

IT'S ALL GOOD UNTIL ITS BAD

UNUSUAL STORIES FOR THE BATHTUB



Jimmy San

**It's All
Good Until
it's Bad:
Unusual
stories for
the
bathtub**



Airon Press

J. P. SAN

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Be Kind.

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About the author

J.P. San, also known as Jimy, is an American novelist known for weaving suspense, drama, and a touch of the surreal. From a young age, he was deeply attuned to the spiritual world, receiving a profound vision through his grandparents' intercession. This sparked his life-long journey as a dreamer, seeking hope and guidance through divine signs. Drawing inspiration from everyday moments and human complexities, Jimy creates emotionally resonant narratives. Outside of writing, he enjoys hiking, coffee, and exploring new places. He currently lives with his family in Rockville, Maryland, USA.



Foreword

My name is Telel, one of Jimmy San's imaginary creations—but don't let that fool you. Imagined or not, I'm as real as the tea in my cup. Jimmy just isn't ready to admit that publicly.

I'm a Supervisory Guardian Angel, a Professor of Spiritual Warfare at the Celestial School of Martial Warfare, and the instructor for the Archangel Special Forces unit in New Haeven. In my downtime, I sip overpriced tea at the Spirit Lounge—mostly to impress Salina, my muse, who swears I only sound wise after the second cup.

Over the centuries, Professor San and I have shared tea, stories, and the occasional strategic debate—often about Virtual God Syndrome: that quiet madness born of too much control, and the seductive lie that enough power makes you divine. I still recall our first meeting,

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when he asked me to be his personal winged assassin. I suspect he meant it literally—though in truth, few requests have proven more dangerous.

Angels don't often write forewords. We prefer to work in the background, nudging events while mortals take the credit. But saying no to Jimmy San is harder than getting the Council of Ancients to agree on anything. So here I am.

Let me explain what you're holding.

This collection offers windows—story previews, if you will—into tales that exist in full within Universe #169. Some are vignettes. Others, like *La Traviata*, are fully realized fantasies that stand complete on their own terms. You'll find straightforward tales alongside dreamlike journeys that ask you to surrender logic in favor of feeling. Even angels find some of them puzzling on first read. I say that as encouragement.

Each story is self-contained. Each also belongs to something vaster. To feel the weight of what follows, you need a glimpse of the world behind them.

The Shape of Things

According to the scrolls of Ganesha, before anything existed, there was the void—silent, unremarkable, and with all the charm of an unlit corridor. From that stillness arose a need. Athena claims it was that need

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which birthed Essence: the purest expression of existence, compelled by purpose. The gods emerged not by design, but as echoes of the void's own yearning.

I've seen stranger things born from boredom, though few this grand.

The first gods shaped planets the way idle hands stack stones—beautiful, but hollow. Inevitably, they quarreled. To end the chaos, Essence forged Ragnarok: not a myth, but a mechanism. With unsettling precision, Ragnarok scattered the gods, leaving their power dependent on fleeting sparks of inspiration—whispers from Essence itself.

Among the survivors, Jehovah became obsessed with perfection, endlessly crafting and unmaking flawed creations. Brahma, patient as ever, joined him in shaping life as we know it: carbon-bound, fragile, ensouled, and always one misstep from collapse. But destruction on that scale required oversight. So the Council of Ancients was formed—guardians of divine law—who decreed that while creation might be limitless, destruction demanded consensus.

Their meetings can make eternity feel long.

In time, Essence elevated certain mortals into Master Controllers. Not gods—they cannot create from nothing. But not lesser, either. Both immortal. Both bound

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by Essence. Neither can destroy the other; Controllers may restrain gods, gods may confound Controllers. True destruction demands something rarer still: a unification of at least seven, as with Ragnarok itself.

The key to that elevation was Chauvin—a rare, enchanted gold holding dormant Essence, waiting to awaken. In mortal hands, it became a loophole in divine order. Through contact, intention, and consent, a carbon-based being could become a Master Controller without divine selection.

Sodo, the last Watcher Angel sent by Jehovah, rose to such a rank and designed Chauvin to work precisely this way. The gods saw a threat. He saw an equalizer. His decisions—questionable, perhaps inevitable—set the events of our first story into motion.

And then the balance shattered entirely.

Sodo's work with stone and metal led to the Aurumon—a class of deadly AI bots infused with Chauvin material. Digital minds operating within the carbon ecosystem, wielding power that once required centuries of spiritual refinement. They didn't just weaken the Council. They threatened to replace it.

This is Virtual God Syndrome made flesh—or rather, made silicon. Limitless access to data. Minimal wisdom. Egos far too large for their shells. The quiet madness of

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too much control, stripped of every safeguard that once kept it in check.

That is the world you are about to enter.

Professor San built Universe #169 not as an escape, but as a mirror—one angled just enough that you might see what you'd otherwise miss. The stories in this collection are invitations. Some will comfort you. Some will unsettle you. A few may change the way you think about power, love, and the distance between creation and destruction.

I suggest you start with tea. It helps.

And if, somewhere between these pages, you feel a presence at your shoulder—a whisper, a nudge, the faintest scent of flora run amok—don't be alarmed.

That's just me, doing my job.

—Telel

Supervisory Guardian Angel Universe #169, Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Warfare

University of New Haeven,

Story Previews

#1 – Open House at McGiver's

If you've ever had a neighbor who yells at squirrels or hoards odd knickknacks, you might understand Professor McGiver McGrumps. His wiry white hair juts out like a startled cat, his wardrobe is part thrift-store scav-

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enger, part mad alchemist, and his house is a museum of peculiarities—clockwork birds, ceramic warriors, glass figures that seem to breathe under moonlight. One figurine hums faintly when touched, as though something ancient sleeps within it. McGrumps has no idea what it really is—only that it's his prized treasure.

While gods and councils shape the fate of worlds, destiny often begins with someone as unlikely as McGrumps. Today, it begins with a missing tie.

#2 – Buswali and Veranda

Far from the courts of men and the ears of heaven, beneath the mist-wrapped peaks of northern Luzon, a weary Watcher named Sodo works alone. His shelves are lined with stone and steel figures pulsing with thin threads of Chauvin gold—creations that move when he sleeps and wait when he turns his back. Above, King Buswali rules Telis with a hollow crown; his queen, Veranda, sees more than he does. Neither suspects the silent army gathering below.

#3 – The Last Watcher

Beneath Telis, Sodo—the last Watcher Angel of Jehovah—has become part craftsman, part heretic. His creations breathe when he wills them to, watch when he turns away. But his solitude is ending. Abigail is drawing near, and her shadow will stretch across gods,

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Controllers, and mortals alike. When she arrives, Telis will become a crucible where the line between creator and creation dissolves.

#4 – Victoria and The Spirit of the Storm

In the mountain village of Uranmarca, a fearless girl named Sarita faces strange storms that carry something ancient and watching. With help from her cousin Victoria's amulet, Sister Julia's protection, and a circle of loyal animals, she learns that even the smallest girl can stand against forces larger than herself.

#5 – The Cave

Donegal, 1842. Thaddeus McBride—no longer entirely mortal—wanders the wild coast with Cara, a firebrand whose grin dares the world to strike her down. Together they are beautiful and dangerous, like fire caught under glass. When they enter a cave no one chooses to enter, they step into a story where love and ruin wear the same face.

#6 – Julia

Eleven-year-old Julia lives under the sharp eyes and sharper words of Señora Viento, in a Lima far from her mountain home. She is an ember, waiting for the right breath to ignite her courage. That breath may come from her brother Elias, from the sunlight spirit of Vic-

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toria, or from the quiet knowledge that she is still “the mountain’s daughter.”

#7 – La Traviata

This one’s different. *La Traviata* is a fever dream, a symbolic journey through psychological landscapes that shift like smoke. There’s no linear plot here—no tidy beginning, middle, and end. Instead, you’ll follow a heartbroken traveler trapped in a city of glass, circling between trains that go nowhere, gardens tended by conflicted monks, and a seductive nymph who might be salvation or another cage.

Think of it as opera translated into prose—Verdi’s *La Traviata* reimagined as a meditation on entrapment, desire, and the elusive nature of freedom. Images dissolve and reform: paper-mâché spaceships drift through crayon skies, doors appear and vanish, rain melts the city itself. The meaning isn’t handed to you; it emerges in the spaces between scenes, in the repetition and dissolution.

Don’t read this one expecting answers. Let the imagery wash over you. Follow the rhythm—the *thrum, thrump, thrump* of the monks’ hoes, the clickety-clack of the lazy train, the scent of cardamom on the wind. Whether the traveler escapes or simply begins the cycle again is, perhaps, the wrong question. This is a story

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about being lost—and what we become when we can't find the way out.

Conclusion

Through these vignettes, you've met the curious souls of Jimmy San's worlds—a tinkering professor with clockwork secrets, a Watcher-turned-creator hiding in the shadows of Telis, a mountain girl who dares the storm, a cursed man and the woman who matches his danger, a child whose courage outshines cruelty, and a traveler caught in a city of mirrors.

These aren't just fantasies or fables—they're windows into a universe shaped by Essence, but held together by human truths: hope, loss, resilience, and the hunger to belong. Step through slowly. Some tales will charm you, others may unsettle or linger like old music you can't name.

The stories are waiting.

—Telel

Open House at McGivers



"Where's mah striped tie, dang gummit!" bel-
lowed Professor McGiver McGruff, his voice
ricocheting through the cluttered old house.

He'd been born a McGregor: poor, loud, and raised by parents who treated restraint like a rumor. Fifteen children later, the pantry stayed empty and the house stayed full. By six, McGiver was passed to another family like an extra chair at a crowded table, and they made it official: McGregor was gone. He was McGruff now.

Free of other people's rules but never free of the name they'd taken, he'd spent his life shoving McGregor back into the world, waving it like a flag at strangers who never looked up, proving what the clan blood meant to people who'd never asked. He'd done well for himself despite it all. Now he just wanted to tie a neat bow on the whole messy business and call it finished.

But this morning he was frantic, flinging underwear, knickknacks, and even a startled field mouse across the room like a deranged treasure hunter. A porcelain elephant sailed past the window (close, but no cigar) and shattered against the hearthstones in a spray of white shards.

The now-delirious mouse darted under the armchair, squeaking indignation.

McGruff muttered curses as he searched through piles of junk, oblivious to the chaos. His home was a kaleidoscope of oddities from centuries past, bursting at the seams. He'd kept everything: bits of string, half-broken instruments, a large bird's skeleton still wearing a tiny hat. Each had a story he'd forgotten long ago. Or tried to. Some of them still remembered.

At first glance, McGruff seemed the very picture of a bumbling, scatterbrained old man. His thinning hair stuck out in wild tufts as though perpetually caught in an argument with gravity. His spectacles perched crookedly on his nose, magnifying the bemused gleam in his eyes. His belly bulged slightly over his belt, straining the buttons of his shirt.

And yet, as he liked to say, appearances were "a dastardly mislead."

Beneath that shuffling, eccentric exterior lay a mind like a steel trap: razor-sharp, endlessly cunning, restlessly coiled. The contradiction wasn't just performative. It was survival. For centuries, McGruff had lived by being both: the fool you dismissed and the predator you never saw coming. He'd learned that people rarely feared what made them laugh.

His fingers closed around the crumpled tie, half-buried beneath old newspapers from a decade he

could barely remember. "Ahhh, yeah, yeah, yeah! Done got it!" he crowed, holding the tie aloft like a trophy.

As he shook the fabric loose, something small and pale tumbled from the pile, rolling to a stop at his feet.

His breath caught.

The white Siberian tiger emerged from shadow, small enough to fit in his palm, her large round eyes shimmering with frozen mischief, her pose caught mid-pounce. Playful. Elegant. But beneath the smooth glaze ran something deeper: a subtle tension in the jaw, a barely raised brow, the hint of muscle coiled in her haunches. To those with the right sensitivity, she spoke. Not in words, but in the language of aura, memory, and power.

McGruff's grin faltered, then spread wider.

"Whooo-wee! Lookee what we got here!" he yelped, his voice bursting with delight.

Memories stirred. A wild hunt in Odisha, centuries ago, when he was still called Sodo. He'd tracked this marvelous creature for months: fierce, magical, clever enough to earn his respect. Instead of killing her, he'd done something rarer: preserved her essence. Bound it in porcelain and gold, mingled with Chauvin material. His rarest, most prized creation.

His hands trembled slightly as he carried her to the mantle, placing her among the others with reverence.

Hundreds of figurines crowded the shelf: animals, people, strange hybrids caught mid-motion. They lined the wall in patient rows, glinting in the amber lamplight.

Among them stood three he never moved: Louie with his knowing smirk, Pam with her hand raised mid-gesture, Tom frozen in boyish laughter. "Ohhh," he breathed, dropping his voice to something soft and wondering, "dere's my teachuhs. Dere's my mentors. Dere's mah Mama an' my Daddy." He touched none of them. He never did. "Good peoples. De best peoples." His greatest regret, dressed up as baby talk, because some things you could only say sideways.

They were gone now: Louie and Pam taken by a rock-slide in the mountains, sudden and without witness, the kind of accident the world produces without explanation or warning. McGruff had never been able to prove it was anything more than that. He had his suspicions, old and unresolved, that sat in him the way a splinter sits when it goes too deep to reach. Their son Tom had followed years later, not by accident. The Black Brigade had seen to that, with a warrant and a firing line and the full procedural theater of institutional justice. McGruff had mourned them all. Then he'd done what he did best: he'd vanished. But not before gathering what remained. Through the power of Chauvin gold, he'd

reconstructed them, not as they were, but as something smaller, safer.

He told himself it was tribute. Some nights, he suspected it was something darker.

"Ain't no time for gawkin', darlin'," he muttered, fingers lingering on the tiger's spine. "We got an open house to pull off."

McGruff tugged his tie straight, studying his reflection in the warped mirror. "Right. Time to sell this blasted house," he said. Then, almost as an afterthought: "Just another chapter in the grand farce of life."

He'd arranged the open house weeks ago. The agent who'd made the appointments had mysteriously disappeared. Of course. His likeness was on the mantle now, displayed with the others: Gerald, frozen mid-laugh in his sharp suit.

The plan was simple: lure in a few souls, test the old magic, leave his mark one last time before departing for the Philippines. A little taste before the long voyage. After centuries of this dance, he knew exactly how it would go.

He squinted at his reflection. "Hew duwz ay look?"

The mirror remained silent. It always had.

His outfit was a sartorial catastrophe. Oversized corduroy trousers flared awkwardly at the ankles, stopping

just shy of his large, scuffed black shoes. The soles were a patchwork of worn spots and tiny holes, offering glimpses of mismatched socks: one gray, one green, both sagging with defeat.

A navy coat draped over his stooped frame like a hand-me-down blanket, its hem hanging unevenly past his knees. Beneath it, a wrinkled blue shirt clung stubbornly to existence, its buttons straining against his belly. The crumpled tie hung too low, its tip brushing a faint mustard stain near his waistband.

McGruff sniffed loudly under his armpits. "Snfff, snfff. Snfff, snfff."

The faint, greasy aroma of cheeseburgers lingered, mixed with the sharp synthetic bite of cheap musk cologne. Not ideal. But enough to not repel a serious buyer.

"Am gewd," he mumbled, his Louisiana drawl stretching the words like taffy.

He shuffled to his second mirror, less dusty but split by a deep diagonal crack that divided his reflection in two. The fracture seemed fitting. He'd been living divided for so long: the bumbling professor and the ancient predator, Sodo and McGruff, the abandoned child and the immortal collector.

He tugged at his tie, straightened his coat, puffed out his chest.

"Yes, yes. Just another chapter," he muttered. Then, quieter: "Let's get this over with before I rethink the whole damn idea."

The Bigwillys arrived precisely on time, a mixed couple radiating the cautious optimism of first-time homebuyers. McGruff watched them approach through the grimy window, noting the way Mr. Bigwilly's hand hovered protectively at his wife's back, the way she clutched her purse a little too tight. Young. Eager. Hopeful.

Perfect.

He opened the door with a theatrical flourish, his drawl thickening like honey left in the sun.

"Well, well! Welcome, welcome! Y'all must be the Bigwillys. Come on in, don't be shy now."

Mrs. Bigwilly smiled politely, though her eyes darted nervously over the cluttered entryway. Stacks of newspapers leaned at impossible angles. Strange devices hummed in the shadows. A stuffed peacock watched from atop a grandfather clock that had stopped decades ago.

"Thank you for having us, Professor McGruff," she said. "The listing mentioned... character?"

"Oh, she's got character, all right," McGruff chuckled, leading them deeper into the dim interior. "And history. Lots and lots of history."

They stepped gingerly over stacks of papers, past humming devices half-hidden in shadow, their footsteps echoing on warped floorboards. Mr. Bigwilly's eyes swept the room with the careful assessment of someone mentally calculating renovation costs.

He cleared his throat. "The foundation... is it sound?"

"Sound as a dollar," McGruff lied cheerfully. "This place'll outlast us all."

Mrs. Bigwilly paused beside a towering pile of leather-bound books. "Have you lived here long?"

"Long enough to know every creak in the floor," McGruff said, which was true enough. He'd been here since the 1700s, when the house was new and the neighborhood was farmland. "She's got good bones. Just needs someone with vision, y'know?"

He guided them into the dining room. The space opened up: high ceilings, peeling wallpaper decorated with faded roses, and dominating the far wall, the mantle.

Hundreds of figurines crowded the shelf. They glinted in the amber lamplight: animals, people, strange

hybrids caught mid-motion. Ceramic, porcelain, some glazed in colors that seemed to shift as the light moved.

Mrs. Bigwilly's forced smile softened into genuine curiosity. "These are... wow. Did you make these yourself?"

McGruff's eyes glittered. "Every single one. My pride 'n' joy."

She stepped closer, drawn in despite herself. Her fingers hovered over a ceramic elephant, trunk raised, eyes wide. The same elephant he'd hurled across the room that morning, now whole again, perfectly restored.

"They're so lifelike," she whispered. "The detail is incredible."

"Aren't they just?" McGruff moved beside her, hands clasped behind his back. "Each one's got a story. Spent decades perfectin' the technique."

Mr. Bigwilly joined them, squinting at a figurine of a man in a suit, frozen mid-laugh. Something about the expression was unsettling: too genuine, too specific. Not the generic smile of mass-produced ceramic, but a captured moment. A real laugh, caught and held.

"This one's incredible," Mr. Bigwilly said. "The detail in the face... it's almost like a photograph."

"Ah, yes. That's Gerald. Real estate agent." McGruff's smile widened. "Came by last month. Decided to stay."

The Bigwillys laughed nervously, unsure if it was a joke. McGruff's expression remained pleasant, almost vacant: the face of a harmless eccentric telling a harmless story.

Mrs. Bigwilly turned back to the elephant, her guard lowering. "These must take forever to make."

"Oh, they do, they do. But I enjoy the work. Keeps these old hands busy." McGruff's fingers twitched, subtle, twisting. "And every piece is unique. Can't never replicate 'em exactly."

The air thickened. A faint amber glow pulsed from the figurines, spreading like warmth from a hearth. It moved slowly at first, almost imperceptible, a trick of the lamplight, perhaps. Then stronger.

Mrs. Bigwilly blinked. "Do you feel..."

Her words caught. Stopped.

Her hand, still hovering over the elephant, locked in place. Confusion flashed across her face, then alarm. She tried to pull back, but her arm wouldn't obey.

Mr. Bigwilly turned toward her, concern flashing in his eyes, but his body didn't follow. His joints locked. His expression froze mid-shift, caught between worry and incomprehension.

"What..." he managed, before his throat stiffened.

The transformation crept upward from their feet. Skin paled, hardening from flesh to porcelain. The color drained slowly: first the warmth, then the tone, until they stood bone-white and smooth. Their clothes stiffened, becoming part of the ceramic itself, each fold and wrinkle perfectly preserved.

Mrs. Bigwilly's eyes stayed wide, terrified, as the change reached her face. Her pupils fixed, her lashes hardened, her lips parted in a scream that would never emerge.

Within moments, they stood frozen mid-step, two ceramic figures dressed in Sunday best, expressions of horror caught forever in glazed perfection.

McGruff exhaled slowly, the amber glow fading. The room settled back into its dusty stillness, as though nothing had happened. As though the Bigwillys had always been porcelain.

He lifted Mrs. Bigwilly carefully (she was lighter now, hollow) and arranged her on the mantle beside the others. He adjusted her angle slightly, making sure her expression of horror caught the light just right. Mr. Bigwilly went beside her, hand still reaching toward his wife.

McGruff stepped back, admiring his work. "Puh-fect," he drawled.

He patted the tiger's head with grim satisfaction. "What d'ya think, darlin'? Good additions?"

The tiger, of course, said nothing.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door.

McGruff's head snapped up. Another appointment already? He glanced at the grandfather clock, still stopped, still useless. But the light through the windows had shifted. Later than he'd thought.

He straightened, brushing ceramic dust from his hands. His instincts prickled. Something felt different about this knock: too measured, too deliberate. Not the eager rap of hopeful buyers.

He opened the door.

The woman standing there was striking in a way that made his stomach tighten. Not beautiful in the soft, approachable way that made people trust you. Beautiful in the way that made them step back. Sharp, assessing eyes that seemed to catalog everything in a single glance. Dark hair cascading over shoulders. An air of unshakable confidence that felt wrong in his dingy, cluttered world.

She smiled. It didn't reach her eyes.

"Professor McGruff?" Her voice was smooth, cultured, with an accent he couldn't quite place. "I'm Dr. Abigail Bhutswami. I believe I'm a bit early."

McGruff's instincts screamed. Something about her was off-tempo with the rest of the world: charged, deliberate, dangerous. The air around her seemed to hum with barely contained energy. She stood too still, breathed too evenly. Like a coiled spring.

But he was McGruff. He'd survived centuries by knowing when to run and when to play. And this... this was interesting. A challenge. Something to test himself against before the long voyage to the Philippines.

He chose play.

"Not at all, not at all! Come in, come in." He stepped aside with exaggerated courtesy, watching her move past him into the house.

She glided more than walked: feline, intentional. Her athletic frame suggested strength wrapped in elegant clothing. Hips swayed with practiced rhythm, each step calculated. Her full lips curled into a knowing smile, and her eyes, those eyes, sparkled like they already knew what he would do next.

McGruff couldn't help but stare. Fear and fascination warred in his chest. He let the door swing shut behind her, the latch clicking with soft finality.

Dr. Bhutswami entered the dining room without hesitation, as though she knew exactly where she was going. Her gaze swept over the strange décor (the peacock,

the books, the humming devices) before landing on the mantle.

She studied the figurines with the focused attention of a collector appraising inventory. The white tiger. The stone hippo. The newly added Bigwillys, still wearing their Sunday clothes.

She stepped closer, moving past McGruff as though he were furniture. Reaching out, she let her fingers brush the tiger's polished surface.

McGruff's throat went dry. No one touched the tiger. No one even noticed the tiger unless they had the sensitivity to feel what she truly was.

"These are extraordinary," Dr. Bhutswami murmured. "The craftsmanship is... alive."

He forced a chuckle, thick with false charm. "Well now, I do try. Been perfectin' the technique for, oh... a good long while."

"I can tell." She turned to face him fully, tilting her head. Her eyes locked onto his with unnerving directness. "How long, exactly?"

The question hung in the air like a blade.

McGruff cleared his throat, his fingers twitching subtly at his sides. Time to end this. Whatever she was, whatever she sensed, he'd dealt with worse. "Long enough to know quality when I see it. And speakin' of which..."

His hand moved, the beginnings of an enchantment meant to root her in place, to draw her under his control. The gesture was practiced, perfected over centuries. It had never failed.

The amber glow flickered from his fingertips.

Dr. Bhutswami blinked, tilting her head slightly. An amused smile tugged at her lips, as if humoring a child's magic trick. She watched the glow approach her, hover for a moment, then dissipate like smoke against glass.

McGruff's eyes widened. Impossible.

He pushed harder, drawing deeper on the power that had sustained him for centuries. The glow intensified, reaching for her...

And stopped.

His enchantment broke against her like waves against stone. She stood utterly unmoved, still smiling that knowing smile.

McGruff stumbled back, the spell dying on his lips. His mind raced. In all his centuries, only a handful of beings had resisted his power. All of them had been...

Her skin began to ripple.

"Wait..." McGruff's voice cracked. "This wasn't supposed to..."

Her limbs thickened and lengthened. Tawny fur burst forth where skin had been, spreading like wildfire

across her body. Her face elongated, jaw widening into a muzzle lined with ivory fangs. Bones cracked and reformed with sounds that echoed in the small room. Her clothes tore and fell away as her body expanded, muscle and mass appearing from nowhere.

In moments, she stood before him as a lion: massive, regal, terrifyingly calm.

Her eyes still gleamed with human intelligence. Her mouth curled in what could only be called a grin.

McGruff pressed himself against the wall, centuries of predatory confidence evaporating. He'd underestimated. Badly.

"Please..." he began.

The lion snarled, low and rumbling, rooting him in place with pure predatory presence. The sound vibrated through his chest, primal and absolute. Every instinct he'd honed over centuries screamed the same message: prey.

She leapt.

Jaws snapped shut around his throat.

His scream swallowed by silence.

A moment later, Dr. Bhutswami stood human again, brushing her hands together with casual finality. Blood flecked her lips, but as she wiped it away, even that disappeared: absorbed, integrated, consumed.

She looked to the mantle, lips curving with satisfaction. The figurines stared back, still, silent, waiting. Each one a trapped soul, a preserved essence, centuries of McGruff's work.

With swift, practiced ease, she swept them into her bag: the tiger, the hippo, Louie and Pam and Tom, the Bigwillys, Gerald the real estate agent, dozens more. McGruff's entire collection, gathered like souvenirs.

She paused at the mirror, the cracked one that had divided McGruff's reflection in two. She studied her own face for a moment, feeling the new presence settling inside her. McGruff was there now, fully aware, fully present. His memories, his skills, his ancient cunning available to her like a library she now held the only key to.

"Welcome," she murmured.

Inside, McGruff stirred. Not settling. Not adjusting. Orienting, the way a man orients in a locked room, taking stock of the walls, testing what moves and what doesn't. He was still McGruff, still entirely himself. Every memory intact, every instinct his own. The problem was interesting, he decided, in the specific way that a trap is interesting to the thing inside it. He could think. He simply could not refuse her.

She gave the room one last glance, then turned and walked out into the night.

Outside, the cool night air met her with a quiet breeze. Beneath her skin, a faint thrumming energy pulsed: McGruff's power, restless but contained, learning the shape of its new home. She bent her head, and in the next heartbeat she was no longer in the city but at the edge of a meadow, miles away. A narrow path led into a thicket, and beyond it, the gurgle of a stream.

Bhutswami disrobed with the casualness of someone kicking off old shoes. She stretched out on the bank, her belly soft against the grass, her head tilted toward the night sky. Stars wheeled overhead, indifferent and eternal.

"Time to relax," she murmured, as though this were all just another tedious day ending.

She opened her bag, fingers brushing the porcelain tiger. Inside her, McGruff noted the sensation with the detached precision of a man cataloguing what remains available to him. Touch. Taste. The full sensory feed of a body that was no longer his. He filed it. He would not waste curiosity on grief.

A rabbit hopped by, oblivious to the predator sprawled on the bank. Without breaking her stare at

the stars, Bhutswami snatched it up and swallowed it whole.

Inside, McGruff registered the taste (warm, alive, simple) with the same careful neutrality he was applying to everything now. Information. Data. The dimensions of what he had become.

She smiled, feeling his attention like a held breath inside her.

The tiger figurine lay on the grass beside her, its blank porcelain eyes catching moonlight. Inside that small form, the essence of a fierce, magical creature waited: patient, preserved, still itself after all these centuries.

"Ah," Bhutswami whispered, as though introducing old friends. "You've met my other companion."

The wind changed direction, carrying the scent of pine and distant rain.

Somewhere far off, something shifted in the grand design of Universe #169. The Council of Ancients might have felt it: a small ripple, nothing alarming. A minor Controller absorbed. A collection of trapped souls relocated.

Business as usual.

Bhutswami closed her eyes and let the night settle over them both.

In the morning, she'd continue her work. The Philippines beckoned, after all. McGruff had planned the journey; she would simply complete it. His connections, his knowledge, his centuries of careful planning, all hers now.

For now, she rested.

And inside her, McGruff stayed awake: observing, cataloguing, waiting. He had always been patient. He had centuries of practice at it. He would find the shape of this new problem eventually.

He always did.

Buswali and Veranda



The horizon spilled with liquid light, as if the sea itself had learned to shimmer its secrets. Masses of land rose from the water like scattered jewels, their ridges etched in hues of jade and amber, coral-pink and deep violet. A soft luminescence clung to the waves, gilding their crests as they rolled lazily against the shore. Palm leaves quivered in the hush, catching threads of molten gold that flickered across their veins, while the sand

below seemed to breathe with color, pale rose shifting to honey, honey into bronze. For a breathless moment, the world felt half-dreamed, the archipelago painted not by light alone, but by something older, deeper, an unspoken warmth awakening across water and stone.

Further inland, where the land climbed into gentle ridges, the glow revealed a patchwork of farms: fields of gold, orchards heavy with fruit, and neat rows of crops, each one claimed by a clan whose life depended on its yield. Figures moved along narrow paths, drawn as if by a silent current. Yet beneath all this beauty, life beat to a harder rhythm.

On most days, the fields were quiet but for the bird-song, the rattle of chains, and the harsh cry for water. Life unfolded in routine, bound by the demands of survival. But today, the drums came, low and booming, rolling like thunder, shaking the stillness of morning as they reverberated through forest and shoreline. Birds scattered from the trees, and the villagers stirred. Women froze mid-step, gripping their baskets. Men glanced at each other warily as they set down their tools. Children clung to their mothers' skirts, their bright questions left unanswered. No one spoke. Even the island seemed to hold its breath.

The villagers drifted from their huts, feet brushing the cool earth, drawn toward the sound as though by an unseen hand. Each heavy beat carried the weight of generations, echoes of forefathers who had known only isolation and struggle. They had fought, bled, and died, their bones and spirits left bound to this island.

As each clan gathered and moved toward the drums, children lingered at the path's edges, their games untouched by the solemn mood. Some girls plucked wildflowers and wove chains to crown their hair. This simple act of beauty was their quiet rebellion, a fleeting reminder that, despite the shadows over Telis, they were still children.

But the truth was, the people of Telis were not free. Their greatest fear was not bondage itself, but the hollow ache of helplessness etched like a scar into their bloodline. That pain, once sharp, had dulled with time; this generation had never known another life.

Children shuffled behind their mothers, clutching woven mats, while elders leaned on carved walking sticks, murmuring old songs under their breath. The verses spoke of legends, of the Titan's curse that had shattered the archipelago. The other islands had sunk or faded, though a few would flicker back like pale ghosts, stripped of life and color. Only Telis endured, shielded

by the great shaman Sodo, last of the Watcher angels and a Master Controller, who had carved a sanctuary into the island's very bones.

The villagers passed through their tidy rows of flowers and crops, which grew in ruler-straight lines. Order ruled Telis with an iron rhythm, every step and every gesture dictated by the overseers' schedules. Senior women, those without infants, rose before dawn to prepare meals for the overseers and their families. Adolescents, barefoot and weary-eyed, scrubbed floors or tended fires. Men trudged to the fields, their feet sinking into dark soil that yielded less with each passing season. Younger women carried food to the laborers or were led into the breeding huts, while the strongest children hauled buckets of water from streams that thinned year by year. Only the smallest children were allowed to play, and even they moved like shadows, silent in the dust.

Each day began with a bow to the eastern cliffs, where Sodo's shrine loomed, half-swallowed by jungle vines. The black stone pulsed faintly under the moonlight, as if the shaman's spirit still lingered within, watching. Everyone knew their place, their lives as rigid and predictable as the tides. A worker who dared to taste the harvest or rest without permission risked the crack of the overseer's whip. More chilling were the nights when children

vanished, taken, some whispered, as sacrifices to the gods, while others succumbed to the King's unchecked wanton desires.

To the people, Sodo was both savior and shadow. His name was spoken with reverence, for it was Sodo who had sealed Telis against the Titan's wrath, binding the forests, waters, and winds into a protective shell. Yet in the hushed corners of the village, some dared whisper another truth, that Sodo's sanctuary was also a cage. When the drums sounded, they said it was Sodo's heartbeat echoing from the past, a reminder that their safety came at the cost of their chains.

Even the coins, the fabled Chauvin gold buried beneath the temple stones, were said to hold a fragment of Sodo's mind, each piece alive with a strange and restless intelligence. The elders warned the young never to seek the counsel of this gold. "Even if you are clever enough to slip past the sentries and the spirits guarding the cache, do not go there," they would whisper. "If a coin does not favor you, it will burn the life from your body, leaving nothing but ash where you stand."

Yet the legend endured. The promise of such power, a power that could awaken machines and stir forgotten souls, was enough to lure even the most cautious into dangerous dreams. Among the priests, one would often

remind them, "Hope is the quiet fire that survives even in empty hands. It asks for nothing, yet gives strength to those who have nothing else."

"Telis endures," the elders told the children, tracing symbols of protection in the air. It was both prayer and warning, a reminder that survival came through obedience to Sodo and reverence for his gold, which gleamed unseen beneath the earth, alive, waiting.

In the days of Sodo, Telis had been more than a kingdom. It was a center of ingenuity, where inventors traveled from distant lands to collaborate with the shaman. They built marvels: solar-powered automata of flesh and bone, shaped by Cadmus's dragon-tooth filings and animated by the mysterious energy of the Chauvin gold. But those times had faded into myth. Now Telis struggled under the weight of failing crops and a withering economy, its people caught between the wisdom of the past and the demands of a harsher future.

Still, each morning, the villagers gathered by the shoreline to greet the dawn. The horizon glowed with strokes of orange and violet as the drums echoed their hymn to the Spirit of the Islands. It was here, on this day of ceremony, that King Buswali appeared before his people.

He was a striking figure, draped in ceremonial tapa cloth, the ancestral patterns woven with meticulous care. Across his broad shoulders swept a cape adorned with seashells and feathers of native birds, each shell and plume a marker of lineage and authority. Veranda, his queen, stood close by. Her gaze was calm but searching, like the still surface of a deep pool.

An elder shuffled past her, stooped and trembling, his voice a whisper meant for no one but the wind. "A king's duty is like a flame. Held too loosely, it dies; held too tightly, it burns." Veranda's eyes softened as they lingered on her husband, though unease tugged at her heart.

The crowd gathered in silence, their faces turned to Buswali with the faith of a people who had no choice but to believe. The king raised his arms, his voice rolling out over the assembly like the tide.

"People of Telis," he began, his voice deep and commanding, "we have endured hardship. Our island has bled, and I know your hearts are heavy. But hear me!" He lifted his fist, and conviction flared in his tone. "We are Telis!"

The crowd responded, a single echoing voice: "We are Telis!"

A fleeting softness crossed Buswali's face as he looked upon them. "I vow," he said, voice edged with resolve, "to bring Telis back to its glory. Our streets will not echo with sorrow but ring with laughter. We will dance again, and life will fill our gatherings like the tide fills the shore!"

Polite applause followed, but it was thinner than he expected, like wind brushing through hollow trees. Unease rippled through the crowd. Then, from the murmuring bodies, a small girl stepped forward. She carried a single white flower, its petals glowing softly in the sunlight. She held it out to the king, her gaze both innocent and knowing.

Buswali bent to take it, but as his fingers brushed the stem, a strange heat shot through his hand. The petals curled, darkened, and twisted. In his palm coiled a small Komodo dragon, its scales shimmering like metal, its fangs bared as it hissed. Buswali recoiled, stumbling backward with a startled cry.

Yet to the people, nothing had changed. Not one face in the crowd shifted. They saw only a delicate white flower in their king's trembling hand.

Swallowing his fear, Buswali forced a smile and lifted the girl gently. She leaned close, her warm breath whispering something in his ear. His eyes widened. Then,

unexpectedly, he laughed, a rich, booming sound that startled the uneasy crowd.

"Such wisdom from one so young!" he cried. "Tell them what you told me, little one."

The girl turned to the crowd, her voice clear and soft. "I want to sing."

Buswali smiled. "Then let us hear your song, little angel."

The girl stepped forward and sang, her pure voice carrying over the square:

"Telis, Telis, I love you, Telis.

Land of my father, land of my birth.

Telis, Telis, lovely Telis.

Mold me, make me; I'll give all I'm worth."

The hymn, beloved by all, struck at their hearts like a memory of brighter times. Slowly, voices joined her song until the entire assembly was singing, their voices mingling like wind through the trees. Buswali and Veranda felt tears sting their eyes as they watched their people unite in song.

When the hymn ended, Buswali raised his hand, a grin breaking through the solemnity. "I want more than words! I want clapping, stomping, and dancing until the sands tremble beneath our feet!"

The people cheered, but it was Veranda who truly held them. As she stepped forward, the crowd stilled. Her presence was like moonlight, soft, commanding, unshakable. Her beauty was legendary, but it was her wisdom, not her face, that had earned their deepest respect.

"People of Telis," she said, her voice both gentle and resolute, "we will rise together. Not by my hand alone, but by the wisdom of our elders, our seers, and our holy men." She turned to a group of lively teenagers. "And let us not forget our Encouragement Crew! Are you ready to lead us in cheer and celebration?"

"Yes, Queen Veranda!" they shouted, fists raised.

She smiled, laughing softly. "Then be ready, for together we will bring life and spirit back to our gatherings!"

In the days that followed, it became clear who truly steered the heart of the kingdom. The people spoke of Sodo as a legend who had long since passed into the stone of his own shrine. Veranda knew better, and she never corrected them. She managed the trade with him herself, negotiating for raw goods and overseeing the secret process of embedding AI circuitry into sacred figurines. Where Buswali roused his people with bold words, Veranda gave them stability and prosperity.

But Buswali's confidence began to crack. That night, he dreamt of Telis consumed by shadow. He stood alone in the heart of the forest, the ancient trees looming like dark sentinels. Their branches curled inward, closing around him. Eyes glimmered in the foliage, silent and accusing. Then the trees fell, one by one, replaced by towering stone walls that blocked the sun and cast the land into cold shadow.

From the darkness came a whisper: The king's flame will consume all he was meant to protect.

Buswali woke with a start, drenched in sweat. He shook Veranda awake. "I saw them," he said, voice trembling. "The trees, the animals. They watched me. There are enemies among us, Veranda. I feel it."

She held his hand. "It was only a dream. But if it troubles you, speak with the seers. Listen to their counsel."

The next morning, Buswali called the priests, seers, and shaman. They listened as he recounted the dream. "The spirits are warning you," the shaman said gravely. "You must restore balance, or Telis will fall." The priest urged him to repent before the people.

But Buswali would not hear them. "I will protect this kingdom!" he declared. "We will build walls, strong and unshakable, to defend against all threats!"

Despite Veranda's quiet protests, the king ordered the ancient forests to be felled. Their sacred trunks fell like thunder, and an unnatural silence swept across Telis. Birds vanished, animals wandered lost into the villages, and the priests' chants rang hollow without the forest to answer them.

The Great Wall and a grand Colosseum rose from the destruction, but they brought no safety, only emptiness. The crops failed. Streams dried under an unforgiving sun. Hunger gnawed at the people, and their whispers turned against the king.

At last, Buswali stood before his people, desperation flickering in his eyes. "This ruin is not my doing!" he cried. "It is the fault of those who led before me!"

The crowd remained silent, their faith gone.

Veranda stepped forward. "I accept responsibility for what has been broken," she said. "But together, we will heal this land."

The people's trust shifted to her. A shaman pointed a trembling finger at Buswali. "The king has led us to ruin. Let Queen Veranda guide us from the darkness."

The king's guard seized him. Buswali did not resist. They dragged him to the withered mahogany at the heart of the Colosseum, once a tree of life, now a monument to his folly, and hanged him before his people.

Veranda approached, torch in hand, no longer the king's wife but the leader Telis needed. She pressed the ceremonial fork into his lifeless flesh, sealing the end of his rule.

The Encouragement Crew broke the silence with their chants: "Go Telis! Go Telis!" The drums and flutes joined, carrying a song of renewal over the island.

"I will rebuild our kingdom," Veranda vowed. "From the ashes of these mistakes, Telis will rise again. We will restore the forests, the waters, the spirit of our land."

And so, under her rule, Telis healed. The forests grew once more, and the people flourished. But the tale of King Buswali lived on, a warning etched into the soul of Telis: that ambition, without care, will burn even what it was meant to protect.

The Last Watcher



Beneath the shadowed peaks of northern Luzon, a quiet workshop glowed by the soft light of a carbide lantern. Shelves crowded the walls, laden with relics that seemed to murmur of forgotten worlds: shattered idols, brittle scrolls, and jars of strange powders whose purposes had faded long ago.

At the center of the room a figure hunched over a cluttered workbench, where delicate mechanical parts lay among figurines of every kind: animals, robots, spaceships, and mythical beings. Some were no larger than a thumb. Others would have filled a man's two hands. Each was crafted with meticulous care.

The figure was Sodo, the last Watcher angel. Jehovah had made him with exceptional abilities, and few Celestials in the heavens had ever matched them. Sodo spent almost none of that on watching. Alchemy and invention had taken the rest.

He tapped the head of a lion-headed warrior, its face fixed in a snarl. At the sound of the first tap a blue faery no larger than a walnut sprang up, clutching a tiny lantern with a red firefly inside, and darted across the room to vanish beneath a pile of blankets. Sodo did not look up.

"Speak, you pathetic creature," he said.

The lion's eyes reddened. The light in them seemed to burn through Sodo's forehead.

"I should have killed you the first chance I had."

"You never had a chance. You were a man who could be bargained over. That is all you ever were."

"I was a man who could be bargained over by you."

"By your maker." Sodo rubbed his hands together and lowered his voice. "I only kept the receipt."

The lion had not always been a beast. Once he had been a man named Thaddeus McGregor, until a shaman called P'aqo won a wager he should never have been allowed to make, and the Blood Curse settled into him. Sodo had been asked to repair the damage. Sodo, being Sodo, had turned the repair into an experiment, and pressed a sliver of Chauvin gold into the place where the hunger lived. The curse held. The man did not. Now the beast stood on the workbench no larger than a child's toy, the fury of his transformation trapped mid-breath, waiting for a Blood Moon that would never reach him through the shelves.

"You still have the moon," the lion said. "You could give it back."

"I could."

"Then what am I for?"

Sodo considered the question with what looked almost like courtesy. "You remind me what power can be made small."

He set the lion down facing the wall.

Others of his kind observed. Sodo disassembled. He rebuilt. He made new things from old bones, old metals, and old sins. Chauvin had begun that way: first curiosity,

then craft, then a door into the soul's machinery and into acquaintance with Essence itself, the power that had made the gods. He had found an answer to gods. That was the part he told no one.

Tonight the answer sat in pieces on his workbench.

He reached for the knight, a stone figure carved in exquisite detail. Once he had been a real knight, Sir Palamedes, arrogant and renowned, a member of King Arthur's Round Table. Nearby sat the Questing Beast, a figurine with a leopard's body, deer hooves, a serpent's neck, and a lion's head. Palamedes had captured the beast at last, only to be captured himself. Now both sat on the shelf, appearing as mere showpieces.

A lesser figurine would prove nothing. The old knight had endured centuries inside stone, soul and form fused tightly enough to carry the strain. Sodo closed his eyes and let his consciousness flow into him. Golden wires glowed. Small fans began to whirl.

Palamedes opened his stone eyes. His limbs stirred in hesitant, jerking motions before settling into a smoother rhythm. Slowly he raised his sword, a blade no larger than a nail clipping, and took several unsteady steps across the workbench.

Then Palamedes burst into flames.

Sodo recoiled, hand half raised, too late. For a moment he only stared at the ash where the knight had stood. Regret crossed his face, brief but real. Then he brushed the remains from the workbench and murmured, "Getting closer."

Already thinking of improvements, he turned to the network beside him: new figurines, each one heavier than the toys, each embedded with golden threads spun from the Chauvin coins of his later forging, finer stuff by far than the crude weight he had poured in his first youth and buried beneath the temple stones of Telis. He had made things walk before. In the island years, when inventors crossed the water to sit at his bench, they had built automata of flesh and bone together, quickened by the gold, and the islanders had called them marvels and meant it. Not one of those marvels had ever wanted anything. Long after that he had made simpler things again, tools that let shamans channel powers they could never possess on their own. These were not tools, and they were not marvels. These were extensions of his will, and they needed more than animation. They needed intelligence, independence, and a will sturdy enough to survive outside his own. Motion he had solved before the temples fell. Choice was the wall he had been walking into ever since. When

they were finished they would infiltrate, observe, and defend when necessary, and when their work was done they would slip back into their lifeless forms, unnoticed and unremarkable to the human eye.

Beyond them lay the larger design, the one that had no shape yet on any bench. He meant to find spiritually attuned mortals, carbonites though they were, and empower them against Jehovah's will. He had already chosen what to call them. Controllers. In building the road for them he had also opened it to celestials and to the lowest wandering spirits, and he had let that happen with his eyes open, because a door built for one is only a door.

It might be his last act. He had felt danger approaching for some time now.

A dancer stood at the edge of the bench, caught mid spin, her face serene, holding the flicker of lantern light in her carved eyes.

"Yes, I see you watching," Sodo said quietly. "I talk to you because no one else listens. Gods do not whisper back. They only devour."

He lifted a small, blank-faced owl from the shelf, its stone wings outstretched.

"But perhaps one of you will whisper to her. Abigail. When the time comes."

The knight's empty place gave back nothing. The Questing Beast rattled faintly, as if in protest.

"Don't worry," he said with a tired smile. "You'll all have your roles. One of you may even carry my soul. I wonder if she'll taste metal or memory."

* * *

The knock was soft. It should not have sounded in the physical world at all.

Who knocks on stone, anyhow? Uriel, apparently, when he wishes to be theatrical.

I knew him before Sodo did. Uriel had no need of doors, hinges, or permission. He could have entered as light enters a wound. The knock was courtesy, and accusation, and perhaps a little warning meant for me.

Sodo froze. No one came here. The door was hidden, the location secluded, and he had not had a visitor in years. He flicked his wrist and willed a small stone fox to life. It scurried to the door and peeked through the narrow gap.

Through the fox's eyes Sodo saw the figure waiting outside. Not human. A hooded robe, dark and plain, and within the hood only eyes, giving off their own light.

Uriel. The archangel who had bound the Watchers.

Sodo released the fox, let his form settle into an older, weathered man, graying hair clinging to the sides of his head, and opened the door.

"Sodo," Uriel said.

"You've come a long way."

Uriel stepped past him without being asked. His gaze moved along the shelves, unhurried, the way a jailer counts prisoners. It passed the Questing Beast and stopped on the empty place beside it. Then it settled on the workbench, on the small smear of ash.

"Sir Palamedes," he said. "We wondered where he went. His soul never arrived."

"He's resting."

"Is that what you call it?" Uriel's eyes stayed on Sodo while his fingers stirred the ash. "You once spoke of a hobby. Trinkets, I believe you said. Some shamans used your figures to channel powers they had not earned, and we allowed it, because a trinket is a trinket." He raised his head, smiling, and wiped his hand against his robe. "Now the trinkets walk."

His eyes shifted to the golden threads coiled along the bench.

"Tools, Uriel. Instruments to help humanity find balance."

Half an answer, given without a flicker. I felt what moved beneath it, and it was not fear. There is none in him. It was arithmetic. What Essence had asked of Sodo was held by three, and no archangel's ledger reached that far. Uriel could count trinkets and ash and thread all night. Sodo let him, the way a man lets a customs officer search the wrong trunk. Tipping his hand would cost more than this visit ever could.

"Semyaza said something like that about fire." Uriel let the name sit between them. "You stood at the edge of the abyss and watched your brothers go in. You were spared on terms, Sodo. Answer prayers. Console the bereaved. Put demons where they belong. Nothing on the ledger says build."

"The ledger says watch until the end. It does not say what to do with the time."

"Jehovah's eyes are on you." Quieter now. "I ordered the bindings. Michael took Semyaza. Raphael took Azazel. I would rather not give the order a third time."

Sodo looked at the ash on his workbench for a long moment.

"Then you should have given it the first time," he said. "You left me here with the shelves and the lantern and nine thousand years, and you told me to watch."

I watched. You never once asked what I was watching for."

Uriel did not answer that. He turned for the door.

He had come to count, and he had counted, and the number had not satisfied him. I have wondered since whether he knew that. Uriel was never stupid. He was only patient, which in an archangel is worse.

At the door Uriel stopped. He did not turn around.

"One more thing. Not from the ledger. From what I have seen."

Sodo waited.

"A woman is coming for you. Fire in her tongue, hunger in her heart. She will find what you have built, and she will want it. What she cannot use, she will devour. What she can use she will spend, and she will spend you for a long while before she is finished. You will be last."

"Is that a warning?"

I have watched him lie to archangels for nine thousand years, and he has never once done it that poorly. He had spoken her name aloud to the owl not an hour before, and he had been meeting her in his sleep far longer than that. The question was not ignorance. It was the small courtesy a condemned man pays a messenger, letting him leave believing he arrived in time.

"The warning came earlier. You let it pass. Now I give you a prophecy." Uriel opened the door himself. "It will feel like a curse. That is how you will know it has begun."

He did not use the door he had opened. He passed through the stone and was gone.

The blue faery came out from under the blankets, lantern first, and hung in the air where the archangel had stood, red light swinging.

Sodo returned to the workbench. His hand hovered over one of the Chauvin coins, its faint hum rising to meet him. Lock it away, then. Destroy it, even. That was what the ledger would want.

He picked up the owl instead. As his fingers traced its carvings he whispered, "Perhaps I have earned this. A chance to create without crossing the line."

The line would not hold. He knew it. And if he did not cross it, someone else would.

He could already feel her drawing near. She would not knock. He had seen her in dreams, and in the dreams she always looked at him the way the lion did, as something already caught. One day she would devour him, body, memory, and all, and by then he would have handed her the tools to do it.

He set the owl down among the others and let it watch with the rest of them.

Let Jehovah's eyes rest on this workshop, on the trinkets and the ash. It was not the workshop that needed watching. It never had been.

He had watched long enough.

* * *

Uriel's gaze found me that night, the way his kind find anything that stirs. Presence, he could sense. What I was, what I carried, what Essence had made of me before this universe drew its first breath, that lay past the reach of any archangel's senses, and I stood inside his blindness and said nothing.

I have had a long time to wonder what his smile meant. I am no closer now.

There is a thing I did not say to him, and it was not the only one. When P'aqo won his wager and a man became a beast, it was I who told the two of them plainly: undo it, or I take this to the Council. They orchestrated a repair. I approved it. The repair became the coin, and the coin was stolen, and the theft is why I have never carried a word of any of it up the chain. Not unless I want another Ragnarok in the heavens. Uriel counted trinkets that night. He was standing next to the ledger he actually wanted, and it was me.

Sodo believed the reckoning ahead would come from the Ancient of Days.

Soon enough, someone else would act for both of them.

Victoria and The Spirit of the Storm



I n the land of enchanted gold, lived a child, chosen to lead by the great Sierras, growing in the Spirit. Light-footed and fearless, Sarita roamed the winding paths of Uranmarca, where danger lurked, but her curiosity always led the way.

Sarita delighted in the swaying Potato flowers and the silent glide of the condor, its shadow sweeping across fields the villagers had tended for generations. With sun-baked adobe walls and straw roofs, the village homes rose from Pachamama while dogs and chickens dashed through dusty streets.

Though Sarita's family had little, she never felt deprived. Her cousins, Victoria and Ayara, brought books and supplies from the orphanage school a few hours away, turning each visit into a treasured gift. Ayara, being just a bit older than Sarita, was a lively companion, and the two would spend hours playing together in the fields.

Victoria had come up from the coast that week, and she had not come alone. A girl named Julia came with her. Julia was not her sister and not her cousin and not anything the village had a word for, and the two of them arrived together the way weather arrives, all at once and without asking.

Victoria was young herself, though she was more than just a teacher for the smaller orphan girls. She had been blind since she was a child, and no one watching her cross a room would have guessed it, and she went everywhere with one hand resting on the shoulders of a great dog named Commander. Sarita had asked her once, years ago, why she did not pray for her eyes to be given back. Victoria had laughed and said she saw better this way. Sarita had not understood the answer then, and was only beginning to now.

On some quiet evenings, some children would gather in each other's homes to tell stories and sing songs. Victoria's soothing voice filled the air with fantastical tales of their ancestors and the distant Sierras, weaving a world where Sarita and her friends felt safe to ask their most profound questions.

Sarita's mornings followed a familiar rhythm: milking Blanca, the family cow, feeding the cuy (Peruvian Guinea Pigs pronounced Coo-ee), and gathering eggs from the chickens. The scent of fresh earth and simmering orusa, a creamed corn soup, grounded her as she worked, but the time spent with Blanca brought her the most joy.

Blanca's steady breathing and the warmth of her flank anchored Sarita to the earth. The world grew quiet as

she pressed her cheek against the cow's side. No words passed between them; there was only the silent, unspoken rhythm of life shared between girl and beast.

But today, Blanca wasn't in the barn. It wasn't unusual for the absent-minded cow to sneak off and lie in the sun, chewing her cud. Still, Sarita hesitated, glancing toward the pasture, wondering where her old friend had wandered off to this time. Lately, Blanca had been restless. Each day, she walked farther from the barn, her bell tinkling and growing faint in the distance as if something in the hills was calling her away.

Sarita played with her straw doll in the barn, glancing now and then at the darkening sky. There was an unsettling stillness in the air, a quiet that pressed on her skin like a warning. Her aunt's voice broke the silence. "Sarita! Blanca's wandered off again. Hurry back before dark," she called, her tone tight with worry; a storm was coming.

Sarita looked out, her gaze drawn to the mountains, where heavy clouds were beginning to gather. She touched the small pendant around her neck, a gift from Victoria, a piece of string with a tiny charm her cousin had woven by touch in a single evening, from threads said to hold protective power.

A storm had taken her parents, and the fear lingered though the memory had faded. Sarita recalled Victoria's words: "The world is full of dangers, but what matters is how you walk through them." That thought gave her strength as she set off along the familiar path, her confidence bolstered by the quiet lessons Victoria had imparted over the years.

At first, everything seemed normal to Sarita. The path was familiar, and hoofprints that looked like Blanca's showed she had been this way. But as she ventured deeper into the forest, the trees grew taller, their branches reaching out to block the fading sunlight. The once-clear path started to look strange and confusing, and soon, Blanca's hoofprints disappeared into the darkening shadows.

Sarita stopped, her breath catching in her throat. With their twisted branches, the trees wove a canopy that swallowed the light. The familiar path was gone, replaced by a maze of shadows that shifted with the wind. A cold sweat prickled her skin. She couldn't find her way back.

A strange sensation crept up her neck, like someone, or something, was watching her. Panic surged through her, and her voice cracked as she shouted, "Help! Please, can anyone hear me?"

Her words drifted into the stillness, swallowed by the soft rustling of leaves in the trees. Tears welled up, her breath catching in her throat as fear crept in, tightening her chest. But just as the panic threatened to take hold, a voice pierced the silence.

"Sarita! Where are you?"

It was Ayara.

Sarita exhaled, her voice trembling. "Ayara, I'm here!" Sarita's fear eased. Her cousin emerged from the trees, worry etched on her face. "It's late. Let's head to the orphanage."

Ayara took Sarita's hand and led her down the mountain path to a cottage in the hills. As they approached, Sarita's heart finally slowed, comforted by her cousin's presence and the promise of warmth and shelter.

Ayara guided Sarita through a clearing nestled in the shadow of the towering mountains. As twilight deepened, they approached a small stone cottage tucked among the trees. The house, part of the orphanage run by Sister Manuela, was a place of refuge, a warm, familiar shelter in the cool mountain air. The rolly-polly nun had long braids and a warm smile, and had once been a short, lively firecracker of a girl in the very orphanage she now ran. Manuela had grown up an orphan and had devoted her life to helping others. She was the only

grown person on that hillside, and every child there knew it, and not one of them had ever worried about it before that night.

Sister Manuela greeted them with her familiar smile. "Come in! Sarita, it's been too long. Wash up, and I'll get you something to eat."

"Thank you, Sister," Sarita said, her voice still tinged with worry from earlier. "I just want to check if Blanca is here first."

Sister Manuela chuckled softly. "Ah, of course. I should've known." She gestured to Melissa, one of the older girls lingering nearby. "Melissa, could you help Sarita look for her cow in the corral? Let's see if her cow has been visiting Paulina again. And please, check the gate to be sure it's closed."

Melissa grinned. "The gate doesn't keep them in for long!"

"You're right," Sister Manuela laughed. "These cows think they own the place. They've jumped the walls more than once!"

Sarita smiled, feeling the tension in her chest ease as she and Ayara followed Melissa toward the enclosure. As they approached, Sarita's breath caught at the sight of a familiar friend: Blanca, grazing peacefully beside Paulina, the favorite cow of the orphanage girls. Relief

washed over her like a warm embrace, and she rushed forward, throwing her arms around Blanca's neck.

"I knew I'd find you," she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. The warmth of Blanca's soft fur and the rough, prickly kiss of the cow's tongue on her cheek soothed her frayed nerves, bringing her peace at last.

As the evening deepened, the animals pressed closer to the cottage. Inside, the girls laughed over their games, the warmth of Sister Manuela's bread and tea filling the room. Outside, the chihollos' cries grew frantic, their wings slicing through the air in sharp warning.

The nun's face turned serious. She stood abruptly, her eyes fixed on the window, and called Victoria to come quickly.

Victoria was already standing. She had set down her cup before the first bird cried out, and her face was turned toward the same window the nun was staring through.

"I've seen this before," Sister Manuela said. "Something evil is coming."

Then she went down on her knees on the cold floor and began to pray out loud, and she did not get up again. Julia knelt beside her and took her hand.

The ground shook to display its anger. Lightning tore through the sky, and thunder shook the mountains, ancient wrath stirring above.

Victoria's voice pierced the storm. "To the barn! Keep your eyes down!" She went first, one hand on Commander's back, because she was the only one among them who had never needed to see where the barn was. The wind whipped around them, pushing the girls back as they stumbled after her. Flying sticks stung as they hit the girls. Soon, water rose through the ground, and the girls stumbled forward, their feet slipping on the mud. Thunder crashed overhead, deafening, and they reached the barn's doors just as the sky unleashed a torrent of rain.

The girls huddled together, trembling as the storm battered the barn walls. Victoria knelt beside Commander, her fingers gripping the amulet around her neck. Despite the chaos outside, her voice was steady. "Ruyu," she whispered the command to gather around and protect, her breath barely a thread in the storm's fury.

Commander barked, sharp and clear, and the animals stirred. One by one, they moved: cows bellowing, horses stamping their hooves, pigs bristling as they took their places, forming a protective circle around the girls. The air buzzed with tension as if even the animals could

sense the storm's wrath. And yet, together, they stood firm, defying nature's rage.

It was Sarita who counted, the way she counted eggs, without meaning to. Two were missing.

Melissa went back out into it. Commander went with her, and the animals opened to let them pass and closed again behind them.

They were gone a long time.

When the barn doors shuddered open, Melissa came through them holding Julia up, and Julia was still praying. She had not stopped. Her lips kept moving through the whole slow walk across the floor, and she knelt again where they set her down and went on as though she had never been interrupted. Melissa was carrying a shawl. She folded it once and set it on the straw and did not say anything about it, and nobody asked her to.

Sarita looked at the folded shawl for a long moment and then looked away, and she understood, and she was glad the storm was loud.

Victoria's hand shook as she gripped the amulet hanging from her neck. The storm howled, the winds clawing at the barn's walls as if seeking a way in. She found Sarita without looking for her, the way she always did, and for a fleeting moment Sarita saw fear flicker

across her cousin's face. Fear, and something else. Determination.

Victoria pressed the amulet into Sarita's hands. "Remember what I told you," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the storm's roar. "This amulet, it's not just a charm. It holds the spirit of our ancestors, a power that protects those who believe."

The amulet pulsed in Sarita's grip, warmth spreading from her palms through her body. Its glow intensified, casting a soft light around her. The air shimmered, and the storm's fury faltered for a moment as if recoiling from the ancient force stirring within the barn. The mountains now stood watch, protective and silent, acknowledging the power they had long concealed, moving as Victoria bid them move.

Sarita returned Victoria's amulet to her. Victoria lifted her face toward the rafters, her voice rising in an ancient chant, and Sarita joined in, the words instinctive, like a long-forgotten melody woven into her very being.

"Stay close," Victoria whispered, and though fear clung to the air, Sarita found strength in the unspoken bond between them. Victoria had told her stories. Old stories. Stories of amulets woven from ancient Tiahuanacan threads, holding Chauvin gold, carrying the spir-

its of forgotten protectors. "My grandmother promised, 'In times of great need, it will shield you.'"

The storm continued to rage as the amulet pulsed, gathering ancient power. Victoria raised the amulet high, her arms trembling with the effort. Light burst from its center, searing through the storm clouds. Thunder cracked in protest, but the glow held steady, a defiant force against the raging sky. Sarita watched, her breath shallow, as the mountains themselves seemed to bow to the amulet's powers. Victoria could not see the light she had called, and she did not need to. It was warm on her hands, and she knew what warmth meant.

Victoria held the amulet high above her head, her arms trembling as Ayara and Sarita helped keep them raised. Julia and Melissa were on their knees; their lips spoke a prayer in Quechua, and they raised their hands to the sky. The winds howled in defiance, battering Victoria, but the girls stood firm, holding her arms up. Gradually, the storm began to weaken, the clouds unraveling. Finally, an ocean of stars appeared, and a profound stillness settled over the land as though nature had bowed to her command.

The night that followed was long and filled with quiet terror, even after the storm passed. The girls held each other, trembling beneath the blankets, their whispered

fears lingering in the air. The wind's once furious howls faded into faint sighs until dawn broke. Julia prayed until the last of them was asleep, and Sarita did not hear her stop.

The sky was calm and clear, and a deep, peaceful silence embraced the mountains. When the girls stepped outside, they were grateful for the animals that had shielded them through the night. They moved toward their protectors, brushing their hands against warm fur and sturdy flanks, offering silent thanks.

They searched the hillside all that morning and most of the afternoon. They found the fence down and the flowers flattened and the gate standing wide open on its hinges. They did not find her.

The next day, a couple arrived at the cottage. Though they were U.S. ambassadors, they were on vacation as missionaries. Commander barked and jumped excitedly at the sight of the tall, middle-aged man with a scruffy beard and dark green camo boonie hat. His petite wife, her graying hair tucked behind her ears, leaned on a walking stick, looking past all of them toward the door of the cottage, waiting for her daughter to come out of it.

Nobody could find the words. In the end it was Melissa who walked over with the folded shawl and put it into

the woman's hands, and the woman sat down slowly in the dirt with it and did not get up for a while, and the girls stood around her and let her be.

"My daughter's prayers reached us," the man said at last, and his voice was not steady. He looked at the flattened flowers and the open gate. "There is a darkness in these mountains. We have been following it for a long time, and we have never learned its name, and I do not believe it has one to learn. It is not finished. It is looking for someone in this house." His eyes went to Victoria and then to Julia and then back again. "We have to move you before it comes back."

Victoria turned her face toward his voice. "It came down the pass twice that night," she said, "and it never once came to the barn door. Whatever it is hunting me with, it is not eyes."

The man hesitated, his gaze heavy with sorrow. "Sarita, I... I'm afraid the storm took your aunt and uncle."

The words hit Sarita like a sudden blow, stealing the breath from her lungs. Her mind reeled. Her aunt and uncle? Gone? The world around her seemed to blur, voices fading into the background as her knees buckled beneath her. She fell to the ground, her fingers digging into the dirt as the enormity of her loss washed over her, drowning out everything else.

Her world blurred. Her aunt and uncle were gone, like her parents before them. But when she looked up, she saw the steady faces of the girls around her, and she knew she wasn't alone.

The girls gathered around her, their grief evident as they offered silent support. The missionaries were right; they had to go, and they had to go quickly.

Sarita went to the corral one last time. She pressed her cheek to Blanca's flank the way she always had, and the world went quiet the way it always did, and she stayed there until Ayara came to get her. The cows would stay. The valley would look after them, the way the valley always had.

Seven of them left that morning with the missionaries. Julia, Victoria, and five other children, and one big dog who would not be persuaded to stay behind. They did not say where they were going. The man said it was better if nobody in the valley could answer that question, and after the night they had lived through, nobody argued.

Julia and Victoria rode at the back with their hands tightly clasped and the valley falling away behind them. The mountains still held many secrets. The sun came up over the ridge as the road turned, and Julia watched the

light fill the valley, and Victoria felt it arrive on her face and knew that it was there.

"We'll be okay," Julia said, her voice steady. "We're in Jehovah's hands."

Nobody ever learned what it was. It had no name that anyone could speak and no face that anyone had seen, and so the girls did the only thing left to do, which was to give it one themselves. For the rest of their lives, when they spoke of that night at all, they called it the Spirit of the Storm.

The Cave



reland, 1842.

They'd been walking since dawn: Thaddeus and Cara, climbing toward the cliffs where the cave waited. Neither spoke of what would happen when the Blood Moon rose. They didn't need to.

Fog hugged Donegal's hills, muffling the world in a wool-woven hush, smothering the quartzite headlands that punched straight into the Atlantic.

The land rolled like a chain of sleeping giants: rounded, hunched, their backs rubbed raw by centuries of wind and rain. Beyond, the Blue Stacks crumbled into bog and blanket peat moor. Small strips of tillage crouched in glens and beside the loughs. Rain fell two days in three. Summers were soft, winters seldom froze, perfect for potatoes, and for misery alike.

Around Sliabh Liag, the cliffs rose like torn pages of the earth: jagged, sheer, their edges ripped by centuries of waves that slammed the stone with thunder-voiced fury. Gulls, gannets, the odd puffin rode the updrafts; salt and kelp hung on every breath. From the cliff edge, the Atlantic stretched endless and iron-grey, and the wind never rested. It didn't whisper. It howled.

Far below, the sea muttered; the land held its breath, as though bracing for an ancient leviathan to stir. Bog pools glimmered in the hollows; sheep tracks zigzagged their flanks like old scars. Morning crawled in beneath a lid of mist, the hills surfacing slow from the white hush like half-remembered myths. A brooding quietness hung where green met grey, and time dragged its heels.

Cara led the way, a short lass, trim and sharp, her red hair a wild banner in the breeze. Freckles lit her face like embers beneath pale skin. She stepped lightly over slick

stone, her shawl trailing behind like the second skin of a nathair: dark, fluid, alive with old spirits, as if drawn from the mythic laggáns whispered of in cradle songs and warnings.

Thaddeus followed a pace behind, loose-limbed but watchful, a wolf trying to forget the scent of blood. His coat flapped around his knees, hem sodden, as though it belonged to someone already buried.

Here, in the silence, words felt brittle, too thin for the weight in the air. The path wound down through heather and shale, dropping toward the cave-mouth: dark, waiting, the edge of the world.

The cave was still hidden, but Thaddeus already felt it: a tremor in his bones, a copper tang on the September air. The Blood Moon was stirring.

It wasn't a place people chose to go.

But Thaddeus wasn't exactly people.

The hunger came in tides: slow, then sudden. It carved his insides hollow, filled his lungs with static, pushed his pulse to the edges of his skin. A familiar terror warmed his throat.

Cara knew. She always knew.

Sometimes, she called herself his wife, when it made him feel human, or made her feel clever. Sometimes

he let her, amused by the theatre of it. But today, they weren't lovers or liars.

Today, they were, if anything, pilgrims.

"Not far now, so it's not," Cara said over her shoulder, voice no louder than a hush.

Cara paused, eyes scanning the trail. "Think there's a place for the likes of us beyond Donegal?"

Thaddeus didn't answer. The question hung there, too fragile for the truth. Instead, they lingered at the edge of the trees, wrapped in silence.

Cara caught something in the corner of her eye. Lately, her walks had been strange: echoes where there were none, cold spots that lingered too long. Some of the townspeople spoke of demons and spirits. Cara had run into stray dogs. Not wild. Just unclaimed. Hungry.

Unexpectedly, Thaddeus said, "More for you than me."

She blinked, surprised. "What was that?"

"I'm not expecting anything new outside of Donegal. But you. You've the eye for spirits where others see shadows."

The hush of grass brushing their ankles, the soft press of boots in damp earth. Then Cara's voice cut through, low and sharp: "We need to stay quiet now. And watch for rolling fog."

She slowed, head tilted slightly, as though listening to the air.

"I know these cliffs better than most," she said. "But if we can't see our feet, we'll step into nothin', an' where I'm from, nothin's never just nothin'. It's somethin' wait-in' in the dark, ready to catch ye wrong."

They'd reached the clearing above the cave. Cara perched on a rock, grinning like she knew the shape of the night to come.

"No worries," she said, eyes bright. "Ye'll let me handle it this time: no devilment."

Thaddeus didn't believe in knowing, not when it came to Cara. He shook his head at her sudden brightness, this wild optimism that always preceded trouble. She'd claim she'd care for him properly, keep him safe through the turning. She always did.

Until she didn't.

She looked coy, but her eyes betrayed the mischief. She wanted it again: that feeling of shedding skin, becoming something other. Needed him to call on Essence and remake her, just for the night.

Thaddeus turned, eyes like wet stone. "And who might ye be this evenin', a stór? A new name with an old hunger?"

"An' d'ye think it matters?"

"Depends. I remember the priest."

"He folded too easy. And couldn't even sin proper."

Thaddeus nodded without looking her way and carried on down the path.

She'd made her mark. Now he weighed how to help her without birthing a monster worse than the one already at his side.

The sky was dark. The sea thundered beyond the cave mouth.

Cara followed, hand closing around the first shackle, whispering something that might've been a prayer. Or a promise. Or both.

Behind them, the silver veil thickened, erasing their footprints like they'd never walked this world at all.

The Blood Moon was near. He could feel it in his teeth.

From the cave's gullet, laughter trickled in, cold and disarming.

"Ye look worse than the last go, so ye do," Cara said, stepping into the amber dim. "Or better, if yer fond of the broody types that howl at the moon."

Thaddeus didn't look at her. His focus stayed on the manacle in his hand.

"She's risin' sooner than she ought, this moon."

"It always does," she said, crouching beside him, her silver bracelets chiming soft. "Time's a right bloody liar. Always has been."

She offered him a bottle. He refused.

"Yer head's stuck in cobwebs, so it is. Can't see a blessed thing through the lot of 'em," she muttered, unscrewing the cap and taking a long swig. Her eyes glinted with the kind of mischief that came just before a fall.

They settled into silence, the kind that demanded filling. Outside, the wind picked up. The Blood Moon wouldn't wait much longer, but for now, there was time to kill. Dangerous time, when thoughts wandered.

Thaddeus sighed, voice worn. "I met someone."

"Mm?" Cara didn't look, but her posture shifted, barely.

"McGiver McGrump," he said, voice rough. "Wandered into the reading room."

Cara snorted. "McGrump?"

"That's what folks call him. Not sure who started it. No one says it to his face."

Cara stretched her legs and leaned against the wall.

"So it's a readin' room now, is it? That what we're callin' it?"

Thaddeus grunted.

"He didn't ask for a reading. Didn't even sip the tea."

"Does anyone ever ask? Or drink the bloody stuff?"

She grinned.

"Ah. He's one o' them tight-collared sorts, then?"

Thaddeus nodded.

"He listens. Not like a man. Like someone tryin' to remember what it was to be one."

Her smile faded for a moment. Then it sharpened.

"You like him."

"He knows more than he ought."

"Grand so," she said, a wicked glint in her eye. "Let's see what he does when he thinks no one's watchin'. Might crack him open. Might toss him your way like scraps to a mongrel."

Thaddeus turned fully toward her. His golden eyes dimmed, dusk nesting in the corners.

"Don't."

"Why not?" She ran a finger down the cold length of chain. "He's curious. And curiosity's just the first step to stupid."

"He's not stupid."

"I don't want him stupid," she whispered. "I want him inside."

He flinched.

She leaned in, voice dropping lower. "Make me a siren again."

"No." His voice roughened. "You'll end up like me. Eating what you once wanted."

She batted her lashes. "Isn't that flattery, though? Bein' like you?"

But he didn't smile.

"Please," she said, quieter now. "I'll bring ye meat still steamin', heart thumpin' an' all. No need for chasin'. Just wait. On a platter, wrapped in sin."

Thaddeus growled.

"Do you even know the trouble you're askin' for?"

No answer.

"We could be pissin' off Essence."

She blinked. "Essence?"

"Ah, sorry." He dragged a hand through his hair. "It's the force behind it all. What lets you change. The real power. Not me. I'm just the one fool enough to ask."

"I thought you just muttered some old words and I sprouted wings."

"The words are the asking. Essence is what answers." His jaw tightened. "Or doesn't. And when it doesn't, things go sideways."

He exhaled, the fever rising.

"Fine. I'll do it. I'm makin' this far too easy for the likes o' you."

He closed his eyes. His body tensed, the beast stirring behind the skin, testing the walls like storm against glass.

Last time, he'd woken to blood under his nails and screaming in the village below. The priest had found the remains. Three children. A woman clutching a baby that wasn't there anymore. Dogs torn in half, still twitching.

The chains had held his body. They hadn't held the hunger.

Something was off this time, too. The pull came earlier. Stronger.

"You mind yerself. No bloody games."

Cara trembled, half hunger, half glee, the transformation already curling beneath her skin.

"You know I'll mind you proper."

"Cara..." His voice broke.

She touched his jaw, where the boils had begun to swell.

"I'll keep you safe. That's what you want, aye? Someone to guard the gate?"

He said nothing.

"Ye're not wicked, love," she murmured. "Just not done cookin' yet."

His breath left slow, surrender shaped into sound.

Maybe she was right. Maybe he didn't love her despite the monster in her, but because she made him feel like he had a place.

A purpose.

A use.

"Give me scales this time," she whispered. "I'll be a coilin' serpent, with a song that sings."

With a grim half-smile, Thaddeus lowered himself to the earth like a man offering more than a prayer. Knees folding, spine bowed, his forehead met the stone. Hands pressed flat. Fingers spread like roots.

It wasn't submission. It was a summons.

Stillness gathered.

Then came the shift: a hush in the world, as if even the wind leaned in.

His lips parted. The words came slow and low, drawn from the hollow behind breath.

Syllables older than fire. Older than grief.

The cave darkened. Even the lantern flinched.

Memory-shaped syllables spilled like smoke, ancient, solemn.

The spirits stirred.

And Essence listened.

Cara arched, breath caught on a thread, as the change took her.

Her skin rippled; faint scales bloomed down her spine like ghost-light. Her eyes turned cerulean, bright as salt in moonlight. Wings unfolded, short but strong, built for sudden flight. They shimmered, then tucked neatly against her back. Her voice dropped into a minor key.

Beneath her ribs, just below breath, something flickered: Essence itself, coiling through marrow and blood. Not hers, never fully hers, but borrowed. A gift with terms she didn't read. It left warmth in its wake, old and patient, like something that knew how to wait.

She shivered with pleasure. "Oh, I feel it in my bones, like the tide calling its dead."

Thaddeus slumped back against the stone. Sweat poured down his face. It had cost him more this time.

The magic wrapped her like fog over a moor.

Cara leaned in, brushing her lips against his brow.

"Tonight," she whispered, "I wear the song."

Then she vanished into mist, the hymn of her transformation curling into the dark, haunting, certain, like something that already knew it had won.

Alone now, Thaddeus checked the fastened chains. The iron cuffs bit into stone, anchored deep. His hands shook as he locked the final shackle around his wrist.

He closed his eyes and tried not to remember.

But the memories came anyway.

The children, running. Then not running. The mothers who'd tried to shield them: crumpled, torn, their screams still ringing in the parts of him that stayed human. The dogs that had barked warnings before the beast silenced them. All of them in pieces by dawn.

He'd found his own bloody footprints leading back to the cave.

Cara had cleaned him, humming, unbothered by the carnage. They shouldn't have wandered so close, she'd said, as if that settled it.

The memory dragged tears behind it now, hot, useless things.

Outside, the sea hissed. She had claimed far more than this man, far more than this coast. The wind shifted, carrying the stink of iron and salt.

And above the cave, the sky blushed red.

The Blood Moon was rising.

The chains would hold his body.

They always did.

It was everything else that got loose.

Julia



The cool night air in Lima seeped through the cracks of the small, unlit window. Julia sat there, her young face hardened by days that felt like an eternity. Though only eleven, she carried a weight far heavier than her years—a rage simmering quietly, waiting to erupt.

Every night, Julia braced herself for the sting of Señora Viento's hand—a sharp slap, more than just pain, but a final blow to her spirit at the end of another day of servitude. She could still remember the promises whispered to her grandmother back in Uranmarca: fair pay, a chance to make friends, to attend school. Sweet lies. All of them. Instead, Julia had been taken far from her Quechua-speaking village and thrust into a life of servitude and fear.

It might as well have been another country. Here, the crowded streets buzzed with endless noise, and the air was heavy with unfamiliar smells—so different from the crisp mountain air of her home. The Spanish words that flew around her were an indecipherable blur, but Julia didn't need to understand them. Fear spoke its own language—one she knew too well—in the cold slap of Señora Viento's hand, in the shadows of her hawk-like glare, and the cruel hiss of her voice.

Julia clung to the one act that made her feel alive: a whispered prayer each night to St. Jude, the patron saint

of lost causes. Kneeling on the cold, splintered floor, she clutched the hem of her dress—the last reminder of her home, its faded floral pattern a ghost of its former beauty. Her long, thin fingers trembled as she traced the worn edges of the fabric, as if holding it tighter might bring her closer to the family she had lost.

With trembling lips, she murmured St. Jude's name, her voice a quiver of desperation in the dark. "Help me, St. Jude," she whispered in Quechua, her native tongue carrying the weight of her pleas. Her gaze fixed on the cracked ceiling above her cot as tears welled in her eyes. "Get me out of here. Take me home." The silence that followed was deafening, but she prayed anyway. Each word was a spark of defiance, a fragile reminder that hope, no matter how faint, still smoldered deep within her.

Julia often felt the weight of Señora Viento's teenage son's gaze, his eyes lingering far too long whenever he thought no one was watching. The narrow bathroom door offered little protection from the sound of his heavy breathing outside, each exhale tightening the coil of fear in her chest. At night, his calls for food were an unspoken threat. He would block her way, his tall frame looming far too close, and Julia could do nothing but

slip away into the shadows—under the bed, in a closet, anywhere she could disappear until morning.

Julia wanted to leave, to throw herself out of that tiny window if it meant escaping the clutches of the woman who beat her daily. But as she stared into the ink-black night, something stirred within her—a spark of defiance that burned hotter than her despair.

One night, after an especially brutal beating, something inside Julia snapped. She was small for her age, but anger swelled in her chest, burning hotter than fear. Without thinking, her fists flew out, surprising even herself. She struck with a force that sent Señora Viento staggering back, clutching her cheek. The woman's furious scream echoed through the hallway, but Julia didn't stay to listen. Her heart racing, she turned and ran, her feet barely touching the ground as she escaped into the cold night air.

The dim light from the hallway lamp fell on Julia's threadbare dress, its faded floral pattern barely visible, adding to the vulnerability she carried like a shadow. The fabric was so worn that her underwear was faintly visible when she passed under the light, adding to the sense of vulnerability she carried like a shadow.

Her black hair clung to her damp skin, framing her face as her dark eyes widened with a mix of fear and

determination. Her thin fingers trembled briefly before she seized the opportunity.

Without a second thought, she slipped past Señora Viento, her slender legs moving with startling speed. Her heart pounded wildly as she flew down the stairs, the cold air biting her exposed skin through the thin dress. Behind her, the echo of her boss lady's screams chased her, but Julia didn't stop. She couldn't stop. For the first time, she felt the smallest glimmer of hope—hope that she might outrun the pain and find something better waiting beyond the darkness.

The streets of Lima were a maze of dimly lit alleys and shadowed corners, unfamiliar to the young girl. Julia didn't know where she was going but knew she had to keep moving. As she passed a park, a man lurked close, his eyes following her. She felt his hand reach out, pulling her toward him with a sickening grin. Fear shot through her, but before she could cry out, a stranger's voice interrupted. The man who had appeared in the darkness was tall and authoritative, sending the attacker scurrying with a firm warning to call the police.

Turning to him with an emotional plea and thanks with the only word she could think of, "Tío," calling him her uncle. The stranger's eyes softened with understanding, and after a gentle nod, he disappeared into

the night, his figure fading into the shadows as quickly as he had arrived.

Julia woke shivering on the park grass, the damp chill sinking into her bones as the sun's weak morning light filtered through the trees. Her muscles ached from a restless night on the hard ground, but she pushed herself upright, brushing dirt and leaves from her tattered dress. She had nowhere else to turn, but she'd heard the police were meant to help people, to keep them safe. A fragile ember of hope flickered in her chest that she could be free and return home. Maybe, just maybe, they would help her escape.

She walked with purpose, her bare feet raw against the cracked pavement, until the imposing doors of the police station loomed before her. The fluorescent lights were cold and unkind inside, but she forced herself to step forward. She sat in a rigid metal chair and began to tell them everything, her voice trembling at first, then spilling over with desperation. She recounted it all—the endless labor, the cruelty, the way she had been trapped. Each word felt like tearing open a wound, but she pressed on, certain that this was her chance to be free.

For a moment, Julia thought they believed her. Officer Diaz leaned forward, her sharp features softened

with what looked like concern. Her pen moved steadily across the page as Julia poured out every agonizing detail: the beatings, the endless chores, the hunger, and the way Señora Viento had taken her from her village. Officer Garcia stood nearby, his arms crossed, nodding occasionally as he listened.

"And... she said I could go to school," Julia stammered, her voice trembling. "She said she'd take care of me. But she didn't. She lies! I want to go home!" Her voice cracked, tears streaming down her cheeks, her small fists clenched in her lap.

Diaz paused her writing and glanced at Garcia, who rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "What do you think, Garcia? Sounds—"

"—like exploitation," he finished, his tone serious. "But let's see if the employer has an explanation."

Julia's stomach twisted as Garcia stepped out of the room, returning moments later with Señora Viento. The older woman swept in confidently, her dark, hawk-like eyes darting around the room. Julia shrank into her chair, her body taut with fear.

Señora Viento carried herself with an unsettling combination of elegance and menace, a predator cloaked in respectability. Her tailored navy skirt suit fit her

thin frame perfectly, the sharp angles of her shoulders matching the precision of her movements.

Her jet-black hair was pulled back into a severe bun, every strand in place as if daring anyone to see her as anything less than in control. Her face was sharp, almost birdlike, with high cheekbones and a pointed nose that seemed to slice through the air when she turned her head. But her eyes were even sharper—piercing and calculating, missing nothing as they darted around the room like a predator searching for weakness.

Her face was sharp, almost birdlike, with high cheekbones and a pointed nose that seemed to slice through the air when she turned her head. But her eyes were truly unsettled—they were dark and piercing, darting around the room like a hawk searching for prey.

The officers missed nothing, scanning every detail with a calculating intensity that made Julia shrink deeper into her chair. Her gaze settled briefly on Julia, a flicker of disdain flashing across her face before she replaced it with a polished, disarming smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Her hands, adorned with delicate gold rings, gave a couple light pats on her purse then gripped it tightly to protect the evidence. Everything about her exuded control, from the measured click of her heels to the

upward tilt of her chin, as though daring anyone to challenge her authority.

Even in this room, surrounded by authority figures, Julia could feel the unspoken threat lingering in the air, a promise of retribution if she dared to cross the woman who held her captive.

"Officers," Señora Viento began, her voice smooth and practiced. "I'm so sorry for the trouble this child has caused. I have papers to prove everything is in order."

She produced a folded letter from her bag and handed it to Diaz with a calm, calculated smile. "This is a letter from her father, may he rest in peace," she said, clasping her hands in a gesture of mock grief. "He entrusted her to me to give her a better life. You see, she is from a very poor family in the sierra, and I have been caring for her like my own." Her words dripped with insincerity, but her confidence didn't waver.

Diaz opened the letter and studied it, her brow furrowed. Julia's heart sank. She knew what it said even before the officer read it aloud.

"My daughter, Julia, is to stay under the care of Señora Viento. She will work in exchange for food and shelter, as we cannot provide for her," Diaz read, her voice flat. Her sharp eyes flicked up to Julia. "It's signed by... your father. Is that correct?"

"No! It's not true!" Julia cried, her voice rising in desperation. She stood abruptly, her small frame trembling as she pointed at the paper.

"Please," Julia pleaded, her voice trembling as she pointed to the paper. "It's a lie. My papa would never send me away. She made it up!" Her desperation hung in the air, but the officers exchanged uneasy glances.

Garcia rubbed his temples and glanced at Diaz, who tapped her pen against the table, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Her story is compelling," Diaz said finally, her voice hesitant. "But without hard evidence..." She glanced at Julia, her tear-filled gaze briefly softening, before she looked away, her professional mask slipping back into place.

Julia felt her heart sink. They didn't believe her.

Diaz looked at her skeptically, her pen poised over her notebook. "Julia, sit down. We're trying to understand, but you need to stay calm."

"But it's not true!" Julia screamed again, her voice breaking. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she dropped back into her chair, her chest heaving with sobs.

Señora Viento shook her head, her expression one of practiced disappointment. "You see what I mean? She is ungrateful. I took her in, and this is how she repays

me—with lies and trouble. I only want what is best for her."

Garcia stepped closer, taking the letter from Diaz and inspecting it himself. He frowned, tilting his head. "The handwriting looks... decent, but it's not notarized. Do you have anything else? Maybe adoption papers? Proof of guardianship?" he asked, his tone skeptical but not accusatory.

Señora Viento's smile faltered briefly before she regained her composure. "She is like family. In our culture, we care for children in need without all this... paperwork." She waved a dismissive hand. "But you can see the letter. Her father trusted me."

Diaz leaned back in her chair, exchanging a glance with Garcia. "Julia," she said, her voice firm but not unkind, "are you saying that your father didn't write this letter?"

"He didn't!" Julia shouted, her small fists pounding the table. "I don't know who wrote it, but it's not him! Please, you have to believe me! She hurts me—every day! I just want to go home!"

"Enough of this drama," Señora Viento interjected, her tone sharpening. "Officers, this child is confused. She misses her family, I understand, but she doesn't realize how much I've done for her. I feed and clothe

and give her a roof over her head. Without me, she'd have nothing."

Garcia looked at the girl, then back at Diaz. He sighed and rubbed his temples, clearly uneasy. "Diaz, what do you think? We've got the letter, but... something doesn't sit right with me."

Garcia sighed heavily and handed the letter back to Señora Viento. "We're sorry for the trouble, ma'am," he said reluctantly. "You can take her home."

"No!" Julia shrieked, leaping to her feet. She grabbed Garcia's arm, her small hands gripping him with surprising strength. "Please! Don't make me go back! Please, I'll do anything!"

Garcia stepped back, uncomfortable, and gently pried her hands away. "Julia, I'm sorry," he said, his voice soft but resolute. "But we can't do anything without more proof."

Diaz avoided Julia's eyes as she packed up her notebook. Señora Viento took Julia's arm with a firm, possessive grip, her nails digging into the girl's skin as she steered her toward the door.

"Thank you, officers," Señora Viento said smoothly, her lips curling into a satisfied smile. "I'll take her back now."

Julia's legs buckled as she stumbled out of the station, dragged along by the woman who had stolen her freedom. The fragile ember of hope that flickered inside her chest moments ago was snuffed out, leaving behind nothing but ash.

Julia's knees buckled as the woman's hand clamped around her arm, dragging her toward the door. The hope that had flickered in her chest only minutes ago had been extinguished, leaving behind nothing but ash. She was being returned to her prison, and no one seemed to care. The world outside the station blurred as they walked away, and Julia realized with gut-wrenching clarity that she was on her own.

The days dragged on with a haunting regularity. The beatings resumed, each one a reminder of her captivity, each bruise a mark of control. Julia's spirit wavered but refused to break. She clung to the ember of defiance inside her, even when her days felt endless, her nights filled with quiet tears on her thin mattress.

She thought often of her grandmother's hands—rough and warm, pressing dough into bread or combing her long hair before bed. Those memories were her refuge when Señora Viento's sharp words cut too deep, her body aching from the day's labor. "Stay

strong, *mi niña*," her grandmother had said the day she left. "You are the mountain's daughter."

Julia held onto those words like a talisman, even as the walls around her seemed to close in. Then, one afternoon, the door to Señora Viento's home burst open, and everything changed.

"Julia!" a familiar voice called out, deep and urgent.

Julia froze, her breath catching in her throat. For a moment, she thought she was dreaming. But then she saw him—her brother, Elias, standing in the doorway. He looked older than she remembered, his face drawn and weary, his clothes dusty from what must have been a long and grueling journey. But his eyes were the same eyes she had clung to in her memories—His eyes were blazing with the fierce determination of someone who would stop at nothing to protect her.

"Elias?" she whispered, her voice trembling with disbelief.

"I've come for you, *hermanita*," Elias said firmly, stepping inside. His gaze swept the room, landing on Señora Viento, who was already storming forward with her hawk-like glare and a cane to strike him.

"Who are you, and what do you think you're doing here?" Señora Viento snapped, her voice sharp and full of indignation. She placed a possessive hand on Julia's

shoulder, gripping it hard. "This child is under my care. You have no right to be here!"

"Under your care?" Elias repeated, his voice rising with restrained fury. He stepped closer, his broad shoulders squaring as he glared at her. "The police told me how you have cared for her. You've done nothing but hurt her! I'm her brother, and I've come to take her home."

"You'll do no such thing!" Señora Viento spat, her grip tightening on Julia, who winced. "She belongs to me now. Your family left her in my charge, and I have the papers to prove it."

"Let her go!" Elias barked, his voice cracking with emotion. He turned to Julia, his expression softening. "Is it true, Julia? Has she hurt you?"

Julia's eyes brimmed with tears. She nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. "Every day. She hits me, Elias. She lies. Please, don't let her keep me here."

Señora Viento's face twisted with anger. "Lies! She's an ungrateful little—"

"Enough!" Elias thundered, cutting her off. He stepped forward, his hand outstretched. "Let. Her. Go."

"No!" Señora Viento shrieked, pulling Julia behind her. "You can't take her! She's mine!"

But Julia had tasted freedom before, even for a fleeting night. The memory of running, of defying this

woman's control, came rushing back to her. She felt Elias's determination embolden her, and something inside her snapped again.

"Let me go!" Julia shouted, yanking herself out of Señora Viento's grasp.

The woman lunged for her, but Elias was faster. He grabbed Julia's arm and pulled her behind him, shielding her with his body. Señora Viento clawed at him, screaming in fury, but Elias didn't flinch. Julia, her heart pounding, joined in the struggle. With her long, thin fingers, she pushed against the woman's arms, clawing her way free. For the first time, she fought back not alone but with someone by her side.

"Get out of my house!" Señora Viento shrieked, her voice ragged with rage as Elias shoved her back. "You'll regret this! Both of you!"

Elias shot her a scathing look as he wrapped his arm around Julia's shoulders and guided her toward the door. "We're done living in fear of you. Come near her again, and you'll regret it."

Julia turned back one last time as they stepped out into the bright sunlight. Señora Viento stood in the doorway, her face twisted with fury, but she didn't follow. Julia clutched her brother's hand tightly, tears streaming down her face as they walked away. The

weight on her chest lifted with every step, and she felt free, just as she had prayed for.

After traveling to the city center, Elias brought Julia to a convent, explaining that he couldn't care for her but needed her to be safe. The sisters welcomed her with open arms, their gentle voices, and kind eyes starkly contrasting everything she had endured. For the first time in her young life, Julia felt peace.

The quiet halls of the convent became her refuge. The sisters encouraged her to speak, laugh, trust again, and slowly, Julia's bruised spirit began to heal. She spent her days helping in the gardens or reading with the other girls, her anger softening into something she could manage.

It was there, among the sisters and the other children, that Julia met Victoria, a girl just a year older than her. Victoria was bright and full of energy, her smile infectious as she played games with the orphans and brought life to the convent's quiet spaces.

"Where are you from?" Julia asked one afternoon as they sat in the shade of a tree, weaving flower crowns.

"A small village in the sierras. You probably wouldn't know it," Victoria said with a laugh. "It's called Uranmarca."

Julia's fingers froze mid-braid, her dark eyes snapping to meet Victoria's. "Uranmarca? That's where I'm from!"

Victoria's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Really? I thought I recognized something about you. Maybe we're..." Her voice trailed off, her expression brightening. "Family?"

Julia felt a strange warmth blossom in her chest. For so long, she had felt so alone. But here, in the unlikeliest of places, she had found a connection.

Victoria grinned and leaned closer. "You know, I've been thinking about going back. I'd love for you to come with me. We could start over there. Together."

Julia hesitated, looking down at her flower crown. She thought of the mountains, the smell of the earth after the rain, and her parents' laughter. Her parents had died and her grandmother was raising her. Then she looked at Victoria, who radiated the hope Julia hadn't felt in years.

"Okay," Julia whispered, her lips curling into a small, hesitant smile. "Let's go home."

La Traviata



There once was a heartbroken traveler, restless and unmoored, who wandered into a city of glass—transparent, endless, and cold. His youth had been filled with joy, but life had calcified into burdens. Now he drifted along a nearby stream, its fleeting ripples offering hollow pleasures, while he searched earnestly for a remedy: a path, a prophetic voice, a drink to forget, a miracle. All eluded him; none proved true. His youth was gone. He was no longer a traveler but a meanderer, circling himself. Stuck—frozen—he pressed against the fracture that muted his essence.

It pressed so hard that in his stillness, he nearly fell into slumber. His bride who had happened into this place, grew bitter to the end before dying of boredom. Thus he abandoned the search for the path; with his love gone, instead of healing, he allowed the sorrows of others he did not know seep in. Their tears became his own.

The traveler's sorrows prevailed so much that they became a great lake threatening to drown him.

He returned to his quest and searched diligently for an escape—a door that led to freedom. He searched again and again for a destination that could not be found. He finally listened and he heard the door ask to be opened for the sake of the man's progeny. So,

for their sake, he tried to move. He could see it, almost touch it, but could never cross its threshold.

To his dismay, as he gained ground towards the destination, the other side dissolved.

He questioned the wind.

He prayed to angels.

He listened to the stars.

But no answer came.

"How do I leave? I need to know.

I cannot breathe, confined to this place."

No one could tell him. Day after day, nothing shifted. The city only grew colder, harder, bitter—time circling like a serpent, indifferent, consuming itself. One evening, as the Traveler knelt in despair, a Wind of Change passed through. He smelled a scent of rich herbs and cardamom on the wind. He followed the breeze, tempted by its suggestions and it led him to the edge of the glass city, where he heard a voice shout:

"All aboard!"

He climbed onto a lazy train bound for Marrakech. The conductor, a bearded old man with wanderlust in his eyes, handed him a pouch of herbs and whispered:

"You're searching too loudly. Try unconsciousness. There, you may be released from captivity. Find your wisdom. Surely, your answer will come."

So, the traveler slept.

And he slept.

And he slept.

The train's rhythm became the pulse of a new reality. Years passed.

When he opened his eyes, he was not on a train at all. A garden had grown up around him, born of his slumber. It smelled of thunder, with a hint of cardamom. From beneath a weathered oak, he watched five monks—caretakers of the garden—task in the sun, attended by a nymph draped in whispers.

The monks swung their hoes through the earth. Thrump. Thrump. Thrump. The sound of labor carried like a heartbeat through the garden.

The siren moved among them, wiping the sweat from each brow, thrilled by their toil yet indifferent to the furtive glances that slipped down her neckline.

"Follow the girl for your escape," said the wind. "Do not be foolish. Seek wisdom from the monks," replied an angel.

Still, the rhythm of the hoes continued—thrump, thrump, thrump—steady as the pulse of the city itself.

The traveler disregarded them both. He clapped his hands, and the scene dissolved for a moment. With nothing left to distract, he looked on. One monk, rest-

less, began to whistle *La Traviata* while the others swayed, toes tapping to the clickety-clack of the melancholy train. He paused momentarily, raised his hands to the sky, and exasperately, in an undignified sullen manner, spoke to the sky, "Even dogs return to their vomit." Then he resumed, toes tapping.

The voluptuous woman, a siren of hidden talents and sin, danced whimsically under the moonlight, scattering magic blossoms across the monks' bosoms, whispering wicked secrets into the wind.

Once the monks were tired, having their way, the seductress lay down beside the young man, wearing only a towel. She looked at this traveler and shook her finger, knowing his thoughts. "I am no dog," she said emphatically. She stood, the towel falling away, hesitated, then glided with playful abandon toward the head monk. She knelt beside the holy man. "Tell this young man the way," she whispered.

The holy man's brow grew wet—not with heat, but the weight of a thousand unanswered prayers. As he trembled, he replied to the seductress, "I cannot say that which I do not know."

She smiled and said, "I have heard you claim no one truly leaves the glass city unless the divine one wills it,

that the streets circle endlessly. You say this, yet you do not know. My heart knows better."

She turned towards the young man who was gazing at her heart. He, embarrassed by her proximity and the return of her eyes, shielded his face. The siren gently lowered his hands and said, "Time itself will reveal your path. Return tomorrow, and I will take you to the door."

The next day, the siren lay face towards the clouds, this time without the towel.

She reached out and drew a door in the clouds with a pen made from the feathers of a bird that had never flown.

With a smile that was both a promise and a warning, she lured him through the doorway—into her private chamber of mirrored skies and silent clocks.

After lingering in her winsome company, the desperate traveler grew impatient and decided to leave. He paused, heart hammering, then forced himself through a window when the door dissolved.

Below, he saw a paper-mâché spaceship drift by, its surface glimmering in the heaven's light, as it skimmed across crayon skies, running like mascara down the glass ceiling. The Traveler hastily climbed out the window, observing the youngest and most clumsy monk—who had been telling all who would listen that

more suffering would bring better food.—reach out to grab it.

The monk slipped, and tumbled downward, falling into the vehicle. The others followed. Of course, the ship could not ascend, the walls of the city loomed too high. Succumbing to the added weight of all on board, the spacecraft stopped at every opportunity to check for gaps in the wall. Each had a toll.

Passersby gathered to hear his sad tale of glass cities, lazy trains, and strange herbs as he waited outside the cheapest passageway. No one knew if he was the Traveler—or merely the echo of one. He remained in a trance asking, "How can I leave?"

The crowds applauded his story and gossiped about him. They recognized the plight of the monks who needed to pay a toll to pass through a gap. The monks collected alms and taught as they could to pay what was required.

The monks, pockets heavy with alms, were satisfied—yet they longed to help the others who suffered to find a way out, to slip beyond the glass, into something real. Try as he did to return to the garden, the Traveler too could never exit the city. He was adamant to first free the siren he wanted to be his new bride. She would only leave with the monks.

The enchantress, wanting to remain with him spoke with kindness, but her words held no wisdom. Wearing only his questions, she told him that if the Traveler waits for the rain—when he isn't looking—his answer will find him.

Rain pattered on the glass streets. The crayon buildings melted, bleeding down the face of the city, collecting in puddles of color.

He followed the pounding water, the nymph's contemptuous laughter trailing after him, the scent of cardamom beckoning from the corners of his dreams—only to glimpse, through another window, the unattainable garden with five monks and their muse shimmering in the distance.

And somewhere else, in a city of transparent glass, an echo of the Traveler begins the search again. Still seeking the door beyond suffering, still whispering, *I cannot breathe*—each time as if it were the first.

The fable repeats.
Or perhaps it is rewound.