THE MIND'S EYE AND OTHER STORIES

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This creative thesis includes a blend of science fiction and literary realism short stories, which are collectively concerned with questions of time, narration, and the use of language. As well, the preface discusses science fiction theory, narrative strategies such as the use of the first person perspective, and the author’s theory of composition.
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PART I

PREFACE
Of Other Worlds

In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin describes science fiction as a “thought-experiment,” the purpose of which “is not to predict the future … but to describe reality, the present world” (xii); understanding the connection between the future and the present is critical to any attempt to define science fiction. Less philosophically, Orson Scott Card says that “science fiction and fantasy stories are those that take place in worlds that have never existed or are not yet known” (18), suggesting that its setting rather than its intention is what defines the genre. Other views of the definition of science fiction range from Farah Mendlesohn’s gently amused “less a genre … than an ongoing discussion” (1) to Darko Suvin’s postmodernist “literature of cognitive estrangement” (372), a phrase that reaches toward the heart of what is often science fiction’s purpose, to effect a change in perspective by making something familiar seem strange or something strange seem familiar. Each of these definitions, like the dozens of others available, is valid in its own way, yet good science fiction must also qualify as good fiction; it should be “fine writing of an imaginative/creative kind imbued with moral seriousness” (Lamarque 571). In these terms, the highest quality science fiction is not only well-written but also creative and significant, often removing the reader to faraway or nonexistent places to provide a perspective about the contemporary questions or ideas that concern humanity.

*Theory: Estrangement, Anthropology, and the Other*

Naturally, science fiction is defined by its interaction with the sciences, from physics to philosophy. “Significant modern SF … discusses primarily the political, psychological, anthropological use and effect of sciences, and philosophy of science, and the becoming or failure of new realities as a result of it” (Suvin 381). While this domain is by no means exclusive
to science fiction, since fiction itself often evaluates and challenges large-scale moral and ethical questions of societal values, science fiction that makes inquiry into the humanity of scientific progress gives itself that kind of moral seriousness so characteristic of good literature. As Le Guin explains in her collection of essays, The Language of the Night, “A great part of the pleasure of the genre, for both writer and reader, lies in the solidity and precision, the logical elegance, of fantasy stimulated by and extrapolated from scientific fact” (119). Science fiction does not abandon the realism of science in favor of metaphor but rather savors the ability to delay metaphoric coherence during the pursuit of inference through fact into truth. In other words, the best science fiction stories “are not interested in what things do, but in how things are” (105). By answering the questions of how and why in their investigation of human character, such stories recognize the reality that people, and their societies, can change.

An unfamiliar setting is often a fundamental ingredient of science fiction. In his essay “On Science Fiction,” C. S. Lewis complains against “all books which suppose a future widely different from the present … without a good reason, which leap a thousand years to find plots and passions which they could have found at home” (62). That is, if outer space is not an intrinsic part of the story, the author has no business taking her characters out there in the first place. On the other hand, Suvin’s paradoxical terms of cognition and estrangement, which attempt “to domesticate the strange” and to “offer a new angle of perception” respectively (Parrinder 40), allow science fiction to employ its usually futuristic settings in a self-aware manner to create the specific cognitive effects of recognition or defamiliarization. Its location in outer space or in an alternate present means that the effects of cognitive estrangement—the alienation by which science fiction is so often characterized—are maximized. Far from following a rote outline, the formal construction of literary science fiction and much postmodern
fiction draws attention to its own fictiveness by challenging reader expectations; in other words, “estranged fiction needs to change our view of our own condition and not simply to momentarily dazzle us with a superficially unfamiliar world” (40). The future setting is not purposeless; rather, the relationship between the future and the present becomes more than a mere extrapolative or allegorical one, but a delicately drawn correlation with the intent to alter a reader’s perspective.

Ursula K. Le Guin’s story “The Masters” provides a good illustration here. According to Suvin’s definition of science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (375), the imaginative framework Le Guin has constructed posits an alternate commonplace about the role of science in society. Estrangement occurs in the opening scene when what appears to be a hazing ritual of a secret society in fact becomes a ceremony welcoming Ganil into a mechanics guild, whose exclusivist purpose is to keep the language of higher mathematics a mystery. The discovery that the numerical place-value system and algebra is considered heretical reveals a commonplace about scientific knowledge, the fear that mechanical invention and mathematical computation are sacrilegious in that they offer a different explanation of natural phenomena. While providing opportunity for comparison greater than mere equivalence, “The Masters” offers commentary about the complex themes concerning the role of science and of scientific epistemology in society.

Science fiction often assumes a narrator who is a scientist, an observer who might be encountering a new culture, an Other. This type of fiction shares strong ties with anthropology, wherein the narrative role of the Other merits extensive examination. As Johannes Fabian points
out in a discussion about the distancing uses of time in ethnographic literature, such narrative devices as the use of the first person or the present tense are used “for the purpose of distancing those who are observed from the Time of the observer” (25). This textual denial of temporal equality ultimately serves to create an Other out of the observed culture, in the same way that in postcolonial theory the “temporal conception of movement has always served to legitimize the colonial enterprise” (95). By distancing, subjectifying, and alienating the Other from the narrator, this denial of equality creates an unfair hierarchy meriting the critical perspective of postcolonialism to uncover “the interests which inhabit the production of knowledge” and reinstate “the wide range of illegitimate, disqualified or subjugated knowledges” of any minor discourses (Gandhi 52-53). What this means for fiction is that the specific narrative techniques of point of view and temporal cues can create not only a cognitive estrangement but also a deliberately constructed Other for the narrator. The narrator-as-observer raises the question of the identity of the real alien, since the narrator and even the reader are implicated in these temporal distancing strategies. Empathizing with or embracing the alien allows the protagonist and reader to gain an alternate perception of themselves, especially if the strangest alien can be discovered to be more familiar than expected. The best science fiction, as much concerned with the future as with the present, holds these doubled settings, times, and selves in perfect tension.

Ultimately, science fiction stories are about all heres and all nows. At heart, this genre is the fiction of ideas, which translate themselves across times and places via the power of metaphor. Like its sister the fairy tale and its grandmother the myth, science fiction enables “metaphorical thinking,” which “underlies creativity in both artistic and scientific creation. Metaphor unites reason … and imagination” (Flaherty 228). In this view, the unusual or unfamiliar setting of a story can be one of its strengths, challenging the reader to ask herself to
what extent she accepts the narrative’s essential metaphors or ideas, and how the characters’ beliefs, strengths, or faults correspond to hers. This defamiliarization is recognized as such and interrogated. Instances in which a reader’s point of view can be challenged occur in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, whose setting on a planet with androgynous beings enables the reader to examine her assumptions about the role of sexuality in societies; likewise in Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow*, the fear that genuine faith can nevertheless lead a person to cause great harm shows itself more starkly on a planet where no one knows God. Against the contrast of space and stars, the most vital, transcending human questions can be better seen.

In “American SF and the Other,” Le Guin writes about the impoverishing act of alienation: “If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person … you have denied its spiritual equality, and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. And thus you have fatally impoverished your own reality. You have, in fact, alienated yourself” (95). While estrangement is used for a purposefully jarring effect, its ultimate goal, I think, is to bridge between the suddenly strange object, setting, character, or idea in order to enrich, not to impoverish reality. Alienating oneself can be positive if it requires the reader cognitively to reevaluate her standpoint on why and how such distance was created, sensed, or enforced. Through this self-examination, the reader might accept a so-called illegitimate knowledge and appreciate the Other whose alienation has been overcome.

The particular subgenre of science fiction to which some of the following stories belong is called soft or social science fiction, because it is based upon the sciences of the humanities, such as sociology, anthropology, history, or linguistics. This type of fiction often explores the heights or limitations of human interaction, a sometimes contemplative genre in which the
landscape of the mind is as worthy of investigation as the farthest-flung star in the galaxy. Social science fiction is essentially character-based because the science does not take precedence over the characters, who often perform scientific or other forms of research. Consequently, my main characters are not physicists or mathematicians but rather communicators—journalists, linguists, students, scholars—each of whom is interested in other worlds, other peoples, other ways of thinking. This type of story can focus on the characters’ discovery of knowledge they sometimes did not know they were seeking, a value that this genre holds in common with literary fiction. The human element is the point of any fiction, an inquiry into what it means to think, feel, and act as a member of humanity.

Other Worlds: Winter and Rakhat

Two novels I admire as examples of the delicate skill of addressing the human question are The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin and The Sparrow by Mary Doria Russell. These, among their other excellent books, as well as fiction by Margaret Atwood, Octavia E. Butler, Doris Lessing, Connie Willis, and many more, follow my definition of good fiction and of good science fiction in that they, by means of eloquent language and metaphoric narrative, enlighten humanity about its own nature. Their language is artfully crafted, and they prove their significance when their characters wrestle with large-scale questions of being. When Le Guin’s protagonist Genly Ai must cross a glacier on the planet Winter with a person he believes is his enemy, he learns to write without satire, “It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end” (220), suggesting not only a life philosophy but also a recognition that the process of artistic creation can be its own reward. Russell explores the interdependency of belief and emotion when her protagonist Emilio Sandoz, in journeying to Rakhat, “discovered the outermost limit of faith and, in doing so, had located the exact boundary
of despair. It was at that moment that he learned, truly, to fear God” (21). In these situations when the limits of the human mind and spirit are tested to their utmost, do we readers understand who we can become, as both individuals and societies.

Ursula K. Le Guin’s philosophy about the importance of story emerges from the first sentence of *The Left Hand of Darkness* when Genly Ai declares his intention to “make my report as if I told a story” since “Truth is a matter of the imagination” (1). This novel exemplifies an ideal blend of setting and situation, taking place in a world where oral communication is highly valued and language is understood to offer an imperfect representation of reality. “[I]f at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice,” Genly warns his readers, “why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them is false, and it is all one story” (1). Local history, gossip, proverb, and myth are some of the many ways that the inhabitants of the planet Winter communicate among themselves. They are also driven by the laws of *shifgrethor*, social mores governing pride and self-respect, under which offering unsolicited advice is a profound insult, yet speaking the truth can be interpreted as treason, in the right light. As any linguist can affirm, words shape the way humans are able to think, and our very self-definition is tied up in the words we use to describe ourselves. Narrative, that is, mythopoeic storytelling, originated as a way to explain natural phenomena and evolved into a strategy for explaining the self’s relationship to the society, and Le Guin’s employment of ancient myth as a counterpoint to the unfolding events of her narrative creates insight into the alien mind. Thus, story matters because it teaches us how to tell ourselves who we are.

Greatly character-driven as is much science fiction, the story of *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell is about a disastrous first contact situation in which none of the participants were aware that they were causing harm. The thesis of this novel is that damage can be done out of
love and a desire to do right, and that simple human interaction can cause irreversible effects. Emilio Sandoz, the mission’s only survivor, accuses God of betrayal, wrestling with the truth that following what he believed was God’s plan inadvertently cost the lives of his friends and hundreds of innocents. One of the characters speculates: “The mission … probably failed because of a series of logical, reasonable, carefully considered decisions, each of which seemed like a good idea at the time. Like most colossal disasters” (12). What I appreciate most about this novel is the way that the clues about what is really happening are sown so subtly and reaped so suddenly; one of Emilio’s colleagues, in an offhand observation, voiced the mission’s real flaw, “Our presence is now a part of this planet’s history” (200). In a setting as vividly described as the most accurate realism, Russell paints a flawed family with pathos and unwavering honesty, elaborating and expanding her idea in a narrative whose details accrue into an inquiry into the very problem of evil, into the very nature of God.

Like Le Guin’s and Russell’s writing, each of my stories addresses the problem of communication in human relationships in an attempt to acknowledge the sometimes apparent impossibility of knowing someone else’s or even one’s own mind. While my characters’ professions often require communication, all does not go easily for them; their social interactions are often directly affected by their attempts to elude or overcome barriers to communication, some insurmountable. Facing censorship of different kinds and sometimes deprived of their voices, the narrators of my five short stories attempt to describe, preserve, explore, or conquer other worlds, places where they live and places where they think.

Matters of narration are a longstanding interest of mine, since, of course, every story must be told by someone. I view narrators as the entrance into understanding both the ideas behind and the techniques of fiction writing. (My academic essays offer perhaps more thematic
contiguity than my fiction, as they critically evaluate questions of narration from the perspective of a creative writer.) A narrator, especially a first-person narrator, is often the most interesting part of the story since she endures the most difficulties and undergoes the most change. Writing in the first person point of view can be exceedingly challenging due to the narrator’s ignorance or blindness. Here, an author must work even harder to suggest to the reader the problems or flaws of the character’s limited perspective: in short, every first person narrator is an unreliable narrator, and yet their necessarily limited points-of-view must at once suggest their flaws and map out their often rocky journey toward self-knowledge.

Unsurprisingly, I most enjoy reading stories in which I question what I’m being told, where there is play between what is said and what is meant. The more gaps and spaces in the narrative, the more implications I must interpret, the better I like the final turn in which something I believed is revealed to be not quite as I first thought. Narrative games are some of my most favorite—elaborate frames hiding unreliable narrators—and an example of one type of narrative game comes from Connie Willis’s novels. Her characters must solve idea-driven problems by first gathering evidence from multiple sources and then blending and sifting the product in unusual or creative ways to produce a solution. They struggle to deduce or uncover the connections between facts and events; they, like Emilio Sandoz, also make mistakes based on what they considered to be the best choice according to their knowledge at any given moment. Writing in first person is a narrative game wholly of itself. Although the point of view can be uncomfortably limiting, that narrative style is especially effective for portraying an empathetic character with a distinctive voice who undergoes a change in belief.

My use of the first person point of view in four of the following five stories is therefore a deliberate acknowledgement of the restrictions of a single person’s understanding. Not only do
many of my stories feature first-person narrators with limited knowledge, but my fiction also
dwells on moments of miscommunication as instances in which characters realize that their
world or they themselves are not as they believed. Frequently I decide to rewrite a third-person
story into first person; exploring the mind and voice of the main character in such a narratively
intimate manner usually solves any problems of clarity or distance, for by deliberately donning
another person’s viewpoint, I can myself see differently.

Questions of Narration: The Stories

In “The Mind’s Eye,” photojournalist Helena Young explores the unique city of Thaaneh
in which looking at faces is illegal; after she is imprisoned by the city watchmen, she must revise
her former worldviews about societies. My original draft was indirectly inspired by James
Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, in which he describes the camera as “an ice-cold, some
ways limited, some ways more capable eye … incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry
truth” (206). As a photographer, Helena can relate to the idea of seeing the world in a different
way through a camera’s lens, though she finds the truth of the camera to be far from absolute.
As well, the camera, the viewpoint through which Helena experienced the city of Thaaneh, has
no function in the dark cell; Helena’s views of and about the city become literally blacked out.
In fact, Helena’s imprisonment causes her to wonder about the consequences of her own limited
knowledge, which relates to my decision to tell this story in first person, a symbol that truth
rarely comprises only a single perspective.

The first incarnation of “The Mind’s Eye” took the form of Helena’s prison journal, a
manifestation of my longstanding admiration for the challenges of epistolary fiction. However,
there could be no suspense about Helena’s survival due to the inescapable reality that she was
physically writing the story. In one revision, I attempted to recast the story in third person,
telling the events in a strictly chronological fashion, but this change destroyed Helena’s tone of wonder as she explored the new world, discovering the little details of hand gestures, wall art, or store names written where the welcome mat would be. When at last I returned the story to first person, without the journal format but with a less direct chronology, I felt that the demands of both the atypical setting and the narrative constraints could be satisfied: Helena could still explore and yet misunderstand Thaaneh. As in The Sparrow, my main character does not necessarily win, and she must suffer punishment for appreciating the social norms too late.

“Waking,” set on the same planet but in a different region as “The Mind’s Eye,” is the story of Elisabeth Ford, a translator and archivist. While on an assignment in a monastery-like retreat, she resolves to aid a woman who claims the skill of prescient dreaming, whom Elisabeth must protect from local political interests by preserving the woman’s dream journal. “Waking” is the most recent embodiment of two other stories that did not know they were the same one: the first was about a student of prescient dreaming and the other was about an anthropologist who failed to comprehend a political situation. My attempt to combine these stories in a completely new setting produced a character with a personal quest for something to give her life meaning. In embracing the silenced testimony, Elisabeth deviates from her supposed anthropological duty to objectify and distance the Other, a job which is always “concerned with boundaries: those of one race against another, those between one culture and another” (Fabian 117). Rather, Elisabeth’s fear of meaninglessness is alleviated when she champions the postcolonial mission to help marginal voices gain scope and power.

“The Conquest of the World” is another story in which a change in point of view revealed the true stakes of the situation. Invited to a game night with the friends of her new boyfriend, Julia finds that a game of Risk enables her to assert herself against the expectations of the males
in her life. Change is a good way to measure progress; as Julia changed from one draft to the next, my story changed as well. Originally written in third person, the story ended with Julia contemplating a breakup with her boyfriend; in the revision, my choice to change the point of view to first person allowed Julia definitively to realize that not only does Zack fail to share her values, he is also trying to prevent her from pursuing her long-term goal of studying abroad. This story benefited enormously from the comments it received during a workshop critique; on the advice of my classmates to create more pathos for Julia, I altered the story’s timeline, created a clearer backstory, and gave Julia’s voice free rein. In the end, Julia’s new awareness that the world is hers emerges through her informal narrative style.

The story “Persephone” stemmed from a blend of two writing prompts: create an active story about a character who was alone, and begin with a sentence from another author’s published work. (The opening sentence, originally from “The Masters,” migrated toward the middle of the story, an altered version of which I preserved out of sentiment.) While Ann, a science writer, is snowed in at her large, empty house the weekend before she plans to move, she attempts to reconnect with her estranged stepdaughter Samantha, but a domestic accident prevents her from doing so: she cuts into her thumb while slicing open a pomegranate. A story about loss, “Persephone” pays homage to the legend of Persephone, a symbol of spring, whose mother Demeter searches for her even into the underworld. In my version, Ann does not find Samantha and remains trapped in her winter shell; the eaten pomegranate means there is more separation to be endured before springtime. I tried to show Ann’s confinement as she paced up-and-downstairs, failing to purge her feelings through her creative work and instead staring longingly outside. Despite the suggestion of the writing prompt, “Persephone” is a slow, quiet
story, in the end more sad than triumphant, another situation in which the knowledge my protagonist gains is not what she expects.

Likewise in “Extradition,” a young journalist named A. M. Moran becomes unwillingly complicit in a political plot to stifle the testimony of General Kane, a military rebel who is being extradited to his home planet. The only story in this collection without any reference to Earth, it is nevertheless about censorship, a properly human concern. After Moran has empathized with the general’s story, she is forbidden by professional constraints from publicizing his testimony, a mission she has promised to undertake. Similar to “The Mind’s Eye” in addressing questions of perception, each of the six parts of “Extradition” is told from a different perspective, blending the omniscient point of view with third and first person in an experiment to see how many different styles a short story could sustain. Communication between political entities and between individuals is purposefully calculated and tightly controlled, governed by unstated rules that fall most heavily on Moran, who must remain silent when she would rather speak. The origin of this story and a secondary theme is expressed in the sentence, “Sometimes the family you make along the way can mean more to you than those by accident of birth.” Most of the proper names derive from people or places I have known, as I wanted to write about the happiness of even brief friendships.

Conclusion: Why I Write

As I reflect upon what my coursework has challenged me to learn and to practice as I continue to write, I appreciate my inability to define fiction or even science fiction adequately, for its contradictions and inconsistencies are what makes creating narrative such a difficult and worthy enterprise. Concerning the problems inherent in reading and writing and ways of knowing, the attempt at communication on the part of the author and the attempt at interpretation
on the part of the reader is, at heart, what makes reading such a gloriously imperfect method of understanding. Discovering the correct destination can still be accomplished by traveling the wrong pathways. In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, William of Baskerville, a monk passionately devoted to logic, arrives at a correct solution by means of an increasingly faulty series of deductions; in the end he realizes that his mistakes nevertheless enabled his present understanding: “I conceived a false pattern to interpret the moves of the guilty man, and the guilty man fell in with it. And it was this same false pattern that put me on [his] trail” (470). This perfectly illustrates writing to me: discovering the final product through a series of artful miscommunications between an author and her words, and between the words and the reader. Happily, science fiction is “a polysemic discourse” since “[t]exts are vulnerable to a multiplicity of interpretations, each of which produces a different landscape” (Mendlesohn 10). In spite of, or perhaps because of, the gaps and misunderstandings at the heart of writing and reading, some perspective on the self can yet be gained.

My sometimes frustratingly circular writing process reflects this cycle of new understandings. Although I am a firm believer in the adage “First draft fast, second draft slow,” meaning that the rough first draft is for putting ideas on the page and the second and subsequent versions are for careful word-by-word editing, this system often finds me midway through a draft before I discover what my composition is really about. Once I’ve written two, three, or several drafts to uncover the true shape of the story, I must then begin again with a new first draft. Occasionally I will believe myself to have fully finished a story and only come by its central image or idea years later; “Waking” is a rewritten story whose center I hope I have finally found. These many drafts appear to me like layers which I peel off one by one, each more concentrated than the last, each shaped more like the image in my mind. The process of coming closer to my
original idea by attempting to read its true form leads me down interesting paths of creative invention: the final product is shaped by the means I took to produce it.

In an essay called “Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction,” Le Guin writes, “To reach the others, artists go into the self. Using reason, they deliberately enter the irrational. The farther they go into the self, the closer they come to the other” (74), concluding that myth is a blend of the rational and irrational, the conscious and unconscious self. The simultaneous pursuit of the other and the self, and the indivisible unity of mind and brain are what attracts me to narrative. Some reasons why I write fiction are because I love language, because I enjoy visiting other places in my mind, and because I agree with Genly Ai that narrative is an excellent vehicle for truth. I write science fiction for all the same motives and because it’s often directly concerned with how to be or why to be human, with how to make things better. If I did not believe that individual and social change were possible, I would not bother reading or writing stories.

As William of Baskerville tells his scribe, “No one ever obliges us to know, Adso. We must, that is all, even if we comprehend imperfectly” (450). The injunction to know thyself will never grow old, and as has been said before, I write to know what I think about the world. I prefer to think of my writing as words in a dialogue, one perspective out of many; mine is one voice in a multi-voiced conversation about life and about the written word. John Gardner says that “all good fiction has … authority and at least a touch of strangeness” (94); the authority I waive, but the strangeness I cherish. I do not aspire to write the last word, but my intention is to write some words that I hope are meaningful.
And sometimes the motive is innocent: writing is often pleasurable. Umberto Eco writes in an essay called “How I Write” that “sometimes one decides to tell a story only to get to know it better” (321). I write in order to know other worlds.
References


PART II

STORIES
I’ve been arrested for unauthorized gazing.

I went out for a walk alone to stretch my back and shoulders after kneading dough all morning with Adrah’s daughters in the kitchen of their inn, and it occurred to me that I wouldn’t get another chance to glimpse the inner circle of the city, since I planned to leave Thaaneh tomorrow. Dwennon, my local guide, would take me back to the capital, and I would leave the planet a fortnight later with no opportunity to return. The inner circle, barred to commoners and foreigners, is where the former royal residence and other noble estates are; it is said to be filled with mirrors, frescoes, statues, portraits, and other forbidden visual art. The press of deadline may have been what made me feel more daring. In any case, I climbed the street and lingered around the gate, taking my stylus camera out of my bag, ready in hand. As I walked past the gateway, I took a picture without lifting my eyes from the cobblestones, but since I couldn’t be sure that I got a good shot, I crossed back and forth several times.

Two watchmen approached me from behind and on either side, so precisely coordinated that they must have been using their eyes. They grabbed me by the upper arms. I was almost startled enough to drop my camera, but my experience as a wartime photojournalist had trained my instinct to grip it tighter when surprised. With one hand I slipped it up my sleeve to fit under the elastic band I wore at my wrist.

“What are you doing, citizen?” one of the watchmen asked.

“Only walking, sir.” I looked at the insignia on his breast, the polished toe of his shoe, anywhere but his face. To look at another’s face was taboo in Thaaneh, a serious offence.
“I think not,” said the other in a clipped tone. I recognized his voice. His hand tightened on my arm. “Besides, you’ve already been warned.” They began to march me back to the second ring, and I fought down my panicking impulse to flee. Resisting arrest was illegal, and if I called out, no one would help me anyway. Watchmen arrested potential accomplices indiscriminately.

They led me through the streets, pedestrians parting way for us without even having to look. Built into the second wall was a staircase that we climbed to a watchtower, one of many posted along the four circular city walls. The inside of the watchtower contained a small, dark room with one chair in the center, where they made me sit. One of the men hung a lantern from a hook on the wall. To keep from staring at the light, I looked down at my hands squeezed together in my lap. The fingers were clammy, red and white.

“Who are you?” the flat-voiced one asked.

I told him my name. “I’m a foreigner.” In Maan, the word means a negative location, literally, I am not-Thaaneh. But this time I called myself a not-Handaara, not from this planet.

“Why are you here?”

I couldn’t say that I had come to see his city, as that would mean prison for sure. “I’m only traveling. The Envoy in the capital has given me permission to come here to—know Thaaneh.” The capital was a week’s journey, one way: no one in this part of the world could verify my story. “I have papers.”

I had to stand up to get them, to reach up under my long linen tunic and down into my high-waisted trousers; I wore the papers wrapped up in wax paper and tied around my thigh. The officer of the watch opened the packet and passed the documents among themselves: my identification papers in Maan and Modern Standard English, a letter from the newspaper for
whom I worked as a photographer, a letter from the Envoy. “Your bag,” he said, and I handed it over. He pawed through it, a piece of soda bread, a comb, a little coin purse half full, a pen and a notebook written in MSE containing several diagrams of the city, an electronic notepad I could fit to my camera to view my photos. My password, a meaningless sequence of letters and numbers, would keep the information safe, but most technology was viewed with suspicion. Alien. “I can explain,” I said, prevaricating, but he slapped me across the face, not hard but effectively. I jumped and was silent, blinking back tears.

He made me relinquish all the rings I’d bought in Thaaneh, the ribbon in my hair, my belt, my sandals. The other man frisked my body professionally, found my pocketknife and stylus camera, which joined the other detritus in my bag. Then he put a black cloth sack over my head and tightened it around my neck with a drawstring. I bit back my cry, willed myself not to struggle. The officer with the dry voice said, “Yelena Yaan, you have been found guilty of unauthorized gazing.” Helena Young.

The two watchmen stood me up and led me through a trapdoor down a narrow spiral stairwell. When I thought to begin counting my steps, I reached thirty-nine before the floor leveled out, so I must be well below ground level. They took me through a maze of twisting halls and locked me in a tiny, pitch dark cell.

I rattled the door for a long time without answer before I explored the room. It was a six-foot cube, which gave me, even without light, a sense of oppression from the low ceiling. The walls were cool stone, the floor packed earth. One wall contained the door, which was solid wood with no handle on the inside, but had a slot near the floor, closed now, through which prisoners could be fed. A slit at the top of the door provided the air. A flat pallet was rolled up
in one corner next to a bucket for waste. There was only my body, my clothes, the black sack, and nothing else.

I could smell the odor of my sweat. I hadn’t meant to look, couldn’t help myself, was sorry now. If a watchman came by, I would beg permission to contact Dwennon or Adrah, to try to buy my release with the rest of the money I had at the inn or the promise of more from the Envoy. I was afraid they would beat me or worse: torture me, rape me, execute me. Or forget me. I sat in the corner farthest from the door and pressed my forehead into my knees. There was still the drawstring threaded in the black bag. Perhaps I was supposed to kill myself.

II

It is surprisingly hard to take pictures without looking around to aim the camera. Although Dwennon seemed to think it a great joke that I wanted to go to Thaaneh just to see it, he was most serious that I should avoid getting caught by the watchmen. Within the city, it is illegal to look at people’s faces or especially to make visual representations of them. The origin of the taboo is religious: the sum of all humans’ faces is the face of God, which is too holy to be looked upon. In order to get my photos, I had to practice the art of the glance using my clandestine camera, a six-inch stylus with a tiny noiseless shutter. But Thaaneh would be worth the inconveniences. It was reputed to be a city of beauties, and no provincial taboo would prevent me from doing my job.

While Dwennon and I waited in a long line to cross the bridge into the city island, I photographed the scenery, though it was odd not to know instantly how the photos came out; I would have to wait until I was alone each evening to see them for the first time. Dwennon kept hissing at me because I was staring. For centuries, the watchmen, religious police who guard against any breach of taboo, have been the real power in Thaaneh. The primary prohibition is
against eye contact, which is an intimacy as close as intercourse; thus all the logical corollaries follow. Improper or lewd gazing is a sin and a crime, and even staring is a major offense, since it constitutes looking at another person without permission. The sin of reproducing the image of a person is therefore tantamount to blasphemy. The taboo also gave rise to a whole vocabulary of profanity, such as “now see here,” “look you,” and “godsy,” from God’s eyes. And so the watchmen looked to make sure that no one else was looking.

The line got shorter, and the foot traffic bottlenecked at the narrow bridge. The watchmen were wearing fitted black masks on the upper halves of their faces, so their identities were still hidden from my camera. Then it was our turn: Dwennon put the two coins in the watchman’s palm and we passed under their gaze with our eyes trained on our feet. Below the boards and ropes, the hundred-foot drop into opaque water seemed to rise up like a threat.

Rumors said the method of execution in Thaaneh was drowning in the sea. Though I had never before felt a moment of vertigo, I struggled to control my impulse to jump. The watchmen kept chanting to everyone entering the city, “No looking. No looking.”

As I was looking at the cleverly braided sandals and jewelry on the feet of those walking near me, a shadow passed in a flicker over my face, and I flinched. A gull hung high in the air above me, a momentary still life before it wheeled away out to sea. I recollected myself and turned my face back to earth, feeling that my action had been observed. I hadn’t done anything wrong, only stared briefly into the sky, but perhaps that was when the watchmen first marked me as someone who looked at things.

* * *

The city of Thaaneh is made of three concentric circles built on the height of the manmade island at the southernmost point of the continent. Each of the city’s circles is
demarcated by the four city walls: a double-thick outer wall protecting against outsiders, the middle wall dividing the first and second rings of the city, and the third wall defining the inner circle. The gap between the outer walls was a major market thoroughfare, and over the next few days, Dwennon and I walked every foot of it. I took pictures of the walls, which were made of stone without mortar, and of vendors’ stalls and vendors when I had the chance, of spices and clothes and shoes and hands, and of the sky, which was a deep blue foregrounded with clouds of fleece. My official objective was to document the architecture of Thaaneh, as part of my newspaper’s Faces of Forgotten Cities series, but I was not unwilling to shoot the faces themselves.

Venturing farther into the city, I photographed the fish market and patronized a shop with delicious cheesy pumpernickel rolls. I saw granaries, factories, breweries. Shops with the store name painted on the doorstep. A street of nothing but pubs. Tenement houses made from broken pieces of ships. Rugs of every conceivable color and design. Fenced and gated bourgeois houses not much different from where I grew up. More views of the bridge. Arches and arrow slits and crenellations and stairways. Garbage carts, beggars, a pious woman with a black veil over her face, and everywhere watchmen.

I didn’t expect it to be so difficult to communicate by hearing only voices without facial expressions. Body language and vocal inflection covered a greater percent of communication than in other societies, as did clothing and rings in the denotation of rank. While bartering with a shopkeeper for a braided wire bracelet, I kept my eyes lowered and saw only his hands, large and hairy, but my camera saw his face. Voyeurism was a sin, but I couldn’t wait to hook up my camera and see what he looked like. There existed in Thaaneh an entire terrain of black market mirrors and portraits, rather like pornography. When I asked Dwennon, he denied their
existence, but I was still eager to meet some of these resistance artists, photograph their work, maybe get my own face painted.

The inn where Dwennon always stayed was managed by Adrah and her daughters. The first time we met, Adrah’s sleeves were turned back, and flour covered her hands, so we did not press palms. I shared a room with the two girls and also, according to Handaaran custom, helped prepare the food and keep the house where I was staying. The first morning of my residence, Adrah’s daughters woke me early to take me down to the fish market to buy dinner and supper. Despite our arriving before dawn, there was still a long wait at the stalls. I hadn’t seen either of their faces but suspected they were twins. They couldn’t have been older than fourteen, but they were laughing with each other about Dwennon, who had stayed with their mother last night.

On the way back, near a gate, a toddler got separated from its mother and began screaming and searching for her. Another woman passing by dropped a cloth over the child’s face, warding off the evil eye with two fingers because it had looked at her. Many days later I tried to remember what I looked like but couldn’t. It had been less than a week since I had seen myself in a mirror, but I couldn’t get a clear mental picture, so I photographed myself. Just my face, no expression. When I saw the picture of me that night, some worry inside me relaxed. A face is like a name—it is what makes you yourself.

* * *

Alone I walked down to the ocean, two weeks into my stay. By midmorning, all the fisherman had come and gone, so all I saw were the clam trawlers, destitute children who dove for clams to sell to vendors. The water was breathtaking, so clear you could see the individual grains of sand. The ocean made me think of a scrap of poem I’d read years ago in a literature course, about why people on the beach always watch the sea even though it’s less interesting
than the land. Something like, “The people along the sand all turn and face one way.” So instead I turned and photographed the land from the ocean’s perspective.

That poem reminds me of photography. A photo is not an objective, factual record; it does not tell the truth. Rather, photography is about perspective. Photos are metanarrative, because they record not only what I saw but also how I saw it. For instance, the watchmen’s act of watching reveals their values; likewise, a photo shows one person’s viewpoint—the photographer’s. The photographer controls the angle, lighting, zoom, and focus of the shot, positioning the object in relation to her own eye. Photography is the art of aesthetic selection.

And so I photographed the walls and the waves, the children in the ocean, the rocky sand and the fine white sand, the lichen on the cliff rocks, my silhouette walking ahead of me, my footprints eaten by the foam. I breathed in the salt. Typically we conceive a pendulum as swinging from a fixed point, but sometimes I believe the pendulum is the fixed point, and everything else swings freeform around it. The photographer views the world from a fixed point with the world swinging around her. It’s all a matter of perception.

Running off the mainland like a string of beads are several other islands, which hold watchtowers to guard the seaward approach. Long ago, “watchman” was an honorable title, but now the watchmen watch the citizens. A distorted inward gaze, searching for sin. Back inside the city walls, I felt scrutinized but couldn’t look around myself to see if I were actually being watched.

On my way back to the inn, I remembered a mural nearby that I wanted to shoot. It was on the outer side of the second wall, in sad disrepair: the animals on the border had been painted over. I was standing too close to fit the whole image in the frame, so I cut across the street, turned, and faced the designs—interlocking circles that I took for a representation of the city. A
watchman in a tower must have signaled to a compatriot on the ground, for as I was aiming the camera, a man seized my arm just a little harder than necessary. Instantly I dropped my gaze to my feet. He said, “What are you doing, citizen?”

“I am a foreigner, sir.” A not-Thaaneh. Doubtless he could hear the fear in my voice. I could hear it there too. I bit my tongue to keep from saying anything that might incriminate myself. Adrah had told me to agree with whatever the watchmen said and to obey them without question.

He drew me close to him and put his mouth to my ear. “Be careful, foreigner. You are watched.” It was an ugly, dirty thing to say. Then he released me roughly, and I was too angry and shaken to see where he went or even to get my picture.

I went quickly back towards the inn, but before long a woman fell into stride beside me. “A foreigner?” she asked me. Her fingers were bare of rings, though even the poorest wore jewelry.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“Where you come from, people look each other in the eye,” she said. Her voice was not that of a young woman, but it was wistful. I’d felt the same longing to see other worlds. Back then, nothing real had been as good as all the things I imagined.

“That’s true.” I didn’t ask her what she wanted from me, but Thaaneh was a culture of such subtext that she heard and answered my question.

“Meet with us on the first.” Four days from now. She began to move away. “Tarragon Street, sixth house, kick twice.” She was gone.

* * *
The following day I made my way to Tarragon Street, one of many tiny streets in the warren between the outer walls. Visiting hour was traditionally midafternoon, when in the hottest months Thaaneh would take something like a fiesta and afternoon tea. I counted to six—the houses were all contiguous—and tapped the brass kickplate at the foot of the door with the toe of my sandal twice. Just above the kickplate was a charcoal drawing of a rectangle crossed by horizontal lines, a sign that the illiterate could have letters read and written here.

The door opened and I held out my hand. A man gave me his, ringless too, and we pressed palms. “Welcome, stranger. Please come in.” I followed him down four steps made of crates. The street level had risen but the floor of his house had not. The inside, unlike most places, was brightly lit. I sensed the eyes on me, took a chance, and looked back. The woman who had met me in the street was there, sitting in a chair in the corner; the rug she was braiding spilled over her lap. Three others, two men and a woman, sat on the floor on cushions around a low table spread with tea, cakes, and fruit. There was a vacant place for me.

The other woman, about my age, looked anxiously at my face. I waited, regarding her, and less than a minute later, she blushed and dropped her eyes. “You really aren’t embarrassed,” said my host.

“No, I’m not,” I said. Then I added, “I apologize.”

“No need,” said the host, then introduced himself as Odet. The woman I’d first met was his wife Shonia, the younger woman was Udreth, and the other two men were Elmaan and Manaath. They were part of a large, loosely organized underground movement that resisted the tyranny of the watchmen. Odet and Shonia explained their goals as we ate and drank. “If the face of God is in us, why should we turn our eyes away?” Odet said. “How can we recognize him if we never see his beauty?”
“It’s time to stop hiding things,” Udreth said. But she hadn’t been able to look at me since she’d first looked away.

Their passion was persuasive, but I didn’t want to get into a religious debate. Maan had no real equivalent of the expression “I see what you mean,” so I told him, “I understand your point. In fact, what I’m here for is to make pictures of your city, so you can be seen—that is, known by others. Is it true that some of the original frescoes remain?” The frescoes would have been designed by an elder generation who did not fear the aesthetics of the expression. The rumor of their existence only fueled my desire to shoot them.

“I know someone who’s seen them,” Shonia said. “In the inner circle. Most of them are painted over, but not all.” She shook out the rug, smoothed it, and I noticed that the center of the rug was a wide open eye with no lids or lashes. The iris was turquoise, the strange blue-green color of the deeper ocean. I asked if I could take a picture of the rug. Shonia stood up and held it up high, covering her face.

There was an insistent kicking at the door. I snapped the picture as Shonia was lowering her arms, so I got a photo of her face after all. Udreth sprang up and grabbed my wrist. She dragged me through the back room, a bedroom, and out the back door. I heard shouts behind us. In a narrow alley we ran, twisting through empty back streets until I was thoroughly lost. After about five minutes, our route rejoined one of the main streets at a point much farther than I expected. “Go,” Udreth said, looking at my feet.

“But——” I wanted to know what had happened, what would happen to the others.

“Just go.” Head lowered, she walked among a group of people, who shifted to accommodate her, and was quickly lost from view. After a long while, I decided not to return to Tarragon Street. I went back to Adrah’s inn but could not sleep.
The Handaaran sexagesimal mathematics system has also given it a calendar based on sixes: six days in a week, six weeks in a month, twelve months in a year. The last day of the month was a holy day called the square of six, so Adrah took her family and guests to church. Outside the city walls, there was a large dark hole in the ground with a manmade slope leading down. Shortly after the descent, the light faded and disappeared, so I ran my hand along the clammy stone wall and stayed close behind Adrah. My feet were clumsy without my eyes, and I kept catching my toe on Adrah’s heel.

After a steeply tilted five-minute walk, we emerged into what felt like a large cavern. Adrah took my elbow and wedged us tightly into the crowd that had gathered deep underground. The air was cool and smelled of mud. The sound of a moving body of people was amplified in the complete darkness. If it was strange to walk around a crowded city trying to be blind, the actual sensation was even stranger. Darkness is a true equalizer.

I expected to hear a sermon, or homily, or lecture, but after a long while, I could discern a single female voice singing. The room’s acoustics made the sound seem to come from the top of the chamber. At first the words were too faint to catch, but the notes hung on the long, slow vowels and ached with crystalline purity. The others grew still, and as a community we all heard the angelic voice falling on us from above, singing of the glory of God.

The lyrics were three words chanted at heartbeat pace—praise, exalt, worship. In Maan, the infinitive of a verb can be simultaneously the first person emphatic present, I do praise, and the second-person singular imperative, you praise. The song was at once a confession and a call to worship. Another voice joined the first singer, this time from behind me, and the hairs on my arms stood out as I listened to the harmonic blending. After each cycle of words, more voices
joined in, until at last everyone was singing with one polyphonic voice, “Praise! Exalt! Worship!” Harmony and wholeness is the proper attitude for worshiping God; only all voices together can sing fitting praise. The thunder of our unified exaltation reverberated into my marrow: I raised my blind face and shouted out the song.

Gradually some stopped singing, then more, then me, and others, until only the first singer eased us out of our mystical transcendence. Then even she ceased. In perfect silence save for the noise of breathing, standing there in the self-imposed dark, I experienced my first touch of the divine. Everyone had come together simply to sing, maybe even watchmen. The power of it chilled me. Then Adrah pulled at my elbow, and I stumbled up out of that dark cavern blinking into the light. Metamorphosed back into a creature of sight.

When I photographed them afterwards, I felt—ashamed.

* * *

A week after Udreth helped me escape arrest, I was at market with Adrah’s daughters buying spices and a wheel of cheese. I have never eaten so well as on Thaaneh: the food is always flamboyantly rich in flavor, the kind you would close your eyes to savor. Adrah lives in her kitchen, and her talent as a cook exists in direct correlation. I stood at a stall, smelling a sachet of tea and wishing there were no ban against importing foodstuffs across planets, when one of the girls tugged on my sleeve. “Look!” she said, pointing. “Yelena, look!”

Alert to the oddity of the command, I followed the direction of her arm. I didn’t understand what I was seeing, a crowd of people bearing a long, shallow wicker basket with something white inside. They were pushing each other to get up close, to look at whatever was in the basket. “What’s going on?”
We three pressed forward with the others. Two people carrying the burden moved ahead slowly enough for the onlookers to satisfy their curiosity. I came close to the woven edge of the basket, walking alongside it. Lying inside was Shonia, wrapped tightly in thick strips of white linen, as if she had dressed up as a mummy. The fabric covered every part of her except her face. Her eyes were open, staring straight into the sun, sightless. The color of her eyes was the color of the sea. The contours of her cheeks, nose, lips were sanded smooth, as if God himself had carved her expression out of a block of white oak. With one fingertip, I touched her cheek. The skin was dry and soft, but colder than live flesh.

“The face of God,” one of the pallbearers said.

“The face of God,” the crowd responded, in a litany.

I pulled my hand away and let the funeral procession pass by me. “What…?”

One of the girls answered me. “After we all see her, she will be given back to the sea.”

“No,” I said to myself. Unable to look around for Odet or any of the others I’d met, I was afraid. Afraid that the watchmen had watched me visit her house. Afraid that, somehow, I’d killed her. I ran to catch up with Shonia’s body. When I reached her, I took a picture.

III

The brightness of lantern light. Someone put something in the room, and the slot fell closed. I leapt up and began to shout and pound on the door, but I heard nothing, no answer, not even a footstep, nor a reply from any other prisoners. I was alone in my own dead end. The gold slowly dimmed until I could no longer see it.

It was a wooden bowl of fish gibbets in a kind of thick, warm grainy meal. No spoon. I ate it because I was hungry, but I was glad I couldn’t see it. After that I ran in place, first because I was cold and stiff after waking up, then out of boredom. And after that I had nothing
to think about except why I was there. The irony of absolute darkness as a punishment for illegal looking did not escape me.

In the dark, time passed slowly and without much remark. After what I thought was about two days, I’d learned the schedule. Food was distributed in evenly separated increments that I guessed was twice a day, always meal and once with fish. A while after the fish, the waste bucket was taken and returned within twenty minutes by my count. The unresponsive attendant never looked in on me. No other sights or sounds, only the dull smell of my own body. Hunger, running, stretching, sleeping. I kept thinking that I needed to keep thinking to keep myself from going mad, so I thought about the way memory is like a camera too, altering reality. The ocean was never so perfect as in my mind.

Sometimes I sang. *Praise! Exalt! Worship!*

* * *

The light from the jailer’s lantern shot a white-hot lance of pain through my skull. It was a long time before I could crawl over and eat. There was no fish this time, and I had been expecting it. Every time I slept to keep from feeling so hungry, I lost track of time. Forty meals, twenty days—or perhaps more. Still, I don’t know how I could have miscounted mealtimes. They’re the only thing that happens.

I’ve gotten thinner; now when I curl my arms around myself to sleep, I can feel my ribs. Today I had to stop running because I felt faint, nauseous and shaky, so I switched my exercises to slow sit-ups, pushups, and stretching. The door guard would not help me if I fainted.

My imprisonment won’t be eternal—when I fail to return to the capital for my return flight, someone will start looking for me. Conceivably, my punishment will only last three more months, even allowing an entire month for the office of the Envoy to locate me. I am trying to
give myself some perspective, to photograph my troubles from far away so that they will seem small. Three months isn’t long, not measured against a lifetime.

The gaze is a powerful thing. A lack of recognition prevents the human connection from even forming: when I was arrested, no one would dare look up to know what happened. To control someone’s ability to see is to control their whole being, to have complete sway over their perceptions and experiences, to prevent individuals from recognizing each other. I wouldn’t know Adrah from a thousand other women of Thaaneh; I might not even recognize her voice from a selection. If there is a crueler form of oppression than anonymity, I don’t know what it could be.

I see now that I with my outward-observing eye was a serious threat to the power structure of Thaaneh. By looking at the city, even the architecture, I was learning to possess it, to recognize it. The word means the same in Maan: re-cognition is to know again, the ability to identify something as itself. I can step into the same river twice because I can visually and mentally recognize the river. Therefore my recognition of Thaaneh makes it mine, and I carry it around in my photographs—and in my mind.

* * *

Whenever I heard the jailer approaching, I would put on the black mask to protect my eyes from the lantern. This time at the cue of his footsteps, I felt around on the floor for the fabric but could not find it. Panicked, I imagined that others in the dark had come in to my cell and taken it from me, that I would wake up some other day without clothes or hair, but then I realized. I was already wearing the mask. I had been wearing it since the last time I put it on.

Here in the darkness I have no body or face, only my mind’s eye, my real self.
Anyone who thinks that photography accurately depicts reality has forgotten the existence of the camera, which takes only the picture the photographer’s mind directs it to take. A camera is a literal lens, a sheet, pane, or film between the observer and the observed—the camera forces at least one remove from reality. The camera’s presence becomes the difference between production on a stage or a screen; in a play, the audience watches the action directly, but in a film, the audience watches the cameraman watch the action. The photographer’s mind is a frame that the photo cannot escape; the audience is subject to the photographer’s dictation. The borders of a picture are like a frame, and the photographer chooses what to include and leave out. Therefore, the photo is an artificially created artistic representation of the photographer’s perception of reality.

Memory is the lens that shows me the past, and imagination the future. The power of blindness cannot last forever, not against the beauty of the human face. The watchmen shouldn’t have left me alone with myself in the darkness; blind, all I want is to see. I wish now for Thaanians to sing praise above ground, looking each other in the eyes. If I publish my pictures someday, I hope that Thaaneh will begin to praise the light, exalt vision, and worship sight.

* * *

I put my mask on when I heard them coming. At first I could not understand any of the words, but then they resolved into Modern Standard English. I stood facing the door, the bolt was thrown back, and the adjutant to the Envoy said, “My god.”

I couldn’t speak. I felt conspicuous, ashamed to be seen. Ashamed to be smelled.

“Helena Young? I’m Stuart Rogers, your lawyer.” He had an arrogant voice; he must be the expert in international law. I had probably made his last couple weeks quite unpleasant.

“Are you Helena Young?”
“Yes.” He asked me to confirm my identity with my private numerical ID, and I told him. I opened my eyes, but the light shone through the cloth, making them ache and water. I pressed my fingers into them and turned toward the wall to cry.

“Look,” he said, “I can’t stay long. I need to know whether you did the things they’re accusing you of. Not that that’ll matter. We’ll get you out. We just have to know.”


“The what? Oh.” He moved the lantern into the hallway but left the door open. The room was dimmer, though not dark.

I removed the sack but cupped my hands over my eyes to shield them from the beams of light. Golden knives in my head. The lawyer began talking of my rights, but I interrupted him. “Did they see the pictures?” All the people I photographed without their knowledge or cooperation. I didn’t want the watchmen to think they were complicit in my crimes.

He hesitated a moment too long. “We haven’t been able to recover your personal effects, but that is certainly part of our ongoing discussions.”

“Time,” someone called down the hallway in Maan.

He cleared his throat. “You might have to stay here… a while longer,” he said, picking up the lantern. “Don’t confess to anything.”

I winced and turned away. “All the things they said, the camera, all the pictures, I did them.”

He hesitated in the doorway. “I’ll do everything I can for you.”

When it was dark and peaceful again, when I was lying on my pallet full of the things I wished I’d said or asked, I opened my eyes wide and pictured all the faces. All those people, the face of God. Face after face after face.
Waking

The library at Winterstone Retreat appeared to be straight out of the Middle Ages, right down to the tapestry of glorious deeds and battering ram-resistant bar across the door. The weak light of a northern sunset filtering down through high windows lit up the four desks and the large worktable, which were placed nearer to the windows than the fireplace, not quite close enough to the flames to be warm. The table where I’d set up my cameras and computer also held writing materials like ink and feathers, as well as the catalog of the library’s fifteen hundred titles, a modest collection of books and scrolls lining the wall adjacent to the door. As an archivist for the Socio-Anthropological Society, my purpose at the retreat was to photograph the rare chantals, illuminated manuscripts in classical Ehan containing the texts of meditative songs still sung by the inhabitants of the retreat.

I’d arrived to Winterstone Island the day before by crossing the Arrow Strait. As I’d leaned out over the slate gray waves trying to catch a signal, my phone slipped through my fingers, numb with cold even inside my gloves. Like most things, the phone disappeared beyond redemption in one irreversible second, and there was little I could do except curse my stupidity and wonder how long it would take the Envoy to send a rescue team when I failed to call in. My foolish accident shortened my assignment from ten days to three or four, which was why I was now preparing for a second all-nighter in the library, trying to waste as little of my remaining time as possible. Not that my insomnia let me sleep much anyway.

Actually, I valued the nighttime, when I could finally be alone with my work and my thoughts. Several times a day I endured the company of the Abbot of the retreat, whose attention to me was an open attempt to ingratiate himself with the Envoy, my direct superior and a person of growing political weight. As well, the Abbot had assigned me an assistant, a young woman
named Philomena, who couldn’t pronounce my name and continually asked me about Earth or what my space voyage had been like. I didn’t blame her curiosity, since I did not expect her to know that after the deaths of my daughter and husband I’d been glad to leave behind everything familiar; but I still resented her interruption of my work. She could only be six or seven years older than the age Ruth would have turned next month, thirteen. In addition to Philomena and the Abbot, the presence of other scholars, illuminators, and musicians could make the library feel like a veritable highway, and I found myself grateful to the setting sun for making itself, and everyone else, scarce.

When I heard the soft knocking on the door, I took a deep breath to stifle my surge of frustration. “Come in,” I said, expecting to see Philomena, back for my half-eaten supper, or the Abbot with another question about the Envoy’s opinion of the border dispute between Eha and Carnland.

Instead, a slim woman wearing a knee-length tunic and a fur-lined hat slipped past the door, closing it silently behind her. She did not look like a typical Ehan, her skin a much lighter brown, her style of dress less decorated, and her straight hair mostly gray, yet she appeared to be my age. Her eyes were ringed in a blue smudge I knew to be sleeplessness, and I saw that she was carrying a burden of grief: one who has clasped her pain as close and as long as I have comes to know it easily in others. “Are you the alien called Elisabeth?” the woman asked me. She swept her gaze over my task. “Yes, of course you are. I don’t have much time. I’m Mahsa, a Waker. I’m being held here as a political hostage.”

I had heard of Waking, of course, the curious skill of prescient dreaming that a rare few Handaarans claimed to be able to perform. They supposedly dreamed the future in uncontrollable snatches, but the phenomenon had so far been unobserved and unstudied by the
SAS. I put a marker in the book I was copying and switched the camera to standby so as not to run down the battery. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I said carefully. “Who is holding you?”

“The Abbot.” Mahsa made a dismissive gesture with her hands, pushing the idea of him down and behind her. She approached the table, the camera perched on its adjustable tripod separating us. She pointed at it and I tensed, ready to protect it from her touch. “I want to give you my dreams, secretly. I want you to remember them with your machine.”

“Why?” I asked, watching her hand. This trip had been two years in the planning, and I would never be able to return. If something happened to my pictures, not only time and money but my reputation as an archivist would be compromised. Plus, I promised myself that I would take the pictures for my daughter, Ruth. She had loved to see the colorful images, practiced tracing the intricate details in her own notebook while I told her what the words said. Songs from another planet.

Worried, Mahsa looked over her shoulder at the door. “I wrote them all down, but they are not safe. The Abbot told me I would have to choose again.” She reached under the tripod and seized my wrist, her fingers locked in a tight circle around my bones. The desperate heat of her gaze fixed me in place. “There are also dreams of my family,” she said, and my heart softened. I too had memories I would wish to save. Mahsa read the change in my posture. “Please, for them, you must—”

The library door suddenly opened; Mahsa flinched at the noise, then her expression of pleading urgency disappeared under an impassive mask as she dropped my wrist and turned toward the Abbot standing in the doorway. He was a small man wearing fine blue robes embroidered in a geometric pattern with silver thread to match the silver chain of his office, a
palm-sized medallion awarded by the royal family to his long-ago predecessor. He smiled blandly above his short, curly beard and held out his hand. “Lady Mahsa, there you are. I guessed you might be looking for me here, so I thought to forestall your search.” He rubbed his thumb over his fingers, a gesture to beckon her. His skin made a dry, sandy, parchment noise.

Obediently Mahsa crossed the room, showing no sign of the intensity I’d just witnessed. I wondered what would make a woman of such physical power comply, but if she valued her book of dreams so highly, she must be as protective of it as I was my camera. The Abbot told Mahsa, “Feel free to wait in my office. I will not be long.”

When Mahsa left, the Abbot turned his smile upon me. His lower teeth were narrow, and some overlapped the others. “I hope Lady Mahsa did not bother you, Dr. Ford.”

I shook my head. “Plenty of people are curious about the camera.” I had arranged the tripod in such a way that I needed only to place a book flat on the table underneath the lens and turn the pages; the machine was smart enough to focus and take the shots itself. With a scroll, I merely instructed the camera to take continuous video and unrolled the sometimes tissue-thin paper under its lens. When I returned to the SAS Department of Archives in North America next month, sixty local years since my departure, I would translate and annotate the photos and recordings, the scholarly project of a lifetime.

The Abbot regarded the camera with polite interest. “It seems so fragile,” he observed. “Strange that you want to turn paper into—memory? Was that what you called it?”

“I assure you, virtual copies are far less fragile than paper,” I said, then instantly thought of my phone, undone by a body of water. A single snipped cord could prevent the camera from sending the images to my computer, or from even making the copies in the first place. Most things were fragile. “If Mahsa wants to come back, I will show her how the camera works.”
The Abbot understood my implied question. “No, no, the Lady is our special guest, a Carnlander sent here to recover from a trauma. To absorb the peace of Winterstone into her unsettled mind. In truth, I’m not sure your camera would be safe in her presence.” The Abbot’s accent made the English word *camera* sound like *chimera*.

I noted his warning well. “What trauma?” I asked.

“The death of her family.” The Abbot’s conversational tone of voice chilled me, and I reminded myself that those who have not lost cannot understand how it feels. “Truly,” he continued, “I would not grieve you with the story. I’ll see she does not disturb you again.” He touched his beard, gave a very slight bow, and left me to my work.

As I turned page after page, my neck growing stiff from holding still so long, I had plenty of time to think on my curious evening guests. It was hard to tell which person was lying to me, either or both. As yet, I had insufficient data with which to form theories, only a superficial knowledge of Waking and an even more cursory briefing of the tensions between Eha and Carnland. No one at the Consulate had thought I might need to know whether a woman might be a hostage and a psychic in one.

Between volumes six and seven of a ten-volume collection of chantals, I went to the fire to warm up my cold, clumsy fingers. The wood smoke smelled inexplicably of maple, although there was no such tree on Winterstone. Mahsa’s concern about her dreams of her family grew in importance to my mind. Mahsa was like me, the one left behind to be sad, the one left behind to remember. I recognized something of myself in the pain in her face, her apparent desire to protect something of her dreams or her family. I prodded the logs with a poker, and they shifted in a rain of gently dropping embers. All she wanted was reassurance that knowledge of them would be preserved.
Ruth had loved to climb the bigleaf maples in our yard in Washington state. I often photographed her hanging from a branch by her knees, her long hair brushing the grass. I stared into the fire for a long time, breathing deeply.

I decided to help Mahsa, if I could.

* * *

I went to bed at dawn and slept poorly for a few hours, my feet still frozen under two blankets and the rather Victorian nightgown I’d been given, the bottom of which could be cinched closed with a drawstring after I curled up my legs. Lying there, I longed passionately for a cup of coffee, as I had not yet developed a taste for the Ehan tea. Its delicate pale shades of green disguised an eye-watering bitterness that did less to wake me up than it did to make me wish I’d never gotten out of bed. Nevertheless, I rose, washed quickly in a basin of cold water, and put on three layers of clothes. By the light outside, it must be nearly noon, well past time to get back to the library. Tomorrow might be the earliest that the rescue team could come for me, and I couldn’t count on persuading them to let me finish out my assignment, not after a previous SAS agent did a six-month stint in jail far to the south.

Philomena was waiting for me just outside the library. “There you are, Espleth.” She reached out and took my hands in hers, a familiarity that made me uncomfortable but which was common among Ehan women. I thought of Mahsa’s hold on my wrist. “We waited our walk for you, so you have to come with us or we will all be sad.”

I tried to free my hands. “I really should get to work.”

“Please?” Philomena was smaller than me, prettier, with dark curly hair and delicate features. She was already dressed in outdoor wear—gloves, boots, cloak, and hood, all a
matching dark green edged in ribbon or beads. Even the tiny scar on the tip of her chin was endearing.

I gave in, returning to my room to put on another sweater and change into boots, allowing Philomena to persuade me to wear her old cloak over my coat. The island of Winterstone was an extinct volcano long ago named Winter’s Stone for the bleakness of its situation at the northernmost point of the country of Eha, where it took the brunt of arctic winds. The retreat, built into the north-facing side of the mountain, was poised midway up the four-thousand-foot rise and directly above the island’s only port. At that height, the air felt like a blade of ice cutting into my exposed wrists, around my ankles, down my collar. Even under my borrowed hat, my ears burned with cold, and I clutched the cloak tightly around me as I followed Philomena and her friends up the path, not too steep but rocky with many switchbacks.

We gained altitude rapidly, and I began to sweat even though the temperature hung just at the cusp of freezing. After an hour, we paused at an outlook to ascertain how high we’d come. The Arrow Strait was visible over the tops of some water elm. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms and stamped my feet to keep them warm and limber. The choppy little waves I remembered from my crossing were not discernible from this height. “From the top of Winterstone,” Philomena told me, “you can see the whole port city and the Ehan capital too. It’s only two miles inland. On a clear day, at least. I’ve never been there, but someday perhaps.” She looked up at me with her earnest, innocent face, locking her arm in mine. “Why did you really come here, Emsabath?”

“I was sent here for my job,” I told her, watching the gray, unmoving surface of the strait. “Actually, I asked to be sent, because I was so unhappy.” The words slipped out past my
carefully constructed filter and I felt compelled to explain. “Four years ago my family died, and I haven’t really been able to get over it.”

Philomena’s arm tightened around mine. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.” We fell into an uncomfortable silence, then she seemed to brighten. “Truly, you should come to one of our training sessions. Before breakfast, we sing and practice mental harmony. We could help you, like we help the Carnlander.”

Her words were kindly meant, but they freshly recalled the hell of grief therapy. Some unmarried, childless state counselor asking me to talk about Travis and Ruth. They said my anger and withdrawal were normal, but they urged me to be happy and social, more willing to write me a prescription than to answer my questions about the justice of death. “I don’t know any of the songs,” I said, wiping my tingling nose to stall my decision. I was tempted to see what it was like, for anthropological reasons, of course, and to try to get closer to Mahsa, who still needed my help.

“That doesn’t matter,” Philomena said. “The Carnlander only listens too.” She pressed my arm again. “I know, I’ll stay awake and help you work all night, and you can come with me to practice the discipline tomorrow morning.”

I hesitated, largely out of the suspicion that Philomena and the Abbot were somehow in collusion to keep me and Mahsa separately under observation; but I quickly felt ashamed for being so paranoid and mistrustful. “It’s a deal,” I said, and taught Philomena how to shake hands. She was delighted and laughingly made deals and shook hands with everyone in the group before we began our descent.

Philomena was as good as her word: we worked through the day, ate a delicious supper of fish and vegetable stew with brown bread standing up in the library, and continued making
records through the night. Our teamwork saved me hours of time, a method wherein we stood on either side of the table, I unrolling one end of a delicate scroll and Philomena rolling it back up again. She was also able to turn the pages of the volumes unsupervised—though I would not allow her to touch my camera itself—while I sorted through the numerous loose papers and pamphlets, trying to see which were oldest or most important. Hours later, I noticed how cold and dark the room had grown; I poked the logs in the fireplace and sent Philomena for tea.

She returned carrying a tray and in the company of the Abbot, who seemed to sleep as little as I did. He wanted to know whether all my needs were being met. I told him curtly that they were, but he affected not to read my body language and looked over my shoulder at the notes I was jotting down on the screen of my tablet computer about a portfolio of papers I would not have time to copy. “I’ve seen your language written before, Dr. Ford,” he said, squinting at my handwriting, “but I can never appreciate the unvarying black squares.” The Abbot’s forehead wrinkled with the force of his distaste.

The appearance of the classical Ehan script was far more artistic than that of English. Not only could it be written either right-to-left or left-to-right, but it also had more than one script, comparable to a continual mix of capital and lower case letters, alternating in cursive and print. Written Ehan also had considerable freedom of word order, so the same sentence might be expressed in almost endless combinations of words, which were as often arranged for emphasis as for sound or for syllable patterns. Its reputed complexity was what originally attracted me to the challenge of mastering it. Small wonder that literacy was truly the mark of an educated Ehan and that quality composers and copyists of chantals were so highly prized.

“A long time ago, lettering was an art among us,” I told him. Asian calligraphy, medieval illumination, font design. “But the beauty has gone out of our writing.” It suddenly
seemed shameful that I was going to turn the Ehan words into English ones, though each of my translations would be accompanied by an image of the original. Nevertheless, no reader could know what the English edition failed to express; that was the sin of translation.

He patted my shoulder and said with a faint undertone of self-congratulation, “There are as many tastes as there are peoples.”

“Ellisis, the tea is ready,” Philomena said.

I turned, then leapt out of my chair. “Not by the camera!” I waved my hands frantically at the tea tray sitting right next to the power cell. She’d poured the tea into two cups mere inches away from the wires and outlets. A spill could ruin everything.

Alarmed, Philomena lifted the tray. “What is it?”

I examined the instrument panel, ran my hands over the table to check for moisture. “Machines and liquids are not compatible.” All clean. I inhaled and exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry to have shouted, but we’ll need to drink these across the room.” I helped clear a space for the tea on one of the other desks. The room was so cold that the wispy steam rising from the clear green liquid was visible for several inches.

The Abbot meditatively studied the camera, balanced on the table like a mechanical spider with a single, unblinking eye. He fingered his medallion. “Do all chimeras break in water?”

I pushed my distrusting thoughts to the back of my mind. “Some. Not all of them.” Surely his interest in the camera was natural. Surely he wasn’t implying a threat. I promised myself to make a backup copy of the images I’d taken in the past few hours. The vulnerability of the equipment and of my position in the retreat weighed on me; my arsenal of replacement parts would be useless if the camera were sabotaged or I were barred from the library.
“I’ll leave you to your tea,” he said. “Until the morning.” He touched his beard respectfully and left.

“I’m so sorry,” Philomena said again. “I didn’t know.” She looked as anxious for forgiveness as Ruth had when she dropped the ceramic mixing bowl, too heavy for her to have been trying to lift. It cracked on the kitchen floor, splattering the wet ingredients for homemade cookies all over the cabinets and Ruth’s clothes. The butter had been expensive, and I was angry. I made Ruth undress in the kitchen so I could soak her clothes in the sink; she wouldn’t leave for new clothes until I told her I’d forgiven her, which I did with little grace.

Philomena offered me a steaming ceramic cup, and I made myself smile at her. Dark red with a leaf-print pattern, the heavy cup was tall and narrow, the better to keep beverages warm in this cold climate. I steeled myself and drank, swallowing the tea as quickly as possible so I would not taste the bitterness for long. Under Philomena’s eye, I was careful not to make a face, but the sharp flavor of the tea, like some kind of floral vinegar, did nothing to invigorate my tired body or mind.

There were many hours of work before I could meet Mahsa again. I gulped my tea like a shot. “So refreshing,” I said, my throat burning. “Let’s start on this next shelf.”

* * *

The hall where the inhabitants of Winterstone practiced their mental discipline exercises was part sanctuary, with icons and an ornately carved stone altar at the far end, and part dance rehearsal room, with mirrors on the walls and mats on the floor. Philomena handed me a square, flat pillow from a stack in the corner, and showed me how to sit on it cross-legged like a tailor, warning me not to slump my shoulders and back. “It will only hurt later,” she said philosophically. As many other Ehans kept arriving, sitting in rows facing the altar, chatting or
trying to wake up, I looked around for Mahsa, but she came in directly before the Abbot. With no glance for me, she sat directly in front of the altar in what must have been her customary place, for it had been left vacant.

Suddenly I remembered I’d neglected to back up last night’s work. Damn. Pushing myself so hard was beginning to make me sloppy. I resolved to go by the library and correct my mistake before I let myself go to bed.

The Abbot seated himself as well, facing Mahsa, his back to the altar. Without preamble, he closed his eyes and began to sing, and everyone joined him. At first I tried to parse the sentences in my mind, holding together all the words that had been sung and rearranging them until I found the combination that would make sense in English. Philomena’s voice beside me was particularly lovely, hitting each note in its true center; the lines were typical of the ones I’d been copying, odes to nature or lyric pleas for peace. When I began to forget some of the slowly rolling words for the third or fourth time, I stopped listening so closely and let my mind wander toward the problem of how I would speak to Mahsa without exciting too much attention.

Perhaps it was customary to congratulate each other on a successful meditation session, which would make it easy for me to approach the Abbot and Mahsa both at once, thus allaying any suspicion that I might want to have a secret conversation with her yet allowing me to invite her openly to the library, a kindness that the Abbot must surely allow, thinking, as he did, that I believed her to be recovering from grief, even though losing one’s family was not something from which one recovered, as if the pain of loss were some disease of finite duration that would eventually work itself out, like a fever, as if the memory of the fine, silky strands of Ruth’s hair, so impossible to French braid, could be excised from who I was now, because in part my grief defined me, since I had lived in my memory so long, so long dreaming of Travis driving Ruth to
the store for hair ribbons on an evening when the roads were just a little too wet, dreaming of her gray peaceful face on the gurney, a drop of Travis’s blood above her eyebrow, dreaming that she opened her eyes and reached up to be held—

Something touched my fingers, and I inhaled sharply, straightening up my slumping body. I had been falling asleep. I pulled my hand instinctively away from the object, a book, and looked up startled at Mahsa, leaning over me. The singing had stopped, and everyone was sitting motionless, breathing so quietly that Mahsa must have moved like a shadow not to be heard. Her dark brown eyes looked deeply into mine. “Please,” she mouthed, pressing the small, fat book into my hand. The roughly cut, folded pages were sewn together with string, the cover a flap of leather tied closed with a cord.

“Yes,” I breathed. A promise. I tucked the book down the front of my pants where my bulky winter clothes would hide it until I could turn its pages under my camera.

Mahsa leaned in close and kissed me on the forehead, just above my left eyebrow where the burning dot of blood had marked my daughter’s face. Soundlessly she returned to her seat.

I touched the book safe under my clothes and looked around to see whether anyone noticed Mahsa approach me. The Abbot appeared to be made of stone, a second altar at the front of the room. I turned my head slowly toward Philomena: her eyes were open! Then I realized she was staring sightlessly, lost in meditation perhaps, or sleeping with her eyes open. I hoped my changed breathing had not alerted her and that she hadn’t heard Mahsa’s movements. In case she was aware of me, I sighed and rolled my painful shoulders, grimacing truthfully at the soreness in my neck. Belatedly I took my hand off the book.

The silence stretched interminably, then. I neither meditated nor slept again, but sat with increasing anxiety about how I could contrive to keep the book concealed. I wondered too
whether the Abbot might not have fallen asleep himself, was failing to dismiss an audience too polite to get up and leave. My legs ached to move, and the pain in my neck, shoulders, and back grew more acute as I tried not to shift my weight. The aspirin in my room and a true night’s sleep inflamed into new life goals.

Finally I heard the others stirring and unfolded my stiff legs. At once Philomena took my hand. “Ellis”—she had apparently given up on all four syllables of my name—“you should sleep now.”

“What a good idea,” I said, yawning. “I need to do one last thing in the library, and then I’ll go straight to bed.” Reflected in the mirrored walls, the Abbot beckoned Mahsa to leave the room. She looked back at me once, expressionless, then followed him. I would keep my promise, copying Mahsa’s journal and backing up all the files.

Philomena insisted, “No, no, let me do it. Truly, you are too tired.”

I felt like an old woman, standing up so gingerly. When I straightened my clothes, I ensured that the book was held in place by my belt and the elastic waistband of my underwear. “Thank you for being so helpful,” I said, rolling my neck in a tight circle, “but I have to do it myself.”

Philomena popped to her feet like a dandelion sprouting. She wouldn’t let go of my hand. “Please, let it wait for later. It’s a deal?”

I tried to recover my fingers from her grip. “I would rather get it done now.” I was becoming increasingly worried about the camera, the images, and the book of dreams. Philomena seemed desperate to accompany me, but I couldn’t think why, unless she was under orders never to leave me alone. I imagined the Abbot decreeing that my camera should be flung over the edge of the mountain to join my phone in the water below. In losing last night’s work, I
would lose over a third of the images. That sharp fear made me jerk my hand out of Philomena’s. “I’m going there without you.”

From across the room, the Abbot called, “Dr. Ford.” He had returned, and his face was bright with pleasure. “Your people have just been sighted in the Arrow Strait,” he announced. He worried his medallion excitedly; he had taken the time to change into more ornate robes, these bright red with yellow accents. Save the beard, he looked quite like a winter-weather Tibetan priest. “The boat is flying the flag of the Envoy. Do you think he has come himself?”

The arrival of the rescue team was not good news to me; I would not be able to take any more images. “I doubt it,” I said. The little man’s face fell. On the other hand, I would be able to photograph Mahsa’s book at my own leisure, to discover at last what she meant by giving me her dreams. “I should go to the library and collect my things.”

“No,” the Abbot cried. “You must have tea with me to give you a proper farewell.”

Refusing an Ehan’s offer of tea was a gross social insult. Politely I bowed, though inside I was raging with impatience. “I am honored.”

“Let us go now. Philomena will make preparations.” He led me from the meditation room through a warren of halls, narrow with thick walls to insulate against the cold, like the tea cups. Mahsa’s book moved against my hip with the motion of my stride. “Have you copied as many chantals as you intended?” the Abbot inquired.

“Not quite.” In fact, despite all my hours of work, I had handled less than half of the library’s contents, though the first thing I’d copied had been the catalog. I wished I could signal the people from the Consulate to leave me be for another week, though perhaps the SAS could be convinced that another future archivist should complete the job I’d begun.
“A pity, then, that you must be leaving.” The Abbot opened a door for me and guided me into his office. A long, low tea table situated over a richly detailed rug commanded the center of the room. The rug depicted a hunt, humans and animals chasing each other in an endless circle, although to the side, out of the chaotic ring, I saw the figure of a woman with her eyes closed. Either she was a dead lady in whose honor the hunt was being conducted, or she was actually dreaming the hunt into existence. I wished I could photograph it, and felt another pang of worry for the camera. The short tea table was barely tall enough to rest my elbows on when I knelt on a cushion in front of it, though for the Abbot it was a more comfortable height. The maple-smelling wood smoke in the hearth tormented my memory.

The table had been laid with a glossy black ceramic pot of tea, already brewing. I wondered how long my alleged rescuers had been on their way, tried to remember how long it had taken to row across the strait. The pot was etched or carved with gold veining that reminded me of the fern that grew beside my mother’s porch when I was Ruth’s age. The tall, thin cups and plates decorated in a matching pattern made up our place settings, with a single two-pronged fork and cloth napkin each. After a short blessing, the Abbot poured the tea, the steam instantly filling the room with the crisp aroma of jasmine and rose. The scent seemed to relax the Abbot; a few of the lines in his face softened.

“I know Lady Mahsa gave you her dream journal,” he observed. While I, shocked silent, was revising my strategy, he filled first my plate, then his, with thick wedges of flaky bread spread with soft herb cheese and topped with a spoonful of honeyed winter fruits. He drank a little of his tea, then sighed and held his cup in both hands. When he spoke, he spoke to the curling steam. “Let me first ask you why you have come here, Dr. Ford, not for the chantals, but the real reason. Let me ask you what you truly hope to gain.”

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I speared one of the berrylike fruits with my fork and chewed it carefully, thinking hard. “I’m an SAS archivist. I hope to gain knowledge of cultural histories and to help preserve it.” I took a little sip of tea, burned my lip and tongue. “Besides, I promised my daughter, long ago, to take her to see your chantals. She wanted to become a translator too.”

“I don’t see that your daughter would have been interested in treachery and rumors of war. That dream journal is far from a chantal.” He saw my surprise, showed his crooked teeth. “Truly, our countries, Eha and Carnland, have been poised for war for many years. Fortunately for us, Lady Mahsa saw through her Waking dreams that when war does come, Eha will win, which is why we have taken her into custody—for her own safety, you might say. The Queen of Carnland has put a high price on her head and would be happy to know of her presence here.”

“She wrote down her dreams of your victory?” I asked. The book seemed to gain its own heat against my skin. My wrist and forehead burned like my tongue.

“I do not know,” he said, almost coyly. “We would never make unwanted demands upon a guest.” He set down his the cup of tea and clapped his hands twice. “We would only offer her a choice, like the one we will offer to you.”

The Abbot will make me choose again, Mahsa had said. I followed the Abbot’s gaze toward the doorway and my heart skipped.

Philomena came into the room carrying a tray with a teapot and my camera on it. She had successfully detached the camera from the tripod, but left some of the wires connected to it, which she curled around the camera neatly like the tail of a cat. She didn’t know how to turn it off, but it was off now, and if it was broken, so much of my work would have been lost. On Ruth’s behalf I was furious and on my own, afraid. I worried whether Philomena had also
tampered with the power cell or my tablet computer. Losing the memory stored in the camera would constitute a third of my work gone. Most things were fragile. Even memory.

Next to the teapot, the camera looked like an alien thing, asymmetrical buttons and levers for mysterious functions, its dead eye watching the ceiling. The Handaarans would never create an object so ugly. Philomena placed the tray on the table between us, her usually cheerful face somber. A teapot full of water. Now I understood my mistake of trusting the Abbot, with my offhand comment that water was deadly to some machines.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said, locking gazes with Philomena. I tried to channel Mahsa’s fixed intensity. “I only came here looking for beauty,” I confessed. “I need a new purpose for life, and I believe I found it in all your beautiful documents. I can offer you what is dearest to an archivist: memory. Don’t you want the known world to remember you for art and songs of peace and renewal instead of politics and war?” Ruth. Though she would never see them, I wanted all the worlds to be filled with beauty for her.

“Here is my offer, Dr. Ford,” said the Abbot. I dragged my attention away from the camera, back to him. “And I hope you will believe me that it gives me no pleasure. You may leave here with Lady Mahsa’s dream journal, or you may save your chimera from its hot water bath.” The Abbot watched me carefully as he spoke, his cup held tightly in his hand, his voice controlled to conceal some emotion. “Unless we and only we know exactly what she dreamed, we cannot be certain of victory. So please, choose what is best for your interests and for ours.”

I pulled the book out from under my clothes and held it in my hands. The Abbot and Philomena both leaned toward me. The leather cover was so old that it was smooth as skin, darkened a rich brown from frequent touch; yet I could still make out the design of a tree encircled by its own roots embossed into the leather. The crafter’s mark, perhaps. The knot
came undone when I pulled the free end of the cord. I opened the cover, looked at the first page. It was written in the language of Carnland, which I could not read. I thumbed the pages. All the same close, foreign handwriting. I wouldn’t even know what I was getting in exchange for the chantals.

“No, Ellis,” Philomena begged. Neither she nor the Abbot could see what Mahsa had written. “I don’t want to destroy all our work.”

The Abbot said he offered Mahsa a choice, but he probably tried to coerce her with something of value. “How did Lady Mahsa’s family die?” I asked. I guessed he informed on them, revealed their whereabouts, somehow, to the Queen.

He finished his last drink of tea before answering. “She chose to keep the book.”

Without hesitation, I said, “Then so do I.” A hundred possibilities shuttered through my mind. The memory card inside the camera might not get wet. The people from the Consulate might burst in and save me. The Abbot might not really follow through with his threat. Mahsa might change her mind and cooperate with the Ehans. Philomena might be unable, after all, to devalue our work. I might leap across the table and knock the teapot aside. Or Ruth might forgive me for what was about to happen.

The Abbot gave me a long, pitying look. “Philomena,” he said, “please pour the water.”

I clenched my teeth. Tightened my hand around the book’s skin. The word no chanted itself in my mind, just as it did when I got the phone call that rainy evening. “You wouldn’t.” I stared the Abbot down.

Hesitantly Philomena closed her fingers around the handle of the teapot. She raised the spout to the level of her face and tilted it down without letting any liquid spill out yet. Waiting for me to change my mind. I held as still as if I were meditating, and Philomena looked to the
Abbot. At his nod, she tipped the teapot forward until a drop of hot water hung visibly on the end of the spout. I flinched. Then the water tension broke, and a thin, steady stream of liquid fell squarely on the camera’s lens.

Some drops of water splashed off of the camera onto the table or rug, but most was caught in the tray where ripples slapped crazily against each other on the surface of the growing pool. Money, time, reputation, memory—destroyed. Soon the camera was sitting in a half-inch bath of water, having been thoroughly soaked by the entire contents of the pot. There was no way the inside of the camera hadn’t been exposed to the water too. When there was nothing left to pour, Philomena bowed her head.

Thin-lipped, I tied Mahsa’s journal closed and stood up. Anger shook me and it was all I could do to hold myself in check, not to cry or scream or wring someone’s neck. “Are we done here?” My voice sounded too calm to be mine.

The Abbot looked with undisguised longing at the book in my hand.

“All I won’t forget this,” I said. “That’s a promise.” I picked up camera and its dripping wire tail. The Abbot looked taken aback, but I walked away on jelly legs before he could have a chance to call my bluff. The photos were still in there, just inaccessible. Perhaps in the sixty more years until my return, some other archivist will have learned how to enchant the beauty from out of the black alien heart.

I went to the library and barred myself in, disassembling the camera one piece at a time on the rug before the fire. My stomach felt hard as a stone, sick with what I had lost. The rescue team, when he arrived, was one man. “Elisabeth Ford?” he called through the door. I let him in because he pronounced it right. The speaker, heavily armed, frowned at the camera parts drying in the fire’s heat. “Why didn’t you phone in your arrival?” I knew that kind of anger: it
stemmed from relief that all those worries had been unfounded and from irritation that they’d had to be endured. It was why a parent shouted at a child who hadn’t been missing.

“I dropped my phone in the Arrow Strait,” I told him, packing away my other equipment. I showed him the damaged memory card and the dream journal. I ran my fingers over the embossed tree, wondering whether one of Mahsa’s family members might have made it. It comforted me to think that the pages had been cut and sewn with love, that the written words were, after all, of one woman’s hope for peace. “I’m glad you came looking for me, though. We need to keep the memories safe.”

“Memories?” He squinted at the book. “Are they in danger?”

“Yes, they are,” I said. My exhaustion made everything seem unreal. I thought I could still feel the kiss on my forehead. I smelled maple more strongly than ever. “Do you read Carnish?” No, that was too much to hope. “In that case, may I use your phone? I need to tell the Envoy about a woman named Mahsa.”
The Conquest of the World

Tyler’s apartment was every caricature of a slovenly college hangout: empty pizza boxes stacked ten high, crushed soda and beer cans thrown in the direction of the trashcan, a broken couch where someone had obviously been sleeping under a ratty, woven blanket, video games and DVDs in a mosh pit around the huge TV. I followed my boyfriend Zack into the room, failing to find even one thing that went against the stereotype I had built around the place. One of the guys, whose features were lost in the cloud of curly brown hair and beard, stared fixedly at his computer screen. Another had his arm draped across the top of the refrigerator and peered inside with a calculating look on his face. When he checked the expiration date on the quart of milk, it remained solid in the bottom of the container, not tilting with the angle at which it was held.

I thought game night with Zack’s friends might be fun, but that was because I hadn’t considered Dungeons and Dragons to be a game. After all of Zack’s cajoling, I finally gave in because now he would owe me something nice, maybe a real date night. It would be the first since our initial dinner two months before. Luckily he’d gotten a text just as we were entering the parking lot of Tyler’s apartment: one of the other players, the DM, whatever that was, wouldn’t be able to make it, so D&D was off.

Zack had called Tyler, pulling into a parking space one-handed. “This completely sucks,” he said. “I mean, Julia and I are, like, already here.” He turned the engine off without straightening the car. As soon as it stopped, I got out of my seat and stood under the streetlamp in the dusk, looking up at the sky while Zack negotiated his seatbelt and the door handle with his left hand. I wasn’t sure where the relationship was going, if it was even going anywhere. The
second Zack opened his door, the light bulb above me clicked on, and I was instantly surrounded by a dozen moths cartwheeling under the beam.

Now, I was standing in the little tiled entryway while Zack dropped onto the couch like he’d been the one sleeping there. Zack hadn’t struck me as the gamer type; well-dressed and cleanly shaven, he stood out against the other college guys at the party where we met, but I was beginning to fear I’d misread him. “Hey, guys,” he said. “This is the girlfriend.”

“Hello, girlfriend,” said the milkman. The other didn’t look up from his computer.

I didn’t say hello. Nameless, I folded my arms over my stomach and backed up until my heels were against the door, thinking about leaving. Whatever I had imagined about meeting Zack’s friends, it wasn’t this insulting introduction or the indifferent hosts. Actually, I’d been prepared to make bright, polite conversation, asking the others about their majors or answering their questions about why I decided to study French in a cheerful, entertaining way, teasing Zack about how I was already planning to leave him to study abroad in Paris my junior year.

In the kitchen, the second roommate, having wisely abandoned the milk, squirted Ranch dressing on a cold burrito. Gunfire came from the computer, and a military voice shouted tinny orders. Zack let out a long, heavy sigh. “So what are we going to do now, Tyler?”

“We could—” I said, then stopped, unsure of my place in the dynamic of friends.

“We could what?” said Tyler, the guy at the computer. I hadn’t thought he could even hear me over the sounds of dying soldiers.

“We could still play a game,” I said. A stack of familiar cardboard boxes held together with dry, yellow tape sat under the coffee table: Monopoly, Scrabble, Parcheesi, Apples to Apples, Risk. “We could play Risk,” I suggested. “It has little figurines and dice too, like your dungeon game.”
A choking noise came from the kitchen. The milk guy was laughing at me. Zack made eye contact with the guy at the computer, and they both shook their heads at each other.

“Or not.” I pulled my phone from my purse, checked the time. Just past eight o’clock, and I had a nine a.m. class. “Whatever,” I said, putting some sarcasm in my voice. Zack didn’t notice.

“No, it’s cool. We can totally play Risk,” said Tyler. He looked at me for the first time, not flicking his eyes up and down my body in the way I’d already grown used to after barely three months of college, but actually assessing my mood. He cleared his throat. “You know you can, like, come in and stuff.”

Reluctantly I sat down on the extreme edge of the springless couch and pulled the Risk game out from the bottom of the stack. I hesitated a moment with the box open on my lap; the coffee table was too cluttered with takeout and rented video games to spread out the playing board. Zack finally realized the problem and told me, “We’ll play at the D&D table.”

After the fantasy maps, strange-sided dice, and painted figures with axes, swords, and staves had been cleared away, Zack and I set up Risk. I read the instructions to myself—it was invented by a Frenchman and was originally called La Conquête du Monde—while Zack counted out and distributed the armies, red for himself, blue and yellow for the other players, and green for me, though I would have preferred to play as my favorite color, yellow. The other two joined us at the table, the guy from the kitchen scraping the last crystalized shards of ice cream directly from the carton. Zack sat on one side of me, Tyler on the other.

I placed my pieces according to my personal history. Western Europe was for France, of course, where I would someday teach English and Language Arts at a village school where everyone knew my name. After those regions, I claimed the Eastern United States for myself.
and my mother, where we’d lived my whole life, and Alaska for my father, where he’d moved after their divorce when I was in sixth grade. My older brother and his wife and five children lived in Brazil, so I put my green army men there too. From there I moved my remaining pieces onto North Africa, Congo, East Africa, Quebec, and all the other regions where people spoke French. Zack laughed at me in front of the other two guys. “There’s no rhyme or reason.”

“Of course there is,” I said, and when they waited for me to explain, I merely stared back at them, an angry knot right at the base of my breastbone. Zack’s behavior was quickly evaporating my sense of charity.

The guys struggled over possession of the Australian and the Asian regions. Though they hadn’t even rolled for an attack yet, the competition had already begun in their distribution of armies around Asia and Eastern Europe. I took extra pains to fortify France, putting so many armies on it that I had to use a cavalry piece. I didn’t care if they laughed; I only didn’t want to lose Paris, my dream for the future.

When play finally commenced, Zack, Tyler, and the other roommate battled amongst themselves over control of Australia. I made quiet work of South America, expanding my base from Brazil until I conquered the whole continent on my brother’s behalf, which enabled me to gain an additional two armies per turn. “So, why does the Outback matter so much?” I finally asked, to get a conversation started. I tried to joke lightly as a signal to Zack that the evening might be recoverable.

Zack made a laugh that sounded like fffft. “It’s the ultimate base of operations,” he explained in a lecturing tone. “I mean, you can’t get more defensible than Australia. Just look at it. It can only be attacked by one country, and it’s the best way to take control of Asia.”

I pursed my lips. “And Asia matters because?”
Zack just shook his head at the other guy, who waved his spoonful of ice cream at the many territories as if their value were self-evident. Tyler answered Zack’s question, with a grin and a raised eyebrow for me. “You rule Asia,” he said, “and you rule the world.”

So I built up my defenses in Canada and Alaska, because it was possible to attack Asia via the Bering Strait. In another hour, when I’d taken over South America and most of North America and maintained a presence eight armies strong in France, the guys finally stopped discussing World of Warcraft and started paying attention to me as a player. The other roommate, Chris, who had ousted me from Africa, made some halfhearted attempts to attack Brazil and break up my monopoly on South America, but Brazil was well defended. I would never let my nieces and nephew fall to foreign rule. Instead, I reclaimed the territory of North Africa with two brilliant rolls of two sixes each, and the guys began to grow anxious.

“You didn’t tell us you were a Risk expert,” Tyler accused. “Or maybe the dice are loaded.” He shuffled his cards, frowning as if they, or fate, were somehow set against him. “I should have used my lucky yellow dice.”

In reply, I moved four armies across the Atlantic into Africa. “If the dice were loaded, you would be rolling sixes too. And I haven’t played since… six years ago. Christmas.”

My older brother David and his family had come back to the States for the holiday for the first time in five years. I was almost fourteen then and hadn’t seen David since I danced on his feet at his wedding reception. My parents hadn’t seen each other since Dad’s move, either. Mom and I picked everyone up from the airport and drove three hours out to the huge cabin Dad had rented in East Texas. That evening after the kids were in bed, Mom suggested playing a game.
Dad said, “We don’t have any games, Linda. Unless you thought far enough ahead to bring some with you.”

That edge in his voice, the signal that he was about to lose his temper, made my stomach tighten. I said desperately, “I bet Wal-Mart’s still open. We could just go get one.”

“That’s a great idea, Jules.” David winked at me. He seemed to have forgotten that I was older than his children, but I told myself not to mind, to keep the peace like I had trained myself to do between my parents before they split. So I rode with David to Wal-Mart at nine at night on the day before Christmas Eve to purchase a board game. Predictably, the games and toys aisle was a disaster, especially depleted in multi-player games.

David was the one who found Risk, squatting down and reaching all the way to the back of the shelf. The actual game seemed undamaged, although some of the plastic shrink wrap was hanging off the box and one cardboard corner was crushed.

“I don’t think Dad will like it,” I said. “I don’t think he likes strategy games.”

“He’ll get over it.” My brother’s nonchalant assurance surprised me. Did he not know about Dad sometimes shouting? Until that moment, I hadn’t realized there was another way to think about my father except carefully. I wondered what else would be different once I became an adult.

“If you think so,” I said deliberately. It would then be David’s fault if Dad got angry about the game.

David didn’t hear my real meaning. “Risk it is,” he said cheerfully, tucking the game under his arm. He put his other arm around my shoulders, which made me feel self-conscious about the bra I’d just started wearing. “High school for you next year. So hard to believe.” He squeezed my shoulders and let me go. “When you graduate from high school, you should come
to São Paolo.” He said the name of the city with a heavy accent. “There’s a great LDS university there. You could study anything you want.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, though I didn’t want to go to college in Brazil.

When we arrived back to the rented house, Mom and David’s wife Sandy had cleared a place on the table; Dad was in the recliner watching sports. “Are you playing, Tom?” Mom asked as the four of us were setting up the game.

“Nah,” he said.

“What?” Mom called, though we’d all heard him fine.

“Said no.”

Mom and Sandy exchanged pointed glances. Apparently they’d been talking about him. “It’s okay,” I said brightly. “I’m going to win anyway.”

They laughed, accepting my brag as a distraction. But David crossed the room, standing in front of our dad, blocking the TV. “Come on. We can’t let Julia beat us men.”

Dad leaned heavily on one arm of the chair, pretending to watch the TV around David. “She won’t win,” he pronounced.

David’s lips tightened with disappointment, and I saw with a shock that he had exactly the same shaped mouth as Mom, including the two parallel crescent wrinkles in the right corner. I touched the right corner of my own mouth, wounded that Dad thought so little of me. He had been right, though. I lost within the first hour and went to bed with the kids.

Dad flew down for my high school graduation, though David had only sent a card. Mom suggested he and I go to lunch, just the two of us, so in the booth after ordering my Portobello sandwich I tried to tell my dad about the intensive language school program in Paris where I wanted to study, what kind of grades it would take to become a Fulbright scholar. Dad nodded
sometimes but ate his double burger when it arrived without looking up once from the red plastic plate. The only question he asked me was whether I’d heard from my brother recently. “No,” I said shortly. I don’t know why it bothered me, but it really did. As if he still didn’t expect me to win.

Still frowning, Tyler shuffled the back cards to the front and then from the front to the back again. “I think there’s something you’re not telling us about girlfriend,” he said to Zack.

Zack gave an exaggerated shrug. “Who knew girlfriend was really good at Risk?”

I slammed my cards on the tabletop. “Julia.”

“What?” Tyler said.

“I’m Julia.” I stared Zack down until his eyes dropped to the board.

“O-kay,” Tyler said. He and his roommate Chris communicated for a moment with their eyebrows, then Tyler cleared his throat. “Hey, why don’t we take a break? Get a snack or something.”

“No,” I said, enunciating clearly. “I am going to win this game.”

They laughed, but the laughter now contained an undertone of nervousness. The knot under my breastbone had grown hard and cold. Solemnly I passed the red attacking dice to Zack. “Your turn.”

He attacked my Western Europe from his position in Southern Europe. We both lost one army. He attacked again and lost two. “Unbelievable.”

Only one of Zack’s red army men remained in Southern Europe, and Chris immediately swiped it up but didn’t have enough armies to defend it. It fell ultimately to me on the next round. I was then able to turn in a set of cards for extra armies, so on the strength of several lucky rolls I rampaged through Africa from the north, eliminating all but one of Chris’s
countries. He lost his last territory to Zack and stood up from the table ruefully. “I guess I’ll go for pizza.”

Zack and Tyler dug in their wallets for five-dollar bills. I did not.

“Uh,” Tyler said. “Anything you want?” He was trying to prompt me to offer some money.

“I like vegetable pizza,” I said, without looking up from my study of the board.

“Boyfriend will pay for mine.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Zack said, with an angry undertone in his voice. But his shot fell short, for I was still winning.

While the other guy was gone, I focused my attention on Europe, and by the time he returned, I had complete control of four of the six continents, which meant that I was gaining fifteen additional armies every turn. Zack and Tyler were openly collaborating with each other against me, had moved side by side on the far end of the table, the better to whisper their strategy. Nevertheless, it was plainly just a matter of time until I dominated the world.

“Damn,” Chris said admiringly. “Here’s your pizza, girlf, uh, Julia. Hey, are you, like, really mad or something?”

“Yeah,” Zack said, reaching for the Little Caesar’s box. “What’s gotten in to you? You didn’t even want to come over and hang out, and now you’re totally destroying us.”

I helped myself to a slice of my victory pizza. The best part was the narrow end, especially if it had every topping in the same mouthful. Onions, mushrooms, olives, banana peppers. I chewed slowly, imagining the vegetarian dishes I could order in France, and swallowed before answering. “I didn’t want you to think I was harmless,” I told Zack.

“We don’t, we really don’t,” Tyler said.
Zack said nothing.

I conquered Asia from two directions, beating Tyler out of the game and isolating Zack in the last four territories that constituted Australia. “Do you concede?” I asked him.

“No.” His lips were pinched thin.

I moved all my available armies into southern Asia and pounded Indonesia for three turns until it finally fell. After that, Australia, and the game, was mine. The whole world was green. I stood from the table and shook the hands of Tyler and his roommate. Tyler held my hand a moment longer than necessary, and I pulled it out of his grasp. I tucked the pizza box containing my leftover vegetarian under my arm. The game had taken three and a half hours. “Ready?” I said to Zack.

We sat in Zack’s car under the streetlamp, the Little Caesar’s box on my lap. “What the hell was that?” Zack said. His voice was tight and high, the angriest I’d ever heard it. He stared straight ahead through the parking lot into the street.

“What the hell do you mean what the hell was that?” I snapped back, using my mother’s sharpest voice. “You introduced me as girlfriend. What did you expect to happen?”

“I thought, I don’t know, that you wouldn’t turn into a complete—” He bit off the word.

I turned my face to the window. “Take me home.”

Zack turned the car on and squealed out of the parking lot. The drive to my dorm was thick with the things we were thinking at each other. We had each humiliated the other tonight, but I had been humiliated first. I watched Zack with my peripheral vision, saw the way he was chewing on the inside of his cheek. Slowly I took a quiet deep breath, relaxed my hands around the pizza box. I reminded myself that I had won.
I got out of the car as soon as it stopped. “Don’t call me.” I slammed the door. In the doorway of my building, I paused to watch the moths spinning around the lamp. I took a deep breath. Maybe I would call my brother tomorrow, see what he was doing. I’d kept France. The world was mine.
Persephone

Something about the furniture must have anchored the heat; now that the barren rooms contained only what she was taking to the new apartment, winter itself settled right into Ann’s bones. As soon as the estate sale was concluded, Ann turned out the lights on the ground floor and retreated up the wooden stairs to Samantha’s old room, where she lay down in Samantha’s old bed, her own bed now. She was glad she had talked herself out of keeping the king-size bed—a double was difficult enough to warm up, even under two quilts.

Hours later, Ann woke curled up in a comma, a fetus, a minnow. The analog clock said 9:35, but Ann could not tell whether it was morning or night, since the overcast winter sky could have been dark at either time. For a disorienting moment, Ann feared she had only slept an hour instead of thirteen, that her days and nights had been inverted. She rose, put on Paul’s bathrobe, which swallowed her like a whale, and booted up the ancient Mac in her study to check the date. It was not Sunday night but Monday morning, the last week of January.

The wall-to-wall bookcases in Ann’s study looked gap-toothed and forlorn. Every one of the books she would be keeping was packed; last month she’d invited all her friends in research, writing, and publishing over in a sad mimic of the book-release parties she used to hold for herself or Paul. They’d left with boxes of books in their trunks, and the rest she’d divided between the public library and the university. Samantha used to call the study “Not-Right-Now-I’m-Working,” but Ann had always been able to lose herself in writing, surprised when hours had gone by and she found herself suddenly hungry. She clicked on the Internet icon to check her email, not really expecting a reply from her editor yet, and certainly not expecting anything from Samantha; but then she remembered that her Internet had been disconnected on Friday.
Downstairs, she turned the heat up to eighty-five degrees—the old heater made a terrible clanking noise that resonated through the open living room. Shuddering, Ann went quickly through the empty house to the kitchen, where she poured the last of her milk into the last of her coffee. No bread for toast. There hadn’t been any reason to buy more, with the move scheduled for tomorrow. She drank the coffee too hot and pressed a hand hard to her sternum as the liquid burned its way through her.

Ann sat at the breakfast table before the bay window, her notebook open in front of her. The snow that must have fallen throughout the night made drifts some two feet tall, covering her backyard in an unbroken sheet of the smoothest, crispest cotton. She reread the last sentence she had written, *He was trying to calculate the distance between man and God*, but now it seemed both melodramatic and obscure. She was working on chapter seven of her fifth book, *Searching for Us*, a history of astronomy through the lives of nine astronomers, though she hadn’t written anything since the chaos of the estate sale. Her old life disappearing into trunks and trailers had put her in a melancholy mood. More often lately, Ann felt that her attempt to make sense of the influence of the telescope upon humanity’s worldview held nothing to the mystical moist night-air, to the perfect silence of the stars. She stared out the window at the grey-blue, cold-blue air. The snow was certainly coming down.

Half an hour later, the two phones rang. The cordless phone on the kitchen counter downstairs made a vaguely electric tone, while the old-fashioned rotary telephone upstairs on her desk rang properly. The two sounds blended badly, and Ann answered the downstairs phone as quickly as she could. “Hello?”

“Ann, love.” It was Linda, the reference librarian from Paul’s university. Linda had helped Ann obtain the most obscure texts for her research several years ago when Ann was
writer-in-residence. Ann had dedicated *Ex Utero* to Linda out of honest gratitude and had kept her poor friend working hard ever since. “Did you see the weather?” Linda asked.

The dry, hard snowflakes were making a fingernail sound on the window glass. “No, what is it?” Ann crossed the room and touched the window with the back of her hand.

“Ice storm. It’s supposed to be terrible, so I left work early. Hope you’re all stocked up.”

On cue, Ann’s stomach growled. She thought of what little she had in her kitchen. Perhaps some eggs, or a frozen dinner. No, she ate the last one yesterday. “Sure, I’ll be fine. When’s it coming through?”

“In a couple hours and it’ll last today and tomorrow. You could make it over here if you came now. Glen and I are making white chili and cornbread.”

“No, no thanks.” Chili sounded delicious, but she hadn’t touched *Searching* in at least five days. Measuring the distance between man and God was looming over her head. “I have to work.”

Linda sighed heavily into the receiver. “You could work over here.”

“I work better alone.”

“You’re sure?”

Ann examined the skin on her hand. Bright red and cold to the touch. “How long have you known me?”

“Too long, sometimes, I think.” Linda hesitated, then gave in. “Well, call me tomorrow, let me know you lived?”

“Of course.” Ann moved to draw the curtain, but it had been sold too. The icy blue natural light invaded the room’s electric yellow, and Ann imagined nature intruding upon all
man’s inventions. It would only take a few more winters to see a ruin of her house, if the new
owners didn’t keep up all the maintenance she’d found so tiring lately.

“Bye, Ann.”

“Bye.” Ann was cold again, from her stillness or her proximity to the window. To warm
up, she climbed the stairs and read in bed, first an astronomical treatise from the 1600s, and then
a biography of Harper Lee, a Christmas present from her editor, Patricia. The year Paul died and
Samantha turned thirteen, Patricia had been insightful enough to pester Ann relentlessly about
her then work-in-progress, All Those Pieces Still, the title coming from Donne’s poem “Broken
Heart.” When Ann finally delivered the manuscript—on time, though it nearly killed her—
Patricia had written, “Ann, you are an artist. This is the most acutely sad study of the circulatory
system that I could have ever imagined.” Three years later, and Ann had finally decided to
follow Samantha’s lead and run away.

She migrated to her empty study with her open notebook, watched the shifting light
patterns out the window: tree, cloud, sun, snow. Ann loved to read and write with the windows
open in summer, though she sometimes did less scholarship and more staring. When Samantha
was still a girl, Ann would stand at the window and watch her swing, worried that she would be
too long getting there if something happened. Ann had also worried that Paul thought she didn’t
love Samantha, was trying too hard or too little to be a good stepmother. In fact, the intensity
with which Ann worried about Samantha was most of the reason Ann could never get any work
done with Samantha around. Samantha made it hard to think properly, with her face so much
like Paul’s that the sight of her never stopped being a surprise. Not-Right-Now-I’m-Working
wasn’t Samantha’s fault, but sometimes Ann secretly blamed her.
Ann’s mother always said, “If you have to blame someone, blame God, because his shoulders are wide enough to carry it.” But her mother had been a Catholic who believed in a God with his arms outstretched: Ann was too claustrophobic to follow such a narrow way. She sometimes looked for God in books, and sometimes found him. But all she usually saw were words.

Ann closed the notebook and stared at the snow.

At five o’clock, she felt hungry, so she made the trek downstairs. Along the way, she was surprised at how the furniture had diffused itself inside the house that had suddenly waxed so huge. Few pieces of substance were left: Samantha’s old bed and one nightstand, Ann’s desk and chair, the loveseat instead of the sofa, the breakfast table instead of the dining table, and her bookcases and much-diminished books. Ann felt as though her life were under scrutiny, shrinking as someone on the other end of the binoculars brought it more sharply into focus. Smaller than it had first appeared.

In the refrigerator, Ann found two eggs, a wrinkled tomato, an opened can of pear halves, Dijon mustard, and a frozen waffle, so she ate the pears while she made a very ugly cheese-and-tomato omelet. She should have gone to Glen and Linda’s when she had the chance, but it would be too dangerous to drive there now. Still hungry, she toasted the waffle and filled up the coffee maker with water before she remembered she was out of coffee. She lit candles because she had them and ate breakfast for dinner listening to God speak snow: the love of the watchmaker extant in every tick of the clock. The snowscape made Ann think of the arctic tundra, how even the most extreme landscapes could not be barren. Life is disposed to live. Credo.

As she rinsed her dishes at the sink, she noticed the pomegranates behind the black bananas in the fruit bowl. Ann had never bought a pomegranate before, but at the grocery store
before the ice storm she’d remembered that pomegranates were a winter fruit, so she’d purchased two. Once at a specialty coffee shop she’d eaten a delicious pomegranate and ginger scone, and she’d entertained a halfhearted idea to reproduce them. For some reason pomegranates made her think of the Emily Dickenson poem “Wild Nights.” And the legend of Persephone. And sex in general.

“Those are in case I urgently need to stuff my bra,” she’d joked when the cashier rang up the fruit.

“What?” The woman hadn’t heard over the beeping of the register.

“Nothing,” Ann said. “Never mind.”

Now Ann held one of the pomegranates in her palm. It did look like a breast—even a very small imagination could concede King Solomon’s metaphor. The fruit was about the size of a C cup, rosy and firm. The scholar in her intrigued, Ann went upstairs and thumbed through the old King James Bible that Paul always kept on the nightstand. She looked for ‘pomegranate’ in the index, but found nothing, so she hunted through boxes for her food reference books instead, carrying the stack of them to bed with her. Reading at her desk felt too exposed, with the empty bookcases and the darkening window reflecting the blank computer screen, the window already getting dark.

Impulsively she dialed Linda. The phone rang four times before the answering machine picked up. “Hi, Linda, it’s me. I was calling because I desperately needed advice about how to cut up a pomegranate. And my house is cold. Call me back, bye.”

The search through the cookbooks yielded a useless orange pomegranate muffin recipe before she found a vegetarian reference book that explained how to separate the pomegranate’s arils, the juice-filled seed cases, from the sections of fleshy white membranes. In a bowl of cold
water, the arils would sink and the tasteless flesh float. Ann pushed aside the books and nested under the covers to warm up. She tossed, she turned; the cordless phone rang by her head. Ann vaulted out of the strange bed and tore through the blankets for the phone. The dark of the window had sucked up all the faint blue light while she slept the evening away. It was almost eight o’clock. She found the cordless after the second ring. “Hello?”

Samantha said, “Hi. It’s me.” Her voice was a little deeper than Ann remembered. Ann closed her eyes to savor the sound. “I got your email. From last week. I was just, uh, calling.”

Suddenly there came upon Ann a wave of love so powerful that she felt weak with the force of it. It had been three years, seven months, two weeks since Ann had last seen Samantha in person. The twentieth of May. Samantha shining bright as daylight, driving to New York the day after high school graduation, shattering Ann’s heart into little glass fragments. Love was blanket white silences, praying for someone else’s protection when you didn’t even believe in God.

“Are you there?”

“Yes,” Ann said, surprised at the calmness of her voice. “I’m glad to hear from you.”

She went downstairs, turning off the lights behind herself. “Though I’m afraid all your stuff is already gone. The estate sale was over yesterday.”

In the background Ann could hear a television—not the individual words, but the pitch and phrasing, the shape of the sentences. Samantha couldn’t stand silence. In their final argument, Samantha had shouted, “I hate how you’re so”—the shadow of Paul worked in her face as she searched for a harsh enough word—“quiet!” Some things never changed.

“No, I didn’t—don’t. I don’t care about the stuff. Anyway. You’re moving?”
In the kitchen, Ann faced the fruit. Shoulerding the phone, she filled a bowl with very cold water, put the pomegranate on a cutting board, and cut through the leathery rind with a French knife. The halves bled onto the cutting board and countertop. Ann picked up one of the pieces and examined it. The arils she’d pierced with the knife were thin, empty sacs, but the others were taut with juice and seed, little ripe pearls growing close with life.

“The house was just too big for me,” Ann said. “I found a nice apartment, first floor, some other people who wished they were still fifty nearby.” She paused. “It’s too quiet here alone.”

Samantha gave an incredulous laugh. “Was that a jab?”

“No,” Ann said simply, because it wasn’t. “Where are you living now?” Ann thought she might be able to learn her stepdaughter’s contact information, if she didn’t sound too eager about it.

“Outside Chicago. Kyle’s out right now.” Thus the call was explained. No one hated being alone more than Samantha, the loneliest only child in the whole Milky Way. Every summer Ann would send Samantha to camp, or to her cousins’ in California. Or Ann would beg the parents of Samantha’s schoolmates to let Samantha stay over for one, two, five more nights. Samantha’s restlessness interfered with Ann’s writing, infusing the whole house with the tender flavor of grief. If not for Samantha, Ann might not have wept for Paul quite so hard.

“So… how was your Christmas?” That day Ann had waited for Samantha to call, hopes plunging when the voice turned out to be a niece or nephew. In the cold water, Ann floated a quarter of the fruit.

The silence, not love, had made Samantha call, but that was fine. “Fine,” Samantha said. “Kyle and I went to Canada for me to meet his parents. We went skiing and his mother broke
her ankle, so we spent the whole weekend in the hospital and then inside the lodge. It was kind of rotten.”

“Is it serious with you two?” Gently with her thumb Ann rolled the seeds out of the fruit and into the water, where they sank. In a few moments, a cluster of jewels glittered at the bottom of the bowl, and Ann pushed the empty husk of broken white flesh to the side. It struck her that pomegranates were heart-sized.

“He’s serious, anyway. I can’t tell if his parents like me.” Samantha paused a second.

“Saw your book up there. In a big stack in a window.”

Ann picked up the second quarter of the pomegranate. “Oh?” The cover image was a sketch from an old anatomy textbook. Her name, for the first time, came above the title. “Was it selling?”

Samantha laughed. “You would know. They had enough left for the display.”

Ann glanced toward the window. All dark. “You want a copy? I could send it to you, if you want to give me your address.”

“With your autograph in it?” Samantha asked sarcastically.

“No, of course not. But really, do you want one? I’ve got a bunch just sitting in a box, and I was panicking that I would have to make forty friends to get rid of them.” She wasn’t sure she had any copies left, but she could buy one from the bookstore. Ann bent the rind back the wrong way to roll out the last arils. The cold water was making her fingers numb.

“You don’t have to,” Samantha said.

“No, I don’t mind.” Ann could feel the address slipping away.

The television suddenly jumped in volume. Sounded like gunfire. “No, really—”

“It’s fine, I’ll—”
Samantha burst out: “I won’t read it, okay?”

“Oh.” Ann reached for the other half of the fruit and the knife. “Why were you calling?”

Samantha sounded distressed. “I have no idea. I saw your email. I was just not okay with all this, and Kyle wants to meet you, and I just—”

“Not okay with what?”

“I don’t know, just—”

Ann didn’t even see it happen. She was holding the knife with her right hand and steadying the fruit with her left. She should have turned the half on its flat side, but she didn’t; and as the knife cut down, the pomegranate wobbled. The knife slipped and sliced halfway into Ann’s left thumb, right below the knuckle. Both Ann’s arms jerked involuntarily, and the phone fell off her shoulder, skidding on the wide tiles and shooting out the batteries.

As if from a great distance, Ann pulled the blade out of her thumb. It was not severed, but was bleeding freely into the diluted pomegranate juice on the countertop. She needed someone to drive her to the emergency room for first aid and stitches, but of course she was snowed in and alone.

Upstairs, the old-fashioned phone rang. Once.

Ann knelt in front of a half-packed box and dug around with her right hand for a dish rag. Twice. Her left sleeve was soaked to the elbow before she found a red-and-white checked cloth to press over the wound. The phone rang a third time. Ann wrapped her thumb in the cloth but couldn’t secure it with one hand. She stood up too fast—her sight went black for a second as the blood drained away from her head—and lurched upstairs.

Scrabbling at the wall, she found the light switch. The phone finished its fifth ring. She pulled it from the cradle. “Hel—” But it was a dial tone. Ann started to cry.
In her desk she found a thick rubber band which she wrapped twice about her upper arm. In the bathroom she kicked over her suitcase until she found the mini first aid kit. Sitting on the toilet lid she unwrapped the soaked cloth and examined the cut. It was still bleeding badly from a large semicircular flap of skin that peeled back to expose the bone. The knife had angled down, scraping the length of the metacarpal. The whole digit was already swollen. Ann couldn’t remember whether that was good or bad.

As efficiently as she could with just her right hand, Ann washed and rewrapped her thumb with gauze and tape, elevating the wound by resting the throbbing thumbs-up on the top of her head. She took a couple of painkillers and cried a little bit more, willing the phone to ring. She didn’t have Samantha’s number, of course, and after tomorrow her own number would change. Samantha might as well be light years away for all they would be able to communicate.

Eventually she blew her nose into a hank of toilet paper, took a deep breath, and left the bathroom. She had smeared blood on the phone, on the light switch, on the staircase banister. On her knees in the kitchen, she reassembled the cordless phone, then dialed call return. Twice she let it ring eleven times before giving up on reaching voicemail.

The sight of her blood all over the counter, already drying, made her feel dizzy, so Ann sat on the floor with the bowl of water and pomegranate. She ate some arils. They were cold and tangy, bursting under her teeth. As a girl, Samantha had a fear of eating seeds in case something would grow in her stomach.

When the phone rang, she seized it like a lifeline.

“Got your message,” Linda said cheerily. “We were outside shoveling. Did you still need help?”
In the devastation of Ann’s heart, all the pieces still lying there shattered, she understood that Samantha wouldn’t call back. However, as she looked at the ruined fruit, Ann could appreciate for the first time the clockmaker’s pain at the birth of universes. She understood, this is the way we help our daughters escape from our bodies.
Extradition

I

Proximity sensors detected the space pod long before it reached the atmosphere of the planet Tel. The pointed trajectory of the five-meter-long ovoid aroused the interest of Telian scientists, who carefully predicted the pod’s place and time of arrival, and informed the Senator of the province of Wellesley that an unidentified flying object was shortly to be landing in his bay. Within the hour, the Senator’s press team announced that a meteorite was due to arrive in the dark of the morning, but was nothing to be concerned about. Amateur astronomers who stayed awake to witness the event said that the asteroid wore a tail of orange flame from atmospheric entry, and that when it touched the water it made a susurrus of steam.

Marines retrieved the pod before the Senator finished his morning tea. The discovery that the object appeared to be from Hakkad, one of the only other two habitable planets on this arm of the galaxy, drove him to an unprecedented second cup, which he spilled on his desktop at the news that the pod was thought to be occupied. Senator Wellesley watched via live feed as the pod—the escape pod—was opened in a secure location deep underground.

At first they thought the man had died in transit, but they quickly discovered that his heartbeat and breathing had been chemically slowed. Carefully they eased him out of the fetal position in which he had been stored. Hakkadian experts on hand identified him immediately as General Kana, a man of political significance on his own planet. He was damaged: his wrists and ankles bore the signs of bonds, some but not all of his toenails and been removed, and one-to three-centimeter circular burns scored his belly and chest. The skin on his back had been crosshatched by a lash, and he was missing his left canine tooth. Inflamed needle marks punctuated the inside of his arms. When General Kana could not be woken, the Senator ordered
him to be removed to the Compound 100 Facility, a high-security hospital where Senator Wellesley himself was to be hidden if injured, though in his twenty-one-year tenure as Senator such action had never been necessary.

Less than fifteen hours later, Lord Taishi asked permission for his vessel to enter orbit, a light fighter whose name in Hakka meant Victorious; the Hakkadian nobleman had come to negotiate the prisoner’s release. In the aftermath of the planet Hakkad’s Great War, a large territory had splintered off and declared independence, but it was recognized neither by the official government of Hakkad, nor by Tel, who had not, to be honest, realized the new splinter country, called Arkamont, was very worthy of notice. Yet of late, Arkamont’s quest for recognition, in addition to employing signs and banners, sometimes used arms, missiles, and bombs. As the leader of Arkamont, General Kana was, to the Hakkadians, unquestionably a traitor. He had been the one with the bombs.

For twenty-eight hours General Kana remained unconscious while receiving medical aid. During the brief time he was awake, his attending physician reported that he was disoriented and unable to answer simple questions. She and her team repaired his physical wounds as well as they could, restraining him in a locked room for his safety, since they could not determine what drugs his captors had given him. Even in his sleep, the man kept repeating the only reply that he had yet given the doctors, which had been translated as, “My name is General Tomilo Kana, and my number is 103-098. I have nothing else to say.”

II

A. M. Moran, a junior member of Senator Wellesley’s press team, arrived at breakfast nervous and three minutes early. Senator Wellesley’s attendants made her wait in the foyer for the three minutes before allowing her to enter the Senator’s office. She had met the politician
before on numerous occasions, but always by chance and while in the company of R. V. Pritchett, her boss, the chief of the Senator’s public relations press. Inside, a cold breakfast of fruits and breads and the Senator’s trademark hot tea had been laid out, though the weather was warm. Senator Wellesley invited Moran to sit and filled her plate himself, though he had only his single austere cup. Moran took a tiny bite of star fruit jam on a corner of toast. Out of politeness, she tasted the tea, but it was dark and bitter.

“I’m very impressed with your work,” the Senator told her. “What I notice most is your factual, unbiased delivery of sensitive material.” All of Tel acknowledged Senator Wellesley to be the planet’s most eminent of the twenty-four Senators; even if Moran went on to win the S. E. Williams Prize for Journalism, his words may still have done her the greatest honor of her life.

Moran fumbled for phrasing. “Truth is… never biased and should always be told.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” Senator Wellesley said. The Senator’s gray and white head hair had relocated to his beard, which he groomed carefully square with rounded corners, like botanical art. The rest of his face was creased with age, and even while he was sitting, his shoulders were slightly stooped. “I have a security clearance eight assignment for you, Moran. I fear you will need to arm all your disinterestedness to observe and report as fairly as you have proved you can.”

“Disinterested,” Moran agreed, “but never, ever uninterested.”

The Senator smiled. “We knew you would be right for this.” He handed her a data stick, which she inserted into her computer tablet. Her eyes widened as she read the reports.

When Moran met him several hours later, General Kana was still strapped to the hospital bed. He was awake and apparently alert, but had not responded to any of the doctors’ questions.
They locked her into the hospital room alone with him; she dragged the only chair into his line of sight and seated herself. General Kana watched her warily.

“Good day,” she said, smiling pleasantly. She didn’t know a word of Hakkadian, but the governmental dossier said the general spoke Telar, a file which she had read only because her security clearance had been raised three points, and which she could be imprisoned for repeating. “I’m Moran. I’m a journalist. With your permission, I’d like to interview you about your recent experiences.”

“I,” General Kana said. “My name is.” He trailed off into Hakkad, frowning. He squinted down at the cloth manacles securing his wrists and tried to raise his arms. “I didn’t—”

“General Kana,” she said, and his attention snapped back to her. “You are on the planet Tel. Our doctors have been treating your injuries.” The majority of the harm was hidden under his hospital-issue clothing, and all Moran could see of it was his bruised mouth and one blackened, bloodshot eye. “Do you remember where you are?”

General Kana had his people’s wild dark hair, worn long and loose, and their beautiful young skin of porcelain translucence. Hakkadians were both taller and longer-lived than the average Telian; General Kana was forty six, still quite young by Hakkadian reckoning. Prison and torture had made him gaunt, but he was clearly a military man in prime physical condition. “Gen-General,” he said. “No. Have to say.” His black eyes grazed the room’s perimeter, Moran, and his restraints. Deliberately he wrenched his wrist around toward the clasp; the knots were not out of the reach of his longer fingers.

Moran stood up. “Please don’t do that.” When he didn’t respond or cease, she went to the door and knocked. She was suddenly terrified that he would get free and in his delirium attack her. A viewing window in the door slid open. Heart pounding, Moran explained to his
physician, P. C. Vandeventer, what the general was doing. Vandeventer reassured Moran that General Kana might still be suffering the effects of the unknown Hakkadian drugs, but was not thought to be dangerous.

Steeling herself, Moran turned around. General Kana was sitting up in his bed, bonds untied, examining the needle marks on his arms with interest. Moran’s instinct was to leave, to run, but General Kana met her eyes at the moment the window snicked closed, fixing her to the ground like hypnotized prey. He took a deep breath and said, “One-zero-three no! Mm… ahh. Grasfilah.”

“Grass-filla?” Moran echoed, repeating his accent badly.

The patient indicated the inflamed pinpricks over his veins. Some of the sores had formed blisters that burst and oozed.

“That’s what they gave you?” Moran guessed.

General Kana blinked slowly, once, freeing her from the paralysis.

In the hallway, Moran flagged down Vandeventer. “Psychiatric medication,” the doctor said, surprised. “An inelegant truth serum, but I can treat it.” She disappeared into thought for a moment, then returned, brisk. “Look, why don’t you come back in a couple of hours? Make it five.”

***

From orbit, Lord Taishi sent a recorded message to Senator Wellesley. “Tomilo Kana, formerly general of the Hakkadian army and the leader of the self-styled country of Arkamont, has confessed to war crimes against my nation, including the bombing of the Royal Palace. Please release him into our custody so that he may be returned to prison.”
Senator Wellesley prevaricated. “Can we not first ascertain that we are holding the correct man?” Senator Wellesley was by all accounts as canny a politician as his guest in space.

The Hakkadian negotiator’s reply consisted of General Kana’s encoded DNA and no additional message. For the subsequent nine hours, Victorious kept all channels open but received only radio silence.

When Moran returned to the Compound 100 Facility, General Kana was eating his dinner. He pinched off a tiny piece of bread, rolled it into a ball using only his thumb and palm, and tossed it down his throat whole. The potatoes were too watery for this activity, the vegetable mix too misshapen, and the meat too tough without a knife. Moran was not allowed to bring anything into General Kana’s room, so she’d stood outside his door, finishing her drink, watching on camera as he picked at the bread. After a while he stopped.

“Are you feeling any better, General?” Moran asked him, sitting in the chair.

“Yes.” He tried on the word as if it were a strange garment. “Thank,” he said. “You, Moran.” New medicines were hanging from his IV.

Vandeventer had explained that General Kana’s torturers had given him so much of the truth serum that it had begun to inhibit rather than loosen the language center of his brain. After an ugly period of detoxification, the antidote already saw him improving rapidly. So far he was able to communicate in one- or two-word sentences, though not without great concentration. He showed no inclination to harm himself or anyone else, and submitted patiently to all their ministrations; he spoke exclusively in Telar now, which Vandeventer theorized was merely polite.

“What.” His gesture encompassed the room and himself.
“What will happen to you now? Even if I knew, I wouldn’t be allowed to tell you,” Moran said regretfully. “I’m just supposed to take down your story and relay it to my superiors, who are making those decisions.”

With two fingers he alluded to her empty hands.

“This is a secure building,” she explained, “so I have to leave everything outside. Fortunately I have a very good memory, but in any case there’s a recorder in my ear.” She took out the tiny silver disc and held it up for him to see. “It has to stay in the building too. Security clearance eight.” She clipped it back onto her earlobe and nested the microphone inside her ear.

General Kana smiled thinly and raised one eyebrow: What now?

Moran felt a rush of compassion. “I—I’m sorry for your plight. I believe that I can help you by listening to your story and making it known. I know it’s not a proper interview yet, but perhaps I can ask you yes or no questions?” Moran shrugged, feeling foolish. “I wish you could talk, it’s always better to let the subjects talk, because the interviewer usually ends up asking the wrong things.”

“Yes,” General Kana said. He settled himself back gingerly on his dozens of stitches and closed his eyes, waiting.

* * *

R. V. Pritchett was eating Senator Wellesley’s breakfast vigorously. “It’s a pretty problem,” he agreed, cheeks full of pastry. Moran forced herself to drink more of the bitter tea, knowing she could use the mental stimulation. Since General Kana’s responses to her questions had been necessarily nonverbal, the recording device had been of little use so far. All night she had worked on her report at her office, making a meticulous transcription of the exchange from
memory, and appending several closely spaced pages of analysis. She only returned to the flat
she shared with a former schoolmate, L. G. Bird, to shower and change clothes.

Senator Wellesley tapped Moran’s assessment showing on the screen in his desktop.
“We can’t release this, of course.” He sounded apologetic.

“Certainly not!” Pritchett agreed. He emptied the serving dish of cold cuts and arranged
them on a large breakfast roll that he spread with soft yellow butter.

“It’s too inflammatory,” the Senator continued.

“Much too much so,” chorused Pritchett.

“Nevertheless, you have done an admirable job. And now that General Kana seems to
have recovered his speech”—the Senator indicated a second report on his desktop, from
Vandeventer—“I eagerly await his version of events.”

Moran cleared her throat. “I find General Kana’s situation sympathetic.” Tiny ground
tea leaves remained in the bottom of her teacup, a lost prophecy. She replaced the cup on the
table. “If we send him back to Hakkad, they’ll put him back in jail, or worse.”

“Fortunately,” Senator Wellesley said firmly, “the question of what to do with our guest
will be put to the Senate. We’ve never needed to write cross-planetary extradition laws before.”

After the members of his press left, Senator Wellesley sat in contemplation of the two
reports and poured himself another cup of tea before the meal was cleared away. He had
gathered a great deal of expensive level-twelve intelligence about General Kana’s activities on
Hakkad. To the Hakkadians, General Kana was worse than traitor; to the people of Arkamont,
whose government the Protean League, the coordinator of this arm of the galaxy, did not
recognize, he was a hero, their brave leader, without whom they had a far slighter chance of
independence, especially if he broke under additional torture.
Senator Wellesley called up Lord Taishi on a communications screen behind his desk. The limp black hair, eyes sunk deep under black eyebrows, and the pallor of his skin caused the nobleman to look, in Senator Wellesley’s maximum security opinion, like a death’s head. Lord Taishi smiled. “It is an honor and a pleasure for me to meet the great Senator Wellesley at last,” he said, putting the slightest emphasis on ‘at last.’ Senator Wellesley regretted that he’d kept the man waiting, but it couldn’t be helped.

“I hope to share the honor and the pleasure,” Senator Wellesley answered, “in person. I am happy to tell you that your spacecraft has been cleared for landing at the Welles Municipal Spaceport.”

“Excellent,” Lord Taishi said. “I will have my officers ready to receive the prisoner.” Senator Wellesley pulled a pained face. “I’m afraid our physicians report that he is still too ill to be moved.”

The Hakkadian’s manner, if possible, grew colder. “Ah. I see.”

Unknowingly giving the Senator’s words the lie, General Kana had worked himself into a light sweat performing calisthenics on the far side of the bed, away from the door. His cotton shirt was spotted with blood where he’d stretched a few stitches. He stopped immediately when Moran came in.

“Morning,” Moran said.

“Is it?” he said civilly. The room had no windows. “You seem tired,” he observed. Moran shrugged. “I haven’t slept.” She guessed, “You slept well and feel better?”

“I did. Do.” General Kana sat on the bed, crossing his legs such that the soles of his feet were visible. Bruises even there.

They regarded each other, then Moran said, “Tell me your story.”
III

I cannot claim to tell you the truth, since I think no single soul can know for certain whether his beliefs are the right ones, but I can tell you my truth, since it is perhaps the only thing I do know. The Hakkadian saying is correct that the first son is for the land, the second for the temple, and the third for war. I was my parents’ third, born under stars that our midwife did not consider auspicious.

Our land, Arkamont, has always been the steppes, a broad inland plain that makes up more than half of the continent yet contains less than ten percent of its population. The cities on the coast consider it shamefully primitive, an appalling reminder that a mere two hundred years ago, Hakkad was technologically barbaric; but too there is a strange duality that we of the steppes are noble primitives. Of this cultural attitude I was ignorant until the age of twelve, when I was sent to an elite eastern military academy, as befits the son of a Duke. It was the first time I’d ever seen the ocean.

In school I met my lifelong friend Wilco, a boy like me with a predilection for machines: he designed them and I built them. The following year I began to distinguish myself with awards for best pilot or first marks in mathematics. At fourteen I composed a long letter to my father—handwritten, since he had no telegraph—concerning my burning desire to modernize my family homeland. I developed a five-year plan to unite the steppes, raise the population, and build walls, roads, factories, schools, hospitals, a government. My letter received no reply.

After I graduated eight years later, I returned to Arkamont briefly to see my brothers before my deployment. Tars was dumb with hard labor, to my sorrow, but Rolf’s training in the priesthood had made him close and subtle. All summer the two of us circled one another, sensing that we each had separate intentions for the land. Rolf mocked that he inherited next, but
I warned that his ambition would hinder him, for the highest level priests of the Order of Chiel cannot own property.

Then I served for the next twenty years in the Great War, unifying the continents against the Karth, our enemies. I built missiles and fired them from airships with great accuracy, and then I trained a lot of other men to do it just as well as I could. I had a talent for distributing assets well, which pushed me towards my present rank. When I was trusted enough, I was able to implement many of Wilco’s and my childhood inventions. Eventually, if they locked the two of us in together with a problem, we could give them five creative solutions, usually involving explosions. We were glorious together.

After we won the war, some of the new King’s men approached me with my handwritten five-year plan for Arkamon, which had never been mailed. They offered to make me Duke if I would implement the plan; I refused, but was willing to teach my method to Tars. They thanked me politely and told me I’d earned a holiday, so Wilco and I treated ourselves to a world tour. He met in person many of his scientific correspondents, and I saw from the ground places I’d targeted from the air. I even met some Telians at the embassy in Karth. They complimented my ability with Telar, which I’d learned in school to read your military histories. It was a good year, but at the end of it I felt nostalgic for Arkamont. I didn’t announce myself—for who knocks on his own front door?

House guards arrested me under the lintel that bore my father’s crest. Rolf, sitting on the ducal chair and wearing the signet ring, had been given the same offer as I had, but he had accepted. I demanded to see my father and my eldest brother. Rolf told me they were dead. Enraged, I tried to attack him, but his guards threw me in the dungeon. Later Rolf visited my cell to gloat about his achievements. He planned to execute me, but I took him by surprise,
fought him, stole his weapon, and killed him. The guards and members of the household who did not swear fealty to me I imprisoned and later exiled. Executed some. Now that I was Duke, I would govern as I saw fit, but I wanted no part of the Hakkadian government that had corrupted and destroyed my family. I sent secret messages calling for my friends and allies to join me in my newly declared country of Arkamont.

Things were quiet for almost a year, while Hakkad pretended I was still their man. I had a three-fold plan to prepare for both peace and war. Any person not a criminal—deportees, homeless, dissatisfied, war leftovers, poor, or hungry—could labor in Arkamont for wage. With society’s unwanted and unappreciated I built my walls and roads, airships and satellites. Also, many soldiers on half-pay during peacetime gave up their Hakkadian commission to be hired into my army. Lastly, my team of scientists, headed by Wilco, built me a country from a prairie in fourteen months. I believe Wilco was the greatest inventor of his generation, but what is more, he was my friend and brother. Sometimes the family you make along the way can mean more to you than those by accident of birth.

Then the second war began. Hakkad attacked Arkamont without parley, though they called us the aggressors. At first they sent missiles, but Wilco used my authorization codes to jam their satellites and redirect their missiles into the sea. Reduced to a land war, their armies took another year to reach us, especially since my soldiers had seeded the way with mines and other traps. At last arriving, the enemy camped downhill from us, but most of them drowned when we turned the River Arka on them. Some asked to join us and some very few marched retreat. Meanwhile all my speeches and diplomacy were ignored by the new King.

So I began to attack, regretting that we who had been allies had become “us” and “them.” Wilco designed a beautiful little airship, fast and stealthy, which I fitted up with precision guns.
We called it the *Sniper*, and any time we felt like it, we could run up the coast, hit our target, and outfly anything that chased us. We thought we might win, but their spies infiltrated us. One quiet evening while we were having a celebratory drink, four assassins attacked us in the castle. Before he died, Wilco sounded the alarm, and I was saved. That night I hung the assassins from the walls, took out the *Sniper*, and destroyed the Royal Palace. Without Wilco to prevent them, they fired missiles and took me prisoner. I told them nothing under their tortures. I will kill myself before I will betray my people.

Unknowingly I gave Hakkad the tool to corrupt my brother Rolf, who caused the deaths my father the Duke and Tars. In turn, I killed him and attempted to correct my unintended mistake. And Fate spun her wheel and Wilco, the best part of me, died. Circumstances beyond my control have brought tragedy into my life: perhaps the midwife was right about my bad stars. Even so, I believe I have kept my self-respect by doing what I knew to be right.

While I was drugged, sympathetic parties unknown to and unsolicited by me smuggled me out of prison and sent me here. I don’t remember anything of my journey through space or what happened when I arrived. I’m grateful, however, for the humane way that I have been treated here; and I will respectfully comply with any decision reached by the people and Senate of Tel about the disposal of my person—with one condition. I request that my story be broadcast. My people deserve the freedom to choose their own government, whether Hakkad or me or Karth or you or simply themselves. For their sake, I will be obedient, but the one thing I must not be is silent.

My name is General Tomilo Kana, and my number is 103-098. I have nothing else to say.
Moran transcribed General Kana’s testimony and sent it to Senator Wellesley at once. She begged permission to submit her formal analysis a few hours later, a request that was willingly granted. At her desk, Moran stared at nothing for a while, then she pulled herself together and began her report. At 3:30 in the morning when he arrived at the office, Pritchett told her to get some sleep, so she went to her flat, planted herself at the dining table, and kept working. She wanted to capture in words General Kana’s expression when he said that ties to the family you make for yourself can be stronger than the family you were born to. A few minutes later Moran’s flatmate Birdie came home from her work as an assistant coroner at a hospital, the literal graveyard shift. “Night,” she said. “Or no, I guess, morning.”

Without looking up, Moran made what a generous person could interpret as a greeting sound.

Birdie went into the bedroom to change clothes. “What are you doing?” she called.

“Writing,” Moran grunted.

There was a hiss of silk on skin. Birdie reappeared in partying clothes, pinning up her nest of curly yellow hair. “Why?”

Moran’s concentration, and possibly her temper, snapped. “It’s my job, all right? I’m a journalist, working is writing, I’m working.”

Coolly Birdie leaned over and put her face in Moran’s face. “Then leave your work at work.” The two women stared at each other. Then Moran turned to her computer, sent her report just as it was, got up, and put on the aquamarine dress.

Birdie, her family, took her out dancing.
No one slept that night. Moran only stopped moving to drink whatever Birdie handed her. Lord Taishi’s brain insisted it was day, so he debugged his guest suite and read Telian news journals, noting with interest that his enemy’s presence had been kept from, or covered by, the press. Senator Wellesley stayed awake to read and ponder Moran’s report; he lost count of how many times his teacup was refilled before he was done. And in the dimmed lighting of his hospital cell, General Kana patiently whetted a metal filing that he detached from his bed.

* * *

Senator Wellesley and Lord Taishi met for breakfast in a private dining room in Welles Mansion. The Senator thought his guest resembled a corpse even more strongly in person, although compared to Lord Taishi, rumored to be over one hundred, Telians aged in a most unappetizing way—wrinkled faces, rheumy eyes, graying hair, stooped shoulders, shuffling walk. Senator Wellesley said, “I believe most Hakkadians pray over their food. Do you do so?”

“No,” Lord Taishi said. “Only the followers of priests.”

“Ah, forgive me.”

Both men ate. Lord Taishi seemed to want to turn everything into a finger food and had an odd way of throwing his head back when he swallowed. He did not touch the meat.

“The Senate is meeting today about your request,” Senator Wellesley said. “Unfortunately it will be a closed session, so only Senators and select staff members will be present. Would you like me to convey anything beyond your written request to the Senate for Hakkad?”

Lord Taishi smiled thinly. “Only that the return of the prisoner would increase our already high opinion of Tel.”
Senator Wellesley drained his cup and waited for the attendant who refilled it to move out of hearing. “Can you speak to what might happen to that opinion if the man in question remained here?”

The diplomat straightened his cutlery primly. “Senator, we must have him back, and we would prefer to do it without force.”

“Force is something that we would also like to leave out of this exchange, especially in regards to the general’s fate.”

“Kana has committed crimes which merit punishment. His fate should not concern you.” The dead face grinned. “Turn Kana over to me, and we will both have what we want.”

Senator Wellesley massaged his forehead. “What we want is shortly to be determined.”

* * *

Moran came to work on the strength of a hot shower, three tablets of aspirin, and a last shot of alcohol. Birdie had urged her to stay home and sleep, but Moran’s separation anxiety demanded that she check in to work. Pritchett zeroed in on her the moment she arrived and herded her into his office, where papers were stacked in every accessible place, on the shelves, desk, chairs, and floor. Moran stood under the onslaught of Pritchett’s wrath.

“Where the hell have you been? Don’t you know the Senate meets in half an hour? No, twenty-eight minutes!”

Moran didn’t know this, but what should it matter to her? She had never been invited.

“Well, you’re invited now. Wellesley put you on his staff list, and all of a sudden no one knows where you are! Your phone is on your desk, no one answers your door, and now you show up hung-over! Dear God, I would never have expected it of you.”
Moran indicated that Pritchett’s shouting bordered on painful. She also suggested that some food might make her more alert.

“No time, dammit, no time. Have you got your recorder in? No?”

The recorder had to stay at the Compound 100 Facility.

“Then you’d better prove that your memory is everything you say it is. Take some paper and get everything down, mind. Here. And here’s your temporary press pass. This meeting will set a precedent for Tel, and if you misquote anyone, you’re fired. This decision could excite the notice of the Protean League, for God’s sake.”

Wasn’t Pritchett coming too?

“No, I’m not coming too, thank you very much. Now get over to the Chamber and pray they don’t ask you a question. Don’t make a fool of yourself, Moran. This could make or break you.”

Moran paused at the door. “Did you hear the general’s story?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think he’s innocent?”

Pritchett pointed cuttingly to the clock. Time was eternally against her, moving ahead second by unvarying second. She had twenty minutes. Moran ran.

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An old man sat down in what General Kana had come to think of as Moran’s chair. “A negotiator from your planet has requested that we extradite you to Hakkad,” the old man said. “I am about to attend a meeting to decide your fate.”

“Probably Taishi.” General Kana’s face was calm and his body relaxed as he sat cross-legged on his bed. “He was one of my torturers.” He folded his arms loosely over his chest and
slowly rubbed his thumb over the inside of his elbow. He did not look like a corpse. He looked like a young man with eyes of ice.

The old man rubbed his square white and gray beard. “You said you would do as Tel decided, but unfortunately your guilt or innocence has little to do with the matter. Will you still abide by our decision?”

General Kana answered, “I always do as I say, Senator.”

“I don’t,” confessed the old man, bowing his head.

The general shifted on the bed. He unfolded his body—tall and powerful, the other man realized suddenly—and stood over the seated figure. The old man felt a trill of fear: with the slightest use of force, General Kana could harm or kill him. He held still. The general spoke. “The wisest thing I’ve ever heard was spoken by my father to my middle brother. ‘To be a man of honor, you must always do what is right in your own eyes—in no one else’s but yours.’”

Senator Wellesley raised his eyes. “Thank you, General.”

V

SENATE EXTRADITES HAKKADIAN, SETS PRECEDENT

All twenty-four Senators met today, 9 Maundi, to debate the extradition of one man to Hakkad. The case was called by the Chair to be a sensitive, ‘closed session’ matter. It would set a precedent for all extraplanetary repatriation.

Tomilo Kana, formerly a general of the Hakkadian army and Great War veteran, arrived to Tel on 6 Maundi via space pod. He is being held in a secure location while recovering from injuries contracted while in the Royal Hakkadian Prison.

Kana, 46, is being accused of bombing the Royal Palace, among other war crimes and, most seriously, treason.
Kana allegedly declared his ancestral lands of Arkamont to be independent of Hakkad. For the past two years, Hakkadian armies have been warring over the territory, resulting in thousands of casualties.

The two sides blame each other for the outbreak of violence.

Kana is being charged by Lord Taishi, who was not present in the Chamber during the debates.

The Hakkadian written charge, read aloud by the Chair, said, “It is imperative that we recover the escaped convict to elicit from him further information in order to preempt additional attacks on the citizens of Hakkad.”

Senator Wellesley (21 years of service) led the discussion in favor of holding Kana indefinitely.

“The Hakkadians call him a rebel and a traitor,” said Wellesley, “but others might name him a freedom fighter. It’s all a matter of perspective.”

Even the Hakkadians appear conflicted: the daily papers in the capital city of Hakkad call Kana the “Bane of the Steppes” as well as “King Tomilo I.”

Opposition to Wellesley’s position was led primarily by Senators Sanza (6), Anglen (13), and Hemmens (30).

“This Senate does not recognize a government of Arkamont,” Anglen pointed out. “Kana should be judged by his own government and must be judged by his own government.”

Since the resolution of the Great War, the Protean League acknowledges only two powers on the planet: Hakkad and Karth.

“Hakkad’s society is grossly bisected by class,” says Hakkadian cultural expert O. D. Forox in a recently published article in *Socio-Anthropological Quarterly.*
A. V. Enno, a linguist at the Telian embassy in Karth, agrees: “There is a sense of unrest between classes even here. Every day there is word from Hakkad about picketing or riots. The poorest want Hakkadian recognition, or they will go to Arkamont.”

Wellesley proposed that aiding Kana in displacing the lowest classes to Arkamont would alleviate Hakkadian unrest. He recommended that Tel provide a neutral ground for negotiation between the two parties.

But Sanza worried that either action would break Tel’s neutrality.

“Holding Kana would make an irrevocable statement about Telian perceptions of his guilt,” Hemmens stated. “Besides, it has never been our policy to bother the neighbors. Why start now?”

After more than five hours of debate, the Moderator (Bylon, 9) tallied the final vote as ten against, fourteen for extraditing Kana.

“This Taishi has made a polite request for what is his,” Hemmens said after the vote. “I am pleased we are able to oblige him.

The Senate charged Wellesley with handing over Kana safely and promptly to his people’s justice.

Wellesley declared, “I am grieved by the loss of a man who may have been an ally. I hope the Hakkadians see Kana as a mutually beneficial solution to their problems: he can help both sides of the conflict get what they want.”

Kana will be delivered to the Hakkadian vessel Victorious at the Welles Municipal Spaceport on the morning of 10 Maundi, less than fifty km and five days from where and when he arrived.
Lord Taishi, when told of the Senate’s decision, said, “The people of Hakkad are grateful for Tel’s friendship and aid and hope that the whole galaxy admires Tel, as we do, for its reputation for justice.”

Submitted by A.M. Moran, 10 Maundi, GE 904

SECURITY CLEARANCE 8

VI

Four figures, well-guarded, approached the launch site where Victorious was waiting. A serviceable ship, it was an older bullet-shaped model bought off of Karth and refitted with some weaponry and an engine booster. During the Great War, Colonel Wilco had designed modifications for it to enable deep space missile launch, but these had never been implemented. The present King thought space travel too costly to bother with; instead, he ordered experts to reconstruct the ruined Sniper. He wanted to learn to fly it.

At the foot of Victorious’s ramp, Lord Taishi waited in his military coat, hands clasped behind his back. The party paused a hundred meters from Lord Taishi, facing him down a narrow, empty hangar. The close gray corridor of concrete and tin was bookended by officers with laser guns trained on General Kana’s pale, broad forehead, three square inches of tremendous value. The general, returning freely to imprisonment, did not flinch under their aim.

For the first time, seeing him in the company of her people and juxtaposed by his own, Moran realized that General Kana was an alien—separated from her by an impossible divide of differences on all counts. He with slight advantage of height and great advantage of years must always be a stranger to her. Any points of connection between them were flimsy and false; neither could be comprehended by the other. She was as far from him right now as if he were already in his grave on Hakkad.
The only sounds were the hum of the emergency exit light batteries recharging and the rush of blood in her head like the sea. She did not want him to go. It wasn’t right.

General Kana addressed Pritchett, to whom he had been introduced after his dawn meal with Senator Wellesley. “I am sorry not to have more time to know you.” He gave the senior journalist a deep nod.

Pritchett returned the gesture with dignity, saying, “It has been an honor, sir.”

And then General Kana turned to Moran. Her face was hot with repressed tears. If she looked up, they would all spill over, the surface tension of her façade broken with eye contact. “Moran.” There was a light yellow bruise around the corner of General Kana’s mouth. Moran watched it jump and bend as he spoke. “You have done so much for me, but I must make one more request of you. You heard my story. I hope—for the sake of the others, and for Wilco—I hope you will tell it.

“I will, I will,” she promised. She looked into his eyes. “I will.” Moran couldn’t see for crying. She gestured around wildly, blindly. “I wish I could—” Her voice broke. They were going to kill him, actually going to kill him. She resolved never to let his memory die.

Solemnly General Kana extended his hand. Moran gave him hers, and across a chasm of twenty-nine light years, they touched.

General Kana nodded once and turned to the Senator. They shook hands briefly, professionally, having already said their farewells. “I’m sorry,” Senator Wellesley said.

“Don’t apologize. I know what I must do.” General Kana rested his hand over his heart.

A frown briefly creased the Senator’s brow as General Kana stepped away. The general took one slow, deep breath and began walking toward his death. The concrete under his feet
seemed hazy to Moran, like heat making a mirror of the horizon. It seemed as though General Kana was not walking across, but up, an ascension. The guns watched him go.

Lord Taishi clasped a pair of metal restraints around General Kana’s wrists and neck and bowed to Senator Wellesley; the Senator saluted him. The guards marched their prisoner up the ramp and raised it behind them. General Kana did not look over his shoulder. Moran wiped her face with her sleeve.

The Telians left the hangar for the control tower, where they could watch the departure. They stood in an out-of-the-way corner while the radiomen at the controls cycled through takeoff procedure. Through the windows they watched Victorious taxiing into position. At length Moran became aware that Senator Wellesley and Pritchett were holding a nonverbal conversation. When they saw her notice them, they looked away.

Senator Wellesley cleared his throat. “Moran, now that the special circumstances are concluded, you will be returned to your previous security clearance level.”

Moran realized in an instant. “I won’t have access to my own reports.”

The sound of Victorious’s engines reached them even in the tower. A mechanized female voice began counting backwards from twenty. Nineteen.

“That’s unfortunately true,” Senator Wellesley agreed, staring fixedly at the floor, “but we cannot make General Kana’s story public at this time. The information would be too disturbing to the general populace."

Fourteen, thirteen.

“History loathes a censor!” Moran cried. “The people should be told the truth.”

“A security violation could see you facing a lawsuit or worse,” Pritchett warned.

Nine, eight.
“But I promised him,” Moran said. She would never let Pritchett make her a liar: she would rewrite all her reports, make the injustice known. She had her memory, hadn’t she? And she had her family. She caught the Senator’s eye. “I can’t believe you let me promise.”

He shook his head slowly.

*Four, three, two, lift.*

*Victorious* engulfed itself in billows of smoke and fire. Instinctively they all turned to the window and watched General Kana disappear from sight.