

the firestorm chronicle anthology



curated by
Matthew McFarland

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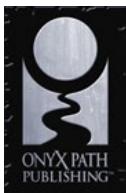
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My Father's Habit

BY JOSE R. GARCIA

I knew the scent of formaldehyde well. At two in the morning, the smell of formaldehyde would waft up through the floorboards and into my room. It came in cycles, with an intense blast of the odor every half hour or so. It would stop at sunrise when my father came out of the basement and went to the kitchen to make us breakfast.

When my father worked at the university, he would come home stinking of it. If Mom and Hannah and I didn't remind him to go wash up, he'd just sit at his desk looking over the research he had done that day, while the whole house would smell like rotting rubber gloves. When he told us that the university let him go, I saw living in a house that didn't smell like a morgue as a silver lining. I wasn't worried about it. I was sure that the crisis would blow over like everything else, and that a new normal would soon follow.

In a way, I was right.



The week after my father lost his job was rough for all of us. Companies and campuses alike were interested in a biological scientist like my dad, but they were all out of state. Hannah was already moving out to study at Duke, but I would be starting high school the next week.

We worked out a solution: until my school year ended, Mom would take more clients at her counseling practice. Dad would take care of the house while job hunting and make sure I would get to school. We hoped that Dad would already be hired somewhere by the time summer came around.

With that settled, we spent the rest of the week packing Hannah's things. Dad didn't help out as much; he was focused on taking the things he could from his campus office. His car ended up having more boxes in it than Hannah's.

The day before Hanna set out on her nine-hour drive, she and I sat in her empty room. The last of her belongings had been carried up from the basement, which was so large and deep down it might as well have been a whole other floor

to the house. The two of us took it all in: the bare walls, the wide open space of the place, and the deep impressions left in the carpet by the furniture.

“You know what I’ll miss about this house, Kyle?” she asked.

I shrugged.

She grinned and said, “Having a bathroom all to myself.”

I said, “Come on, it can’t be that bad.”

“Three people, one apartment, one shower, and we all have to be at the same place at the same time. It’s gonna suck,” she said.

“Oh no, you’ll have to actually interact with people all day,” I said. “I feel so sorry for you.”

She slapped my leg with the back of her hand. “At least I won’t have to deal with you thumping around over me,” she said.

I looked at her and smiled. “I’m amazed you didn’t pound a hole in the ceiling.”

We heard a groan outside the room, followed by the sound of a box crashing onto the floor. We went out and saw Dad in the basement living room, bent over with his hands on his knees, taking breaths. There was a large white box in front of him, taped down tight and labeled “HFU Bio Sci Dept”.

“What is this?” I asked him.

“Things from my office,” Dad answered. He straightened his back and took a deep breath. “I’m going to need your help soon,” he said to both of us. “Once I get all these boxes down here, we’ll need to get my desk.”

“Why would you want it all the way down here?” Hannah asked.

“With you moving out, I was thinking of turning this whole basement into my study,” he answered. “I’m thinking of putting books and notes here, storage in the boiler room, and some research in Hannah’s old room.”

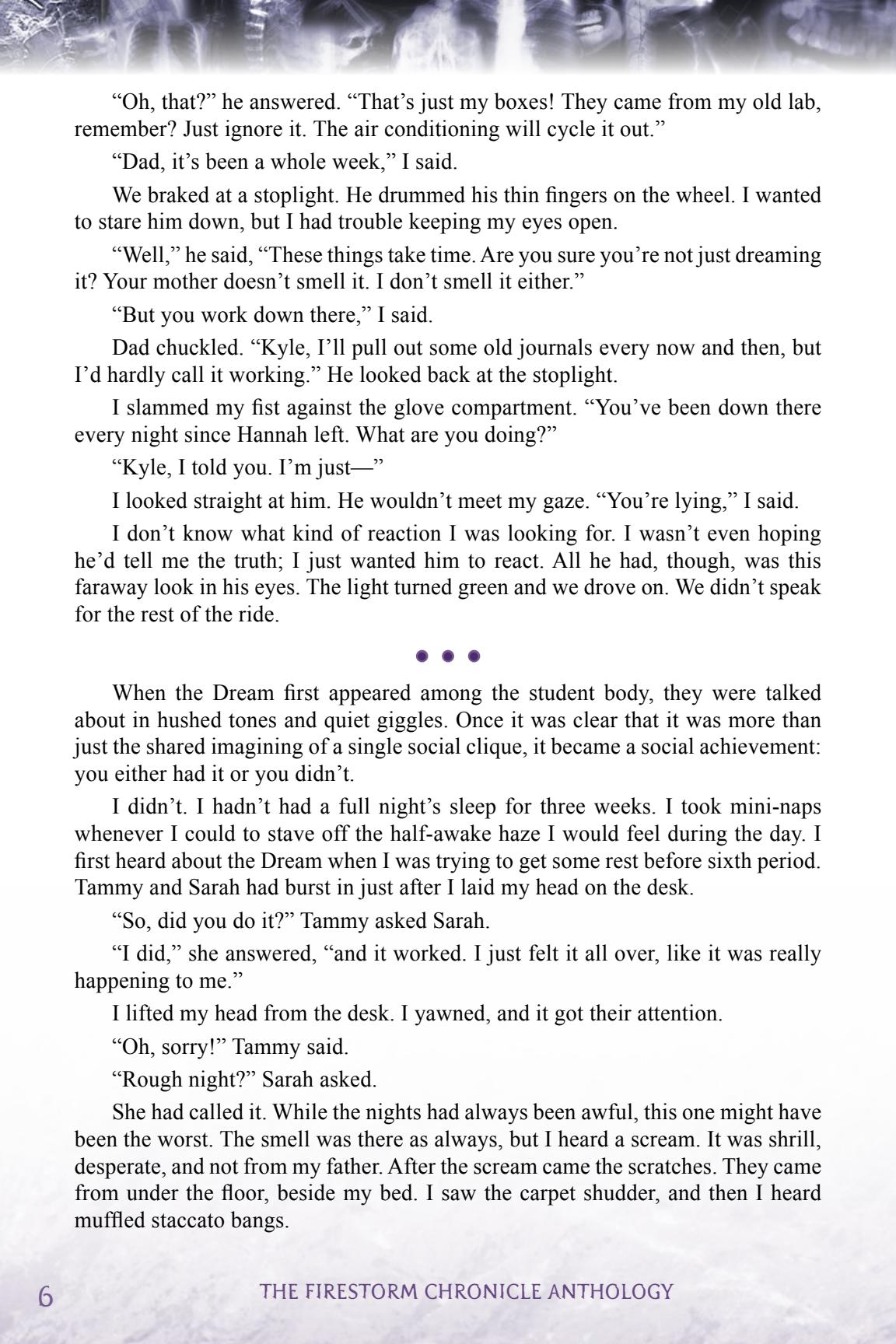
Hannah locked eyes with him and said, “I just moved out and I’m already getting replaced? Thanks, Dad.”

Dad stared at her. She broke into a smile. He blinked. Then he started laughing so hard he brushed tears off his face. The empty basement gave the sound a hollow echo. It was the last time I can remember hearing my father laugh.

• • •

I had only asked my father about the smell once: in his car, on the way to school. We were driving during a morning rainstorm, the fifth one in a row. A whole week had passed since my father began working in the basement. I hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in that same amount of time. I thought that maybe there had been a bottle of formaldehyde that had spilled downstairs, but Dad always seemed to have a job for me to do whenever I tried to look.

Earlier that morning, I had heard him coughing through the floorboards. It was just loud enough to keep me from getting back to sleep.



“Oh, that?” he answered. “That’s just my boxes! They came from my old lab, remember? Just ignore it. The air conditioning will cycle it out.”

“Dad, it’s been a whole week,” I said.

We braked at a stoplight. He drummed his thin fingers on the wheel. I wanted to stare him down, but I had trouble keeping my eyes open.

“Well,” he said, “These things take time. Are you sure you’re not just dreaming it? Your mother doesn’t smell it. I don’t smell it either.”

“But you work down there,” I said.

Dad chuckled. “Kyle, I’ll pull out some old journals every now and then, but I’d hardly call it working.” He looked back at the stoplight.

I slammed my fist against the glove compartment. “You’ve been down there every night since Hannah left. What are you doing?”

“Kyle, I told you. I’m just—”

I looked straight at him. He wouldn’t meet my gaze. “You’re lying,” I said.

I don’t know what kind of reaction I was looking for. I wasn’t even hoping he’d tell me the truth; I just wanted him to react. All he had, though, was this faraway look in his eyes. The light turned green and we drove on. We didn’t speak for the rest of the ride.

• • •

When the Dream first appeared among the student body, they were talked about in hushed tones and quiet giggles. Once it was clear that it was more than just the shared imagining of a single social clique, it became a social achievement: you either had it or you didn’t.

I didn’t. I hadn’t had a full night’s sleep for three weeks. I took mini-naps whenever I could to stave off the half-awake haze I would feel during the day. I first heard about the Dream when I was trying to get some rest before sixth period. Tammy and Sarah had burst in just after I laid my head on the desk.

“So, did you do it?” Tammy asked Sarah.

“I did,” she answered, “and it worked. I just felt it all over, like it was really happening to me.”

I lifted my head from the desk. I yawned, and it got their attention.

“Oh, sorry!” Tammy said.

“Rough night?” Sarah asked.

She had called it. While the nights had always been awful, this one might have been the worst. The smell was there as always, but I heard a scream. It was shrill, desperate, and not from my father. After the scream came the scratches. They came from under the floor, beside my bed. I saw the carpet shudder, and then I heard muffled staccato bangs.

Dad was already waiting for me when I got to the basement door. He ushered me back to bed. He shut my door and said, "I have everything under control."

I didn't know how to tell them any part of that and still seem sane, so I just nodded.

Sarah grinned. "Trying to get the Dream?"

"Dunno what that is," I said.

"Wow, really? Tammy said. "I figured everyone was trying to get it by now."

I shrugged.

Tammy said, "Tell him, Sarah."

We turned to Sarah. She looked to the door, smiled, and leaned in low.

"Ok. So. I was doing what she told me to do. I had a huge glass of water before bed and I was sleeping on my back."

Tammy looked to Sarah.

"You forgot to put sugar in the water!" she said.

Sarah said, "It worked, didn't it?"

Tammy shrugged. I propped my head on my arm to keep awake.

"So, yeah," Sarah continued, "I did most of that stuff, like she said, and then I was just in this black space all alone. And it just smells *awful*, like when we were all dissecting frogs last year, that kind of smell."

I sat up and said, "Formaldehyde."

"Yeah, that," she said. "And I think, 'That's why my chest is burning', right? The smell? No. I look down and I'm on fire!"

Tammy and Sarah shared a grin. I shivered.

"And I must have been on fire for a while, 'cause there's nothing left in my chest. I can see the flames burning through my ribs! I could feel it too! It was so weird!"

"What happened next?" I asked.

Sarah shrugged. "I burned. All my body, just *fwoof!*"

She flicked her fingers outward, as if she was brushing ash away. "Gone."

"Wow," I said. "You had the same dream, Tammy?"

"We all did," she answered. "Or at least most of us. The seniors say they have their own way of getting it. You should try it, Kyle! I wrote my method of doing it right—"

The bell rang. I never got to learn Tammy's method and I didn't want to. I had spent more than enough time dealing with that smell in my waking life. I didn't need it pouring into my dreams.



Dad hid what he did well. The chances of getting caught were low: most of the day he had no one around, as well as unfettered access to the phone, to our e-mail, and to our regular mail. Years of experience in teaching taught him how to manage his time. Though he would work day and night in the basement, he'd have breakfast ready in the mornings and dinner started in the evenings, he'd pick up the mail and do the laundry, and the house was always clean.

If any of this left him fatigued, he knew how to hide the signs. He always greeted us with a smile and he would still talk with us at dinner, on the few nights that we ate as a family. He talked at the dinner table about his old job more than he ever did when he was employed. He was willing to help us out if we needed it as long as it didn't interrupt his time in the basement.

If there was any kind of hint as to what my father was up to, besides the smell, it was the journal. He kept it with him when he was upstairs. He'd take every opportunity to write in it, no matter how small it was. I even saw him scribbling in it while cooking. We would be having burgers and he'd flip a patty over and watch it sizzle. Then he would mutter something to himself and his eyes would grow wide and he would write as fast as he could on the page before he flipped the patty over again.

I got to take a look at it once. Dad and I were on the couch. The TV was on, but we weren't watching it. He was writing in the journal and I was texting Hannah. It was raining, as always; the storm clouds had gotten so thick that sunrise and sunset were just flickers of color between pitch-black clouds. Lighting flashed and the house went dark. The thunder shook the windows.

Dad sighed and put down his journal.

"Kyle," he said, "Text your mother and tell her the power's out. I'll get the candles."

He left, and I did. Then I snatched up the journal and flipped through it. The storm made the pages hard to see, but the intermittent flashes of intense white light gave me a good sense of what I was reading.

The text was in some kind of shorthand, but the pictures hinted to what it was about. The early pages had sketches of molecules and diagrams of human tissue. I had expected these: a lot of Dad's work involved studying tissue, and before he lost his job he had been talking to Mom about the idea of human tissue being grown from "artificial biopolymers."

The later illustrations of the journal became rushed and hurried, drawn by an unsteady hand. Molecules crossed into molecules, making spirals and patterns I could only begin to guess at through the thickness of the ink. The patterns become symbols, crosses and sigils and geometric shapes I couldn't name.

Lighting flashed and I saw one of the largest drawings on the page. It was a figure in a human shape, with a flame drawn on its chest and eyes that were like suns. The symbols circled around it.

I heard footsteps coming from the kitchen. I put the book back on the couch. Dad put a scented candle on the table. He saw the journal. “I knew I forgot something,” he said. “Did you text her?”

I kept my eyes to the floor and nodded. He took the journal; I felt him glance at me.

“I’m going to go downstairs and see if everything’s fine down there. Okay?”

I nodded again. I heard him leaving the living room and step into the basement. I watched a trashcan blow out into the street as the smell of cinnamon hit my nose.

• • •

It took a month for the university to contact us. They called Mom at her practice; it was the only contact number Dad had put down when he was hired. She came home early, furious. Dad was making dinner. I was in my room, trying to block out the thunder and waves of rain hitting my window to get some sleep.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” my mother shouted from the kitchen.

I sat up. This was it—something was going to give. I couldn’t hear what Dad was saying through the wall, but I could tell he was denying whatever it was. I left my room and clung to a wall in the hallway, listening.

“The university called,” Mom said. “Ten boxes from their lab, missing. They said you ‘tampered with inventory.’ They’re going to press charges, Noah!”

“It’ll be fine. It just looks bad because I got fired—” Dad began.

“You didn’t get fired,” Mom said.

Dad went silent. I leaned over the wall. Dad couldn’t look Mom in the eye; he just stared at the soup he was making.

“They told me you quit,” she said. “The university rejected your project, so you quit.”

Dad sighed. Mom shut her eyes and took a deep breath.

That was all the admission I needed. “You made me bring them down!” I yelled.

The two of them glared at me. I was suddenly aware of the tension in my stomach and how dry my throat was.

“When Hannah was moving out,” I continued, “You brought the first box down.”

Mom stared at Dad. He just kept stirring the soup.

I looked into Mom’s eyes. “He’s doing something with them in the basement.”

Dad dropped the spoon into the pot. “Kyle.”

His tone of voice made me regret my words, but it was too late to stop now. “I’ve smelled what he’s doing and it’s been keeping me from sleeping. How about you, Mom? Had a good night’s sleep lately?” I walked towards the basement.

Dad left the stove and we both locked eyes as we approached the door. “Do not open that door,” Dad said.

I didn't respond. I stood in front of the door, and he in front of me. I reached for the doorknob and then he was on me.

My father was never a strong man, but in that moment, I felt all his strength and all his weight on me as my head slammed against the floor. I struggled against him, and every thought in my head was urging me to strike back. The screams of my mother and the furious eyes of my father stopped me from doing that. I wasn't the one who caused all this. I would not play this game.

He got off me and I stood up. I looked at the both of them. "I'm going to try to get some sleep," I said.

I went back to my room and closed the door. Lying down on my bed, I threw the covers over my head. It didn't muffle the shouting and screaming, or the slam of the front door. My face felt slick from sweat and tears. I heard a knock on my door.

"Soup's ready," Dad said. "Your mom went back to work. I don't know when she'll be back."

I went to the kitchen and ate with my father. He was done with his bowl before I even blew on my first spoonful. He got up and walked to the basement.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did you do this?"

He was silent for a moment. He seemed to be looking for some pattern in the wood grain on the basement door.

"They laughed at me," he said. He closed the basement door, and I was alone.



Mom didn't come home that night. She wasn't there in the morning either. Despite this, my dad couldn't have been in better spirits. He was singing while he cooked breakfast, and there was a great big grin on his face the whole time. Any attempts at discussion about the night before were rejected with a shake of his head, and I went to school angry and confused.

I texted Mom in-between classes. My best guess was that she had gone to spend the night at a friend's house, but that didn't ease my anxiety. She left me alone with Dad, even after the fight, and had gone silent. Friends and teachers would talk to me, but all I could think about was what would be waiting for me at home.

When I was called out of class in the middle of fifth period, I was so caught up in these fears that I hadn't heard the teacher until the third time she called my name. I walked as fast as security would allow me. I knew it was Mom. I knew she was going to pick me up and take me away from that house.

The person at the office was not either of my parents. He was tall and old, dressed in a cream suit untouched by the pouring rain outside. He sat under a dimmed fluorescent lamp, but his eyes seemed to shine as bright as the other lamps in the room. He smiled as he saw me.

“He’s here,” said the secretary, “You can leave.”

I looked at him, dumbfounded. “I don’t know this man,” I said.

The secretary didn’t look up from his computer. “Yes, you do.”

I started to protest again, but I felt a gloved hand on my shoulder. The man in the cream suit was behind me. His smile was gone. He tightened his grip. “Please, Kyle,” he said. “This is about your father.”

I sighed and picked up my things. “Fine. Let’s go.”

We ran through the parking lot in the pouring rain. We went to his car, an old sedan. The rain came down hard. Despite the large umbrella the man kept over our heads as we ran, I entered the car soaking wet. The man, just as dry as when he was inside, drove us out. I waited until we were on the road to ask questions.

“Are you from the university?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

I was afraid he would say that. That suit was too nice for any professor I knew. I looked at the dashboard. We were picking speed on the highway, but the speedometer stayed frozen at 35 miles per hour. In fact, I realized I hadn’t seen it move from that spot, even when we were parked. Nothing on the dashboard was moving, or had lit up. “So, who are you really?” I said. “Police? FBI?”

“I am someone who is concerned about your father,” he said.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not dealing with this.” I reached for the door handle and yanked it. It was locked, but I didn’t care. I kept yanking until I heard the sound of hail hitting the car roof. That was new.

“Do you have any idea what I’ve been through?” I asked the man. He didn’t answer. He turned the corner and I recognized the street. We were back on the way to my house; my neighborhood was a couple streets away.

“Please,” I said, more pleadingly than I had wanted. “I don’t where my mom is. I don’t know if she’s okay. Something’s wrong with my dad and nobody seems to care!” I lost my temper and hit the window. He didn’t react. “And I’m exhausted. I’m scared.” I tried to steady my voice. “Please. Just tell me what you know.”

The man paused, then nodded. He never looked at me. “Someone special will be born,” he said. “The birth will not be an easy one.”

The lightning was blinding and the thunder rattled my bones. The skies above had turned green and the hail fell in larger and larger chunks. Yet, as bad as the weather got, the car kept moving; debris and damage seemed to fly out of its way.

He continued. “There will be complications. Your father will not live to see him draw breath. His failures are fatal, and our special fellow will have to deal with the mess your father made.” He chuckled like he was telling a sly joke.

If he was, I didn’t get it. Who was he talking about? Was this man going to kill my father?

“He will have no family. You know how that feels, don’t you, Kyle? To be at home and feel so alone?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn’t find the words. I hated this man, who seemed so at peace with the world and could talk about me like he knew me. I hated that he only told half-truths and evaded my questions.

I hated that he was right.

We parked in my driveway. My house was the same as it ever was, just like the rest of the neighborhood, but the lightning gave it fearful shadows, and the shade of green that colored the world made it dull and lifeless. The man in the cream suit left the car and opened my door. He smiled.

“Kyle Ross,” he said, “You are needed.”

He meant it. I could see it in his eyes. I still didn’t know what he meant, I was still terrified but there was only one way it would all go away. I took a deep breath and ran to the front door. The hail might have missed the man, but it sure as hell wasn’t going to miss me. As I swung the door open and looked back, the man and the car were gone. I swore and stepped inside. Of course I was doing this alone.

I called out for my father. The hail and the wind had blown out a few of our windows, but the roar of the storm didn’t drown out his screams from down in the basement.

I grabbed a knife from the kitchen and charged down the stairs. The stench of formaldehyde was overpowering, even worse than the nightly smell in my room. I stretched the collar of my shirt above my nose and kept ahead.

The basement had changed. Books and papers littered the floor. There were vats of what looked like human tissue—the source of the smell that had haunted me for so long. The infrastructure of the house had been plundered: wires were tied into our breaker circuits, the gas from the boiler room siphoned and carried into tubes. They led to my sister’s old room, where my father lay, bleeding out on the floor.

I cried out and knelt beside him. It was like he had been ripped apart by a wild animal. His torso was nothing but mangled flesh, blood, and bone. I thought I saw him open his mouth to speak, but no words came out. The knife felt cold in my hand, but I couldn’t let it go.

I felt the tearing in my back before I heard my shirt rip. Adrenaline ran through me and I stabbed my attacker. The head with claws reeled back, bleeding a thick yellow liquid. It rallied with the rest of its swarm. They lined the walls and the ceiling, and were gathered around a single, human size and shaped figure made of plastic. The wires and tubes ended in a hole in its chest.

The swarm sized me up. Hundreds of pale body parts with fangs, claws, and glassy eyes stood still, chirping. My head spun at the sight of them and I squeezed the handle of my knife.

I stepped back and almost tripped over my father. A box of matches fell from his pocket. The creatures stopped chirping and I heard a quiet hissing instead: the

gas line into the open chest of the plastic statue was active. I took the box, keeping my eyes on as many dead, shining eyes as possible. I struck a match. They watched the flame with a hungry look and let me step to the figure.

I took one last look at my father and dropped the match into the hole. A white fire lit in its chest and the wires crackled with electricity. The creatures leapt upon the figure, and I ran. A thunderclap so loud it shook the very foundation of the house sounded, and I stopped in the middle of the stairwell.

The basement in front of me was engulfed in flame. I fell onto the stairs and looked up to see the wind sweeping away my house. The ceiling tore away to reveal the chaos outside. Branches of lightning fell upon the earth, reducing homes to ash and fire burning in spite of the rain. The stairwell, no longer connecting any part of the house, fell over.

One last earth-rattling thunderclap shook the air, and then it was done. The clouds parted to reveal the warm colors of evening. I stood up in a hole in the flat field that was now my neighborhood. The ground was perfectly level as far as the eye could see. A gentle breeze blew.

I moved and felt a hot jolt of pain in my leg. It was hard to look, but I had to know, exhausted as I was. Gripping my thigh and looking closely to check the damage, I saw a bit of rubble in front of me shift. Underneath it, I saw a white flame, and then a hand parted the debris like a drowning man reaching for a rope.

The figure shed off the rubble as if he was pulling away a blanket. He loomed over me, his body made of translucent plastic. A white flame burned in his chest; even in the early evening light, it made his eyes shine with an eerie glow. Every part of him was sculpted to perfection, an Adonis powered by flame.

He looked around, at the empty field. In the distance I heard sirens. He could hear them too. He looked to his left and saw the blood-spattered concrete and stucco that I was sure was my father's tomb. The creatures were gone. They were either burned away or buried with my father. Both fates were too good for them.

He took a long look at me, this scared bleeding kid with a knife in one hand and his leg in the other. His eyes widened and his lip quivered. I kept the knife tight in my hand. The plastic man opened his mouth and let out a sound. He furrowed his brow and looked down. Then he nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I was torn between laughing at him and cutting him apart. This man, this thing, was that all it had to say? It was the cause of my month of hell, the murderer of my father, and the reason I no longer have a home. All it could say was that it was sorry? Did it really think that an apology would make everything better?

I took a step forward to it with my knife raised and it flinched. I sneered at it and I felt glee for the first time in a long while. For something that could shrug off concrete it wasn’t so tough after all. From behind the knife, it just looked so frail. I saw the terror and regret in its glowing eyes.



That stopped me.

He really was alone. He was as scared and confused about all of this as I was, and the one person who could have explained why he was here, the one person we both needed most, was growing cold under the rubble. We were both abandoned, left with questions that would never have answers.

I dropped the knife and embraced the plastic man. I sobbed into his chest, which felt more like flesh with each passing moment. I couldn't feel the fire I knew was under his chest, and I already felt silly for thinking something like that was possible.

“It's okay,” I told him, “I'll be fine.”

I let go of the plastic man and sat on the ground. He did the same. I smiled and lay on the rubble. The moisture of the ground stung my back. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The smell of rain lingered in the air, and I couldn't think of a more wonderful scent.

I fell asleep listening to the approaching sirens.



La Familia de la Sicaria

BY PETER SCHAEFER

Two men stood outside the small corner market, surrounded by looming residential buildings. One smoked a Marlboro, the other just leaned against the wall between the market and the apartments next door. An iPod pumped music into one ear, the other earbud dangling down his chest.

“Hey, Este,” the smoker said to a young woman walking past. “You finish your college applications yet?” He spoke the accented Spanish of a first-generation American, and she replied in the same.

“Not yet,” she said. She smiled and looked away. “I’ll get them done soon, you don’t have to look out for me, Javi.”

“He don’t have to,” said the other, “But he wants to, eh?” He grinned. Javi gave him a light punch in the shoulder, and Estebana walked on around the corner, smiling.

“How long you think he’ll be?” said Javi.

“Who you talking about?” Nico looked at him with tilted head.

“Him.” Javi gestured at the residences behind them. “I’m on my second cig here, man. I don’t smoke these things for my health.”

“It’s a her, man. Don’t fuck that up to her face.”

“Una sicaria? Really?” Javi tapped his cigarette and forgot to put it back in his mouth. “Fuck.” He drew the word out.

“Don’t like that?” Nico asked.

“Weirds me out, man,” Javi said. “Like, a man I can see doing that. But a woman.” He shook his hand. “What’s she like?”

“Fuck, I don’t know man. She’s big time, only comes into town for the job. Big men send her where they need her, you know?” He pulled the other earbud out. “Saw her once last year. She has this look that freezes your soul, you know?”

He touched the cross hanging on his chest. “Scary motherfucker, that’s for sure.” Nico took a flask from his back pocket and took a drink.

Javi was quiet for a few minutes. “What’s her name?”

“Juanita.”

“Juanita what?”

A less-accented version of Mexican Spanish broke in. “Just Juanita.” She was standing in the doorway of the apartment building beside them. “Here.” She hefted a heavy-duty black trash bag, and Nico caught it reflexively. “They agreed not to bother our family any more,” she said. She smiled, and Javi tried to smile back but found that he couldn’t.

They stared as she walked off down the street. “Damn,” Javi said. “Stone cold —”

“Shut up, man,” said Nico. He whispered, “I think she can hear you.” Raising his voice, he called, “Thank you for your help, cousin!” She turned and again gave them that smile that they couldn’t quite return, and then she walked away.

“Damn,” said Javi.

“Creepy, right?” said Nico.

• • •

She was driving south on 95 when the call came. She didn’t have to look at the number to answer, “Hello, Papi.” Her voice carried a touch of shyness.

“We’re good, Juanita Bonita,” says the aged Hispanic voice on the car speakers. “You did a wonderful job today.”

“Thank you, Papi.”

“Your cousins were very impressed,” said Papi.

“They didn’t seem happy to see me,” she said.

“Your cousins don’t know you the way I do,” he said. “But they love you anyway, because you’re family.”

“I love them too, Papi.”

He paused. “Our cousins need you in Los Angeles. Someone is getting in the way of their business.”

“On my way, Papi,” she said, tapping her GPS for directions.

“You’re such a sweet girl, Juanita. Take your time. They don’t need you for a couple weeks yet. Be ready, and I’ll call you when it’s time. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Papi.”

• • •

She pulled over to see the Indian Muffler Man in wherever, Oklahoma, outside of Oklahoma City. It was all tourist trap: a small Indian “trading post” with a painted fiberglass Indian looming over it. She inspected the place from her car. Two

other vehicles sat in the lot, one a dusty, rusty old pickup with stains from where the stick-figure-family stickers had been pulled off; the other a station wagon.

The trading post was about the size of a gas station convenience store. If what Juanita could see in the windows was any indication, it was full of t-shirts, mugs, plastic tomahawks, and fake arrowheads. A sign read, "No public restrooms." The paint was peeling and someone had covered various cracks in the windows with duct tape.

The advertised Indian was in similar shape. The paint had faded in places, and the shoulders and arms were smeared with a decade's bird shit. Where the cables holding it up had been bolted to the concrete, the plates looked like they could rip free at any moment. Standing at its base, a little girl looked up at the giant figure. Juanita watched her and wondered how old she was. Children's ages confounded her. Was this girl five or six, or was she older than Juanita and as much as ten or eleven?

As Juanita watched, the trading post door opened and someone called for Kaitlyn. The girl ran inside. Juanita unbuckled her seatbelt, grabbed her baseball cap, and went in.

Bells jangled as she entered. Knick-knacks stood on and hung from rows of wireframe shelves near her. Closer to the register, cheap snacks and a freezer of cheap novelties replaced the cheap souvenirs. A bored young woman sat behind the counter, watching a small TV. One of her grandparents might have been Kiowa or Comanche or something, but only maybe.

The girl Juanita had followed touched and looked at small Indian-themed toys, next to a wall covered with to-scale full and partial replicas of the Indian Muffler Man. Her parents and an older sister wandered the nearby aisles, their eyes sliding over the offerings without interest, their hands touching this or that without any intention to pick anything up. Only the youngest seemed engaged by the opportunities in the trading post.

Juanita later wondered if she should have seen the danger early. She would console herself that her training and experiences had attuned her to a different sort of threat than that of a ceramic head falling off its wall mount. The crash of the head shattering got the room's attention, but the girl's wail held it. Almost before Juanita could blink, the girl's family was around her, touching her comfortingly, holding her close, saying kind words, and checking her for injury.

The woman behind the counter didn't move, just looked on with wide eyes. She caught Juanita's gaze and lifted her eyebrows as if to say, "What could I have done?"

Juanita looked away. She watched the family as they helped the girl to her feet and walked outside with her. Kaitlyn favored her shoulder and there were flecks of blood on her legs where ceramic shards had cut her, but Juanita thought the girl had escaped significant injury. Once the door jingled closed, Juanita walked over to the counter and pushed up the brim on her hat.

“Give them something from the freezer as an ice pack,” she said in her accented English. She knew how to sound like she wanted to pick a fight, and she used that now.

“Girl broke a souvenir,” said the woman defensively. “I ought to make them pay for it.”

Juanita gestured with her chin at the empty spot where the head had hung. “That’s about two feet out of her reach. She didn’t touch it and you know it. She’s going to have a bruise the size of Texas where that thing clipped her, and the best thing to do is ice it early. Give her something from the freezer to make it better. It’s the fair thing to do.” She put a hand on the woman’s shoulder and softened her eyes. “I know you want to be fair.”

The clerk’s face softened. “You’re right,” she said. She stood from her stool and filled a plastic bag with the Indian statue’s face printed on it with ice cream novelties. On her way out from behind the counter, she stopped by where the head had fallen. “I want to give her one of our souvenirs, too. Do you know which one she’d like?” Juanita pointed out one the girl had been playing with, and the woman thanked her and ran out the door.

Juanita watched from the door. The corner of her mouth tugged upward, then she broke into a grin as the woman gave the family the bag, and handed the souvenir to the girl, who had shifted from wailing to a quiet sob. She smoothed the smile off her face as the clerk came back and thanked Juanita, and then she smiled again watching the family.

Just watching that love from a distance, brushing past it close enough to feel the care they all feel for each other, lightened Juanita’s heart. She went back inside and bought a cold drink and one of the cheap ice creams. When she returned, the family had gone but her joy stayed with her.

Settling into her car, the memory almost made her cry. Ten minutes later, she pulled over on the side of the freeway and sobbed. She only half knew why.



After three days in Los Angeles and an affectionate phone call from Papi, a car picked her up from her Motel 6 in Chino. Once she buckled in, the two men in the front told her she’d picked a great place to stay and saved them a lot of driving. They didn’t stop talking.

Juanita let it wash over her. They didn’t seem to need any input from her to keep the conversation going, and she enjoyed feeling the camaraderie between them. She’d heard it many times. It never quite extended to her, but she enjoyed it just the same.

When they stopped outside a ranch-style home ten minutes later, the ride felt too short. She’d have liked more time in the car, but knew that the moment was over. Once, she’d asked the drivers to go around the block again, and the confusion had killed the mood.

She got out and stretched, knowing they were watching. She had a grace that people admired, and showing off for family gave her pride, so she did. The trunk popped open and the passenger came around to it.

“Anything you need?” He looked at her expectantly. She peered into the trunk. A couple compact submachine guns sat there fully assembled, in a jumble with a handful of assorted pistols. She thought she saw an AK underneath it all. “Is that a grenade?” she asked.

Her cousin nodded with a grin. “Oh, yeah. You want?”

“God, no,” she said. She didn’t move toward the trunk. “I’m good.”

“Okay,” he said. He grabbed two of the handguns and tucked them in his waistband. “Let’s go.”

“What?” she said without affect.

“Let’s take care of this.” The man bobbed like he was going to start bouncing away.

“Cousin,” she said. “I’m going in alone.”

“Are you kidding?” he said. “Papi Cid says you’re good, but we’re family! I got your back.”

“Yes,” she said. “We’re family, and I know you’ve got my back. But,” she touched his arm, “I can’t let my family get hurt. Please stay outside. I’ll call if I need any help.” Her voice carried her concern, and his posture softened.

“Okay,” he said. “Fine. I’ll watch the door.”

She smiled. Like most people, he wasn’t able to return it. “I’d like that very much.”

He walked with her to the door. “It’s everyone,” he said. “They been getting in trouble a long time.”

“They always have,” she said. She took a few breaths to focus herself, to call on her inner fire before entering. She opened her eyes on a key, held out to her in the man’s hand. There was no indication where he’d gotten it. As she took it she resolved to ask Papi later.

Inside, she pulled her pistol and looked around. The dining table to her right had been set. The plates had chips and the silverware had dings. It was a meal set for family. In front of her, she could see someone’s head resting on the arm of a couch facing off to the left. Television noises drifted from that direction, and the clangs of a kitchen came from the other.

Before anyone looked in her direction, she crept down the hallway to the left. Confirming that the master suite was empty, she stepped back out and found herself face to face with a man. As she pulled the trigger, she thought he looked like a caring father, even with the bridge of his nose blown out the back of his head.

Rather than being blown backwards like murder victims in media, the corpse maintained the momentum of the man it had been a moment before, and it fell

directly on Juanita. At this point, the screaming had started. Getting the corpse out of her way gave the others enough time to run down the opposite hall.

Juanita slapped a hand to her cheek and looked across the house. A woman in an apron was shooting wildly down the hall as children ran through a door beyond her. Juanita idly wondered if they were big enough to be teenagers.

Juanita's gun came back up in a practiced motion. It felt like something she'd done a thousand times. Perhaps she had. But the grind of a garage door motor kicked in. Instead of firing, she ran the length of the hall and slammed into the door as the mother shut it behind her. She was certain that her cousin would react to the garage door opening and put himself at risk, so she burned her energy and kicked through the door in a single motion.

First things first: the garage door control was right there, and a single press started the door closing again. Before she pulled the trigger again, though, she heard something that stopped her dead. "Papi," whispered the woman. "Papi, please."

Juanita leapt onto the car separating her from the targets as the garage door clanged down. Her gun leveled at the mother, holding a cell phone to her ear. "Who are you calling?" Juanita demanded. "Who?"

"Papi Cid," the woman said, tears on her cheeks. "I can't reach him," she cried. Her children looked terrified.

"Wait," said Juanita. "Just...wait. Don't move." Her eyes flicked around the room, seeing nothing but her thoughts. Pounding on the garage door interrupted her.

"Juanita!" Her targets looked at her. "Is everything okay in there?"

"Fine," she yelled. "Stay by the front door!" She squatted on the hood of the car and spoke quietly to the mother, gesturing with her gun for urgency. "Where's the nearest walk-in closet?" The woman looked at her like she was crazy, which made a lot of sense, Juanita reflected. "Where?" she demanded.

"Alvi's room," she said.

"Great," said Juanita. "Come with me. Now." Her tone moved them instantly. They followed her back into the house. She tried to obscure the corpse across the house while she herded them into the boy's bedroom and then into the closet. After checking to make sure it didn't have any windows, she told them to wait and shut the door on them.

She sat on the boy's bed facing the closet, holding the gun on her lap. She could hear someone crying inside. The mother? The daughter? Alvi? She didn't know. She didn't know if she cared. One part of her yearned to throw open the door and comfort them, call them cousins, swear to protect them. The other part said that her role was to march to Papi's drum. She grabbed her phone.

"Papi?" she said as soon as he answered.

“Juanita, what’s wrong? You shouldn’t call so soon.”

“I know, but,” she caught a sob. “These people, they’re family.”

“They betrayed us, Juanita. You know I love our family. They stopped loving us,” he said. “Maybe they never did.”

“So this is...” she trailed off.

“A lesson, girl, for them and for everyone in the family. Now get it done and I’ll speak to you later.” He sounded angry. Worse, he sounded disappointed. It was all Juanita could do not to cry out when he hung up. She wiped tears with the back of her arm, then she wiped away more tears.

The closet was quiet. She wondered how long she’d been sitting there. Juanita stood, holding the gun in her hand like it was a foreign object. Strange reactions started burning within her, mixtures that would race through her like a wildfire, leaving what had become part of her and searing away the rest. Something new would grow in its place. Blinking away tears and feeling more human than ever before, she saw that she’d already made a choice. She opened the closet door.

The three looked up without a sound. They were holding each other, and Juanita wondered if they’d been praying. She wondered if she was about to answer those prayers, or if she would shatter them. “Wait right here,” she said.

Jogging to the front door, she stood beside it and shouted, “Get in here!” The man ran in. She wondered that she didn’t know his name. It had always been her policy not to ask, not to know. Better if she didn’t have to disturb her cousins that way. He was looking at her; she was taking too long. “One’s holed up in the garage with a gun. That way.” She gestured, and when he took the lead she shot him in the back of the head. Even when betraying her Papi, gunplay felt as natural as blinking.

She tucked her gun under her jacket and sauntered out the front door. Another gunshot echoed through the residential neighborhood. She stepped back inside and as she shut the front door, an explosion followed. Returning to the boy’s closet, she opened the door. “Papi’s betrayed you.” Her anguish was clear in her voice. “I’m going to protect you. If you can bring yourself to trust me.” Tears ran down her face. “Please. More than anything, I want to keep you safe. Please come with me.”

They did. Again shielding them from another look at her first victim — her last victim, she decided — she led them out to the garage. “Get in,” she said. “Start the engine. Leave the driver’s seat for me.” Opening the house circuit breaker, she ripped out some fuses and jammed her thumbs in their place. Electricity arced from her wrists to the wall, from her ankles to the floor, and she shuddered until the lights died.

A moment later, the car burst through the garage door and onto the street. No one was around. She could hear sirens, but still at some distance. Papi always had the family’s back.

Now she wasn’t his family anymore.



“Cove Fort, built in 1867, is the only Latter-Day Saints fort still remaining from the 1800s, in part due....” The instructional video started over, and Juanita turned from it to look at the handful of informational graphics on the wall. She watched Alvaro and Damita argue out of the corner of her eye and tried not to listen. Instead, she looked around to make sure Marisa hadn’t wandered off.

“Mom,” he said, “I just want to go home. I’m missing school. She won’t let me call my friends. She took my phone, Mom, what am I supposed to do?”

“You know we can’t go home,” Damita said. “Juanita loves us, and she’s keeping us safe from the people who want to kill us. Just like they killed your father.”

“*She* killed Dad, and she was going to kill us, too, except for some crazy change of heart. And she still killed Dad!”

“Hush,” Damita hissed. “If they hear, we will all go to jail, and the sicarios will kill us.”

“You think anyone here speaks Spanish?” he demanded. His voice was thick with anger, but he lowered it to a whisper. “And besides, you don’t know that. What if they’re only trying to kill her? Maybe we’re human shields, you don’t know. You only think Papi Cid tried to have us killed because she said. What if he’s trying to rescue us?”

Juanita grabbed the teenager by his bicep and dragged him outside into the fort’s dusty yard. He struggled, but couldn’t budge her grip. Damita followed, and Marisa looked over from where she was examining an old cannon.

“I am the only reason you are alive now, young man,” said Juanita. “You cannot even count the number of times one of Papi’s ambushes have missed us by this much,” she held her fingers a hair’s breadth apart, “because I save you from them.” Tears formed in her eyes. “I just want to keep you safe,” she said. “You’re the only family I —”

“We’re not your family.” He pushed her as he spat the words, and surprise rocked her more than the force. “You keep talking like we’re flesh and blood, but we’re not. And you’re really not. Do you even breathe? What are you?”

“Maybe, maybe,” Juanita stuttered. “Maybe you aren’t my family. But you are a family, and I think that’s —”

“You already broke my family. You killed my dad, and you kidnapped all of us, and you’re taking us on your crazy ride and you’re probably going to kill —”

Damita’s slap rocked him. “Stop it!” cried Damita. “She’s the only one who’s helping us! Just, just, if you’d accept her the way I have —”

“Stop, Damita,” said Juanita. She was openly weeping now. Damita and Alvaro were crying too, and Marisa ran over to her brother. “I want to help you,” she said, “but obviously I can’t. I need to be alone.” She turned abruptly and walked out

of the fort. Damita caught up to her and tried to stop her and say something, but Juanita shrugged her off and kept on.

As she left them behind, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. There was no one relying on her, no one needing her, no one loving her or wanting her love. Accepting that her greatest fear was inevitable was easier than earning love from her new family.

When she returned hours later, Juanita found them by the car. The deepening twilight made a stark silhouette of the three of them in the empty parking lot, Damita sitting with Marisa on the curb and Alvaro lying on the hood of the car. Before Juanita turned the corner, she hadn't been sure whether she wanted them to be waiting for her, but joy and gratitude overwhelmed her. Her family wanted her.

She held that thought tight as she approached, and everyone stood. She hugged them in a group, ignoring their stiffness. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry. I was just...overwhelmed. I've never been so...close with a family before. I'm sorry." She smiled as warmly as she could. None of them returned it. "Let's go find a motel and get some rest. We'll all feel better after some rest."

Pulling out the keys, she let them into the car and, reminding them to buckle up for safety, got them on the road.



They were in a cheap motel five miles off of I-15 in southern Idaho when the attack came. Unusually, Juanita was sleeping when the door burst inwards, so it took her several seconds to find the gun under her pillow. Putting suppressive fire in the doorway, she shouted at the others as they woke up. "Into the bathroom! Get in the tub!" She repeated herself until they looked ready, and she stepped into the line of fire to provide cover.

Before, she had been shooting to put up a wall, and if anyone had gotten hit it was because he'd walked into it. Now was different. Her shots were precise, and each put a man down: two directly outside the room, one firing from behind a black SUV with flashing red-and-blue lights.

They dropped, but not before returning fire. For every round her pistol sent out the door, their assault rifles sent over a dozen in, missing or ricocheting off her fire-hardened flesh. Someone cried out, she thought Alvi, and then a woosh from behind her chased all thought from her head. Turning, she saw her family falling backwards, flame licking from the bathroom, flames climbing Marisa's arm.

Dropping her gun, Juanita grabbed the comforter off the nearest bed and slammed Marisa against the wall. She ignored the girl's screams and her own pain as she held the burning limb out straight and smothered it with the comforter. More bullets bounced off her skin, and with a thought she burned away her pain. Pushing her family en masse in between the two queen beds, she bellowed, "Stay down!" and swept up her gun on her way to the door.

The man behind the car had gotten back up, so she put two shots his way to keep his head down. A quick look out the door showed her two more armed men, and there had to be at least one more out back to put an incendiary in through the bathroom window. One deep breath later, she stepped out of the room.

It hurt. With her focus, each shot she took put a person on the ground, but they called a storm of lead down on her and her skin blossomed with deep bruises. A few breaths later they'd stopped firing. She put another bullet in each of their heads just to be sure.

Grabbing up one of the assault rifles, she ran to the corner of the building. After a brief listen, she turned the corner and spent the rest of the magazine ruining the face of the armed man running at her.

Taking his rifle, she took a quick look behind the building, then through the parking lot. She spotted some people peeking out through the curtains from other rooms, and ran back to her room where Damita was crying out for her.

Smoke drifted out from the doorway. The bathroom fire was a slothful lick of flame now, she guessed that the all-consuming fire just didn't find the synthetic carpeting very appetizing. On the floor between the beds, Marisa held a towel against Alvaro's body. In the dim light and smoke, the red looked almost black.

Juanita was pushing past Damita when the woman screamed, "Help him!" Looking under the makeshift compress, she reached under the bed for her pack. The assorted medical supplies she'd assembled in the past week wouldn't be much, but they'd be better than nothing. Quietly explaining what she was doing, more to distract the teenager than to inform him, she cut away his shirt and examined the wound.

"It's a through and through," she said calmly. Looking at Damita, she realized that the woman had no idea what that meant. "It's not a fatal wound. I can fix this," she said. Juanita realized that her voice contained none of her usual emotion. She wasn't sure she actually cared. "I'll fix it." She got to work.

As she cut, dabbed, wiped away, disinfected, and got to sewing, she wondered about how she felt. These people weren't really her family. She'd clung to them out of hope and some vague notion that family was a beautiful thing, that it was worth protecting, and that she would be betraying some higher principle if she had killed them. She'd loved the romance of fighting the power that wanted them dead, keeping them safe against all odds. But she didn't belong with them: they didn't want her. She needed to stop deluding herself that she could find the kind of happiness that she'd seen in them.

Her tense first aid finished, she sat back against the bed and stared straight ahead. "Okay, let's—" Damita's slap interrupted her.

"This is how you protect your family?" Tears ran down Damita's cheeks and her voice dripped with anger and fear. "We could be dead. Alvi's been shot! Marisa's been burned! These are people who rely on you. You are the *only* thing

keeping us alive.” Juanita stood and pushed past Damita until she could look out the door. Damita kept screaming. “We brought you into our family. We love you! I treat you like a sister, and the children like you were a second mother! You are one of us, but you need to keep us safe!”

Juanita let the words slide past her. She could hear a phone ringing somewhere. Ignoring Damita’s demands to know where she was going, Juanita walked to the SUV, lights still flashing, and took a phone from the cupholder. She answered it. “Hello, Papi.”

A brief pause. “Juanita Bonita? Sweet thing, what happened?” Papi Cid’s voice carried worry for her. She didn’t want it.

“I killed them all, Papi.”

Rage replaced worry. “I *will* get you, Juanita. You are *my* girl, *mine*. You *belong* to me, and I will have you! I will kill that God-damned family you betrayed me for and God help me, I will bring you home where you belong.”

Juanita looked back into the motel room. Damita, standing in the doorway, had fallen silent. “They’re not my family any more, Papi.”

“Of course they’re not, girl,” said Papi. “I’m your family, and I’m going to bring you home.”

“No,” said Juanita. “I don’t have a family. I don’t deserve a family. I’m going to be alone forever.”

“Nonsense, Juanita. You’re my family, and I will find you.”

“I’m going to kill you, Papi. You and all your family, until you let me be alone. Now leave me alone.” She threw the phone over the motel.

“What do you mean you don’t have a family?” Damita was furious and she wasn’t hiding it. “We’re your family. We’re going to stay with you and make sure you know who loves you.”

Juanita didn’t say anything, even when Damita screamed and cried at her to stay with them as Juanita collected the assault rifles, combat vests, ammunition, and everything. When the woman clung to her, Juanita peeled her off and shut her in the bathroom and barricaded her in with a dresser. Alvaro had passed out, but Marisa watched her with heavy eyes. Juanita saw anger there, but had no idea why, and she didn’t ask.

Marisa watched as Juanita drove off. Weeds grew out of the cracked parking lot as she watched, and the grey clouds overhead spun into the beginnings of a storm that would last for days.

My Body

BY EDDY WEBB

Even after a year, I didn't feel right in the body I was in. Day after day I taught myself how to pilot this ship of bone and muscle — moving, talking, lifting, writing — but it never felt natural. Occasionally there was a moment where I could pretend it was *my* body, where the simple pleasure of walking or brushing against rusty metal or smelling turpentine fumes became almost joyful. But then I looked down to my right hand, missing the tip of the index finger, and I remembered that I'm just a stowaway on someone else's damaged, broken ship.

Hari, my creator, helped some days. There was only one cracked mirror in the concrete warehouse and office building we lived in (which I was *never ever* allowed to leave). He always gave me privacy when I used the mirror. The body's hair was long and black, although it was falling out in places. Its face was gaunt and pale, and the stitches were very well done. I never felt more alone than when I looked into the body's eyes, trying to find some memory of my time before Hari made me. But there was always nothing.

Sometimes, Hari gave me tasks and chores to do, and he'd take careful notes as I did them — moving buckets of water, rolling old tires, stacking and unstacking pallets. Other times, he would give me notebooks and tell me to write down all the words he pointed out in a book. I enjoyed the reading and writing drills. As I grew more confident in my control, he told me about the Azoth, the Divine Fire that burned within me, and how I can use it to make me stronger. He always said, "Ranga, this is good for you. You were lucky your body was fresh when I made you, but you still must claim possession of it. It must become your body." That helped, too — always calling it "my body," even when it never felt like it was, when it felt like it belonged to someone else.

Soon after Hari made me, I asked him about my name. He said it was short for Chitrāngadā, who was a princess in an old story. She was a woman who fought to protect her land. She fell in love with Arjuna, another warrior, but she feared that

he would never love her, homely as she was. She asked for a boon from the god of love, and he transformed her into a beautiful woman, and Arjuna fell in love with her. But then marauders attacked their kingdom, and the villagers cried out for their strong princess to protect them. Arjuna grew distant, craving to meet this powerful woman with skills to match his own. Chitrāngadā saved her kingdom, and Arjuna fell in love with her all over again.

I showed him the hand with the missing fingertip. “If this finger was more like yours, would I be beautiful, like a human?”

He paused, and his face looked angry. “That was what I had to give up to Osiris to bring you to life.”

We didn’t talk about my name again after that night, but sometimes I wished the god of love would give me a new body as a boon. A human body. I didn’t care if it was beautiful, as long as it was mine.

There was only one bed in the warehouse, an old mattress that smelled of sweat and gasoline. When it was time to sleep, Hari told me to lie in the bed with him. He always wore his clothes and long coat when he did. The body I was in never felt cold, but I wore my clothes, too, awkwardly lying next to him until he fell asleep. Once he did, I slid away and went to the large tank of stagnant water in the back. It was large enough for the body to fit, and I would feel the caress of the water over the eyes (*my* eyes — must remember that) as I sank to the bottom. The water embraced me, and I felt safe and comfortable there. He was angry at me for that, too, every time I did it. But I kept doing it. I didn’t mean to upset Hari, but the body (*my* body) does things on its own sometimes.

One night, he told me to get my notebook for more reading and writing drills. I had forgotten where I put it, so I went from room to room looking for it. One office still had a filing cabinet and some other furniture in it. The door wouldn’t open, and I was about to give up and move on, but the body insisted. I pounded on the glass until it broke, and I climbed in to see if my notebook was in there. The cabinet didn’t have my notebook in it, but it did have a few pieces of paper and a picture. I recognized Hari’s handwriting immediately, but I didn’t know any the names of the people he was writing about — “Canopus” and “Dump Truck” and “Dollface.” I set them on the top of the cabinet and picked up the picture.

It was the body. Her hair was cleaner and her skin was darker, but it was the face I saw in the mirror, smiling at me. She was standing outside, carrying a large bag on her shoulder. The hand on the strap had all its fingers, and she stood next to a sign that said “Case Western Reserve University.” The hands I wore shook as I turned it over. On the back was written a single word: “Rachel.”

My body. My body had a life before me. I knew the body wasn’t mine, but it was different now that she was a *person* before me. I was scared, terrified that I wasn’t who I thought I was. I couldn’t think, but I felt like the body had a clearer idea of what it wanted, of going back to the life it had. Or maybe I did, and I was

too afraid to admit to myself the logic of going outside when I was *never ever* allowed to go outside. Never go outside, never talk to strangers, and always run from the police — those were the rules. I don't know which of us did it or why, but I shoved the picture into my pocket and ran out of the warehouse, into the night.



I learned so much on those first few nights alone. The city that Hari and I lived in was called "Detroit," and many of the buildings I saw looked as worn and broken as I felt. I found a pool of oily water and saw Rachel, not Ranga. The body was showing others what it was, what it wanted to be again.

Soon after breaking the rule about being outside, I ached to break the rule about talking to others. I walked for a long time before I found someone, and I walked for even longer until I found someone who was nice to me. A woman with short hair the color of deep water looked at my picture.

"You look happy in this picture," she said.

"I probably was," I said.

"Do you like Detroit?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said.

She handed the picture back. "I don't blame you. I have a cousin who went to Case. She said that Cleveland was a hell of a lot better than here, if you can believe that."

I asked if I could touch her hair. She swore at me, and I ran away.

From there I walked to the highway. The cars bothered me at first, rushing by at high speeds with loud engines. For an hour the body hid in some trees by the road, just watching the cars go by, while I screamed that we needed to go to Cleveland. Slowly, though, the sound became soothing, like the babble of a stream, and I was able to walk along the highway as they rushed by. I imagined everyone that drove by was going home.

A few people stopped next to me, and I told them I was a student from Case needing a ride. I showed them my picture, and they all told me I used to have such a nice smile before buying me some fast food and dropping me off a few exits down the road. One truck driver offered to take me all the way to Cleveland if I shared her bed in the back of her trailer. I agreed, and I laid down as I did with Hari, with all my clothes on. She became angry and left me a few miles in the opposite direction of where she picked me up.

Every few days I slept on benches or in small patches of grass behind gas stations. Once I was woken by a police officer. I wanted to talk to him, too, but he threatened to take me away for a very long time. After that, I ran whenever I saw a police car. Once in a while a person would give me money, and I would ride a bus as far as I could until I became uncomfortable with the stares from the other passengers. Once I slept in a park in Toledo, right near a rushing river. I thought

I felt something moving in the water a couple of times, but when I looked, there was nothing there.

Eventually, I looked through a window smeared by handprints and saw a sign welcoming me to Cleveland, Ohio, the “Birthplace of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” I could smell the lake water even from here. Case Western Reserve University was easy to find, but it was a large area, with thousands of people teeming through all the time. They were clean and young and *human*, and to me they all looked beautiful. When they noticed me, though, I got confused or suspicious stares, so the body decided to hide in a bus stop enclosure and watch people go by.

“Excuse me? Do you need help?” I looked up, and saw an elderly woman smiling to me. She wore a long gray dress and covered her hair with a white cloth, but her kind face was open and exposed. She was carrying a couple of blue plastic bags.

I smiled back at her. “Yes, I do.”

“Come with me, dear,” she said. “I’ll give you a ride back to the convent, just down the road a bit. We’ll get you a little food and some new clothes.”

The body’s stomach growled. “Yes. That would be nice. Thank you.”

She took me to a powder-blue car with a dent in the hood and drove me to a large complex of old stone walls and stained glass windows. Inside, she gave me clothes and the use of a shower. The water pouring over my body soothed me and made me feel safe while I cleaned the body’s skin and eyes. As I ate a plate of bologna and cheese sandwiches at a scarred wood table, the elderly woman introduced herself as Sister Francis of the Poor Clare Colettine Convent. I didn’t know what that meant, but she seemed pleased with it, so I nodded in appreciation and started eating another sandwich.

“Is this you?” she asked after I showed her the picture.

“I think so,” I said around a mouthful of cheese.

“You remind me of my niece.” She handed it back without turning it over.
“Were you a student?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh dear.”

I stopped chewing, suddenly terrified of the knowing look she was giving me. Did she know the body? Was she going to send me away? Was I on the cusp of success or in terrible danger?

“Forgive me for saying so, but I’ve seen it before. I know that...drugs...can sometimes do terrible things to your memory.”

I started chewing again, relieved and disappointed. “That’s right,” I said after I swallowed. “I don’t remember anything before my...problem.”

“I’m sure your family must be very worried about you. Once you’re feeling better, we can call the police and see what they know.”

“No!” I said. I reached toward her in desperation, knocking the plate onto the floor. Bread and cheese and meat flew everywhere as the plate shattered. Sister Francis recoiled from me, but I grabbed her hand anyway, hoping it was only the loud noise that scared her. “Please. Don’t call the police. The police will take me away for a very long time.”

“But they will be able to help you far better than...”

“I just need to...find myself.” My mind started to race, the fear washing away as the body replaced it with cool reason. “Please, Sister, let me stay here for a few days. I won’t be any trouble.”

She frowned. “The Reverend Mother will be upset that I’ve brought another homeless woman here.”

“I’m...I’m strong, and I always did chores at my old home. I can help.” I stroked her hand, hoping to reassure her. “Please. Just a little while.”

She pulled her hands away, but smiled. “I’ll see what I can do. At least tell me your name.”

For a moment, I almost asked her to call me “Rachel,” but that wasn’t my name. That was the name of this body. “You can call me Ranga,” I said finally.

“Ranga,” she repeated, smiling. “That’s a pretty name.”



Sister Francis gave me a small cot in a tiny room with a lamp and a bible. I was so happy to have a book to read that I forgot to sleep. The next day I changed into my new clothes: a pair of jeans that didn’t quite fit and a plain black T-shirt that did. Sister Francis told me that she sets clothes aside for “those women in need of help” that she brings in from time to time.

I went to the kitchen and ate with all the nuns. I showed them the picture, and they shook their heads and apologized for not being able to help. The Reverend Mother Abbess, a dour-looking woman in a stark black and white dress and wimple, muttered something about me finding what I was looking for before taking her plate to her office. She didn’t even look at the picture.

Sister Francis suggested some chores I could help with. The convent was a series of four long buildings, all connected in a square, with an open-air garden in the middle. She opened the door to one of the sheds in the garden and indicated some rusty, unidentifiable pieces of metal. One sister thought they might have been parts of a tractor, while another insisted they were the remains of a water pump, but they all agreed that they needed the space in the shed for more storage. Sister Francis seemed surprised at how easy it was for me to carry the heavy metal parts. The Abbess watched from a window as I worked.

At night the nuns let me listen to their prayers, which sounded nice but seemed to give them more comfort than they gave me.

On my third day there, they introduced me to Sister Maria. She was younger than the other nuns — maybe about the same age as the body — and she wore a shirt and jeans like mine. She hugged me in greeting, and told me she had just gotten back from a trip to the Poor Clare monastery in Brazil. Sister Francis explained that I had lost my memory and was looking to return to my old life.

I showed her the picture. She smiled when she saw it, and then flipped it over to read the back before handing it back to me.

“That smile is hard to forget. I think I’ve seen you before, Rachel.”

“She prefers the name ‘Ranga’ now —”

“Where?” I said, cutting off Sister Francis’s retort in my excitement. “Where did you meet her?”

Sister Maria looked startled and confused, but she shook her head. “Sometimes I go to the library to study and think about things. I saw you there a few times.”

“What was I doing?” I pressed.

“I don’t remember. I was focused on my own studies and contemplation, and didn’t pay much attention to the people around me. I’m sorry. But I remember your smile. It was so radiant, and that made me happy just seeing it.”

“Sister Maria has always been very inquisitive,” Sister Francis said, a slight smile on her face taking the sting out of her criticism.

“Can you take me there?” I pleaded.

“What is going on?” The Reverend Mother Abbess walked in, looking at all of us with suspicious eyes.

Sister Francis took a step toward the Abbess. “Sister Maria may know something about our lost soul.”

“Good,” the Abbess said, although she didn’t look pleased at all. “Then she can be on her way.”

“I can take her,” Sister Maria said suddenly. “It’s not that far, and I know the way.”

“Certainly not,” the Abbess said. “You have only just returned from your pilgrimage. Your and Sister Francis’s charity is noble, but it distracts you from the vows you have taken. Your duties are here.”

“Let me at least give her a map, Reverend Mother. It will only take a moment.”

The Abbess looked at Sister Maria for a long time, and then her face softened and she turned away from us. “Fine. I will see our guest out once you are done.”

Maria took the body’s hand and led me to a small room that had a desk with a large beige computer monitor on it. Next to it was a heavy-looking printer. She printed out two maps: one to the library and one of the interior. Using a pen, she marked the path on each.

“There,” she said, finishing up the second map. “Right by the science section.” She gave me the maps and some money. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, Rach... Ranga.”

She walked me to the front door as I shoved everything into my pockets. “Thank you, Sister Maria. For everything. And please thank Sister Francis as well.”

“We are all God’s children,” she said, smiling. “We have to care for one another.”

The Abbess was standing by the front door, holding it open. She looked less angry than she had since I first arrived there. More afraid.

“I am sorry, child,” she said in a low voice. “I sincerely wish you the best on your journey, and I know that God will help you find your way.”

“I understand. I am sorry I was a bother. Thank you for your kindness.” I hugged Sister Maria one more time, and then I turned and walked out the door.

As soon as I did, I heard the door slam and the lock turn behind me. I could hear Sister Maria yelling something, but I didn’t turn around to find out what it was.

I looked up at the bright blue sky above me. “Can you help me?” I asked. The sun shone on Rachel’s face in reply. It felt nice, and I closed the body’s eyes for a moment, enjoying it.

• • •

I had never seen so many books before. They were on shelves stacked three or four high, and there were row upon row of shelves. People wandered in and out of the stacks, quiet as ghosts, some carrying heavy books in their arms like precious treasures. The subtle smell of paper and ink was a pleasurable promise of superstitions removed and questions answered. It was almost as comfortable as the feeling of water gently filling up the body’s lungs after a long day of chores.

I walked to the place Maria indicated on her map. It looked much like the other parts of the library, but the smell of paper and ink intensified. I sat at a small table with a small pile of books on it, and the chair welcomed me like an old friend. I could feel every dent and scratch on the table, and each one felt soothing. I opened a book on the stack at random, hoping it would tell me something. There were some words about engines and motion that I didn’t understand, so I closed it again. Something about this place was familiar, but I couldn’t put my...

...I looked down at the body’s hand...

...My finger on it.

Something in the back of my mind began to spin, like an eddy forming. I saw Rachel’s hand (*my* hand) on a book much like this one, but the fingers were whole. And I was talking to...someone. A man, I think. A man I knew. The conversation was vague, silly stories about angels made from rusty metal lurking in the tunnels

under the school. Not everyone thought the stories were silly, though. Rachel didn't care about the angels anymore. Why didn't she care? The images were slipping away.

I heard something behind me, like a snarl or a growl. I stood up, knocking the chair over, but I didn't see anything except disapproving stares from the ghosts of the library. I sat the chair back up and leaned on it. Rachel's hair fell in front of her face, hiding me from the stares as I tried to remember. I looked at the cover of the book: *Engine Dynamics and Crankshaft Design*. There was a picture of a car cut in half, with arrows pointing at various pieces.

A car...

Rachel died in a car. A car in water.

The body flushed the frustration away, replacing it with cool reason. Yes. Rachel died in a car accident. Given that her body (*my body*) was relatively whole when I was made, she couldn't have been dead too long. Odds are also high that she died somewhere near here, near the lake. With all this information around me, there must be a reference, a mention, or a record of such a thing. The body's half-finger trembled as I pushed myself away from the chair and looked for someone who knew what I needed.

Thirty minutes later, I was in front of a computer, reading Rachel's obituary. Rachel Pride died in a car crash last year after her brakes failed and her car tumbled into Lake Erie. She was riding with a male passenger, but his body was never recovered, believed to be flung clear of the accident. She was buried in Highland Park Cemetery. I gave the librarian some of my change, printed another map, and left.

I heard another gargling growl as I walked out of the building. Again, I turned, but I didn't see anything. For a moment I thought I saw a familiar powder-blue car with a dent in the hood, but it turned the corner before I could get a good look.

• • •

Rachel Pride, died 2013.

“The art is long, life is short.” Hippocrates.

Light drops of rain splattered on the marble tombstone. Just a name, a date, and a quote. No hole dug in the ground with an open casket at the bottom. No dramatic thunderstorm as lightning flashed to reveal the missing corpse. Instead, it was a peaceful, wooded area with small knots of flowers. It was raining, but it was a light, gentle rain that soothed me as I read the twelve words over and over. No family members buried nearby, no date of birth, not even a middle initial. I knelt in front of the tombstone, disrupting a few wilted flowers lying next to it, and ran the body's fingers over the engraving.

“You took your secrets with you,” I whispered to the cold stone. “But you didn't trust me with them.”

A snarl. I heard it distinctly this time. I turned around, hair plastered to Rachel's face as the rain increased its intensity, and I saw a monster slowly appear as it walked toward me. It was covered in dark, rubbery scales, and had webbing on its hands. On its face was a long snout that looked like something between an alligator and a bear. The monster snarled again, and I saw sharp teeth in its mouth. Judging from the adaptations, it seemed more suited for water than land, so something brought it here.

"I assume you're not here to talk," I shouted in the rain.

Another snarl as it continued to plod toward me. Not intelligent, then, so what brings it here isn't a plan of its own creation. What could possibly...

I wiped the rain from Rachel's eyes, forcing the body to concentrate. No time for analysis. I vaulted over the tombstone and started to run for the main gate. I dodged around a tree to move onto the path, when I saw another monster in front of me. This one had a human face and a slighter body, but with a thick tail behind it. I stopped, sliding a little in the mud.

I looked back, and the other creature was still behind me, increasing its speed to a slow run. The body (*my body*) tried to correlate the range of motion with the volume of rain, but I ignored it, backing up so I could keep both of the monsters in the body's peripheral vision. I imagined the fire inside of me, the raging Azoth that gave me life and strength and power. The bones in Rachel's fingers cracked, the skin split, and licks of blue flame or maybe electricity kissed the edges as claws grew. I could taste blood as Rachel's teeth grew points, ready to tear into the monsters' thick flesh.

"Did you like the tombstone, Ranga?" Hari's voice.

I glanced over Rachel's shoulder, trying not to take her eyes (*my eyes*) off the creatures for too long. I saw Hari, drenched in the downpour, holding Sister Maria against him with one arm across her throat. Her eyes were wide in terror, but she was staring at me.

At the real, imperfect me. Not at Rachel, but at Ranga, with hair falling out and stiches on her face.

"Let her go and help me with these monsters, Hari," I said, looking back at the creatures.

"Certainly." He raised his voice slightly. "Dump Truck. Dollface. Stop."

The monsters stopped.

I waited a moment before turning to face Hari fully. I could feel the body's cold logic overwhelming my fear, my confusion, my shame at Sister Maria's terror. I yelled, trying to be heard over the storm. "You made these monsters. You've been watching me through them."

"Consider them rough drafts, made from the remnants of others like you. After you left us to rejoin the world."

I looked down. Claws sprouted from all of Rachel's fingers but one, the one with the missing tip. The one imperfection that brought me to life.

Again.

"I was like this before," I said. The words were as dead as I felt.

"When I was called Canopus," Hari said. Sister Maria tried to kick at his shin and squirm out of his grasp, but he just held her tighter as he continued. "You became human again, but I still wanted you in my life."

"You were there when I drowned."

"Yes. I tested theories of resurrection on my former companions. I perfected them on you."

I pointed at Sister Maria. "What about her?"

"She followed you. Everyone worries about you, Rachel, and you worry about them. But if you don't come back home to me, I'll kill her right now."

"Why would I worry about her?"

Sister Maria's eyes grew wide. "No! Please!"

Hari's eyes grew suspicious. "Rachel would never allow an innocent woman to die."

"I am not Rachel." I slashed Sister Maria's throat. Her eyes were wide with surprise as her head lulled back and blood poured down her shirt.

"I am not yours to have." I clawed at Hari's face and he fell back, letting go of the corpse.

"You are not a god." I fell on him, pinning him to the ground. He tried to kick me off of him, and I shattered his knees.

"You are not my master." I grabbed his head, and poised the claws on Rachel's thumbs over his eyes.

"Please," Hari said. "Rachel, please don't."

I considered his words. Removing Sister Maria as a hostage was efficient — without her, Hari had no leverage. And without Hari, the monsters would no longer pursue me. Dispatching both solved all of my immediate problems.

And yet, part of me wanted to be a good person. Part of me wanted to be the woman with the beautiful smile. Part of me wanted to read books and laugh at stories and wander the world.

But that woman was dead, and Hari would keep coming after me, day after day, night after night. I would never be free. I would never be Ranga.

I felt Hari's eyes burst under *my* thumbs.

Beautiful Strange

BY MARK L.S. STONE

A long time ago, I spent a few months traveling with Nora, a woman I know who was stitched together out of piano wire. She was the one who'd gotten me into the custom of spending the last of my money, whenever I was about to run out, on human food. She'd said, "If you're going to live on bugs and tree bark for a few months, it's good to have a nice memory to carry with you while you do it."

I tried not to think about Nora and what happened to her as I walked up to Macy's Roadhouse. It was snowing, but the snow wasn't sticking to me. It never did. The nuclear fire twisting around in the bottom of my gut was too hot.

I took a seat at the bar and ordered the double hamburger platter. The man behind the bar — a hefty man with pale skin and a big, round, moon-like face, made to seem even bigger and rounder by his bald head — tried to strike up a conversation. I responded, because it's always good to get in a little practice dealing with people, but I couldn't stop myself from leaning back. I couldn't help picturing the radiation coming off me, and what it could do to him. I was calm, I felt safe, so I knew it wouldn't be too bad.

"So, where you from, man?" he said.

I shrugged. "I'm coming from New York."

"Big city guy, huh?" He seemed dubious. I didn't look much like anyone's idea of a sophisticated New Yorker, with my patched jeans, work boots, and hardware store button-down shirt. "What did you do in New York?"

That question fed the fire inside me. New York. Bad things had happened there. The room felt a little hotter, and I knew it was me, putting out rads and poisoning everyone around me. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and changed the topic.

“I was born around here. Near Stevensville.”

That earned me a smile. Apparently, the bartender had cousins on the western side of the state. He started asking questions, fishing for evidence that we were related. It seemed ridiculous to me. I was darker and taller than the bartender, rangy and skinny rather than soft and round. Still, it didn’t make me think about New York, and that helped me calm down.

“You looking for work?” he asked.

I looked down at my half-finished double hamburger platter. It felt good to eat real food. It made me feel like I was getting closer to my goal, not just screwing around. If I wanted to keep on eating, though, I needed money, and to get money, I needed a job.

That was how I met Henry Glasser.



Henry didn’t waste any time. He met me at the front gate, asked my name, shook my hand, and launched immediately into describing the job.

Henry was pale and dark-haired. He was a big man, tall and broad, with a little fat clinging to the bottom of his belly. I admired him as we walked around the farm. It wasn’t that he was particularly beautiful as humans go, but he had that thing that none of us do. He was entirely in his body. He fit his flesh, and it fit him, and that was the way it had always been for him.

“It’s pretty simple work,” Henry said. “This will be my first time keeping the farm going through the winter on my own, and I’ll need all the help I can get. Have you ever done farm work before?”

“No, but I’ve done other stuff. I’ve done dock work. I drove a truck for a while.”

Henry nodded, thoughtfully. “How are you with machinery? If I show you how something goes together and print out a schematic, can you take it apart, clean the parts, and put it back together again?”

“Probably.”

“Great. You can start off with the farm equipment. We’ve got a lot of shit that needs to be cleaned and stowed away properly, or the grit will eat away at it and it’ll be totally fucked come spring. After that, we’ll see. There’s always something that needs to be done. If you make me happy enough, there might still be a job for you at the end of the winter. Migrants pass through and some of them are good people, but I’d like to have a couple of employees full-time.”

“That’s good,” I replied, but Henry looked at me strangely, and I thought that I’d probably lied poorly again. Humans seemed to do it all the time, but I wasn’t very good at it.

We toured the farm, Henry pointing out the storage sheds and animal pens, the fields where he grew corn, soybeans, and carnations, and the farmhouse itself. I’d been in a couple of human homes by then, and this one seemed out of sorts. Most available surfaces were covered in clutter. The sink was filled with forks and plates and frying pans, most of it crusted with old food. The air smelled dusty and stale.

“And this,” Henry said, reaching into a wooden cage raised off the floor by four legs, “is Henry Junior.” When he stood, he was cradling a tiny baby. I thought that he was a little more than a year old, maybe, but I hadn’t seen enough human children to be sure.

“I hope you don’t mind that I rushed the tour,” Henry said. “I can’t leave this little guy alone for too long. He narrowed his eyes. “You ok?”

I had stepped back as soon as I realized what he was taking out of the cage – the crib, I reminded myself. It was a crib. It wasn’t rational, I knew, but I couldn’t help but imagine what the radiation in me could do to someone so young and soft. I was working hard to keep my mild panic from touching my face.

“I don’t like kids,” I muttered.

Henry frowned. “Well, you’ll have to get used to it. There’s little Henry here, and there’s Lilly, too. Is this going to be a problem?”

“No,” I said, too quickly. “I’m not... I don’t get mad at kids. I’m afraid of them. Always have been.” I shut my mouth before I could say anything else stupid.

Henry chuckled. “I’ve met men like you. Spend enough time away from kids and you get to be afraid of them. You don’t know what they’ll do next. You haven’t got anything to worry about, Ted. Lilly will be at school most of the time. Keep your language clean when she’s around and let me know if she gets in your way, and that’s it. Junior won’t be any of your concern, unless I send you to town for diapers or formula. Is that all right?”

I couldn’t figure out exactly why, but I knew that he was going to offer me the job. It was something about how he said my name. “That’s fine.”

“Well, then. There’s a place here for you if you want it, Ted.” He placed the baby gently back in his crib, then offered me his hand.

I hesitated just a moment, troubled by thoughts of poisonous invisible rays and visions of healthy flesh blossoming into tumors, and then we shook on it.



I adapted quickly to life on the Glasser farm. My responsibilities included maintaining several different kinds of farm equipment, an enormous amount of cleaning, basic repairs on tools and household items, and occasionally taking one of the two trucks into town to pick up supplies.

The framed photographs hanging from the walls and sitting on shelves and side-tables depicted every member of the Glasser family throughout the years. Those frames held several photos of Lilly, showing how she grew from a small child to a less small child, fewer photos of Henry Junior showing his growth from a tiny bundle of flesh to something that approximates a small human being, and Henry.

Some of the photos also showed a dark-skinned woman with symmetrical features and hair knotted into a mass of tiny braids. In one of the photos, she stood next to Henry, their arms wrapped around each other, both of them smiling. In another, she held a tiny child — I couldn't tell if it was Henry Junior or a younger version of Lilly — and smiling even more broadly.

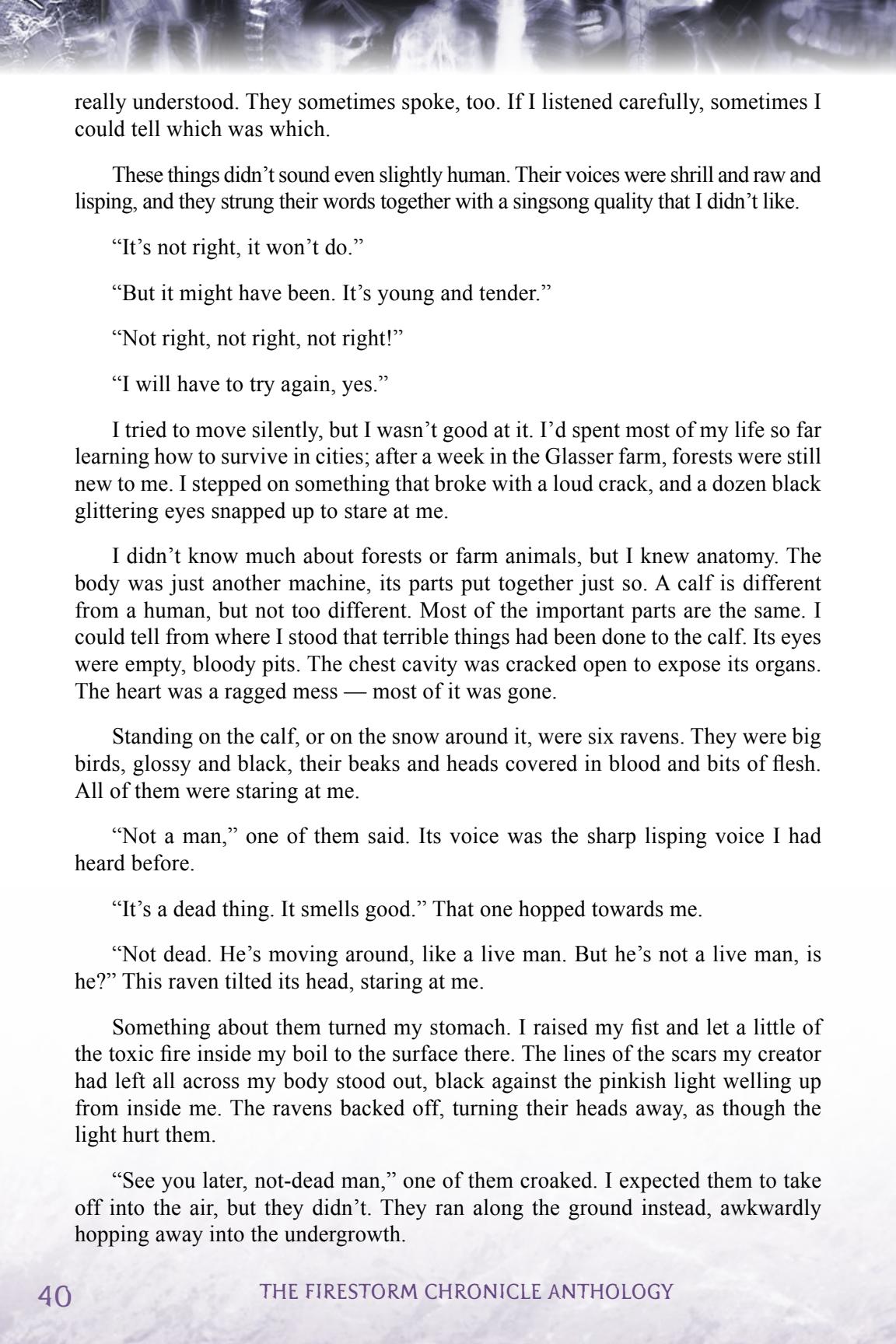
The woman was a mystery. Nobody ever spoke about her. Henry didn't even seem to see her photos. For all that the house was, generally, a mess, those pictures seemed to gather dust even more quickly, as though they were never, rather than infrequently, cleaned. The mystery woman was odd, sure, but not the oddest thing I'd known humans to do. It didn't compare to the evil things that lived in the forest behind the farmhouse.



I learned about the evil things after a heavy snowfall damaged the fence, which let a couple of the calves escape. Henry sent me out to catch as them if I could. I knew it was all but hopeless — animals don't like me, and tend to run away when I get close — but I couldn't explain that, so I just did as I was told. It wouldn't be the first time I'd managed something that was supposed to be impossible for me. Maybe it would be a learning experience.

The day was so overcast that the early afternoon was like twilight. It got worse when I followed the calf's tracks into the stretch of forest behind the house. I did my best to move quietly, hoping to sneak up on the animal, and stopped when I heard the voices.

I knew that they weren't human voices right away. I had been listening to human voices my whole life, but I also listened for other voices. Pandorans sometimes spoke, or at least made noises like speech. I had also encountered other things, things that weren't Pandorans or Prometheans or humans, things I never



really understood. They sometimes spoke, too. If I listened carefully, sometimes I could tell which was which.

These things didn't sound even slightly human. Their voices were shrill and raw and lisping, and they strung their words together with a singsong quality that I didn't like.

"It's not right, it won't do."

"But it might have been. It's young and tender."

"Not right, not right, not right!"

"I will have to try again, yes."

I tried to move silently, but I wasn't good at it. I'd spent most of my life so far learning how to survive in cities; after a week in the Glasser farm, forests were still new to me. I stepped on something that broke with a loud crack, and a dozen black glittering eyes snapped up to stare at me.

I didn't know much about forests or farm animals, but I knew anatomy. The body was just another machine, its parts put together just so. A calf is different from a human, but not too different. Most of the important parts are the same. I could tell from where I stood that terrible things had been done to the calf. Its eyes were empty, bloody pits. The chest cavity was cracked open to expose its organs. The heart was a ragged mess — most of it was gone.

Standing on the calf, or on the snow around it, were six ravens. They were big birds, glossy and black, their beaks and heads covered in blood and bits of flesh. All of them were staring at me.

"Not a man," one of them said. Its voice was the sharp lisping voice I had heard before.

"It's a dead thing. It smells good." That one hopped towards me.

"Not dead. He's moving around, like a live man. But he's not a live man, is he?" This raven tilted its head, staring at me.

Something about them turned my stomach. I raised my fist and let a little of the toxic fire inside my boil to the surface there. The lines of the scars my creator had left all across my body stood out, black against the pinkish light welling up from inside me. The ravens backed off, turning their heads away, as though the light hurt them.

"See you later, not-dead man," one of them croaked. I expected them to take off into the air, but they didn't. They ran along the ground instead, awkwardly hopping away into the undergrowth.



I looked down at the dead calf. Henry would want to know what happened to it. I couldn't explain it, but I wouldn't have to. I could just tell him that I found it like this and let him decide what it meant. I hefted the bloody carcass up onto my shoulders and turned back to the house.

I had expected Henry to be sad and frustrated when I brought him the dead calf. Perhaps, I had thought, he might be a little relieved; it was bad to lose the calf, but at least the search was over now and we could focus on finding the calf that might still be alive.

He looked at the calf's injuries and his face went stony and cold. "I should have shot those fucking birds," he muttered. Then he turned and walked away.

"What birds?" I called out after him.

"Make a fire in the yard and burn the fucking thing!" he replied, and went into the house.

Henry wasn't usually a heavy drinker, but as soon as he finished putting his children to bed, he sat down in the kitchen and drank until he blacked out at the table.

• • •

I didn't really speak to Lilly until a week after the crows in the backyard. She avoided me, which was fine.

Henry had bought a machine second-hand that processed the soybeans. The previous owner left it out in the rain too often, and the inner parts were rusted and filthy. Henry found the blueprints online and left me in the barn with all the tools I needed to take the machine apart, clean it, and put it back together again.

It was good work. I liked how sharp and clean and simple it was, taking something apart, removing the detritus, and putting it back together. I got so lost in it that it took me a long time to realize that I wasn't alone.

Lilly was perched on a box, staring at me with her enormous brown eyes. She was a gangly child, eleven years old, with tawny skin and a huge mass of dark curly hair. She had Henry's nose and chin, but the rest of her face resembled the woman in the pictures.

"You're weird," she said. I froze. Had she seen something? It was a few heartbeats before I realized that she was just being a child. What she said next took me by surprise.

"I read your books. You should lock your door. Why do you have books on nuclear physics? Most of the people who come to work here don't have books that big. They look like school books."

“I like nuclear physics,” I said. She didn’t seem convinced. I tried to fill the space with more words. “Do you like science? In school?”

“It’s better than art,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Art is dumb. In science we get to blow stuff up and make crystals.”

“That’s nice,” I said, keeping my head down.

“Daddy doesn’t want me to bother you. He says it’s because you have work to do, but I think it’s because he doesn’t trust you. He still misses José and Craig. They left after Mom died. Mom and dad let them play with me. Sometimes Craig was my babysitter.”

“Well, you’re a smart girl. It’s smart of you to see that. And your dad is a smart man. I’m new here, and he hasn’t got any reason to trust me, yet. You should listen to your father when he tells you to stay away from strangers.”

Lilly leaned in close. “But I know that you know about the bad birds,” she said conspiratorially.

I jumped back, so surprised that I dropped the screwdriver. It went spinning away from me, down into the guts of the machine I was working on. I glanced down after it, then looked up at Lilly. “What?”

“They told me.”

“Who told you?” I was afraid of the answer.

“The bad birds told me. They were talking to me in my sleep.”

“You shouldn’t listen to them,” I said, speaking very slowly. “You’re right that they’re bad. They are bad. You should stay away from them.”

“I can’t stay away from them. They can talk to me in my sleep. I thought that the winter curtains would help. I tried sleeping under my bed. But I can still hear them no matter what.” Her face and voice became distant, and for the first time I noticed the dark circles under her eyes, as though she’d been crying recently or not getting enough sleep, or both. “I tried telling Daddy, but he wouldn’t listen.”

I was gripping the edge of the thresher’s open hood so hard that my knuckles were going white. The drafty barn had started to feel warm, and I realized that it was my fire. I watched as my scars traced themselves out on my skin.

“You should go, Lilly,” I said, struggling to keep my radiation under control. “Go back to your dad. Don’t tell me these things, tell him.”

“I told you, he wouldn’t listen!” She shouted. Her eyes were starting to tear up. “José would have listened. Craig would have listened.”

I thought about radiation, imagined it permeating her, poisoning her. “You should go.”

“I read about it in the library,” she said. “It’s called a valravn. It’s a raven that gets to be magical after it eats a king’s heart. Mommy wasn’t a king, but she used to say that she was a queen because her ancestors were kings in Africa, and she called me her princess. So, they’re all valravns. They ate mommy, and now they want to eat Henry, because if they eat a baby’s heart, the sun won’t bother them anymore.”

“That’s just a story,” I said lamely. “You shouldn’t be reading stories like that if you’re going to believe them.”

Lilly looked at me accusingly. “José would have listened to me,” she said, then hopped off the box and ran away.

I took my hand off the edge of the open hood. I’d left charred black fingerprints in the faded red paint.

• • •

On the night that it finally happened, I was pacing back and forth in the upstairs hallway. I don’t really know what I was looking for, but ever since Lilly had told me that the birds spoke to her in the night, I’d found myself doing that. I hoped that I’d hear something or maybe be able to help her.

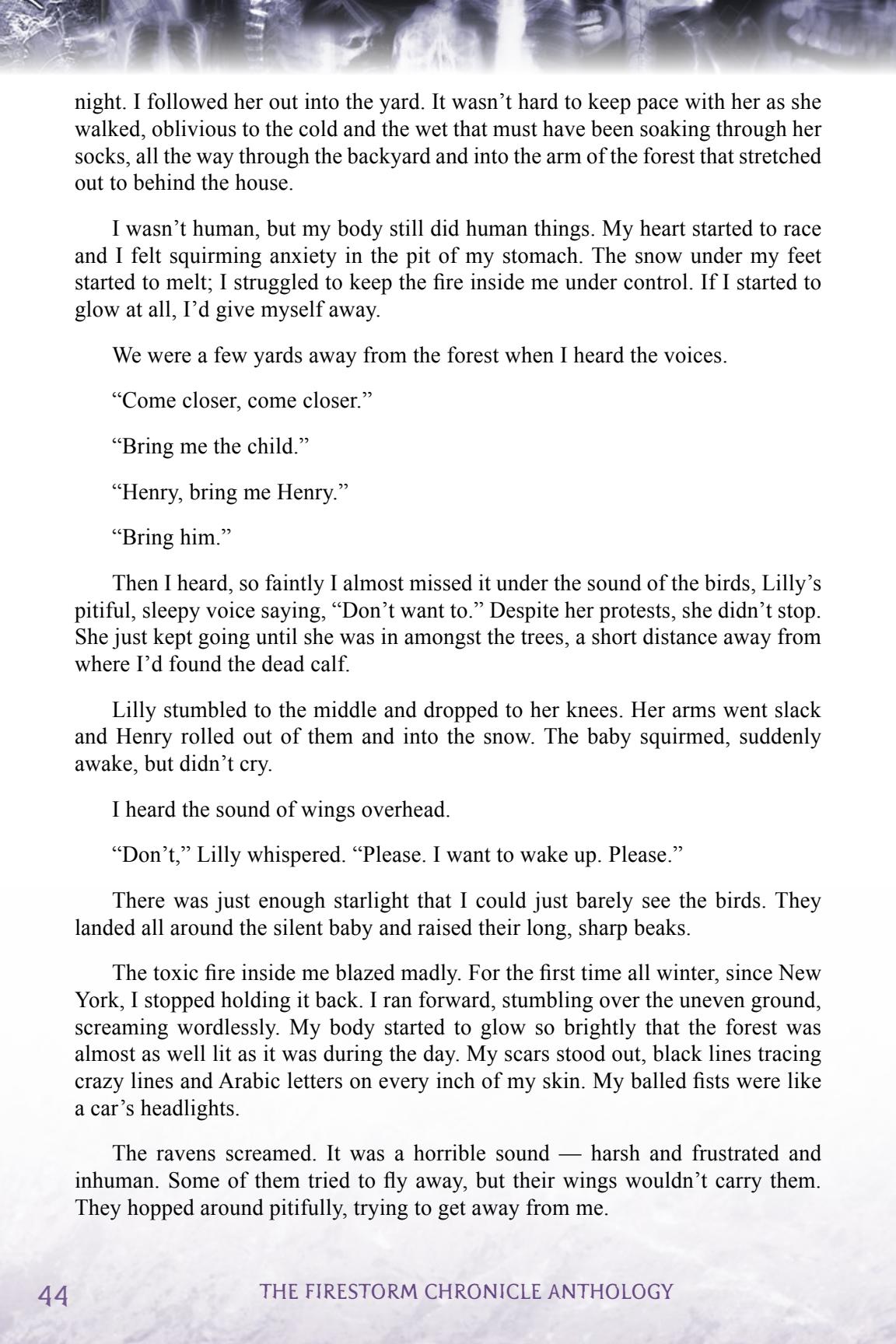
It was lucky that I had trouble sleeping that night, or I wouldn’t have noticed Lilly slip out of her room. She stood in the hallway for a second. Her body was rigid, her hands clenching and unclenching at random. Then she turned and walked to her father’s room.

I waited for a second. I was sure that she’d come out a moment later, maybe with her father there to put her back to bed. Or perhaps she’d crawl in with him; I’d read somewhere about human children sometimes sleeping in the same bed as their parents.

When Lilly came out, she didn’t have her father with her. She had her brother cradled in her arms. The infant was still fast asleep. Still moving with an awkward gate, she went downstairs.

“Lilly,” I whispered, following her. “What are you doing?”

She didn’t listen. It was like she wasn’t even there. I followed her as far as the back door. She opened the door, still holding her brother, and walked out into the



night. I followed her out into the yard. It wasn't hard to keep pace with her as she walked, oblivious to the cold and the wet that must have been soaking through her socks, all the way through the backyard and into the arm of the forest that stretched out to behind the house.

I wasn't human, but my body still did human things. My heart started to race and I felt squirming anxiety in the pit of my stomach. The snow under my feet started to melt; I struggled to keep the fire inside me under control. If I started to glow at all, I'd give myself away.

We were a few yards away from the forest when I heard the voices.

“Come closer, come closer.”

“Bring me the child.”

“Henry, bring me Henry.”

“Bring him.”

Then I heard, so faintly I almost missed it under the sound of the birds, Lilly's pitiful, sleepy voice saying, “Don't want to.” Despite her protests, she didn't stop. She just kept going until she was in amongst the trees, a short distance away from where I'd found the dead calf.

Lilly stumbled to the middle and dropped to her knees. Her arms went slack and Henry rolled out of them and into the snow. The baby squirmed, suddenly awake, but didn't cry.

I heard the sound of wings overhead.

“Don't,” Lilly whispered. “Please. I want to wake up. Please.”

There was just enough starlight that I could just barely see the birds. They landed all around the silent baby and raised their long, sharp beaks.

The toxic fire inside me blazed madly. For the first time all winter, since New York, I stopped holding it back. I ran forward, stumbling over the uneven ground, screaming wordlessly. My body started to glow so brightly that the forest was almost as well lit as it was during the day. My scars stood out, black lines tracing crazy lines and Arabic letters on every inch of my skin. My balled fists were like a car's headlights.

The ravens screamed. It was a horrible sound — harsh and frustrated and inhuman. Some of them tried to fly away, but their wings wouldn't carry them. They hopped around pitifully, trying to get away from me.

I remembered what Lilly had said: “if they eat a baby’s heart, the sun won’t bother them anymore.” I wasn’t the sun, but I would have to do.

One of the ravens jumped up at me. I raised my foot and stomped it into the dirt. I swung my blazing fists down, catching the birds as they tried to hop away. My skin was so hot that they combusted instantly, turning into piles of ash and feathers and scorched bones.

At the edge of my light, I saw a few ravens starting to take to the air. I screamed again, raising the intensity of my light, and the birds fell to the forest floor. It was easy for me to grab them in my burning hands and cook them.

As the last of them died, I stood there panting, my glow slowly fading.

“No, Daddy,” Lilly said. “He saved me. He saved Henry.”

I turned around. Henry was standing there, his bulky body interposed between his daughter and me. He had a shotgun cradled in his arms — not pointed at me, but with his fingers on the trigger.

“I know, sweetheart,” he said. “I saw. Those birds... were they talking?”

I nodded.

Henry walked over to me, pushed the gun into my hands, and knelt to pick up his son. “Let’s all get inside,” he said. “We can talk about this over coffee.”

• • •

We sat around the kitchen table, Lilly and Henry and Henry Junior on one side, me on the other. Henry was holding his son in one arm and hadn’t even put him down to brew the coffee. Henry looked like he didn’t want to ever let him go again.

“So, what...” Henry finally started. It took him a second try before he could force the sentence out. “What was all that?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“They were valravns,” Lilly said. Haltingly, sometimes needing her father’s encouragement to finish a sentence, she explained to her father everything she’d explained to me. She added that she’d heard the birds ever since her mother died.

“There was an accident,” Henry said at the mention of his wife’s death. “I was taking the kids to visit my parents. The farm hands were in town, and...” he trailed off. “The birds had gotten to her by the time they got back.”

“I tried to tell you,” Lilly said when she finished. “You wouldn’t listen.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Henry said, squeezing her awkwardly with one arm. “And what about you?” he said, looking me in the eye.

I thought about explaining all of it to Henry — the power plant engineer, his cancer, his obsession, how his efforts to preserve his life somehow killed him and gave birth to me — but it didn’t seem fair to burden him with even more.

“There’s strange things in the world,” I said. “You know that now. I’m one of those strange things. Do you really want to know more?”

“You know what?” Henry said. “I don’t want to know more. I don’t want to know at all.”

I nodded. “I should go. You’ve been through enough, and I’m not safe to be around.”

“No,” he said.

“That light that came out of me? It’s radiation. I’m radioactive. I could hurt you, make you all sick.” I stood up. “I shouldn’t have come here at all. This was a bad idea.”

“You didn’t hurt us, Ted,” Henry insisted. “You saved us.”

“But, the radiation—”

Henry didn’t let me finish. He leaned across the table and put a hand on my arm. “People are tough, Ted. It takes a lot of radiation to hurt someone so bad that they can’t get better. Heck, I heard on the radio about a guy who was caught in *both* atomic bomb blasts, and not only did he live to be almost a hundred years old, but when he had kids, they were also healthy. If you were really that bad, we’d already be sick.”

I opened my mouth to object, but Henry kept on going. “It doesn’t matter, Ted. You saved my family. Those things would have cracked my son open and eaten his heart, and they would have made my daughter be a part of it, and then, where would we be?”

“We learned about radiation in school,” Lilly said. “The sun is radioactive, did you know that? And the beams of the sun are what give everything on Earth the energy to live. And sometimes when the radiation causes mutations, it’s bad, and that’s where cancer comes from, but sometimes it’s good, and that’s part of how evolution happens, which is why we aren’t monkeys anymore.”



I didn't know what to say to that, so I didn't say anything. Lilly filled the silence, forging ahead. "They were inside my head," Lilly said, rubbing her temple with the knuckles of her left hand. "They were making me do bad things. They made me take Henry to them."

"It's okay, sweetie," Henry said, taking her hand. "It's not your fault."

"And you stopped them. You smashed them and you burned them. I saw it. I couldn't move until you'd smashed the last one, but I could see it. You saved me. You can't be bad radiation. I don't believe it. You've got to be good, like the sun. That's why they were afraid of you. That's why you could burn them up, and that's why they couldn't fly. Because you're like the sun."

Henry looked back up to me. "Stay until spring. It's only another month. I'd hate for you to be traveling in this weather."

"All right," I said. "I will."



There was still snow on the ground when I got on the bus that would eventually take me to California. I didn't have any particular reason to go to California, but it was someplace I'd never been, and it was far away from New York.

It was spring, though, and the snowfall was light and not sticking. It wasn't enough to even wet me. The heat inside me burned the snow away as soon as it touched my coat.

I stepped up onto the bus, stowed my bag, and took my seat.



The story doesn't really end there, though.

The last thing that happened was a few months later, when California summer was finally turning into California autumn, and a letter from Lilly finally reached me. There was a smaller envelope inside the mailing envelope, and the letter was labeled "read this first," so I did.

Lilly wrote about her summer vacation. She made it sound as though life was slowly returning to normal, although the entire family had been changed by what they had seen during the winter. She wrote that she still had nightmares of the ravens' voices in her head and she still slept with a light on. Her father had taken a chainsaw and cut down every one of the trees in that little arm of the forest and then burned the stumps. The burned ruin had bothered Lilly so much that she'd taken some carnation seeds and planted them among the ashes, right where I'd fought the ravens. The seeds had grown, and bloomed.

This was how Lilly ended her letter:

The birds were strange and bad. They wanted to hurt people. But not everything that's strange is bad. Some things are strange and good — like you. Maybe you hurt people by accident sometimes, but you don't want to. You try to do good.

Some things that are strange are bad, but some things are strange and good. Some things are strange and beautiful.

I read the letter three times before I opened the second envelope.

Inside, I found a carnation that had been carefully pressed and dried. Instead of one flower, it was a cluster of tiny blooms pressed close together. The petals were streaked and spotted red and yellow.

I knew that this carnation had grown in the soil behind the forest, where I'd stood and fought the birds and stopped them from eating Henry Junior's heart and making Lilly their accomplice. Beautiful and strange.

I kept that flower for a long, long time.



Dedication

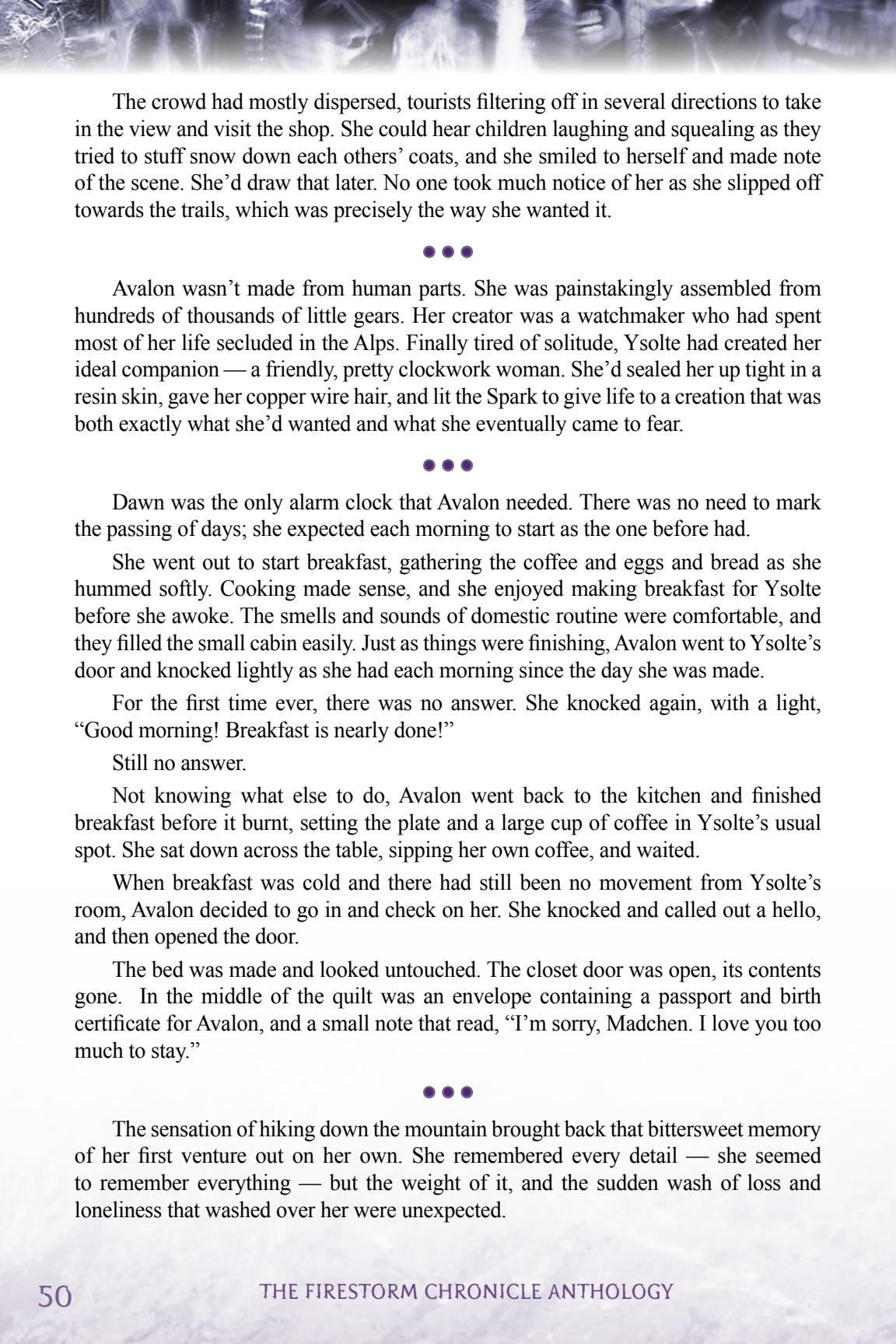
BY SARAH DYER

Winters are cold in Colorado. The train ride up to Pike's Peak was crammed full of people bundled up against the wind and snow. The recent snowfall had been cleared from the tracks, and Avalon enjoyed the scenery as it rolled past. She needed a break from the throng and had taken her leave from them a few days before. They seemed to understand, and they even helped chip in to get her some reasonable-looking winter gear for her trip up the mountain. She didn't need it — the cold didn't seem to affect her at all — but she knew that it was important to keep up appearances. They'd found a ski jacket and some snow pants in a secondhand store, both in decent condition, if a bit shabby around the edges.

The pants were a faded pink, which amused her greatly, and though the coat was a boring gray color, she found a hidden inside pocket that the previous owner had forgotten to clean out. She'd acquired a clicky pen from a towing company in North Platte, Nebraska, an old key on an owl keychain, and five dollars. These little things had made her inordinately happy, and she wasn't even disappointed when the pen turned out to be dried up. She kept it in the outer pocket, her repetitive clicking muffled nicely by the thick coat.

She loved these little marks of life and practiced making up stories about them. The key opened the green front door to a little white house, where a young couple lived. The pen had lived in the pocket of the coat for a while, signing receipts and eventually jotting down a phone number for the local animal shelter, because the house just wasn't complete without a dog. The keychain was special, though — a gift from a friend before she moved away.

She was making up stories about the other doors that key could open, clicking her pen in an oddly perfect rhythm, when the train slowed. The mountain was stunning, and the chatter in the train car gave way to gasps of awe as they approached the stop. Avalon sank into her seat a bit more, pulling up her hood and happily watching the crowd as the train emptied, waiting until the last person was gone before gathering her bag and exiting herself.



The crowd had mostly dispersed, tourists filtering off in several directions to take in the view and visit the shop. She could hear children laughing and squealing as they tried to stuff snow down each others' coats, and she smiled to herself and made note of the scene. She'd draw that later. No one took much notice of her as she slipped off towards the trails, which was precisely the way she wanted it.



Avalon wasn't made from human parts. She was painstakingly assembled from hundreds of thousands of little gears. Her creator was a watchmaker who had spent most of her life secluded in the Alps. Finally tired of solitude, Ysolte had created her ideal companion — a friendly, pretty clockwork woman. She'd sealed her up tight in a resin skin, gave her copper wire hair, and lit the Spark to give life to a creation that was both exactly what she'd wanted and what she eventually came to fear.



Dawn was the only alarm clock that Avalon needed. There was no need to mark the passing of days; she expected each morning to start as the one before had.

She went out to start breakfast, gathering the coffee and eggs and bread as she hummed softly. Cooking made sense, and she enjoyed making breakfast for Ysolte before she awoke. The smells and sounds of domestic routine were comfortable, and they filled the small cabin easily. Just as things were finishing, Avalon went to Ysolte's door and knocked lightly as she had each morning since the day she was made.

For the first time ever, there was no answer. She knocked again, with a light, "Good morning! Breakfast is nearly done!"

Still no answer.

Not knowing what else to do, Avalon went back to the kitchen and finished breakfast before it burnt, setting the plate and a large cup of coffee in Ysolte's usual spot. She sat down across the table, sipping her own coffee, and waited.

When breakfast was cold and there had still been no movement from Ysolte's room, Avalon decided to go in and check on her. She knocked and called out a hello, and then opened the door.

The bed was made and looked untouched. The closet door was open, its contents gone. In the middle of the quilt was an envelope containing a passport and birth certificate for Avalon, and a small note that read, "I'm sorry, Madchen. I love you too much to stay."



The sensation of hiking down the mountain brought back that bittersweet memory of her first venture out on her own. She remembered every detail — she seemed to remember everything — but the weight of it, and the sudden wash of loss and loneliness that washed over her were unexpected.



She looked out over the mountains, staring at the jagged rocks dusted with snow, the fragrant pines and scrubby brush, and the pure white puffs of clouds in the icy sky. The view was stunning, and she made several more notes for future drawings. Then she sat down, wrapped her arms around her knees, and wept.



It wasn't about Olly, not really. She'd liked him — they were both artists and he was sweet and friendly — but it wasn't the loss of him that bothered her. It was the *way* she lost him and the damage that had been done. She'd been lucky in her travels thus far. Her oddities hadn't really flared up and caused trouble before. She could almost believe she was normal.

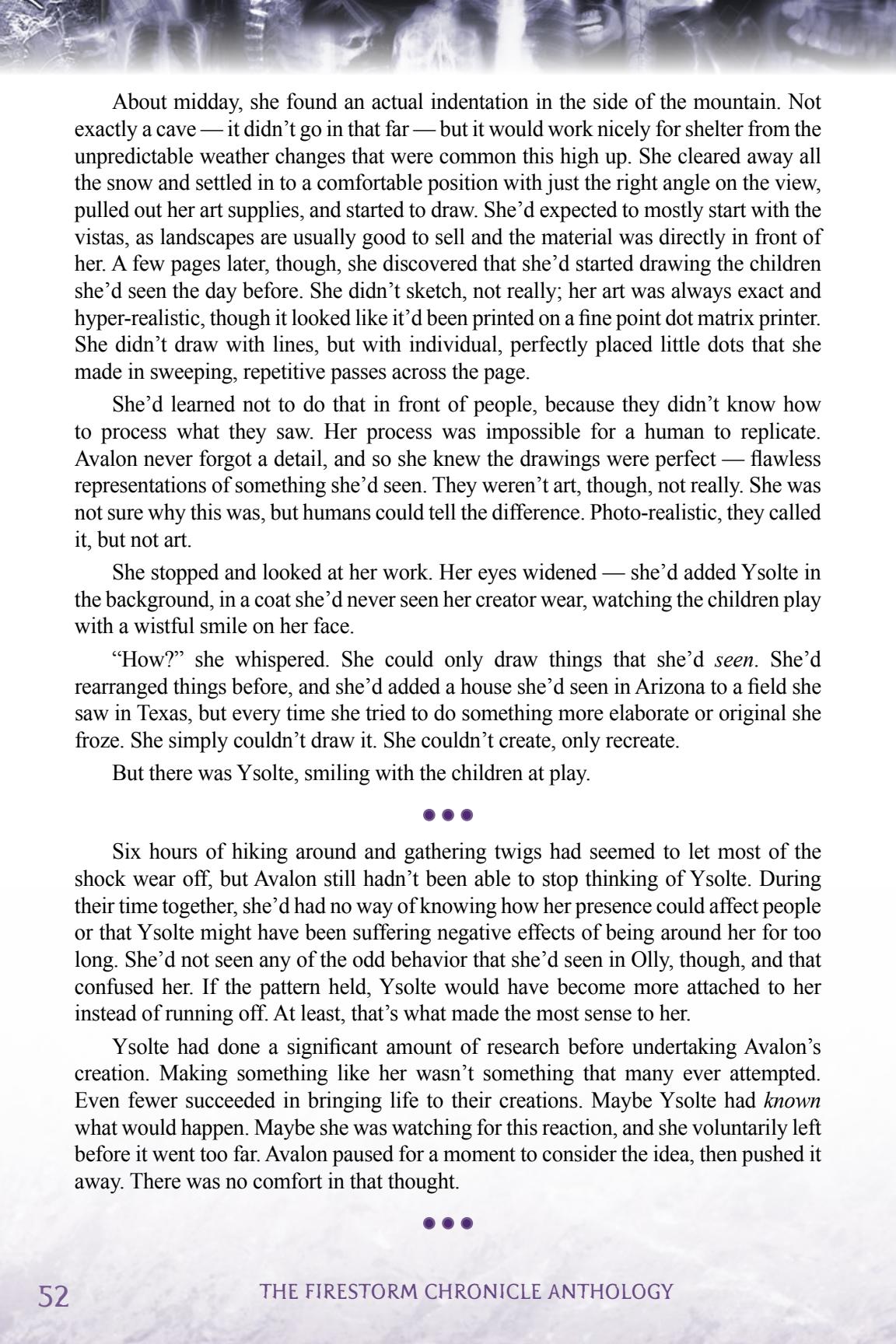
Avalon was built to be pleasing. She was crafted to be beautiful, made to be kind and friendly. It wasn't uncommon for her to attract attention. She never saw this as a bad thing, and it had worked out well for the throng she'd been traveling with. She just seemed to have a way with negotiations.

This went too far, though. The sweet, gentle man she'd come to like so much had suddenly turned obsessive. He followed her around and tried to convince her to run away with him, to be his muse and the center of his life. It all sounded quite romantic at first, as no one but Ysolte had really shown much beyond a casual interest in her before now. Then it started to spread. It infected the people around them. Everyone was keeping an eye on her, either for want of getting closer to her or out of fear and jealousy. She left without saying goodbye to him, heartbroken as she realized he wasn't going to go back to the old him. Her throngmates had told that he'd always wish for her, and might, if he was lucky, slowly displace his feelings onto a real person, someone who might reciprocate them. Avalon didn't want to consider what would happen if Olly transferred his feelings to someone new. Would it be worse, she thought, or better if he found a person who *could* be his muse?

She couldn't handle being near anyone once they got clear of him. She'd tried — talked with her throng about where to go next and what to do — but she was afraid to be close to anyone. She knew her traveling companions were immune, and yet she couldn't talk to them for fear they'd start to stare with that empty, hungry look. Her throngmates had made arrangements to meet up later, while Avalon stocked up her pack and set off for the solitude of the mountain.



Navigating in the approaching dark was a challenge, but she managed to find an overhang for shelter. It took her a while to clear the snow away, as she didn't have a shovel, but the work was repetitive and relaxing. She made a little surround of snow, with enough space between the top of the pile and the edge of the overhang that she could enjoy the stars as she lounged against the rock wall. She woke with the dawn, blinking into the brightness of the rising sun. She grabbed her bag and wandered off.



About midday, she found an actual indentation in the side of the mountain. Not exactly a cave — it didn't go in that far — but it would work nicely for shelter from the unpredictable weather changes that were common this high up. She cleared away all the snow and settled in to a comfortable position with just the right angle on the view, pulled out her art supplies, and started to draw. She'd expected to mostly start with the vistas, as landscapes are usually good to sell and the material was directly in front of her. A few pages later, though, she discovered that she'd started drawing the children she'd seen the day before. She didn't sketch, not really; her art was always exact and hyper-realistic, though it looked like it'd been printed on a fine point dot matrix printer. She didn't draw with lines, but with individual, perfectly placed little dots that she made in sweeping, repetitive passes across the page.

She'd learned not to do that in front of people, because they didn't know how to process what they saw. Her process was impossible for a human to replicate. Avalon never forgot a detail, and so she knew the drawings were perfect — flawless representations of something she'd seen. They weren't art, though, not really. She was not sure why this was, but humans could tell the difference. Photo-realistic, they called it, but not art.

She stopped and looked at her work. Her eyes widened — she'd added Ysolte in the background, in a coat she'd never seen her creator wear, watching the children play with a wistful smile on her face.

“How?” she whispered. She could only draw things that she'd *seen*. She'd rearranged things before, and she'd added a house she'd seen in Arizona to a field she saw in Texas, but every time she tried to do something more elaborate or original she froze. She simply couldn't draw it. She couldn't create, only recreate.

But there was Ysolte, smiling with the children at play.



Six hours of hiking around and gathering twigs had seemed to let most of the shock wear off, but Avalon still hadn't been able to stop thinking of Ysolte. During their time together, she'd had no way of knowing how her presence could affect people or that Ysolte might have been suffering negative effects of being around her for too long. She'd not seen any of the odd behavior that she'd seen in Olly, though, and that confused her. If the pattern held, Ysolte would have become more attached to her instead of running off. At least, that's what made the most sense to her.

Ysolte had done a significant amount of research before undertaking Avalon's creation. Making something like her wasn't something that many ever attempted. Even fewer succeeded in bringing life to their creations. Maybe Ysolte had *known* what would happen. Maybe she was watching for this reaction, and she voluntarily left before it went too far. Avalon paused for a moment to consider the idea, then pushed it away. There was no comfort in that thought.





Days went by, and Avalon fell into a routine. The cold didn't bother her and she barely needed to eat, so she spent the time comfortably wandering the mountainside and sketching. She was more than halfway through the first sketchbook by this point and was pleased with the work she was doing.

Ysolte had shown up in a couple more pictures. Avalon wasn't sure what to make of it. Her creator had aged a bit in her images, and Avalon wondered if that's what she really looked like now. She had no way of knowing.

Still, she kept drawing. She sketched all the places she'd visited over the past couple of years; in every crowd, she found Ysolte inserted somewhere. After her initial confusion and discomfort, Avalon grew accustomed to finding her in places she hadn't been. She marked it off as her efforts to expand her creative streak suddenly paying off. It only made sense that she'd focus on Ysolte — but she was surprised that no one else from her life had shown up this way.



Eleven days into her solitude, Avalon heard footsteps crunching through some of the crisp snow nearby. She froze. She wasn't anywhere near the hiking path. She tried to dampen her Fire, just in case it was a monster or another of her kind, but then she heard a muffled, "Hello? Is there anyone out here?"

The voice sounded exhausted. Avalon knew that most humans couldn't survive the harsh temperatures up here without proper equipment. It was late afternoon. No way this person could get back to the train station before dark — if anyone was left there anyway. She was out and tromping towards the voice within moments, tugging up her hood and making sure her coat was fully zipped and fastened. Avalon had to clear her throat a bit, as it had been days since she'd spoken. "Hey, are you okay?"

The woman nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound, whirling around to face her. "Jesus!" The woman stumbled back, and caught herself. "Oh, thank goodness! I thought I was going to be stuck here all night!" She stepped closer to Avalon, looking incredibly relieved. "Do you have a snowmobile or something to get back?"

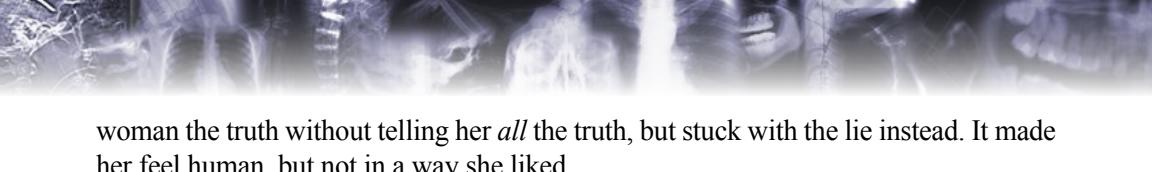
"No, I'm sorry...I'm actually setting up a camp up here, not too far away. It's a bit late — I don't think you'll make it back to the train station in time to catch a ride back. Come on with me." She noted how easily she was falling into conversation when the entire purpose of this trip was to avoid human contact. The woman, however, seemed surprised and skeptical.

"Camping? Seriously? Are you nuts?" The woman shook her head. "I shouldn't complain — you're saving my ass. Thank you." She stuck out a gloved hand and smiled. "I'm Betsy. What's your name?"

"My friends call me Avalon."

"Nice to meet you, Avalon. Where's your campsite?" Betsy asked.

"This way. I was just getting ready to start a fire when I heard you." It wasn't true, of course. Avalon didn't need the warmth. She tried to think about how to tell the



woman the truth without telling her *all* the truth, but stuck with the lie instead. It made her feel human, but not in a way she liked.

Betsy didn't distract her from those thoughts as they worked their way back to Avalon's little campsite. Luckily it really did look like she'd just found it and cleared it out; no coals or ash to show evidence of a fire, no tent or gear. Avalon hadn't brought any of that, as she didn't really need it — but now she was sorely wishing for a shelter of some sort.

"I like to rough it, so I packed light. I think this will be okay for the night, though." Betsy seemed unsure of the prospect, but moved to the back of the indent in the rock to put down her backpack while Avalon started the fire. She'd collected a modest pile of branches and pinecones to craft into frames for some of her art, but she lit them up without hesitation.

"So Betsy, what brings you out here? You're not as crazy as me." Avalon smiled a little over her shoulder, glancing briefly at Betsy — and seeing Ysolte instead. She blinked rapidly and shook her head, brushing her hands off and standing up in an attempt to cover. When she looked back up, it was Betsy again — not her creator.

"I came up here with my publisher and his wife, doing some research for my next book. I decided to go wandering to get a feel for the mountain, and then I couldn't find my way back." She rubbed her hands together and scooted closer to the growing flames. "They may not even look for me till tomorrow. I have a habit of running off."

"Oh? Well, they have nothing to worry about. We'll get you back to the train tomorrow morning, safe and sound. And then you'll have a story about how you braved the night out here!" Avalon rustled around in her pack and pulled out a couple of granola bars. "Here, eat these. I'm going to gather some more wood for the fire. Will you be okay for a little while?"

Betsy was looking tired, but quite a bit less frozen around the edges. "I'll be okay. I won't let the fire go out, either."

"Good. Eat, rest, and I'll be back soon," Avalon said, disappearing into the growing shadows.



Avalon hadn't been allowed to go to Gadmen, and that had always made her sad. She'd wanted to see the town, meet the people — but Ysolte had been adamant. The reasons, however, had changed a bit as time progressed.

At first, she was just too new. She was awkward and unfamiliar with social interactions, though her French and German were both impeccable. Ysolte had gotten some language tapes as well, and Avalon was quickly picking English up too. She was grammatically correct but horrible at talking to people.

Then it was her clothing. Ysolte hadn't collected more than a few pieces of clothing prior to Avalon's successful creation, and the girl wasn't terribly coordinated at first. It took a bit of practice and lots of mending to keep her upright and in good repair. She'd learned quickly, though, and gotten a handle on herself before Ysolte had really had a



chance to process it. That meant that Avalon was ready to go exploring, but her clothes just weren't appropriate to be seen in public.

Then it was the novelty. Ysolte had said she was nervous that Avalon wouldn't want to come back to their quiet little cabin, so small and isolated up in the mountains, once she'd experienced a town. Gadmen wasn't exactly a metropolis, but Avalon hadn't actually met anyone other than Ysolte. Going shopping, sitting at a cafe — these were things that Avalon had only heard about, and she thought it was probably a reasonable fear on her creator's part.

Finally, in the days before Ysolte disappeared, it was the people. Ysolte showed constant fear that if Avalon ventured off into the world, she would be wooed and whisked away by someone better. Avalon tried to reassure Ysolte and the topic would be forgotten, then they'd find something that needed to be added to the shopping list, or Avalon's language tapes would mention a new place, and it would start over again.

She'd never quite realized how lonely it was up there. Until Olly, she didn't realize what Ysolte had gone through, how her feelings for Avalon had changed. Looking back, she could see it. She could only hope that Ysolte had received some help, and that she wasn't still aching for her creation. Ysolte had been strong enough to leave. Avalon respected that, even if it made her ache.



She returned after dark, the glow of moon and stars letting her navigate without too much hassle. The fire was dim, but not out, and Betsy was shivering. Avalon hurried to stoke the fire, adding the kindling as quickly as she dared, and tried to get Betsy's attention and keep her awake.

"I got more wood, Betsy! Let's get you warm." A soft grunt and a tiny shift in position was the only response. "Hey, why don't you wake up and tell me about your books! I wonder if I've read any of them."

Betsy struggled to sit up, then slumped back down. "Probably not," she mumbled.

"Come on, try me! Tell me all about them, and we will see if I've read them."

Betsy groaned and waved her hand at Avalon, trying to brush her off, but Avalon knew that humans were not resistant to the cold, and sleeping when too cold was bad. She hoisted Betsy up a bit and scooted her closer to the fire, then sat next to her, rubbing her arms and shoulders. Avalon wasn't going to be a huge source of body heat herself, but she could help keep residual heat from escaping.

Betsy sighed, and started shivering as she warmed up. "I...Jesus, it's c-cold. I w-write romance novels. You know, swashbuckling pirates and shirtless Scotsmen. They're horrible, but the pay is decent."

Avalon smiling, leaning in against Betsy. "Oh, I love those!" she said. "They always fall in love, and it's perfect."

Betsy smiled ruefully. "Yeah, it's a great story, isn't it? Opposites attract. Beauty tames the Beast. But that's not really how it works, is it? I write the fantasy, not the reality."

Avalon sighed a bit, hugging the woman a bit closer. Betty didn't seem to mind and seemed to be getting more animated. Avalon said, quietly, "Well, what's wrong with a little fantasy? Sometimes it does us good to believe that it's possible — that things like soulmates and happy endings exist. It's good to have hope. Also, it's sexy."

Betsy chuckled and nodded, rubbing her hands together. "Ugh, everything's stinging. Yeah, it's definitely sexy. If they just love each other *hard enough*, everything will fall into place." Her nose was starting to run. "It's a bunch of crap, though."

"So why do you keep writing them when you sound like you dislike them so much?" Avalon asked. "Why do something if it doesn't make you happy?"

Betsy smirked, still shivering a bit. "Because I'm good at it. It pays. People buy it."

"So it makes other people happy?" Avalon asked.

Betsy tilted her head, and Avalon's heart skipped a beat. *Is it starting?* But all Betsy said was, "I suppose. But that doesn't mean it's healthy."

"Maybe you should write your next book to make you happy, then. What would you write about?" Avalon was struck by an urge to put her arms around the woman next to her, but instead sat back a bit, not wanting to cause her any more discomfort.

Betsy extracted herself enough to stand up. "I would write about the planets, I think. When I was young I wanted to be an astronaut. Not just an astronaut. Like, a pioneer in space, adventuring across the universe. It gives me a sense of urgency, I think, we have these short little lives and the distances between stars don't even fit into our heads." She stretched, the color coming back to her face. "I may love science fiction a bit too much."

Avalon tilted her head back and looked at Betsy, framed against the moonlit snow. She could see both of them clearly now, Betsy and Ysolte, flickering back and forth in the firelight. "You should write that story." Avalon said. "It's very human. I'll buy it."

Betsy nodded, coming back around to sit by Avalon. "Well, at least it sounds better than sexy mountain men, doesn't it?"

"I think so." Avalon wrapped her arm around Betsy's shoulders and propped them up against her backpack. "It's late. You should sleep. The fire should last the night now, and we'll get to the train station first thing in the morning."

Betsy said something, but Avalon wasn't listening, and before long Betsy was dozing off. Instead Avalon tended to the fire and watched the stars. She could almost imagine the story herself.

Almost.

• • •

Her dreams were full of ghosts.

All the people she'd met — the tattooed guy at Burning Man, the shopkeepers, the people who bought her art — they were all so vivid, and yet utterly out of reach.

He was there, begging her to be his muse, but he couldn't hear her protests.

Ysolte was there, trying to push everyone away, but she fell right through them. They never noticed her.

Avalon cried out for them, reaching out and never getting any closer. She panicked, scared that the world around her was dissolving — until she saw that she, too, was fizzling and fading. Then she wasn't afraid anymore, and let herself fade into mist to mingle with the rest of them.



Betsy woke her gently, taking one of Avalon's hands and rubbing it gently between her own. "Rise and shine, Avalon. It's morning."

Avalon blinked, surprised that she'd actually managed to doze off, let alone sleep so soundly. "It's after dawn. How did that happen?"

Betsy chuckled and kicked snow at the remnants of the fire. It was still going, but just barely. "Same as it does every day. We got some snow last night, so there's a bit of fresh powder to walk through. Do you think we'll be able to find our way back?"

Standing slowly, Avalon brushed the light dusting of snow from her legs and feet. "I remember how to get there. We'll be fine. Granola bar?"

"Sure." Betsy reached over and picked up Avalon's bag, rummaging absently. She pulled out one of the sketchbooks with the granola bar, arching a brow at Avalon. "What's this? Can I see?"

Avalon nodded, taking her pack back and retrieving the last bar for herself. "Sure. It's just some sketches."

"Just some sketches, eh?" Betsy was staring at the drawings, flipping through slowly. "These are...unreal." She paused for a long time on one page, flipped past, and then promptly flipped back. She didn't speak for several minutes, just staring at the page.

For a moment, Avalon froze. Something in the tone of Betsy's voice made her want to grab the book and bolt before something bad happened. She decided to wait, though, and see how this played out.

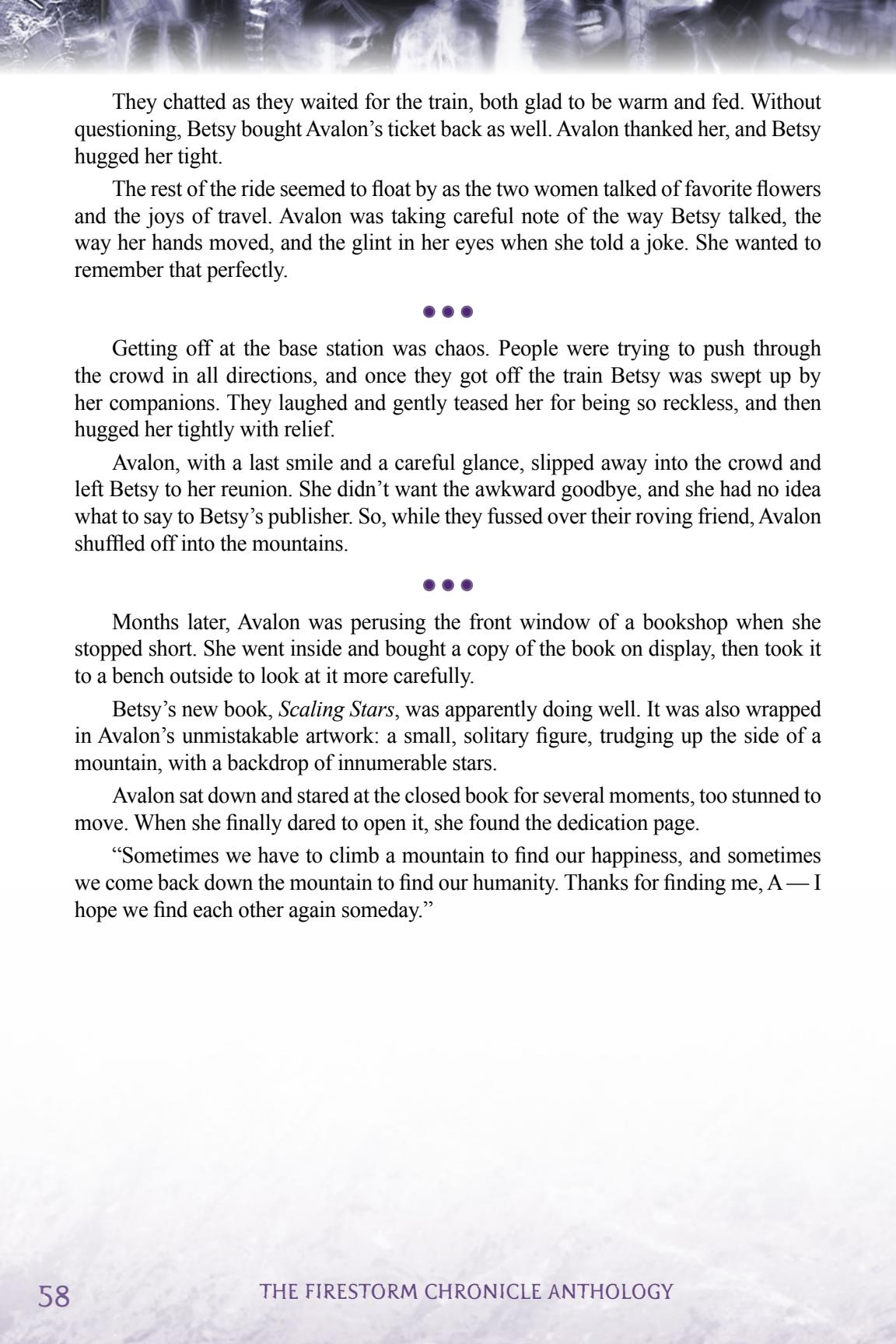
"Which one is that?" Avalon peeked forward to see, then smiled shakily. "I'm not surprised you like that one. Would you like it?"

Betsy nodded slowly, handing the book over. Avalon very carefully tore the page out and handed it over, and Betsy slid it carefully into her own pack. "I don't know how you do it. Those are incredible."

Avalon shrugged. "Guess it's just the way I'm made."



They didn't really speak after that, as they started their trek back up the mountain. It was nearly midday by the time they got to the station, and Betsy was visibly fatigued. She led Avalon into the little cafe and bought them both sandwiches and water.



They chatted as they waited for the train, both glad to be warm and fed. Without questioning, Betsy bought Avalon's ticket back as well. Avalon thanked her, and Betsy hugged her tight.

The rest of the ride seemed to float by as the two women talked of favorite flowers and the joys of travel. Avalon was taking careful note of the way Betsy talked, the way her hands moved, and the glint in her eyes when she told a joke. She wanted to remember that perfectly.



Getting off at the base station was chaos. People were trying to push through the crowd in all directions, and once they got off the train Betsy was swept up by her companions. They laughed and gently teased her for being so reckless, and then hugged her tightly with relief.

Avalon, with a last smile and a careful glance, slipped away into the crowd and left Betsy to her reunion. She didn't want the awkward goodbye, and she had no idea what to say to Betsy's publisher. So, while they fussed over their roving friend, Avalon shuffled off into the mountains.



Months later, Avalon was perusing the front window of a bookshop when she stopped short. She went inside and bought a copy of the book on display, then took it to a bench outside to look at it more carefully.

Betsy's new book, *Scaling Stars*, was apparently doing well. It was also wrapped in Avalon's unmistakable artwork: a small, solitary figure, trudging up the side of a mountain, with a backdrop of innumerable stars.

Avalon sat down and stared at the closed book for several moments, too stunned to move. When she finally dared to open it, she found the dedication page.

“Sometimes we have to climb a mountain to find our happiness, and sometimes we come back down the mountain to find our humanity. Thanks for finding me, A — I hope we find each other again someday.”

To Each Her Adam

BY MEGHAN FITZGERALD

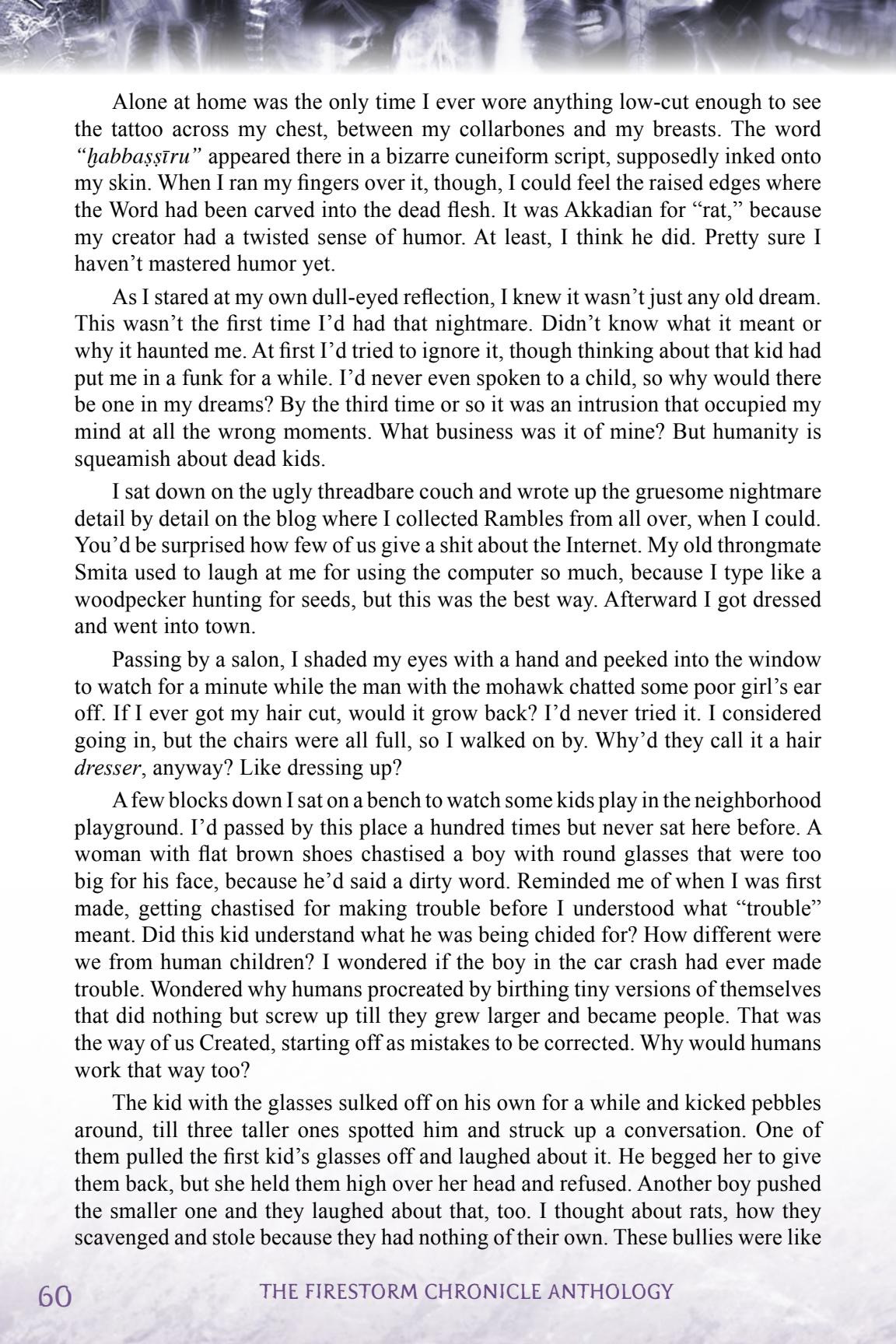
The tires on the hulking blue Ford pickup squealed against implacable asphalt. They filled her vision as the other driver swerved clumsily and the truck careened straight for her windshield at an angle. She shrieked a name and frantically churned the wheel to avoid plowing off the road and into the schoolyard beyond the curb. Horns blared in a screaming cacophony. Her passenger wailed a single word over and over again in terror, and then it all surrendered to the sickening crunch of metal destroying metal.

Shouts reached her from what seemed like a faraway place. She tried to open her eyes until she realized that they were already open, but the left one saw nothing and the right saw vague blurred shapes instead of the world she knew must have been there. The name she'd screamed came to her lips again as a desperate croak. She reached out a spasmodic hand toward the passenger seat, but the blur there wasn't moving. The last thought she had before the darkness swallowed everything was how she'd wanted to hear that single word one more time.

“Mom!”

I came awake the way I always did, battling with sleep to make it slink away back to wherever it came from. Waking up was too much like clawing my way out of that first mound of dirt, under the watchful eye of some winged marble statue, all over again.

I dragged myself to the tiny bathroom with its cracked puke-green tiles and gazed at myself under the flickering, droning fluorescent light. Could've fixed this place up, maybe, or hired someone to do it for me. But why bother? In the mirror, I saw two people. One had long, stringy blonde hair with dark roots, a squarish chin and too many embedded frown lines. The other was a hideous grey-skinned corpse streaked with mud that never came off no matter how many times I showered, lined with black veins. Bet you can't guess which I was fonder of.



Alone at home was the only time I ever wore anything low-cut enough to see the tattoo across my chest, between my collarbones and my breasts. The word “*habbaṣīru*” appeared there in a bizarre cuneiform script, supposedly inked onto my skin. When I ran my fingers over it, though, I could feel the raised edges where the Word had been carved into the dead flesh. It was Akkadian for “rat,” because my creator had a twisted sense of humor. At least, I think he did. Pretty sure I haven’t mastered humor yet.

As I stared at my own dull-eyed reflection, I knew it wasn’t just any old dream. This wasn’t the first time I’d had that nightmare. Didn’t know what it meant or why it haunted me. At first I’d tried to ignore it, though thinking about that kid had put me in a funk for a while. I’d never even spoken to a child, so why would there be one in my dreams? By the third time or so it was an intrusion that occupied my mind at all the wrong moments. What business was it of mine? But humanity is squeamish about dead kids.

I sat down on the ugly threadbare couch and wrote up the gruesome nightmare detail by detail on the blog where I collected Rambles from all over, when I could. You’d be surprised how few of us give a shit about the Internet. My old throngmate Smita used to laugh at me for using the computer so much, because I type like a woodpecker hunting for seeds, but this was the best way. Afterward I got dressed and went into town.

Passing by a salon, I shaded my eyes with a hand and peeked into the window to watch for a minute while the man with the mohawk chatted some poor girl’s ear off. If I ever got my hair cut, would it grow back? I’d never tried it. I considered going in, but the chairs were all full, so I walked on by. Why’d they call it a hair dresser, anyway? Like dressing up?

A few blocks down I sat on a bench to watch some kids play in the neighborhood playground. I’d passed by this place a hundred times but never sat here before. A woman with flat brown shoes chastised a boy with round glasses that were too big for his face, because he’d said a dirty word. Reminded me of when I was first made, getting chastised for making trouble before I understood what “trouble” meant. Did this kid understand what he was being chided for? How different were we from human children? I wondered if the boy in the car crash had ever made trouble. Wondered why humans procreated by birthing tiny versions of themselves that did nothing but screw up till they grew larger and became people. That was the way of us Created, starting off as mistakes to be corrected. Why would humans work that way too?

The kid with the glasses sulked off on his own for a while and kicked pebbles around, till three taller ones spotted him and struck up a conversation. One of them pulled the first kid’s glasses off and laughed about it. He begged her to give them back, but she held them high over her head and refused. Another boy pushed the smaller one and they laughed about that, too. I thought about rats, how they scavenged and stole because they had nothing of their own. These bullies were like

rats. I stalked across the warm blacktop and snatched the glasses from the girl's hand. They all stared up at me.

"Cut it out," I said, handing the glasses back to the boy who was squinting and blinking without them. A moment passed like a car with a flat tire dragging to a halt in the middle of the highway. "Well, go on!" I shouted at the bullies, feeling my hammering heartbeat. Hadn't talked to anybody in a good long while. Not people, I mean.

They bolted, while the boy with the glasses fired a piercing gaze at me. "Thanks," he said. "Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know," I replied, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets.

"Okay."

"What do you think you're doing?" The woman with the brown shoes came bustling over to put herself between the boy and me. She tilted her chin up at me. "You...you get away from him right now, or I'll call the police."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. My hands balled up into fists inside my jacket, holding onto some lifeline that didn't exist and trying to squeeze words out of it. Eventually I mumbled something that sounded like "sorry" and shuffled off. Behind me I heard the woman chastising her son again, this time for talking to creeps. I pictured the kid from the car crash, all blurry lines and blood and silence. Didn't seem right, telling off a kid just for talking to somebody, when she might not even get to see him grow large and become a person.



That night, I called Smita. When she picked up, her voice was its usual breathy crystal bell. "It's me," I said.

"Nicodema!" She laughed, like someone had given her a wonderful gift. That's my name, Nicodema. My creator told me that we were like the rats in that book, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. We don't belong with the real rats anymore, but we don't belong with the humans yet either. We broke out of our little mazes and now we have to have a Plan, so we don't become parasites on the world. So we can join the People Race. Nicodemus was a wise rat.

Her laughter died down immediately, though. "Is something wrong?"

"No," I assured her. "But can I stay with you? For a while?"

I told her about the dream, and about the schoolyard in it. Told her how I'd looked up the name of the school, and how I wanted to investigate the boy in the accident. Smita lived in a trailer park in South Carolina, and the school was only an hour or so from there.

"Well, sure," she said, "I'd love to have you. Do you think your nightmares are, you know. Important?" She whispered the last word, like someone would overhear her, even though she lived alone.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “I can’t stop thinking about it, so I figure if I find out more, I’ll find out *why*.”

She giggled. “That’s you all over.”

The next day the sun beat down like a blinding drum. I bought a bus ticket and sat in the back corner wearing huge sunglasses and too much clothing for the summer weather. Kept my mouth shut the whole ride, even when a couple of guys called me homeless and tried to get me kicked off the bus. Outside, the sun’s glare made it hard to see the long empty stretches of road punctuated by the occasional farm produce stand or billboard advertising fireworks and good times and Jesus. Not at the same time, of course.

The bus dropped me off someplace that was barely on any maps. I walked about twenty minutes to the car rental lot and then drove with the air conditioner blasting, past tree-dappled streets and strip malls with only one or two stores still open. I wondered what sorts of gaping, abandoned holes that used to be stores were hidden behind locked doors.

Smita hugged me when she saw me, with her spindly arms and smooth coffee-colored skin. She had to do it under my arms instead of around my shoulders, because she was so much smaller. Her hair hung in black ringlets down to her shoulders and her eyes were bright and warm like chocolate, but I could see that underneath the chocolate they looked more like glass marbles. I endured the hug as usual. She wasn’t mad about it though.

We took my rented Jeep out to Lake City and visited the mostly empty library there, to use the computer and find newspaper articles about boys killed in car crashes near Scranton Elementary School. After ten minutes Smita wandered away to look at magazines full of pretty skinny women, but eventually I found what I was looking for without her. “That’s him,” I said.

“Where?” She abandoned her magazine and came back to peer at the screen, resting her hands on my shoulders. “Oh, there you are,” she said to the photo. “That’s just awful, isn’t it? Look. Lucas Goodwin, and his mother Alice Goodwin.”

Alice. Lucas. The names sounded like gongs in my mind, cementing something into place. I remembered screaming the name *Lucas* and making my throat feel raw. I’d never screamed like that, not awake. Almost did it right then, just to see if I could hurt *my* throat that way, but the thought of drawing attention gave me that familiar painful, hollow feeling in my stomach so I didn’t.

“What now?” Smita asked, hopping up to sit on the table and swing her legs back and forth. “You found your dream people, did it tell you anything?”

“Not yet.”

She went back to her magazines and tried to strike up a conversation with a librarian while I poked around on the Internet. Lucas Goodwin had been a Boy Scout and had won some kind of fishing prize. There was a video of him pulling a shiny, wildly struggling fish out of a lake and smiling at the camera. He and Alice

posed for some pictures and then together they let the fish off the hook and put it back into the water. She smiled more than he did. Why was *she* so happy? She hadn't done anything special.

Later I let Smita buy me dinner, after she complained that it was uncouth of me to keep eating leaves all the time. She called me a giraffe. Easy for her to say, she had a real job. In exchange I made her tell me a Ramble, and she talked about the boy who had brought her flowers at the supermarket every day before she'd had to transfer to another store. She decided that flowers were a symbol of affection between humans because the bright colors made them happy. I pointed out that they also died quick, and she clammed up.

"I shouldn't have said that," I told her hours later, lying flat on my back in her bed with the white noise of cicada song drowning the night outside.

"Said what?" She rolled over to face me.

"About the flowers." She didn't say anything, so I filled up the silence. "You're the bravest one of us I know. You smile at people even when they don't smile back. Maybe especially then. So, I'm sorry."

"Nicodema...thank you." I turned my head and watched tears pool up behind her glass marbles. I nodded. She said, "Do you think you'll stay this time?"

"I don't know."

A little while later, slim arms wrapped around my waist. "Talk to me," Smita sighed, drowsy and warm against me. "Tell me a story." So I did.

• • •

...hulking blue Ford pickup...

"Mom!"

When I finally heaved my way back to groggy consciousness, dogs were barking outside, Smita was already at work and the trailer felt like it had been dumped into a volcano. Lucas Goodwin was still caterwauling in my head, louder than the sounds of shouting neighbors. Finding out who he was had turned up his volume. As I ate breakfast and showered and dressed, his voice bounced around in there. Thought if I didn't let him out somehow he'd explode.

My creator once told me that the best stories are the ones that just spilled out of somebody's pen because they wouldn't stay put. He said any creative work was like that, including us. That we exist because somewhere there were people who just couldn't keep the Divine Fire all bottled up inside anymore, and then we spilled out of their pens. He made us sound like some kind of miracle. I know enough about jokes to know that's a laugh.

His words came back to me then, though. I put on my sunglasses and went for a drive to the magistrate's office in Lake City. The heat baked through my jacket when I got out of the Jeep. Across the street, an abandoned motel hunched beside

an empty lot and power lines crawling with kudzu. I imagined the kudzu growing out of control and burying the town alive under a blanket of hungry green.

Inside I waited to be seen by the bland old man behind the counter even though no one else was there. Showed him my old PI license for the privilege of getting looked at like it was day-old bread and told I could find the burial records myself. Didn't thank him on my way out after, and he didn't tell me to have a nice day, because neither of us deserved it.

I used to be a detective, back when I was obsessed with what guilt was for. I was good at it, too, until somebody decided *I* was the criminal. Going to jail didn't explain anything I thought it might. Afterward I started taking other people's blame. A shortcut, I guess, to feeling like a rat without having to be one. Eventually, I broke into some lady's house, and after that I quit everything and left. Smita cried and chewed me out over the phone, but I didn't come back.

Driving on the highway again, I thought about what it would be like for him. Would it be the same as when I first woke up, choking on dirt in the pitch darkness and flailing like that fish wriggling on a Boy Scout's hook? I knew, just by knowing, that I couldn't skip the burial part. I'd have liked to do something else to make it less scary for a kid, maybe just splash him with mud. Kids like rolling around in the mud, right? But it felt wrong to think of it that way. Nothing would happen.

My palms were sweaty against the steering wheel. What if it didn't work? What if it *did*? Sure, I'd mentored some others before, but that's not being a mom. That's just telling stories. You can't fix a mistake as big as a kid just by telling stories. What the hell did I think I was doing? But I pulled into the wide, empty parking lot of the local Walmart anyway, bought a big garden shovel and a hundred pounds of modeling clay. A heavyset woman in a neon pink t-shirt cut in front of me in line at the checkout counter on the way out. I didn't stop her.

Lake City Memorial Park wasn't much of a park, just an expanse of flat tomb markers, some with flowers perching on top, scattered around a grassy plain the size of a football field. Out near the highway, a walkway led up to an open book made of stone — to welcome visitors, I guess — flanked by lampposts and a few waist-high angel statues. A little house and a trailer office marked the far end, with a gray pickup truck silently menacing passers-by from behind a tree. The truck suggested somebody was home, but I'd come this far. Could find him, at least, and then wait till nightfall.

I left the Jeep running and hopped down. Birdsong rang out over the graves from the trees lined up behind the cemetery, and the unforgiving hot air felt like a dreamy haze. A few mosquitoes buzzed around my head till they decided I didn't have what they wanted. What would happen if a mosquito drank my humour? Would it get sick, or die? Would it see a vision? I wondered if Elpis cared about insects.

Took me almost thirty minutes to find the tomb marker. It read, "In loving memory of LUCAS GOODWIN, beloved son. Rest in peace. You are dearly

missed.” My shadow blocked the sun’s glare from the polished stone of Lucas’ marker, but it reflected brightly on Alice’s beside it. I glanced around to fix the position in my mind for later. Wait, had that angel just moved? I squinted at it through my sunglasses. It was definitely shaking.

In fact, all of them were shaking. Then *I* was shaking. I didn’t have a gun on me, or a bat or anything. And I’d flushed the mix for breaking walls with my fist out of my system a long time ago. I took a slow, cautious step backward toward the Jeep. Maybe they weren’t fully awake. Took another one. Maybe they’d sense me leaving and hush back up again. Maybe—

Then I was running.

I heard them thudding against the book sculpture in their haste to turn stone to flesh, heard them tear across the grass. Heard their wheezing, heaving breaths and the earsplitting shriek of their claws scraping against polished headstones. Before I came within spitting distance of the Jeep, a heavy weight landed on my back and bore me to the ground. I grunted and jabbed backward with an elbow, but all I managed was to jam my arm directly into its oversized mouth. Couldn’t help crying out when it bit down with teeth like jagged knives. As I scrambled to my feet the thing didn’t let go. I dragged it along with me as I stumbled toward the car, my hair falling into my face.

On the other side of the park, the rumbling engine of the pickup started, but I couldn’t think about anything but escape. My right arm was dead weight. With a wordless, ragged shout, I sent my Pyros surging through my limbs. Panic and pain were briefly subsumed in the rush of power and I slammed the creature hard against the Jeep till its grip weakened. I slung it away, fighting dizziness as it flew and landed with a gurgling squeal.

Just as I grabbed the handle and threw open the driver’s side door, another one latched onto my leg and sank its teeth in. The truck was on its way now, and its growl fired frenzy in me. They had to stay away, away, *away*, had to get *away*. I hauled myself half into the driver’s seat and fumbled for the shovel in the backseat. A deafening *clang* and a warm splatter later, my leg was free. I pulled it inside and slammed the door, flattening grass and tearing up dirt to get the hell out of that cemetery.

I panted for breath and was glad the highway was deserted, because I know I didn’t obey any signs or anything for a good long while on that drive. My jacket was stained black all up and down the right arm, and when I got back to Smita’s trailer I staggered into the tiny bathroom and plopped myself down on the toilet seat cover, dripping bile all over the linoleum.

I’d planned to clean myself up and take a bath with a hair dryer or something, but the next thing I knew the sun was setting outside the little shower window and a musical, breathy voice was saying, “Nicodema? Nicodema! What happened?”

“This is crazy,” I muttered. My head felt heavy. “Smita, I can’t do this.”

“...do what?” She began to gingerly pull my jacket off. “Why don’t you start from the very beginning, while I...” Then she saw my arm under the denim. “...while I...”

“I was gonna make a kid,” I said dully. “Lucas Goodwin, you know? Only not him, a new one. But they were there. Waiting for me.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” she said, because that’s what people say. She opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out a fork. “You mean, there were...those monsters? What did you call them?”

“Pandorans.” Didn’t even twitch when she started dabbing a wet washcloth at the bite. “That’s what the Rambles say. It’s too much. I could never protect him, not from all the rats.”

“Um...” Smita didn’t say anything else till my wounds were clean, and then she knelt in a puddle of black fluid and took my hand, folding my fingers around the fork. “Nicodema, listen to me. Whatever happened, it’s over now. And I’m here. I can take off from work tomorrow, we can...we can make a child together.”

“No!” I snapped. She winced. “What’s the point? So he can learn all about how screwed we are? Learn how to live like a pathetic animal? How to turn his back on all the scavengers and predators because there’s nothing he can do? Or even better, *be* one? It’s so easy.”

“That’s not—”

“Don’t tell me that’s not true!” I jerked my hand out from under hers, flung the fork away. I slammed my open palm into the bile-covered floor, feeling Pyros pulse through me, and offered it to her forcefully, jabbing it toward her face. “We’re just monsters, Smita! I’ll *show* you how true it is! Taste it!”

She shook her head, her perfect curls bouncing, chocolate eyes open wide as she pulled away. “No. Nicodema, please—”

“*Do it!*” I growled, surging forward to push her up against the sink. I held my hand up to her mouth like she was a dog chewing something she shouldn’t. She shuddered, sobbed once, cupped my humour-slick hand in both of hers with her stupid feather-gentle touch. She shut her eyes and bowed her head to close her mouth over my palm, her warm tongue lapping up my blood.

I knew what she was seeing when she went still, gazing at a faraway place. My pain, my rage. The freakish mis-creations, all claws and ravenous appetite. The disdainful eyes of people, everywhere I went. All the bullies on the playground that was the world. My helplessness. My incomprehension. Maybe things were different for her, I didn’t know. I only knew that for all I’d learned about myself, I still couldn’t see the light past the rats.

By the time she drew her mouth away and looked up at me, tears were dripping down her cheeks. She sniffled and wiped her lips with the back of her hand idly. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

I sat back against the toilet, my own hand dropping into my lap. “You’re sorry.”

“Yes.” She leaned forward to rest her forehead against mine, to look me in the eye. I wanted to crawl back into my mound of dirt and sleep there till I woke up as someone else. “You’re always taking on the world and doing it alone.”

“Well, I’m done.”

“No you’re *not!*” she snapped, her fingers lashing out to wrap around my wrist like a claw, like she thought I was about to just vanish. For a second I thought there was panic in her eyes, but that didn’t make sense. More gently, she repeated, “No, you’re not.” Her claw turned back into delicate fingers and she touched my cheek. “You’re only just getting started. Make a child. I’ll be with you. This is something you’re meant to do.”

“And how do you know that?” I thought it would come out condescending. Instead it sounded like a plea.

She smiled. “You showed me. So...don’t leave me, okay?”

“Okay.”

• • •

The next week flew by in a blur of washing dishes and blogging. Told Smita I wasn’t about to freeload forever, so I took to doing chores around the trailer while she went to work. Every night we sat out beside the fresh grave behind the trailer park, where we’d buried the half-decayed corpse that I’d carefully filled in with modeling clay to make it look like a whole human body again. It — no, he — had a word written in permanent ink mixed with my black bile on his tongue, charged up with my Azoth, all the way it was supposed to be.

“A watched pot won’t boil,” Smita told me one night, as I got up to head out again.

“Well, he’s not a pot,” I said.

“Why are you so impatient?” She stirred her sweet tea with a straw, the ice cubes clinking together. “The dreams stopped, right?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe—”

Thump. Thump. On the door of the trailer, like someone without arms awkwardly knocking.

My heart started making a noise a lot like that too as I turned toward it. I’d taken two steps when a childlike voice said, “Mom.”

I froze and looked at Smita. She was grinning ear-to-ear and shooing me toward the door, but something made me hesitate. “Go,” she mouthed at me.

Had my hand wrapped around the handle when it hit me. He shouldn’t have been talking yet.

“No,” I whispered, and then we heard it again. “Mom.” Only this time, it came from the back. I snatched my hand away from the door handle like it was red hot.

Thump.

“Mom.” Outside the kitchen.

“Mom.” On the roof.

“Mom.” Through the shower window.

Thump. Thump.

“...Nicodema?” Smita’s voice shook.

“No,” I said, louder this time. “No, no no no no no no!” I hurled a lamp with all my strength and it shattered against the wall. “He was mine, he was *mine!*”

“Um...” She stood up, looking like a fish in a tank of circling sharks, as the mindless chorus rose outside.

“Mom.” “Mom.”

“I *made* him!” I dug my fingernails into the wallpaper and clawed through it pointlessly. “I dreamed and labored and *bled* for him, he was mine and they took him away from me...”

“S-stop it, you’re scaring me.”

“Shut up!”

Thump. Thump. Crash.

The side window exploded into shards. I stalked over and thrust my hand through the jagged hole, closing it around thrashing, oozing flesh. Pyros boiled up inside me like a searing white pain, begging to be unleashed. So I unleashed it.

The jolt of electricity threw the jittering thing away, and it bounced in the dirt, sizzling. The demented refrain became more urgent, like they wondered why I’d hurt them but had only that one word to express their sorrow. I caught a glimpse of too many eyes as the sour stench of burnt meat twisted in the air.

I’d had enough.

• • •

I was slumped in the middle of a smoking pile of twitching, incomprehensible shapes when Smita found me. She had a long kitchen knife clutched in one fist. She bled from several angry rents in her perfect mocha latte skin.

“I’m so—”

“Sorry. I know.” My voice came out hoarse. My throat felt raw after all. How about that.

“It’s okay—”

“Quit it with the platitudes. Say something original for once in your life.”

“Fine.” She wiped gooey black fluid from the knife onto her shirt. “I’m worried about you.”

“Well, I’m not your problem anymore.” I stood and stretched. The air smelled like ozone and passion and guilt. That searing pain bubbling in my Pyros had dulled to a slow burn just beneath the surface, but it wasn’t gone. “I gotta get out of here.”

“What? Why? Where are you going?”

“Somewhere else.” I plucked the knife from her hand as I brushed past her. “Done enough self-absorbed bullshit. Told enough stories.”

She caught up to me and grabbed my shoulder, spun me around. “What, that’s it? You fail one time and you’re just done?”

“Not done. Just getting started. That’s what you said, right? Let go of me, Smita.”

She ignored me. “Don’t leave me again. It’s not fair. I can *help* you!”

“Get off!” I shoved her hard and she tumbled off her feet. The naked shock in her eyes impaled me, but my mind seethed with crackling indignation and I couldn’t apologize. “No more bullies, no more moochers, no more rats, you understand?”

“Then I’ll come with—”

“Don’t.” I turned around and kicked a bloody something out of my path as I took a step.

“Nicodema, stop—”

“Leave me alone.” It was a distended head. Its tongue lolled out like a ribbon. On it was written, “*Hope.*”

I passed under a flickering streetlight while she screamed my name. “Don’t leave me! *Don’t leave me!*”

But I didn’t come back.



Brothers

BY ANDREW ATRAMOR

I slammed Will Ledley against the wall of his pawn shop. My hand was pressed firmly under his chin. I was sure he could feel the lattice of scars on my fingers. I held off on choking him, though. Will had been working for me and he had information I wanted; it had taken a full month of petty theft to get him the money he asked for. But I needed him to think I might hurt him.

“What haven’t you been telling me?” It was a calm question. I pressed my face close to his and wondered if he could see the stitch-marks around my lips.

Simon leaned over my shoulder. His bloodshot blue eyes darted all over Ledley’s face. The boy was healing up good; he’d been bruised and bloodied when I found him, surrounded by screaming meth heads. I felt bad for him. He had no friends, nowhere else to go. I don’t often feel bad for people, so I let him stay with me. It was getting to be time to cut him loose though. “He’s holding back,” said the kid. He gave Will a little punch in the gut. People who spend any time with me tend to get violent.

Ledley’s Pawn was a tiny store sandwiched between a Brooks Pharmacy and one of those places that cashes checks. It was close to midnight and nobody gave two shits about what happened in that part of town. All the parts of Providence I felt comfortable in were like that.

“Nothing. I haven’t been holding back anything,” said Will. I pressed my hand just a fraction of an inch closer to his throat. “Well, okay, some things, but you have to understand, you aren’t the first person to ask me about that fucking gun. The thing has been a headache since you brought it to me, and now the cops want to know where I got it. Wolfe, come on, we’re friends. You don’t have to do this.” My hand trembled at the word “friend” and I dropped him. I didn’t want to accidentally fry his nervous system.

“I could snap your neck like a dry biscuit, asshole. We’re not friends. I paid you for information. You think a guy like me has a day job? Tell me what you learned and we can start over again, civil.” He glanced at a manila folder resting unceremoniously under a blunt replica of a samurai sword.

“Christ, thank you. Jeez, you need to relax. Take up yoga or something.”

Simon strummed a guitar he’d found on the wall. It sounded like crap to me.

Ledley winced. “Does he have to play with that? It’s antique.”

“Don’t change the subject,” I said.

Will spit out a hunk of phlegm and nodded. “The gun. So. I talked to a cop friend of mine, ran the serial number by him. And you know what he told me? That gun you have is wanted in a murder investigation.”

My head felt itchy, and my left hand idly stroked the cool metal of the handgun in my pocket. “What else?”

“Do you remember that shootout that happened on Fifth, like, nine months ago? The one where six idiots decided to kill each other in broad daylight?”

I knew nothing before my birth. Nine months earlier I had been a bunch of cold body parts until somebody decided to sew them all together. “I remember. It belonged to one of them?”

“Worse,” said Will. “If it was just that, it’d be a loose widget in a crime everybody says is solved. No, the problem is, your gun was used six hours before that, in the murder of Nancy Weiss. In North Attleboro.”

I saw her. In my head, I mean. Blond hair on a not-really-pretty face. Her voice was coarse, like sandpaper on your skin. “How do the cops know it was *this* gun?”

“The fuck is that,” said Simon. He was staring out the small, barred window above the front door, guitar dropped hastily on the ground. An orange glow lit up his face.

“Will, you stay here. This’ll just be a minute.”

“Fine with me,” Ledley said. “Should I call the cops?”

“No cops,” said Simon.

It was a fire. Not a big fire. Just a trashcan, placed directly in front of the door. I could smell the faint odor of gasoline. Another tremor ran through my hand and this time a spark jumped between my fingers. The door jingled as we stepped out onto the dead street. Not so much as a dog barking.

“Holy shit, that stinks,” exclaimed Simon. “Who the fuck does something like this?”

I looked at the fire and thought — something wasn’t right. When people say they can feel their hair stand up, I have no idea what they mean. My body is completely hairless. One more check in the “not-normal” column. Whatever process put me back together fried all of it off. But right then I could feel a tingling feeling run down my spine. It felt like somebody rammed a car battery into my back.

At that moment, the front window of Ledley's Pawn exploded like somebody had thrown a cinder block out of it. A hunk of leathery gray flesh the size of a cat landed ten feet from us and scampered down the sidewalk. It had something with it — in its hand, if you could call two folds of skin a hand. Will's manila envelope. I ran after it, but the damn thing was fast. It ducked under a parked car. Simon pulled ahead of me and the two of them turned down a narrow alleyway. By the time I caught up, I saw the boy on his knees, one arm tucked under a big green dumpster.

"That's not a good idea," I shouted at him, but the thing must have latched onto his arm. He let out a big slew of curses and screamed. I pulled at his legs, trying to get him free, but his shoulder popped and I was worried the arm would dislocate.

"Stop! The fucking thing is gonna rip my arm off!"

I grabbed the dumpster and tried to lift it. My back muscles struggled and my arms wobbled. I knew I could probably lift it, could probably force the muscles to burn and twist with the right combination of concentration and effort, but the bone-crunching sounds were getting worse. I nodded and felt a surge of tremors in my left hand. "Hold on. This is going to feel like sticking your tongue in an outlet."

My hand lit up like an arcing power line. Simon didn't notice what I was doing but he sure as hell noticed when I put my palm against his back. A jolt of blue-black energy shot out through his body. Normal people are pretty fragile, in my experience, so I tried to take it easy on him. I only gave him a second of juice, just enough (I hoped) to fry the little asshole that had him. In any case, it let go, and I pulled Simon free. He stammered and caught his breath, the smell of cooked flesh wafting over the odor of hot garbage. I pushed the dumpster slowly aside. Underneath was a small drainage grate, a puddle of black sludge, and Will's manila envelope. I tucked it under one arm and slid against the ally wall.

Simon caught his breath, lying on the ground like he'd been shot. "What the fuck was that?"

"Car battery," I said. His expression told me he didn't believe me, but I didn't have time to explain. "We should see how Will is doing."

Will Ledley wasn't doing very well at all. His face had been caved in with a blunted samurai sword. Bits of bone were scattered around the floor of the pawnshop. Simon stepped outside to vomit.

"You think that little dog thing did this?" he asked, shouting at me from outside the shop.

"I don't think so," I said, leaning over the body. Whatever had done it had been strong. It didn't look like Will had put up much of a struggle — he'd been whacked once, maybe twice. The sword was cracked at the hilt and blood pooled all over the cement ground. In my head I saw her again — Nancy — and I saw a

pool of blood like this on a hardwood floor. I shook my head and stood up. "We should get out of here. The cops might actually be interested in this one."

• • •

My latest home was an abandoned garage, a little workshop with a broken neon sign out front that just said "MANNY'S AUTO" in all capital letters. The place reeked of motor oil and was filled with old trash when I moved in. Simon found a generator in the basement that he got going, and we got the place cleaned up. It would have been almost comfortable, had it not been for the cats. Whole gangs of them. They stayed outside and fought each other. Some mornings we'd go out and find a few dead ones.

"You still haven't told me what you did back there." He stared at me, waiting for an answer.

I buried my face in the manila envelope. An anonymous someone had sent the police some amateur ballistics tests, my Glock's serial number, pictures, and most importantly, a name. Russell Weiss. The whole thing was noted as "highly suspicious" but the police were following up the lead all the same. Nancy Weiss — husband to Russell Weiss — had been murdered nine months ago, just before my "rebirth." Russell was presumed dead too, several witnesses said he died in the Fifth Street shootout, but nobody found the body. I had a pretty good idea of where it was. Parts of it, anyway.

Simon frowned. "Are you a robot or something? Military experiment? What?"

"Honestly, Simon, I have no idea. I woke up in a dark room nine months ago with nothing but this gun and a wallet stuffed with cash. I'm just a guy with a memory problem." Except that wasn't true either. I remember waking up in pain, all my parts screaming in confused rage. I stumbled into the night, mostly naked. Trial and error was my only friend, until I found Leanne, and that had earned me a new scar on my chest.

He seemed to notice my mood. "Anything useful in there?"

"Yeah. Nancy Weiss' address. She's dead, but I figure I can talk to her neighbors, see if anybody remembers me. We should get going tonight, too. In case the cops get onto us about Will's murder."

"Hell man, I'm tired," he groaned. "We can go in the morning. Get us a bus or something. Nobody saw anything, we're safe."

"No bus. We have the Buick." I said.

Simon grimaced. "That thing is a piece of shit," he said, and spat. "Better off with the bus."

"We're taking the Buick," I said. The last thing I wanted was to be on a bus surrounded by strangers for a few hours. He made one final plea and then started to pack his clothes. I watched him as he folded his clothes, occasionally stopping to kick his dresser. He almost never swore when we first met. The scar on my chest was getting itchy again.



The Buick was a piece of shit. It chugged along no faster than thirty and shuddered every time I hit the brakes. Simon clutched the seat belt, white-knuckled, as we lurched along on Route 1 headed north. He was pensive, and he could tell something was wrong, but he didn't say anything. I was happy about that. I really didn't feel like explaining anything more to him than I had to. The incident with the dumpster and the excessive voltage had left him distrustful. It wouldn't be long.

We stopped at a shitty motel not far from the Massachusetts border, the kind of place people go with hookers. Forty or so units surrounded an unkempt parking lot, and the whole place sat across the street from some sort of junkyard — I could see school buses, broken cars, and jagged metal behind a tall fence with barbed wire. The caretaker took my money, but I could tell he thought I had some perverted ideas about Simon. I kept my trembling hand under control and took the room key with gritted teeth.

I was outside when the sun came up. Near as I can tell I need as much sleep as anybody else does, but there wasn't going to be any for me that night. Between the coming ordeal and what we'd already been through, my brain was humming like it had the first time I'd opened my eyes. Images were coming back. Some of them were my own. Some of them were somebody else's.

I saw Nancy Weiss on the ground again, bleeding onto the hardwood floor. I saw the gun, in my own hand, trembling. And I saw Leanne's knife an inch deep in my chest. The memories were sharp, fresh, and visceral. I left a little note on the desk next to Simon's snoring head and got in the car. I sat in the back of the Buick for the rest of the night, trying not to puke.

The sky was the color of dried vomit when I saw him. He was less than five feet tall and I could see he wasn't wearing much of anything — a ratty brown hoodie full of holes and a pair of corduroys two sizes too large on his tiny frame. The skin I could see — just his face and his left hand, clutched to his chest — was a pale gray color. His eyes were dark brown like my own and he smiled a wide smile the entire trip from the junkyard to my side. I didn't try to stop him, just raised my hand and waved. There was no question. He was like me, sewn together from different parts and held together with something unknowable. I felt paralyzed.

When he got close to me — maybe three feet away — he stopped.

“Hello, brother,” he said.

“Who the fuck are you?” I stood up. He flinched from me, like I'd thrown a baseball at him.

“Don't you remember me? I was there for you when our creator was not.”

I shrugged. “I don't remember much of anything. You're... you're like me, aren't you?”

“Yes,” he said, and stepped a little closer. That shiver went through my spine again. “The same one made both of us. We were sewn together from corpses, you and I, and now there’s only one real difference between us.”

“What? Is it that you’re crazy?”

“I’ve given up on them, Wolfe. They hate us. You’ve seen what they do to us when given a chance. Do you want to walk that path forever? Watching instead doing? Acting out the same sad story of abandonment and rescue? That’s why you came here, isn’t it? The next sad chapter in a life that isn’t even your own?”

I thought about Simon punching Will Ledley in the gut. I thought about how my first trip to a grocery store had ended up with me thrown out into the street. “People are all right. We make them a little uncomfortable, I guess.”

“You don’t make them uncomfortable,” said the corpse-man. “You’re *wrong* to them. You remind them of their wasted potential and all the ways they’ve squandered their lives. You are a just a deformed thing, pitied at best. You can’t be a part of that world. Be a part of ours. Come with me and I can show you what it means to be remade.”

He sounded fucking ridiculous, but I wanted to go with him. From the moment I woke up I knew I was broken. The scars were fresh then — on my wrists, on my stomach, on my legs, my whole body a mess of scars — and the only thing I knew I had to do was *eat something* and *walk*. My first 48 hours were chaos. I couldn’t form words. I didn’t know up from down. If it hadn’t been for Leanne I would have wandered into traffic. “Who made us? What are we? Tell me *something*. I’ve come this far and I’ve barely learned anything.”

“I knew him, yes,” he said. His voice seemed tense. “He has left us both, I’m afraid. But I know someone who can answer your questions. Someone better. I can take you to him. He told me to find you.”

I cocked my head. There was something excited and obsessed in his eyes. I didn’t trust it. “I need time to think about it.”

“The boy hates you. Or is going to hate you. You know it. Have you forgotten the incident with the woman? The one who stabbed you?”

Leanne. “How the hell do you know about her?”

“My master told me many things, Wolfe. I can teach you everything you need to know. How to grow. How to leave the flesh behind. You just have to trust me. And keep an open mind.” He extended his hand toward me. The fingernails were black. His hand looked *greedy*.

“No,” I said. “I have to think —”

“There’s nothing to think about!” He wagged one of his long, yellowed fingers at me. “You are lost, alone. You aren’t trying to help these urchins — you’re trying to help yourself! And you’ll drive them all mad before you’re done with them. *She stabbed you while you were sleeping*. How long until the boy does the same?”

The scar in my chest throbbed. Tremors ran through my hand. I wanted very much to hit him. Instead I pushed his hand away. “Get the fuck out of here. I don’t want to see you again.”

“You are making a mistake. There is a power in you that could be used for *good*. You could be one of his Chosen. He’s an *angel*, Wolfe.”

“Get. Out.” I took a step forward and he did a little mock bow. He ran off, though, shuffling awkwardly away on his misshapen legs. I wanted to chase him down and crush his little head. Instead I got in the Buick, turned over the engine, and drove the opposite way. I left Simon behind, even as I saw the boy run out into the parking lot waving his hands above his head. I had left him my wallet, with the last of my money, and a little note that said, “Sorry. Please go someplace nice.”

• • •

Sunrise Apartments was ugly. It shared the street with a bunch of near-identical mill houses. Tall, three-story shitheaps with peeling paint and non-functional balconies. Each little cluster had some stupid name. Sunrise. Hope. Freedom. They were all junk though, all of them, and they all looked like home.

Nobody wanted to buzz me into the building. I tried all three floors. Only the guy in Unit 1 even answered me, and he shut me down after one question. “I don’t know who you are,” he said, “and I don’t want to. I’m gonna call the cops unless you get out of here.” I ignored him and gave the door a little jolt. It popped open as easy as that.

I knew Nancy’s apartment — my apartment, maybe — had been on the third floor. It was a winding staircase, too crammed for more than one person to fit up at a time. I had to stoop a little. I could smell the place before I got to it. It was a hundred conflicting scents. Dust. Decay. Soup. Spices. The landing was strewn with stuff. A rusted bike. A shovel, still covered in earth. A knee-high stack of newspapers. I knocked on the door.

When it opened, an ancient, wizened head poked through the crack. The man had a friendly-looking face and a smile that looked a little too big for his head. He waved me in. “Come in, come in. No sense waiting in the hall.”

The smell inside was much stronger. Earthy. The man was a hoarder. Piles of newspapers on every surface. On the windowsills, on the kitchen table, the counters, on the floors. There were dirty pots and pans stacked high in the sink. He sat down at the table — behind another stack of papers — and sipped a cup of tea. I felt like I was in a dream. Everything about the apartment was familiar. I knew that through one door I’d find the living room, though I doubted he still had my blue couch or my old static tube television. I remembered it. The way the sunlight came through the drapes, the way the floor creaked. The huge dark stain on the kitchen-nook floor.

“You’re Russell Weiss,” he said calmly. “I almost couldn’t tell at first, but it’s there, in your face. You look like you’ve been through hell.”

That got my attention. “How do you know me?”

“I’m the landlord,” he replied. “Real shame what happened to your wife. It couldn’t be helped, though. Not the way you two were headed.” He must have seen my shock and just shrugged. “Everybody knew what you were up to, Russ. You hated your job at the office. You started driving all that coke and whatever else into the city. It was only a matter of time before you started selling. Nancy was hollering for a house — I guess you were real desperate for cash. Only, I think Nancy didn’t approve, eh? Can’t be helped. Man has to do what he has to do.”

“I don’t remember,” I said. “I don’t remember any of that.” *The blood on the floor. “I woke up after she died.” My trembling hand.*

The man chuckled. “You went off the deep end. You shot her, and then you went into town and got yourself killed too. Maybe it was all an accident, I don’t know. But you did it.”

“Who the fuck are you?” The gun was in my hand — my *good* hand, my right hand — before I even knew what I was doing. The left trembled uncontrollably, like it was on fire.

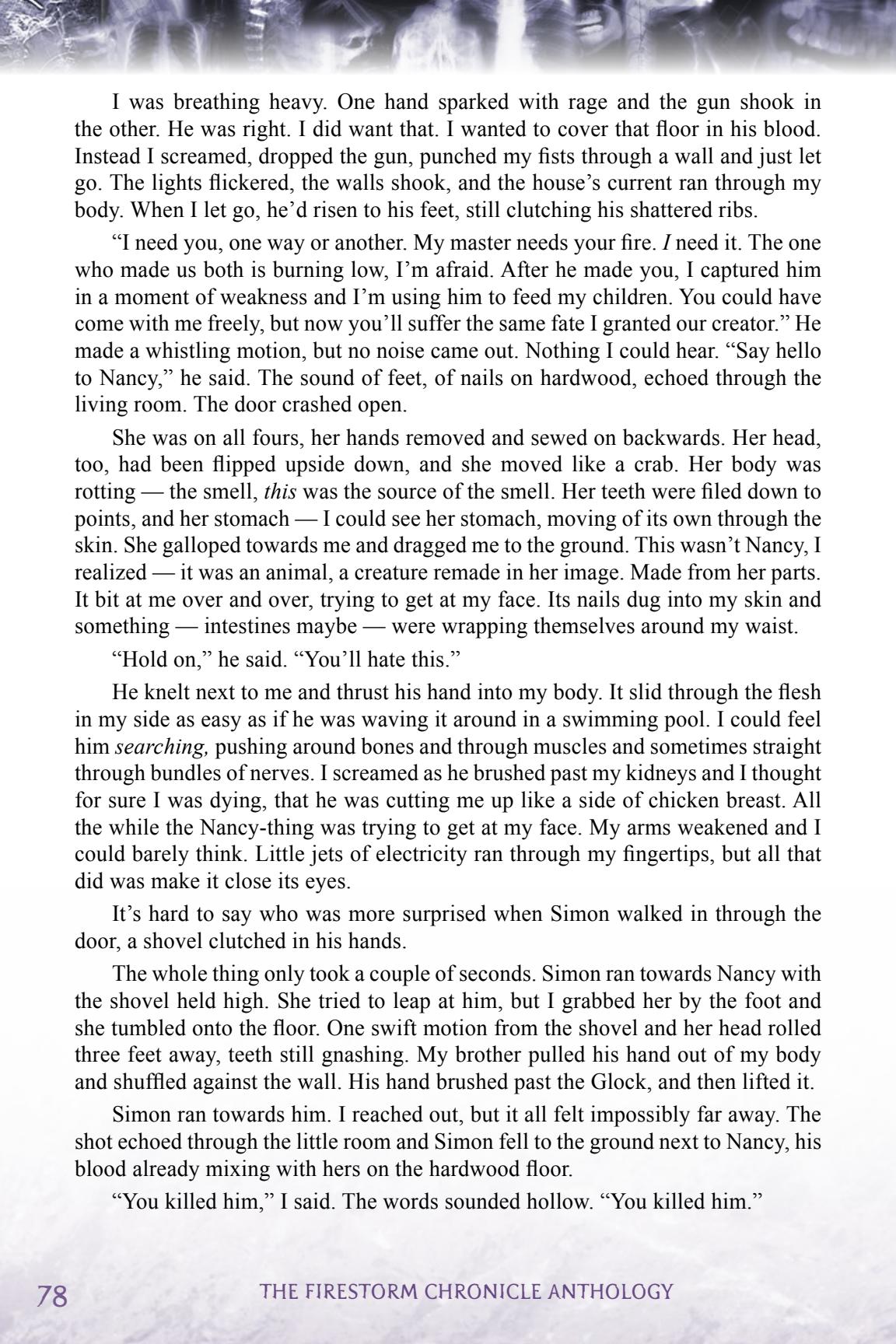
“The real question is — who are you? Are you somebody who killed his wife because she found out you were dealing drugs? Are you somebody who kills an old man because he can’t deal with a little harsh truth?” He beat his fist against his chest. “Answer me! You can’t just pretend you don’t hear me.”

I fired the gun. I wasn’t aiming for him; I just shot it, blind rage, straight out the window above his head. The glass shattered and I rushed him, flipping the table. I pressed him against the wall with my left hand under his chin. Globs of his skin sloughed away and revealed a gray, scaly hide underneath.

“You’re a monster,” said my brother. “You’re a dumb brute, but I could educate you. Do you see now — this is who you were! As a human, you were scum. A murderer, a drug dealer, and a coward. I didn’t want you to find out this way, but that’s the truth.”

I threw him down on the ground and howled. I kicked him, yelled at him. I was incoherent. He curled up into a small ball and laughed. He was laughing, even as I crushed his ribs under my stolen boots. “What’s so fucking funny!”

“You’re just proving me more right with every passing moment,” he said. “Are these the thanks I get? That was my money you found in that factory, it was me that gave you that gun, but I never thought you’d chase it this far. You were supposed to be the good son, you know. Our maker, he thought of me as a mistake. But now here we are. Would you like to hurt me more? Would it please you to snap my neck? To let the fire of your Azoth burn through my body until my eyes popped?”



I was breathing heavy. One hand sparked with rage and the gun shook in the other. He was right. I did want that. I wanted to cover that floor in his blood. Instead I screamed, dropped the gun, punched my fists through a wall and just let go. The lights flickered, the walls shook, and the house's current ran through my body. When I let go, he'd risen to his feet, still clutching his shattered ribs.

"I need you, one way or another. My master needs your fire. *I* need it. The one who made us both is burning low, I'm afraid. After he made you, I captured him in a moment of weakness and I'm using him to feed my children. You could have come with me freely, but now you'll suffer the same fate I granted our creator." He made a whistling motion, but no noise came out. Nothing I could hear. "Say hello to Nancy," he said. The sound of feet, of nails on hardwood, echoed through the living room. The door crashed open.

She was on all fours, her hands removed and sewed on backwards. Her head, too, had been flipped upside down, and she moved like a crab. Her body was rotting — the smell, *this* was the source of the smell. Her teeth were filed down to points, and her stomach — I could see her stomach, moving of its own through the skin. She galloped towards me and dragged me to the ground. This wasn't Nancy, I realized — it was an animal, a creature remade in her image. Made from her parts. It bit at me over and over, trying to get at my face. Its nails dug into my skin and something — intestines maybe — were wrapping themselves around my waist.

"Hold on," he said. "You'll hate this."

He knelt next to me and thrust his hand into my body. It slid through the flesh in my side as easy as if he was waving it around in a swimming pool. I could feel him *searching*, pushing around bones and through muscles and sometimes straight through bundles of nerves. I screamed as he brushed past my kidneys and I thought for sure I was dying, that he was cutting me up like a side of chicken breast. All the while the Nancy-thing was trying to get at my face. My arms weakened and I could barely think. Little jets of electricity ran through my fingertips, but all that did was make it close its eyes.

It's hard to say who was more surprised when Simon walked in through the door, a shovel clutched in his hands.

The whole thing only took a couple of seconds. Simon ran towards Nancy with the shovel held high. She tried to leap at him, but I grabbed her by the foot and she tumbled onto the floor. One swift motion from the shovel and her head rolled three feet away, teeth still gnashing. My brother pulled his hand out of my body and shuffled against the wall. His hand brushed past the Glock, and then lifted it.

Simon ran towards him. I reached out, but it all felt impossibly far away. The shot echoed through the little room and Simon fell to the ground next to Nancy, his blood already mixing with hers on the hardwood floor.

"You killed him," I said. The words sounded hollow. "You killed him."

“You killed her.” His mouth snapped at me when he talked like an impotent bear trap. “You killed Nancy when she was your wife. We’re both murderers now.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t. I didn’t kill her. I’m not Russell Weiss. Maybe I have Russell’s brain or Russell’s hand, I don’t know; but he isn’t me. I’m Wolfe. Simon was friends with *me*, not Russell. *Me*.”

“You’ll never be friends with them, not in a million years. Only with your own kind can you ever hope to find peace. Come with me, I swear, and my Master —”

I closed my eyes and let it roll through me. It was a kind of fire, I guess. Azoth, he called it. It shot from my fingers, as strong as a lightning bolt, and seared him where he sat. He didn’t even finish his sentence. When I was done his skin had turned from pale-gray to gray-black, his mouth still twisted into a too-wide grin.



I spent two more days in North Attleboro, but I stayed away from any place particularly populated. The police called it a double homicide, which meant my brother was still loose. It’s a fact I’ll have to remember next time, though one I wasn’t surprised to discover — after all, I’d survived a stab clean through my heart.

On the third day I turned north, towards Boston, going on foot. Simon’s death hit me hard. I left the Buick behind, as much because it was a liability as because it reminded me of Simon. It was my fault he came back for me — I’d forgotten the envelope in the hotel room, the one we got from Ledley. I’ll never know if he would have become like Leanne, broken and wild, but I do think of him as my friend. People aren’t all bad.

I stopped at a gas station near Dedham and ran a shock through the vending machine. Four bottles of water rolled out, which I quickly stuffed in my backpack. I was going to turn back towards Route 109, but I heard something from behind the back of the gas station. My brain started humming.

There were three barrels of trash back there, all of them placed in a nice orderly row. The brick wall of the building was thick with graffiti — it was just a mess of tags, half-scrawled names and crude pictures. One symbol stood out to me, though, a figure surrounded by flames. It was poorly painted, but I could make out the important features. It was big, with black wings that stretched above its head. It had no face — just a jumble of lines where the face should be. Near its feet were a dozen tiny people, all of them burning.

I took a gulp of water. “Fuck,” I said, and turned back towards the highway. My brother’s words haunted me. “*He’s an angel. He needs your fire.*” I huddled deeper into my coat and stared at the graffiti angel, suddenly feeling very alone.

Love is Action

BY MATTHEW MCFARLAND

Father: The priest smeared ash in a rough cross on her forehead, and I watched. I thought about getting up and going to receive the sacrament, but I was afraid. I was afraid the ashes would burn into my flesh, that the priest would touch me and scream “Unclean!” I was afraid of the parishioners getting up *en masse* and burning me out on the church lawn. They wouldn’t. They didn’t. None of that would happen. I knew this. My fears were irrational and stupid. That I *had* these fears excited me, because it meant I might be becoming human.

My son touched my arm and nodded across the aisle. I glanced over, and I saw a man holding a baby. The baby was not quite a year old, I guessed, and the man was perhaps in his 30s, but I am a bad judge of age with respect to adults. My son watched, fascinated, as the man rubbed his lips and nose across the top of the baby’s head. The baby had a quiet, glazed stare on his face (I assumed “his” based on the clothes, though I reminded myself that I had no way to know for sure), and I recognized that this meant the baby would soon be asleep. The father had his eyes closed and continued the motion.

“What’s that mean?” whispered my son. My daughter, on my left, was listening to the priest and didn’t hear.

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. It wasn’t entirely true. I didn’t *know*, but I could guess. Probably the man found the scent of his child pleasant, and they both found the touch soothing. I remembered my daughter’s birth, such as it was. After it was complete, I knelt there for an hour, my hand rubbing her back while she sobbed, her new mind struggling to take in everything around it.

I did not do that for my son. I couldn’t. I wonder if that would have made a difference.

“Pay attention,” I whispered to him, perhaps more sharply than I needed to. He *was* paying attention, just not to the priest. I put my hand on my daughter’s knee and squeezed, gently, and she smiled at me.

If my son noticed, he did not respond.



Sister: I remember the night my brother was born. Our father built us both out of bodies that he harvested, parts taken from people who didn't need them anymore. He had a crumpled piece of paper on which he'd copied down a process, a ritual passed down for more than 200 years. It burned when my brother was born.

Dad took the bodies he used to make me from a hospital. He took whole bodies from people who hadn't been claimed. He did it over the space of three weeks, using his job as an orderly to get access and changing paperwork to hide the thefts. He took tools to cut up the bodies and stitch them together, but he returned them. He told me once that he wanted my creation to make as little impact as possible, like taking pictures in a natural park. He knew that he couldn't make *no* impact, but he also refused to harm people to find my body. I always appreciated that — no one had to die so I could live.

When I was born, the first thing I remember is water. It was pouring rain, and the sky was full of lightning, but Dad stood over me. I tried to stand, but I couldn't — my legs didn't work. I didn't even know what "legs" were, but I knew I couldn't get my bearings. Dad didn't try to get me up. He crouched there by my side and rubbed my back, feeling where the stitches were pulled tight and where the skin was smooth. He waited until I found myself, until the light subsided and I could see, and then I sat up and looked at him.

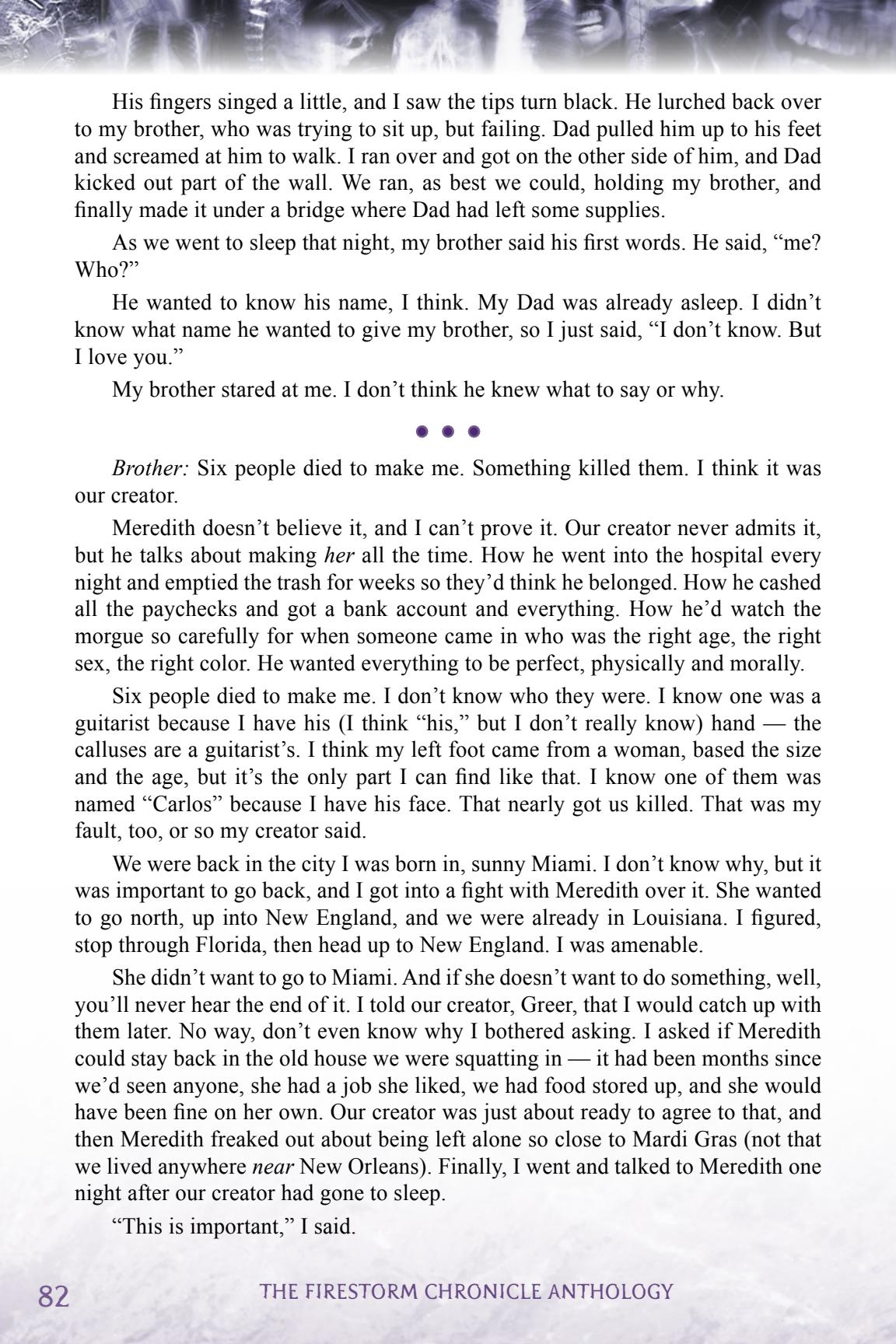
"Meredith," he said. "I'm your father. I made you. And I love you."

"I love you, too," I said back to him. I didn't know what it meant, but it *felt* like the right thing to say. I later learned that it was. I was right, I do love him. I love my brother, too, even though he's...who he is. He hurts me sometimes. Dad tells us all siblings fight, but that we need to be careful. He tells my brother not to hurt me. He tells me not to provoke my brother. He tells us both that he loves us. He didn't tell my brother that, though, on the night he was born.

The night my brother was born was the night of another violent storm, but this time I remember the wind more than the water. I know it was raining, but the wind whipped it everywhere. My father and I carried my brother's body into an empty building. I saw a menu on the wall written in chalk, but most of it was gone. I just saw the word "shake." The building caught fire right after I read that, and now I can't really enjoy shakes anymore. They make me think of that night.

As the building caught fire, I heard the wind outside and my father's voice as he finished the ritual. He had the paper tucked into his belt. My brother opened his eyes and tried to sit up, but like me, he couldn't make his body work right. The people were outside, and they were screaming at my father, but I didn't understand them because they were screaming in Spanish.

The wind picked up. The window blew open, and the paper in my father's belt flew across the room and into the fire. My father looked over and dropped my brother's body to get it, but it was already burning to ash.



His fingers singed a little, and I saw the tips turn black. He lurched back over to my brother, who was trying to sit up, but failing. Dad pulled him up to his feet and screamed at him to walk. I ran over and got on the other side of him, and Dad kicked out part of the wall. We ran, as best we could, holding my brother, and finally made it under a bridge where Dad had left some supplies.

As we went to sleep that night, my brother said his first words. He said, “me? Who?”

He wanted to know his name, I think. My Dad was already asleep. I didn’t know what name he wanted to give my brother, so I just said, “I don’t know. But I love you.”

My brother stared at me. I don’t think he knew what to say or why.



Brother: Six people died to make me. Something killed them. I think it was our creator.

Meredith doesn’t believe it, and I can’t prove it. Our creator never admits it, but he talks about making *her* all the time. How he went into the hospital every night and emptied the trash for weeks so they’d think he belonged. How he cashed all the paychecks and got a bank account and everything. How he’d watch the morgue so carefully for when someone came in who was the right age, the right sex, the right color. He wanted everything to be perfect, physically and morally.

Six people died to make me. I don’t know who they were. I know one was a guitarist because I have his (I think “his,” but I don’t really know) hand — the calluses are a guitarist’s. I think my left foot came from a woman, based the size and the age, but it’s the only part I can find like that. I know one of them was named “Carlos” because I have his face. That nearly got us killed. That was my fault, too, or so my creator said.

We were back in the city I was born in, sunny Miami. I don’t know why, but it was important to go back, and I got into a fight with Meredith over it. She wanted to go north, up into New England, and we were already in Louisiana. I figured, stop through Florida, then head up to New England. I was amenable.

She didn’t want to go to Miami. And if she doesn’t want to do something, well, you’ll never hear the end of it. I told our creator, Greer, that I would catch up with them later. No way, don’t even know why I bothered asking. I asked if Meredith could stay back in the old house we were squatting in — it had been months since we’d seen anyone, she had a job she liked, we had food stored up, and she would have been fine on her own. Our creator was just about ready to agree to that, and then Meredith freaked out about being left alone so close to Mardi Gras (not that we lived anywhere *near* New Orleans). Finally, I went and talked to Meredith one night after our creator had gone to sleep.

“This is important,” I said.

Meredith was sitting on a fallen tree. The tree had fallen on the house during the last storm. It was quiet now, but the storms were getting more common. “No, it isn’t,” she said.

I looked down. I was pissed. She doesn’t get to decide what’s important to me. I didn’t want to yell at her, though. “Meredith, I’ve been dreaming about this for weeks.”

She looked at me, her eyes a little wide. We don’t kid about our dreams. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed, thinking of the dreams. “It’s the place I was born. I see the fire, the wind, and the people outside, but they’re—” I didn’t want to say it, but I knew she’d push.

“What?”

“Just trust me, please? This is something I need to do.”

She stood up. “I need to go to New England, too.”

“I believe you,” I said. “But we’re five hundred miles closer to Miami than to Maine, and we can get a boat in Miami like we did last time.”

“When Dad got us a boat to get us away from the people trying to kill you.” I knew what she was doing. I couldn’t help myself, though.

“You know what? Fuck you. That wasn’t my fault and you know it.”

She slid off the tree and landed in front of me. “The hell it wasn’t. You went into that basement and found those bodies. You didn’t tell me or Dad what you were doing.”

My fingers started to itch. I told my body to *run away* but nothing was listening. “I *did* tell you and Greer what I wanted to do. You didn’t listen. Greer didn’t listen. I don’t have any more choice in this than you do.” I felt the skin on my fingers split. The claws were there. *Run away run away run away*—

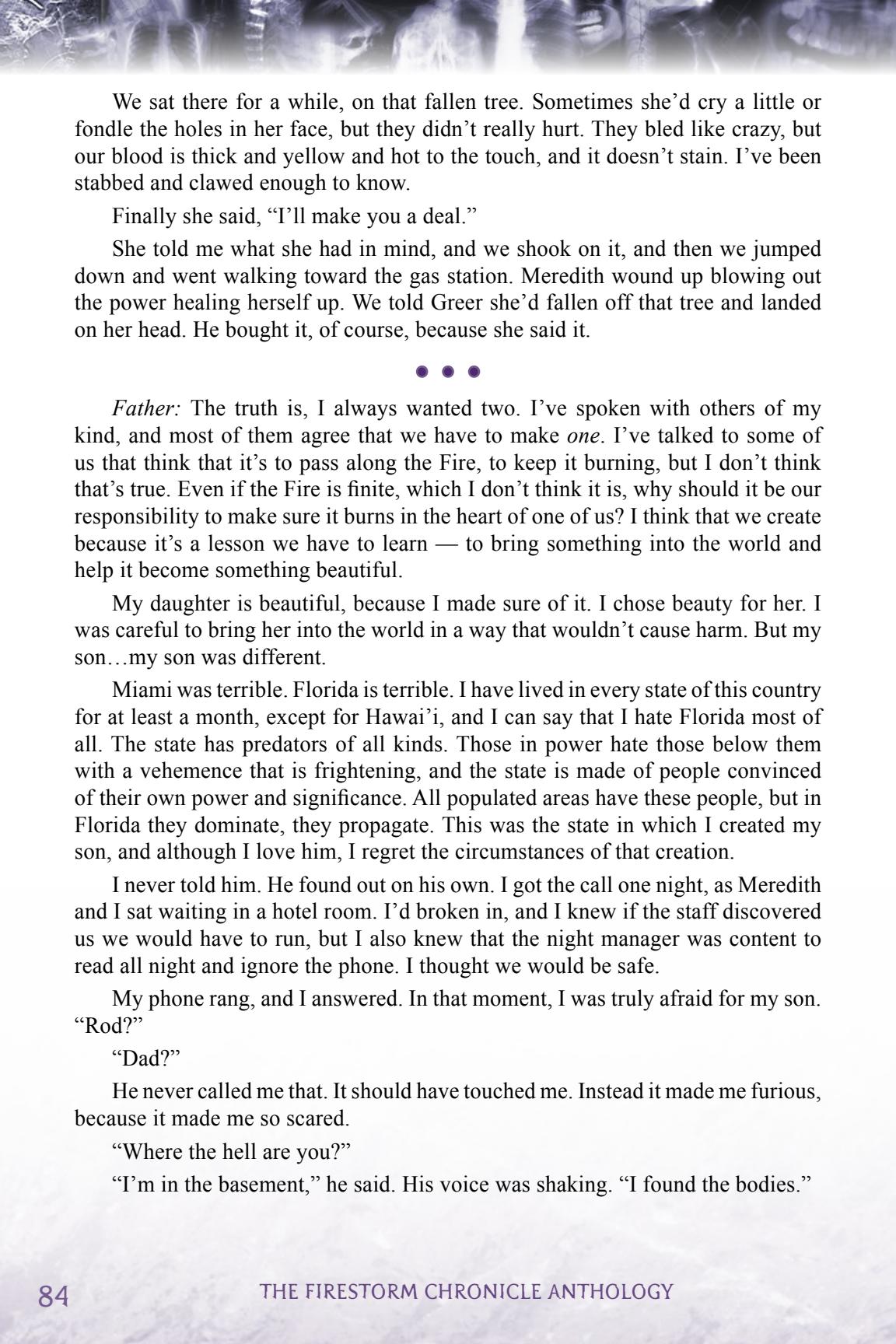
“You went into that basement, and suddenly there are people trying to set us on fire, *again*. That always happens with—”

My hand moved, and then her cheek was open. I could see the three gashes and white space from the fat, and little pinpricks of red that were going to start bleeding soon.

She stared at me, too shocked to hurt. She drew in a breath to scream, and I jumped forward and put my hand over her mouth. I held her there while she thrashed and screamed and cried, and I kept thinking, *I’m so fucked. Greer is going to kill me.*

And then I looked down at her, and I let her go. She put her hand up to her cheek and felt the holes. “Fuck you,” she whispered.

I nodded. “Yeah, I know.”



We sat there for a while, on that fallen tree. Sometimes she'd cry a little or fondle the holes in her face, but they didn't really hurt. They bled like crazy, but our blood is thick and yellow and hot to the touch, and it doesn't stain. I've been stabbed and clawed enough to know.

Finally she said, "I'll make you a deal."

She told me what she had in mind, and we shook on it, and then we jumped down and went walking toward the gas station. Meredith wound up blowing out the power healing herself up. We told Greer she'd fallen off that tree and landed on her head. He bought it, of course, because she said it.



Father: The truth is, I always wanted two. I've spoken with others of my kind, and most of them agree that we have to make *one*. I've talked to some of us that think that it's to pass along the Fire, to keep it burning, but I don't think that's true. Even if the Fire is finite, which I don't think it is, why should it be our responsibility to make sure it burns in the heart of one of us? I think that we create because it's a lesson we have to learn — to bring something into the world and help it become something beautiful.

My daughter is beautiful, because I made sure of it. I chose beauty for her. I was careful to bring her into the world in a way that wouldn't cause harm. But my son...my son was different.

Miami was terrible. Florida is terrible. I have lived in every state of this country for at least a month, except for Hawai'i, and I can say that I hate Florida most of all. The state has predators of all kinds. Those in power hate those below them with a vehemence that is frightening, and the state is made of people convinced of their own power and significance. All populated areas have these people, but in Florida they dominate, they propagate. This was the state in which I created my son, and although I love him, I regret the circumstances of that creation.

I never told him. He found out on his own. I got the call one night, as Meredith and I sat waiting in a hotel room. I'd broken in, and I knew if the staff discovered us we would have to run, but I also knew that the night manager was content to read all night and ignore the phone. I thought we would be safe.

My phone rang, and I answered. In that moment, I was truly afraid for my son. "Rod?"

"Dad?"

He never called me that. It should have touched me. Instead it made me furious, because it made me so scared.

"Where the hell are you?"

"I'm in the basement," he said. His voice was shaking. "I found the bodies."

My heart sank even more. I started to sweat. I heard thunder in the distance. "Rod, get out of there. Please. It isn't safe."

"I think somebody saw me come in here," he said. Then the line went dead.

"Dad?" Meredith watched me from the room's little table, our card game still spread out. "Where's Rod?"

I didn't want her to go, but I couldn't leave her, either. "Honey, come on. Bring the bag."

She nodded and grabbed the duffel from the floor. She left the cards. She knew if I said to bring the bag, it was too important. That's my girl.

We stole a car and got the building. It wasn't far from where Rod had been born. The neighborhood was still damaged from that storm, and now they'd get another. I wondered if the three of us together simply brought too much energy to Miami, and the state rebelled against us with those storms.

The door to the building was open, kicked off the hinges. The basement stairs were gone — I'd destroyed them when I'd left this place the last time.

Rod was down in the basement. The bodies were lined up on the floor. I couldn't remember their names, but I remembered what I'd taken from them. A face, a hand, a foot. Rod had arranged them neatly, each body laid out as though in state, but two of them were noticeably incomplete. Toros missing, arms gone. The two I'd used to build most of his body. My two favorite. The two best.

"Dad, is this where you built me?"

I turned to Meredith. "Keep watch. If you hear someone, let us know." She nodded and stepped back into the dark. I'd taught her well.

I jumped down into the basement, and stood to face my son. He didn't look angry, just confused and hurt. "Yes. I built you here."

He nodded, slowly. "But this isn't where I was born?"

"No." I took my eyes off him to look at the walls. The killer had written things on the walls. Though I'd tried to blot them out, some symbols still remained. "I took you out of here, caved in the stairs, and carried you to another building to birth you."

"Why?" He wasn't asking why I moved him. He's gesturing at the bodies.

"I didn't kill them, Rod. I found them."

He opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, but he never got the chance. Meredith tapped on the wall and flashlights shone down the hole. I ducked into the shadows. Rod didn't move, just stood there as the beam lanced down.

"Carlos? Oh, my god, is that you?" The light was in his face. Carlos' face. I'd never known the name of the young man whose face I carefully cut away and sewed onto another man's skull. But some important vestige of Carlos must have remained, because the person with the flashlight knew him.

“I’m not Carlos,” said Rod. He looked down at the bodies. “I’m not any of them.”

That was what he was here to learn, of course. I realize that now. Then, I just saw my son being stupid and emotional, while my daughter was in danger and we were trapped. I jumped, I grabbed flashlights, I broke them, I helped my family escape. And later, I told my son I was angry and ashamed of him, and I berated him for not telling me where he was going. He accused me of murdering those people to create him. I denied it, but he did not believe me. We fought, and the skies screamed and howled.

I didn’t think Meredith heard what I said to him. I should have known. Meredith listens.

• • •

Sister: Rod left us in Miami, and I lied to my father for the first time ever. When I did, I felt the welling up inside me, the cold, biting, acidic taste in my mouth. I kept it under control but later I cried, because I hated that telling a lie was so important. Lying was something I had to learn to do, and I knew that meant that *people* lied a lot. I whispered to myself that night that I didn’t want to be a person if lying was important for people, but I didn’t mean it.

I lied to my father and told him I’d had a dream about Maine the night before. I’d had dreams of Maine, of course. I dreamed of a sign saying “Welcome to Maine: Life As It Should Be,” and I dreamed of snow and a man with dark hair and a missing hand. That was all true. But I hadn’t had those dreams in a week or so, and I didn’t feel like it was urgent. My father had told me the difference, told me that sometimes we’d see visions that we needed to follow *right away*, and others that could wait. My brother needed to get back to Miami *right away*. My vision in Maine could wait.

But I lied, and told Dad we needed to leave *right away*. I knew he would believe me. I also knew how much it hurt him to leave Rod behind.

We flew to Maine. Dad hated flying. Too much could go wrong — they could notice our fake IDs, we could cause mechanical problems on the plane, we might fly through a storm and worsen it, a sky marshal might see us as a threat. But none of that happened. We boarded in Miami, flew into Hartford, and then took a smaller plane into Maine. As we landed, I realized that I actually didn’t need to find the dark man with the missing hand. I didn’t know who he was or what importance he had to me, and as the plane touched down, bouncing slightly, I realized I didn’t care. I missed my brother. I never should have left him.

• • •

Brother: Meredith and Greer left for Maine, while I stayed there in Miami. I watched the plane leave, and I felt the connection between us grow weaker until the plane was just a light in the distance and the brand on my wrist didn’t burn or glow. They were gone. I was free.

I reveled in it that first night. I went to parties and clubs. I grabbed a rich young man outside a bar and stole his wallet and his clothes, and I used the money to buy drinks and company. I had sex with women and with men, I inhaled cocaine and I swam in the dark ocean. I did whatever I could think to do, because I knew that once my creator returned — and he would — I might never get another chance.

The next morning, I awoke to find a man standing at the bedroom door, looking at me, with a strangely disgusted look on his face. I should have been angry or ashamed, but I wasn't. I remembered the night before. He had been happy to take me home, happy to help me figure out how my body worked together with his, and now *he* was the one feel repulsed. By me, or by himself? I didn't care. I was happy. I smiled at him on my way out.

I went to a thrift store and bought old clothes, and I left my new, expensive, stolen ones in their donation bin. I had felt attractive in the stolen clothes, but I felt like *me* in these old clothes. That, somehow, was more important.

I thought that I would go to the building where I was born, but as I stepped out into the sunshine, it didn't seem important to me. Instead I went to the ocean, stripped off my clothes, and walked out into the water. People stared; I was wearing an old pair of boxer shorts, not a swimsuit, but I didn't care and soon they forgot me. I wasn't hurting anyone.

I floated on my back, and I exalted in that feeling. *I wasn't hurting anyone.* No one had to suffer or die for me, and that thought crystallized for me why I hated my creator so much. People *had* suffered and die for me, and my creator had facilitated that. Even if he hadn't killed those people, as he claimed, he used them to make me. Their deaths and disappearances had made an impact, and when their bodies had finally been found, what horror and confusion their families have felt! I felt tears flow down my face and mix with the endless sea, but at the same time, I felt acid in my mouth. I dove underwater, changed my body so that I could breathe, and swam deep. I swam away from the humans above, because I had no desire to see them hurt or feel their eyes on me.

I don't know how long I stayed down there, but when I surfaced, the sky was black and the people were gone. And I realized, as I swam slowly for shore, that the lesson I'd learned had come at a price. The storm was coming, again.

Father: My first thought was that Maine was quiet as compared to Florida. As I acclimated to the area, I realized this wasn't necessarily the case. Vehicles still rumbled by, people talked, and I could still hear music from cars and phones and homes if I listened. But the volume was lower. The tone was different. People didn't seem so ready to murder each other here.

Meredith was distracted from the moment our plane descended, but I was prepared for that. She was walking her road, and that road was taking her someplace she hadn't considered. I knew that feeling well.

We stole a car from the long-term parking lot and drove it into town. I didn't know how long the car would go without being missed, but I didn't plan on keeping

it more than a few hours. If Meredith wasn't able to get a fix on what she needed to do by sunset, we'd get a hotel room and sleep, and she could try and let her dreams guide her. That was risky, of course; forcing visions could scorch the land. But time was a factor, she'd said, and I trusted her.

As the day wore on I trusted her less, and I felt terrible for it. I watched as she looked in windows, searching cars and stores and glancing up and down streets for the man she sought. She didn't find him, but that wasn't what upset me. My experience in walking the road was that even the search had meaning, but this wasn't searching. Meredith was biding time.

I said nothing. I simply felt sad that she would lie to me, and I didn't want to confront her until I figured out why she had lied. That evening, as we sat in a coffee shop, me sipping dark espresso and her picking at a muffin, I figured it out.

“Rod.”

“What?” She glanced up, poppy seeds on her fingers and mouth.

“You did this for Rod. So that he could be alone in Miami.”

Her face fell. “Oh, Dad.”

I dropped my eyes. “Meredith.” I couldn't find the words.

“Dad, I'm sorry.”

I looked up, and I tried to read what I saw in her face. I saw relief, and guilt, and fear, and sadness. But no anger. She was not angry with me. She had not deceived me because she hated me or because she thought I might be angry with her. She had done it because she knew I would listen to her.

And that I *wouldn't* listen to Rod.

I stood up, leaned over, and kissed her on the forehead. “I love you,” I said, savoring the metallic taste I suddenly found. “I love you, Meredith, but it's time you were on your own.”

“Dad?” A little afraid. But not much.

I walked out the door and heard the storm coming. But I walked on, because I knew it wasn't for me.



Sister: Dad kissed me, and I watched him walk away. He left the bag. That's how I knew it was real.

That bag contained everything. His ramble, my ramble, even parts of Rod's. Dad's notebooks and his frantic attempts to reconstruct the ritual. Our money, our IDs, the maps that showed where we'd gone and what we'd done. Our lives and our roads. And Dad walked out of that coffee shop and left it for me.

He turned left after he walked out the door, and I knew he was headed for the bus stop. He'd left me the keys, and I knew I'd need to return or abandon the car before anyone noticed it was stolen. But right then, I was sitting at the coffee



shop, tears on my face, knowing that my father trusted me with my own life, my own road.

And I knew, in that moment, I would never see him or my brother again. I closed my eyes and I wished, on my own soul and on the storm, for him to be happy and to complete his Work. And then I stood up, and I walked out into the cooling night.



Brother: It took me the better part of the week to get back to the building where I'd been born, but eventually I couldn't ignore what my dreams were telling me. The building was empty, the doorway boarded up, and yellow police tape hung loose around it. The bodies were gone. The people my "father" had used to make me had been given burials and doubtless the investigations were still ongoing.

I wasn't here for those people, though, not all of them. I was here for Carlos, the man who gave me a face.

I walked down the block, very deliberately making eye contact with the people there. I walked into bodegas and looked at employees and customers. My dreams had told me that someone would know me, but I didn't know who or when. And so I walked on, around the block, looking up into apartments and through car windows, until twilight fell and I slumped against the cooling bricks of the building in which I'd been born.

A man walked out of the alley and looked down at me. "Carlos?"

I looked up at him. I didn't answer. I wasn't sure what to say. The man leaned on the wall, his right hand in his pocket. I stood up; it seemed polite. "Carlos was a friend of mine. He was murdered right over there." The man nodded across the street at a parking lot.

"How do you know where?" I said.

The man turned to face me. "Because I saw it happen."

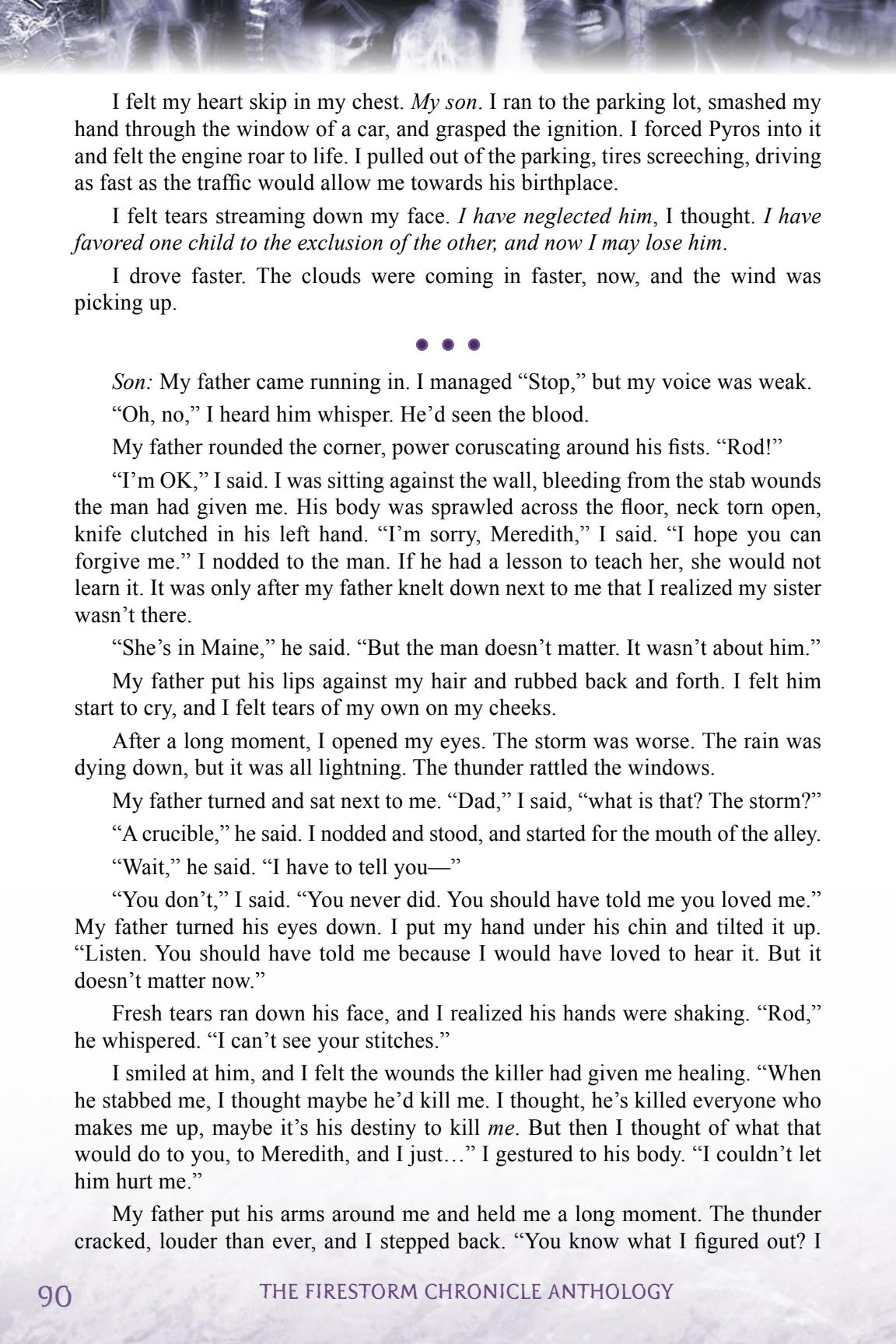
I tried to imagine how a normal person would approach this conversation, and I came up completely blank. "You...saw it?"

"Well," said the man. "It's kind of a weird story." He stood up straight and took his hand out of his pocket...but he had no hand. His right arm just ended at the wrist. I was busy staring at that, and I didn't see the knife.



Father: I arrived in Miami, yet again. I'd flown, but the experience hadn't been as harrowing this time. I wasn't sure why — perhaps because I was flying alone?

I considered taking a taxi into the city, but as I left the airport, I felt dread. I looked east, toward the ocean, and I saw the sky was black. Lightning danced between clouds. The lightning was blue, the same strange storms that had visited the city when my son was born.



I felt my heart skip in my chest. *My son.* I ran to the parking lot, smashed my hand through the window of a car, and grasped the ignition. I forced Pyros into it and felt the engine roar to life. I pulled out of the parking, tires screeching, driving as fast as the traffic would allow me towards his birthplace.

I felt tears streaming down my face. *I have neglected him, I thought. I have favored one child to the exclusion of the other, and now I may lose him.*

I drove faster. The clouds were coming in faster, now, and the wind was picking up.

• • •

Son: My father came running in. I managed “Stop,” but my voice was weak. “Oh, no,” I heard him whisper. He’d seen the blood.

My father rounded the corner, power coruscating around his fists. “Rod!”

“I’m OK,” I said. I was sitting against the wall, bleeding from the stab wounds the man had given me. His body was sprawled across the floor, neck torn open, knife clutched in his left hand. “I’m sorry, Meredith,” I said. “I hope you can forgive me.” I nodded to the man. If he had a lesson to teach her, she would not learn it. It was only after my father knelt down next to me that I realized my sister wasn’t there.

“She’s in Maine,” he said. “But the man doesn’t matter. It wasn’t about him.”

My father put his lips against my hair and rubbed back and forth. I felt him start to cry, and I felt tears of my own on my cheeks.

After a long moment, I opened my eyes. The storm was worse. The rain was dying down, but it was all lightning. The thunder rattled the windows.

My father turned and sat next to me. “Dad,” I said, “what is that? The storm?”

“A crucible,” he said. I nodded and stood, and started for the mouth of the alley.

“Wait,” he said. “I have to tell you—”

“You don’t,” I said. “You never did. You should have told me you loved me.” My father turned his eyes down. I put my hand under his chin and tilted it up. “Listen. You should have told me because I would have loved to hear it. But it doesn’t matter now.”

Fresh tears ran down his face, and I realized his hands were shaking. “Rod,” he whispered. “I can’t see your stitches.”

I smiled at him, and I felt the wounds the killer had given me healing. “When he stabbed me, I thought maybe he’d kill me. I thought, he’s killed everyone who makes me up, maybe it’s his destiny to kill *me*. But then I thought of what that would do to you, to Meredith, and I just...” I gestured to his body. “I couldn’t let him hurt me.”

My father put his arms around me and held me a long moment. The thunder cracked, louder than ever, and I stepped back. “You know what I figured out? I

figured out that ‘love’ is what you do. It’s not what you say.” I wiped the blood and tears from my face and smiled. “So, I know you love me, Dad. And I’m sorry that it was hard for me to say it, too. And tell Meredith I’m sorry I hurt her.”

“I’ll miss you,” said my father.

“Yeah,” I said. “But it’s now.”

He nodded. “It’s now.”



Father: I watched him walk away, through the doors, into the storm of lightning and fire.

I got up and looked around at the bodies. I walked past them, out the doors, and into the storm, the texture of my son’s hair still on my lips. I knew I would miss it, and I knew I had missed opportunities to love him the way he deserved.

But I did love him, and he knew. And that was enough.



Some Running Night

BY TANYA COHAN-DIAZ

Dark tarmac rises up to meet the wheels of the bus, and the road whispers against rubber not yet worn bald by time or weather. She rides the bus every day, like some kind of clockwork. The where doesn't matter, but the how — that careful measuring of money to feed into the ever-hungry meter, the parceling out of her time, her hunger, her energy — that matters so much more.

Time is no longer ephemeral. Seasons pass for her as they do for the warm, sweat-rich press of humanity. Her skin has begun to crinkle at the corner of her eyes, her hair lighten with grey in places. Ageing was an impossibility. Beautiful decay, the body rent by time. She can remember envying that.

Living is its own exquisite pain. Not the grand, sweeping agonies of Created life, as deep and as dark as any of the ancient epics. That long stretch of years passes in a dream behind her eyelids, when she sleeps, and at times they are as half-remembered as all that. Her torments are smaller, more manageable, more acute. Miracles on the small scale. But miracles nonetheless. The push of breath into her lungs, the automatic blink of her eyes. The warmth of the sun on her skin, her hair. The bitter, biting cold.

The cancer is secondary.



The streets were bleeding light again. The torrential downpour of the rainy season showed little promise of easing for more than an hour at a time, and when the sun managed to break through the oppressive gray of the skies, the sheer brightness of it threatened to turn the entire city jungle-humid before it was plunged back down, down, down again into the frigid rain. The horizon hung claustrophobically close, all clouds erased into one mass, and the sky remained that same slate. And that rain would give way to the cold of winter.

Cold tongues of rain that would slick her hair down close to the scalp, turn



skin clammy. Necklaces of drops that coated the fine wool of her coat. Nothing close to a proper storm — not for a long while, yet. The sizzle of a city-wide headache at the spike of pressure had yet to press in. On the cobblestones her heels made hardly any proper noise, just the occasional whisper of a wooden heel against rock, worn smooth by the decades. She loved it, just the same. A city that was both ruin and treasure, glimmering, its windows shuttered and dark at day and brilliant in the night.

His hand steadied itself against her elbow, holding her close. From a distance they could be lovers, siblings. Friends. He took her to cafes, escorted her to bookstores. Let her browse, and kept careful watch over what she would choose. At times he would ask her to explain why she picked what she did, and would laugh as though gently surprised when she could not always explain.

He acted as though that was the grandest kind of game he might conceive of. He kept close guard over her, kept better stewardship over the proceedings as he was wont. He bought her everything and anything she might ever want, anyway, and recorded it all in the slim cerulean journal in the breast pocket of his fine jacket.

This was the only time she was permitted to leave the house. And even then, the house was beginning to show its signs of its exposure to her. The house was her world, her kingdom. She did not pay attention to the running of it as she had heard some ladies did — the housekeeper did her best with that kind of ministration. Did a better job than Nepenthe would have, and they all understood it.

“Remember: these are prolonged experiments in socialization,” he said at the threshold, wrapping her scarf tight enough to keep the chill out, his head ducked down low as he focused on doing up the last buttons up of her coat with his surgeon’s sure hands. “There is nothing to be afraid of. The people out there are like you or I, and if I am there you will be just fine.”

“Do you think I-I need it?” Nepenthe asked, her eyebrows creasing in a mimicry of the expression he made when she was especially daring, or when her stutter grew to be too much. It was lessening with each day as her tongue remembered the shape of vowels and consonants.

“No, my dear.” His smile was soft, indulgent. “But seeing you happy makes me happy. Do you remember why you cannot go out alone, Nepenthe?”

“I would get lost. Or hurt, and not know the way back.”

He nodded, his gaze never entirely centering on her own. Her creator would always insure she was bundled against the damp, where the rain would not get at the silk of her sutures, before his hand went to her elbow. Not entirely proper. But she would wander, without the anchor of him.

Her creator tugged his hat down low over his brow, mouth thinning in thought. “Let’s be off, then.”

(She wondered, later, away from him, if maybe he was showing her off to a world not yet ready to understand what it is he had done. What he had dared to do, with the strange birthing of her.)

In winter, the city became a jewel box in the crown of an empire just beginning to show its wear. Just before that grand dame would give in to grief, and the end would begin. Snow would alight upon the eaves, the scaled roofs of buildings made bright and beautiful in the brilliance of the sun.

Her father, such as he was, loathed the cold. He hated the rain, too, but she could tell it brought him some modicum of joy to see her laugh at the splash of puddles, to stroke the back of a hand down his short beard where the water beaded. Her creator never told her what love was, exactly. She knew.

• • •

Here, close to the earth, in the dark, was her favorite part of the house. Cold, the earth perpetually a little damp, the root cellar was chilly enough to keep the prizes her creator's maid brought back from the market fresh for days. He called it *morbid*, for her to enjoy this place. The worms were close. The bones of the house were even closer. The heartbeat of the residence above echoed and rebounded through the cavern of the dark basement, the wooden support of ribs falling off into what felt like the void where the light of the lamp did not entirely reach.

She had taken to cleaning the cellar out, when embroidery or painting did not suit her. She similarly treated the attic, with its shroud-wrapped pieces of old furniture or the scattered statuary of her maker's long-dead relatives. To explore those remnants of his history was to imagine other worlds. Other people to populate her life with.

When he cared to he would tell her about them, or point to portraits in the salon that cluttered up the walls. He would show her the treasures of his curio collection: jewel-like beetles from foreign climes, luscious red coral the same hue as her lips. Skulls, smooth and white, or stuffed animals trapped forever in their dioramas beneath glass. Wondrous things. A gentleman's hoard. He would show her anatomical renderings, or Venus, trapped in wax and made into a reference for surgeons such as he. Bring her flowers as though he were courting her, and lavish her with necklaces laden with jewels, or dresses more confection than proper garment. Beautiful things. Feminine things. He never entirely understood why she only seemed half-interested in them.

But this was one portrait she had yet to see. A gilded edge of a frame peaked out beyond the shroud of wrapping, and she could not entirely help herself. She knew all of the portraits and landscapes in the house as intimately as though they were friends. Her hand peeled the paper away, slowly, slowly. She unwrapped it like she imagined a bride being unwrapped on her wedding night. Hands trembled with the anticipation of discovery, of finding a truth once obscured. The tickle of memory, or some song half-forgotten. The paper slid out of her hands in the end anyway, crackled as it fell at her feet. She barely heard it.

For a handful of moments, she thought that perhaps she had a sister, once. Perhaps that was why the paintings were sequestered away, wrapped in their paper that crinkled and sighed when moved from one corner of the basement to another to clean it out properly. The muscles of the woman trapped within the painting were held differently than her own. Her cheekbones were fine, pale skin stretched taut and flushed with life. Eyes bright with the fever of youth, her smile gentle and curving and knowing.

Nepenthe could find parts of herself in that painting, in who she was supposed to be, who she might have been, once. But this woman, this half-stranger, was an ideal. Who she was now stretched ragged between the two: porcelain-skinned opus, not yet achieved; and that facsimile formed in pigment. Sealed away under lacquer forever. Not like *her*. No, Nepenthe would always be who she was. And for all his attempts, her maker could never transform her into this stranger.

Her creator kept all the mirrors of the house covered. Yet the shape of her reflection was not unfamiliar, trapped in puddles or in the fine silverware she polished. She tried not to think about the why and how of it. She knew the cause, in the end. Just the same as the steward, whose gaze lingered most on her lips, or the perfect flush of her cheeks, and the maids, who had taken to slips of cruelty when Nepenthe needed help with her toilette. Ladies did not dress themselves, her creator had explained. He so wanted her to be a fine lady, like the ones she saw on their excursions. Hidden away from the world, in their gowns and gloves and hats. Specters clad in silk and taffeta, velvet and organdy.

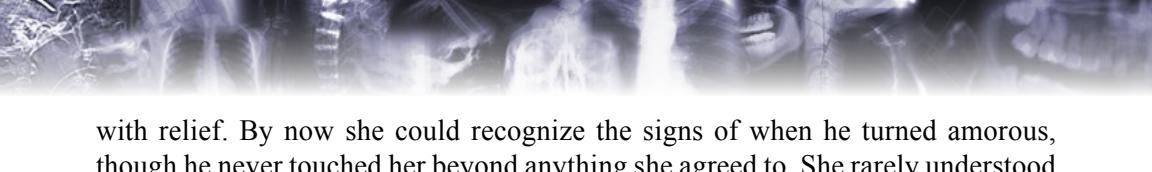
“*Vater*,” she found herself saying, her voice high and choked with the sight of the doppelganger caught in paint. That stranger-self’s hair was darker, curling thick over her shoulders and spilling down the front of a bodice of a dress that Nepenthe remembered her maker taking out of her hands, tucking away for later in the bottom of his dresser.

“*Vater*.” *Father*. She said it again, voice even higher. Her breath was a knot, and her hands had fisted themselves deep into the skirts of the deep taffeta blue of her dress. Pale knuckles rose above that sea of fine, fine cloth, suddenly so like the dresses of the few scattered dolls tucked away in the trunks down here in the dark. Reality coalesced around her into agony as her creator thundered down the stairs. His hands caught around her shoulders, her loose hair sticking on the fine tweed of his jacket. He spun her to face him, his broad hands making her shoulders ache down to the bone. Her corset creaked against her ribs, and breathing became even more of a chore.

“What is it?” His voice came like a bellows, his eyes roving over the entirety of her for a wound she could not put a name to.

“Who am I?” she whimpered, her hands latching onto his collar, buttons digging into the palm of her hand.

The tide of anxiety washed away from him. “My Nepenthe,” he said, his hands gentling. Fingers brushed back the hair stuck to her lips, eyes growing drowsy



with relief. By now she could recognize the signs of when he turned amorous, though he never touched her beyond anything she agreed to. She rarely understood what of the act he liked. There were other things to enjoy, other things to exalt in.

“No. *No*,” Nepenthe spat the word, and she stabbed a finger towards the master copy of herself. “Who am I?” She said again, her voice raw and throat aching.

He choked on the truth of what she was, his face now a rictus of surprise. Of fear.

“That doesn’t matter.” He said quietly, and turned the painting away from them. Nepenthe wanted to stop him, to shout at him. But instead she merely watched, her eyes hot with unshed tears. “You’re here, now. With me. There’s nothing to worry over, Nepenthe. I promise.”

She had crossed her arms in an effort to keep out the chill of it, and he put his hands on top of her own. Fingers squeezed briefly before he wrapped her in a tight hug, his face burying in her hair.

“I love you.” Her creator murmured. “Let’s go upstairs, you’re absolutely freezing.”

Nepenthe never entirely knew what it was to be cold. In that moment she wondered if she would ever stop. She turned from the painting entirely at his gentle insistence, and let him draw her upstairs to the warmth of the house. The lock to the basement was changed within the week, the key hidden.

He brought for her the finest manacles to be found in the city from the best locksmith. The chain between the almost delicate shackles chimed as he pulled them forth from the silk-lined box.

“Come here,” he said. “I have a great gift for you, my Nepenthe.”

And when he tried to put them on her, she struck his temple with the lamp from his writing desk and ran as far as she could. The image of him, the white of his skull and the flower of blood blossoming into the thick Persian carpet of his study, stained her memory as much as the eyes of that smiling ideal.



The air sang through the boards of the long-forgotten hunter’s cabin. Antlers hung down from the rafters like thorns, and she kept herself from running her hands over them to feel how cool they were, how warm they could have become in her palm. How they might have felt against her cheek. They reminded her of the briars that surrounded the sleeping princess’ castle, keeping out prince and monster alike while she slumbered. But they were the dragons, weren’t they?

“Do you know of the myth of Galatea?” Beyn asked one night. Beyn — broad, strong, his face like a worn stone. Old as the soil was old, and twice as steady. In his eyes, Nepenthe could imagine what childhood might have been. He kept himself styled as a halfway proper scholar, too. Or at least, that was how Nepenthe imagined him.

“She was made by Pygmalion. A...a sculptor. And he prayed to a goddess to make her human, so that he could love her as a woman, and not as a statue he’d made.”

She stirred the coals of the fire they had made with an iron poker long given to rust. It flaked in her hands, left scales of metal and red dust behind on her skin, which looked more like the bone china that graced the table of her maker. The obsession with her apparent beauty if they stayed too long in any given town was a blight she loathed growing accustomed to. For Beyn it was nearly the same. These things were mundane, such as they were. Nepenthe could nearly pity humanity for it — after all, it was not their fault that they were so infected by the sins of their creators. The sins of their existence were a burden on the entirety of the world, it seemed.

Beyn nodded, his eyes moving from her face to Zero, who sat by the window in an old half-rotten chair, zir hatchet across hir knees and chin propped up in a hand.

“Fairy stories won’t help her,” Zero sighed, catching his eyes. “Do you think they helped before? With her maker?”

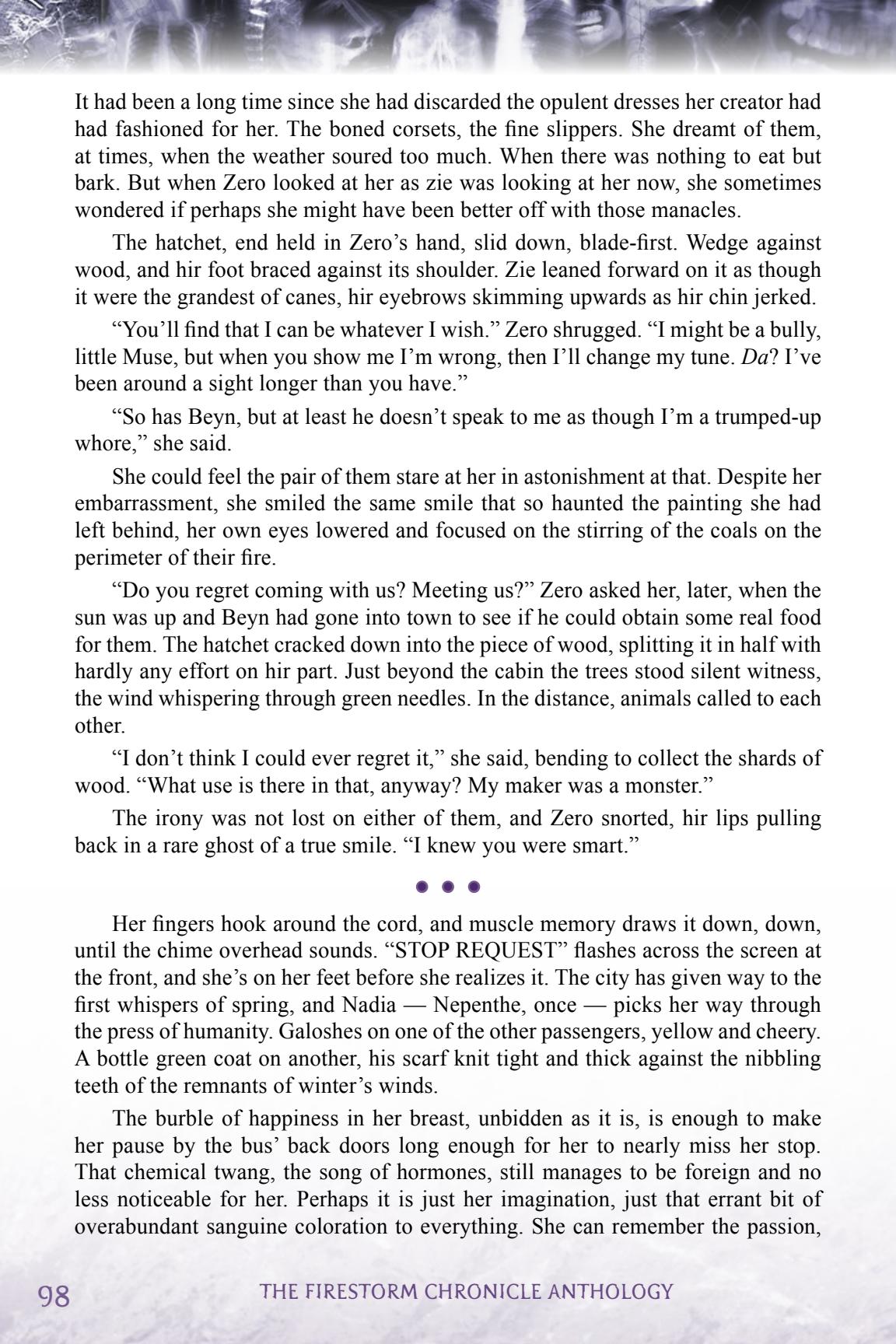
The argument is an old one, worn and staid as the Hessian boots that Zero affected, with their dye faded and leather crackling where they used to merely crease. Zero dressed as a soldier, as a guard, and zie took the job of watching over them as seriously as Beyn did education and learning. There was something beautiful in Zero, even despite the twist of scars sutured with wire. The strength of hir jaw, the height of cheekbones. Hir tapered hands. In hair that always escaped a short braid that managed romantic leanings, somehow. In Zero, the idealized soldier-hero was made real, caught forever as it was in the propaganda portraiture of the epoch and delivered unto the world into a creature of flesh.

“It does not matter why we were made,” Zero continued, leaning forward with a groan of wood that had surely gone soft within the upholstery. “We are here, right now. Are your fairy tales going to help put food in our stomachs? No. Are they going to help us when the mobs come, or the land turns putrid?” Zero laughed, sitting back, hir hatchet catching the light. “All the wondering and wandering in the world surely taught you better than all that, Beyn.”

The child of earth guffawed, his hand sweeping to indicate the whole of them. “You say that, Zero? To me? Don’t be as literal as all that. I know you for a clever thing. Nepenthe is new — to us and to herself. She needs to be taught, or else she’ll be just a pretty shell and nothing else.”

“What else is a Muse good for, you old rock? Look at her face and tell me she wasn’t made for someone’s bed. Same as you were to work, and same as I was to fight. She’s no better than a doll. The sooner you start to train her for *that*, the sooner she starts to understand her nature.”

“Don’t be cruel,” Nepenthe said quietly, looking into the fire. Her fingers twisted hard around the poker, her free hand digging into the soft flesh of her thigh.



It had been a long time since she had discarded the opulent dresses her creator had had fashioned for her. The boned corsets, the fine slippers. She dreamt of them, at times, when the weather soured too much. When there was nothing to eat but bark. But when Zero looked at her as zie was looking at her now, she sometimes wondered if perhaps she might have been better off with those manacles.

The hatchet, end held in Zero's hand, slid down, blade-first. Wedge against wood, and hir foot braced against its shoulder. Zie leaned forward on it as though it were the grandest of canes, hir eyebrows skimming upwards as hir chin jerked.

"You'll find that I can be whatever I wish." Zero shrugged. "I might be a bully, little Muse, but when you show me I'm wrong, then I'll change my tune. *Da?* I've been around a sight longer than you have."

"So has Beyn, but at least he doesn't speak to me as though I'm a trumped-up whore," she said.

She could feel the pair of them stare at her in astonishment at that. Despite her embarrassment, she smiled the same smile that so haunted the painting she had left behind, her own eyes lowered and focused on the stirring of the coals on the perimeter of their fire.

"Do you regret coming with us? Meeting us?" Zero asked her, later, when the sun was up and Beyn had gone into town to see if he could obtain some real food for them. The hatchet cracked down into the piece of wood, splitting it in half with hardly any effort on hir part. Just beyond the cabin the trees stood silent witness, the wind whispering through green needles. In the distance, animals called to each other.

"I don't think I could ever regret it," she said, bending to collect the shards of wood. "What use is there in that, anyway? My maker was a monster."

The irony was not lost on either of them, and Zero snorted, hir lips pulling back in a rare ghost of a true smile. "I knew you were smart."



Her fingers hook around the cord, and muscle memory draws it down, down, until the chime overhead sounds. "STOP REQUEST" flashes across the screen at the front, and she's on her feet before she realizes it. The city has given way to the first whispers of spring, and Nadia — Nepenthe, once — picks her way through the press of humanity. Galoshes on one of the other passengers, yellow and cheery. A bottle green coat on another, his scarf knit tight and thick against the nibbling teeth of the remnants of winter's winds.

The burble of happiness in her breast, unbidden as it is, is enough to make her pause by the bus' back doors long enough for her to nearly miss her stop. That chemical twang, the song of hormones, still manages to be foreign and no less noticeable for her. Perhaps it is just her imagination, just that errant bit of overabundant sanguine coloration to everything. She can remember the passion,

so deep and abiding that it nearly wounded when she was no less alive than she is now. No, she was just *different*. How wrong it is, to think of herself as incapable. How wrong it is to think of her former siblings in such a state. Her...throng.

It is hard to remember them. Harder still to put names to faces. Sometimes, she wonders if she is something Nepenthe left behind. An old garment, fallen out of fashion. (And Nepenthe, when she could be, was once at the height of such things.) Her body is not corrupted as much as it has become the serpent, consuming itself. Every cell is a betrayal, a knife in the gut.

But there is something in that, too, that Nadia can appreciate. Tragedy and ecstasy, in one. A slow descent, perhaps, over the coming months. So quickly that nothing short of a miracle might save her, and Nadia is too familiar with those to believe that she might be blessed twice.

The road rises up to meet her foot, it seems, and she disembarks, stumbling a little beneath that awkward yank of gravity before she manages to get to the sidewalk. She crosses that short distance, weaving between the scant few other pedestrians, to get to the cafe.

Enough places for Beyn to try his considerable intellect against the intelligentsia of the day. Plenty of people for Nepenthe to fall in love with, and to fall for her in return. And Zero, constantly lonely, to get a bit of peace despite hirself. These places still feel like a last bastion, somewhere that those dream-like old friends might have frequented, the few times they had money to manage a pastry, a scalding hot concoction of tea or coffee.

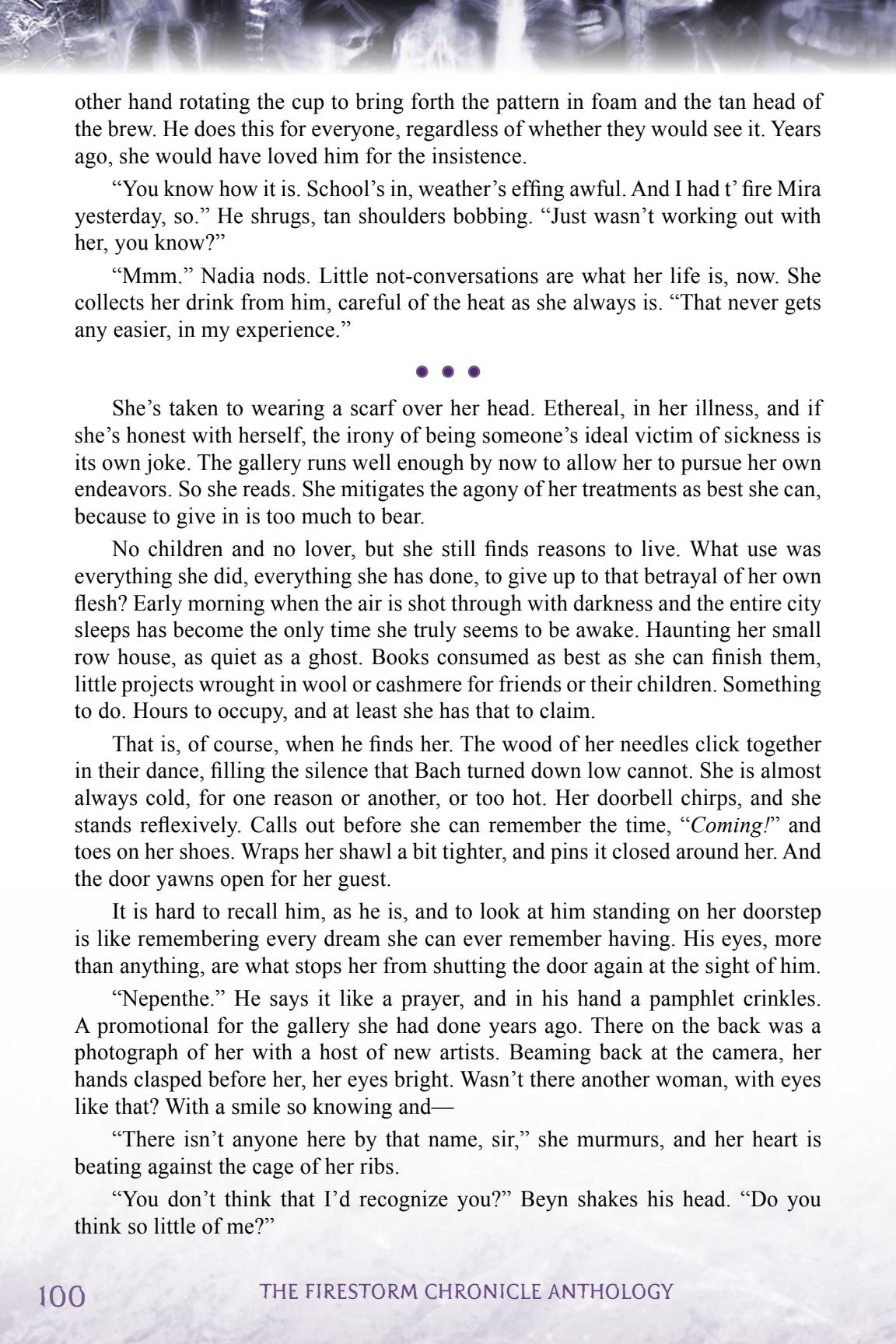
She orders a drink and tries not to think of how much it feels like she's ordering an elixir. How much it means to her, for this brief bit of contact. It has been a long time since she's felt adrift in the modern era. Cars are still a quiet surprise, on some days, though most times she can hardly place the why of it or the how. The time has changed its skin again, and the world is, as ever, both the better and worse for it.

“How’re you doing?” the barista asks, smile growing in recognition.

His skin is embroidered with tattoos of ships and leviathans, his long hair pushed back from his face. Something in his smile is as earnestly honest as she can fathom, and Nadia smiles back despite herself. It is easy to be friendly. She's still beautiful enough to warrant the wolf whistles and the honest appraisals alike, and it means that everyone is willing to open up to her. The twist of her stomach at knowing that one day — perhaps soon — he might turn against her is gone, though her guts know the dance well enough to clench at the memory.

“Gallery’s doing well,” she says, unbuttoning her coat as a matter of course. Too hot inside to keep it on, especially with the place as full as it is. “You’re doing well though too, eh?”

He laughs, low and honest, his head tipping towards the other patrons as he pours out the steamed milk into her *cafe au lait*. His wrist moves, easy as anything,



other hand rotating the cup to bring forth the pattern in foam and the tan head of the brew. He does this for everyone, regardless of whether they would see it. Years ago, she would have loved him for the insistence.

“You know how it is. School’s in, weather’s effing awful. And I had t’ fire Mira yesterday, so.” He shrugs, tan shoulders bobbing. “Just wasn’t working out with her, you know?”

“Mmm.” Nadia nods. Little not-conversations are what her life is, now. She collects her drink from him, careful of the heat as she always is. “That never gets any easier, in my experience.”



She’s taken to wearing a scarf over her head. Ethereal, in her illness, and if she’s honest with herself, the irony of being someone’s ideal victim of sickness is its own joke. The gallery runs well enough by now to allow her to pursue her own endeavors. So she reads. She mitigates the agony of her treatments as best she can, because to give in is too much to bear.

No children and no lover, but she still finds reasons to live. What use was everything she did, everything she has done, to give up to that betrayal of her own flesh? Early morning when the air is shot through with darkness and the entire city sleeps has become the only time she truly seems to be awake. Haunting her small row house, as quiet as a ghost. Books consumed as best as she can finish them, little projects wrought in wool or cashmere for friends or their children. Something to do. Hours to occupy, and at least she has that to claim.

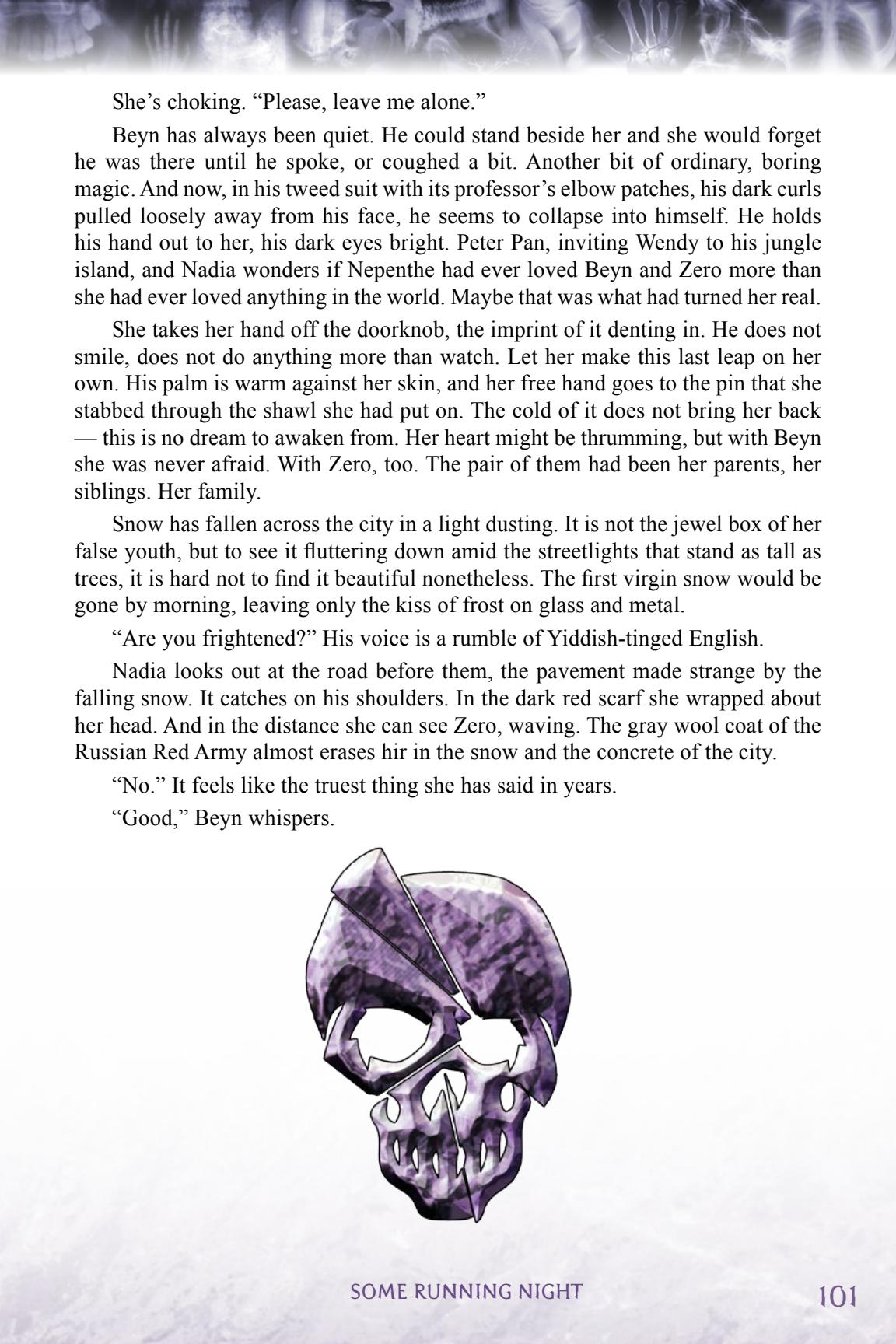
That is, of course, when he finds her. The wood of her needles click together in their dance, filling the silence that Bach turned down low cannot. She is almost always cold, for one reason or another, or too hot. Her doorbell chirps, and she stands reflexively. Calls out before she can remember the time, “*Coming!*” and toes on her shoes. Wraps her shawl a bit tighter, and pins it closed around her. And the door yawns open for her guest.

It is hard to recall him, as he is, and to look at him standing on her doorstep is like remembering every dream she can ever remember having. His eyes, more than anything, are what stops her from shutting the door again at the sight of him.

“Nepenthe.” He says it like a prayer, and in his hand a pamphlet crinkles. A promotional for the gallery she had done years ago. There on the back was a photograph of her with a host of new artists. Beaming back at the camera, her hands clasped before her, her eyes bright. Wasn’t there another woman, with eyes like that? With a smile so knowing and—

“There isn’t anyone here by that name, sir,” she murmurs, and her heart is beating against the cage of her ribs.

“You don’t think that I’d recognize you?” Beyn shakes his head. “Do you think so little of me?”



She's choking. "Please, leave me alone."

Beyn has always been quiet. He could stand beside her and she would forget he was there until he spoke, or coughed a bit. Another bit of ordinary, boring magic. And now, in his tweed suit with its professor's elbow patches, his dark curls pulled loosely away from his face, he seems to collapse into himself. He holds his hand out to her, his dark eyes bright. Peter Pan, inviting Wendy to his jungle island, and Nadia wonders if Nepenthe had ever loved Beyn and Zero more than she had ever loved anything in the world. Maybe that was what had turned her real.

She takes her hand off the doorknob, the imprint of it denting in. He does not smile, does not do anything more than watch. Let her make this last leap on her own. His palm is warm against her skin, and her free hand goes to the pin that she stabbed through the shawl she had put on. The cold of it does not bring her back — this is no dream to awaken from. Her heart might be thrumming, but with Beyn she was never afraid. With Zero, too. The pair of them had been her parents, her siblings. Her family.

Snow has fallen across the city in a light dusting. It is not the jewel box of her false youth, but to see it fluttering down amid the streetlights that stand as tall as trees, it is hard not to find it beautiful nonetheless. The first virgin snow would be gone by morning, leaving only the kiss of frost on glass and metal.

"Are you frightened?" His voice is a rumble of Yiddish-tinged English.

Nadia looks out at the road before them, the pavement made strange by the falling snow. It catches on his shoulders. In the dark red scarf she wrapped about her head. And in the distance she can see Zero, waving. The gray wool coat of the Russian Red Army almost erases hir in the snow and the concrete of the city.

"No." It feels like the truest thing she has said in years.

"Good," Beyn whispers.



Talk About the Weather

BY WOOD INGHAM

The last thing Israel hears before he dies is the story. He is sitting in a gutter in the lane behind an Asda in Southampton and a pink-haired girl with a lilt from far-off Wales in her voice comes sits beside him by the wheelie bins, black and red and green and rust behind the Asda, and starts to talk. She is high. They're usually high, or stoned, or falling over drunk on dirt-cheap piss-colored cider when they talk to Israel. No one sober talks to him like that. No one sober talks to him at all.

It is a ghost story, from far-off Swansea (that's where I'm from, the girl explains, as if she needs to, clicking the rivet in her tongue between her teeth in a way that makes Israel shudder, and I'm never going back, she says, as if she needs to). In Bishop Vaughan School, the Catholic School, the kids scare each other with a story about the Stitched-Up Nun. She's made from pieces of murdered school-girls, all held together with wires and rivets, and she'll come to get you and tear you to pieces when you pray to the Devil. Pray to the Devil, they say, I dare you, dare you, dare you, and see what happens when the Stitched-Up Nun comes.

And then what? Israel says.

The girl explained that she prayed to the Devil and then nothing happened but soon she felt as if she'd been all torn to pieces and sewn together wrong, and ran away. And here she is all speeding in an alley talking to a man who stinks of stale seawater about a story they told in a place she'll never go back to again, and Israel says, *you should go back*.

And then she starts to look at him strangely (they always do), and soon she wanders off and Israel eats some scraps gleaned from the green wheelie bin, wondering if his friend the Sister Stitch, has ever been to Swansea, and if she knows that children tell stories about her there. He drifts off to sleep, still wondering.

This is how Israel dies: woken by a kick in his side, he sees a young man's face close to his.

— *Wake up, says the face.*

Clean-shaven, short haired, hard-eyed. A smart shirt, sleeves rolled up above some sort of regimental tattoo, vaahls all posh and prawper. Gold watch that he probably doesn't need. Money and death, the mark of an officer. Israel pulls himself up.

— *Can I 'elp 'ee, zur?* Israel says, rubbing his head, noting that the man has other men here too, two, three, four, all staring down at him as he lies here behind the wheelie bins, the remains of a gelatinous slug-covered lettuce on his chin.

He receives a fist in his face. A mirror-polished shoe impacts his groin, another his stomach. Someone stamps on his shin so hard he can hear it shatter like old pottery. Israel's pain is minimal, pain has never been his problem, but his surprise is so intense he does not know what to do. He swats the first posh boy away, is barely aware of the man landing in some bin bags five feet away, and tries to get to his feet, but the leg gives way beneath him and he falls back. Another man jumps on him, stamps on his stomach. A third, or maybe a fourth, has a bottle, smashes it over Israel's face. Israel gets a glimpse of a man at the back holding up a phone, pointing it at him. He wonders why. Cold barbed glass slices through the vitreous humour of his left eye and another rain of fists and shoes collapse on him. His arm breaks. He lashes out, unseeing, with his good arm and feels the fist impact a stomach.

— *Shit, says one of the posh boys, and another one says, Why is he still awake? This fucker really needs to be dead now.*

Israel lashes out again, but impacts only air. He receives a brick to his face, driving his nosebone up into his brain. His cheek caves in. His jaw collapses into shards that tear his tongue to shreds. The blackness that obscures his vision becomes a pit, universe-wide, that engulfs him, and before consciousness of anything at all is lost entirely, he thinks, O! I am dead, and this is how it feels.



It is for the sake of people like Israel Hands that they embedded the spikes in the pavement in the stretch outside the bank, that they drilled holes in the bridge so that it offers no shelter from the rain.

Israel was not welcome at the shelter. He tried selling the Big Issue but no one ever bought it from him. Help the homeless, they say, but it's easy to help the homeless when you're filling a food parcel or dropping a coin in a hat or buying a magazine you're not going to read, only wield rolled up like a ward to keep the other homeless away because you've done your duty and fulfilled your obligation and they cannot touch you. Help the homeless, help the poor, yes, but take care: you might have to talk to them. You might have to stand by them and have them talk to you and breath on you and cope with the fact that their experiences and opinions are not your opinions and experiences. One day you might even have to have them as neighbours, to live by them, and who faces that?

Move on, Israel: you are not welcome here. The land rejects you.



Israel knows he is alive again because of the flash of light, because he is dreaming. He is lying broken in the back lane gutter when a light explodes inside of him, filling him, causing him to dissolve into it. In his dream his broken body is raised into the sky, still lying prone, arms and legs hanging, suspended by an aethotic light. There, lying prone on the sky, high above the grey sprawl, he is visited by a crow, who comes and perches on his chest.

He asks, Be you the Reaper?

The crow cocks its head one side. It makes a noise like a crow, laughing. I am *mistaken* for Him from time to time, says the crow, and He and I are often seen together, but no, that's not me.

Israel stares into the black-marble eyes of the crow. He receives an impression of tremendous age. He realises that he and the crow have an awful lot in common, can feel the furnace-light inside the crow, tugging at the light inside himself. Like calls to like.

The crow, courtly, strangely, like the owner of a big old ship, says at length, I'd best be getting on. But I need to ask you something, Israel.

— *Ask and geddet done weth*, says Israel. *There ent no call to stand on ceremony 'ere.*

— *Come visit me.*

— *Where do you live?*

— *Come visit me, come visit me, come visit me.*

It fades to darkness.

In the blackness, Israel can hear the Sister talking to him as if she is there: *for the poor always ye have with you, John twelve verse eight, Matthew twenty-eight eleven, but not so many, Israel, never so many as this. Poverty is an evil, Israel. It does not refine us, we did not deserve it, nor does God decree that we should be poor.*

He has missed Sister Stitch. She is hard-faced and cold, but she offers a comfort to him his temporary addled friends cannot. He has not seen her for a month or more now, since they stood together by the sight of a glass mansion on the Isle of Wight, and watched it hum and glow and vanish into the night. He knows she is alive still, and he knows she'll come and find him when she needs. He needs her now, he realizes.

He awakens face-down in a black binbag full of something soft and foul-smelling, chest above his head, feet above his waist. His arms are pinned to his sides. He can hear someone calling his name, muffled, far away.

Light floods in from above as with a creak and a squeal the lid of the wheelie bin is raised, and Israel Hands feels bone-hard hands around his ankles, lifting him out, clumsily, almost comically, and then dumping him unceremoniously on the concrete.

Speak o' the Devil, thinks Israel and then immediately repents, for it is the Holy/Unholy Sister, all sackcloth and ashes and rivets and staples and mortified flesh. And Israel has missed her.

— *You died, then*, the Sister says, her thin gray lips tight and pursed. *You died*.

Israel explains about the Navy boys, and the Sister nods, without surprise or shock. You keep away from soldiers and sailors when you're like Israel and the Sister, because when the whole world hates you, when the flowers die around your feet and the sky turns heavy and sad, the horses and their young shy away, but the dogs snarl and go for your throat.

He knows that she will not ask him what it was like, for in the century or so that she has been alive, she has not herself died and she is curious to know what it is like, but he tells her anyway, about the feeling of flying, the crow landing on his chest and asking him to visit like a neighbour. He doesn't tell her about the blackness, though; he doesn't want her to hear that.

They get up at length and walk out of town, glad for the grey small hours where no one is abroad. For a while they are silent, but then Israel, it still on his mind, tells her the story of the Stitched-up Nun.

Sister Stitch has never been to Swansea, but perhaps it is time to go.

The dawn, purple and gray, rises like a judgement behind them. In the dawn chorus, Israel is sure he can hear a sound like a crow, laughing.

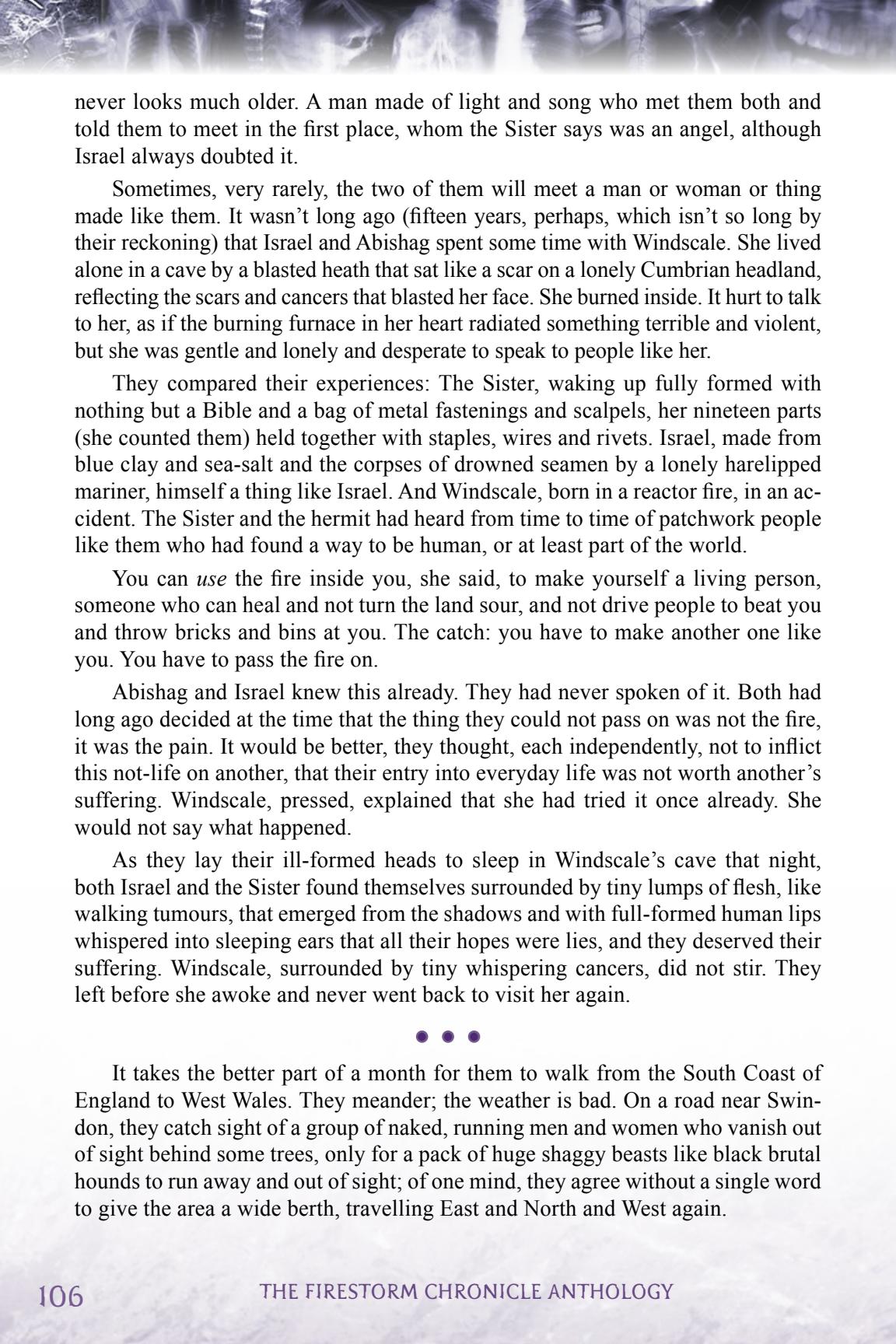


They walk. They are in no hurry. The two of them have always had the time to spare, these patchwork people, which is just as well, because they have no money for buses or trains, and no driver will pick them up at a roundabout on the motorway and ask where they are going, or talk to them about the weather.

Israel overheard someone talking about the weather not long ago. *Morning. Morning, you all right? Can't complain. Beautiful today, isn't it? Gorgeous. Doing anything? Nothing much, taking the kids down the park.* It didn't mean anything, the smallest talk, and yet it showed a thing denied to him, a showing of regard, a mutual connection. You say you're fine, you talk about the weather, and really you're saying, Israel reasoned, you are my friend. Small talk is the biggest talk there is.

One day Israel will walk up to a person who is not drunk, or stoned, or high, and he will say, good morning, and talk about the weather. It is his dearest wish.

They have wandered at the their walking pace across these islands for the better part of a century, and in that time Israel Hands and Abishag Stitch have occasionally met other people who in some way or another are disconnected from the world. The wan little woman with no shadow or reflection who told them in a birdlike twitter why her shadow was missing and just how much it hated her. A middle-aged man with the devil in his eyes and fire at his fingertips, whom the two of them have met three times now over the space of seventy-five years, and who



never looks much older. A man made of light and song who met them both and told them to meet in the first place, whom the Sister says was an angel, although Israel always doubted it.

Sometimes, very rarely, the two of them will meet a man or woman or thing made like them. It wasn't long ago (fifteen years, perhaps, which isn't so long by their reckoning) that Israel and Abishag spent some time with Windscale. She lived alone in a cave by a blasted heath that sat like a scar on a lonely Cumbrian headland, reflecting the scars and cancers that blasted her face. She burned inside. It hurt to talk to her, as if the burning furnace in her heart radiated something terrible and violent, but she was gentle and lonely and desperate to speak to people like her.

They compared their experiences: The Sister, waking up fully formed with nothing but a Bible and a bag of metal fastenings and scalpels, her nineteen parts (she counted them) held together with staples, wires and rivets. Israel, made from blue clay and sea-salt and the corpses of drowned seamen by a lonely harelipped mariner, himself a thing like Israel. And Windscale, born in a reactor fire, in an accident. The Sister and the hermit had heard from time to time of patchwork people like them who had found a way to be human, or at least part of the world.

You can *use* the fire inside you, she said, to make yourself a living person, someone who can heal and not turn the land sour, and not drive people to beat you and throw bricks and bins at you. The catch: you have to make another one like you. You have to pass the fire on.

Abishag and Israel knew this already. They had never spoken of it. Both had long ago decided at the time that the thing they could not pass on was not the fire, it was the pain. It would be better, they thought, each independently, not to inflict this not-life on another, that their entry into everyday life was not worth another's suffering. Windscale, pressed, explained that she had tried it once already. She would not say what happened.

As they lay their ill-formed heads to sleep in Windscale's cave that night, both Israel and the Sister found themselves surrounded by tiny lumps of flesh, like walking tumours, that emerged from the shadows and with full-formed human lips whispered into sleeping ears that all their hopes were lies, and they deserved their suffering. Windscale, surrounded by tiny whispering cancers, did not stir. They left before she awoke and never went back to visit her again.



It takes the better part of a month for them to walk from the South Coast of England to West Wales. They meander; the weather is bad. On a road near Swindon, they catch sight of a group of naked, running men and women who vanish out of sight behind some trees, only for a pack of huge shaggy beasts like black brutal hounds to run away and out of sight; of one mind, they agree without a single word to give the area a wide berth, travelling East and North and West again.

They walk from Oxford to Gloucester, to Hereford, and across the border into Wales. Monmouth, Abergavenny, Merthyr, Ebbw Vale. So much beauty in these hills and valleys green and black, but such poverty. Hard-eyed children in thirty-year-old T shirts wandering the streets smoking, their ribs visible beneath the gauze-thin rags that serve for clothes. No smiles. Parents who sit and stare into space while their children cry. Affection is a luxury for the affluent. The poor remain hard.

They are preparing to cross the M4, seven miles from Swansea, without getting run over or seen by the police — no pedestrians are permitted on this stretch, but how else can one find one's way across this country without a car? These are the veins and arteries of the country, the vehicles the blood, the oxygen.

The Sister often tells Israel his imagination is too vivid. He is engaged right now on an extended reverie about how the whole island has been brought screaming to life, just as he, and Windscale, and Abishag were, that it is a beast that may one day rise from the ocean and shamble across the world, its people reduced to its mad mindless cells; its eyes, its nerves, its hair. He stops under a tree, rests his hand against it, feels the moss wither a little under his hand. Sister Stitch hasn't noticed. She walks ahead.

It's hot today. Summer came early.

— *Good morning, Israel*, says a voice. *How are you?*

Israel looks up into the tree. Above his head, an old, sad-looking crow perches. A gold chain is wrapped around one of its ankles. Its wings look uneven. Its feathers are grayish and dull, but seem to bleed darkness. You could fall into those feathers. It smells of mold. It makes the fire in Israel's stomach burn. Like calls to like. The crow cocks its head to one side. It expects a reply. An adherence to the ritual. The roar of the motorway traffic, just out of sight, remains constant.

— *Ah'm fine, thanks*, says Israel. *'Ow are you?*

— *Can't complain*, says the Crow. It talks with a lilt in its voice. *Looks like a beautiful day, it says.*

— *Et's lovely, zur*, says Israel. *Et surely es.* Israel folds his arms. He adds, *You doin' anythen speshaw t'day?*

The crow moves its wings, as if shrugging.

— *Not really*, it says.

— *Israel!* The Sister has realised he is not close behind and is calling for him. *What are you doing? Who are you talking to?*

— *Crow*, he says.

The sister's watery eyes narrow. She scratches her chin.

— *It's one of us*, she says. *Someone has made it. Like us.*

— *Surely*, says Israel.

— *We should get away from the thing.* The Sister is thinking of the glass mansion. She is thinking of Windscale's cancers.

— *No*, says Israel. *No. Et's a friend.*

— *How can you know that?*

— *We'm tawking bou' the weather.*

The Sister looks at him with those cold, cold eyes, and then looks at the crow.

— *It is a pleasant day*, says the crow.



When he was first made from an old dead crow, some string and a handful of stones, he was just a crow, and Crow. *Bran*. Crow. But he flew around the world a dozen times and when he came back there were stories about the magic crow, dire stories, corsepicker that he was, and he was *Tad Bran*. Father Crow. And he found he could not stay, so he flew around the world another dozen times, and saw how everything had changed in that time, and he came back to Wales and the stories had grown and changed and some of them were not true, and now he was *Taid Bran*, Grandfather Crow, and still he could not stay. So he flew around the world a dozen times more, and when he came back to Wales, most of the people had forgotten him or didn't believe in him anymore, and in the folk tales still printed by the small-run heritage presses, he was *Hendaïd Bran*. Great-Grandfather Crow. And Hendaïd Bran he remained.

Hendaïd Bran knows how fly into the dreams of the dying and the new-born and the born again. Hendaïd Bran knows how to drive a person mad with his song. Hendaïd Bran speaks all languages, even the languages of Heaven and Hell.

Hendaïd Bran is tired.



It was Great-Grandfather Crow all along, the crow that brought them here. He seeds stories of the patchwork people, the Promethean people, in the ears of children and homeless people. Not just of the Sister. There are others, he tells them, not many, but enough, and everyone has a story here, and has done for the longest time, in the hopes that they will come looking for their stories and meet him here, for he has done with flying and prefers these things to be left to chance. The story of the woman who became a statue. The one about the woman with the sewn-on mask for a face. The story of the man who walked out of a river, water streaming out of the bullet holes that riddled him and killed every one of the men who tried to kill him. The story of the hare-lipped mariner.

No one else has ever come, but then the crow half-hoped that no one would, left it so far up to chance that it took a hundred years or more for someone to come. Because of the thing he needs them to do, because it is a terrible thing.



Israel and Abishag sit around the campfire they have made in the sight of Port Talbot. Across the bay the pillars of smoke by day and pillars of fire by night rise from the steelworks. Fire lights smoke across the sky: nights in Port Talbot look like the dawn is always about to come, even when it is a long, long way off. The two patchwork people know what it is to be tired, and how much tired, how much more alone is the sad old bird who waits alone?

But. Hendaid Bran needs a body. He cannot reach his end, whatever it might be, until he has passed his inner fire on. He must make a new life to carry his sins and bear his suffering, and he has no hands to make it. Will you find me the parts to make a life? He asks. Will you help me?

He is so sad. So old. And neither Israel nor the Sister have ever seen the result of this. Neither has ever tried to make another of their kind; neither has ever seen one of the patchwork people reach the state of being human.

And curiosity will out.



What did you intend to find by coming here to begin with, Abishag?

Israel doesn't ask it. He knows all too well that this is never the point. When you have no purpose to speak of, no direction to go in, when the only purpose afforded you is one that you have closed off forever. Except that now, now here they are, 24 hours later, walking down Wind Street, past the Swansea bars and the Swansea clubs, 'roiders in T shirts several sizes too small stumbling out and singing broken hymns and arias, land of their fathers, *ar hyd y nos*. A street pastor in a black jacket is holding back the hair of a girl in a short orange dress that rides up her thighs as she vomits into the gutter; his mate is talking her friends into getting a taxi home.

The men leaving the gay bar let go their hands as they walk out onto the street. Some graduands, still in their shirts and ties, fresh faced like children, lurch from side to side.

This is the ritual. This is a place of worship.

Thirty yards away from the main street, a stone's throw from the jollity and dizziness and good-natured vomiting, is the back alley, the place where Israel and the Sister feel at home.

Here the music and the laughing and the shouting are muffled. The Sister has her hand in her bag of scalpels. Israel is not afraid to beat a person, and has even, once or twice, killed, but never out of anything but anger, never outside of the fury of a fight. He's tried already to engage her on this.

— *Surely we could go the hospito. Or the fune'ro home.*

— *You know we couldn't, Israel.* The Sister is gentle.

— *We cannot murder a person* —

- *We promised.*
- *Not to murder.*
- *We may not have to.*
- *You got your scowpo's.*
- *Yes, I have.*

She will not be turned. He knows she doesn't want this as much as he doesn't. But she has committed herself. She promised to find a body that a raven may enliven. She will.

Israel stops at a wall. Scrawled on it are the words *I keep waiting for something to kick in*. He bites his lip, and it tastes of salt and earth, as it always does.

Someone says something. Behind the wheelie bin, curled up into a ball is a figure.

— *Who's there?* Abishag is there behind him. Israel puts a hand out, and holds her back.

He bends over. He can see a tuft of pink hair. She's hugging herself, shaking. Trackmarks on bare arms. Shivering despite the still-remaining heat of the evening.

— *I know you.*

Her eyes have rolled up into their sockets. Israel kneels and holds her in his arms. She mumbles something. She convulses. A line of spit rolls down her chin. She coughs once, and lets out a sort of gurgling sound, and then she is still.

— *What did she say?* Abishag Stitch is kneeling beside him now.

— *Tha'she's sorry. Jus' that.*

It goes unexplained. Too little in Israel's experience makes sense for him to concern himself, but the intense sadness he feels is a new thing. He did not know her name. He could not talk about the weather with her.

The Stitched-Up Nun nods, once. Israel picks up the girl's body in his arms like one would hold a sleeping child. She is as light as straw. Israel isn't happy about desecrating a corpse, but it cannot be worse than violating the living.



They bring the corpse of the pink-haired girl, wrapped in a sheet, to the top of Kilvey Hill, in the bushes in the shadow of the big TV aerial, along with a bottle of toilet bleach, a screwdriver, a roll of gaffer tape, some wire, a couple of forks, a box of four-inch nails and a pair of two-pound coins.

Preparing a dead woman's body for the Fire from Heaven is grim work, but by the time the bird has come back, the body is impaled with a dozen or more metal implements, all held on with tape and connected with wire and so doused in bleach the chlorine can be smelled in Neath.

They are so engrossed in their work, that it is some minutes before they notice the crow on the bush beside them.

— *Does she have a name?* Hendaid Bran is matter-of-fact.

Abishag is about to utter a denial, but Israel speaks first.

— *Sunny.* He stands like a child, defiant, proud, shy in that way that children are.

The bird and the ersatz nun stare at him.

— *Sunny.*

The bird perches on the screwdriver that is sticking out of the corpse's throat and looks down. Above, clouds gather.

• • •

The storm begins. Lightning strikes the bird and the corpse three times, and on the third time, the flash is so bright, the smell of ozone so strong that Israel wonders if the bird has been annihilated.

But the bird is here, lying on the girl's body, its head under its wing. Israel picks it up. Abishag Stitch crouches, leaning back on her heels, staring at the body. She puts a hand on the girl's cheek, and the girl suddenly takes in a deep juddering breath, convulsing. Abishag holds the girl as her mouth opens and shuts, and she begins to wail with pain. There is fire here. The lightning left its mark.

The bird comes to at the same time. Its wings flap wildly and Israel lets it go, watching as it pecks once at the ground, and then composes itself. It looks around, and lets out a short, sharp *caw*.

Abishag is holding the weeping newborn, consoling her.

Israel watches the bird circle and fly away.

— *Be sunny soon,* he says.



About the Authors

Andrew Atramor is a freelance writer, bookseller, horror enthusiast and a snappy dresser. He lives in Seattle, Washington with his cat Dorian, though he still pines for the snowy hills of Massachusetts that were once his home. This is his first published work.

Born in Miami and quickly leaving for the colder climes of the North, Tanya Cohan-Diaz is currently working as a freelance writer and game designer for Onyx Path Publishing when not acting as a front desk associate for the DOA in Wisconsin.

Sarah Dyer is an aspiring creative thinker, intermediate cat wrangler, and novice writer. She lives and works in Cleveland, Ohio, and is constantly on the lookout for something new and exciting to learn. Her first published work was in the God-Machine Chronicle Anthology.

Meghan Fitzgerald is a freelance writer and game designer, and a digital archivist at HBO. She is currently working on several projects for Onyx Path Publishing, as well as the Chill RPG for Growling Door Games. She has also penned lyrics and libretti, including the new English translation of Final Fantasy VI's Aria di Mezzo Carattere.

Jose R. Garcia was born, raised, and currently resides in Orlando, Florida. He is a freelance writer, full-time student, and amateur game designer. This is his first published work.

Wood Ingham has been a professional performance poet, artist and writer since 2002. He's worked for the British Government, he's that good.

Matthew McFarland is an Ennie-award winning game author and developer. His work has appeared in almost all of the World of Darkness games (both the old and new iterations), and he developed the revised Dark Ages line of games. In addition to working as a speech-language pathologist in the Cleveland Metropoli-

tan School District, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, own and operate Growling Door Games, Inc. <http://growlingdoorgames.com>.

Peter Schaefer is watching you. Zipping from lair to safehouse, he designs games while avoiding the fuzz. Ludum-related accomplishments include writing for Exalted, the new World of Darkness including Werewolf and Mage, and working as a developer on D&D4E. If you want to know more, visit <http://catachresis.shoelesspetegames.com> for weekly stories that are very, very short.

By day, Mark L. S. Stone is a middle school science teacher. He lives in Oakland, CA, with his wife. His RPG work has appeared previously in the Demon: The Descent and Mage: The Awakening Chronicler's Guide. If you like what you read here, more of Mark's fiction has been found online at the Dunesteeff Audio Fiction Magazine. He also blogs about fiction, roleplaying, art, and geek life at burningzepplinexperience.blogspot.com.

Eddy Webb (with a "y," thank you) is an award-winning writer, game designer, and Sherlockian. He has worked on over 100 products, including five years on the World of Darkness MMO. Today he is a freelance writer, game designer, and consultant. He can be found at eddyfate.com.



the firestorm chronicle anthology

The Created wake with a flash of lightning, a gush of water, or a mouthful of air. They stumble into life, knowing barely enough to play at being human.

But human is exactly what they must become. The urges in their alchemical bodies, the marks left by the Prometheans preceding, and every instinct they possess, tells them that Humanity is the goal. Strive, learn, struggle, and reach the New Dawn.

Sometimes that Pilgrimage ends well. Sometimes it ends in tragedy. Either can herald a Firestorm.

The Firestorm Anthology contains ten new stories inspired by Promethean: The Created, including new fiction from:

Andrew Atramor

Meghan Fitzgerald

Peter Schaefer

Tanya Cohan-Diaz

Jose R. Garcia

Mark L.S. Stone

Sarah Dyer

Wood Ingham

Eddy Webb

Matthew McFarland

