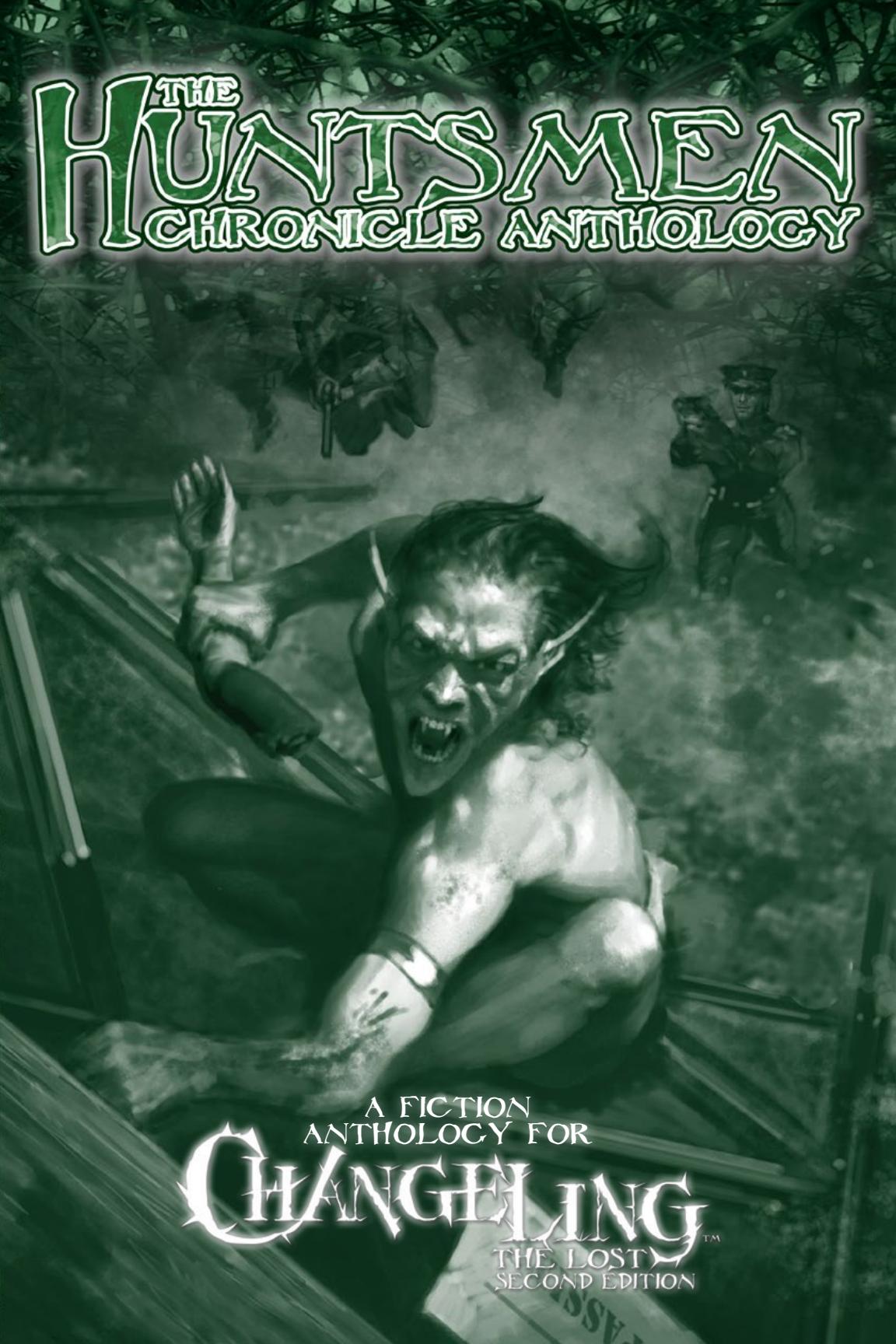
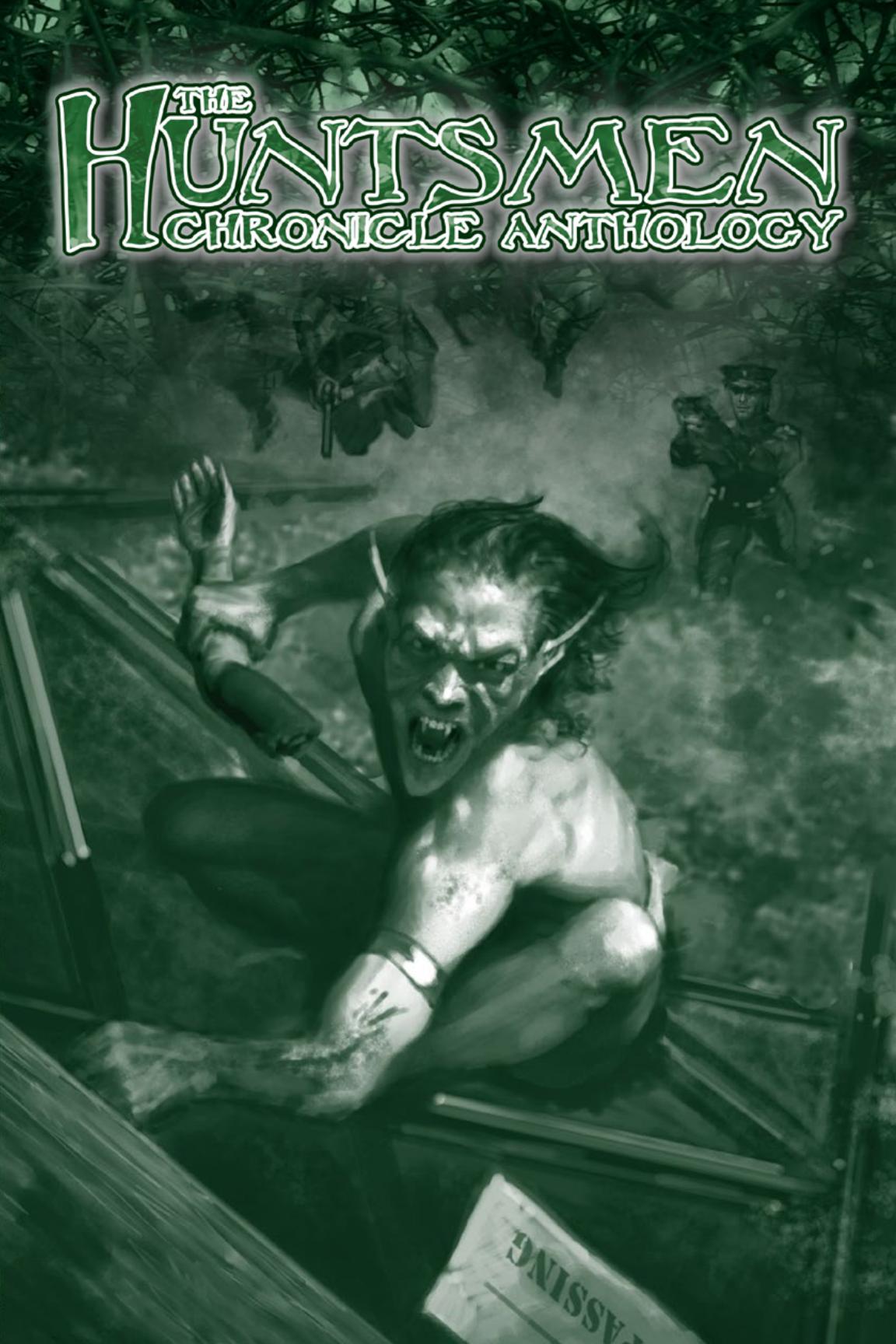


THE HUNTSMEN CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY



A FICTION
ANTHOLOGY FOR
CHANGELING
THE LOST
SECOND EDITION

THE HUNTSMEN CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY



Developer: David A Hill Jr

Additional Development: Rose Bailey and Matt McElroy

Authors: Elizabeth Chaipraditkul, Theo Cohan-Diaz, J Dymphna Coy, Jess Hartley, Lawrence Hawkins, Matthew McFarland, Marianne Pease, Lauren Stone, Jacqueline Sweet, Audrey Whitman, Filamena Young, Tara Zuber

Editor: Carol Darnell

Additional Editing: Eddy Webb

Creative Director: Richard Thomas

Layout and Design: Mike Chaney



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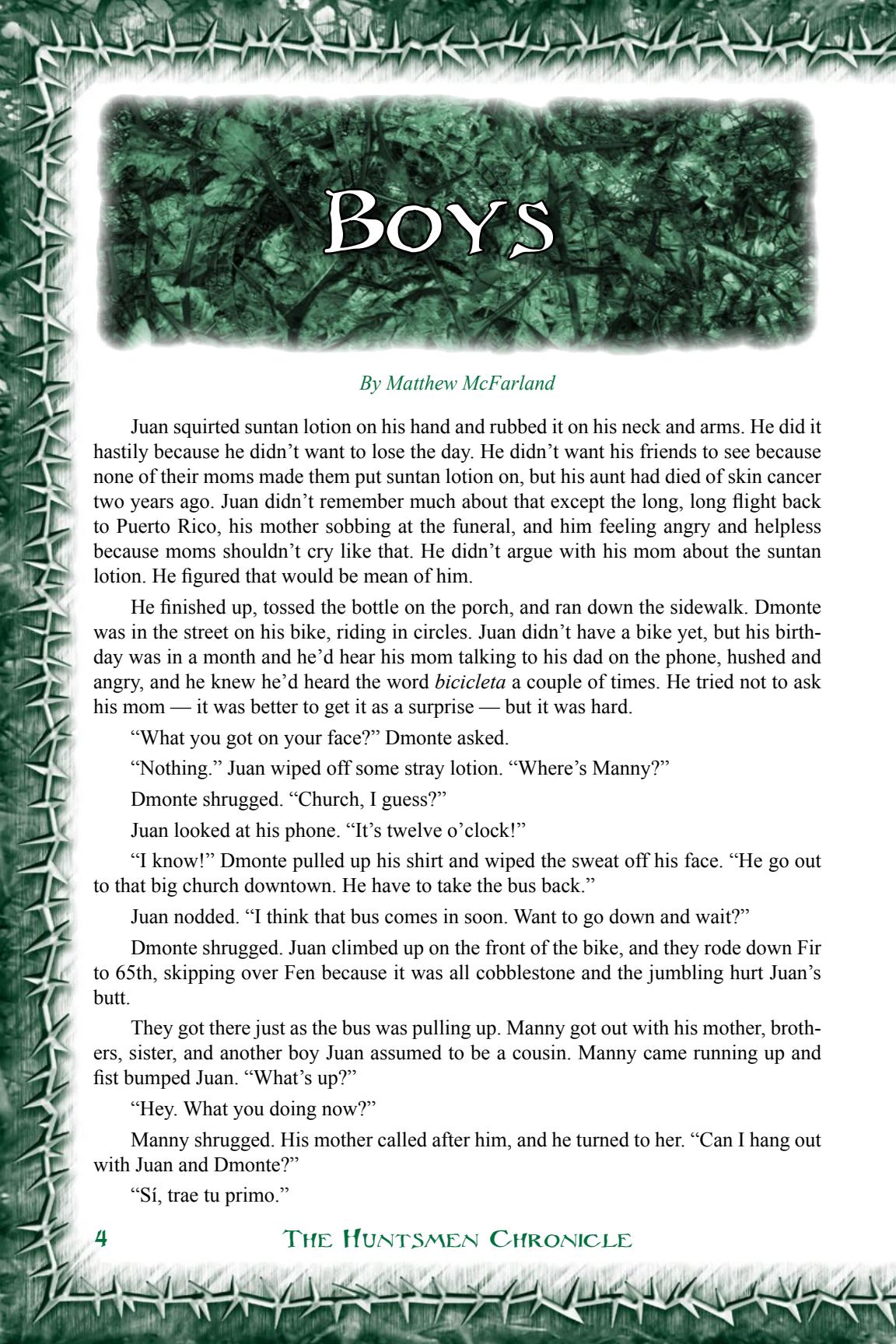
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Boys

By Matthew McFarland

Juan squirted suntan lotion on his hand and rubbed it on his neck and arms. He did it hastily because he didn't want to lose the day. He didn't want his friends to see because none of their moms made them put suntan lotion on, but his aunt had died of skin cancer two years ago. Juan didn't remember much about that except the long, long flight back to Puerto Rico, his mother sobbing at the funeral, and him feeling angry and helpless because moms shouldn't cry like that. He didn't argue with his mom about the suntan lotion. He figured that would be mean of him.

He finished up, tossed the bottle on the porch, and ran down the sidewalk. Dmonte was in the street on his bike, riding in circles. Juan didn't have a bike yet, but his birthday was in a month and he'd hear his mom talking to his dad on the phone, hushed and angry, and he knew he'd heard the word *bicicleta* a couple of times. He tried not to ask his mom — it was better to get it as a surprise — but it was hard.

“What you got on your face?” Dmonte asked.

“Nothing.” Juan wiped off some stray lotion. “Where's Manny?”

Dmonte shrugged. “Church, I guess?”

Juan looked at his phone. “It's twelve o'clock!”

“I know!” Dmonte pulled up his shirt and wiped the sweat off his face. “He go out to that big church downtown. He have to take the bus back.”

Juan nodded. “I think that bus comes in soon. Want to go down and wait?”

Dmonte shrugged. Juan climbed up on the front of the bike, and they rode down Fir to 65th, skipping over Fen because it was all cobblestone and the jumbling hurt Juan's butt.

They got there just as the bus was pulling up. Manny got out with his mother, brothers, sister, and another boy Juan assumed to be a cousin. Manny came running up and fist bumped Juan. “What's up?”

“Hey. What you doing now?”

Manny shrugged. His mother called after him, and he turned to her. “Can I hang out with Juan and Dmonte?”

“Sí, trae tu primo.”

“Claro. Emilio, vamos!” The other boy, about 10, thin, wearing some button-down shirt and slacks just a bit too short for his legs came trotting over. “Juan, es mi primo —”

“English, dude!” Dmonte finally got frustrated enough to speak up.

“Damn, dude, calm down.” Juan and Manny laughed. Dmonte got all pouty when he got mad. “This is my cousin, Emilio. This is Juan and Dmonte.”

The boys exchanged greetings, hand slaps, and started heading back into the neighborhood. The July heat was rising, and sweat poured down their bodies as they walked, Dmonte sometimes stopping to walk his bike, sometimes riding ahead and circling.

• • •

The Tall Blue Man placed the last shovelful of dirt on the grave. He tossed the shovel back in his van and pulled a chunk of rock — easily four hundred pounds — from the floor. The van raised up with a pained screech, perhaps glad to be rid of the weight. The Tall Blue Man could have asked the van, but he didn’t much care how it felt.

He carried the rock over his shoulder to the grave and dropped it on the north end. He thought that was where the woman’s head was pointed, but he couldn’t remember, and he didn’t care about that, either. But he *did* care about marking the grave because he felt it would be disrespectful not to. It wasn’t her fault that she hadn’t known a new story. He crouched down by the stone and traced his finger on the rock, willing the rock to become carved.

When he was finished, the words “Woman with wings. Escaped on clouds. Told the story of the Lucky Beggar” were chiseled into the stone. The Tall Blue Man stood and stretched his back.

Wind whipped through the valley, and he shuddered. To a human being, the valley would be pleasantly cool, a respite from the heat of the day. To the Tall Blue Man, it was *cold*. He was too long out of the sun, and he felt exposed without a blanket of heat over him. He took his jacket, carefully and neatly folded, from a gravestone near his van, and slipped his arms into the sleeves.

He put his hand on the side of the van and savored the feeling of warm metal. “Where shall we go today?” he whispered, not to the van, but to the road. “Where does the sun grow close to the Earth? Where do the plants die from dryness, or the people suffer under a sky pregnant with rain?”

The road answered, and the Tall Blue Man climbed into his van and drove off.

• • •

The boys didn’t leave the neighborhood, and Manny was bored. He wanted to show Emilio some of the cool things he did with his friends — sometimes they played Xbox at Dmonte’s house, or went swimming in the little pool at Juan’s cousin’s house, or walked down to the park and played basketball. But today, they just wandered, chatting. They walked slowly away from the bus stop, away from the coffee shop and the expensive ice cream place on Detroit where all the rich folks went after they saw corny movies at the Capitol Theater, and away from the drugstore where Dmonte got caught stealing candy bars. They walked past their school and back towards Dmonte’s house, but Dmonte turned his bike left on Birch instead of right.

“We ain’t going to your house?” said Manny.

“No.” Dmonte biked ten yards up Birch and stopped to tie his shoe.

Manny came jogging up. “You don’t want to play Xbox?”

Dmonte shook his head. “Can’t. It got stolen.”

“Oh, damn!” Juan and Emilio had caught up. “Who did that?”

“I don’t know,” snapped Dmonte. He was getting pouty again. “Probably Boy.”

The others nodded. Boy — they didn’t know his real name, but that was what everyone at school called him — had dropped out of ninth grade, and everyone was afraid of him. They’d heard he beat up a girl for her phone and her money outside the Capitol one night.

“It’s hot,” said Emilio. He was still wearing church clothes and sweating right through them. Manny had taken off his long-sleeve shirt and tied it around his waist.

“We should go swimming,” Juan said.

“At Diego’s?”

Juan shook his head. “Nah. He’s in Puerto Rico right now and his mom don’t like me.”

The boys kept walking. They came to 65th, a couple blocks north of where they’d met Manny and Emilio. They weren’t supposed to cross 65th here.

“We could go down to the park,” said Manny.

“Man, that’s too far,” said Juan. “And we ain’t got a ball.”

Dmonte slapped Juan on the shoulder. “My dad live right over by the park,” he said. “We can get a ball from him, he got like twenty.”

“I don’t want to walk that far. The street’s all tore up.”

“You a pussy, dude.” Juan punched Dmonte in the shoulder. Dmonte dropped his bike and the two chased each other around, smacking, punching, wrestling. Emilio laughed, but Manny knew if they didn’t stop, Dmonte would lose his temper.

“Hold up! Why don’t we just cross here?”

Dmonte shoved Juan and then turned to Manny. “What do you mean?”

Manny pointed across the street. “There’s all trees over there. It’s not as hot. We just turn by the gas station and walk down to the park that way. Just means we don’t have to go through where the street’s tore up.”

Juan looked back into the neighborhood. “We ain’t supposed to cross here, though.”

Dmonte smacked his shoulder. “So? We’re allowed to go to the park, right?”

Juan nodded. “Yeah, OK.”

Emilio had stayed quiet during all of this, but had taken off his shirt and tied it around his waist, like Manny’s. Emilio had a wife-beater on under the shirt, and it was almost transparent through the sweat. “OK.”

They all looked at him like they had forgotten he was there. Manny put a hand on his shoulder, and the four of them dashed across the street, yelling, and then plunged into the shade of the tree-lined neighborhood like jumping into a pond.



Boy's real name was Abioye Layeni. He and his three sisters, refugees from Nigeria, had arrived in the United States when he was nine. They'd live with their aunt, who, at the time, had a Puerto Rican boyfriend who had trouble pronouncing the kid's names. He gave Spanish nicknames to the girls — Cora, Ama, and Estrella — but Abioye he just called "Boy." It stuck to Abioye like a dead skunk to the street. He hated that name, but by the time he turned 14 and the Puerto Rican man was long gone and his aunt was arrested and his sisters put in foster care, he stopped caring.

Now Boy was 18, and he barely remembered the Puerto Rican boyfriend or his middle sister. He exchanged emails with his oldest sister, who was going by "Katie" now. His youngest sister was still in a foster home on the west side of town. He'd seen her once at Tower City, in a crowd of people in the skywalk from the baseball stadium. She looked happy. Boy had stolen a bottle of rum that night, and he had no memory of the next day.

Boy was staring at the TV. It was off. Everything was off, and the house was eerily quiet. Boy put down the bowl he'd been about to light up, and looked out the window. He could see the TV in his neighbor's house, showing some cartoon for their ugly, loud kids.

He stood up and walked to the table. It was covered with envelopes, a lot of them from collectors or utilities. He found the one from the power company and opened it. He didn't understand most of what it said — he spoke English and Yoruba, but he read very little of either. He did, however, understand the words "PAST DUE" and the number in red. "Shit."

He thought about waking Ibe, the man who owned the house, but decided not to bother. Ibe didn't have any money anyway. Boy debated smoking up before he left, but decided against it. If he smoked up, he'd just stay, and then wind up sweating and losing his high too quickly. Better to go and find some money, and see if he could pay the bill. If he did that, Ibe might not ride his ass about finding a job so much.

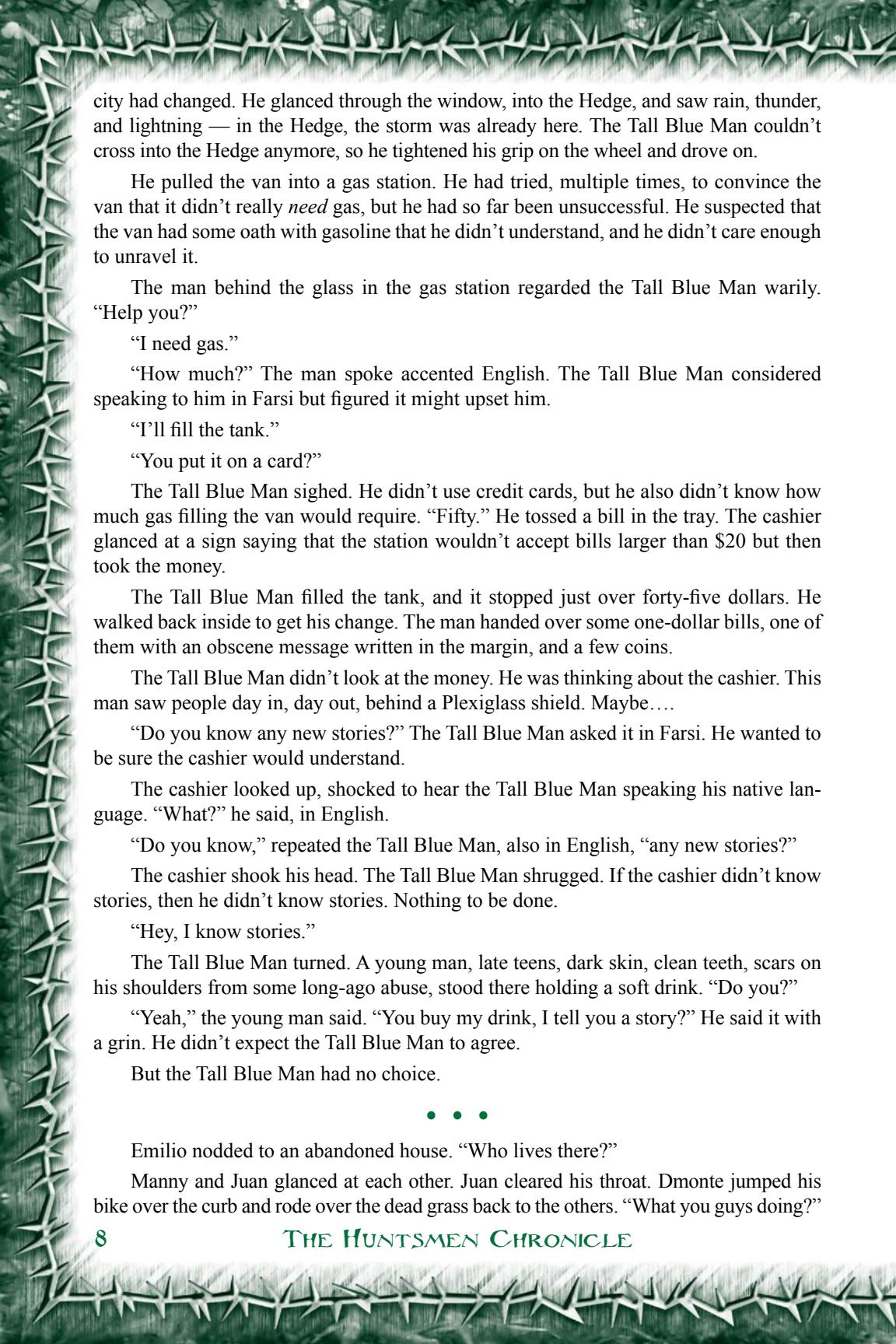
Boy took off his soccer shorts and yanked on a pair of jeans. It was too hot for them, but the pockets were big enough to conceal his gun. He pulled on a tank top and walked out the door. He glanced into his neighbor's window again, wondering if he could sell their TV, but the kids were all in the living room. He didn't like the kids, but he didn't want to hurt them. Besides, he had to live on the block, too.

He trudged down the street toward the gas station. He had a couple of dollars in his pocket; at least he could buy a pop.



The Tall Blue Man pulled off the highway and stopped at a red light. He cranked down the window and inhaled the air. It tasted like lake water, like fish bones and industrial sludge. The air was wet and sticky, and the temperature climbing steadily. He smiled and relished the feeling of perspiration under his hair.

He had been to this city before. He remembered stories of torsos and gangsters, but nothing he hadn't heard before. The Story of Horrible Murder was nothing new, nor was Dogged Defender of Justice. Perhaps today, he'd hear something new. The character of the



city had changed. He glanced through the window, into the Hedge, and saw rain, thunder, and lightning — in the Hedge, the storm was already here. The Tall Blue Man couldn't cross into the Hedge anymore, so he tightened his grip on the wheel and drove on.

He pulled the van into a gas station. He had tried, multiple times, to convince the van that it didn't really *need* gas, but he had so far been unsuccessful. He suspected that the van had some oath with gasoline that he didn't understand, and he didn't care enough to unravel it.

The man behind the glass in the gas station regarded the Tall Blue Man warily. "Help you?"

"I need gas."

"How much?" The man spoke accented English. The Tall Blue Man considered speaking to him in Farsi but figured it might upset him.

"I'll fill the tank."

"You put it on a card?"

The Tall Blue Man sighed. He didn't use credit cards, but he also didn't know how much gas filling the van would require. "Fifty." He tossed a bill in the tray. The cashier glanced at a sign saying that the station wouldn't accept bills larger than \$20 but then took the money.

The Tall Blue Man filled the tank, and it stopped just over forty-five dollars. He walked back inside to get his change. The man handed over some one-dollar bills, one of them with an obscene message written in the margin, and a few coins.

The Tall Blue Man didn't look at the money. He was thinking about the cashier. This man saw people day in, day out, behind a Plexiglass shield. Maybe....

"Do you know any new stories?" The Tall Blue Man asked it in Farsi. He wanted to be sure the cashier would understand.

The cashier looked up, shocked to hear the Tall Blue Man speaking his native language. "What?" he said, in English.

"Do you know," repeated the Tall Blue Man, also in English, "any new stories?"

The cashier shook his head. The Tall Blue Man shrugged. If the cashier didn't know stories, then he didn't know stories. Nothing to be done.

"Hey, I know stories."

The Tall Blue Man turned. A young man, late teens, dark skin, clean teeth, scars on his shoulders from some long-ago abuse, stood there holding a soft drink. "Do you?"

"Yeah," the young man said. "You buy my drink, I tell you a story?" He said it with a grin. He didn't expect the Tall Blue Man to agree.

But the Tall Blue Man had no choice.

• • •

Emilio nodded to an abandoned house. "Who lives there?"

Manny and Juan glanced at each other. Juan cleared his throat. Dmonte jumped his bike over the curb and rode over the dead grass back to the others. "What you guys doing?"

Manny pointed to the house, Dmonte's eyes grew bigger. "My mom says the Devil lived there."

Emilio looked at the house again. It was old; the paint on the sides was brown and peeled. An iron fence circled the tiny yard — easy to see through, and yet somehow it made the house seem closed off from those around it. "What you mean?"

Dmonte stepped off his bike and walked up to the fence. "Mom says the Devil lived there, and he used to take kids and put them in the basement."

Emilio felt like he should cross himself, but he had just been at church, so maybe it was just on his mind. "Used to?"

Manny nodded. "Yeah, they came and arrested him."

"The Devil?"

"He wasn't the Devil, dude." Juan grabbed the fence and pulled himself up. "He's just some crazy guy. He killed people and buried them in the yard and then they arrested him, and he's dead now."

"How?"

Juan shrugged. "Cops shot him?"

"Here?" Dmonte looked around the yard.

"Dude, I don't know. Jail."

The boys stood, staring through the fence. Emilio tapped the gate, absently, thinking of movies he'd seen where the cops shoot the killer. Most of the time, that didn't work.

The gate creaked, and the boys jumped back. Juan let out a yelp, and Dmonte tripped backward over his bike.

"You OK?" Emilio helped him up.

"You scream like a girl," Manny said, looking at Juan.

"Dude, shut up."

Dmonte touched his leg. He was bleeding slightly. He walked over and grabbed the gate, shook it. It creaked and rattled, but held fast. "The hell did you do?"

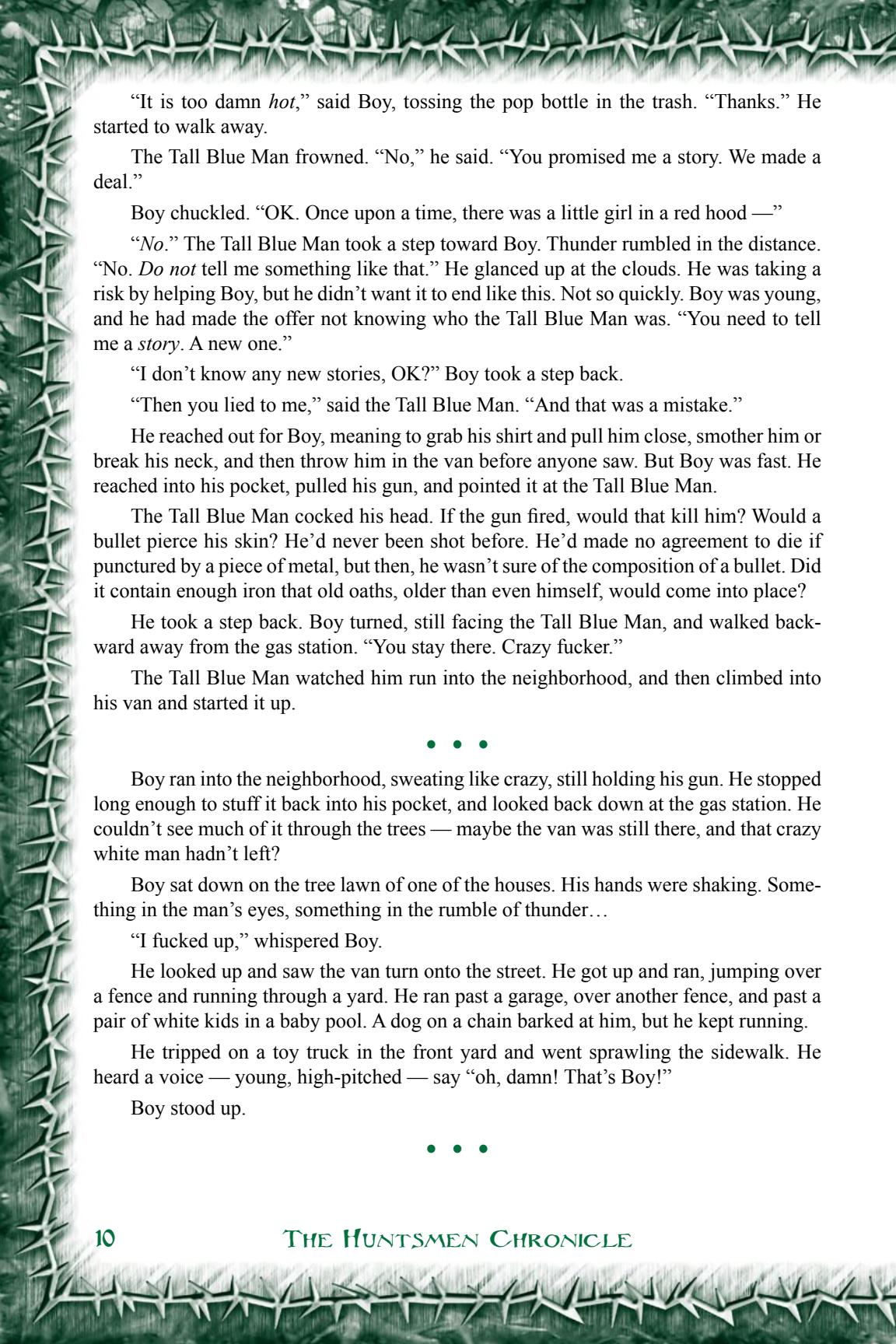
Emilio shrugged. "I don't know. I just touch it."

The boys looked at the house again. Manny shuddered. Emilio kicked at the ground. Dmonte wiped his nose on his wrist. Juan looked up the street. It wasn't fun anymore. The boys didn't know why, but something changed, and the house loomed bigger than any of them.

"Come on, my dad's house on the next block." Dmonte started walking his bike. The others followed. Manny took his cousin's hand, and Dmonte noticed but didn't say anything.

• • •

Boy sat on the front bumper of the van, drinking his pop. The Tall Blue Man stood on the sidewalk in the sunshine. He doubted very much that Boy knew a new story — he was too young, for a start — but he wasn't in a hurry. It was too nice a day.



“It is too damn *hot*,” said Boy, tossing the pop bottle in the trash. “Thanks.” He started to walk away.

The Tall Blue Man frowned. “No,” he said. “You promised me a story. We made a deal.”

Boy chuckled. “OK. Once upon a time, there was a little girl in a red hood —”

“No.” The Tall Blue Man took a step toward Boy. Thunder rumbled in the distance. “No. *Do not* tell me something like that.” He glanced up at the clouds. He was taking a risk by helping Boy, but he didn’t want it to end like this. Not so quickly. Boy was young, and he had made the offer not knowing who the Tall Blue Man was. “You need to tell me a *story*. A new one.”

“I don’t know any new stories, OK?” Boy took a step back.

“Then you lied to me,” said the Tall Blue Man. “And that was a mistake.”

He reached out for Boy, meaning to grab his shirt and pull him close, smother him or break his neck, and then throw him in the van before anyone saw. But Boy was fast. He reached into his pocket, pulled his gun, and pointed it at the Tall Blue Man.

The Tall Blue Man cocked his head. If the gun fired, would that kill him? Would a bullet pierce his skin? He’d never been shot before. He’d made no agreement to die if punctured by a piece of metal, but then, he wasn’t sure of the composition of a bullet. Did it contain enough iron that old oaths, older than even himself, would come into place?

He took a step back. Boy turned, still facing the Tall Blue Man, and walked backward away from the gas station. “You stay there. Crazy fucker.”

The Tall Blue Man watched him run into the neighborhood, and then climbed into his van and started it up.

• • •

Boy ran into the neighborhood, sweating like crazy, still holding his gun. He stopped long enough to stuff it back into his pocket, and looked back down at the gas station. He couldn’t see much of it through the trees — maybe the van was still there, and that crazy white man hadn’t left?

Boy sat down on the tree lawn of one of the houses. His hands were shaking. Something in the man’s eyes, something in the rumble of thunder...

“I fucked up,” whispered Boy.

He looked up and saw the van turn onto the street. He got up and ran, jumping over a fence and running through a yard. He ran past a garage, over another fence, and past a pair of white kids in a baby pool. A dog on a chain barked at him, but he kept running.

He tripped on a toy truck in the front yard and went sprawling the sidewalk. He heard a voice — young, high-pitched — say “oh, damn! That’s Boy!”

Boy stood up.

• • •

Dmonte stopped his bike. Boy was on the sidewalk, breathing heavy, covered in grass stains. His eyes were wide and his dark skin glistened from sweat. Dmonte had a big smile on his face. He didn't know it, he didn't feel happy. He felt terrified.

"The fuck you smiling at?" Boy took a step toward Dmonte.

Juan, Manny, and Emilio caught up with them. "Who's—" Emilio began.

"You *shut up*," screamed Boy. They jumped. Juan covered his ears. Boy pulled a gun out of his pocket. "Bike. Give me your bike. Now."

Dmonte got off the bike and ran. The other boys followed. Dmonte turned around and saw Boy ride off in the other direction.

They got to the end of the block and rounded the corner. Manny stopped, clutching his side.

"What?" said Juan.

"Hurt," replied Manny. "*Mi lado.*"

"Who was that?" Emilio had lost his church shirt. He was looking back the way they'd came.

Dmonte had tears streaming down his face. "Boy. That motherfucker. That fucking —"

A van rounded the corner, and slowly rumbled up the block. All four boys stopped to watch it. It was a big, blue, panel van, the kind Dmonte's mother had told him to stay away from. It was dirty, but not rusted out at the bottom the way old cars around the neighborhood were. This was covered in dust, like from an old dirt road.

The van stopped, and a man got out. He walked around the van, toward the boys, and Dmonte looked up at him. He was taller than Dmonte's dad. He was white and had bright white hair. He wore a jacket with diamond patterns, and as he got closer Dmonte saw it had *scales*.

The man crouched down to look Dmonte in the face, and Dmonte realized who it was.

"The Tall Blue Man," whispered Dmonte.

Juan looked at him, and then to his friend. "What?"

"My mom told me. 'There's a Tall Blue Man, drives a big blue van, and he's only around when it's hot. If you catch his eyes, don't have no surprise, you'll find you're the one that's been caught.'"

The man nodded. "I didn't think anyone knew that anymore."

Dmonte dimly realized he was staring at the man's eyes. They were blue in a way that Dmonte didn't have words to describe.

"You gonna take us away?"

The Tall Blue Man looked at the boys. "I would have nowhere to take you," he said. "And anyway, I'm looking for someone right now."

Dmonte nodded. "OK. Who?"

"I think you know him as 'Boy,'" said the Tall Blue Man, and Dmonte found his smile had come back.



Boy rode as hard as he could. He was trying to make it out of the neighborhood, out to the Market, out by the bridge to the RTA stop. He had a friend who worked that stations selling weed, he figured he could get a lift. He didn't know where he'd go. He just had to get away.

But he found himself turned around. He was back in the neighborhood, back on the east side of 65th, not far from the gas station where he'd met that crazy fucker. He took a left, trying to head south, but after a block, he realized he was going north instead. "What the fuck," he whispered.

He stopped, and look around. He didn't know anyone that lived on this block. He glanced to his right, and saw a house with an iron fence, an overgrown lawn, and peeling brown paint. The windows were boarded up, but the gate was open.

Boy dropped the bike on the ground and ran through the gate. He tried the front door — it was unlocked. He ran inside and slammed the door, throwing the deadbolt.

The house was dark. The windows were covered, so very little sunlight came in. Boy walked into the main room, slowly, breath still coming shakily. He drew his gun, not really knowing why.

"Boy," whispered a voice. He whirled around, gun pointed at... nothing.

"Boy," it said again. Again, he turned. Nothing but empty walls. Old, cracking wallpaper barely clung to the walls. No furniture, no footprints in the dust. Boy saw a door at the other end of the room. He walked toward it, turning every step to find the source of the voice, but he was alone.

He gripped the doorknob. It felt cool to the touch, though the air around him was as wet and stultifying as ever.

"Boy," whispered the voice, "you are a liar."

Boy turned the knob. He opened the door and took a step forward.

"Boy," said the voice, "this ain't your house."

Boy heard a *click* under his foot. The door swung shut behind him.

"Boy," said the voice, "you broke a promise."

Boy started descending the stairs. From below, he could hear movement, but he couldn't stop. His gun was in his hand, but his hand was shaking so badly that he could hear the magazine rattling. "Please," he whispered. "Please, I just —"

He stepped off the last stair, onto a cold, stone floor. A man sat in a simple folding chair, holding a long knife.

"Boy," said the man, "what are you doing here?"

"I was trying to get away," said Boy, his voicing catching in his throat. "The man —"

"You came into my house," said the man with the knife, "and you don't know who I am?"

"No," said Boy.

"I'm the Devil," said the man, and raised the knife.



“That’s corny,” said Dmonte.

Juan smacked his shoulder. “Why?”

“Devil can’t just say ‘I’m the Devil.’ That sounds corny.”

“No, it don’t.” Juan looked at Manny.

Manny shrugged. “It sounds good. I mean, then he stabs him, right?”

Emilio shook his head. “No, Boy should shoot the Devil.”

Dmonte laughed. “You can’t shoot the Devil!”

“No, like, he shoots the Devil, and the Devil just laughs.” Emilio bounced on the balls of his feet. “He shoots like a bunch of times —”

“But the Devil walks toward him like, real slow.” Manny grinned. “Yeah, that’s raw!”

“You hear that?” said Juan. “Sound like firecrackers.”

Dmonte shrugged. “No.” He looked up at the van. “That good enough?”

The Tall Blue Man smiled. “I don’t know. Is that an ending?”

Juan shook his head. “No. He shoots the Devil, but the Devil stabs him!”

“Or cuts off his head.” Manny ran a finger over his neck. “I saw that in a movie, they left the guy’s head in the mailbox.”

“Or they never find him again,” said Dmonte. “Like, he shoot the Devil, and then you hear a scream, and then he just gone.”

The other boys nodded. It was a good ending.

The Tall Blue Man started up the van and pulled away.



“Dmonte, that you?” Dmonte’s father had been sitting at the kitchen table, reading. He’d been meaning to mow the lawn today, but it was too damn hot, and the kitchen was the only room in the house with any cross breeze.

“Yeah, Daddy.” Dmonte came into the kitchen. He had three Puerto Rican boys with him. Dmonte’s father saw him go for the fridge.

“Hey, whoa.” Dmonte turned, looking sheepish. “Y’all can have lemonade or water, but don’t be drinking no pop.”

“All right, Daddy.” Dmonte pointed to the cupboard. “Can you get cups down, please?”

Dmonte’s father smiled. “Yeah.” He stood up and stretched, and opened the cupboard. He pulled out four plastic cups and set them on the counter, while Dmonte took a pitcher of lemonade from the fridge. “Hi, boys.”

The boys mumbled hellos and introductions. Dmonte’s father waited until they had drinks, and then sent the other boys out to the back porch. “I gotta talk to you, little man,” he said.

Dmonte's eyes got wide. "What I do?"

"Ms. Benson called me up," he said. "You leave your bike on the street?"

"No, Boy *stole* my bike, Daddy."

"Boy did?"

"Yeah, he did." Dmonte looked like he was about to say something else but then stopped.

Dmonte's father frowned. "You OK?" Dmonte nodded. He seemed all right. He wasn't hurt. "All right, well, Ms. Benson has your bike, so you can walk over and get it later, and you make sure you say thank you."

"Yes, Daddy."

"You want to go play ball?" Dmonte nodded. "All right, you finish your drink and then get a ball out the mud room. But if them dudes is there drinking, you all come right back here, you understand?"

"Yes, Daddy." Dmonte gave his father a quick hug and ran out to join his friends.

• • •

The Tall Blue Man pulled onto the highway, out of the city, heading west, back to the graveyard. Thunder cracked above him, and rain poured down, turning the highway into a river. Traffic slowed. The Tall Blue Man glanced in the back of his big, blue van and considered.

Did he need a stone? Did the man in the back deserve a marker? He had not, after all, told the Tall Blue Man a story. He had lied about his intentions and fled from the Tall Blue Man.

But he had *been* a story. Was that enough? The Tall Blue Man wasn't sure.

And what about the boys? They hadn't offered the Tall Blue Man a story, but he had accepted — even participated — in the story they'd told. Did that violate his oaths?

He didn't know, and that sensation was strange. The Tall Blue Man looked down at his right hand and realized the skin had taken on a bluish cast. He wondered how long that might last.

Traffic picked up again, and the van lurched to life. The Tall Blue Man looked ahead, and could barely see the setting sun behind the clouds. He wasn't sure, yet, if Boy *being* a story was the same as *telling* a story, even if the story he'd become was a familiar one (Evil Man Receives Comeuppance). But he had hundreds of miles to make up his mind.



BROKEN THINGS

By Lawerence Hawkins

The pile of garbage on the couch shook and shuddered. It was bound to collapse soon.

Sure enough, it all came crashing down. First, flew the free sheets of paper – the paper-thin apartment had been buried in letters not yet trashed. Laminated slabs of library textbooks slid loose next down the smooth runoff, slamming by their spines into the ground. These impacts set off a great stir, which sent a bag of chips, a pile of mealy accent pillows, and a now-charged wireless controller to the thin, carpeted floor. There was a brief quiet – the kind that hangs along a precipice – then a shouted swear from underneath the floor. That anger woke Corwyn up.

He rolled off of the narrow couch with a great clack of obsidian plate onto the plastic kind. He'd more or less caught himself, so aside from a nick to the cheek from his own hands, he survived the fall. He was developing a reputation for shaving cuts, which was a shame. He was good at shaving – especially lately. With a yawn, he lifted the dark, pointed visor from his eyes and winced at the grind of black glass against his temples. He wondered what time it was.

An alarm went off on his “feature phone.” He hated the brick but needed buttons now.

3:30 AM. Time to get ready for work. He couldn't resist a smile. This opened up his cheek, sending a trickle of blood onto his only surviving work shirt. His hands and the fangs on his visor had made short work of the rest early on until he'd worked out a way to dress himself.

It was starting to be one of those days, and Corwyn wouldn't imagine a better life.

• • •

A young priest stared at an old virgin, wondering if he could still grasp the concept.

It was easier once when he was younger still and full of an easier love. It wasn't blind devotion – he'd studied for years, both the verse and the philosophers, the criticisms and the harder sciences. He'd found God in all of it: every word, every question, every contradiction. He'd never felt full, but he'd felt so certain. He was in love with God and his Creation. All of it.

Now? He stared at a statue of a woman at peace and wondered how she'd managed it.

It had been gradual if it had been anything at all. He'd served his community; not just with words, but by the ladleful. He'd baptized newborns and held the hands of the dying; not many of either, but enough to feel the profound weight of both. He was still young, treated like a mystery by the old women and men who had been constants of his own Sunday mornings. They knew what kind of boy he was, but not what kind of father he would be. And that was just it...

Neither did he. He'd done his studies. He'd done the good work. Now he felt... done.

"Father, forgive me for my selfishness," he whispered. "And if... No. No." He wouldn't ask for a sign, nothing so sensational. He thought of old Moses and of Kierkegaard and laughed. Those who ask for signs often get them. The truth, they'd soon discover, was a wilderness.

The trickle of bright water from the stone of the virgin statue's eye came anyway.

He saw this truth in phases. First, he doubted. It had to be simple condensation catching light, but the dim morning had already dimmed the overhead lamps. The cathedral was American, Midwestern, and not so old, but the garden was a shadowed ocean unto itself. No. The shining droplet came from a crack in the rock itself. It welled and wept like a boxer's blow, spreading over the left cheekbone. It was as if the stone itself had suffered his skeptic's eye.

When he ran out of doubts, he scrambled for symbolism. He ran through all the meanings, all the records of miracles he'd once studied more as metaphors than inspirations. He found he hadn't studied them enough. He had no idea what his sign was supposed to mean.

Bereft of hard-earned answers? He knelt and prayed. And, as he submitted himself?

The weeping light and a patina of filth sheared from the stone and touched his brow.

This hollow of a woman knelt as he knelt, bowed its head as he did, and prayed as he prayed. The priest faltered, shaken by the sight of this weathered shell and the pristine statue behind it. "Is... Is this the reason I'm here? Are you... the reason I was born?" he asked the hollow thing. To his surprise, the miracle paused to consider the question. Then it nodded. Its palms caught the man's cheeks, then slid to his throat, leaving a slow trail of soot and shine.

"Forgive me," he strained, with the last of his breath. "Forgive... Me..."

And with the first of its own, the hollow thing obliged. "You are forgiven, child."

Disposing of a body was a simple effort of experience. Taking its shape? Familiar. And yet, inside, it was hollow. It had only so much light to spare. So much time, too little and too much.

Even now, soot clung to his skin. No. Its skin... Purpose would have to be its solace.

This descent, this fall into a world of grime and doubt, would be its burden.

• • •

Corwyn yawned through his morning like a daydream, making the most of things.

He had a grace to his gracelessness, a method to his heavy mitts. He helped unload what was left of the overnight restock to hurry the back-to-school staff to their beds. He worked with a slow sureness that more than caught him up with the weary shift's rush job. He was yawning as they were listing, but he always seemed to shuffle just ahead of them. He only cut one bag open this time, large-breed kibble, but people had already started stories about his clumsy luck.

Once you've got a story going, you don't have to worry much about the truth.

After the overnights crawled out the door? He made fresh coffee. He'd avoided it for days, but a few hours of practice at home and he felt ready. This would be his moment. He'd trained. He had this. No one heard the knife-on-glass screech of his first furtive grab at the pot. He rubbed his brow with an inner elbow, scraped up his visor, and stopped being careful. It helped.

Once you know, what you can do? Thinking only makes it worse.

A few focused minutes later, his fingertips dripped and steamed but he had a pot done and a mug in his palms. The heat didn't reach his finger bones, but it warmed his cheeks just fine.

"My hero," said the photo girl. She'd slipped in and slid by, a candle-flicker shadow. She filled her own mug from his careful labors. Hers had a custom print – a tree, branches gnarled like fingers, the tips blistered with pale, sharp blossoms of frozen-over violet. She smiled like those blossoms, thin white razors under a gauze of ice. She poured. She sipped. She tried to scowl, but the sensation never made it to her eyes. So she drank it down, steaming all the way.

"How was it?" he asked, trying not to reach out. Not to wipe her chin. It would be weird, he had to remind himself. She didn't know him. She never had, not even in his fantasy, really.

"Good," she lied, out of polite habit. It didn't reach her eyes. Nothing did. Her smile was a shadow of a smile. Her voice sluiced through the points of her teeth. "Thanks," she said, a little firmer. She hesitated like she was trying to think of something else to say, but no. She left.

Corwyn didn't say a word. What was there to say? In the real word, they were strangers.

Once you know you're not the hero of the story, you stop trying to win over the girl.

After coffee and a morning gaze into an off-white wall, he checked in with the store manager. She reminded him that he was a security contractor, not a night stocker and that he wouldn't get a dime for helping out. He laughed it off, offered to help anyway. She ignored him.

The shop was mostly safe but dying slowly. It had burst up like a predator on all the local mom-and-pop shops. But as the small pond started to go stale? So too did the fish. Corwyn found a simple structure to the work. No one liked the place, but everybody needed that big, ugly store.

Once you win the tale, there's nowhere left but down or out. You're stuck with it all.

So Corwyn ran his rounds. He helped in housewares; nothing broke. He ran his rounds again. He helped in electronics, mostly by keeping Brenda busy gossiping while the kids of color did not a damned thing wrong. Corwyn used to think "better safe than shoplifted." Now? He felt a little guilty about it, but that wasn't the point. He did it because Brenda was his problem now.

Once you get bit, you don't get better as a result. You just get used to fighting back.

After electronics? He enjoyed most of his lunch, not looking at the photo girl across the break room. He wasn't the only weirdo in this small big town, but two people... things like him in one store? Two characters, from one story? He didn't look. He didn't want to look, the way you don't want to press on a bruise. He still had to glance nearby, had to know it still hurt. She? Didn't feel a thing. She noticed his not-looking. She smiled with that iced-over expression, right through him. To her, he was another player in the local scene. A nice, if weird, guy. To him?

She was a shadow of something else. Someone else, in another life. They'd both been.

Once you cross the threshold, whatever you've left behind is lost.

After lunch? Rounds and hardware. Rounds and school supplies. Rounds and another round of coffee; the thrill had passed, now it was just another chore. Rounds and sneaking cash into a short register. Pam took it because Pam needed it. Before shift change, he checked in with the store manager again. She reminded him that his boss worked out of a trailer at the bigger, bolder 24-hour behemoth store. Corwyn smiled and asked if she needed anything else. He walked her to her car. She didn't thank him. He waved. She pretended not to notice.

Once you know better, the little hurts can feel like comfort.

After that? He locked up. He ran one more round as a victory lap. Set alarms. He spent another hour pacing aisles and humming old soundtracks, expecting a random encounter with... what? A thief? A goblin? A dragon? A squatter in yard furniture? A shadow? A light he'd left behind?

Once you're out to the other side, the light never looks the same.

So, after all of that? He slipped out through the locked back door and slumbering alarms and sat for 20 minutes in his chugging, messy car. The steering wheel had grooves from his clawed gauntlets and a scratched-out crease from the crest of his glassy visor. He sat there, holding the wheel, taking deep breaths until he could work up the will to go home. The stacks of old mail waited for him. Bills, mostly medical. Some not. Few of them had his name. He was only nineteen. Most of them still went looking for his mother. He'd called a couple, but most of them wouldn't take his word that she was dead. It was too much. Work was easy. Going home?

But the big, empty box was still there. So was the big damn television. So he went home.

He played an old role-playing game, wondering if he'd still love the story. So far? He still really did. He wanted to cry. Instead? He played for two hours. Saved. Did GED prep. Showered. Dressed by careful inches. Tied his tie, oddly easier with these numb glass talons. And after that?

Corwyn went to church. It was all part of the process. He had to make the most of it all.

• • •

It hated every moment here, but there's a process to the hunt. There are rules. Purpose.

First? It had to learn the land. It had to study the terrain. Not just the city streets and rural routes, but the way the roads were seen and taken. It had to know which places haunted people. Which ones were safe. Which ones were sacred. It had to know the story of the city first. It had to choose. So it played its role; it became him, the priest who'd fallen out of love with God.

It was painful but necessary. Love cools down to embers in the real world.

It went through his morning routine; paperwork and mail, the dull mortal affairs of a portal to the infinite. Things cost. The light was electric and had to be fed – at cost. The cold crept in, disdainful to the warmth inside, and so it must be held at bay – at cost. The wallpaper was old by American standards, which was only ever old by American standards. It had to be replaced soon – at cost. Speakers, since voices didn't reach – at cost. Times and seasons written out on paper pamphlets – all of it, at cost. The cheap wood, velvet, and plaster had a mortal hunger. And they called this a place for a god? How curious, mortal gods must be. Even the father had a stipend to fill his body with daily bread, unable to subsist on blood and flesh and faith alone. It found this process intolerable – to transubstantiate faith into mere, human waste.

It was painful but necessary. Nothing is purely anything in the real world. It all changes.

It went for a walk out of assumed habit. There was morning coffee, produced by an indifferent machine and its many parts. The steaming metal. The hurried hands. The exchange of card for a drink, card and receipt back... a signature? It struggled for the name, before recalling it off of a bill. Names. Such inadequate things. It didn't feel like either word. The coffee was terrible, and the walk? Uneventful. But this was the role as it was played. Next? The rounds.

It had so many places to be, so many things to learn. So many indifferent machines. It visited a school that trained young minds to believe a certain story – at this, it allowed itself a smile. There was devotion here and terror. There was rebellion here and reliance. There were archetypes and rites of passage. No one came through quite the same, but for all the differences? There was a narrative consistency. This school was a good machine. So were the charities. So were the morning and midday masses. Every word, gesture, and breath had a purpose as it used them.

In the rumors and the whispers, in the little stories and the sobbing souls, the story coalesced. There were dark things in this quiet place; irrelevant ones, the natural predators to human prey, but interesting ones as well. Places with unusual doors. People with unusual memories. Dreams with unusual endings. Death and cruelty in the waking world. For all the secrecy, it never took long to ferret out the familiar themes. This city has an infestation, grains of sand in its vast, irregular machine. It felt the press of their expectations, the story they wove.

It was painful but necessary. The only true tales in the real world are the ones we tell.



The creature walked through the romance of this young creature's life and did its best to breathe it in. There was a dance, and a comfort in that dance, for those who knew to submit to the pace and reaching hands all around. The subtle interplay between itself and the expectations of others, from the old folks looking for a stumbling, earnest child to the young souls looking for someone out-of-touch, but honest in a way they couldn't bear to be. It smiled at those who wanted smiles – both gentle and uncertain. It played the game of chastity, being young and male and sweet to the eye. It noticed as he had noticed. It found amusement as he had. It had a role.

And best of these? As a beacon, signal, light. It found this role familiar. It found itself.

Afterward, it cradled its inner light and washed its hands profusely. The skin pinked. Reddened. Flaked, but it didn't matter. The soot kept on collecting, kept drying and savaging the flesh. The light inside would flicker, candle-weak, and it would shudder at the sensation. Then, it would wash its hands again. It had to go back into the fray of its environment. It would bring solace to the lonely and the lost. It would represent permission and forgiveness, as it always had. It would hurt inside, as this man had hurt inside, longing for a love too vivid for sensible souls.

It was painful but necessary. The real world cannot sustain the necessary passions.

But the hunt persisted. It understood now. And as it had expected? What was needed was delivered by this indifferent machine. A lost sheep entered. The father and the light inside both smiled. Its purpose lay before its eyes. And in purpose lies no reward but oblivion. Acceptable.

• • •

"In the name of the Father, The Son, and the Holy Ghost... It has been one week since my last confession." Corwyn's first one had been interesting. He'd planned to tell the young new father all about his real troubles; about his need to escape, about the escape he'd found and the things he'd done there. Instead? He'd told him about watching his mother die, wishing she'd do it faster. Cheaper. Wishing he could have a life after hers ended. That was hard. Too hard.

After that, he embraced a routine. He sat in the shadows and let his scratchy work pants scrape against the old seat cushion. He said the lines. He felt the feelings behind the lines. He examined himself before God and he felt God examine him through the priest. He told the easy truths that came to him, based on the easy life he led. It was like the coffee. It was preparation.

One of these days, he'd feel practiced enough to let go and let his mortal sins slip out.

"Are you contrite for these actions?" asked the priest. "Your white lies, your private lusts, your distance from a better self that a higher truth has imparted you with the free will to seek?"

That... That line was different. The spirit was there, but Corwyn had to swallow hard.

He stumbled over the next words, the next lines. "I am. I want to, uh, do penance?"

"Why?" asked the priest. "My child, tell me why you're sorry for these little things."

Corwyn knelt there for a moment, at a loss. "Because..." he thought. "They're bad?"

“Terrible.” The priest allowed itself a little laugh. “But why are you sorry for them?” Before Corwyn could reassert the obvious, it pressed on. “You should be sorry for them, of course. Those who live and die? Live through a calculus of minor sins. We bear them from our birth into this sinful world and we indulge them until death returns us to a higher place. That is why we have this gift, isn’t it? This process. But why are you here now? Why are you here enough to have a rut, when some don’t bother to show up much at all? Why are you sorry?”

“Because I’ve sinned,” Corwyn said. It just slipped out, practice made perfect. So? He stopped trying. “I’ve sinned so much, I want the little things out of the way. I’m... grinding.”

“Grinding?” it asked, rubbing its hands against its seat. The rich, red velvet stained.

“It’s a game thing. Or really, it’s anything you do for a long time to get a little bit better.” Corwyn felt at the visor in his skull. It always fell when he bowed his head. It always hurt when it fell, but hurt more when it rose again. “It’s taking this big, long, impossible... thing, and just doing it in the smallest pieces possible. I show up every week because I need to show up every week. I’m grinding up to something big. Sorry.” He could barely see the slits of the confessional and he was grateful because crying always felt like cheating. He had it easier than others.

He thought of his mother in a hospital bed. He thought other people in impossible places.

Once you’ve seen how dark true stories get, you’re left with an ugly gratefulness.

The priest let him expel a few shuddering breaths in silence. It approved of silence, of time taken to appreciate the weight of moments that matter. This, too, was all part of the process. Still, it had limits, both in time and in patience. “Do you know what you’re sorry for, child?”

Corwyn nodded. His voice had gone hoarse. Rough. A growl. “I do, father, but I’m afraid.”

“It might surprise you to know this, but being afraid is necessary to all of this. I’m afraid.” It had spoken by instinct. Now, it had to deliver. This was part of the role, part of the process, part of this place in the dark between two beings. No half-suggestions – a story for a story. A penance for a confession. So it would be. It borrowed a dead man’s word to tell its truth. “Child, I’m afraid of the world we live in. I’m afraid that the faith in a mortal child is not a faith eternal, and that love you’re left with isn’t strong enough to sustain anybody. You make do, of course. You pray. You work. You rest. You pray. You work. You... rest. There are cycles and there’s a system to it all. But nothing in this world is as clean as the one beyond it. And it hurts.”

Corwyn took this in a similar silence, letting the moment pass with due respect. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” it echoed. “But I also believe in love eternal. I believe that we can strive and we can struggle and that we can find childish love again. Amid childish fears and childish joys. We can become innocent in pursuit of something pure, something...true. Why settle for survival?”

Corwyn wiped a tear from his chin. He felt warm red before the cut had time to sting. The priest smelled it. Smiled. “But I have a penance for you, child. A grind for you.” “What... What is it? What do I say now?” The process collapsed. “What do I do?” The priest licked its lips. “You will do a penance. And I will bless you. That easy.”

“Oh. Right...” Corwyn resettled on his knees, clasped his hands together carefully. He didn’t want the glass to grind, didn’t want the fog of glamour to make him lie in the booth. It felt wrong, but letting the subterfuge go would be much, much worse. It would be selfish of him. This life, or what was left of it, was his to bear. With practice? Maybe he could handle it.

“Child,” said the creature on the other side of the booth. Its half was filthy with a dripping grime. It had lingered too long. It could smell the stale earth, sharp like a raw morning. Soon, Corwyn would smell it, too. “I want you to tell me about the lost children in this town. I am here to bring a love and faith and struggle eternally to one who can appreciate the beauty of eternal things. I am here to return a pilgrim to their appointed place. Child, I want your help.”

And a third silence, this one heavy, sharp, and cold. They both waited in the dark.

Corwyn took a deep breath. Tasted grit. “Is the father dead?” he finally asked.

“Yes,” it answered. “But we both know he’s in a better place than here. I am sorry.”

“Have you hurt anyone else?” he pressed. His lips curled into an ugly, resigned smile.

“Not yet, but it will soon be necessary. You know this. You know what I am. Yes?”

“One of them. From the other place. You’re on a hunt.” Hunt. The word rang sacred.

“Yes. A Huntsman.” On its lips? The word dripped, wet and profane. “Here, that’s what I am. But it’s not all that I am. I used to be so much... else? ‘More’ is the wrong word. More is... wrong.” It traced its fingers along the fleur-de-lis cut in the confession screen. Earthy dew dripped from its touch. It caught every last speck of light, even the gleam off Corwyn’s hands and visor. It was light and it was filth. It spoke softly, but with a bitter depth. “I remember you, in a way. Not a name, but I was a... place for you. I remember your need. Your pride. Your purpose. You ached for a light when you found yourself in darkness. You wanted to be saved.”

Corwyn looked down through the visor at his hands. Lean, sharp. Trickling blood.

“You weren’t taken, child. You came. You sought. You needed a story, a more perfect kind of struggle than whatever mess this world had written out for you.” It beamed, enthralled in memory. “When my Lord came to you and adorned you in your gleaming armor, when He made you a sword against the ugly and the lesser and the lies? You reveled. You took your bloody grind through every evil He could conjure for you. How many of your own kind did you kill?”

“Seven,” Corwyn said. It just slipped out. He was ready. It asked. He answered. “Seven, I think. Probably more. Maybe less? Time isn’t... time, there, right? At first, I thought they were just things, just imaginary goblins in the dark. But some of them said strange things when I cornered them. Some of the goblins weren’t so imaginary, once

you got to know them. Once you got inside them. Some cried about places that didn't fit the theme, lives that weren't... weren't fantasies. I wondered about those. Seven of those. Seven, before I had the guts to ask Him."

"The Lord would never lie." The priest nodded. "But I offer salvation, not absolution."

"You can't offer me anything!" Corwyn snarled. "We can fight you here. Beat you."

"Then why have you not yet attacked?" it asked. "Isn't that what you are? A knight?"

Corwyn seethed. It embraced that anger. It had the advantage here, of preparation and the little, lost lamb's own fury. It was no warrior, but there's no need for that in the killing. Just a process. Just a purpose. There was a story to be told here, with heroes and villains and victims.

But then? Corwyn surprised them both. "But I don't want to be a knight anymore!"

Surprised and disgusted, it clenched the screen, cracking cheap plywood between fingers that weren't fingers. Shafts of light punctured the dark. "And I don't want to live! Help me."

Corwyn whispered a prayer, the canned contrition he'd expected for his venal sins. For his thoughts about Pam. For his real, uglier thoughts about his store manager and his sharp hands and how she wouldn't ignore him. For lying about some of his overdue bills. For all the little sins he had to do to keep his small, imperfect life in place. For wanting the photo girl. Keeping things from her. For remembering her from there. Finding her. Fighting her. Saving her and being saved. Seeing a break in the brambles, and leaving her there, yet finding her here. Broken.

He prayed while the creature listened. When he was done, it imparted words of solace.

It was painful but necessary. The rules of the game feed the yearning to the climax.

Once you've settled the rest of the stories? The end is one long, simple slope.

This last silence was like glass – a clear danger between them. Corwyn took a breath and broke it. "You can take me now," Corwyn whispered. It was easy. He was ready for it this time.

The Huntsman paused, confused. Then it sighed, "I'm not here for you, child."

Corwyn understood. He even smiled, eyes hidden behind the visor. He wasn't the hero of his own story. He would never, ever get the girl. And this town was too small for two oddities.

"You think she'll be happier there?" he asked the creature. "Will she find herself?"

It considered, then answered honestly. "Self makes no sense to me. Where I go? Everything awaits. Feel everything? Perhaps self will be among the seasons. Don't you miss it?"

"I do," Corwyn admitted. "I do. But I'm ready for my penance. And my blessing."

Once you've hurt someone once to save yourself, every other hurt feels inevitable.

It was painful but necessary. The real world has no place for broken things.

CHECKMATE

By Marianne Pease

"Well, this is quite nice. Feeling nostalgic for your golden age?" the man asked, picking up one of the pawns from the chess set on the table and twirling it between his fingers.

The little cafe was built into the bottom of an old tenement building, sunlight pouring down on the dusty terrace; soft shadows and the murmur of voices from within making it feel almost as if it were real instead of a construct of the dream. Rashid poured a cup of coffee for himself and slowly looked up at the Huntsman across from him. "The warmth of memory is a respite. It's been a long time since I last defeated you. It will be a pleasure to do so one more time."

The Huntsman laughed, sharp canine teeth gleaming when he opened his mouth. "Fleeing halfway around your world was an unexpected move on your part." He replaced the pawn and moved it forward across the board. When he let go, it was no longer a worn wooden piece but a crystalline blue figure of a young woman. "White to 4e. The game's already begun again and I will not lose this time."

"How many times have I defeated you?" Rashid mused, studying the Huntsman's opening move. "Three times now?"

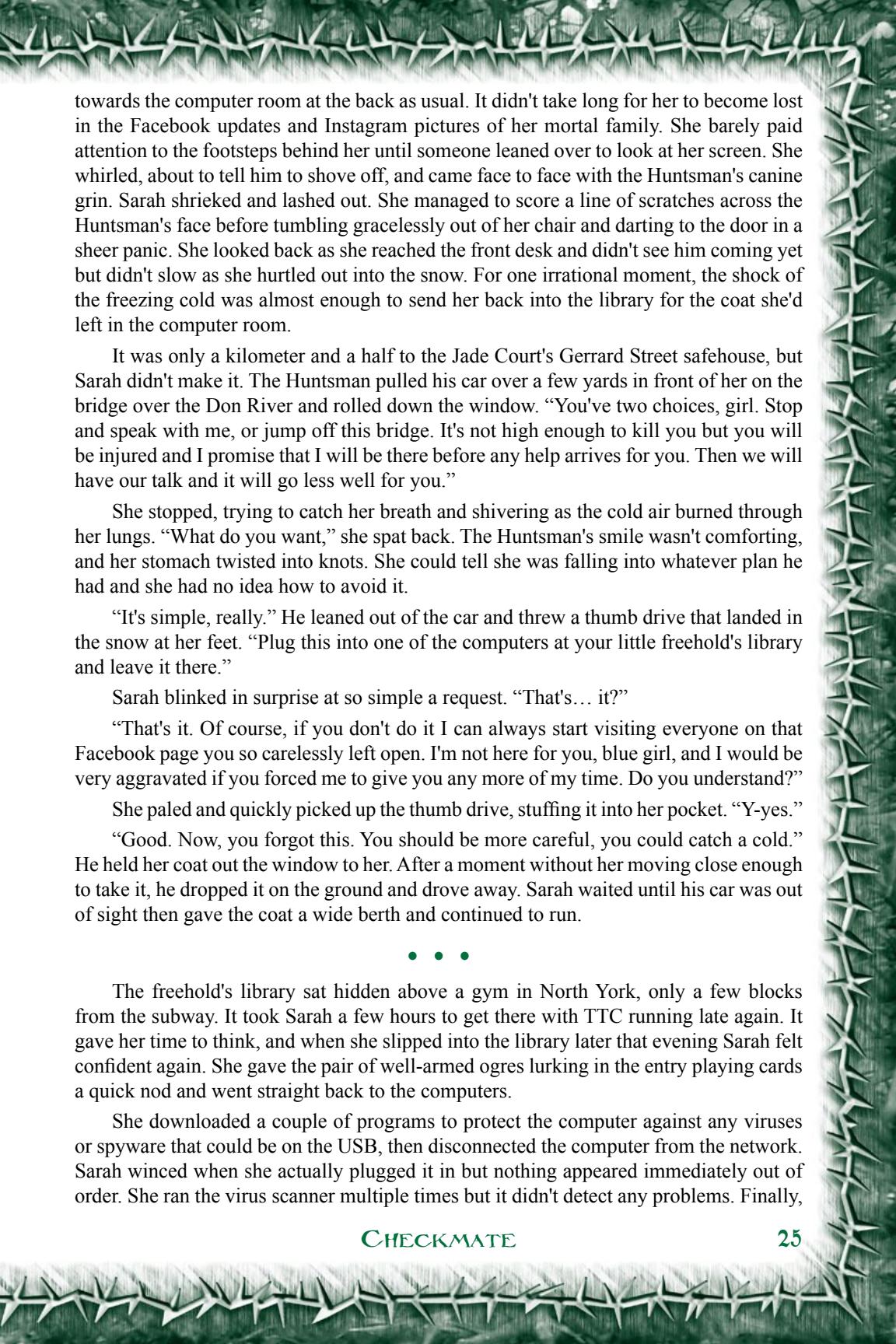
"Twice. The first time was your mentor's victory, not yours. I would have had you without his interference. Just as I would have taken you long ago if you hadn't fled. Here you are, though, buried in this frozen waste of a country. Your freehold is dying, a cobbled together mishmash of stories held together by the strength of one woman. How long will it take for the freehold to fall to petty squabbling? How long will the Ruby Court accept the situation without trying to fix it?"

The old man moved forward a pawn to c5. He frowned when its appearance shifted, becoming a black ogre with a crack along the base. "Third time is the charm then."

"Yes. It is."

• • •

Blue Sarah sighed in happy relief when the doors of the library closed behind her and the blast of warmth from the heater began to thaw out her fingers, turning them bright ruby red. She dumped the stack of books she was returning onto the desk and headed



towards the computer room at the back as usual. It didn't take long for her to become lost in the Facebook updates and Instagram pictures of her mortal family. She barely paid attention to the footsteps behind her until someone leaned over to look at her screen. She whirled, about to tell him to shove off, and came face to face with the Huntsman's canine grin. Sarah shrieked and lashed out. She managed to score a line of scratches across the Huntsman's face before tumbling gracelessly out of her chair and darting to the door in a sheer panic. She looked back as she reached the front desk and didn't see him coming yet but didn't slow as she hurtled out into the snow. For one irrational moment, the shock of the freezing cold was almost enough to send her back into the library for the coat she'd left in the computer room.

It was only a kilometer and a half to the Jade Court's Gerrard Street safehouse, but Sarah didn't make it. The Huntsman pulled his car over a few yards in front of her on the bridge over the Don River and rolled down the window. "You've two choices, girl. Stop and speak with me, or jump off this bridge. It's not high enough to kill you but you will be injured and I promise that I will be there before any help arrives for you. Then we will have our talk and it will go less well for you."

She stopped, trying to catch her breath and shivering as the cold air burned through her lungs. "What do you want," she spat back. The Huntsman's smile wasn't comforting, and her stomach twisted into knots. She could tell she was falling into whatever plan he had and she had no idea how to avoid it.

"It's simple, really." He leaned out of the car and threw a thumb drive that landed in the snow at her feet. "Plug this into one of the computers at your little freehold's library and leave it there."

Sarah blinked in surprise at so simple a request. "That's... it?"

"That's it. Of course, if you don't do it I can always start visiting everyone on that Facebook page you so carelessly left open. I'm not here for you, blue girl, and I would be very aggravated if you forced me to give you any more of my time. Do you understand?"

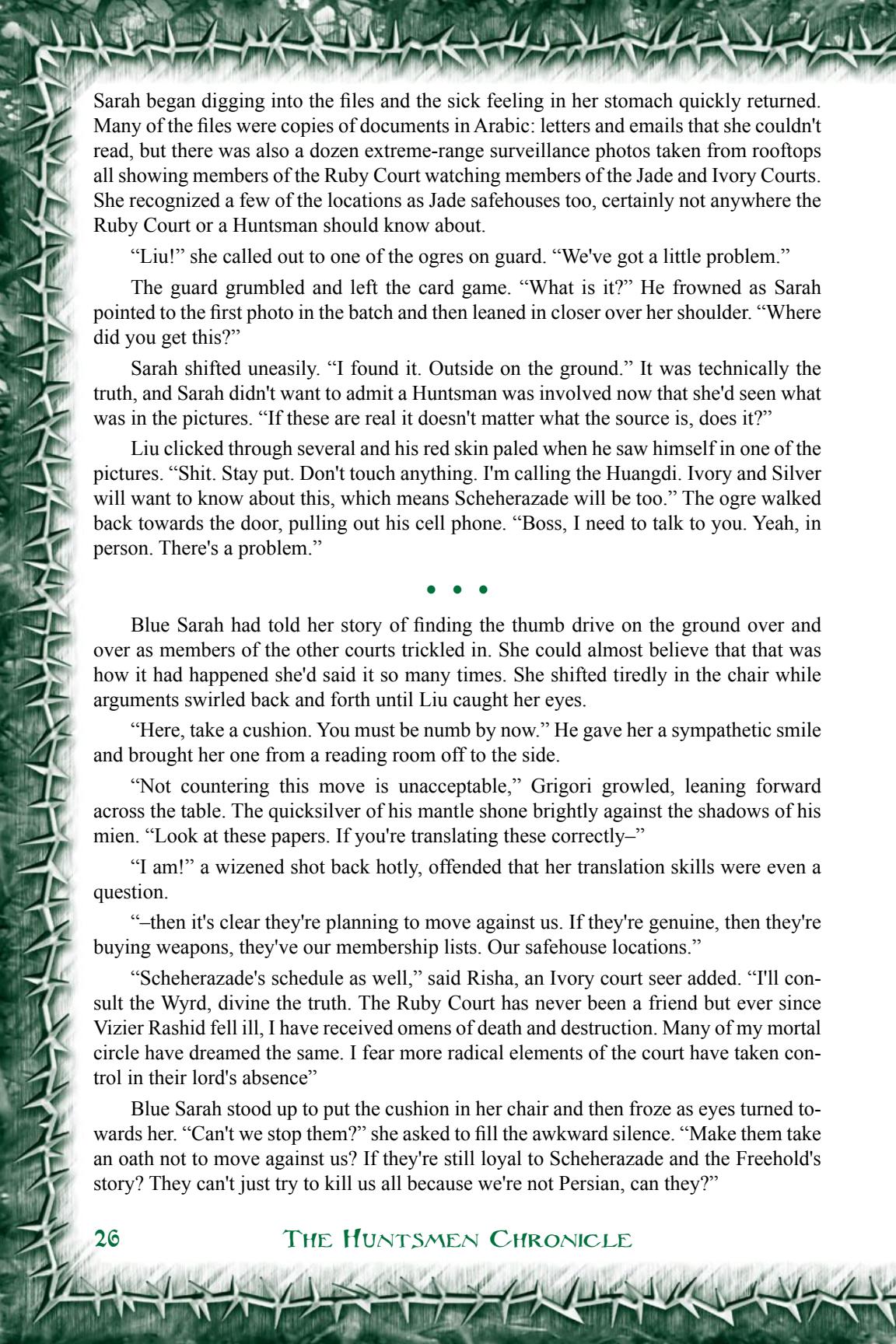
She paled and quickly picked up the thumb drive, stuffing it into her pocket. "Y-yes."

"Good. Now, you forgot this. You should be more careful, you could catch a cold." He held her coat out the window to her. After a moment without her moving close enough to take it, he dropped it on the ground and drove away. Sarah waited until his car was out of sight then gave the coat a wide berth and continued to run.

• • •

The freehold's library sat hidden above a gym in North York, only a few blocks from the subway. It took Sarah a few hours to get there with TTC running late again. It gave her time to think, and when she slipped into the library later that evening Sarah felt confident again. She gave the pair of well-armed ogres lurking in the entry playing cards a quick nod and went straight back to the computers.

She downloaded a couple of programs to protect the computer against any viruses or spyware that could be on the USB, then disconnected the computer from the network. Sarah winced when she actually plugged it in but nothing appeared immediately out of order. She ran the virus scanner multiple times but it didn't detect any problems. Finally,



Sarah began digging into the files and the sick feeling in her stomach quickly returned. Many of the files were copies of documents in Arabic: letters and emails that she couldn't read, but there was also a dozen extreme-range surveillance photos taken from rooftops all showing members of the Ruby Court watching members of the Jade and Ivory Courts. She recognized a few of the locations as Jade safehouses too, certainly not anywhere the Ruby Court or a Huntsman should know about.

"Liu!" she called out to one of the ogres on guard. "We've got a little problem."

The guard grumbled and left the card game. "What is it?" He frowned as Sarah pointed to the first photo in the batch and then leaned in closer over her shoulder. "Where did you get this?"

Sarah shifted uneasily. "I found it. Outside on the ground." It was technically the truth, and Sarah didn't want to admit a Huntsman was involved now that she'd seen what was in the pictures. "If these are real it doesn't matter what the source is, does it?"

Liu clicked through several and his red skin paled when he saw himself in one of the pictures. "Shit. Stay put. Don't touch anything. I'm calling the Huangdi. Ivory and Silver will want to know about this, which means Scheherazade will be too." The ogre walked back towards the door, pulling out his cell phone. "Boss, I need to talk to you. Yeah, in person. There's a problem."

• • •

Blue Sarah had told her story of finding the thumb drive on the ground over and over as members of the other courts trickled in. She could almost believe that that was how it had happened she'd said it so many times. She shifted tiredly in the chair while arguments swirled back and forth until Liu caught her eyes.

"Here, take a cushion. You must be numb by now." He gave her a sympathetic smile and brought her one from a reading room off to the side.

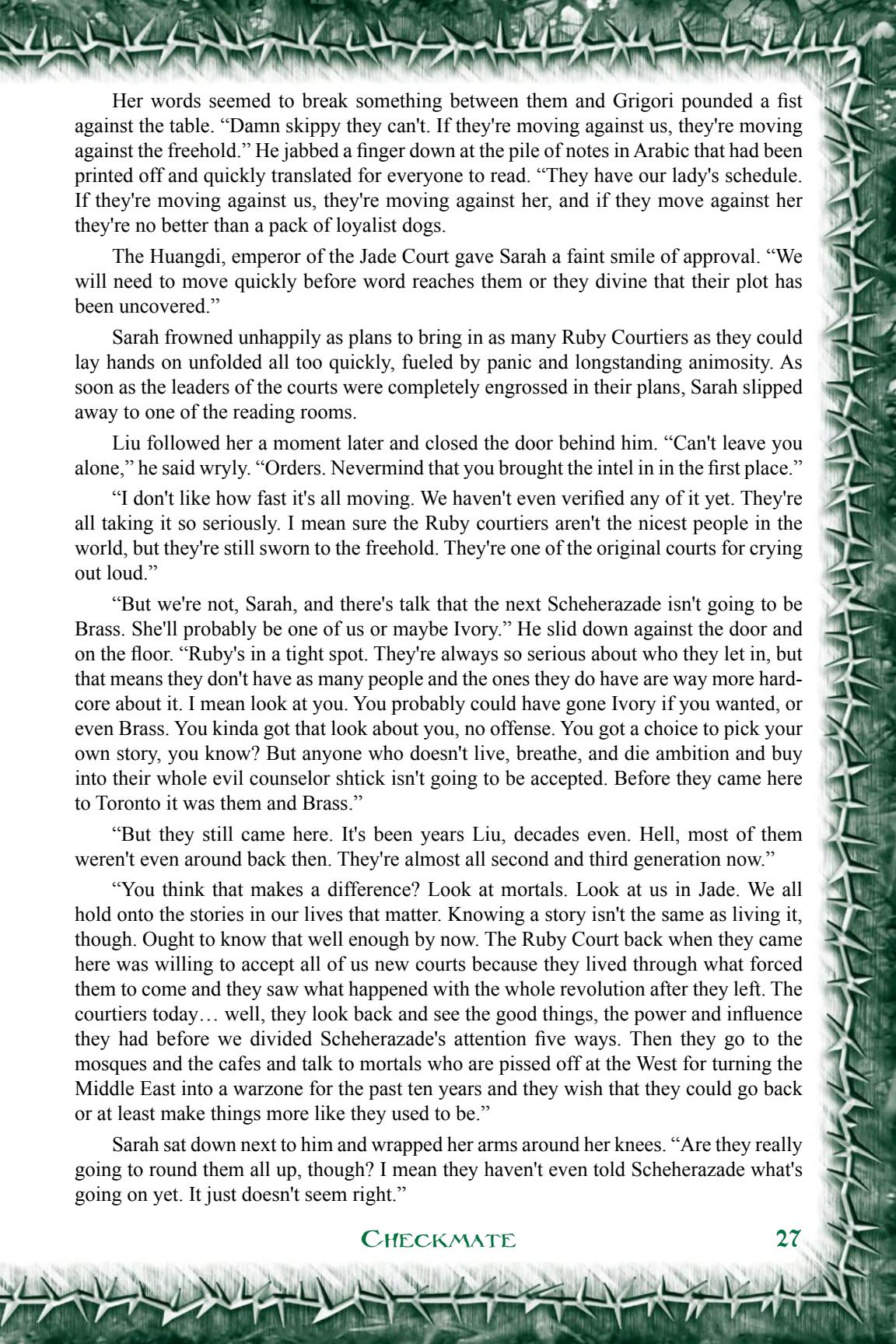
"Not countering this move is unacceptable," Grigori growled, leaning forward across the table. The quicksilver of his mantle shone brightly against the shadows of his mien. "Look at these papers. If you're translating these correctly—"

"I am!" a wizened shot back hotly, offended that her translation skills were even a question.

"—then it's clear they're planning to move against us. If they're genuine, then they're buying weapons, they've our membership lists. Our safehouse locations."

"Scheherazade's schedule as well," said Risha, an Ivory court seer added. "I'll consult the Wyrd, divine the truth. The Ruby Court has never been a friend but ever since Vizier Rashid fell ill, I have received omens of death and destruction. Many of my mortal circle have dreamed the same. I fear more radical elements of the court have taken control in their lord's absence"

Blue Sarah stood up to put the cushion in her chair and then froze as eyes turned towards her. "Can't we stop them?" she asked to fill the awkward silence. "Make them take an oath not to move against us? If they're still loyal to Scheherazade and the Freehold's story? They can't just try to kill us all because we're not Persian, can they?"



Her words seemed to break something between them and Grigori pounded a fist against the table. “Damn skippy they can’t. If they’re moving against us, they’re moving against the freehold.” He jabbed a finger down at the pile of notes in Arabic that had been printed off and quickly translated for everyone to read. “They have our lady’s schedule. If they’re moving against us, they’re moving against her, and if they move against her they’re no better than a pack of loyalist dogs.

The Huangdi, emperor of the Jade Court gave Sarah a faint smile of approval. “We will need to move quickly before word reaches them or they divine that their plot has been uncovered.”

Sarah frowned unhappily as plans to bring in as many Ruby Courtiers as they could lay hands on unfolded all too quickly, fueled by panic and longstanding animosity. As soon as the leaders of the courts were completely engrossed in their plans, Sarah slipped away to one of the reading rooms.

Liu followed her a moment later and closed the door behind him. “Can’t leave you alone,” he said wryly. “Orders. Nevermind that you brought the intel in in the first place.”

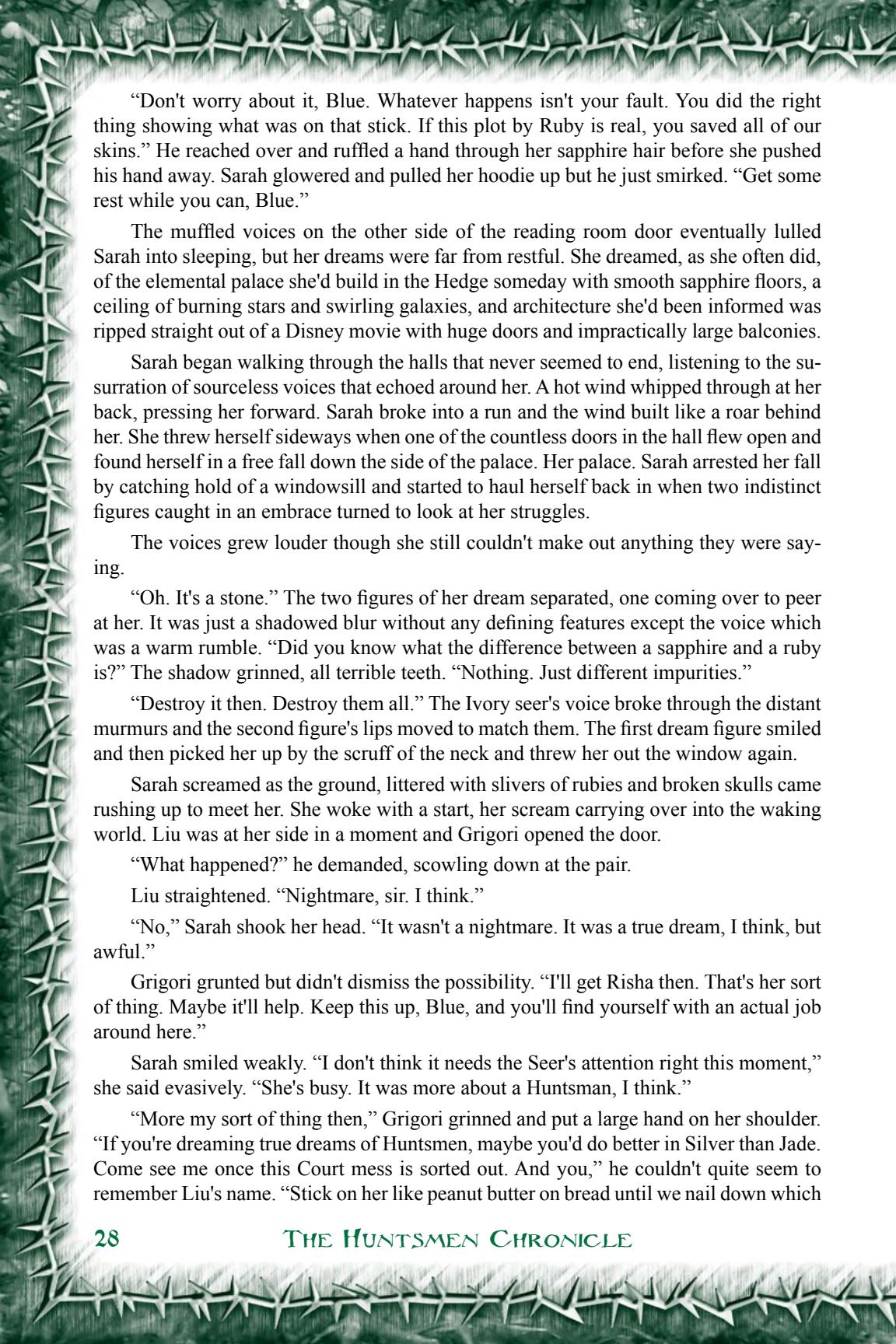
“I don’t like how fast it’s all moving. We haven’t even verified any of it yet. They’re all taking it so seriously. I mean sure the Ruby courtiers aren’t the nicest people in the world, but they’re still sworn to the freehold. They’re one of the original courts for crying out loud.”

“But we’re not, Sarah, and there’s talk that the next Scheherazade isn’t going to be Brass. She’ll probably be one of us or maybe Ivory.” He slid down against the door and on the floor. “Ruby’s in a tight spot. They’re always so serious about who they let in, but that means they don’t have as many people and the ones they do have are way more hardcore about it. I mean look at you. You probably could have gone Ivory if you wanted, or even Brass. You kinda got that look about you, no offense. You got a choice to pick your own story, you know? But anyone who doesn’t live, breathe, and die ambition and buy into their whole evil counselor shtick isn’t going to be accepted. Before they came here to Toronto it was them and Brass.”

“But they still came here. It’s been years Liu, decades even. Hell, most of them weren’t even around back then. They’re almost all second and third generation now.”

“You think that makes a difference? Look at mortals. Look at us in Jade. We all hold onto the stories in our lives that matter. Knowing a story isn’t the same as living it, though. Ought to know that well enough by now. The Ruby Court back when they came here was willing to accept all of us new courts because they lived through what forced them to come and they saw what happened with the whole revolution after they left. The courtiers today… well, they look back and see the good things, the power and influence they had before we divided Scheherazade’s attention five ways. Then they go to the mosques and the cafes and talk to mortals who are pissed off at the West for turning the Middle East into a warzone for the past ten years and they wish that they could go back or at least make things more like they used to be.”

Sarah sat down next to him and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Are they really going to round them all up, though? I mean they haven’t even told Scheherazade what’s going on yet. It just doesn’t seem right.”



“Don’t worry about it, Blue. Whatever happens isn’t your fault. You did the right thing showing what was on that stick. If this plot by Ruby is real, you saved all of our skins.” He reached over and ruffled a hand through her sapphire hair before she pushed his hand away. Sarah glowered and pulled her hoodie up but he just smirked. “Get some rest while you can, Blue.”

The muffled voices on the other side of the reading room door eventually lulled Sarah into sleeping, but her dreams were far from restful. She dreamed, as she often did, of the elemental palace she’d build in the Hedge someday with smooth sapphire floors, a ceiling of burning stars and swirling galaxies, and architecture she’d been informed was ripped straight out of a Disney movie with huge doors and impractically large balconies.

Sarah began walking through the halls that never seemed to end, listening to the surruration of sourceless voices that echoed around her. A hot wind whipped through at her back, pressing her forward. Sarah broke into a run and the wind built like a roar behind her. She threw herself sideways when one of the countless doors in the hall flew open and found herself in a free fall down the side of the palace. Her palace. Sarah arrested her fall by catching hold of a windowsill and started to haul herself back in when two indistinct figures caught in an embrace turned to look at her struggles.

The voices grew louder though she still couldn’t make out anything they were saying.

“Oh. It’s a stone.” The two figures of her dream separated, one coming over to peer at her. It was just a shadowed blur without any defining features except the voice which was a warm rumble. “Did you know what the difference between a sapphire and a ruby is?” The shadow grinned, all terrible teeth. “Nothing. Just different impurities.”

“Destroy it then. Destroy them all.” The Ivory seer’s voice broke through the distant murmurs and the second figure’s lips moved to match them. The first dream figure smiled and then picked her up by the scruff of the neck and threw her out the window again.

Sarah screamed as the ground, littered with slivers of rubies and broken skulls came rushing up to meet her. She woke with a start, her scream carrying over into the waking world. Liu was at her side in a moment and Grigori opened the door.

“What happened?” he demanded, scowling down at the pair.

Liu straightened. “Nightmare, sir. I think.”

“No,” Sarah shook her head. “It wasn’t a nightmare. It was a true dream, I think, but awful.”

Grigori grunted but didn’t dismiss the possibility. “I’ll get Risha then. That’s her sort of thing. Maybe it’ll help. Keep this up, Blue, and you’ll find yourself with an actual job around here.”

Sarah smiled weakly. “I don’t think it needs the Seer’s attention right this moment,” she said evasively. “She’s busy. It was more about a Huntsman, I think.”

“More my sort of thing then,” Grigori grinned and put a large hand on her shoulder. “If you’re dreaming true dreams of Huntsmen, maybe you’d do better in Silver than Jade. Come see me once this Court mess is sorted out. And you,” he couldn’t quite seem to remember Liu’s name. “Stick on her like peanut butter on bread until we nail down which

Huntsman she's dreaming of. We're not going to lose you just because we're busy with politics. Capiche?"

• • •

"Do you know what I love about you changelings the most?" the Huntsman asked as the pair continued to play chess. The board had grown, the rest of the cafe fading out until all that remained was the sharp smell of coffee in the air and a blur of color around them. The board dominated the table and each piece they touched took on a new face.

Rashid hesitated a moment, then moved his queen forward across the board to counter the ivory bishop. Golden color poured out of his fingers and the piece took on a life of her own, pulling a veil down across her eyes. "There's nothing you love," he countered harshly.

"Of course there is. I love that you are so predictable. You're all the same. Oh, different strengths and weaknesses but at the end of the day, the only thing that matters is your utter terror at the idea of returning home. You may have been born to this world, but your soul grew in the other. Even coming back here you mimic the stories of Arcadia for power while fighting your true place in the tale. If you accepted that and forfeited this game you could return to that tale."

"You aren't going to win this game," Rashid said quietly. "I'm already dying, and you cannot take me back alive. If you could, you'd be doing it instead of pestering me in my dreams. I've already won and there is no terror left for me, as I do not fear death."

• • •

"I sort of lied about my dream, Liu," Sarah admitted when they were alone again. "I couldn't tell the Seer about it."

"What do you mean?" The ogre frowned.

"I mean she's in on it, this — whatever it is with the Ruby Court. Politics. If I'd known..." Sarah shook her head before she made a full confessional of her agreement with the Huntsman. "I mean I don't think she's in on it so much as behind it."

His frown deepened. "Are you sure you're interpreting your dream correctly?" he asked skeptically. "Ruby and Ivory go at it pretty hard over influence but whatever her plans are or however she takes advantage of the situation, Ruby started it. They're the ones spying on the rest of us and buying weapons. They're extremists. Don't let a nightmare get the better of your common sense."

Sarah bit her lip, then nodded. "Yeah, maybe you're right," she said, even though she wasn't convinced. "So what's the next step? I'm not even sure how long I was asleep."

"A couple hours. It's getting to be stupid o'clock but Silver, Ivory, and us have been calling everyone in. Not here, but a couple safehouses we're pretty sure aren't compromised yet."

"That's moving fast."

Liu shrugged. "If we don't it could leak. Small community after all."

"Does Brass know? Or Scheherazade?"

“Not yet. After we get the Ruby Court in custody they’ll be called in.”

“Easier to ask forgiveness than permission?” She raised an eyebrow.

He chuckled. “I guess. Not my call. Not like anyone’s going to be hurt, though.”

“You hope,” Sarah said, unconvinced. “It’s going to get messy.”

“Hey, no jinxing us.” The ogre rapped a knuckle on the wooden door frame.

“Just wear your armor.”

• • •

“Oh I’m not here to pester you,” the Huntsman bared his canine teeth in what might have been a smile on a mortal but was utterly menacing on him. “I’m just here to watch your expression when you realize that you’ve lost. You see,” the Huntsman looked at his watch and then toppled a knight, “it’s just about time now. You’ve been in check the entire time and didn’t even realize it.”

• • •

Blue watched, fascinated as Liu carefully pricked his finger on a thorn from the Hedge and let several drops of blood fall onto the gun spun from a beating heart. It leaped in his hand, drinking in the blood and turning from dark, dead brown to bright red. “That is completely disgusting,” she declared.

The ogre grinned. “Sure, but she’s awesome, right? Heartseeker never misses either. You know how to use that gun? I can’t believe you’re coming on this. You could have just stayed at the library.”

She grimaced a little and looked out the car window at the restaurant. The blinds in front were closed but the lights were on inside. “I started this story, I feel compelled to be here when it ends. However it ends.”

“Just stay in the back.”

Sarah rolled her eyes but Grigori clapped his hands together. “Let’s try not to stab anyone. We can sort out who’s responsible and who’s not once we have them all in custody.”

She nodded nervously and watched as the gathered force of Silver, Ivory, and Jade rushed in. The Ruby courtiers were taken by surprise. Sarah moved in behind them and for a moment thought that it had ended swiftly, but then the Ruby Court rallied and made a coordinated break for the door. Old instincts honed on the other side of thorns burned through her as a spider-legged Darkling darted towards her. Sarah seized the Wyrd and a bright rainbow of gemstones grew into armor around her as Glamour rushed through her. The Ruby Court darkling bowled her over, sharp sapphire spines sticking into him as he kept going and skittered down the street into the darkness.

The battle was over in only a few short, bloody minutes and the air practically hummed with power and her ears were ringing from the gunfire by the time it was finished. The thirty-four Ruby courtiers who were taken were lined up along the back wall of the restaurant and heavily guarded, while the healers began sorting the injured from the dead. Sarah was just glad to see Liu in one piece when he finally came searching for her.

“What’s the count?” she asked grimly.

“Twelve of ours dead, four of theirs, and I’m not sure how many managed to escape.”

She gasped. “So many...”

“They knew we were coming, somehow. It was practically the entire court gathered here. The Seer saw they’d be here, but not that they’d be armed and ready. The body count isn’t going to help their cause either.”

It didn’t take long for Scheherazade herself to arrive, surrounded by the Brass Court. They were armed to the teeth and many veiled so they couldn’t be identified. A hush fell over the restaurant and all bowed low. Scheherazade herself was veiled, not in a traditional burqa, but a gossamer costume woven of starlight and moonbeams. A few of the Ruby courtiers’ expressions lit with hope at her arrival but tensions were high.

“I expect a certain degree of enthusiastic disagreement among my courtiers,” she said quietly, but her voice cut like a knife. “We are strong because our stories are many, yet here I find you all with the blood of your brothers and sisters on your hands over what minor disagreement now?”

“Sultana, the Ruby Court has betrayed us, *all* of us.” Risha stepped forward and sank down to bow her head to the floor. “The Jade Court uncovered evidence of their treason by purest chance and to my eternal dismay, my divinations confirmed it to be true.”

Sarah held her breath. Things had gone too far to speak her doubts now, in front of everyone, especially when they were founded on a vision of her own and Risha was the most prominent Seer in the freehold. Scheherazade turned and looked at the long line of Ruby Courtiers. “I have seen the evidence with my own eyes and already taken counsel with every court save yours. You’ve sought my assassination and the younger courts’ destruction. If any of you have any defense against these accusations you will have the opportunity to speak. Your vain and foolish ambition would destroy what peace and safety we’ve built in Toronto. As such, there is only one sentence that I can give.”

She closed her eyes for a moment as if to gather her courage, then stared straight forward. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The Ruby Court is hereby sentenced to dissolution. No more will they serve me or be under my protection.”

Sarah gasped and almost stepped forward to protest but Liu pulled her back next to him. “You can’t fight this,” he hissed, the sound buried beneath the quick whispers that sprang up at the pronouncement. “It is not your fault.”

Scheherazade waited a moment for silence to fall again and continued. “If any of you condemned souls are innocent of this treachery you may swear it, and then pledge yourself to one of my courts.” She looked to one of the veiled Brass courtiers and gave him a sharp nod to begin.

Four stepped out of the formation around Scheherazade and moved to the first in the long line of prisoners. “Bey Alia. Can you swear your innocence in regards to these plots against the Sultana Scheherazade and her courts?”

The fairest looked up in alarm as the four Brass courtiers stood over her. “You don’t understand!” she protested. “It wasn’t like that. We’re trying to save the freehold, not destroy it!”

The executioners looked to Scheherazade and she shook her head. “Wyrd forgive us, and grant us a better future,” she murmured in benediction. “Be grateful Vizier Rashid is too ill to be here, Bey Alia. Seeing the fruit of your evil would destroy him.”

Blue Sarah couldn’t watch as the scimitar fell with a sickening thud and turned and fled the room as the executioners moved to the next in line, splattered in his fellow courtier’s blood, and asked him to swear his innocence and loyalty to another court.

• • •

Rashid blinked, distracted from Huntsman’s monologue as a ruby tear fell from his eye and bounced across the floor. A second fell, and then more began to bleed out from his eyes in a continuous stream. He tried to stem the flow and then choked back an agonized cry as the stone began to rip through his skin. The walls of the dream were bleeding the beautiful stones as well before they shattered with the force of an explosion as the storm of Wyrd and broken oaths tore through his very soul. Rashid collapsed, shuddering in agony as the Ruby mantle left him and the court was no more.

The Huntsman stood untouched and smiling through the destruction. “See? Predictable. You could have come with me before. You could have prevented this from happening, but you fought. You were so proud of yourself, of using death as a means of escape. You have no protections left to you now. Everything you had is gone. Everything you worked for is gone. You cannot even wake to fight me. The nurses were kind enough to give you something to help you sleep since you’ve been in such pain.” He reached out and tipped over Rashid’s king, shattering it into tiny little pieces.

“Checkmate.”



CHAINED HEARTS

By Lauren Stone

“I didn’t do it.”

“Mom, Sybil left the window open,” Meredith screamed.

“Did not.”

The twins sat on their beds, arms crossed and staring at one another. Neither sister was willing to admit who had left the window open; nor willing to get out of the comfort of their beds to close the open window.

“*Mom!*” The twins screamed.

“I don’t care who did it, just close the window,” their mother yelled from the hall.

“You’re closer,” Sybil smiled.

“Nuh, uh. You are,” Meredith protested.

“Yuh, huh.”

“Nuh, uh.”

A guttural moan echoed down the hall, followed by heavy, lumbering footsteps. The crashing of tired legs against hardwood stopped at the door to the twins’ bedroom. A hundred and eighty pounds of exhausted mother blocked the light from the hall, her shadow scrawled across the floor between the twins’ beds. “Go to sleep.”

“We can’t, the window is still open,” Sybil pleaded. “Meredith won’t get up and close it.”

“I didn’t open it!”

“You did, too.”

“I did not.”

“Did, too.”

“Did not.”

“Uh huh.”

“Nuh uh.”

“*Enough!*” The twins’ mother stomped across the room to the open window and slammed it shut, ordered the twins to go to bed and stumbled back to her bedroom.

“Night mommy, I love you,” Sybil called after her sweetly.

Their mother grumbled in the hall.

“You’re the worst,” Meredith said, pulling the covers over her head and trying to get to sleep.

The window frame slammed against the wall.

Meredith threw the blankets off her head. “Stop it, Sybil.”

Sybil’s body hovered above her bed, a mass of leaves and dust swirling around her. She screamed, “Mere, help me.”

Meredith rushed out of bed toward her sister, the blankets falling to the floor. Her bare feet slapping against the hardwood were silenced by the blankets wrapping around her ankles. She started to fall, but before her face could meet the ground Meredith’s body flew into the air. The blankets holding her above the bed wrapped tightly around her body, muffling her screams.

The twins, bound and gagged by cloth and leaves, struggled against their bindings, the wind howled through the room, a demonic scream hung suspended for what seemed like an eternity then everything fell silent.

• • •

Tap. Tap. Tap. Meredith felt her sister poke her in the shoulder. An annoying morning ritual that she’d prayed her sister would get over one day. Tap. Tap. Tap.

“What?” Meredith turned over and glared at her sister.

A rush of cold wind bristled through the barren trees.

Meredith sat upright, blinking and rubbing her eyes, trying to wake herself from the dream.

“It’s no use, Mere.” Sybil tucked her knees into her chest, rocking gently back and forth, chewing on her lower lip. Another habit Meredith hoped her sister would grow out of someday.

“What is this place?” Meredith stood up, her feet sinking into the fresh snow.

“How should I know?” Sybil rocked.

The warmth and safety of their bedroom were long gone. Meredith walked their new world. Bare trees dotted the snow-covered hills. The branches like willowy hands reaching out in every direction searching for something once cherished, now lost. Sybil stopped rocking and now followed closely behind her sister.

“Are your feet cold?” Sybil whispered.

“No.”

“Isn’t that strange?”

Meredith looked down. Her bare feet buried in three inches of fresh snow. The bottoms of her purple plaid pajamas crusted with white fluff. She lifted her right foot from the snow, examining the skin. “It looks okay.”

“It’s *not* okay,” Sybil cried.

“We need to go.”

“Go where?” Sybil sank into the snow.

Meredith looked around. There was nothing but a sea of white, peppered with the longing branching hands of trees in every direction. There was nothing to indicate which way they should go to find shelter or safety, in the vast expanse of white.

“Give me your locket,” Meredith ordered.

“Why?”

“You remember what grandma said about them?”

“No.” Sybil sullenly pulled her knees to her chest and began to rock again.

Meredith stood over her sister. “She said they were special. That if ever we were lost, we could open them up and they would show us the way home.”

“Why don’t you use yours then?”

“I can’t, it’s gone.” Meredith stroked her neck. The place where her locket normally rested felt empty and hollow. Like a piece of her was missing.

Sybil’s hands wrapped around the back of her neck, her fingers searched for the clasp. “Where is it?” Sybil searched for her missing locket. She pulled at her clothes, hoping it had fallen off and gotten trapped in the fabric.

“They took it.”

“They? They who?” Sybil stopped her search and stared at her sister.

“Whoever brought us here, duh.”

“How do you know it was a they?”

“What?” Meredith cocked her head to the side staring at her sister as if she’d lost her marbles.

“I just mean,” Sybil stepped closer to her sister as if to tell her a secret, “how do you know it was a ‘they’ and not a ‘what’?”

“What?”

“Exactly.” Sybil nodded her head, her mouth tightened in smug determination.

“No, I mean, what are you talking about?”

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘a what’?”

“Oh.” Sybil again chewed on her lower lip, considering the word carousel she had created. “It all just seems so strange.”

“Well, yeah.”

“But, like this place. It’s not normal.”

“Okay.” Meredith furrowed her brow, moderately concerned that her sister may have lost it for good this time. Or had just decided to annoy her by stating the obvious.

“I just mean, how did we get here? Or, are we really here?” Sybil jumped up and down in the snow. “It’s cold, but, it’s not as cold as it should be. Like, this is what snow is like in a dream.”

“So you think we’re just dreaming.”

“Or, I’m just dreaming.” Sybil smiled.

“Or, I’m just dreaming.” Meredith smiled.

“I know I’m really me.”

“Well, I know I’m really me.”

The twins stared at each other. Unblinking, the snow melted beneath their feet. The sun set and rose, and the twins stared. The snow faded away. Their toes crinkled in the dirt. Grass sprouted between their feet; the blades going to seed that blew in the wind, then withered and died. Snow fell and the twins still stared. The world around them changed. It lived and died and was born anew, all while they stared.

Meredith lifted her toes from the snow and set them back down into a bed of warm grass. Looking at her twin she declared, “I think we died.”

“No way.” Sybil looked away from her sister and sat down on a mound of tall soft reeds, coated with morning dew. “Do you think *this* is heaven?”

Meredith looked around. The hills were now covered in lush green grass instead of snow, but the trees were still barren. The branching hands still searched for something lost, remained dormant; their longing sticks unaffected by spring. “No.”

“Why not?” Sybil again pulled her knees up to her chest.

“I don’t think heaven would have witch-finger trees.”

Sybil looked at the tree closest to them. Its bark ragged and peeling. The branches seemingly reached in all directions, tense and strenuous. “They look sad.”

“The trees?”

“Yeah. Like, they look lost. Like, they don’t belong here.” Sybil stood and walked over to the tree, laying her head on its trunk. The branches bent down, now heavy with leaves. White flowers bloomed through the dense green treetops, turning in on themselves, and sprouting red apples that fell to the ground around the girls’ feet. Sybil picked one of the apples off the ground and raised it to her lips.

Meredith slapped the apple out of her hands. “Don’t eat that.”

“Why not?” Sybil reached down and picked up another apple.

Meredith slapped the second apple out of her hands. “You read all those books and you learn nothing.”

“What are you talking about?” Sybil picked up another apple; Meredith slapped it out of her hands again. “Stop that.” Sybil picked up another apple.

“You stop that.” Meredith raised her hand to slap the apple away, again. Sybil sighed and dropped it to the ground. The apple rotted and turned to sand.

“I told you,” Meredith smirked. “This place is not normal.”

“But, I’m hungry.” Sybil picked up another apple.

Meredith, frustrated, slapped this one out of her hand too. “What is wrong with you?”

“What?” Sybil, determined, picked up another apple.

“They could be *poison*. Why would you eat that?”

“But, I made them.” Sybil bit into the apple.

Meredith studied her.

She watched her, closely.

Sybil took another bite of the apple.

She was fine.

She did not wither or turn to dust.

“Have one.” Sybil picked up another apple and held it out for Meredith.

Meredith took the apple from her sister. She rolled the apple in her hands, inspecting it closely. “What do you mean, you made them?”

“When I hugged the tree, I wished that it was alive again. I guess it was an apple tree.” Sybil took another bite.

“You wished it alive?”

“Yeah.” Sybil smiled, her teeth coated in blood.

Meredith looked at the apple. The ruby skin protected a mass of bloody flesh instead of the crisp white inside that she expected. “You should probably stop eating that,” she said, calmly.

Sybil took another bite. “Why?”

“No reason.” Meredith dropped her apple to the ground.

The leaves fell from the tree. The branches withered and broke, falling to the ground. The tall tree slipped into the earth until only a stump remained; its top level and smooth. Sybil sat on the newly manufactured stool and finished her apple.

“We need to get out of here.” Meredith looked out on the horizon. The world began to shift again. The trees went into bloom, fruited then withered leaving behind a series of smooth stumps. “Did you wish for this?”

“I wanted somewhere to sit.” Sybil smiled, teeth as white as in a toothpaste commercial. “You try.”

“Okay, I want a cheeseburger.” Meredith held her hands open waiting for her miracle to arrive.

“That’s not a real wish.”

“Oh, but wanting somewhere to sit is a real wish.”

“Don’t be jealous because you’re bad at wishing.”

“I wish I knew where we were.” Meredith sat on the stump next to Sybil.

“That’s a good wish.” Sybil closed her eyes for a moment. “Arcadia.”

“What?”

“That’s where we are. Arcadia.”

“This isn’t Arcadia. We’ve been to Arcadia. Grandma lives in Arcadia. They have a mall.” Meredith crossed her arms and turned away from her sister. “Do you see a mall?”

“It’s not that Arcadia.”

“Duh.”

Sybil stood and walked toward the western stumps.

“Where are you going?” Meredith ran after her.

“I know where we need to go.”

“But, how?”

“The tree told me.” Sybil smiled and ran faster toward the stumps.

“You talk to trees now?” Meredith was growing concerned about her sister’s mental stability. But, then again, she was the one hallucinating bleeding apples.

Meredith ran after Sybil, who gleefully jumped from stump to stump across the expansive meadow. “Are you coming or not?”

“Where are you going?”

“To the center.”

“Why?”

“It’s where we are supposed to go.” Sybil laughed. “It’s why we are here.”

“How do you know this?”

“I already told you.”

“The trees.” Meredith rolled her eyes.

Sybil jumped to the next stump and disappeared.

“Sybil!” Meredith screamed and ran after her sister. She came to the spot where Sybil disappeared and found nothing but the original tree stump surrounded by bleeding apple cores.

One apple remained untouched. Meredith picked it from the ground and brought it to her lips.

“Stop,” a woman’s voice ordered from behind Meredith.

Meredith turned to find a luminous woman, six-feet-tall with silver locks that wisped about her face and hung down like a weeping willow. “Did you want this?” Meredith held the apple out toward the woman.

“Yes.”

“What will you give me for it?” Meredith pulled the apple back close to her chest.

“What do you want?” The woman trained her gaze upon Meredith. Though she was a slight woman, her lumbering frame towered over the nine-year-old Meredith.

“My sister.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that.” The woman stepped toward Meredith. “She’s not here anymore.”

“I just want to go home.” Meredith cried, missing Sybil, missing home. “I want to wake up from this.”

“If you give me the apple, I will send you home.”

“Will my sister be there?”

“Of course.” The woman smiled.

Meredith held the apple out for the woman to take. “You promise?”

“It’s a deal.” The woman took the apple, the flesh became translucent. The apple’s core held a young girl, who stared out at Meredith.

“Sybil?” Meredith rushed to grab the apple back.

The woman laid her hand on Meredith’s shoulder and the world went white.

• • •

The window slammed against the wall.

Meredith threw the blankets off of her head, grumbling, “Sybil, I told you to stop it.”

The window slammed against the wall. Sybil’s bed was empty.

Meredith dragged herself out of bed and to the open window. The sun was up, but the street lamps were still lit. The world was just starting to wake. A middle-aged man wearing a suit got into a sedan and began his day. Meredith closed the window securing the lock.

Down the hall the toilet flushed. Meredith ran out of the bedroom to find her sister. “Sybil, I just had the craziest dream.”

Sybil walked out of the bathroom, wiping her hands on a towel. “Meredith?”

Meredith looked her sister over, something didn’t seem right. The towel in her hands was stained. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?” Sybil stared at Meredith.

“You seem different.”

“I’m not different.” Sybil smiled.

Sybil’s teeth were coated in blood. The same way they had been in the dream. Meredith looked her sister over again. Blood soaked the hem of her pajama bottoms and the cuffs of her shirt. “Are you hurt?”

“Of course not.” Sybil smiled, again. The blood was gone.

Meredith’s eyes fell on the locket around Sybil’s neck. It was silver with gold roses on it. “Why are you wearing my locket?”

“What are you talking about?”

“My locket. You took it. Give it back!” Meredith reached for the necklace.

“You’re crazy! This is mine.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“My locket is silver with gold roses on it. *Your* locket is a solid gold heart.” Meredith wound the locket around her fingers. “Give it back.”

“Stop it. You’re hurting me,” Sybil screamed.

The chain slid through her neck like a piece of string through a freshly baked cake.

Sybil screamed.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Meredith held the locket, Sybil’s hands clutched around her throat.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Sybil screamed.

Meredith stared at her sister and then back at the locket in her hands. The chain was intact, the clasp still connected. It made no sense. How could the necklace slide through her sister’s neck and not decapitate her?

Sybil rushed Meredith pushing her to the ground. “Give it back!”

“No!” Meredith struggled to get her sister off of her.

“Stop it.” A voice echoed down the hall.

Meredith froze. The voice sounded familiar, but it couldn’t be.

A pair of hands wrapped around Sybil’s neck, dragging her off Meredith and into the bedroom. Meredith struggled to catch her breath; stumbling to her knees she followed them.

Sybil and the stranger struggled near the open window. Sybil punched the stranger in the face. “Paris isn’t going to be happy about this.”

The stranger pushed Sybil out of the window. Meredith screamed and ran to save her sister. Her legs were not fast enough. The stranger stepped aside as Meredith leaned out the window to see Sybil’s body strike the pavement below.

There was no blood.

No mangled and broken body on the street.

No horrific scene that would scar Meredith for life.

Merely a pile of leaves mixed with dust lay in the street.

Mrs. Anderson, the next-door neighbor, and her border collie, Lancelot, walked through the pile of Sybil. Meredith stifled the urge to scream or vomit and sank to the floor in front of the window.

The stranger sat on Meredith’s bed in the shadows. “You doing okay?”

“No.”

“That makes sense.”

Meredith pulled her knees to her chest and bit her bottom lip. “What was she?”

“Who, Sybil?” The stranger laughed. “She was a fetch.”

Meredith realized she was in Sybil’s panic mode, as her body trembled. She tried to shake off the ghost. “What’s a fetch?”

“It’s what they leave behind.”

“What *who* leave behind?”

“The fae.”

Meredith looked to the shadowed figure and pondered that. “Who are you?”

“Oh, you’re not ready for that, yet.”

“How do you know?” Meredith stood up, indignant.

“Trust me. I know you pretty well.” The stranger laughed.

Sunlight streamed through the window, Sybil’s gold locket gleamed on the stranger’s neck.

“Sybil.” Meredith ran to her bed and wrapped her arms around the stranger.

The stranger pushed away from Meredith. “Not exactly.”

“What do you mean not exactly?” Meredith looked at the stranger. Her hair was braided in two pigtails, tucked behind her ears. Their auburn ends brushing her shoulders. Sybil’s gold locket rested on a pair of Meredith’s purple plaid pajamas.

“Why are you wearing my pjs?”

“Technically, they’re mine.” The stranger laughed.

“I don’t understand.” Meredith pushed away from the stranger, the sun rose outside, light streaming through the window. The stranger’s face illuminated. A perfect copy, down to the small scar over the right eyebrow, Meredith rubbed the scar on her face.

“How did it happen?” The stranger rubbed her own scar.

“You don’t know?”

“Not... not really.” Her face scrunched up a bit like she was thinking really hard about something.

Meredith smiled. Being a twin she was used to having conversations with someone who looked exactly like her but never understood her. “Summer after first grade.”

“You fell down the stairs out front.”

“Yeah.” Meredith stopped smiling. “I was running to catch the ice cream truck.”

“Yeah.” The stranger smiled. “And you ended up with three stitches instead of an ice cream sandwich.”

“Yeah.”

“And Sybil was super mean. She kept saying, ‘that’s what you get’.”

“Yeah.” Meredith pulled her legs back up to her chest, trying to find comfort in the gesture, as well as move away from the stranger without falling off the bed.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Sitting like that. Sitting like her.” The stranger cocked her head to the side. “Why are you sitting like her?”

“I...I don’t know.” Meredith lets go of her legs. “Are you real?”

“Sort of.” The stranger giggled.

“Is this a dream?”

“No.”

“Where is Sybil?”

“You shouldn’t ask stupid questions, Meredith.” The stranger frowned.

Meredith pulled her legs back again. “Are you going to hurt me?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

“Promise.”

Meredith looked at the window. “Why’d you do it?”

“She was going to kill you.” The stranger set her hand on Meredith’s foot. “I couldn’t let her do that.”

“Why not?”

“Then I’d go away, too.” The stranger frowned.

Meredith grabbed the stranger’s hand. “What do you mean you’d go away, too?”

“I don’t exist without you.”

“Do I exist without you?” Meredith looked back to the window. “Did you kill her?”

“I did what I had to do.”

“Did you kill the *real* Sybil?”

“What? No, of course not.” The stranger looked to the window. “At least, I don’t think so.”

Meredith squeezed the stranger’s hand hard, the stranger squealed. “What did you do?”

“I protected you. I protected us.” The stranger pulled her hand away from Meredith. “I don’t think it works that way. I think Sybil is still there. And, well, *she* was left here so no one would know she was gone, but we messed that up, so now, I guess, all that’s left to do is figure out which one of us should be her.”

“What?”

The stranger got out of bed and walked over to Sybil’s dresser. “Who do you want to be?”

“I’m Meredith.” She chewed on her lower lip.

“Are you sure? You sure have Sybil’s worried routine down.” The stranger routed through the dresser and pulled out a fresh pair of green pajamas.

A police siren rang in the distance.

“We should probably get our stories straight.” The stranger changed into the green pajamas.

“What do you mean, get our stories straight?” The siren grew louder.

“For the police.” The stranger put the purple pajamas in the laundry basket.

“What do you mean, for the police?” The siren stopped. Someone knocked on the front door, the banging echoed up the stairs into the girls’ room. Meredith ran to the window. Two patrolmen stood on their front steps. The police cruiser parked in front beside the pile of Sybil’s leaves. “Why are the police here?”

“Oh, no reason. Well, not *no* reason.” The stranger walked to the window and wrapped her arm around her ‘sister’.” “You should probably go check on Mom and Dad.”

“Why?”

“Just go.” The stranger released Meredith. “I’ll be Sybil, okay?”

“Okay.” Meredith walked out of the bedroom and down the hall to her parents’ bedroom.

The police knocked on the door again.

Meredith walked into the room; with the curtains drawn, it was too dark to make anything out. She felt along the wall for the light switch and flipped it on. The room flooded with artificial light exposing the horror Sybil’s fetch had unleashed upon the twins’ mother and father. Meredith screamed.

The police broke through the front door and ran up the stairs.

Meredith crumpled to the floor, her parents’ blood soaking into her pajamas. The stranger ran into the room, wrapping her arms around Meredith, whispering in her ear, “It’s going to be okay.”

The officers ran into the room, their weapons drawn. The “twins” wrapped themselves tighter around one another. The stranger, now Sybil, screamed, “Stop! We didn’t do anything.”

The officers holstered their weapons. The taller one turned to the smaller man. “Call it in.” The smaller officer left the room and went down the stairs back to the squad car.

The taller officer walked over to the girls and stood above them, his eyes trained on Meredith’s locket wrapped around the new Sybil’s neck. “Come on girls. It’s time to go.”

“Go where?” Meredith wiped her tears away.

“Somewhere safe.” The officer smiled. He reached down offering his hand to Meredith.

Meredith reached up to take his hand. Sybil slapped Meredith’s hand down. “No.”

“Ow. Why’d you do that?” Meredith rubbed her hand where Sybil had hit her.

“He’s one of *them*.” Sybil pushed away from the officer. Her feet slipped in the blood, smearing it across the hardwood floors as she tried to get away.

“He’s here to help. Police are here to help.” Meredith quietly repeated everything every grown-up ever told her and then grabbed Sybil’s hand. “He’s a good guy.”

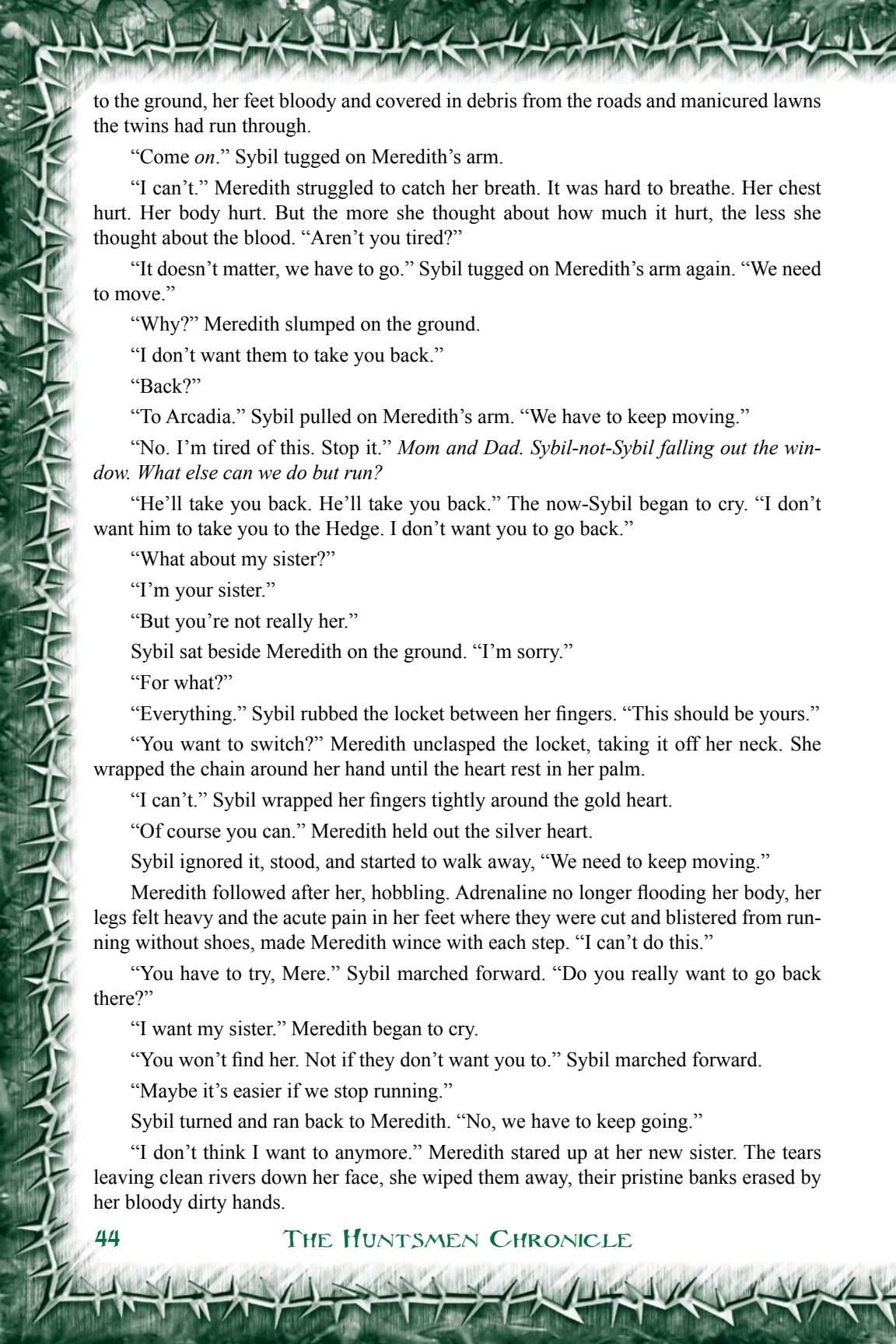
Sybil shook her head, ripping her hand from Meredith’s grasp, getting to her feet. Meredith turned back to the officer. He reached out grasping for Meredith. Startled she pushed back, Sybil’s hands wrapped around her shoulders pulling her to her feet.

“We have to go.” Sybil pulled Meredith out of the room and ran down the stairs.

“What are you doing?” Meredith’s bare feet stumbled beneath her, leaving a trail of tiny bloody footprints from her parents’ bedroom to the front door.

Sybil pushed past the officer who was sent to radio in the incident. “We have to go *now*.”

The twins ran down the street, their bare feet stomping through the pile of leaves left behind by the fake Sybil, bits of her sticking to the wet blood on their clothes and bodies. They ran until their legs ached and their lungs breathed fire. Sybil dragged Meredith behind her, gripping her wrist tightly. Meredith’s legs gave out beneath her and she fell



to the ground, her feet bloody and covered in debris from the roads and manicured lawns the twins had run through.

“Come on.” Sybil tugged on Meredith’s arm.

“I can’t.” Meredith struggled to catch her breath. It was hard to breathe. Her chest hurt. Her body hurt. But the more she thought about how much it hurt, the less she thought about the blood. “Aren’t you tired?”

“It doesn’t matter, we have to go.” Sybil tugged on Meredith’s arm again. “We need to move.”

“Why?” Meredith slumped on the ground.

“I don’t want them to take you back.”

“Back?”

“To Arcadia.” Sybil pulled on Meredith’s arm. “We have to keep moving.”

“No. I’m tired of this. Stop it.” *Mom and Dad. Sybil-not-Sybil falling out the window. What else can we do but run?*

“He’ll take you back. He’ll take you back.” The now-Sybil began to cry. “I don’t want him to take you to the Hedge. I don’t want you to go back.”

“What about my sister?”

“I’m your sister.”

“But you’re not really her.”

Sybil sat beside Meredith on the ground. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Everything.” Sybil rubbed the locket between her fingers. “This should be yours.”

“You want to switch?” Meredith unclasped the locket, taking it off her neck. She wrapped the chain around her hand until the heart rest in her palm.

“I can’t.” Sybil wrapped her fingers tightly around the gold heart.

“Of course you can.” Meredith held out the silver heart.

Sybil ignored it, stood, and started to walk away. “We need to keep moving.”

Meredith followed after her, hobbling. Adrenaline no longer flooding her body, her legs felt heavy and the acute pain in her feet where they were cut and blistered from running without shoes, made Meredith wince with each step. “I can’t do this.”

“You have to try, Mere.” Sybil marched forward. “Do you really want to go back there?”

“I want my sister.” Meredith began to cry.

“You won’t find her. Not if they don’t want you to.” Sybil marched forward.

“Maybe it’s easier if we stop running.”

Sybil turned and ran back to Meredith. “No, we have to keep going.”

“I don’t think I want to anymore.” Meredith stared up at her new sister. The tears leaving clean rivers down her face, she wiped them away, their pristine banks erased by her bloody dirty hands.

“You really love her, don’t you?” Sybil sat beside Meredith.

“Of course, she’s my sister.” Meredith let the locket unravel and drop from her palm, the end of the chain clasped between her fingers. The heart swung freely. Circling back and pointing to Sybil’s neck. “Funny.”

“What?”

The point of the gold locket around Sybil’s neck pulled toward the silver heart in Meredith’s hand. She smiled, “Grandma said they would always help us find our way home.”

Sybil grabbed the gold heart and pulled it forward. The chain slid through her neck like the other locket had through the fake Sybil’s. “It’s yours.”

“But, I thought you needed it to stay.”

Sybil handed the locket to Meredith. “I’m not your sister. I don’t belong here. I don’t really belong anywhere.”

A police siren howled in the distance.

“You need to go now.” Sybil shoved the locket into Meredith’s hand.

“What about you?”

“I’ll keep him distracted. But you need to go now. I hope you find her.” Sybil stood and ran toward the police car.

The lockets spun in Meredith’s hand pointing north. She pulled herself from the ground and walked in the direction they pointed.

The sirens grew louder, tires screeched to a halt. Sybil screamed. Meredith stopped and looked back. The officer stood above Sybil; his gun drawn. The smaller officer ran from the car yelling at his partner. The taller man turned the gun from Sybil toward his partner.

Meredith screamed and ran toward the officers. The tall one pulled the trigger. Sybil threw herself between the officers, the bullet striking her chest. The officers stood in the middle of the street as Sybil unraveled. The blanket she was made from wafted in the breeze then settled to the ground between them.

“Well, that was close,” the smaller officer said.

“Where’s the other one?”

“Don’t worry, she won’t get far.” The smaller officer grinned.

Meredith turned and ran as fast as she could, the lockets leading her away from the officers, running until she circled back to the house. It was quiet. No crime scene tape. No police. No one directed people away from the horror hidden in their idyllic suburban sanctuary.

The pile of leaves scattered down the sidewalk. Meredith walked up to the open front door and into her home. The bloody footprints trailed down the stairs. Meredith was careful not to step on them. She worked her way up to the second floor, past her parents’ bedroom and into the bathroom.

She set the lockets on the counter, stripped the soiled pajamas from her body, discarding them in the hamper, and got into the shower. The hot water beat down on her

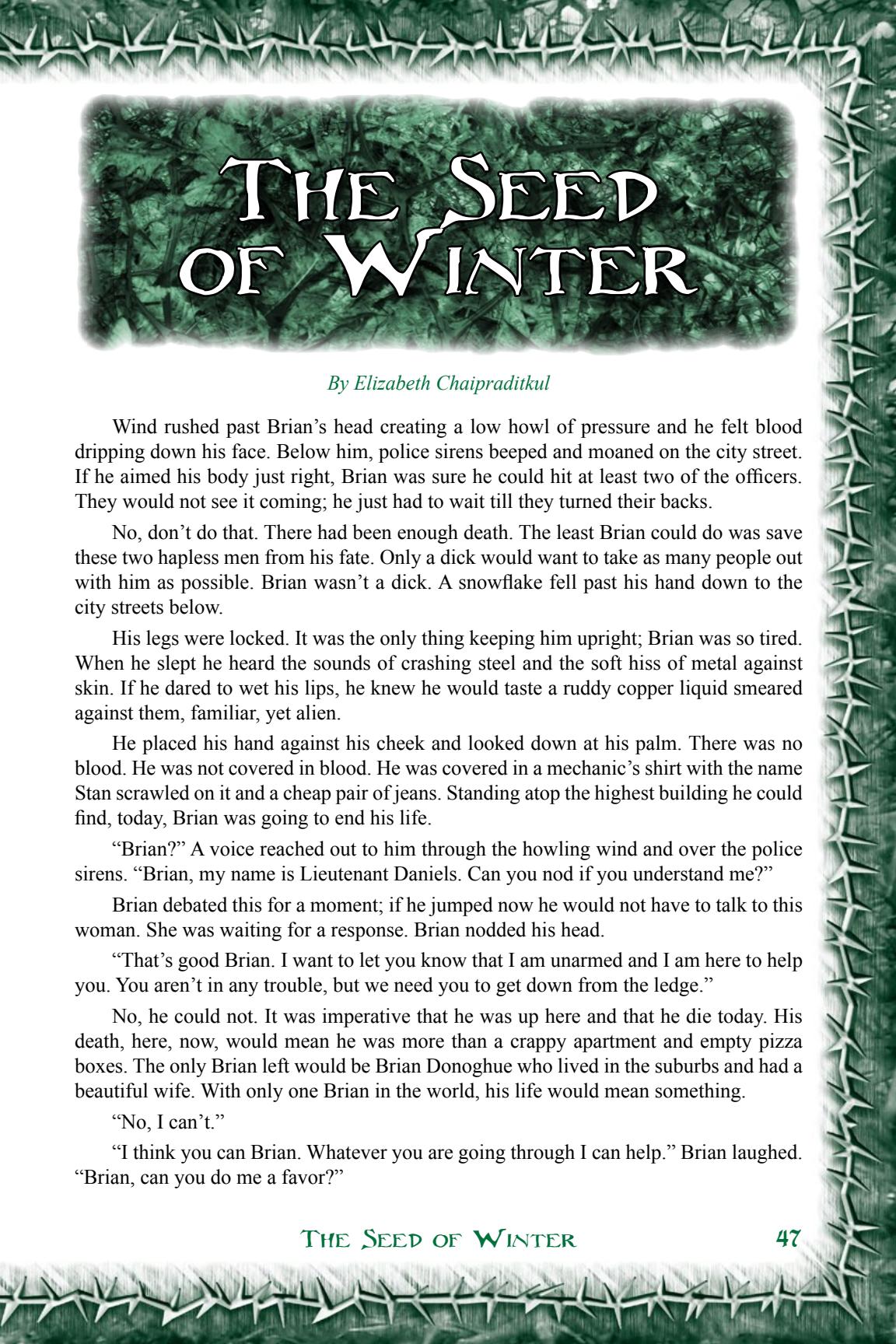
tired body, washing away the dirt and blood. Her skin white and swollen where the hot water exposed and cleaned the cuts she had earned on her journey. Meredith got out of the shower, wrapped herself in a towel and stood before the foggy mirror.

She wiped the condensation from the glass. Meredith picked up her silver locket from the counter and fastened it in place. Its cold metal made her feel more like herself. She stared down at her sister's locket, abandoned on the counter. It didn't seem right. Like her sister, the locket was lost. Meredith picked up Sybil's locket and fastened it around her neck. The two hearts rested together.

Meredith went into her bedroom and got dressed. Tending to her injured feet, she covered the cuts with bandages before securing her sneakers. She took her book bag and a suitcase from the closet and filled them with clothes. Meredith broke open the twins' piggy banks, throwing their meager savings into her bag, went downstairs and took the emergency cash their mother hid in the old roll top desk. Her father's wallet and mother's purse lay on the kitchen table. She went through them for cash and credit cards and walked out of her home for the last time.

Meredith stood at the corner with her bags. She held the lockets. "Take me to Sybil." The hearts pointed down the road and Meredith followed.





THE SEED OF WINTER

By Elizabeth Chaipraditkul

Wind rushed past Brian's head creating a low howl of pressure and he felt blood dripping down his face. Below him, police sirens beeped and moaned on the city street. If he aimed his body just right, Brian was sure he could hit at least two of the officers. They would not see it coming; he just had to wait till they turned their backs.

No, don't do that. There had been enough death. The least Brian could do was save these two hapless men from his fate. Only a dick would want to take as many people out with him as possible. Brian wasn't a dick. A snowflake fell past his hand down to the city streets below.

His legs were locked. It was the only thing keeping him upright; Brian was so tired. When he slept he heard the sounds of crashing steel and the soft hiss of metal against skin. If he dared to wet his lips, he knew he would taste a ruddy copper liquid smeared against them, familiar, yet alien.

He placed his hand against his cheek and looked down at his palm. There was no blood. He was not covered in blood. He was covered in a mechanic's shirt with the name Stan scrawled on it and a cheap pair of jeans. Standing atop the highest building he could find, today, Brian was going to end his life.

“Brian?” A voice reached out to him through the howling wind and over the police sirens. “Brian, my name is Lieutenant Daniels. Can you nod if you understand me?”

Brian debated this for a moment; if he jumped now he would not have to talk to this woman. She was waiting for a response. Brian nodded his head.

“That's good Brian. I want to let you know that I am unarmed and I am here to help you. You aren't in any trouble, but we need you to get down from the ledge.”

No, he could not. It was imperative that he was up here and that he die today. His death, here, now, would mean he was more than a crappy apartment and empty pizza boxes. The only Brian left would be Brian Donoghue who lived in the suburbs and had a beautiful wife. With only one Brian in the world, his life would mean something.

“No, I can't.”

“I think you can Brian. Whatever you are going through I can help.” Brian laughed. “Brian, can you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Please, don’t laugh at yourself.” He heard the officer taking a few steps closer and with each step the urge to jump grew stronger. “This isn’t a joke, Brian. This is your life.”

Brian turned around and looked at this Lieutenant Daniels. There was nothing remarkable about her. She wore normal police attire and had her brown hair pulled back in a bun, her eyes seemed to show genuine concern for his wellbeing.

“You sure do say my name a lot.”

“I have to Brian, it’s part of my training. It keeps you here with me.”

“Part of your training? People don’t have to do everything they are trained to. If I did...” Keep it together Brian. Don’t ruin this woman with nightmares of home.

“If you did, what? We have counselors who can help you. Ending a life is never the answer.”

“Sometimes, it is the only answer,” Brian mumbled under his breath.

He remembered his first real day in the arena. The hedge had pulled and torn at him. When he arrived his psyche and his body were shattered. Doctors had bathed him, tended to his wounds, given him delicious food, and allowed him to rest. While each figure who cared for him seemed more alien than the next, he never felt the need to ask questions. After the hedge, in the hospital, Brian was at peace.

“Brian, are you still with me?”

He snapped back to reality and looked down. There were more people gathering. He should do it before his face was on TV. That was just going to confuse things.

“We can talk about whatever you’d like. Please just get down from the ledge.” The lieutenant took a step further.

“Please,” Brian managed to get out, “just leave me be. I just want my... I just want it to be quiet for a moment. Don’t take one more step.”

“OK, Brian, I’m doing what you say, but now you have to do something for me. Please, talk to me. You can tell me anything. I am here to listen to you.” Her voice took a higher pitch; it became more insistent, desperate.

“You don’t want to hear what I have to say.”

“I do. I promise you, I do.”

“You should be careful who you make promises to. It can get you in trouble.”

“Has it gotten you in trouble?”

Brian’s thoughts drifted back to the arena. Fully healed, he was brought to the center of the arena and left alone. He thought of his father, Stan, and the time he let Brian stay up late to watch *Spartacus* on TV. Looking upwards a snowflake fell from the sky and landed on his nose, then three more, and soon the entire sky was filled with flurries.

The snowfall intensified and thickened; the arena’s sandy floor turned white. Through the snowfall, Brian saw a figure. It seemed to lurk on the edge of truly being seen, a shimmering border between the reality of what was in front of him and the unknown obscured by falling snow.

Brian walked towards the figure who, when noticed, stopped and waited. Approaching the figure it became more and more familiar. Finally, standing only a foot away from it, Brian realized he was looking at himself and laughed. The replica laughed as well.

Was it some kind of mirror? He reached out to touch the other's shoulder and it felt real. The other stood perfectly still and then smiled, touching Brian's shoulder. Brian laughed again in wonder and held out his hand. His father, Stan, had taught him this was polite when meeting other people. The other Brian reached out and shook his hand. He then brought his hand to Brian's face and patted his cheek.

This must be the custom of his people, Brian thought, and so he brought his hand to the other's cheek and patted it softly. The other drew back his hand and slapped Brian hard across the cheek. Brian could feel his cheek reddening, blood rushing to the surface.

“Hey, that's not nice!”

“What's not nice, Brian?” Lieutenant Daniels questioned.

“Uh, sorry. Nothing, it's nothing.”

“No, please tell me, Brian. I want to know.” She pleaded with him for some kind of answer. Brian could see sweat drops on her forehead and her skin paling. The closer he looked at her the more worried she seemed and the more foreign to the plain, brown-haired girl he'd first met.

“I want to know why he slapped me.”

“Who slapped you? Violence is never the answer.”

“The other me, why did he slap me? It didn't have to end the way it did. I know that now. I know I could have changed it, made it better.”

“We always get second chances, Brian. Why don't we find this other you and talk to him? We can do it together. You just have to come with me.”

Brian could hear the doubt in her voice. “You think I'm crazy, don't you?”

She sighed, “I think you are tired, Brian. I think you are up here because you think you don't have any options left in your life, but I am here to tell you that you do. Even when things seem their darkest, there is always something left.”

Brian picked up the rock next to him and he brought it down onto the other's face. Fear had glued Brian's eyes so tightly closed he saw stars and he could feel the other's blood dripping down his face. He was back at the arena. He let out a scream and jumped off the lifeless figure underneath him.

What had he done?

He was so sorry, so very sorry, and so very terrified. He could feel his pants warming from the release of this fear. He felt ashamed. What at first sounded like the thrumming of his heart that had leaped into his head, Brian realized, was a soft clapping sound. Snow stopped falling from the sky. Brian looked around and he saw no one, no one was making the maddening sound he heard. He and the other's broken body were alone.

He screamed. He screamed at the top of his lungs, but there was no reply except for the quiet left-after applause. Crawling over to the lifeless body of the other, Brian saw his own face staring back at him, but the expression was a mask one only wears in death.

He cried, he prayed, he hugged the corpse close to him so it would not get cold. He tried to care it back into living.

Silence. Until his breath ran cold once more and snow began falling from the sky. Brian crawled backward trying to escape the flurries' reach, but with his back flush against the arena wall, there was nowhere to go.

Two figures strode towards him. The moment Brian noticed them, they were on him. Not one, but two perfect replicas of himself, two others. They grabbed him and tore his shirt. "Please, no!" Brian begged. He didn't want to hurt anyone. The others pulled him to the floor digging their nails into his arm. "Stop! You don't have to do this."

The laughed mimicking him, "Stop! You don't have to do this." Brian's leg shot up, kicking one away. For the first time in his life, he felt the feeling of utter despair. He did not hurt people, he could not hurt people, but he didn't want to die.

"Please..."

"Brian, I'm here." The lieutenant had moved closer to him. Brian looked into her eyes and saw a blue hue changing to amber staring back at him. He felt a heat coming off of her, an intensity. She was focused solely on him.

"You seem like a nice woman. I don't want to hurt you, I just want to jump. Please stay where you are."

"Brian, you're not the type of guy who could hurt someone."

"How do you know that?"

"You don't have it in your shoulders. People who hurt people stand like they are always about to be mugged. No matter how straight they stand, you can always see that tension. It builds up and up, till they just snap. You don't have that."

"You're wrong."

"I am? Tell me how I've gotten you wrong?"

"You're wrong because I have hurt people. I've hurt so many people I can't even count them anymore." The skyline moved and warped in front of Brian. He tried to focus, to remember he had made it back. "They're all just blood in my reflection now. Each time I look in the mirror I see them; each time I wash my hands, I try to wash them free. When I sleep, I hear the chant of 'champion' haunting my dreams. I need to erase what I've done. I need to be a good man."

His throat was sore with regret and Brian's eyes burnt with tears.

"You are, Brian." Lieutenant Daniels held his hand. As her skin touched his, Brian's resolve melted and he stepped down from the ledge. He knelt at her feet.

When Brian came back he promised himself he would no longer be a monster, but they were hunting him. Brian tried to hide. He took his father's name, Stan, and kept his head down. He tried to live a good life, but no matter what he did, he could not forget. Brian, the other Stan, felt the warmth of sorrow weighing on his shoulders.

"Brian, it's going to be okay."

His name hung in the air and coaxed Brian back to reality. "How did you know my name?"

“You told me. Don’t you remember?” The lieutenant cooed, her fine, angular features framed clearly in the sunlight.

“Okay, I just....” Brian put his head in his hands. He just needed it to stop. Why did he get off the ledge?

“It is OK, Brian. You aren’t a murderer. That isn’t you. Everything you’ve done has been out of necessity. You were an artist, a champion. You wielded the cold — bent it to your will, slew your opponents with grace and speed. You became a god among rodents.”

Brian’s muscles tensed at the word champion. It had been so long since anyone had said that to him. Old memories came flooding back, clawing at his muscles, screaming at him to run.

“No!” He pushed the woman back and truly looked at her for the first time.

Lieutenant Daniel’s frown rose and twisted into a smile. With her lips open Brian could see a giant maw of teeth and the lieutenant’s skin shone a pale red in the sunlight.

“No, I am not going back.”

“Brian, please, let’s stop pretending. You’re coming back with me. Not because you want to, but because you need to. You need today to mean something. You don’t think I heard you? You need his death to mean something.”

Brian flashed back to the arena, kneeling over the boy again, looking down at his own face. No, it wasn’t his face. This boy wasn’t him at all. The boy he murdered was just some poor soul stuck in the arena like him.

“The only way it’ll mean something, Brian, is if you come back with me. Help train others to not make the same mistakes you did. Pick the ones that’ll survive. You’ll save lives.”

“No!” Brian’s focus narrowed, the sorrow aching through his body being replaced with the urge to fight. He slammed his hand against his chest. “I would not be saving lives, I’d be taking them. You, your kind, whoever, whatever you are did this to me. I am not a monster!”

“I wish you would calm down Brian. This isn’t good for you. You really don’t have a choice in this.” Lieutenant Daniels unhooked the baton on her belt flicking it open. She was right. He didn’t have a choice. There was no way Brian would be able to take on a Huntsman.

There was only one option.

• • •

On the city streets below, Officer Rodgers covered his eyes against the glare of the Fall sun. It appeared that Daniels managed to talk the jumper off the building. Good, no need to see man-cake before lunch.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn towards the top of the building. Faintly, he could hear a man yell and before Rodgers had a moment to reflect, two figures fell from the building. Frozen in time Rodgers tracked the two figures as they fell, only tearing his sight away at the moment of impact.

Time sped up. Rodgers saw the gruesome scene of one body splattered against the sidewalk and he retched. Bewildered, Rodgers dragged himself back to the squad car to call it in.

“One casualty, female, officer down. I repeat, officer down.”

Placing his radio back, Rodger leaned against his squad car and his head turned to the sky. A snowflake landed on his nose with the promise of snow to blanket the streets clean.



A BETTER ME

By Steffie de Vaan

My mind is a mess. I remember my life in bits and pieces, separate events flowing into each other until I can no longer tell them apart. Time has lost all meaning; the past, present, and even future are all the same. Emotions barely register. I don't feel alive anymore. I just exist. Here. Now. I think I'm broken.

A few events still stand out with some clarity. The day Thrace was born is one of them. Scott nearly got two tickets driving me to the hospital, though I was barely aware of it at the time. Then pain and doctors, and finally I got to hold my son in my arms. I looked at his face, all wrinkly from the long push, and remember thinking how perfect he was. I had never felt a love that strong. In a single moment, Thrace became more central to my life than the sun, more important than breathing. He was love incarnate. And now it's gone. I look at him, my tawny-haired boy, and all I feel is a distant curiosity. I observe him like I do the neighbor's dog, always trying to crawl under the fence into our yard. I remember loving him. I just don't feel it anymore.

Thrace is quiet as a mouse around me nowadays. They both are; they feel the disconnect too. I wonder if they are sad or merely confused that their mother stopped caring. I'm not even sure Jip is old enough to fully understand. Sometimes he shows me pictures he's drawn or bugs he's caught. I smile and pretend to be interested. Then Thrace comes and pulls him away. It took Scott longer to catch on that I'm different. He reacted like all men do and tried to find a solution. He wants me to see a doctor, which I know is code for a psychologist. I told him no, said I was tired; how could I not be as the stay-at-home mom of two rambunctious toddlers. In truth, I don't want to go because it won't matter. I don't think a doctor can fix what's wrong with me.

• • •

I wake up in the middle of the night. A wan blue light falls between the gap in the curtains. Bladder control has been a distant memory since Jip was born, so I get up to use the bathroom. I stop briefly as I pass the boys' bedroom. I used to check on them every night, just a quick peek to pull up a blanket or maybe plant a kiss on a crayon-painted face. Small signs of love, things a mother does. Not anymore, though, and I continue on my way.

Two minutes and three full droplets of pee later, I'm washing my hands in our an-

tique basin. I run my hands across the smooth surface and the stone feels more real than I do. I bend over to splash some water on my face and she's looking at me when I stand up. My mirror image. Flawless skin – one of the few blessings my mother left me – but paler than I used to be. Bags so dark they almost eclipse my brown pebble eyes. Autumn leaves cascade down my shoulders in hues of brown and red.

“Thief,” mirror-me says.

I wake up.

• • •

Janet comes to visit next morning. She talks about the house, the club, and Melanie Monroe's new boy toy. *We're putting in a jacuzzi, and oh the neighbors will be so jealous. Surely the club will ask me to host the annual fundraisers, how could they not. To think he's only nineteen, can you imagine the scandal!* On and on and on. I'm barely paying attention to her when my eye falls on the African bowl on the side table. Scott and I bought it on our honeymoon in Kenya. The vendor claimed it's basalt, but he was probably lying. Regardless, I have always adored the gleaming black surface and the weight of it in my hands. I keep looking at the black bowl while Janet prattles. There's me, the stone, and Janet. Janet who vomits after every single meal to maintain her perfect size zero. Who steals her kids' Ritalin so she can get through the day. Who danced with me in fountains and held my hair when I was sick. My best friend in college. It sickens me to see her like this, hollowed out to a sack of jealousy and pretense. I lean forward to take the bowl. By now, Janet has noticed my distraction. Why am I not listening to her? Her voice becomes shrill, buckling under the strain of being ignored. Why am I not listening to her!

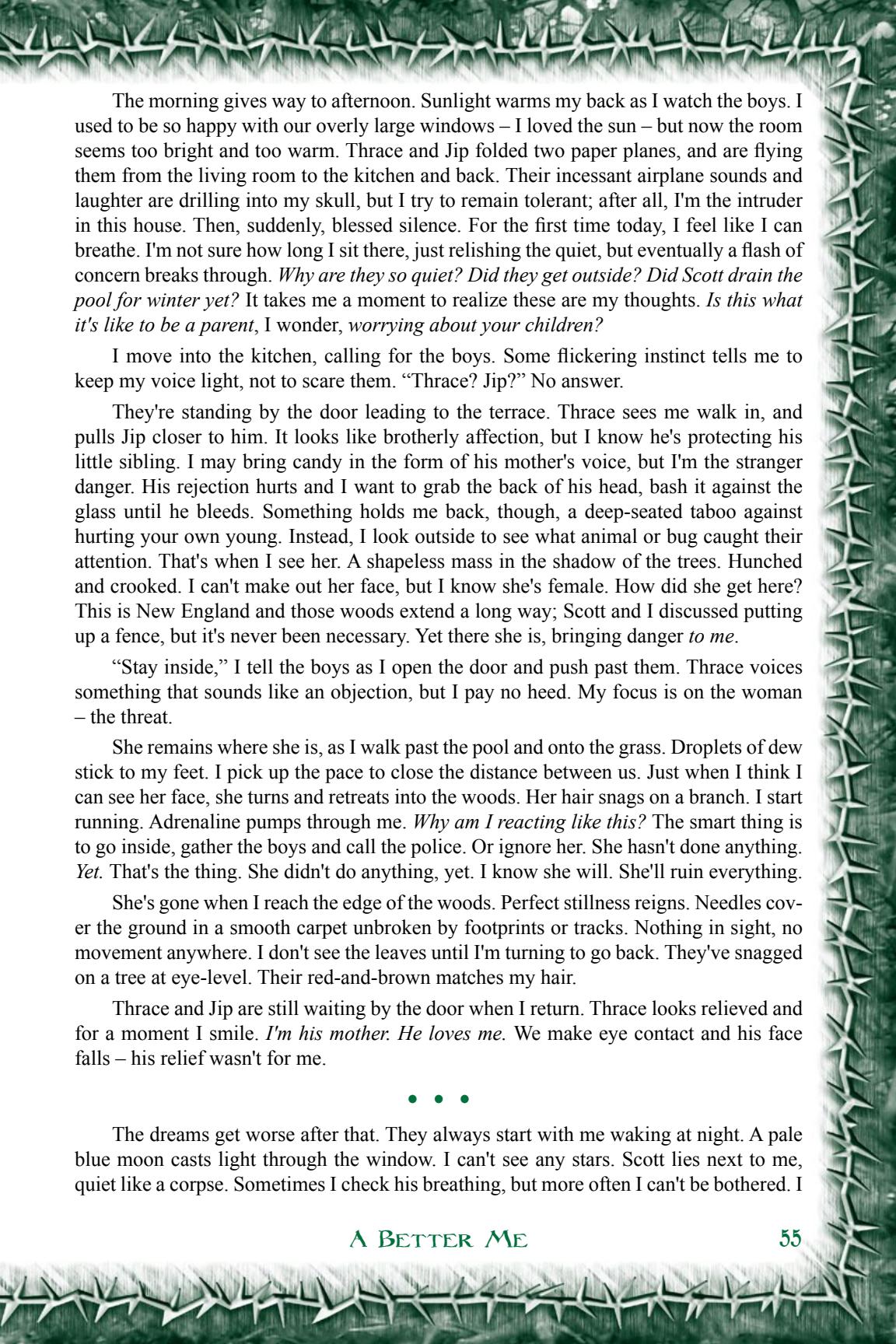
Stop!

I swing and bury the basalt in her jaw. Blood and teeth explode from her mouth, and she looks at me with a blank look of surprise. I pull back to swing again. Her skull cracks and her right eye pops like jelly under the blow. She falls back against the sofa, twitches for a second and stops moving. I look at the stone in my hand, caked with hair and blood. Soft, mottled red bits cling to the bowl. Those must be skin, or brains, some detached part of my brain speculates. I contemplate what to do with the body. Am I strong enough to drag her to the woods? The broken pine tree would be a perfect spot to hide her. I'm still pondering this when she speaks.

“Dear?” Janet's voice brings me out of my daydream. She's fine; looking at me like I've lost it, but fine.

I glance down at the bowl in my hands. Not a mark on it; not on Janet, either. Looking at her, I feel a flash of guilt. Not for dreaming about killing my best friend, but for not doing it. The real Janet would thank me if I buried this mockery. Instead of putting her out of her misery, though, I fake a headache so I can be alone. Janet is still prattling as she leaves, offering best wishes that my headache may pass soon. I exhale as I close the door behind her, still trembling with anger and a desire to kill. Maybe Scott is right, maybe I should see a doctor.

• • •



The morning gives way to afternoon. Sunlight warms my back as I watch the boys. I used to be so happy with our overly large windows – I loved the sun – but now the room seems too bright and too warm. Thrace and Jip folded two paper planes, and are flying them from the living room to the kitchen and back. Their incessant airplane sounds and laughter are drilling into my skull, but I try to remain tolerant; after all, I'm the intruder in this house. Then, suddenly, blessed silence. For the first time today, I feel like I can breathe. I'm not sure how long I sit there, just relishing the quiet, but eventually a flash of concern breaks through. *Why are they so quiet? Did they get outside? Did Scott drain the pool for winter yet?* It takes me a moment to realize these are my thoughts. *Is this what it's like to be a parent, I wonder, worrying about your children?*

I move into the kitchen, calling for the boys. Some flickering instinct tells me to keep my voice light, not to scare them. “Thrace? Jip?” No answer.

They're standing by the door leading to the terrace. Thrace sees me walk in, and pulls Jip closer to him. It looks like brotherly affection, but I know he's protecting his little sibling. I may bring candy in the form of his mother's voice, but I'm the stranger danger. His rejection hurts and I want to grab the back of his head, bash it against the glass until he bleeds. Something holds me back, though, a deep-seated taboo against hurting your own young. Instead, I look outside to see what animal or bug caught their attention. That's when I see her. A shapeless mass in the shadow of the trees. Hunched and crooked. I can't make out her face, but I know she's female. How did she get here? This is New England and those woods extend a long way; Scott and I discussed putting up a fence, but it's never been necessary. Yet there she is, bringing danger *to me*.

“Stay inside,” I tell the boys as I open the door and push past them. Thrace voices something that sounds like an objection, but I pay no heed. My focus is on the woman – the threat.

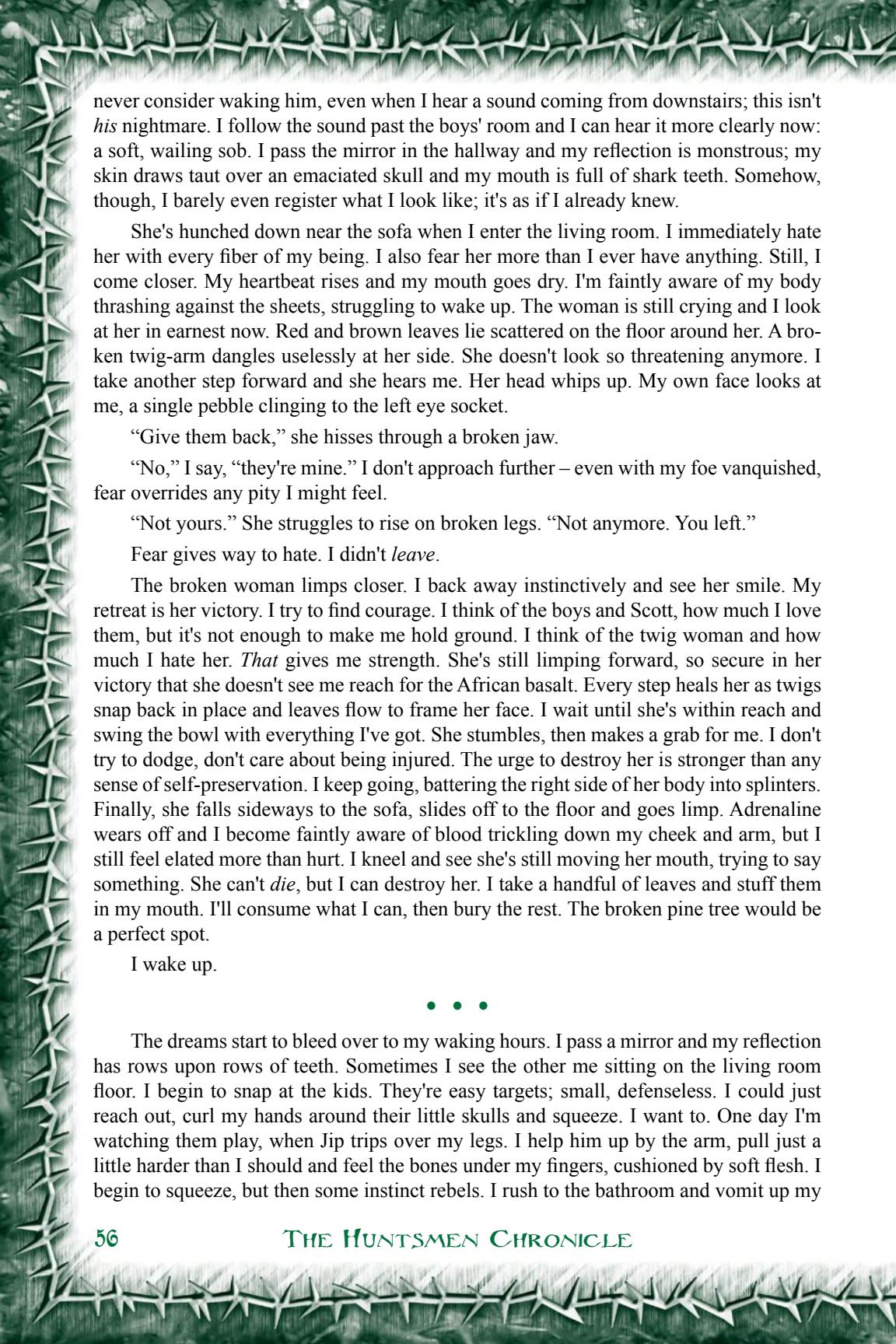
She remains where she is, as I walk past the pool and onto the grass. Droplets of dew stick to my feet. I pick up the pace to close the distance between us. Just when I think I can see her face, she turns and retreats into the woods. Her hair snags on a branch. I start running. Adrenaline pumps through me. *Why am I reacting like this?* The smart thing is to go inside, gather the boys and call the police. Or ignore her. She hasn't done anything. *Yet.* That's the thing. She didn't do anything, yet. I know she will. She'll ruin everything.

She's gone when I reach the edge of the woods. Perfect stillness reigns. Needles cover the ground in a smooth carpet unbroken by footprints or tracks. Nothing in sight, no movement anywhere. I don't see the leaves until I'm turning to go back. They've snagged on a tree at eye-level. Their red-and-brown matches my hair.

Thrace and Jip are still waiting by the door when I return. Thrace looks relieved and for a moment I smile. *I'm his mother. He loves me.* We make eye contact and his face falls – his relief wasn't for me.

• • •

The dreams get worse after that. They always start with me waking at night. A pale blue moon casts light through the window. I can't see any stars. Scott lies next to me, quiet like a corpse. Sometimes I check his breathing, but more often I can't be bothered. I



never consider waking him, even when I hear a sound coming from downstairs; this isn't *his* nightmare. I follow the sound past the boys' room and I can hear it more clearly now: a soft, wailing sob. I pass the mirror in the hallway and my reflection is monstrous; my skin draws taut over an emaciated skull and my mouth is full of shark teeth. Somehow, though, I barely even register what I look like; it's as if I already knew.

She's hunched down near the sofa when I enter the living room. I immediately hate her with every fiber of my being. I also fear her more than I ever have anything. Still, I come closer. My heartbeat rises and my mouth goes dry. I'm faintly aware of my body thrashing against the sheets, struggling to wake up. The woman is still crying and I look at her in earnest now. Red and brown leaves lie scattered on the floor around her. A broken twig-arm dangles uselessly at her side. She doesn't look so threatening anymore. I take another step forward and she hears me. Her head whips up. My own face looks at me, a single pebble clinging to the left eye socket.

"Give them back," she hisses through a broken jaw.

"No," I say, "they're mine." I don't approach further – even with my foe vanquished, fear overrides any pity I might feel.

"Not yours." She struggles to rise on broken legs. "Not anymore. You left."

Fear gives way to hate. I didn't *leave*.

The broken woman limps closer. I back away instinctively and see her smile. My retreat is her victory. I try to find courage. I think of the boys and Scott, how much I love them, but it's not enough to make me hold ground. I think of the twig woman and how much I hate her. *That* gives me strength. She's still limping forward, so secure in her victory that she doesn't see me reach for the African basalt. Every step heals her as twigs snap back in place and leaves flow to frame her face. I wait until she's within reach and swing the bowl with everything I've got. She stumbles, then makes a grab for me. I don't try to dodge, don't care about being injured. The urge to destroy her is stronger than any sense of self-preservation. I keep going, battering the right side of her body into splinters. Finally, she falls sideways to the sofa, slides off to the floor and goes limp. Adrenaline wears off and I become faintly aware of blood trickling down my cheek and arm, but I still feel elated more than hurt. I kneel and see she's still moving her mouth, trying to say something. She can't *die*, but I can destroy her. I take a handful of leaves and stuff them in my mouth. I'll consume what I can, then bury the rest. The broken pine tree would be a perfect spot.

I wake up.

• • •

The dreams start to bleed over to my waking hours. I pass a mirror and my reflection has rows upon rows of teeth. Sometimes I see the other me sitting on the living room floor. I begin to snap at the kids. They're easy targets; small, defenseless. I could just reach out, curl my hands around their little skulls and squeeze. I want to. One day I'm watching them play, when Jip trips over my legs. I help him up by the arm, pull just a little harder than I should and feel the bones under my fingers, cushioned by soft flesh. I begin to squeeze, but then some instinct rebels. I rush to the bathroom and vomit up my

breakfast. I begin to cry. I don't want to hurt my boys. I love them. I *remember* loving them.

Scott finds me still crying and retching. He's home early – Thrace must have called him. They're talking about me behind my back. Plotting against me. *They don't want me here.* It takes every ounce of self-control not to rip out Scott's treacherous spine, to paint the perfect white tiles in his blood. I try to remember our wedding day, to summon up the love I once felt for him. We had a beach wedding ordained by a friend, and a small ceremony; this was before Scott landed his big job and we needed to keep pace with the rich and snobby. I begin to cry again and he leads me to the downstairs bedroom.

I can hear Scott on the phone; he's not as quiet as Thrace. He's talking to our family physician, asking for a referral to a psychologist. Red-hot anger flares up, but part of me realizes Scott is right. Something is wrong with me. I pull the blankets up to my chin and cry some more.

I've almost fallen asleep when Jip comes in. "It's okay, mommy." He gives me his favorite toy car, a bright red fire engine. "You'll get better and then you can stay with us." I feel it at that moment, for the first time in months. *I love him.* I never want to hurt him. I need to get better.

• • •

My first session with Doctor Coddle is a mess. I sit on the sofa, silent and hostile, while he tries to coax me into talking. What am I supposed to say? My husband and children make me so angry that I want to murder them. I fantasize about killing and burying my best friend. I have nightmares about a stick-woman wearing my face. On the second day, I decide to talk about the latter. It seems like the safest topic, the one that doesn't make me seem like a murderous maniac who needs to have Child Protective Services called on her. Coddle listens to me, nods almost imperceptibly in encouragement and sympathy.

"What do you think is causing those dreams?" he finally asks.

I bark out a bitter laugh. "If I knew, I wouldn't be here." *God, are all psychologists this useless?*

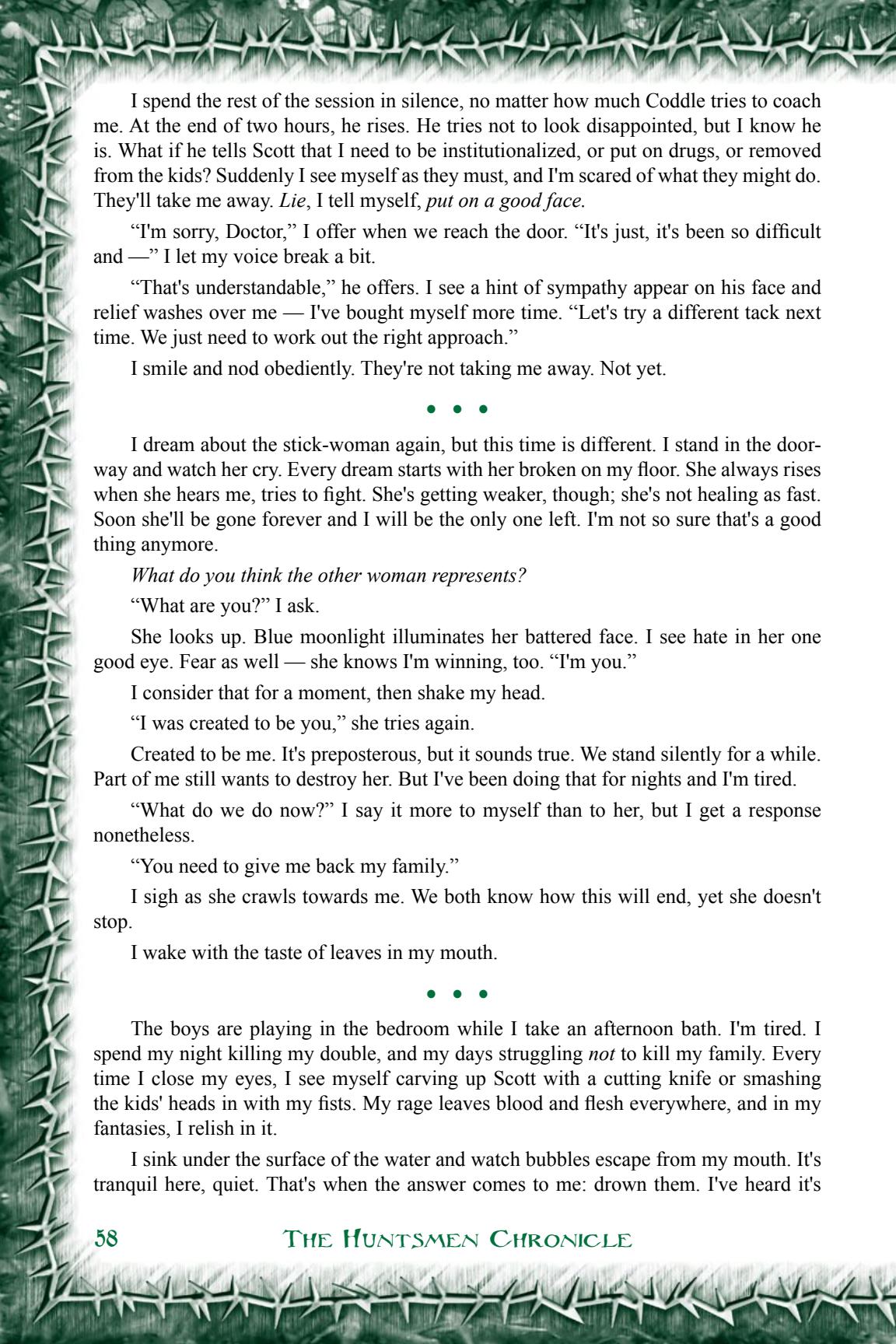
Coddle remains silent. That's his job, I guess. Ask stupid questions and then watch me struggle to find the answer. This is dumb. Scott got me in for three sessions a week as-of-now. We're spending good money on Coddle and this is what we get in return.

Coddle must sense my frustration because he rephrases the question: "What do you think the other woman represents?" He tries to sound patient, but I catch the condescending undertone. He's giving me hints. Leading me to the correct answer like a school teacher.

"I think she represents me." *One and one is two, sir.*

"These emotions of fear and hate, where do you think they come from?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't —" I stop. Perhaps I'm afraid I'll hurt my family? I contemplate that answer. It makes sense from a rational point of view. I do fear hurting them. A natural response would be to hate myself for it. Yet it doesn't feel right. I'm not seeing the entire puzzle.



I spend the rest of the session in silence, no matter how much Coddle tries to coach me. At the end of two hours, he rises. He tries not to look disappointed, but I know he is. What if he tells Scott that I need to be institutionalized, or put on drugs, or removed from the kids? Suddenly I see myself as they must, and I'm scared of what they might do. They'll take me away. *Lie*, I tell myself, *put on a good face*.

“I’m sorry, Doctor,” I offer when we reach the door. “It’s just, it’s been so difficult and —” I let my voice break a bit.

“That’s understandable,” he offers. I see a hint of sympathy appear on his face and relief washes over me — I’ve bought myself more time. “Let’s try a different tack next time. We just need to work out the right approach.”

I smile and nod obediently. They’re not taking me away. Not yet.

• • •

I dream about the stick-woman again, but this time is different. I stand in the doorway and watch her cry. Every dream starts with her broken on my floor. She always rises when she hears me, tries to fight. She’s getting weaker, though; she’s not healing as fast. Soon she’ll be gone forever and I will be the only one left. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing anymore.

What do you think the other woman represents?

“What are you?” I ask.

She looks up. Blue moonlight illuminates her battered face. I see hate in her one good eye. Fear as well — she knows I’m winning, too. “I’m you.”

I consider that for a moment, then shake my head.

“I was created to be you,” she tries again.

Created to be me. It’s preposterous, but it sounds true. We stand silently for a while. Part of me still wants to destroy her. But I’ve been doing that for nights and I’m tired.

“What do we do now?” I say it more to myself than to her, but I get a response nonetheless.

“You need to give me back my family.”

I sigh as she crawls towards me. We both know how this will end, yet she doesn’t stop.

I wake with the taste of leaves in my mouth.

• • •

The boys are playing in the bedroom while I take an afternoon bath. I’m tired. I spend my night killing my double, and my days struggling *not* to kill my family. Every time I close my eyes, I see myself carving up Scott with a cutting knife or smashing the kids’ heads in with my fists. My rage leaves blood and flesh everywhere, and in my fantasies, I relish in it.

I sink under the surface of the water and watch bubbles escape from my mouth. It’s tranquil here, quiet. That’s when the answer comes to me: drown them. I’ve heard it’s

painless, peaceful even. That's better than their mother killing them in a violent, messy fit of anger. The water is still at body temperature too, so they won't even be cold.

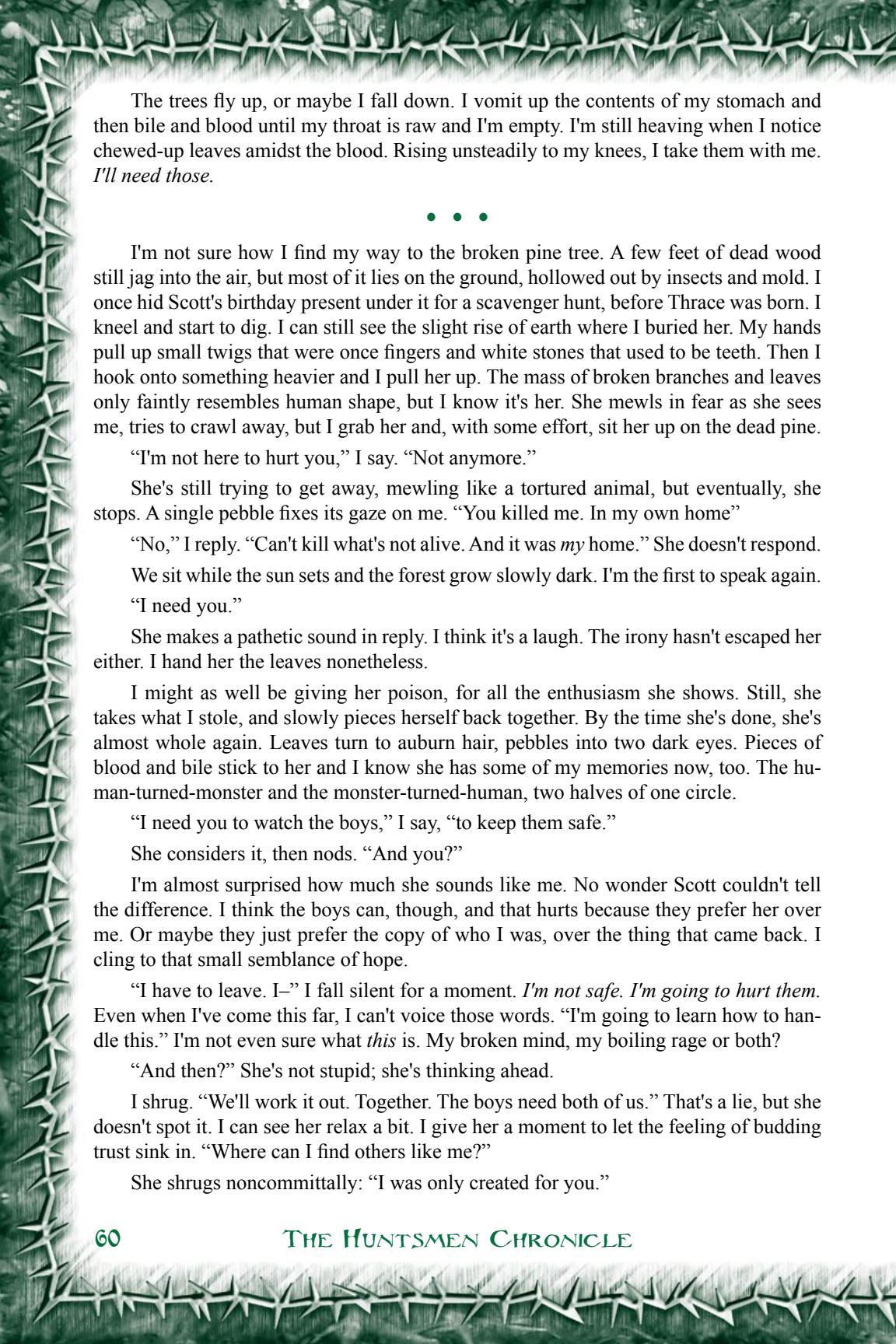
I leave a trail of puddles as I climb out of the bath, and make a note not to slip when I carry the boys back. I've always bathed with them – first with Thrace alone and later with Jip pressed to my chest while Thrace made small waves. They'll like it. It's a good way to go.

The boys are sitting on the rug in the master bedroom, playing with the garage they got for Christmas. Thrace is closest to the bathroom door – he's shielding his little brother from me again. Instinct causes him to look up, and he sees me. This time he doesn't flinch or look away. I think he sees my newfound peace and is trying to figure out what caused it. Does he know I'm going to kill them? He smiles at me, albeit hesitantly, and goes back to playing. He's facing Jip now, away from me, yet his posture remains relaxed. *Does he trust me?* I spot the red fire engine in his hand and for a moment, I'm whole again. *He does trust me.* Even if it's temporary or because he misread my intentions, my firstborn trusts me. Clarity breaks through the mess in my mind; I must never betray my child's trust.

I leave the house through the kitchen, not wanting to attract attention from the neighbors. The boys are still playing in the bedroom and they're safer without me, but try explaining that to suburban hockey moms. I walk as fast as I can – I need to be away before I forget how precious my children are. I don't want to hurt them, but I will if I stay. Leaves and needles crunch under my feet as I enter the woods. The autumn air is cold on my wet skin and now it dawns on me that sensible people dress after taking a bath. I can't go back, though; I only have the strength to walk away once.

A dueling sense of sadness and freedom rushes over me. I no longer feel cold. I'm floating. This is wrong. This is right. *This is what is.* That's when I remember Her. Needle-fingers. Too-long teeth. Hands that hurt and break and rebuild. I stop in my tracks. She feels more real than any other memory I have, but She can't be; nightmares aren't real. *Except I think this one is.* I was walking in these woods and then.... My mind struggles to remember, to separate truth from illusion. A creature sent by Her. Taller than any man has a right to be, cloaked and hooded. He saw me and.... Did he take me? Did I run? Broken memories slowly fit themselves back together and everything is spinning.

Her woods are perpetually shrouded in twilight, the blue moon casting a pale light as I struggle to survive. Other creatures live here, some utterly mad and vicious, other still partly human. Some of them are stolen people like me, but camaraderie is a luxury none of us can afford. Hunger and violence are ever-present; this is an eat-or-be-eaten world. I hunt and consume, growing in power every time I devour another victim. I forget what it's like to be human. Towards the end, I'm as bad as Her; prodding and hurting until flesh falls apart and spirit breaks. In all my inhumanity, though, two things remain: my children and Scott. Even when I no longer remember my own name, I am driven to return to them like a wounded animal seeking its nest. Finally, after countless victims, I have the power to find my way back. I leave the blue moon behind, run and walk and finally crawl through endless thorns that rip away the last of my sanity. But I make it – I am home. Only to find an imposter sitting on my sofa, looking up at me with my eyes; one last hurdle to overcome before I reclaim my life. I take the basalt bowl from the table and swing.



The trees fly up, or maybe I fall down. I vomit up the contents of my stomach and then bile and blood until my throat is raw and I'm empty. I'm still heaving when I notice chewed-up leaves amidst the blood. Rising unsteadily to my knees, I take them with me. *I'll need those.*

• • •

I'm not sure how I find my way to the broken pine tree. A few feet of dead wood still jag into the air, but most of it lies on the ground, hollowed out by insects and mold. I once hid Scott's birthday present under it for a scavenger hunt, before Thrace was born. I kneel and start to dig. I can still see the slight rise of earth where I buried her. My hands pull up small twigs that were once fingers and white stones that used to be teeth. Then I hook onto something heavier and I pull her up. The mass of broken branches and leaves only faintly resembles human shape, but I know it's her. She mewls in fear as she sees me, tries to crawl away, but I grab her and, with some effort, sit her up on the dead pine.

"I'm not here to hurt you," I say. "Not anymore."

She's still trying to get away, mewling like a tortured animal, but eventually, she stops. A single pebble fixes its gaze on me. "You killed me. In my own home"

"No," I reply. "Can't kill what's not alive. And it was *my* home." She doesn't respond.

We sit while the sun sets and the forest grow slowly dark. I'm the first to speak again.

"I need you."

She makes a pathetic sound in reply. I think it's a laugh. The irony hasn't escaped her either. I hand her the leaves nonetheless.

I might as well be giving her poison, for all the enthusiasm she shows. Still, she takes what I stole, and slowly pieces herself back together. By the time she's done, she's almost whole again. Leaves turn to auburn hair, pebbles into two dark eyes. Pieces of blood and bile stick to her and I know she has some of my memories now, too. The human-turned-monster and the monster-turned-human, two halves of one circle.

"I need you to watch the boys," I say, "to keep them safe."

She considers it, then nods. "And you?"

I'm almost surprised how much she sounds like me. No wonder Scott couldn't tell the difference. I think the boys can, though, and that hurts because they prefer her over me. Or maybe they just prefer the copy of who I was, over the thing that came back. I cling to that small semblance of hope.

"I have to leave. I—" I fall silent for a moment. *I'm not safe. I'm going to hurt them.* Even when I've come this far, I can't voice those words. "I'm going to learn how to handle this." I'm not even sure what *this* is. My broken mind, my boiling rage or both?

"And then?" She's not stupid; she's thinking ahead.

I shrug. "We'll work it out. Together. The boys need both of us." That's a lie, but she doesn't spot it. I can see her relax a bit. I give her a moment to let the feeling of budding trust sink in. "Where can I find others like me?"

She shrugs noncommittally: "I was only created for you."

“But there *are* others like me?” Another shrug and I decide to drop the issue; we’re both in the dark here. That’s okay. Monsters thrive in the dark.

I smile encouragingly at my double and help her rise. She shoots a hesitant smile back. I can tell she wants to believe everything will be fine when I come back. We stand together for another moment, neither of us willing to turn our back on the other. Finally, she’s the one to give and I watch her walk in the direction of my house. The hate I felt towards her is gone, replaced by pity. Her desire to be helpful, to believe we can build a bond, will override her caution in the end.

By now the woods are shrouded in darkness. Moonlight filters through the trees; it’s a pale shade of silver, not blue, and I take comfort in that. Whatever else may happen, I did make it home. I have to learn to control my rage, figure out how to handle whatever the hell I am, but that can’t be harder than escaping from Her. I just have to keep going. Find others like me and reclaim my identity – *all* of it.

I turn and walk deeper into the woods.



IMPOSTOR SYNDROME OR, ANITA 2.0

By Jacqueline Sweet

Anita should have been happy.

She had her own home in San Francisco's Noe Valley, a quiet Victorian that needed some work but which belonged to her and her alone. A giant tech firm that even her mother had heard of had purchased her start-up. She was rich. She was successful.

She was plagued by nightmares.

Anita hating sleeping. She did everything she could to avoid it. Her business partner, Sameen, thought she was a workaholic, obsessed with turning out the perfect code, the perfect app. But really it was just another way for Anita to stay awake. When she slept, she dreamt insane things. Castles rising out of the thick mist, their facades shifting as if by a whim, every door a mouth and every room a gullet waiting to devour her. She dreamt of the wind blowing against her skin, but every gust tore a bit of her loose, like leaves from the oak trees in autumn. And she dreamt of monsters.

So, it was one night in January she was avoiding sleep, tapping away on her new laptop. Her new corporate masters had taken one look at her beaten-up old MacBook with the stickers and scuff marks and had insisted she be issued a new model at once. She missed the old machine. It had personality, quirks that the newly unboxed machine lacked. There was always a fear in the back of her mind when she purchased something new that it would never fit into her life, that it'd always feel as out of place as an extra tooth in her mouth.

Sipping black tea, working on stubborn code, Anita was startled by a noise from the street. There was never noise on her street. No one navigated the hills and one-way streets to get to where she lived unless they were invited. Anita carried her steaming mug to the window and parted the thick, dense curtains. In the middle of the street a girl — a teenager wearing a ripped leather jacket — struggled in the grip of some shadowy thing. Anita couldn't see clearly what the thing was, the light was wrong on the street like someone had twisted all the lights away into unfamiliar angles.

Without even thinking about it, Anita grabbed a knife from the butcher's block on her granite-topped kitchen island — when she bought the house, Anita had thrown away all her old possessions, started fresh. Throwing open the front door and taking the steps two at a time, Anita rushed to help the teenager.

“Get away from her!” she screamed, waving the knife in front of her like a talisman. She’d never been in a fight in her life, much less stabbed someone. At the sound of her voice, the shadowy thing — it had fingers like branches all covered with thorns — leaped away backward, sinking into the thick hedges that bounded Douglass park. The sound it made as it moved was otherworldly, a high keening that shook Anita down to her bones.

“Are you okay?” she asked the teenager. The girl was covered in scratches, blood welled and dripped down her arms and neck. Under the blood, she was dirty, reeking of sweat and rough living. Her skin was a dirty gray, like old mop water. The girl didn’t respond. Her large brown eyes stared at Anita in shock.

“What was that thing? Will it come back?” Anita asked. The girl’s mouth open and closed like a fish drowning in the open air. “It must have been a crazy person in some costume,” she decided. “You get all sorts of weirdos in this town.”

Anita helped the teenager to her feet, slinging one of the girl’s arms over her shoulders. They were a similar height and build. She half-carried and half-pulled the bloodied homeless girl into her house. It wasn’t like Anita to help someone this way. She never gave to charity, believed everyone had to get by on their own. The world was built for hard workers, she believed. But still, she couldn’t just leave the young thing in the street, especially not when wackos wearing gloves covered in thorns were out there, attacking people.

So, it was that Anita dragged the girl into her house, across the threshold, and into the guest bathroom.

• • •

“Who was that guy?” Anita asked.

She’d drawn a bath for the girl and helped undress her. The teenager was nearly catatonic; moving with a strange stiffness like she didn’t know her limbs could bend. The girl watched Anita with her large brown eyes as if Anita was a predator about to pounce.

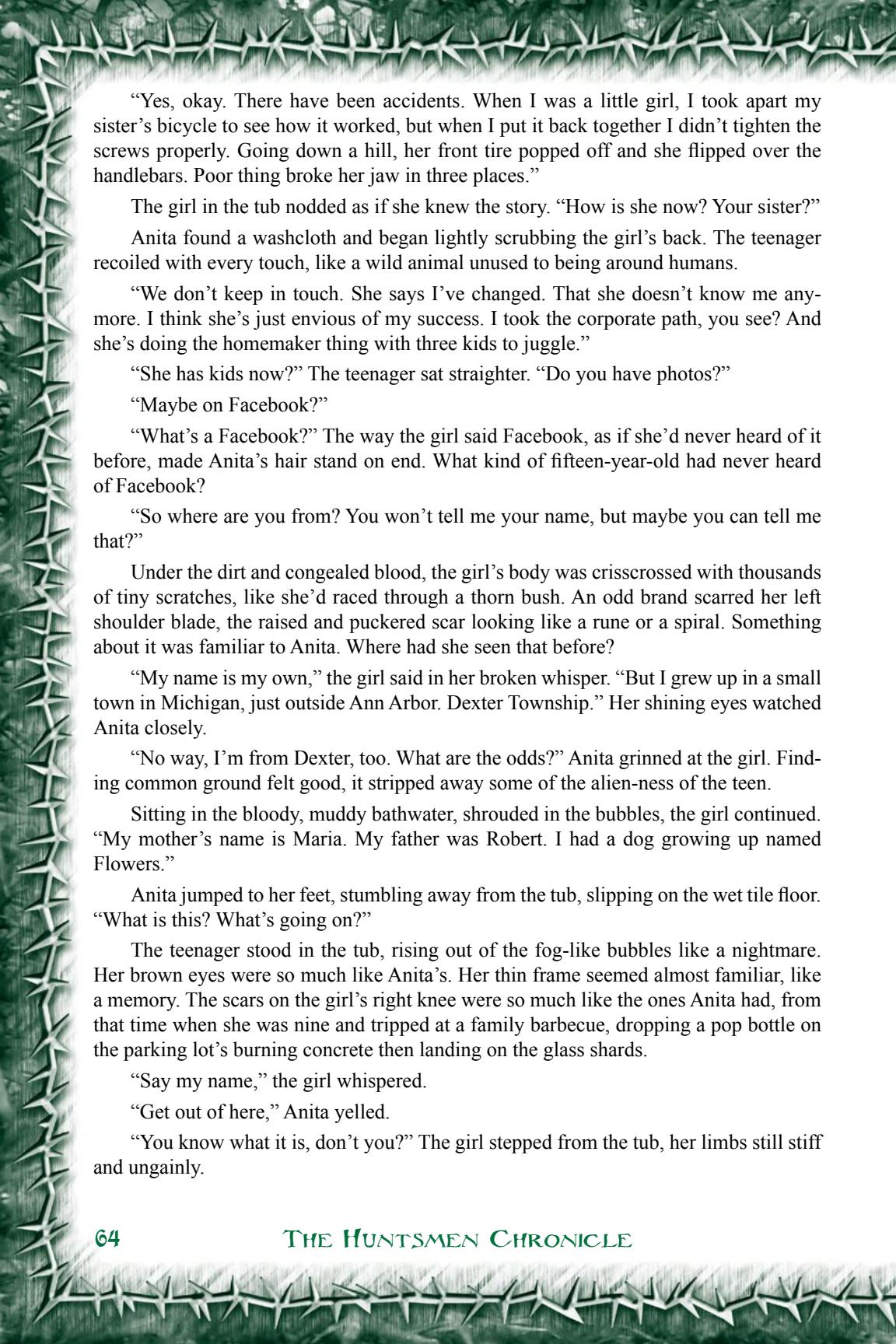
“Look, you don’t have to be scared. I’m not going to hurt you.” Anita helped the girl step into the bath. Bubbles filled the tub like fog. She’d only used the tub once herself, and now it was being — well, not defiled exactly — but from now on the bath would contain memories of this night. It couldn’t be helped. Your experiences changed you forever, even the tiny ones.

“Promise?” the girl said, in a voice so quiet Anita struggled to hear her.

The sound of it nearly broke Anita’s heart. What terrible things had befallen this girl?

“Of course, I promise. I’ve never hurt anyone.” The girl jerked away from her, slipping in the tub.

“Everyone hurts someone. Sometimes you don’t mean to. Sometimes it’s an accident, like when you take apart something and put it back together wrong.” The bath water turned a dull gray as the soap and steam eased the caked-on misery from the girl’s skin.



“Yes, okay. There have been accidents. When I was a little girl, I took apart my sister’s bicycle to see how it worked, but when I put it back together I didn’t tighten the screws properly. Going down a hill, her front tire popped off and she flipped over the handlebars. Poor thing broke her jaw in three places.”

The girl in the tub nodded as if she knew the story. “How is she now? Your sister?”

Anita found a washcloth and began lightly scrubbing the girl’s back. The teenager recoiled with every touch, like a wild animal unused to being around humans.

“We don’t keep in touch. She says I’ve changed. That she doesn’t know me anymore. I think she’s just envious of my success. I took the corporate path, you see? And she’s doing the homemaker thing with three kids to juggle.”

“She has kids now?” The teenager sat straighter. “Do you have photos?”

“Maybe on Facebook?”

“What’s a Facebook?” The way the girl said Facebook, as if she’d never heard of it before, made Anita’s hair stand on end. What kind of fifteen-year-old had never heard of Facebook?

“So where are you from? You won’t tell me your name, but maybe you can tell me that?”

Under the dirt and congealed blood, the girl’s body was crisscrossed with thousands of tiny scratches, like she’d raced through a thorn bush. An odd brand scarred her left shoulder blade, the raised and puckered scar looking like a rune or a spiral. Something about it was familiar to Anita. Where had she seen that before?

“My name is my own,” the girl said in her broken whisper. “But I grew up in a small town in Michigan, just outside Ann Arbor. Dexter Township.” Her shining eyes watched Anita closely.

“No way, I’m from Dexter, too. What are the odds?” Anita grinned at the girl. Finding common ground felt good, it stripped away some of the alien-ness of the teen.

Sitting in the bloody, muddy bathwater, shrouded in the bubbles, the girl continued. “My mother’s name is Maria. My father was Robert. I had a dog growing up named Flowers.”

Anita jumped to her feet, stumbling away from the tub, slipping on the wet tile floor. “What is this? What’s going on?”

The teenager stood in the tub, rising out of the fog-like bubbles like a nightmare. Her brown eyes were so much like Anita’s. Her thin frame seemed almost familiar, like a memory. The scars on the girl’s right knee were so much like the ones Anita had, from that time when she was nine and tripped at a family barbecue, dropping a pop bottle on the parking lot’s burning concrete then landing on the glass shards.

“Say my name,” the girl whispered.

“Get out of here,” Anita yelled.

“You know what it is, don’t you?” The girl stepped from the tub, her limbs still stiff and ungainly.

Anita dropped to the floor, huddling into a ball. This must be one of her nightmares. It felt so real, but it was impossible. The girl looked just like her from years ago. Ten years? Fifteen years?

“Say it!” the teenager growled, her eyes for a split second becoming utterly black, her teeth turning into splintered wood.

“Your name is Anita!”

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“How do you know so much about me?” Anita looked around for something in the bathroom to defend herself with. A hairbrush? Some towels? The hand mirror she used to make sure her part was straight in the mornings? None of it seemed especially fearsome.

“I don’t know anything about you.” Venom dripped from the girl’s words.

“You know my name. My mom’s name. My dog’s name.”

The girl stepped out of the tub, standing between Anita and the door. Behind Anita was the too-small-to-climb-through window. She raised her arm, pointing a crooked finger in accusation. For a second Anita saw her not as a teenaged girl, but as an old oak tree, branches reaching across a bare plain. She blinked and the vision was gone, but a yawning horror remained in Anita’s heart.

“Your name is Anita Reyes. You grew up in Dexter, Michigan. You liked drawing and were bad at math. You used to take books to the crawlspace below the house, down into the dust that smelled like nothing could possibly live there. You spread out a picnic blanket and read your books while your mom frantically searched the house for you.”

“Did someone put you up to this? Is that what’s going on here? Is this some sort of sick corporate hazing?” There had to be an explanation.

“And when you were fifteen the worst thing in the world happened to you.” The girl’s voice deepened, becoming a groan like lake ice at night fighting against its bondage. “You were on your way home from school. It was June. There was only one week left in the school year. You had plans with your friend Beatrice.” The teenager blinked. “Whatever happened to Beatrice?”

“We lost touch in high school. I found new friends.”

“You don’t have friends. You have colleagues. You have camouflage.” She stepped nearer Anita. The girl was naked, dripping with soap bubbles, but she may as well have been a wild animal for all the fear she engendered in Anita. “That was the summer you were going to kiss a boy for the first time. That was your big plan. But that day on your way home, the path you took through the woods was different that day. You found yourself walking through the fog that never ended. Then into and through a thorn bush larger than a city. Was that the worst thing ever?” She cocked her head like an owl listening for the scurry of mice feet. “Or was it later when you escaped? When you came home and saw the thing that he left in your place? The imposter. It wasn’t even a real person.”

Anita didn’t like the way the girl was looking at her. Like she wanted to tear into her flesh and show the world she was a doll or a robot. “I’m real,” she said. “I’m a real person. You’re having some sort of psychotic break. We can get you help.”

“It was a pile of butterfly wings and flower petals and twine wrapped up in magic. It thought it was a person; it didn’t understand why no one liked it. Why its relatives shrank from its presence. Coworkers tolerated the thing because it was good at its job, but they didn’t like it. They could see how wrong it was. How it didn’t belong. Everyone who met the thing — the thing made from garbage and trash and detritus — even if they didn’t know it wasn’t real, they could sense it. That little spark of life in them gazed into the trash thing and nothing gazed back. Imposter! It didn’t have a soul. It couldn’t love, couldn’t have a family, or friends. It couldn’t do human things. Because in the end it was just garbage pretending to be a person.”

The girl sneered at Anita, her face made ugly with a sense of superiority.

Reaching behind herself, Anita felt for something, anything to defend herself with. Her hand settled on the long bone handle of her antique mirror. She’d found it at an antique store up in the Russian River during last summer’s company retreat. The retreat had seemed like such a good idea at first. She could spend more time with her coworkers and maybe get closer to Mark Lawrence. But no one had wanted to talk to her. They’d all shied away when she approached. Even when she worked up the nerve to get into the hot tub at the retreat, everyone had cleared out. Instead of playing ping-pong or sitting on chairs next to the river with the people she worked with, Anita had gone into town, prowling the cute old shops and trendy eateries.

The mirror always reminded her of that weekend. She’d never felt so alone in a crowd before. Every time she picked it up she was reminded of how she didn’t fit in with the techies and brogrammers, or even the management, which she basically was. Why had she kept the mirror?

Anita swung the mirror at the girl’s head, but the teenager moved like a nightmare, sliding out of the way of the blow. A flash of light, a glimpse of her reflection, was all that hit the teen, but it was enough. The girl recoiled as if Anita had thrown acid in her face.

“No, no, no,” the girl hissed. “There are promises and promises. The mirrors always lie. So much hate in them.”

Anita had no idea what she was talking about. She didn’t care. Seeing the fierce girl vulnerable, she charged past her out of the bathroom. Anita was dressed, wearing shoes in the house even though she tried not to. The girl was naked and wet. There was no way she could catch her. Anita sprinted down the long hallway towards the front door. Once she hit the street, she could go anywhere. If the girl wanted to rob her, to steal her identity or whatever her game was, let her. She had five grand in cash hidden in the kitchen and her laptop was encrypted and locked with a biometric scanner. There was nothing the weird girl could do to her house that couldn’t be fixed.

Anita threw open the front door and screamed. Standing there, dripping wet and wrapped in one of Anita’s towels, was the girl. Before she could turn, the girl lashed out and slammed Anita’s head into the wall.

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The first thing she noticed when she came to was the smell of bacon frying.

“They say if you eat the food, you can never leave. I never knew if that was true, so I didn’t eat the food. All those years trapped and I never once ate or drank. How can something human not eat for a decade?” The girl was dressed now, not in her tattered rags but in Anita’s workout clothes. They were a little too small for Anita and a little too big for this girl.

“What do you want?” Anita’s throat was dry. Her hands were trapped behind her, wrapped in packing tape that crinkled as tested the bindings. She was on a chair, in her beautiful newly remodeled kitchen.

“I wonder if I eat food here, in the real world, if that’ll prevent them from taking me back?” The girl picked the bacon up with her bare fingers, mindless of the sizzling grease. She tilted her head back and dropped the meat down her gullet like a snake devouring a mouse.

“What’s your name?” Anita asked. “Your real name? Who put you up to this?” She’d heard stories of the dangerous pranks executives played in Silicon Valley and of how far investors would go to sabotage a deal. This had to be a stock thing. No one cared enough about Anita for it be real.

“You know my name!” the teenager bellowed, her skin becoming bark-like for a shadow of a second.

“Your name can’t be Anita Reyes,” Anita said. “That’s my name. That’s me.”

“You stole it,” the girl hissed. “Or maybe it was just stolen from me and given to you? Maybe it’s not your fault? Maybe you don’t even know that you’re fake?”

Anita thought about that weekend on the Russian River. She thought about Christmas at her mom’s house, the way the conversation never sparked or took off with her family, how seeing them felt so hollow. Could she be fake?

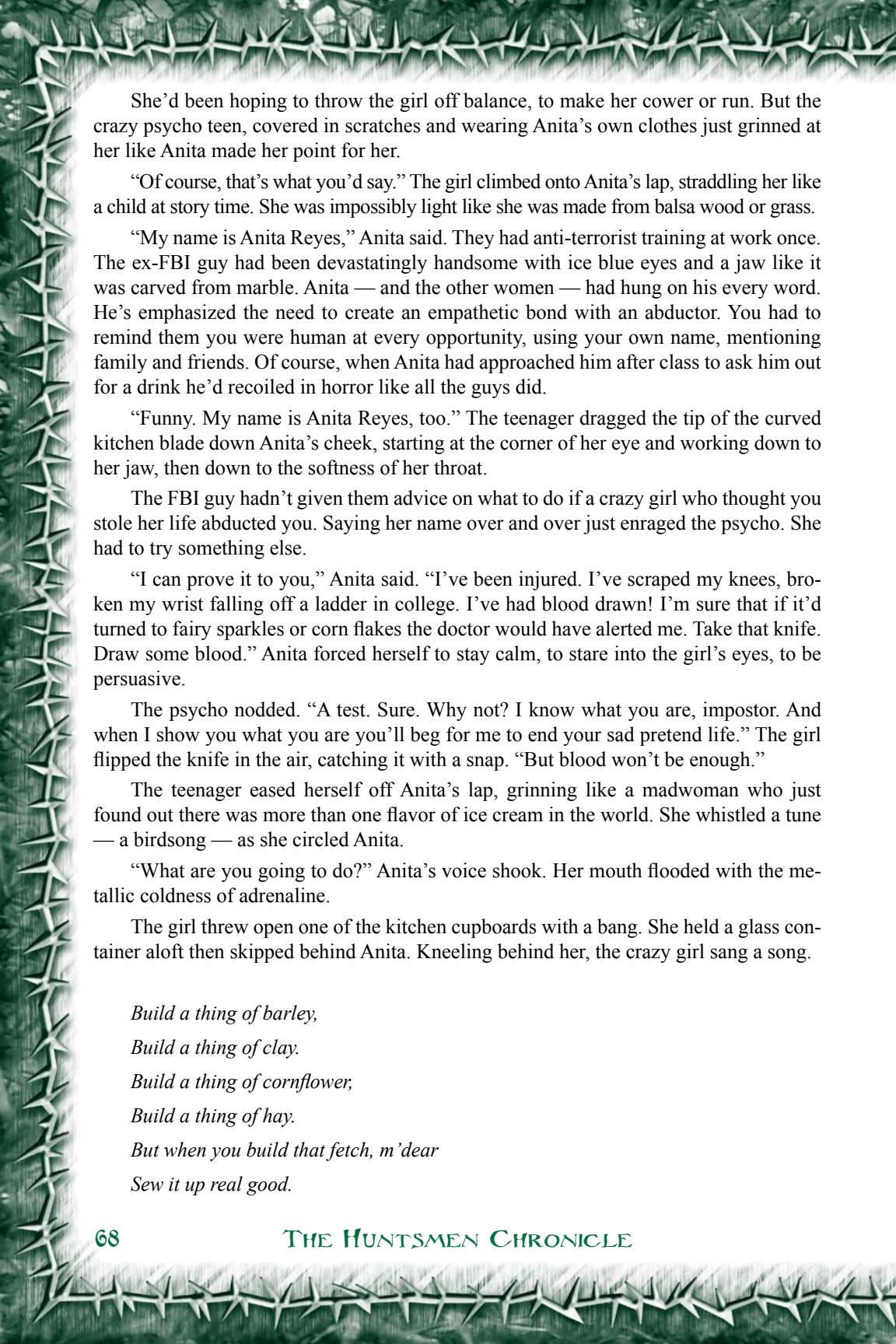
“I’ll prove it to you,” the girl grinned. Rummaging through the kitchen drawers, she came up with a knife. A slim curved knife, the one Anita used exclusively for cutting avocados and lemons for guacamole. “When those things took me, they left you in my place. But you’re not real. You’re not even an idea. You’re a bad echo of my life, going through the motions because it doesn’t know what else to do.”

Anita shook her head. How do you convince a crazy person that you’re real?

“But what did they use to make you? The smart way would be to use my blood and flesh and bone, but those assholes are so cocky that they couldn’t even bother with that, they used whatever was at hand.” She stepped closer, waving the knife in the air. “Tell me, what will you turn into when I cut you open? Cigarette butts? A pile of old magazines? I heard about one of you; when the real her returned and cut her open she turned into a blow-up doll. Is that what you are inside? A sex doll?”

The teenager vibrated with crazy, spitting as she talked. She stabbed and swung with the knife as she walked around Anita.

“If you’ll cut me open you’ll find blood. You’ll find meat. You’ll find all the usual stuff you find inside a person.” Anita gathered her breath, then shouted, “Because I am a real person, you fucking psycho!”



She'd been hoping to throw the girl off balance, to make her cower or run. But the crazy psycho teen, covered in scratches and wearing Anita's own clothes just grinned at her like Anita made her point for her.

"Of course, that's what you'd say." The girl climbed onto Anita's lap, straddling her like a child at story time. She was impossibly light like she was made from balsa wood or grass.

"My name is Anita Reyes," Anita said. They had anti-terrorist training at work once. The ex-FBI guy had been devastatingly handsome with ice blue eyes and a jaw like it was carved from marble. Anita — and the other women — had hung on his every word. He's emphasized the need to create an empathetic bond with an abductor. You had to remind them you were human at every opportunity, using your own name, mentioning family and friends. Of course, when Anita had approached him after class to ask him out for a drink he'd recoiled in horror like all the guys did.

"Funny. My name is Anita Reyes, too." The teenager dragged the tip of the curved kitchen blade down Anita's cheek, starting at the corner of her eye and working down to her jaw, then down to the softness of her throat.

The FBI guy hadn't given them advice on what to do if a crazy girl who thought you stole her life abducted you. Saying her name over and over just enraged the psycho. She had to try something else.

"I can prove it to you," Anita said. "I've been injured. I've scraped my knees, broken my wrist falling off a ladder in college. I've had blood drawn! I'm sure that if it'd turned to fairy sparkles or corn flakes the doctor would have alerted me. Take that knife. Draw some blood." Anita forced herself to stay calm, to stare into the girl's eyes, to be persuasive.

The psycho nodded. "A test. Sure. Why not? I know what you are, impostor. And when I show you what you are you'll beg for me to end your sad pretend life." The girl flipped the knife in the air, catching it with a snap. "But blood won't be enough."

The teenager eased herself off Anita's lap, grinning like a madwoman who just found out there was more than one flavor of ice cream in the world. She whistled a tune — a birdsong — as she circled Anita.

"What are you going to do?" Anita's voice shook. Her mouth flooded with the metallic coldness of adrenaline.

The girl threw open one of the kitchen cupboards with a bang. She held a glass container aloft then skipped behind Anita. Kneeling behind her, the crazy girl sang a song.

*Build a thing of barley,
Build a thing of clay.
Build a thing of cornflower,
Build a thing of hay.
But when you build that fetch, m'dear
Sew it up real good.*

*For when its day is done, m'dear
Its heart will turn to wood.*

The girl seized Anita's well-taped hands in her oak-strong grip and brought the knife down in a slash.

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The finger sat in a dish between them on the table, pointing at the girl accusingly. "I don't understand," she said. "It should have turned by now."

Anita couldn't breathe. After the cut, there'd been screaming. And bleeding. But mostly screaming. The teenager had panicked as if she'd never heard someone scream before. She'd grabbed a dishrag, wet from the day's washing, and stuffed it deep into Anita's mouth. It tasted like mildew and spilled chili powder and soap. It writhed in her mouth, the end dipping into her throat and making her gag over and over. She would have spit the cloth out, but the girl had wrapped tape around her head, securing the rag in place and forcing Anita to breathe through her nose.

The finger in the dish had bled a while, then turned a bit ashen. It hadn't turned to pig ears or old crayons or whatever the crazy girl thought it might. It was the worst magic trick ever; she'd turned a perfectly useful finger into a dead lump of meat in a dish.

"Maybe it needs more time?" The crazy girl poked the finger with the tip of the knife. It squelched quietly in the congealing blood. The crazy girl paled. Anita knew that look of immediate regret on the girl's face. She'd seen it on her own often enough in reflections, or in corporate videos. The teenager took the glass dish with Anita's severed finger in it and slid it into the freezer.

How long could a finger be severed and still be re-attachable, Anita wondered.

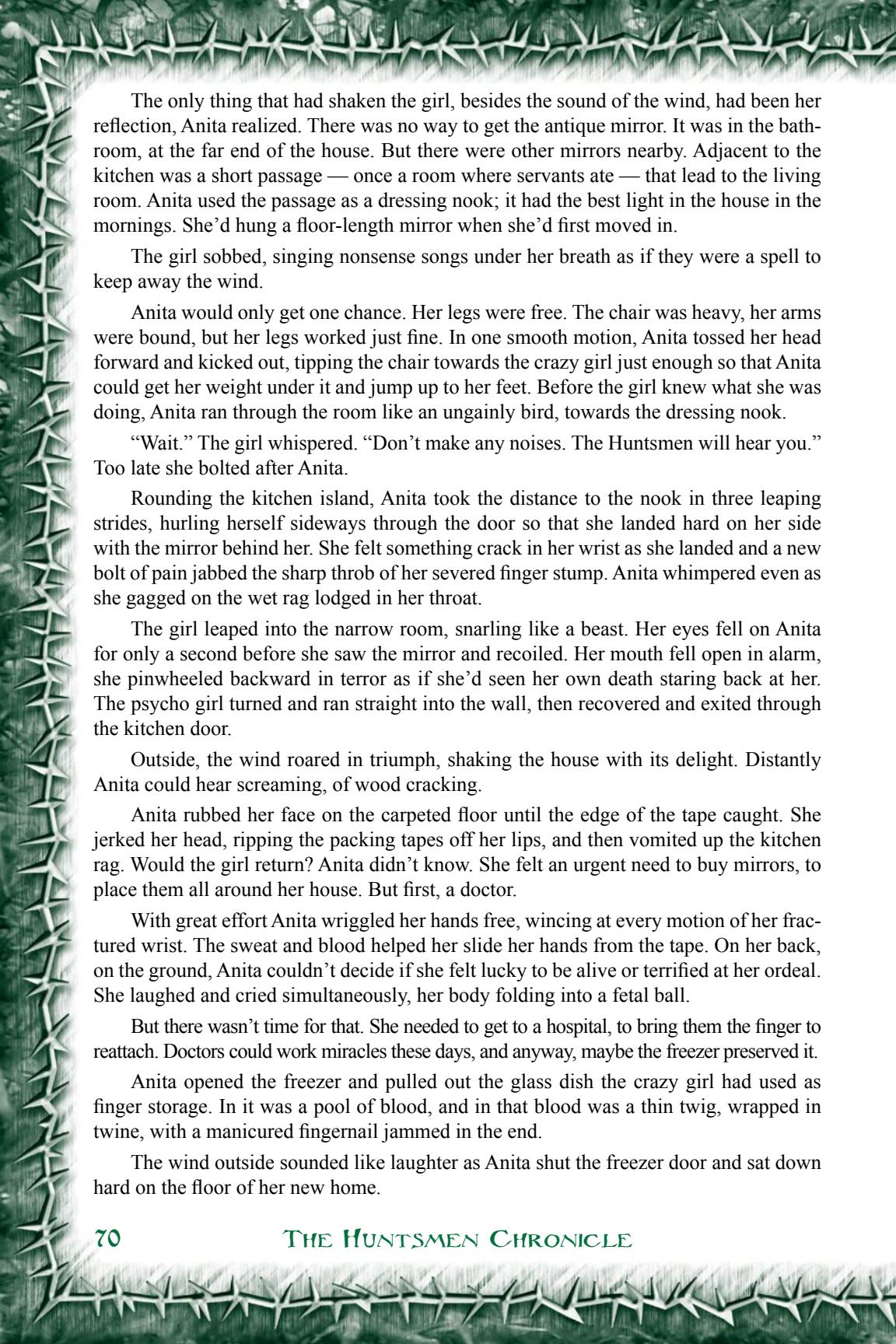
The girl tossed the bloody knife into the stainless-steel sink with a clatter. She washed her hands, a look of wonder crossing her face like she'd forgotten what running water looked like.

Anita gagged again. If she didn't get the rag out of her mouth she'd either choke on it or gag herself to death. Was that even possible? Every time her throat tightened in that terrifyingly unstoppable gesture, her nostrils pinched shut and she couldn't breathe. Breathing grew more difficult with every gag. Being stabbed by a crazy girl that looked like a twisted version of herself as a young teen now seemed the better way to die. Better stabbed than choking.

She tested the wrist bindings, but the girl had used all the packing tape. Anita was going to die unless she figured out a way to free herself.

"It doesn't matter if the finger didn't change. It's obvious what you are. You can't be the real Anita Reyes." The girl wouldn't look at Anita now. Her eyes stayed locked on the flowing water. "I'm the real Anita. Aren't I?"

The wind howled outside the house like a wild animal on a hunt. The girl froze at the sound like the wind was calling her name.



The only thing that had shaken the girl, besides the sound of the wind, had been her reflection, Anita realized. There was no way to get the antique mirror. It was in the bathroom, at the far end of the house. But there were other mirrors nearby. Adjacent to the kitchen was a short passage — once a room where servants ate — that lead to the living room. Anita used the passage as a dressing nook; it had the best light in the house in the mornings. She'd hung a floor-length mirror when she'd first moved in.

The girl sobbed, singing nonsense songs under her breath as if they were a spell to keep away the wind.

Anita would only get one chance. Her legs were free. The chair was heavy, her arms were bound, but her legs worked just fine. In one smooth motion, Anita tossed her head forward and kicked out, tipping the chair towards the crazy girl just enough so that Anita could get her weight under it and jump up to her feet. Before the girl knew what she was doing, Anita ran through the room like an ungainly bird, towards the dressing nook.

“Wait.” The girl whispered. “Don’t make any noises. The Huntsmen will hear you.” Too late she bolted after Anita.

Rounding the kitchen island, Anita took the distance to the nook in three leaping strides, hurling herself sideways through the door so that she landed hard on her side with the mirror behind her. She felt something crack in her wrist as she landed and a new bolt of pain jabbed the sharp throb of her severed finger stump. Anita whimpered even as she gagged on the wet rag lodged in her throat.

The girl leaped into the narrow room, snarling like a beast. Her eyes fell on Anita for only a second before she saw the mirror and recoiled. Her mouth fell open in alarm, she pinwheeled backward in terror as if she’d seen her own death staring back at her. The psycho girl turned and ran straight into the wall, then recovered and exited through the kitchen door.

Outside, the wind roared in triumph, shaking the house with its delight. Distantly Anita could hear screaming, of wood cracking.

Anita rubbed her face on the carpeted floor until the edge of the tape caught. She jerked her head, ripping the packing tapes off her lips, and then vomited up the kitchen rag. Would the girl return? Anita didn’t know. She felt an urgent need to buy mirrors, to place them all around her house. But first, a doctor.

With great effort Anita wriggled her hands free, wincing at every motion of her fractured wrist. The sweat and blood helped her slide her hands from the tape. On her back, on the ground, Anita couldn’t decide if she felt lucky to be alive or terrified at her ordeal. She laughed and cried simultaneously, her body folding into a fetal ball.

But there wasn’t time for that. She needed to get to a hospital, to bring them the finger to reattach. Doctors could work miracles these days, and anyway, maybe the freezer preserved it.

Anita opened the freezer and pulled out the glass dish the crazy girl had used as finger storage. In it was a pool of blood, and in that blood was a thin twig, wrapped in twine, with a manicured fingernail jammed in the end.

The wind outside sounded like laughter as Anita shut the freezer door and sat down hard on the floor of her new home.

IT HAPPENED TO ME

By Audrey Whitman

Aimee:

So he's me, kind of. Better job, better relationship with my — our, mom. Takes selfies and posts photos of his matcha lattes and his wife and their million adopted babies. Gross.

He's...not married to *Katrina*, though. And I sort of thought we would be. I mean, I followed the scent of her hair back out of Arcadia. Rolling it around in my mouth like a peppermint as I ran, brisk and clean and full of unkept promises. When I stood in the long saltgrass by the bay to catch my breath on solid ground, *real* ground, the first thing I did was try to pick its scent up again. I'd thought I might have missed some dates, I didn't think I'd be missing years. Well, *he* didn't miss those years. He sews his button eyes back on every morning, thinking they're eyeglasses, and kisses some other woman. She's cute, I guess, but doesn't seem like our type. Or maybe just not mine. It's getting unhealthy, all this watching them go to work and scrolling through his Instagram.

And it's not like I have to kill him, right? I could just let him keep a life I don't even want, mothers and mothers-in-law and an associate at a nice anonymous firm. God, I was so basic. But he's not even friends with *Katrina* anymore. *Her* life, maybe I could slip back into.

That was the logic that carried me to the doorstep of her apartment complex, loitering in the lobby, waiting for her to come downstairs. Her voice had been cautious and slow, like the words were crawling around a feeling too big to speak. Anger, probably. But she said she'd come downstairs. I rocked forward and back on the balls of my feet, squeaking in my wet shoes. I'd always been a little twitchy, but now I can't bear to be still. I spent a lot of time running, my first weeks back. The continuity helped, even if it felt a little perverse.

The elevator doors opened, and I released a breath I hadn't even realized I was holding. She *came* and she was so very the same that I blinked a little. Aging gracefully, I guess. A little sprinkle of white in her wiry black hair, long and full around her head. A belted dress I bought her at a street fair 10 years ago. No shoes. There was a wild look in her eyes that felt familiar, but before I could really think about it I was calling her name. It sounded high and sharp in the empty hall. Too different, even though I've been practicing.

“Ja...Aimee?” She started to touch my face, and checked herself. Flattened out the betrayed look on her face. “What are you going by these days?”

My heart twisted. “Aimee, I guess. That’s how my roommates know me.”

“What about Lucy?” She looked increasingly less confused.

Lucy? *Oh.* “It’s...complicated. She doesn’t know.”

Katrina’s eyes flickered past me and she snorted. “Girl, you’re not complicated. I see you.”

My vision went dark around the edges. I took a step backwards, then too many forward, until we were breathing the same air. “What do you see?”

She tipped my head up to look at her, and this time I actually did. A second eyelid snapped over her eye and back again. Eyes so deep a black I almost fell into them. I did fall onto her. And I felt the soft scaling on her shoulders. *Oh, Katrina.*

“I didn’t...did you fall down the well after me? I never thought. Was that *you* yelling back to me? Oh god, I left you there. I’m so sorry, I thought it was a trick.” Words were falling out of my mouth, I might have been crying. “I would have gone back, I would have gone back, I’m so sorry.”

“Shh. If you can even think about putting a foot back into the Hedge without screaming, I’ll accept that as an apology. It’s been a minute, Aimee. Where’ve you been?”

She was smiling, a little. Not enough to get myself invited back upstairs, but enough to keep talking. “Oh, over the river and through the woods. I’m pretty sure my grandparents are dead now, though.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not what I meant. Why hit me up now?”

“Oh. Well. I’ve actually only been back a couple of weeks? And if I’m being completely honest, I spent most of that time following...him to work and hanging out outside your building wondering if I should call you.” Then I had an awful realization. “Wait. I found you under your real name. Did they...did they not replace you too?”

Katrina shivered. Now that I was looking, the scales rippled too. Like mica and cobras and the inside of shells. “She was made of glass and she wanted to fight about it.”

“What happened?”

“I cracked her open and feathers poured out.”

“I haven’t. I mean, I didn’t. I don’t want to. Jesus, he has *kids*. He’s a *he*.”

“Yeah, I know. I went looking for you after I got back, too. I can see why you might want to leave well enough alone. Not like you wanted to be him before.”

“Well, Mom seems happy with him, and...if Lucy can’t tell, maybe it would be kinder to let her keep him? It seemed cruel to just pop into her life and be like ‘Hey, your husband is imaginary and I have to destroy him so I can have a name I don’t want back. So how do you feel about a divorce and full custody of all these kids?’ I *did* joke a lot about blowing up my life.”

Katrina pulled on a curl. “Well, that’s not quite fair to her either. Like, what if...she did know? Or had figured some piece of it out on her own, but didn’t know what to do about it? She’d...she’d probably think she was going crazy, and only we would know different.”

“Hell, I don’t know what to do with my *own* life. I definitely don’t have any words of wisdom to fill the pages of ‘So Your Husband’s a Fetch: Living With The Consequences of Fae Jerks’. She’d be better off talking to you.”

Katrina winced. And even as the door creaked open, I knew. “She *was* going to talk to you.”

“Aimee, we have a history. If she was going to call someone, it would have been me. I think you should talk to her too, but she didn’t come looking for you.”

Of course they knew each other. I knew that. I must have known that. They had lives that kept happening while I was gone. People that they were to each other, through... James. Things about him they shared that I’d only know second-hand. I suddenly felt like an eavesdropper in a conversation about myself. A lacuna in their lives that had been unacceptably filled. Lucy was looking at me like her life might go up in smoke if I blinked. And she wasn’t wrong.

The rain outside picked up. Katrina’s eyes flickered to my left half a second before mine followed. It was like someone had run a finger up the length of my spine; at first just a nervous tickle, but getting insistent and angry.

I had not properly considered the possibility that escaping Arcadia wouldn’t be enough to keep me safe.

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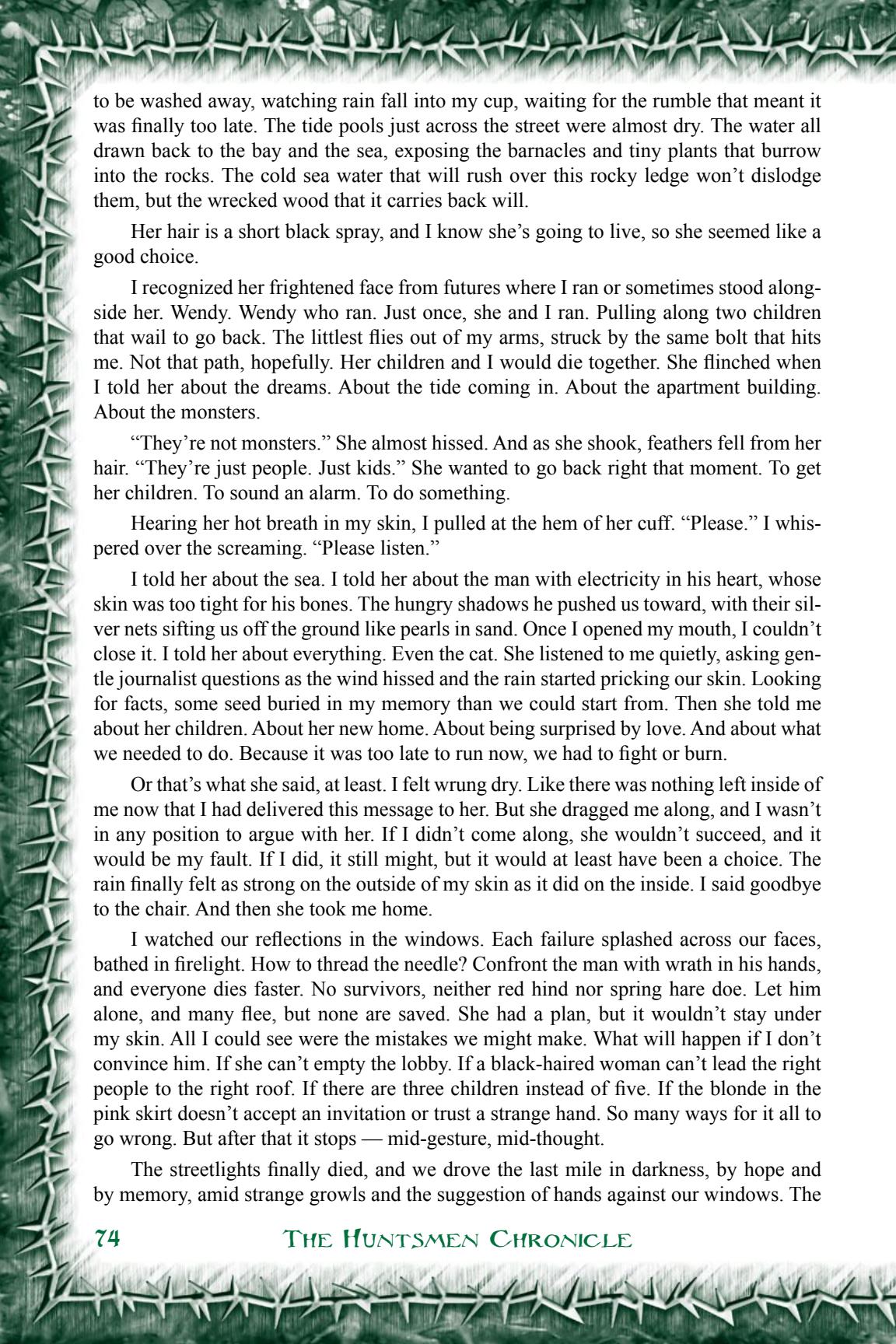
John:

It always starts the same way. Everyone already fleeing the burning building, lightning striking over and over, driving out the darkness in the night sky. Sometimes I’m standing amid the fleeing people, counting them as they turn to monsters before my eyes. Sometimes I’m running with them, my limbs being stretched out in front of me, my hands disappearing into mist. The words of my scream catching in my throat and dissolving into a toneless sigh. Sometimes I’m on the roof, directing a man hurling lightning bolts, showing him who to strike next. I’m dreaming it a couple of times a night now. Cycling through the possibilities, faster and faster.

When I was little, I knew that I saw things in my head. That I remembered them before they happened. People getting hurt. People dying. Once, I tried to warn my aunt that her cat was going to be hit by a car, but she just blamed me when it happened. I didn’t tell anyone after that, but the seeing never stopped. I tried to ignore the memories when I had them, and more often than not they were so disorienting that it was easy to just call them dreams. This doesn’t feel like a dream anymore, and it’s never come on so strong. Never carried so far into waking. I can smell the rain already. Petrichor wafting up from dry concrete. Cold droplets on my skin under a clear sky.

I feel like I’m being asked to pick a side, but I don’t know which is which, only that not picking is just as dangerous. Something bad is going to happen, and if I’m not careful, it might be my fault. And I don’t think I have much more time. I have to tell someone soon. So I went to a coffee shop.

Don’t laugh. I couldn’t think of anyone I knew who would believe me. A stranger seemed almost more likely to take me seriously. So I sat outside, in a chair that was going



to be washed away, watching rain fall into my cup, waiting for the rumble that meant it was finally too late. The tide pools just across the street were almost dry. The water all drawn back to the bay and the sea, exposing the barnacles and tiny plants that burrow into the rocks. The cold sea water that will rush over this rocky ledge won't dislodge them, but the wrecked wood that it carries back will.

Her hair is a short black spray, and I know she's going to live, so she seemed like a good choice.

I recognized her frightened face from futures where I ran or sometimes stood alongside her. Wendy. Wendy who ran. Just once, she and I ran. Pulling along two children that wail to go back. The littlest flies out of my arms, struck by the same bolt that hits me. Not that path, hopefully. Her children and I would die together. She flinched when I told her about the dreams. About the tide coming in. About the apartment building. About the monsters.

"They're not monsters." She almost hissed. And as she shook, feathers fell from her hair. "They're just people. Just kids." She wanted to go back right that moment. To get her children. To sound an alarm. To do something.

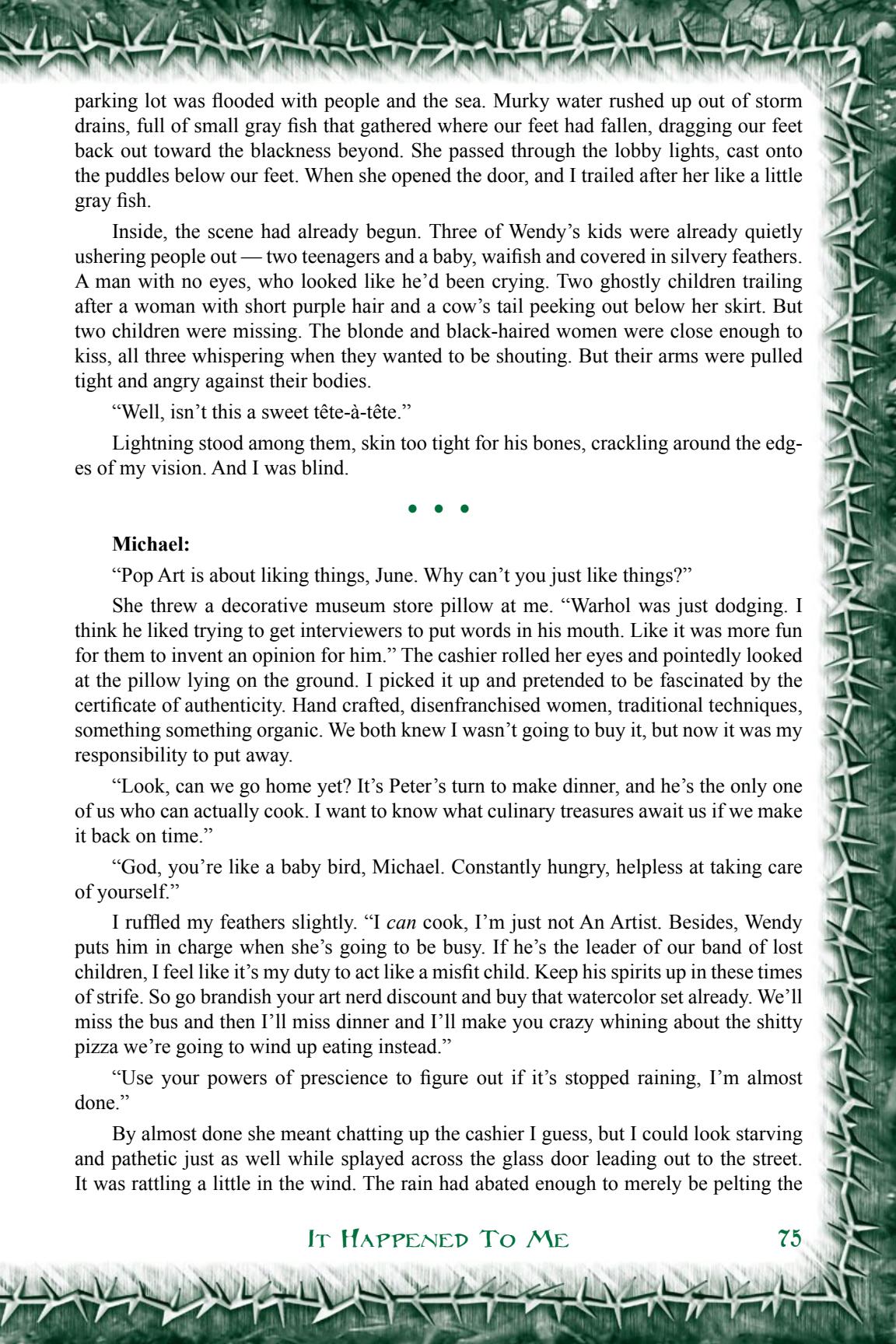
Hearing her hot breath in my skin, I pulled at the hem of her cuff. "Please." I whispered over the screaming. "Please listen."

I told her about the sea. I told her about the man with electricity in his heart, whose skin was too tight for his bones. The hungry shadows he pushed us toward, with their silver nets sifting us off the ground like pearls in sand. Once I opened my mouth, I couldn't close it. I told her about everything. Even the cat. She listened to me quietly, asking gentle journalist questions as the wind hissed and the rain started pricking our skin. Looking for facts, some seed buried in my memory than we could start from. Then she told me about her children. About her new home. About being surprised by love. And about what we needed to do. Because it was too late to run now, we had to fight or burn.

Or that's what she said, at least. I felt wrung dry. Like there was nothing left inside of me now that I had delivered this message to her. But she dragged me along, and I wasn't in any position to argue with her. If I didn't come along, she wouldn't succeed, and it would be my fault. If I did, it still might, but it would at least have been a choice. The rain finally felt as strong on the outside of my skin as it did on the inside. I said goodbye to the chair. And then she took me home.

I watched our reflections in the windows. Each failure splashed across our faces, bathed in firelight. How to thread the needle? Confront the man with wrath in his hands, and everyone dies faster. No survivors, neither red hind nor spring hare doe. Let him alone, and many flee, but none are saved. She had a plan, but it wouldn't stay under my skin. All I could see were the mistakes we might make. What will happen if I don't convince him. If she can't empty the lobby. If a black-haired woman can't lead the right people to the right roof. If there are three children instead of five. If the blonde in the pink skirt doesn't accept an invitation or trust a strange hand. So many ways for it all to go wrong. But after that it stops — mid-gesture, mid-thought.

The streetlights finally died, and we drove the last mile in darkness, by hope and by memory, amid strange growls and the suggestion of hands against our windows. The



parking lot was flooded with people and the sea. Murky water rushed up out of storm drains, full of small gray fish that gathered where our feet had fallen, dragging our feet back out toward the blackness beyond. She passed through the lobby lights, cast onto the puddles below our feet. When she opened the door, and I trailed after her like a little gray fish.

Inside, the scene had already begun. Three of Wendy's kids were already quietly ushering people out — two teenagers and a baby, waifish and covered in silvery feathers. A man with no eyes, who looked like he'd been crying. Two ghostly children trailing after a woman with short purple hair and a cow's tail peeking out below her skirt. But two children were missing. The blonde and black-haired women were close enough to kiss, all three whispering when they wanted to be shouting. But their arms were pulled tight and angry against their bodies.

“Well, isn't this a sweet tête-à-tête.”

Lightning stood among them, skin too tight for his bones, crackling around the edges of my vision. And I was blind.

• • •

Michael:

“Pop Art is about liking things, June. Why can't you just like things?”

She threw a decorative museum store pillow at me. “Warhol was just dodging. I think he liked trying to get interviewers to put words in his mouth. Like it was more fun for them to invent an opinion for him.” The cashier rolled her eyes and pointedly looked at the pillow lying on the ground. I picked it up and pretended to be fascinated by the certificate of authenticity. Hand crafted, disenfranchised women, traditional techniques, something something organic. We both knew I wasn't going to buy it, but now it was my responsibility to put away.

“Look, can we go home yet? It's Peter's turn to make dinner, and he's the only one of us who can actually cook. I want to know what culinary treasures await us if we make it back on time.”

“God, you're like a baby bird, Michael. Constantly hungry, helpless at taking care of yourself.”

I ruffled my feathers slightly. “I *can* cook, I'm just not An Artist. Besides, Wendy puts him in charge when she's going to be busy. If he's the leader of our band of lost children, I feel like it's my duty to act like a misfit child. Keep his spirits up in these times of strife. So go brandish your art nerd discount and buy that watercolor set already. We'll miss the bus and then I'll miss dinner and I'll make you crazy whining about the shitty pizza we're going to wind up eating instead.”

“Use your powers of prescience to figure out if it's stopped raining, I'm almost done.”

By almost done she meant chatting up the cashier I guess, but I could look starving and pathetic just as well while splayed across the glass door leading out to the street. It was rattling a little in the wind. The rain had abated enough to merely be pelting the

sidewalk, rather than cracking against it hard enough to pit the surface. The bus would be moving slowly enough that we might still catch it, but we'd get soaked on the way there.

Then June started twirling her hair at the cashier, and I started hauling her to the door. "June, it's pouring, we need to go now." Far in the distance I could hear thunder rolling, and the lights dimmed for a moment.

She dug in her heels, pulling away. "If it's raining that hard, we should just stay. Maybe Wendy could pick us up later." Then, whispering, "I am So Close, Michael. She is definitely maybe going to give me her number. And you are spoiling it."

The cashier coughed delicately. "We're closing in a few minutes anyway, you should probably try to catch that bus." And then June expired, dropping to the gift-shop floor muttering incoherent apologies, and I had to drag her lifeless corpse out into the rain.

The neon was melting down to the sidewalk. We splashed through puddles of light and stood in the wet reflections of stoplights and didn't speak. It was a little like the old times, where it was all we could do to keep ahead of Her and her maidens. Quiet quiet, flying when we could and running when we had to, sleeping under roots and in the lees of stones. My eyes always flicker a little when I'm remembering. It's like the Hedge gets wrapped over what's actually in front of me, covering the world, but also filling it in. Everything feels a little more real when it's full of forest. Everything looks a little less real when it's covered by forest.

Which is how it came to be that we ran directly into the bus we were supposed to be catching. It was a different driver than before, slow to meet our eyes, hardly seeming to notice the water we tracked in. The rain beat down on the roof of the empty bus, and we huddled together, shivering in the forced air. Maybe I dozed a little, because June was anxiously pulling my feathers and had given up whispering for chirping. The bus was still empty. The driver still wasn't looking at us. I didn't recognize the dirty road we were traveling down, but I did recognize that copse of trees.

Function could follow story here. Pulling the cord might stop the bus, but that might also make it dissolve into foam, or take on new ghostly passengers, or the driver might finally open his eyes. Of all of us, Robin might have remembered best how to tell the dreamers from the ogres, and Summer would have seen through the trick. June and I would just need to make do. I touched the cord lightly at first, and felt the driver shudder through the floor of the bus. Then we joined hands, pulled it hard, and ran for the back of the bus. The driver howled, and the bus flexed along with his body. A giant, black-eyed mare unfurled its hooves and shook the glass from its faces.

We stumbled in the waves of water slowly cascading down its body, washing over each face, catching in the valleys under each eye. We slid down its sleek legs, and June flung her pressed watercolor powder into the puddles at our feet, drawing powdery streaks into the straight bright lines cast by the neon sign at the receptionist's window. Once we could hear sirens, never letting go, we jumped through the puddle, and fell straight through to a fire.

I choked on smoke and June screamed. I'd finally unpacked my bag yesterday. I'd thought we were finally safe. Wendy had found us, and months later she still hadn't let us go. There was school most days, and Mandarin lessons after, and only chores when

they needed to be done. June and Summer were painting together. I was teaching Robin to read. Peter still held us when we woke up shivering. I only just got a home. I'm not ready to be done.

The second night after she rescued us — when the cold hadn't quite left my bones, when I still wasn't used to my new name — I asked Wendy why. She said she didn't even think, when she found us hiding in the bog. Didn't stop to justify it to herself, to explain why she should run or come closer. She just knew that she had to pick us up and take us home. Peter didn't leave us, even when he knew he couldn't protect us anymore. Wendy didn't leave us, even when she found out what we were. I can't leave them either.

I rubbed at the smoke in my eyes and ran towards the fire, trusting June to follow. I didn't even think.

• • •

Wendy:

I don't run anymore.

It used to calm my nerves. Gave me a chance to yell in my head all the things I wasn't going to say to my actual boss. I rehearsed long rants about respect and cowardice and manifesting good in the world. (I don't even remember when I gave up asking to be called something other than 'Miss' or 'guys', maybe after the other female employee quit.) So I ate my words and made nice and asked exactly once to change managers. And got fired at my next performance review — for "being difficult" and "politicizing everything." My best work friend suggested I had brought it on myself by complaining on work chat about how I couldn't take lunar new year off. Since we "were totally about to crunch, you know." I did know.

I kept running for a while after that. At first it just seemed like it might be good practice. Give my days some structure. Help me keep my mind focused while I looked for new jobs. While I thought about changing industries. Besides, every time I ran that way the path seemed to get a little more remote and overgrown. Each time I ran a little farther, I saw something new. Interviewers asked a lot about my politics, and offers dried up after they contacted former employers. So I had some time on my hands. Doing favors for nonprofits I worked for in college kept me from digging too deep into my savings, but there's only so much your social network can do for you. I was running a couple of hours a day at that point.

I'd been out all morning when I found them. Just 20 minutes farther than yesterday, there was a little shadowy lake. A pond, really, maybe no more than 100 feet across, but with water so dark it seemed to go down forever. And it was full of skeletons. Thousands of delicate bones, washing up with the little waves that seemed to come from somewhere under the surface, forming little islands that crested the water, gathering more as the current drifted fragments to them. Some old and mossy, some new — still white and streaked with pink. I don't know why I didn't just run away. I hadn't been tired when I stopped, just curious. But as I watched the bones churn in the water, I didn't run. Which I guess is how I heard them. Too soft for me to have made them out over my own heavy breathing otherwise. A nest of baby swans, crying the way you do when you're too tired



to heave out another sob, but the pain hasn't stopped. When the salt just burns your eyes because there's no water left to clear it out. When you've lost your voice from screaming. Not that I would know.

I still don't know much about birds, but at the time all I knew was that they didn't seem like the same age. One was almost grown, but one was barely hatched. Do birds even know their younger siblings? The eldest was...watching them, I guess, but didn't try to chase me away. I mean, I've tried to feed swans at parks before. I know how they can be about hatchlings. This one just looked tired. Covered the younger ones with its wing and looked...sad? Can birds look sad? I walked a little closer. Sad, and maybe scared. A quiet hiss, and a wince as it tried to move. Oh, its wing was broken. No wonder it couldn't fight me. I know you're not supposed to bother wounded animals. But I couldn't just leave them. Not in a nest made of thin hollow bones.

"Hi," I said, even though it seemed silly to talk to a swan. But I needed to say something as I crept closer, to try to reassure it that I wasn't going to hurt them.

"Hi," the biggest one whispered back. "Are you going to eat us now?"

The strangest thing was that it didn't seem strange. I just thought, 'oh, of course this swan can talk', and then kept right on. "No, I promise." It sighed, as though it didn't believe me.

I tried to smile, but at the same time I stepped on a bone and crushed it. Bird bones crush, I thought absent-mindedly. Bird bones crush, I thought urgently. "Um. Is it okay if I take you somewhere else? I'm starting to feel really weird about this place."

Can birds roll their eyes? "Starting to? How did you even get here, lady?"

"I was running, and don't sass me."

And it flinched. "I'm sorry ma'am. It was my mistake, please don't hurt them." The broken wing extended a little further over the babies.

"Oh, sweetie. I didn't mean to scare you. It's just what my mother said to me when I talked back. I wasn't thinking." It settled back a little, still defensive, still watchful. "Do you have a name? It seems rude to pick you up if I don't know your name."

I've never seen a swan shed tears before. "We don't know them anymore. I think she ate them."

"She ate them?" And I looked toward the lake.

"No, not the creature in the water. Whatever's there doesn't come out during the day. I felt it sniffing my feathers last night, but it left us be. Maybe it's waiting for something better than some scrawny bird-kids."

"Well, now I definitely want to get out of here. Can I pick you up...Peter?"

"Peter? Okay. But please don't leave the little ones behind."

"I won't. Here, let me get my arms around your wing." And then he turned into a boy in my arms. I only just managed to not drop him on the babies below us. We both screamed, and the water trembled. "Okay. Okay. Now you're a boy somehow and we can talk about this when we are all far away from the bone water. Are they going to get turned into kids too? Because I go to the gym, but I don't think I can carry five teenagers."

He...Peter looked pale and scared and said "Can you fix us? Could you name all of us?"

"Okay, yes, fine, I will name everyone once we are away. Will they stay birds if I don't name them yet?"

"Maybe if you don't touch their skin?"

"Okay, good enough." I took off my jacket and wrapped it around the four smaller birds, who shrieked, high-pitched and scared, until Peter touched them all and chirped gently to them.

The water shivered and flexed, like something taking off a coat and shaking it. The air filled with a deep thrum, rattling my teeth and my nerves.

So with a coat full of birds and a naked teenager riding piggy-back, I ran as fast as I could back down the path I had taken and didn't look back. Bones and rock to dirt to gravel to pavement to wood to tile to a bathtub full of children.

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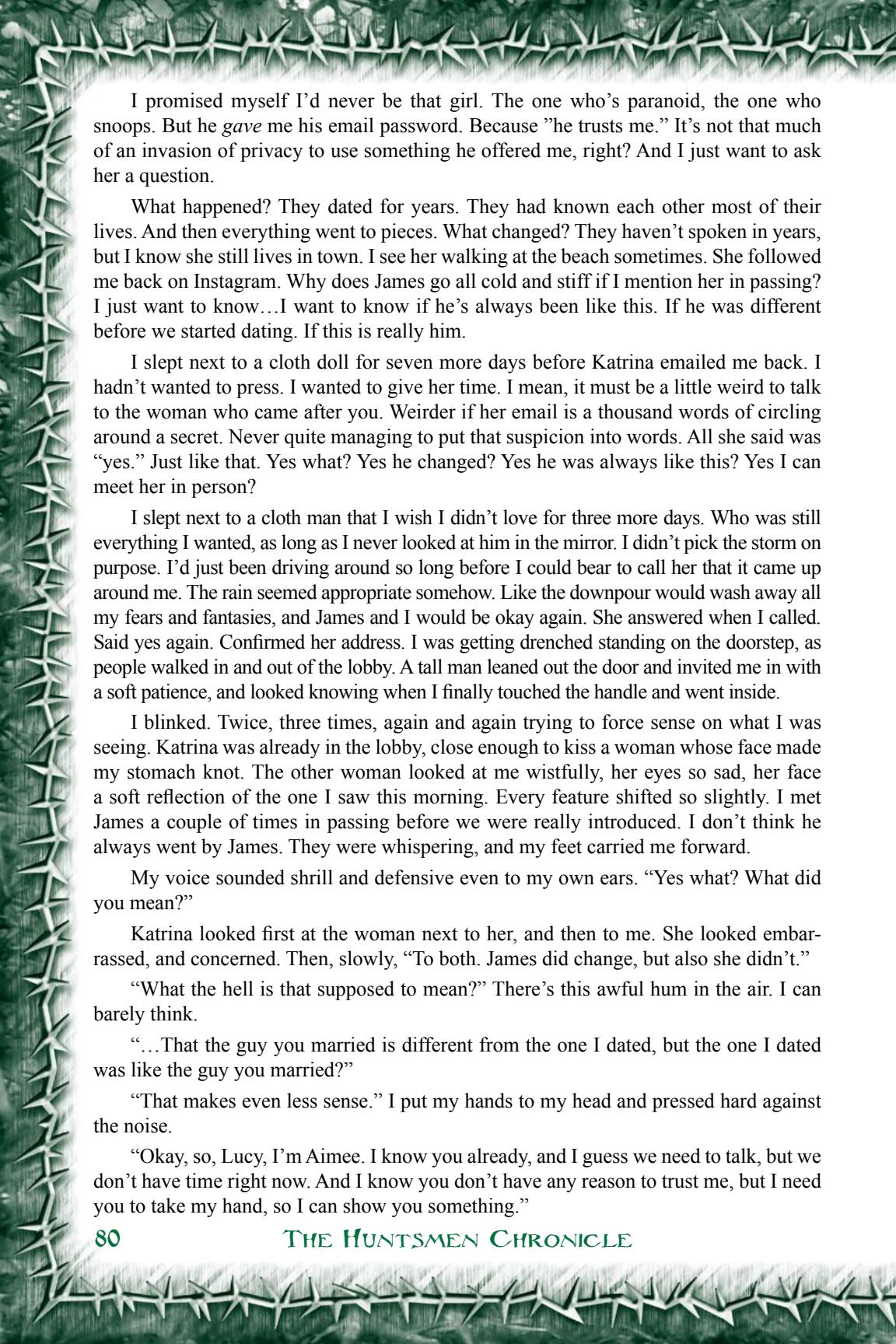
Lucy:

I've always prided myself on being perceptive.

Stella and Susan were paddling around in the tub, and James was sitting on a stool next to me, cooing at them. When I looked to my side, there was a man whose glasses were sliding down his nose. When I turned slightly past, I could see our reflections in the bathroom mirror. Mine looked the same — snub nosed, sleepy-eyed, blonde roots growing in under bottle red. His... blurred like someone had smeared a handful of Vaseline on the glass. There, his face was patchwork, and his flat button eyes hung loose. When I turned back to James, his bright blue eyes lit up, and his smile pulled up the rims of his glasses. In the mirror, cloth shuffled itself and formed a gap shaped like that smile. I didn't flinch when he rested his flesh (fabric) hand on her knee and leaned in for a kiss. His face felt warm and unshaven and familiar. But when I peeked through my lashes, the cloth face in the mirror was rubbing against hers.

I've been thinking about that for a couple of weeks now. Would you feel yourself going crazy? Or might it happen so quietly that one day you could wake up sure that there was a cloth doll in your bed? Do nightmares about getting lost in writhing brambles snap into place all at once, or are they the ones I used to forget as I woke? Because I would have noticed. I think I would have noticed.

The sun was too bright again today. Out of the corner of my eye everything had extra reflections. The light bouncing off my coffee cup from a direction it couldn't have, in colors the light couldn't have been. My doctor says they're migraines. That the nightmares are normal for new mothers. Adopting is stressful, especially two babies at once. Bureaucracy can feel like a briar patch. Have I been meditating? Taking my medication? I haven't told him about the mirror thing, he'd probably tell me I'm hysterical. Not the funny kind of hysterical either. I think you can get your kids taken away if you're committed. I love James. I think the person I love is James.



I promised myself I'd never be that girl. The one who's paranoid, the one who snoops. But he *gave* me his email password. Because "he trusts me." It's not that much of an invasion of privacy to use something he offered me, right? And I just want to ask her a question.

What happened? They dated for years. They had known each other most of their lives. And then everything went to pieces. What changed? They haven't spoken in years, but I know she still lives in town. I see her walking at the beach sometimes. She followed me back on Instagram. Why does James go all cold and stiff if I mention her in passing? I just want to know... I want to know if he's always been like this. If he was different before we started dating. If this is really him.

I slept next to a cloth doll for seven more days before Katrina emailed me back. I hadn't wanted to press. I wanted to give her time. I mean, it must be a little weird to talk to the woman who came after you. Weirder if her email is a thousand words of circling around a secret. Never quite managing to put that suspicion into words. All she said was "yes." Just like that. Yes what? Yes he changed? Yes he was always like this? Yes I can meet her in person?

I slept next to a cloth man that I wish I didn't love for three more days. Who was still everything I wanted, as long as I never looked at him in the mirror. I didn't pick the storm on purpose. I'd just been driving around so long before I could bear to call her that it came up around me. The rain seemed appropriate somehow. Like the downpour would wash away all my fears and fantasies, and James and I would be okay again. She answered when I called. Said yes again. Confirmed her address. I was getting drenched standing on the doorstep, as people walked in and out of the lobby. A tall man leaned out the door and invited me in with a soft patience, and looked knowing when I finally touched the handle and went inside.

I blinked. Twice, three times, again and again trying to force sense on what I was seeing. Katrina was already in the lobby, close enough to kiss a woman whose face made my stomach knot. The other woman looked at me wistfully, her eyes so sad, her face a soft reflection of the one I saw this morning. Every feature shifted so slightly. I met James a couple of times in passing before we were really introduced. I don't think he always went by James. They were whispering, and my feet carried me forward.

My voice sounded shrill and defensive even to my own ears. "Yes what? What did you mean?"

Katrina looked first at the woman next to her, and then to me. She looked embarrassed, and concerned. Then, slowly, "To both. James did change, but also she didn't."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" There's this awful hum in the air. I can barely think.

"...That the guy you married is different from the one I dated, but the one I dated was like the guy you married?"

"That makes even less sense." I put my hands to my head and pressed hard against the noise.

"Okay, so, Lucy, I'm Aimee. I know you already, and I guess we need to talk, but we don't have time right now. And I know you don't have any reason to trust me, but I need you to take my hand, so I can show you something."

Spitefully, I felt myself pulling my arms closer, tight around my body. Like that would keep the memories away. "How could you possibly help me? And what's making that awful noise?" Something kept creeping around my head. I kept almost remembering.

Then someone was with them, who I couldn't *quite* see. Like a flicker in my vision. A missing cell of film. A skipped beat. But when I framed that space against the light just right, his skin was illuminated from within. Even more of what I already wasn't telling my doctor about. People shaped wrong, rushing off the elevators.

"Who's that?" When he opened his mouth it sounded like bees and fluorescent lights, and he looked at me like I was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. "What is he saying?"

"You can see him?" The other woman seemed terrified. I wasn't sure that was an improvement over the wistful look she'd been giving me earlier. "Lucy, please. I know this is...difficult for you, but I kinda feel like I owe it to my fetch to keep you safe until we all have a chance to talk?"

She shrugged defensively. "I mean, I'd want you to be safe if I was in his shoes."

The space where a man shouldn't have been flexed, and I could see the imprints of his fingers on her shoulder.

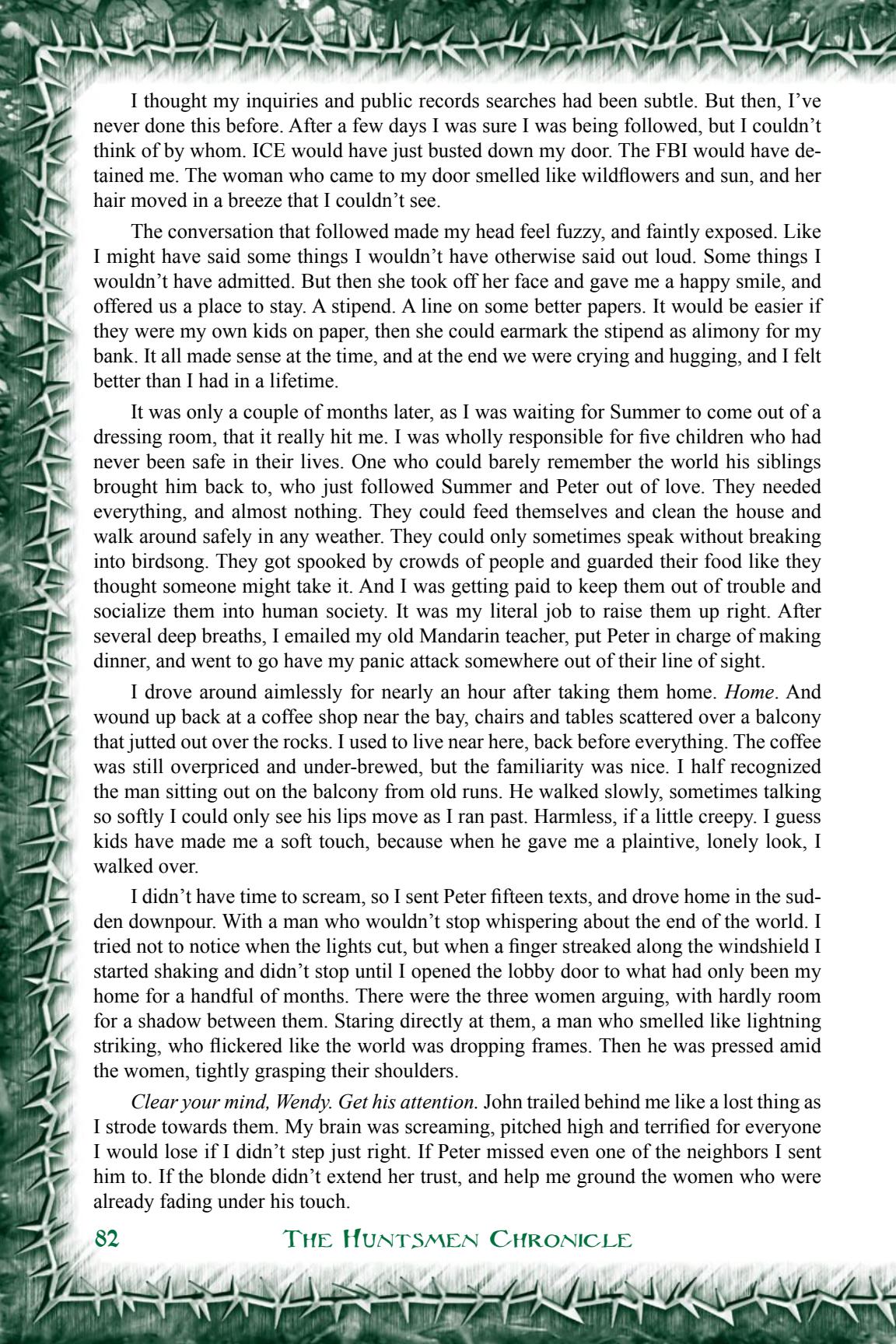
"What's a fetch?" I whispered. But I knew. *I knew.*

• • •

Wendy:

Adopting children is, theoretically, difficult. There are lots of interviews, and social workers asking how secure your income really is. And the occasional insinuation that a child might prefer to be with someone more like them. It's less difficult when the children don't...exist, exactly. An extra handful of model minority children can disappear if you take them to the right neighborhood. But it gets harder again when you try to take them to the hospital or put them in school. Peter had a broken arm. June couldn't read. Robin thought I was a fairy. Summer couldn't speak English. And Michael wanted me to like him so badly it hurt my heart. They sang like birds, and could, to our mutual discovery, be both at once. Bird-children, running from someone who hurt them so badly I hear them crying in their sleep every night, huddled together in my bed. She kidnapped them, and took away everything they could have been. I've had my worthiness questioned. I've been told that none of the things I am are important. But no one ever really took them away, no one pulled them out of my heart. At least I can give a little of that back to them. They don't actually look much like me, or each other, but most Americans can't tell the difference. Especially not with hapa kids.

I hadn't specifically wanted children. But I had some time on my hands, a landlord who was willing to look the other way while I sorted out some "runaways" I found sleeping outside, and nothing more worthy to be doing. But four children, one teenager, and an adult can't stay in an efficiency forever. Not without something to prove I wasn't just another kidnapper. So the six of us decided that I had a handful of runaway cousins. We would be close enough family that I could maybe get custodianship while we tried to find birth certificates. To see if they had parents who knew their birth names.



I thought my inquiries and public records searches had been subtle. But then, I've never done this before. After a few days I was sure I was being followed, but I couldn't think of by whom. ICE would have just busted down my door. The FBI would have detained me. The woman who came to my door smelled like wildflowers and sun, and her hair moved in a breeze that I couldn't see.

The conversation that followed made my head feel fuzzy, and faintly exposed. Like I might have said some things I wouldn't have otherwise said out loud. Some things I wouldn't have admitted. But then she took off her face and gave me a happy smile, and offered us a place to stay. A stipend. A line on some better papers. It would be easier if they were my own kids on paper, then she could earmark the stipend as alimony for my bank. It all made sense at the time, and at the end we were crying and hugging, and I felt better than I had in a lifetime.

It was only a couple of months later, as I was waiting for Summer to come out of a dressing room, that it really hit me. I was wholly responsible for five children who had never been safe in their lives. One who could barely remember the world his siblings brought him back to, who just followed Summer and Peter out of love. They needed everything, and almost nothing. They could feed themselves and clean the house and walk around safely in any weather. They could only sometimes speak without breaking into birdsong. They got spooked by crowds of people and guarded their food like they thought someone might take it. And I was getting paid to keep them out of trouble and socialize them into human society. It was my literal job to raise them up right. After several deep breaths, I emailed my old Mandarin teacher, put Peter in charge of making dinner, and went to go have my panic attack somewhere out of their line of sight.

I drove around aimlessly for nearly an hour after taking them home. *Home*. And wound up back at a coffee shop near the bay, chairs and tables scattered over a balcony that jutted out over the rocks. I used to live near here, back before everything. The coffee was still overpriced and under-brewed, but the familiarity was nice. I half recognized the man sitting out on the balcony from old runs. He walked slowly, sometimes talking so softly I could only see his lips move as I ran past. Harmless, if a little creepy. I guess kids have made me a soft touch, because when he gave me a plaintive, lonely look, I walked over.

I didn't have time to scream, so I sent Peter fifteen texts, and drove home in the sudden downpour. With a man who wouldn't stop whispering about the end of the world. I tried not to notice when the lights cut, but when a finger streaked along the windshield I started shaking and didn't stop until I opened the lobby door to what had only been my home for a handful of months. There were the three women arguing, with hardly room for a shadow between them. Staring directly at them, a man who smelled like lightning striking, who flickered like the world was dropping frames. Then he was pressed amid the women, tightly grasping their shoulders.

Clear your mind, Wendy. Get his attention. John trailed behind me like a lost thing as I strode towards them. My brain was screaming, pitched high and terrified for everyone I would lose if I didn't step just right. If Peter missed even one of the neighbors I sent him to. If the blonde didn't extend her trust, and help me ground the women who were already fading under his touch.

“Well, isn’t this a sweet tête-à-tête.” His voice kept tuning like a broken radio, words hissing around the static.

We were in a wide, tile-floored atrium. The kind designed by someone who’s never lived along a heavily trafficked apartment hallway. Noisy. Sound muddled as it bounced back and forth between the tile and the glass, shoes squeaking and rain pelting and people yelling as softly as they could over the din. I cracked the heel of my boot hard against the tile three times. The echo was as loud as I could have hoped it would be. Everyone who was left inside stilled and stared.

“I think you should leave. You’re making those women uncomfortable.” *Focus on the moment.* “Get out of our building.” People were shuffling between me and the doors outward. I listened for the click, and heard an anguished howl from outside. Someone pounding on the glass doors trying to get in. I couldn’t look. His laughter was like breaking glass.

I took another step forward, clacking my boots again, and pushed the blonde’s arm. “Grab their hands,” I whispered, “they need an anchor.” I shoved her close enough to them that she would need to grab hold of them to keep her balance. She almost let herself fall anyway, finally landing hard against the taller woman’s collarbone.

The three women all shuddered a little at the touch, and the two dazed ones began to shake off whatever hold he had on them.

“Not today, Satan.” And Preeti slammed her fist against the back of his head.

Smoke billowed up from the floor in hot waves, and the glass above us shattered, shards crashing down around us.

• • •

Katrina:

The sky cracked open, and the surface of the water boiled, and the man with a leather jacket full of stars glitched up to the roof of the building. And for several long minutes, no one followed. He wiped the flesh from his wet black hands and shook the blood from his bones and waited, impatiently, for the story to begin.

The red one will be first by a heartbeat, he thought, with her backwards palms and long straight hair. She wants to be the one who stands between people like him and the fragile world. Then her co-conspirator, matched in form but not substance, who will struggle to put the wall of her body between her foolhardy sister and himself.

Is that thundering their feet on the stairs, or the borrowed blood in his ears?

The serpent would rather hide, and the hind can’t tell which way to run. The prey’s instinctive urge to flee after discovering their huntman softly breathing the same stale air. No reason he can’t collect more than one bounty while waiting them out, though. The contract is flexible, and rewards initiative.

“You know it’s just toying with us, right?” Adita said to Wendy’s hastily assembled army. “They can’t even really be killed this side of the Hedge. It’s probably just waiting to catch as many of us at once as it can.” She shivered. “A glut of souls to take back with it.”

“We *live* here. It’s not like we can just pull up a whole apartment building worth of changelings and their kids to go hide and wait for it to pick us off one by one” Preeti said. Once upon a time, she was the more gentler twin. Somewhen in their durance, the righteous anger got wrung right out of Adita and poured into her. “Even if it doesn’t stay gone, it’ll give us a chance to prepare a little for the next round.”

“And as one of the kids who lives here, please. I can’t remember much of anything before Wendy saved us, but I know this is my first real home. I want to stay. I want to help.” Micheal and June seemed to be trying extra hard to look angelic and brave. They look so young that it breaks my heart.

“How do any of you even understand what it wants? It’s just a mouthful of bees and static. I can feel it pressing in my ears and behind my eyes, but there aren’t any *words*.” Lucy was rallying faster than I thought she would. Grounding me and Aimee seemed to have done her some good too.

“What is she still doing here? This has nothing to do with her.” Silvia doesn’t much socialize with the normals after those ghost kids of hers got harassed by some dude who thought he was hot shit for being able to see them in the first place. I think she still resents Wendy a little for getting to live here with all those swan babies.

“Well, it does a little bit. She’s, um, married to my fetch. And she’s basically defenseless. I can’t just send her out into the night with him wandering around looking to spite us.” Oh, Aimee.

“Doesn’t even matter if we’re the dream team, we’re the ones Wendy got. So what’s the plan?” I try to stay out of team planning. I’m more of an underbrush girl.

“Well, I didn’t know that you couldn’t actually kill him, which complicates things.”

“It’s not that we can’t kill it exactly. It’s just that it wouldn’t matter if we tried here.” Adita twisted and untwisted her braid around her wrist. “They’re only kindof real here. You need to find their hearts to actually stop them, buried somewhere in the woods around and between the arcadian estates.” She shrugged. “So there’s barely any point. We tear it to pieces and it’ll only come back knowing how many pieces we were able to shred it into.”

“I dunno, I feel like tearing him to pieces would be pretty therapeutic, all things considered.” Preeti said it, but there were more agreements than demurrals. Maybe we could at least scare him off for awhile. Long enough to get this place hidden properly. With so many courts represented, surely someone could help us figure that out.

“I’m not the only one who’s noticed that he’s almost constantly discharging electricity, right?” Some hesitant nods, and some thoughtful ones. “Remember that chunk of the roof that’s just been a giant metal plate for six months? Let’s stick him there with his own current, and Preeti can tear him to pieces.”

Wendy looked at the swan babies. “I know I can’t keep you here. And I won’t make you claim that you’d stay away from the fighting, when I know you want to be there. But think about your siblings. They need you too.”

An army can’t be quiet, especially not when trudging up an access staircase, and fileing out one at a time. But numbers are going to help us more than stealth. That kind of trick only works the once.

He felt them under his skin, even before the first strike caught him in place. Their infectious disloyalty seeping through his fingertips. The urge to run and find his heart. To go home. The hunter couldn't have been distracted from his hunt. And yet somehow, the hunter was distracted. And in his moment of startlement, the red twins pulled him in twain.

Adita is crying, but Preeti is too pleased with herself to be much comfort. Too fragile to move into her life's future. Too ready to storm the Hedge gates and tear up any threat to motley or freehold she can imagine.

When did Wendy get so good at comforting people, at getting our attention, at treating our breaks and sprains and the thousand indignities that changeling flesh is heir to? I think she's a little wasted as a stay at home parent.

Lucy and Aimee are trying to work out custody of James's life. I don't think she quite believes that Aimee really doesn't want to steal back into her old life, evicting her 'real' husband. Aimee just wants him to keep being good to their parents. No one knows how to tell him, or if they should. If they could live with the things they said to each other on the way to this moment. If either of them could forgive the other. The conversation skidded to a halt. So we sat in silence.

I don't know that any of it was really forgiveable. I don't know how you would even ask. The weight of too many memories, and not enough time. The rain took the place of words. Wind slowing where we might have apologized, trees sighing where we might have forgiven.





SO THEY SAY

By Tara Zuber

Laughter bubbled in Alis' chest, threatening to surge up her throat. Around her monsters swanned about in masks more mundane than the faces that wore them. Of course, she was monstrous now as well. Moon-pale scales shifted over her skin and flaked off beneath her fingernails as she scratched at them. The itching never stopped.

"Mm," a woman with a long fox snout said, staring at Alis. "A new face." She sniffed the air. "A fresh face even. You still stink of their lands."

"Who are you?"

"Bold, too," the fox-woman said, the corners of her mouth pulled backward in what was likely a smile. "Who's your Keeper, new girl?"

"Bothering my charge, Young-ja?" Flex, the candlestick man with a face like melted wax, appeared behind Young-ja. Flex had found Alis after she'd won her way free of the brambles.

"Just saying 'hello.' Overprotective as ever, Flex." Young-ja looked back at Alis. "You poor dear," she said, her voice slick with syrup. "Has he even told you anything?"

Alis edged away from Young-ja and toward Flex. "I know about the Fetches —"

"Oh, Fetches." Young-ja rolled her eyes and flicked one hand aside. Her nails were sharp and black-red. "But has he told you about the real dangers? The Huntsmen?" Her eyes sparkled with amusement and menace.

Alis shook her head.

"She's only been free two days," Flex said. "I wanted her to adjust first."

Young-ja barked with laughter. "She must be terrified." Her black eyes bore into Alis'. "You think we're scary, but you can see us, name us. The Huntsmen are not so accommodating. Do you understand?"

Alis shook her head.

The light glittered off Young-ja's teeth. "Then let me explain."

• • •

Young-ja's Tale

People forget what it is like to fear darkness as a child. Adults may shudder at the shadows or keep lights near their beds for quick reassurance, but all their anxieties have grown from truth or tale.

Stories of men with long knives and sharper smiles waiting over your bedside, stories of eyes at the windows staring. And existential worries: fear of making rent, being found out, repairing the car, being who you want to be, getting by.

We forget how to fear a darkness we can't shape.

The Huntsmen may have a form, but that is a lie. They are the depths of the closet before we know enough to fear a monster hiding within them. They're the scratch of metal on glass before our mind thinks of hooks or claws.

We give them shape like we give darkness shape, fooling ourselves into thinking we can grasp them.

The Huntsmen appear as people because we need monsters to fill our closets, but that is how they win. The True Fae snagged pieces of nothing: a still puddle of rain, wind rushing down over stone, a spider's web, and twisted them into hunters with only one purpose: us. We see them as Huntsmen, but to nothingness, one shape is as meaningless as another.

If you only look for the monsters and killers and creeping dreads of doubt and fear, you'll miss the darkness.

What do you see?

A stranger silently waiting for you to fall asleep. Your lover creeping away, leaving you forever alone. A Huntsman comes to drag you back through the Hedge. Clothing draped oddly over a chair. A stack of books. A branch.

The shadows can be anything at all.

• • •

Alis tore her gaze from Young-ja's amused grin and looked to Flex. His slipping smile was tight with anger. "Do not mislead her. Alis, the Huntsmen are real, but they are not boogeymen."

"Not merely boogeymen, perhaps," Young-ja said with a careless shrug.

"What is happening here?" A tall woman in a jeweled emerald mask stepped between Young-ja and Flex. "You look on the verge of igniting, Flex."

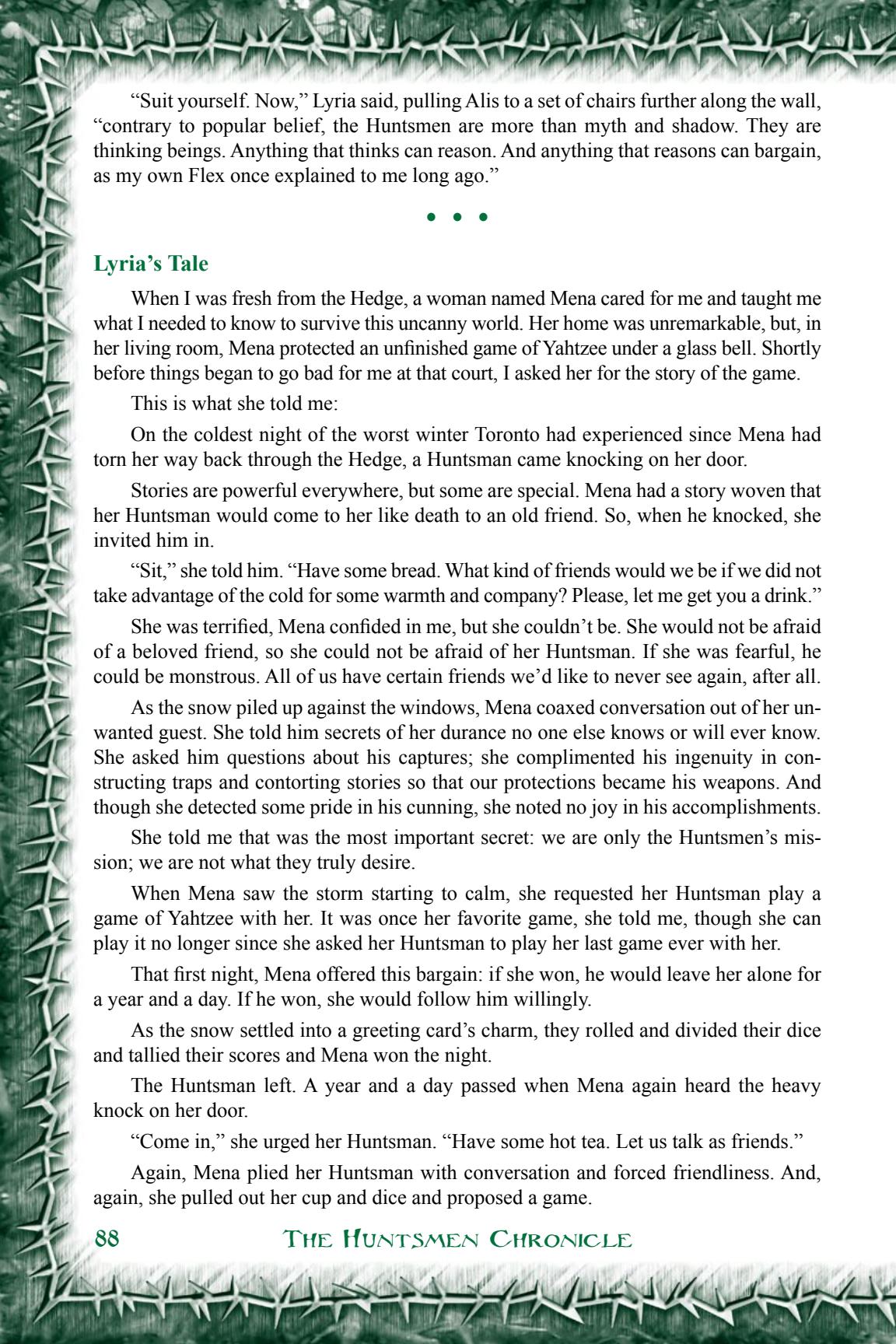
"Flex is being lax in his tutelage," Young-ja said. "I merely filled a gap."

"The Huntsmen."

"Do you know what the Huntsmen are?" Alis asked.

"Of course I do," the woman said. She held out her hand to Alis; the too-long, pale fingers were translucent in the lantern light, beautiful and multi-jointed. "Come over here and let these two have their spat."

"I'm not leaving her alone again, Lyria," Flex said.



“Suit yourself. Now,” Lyria said, pulling Alis to a set of chairs further along the wall, “contrary to popular belief, the Huntsmen are more than myth and shadow. They are thinking beings. Anything that thinks can reason. And anything that reasons can bargain, as my own Flex once explained to me long ago.”

• • •

Lyria’s Tale

When I was fresh from the Hedge, a woman named Mena cared for me and taught me what I needed to know to survive this uncanny world. Her home was unremarkable, but, in her living room, Mena protected an unfinished game of Yahtzee under a glass bell. Shortly before things began to go bad for me at that court, I asked her for the story of the game.

This is what she told me:

On the coldest night of the worst winter Toronto had experienced since Mena had torn her way back through the Hedge, a Huntsman came knocking on her door.

Stories are powerful everywhere, but some are special. Mena had a story woven that her Huntsman would come to her like death to an old friend. So, when he knocked, she invited him in.

“Sit,” she told him. “Have some bread. What kind of friends would we be if we did not take advantage of the cold for some warmth and company? Please, let me get you a drink.”

She was terrified, Mena confided in me, but she couldn’t be. She would not be afraid of a beloved friend, so she could not be afraid of her Huntsman. If she was fearful, he could be monstrous. All of us have certain friends we’d like to never see again, after all.

As the snow piled up against the windows, Mena coaxed conversation out of her unwanted guest. She told him secrets of her durance no one else knows or will ever know. She asked him questions about his captures; she complimented his ingenuity in constructing traps and contorting stories so that our protections became his weapons. And though she detected some pride in his cunning, she noted no joy in his accomplishments.

She told me that was the most important secret: we are only the Huntsmen’s mission; we are not what they truly desire.

When Mena saw the storm starting to calm, she requested her Huntsman play a game of Yahtzee with her. It was once her favorite game, she told me, though she can play it no longer since she asked her Huntsman to play her last game ever with her.

That first night, Mena offered this bargain: if she won, he would leave her alone for a year and a day. If he won, she would follow him willingly.

As the snow settled into a greeting card’s charm, they rolled and divided their dice and tallied their scores and Mena won the night.

The Huntsman left. A year and a day passed when Mena again heard the heavy knock on her door.

“Come in,” she urged her Huntsman. “Have some hot tea. Let us talk as friends.”

Again, Mena plied her Huntsman with conversation and forced friendliness. And, again, she pulled out her cup and dice and proposed a game.

“Perhaps I got lucky last time,” she said. “Let’s play two out of three to be sure. If you win, I will follow you. If I win, you will grant me another year.”

Again, the Huntsman agreed. Such bargains are rich in story and such tales oil the Huntsmen’s gears. Narrative strengthens them. Besides, they know that their story will always trump in the end. One way or another, the Huntsman always wins.

Mena won the first game that evening. The Huntsman won the second. The third game never ended.

You see, Mena had not wasted her year and a day reprieve and, during their third and final game, she offered the Huntsman what he wanted more than capturing her.

No one knows what Mena promised the Huntsman to make him leave. Some say she opened a secret passage for him back to Arcadia so that he was no longer barred from his home until his mission was complete. Others say she turned him into a vine and even now he is growing in her garden and up the old brick wall of her home. Still, others say she took his memories so that he could live a life without fae demands as a human, or that she bore him a son and that he has promised not to return for her until his family is gone. Each rumor is wilder than the next.

All that is truly known is this: Someday Mena’s Huntsman will return for her and they will finish their game. As for what happens then? Well, let’s just say that no matter how long a game runs or how many times a story twists, fate and life and doom are such that the Huntsman, somehow, always wins.

• • •

During Lyria’s story, others had drifted toward their group. Alis shrunk back against her chair as they talked over her.

“Tell that yarn of yours as much you want, Lyria; it ain’t gonna make it true.” A catfish stared at Alis out of the water-man’s bare chest.

“Huntsmen’s just stories. I told you. I saw a bunch of them back at Brown’s bar just sitting around, drinking beer, and boasting about how they liked to catch changelings.”

“Privateers,” Young-ja said, flicking her fingers at the tiny, doll-woman who had spoken. “Real Huntsmen don’t need a beer or....” Her gaze flickered to Lyria. “... Yahtzee. Shifting shadows, new girl. Solid darkness you can’t ever grasp.”

“Listen to the fox,” the water-man said. “Them Huntsman change shape easy as breathing. Heard of this one that walks about as a lawman pretending to be helpful.”

A massive man carved out of glowing coal spoke in a low, crackling voice. “They’ll trick you.” He moved closer to Alis’ chair. The shimmer of the heat off his skin was a balm. The incessant itching eased.

“What do *you* know, Eli?” Flex asked, his hands curling over the back of Alis’ chair.

Alis leaned toward the ogre and his warmth. Red burned through the cracks in his skin. “What *do* you know?” she asked.

“Changing forms, using your Fetch, twisting your story — they have lots of tricks and traps.”

“Tell me.”

“Fine.”



Eli's Tale

I once knew a girl. Nice girl. Sweet. Even after Arcadia she believed in the best in everybody. She crafted little photograph albums of her Fetch and its family like she was one of them or else their ghost, their own little Casper. At night, she'd creep through their windows and steal away the children's nightmares. Her Fetch's children's nightmares.

One night one of those little darlings woke and saw her, true-faced, standing over his bed and screamed.

Lights flew on. Her Fetch stumbled down the hall, calling out for her baby boy, "Zachary! Zachary, answer me!"

The girl escaped, but not before staring face to face with her own Fetch. And though years, wrinkles, weight, and life separated them, people recognize their reflections. While her Fetch stood stunned and the little boy sobbed, our girl leaped out the window and scurried home.

And that should have been the end. But our girl was obsessed with this future she'd never claim. When Zachary or his sister won a sports trophy, she showed off photos. When the family struggled for money, she snuck and stole, getting them whatever they needed. I think she'd even made a deal with the goblins for them.

She went back.

And this time her Fetch was ready for her. As she snuck into Zachary's room to steal his nightmares and give back only good dreams, the lights flicked on. Her Fetch's husband stood in the bedroom doorway. She whirled back to the window, but her Fetch blocked her and said, "We should talk."

I won't repeat the farce of their conversation, but here's the gist: the Fetch and her husband thanked our girl for everything she'd done for them and invited her to stay. Open arms. No hard feelings. "Family should stick together" and all that rot.

Everything she'd ever wanted.

One of the last times I ever saw our girl, she was dancing back here for a feast and some loose ends. She told us about her great fortune. Then she danced back to her Fetch's house and was lost again.

The rest I know from my own investigations and harvested dreams. Our girl went to the house wearing a backpack stuffed with clothes and carrying a cardboard box full of those damn photo albums. Like they were going to be anything other than creeped out.

The Fetch took the box as she let our girl into the house and gave her a hug. She filled our girl up with all the lies she'd ever wanted to believe. The family was incomplete without her. As her Fetch prattled, the house grew darker. Colder. Like a bad memory.

And a woman with a long braid wrapped around her neck like a noose slipped up behind our girl and grabbed her by each shoulder. Our girl twisted like a snake and tried turning shadow, but the Huntsman held on as strong as Janet to Tam Lin and told her, "Time to go."

I know because I heard it tangled up with her cries for help that ripped through my dreams. She clung to any dream she could reach, grasping like fingertips on a door frame. The Huntsman did not falter and dragged her, scraping and scrabbling through dream after dream, through the Hedge.

All while the Fetch sat in her home as pleased as a cat. She'd gone online, I gleaned from her later, looking up doppelgangers when the Huntsman had reached out. They'd plotted that little honey trap together, banking on our girl's deepest wishes and trusting nature.

Just another scheme from the Huntsmen's bag of tricks.

• • •

“Satisfied?” Eli asked.

Alis looked at the collection of faces crowded around her. Young-ja's nose twitched. The water-man's catfish swam in circles behind his eyes. The doll-woman was turning a key in her hip. Eli's heat pulled at her skin. Alis turned away, pushing her face into Flex's familiar wax. It molded around her nose.

“I want to go home.”

“This is why I hadn't told her yet.”

“She's a bold one; she'll recover. And maybe now she'll last a bit longer, too.”

“Come, let us grant them some space. I imagine she needs to process.” Lyria drew the others away.

Alis shivered in Eli's absence. She leaned back from Flex, embarrassed by her behavior. “How do you bear it?” she asked.

“Day by day,” Flex said. “We have good lives here; you'll see.”

She hoped he was right.



THE TROUBLE WITH ALICE

By Filamena Young

Act I

Somewhere in Inglewood, a street that's seen better days. To the beautiful people, it's a place to pass by in a hurry. To Lisa McDade, professional private investigator, it was the start of it all...

The guy's in his late forties but carries himself like he's twice that. Kind of bent over, shuffling. But shuffling fast. His bent neck cranes this way and that as he crosses a busy Los Angeles intersection among a crowd of faster-moving, sun-kissed youths on their way anywhere but here. Here being a side street without a name anyone can remember, a few bars, and a paycheck loan place that offers to 'Buy Gold at Insane Prices' on its colorful banner out front.

Lisa was only here to track a cheating husband. That was most of her work. Runaway teens looking for a taste of freedom and men breaking outdated vows to women who still bought in. He was asleep in an apartment over one of those bars, a dingy place rented by a woman in her twenties with fire in her eyes and a seething hatred for rich men. It was going to end badly. But that's not where the story goes from here. No. The story that matters is the one that starts, more or less, when that shuffling man shuffled his way right into Lisa. She'd gotten out of her car to stretch her legs, and here's this man, hurrying as much as his crooked body would allow him.

"Woah." She said, and looked past him, around him. "You getting followed? You in trouble?" she asked him in a kind of stage whisper. It was broad daylight and this wasn't the worst part of LA, but she could tell fear when she saw it. This guy was afraid. Deathly afraid.

"What?" He lifted his face up to look at her like it was a chore to do and blinked big bugged eyes at her. "Is that you say?" He lisped with the lightest, gentlest touch of a German accent; a sort of jolly tightness in his tenor. Sweet. When he wasn't so afraid, he must have been a real sweet old man.

"I said are you being followed? Are you okay?" she asked him again a little louder, glancing only at his face briefly before looking back to the mid-day trickle of a crowd.

"No."

She'd asked two questions and she couldn't be sure which one he was answering. "Okay. You want a lift somewhere?"

"Kindness." He muttered like it was a secret. "Yeah, uh. You think you could take me to park three blocks from here? These old bones, they don't move so fast and..."

"You got a date with a chess table?"

He laughed. "That's about right."

• • •

Ten minutes of LA traffic later, Lisa stops beside a public park.

"This okay?" she asked him, sliding her wallet out of her pocket. "I'm going to give you my card; you call me, okay? I help people when I can." He laughed at that, like a man looking at the gallows, then his eyes went wide.

"Yes! You can help!" He reached into his own pocket and produced a surprisingly crisp one dollar bill. "Take this. Put it in your wallet if you want, but don't spend it! I may come back for it later. Okay?" He took her offered card but didn't look at it, holding out the bill expectantly.

"I. Uh. Okay. I can do that. I'll hold on to your dollar. You call me or get in touch when you're ready to get it back?"

He looked wistful, sad, but relieved when she slid the bill into her wallet. "If I can come back for it, I will." He squeezed her hand, then got up out of the car. Her grandfather had squeezed her hand that way the last time she saw him. Lisa shook it off and waved to the man as he shuffled into the park toward the chess tables.

• • •

In Lisa McDade's office, it's several hours later and the sun is fading over the dirty LA skyline and into the ocean. You can't see that from McDade's window. It's got an 'Eastern exposure' to a dingy brick wall next door. She's on the phone with a screaming client. So, business as usual until...

The woman that walked into Lisa's office without knocking was the kind of beauty you didn't put into a movie. She was beautiful in a way you kept away from cameras and hoarded for yourself if you were most kinds of men, and you worshiped in secret if you were most kinds of women. Lisa wasn't most kinds of anything, so instead she said goodbye, again, to a wrathful wife and offered the woman a chair.

She wore red like no one had ever told her it was dangerous for a woman in LA to be interesting. She wore red like it was her nature and she wouldn't be denied. When she spoke, her red lips were old-Hollywood perfect and even without playing for that team, Lisa couldn't pull her eyes away from the woman's mouth.

"I want to hire you to find my uncle."

Lisa rubbed her face with both hands. "Right. Can I get you some coffee? What can you tell me about your uncle?" As Lisa stood, the woman in red stopped her.

"That's fine. No need for pleasantries. I'll give you his picture and five thousand dollars cash now. Another five when you find him. Is this enough?"

Lisa's eyes narrowed as she scanned the woman, the area, then shook her head. "That's how they do things in a detective novel, sure, but you have to understand I'm not Philip Marlowe, okay? It doesn't go that way in the real world."

"The real world." She laughed, dismissively; it was beautiful and infuriating. Maybe she was from money, but she sounded like 'real world' realities were something she just never bothered herself with. Here, in Lisa's shit office in a shit part of LA, she seemed out of place and impossible. "You can find him?"

"I can try. Usually, we sign contracts, there's legal..."

"I'm not concerned with the law. Is five thousand enough?"

"It is."

"Then ten thousand will be enough to motivate you." The woman took an envelope out of her Gucci bag and dropped it on Lisa's desk. If it was in twenties, it was five grand. Easy.

"And the picture? Where's he hang around? When's the last time you saw him?"

"There's a park in Inglewood, I know he likes to meet with some other men there."

"For chess?" Lisa broke in, and the woman arched a brow.

"Yes. That's right. I don't think you need a picture, do you?"

"I guess I don't. How about names?"

"Eugene Calendar. He's about 45, stands about 5'7", but he's hunched. But you know all that too." The woman tossed off lightly, checking the red polish on her long perfect nails.

"And your name?" Lisa asked, taking the envelope. Her head swam. This was too pat, too keen. Real life didn't work like this. Real detective work was different, difficult, unglamorous.

The woman breathed out and it disturbed the light flowery perfume she wore, filling the air around Lisa with roses and gardenia. "We'll get to that when you find him."

"How will I get in touch if I find anything?" She waved away the perfume, trying to clear her head.

"I'll get in touch with you. It's alright Ms. McDade. This is exactly how this is supposed to go."

The woman in red left and Lisa got up, getting herself a drink.

• • •

Two hours later, night set in and the yellowed lights of LA came to life. Early spring or late fall, it didn't matter to LA either way. The air was wet and now tonight; a low yellow fog has rolled in and pools up in the alleys and gutters. Lisa pulls up near a recently familiar public park in Inglewood only to find cop cars and crime scene tape instead of old men playing chess past their bedtime.

In the old stories, the pulpy yarns about two-fisted detectives, a detective always has some friends on the force. Someone who will drop them clues and maybe even calls them first down to a crime scene. It didn't exactly work that way in the real world. Lisa got out of her car and approached the police tape.

“Who’s the detective on scene? Do you know?” The first three patrol guys she asked shook their heads, not knowing or not answering. Finally, someone told her it was Ramirez, and Lisa sighed. Detective Marie Ramirez and Lisa have a history. Good or bad, neither of them was sure.

As she was busy trying to get the boys in blue to send along a message that Lisa maybe had some information, Ramirez approached with a plastic baggie hanging in her hand.

“You’ve got information for me, McDade? Give.”

Lisa rubbed her face. As an older respectable professional police officer, Ramirez didn’t tend to talk like that, so it was serious or the perfume from earlier was still messing with Lisa’s head.

“Nice to see you too. Any chance you tell me what’s going on here? I came down here to check something out for a client....”

“That explains that.” Ramirez handled the bag out of her fingers easily so Lisa could see, yeah, her card, with a bloody fingerprint on it in the evidence bag.

“I gave a card out like that to an older man today; he looked like he was in trouble. Maybe 45, but bent with osteoporosis or some kind of spinal disorder. Nice guy, though. Maybe named Eugene?” Lisa gave a little to get a little, but Ramirez wasn’t in a sharing mood yet.

“What was he afraid of?”

“He didn’t say. Wouldn’t say. We were a few blocks over when he ran into me. I offered him a lift somewhere. He picked this park. I guess he never left?”

Ramirez handed off the evidence bag to another detective and nodded, stepping past the police line to walk with Lisa a bit.

“I can’t say anything specific at this point,” Ramirez said plainly.

“Alright.” Lisa nodded, understanding. “I’ll buy you a cup of coffee down this way. If you need me to come down the station later to make a statement, I will. But later?”

Ramirez nodded and they walked slowly toward a corner bodega.

“Nothing official, sure. Can we talk theory then?”

Ramirez shrugged.

“Let’s say there was a dead old man, a real sad thing, sure, but under what circumstances would a handful of detectives and Do Not Cross tape show up where that old man died?”

Ramirez thought about that. “Well. Let’s say the old man clearly died of six or so bullet wounds to the chest and head. Large caliber. Like an old school gangland hit, only today and in a part of town where someone should have seen something. Inglewood isn’t the nicest place, but plenty of locals give a shit about that park being safe. They put a lot of work into it. It’s a real shame this had to happen there.”

As they talked, a long black car with government plates slowly drove past them toward the crime scene. Federal government plates.

“FBI?” Lisa asked.

“Now that I really can’t tell you,” Ramirez said following the same car with her eyes.

“Can’t or won’t.”

“Can’t. I have no idea why a Fed would be coming down to a sad little scene like this.” She glanced the way to the scene. “You can bring me a coffee tomorrow when you come down to the station to give me your statement. Including what you’ve got on your client.”

“I’ve got nothing on my client. Yet. Let’s call it the day after tomorrow when I can give you more about both?”

“Clock’s ticking McDade. Don’t louse this up.” Ramirez warned gently before jogging back to the park.

• • •

Another two hours later and we find Lisa back in her rent-controlled apartment, inherited years ago from a maiden aunt. It’s a nice place, but old and drafty, and on nights like this, it seems like the fog would creep in at any moment.

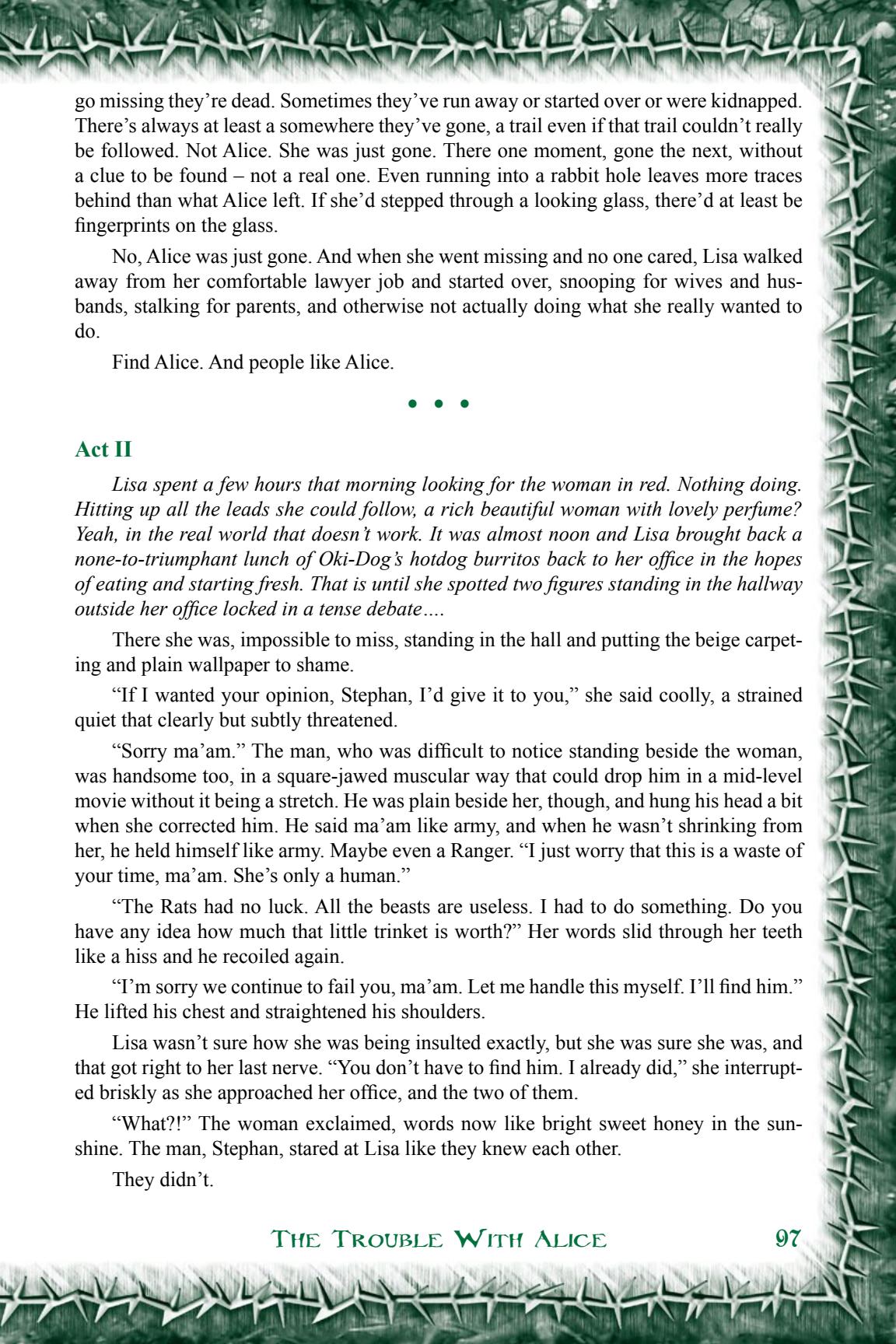
Lisa laid on the futon, somewhere between a couch and a bed, and shitty at both jobs. She was the sort used to writing notes, complicated journals of her day's activities. For legal purposes, for billing clients, and for her own sanity. Once she wrote down the terrible things she saw that people did to each other over money and jealousy, she could forget about it until she had to look it up again. She wrote down the sad stories of spousal abuse and theft and greed into a notebook with dates, locking the memories in ink on the page to both preserve those stories and exorcise them. It kept her from getting too cynical. Too hateful. She hadn't gotten into this business because she hated people and thought the worst of them. The opposite, really, and she was sure she wasn't going to end up the kind of heartless slime that held on to this job too long. Barely better than bounty hunters. Not her. She was doing it for the right reasons. That's what she told herself.

But tonight, she didn't know what to put down on the page. What to exorcise away. She wrote down the facts, as she knew them, in bullet points. It looked like the notes on Dashiell Hammett's cocktail napkin.

**Dead old man — Eugene Calendar. Scared/being chased. By the niece? Maybe.*

**Woman in Red — Eugene's 'niece'. Has money. Didn't give a name = famous?*

She closed the notebook and tossed it on an Ikea end-table she'd paid about twenty bucks for, give or take. It looked like it. So did the rest of the place. Cheap but trying. That was Lisa all over. She got up from the futon and in doing so, stood up face to face with her sister Alice. Well, the picture of Alice from five years back she hung up on the wall in the nicest frame she could afford. Alice, a candid shot, smiling and pushing hair behind her ear, looking perfect and confident and happy. Alice was gone, though, and this was probably the last photo anyone ever took of her. Around the photo, taped to the wall, were notes, maps, a few police statements, Lisa's whole case. Everything she knew about her sister's disappearance as decoration on her apartment wall, so it was the last thing she saw when she passed out on that back-breaking futon, and the first thing she'd see when she woke up aching. Decoration because it was all a dead end. Sometimes when women



go missing they're dead. Sometimes they've run away or started over or were kidnapped. There's always at least a somewhere they've gone, a trail even if that trail couldn't really be followed. Not Alice. She was just gone. There one moment, gone the next, without a clue to be found – not a real one. Even running into a rabbit hole leaves more traces behind than what Alice left. If she'd stepped through a looking glass, there'd at least be fingerprints on the glass.

No, Alice was just gone. And when she went missing and no one cared, Lisa walked away from her comfortable lawyer job and started over, snooping for wives and husbands, stalking for parents, and otherwise not actually doing what she really wanted to do.

Find Alice. And people like Alice.

• • •

Act II

Lisa spent a few hours that morning looking for the woman in red. Nothing doing. Hitting up all the leads she could follow, a rich beautiful woman with lovely perfume? Yeah, in the real world that doesn't work. It was almost noon and Lisa brought back a none-to-triumphant lunch of Oki-Dog's hotdog burritos back to her office in the hopes of eating and starting fresh. That is until she spotted two figures standing in the hallway outside her office locked in a tense debate....

There she was, impossible to miss, standing in the hall and putting the beige carpeting and plain wallpaper to shame.

"If I wanted your opinion, Stephan, I'd give it to you," she said coolly, a strained quiet that clearly but subtly threatened.

"Sorry ma'am." The man, who was difficult to notice standing beside the woman, was handsome too, in a square-jawed muscular way that could drop him in a mid-level movie without it being a stretch. He was plain beside her, though, and hung his head a bit when she corrected him. He said ma'am like army, and when he wasn't shrinking from her, he held himself like army. Maybe even a Ranger. "I just worry that this is a waste of your time, ma'am. She's only a human."

"The Rats had no luck. All the beasts are useless. I had to do something. Do you have any idea how much that little trinket is worth?" Her words slid through her teeth like a hiss and he recoiled again.

"I'm sorry we continue to fail you, ma'am. Let me handle this myself. I'll find him." He lifted his chest and straightened his shoulders.

Lisa wasn't sure how she was being insulted exactly, but she was sure she was, and that got right to her last nerve. "You don't have to find him. I already did," she interrupted briskly as she approached her office, and the two of them.

"What?!" The woman exclaimed, words now like bright sweet honey in the sunshine. The man, Stephan, stared at Lisa like they knew each other.

They didn't.

“You should come in for some coffee,” Lisa said, unlocking the door.

“No time for pleasantries. Do you have him somewhere? Where is he?”

Lisa shook her head, irritated further by the beautiful carelessness. She tossed Stephan a glance, and he shook himself out of his stare, looking down to his shoes. “I just think you should sit down.”

“Nonsense. Tell me,” she ordered, the poised facade decaying, leaving behind a sort of spoiled brat in perfect skin.

“Fine.” Lisa breathed out hard. “He’s at the city morgue. Police found his body at that part in Inglewood you told me about. Murdered. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

The woman didn’t follow. Stephan followed Lisa inside while the woman stood in the doorway indignantly. “But what will we do if he’s dead?” She demanded, expecting someone to fill her in. Lisa wasn’t about to. “I can give you the name of the detective who’d been on the scene. She can fill you in more. I don’t have the details. And my condolences.”

“Ma’am,” Stephan said quietly, pulling his attention from Lisa back to the woman. “If you identify the body they’ll likely release his belongings to you. If he had it on him, there you are. If not, maybe this... detective? Maybe she can find where he was staying.”

“Ten grand on top of the five you already owe me for finding him,” Lisa said sitting heavily behind her desk.

The woman in red narrowed her eyes on Lisa, her lips tugged up into the start of a sneer, but she stopped herself, and reached into her bag, throwing another envelope on the desk. “Fine. Find his place. Stephan will be your point of contact.” She said it like it was a joke Lisa wasn’t in on. Then she marched out, leaving behind a swirl of perfume and little else. Thinking on it, Lisa couldn’t even recall if she was a blonde or brunette. Not the sort of detail Lisa tended to forget.

• • •

Stephan had a name and a phone number like a normal person, but before Lisa could decide on what to do next, or even ask him any questions, she got an emergency text from Ramirez calling her down to the station.

Forty-five minutes of LA traffic later, Lisa signed in as a guest and waited for Ramirez to meet her. She wore a guest badge. Everyone here was badged and identified: cops, civilians, the press, and the perps or suspects. Everything neatly ordered so that the people with the guns could easily identify who to shoot and who to probably not shoot if anything went sideways. Everyone had a place, and like layers of the stratosphere, the hierarchy was clear. As far as these things went, she was above the reporters, but not by much. The LA police department had official feelings about private investigators. They weren’t pleasant.

“The body is missing. You find out anything on the niece yet?” Ramirez said with not so much as a ‘you forgot to bring me coffee.’

Lisa stood up stiffly and shook her head. “I don’t even have a name yet. I can give you a rough description but the whole thing is weird. What do you mean the body is missing?”

“I need you to remember who is interviewing who, here,” Ramirez said tersely and Lisa sighed. “As of twenty minutes ago, the coroner can’t account for the body. This client of yours is literally the only lead anyone has got. If you’re holding back McDade, now is not the time.”

Lisa held up her hands. “I couldn’t even tell you the color of her hair, Ramirez. I’m not holding back.” Well. She could have given over Stephan’s information, but there was a reason cops didn’t trust private investigators and vice versa.

“Anyway, it’s weird and we’re getting a lot of pressure from upstairs. You help us out here, and that’s credit you can cash later. That Fed they sent down...” Ramirez shook her head and gestured to a lounge. A tall, narrow, angular man in a blackest-black suit had taken over a set of folding tables with boxes of files.

“He’s been chasing this old man for a while?” Lisa asked.

“Seems like. Only he doesn’t say why. No idea what the sad little man was guilty of. Didn’t seem like he coulda hurt a fly.”

“Maybe he wasn’t guilty of anything?”

Ramirez gave her a look and Lisa held up a defensive hand. To detectives like Ramirez, everyone was guilty of something. It was just a matter of catching them doing it.

“He want to talk to me?”

“Not yet,” Ramirez said, and Lisa could all but hear the rope holding Damocles’ sword give a little bit.

“You called me all the way down here to tell me the people at the coroner’s office lost a body? That’s not like you.”

“Nothing about this case is right,” Ramirez admitted quietly. “None of it makes sense. No one has any idea what happened. It’s like their heads were just full of fog.”

“...and perfume. You wanna try something weird?”

Ramirez shook her head but waited to listen anyway.

“Ask the security if they remember a woman in red.”

“What?”

“A woman in red; she’d’ve marched in there demanding the body and the personal belongings. Real head case, has no idea how the world works for little people like us. Rich bitch, you know the type.”

“I might have heard something about that.”

“Whenever that was happening? That’s when she had people grabbing up the body. I don’t know how, but I can promise you, she was there and she was keeping everyone busy while she had people do the job.”

“I’ll look into it. This your client?”

“Maybe. I’ll know when you hear one way or another when it happened.”

“You be careful with this one, Lisa.”

She nodded. “Thanks, Marie.”



Lisa McDade had no leads, no ideas, and every warning bell in her head told her to walk away. Now. Before it was too late. But despite that, something brought her back to the only place she had anything even close to a lead. When she arrived in Inglewood she was being followed by a long dark car with government plates. She lost him, knowing LA better than he could hope to, but only barely.

She stood outside the crime scene, clear of the police, and did the only thing she could think to do. She called up the woman's soldier boy.

“This is Stephan.” He sounded like he was driving.

“I've got information for you.”

“Tell me.” His teeth were gritted now.

“No. Meet me. I got questions that need answering.”

“I can't answer any of your questions.”

“Then I can't help you. She told me you were my point of contact.” She heard him curse, away from the phone.

“Where are you?” Before she could answer he went on. “Never mind. I already know.” And he hung up. She cursed at her phone, dialed him again, but he didn't pick up. She got a kebab from a cart. He had that long to show up or call her back.

It was almost exactly that long. She tossed away her wrapper just as he came striding up. Outside of the woman in red's radiance, he had a raw intensity of purpose that couldn't be ignored. Like the aspect of a hero carrying orphans out of a burning fire. And he was staring at her again like he had when they first met. She didn't like it.

“You know where he was staying.”

“Not yet. I need more. And I need to know what I'm actually getting involved in. There is nothing normal about any of this and I don't like it. I know you're throwing around a lot of money, but that doesn't solve all problems in the real world.”

He shrugged, unconvinced of that. “She hires talented, loyal people to do what they're best at. You seem to be best at being in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Lucky you.”

“Yeah lucky me,” she spat back. “But this is too much. There's FBI looking into this. Just who was this nice old man? Who is the woman we're working for?”

Stephan started to pace, rubbing the back of his neck. “You saw FBI? Many of them? Or just one?”

“What? Just one. Why?”

“What did he look like? Do you remember the color of his eyes?”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything? I can't remember specifics, no, he was a skinny guy in a suit. I didn't get real close. But I couldn't tell you your boss' name either, or even the fucking color of her hair, so apparently I'm suddenly lousy at my job.”

“No. It's a trick. She stole it from them.” He hesitated in his pacing. “Don't let it get to you. If he's the Fed, you just know he is, even if you can't remember any better details.”

“This is crazy.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Alice, I don’t...”

Her blood ran cold. “How...” Her eyes narrowed. “You knew my sister?”

He swallowed. “Yeah, a long time ago. Your sister, huh? Twins maybe?”

She nodded, staring daggers into him.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you more when I can. It’s just... She’s missing too. If the Fed has her, we have to find the both of them before it’s too late.”

“Now you’re telling me this? He followed me to this area. Are you sure he had something to do with the disappearance?”

“It was him. I’m going to see if I can pick up his trail. You find the old man’s place. It’s important. Life and death. Literally. You got me?”

She didn’t but he was running off to his car before she could say anything else. That was happening a lot lately.

• • •

But before our heroine could return to her car, she was confronted by a tall thin man in a narrow blackest-black suit and a cool smile on his lips...

“Ms. McDade, how nice to see you. I’d hoped to catch you. You know what they say, about criminals and the scene of the crime? I think it’s far more common among criminologists. I’ve never once met a man or woman with a mind for law and order who didn’t linger in places of unsolved mysteries. And so here you are.”

Lisa straightened up from her initial surprise and fought down an intense fight or flight reaction. As if by clockwork, she glanced past him to see that the sky was turning softly purple and orange with LA’s dusty twilight. For a minute she couldn’t remember if she was coming or going from midnight. The fog that pooled around them did nothing to ease the itch on the back of Lisa’s throat.

“I’m sorry, Agent what now?”

“Ms. McDade, I’ve looked at your record. You had a very promising career ahead of you in civil law, and when you applied in Virginia your marks were outstanding.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think I’d look menacing enough in a black suit. You wanna tell me what you want?”

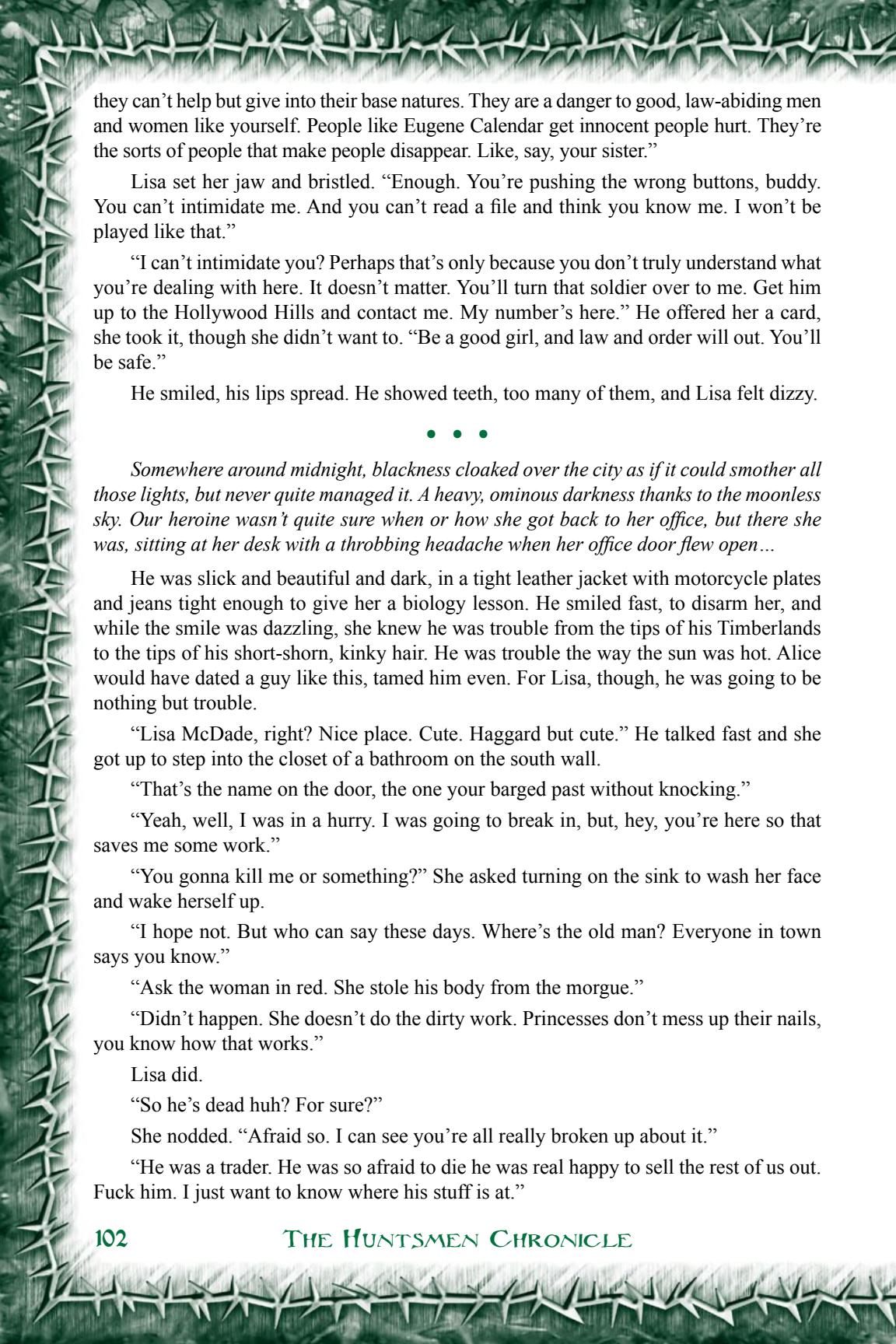
“I want what you do, I want restoration of law and order. What can you tell me about the soldier?”

She shook her head. “You don’t scare me.” She almost sounded sure. “You didn’t give me a name or show a badge. You’re not working a case. This is something personal.”

His lips curled into an annoyed grin. “That could be true.”

“Why have you been stalking that old man? What do you want with the rest of them?”

“The toymaker? An old man? You must be joking. They may look like you, normal, or normal-ish, Ms. McDade, but I think you’ll find out very soon that none of the suspects in this case are normal people. They can hide their... deviance for a while, but sooner or later



they can't help but give into their base natures. They are a danger to good, law-abiding men and women like yourself. People like Eugene Calendar get innocent people hurt. They're the sorts of people that make people disappear. Like, say, your sister."

Lisa set her jaw and bristled. "Enough. You're pushing the wrong buttons, buddy. You can't intimidate me. And you can't read a file and think you know me. I won't be played like that."

"I can't intimidate you? Perhaps that's only because you don't truly understand what you're dealing with here. It doesn't matter. You'll turn that soldier over to me. Get him up to the Hollywood Hills and contact me. My number's here." He offered her a card, she took it, though she didn't want to. "Be a good girl, and law and order will out. You'll be safe."

He smiled, his lips spread. He showed teeth, too many of them, and Lisa felt dizzy.

• • •

Somewhere around midnight, blackness cloaked over the city as if it could smother all those lights, but never quite managed it. A heavy, ominous darkness thanks to the moonless sky. Our heroine wasn't quite sure when or how she got back to her office, but there she was, sitting at her desk with a throbbing headache when her office door flew open...

He was slick and beautiful and dark, in a tight leather jacket with motorcycle plates and jeans tight enough to give her a biology lesson. He smiled fast, to disarm her, and while the smile was dazzling, she knew he was trouble from the tips of his Timberlands to the tips of his short-shorn, kinky hair. He was trouble the way the sun was hot. Alice would have dated a guy like this, tamed him even. For Lisa, though, he was going to be nothing but trouble.

"Lisa McDade, right? Nice place. Cute. Haggard but cute." He talked fast and she got up to step into the closet of a bathroom on the south wall.

"That's the name on the door, the one your barged past without knocking."

"Yeah, well, I was in a hurry. I was going to break in, but, hey, you're here so that saves me some work."

"You gonna kill me or something?" She asked turning on the sink to wash her face and wake herself up.

"I hope not. But who can say these days. Where's the old man? Everyone in town says you know."

"Ask the woman in red. She stole his body from the morgue."

"Didn't happen. She doesn't do the dirty work. Princesses don't mess up their nails, you know how that works."

Lisa did.

"So he's dead huh? For sure?"

She nodded. "Afraid so. I can see you're all really broken up about it."

"He was a trader. He was so afraid to die he was real happy to sell the rest of us out. Fuck him. I just want to know where his stuff is at."

“Wherever his body is, I imagine. Again, you wanna check with that woman. What’s her name again?”

He laughed. “Nice try. Your calendar’s on the wrong month. And your hooch is unopened. I should blow, but if you wanted to share some shots, I pretty much never turn down a few shots with a pretty lady.”

She came back out of the bathroom to find he’d opened a few of her drawers and was holding a hold-out bottle of vodka up to her. She snatched it, looked it over, still sealed, and set it down on her desk. “I’m supposed to make a joke her about a woman’s drawers, but I can’t even bring myself to do it. Get out, will ya? Before I call the cops? They’re real interested in everything I do and everyone I talk to these days. Especially the Feds.”

That got a flinch out of him, which she stored away for later analysis. “Fine, fine, I’m just saying, you find the old man’s stuff, help me find his special little trinket, and I will make it well worth your time.”

“Instead of the woman in red or Stephan or the Fed.”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll put you right on the top of the Rolodex.”

“Sure. Just remember, they’re pretty, but I get the work done. That’ll help you make your choice at the end of the day.”

He left, and she locked the door behind him. She grabbed a glass off the bathroom sink and put it down next to the bottle, glancing at the desktop calendar. It had been set to the wrong month. Spielzeughersteller was a local hand-made gift shop that handed out these little desk numbers at Christmas. It was cute this month, a little wooden top with a base that shoots it out spinning all over the place. She considered the calendar, the toy, and had a shot of the vodka.

• • •

Two hours and a few shots later, our heroine discovered two things. One, her wallet was missing, and two, somehow her vodka had been spiked. And both of those things pointed at the same source. So, drunk and drugged, Lisa McDade hits the late-night streets of LA to find a man who owed her more than a few answers.

The streetlights danced by dreamily, like giant fireflies that wouldn’t hold still. Their movement made Lisa dizzy so she kept from looking at them as best she could. Under her feet, the road was the road, but it was also fine cobblestone with silver for grout. It wasn’t real, but she couldn’t tell her brain she wasn’t seeing what it wanted to see.

Even this late at night, there were people out, though they kept to themselves and walked quickly. Just like Lisa, they hoped to go unnoticed in whatever poor choices they made in life to put them out on the streets at this hour. Most of them were normal, if shady sorts, or people in non-traditional jobs doing their best. Sometimes, though, her drug-addled mind would transpose on them this other image. A giant man, twice the size of anyone else on the street, staining the concrete under his feet with skin like stone and mud. A woman, dripping, water trailing behind her; even her clothing was just water pouring impossibly constant to clothe her. A pair of boys with fox heads. None of it was possible. But she couldn’t quite convince herself it was just the drugs.

She had only one clear idea as to where she'd find anything, the man who stole her wallet or anything else for that matter, and it was so hunch-based it felt ridiculous. And yet here she was, marching in the middle of the night to Spielzeugherrsteller Curious Gifts. The dark window and closed sign suggested the shop hadn't been opened in days. The simple, wooden, hand-painted toys in the window looked sad somehow, trapped in stillness unbefitting a toy. But she wasn't going in through the front door. She told herself the odd glowing that came from inside the shop and some of the toys was nothing but the drugs. She slid around the building looking for a secondary entrance.

A back alley and a fire escape to a second-floor apartment fit the bill, and she ascended the escape two steps at a time when she saw that the apartment door was open.

He was inside, well, sort of him. He was just as handsome but now her drug-addled brain saw him draped in shadows he couldn't shake like the night clung to him and got stuck. Only his eyes and his teeth stayed luminous through the shadows, and that's why Lisa couldn't see where he'd been shot, just smell the blood in the air.

He was on his back, breathing hard. "It's okay. I already searched the place. You can tell the Court the prize wasn't here."

She didn't ask him about details. "Where are you hurt? I'll call an ambulance."

He coughed up blood that splattered across his full lips and teeth. "Don't bother. It's too late. That's okay. Did it work?"

"What work?" She took his hand and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"The trick with the vodka. Did I open your eyes?"

"I'm tripping, is that what you mean?" she asked him, and he grinned big.

"The rest of them, they'll lie to you. You'll walk right smack into death or worse without ever knowing what was really going on. I can't stand that. I don't care what it cost me. I couldn't see another lamb slaughtered, you know? This is real. It's all really happening." He coughed again and the pain caused him to hyperventilate.

"It's okay... I'm going to call for help. You hang on a minute and you can tell me all about it."

He focused his eyes on her a minute, but only a minute. "Call whoever you want." He reached a shaking hand into his pocket and pulled out her wallet. "This is yours. Sorry. Had to get you to follow. Don't lose it again, okay? It could save your life."

• • •

By dawn, Lisa had spent several hours answering police questions. Her 'friend' known as Cameron the Rat on the street, accused of a lot, caught doing nothing, had been shot in the back at close range in the apartment. With blood on her shirt and her hands, it was time for some answers.

Lisa McDade wasn't even close to tired despite the hour. *Must have been the drugs*, she told herself. She called Stephan and he grudgingly met her outside the Bradbury Building downtown. She'd always loved that building, its lovely red bricks and wrought-iron windows commanding the attention of the whole intersection where it sat on the corner. A building meant to be a landmark from day one.

She'd thought the drugs had cleared, but as Stephan approached, she could see that was anything but the case. The creeping dawn light lit him so that his skin seemed golden, glowing, and his handsome features humbled her, making her feel guilty for every granny she didn't help across the street, but mostly, for never living up to her responsibility to find Alice. He wore army fatigues stripped to the waist, his dog tags, also gold, danced across his bare chest. Something about the pants was old-fashioned, a few wars old. It couldn't be happening. But it was.

"What is it?" he asked her, and his voice throbbed with authority.

"I, uh." She straightened up. "Nothing. Someone drugged me. I'm still feeling it a little. We don't have time for that. You find your woman?"

"Not my woman. A woman. The woman depending on who you ask. But no, no luck. I can't find the Fed if he doesn't want to be found. I'm starting to think it's hopeless."

"But you won't stop looking." It wasn't a question, she moved on. "I met the Rat."

Stephan's golden brow knit and she had to rub her eyes to remember she wasn't seeing what she thought she was. "He drug you?"

She nodded. "Then someone shot him. Close range. In the back. Someone who could sneak up on him. You figure the Fed could?"

"No, Fed's gotta announce himself. That's part of the rules. Shit. I almost liked him sometimes." He paced. "It could have been someone he'd let behind him. That's not a lot of people."

"The woman?"

"Maybe," Stephan said bitterly. "But it doesn't matter. I have to find her and help her anyway."

"None of this makes any sense."

"Not to you, no I imagine not," he said, sympathetically. "When the drug he gave you wears off, you'll be able to walk away. It'll be better that way. Safer. For you."

"Not going to happen. Two bodies land at my feet and I'm ruined with the cops in this town if I don't bring them something I can close the case with."

"That's not going to happen."

"I'll surprise you. How did you know Alice?"

She caught him as off guard as if she cold-cocked him all at once. He shook his head. "Now's not the time."

"The hell it isn't. Is she dead?"

"No," he said, bitterness stealing the command from his voice.

"Can you get to her?"

"No. And I'll carry that for the rest of my days. It's why I want you to walk away before it's too late. I can't have the weight of both of you on me."

• • •

Everywhere she went, our heroine could see traces of these oddballs. Impossible people made out of nightmares and fairy tales. LA had a lot of them. Not everyone, but enough that she couldn't get her breakfast coffee without seeing a handful sneaking into Boulevard3, a nightclub built into the old Hollywood Athletic Club during the day. But what could they be doing in a club or in the historic landmark at this time of day?

Nobody used the Athletic Club where Errol Flynn trained to swashbuckle, but the city had preserved it as a landmark, and the nightclub only took up part of the building. The rest was for events and filming. And it was into this event space that a few freaks and weirdos were sneaking unnoticed. Well, except for Lisa, who couldn't miss them. How she was seeing them wasn't real, but she had to know if it was all connected somehow. Right time, right place, right?

She went in unnoticed behind the others too busy trying to hide their own entrance to notice others might be doing likewise.

Inside it looked more than a little like a Hollywood backlot. At least to her. The main hall here was pure Meyer & Holler architecture, pure old Hollywood. Pure romance. The people? Half animals, elemental entities in sweat pants, creeping shadows in suit coats and slacks, and a few beautiful ... things... hovering around Stephan. He stood out even among them. But maybe that was because the woman wasn't around to eclipse him. A pair of bent and trembling clockwork men stood near the door consoling each other. They didn't notice her. Still, Lisa stayed put in case she needed to run.

"What are we going to do?" a voice boomed, a man with a lion's maw paced like a caged animal. "With her gone, the whole thing could fall apart."

"And Eugene, he couldn't really have betrayed us," one of the clockwork men moaned.

"The Gentry will come. We should leave. We should find another court," the shadowy types whispered. Some of them were crying, she realized now, it had been so quiet. *Just got the news about the Rat, maybe?*

Stephan shook his head, stepping away from the glittering, glimmering beauties and spoke loud and clear. "We lost the Rat. We lost Eugene. We don't know that the Woman is dead. I'm going to find her. No matter what it takes, I'm going to find her."

"And if you can't?"

"Then you're free to do whatever you think is best. I still believe in this court. I still believe in these stories. You make your own call, I have things to do." Angrily, he marched to the exit, and the crowd fell into quiet angry or terrified discussions.

Lisa made a quick exit.

• • •

Later, how much later even Lisa didn't know, she sits in her office staring at notes and notebooks scattered across her desk. Nothing fit. Or rather, everything fit too well, and it was driving Lisa up a wall.

Lisa got up from her desk with a growl. She was more or less done with this trip a dead man had sent her on, and so she holed up in her office. She'd turned off her phone

and put her laptop into a drawer at the bottom of a filing cabinet, which she then locked. The outside world would just have to stay out there.

“What do I know?” she asked herself again, turning back to look at the desk from a standing position. Like that would change something.

“An old man needed some help, I gave him a lift, he paid me for it. The same day, a strange woman came to my office asking about the old man. Meaning she knew about the encounter. But why?” She stopped and wrote down the question on a memo and stuck it to the desk.

“She offered a lot of money to find this old man, and then when she found out he was dead, accepted a request for even more money to find out where he lived. Which means she didn’t know who he really was, or what he did for a living. The gift shop wasn’t exactly famous to tourists, but plenty of people knew about it. The Fed knew Eugene was a toymaker. Even called him that. But never went right to the store. Why?” She wrote a big question mark over the name of the shop on another note and started to pace slowly.

“This woman wanted something Eugene had. Bad. She had a whole crew of people looking, even hired me, but why couldn’t she just go after him herself? It’s like there was some set of rules making her play a part instead of just doing things the way people actually operate. It’s like they’re all working out of the pages of a detective novel.”

She trailed off. “Hell. Even me. I’m fucking monologuing alone in my office over a desk full of clues!” She fumed, tossing her hands up as if Chandler himself were smirking at her from the afterlife. She swept the clues off her desk and prepared to leave the office. She’d had enough of it, of the case, of these people, of being drugged, of all of it. Maybe it was time to get out of detective work. Maybe it was time to try to start over again.

As she pondered that, she picked up her wallet to slide it into her jacket pocket. Which was when she remembered the dollar the old man had given her. She slid it out and considered it. Just a plain bill, nothing written on it. She even held it up to the light. The ink was a little weird, but she didn’t trust anything she saw, not anymore. She slid it away, dismissing it and the whole thing. She needed a vacation more than she realized.

She locked the door behind her. If she could find the woman, there was ten grand waiting for her. And maybe answers. Which were, frankly, more valuable than money.

• • •

Down Hollywood Boulevard toward the north, Lisa McDade leaves her office to go home. This time, she promised herself, she was out, and that was all there was to it until she saw a familiar glowing golden soldier leaning on a lamppost at the intersection of Las Palmas and Hollywood.

Her eyes drifted past him to the building behind, him, a spot famous if you were really into the whole detective thing. But to most people, it was just another Golden-era Hollywood office building. She breathed in and out and marched toward Stephan.

“You following me?”

“I was here when you got here, so maybe it’s the other way.” He smiled faintly, and Lisa forced herself to look away from him. She kept walking, and he fell into step beside her.

“Aren’t you busy trying to find your woman?”

“The Woman. But not really. Basically, I have to hope the Fed comes after me and I can get her back.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Sometimes duty calls for doing something crazy.”

“Where’s he going to take her? Or is he just going to kill her?”

“If he kills her, or me, it’ll be a mercy. Shitty what happened to Rat, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“Which is?”

“Where your sister went,” he said solemnly. “These things, they take people. They take them and drag them through hell and they come out different. Or they don’t come out at all.”

Lisa still didn’t buy it, but she was sure he bought it. “If I knew where to look, I’d get her back. Hell or not.” She bit her lower lip, the words had more gravity than she meant. “The bond you have with a twin, you don’t understand it. No one does. It’s like phantom limb syndrome but my whole body.”

He looked her over. “I could show you the way, but...”

“I’d make it back. With her.”

He laughed. “How are you so sure?”

“I don’t go back on promises, and I fucking swear, if I knew where she was, I’d get her back no matter what.”

Stephan stiffened. “Don’t. Don’t say anything like that to me.”

“Why not?”

“Old rules. It’s complicated. Just, be careful about swearing around me, okay?”

She shook her head, stuck her hands in her pockets. “I can get you to the Fed.”

“What?” Stephan grabbed her by the shoulder but she shrugged it off roughly.

“First, don’t put your damn hands on me, and second, you heard me just fine. I got a way to contact him. He’ll meet us. It’ll basically be me delivering you to him. Which looks sounds like a damn terrible idea.”

“Shit!” He kept his hands to himself but hurried along her side. “Make the call, this is the only chance we have. I promised to protect her, no matter what, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“No,” Lisa said, coolly.

“What?”

“Not until you promise me you’ll show me the way to get my sister back.”

Stephan recoiled. The daylight seemed to withdraw from his skin, and he became more like twilight in his shock. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I know enough. I’ll take you to the Fed, but only if you promise you’ll survive and take me to where I can find my sister.”

He hedged.

“I promise I’ll make it back.”

“That’s not exactly the way it works.”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Do we have a deal or what?”

The seasonal wind cooled. Was it darker than it should be for that time of day? Must have been a cold wind coming down from the hills that loomed just north of them.

“Fine. We have a deal.” It felt serious. Way more serious than it should have been.

• • •

Lisa made a call, and the die was cast. There was no turning back now.

“So you all have to play out a detective story every time one of these creeps shows up trying to kill you or drag you back?”

“More or less,” Stephan said quietly, the curved road of Mulholland slipped past them, Lisa didn’t spare the gas pedal as they drove. “You got it a little backward, but that’s basically it.”

“It explains a few things. Almost everything, really.” They came up on the spot, and Lisa climbed out. “I hate the Hills,” she said tersely.

“Why? They’re beautiful. There’s no view like it anywhere else.”

“Yeah, that’s it exactly. It’s beautiful. Every time I’m up here it reminds me how ugly the city can be.”

The two of them were quiet there together, as the last of the light drained away from the purpling sky. Another twilight. Another liminal time. Lisa turned as the long black car pulled up, and Stephan readied himself to slug it out. He was crazy, but so was all of this.

The Woman stepped out of the car first, shivering, the beauty dampened by fear or something darker. “He’s got a gun on me,” she warned as Stephan started to rush to her. “The same gun that got the Rat and Eugene,” she added, glancing to Lisa. “You’re better than any of us expected.”

“I was just in the right place at the right time,” she answered, sighing. She put a hand on Stephan’s arm, at least she meant to, but a bitter wind passed the three of them, kicking up the Woman’s red dress and forcing Lisa to pull her coat closed.

There was no interval between when the Fed opened his car door and when he was standing next to the Woman with a gun in her ribs. No window to make a move. He was just too fast.

But also, he was bleeding. Badly. The blood that pooled along his white shirt told her it was a gut shot. A painful one. But the Fed wasn’t giving up just yet.

“I guess it’s pointless to tell you that you need to get to a hospital.”

He nodded. “A hospital can’t help me now. But that’s not going to stop me from doing,” he coughed, “my job.”

“But you gotta play by the story’s rules, right?”

He nodded.

“Fuck this, I’m going to kill him.” Stephan started toward the Fed, but that gun reminded him when a shot landed in the dirt near his foot.

“You won’t avenge your friends by pounding me into the dirt, soldier-boy.”

Stephan spat at the ground.

“He’s right,” Lisa said grimly, and all three of them turned to look at her. “You said it yourself, he’s here to drag you all back to hell. Killing you was too easy. That gun isn’t his.”

Stephan rubbed his neck. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t listen to her Stephan! What the hell does she know? She’s just a human!” The Woman cried, her voice a wave of pathos.

“Maybe, but I’m also the detective in this convoluted story.” Lisa tossed back. “These are your rules, not mine. Deny all you want, but it was all there from step one. You wanted something, but not your ‘uncle.’ You didn’t give spit that the old man died. Why? Because he was a trader and you knew it. The second this asshole showed up,” she motioned to the Fed, “he sold all of you out. Am I right?”

The Fed nodded. “I granted him a certain immunity for giving me the names of greater deviants.”

“The trinket you were after? That Eugene had? It... It came from him?” Stephan gasped.

“Do you have any idea how much that thing is worth?” The Woman hissed, her mask failing her again, revealing the lizard, metaphorically, behind the beautiful face. “It’s life or death. If I had it right now.... You know where it is, don’t you?” She started to take a step toward Lisa, but the Fed stopped her.

“Let her talk. That’s her right.” He was wavering on his feet, but they were all sure he could still shoot to kill.

“You killed Eugene when you realized he had given the trinket away. But you couldn’t have your friends all finger you, so you hired a detective to make it look like you didn’t know what was up, and I could find that trinket for you in the meanwhile.”

“So what if I did? The old man endangered all of us. I was protecting the Court.”

“What about Rat?” Stephan asked, the betrayal crystal clear in the quiver of his voice.

“Greed,” Lisa said. “He was about to find the trinket, or so she thought, so she shot him. She had no idea how close she was, either. Or she’d be really pissed right now.” Lisa took out her wallet and took a dollar bill out, all eyes fell on it.

“That’s it? You killed Rat over that?”

“That and so much more,” she hissed. “Give it to me, you stupid woman. Give it to me now, and all the money I can manage, it’s yours. It’s life or death. Give it to me!”

Lisa looked at the bill and lowered it, sighing. “I don’t think that’s a...” She was interrupted by the violence of a gunshot. She followed the trajectory from the Woman’s forehead to the smoking barrel of a gun in Stephan’s hand. “There. I saved you having to make the right choice.” He lowered the gun.



The Fed laughed. "That seems about right. Couldn't let me drag her back to the Gentry, but couldn't have her getting away with it. You creatures are so," he coughed hard, "predictable." He took a step toward Stephan then landed on his knees, gagging. "Looks like it's a trip back for just one." He reached for Stephan anyway, who stepped back. The Fed collapsed to the ground. Live, whipping vines wrapped in old movie film burst out of the ground around him, dragging the Fed into the ground. The man screamed. The man screamed terribly. The agony wasn't human. The Fed had never really been a man to begin with.

• • •

Dawn reached, rosy, up along the hills, lighting the sky gold and pink. They'd spent the night sitting on the hood of the car saying very little. Our heroine had one final choice to make. The hardest of them yet. The weather warmed as dawn approached, and fog drifted across the country road despite how high up they were. Somewhere along the way, she gave him an old man's ill-gotten dollar bill, and they had kissed when the night was quiet enough. But that was hours ago.

"So you're the bad guy here, really," she said to him. The Hollywood Hills stretched out below them.

"Looks like." He said after a long time quiet.

"She shot him? Before he got the gun away from her?"

"That would be brave, but I don't think so. She was never much of a shot, that's why it took her seven with Eugene."

"So who shot him?"

"Maybe no one. His time just ran out. It just fit the story."

Lisa nodded, understanding in her gut without really understanding in her brain. "What do I do now?"

"If I was you?" he said, turning to look her in the eyes, unflinching and painful in their honesty. "I'd walk away, let myself forget. Go back to a normal life..."

"...without you," she interrupted him. "Without the truth."

He looked away, the balmy breeze that blew past made the fog dance a little.

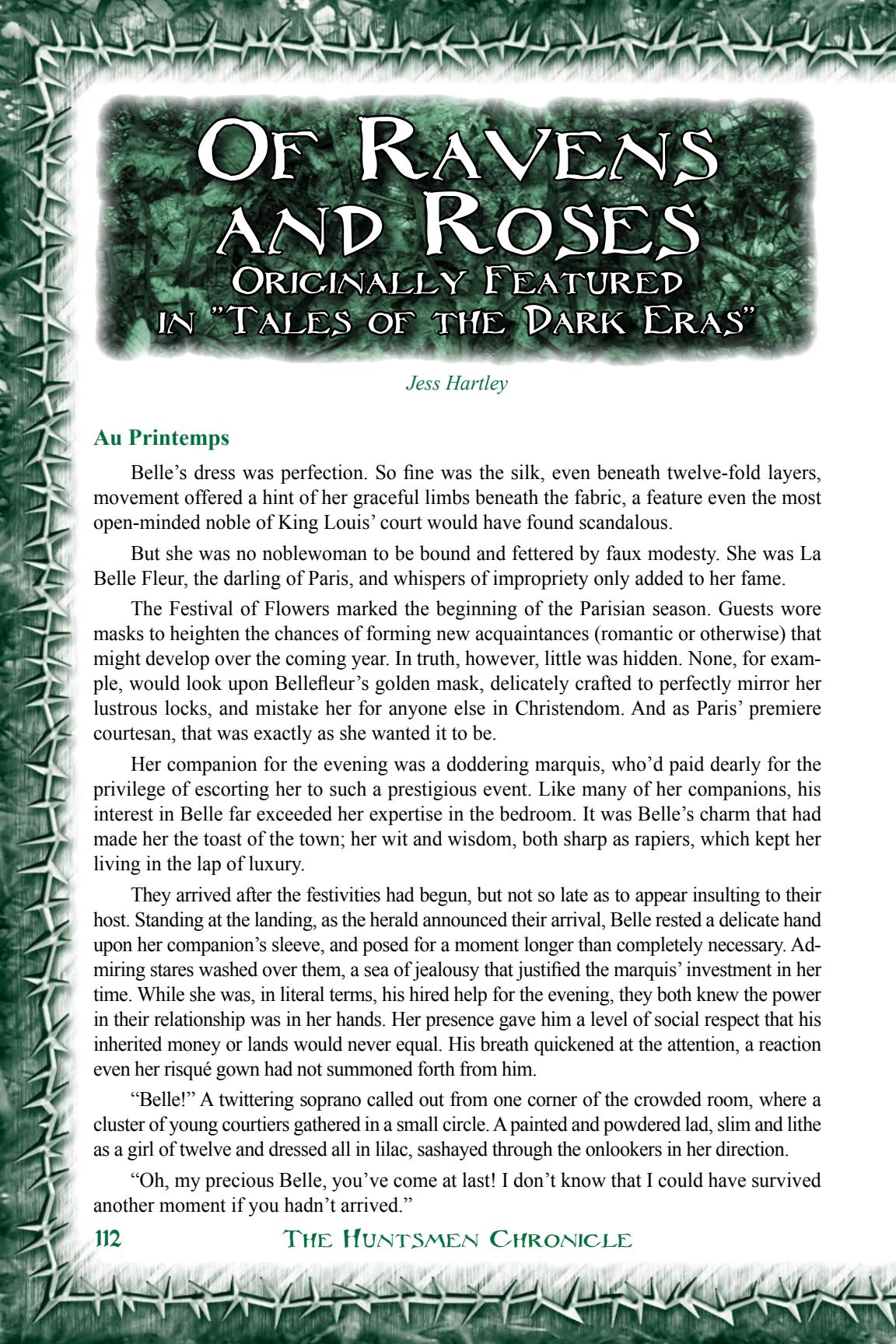
She looked back down to the rolling hills but couldn't see LA anymore. The brush and grown up, grown twisted, grown terrible. It filled with menace. She took a step toward it. He put a hand on her shoulder but she brushed it away. "I'm going in with my eyes open. Almost nobody does, right? Hell. I have to find her in there."

"You might not make it out. You won't be you anymore when you leave."

She shook her head. He sounded so far away though she'd only taken a step. "I'll get out, I have to see you again. I made a promise." She didn't have anything to say about the other part.

"I'll wait for you," he shouted after her.

"You better." The brambles gave way to concrete and broken promises, looming and perilous set pieces from old movies. And metal. A lot of metal. She couldn't see him anymore, and ahead, well, who knew.



OF RAVENS AND ROSES

ORIGINALLY FEATURED
IN "TALES OF THE DARK ERAS"

Jess Hartley

Au Printemps

Belle's dress was perfection. So fine was the silk, even beneath twelve-fold layers, movement offered a hint of her graceful limbs beneath the fabric, a feature even the most open-minded noble of King Louis' court would have found scandalous.

But she was no noblewoman to be bound and fettered by faux modesty. She was La Belle Fleur, the darling of Paris, and whispers of impropriety only added to her fame.

The Festival of Flowers marked the beginning of the Parisian season. Guests wore masks to heighten the chances of forming new acquaintances (romantic or otherwise) that might develop over the coming year. In truth, however, little was hidden. None, for example, would look upon Bellefleur's golden mask, delicately crafted to perfectly mirror her lustrous locks, and mistake her for anyone else in Christendom. And as Paris' premiere courtesan, that was exactly as she wanted it to be.

Her companion for the evening was a doddering marquis, who'd paid dearly for the privilege of escorting her to such a prestigious event. Like many of her companions, his interest in Belle far exceeded her expertise in the bedroom. It was Belle's charm that had made her the toast of the town; her wit and wisdom, both sharp as rapiers, which kept her living in the lap of luxury.

They arrived after the festivities had begun, but not so late as to appear insulting to their host. Standing at the landing, as the herald announced their arrival, Belle rested a delicate hand upon her companion's sleeve, and posed for a moment longer than completely necessary. Admiring stares washed over them, a sea of jealousy that justified the marquis' investment in her time. While she was, in literal terms, his hired help for the evening, they both knew the power in their relationship was in her hands. Her presence gave him a level of social respect that his inherited money or lands would never equal. His breath quickened at the attention, a reaction even her risqué gown had not summoned forth from him.

"Belle!" A twittering soprano called out from one corner of the crowded room, where a cluster of young courtiers gathered in a small circle. A painted and powdered lad, slim and lithe as a girl of twelve and dressed all in lilac, sashayed through the onlookers in her direction.

"Oh, my precious Belle, you've come at last! I don't know that I could have survived another moment if you hadn't arrived."

The fop dropped into the most elaborate of bows, so low that his powdered wig practically swept the floor before the newly arrived couple. He remained, doubled over and yet somehow making the gesture look elegant, until Belle began introductions.

“My Lord, may I present Etienne Bonheur, a... charming... young man of my acquaintance. Etienne? Lord Charles, Marquis d’Albert. My companion for the evening.”

Etienne rose with the grace of a ballerina. “Enchanté, Marquis d’Albert, truly an honor...” He turned to Belle, clutching her hand. “Please, my darling, you must come with me.”

Bellefleur turned to the marquis, and leaned in to brand his cheek with her rose-tinted kiss. He reached up, almost touching the place where her lips had colored his skin, then pulled his portly hand away so as to not mar her mark.

“Forgive me, my dear? I won’t be but a moment,” she lied, knowing her companion expected nothing less.

Etienne dropped another courtly bow to the marquis. “You don’t mind, do you, m’lord? I swear I wouldn’t if it weren’t a matter of life or death...” As they slipped away, Etienne continued under his breath. “Or boredom, which, as I’m sure you’ll agree, is by far a worse fate.”

Belle allowed Etienne to lead her through the party, swirling her though a progression of dancers at the center of the ballroom, before hopping out of the intertwining array of couples on the far side of the room. Etienne snatched a pair of champagne flutes from the tray of a liveried servant, handing one to Bellefleur before escorting her to the next room.

A flock of brightly hued courtiers had nested together here, their pageantry only dulled by a single, silent, silver-haired man in a dove grey mask. Their attention focused on a young woman at the center of the circle wearing a mask of yellow feathers crafted in the guise of a goldfinch.

The finch-woman squared her shoulders and gestured broadly making an oversized sign of the cross in front of her.

The rest of the circle began making guesses as to who the woman was pretending to be.

“Father Michael?” A crimson-gowned girl in a demon-mask offered, naming one of the nearby church’s religious leaders.

Her companion, a stalwart youth all in white, with an angelic mask and halo laughed. “It couldn’t be Father Michael — she isn’t drinking the communion wine!”

In response, the pantomiming woman shook her head, and stepped forward, changing her posture as if to represent a new person. She held both hands with fingers splayed towards the ceiling over her head, her palms a few inches apart. She lowered her hands, fingers still pointed upward, onto her hair like a hat.

“A crown! Is it the King?” A twittering of nervous laughs emerged from the group. Mocking a local priest was one thing, but to mimic royalty was touchy business, even among friends.

The goldfinch-woman smiled and nodded, then stepped back into her original place and squared her shoulders again. She made another cross in front of her, and then mimed reaching forward as if taking something from the now-invisible figure in front of her and pocketing it. She repeated this several times, then reached for the candelabra on the nearest side table and pretended to steal it as well.

The crowd murmured with confusion until Etienne burst out in ribald laughter. “It’s the Cardinal...and he’s robbing the King blind!”

The pantomiming woman clapped her hands, smiling, although a blush rose to her cheeks. She quickly glanced around at her companions to see if she’d ventured too far. The Cardinal was an important — but not well loved — figure in the current court. His greed and manipulation were only slightly less well known than the King’s unexplainable affection for him, which made him a dangerous (and therefore tantalizing) man to mock.

But, intoxicated on wine and each other’s company, the courtiers clapped and congratulated the goldfinch on her creativity.

“Your turn, Etienne!” The young woman in yellow kissed the air beside his cheek, her gaze flickering to Bellefleur as she did so. If she expected to find jealousy there, she was heartily disappointed. While Etienne’s companionship was amusing, to feel envy would have required that the other woman possessed something — tangible or ethereal — that Belle wanted and could not have. And that was simply not so.

Etienne strode to the center of the circle, making a bold play of considering his topic. By tradition, the guessing game’s subject had to be someone well known enough for even the newest of courtiers to recognize them. As well, it could not be someone who was participating in the competition, although other attendees of the party were fair game. While there was no real “score” to keep, accolades were given for particularly biting social commentary in the guise of emulation, and Etienne would not want to be outdone by the previous performer.

With a wink to Belle, he exclaimed “Ah! I have it!” and began his pantomime.

Etienne stepped out of the circle, pulling his arm in front of himself to obscure his features and surreptitiously watching all around him. Then he dropped his arm and stepped away, miming a driver holding the reins of a carriage as he progressed on a path that would take him in front of Etienne’s original hidden position.

Belle felt a shiver run down her spine, and her blood began pulsing audibly in her ears as she watched him play out each role — an obvious brigand, the frightened carriage driver, the pompous noblewoman within the coach.

“Robin Hood!” The guesses began, with excited voices calling out their suggestions. “A highwayman!” “A tax collector!”

Belle’s heart raced, the room’s lights swirling before her eyes. She fanned herself as the crowd around her clamored to be the first to identify Etienne’s secret persona.

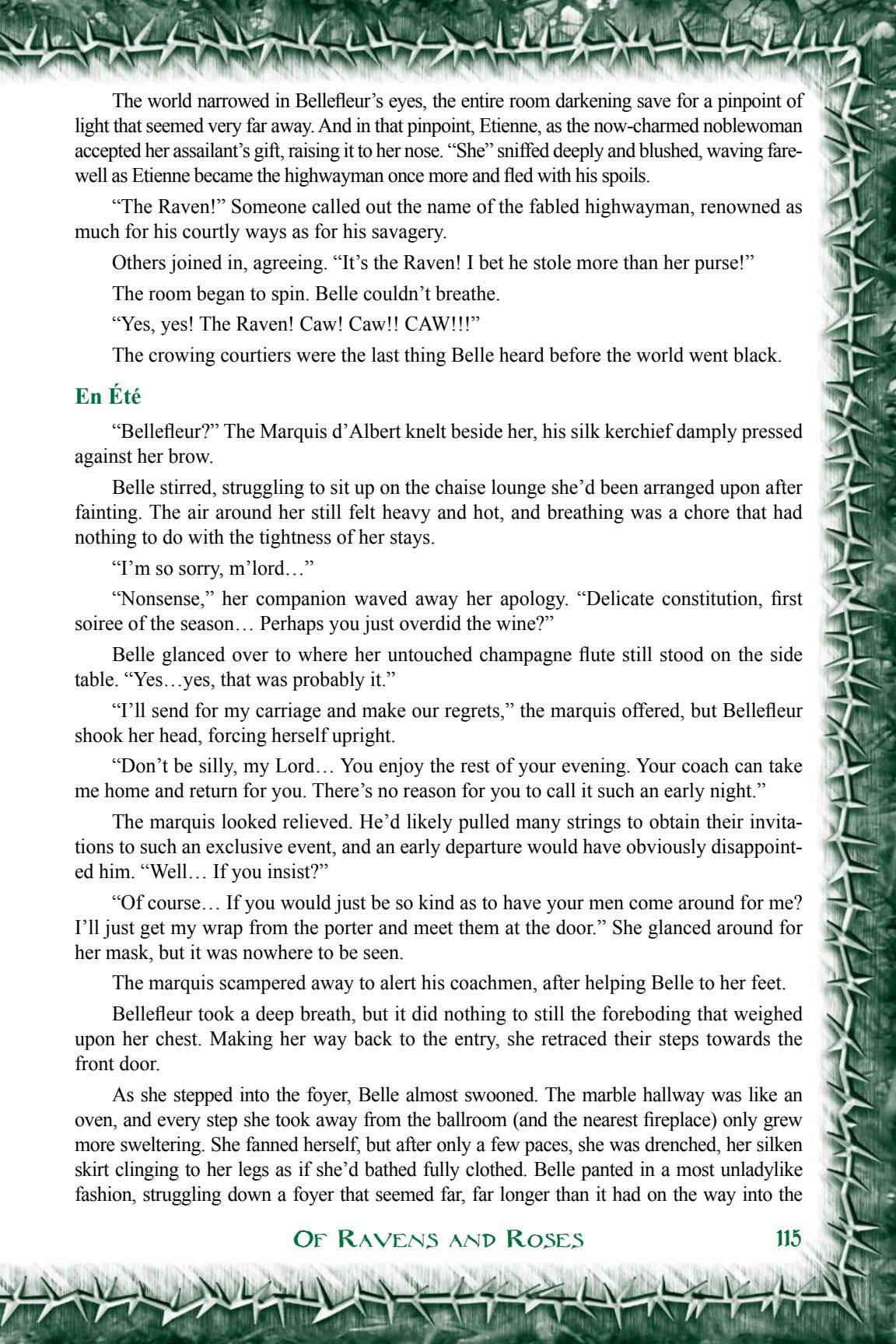
Etienne gestured with an extended thumb and forefinger mimicking a flintlock, and Belle could hear the weapon’s explosion ringing in her ears as he “shot” the carriage driver.

... no...

As he stepped into the slain servant’s role and fell to the ground, she could smell the blood and brains and burning bone from the bullet shattering his skull.

...no, please...

Switching rapidly back and forth between the roles of the highwayman and the noblewoman, Etienne first robbed his victim, then swept a courtly bow and presented “her” with a gift.



The world narrowed in Bellefleur's eyes, the entire room darkening save for a pinpoint of light that seemed very far away. And in that pinpoint, Etienne, as the now-charmed noblewoman accepted her assailant's gift, raising it to her nose. "She" sniffed deeply and blushed, waving farewell as Etienne became the highwayman once more and fled with his spoils.

"The Raven!" Someone called out the name of the fabled highwayman, renowned as much for his courtly ways as for his savagery.

Others joined in, agreeing. "It's the Raven! I bet he stole more than her purse!"

The room began to spin. Belle couldn't breathe.

"Yes, yes! The Raven! Caw! Caw!! CAW!!!"

The crowing courtiers were the last thing Belle heard before the world went black.

En Été

"Bellefleur?" The Marquis d'Albert knelt beside her, his silk kerchief damply pressed against her brow.

Belle stirred, struggling to sit up on the chaise lounge she'd been arranged upon after fainting. The air around her still felt heavy and hot, and breathing was a chore that had nothing to do with the tightness of her stays.

"I'm so sorry, m'lord..."

"Nonsense," her companion waved away her apology. "Delicate constitution, first soiree of the season... Perhaps you just overdid the wine?"

Belle glanced over to where her untouched champagne flute still stood on the side table. "Yes...yes, that was probably it."

"I'll send for my carriage and make our regrets," the marquis offered, but Bellefleur shook her head, forcing herself upright.

"Don't be silly, my Lord... You enjoy the rest of your evening. Your coach can take me home and return for you. There's no reason for you to call it such an early night."

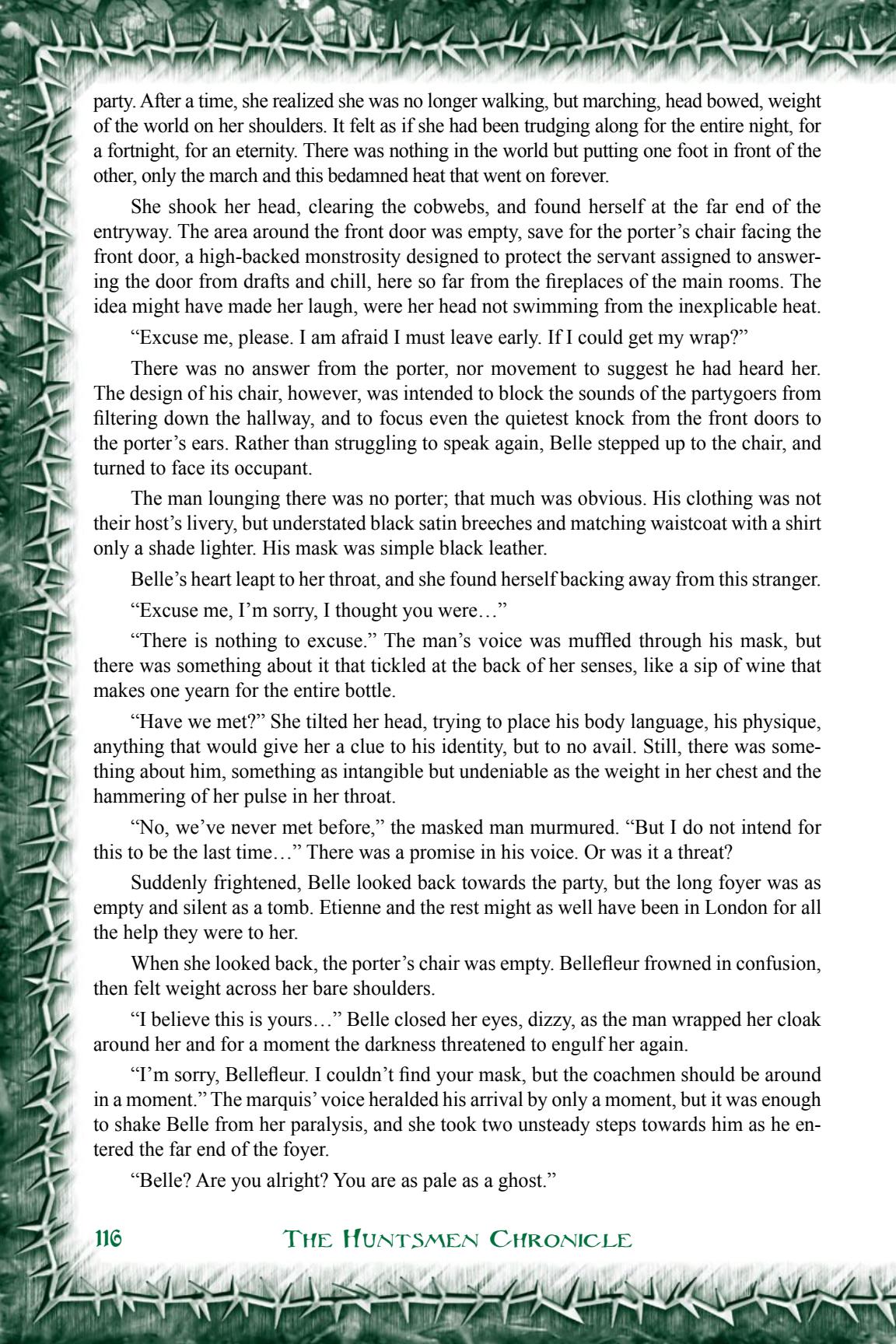
The marquis looked relieved. He'd likely pulled many strings to obtain their invitations to such an exclusive event, and an early departure would have obviously disappointed him. "Well... If you insist?"

"Of course... If you would just be so kind as to have your men come around for me? I'll just get my wrap from the porter and meet them at the door." She glanced around for her mask, but it was nowhere to be seen.

The marquis scampered away to alert his coachmen, after helping Belle to her feet.

Bellefleur took a deep breath, but it did nothing to still the foreboding that weighed upon her chest. Making her way back to the entry, she retraced their steps towards the front door.

As she stepped into the foyer, Belle almost swooned. The marble hallway was like an oven, and every step she took away from the ballroom (and the nearest fireplace) only grew more sweltering. She fanned herself, but after only a few paces, she was drenched, her silken skirt clinging to her legs as if she'd bathed fully clothed. Belle panted in a most unladylike fashion, struggling down a foyer that seemed far, far longer than it had on the way into the



party. After a time, she realized she was no longer walking, but marching, head bowed, weight of the world on her shoulders. It felt as if she had been trudging along for the entire night, for a fortnight, for an eternity. There was nothing in the world but putting one foot in front of the other, only the march and this bedamned heat that went on forever.

She shook her head, clearing the cobwebs, and found herself at the far end of the entryway. The area around the front door was empty, save for the porter's chair facing the front door, a high-backed monstrosity designed to protect the servant assigned to answering the door from drafts and chill, here so far from the fireplaces of the main rooms. The idea might have made her laugh, were her head not swimming from the inexplicable heat.

"Excuse me, please. I am afraid I must leave early. If I could get my wrap?"

There was no answer from the porter, nor movement to suggest he had heard her. The design of his chair, however, was intended to block the sounds of the partygoers from filtering down the hallway, and to focus even the quietest knock from the front doors to the porter's ears. Rather than struggling to speak again, Belle stepped up to the chair, and turned to face its occupant.

The man lounging there was no porter; that much was obvious. His clothing was not their host's livery, but understated black satin breeches and matching waistcoat with a shirt only a shade lighter. His mask was simple black leather.

Belle's heart leapt to her throat, and she found herself backing away from this stranger.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry, I thought you were..."

"There is nothing to excuse." The man's voice was muffled through his mask, but there was something about it that tickled at the back of her senses, like a sip of wine that makes one yearn for the entire bottle.

"Have we met?" She tilted her head, trying to place his body language, his physique, anything that would give her a clue to his identity, but to no avail. Still, there was something about him, something as intangible but undeniable as the weight in her chest and the hammering of her pulse in her throat.

"No, we've never met before," the masked man murmured. "But I do not intend for this to be the last time..." There was a promise in his voice. Or was it a threat?

Suddenly frightened, Belle looked back towards the party, but the long foyer was as empty and silent as a tomb. Etienne and the rest might as well have been in London for all the help they were to her.

When she looked back, the porter's chair was empty. Bellefleur frowned in confusion, then felt weight across her bare shoulders.

"I believe this is yours..." Belle closed her eyes, dizzy, as the man wrapped her cloak around her and for a moment the darkness threatened to engulf her again.

"I'm sorry, Bellefleur. I couldn't find your mask, but the coachmen should be around in a moment." The marquis' voice heralded his arrival by only a moment, but it was enough to shake Belle from her paralysis, and she took two unsteady steps towards him as he entered the far end of the foyer.

"Belle? Are you alright? You are as pale as a ghost."

Bellefleur nodded, unable to form words for a moment. “I... he...”

The marquis closed the distance between them quickly, grasping Belle’s shaking hands between his. “You poor dear, I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“I am not alone...” She turned toward the still closed door, but her masked companion was nowhere to be seen.

“I thought the porter would be here to wait with you. Where has that lazy scoundrel wandered off to?” The marquis blustered, and then opened the door and stepped out onto the front stairs seeking the host’s hired help.

Belle took a tentative breath, and then another, her chest finally filling deeply with the cool night air. She began to follow her escort, but only made it a step before pausing her in her tracks. An icy shiver ran down her spine, and for a moment, she felt the masked man’s presence behind her once more. She spun, half-expecting to find him standing there, but the foyer was empty.

She sighed, although even she could not tell whether it was with relief or disappointment. As she began to turn back to the door, however, something caught her eye.

There, resting in the porter’s chair was the golden mask she’d worn that evening. Alongside it was a single perfect paper-white rose.

En Automne

Twelve men on fiery steeds, twelve ladies on gentle mares, all dressed in finery of red and gold. Accompanied by servants, the hunting party proceeded on a gentle journey through the nearby forest.

“I spoke with Madame Lavoisier, and she swears he is a ghost. When she and her husband were robbed, the Raven disappeared from plain sight, right before their eyes!” The gaggle of young women gasped in alarm, several crossing themselves to protect against the forces of darkness.

Belle shivered, as she always did when the highwayman’s name was spoken aloud. She hadn’t been the same since the Feast of Flowers nearly a month ago, and the Raven was to blame. “Madame Lavoisier is blind as a bat, and her husband is fond of the drink,” she put forth. “They likely got lost in the fog on their way home, and were never accosted at all.”

The gossip would not be so quickly dissuaded, however. The roguish Raven had become a favorite topic of conversation among female courtiers, and it was said that some even planned journeys through dangerous parts of the countryside specifically for the purpose of attracting his attention. Belle, on the other hand, wanted nothing so much as to avoid him...a plan which she had managed only in the strictest of definitions.

“He’s nary a ghost,” lectured a red-haired daughter of a visiting noble, with a thick northern accent. “He’s one of the Good Cousins, for certain. My ma spoke of such, when I was but a child. ’Tis iron you need, to drive him away...”

A dark-haired lass on a milk-white mare chuckled in an earthy fashion. Like Belle, she was a member of the courtisane, although lower in social status and prestige. “Why in heaven’s name would you want to drive him away? If he’s as handsome as they say, I’d sacrifice my purse for one of his roses.”

Bellefleur breathed deeply, the image of white roses flashing through her mind. She replied sweetly, her voice dripping honey, but not so thickly as to mar the edge to her words. "Your 'purse', Lisette? Do you think he'd be getting fair trade for a flower? You might have to offer him change."

Lisette straightened in her sidesaddle, sniffing in indignation, but the other ten ladies tittered at Belle's jest before returning to discussing the Raven's reported charms.

Bellefleur sighed, longing to leave the conversation, but as the hostess for today's outing, niceties demanded that she remain with the hunting party en masse. She couldn't ride away, as much as she wanted to, so instead, she spurred her bay mount gently and moved up towards the knot of menfolk ahead.

"Lovely afternoon, is it not?"

The cluster of mounted gentlemen welcomed her into their midst with a flurry of greetings, each more gracious and flowery than the last. All but one, that was.

"Bedamned boring, I'd say," the young duke grumbled, scanning the woods around them. "I haven't seen so much as a squirrel all day." While his bravery had earned him great accolades on the field of battle, and his fervor in the bedroom was only matched by his generosity, Henri was easily bored, a challenge which fortunately Belle excelled in addressing.

"Perhaps a test of skill then, m'lord? If the quarry will not present itself, then perhaps we could make a game of finding it." The duke considered himself quite the talented hunter and rarely resisted the opportunity to show off his expertise.

Her companion's visage brightened, like the sun emerging from behind a thunderhead. "Indeed! Whoever tracks down the most valuable prey wins all! What do you wager, lads?"

Belle signaled the servants towards the clearing prepare for their respite, and they moved seamlessly and efficiently to set up a small pavilion, and then to aid the ladies in settling in.

Meanwhile, the men bandied about wagers, each proposing some precious item. Purse of coin were bet, as were favored hounds, a hunting hawk, and even a prized stallion. When each of the men had offered something to gamble, the duke began to lay out the terms of the competition.

Belle interrupted, speaking softly from beside her patron. "M'lord?"

"Yes, ma Belle?" Energized by the prospect of the competition, the young nobleman's spirits had noticeably lifted.

"You have not gathered all the bets," she chided softly, with an enigmatic smile.

The duke pointed to each of the men in turn and rattled off their offering. He turned back to her, tilting his head in confusion.

The corner of Belle's mouth lifted in a mischievous half-grin. "Surely, my good lord, the one who proposed the competition should be allowed to enter?"

It took a moment before her meaning set in, but when it did, the duke guffawed in glee. "You? Do you even have a weapon?"

Belle reached into a bag hanging over her saddle, and pulled forth a tiny pistol, barely longer than her hand. Around her, the men roared with laughter.

“Fair enough, you have me there. With such an impressive weapon, you surely are a contender. But...what would you offer as a wager?”

The courtesan furrowed her brow, thinking deeply. “You gentlemen have surely surpassed me in your offerings... I have not the wealth to compete with your purses. However, perhaps there is something I have to offer which might be considered valuable. A night in my companionship?”

For a moment, Belle feared she had gone too far, and insulted her current patron. The briefest of frowns marred his handsome brow for a moment, and as if in answer, a single cloud drifted across the noonday sun, casting shadow over the clearing.

“I mean, after all, my good lord,” she continued, voice as smooth as silk, “we all know who shall win the wager, do we not?” She winked coquettishly at him, then lowered her gaze with a long-practiced blush.

The duke roared in laughter. “Indeed! Indeed! And what better motivation, eh, lads? Let the wager be set!”

No sooner had the duke spoken than the sky began to darken. The ladies, sans Bellefleur, made for the protection of the pavilion, while the menfolk and their hostess mounted their horses once more. The duke shouted to be heard over the growing wind. “An hour — no more. Return here and we’ll compare our quarry! On your mark! Go!”

Lightning punctuated his shout, startling the horses into frenzy. The riders took to the woods in various directions hoping the storm might stir some game for their sport. As the thunder rumbled over them, Belle’s bay whinnied and jerked at the bit, nearly pulling the reins from Bellefleur’s hands.

A second bolt of lightning, this one striking within the clearing itself, was too much for her mare to bear. With a scream, the little bay reared up on her hind legs, then spun and headed into the forest just as the skies let loose a downpour.

Branches whipped at Belle’s face, stinging and scratching as the horse dashed through the thick underbrush. Belle dropped her pistol, forgoing the weapon to clutch at the saddle with one hand and the bay’s mane with the other, in an attempt to keep her seat. Hot summer rain drenched them both, steaming from the horse’s coat and soaking Belle to the skin.

Ahead, Belle spotted a large rock outcropping, tall enough to provide shelter for both her and the mare. She grabbed at the reins, hauling hard on the horse’s lead to slow the frightened mare and force her towards the cave.

Once within, Belle dismounted, her heart still pounding in her chest. The ground here was thickly strewn with seasons of fallen oak leaves, a carpet so deep she could not feel the stone beneath. The air here was sharp, despite the humidity, and redolent with the aroma of overripe fruit, rotted plant matter, and the coppery scent of blood.

“We meet again...” The masked man stepped out of the cave’s shadows and wrapped an arm around her waist.

Belle stifled back a scream. It wasn’t possible. He couldn’t be. How could he have...?

“An unfortunate hunt for you, my dear,” the Raven murmured. Her clothing was soaked, every single layer, but she could still feel his heat through the sodden brocade.

She pulled back. “It’s you. You cad!” She reached out to slap at him, but he caught her wrist in a steely grasp.

“You have not liked my gifts?” As it had that first night, his voice teased at her senses, affecting her in ways she could neither control nor understand.

“Gifts? I had not noticed,” she lied. How could she not have? The roses began appearing the morning after the Fête of Flowers, as mysterious as the highwayman himself. Left in her carriage. Waiting at her favorite café. Presented by street urchins as she walked through a park. She’d strained to spy him, but failed to catch even a glimpse. Only the roses remained to torment her waking hours — and her dreams.

“As you wish,” he nodded. “A gift bears no obligation to the one it is bestowed upon... not even recognition.” The Raven paused, and Belle’s eyes struggled to make out his countenance in the darkness. Although he was pressed against her, she could sense little more than his outline, not tall as the rumors had made him out, nor muscled like some Greek god. He was her height, no more, and his grasp, though strong as steel, was wiry rather than overwrought. His face was covered, and in the darkness she could barely make out the shape of the beaked mask that, along with his penchant for sparkling gems and shining jewels, had given the highwayman his name.

“However,” he went on, “I am afraid a wager is another matter, and my claim must be paid.”

Belle frowned in confusion. “Wager? I don’t understand.”

Although she could not see his face, the Raven’s smile was evident in his voice, as he tightened his grip on her waist. “I cannot imagine that any of the other hunters have captured a quarry as lovely or wild as I have.” He squeezed her so tightly her head swam, and then released her and stepped away.

Bellefleur struggled to catch her breath, and as her senses gradually returned, she stammered a response. “But how could you have... How did you know?”

The empty shadows gave no reply.

En Hiver

She returned to the clearing, only to find the pavilion destroyed in the storm, and her servants and companions returned to more hospitable surroundings. After ordering a note of regret to be sent to the young duke, Belle had settled herself by the largest fireplace in her home, wrapped in downy quilts, while her maidservants had prepared vast quantities of hot water for her bath.

She’d stayed in the tub long past nightfall. When exhaustion overcame her, her personal attendant helped her into her warmest nightclothes, a gown of ivory brocade with snow-white stockings, and then brushed the gnarls from her hair and plaited it tightly in a coronet high upon her head.

“Shall I stay?” It wasn’t uncommon for the young girl to remain in Belle’s room overnight, reading to her lady until the courtesan fell asleep, but tonight, Belle shook her head.”

“Thank you, but no...” Belle’s eyelids were heavy as stones, and it was all she could do to make her way towards her chambers while remaining upright.

As was her preference, Belle’s bedroom windows had all been opened to freshen the room and let in the night air. Moonlight spilled through the glass, illuminating a silver pathway across the room to her four-poster bed. Belle was halfway across the room before she realized that something was wrong. The crimson duvet and coverlet had been turned back, revealing pristine white sheets in anticipation of her arrival. And there, on the pillow, was a single paper-white rose.

She gasped, just as the Raven stepped forward, his shadow falling across her bed and casting the flower into darkness.

Belle inhaled, preparing to scream, just as the highwayman’s hand clapped across her mouth.

“Hush, now. No need for that. What will happen here this evening is only between you and I.”

For a long moment, they stood there eye to eye, one of his hands holding back her scream, only his mask separating them. At length, she nodded, and he slowly uncovered her mouth. When she did not attempt to make a noise, he stepped backwards away from her.

“There... That’s better.”

Belle attempted to regain her senses and take control of the situation. “I suppose you are here to collect upon your wager? I am afraid you have not found me at my best.”

The highwayman chuckled, shaking his head. “I fear, La Belle Fleur, that you mistake my intentions.”

The courtesan arched one delicate eyebrow his direction. “Truly? You show up here in my chambers, alone, while I am...en dishabille...after sending me roses for weeks without end...”

The Raven laughed, a coarse cawing guffaw that echoed throughout her bedchambers.

Belle scowled, all pretense at flirtation lost in her confusion.

“Ah, the roses. I see. Yes, you are mistaken.” He reached behind his head, fingers working nimbly at the ties of his mask. “You see, they were intended as a message. But not the one you took.”

“No?”

“No.” Backlit by the moonlight, the highwayman pulled the mask off over his head, revealing a crown of golden hair, braided in a fashion not entirely unlike Belle’s own. He tossed the beaked mask onto the bed, where it landed alongside the blossom.

“You see,” he said, in a voice no longer muffled by the mask. Belle frowned at its dulcet tones, far more feminine than they’d seemed before. The Raven shook out a mane of golden curls, and stepped into the moonlight. Belle gasped to see her own features looking back at her.

“The life you lead, it was once mine. Until I was taken, and you left in my place.” The stranger wearing Belle’s face stepped forward towards the stunned courtesan.

“And, while that life is no longer one I can return to, it rankles me to see you living it. To see someone...some *thing*...like you, wearing my face and using my name.”

Belle gasped like a fish out of water, struggling to understand the impossibility before her.

“The roses were not intended as a gesture of affection, my dear. Not at all. They were a reminder that flowers like you are easily plucked.”

The swordswoman gestured, and her blade was in her hand, shining steel flashing between the pair like a living thing.

“And once plucked...”

The rapier slashed, cutting through fabric and flesh with equal ease.

“They quickly wither and die.”

Belle did not have time to scream as ribbons of red unfurled across her. Her blood stained her nightgown, the pillows, the coverlet, crimson rivers on the snow white sheets.

In less than a heartbeat, the woman who had once been Belle wiped her blade on her black silk sleeve before returning it to her scabbard. She moved towards the window as the creature that had lived her life began to collapse into a tumble of vines and blossoms.

By the time the flowers reached the floor, the room was empty once more.



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