” He stood up, kissed the girl lightly, and flopped down again.

“Either you finish reading *People’s History of Magic* and talk with me about this intelligently, or you get to hear me monologue. Your call.” She sat on the rock next to his, and swung her legs lightly across his lap.

“I choose death,” said Wessel, handing her the bottle.

“Augh,” she said, taking a pull. “What are we celebrating here?”

“Sam’s Emily’s ex. We’re doing a kind of a wake thing.”

To avoid seeing the couple being a couple, I had been lighting a cigarette while gazing off into the middle distance, my fondest companion, but this pulled me back in.

“We are?”

“We kind of are,” said Lauren. “Nothing elaborate, but you know. A little drink and a little talk would be nice.”

“Alright,” I said.

“Alright.”

We sat in silence like a breath held between the steady beats of trucks dopplering along the

highway out of hearing, and in darkness, all of us at least a little grateful for not being able to make out one another's faces except through the corners of our eyes, and passed the bottle around.

"I can start," said Wessel. Tiisetso pulled her legs away while the boy shifted forward, arms on elbows, gazing at some fixed point in the air between us.

"I don't think I knew her that well, really. She was older than me, she was a girl, she was intense, and it was hard to get her to play with me because she was always reading or digging in the attics or fighting with mom. A lot of the time I didn't like her very much. But she wanted me to be happy, you know? A couple of weeks before she lit out for the city, she came up to my room where I was busy having a panic attack about these spell conjugations dad had set for me and I'd completely forgotten to do, and she just sort of wandered around, looking at things, then came to peak over my shoulder – and I was about to yell at her to get out or something, and she just reached over and fixed my chart for me. Then she explained what I had done wrong, patted me on the head, and went downstairs. When I followed half an hour later, there was a sandwich waiting for me in the kitchen."

He took a swig of the brandy.

"It's a dumb story, I know, but there were these moments where she'd break out of the ice queen thing and just be kind, you know? Those moments stood out." He poured out a little of the drink, and passed it over to Tiisetso.

"Oh," she said. "Alright. Well, so, I was in awe of Emily from the first day. Back when the Sol Plaatjie School was still teaching magic, she volunteered there, and you know, I was still young. I was hungry for any kind of knowledge. So even though she taught European magic, and she taught with a settler mentality, I liked her. Even though, when I asked her about workings that my grandmother used to do, she would frown and tell me about the French origin of the spell, and that my grandmother wasn't doing it right, and I would believe her. By now I'm almost grateful about the Hardwicks shutting down the Sol Plaatjie School's magic class, even if they were just doing it to stop half-educated township kids from trying to sell their shitty enchantments on street corners. If that school had stayed open I'd have been totally colonized in my thinking." She took a pull of the bottle, and once her coughing had subsided, resumed. "But

still. When they closed the school, Emily Hardwick showed up at my front door, greeted my mother in rehearsed Shona that was almost intelligible, and handed me an armload of books. Swedenborg, Vico, Wittgenstein, a bunch of dead white men that she could afford to part with because they had extra copies in that big house up the hill. Even then I resented the gift, resented having to owe that girl something.” She poured out a mouthful of drink, making an indecent sound on the dusty ground. “But she gave me books. That made a difference to me.”

Lauren stepped forward and took the bottle from Tiisetso’s dangling wrist, and remained standing as she took a pull. Her voice was unchanged by the brandy, her face just a patch of more determined dark against the night sky when she said, “Emily was a disappointment. In a lot of ways. She wasn’t the sister I wanted, she wasn’t the daughter her parents wanted, and she wasn’t the mage that she could have become. We didn’t have much in common that wasn’t magic. We didn’t like the same music, or the same people, the same bad music you’re supposed to love when you’re a teenager. She was supposed to be a role model for me but she was a person I couldn’t begin to imagine being, or imagine wanting to resemble. But there was an afternoon where we were out in the desert, practicing fireballs, and I must’ve been about fifteen years old, sulking because I was in the desert with my sister throwing fireballs instead of being at a friend’s party, kissing some idiot boy who tasted of chips and soda. And I cast this one mother of a thing, lost most of the hair on my forearms, obliterating the target we were working with. And Emily looks over at me and says, “that should be hotter.”

And I say, “excuse me? I just blew up a mannequin.”

She shrugs, and says, “Haddo’s Greek Fire was used to melt steel, once – but you’re only at two thirds of the temperature you would need to be to do that.”

“So?” I say. “Everyone knows spells get less potent with time.”

“Well that’s the party line, sure,” she says. “We live in a fallen age, no magical artefact has outlived its maker in decades, things were better before the revolution, the era for major arcana is over, and so on. Personally, I think the world’s gotten better at calling mediocre magicians out on their bullshit; no more of this ‘true name’ business, no deferring to old men with white beards, a grasp of Greek, and misplaced authority. Magic just got harder, not weaker. You know?”

Then she holds out her hand, with this white hot-ball in it that I can feel on my skin from a few

feet away, in the middle of the day in the desert, and lobs it at the remains of the mannequin – and all the sand around it just melts. Like the surface of water, but locked in place, the ripples these perfect unmoving rings. I'd never been so angry at anyone in my life. We went home, and showered, and I spent the next month reading and training and reading until I could melt steel, if I felt like it." She tipped the bottle to the side. "Sometimes I feel like it."

And inevitably, the bottle came to me. Pretty much empty, but enough in it to rinse the dryness out of my throat. "So – I don't think I knew the girl you guys know. She came to the city because nobody knew her there and none of her memories were there, so she could decide what kind of person she wanted to be without the baggage of history. So I can't promise that we're talking about the same person here. But she was important to me. She was – she was the kind of girl who thought her work was the most important thing in the world, and the most important thing about her. Which meant that if whomever she was with didn't completely understand or completely love her latest project, they couldn't completely understand or completely love *her*. She could never take her lovers that seriously, if they weren't on the same level as she was – and really, nobody was.

Which, fine, that happens. It's how the thing goes. But it meant that even though there had been people before me, they all got driven away hard when things started cooling down – so that by the time they heard about this girl overdosing and getting found in an alley, they were so far off that it never occurred to them to take a second look at what happened, to see if it didn't look right. They had no reason to ask questions. If the timing were different, I'd have been one of them. But it didn't work out that way." I stubbed out my smoke. "She was the kind of girl who made you want to look more closely, while you were with her." I emptied the bottle on the desert floor.

"And I looked closer. So now I'm here. For what it's worth – I did love her. Probably not as well as I should have or as well as she needed, but what I had to offer was hers." This would be me setting Lauren up to remind me that what I had to offer had been Emily's, and a couple of other people's, more than once, but I guess maybe the sisters weren't that close, because all she did was laugh, and say,

"Didn't they tell you? Love is a sickroom with the roof half gone."

"Are you high right now?"

"Ignore her," said Tiisetso. "She quotes people when she's tipsy."

“Hey,” said Wessel, standing to take the dead bottle out of my hand, “target practice?”

“Sure,” said Lauren, taking half a stumble and half a step backwards. “Rack ‘em up.”

“Alright,” he said, winding his arm back before hurling the dark brown thing into the night, so that it was lost to my sight almost immediately. But not to Lauren’s. She had one eye closed and an arm extended, tracking the wide invisible arc of the thing across the horizon, before a rush of hot air and light shot along her arm and past her finger, roaring into the distance and exploding with the pop of broken glass and combusting air.

“Jesus,” I said. “Do you have a license for that thing?”

“Please, like we’d tell the government about all the spells we know” said Lauren. “Besides; hexes don’t kill people, insufficient respect for the importance of other people’s lives kills people.”

“What?”

“It’s reductive,” said Tiisetso, “but not untrue. Besides, magic legislation is almost unenforceable. Mostly it’s a way to toss brothers and sisters with an uncomfortable amount of magic into an iron room – which is practically a death sentence.”

“How’s that?”

She laughed. “Sister, nobody likes a magician in jail. I don’t care how long ago Salem was, they’d still try and burn us if they could.”

“As if you’d let them,” said Wessel, picking her up from behind.

“No!” she laughed, “no, you’re squeezing my bladder, stopit I have to pee.”

“I could stand to powder my proverbial too,” said Lauren. “Sam?”

“Pass,” I said. “Thanks.” Wessel set Tiisetso down, and the two girls moved off into the greater dark.

Wessel stood near me, quiet now, so I handed over the hip flask and asked him, “so what’s your angle in all this? What do you get? I mean Lauren’s probably getting the family business, your girlfriend seems pretty set on some high-profile magicking – what happens to you? ”

He shrugged. “I mean – the Wittgenstein thing sounds cool and all, but I just like being able to throw lightning with my hands, y’know?”

He tossed a half-hearted bolt at a shadow that looked a little like a cat.

“I mean – I don’t do that much magic, really. Fireball here, levitation there, but it’s all pretty much high school stuff. Nothing too complicated. I mean I once made a golem out of river clay

to give a girl a valentine, but I made one leg too short and it walked off into the Karoo by accident, so you can see how complicated works out for me. Any of the serious magics, the big magics, they need you to really love them for it to work, you know? I didn't care that much about the golem. Or proportions, whatever. If you don't love it that much, you're going to do shitty magic, so what's the point? I love other stuff; people, animals, whatever. Myself, I guess. So I'm not going to be a magician like my sisters. And I'm truly okay with that."

He took a swig.

"Anyway. There's some inspired yokel wisdom you can take back to your friends in the city."

He paused. "I guess now you say it's cute that I think you'd tell your friends."

"It's cute how you think I have friends," I said.

"Oh hey," said Wessel, "before I forget. Here." He put his hand in mine, and there, resting on my palm, a familiar pulse to my junkie fingers, was Emily's ring. The ring that, apparently, didn't work anymore. The ring I had done painful work with. "It's supposed to be cursed and all, but I'm pretty sure the magic's rubbed off on it. And we wouldn't have any use for it here. It's a memento, right?"

"Right," I said, putting the thing away. "A memento. Thank you." He handed over my hip flask.

"Don't worry about it," he said, clapping a hand on my shoulder.

The girls came back, Lauren passing us wordlessly to fetch another bottle.

We drank till sunrise. At length, Lauren yanked open another door in the night sky, a little lopsided, that opened a couple of feet above the street where my hotel was. I climbed through, scuffed me knees and palms in the drop, and stood up, grinning, the Kimberley magicians grinning back at me.

I waved goodbye, then stumbled to my dorm, where I drained the last of my hip flask and sank gratefully into the blackened sleep where I knew, even if I were to dream, I would not remember. Outside, the sun continued to rise and lives began in earnest all around that little burb, and many others like it.

[18]

I shuddered inside my jacket on the chilled train platform. The floating glow-worms hung around the place, casting their diffuse light across the desiccated husks of obsolete train engines, and drawing long shadows across oxidized pillars and abandoned train lines that were putting up the good fight against rust and weed for no good reason. The things lit the place up prettily, domed ceiling and all, but offered no warmth.

There were two other passengers waiting at the station, a young blond guy with baby-blues, carrying a rucksack that looked like it was made for smuggling furniture, and a stooped-over woman dressed up the way people did when they still had to dress up to travel – blue cotton jacket, ivory gloves, glossy heels, old stout pride. We had time to take each other in, however furtively, because the train was an hour late creeping into that grim little sphere of light, cut off from the rest of town by darkness, by barbed-wire fences, by the desire to leave.

The arrival of the coal-stained, stuttering thing fetched up a sigh, an untightening, from somewhere unexpected in me. I knew exactly what a mess I was heading into, but even so. There's a kind of pleasure in every return, even if it's only a return to familiar catastrophes.

Or maybe there's just a kind of pleasure in getting the hell out of a hick town.

It wasn't all bad. I was looking forward to the ride home, for a given value of home. I wanted to see the tendrils of the city creep into the horizon like the slow appearance of a new kind of plant as you move into a different climate – showing up in the shadows and the crevices first, barely visible to an eye trained for miles on darker greens and broader leaves, but making itself more and more apparent for those who know where to look, until all at once the new colours are choking out the old, and the terrain you knew is aggressively overturned. I wanted to watch for new shoots of urban sprawl, as if overnight they might have sprung up and encroached further into the rural and the arid worlds I was coming from, and could briefly kid myself into thinking I belonged in.

But there was a situation with the conductor, which amounted to the train people having given away the coupe I'd booked; I could wait for the Monday train, or they'd be happy to let me ride third class at no extra charge.

I said that was awful kind of them, but bureaucracy doesn't have the kind of nerves that get rubbed wrong by sarcasm.

Things had wrapped up more or less harmlessly with the Hardwicks, but even so – I was a hair's breath from overstaying my welcome in that town, and the place had more or less overstayed its welcome with me. I glanced in at the crowded third class compartment, stale sweat and coal dust and packed lunches, five or six conversations running across the car and one another, and nodded at the conductor. There wasn't anything else I could do. I shuffled around trying to keep my face dead and familiar, and found a window seat next to the grandmotherly woman from the platform without much difficulty – though she wasn't delighted at having to give up the extra space, least of all for one such as me. I was fairly sure I'd washed off the gin smell from the night before, but that stuff comes back without any warning. I nodded and smiled and got nothing in return, and bid farewell to the town and any hopes of useless rumination conducted from a quiet train

window. Behind me, someone had started singing – a lullaby or a ballad or a dirge, I didn't know, because it was in a tongue I had not bothered to learn. Voices flitted back and forth around me, and I had to suppress the memory of a bloated bronze face drowning me in a wave of sound, and I looked down at my hands. My seatmate sniffed and shifted away, though she still spilled a fair deal over the armrest between us.

I caught myself feeling grateful for the fact that nobody was trying to talk to me or catch my eye, and in a manner distinct from the gratitude I felt at being left alone at a bar. It was the kind of observation that blew things apart if you looked at it too closely, so I rolled my head towards the window, trying to look past my yellowed reflection at whatever flashes of shape or colour I could make out in the night. There wasn't much. Before too long, I slept.

And this was different. Because, yes, the usual drama with Emily played itself out, with the familiar pains and sordidness and banalities of the flesh, the same artificial excitement that a dream, even a dream you are tired of, can twist out of you as a fish knife can remove bone – but this was all background. The choppy-lit action unfolding on a tattered screen, while I sat in the theatre, doing something else entirely.

I was sitting at a table, measuring out white powder, checking a scale, and scooping out small regular measurements, pouring them onto squares of paper which I had arranged around the table.

I was standing on a street corner, watching for cops and watching for marks and watching for unfamiliar faces that looked like they were engaged in the same business, my joints aching and my mouth foul and my pockets burning.

I was walking along the river at night, having met half my quota and enjoying, for a moment, the cool evening breeze, another two deliveries to deal with.

I was sleeping on a filthy mattress, shivering, sweating.

I was sitting at a small kitchen with friends, with colleagues, the game running on the radio only half-attended to, a league of brown bottles strewn about the floor, a tightly-packed bottleneck getting passed around, the air thick with smoke and my thoughts hard and empty and I am happy.

I am passing small white squares to a figure in shadows, accepting a wad of cash in return – too much, I think, with an inward sneer.

I am looking out of the river, and my whole arm is burning, and I hear a sound like a branch snapping and then I can only feel one part of my arm, and what that arm feels like is grinding, snapped-splinters pain, nothing but an internal roar of pain-

I got jolted awake by someone with a sweaty face and a uniform, his hand tight on my shoulder; I had been yelling in my sleep, and someone had called a member of the train staff.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the worried-looking man “just a nightmare.” My mouth dry and my jaw aching from grinding my teeth, I didn’t quite manage to make the grin look convincing. I glanced at the woman beside me, who wouldn’t meet my gaze, and was clutching a pocket bible with two hands. The lackey was still looking at me with big yellow eyes, so I asked if the dining cart was open; he cast a look at the car behind me, which was a new kind of quiet, and nodded a discreet yes. I got up, pulled the Jung out of my bag for good luck, and went to the place where they sold awful coffee and overpriced crackers to ride out the rest of the trip home.

I sat alone in the dining cart that some kind soul had lit up for me, and thought things over while staring out into the vanishing darkness.

It was a worry. What I had hoped was maybe the slow unravelling of Emily’s dream, the erosion of her spell, and the eventual disappearance of her thumbprint on my psyche, was something else altogether. Jolted by the gin, or the stress, or the lack of sleep, or by whatever had been unearthed by being around the Hardwicks, sources of potent magic and painful memories both, or – I don’t know. But memories that didn’t belong to me, the memories Ollie which had yanked out of the minds of two dealers, which I’d swallowed to deal with the problem of disposal, were starting to assimilate with my own, trickling into my forebrain. I’d expected some fallout there, obviously, but I hadn’t realized that the memories extended far deeper than the hours before meeting with us I’d told Ollie to scrub out. Either he had fumbled on the night, or he’d erred on the side of – well. Caution for us, potentially catatonic brain damage for the dealers. And maybe a psychotic break for me, now that I had – what, days? Weeks? – of some stranger’s thoughts floating around my head, bashing together with mine.

I tried to gauge my sanity with an instrument whose sanity I was unsure of.

There had been cases before, obviously. Early attempts at interrogation, pulling information out of reticent folk's minds and dumping it into a more talkative vessel. But it was never just information; a whole range of sensory experience came with it, thoughts, memories of memories, chunks of identity getting yanked out of one person and thrown into another. For the individual getting scrubbed, it was usually liveable – we all have holes in perception here and there, which we fill up with context. The stool pigeon, on the other hand, had to deal with a wholly alien set of experiences, values, knowledge suddenly showing up on their shores. Small chunks could usually be borne without wrecking everything, but past a certain threshold, invariably, psychosis followed. Huge shifts in behaviour, ranging from tastes in food and drink to shattering marriages, shifting political allegiances, radically unstable senses of self.

It turns out that really, genuinely seeing the world from another person's perspective, requires a flexibility that the mind does not have. When faced with true empathy, that thing every poet, actor or writer claims to be chasing, most people go insane. Having to account for irreconcilable notions of how the world worked, and what the self was, suicide was pretty common among those who wished to absorb sensitive information. Which did not, shockingly, stop governments from making use of their services.

So there I was, waiting for the sun to come up and gauging my interior space, trying to remember my dreams as they got reshuffled by memories that I couldn't quite recognize, but couldn't quite disown, either. But then, when in the history of train travel has a passenger sat in a dining cart at four in the morning and thought cheery thoughts?

[19]

I got home, dropped my bag, took a shower, looked long and hard at my bed, then went out and got a cab to Rondebosch.

We took Main Road, oldest and most ridiculous of spinal cords for that little town. Train-addled and nauseous with fatigue, I had my greasy forehead leaning against the glass, looking out at the kind of business that had been there since the ox-wagons and the plunder and cruelty and – well, hell, you can imagine. Structural inequality here, history of colonialism there, fruit vendors who'd taken the train in from across town so they could sell stuff outside high modernist buildings that nobody wanted to live in.

I'd arranged to meet Ollie at Hart's Hall, a cozy little spot where nobody knew your name. Exposed ceiling beams, big fire pit in the middle, heavy wooden tables turned into lunar surfaces by decades of spilled beer, around which sat people with broad shoulders, paunches, burst blood vessels and a story about how things used to be better. Not my favorite place by any stretch, but it was somewhere to hole up in and forget about yourself from time to time.

Ollie was waiting for me at a window seat when I came in, half a drink in front of him and a dumb smile on his face.

“Well hey,” he said, “mystery solved, huh?”

When I stared at him and said nothing, he quickly added, “Oh shit, I'm sorry – I've been thinking about this whole thing as like an adventure lately, you know? You forget about how serious it is. But this is good, right? You've got closure.”

“It’s a little early in the day to be shooting so far above my head.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh – christ, do they not get the papers up there? Here, hang on,” he said, jumping up and snatching an abandoned broadsheet from the bar, which he tossed at me.

“There’s a mutual acquaintance of ours on the fourth page,” I heard Ollie say, my eye already caught by the headline ‘Dirty Dealer In Jailhouse Suicide,’ which – well. There it was in black and white, so it had to be true. Terrence Gatyeni, twenty-three years of age, previously charged with two counts of breaking and entering, one count of grievous bodily harm, having surrendered himself at the Mowbray police station Friday morning to confess his involvement in the processing and distribution of Class A substances, including a tainted batch of which was known to have been the cause of several recent deaths in the area. Gatyeni was searched and found to have such unidentified substances on his person, and subsequently brought into custody for possession. What the search didn’t find was the razor blade secreted on his person, which was found next to his body the following morning.

“Yeah,” I said, “that about figures.”

“I’m sorry?”

I looked up at Ollie. “‘No foul play is suspected, but naturally authorities are baffled; an inquest is ongoing.’ How do you rate the chances of that particular mystery getting unraveled?”

Ollie shrugged. “What is there to unravel? He probably found that he had a guilty conscience – probably not without the help of your arm-twisting –turned himself in, and since that didn’t make him feel any better, he sort of went the extra mile.” He quirked a smile. “I guess you didn’t need to take the trip up after all.”

I chewed my lip. “So, what, he sticks around with Emily so she can take a hit, she gets sick, he panics and drops her body in an alley? That’s above-average service for small time hustle.”

“So maybe she was partying with somebody else – could you blame them for not coming forward?”

I looked down at the article. Above and below were op-eds about the need for more police funding to up prison security, and the relationship between drugs and depression. The other pages carried different stories about different people; Emily’s name didn’t come up.

“It fits, Sam.”

“Maybe. If you hold your breath, and skipped breakfast.”

A waiter came by and replaced Ollie’s drink; I ordered coffee.

“What kind of a miracle is this?” said Ollie.

“The water-to-wine one, but backwards,” I said. “Actually, I’m still shaking off the remains of Saturday night. Small town drunks are rough.”

“Well, sure. They’ve got more to prove.”

We trash-talked small towns while they were out of earshot for a little while longer, and I tried to get my blood moving a little less sluggishly, and waited for Ollie to get a little more suggestible. I figured we were there after another drink and a half. I set down my cup, broke into whatever set of one-liners we were putting together, and said:

“Look – there’s one more play I need to make. And I need your help for it.”

I watched Ollie’s face shift from goofy repose into something like the look the woman on the train had given me; somewhere between pity and fear.

I cut him off before he could say what he was going to say:

“I know. And if I ask for anything else after this, you’re welcome to write me off as a crazy person who’s going to be chasing windmills for the rest of my days – but there’s one more thing. And it’s not even that big of an ask.”

Ollie looked out the window, and the quiet suburban road with the dogwalkers, and the school kids, and the grim middle-aged joggers winding between the trees, the leaves starting to show hints of copper and the low sound of water running nearby – and I hated to pull him out of that genteel prettiness, hated to disrupt it myself, but hell. Pennies, pounds.

“You know I’m hanging on to some memories that aren’t entirely my own,” I said, keeping my tone flat, my voice even with the volume of the bar’s regular drone.

“Jesus, Sam,” said Ollie, looking at me and quickly away.

“Yeah well. All I’m saying is that what I’ve got floating around in my head doesn’t exactly check out with what’s in here,” I said, tapping the paper. “Now that could be any number of things – the cops twisting the story a little to keep from hurting sensitive readers, my own memories getting garbled, whatever. It could be nothing. But there’s a nasty thought floating around that I want to get checked out before I commit to buying whatever version of events these guys are selling. Alright?”

“Does it matter whether or not I think it’s alright?”

I looked him in the eyes and thought about that. I was tired and sore and I didn’t know for sure that any of it was worth a damned thing.

“Not to me. But I understand if you’re wanting to pull out by now; you’ve been beat around for no good reason over this, and I’ve been taking that for granted. I’m sorry. There’s another thing that needs to be done, and I’d be grateful for your showing up for it – but no hard feelings if you don’t.”

“Oh, come off it. Put your tiny violin away, it creeps me out when you try and sound sincere. Yes, okay, I’ll come. Who doesn’t love a little closure, right?”

“You’re a prince, Ollie.”

“I’m an idiot. But at least I know I’m an idiot. What do you need?”

I worked at a knot of tension that had moved from my shoulders to the back of my neck, and yawned. “There’s a door at the magic school that transports you across the city.”

“There are a few of those.”

“Oh. Of course there are. Do you know about the broom cupboard above the big hall?”

He shook his head. “I thought it was a place where you put brooms. But I can get to it, absolutely.”

“Then I need you to head over there in a little while, and step through the magic broom cupboard about two hours from now – if I haven’t resolved it by then, then it’s not gonna get resolved, and I need to leave. And if I have resolved it by then – I’m not saying things are likely to get messy, but it’d be good to have someone on my team if they do.”

“Do you have a plan here?”

“Please,” I said, “plans are like maps, they’re only any good for telling you things have gone wrong. If I go in without a plan, there’s no chance of the plan going awry.”

“Christ,” said Ollie.

“Last favor I’ll ever ask of you.”

“Don’t lie to me while I’m down, Sam. Christ. Alright. Where does the door take me, anyway?”

“The Irma Stern gallery, over in Rosebank.”

“Who?”

“Seriously? She was a big deal sorcerer. They’ve got stuff of hers at the national gallery.”

He shrugged. “There’s a new big deal sorcerer coming up every minute. And two new galleries.”

“Culture,” I said, “that’s what this generation lacks.”

“Sure,” said Ollie. “We’ve had it too good for too long.”

He drank his drink, and I drank mine, then he got on his broom to head to the far side of the city and play backup for me, and I started the slow walk to Rosebank. I schlepped uphill first, so I could cross the university to get there – both to avoid being on Main Road in the afternoon, when the crush of people trying to get home and the chilled breeze and the long shadows were very nearly designed to erase one’s will to live, and to indulge in a quiet walk across an empty campus. I try not to let prettiness dictate too much too often, but an empty university lane that echoes under my feet, half-dead ivy on the walls and columns interspersed by trees beginning to be disrobed by the wind offers me, as it offered me then, something difficult to resist.

There’s something else to that, though; a walk as pretty as that, with the yellow light filtering past the giant floating chunks of mountain, the burbling fountains and the two or three furtive students crossing the quad on their own solitary agendas and all the rest is great for atmospherics, but has the chief effect of letting me get away with not thinking about anything. This was the danger of living in the parts of the city that sold themselves as portraiture; living in them meant you didn’t have to think too much. Whereas the low road along the main jag of the suburbs would’ve been wretched, sure, but would’ve forced me to think things over in an attempt to escape that wretchedness.

I don’t know. Maybe if I’d gone the less picturesque way things would’ve gone differently. But then, if letting prettiness dictate things is a danger, letting conjecture dictate things is a death-trap – so let me slip that particular noose.

I got to the Irma Stern gallery a little out of breathe and unclear what to expect – it was late, but the lights were on inside Patrick’s office. I rang the doorbell, which worked about as well as could be expected, then banged and kicked at the door until the thing got wrenched open from the inside.

“We’re closed for the day, so- oh.”

“Hi, Patrick.”

“Sam. What a surprise.”

He was wearing some kind of overtight flannel and the scruff of his beard had gotten worse, but I figured I still had a half-healed scrape on my face and I was running on coffee and spite, so probably we were even..

“I guess I’m surprised too. I was in the neighbourhood – are you especially busy with eldritch researches this evening, or can you talk?”

Jaundiced eyes looked at me through the security gate for a long few seconds, and I was beginning to worry that I’d have to find some other way in – or some way of warning Ollie not to take the Narnia door, at least – when Patrick fetched up an oceanic sigh, and unlocked the gate.

“Not at all,” he said, “please, come in.”

I followed him through darkened gallery where supine Eves stared at me through half-lidded eyes and wood carvings creaked out of step with our own paces, and the world outside was muffled by the sound of birdsong and rustling leaves that hadn’t been there a minute ago and probably hadn’t really been there a decade ago either.

Patrick grunted a little as he lowered himself into the chair behind his desk, and I took the arm of the chair I’d been on at my last visit; he offered me his clove smokes again, but I had my own out and lit already. He sat back and rubbed his eyes. “You’ll have heard the news, then,” he said.

“Only just,” I said. “Upsetting stuff.”

The place was unchanged so far as I could tell; same yellow light, same stink of sweat and smoke, same acreage of papers.

“Yes. Although, I must admit to being rather relieved at having someone definite to blame.”

“Other than ourselves, you mean?”

“Just so.”

“If it’s any consolation, we could run ourselves ragged trying to figure out who put her in a place where she felt like she needed to be on the needle.”

“Oh of course, anything to pass the time.”

He had leaned back hard against his chair – I couldn't see his hands clearly beneath the stacks of paper, so I couldn't tell if this was him in a bizarrely clenched repose, or if he was in fact tensing.

“Patrick – you've been clean for a while, right?”

“Clean's a relative word.”

“I don't mean morally.”

“Oh, good. Then, no, or rather yes, I haven't been on any of the usual substances in several years.”

“Oh,” I said, deflating a little.

“Why do you ask?”

My turn for the oceanic sigh. “Well it's just – and don't ask me how I know this, it's a long story – but I was really hoping for an innocent explanation for why you would've recently purchased a large quantity of heroin from the young man who killed himself in jail over Emily's death.”

A long, slow spoonful of molasses moment hung there before dropping to the ground.

“Well fuck,” said Patrick Hoffmann, leaning slowly forward in his chair. “I didn't think that could come back to bite me anymore.”

“You're not even trying to cover yourself.”

A convulsive shrug. “What possible purpose would that serve?”

“Indicate shame, maybe. Sorry, I got raised with some religion, that still makes itself felt every now and then. I don't understand – what's the angle? Professional envy, spurned romantic advances, ideological differences?”

“It's funny, isn't it? The need for there to have been a reason.”

“Shut up,” I said, “and let me see if I have this right. You picked up the dope from young Terrence, heavily drugged Emily at some point, which couldn't have been too hard if she wasn't expecting anything, and dropped her from a hotel window into a back alley. It wouldn't have been too hard to rub out your footprints in the minds of the hotel staff. Then I come along asking questions – maybe some other people did too – so you climbed into Terrence's dreams and convinced him, somehow, to turn himself in. And the suicide? Was that you too, or did he get there himself?”

“Does it matter?”

I thought about it. “Not to me; not really. But somebody out there probably cares.”

“Bully for them. But yes – good work. Nine out of ten, I’d say; you pass in the highest percentile, though not quite top of the class. Because why did I drop your ex-girlfriend, my best and favourite student, out a fifth-story window if she was already overdosing on brown? If it was just because I wanted her dead, that seems a bit much, does it not?”

I was having a hard time breathing, and said nothing. At length he sat back, and folded his hands across his paunch.

“It’s because even while she was overdosing, she was dreaming – which was when she was her most dangerous; she was warping the room around me, messing with physics, trying to save herself or bring with me her. I’d been hoping to have her expire quietly on the bed and then slip out, but the way she was reacting, I had to take drastic measures.”

“Dangerous how?”

“She was a girl who could blow things up with her mind. In what way wasn’t she dangerous?”

“She’s been able to do that since you’ve known her. What changed?”

“Magic did.”

“Spare me the goddamned fortune cookies or so help me I will pull the plug on this and bring Reddy and her lackeys down on you right now, and you’ll never get to tell people how clever you were.”

“I’m being quite serious. She’d begun to change magic – not hugely, not in any fundamental sense, but by increments. Artefacts that hadn’t worked in years started up again, and a few reliable ones crapped out. Spells changed in density. I’ve told you before that one of the leading theories here is that the meaning of a given spell is determined by the collective unconscious, by the secret thoughts of the society they’re being cast in – and Emily Hardwick, my prodigal oneiromancer, had begun to tap into that, one way or another. She started changing things.”

“And you didn’t like that.”

“I didn’t think we could survive that.”

I thought about the dream that continued to imprint itself in my head long after the girl who’d written it was in the ground.

“You said you didn’t know why she died. We did the question game and you said you didn’t know why.”

“Don’t be naïve.”

“Don’t give me that – you’ve been trying to protect some outdated notion of how magic works this whole time, no way in hell you wouldn’t take the questions seriously.”

“Fine! I didn’t lie. You’re right. Well done. I didn’t know why she died because I didn’t know precisely what I was preventing. Magic was changing slowly around her, but I didn’t know exactly where her whims would take it. I learned enough from her notes to undo the changes she’d already brought into effect – and I’ll admit to making a few other subtle renovations here and there. But you need to understand, Sam – the popular unconscious, the way magic works when everybody’s steering it together without knowing it, is cruel, but it’s fair because it’s arbitrary. Allowing it to be controlled by any one person would be an injustice. She had to be stopped to keep things from changing – but changing into what, we’ll never quite be sure.”

“How did you know she was changing stuff on a whim?”

“Thanks to you, mostly.”

“How does that fit?”

He stared for a beat.

“Where are you from, Sam?”

“Bali. What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“You see, that’s strange because the last time I asked you where you were from, you told me –“ he paused to check a scrap of paper, “Quebec. Which seems like an odd thing to want to lie about.”

“I say a lot of things.”

“Where are you from, Sam?”

“Auckland.”

“You just told me Bali.”

“Why does this matter to you?”

“You’re not getting it.” He sighed. “Pity; I was hoping we could use this in some way. Emily was trying to forget you – and people are forgotten the way people die, never all at once but piece by piece, first your innocence than your love of the colour green then your lisp, then your fear of dogs, then your sense of self...it all gets slowly abraded, rubbed away, so that nobody ever really notices the difference between the moment before and the moment after the rubbing away of the last atom of your indivisible self. She was forgetting you in pieces; forgetting where

you were from, the colour of your eyes – have you noticed they change? Why would you. And because she was at the same time finally tapping into the collective unconscious, had developed the oneiromantic techniques for beginning to shift that collective unconscious... slowly the world began to forget you too. You're a cipher, Sam; what remains of you remains because I stopped her before it was too late, and because of that small bubble of psyche you've got trapped inside that dream she gave you; a closed loop, referring only to itself, untouched by the dreams of the collective. Which is a kind of insanity, by the way – not conforming to the collective's dreams. It's just that your delusion is that you exist."

I was standing. "You're insane," I said.

"I've just explained; you're the insane one. You barely exist! Go on, try and dredge up some childhood memory, some fact about yourself that isn't just a one-liner you've pulled out of the air. You're insubstantial, Sam."

And, yeah, he had me there; I cast back for something I could be sure of and all there was, was echo.

Patrick was standing too.

"So perhaps I'd better cure you of your delusion," he said. I stepped back, suddenly reminded that, not for the first time I was sharing a room with someone who could tear holes in reality, and probably in me. Which isn't the kind of thing you forget, really, but sometimes you try and push it to the back of your mind. "The main disappointment here," said Patrick, watching me through narrowed eyes, "is that you never asked what I was doing at a hotel with her." He raised a hairy forearm, bulging with muscles that moved in directions that weren't entirely real – at which point, as instructed, as expected, Oliver Starnes leapt out of the Narnia door, broom before him, and stopped short.

"What?" he said, standing between the two of us in that small, dank office.

Patrick reached out and put his large, hairy palm to Ollie's head, and said a word in Aramaic; there was a muffled cry, and white light flashed out the back of Ollie's skull. His body fell to the floor, the place where his face had been smoking.

"I put all the other spells back the way they used to be, but I liked this one," said Patrick. "You didn't need to bring him," he added, scoldingly, and raised his arm again – except now I stepped

forward, and punched upwards, shattering the bones of his forearm, a white flash going off a little ways above my head, the flesh of my neck suddenly flush as if sunburnt, and while Patrick held his working hand to his mangled arm, muttering some healing spell, I reached down for Ollie's broom with my right hand, the hand that wore Emily's ring, the ring I'd inverted when Ollie leapt in – I grabbed the broom and, half blind, pointed it where I thought it should be, and told it to go.

There was a thunk, and a gasping sound, and then I had to let myself fall over and hope things had gone more or less okay. Nothing happened for the minute or so I needed to be on the ground – just a thin sucking noise in the distance.

At length my vision cleared enough to let me stand again, though the room still cast multicoloured echoes across my vision.

Patrick was standing very still against the wall; half a broom extended from his chest, and a little ways into the cheap plaster behind him. The sucking noises were coming from Patrick.

“Hey,” I said, “it's mister nobody-gets-to-control-the-popular-unconscious-except-me. How's it going?”

He gasped, painfully, I guess, and tried to say something. It took a while. I came a little closer. Eventually, between coughing and bubbling, he wheezed; “How can you be sure I didn't will this all along?”

I thought about that.

“Genuinely, who cares?” Then I punched Patrick in the mouth, shattering his jaw – not to be mean or anything, just to keep him from any last-minute spellcasting. Also, a little bit, to be mean. I sat on a low stool and waited for the sucking and hissing sounds coming from his chest to stop, then I went over and checked his pulse. And then that part was over.

I pulled the ring off. Like any junky, I hadn't meant to use the thing, but when I found out I had a twenty-hour train ride that was going to depress me terribly anyway, I figured I could charge it up a little and not notice the drain too badly. Just in case.

I sat down then, very suddenly very tired, and thought about thinking about my next move. I didn't have any. I wondered if setting the place on fire would make me feel any better, while also

disguising incriminating evidence – and maybe that’s what I would have done, if a darkened figure hadn’t picked itself up from the floor.

We looked at each other.

“That didn't need to happen,” said Ollie’s shadow.

“I know. I'm sorry.”

“To hell with your sorry.” The figure was faintly transparent, depicting a darkened version of the room within its silhouette. At its feet lay the body that it had once belonged to.

I shrugged. “Can I get you a smoke or something?”

“Pass. I don’t think I can touch things, anyway.” It looked over the thing they used to call Patrick Hoffmann. “Hell of a way to go.”

“Great argument for keeping a broom handy.” I tried to focus on the outlines of the shadow, and found my eyes smarting. “So what’s the deal here? Some kind of afterlife?”

The silhouette of a shaking head. “We spent a little time apart a few year ago – well, you know about that. Separation makes for separate identities, y’know? And it’s night, that helps. I’ll probably dwindle away over the next little while.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“I’ll be gone by sunrise.”

“Oh. I can sit with you, if you want.”

The shadow laughed, and I found myself feeling grateful that it couldn’t seem to move away from Ollie’s body. “I think I’m done spending time with you Sam Tiptree. Bad for my health. No, you get away from me. Go on. I've got shadow stuff to do.”

I went on, heading back along the corridor Patrick had led me along maybe an hour before.

When I looked back at the door, the shadow was looking down at the boy’s body lying prone at its feet.

I stepped outside, and was struck, again, by the sudden reemergence into the cold air, and light, and noise. Traffic had slowed down, but was still audible from two blocks over, and there were lights in the buildings, and there was a chilled wind cutting through my jacket. I was shaking. I was glad to have the cold to blame for my shaking.

I jammed my hands in my pockets, and on the left hand side I felt Emily's ring. I stood feeling the weight of it against the outside of my hand for a few moments before drawing it out – and with my breath held, hurled it into the overgrown darkness leading up into the mountain. So that some other poor idiot could get their nights tangled up with it.

It wasn't thirty seconds before, cursing myself for a fool, I hauled myself up into the bushes after it. I got maybe five paces into the shadows before Reddy's dog got me.

[20]

The way Reddy tells it, she was doing me a favour by having her dog scoop me up like that – apparently Ollie's family had a pretty thorough insurance spell honing in on his body, cursing everybody within a few feet of it. The gallery wasn't exactly levelled, but it was shook up but good; visitors weren't allowed back there for a couple of weeks, while they cleaned the place up.

Not that anybody noticed.

I wasn't at Reddy's place for more than an hour – I gave her as much of the story as she needed to spin it into something else; she didn't ask for more than that. The stuff about Emily's research, about Patrick's pet theory, I let that go; the research was out there, and probably some other wunderkind would stumble across it some time and wreck somebody's world with it, but I wasn't going to facilitate the process.

Nobody saw fit to reopen the Hardwick case; so far as anybody out in the world was concerned, the student who'd overdosed and wound up making a mess on an alley and those two magicians who'd killed each other over an ill-timed breaking and entry, were unrelated facts. There was a short op-ed in the papers about a need for stricter magic legislation to keep these kinds of avoidable accidents from happening, but not much else. I didn't know if that was because there were riots in Lagos and a coal miner's strike getting into its third month and another stab at rebranding by the Pope and all kinds of bigger, more important headlines to find puns for, or if it was because Reddy leaned on whomever she had to lean on to keep people quiet. I didn't care; people were going to buy their own version of events, no matter what the papers or anyone else said.

My name didn't come up anywhere except on a plane ticket out of town. Reddy said that maybe I felt like wrapping up my research from a distance; that probably I was distraught, and needed to get some perspective, or something. I said that sounded about right.

One more dream. Not the last of her I had – they still come every now and then, although less and less frequently, interspersed by nights with new faces and new memories I can be a little more sure about being entitled to – but the last of her I had in that city, and the last time I tried to talk to her.

“Hey, Em,” I said to the shape in my arms. The shape with the eyes that weren't emerald, and the warm weight against me, and faint smell of citrus on its skin.

“Hello yourself.”

“Sort of surprised to see you here.”

“Mm? Why's that?”

I sighed. “They tell me you died.”

“I'm here, aren't I?”

“Well that's just it. You shouldn't be here. You should be a ghost, or a soul, or a shadow, or a photo on the wall, or some dust in an urn. But you shouldn't be – you shouldn't be whatever this is.”

“Sam? What are you –”

I stood up in that shadow of my apartment, the room blurring around me as the dream started to drift off-script. “You died, okay? You fell. I don't know exactly how it happened, I don't know if

you were in a place to reach up and try and grab at the air, or if you could feel the ground coming at you, if you were sad or angry or relieved that whatever it was, was coming to an end and – I don't know, Em. But you're gone. You need to be gone. I'm sorry,"

The blurry shape of a person looked back at me and said nothing, because why would the dream of a night with a girl know what to do with a thing like that?

Things went dark and, gradually, I woke up. The room was grey with cloudy midmorning light, and I was curled up tight against myself. I let myself unfold slowly, and lay on my back, staring at a ceiling that was spiderwebbed with cracks along the plaster that formed accidental shapes in the mind's eye.

Not for the last time, I tried to cast back for some kind of memory, some clear and obvious thing about myself – a point of origin, a hard conviction, a childhood memory. I cast, and cast, and cast, and nothing came but echoes, my attention bouncing off the back of my own mind and coming back at me. An apostrophe; a sign to show that something was missing.

I lay on my back and looked up at a ceiling that was just a ceiling, feeling for the space that had been occupied by something that might once have been important, something that had been lost cheaply. And, having lost such a thing, what kind of room that opened up for the future.

I sat up slowly.

"Well," I said, to my empty apartment. "That's not nothing."

ENDS