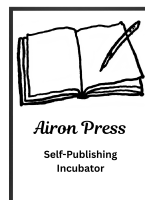


Stories Adults Tell Their Lovers, Pets, & Cellmates



Jimmy San

Stories Adults Tell Their Lovers, Pets, and Cellmates (NSFW)



Airon Press - Spines

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Stories Adults Tell Their Lovers, Pets, and Cellmates — Beta Edition, Version 1-26

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Be Kind.

About the author

J.P. San, also known as Jimmy, 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 lifelong journey as a dreamer, seeking hope and guidance through divine signs. Drawing inspiration from everyday moments and human complexities, Jimmy 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.



Jimmy San

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Foreword

Introduction

My name is Telel, and I'm one of Jimmy San's characters, though it's a bit odd being asked to step forward and introduce myself. Professor San wanted a few words for this collection, which is unusual; angels aren't often drafted to write forewords. We prefer the background: a nudge here, a quiet warning there, while mortals take the credit. So consider this your gentle caution. These are Jimmy's naughtier stories, or at least his most outrageous. Not all the stories are NSFW; a few are springboards to other levels of thought to share with those you love, or keep close. If you prefer your imagination neatly fenced and well-mannered, you might want to begin with one of his completely family-friendly offerings, *It's All Good Until It's Bad*. But if you're willing to wander into the disturbing and the titillating... welcome.

Professor San and I meet from time to time to trade ideas or, more often, to discuss family matters. His, not mine. I'm an angel: no spouse, no children, no long-running domestic opera. Now

and then I wonder what it would be like to have someone scold me for leaving my sandals in the wrong place, but most days I'm grateful I missed that particular storm. Eternity comes with its own inconveniences, but at least it doesn't include arguments over laundry, or over who forgot to buy milk.

What I do have is eternity, and trust me, it's not as glamorous as mortals imagine. It's less harp music and radiant sunsets, more long stretches of watchfulness punctuated by brief, alarming bursts of consequence. Much of that time I've spent alongside my associate, Ikart. If you've read *Shattered Mirrors*, you already know why that's... complicated. If you haven't, let's just say Ikart can turn a quiet moment into a test of patience and principle, keeping you on your toes, if angels had toes, and on your wits, which we most certainly do.

I watched over Jimmy's shoulder as he chose the stories for this collection and argued with him about the order, which he ignored. Some tales are minor miracles. Others are glorious messes with excellent timing. My role here is simple: to welcome you, offer a little context for the worlds you're about to step into, and occasionally whisper the truths that hide between the lines. Saying no to Jimmy San, by the way, is harder than getting the Council of Ancients to agree on anything, and they can argue over a comma for three centuries.

So here I am, doing my best to give you the inside scoop. If anything feels unclear, or if you're the kind of reader who likes to peek behind the curtain, tell us. You can ask about the rules of Essence, the curious cast, or why a single choice can ripple outward into cosmic consequences. Maybe we'll even slip a few extra secrets into the next edition. And if you think you have what

it takes to be a beta reader, or you simply want first dibs on whatever Jimmy unleashes next, visit ProfJimmySan.com and sign up. One of the perks is discounts. Personally, I'm fond of the freebies.

For now, take this as your invitation to step into San's universe. These stories are windows. Some are fogged by desire, some wiped startlingly clear by truth, but all are worth peering through... if you don't mind what looks back.

Professor San's Explanation of Origin

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 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 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 and 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 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, don't be alarmed. A whisper, a nudge, the faintest scent of flora run amok: that's just me, doing my job.

Now that you know the shape of the world, let me introduce you to the people who live in it.

Story Previews

#1 A Brother's Regret

Lam Portillo stands at his brother's funeral with laughter pressing against his chest, which is not the grief anyone expects of him. The world remembers Joseph as a soldier, a hero. Lam remembers a wound that never closed. And then there is Joey, who spoke of angels by name, who claimed to see what others could not, whose visions will outlast the stone carved above his grave. The living think they bury their dead. I tell you it is the dead who bury the living, until the living learn to rise.

#2 The Last Watcher

There are angels who fell and were swallowed by the abyss. Then there is Sodo, who stepped sideways into silence and was forgotten by neither heaven nor hell. In a hidden workshop beneath the peaks of Luzon, he threads golden wire through stone figurines that stir, walk, and burn. He calls it service. The Council calls it something else. Uriel has already come with his warning, and warnings from archangels are not courtesies. They are countdowns. Yet it is not Uriel that Sodo should fear. Someone else is drawing near, and she will not knock.

#3 Being Bella

There are rooms the world agrees not to name. Bella enters one tonight: young, poor, unfinished, and walking in on her own two feet, which matters more than you know. Alexei waits behind steam and wine. He will call her Aisha. He will look into her face and see a ghost, and he will not hear her correct him. Men like Alexei never do. But Bella is no mirror. Beneath the silk is a mind

mapping every room for exits. She is not yet powerful. She is becoming, and becoming is the most dangerous thing a mortal can do.

#4 The First Battle of Cuzco

I have seen altiplanos burn before, but seldom with such ferocity. Dr. Abigail Bhutswami unleashes her biobots with an executioner's precision while Victoria and her companions call upon the memory of earth and spirit. This is not machine against flesh. It is hubris against remembrance, and the ground itself rises in testimony: roots, wind, beasts, and voices older than steel. This is *Fractured*, the first chapter of *Shattered Mirrors*, a reckoning carried in smoke and song. The land remembers.

#5 Night Becomes Her

Mortals call this kind of writing flash fiction: a whole life compressed into a single breath. I call it honest. One room, one night, and a silence that presses like a hand against the throat. No gods here, no Controllers. Only the cats, the table, the blinds, and the slow violence of memory against a ticking clock. Some stories need a universe to tell their truth. This one needs only a night. Read it once. Then again. Let it echo.

#6 Julia

Julia is an ember: eleven years old, and she has endured more than some warriors I've known. She serves under Señora Viento, a hawk that learned to wear lipstick and heels. But on the hard nights, Julia whispers prayers to St. Jude, clutches the hem of a faded dress from Uranmarca, and repeats her grandmother's words: she is the mountain's daughter. Watch her small fists clench. Watch her bare feet run through Lima. Watch her stand in the shadow of cruelty and refuse to be owned by it.

#7 La Traviata

Verdi's *La Traviata* means the fallen woman: a tale of love that blooms in defiance and withers under judgment. Jimmy borrows the name, then tilts the mirror. Here the fallen one is a restless traveler trapped in a city of glass, circling gardens, monks, sirens, and impossible doors. Where Verdi gave us a deathbed aria, this tale offers a restless refrain: an ending that restarts itself, a search without closure. It was written, I should add, for an imaginative twelve-year-old named Mia, which tells you something about the company Jimmy keeps.

Conclusion

And so, through my vignettes you've met the stories and these curious souls who wander through Jimmy San's worlds. Across these pages you'll meet a bruised, stubborn cast that refuses to behave: Lam Portillo, carrying grief like a concealed blade; Joey, the "hero" who spoke of angels by name; and Leslie, whose quiet steadiness bends without breaking. You'll pass through Telis with King Buswali and Queen Veranda, bright crowns and long shadows, while beneath them Sodo, the last Watcher, forges living creations with Chauvin gold, half penitent and half heretic, until Dr. Abigail Bhutswami draws near with the kind of presence that unthreads worlds. In darker rooms, Bella learns to survive by performance as Alexei mistakes her for a ghost of his desire, while Aisha and Hassan endure the prison's slow erasure under the watch of Edna, a guardian who whispers what can't be prayed aloud. And elsewhere: Julia, an ember of a girl under Señora Viento's predatory polish; Elias, her storm of a brother; Victoria, sunlight in

a convent corridor; and a restless traveler trapped in a glass city of monks, sirens, gardens, and impossible doors. Each of them is proof that in San's universe, the strange are never decoration... they're destiny.

What you'll find in these stories isn't just fantasy or fable. They're shards of something larger: windows into a universe shaped by Essence, but held together by very human truths: hope, loss, resilience, and the hunger to belong. If I've done my job, you'll feel these currents as you read, like whispers from one story to the next.

I'll leave you here, at the threshold. My advice? Step through slowly. Let each tale sit with you. Some may charm you, others might unsettle or linger like old music you can't name. That's the beauty of Jimmy's universe. It doesn't hand you all the answers. It invites you to listen, to look closer, and to feel.

Now, turn the page. The stories are waiting.

—Telel Supervisory Guardian Angel, Universe #169 Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Warfare University of New Haven

A Brother's Regret

I scanned the sea of faces, some familiar, most not.

We were all standing there, just waiting, holding ourselves open to anything that might give this moment some kind of meaning.

I didn't feel like the right person to speak.

I didn't feel equipped to pull a truth from my brother's death that would help anyone, least of all me, make sense of things.

"Now, I would like to invite Lam Portillo, brother of the deceased, to share a few words."

I froze, paralyzed by the cacophony of the crowd, thunderclaps splitting through my mind. Murmurs rose and fell like waves, tugging at me as the trembling ground beneath my feet felt ready to collapse. The damp air clung to my skin, heavy with the lingering scent of wet-cut grass. Family and friends huddled together in front of me, their grief-stricken faces searching desperately for comfort. They waited for my words, but my throat remained solid, unyielding as stone.

"Lam?"

I heard an unfamiliar voice. A tightness gripped my chest as I looked over the crowd again, each breath a struggle. It wasn't sorrow or regret, just the sheer weight of the moment, the crushing finality of it all. I hadn't cried, not one tear. For a split second, I had the absurd urge to burst out laughing, to feel some release, some break from the heaviness pressing down on me.

I suppose I had leaned mostly on the kindness of friends. I felt ashamed that I never considered reaching out to god for comfort. I had closed off spiritual connections as a child. I had made god too small in my eyes. For that I acknowledge that I need forgiveness.

My sister's small, weary smile offered a flicker of comfort, a fragile moment of peace to hold onto. There was something in Leslie's presence, a quiet strength that stirred something deep within me, like a subtle shift in the air, almost imperceptible but undeniable. Surrounded by familiar faces, I felt a strange sense of change hovering around us, just out of reach, waiting to take shape.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone standing just behind her, shaking his head in disapproval. The figure was barely there, a hazy outline in the dimming light, yet unmistakably angelic: a presence both gentle and stern, like a warning wrapped in grace. I blinked, half-expecting the vision to disappear, but this angel opened its glorious wings and lingered, watching us with an expression I couldn't quite decipher.

I heard a few people urging me to begin, embellishing my doubt that I was the right person to deliver this eulogy and provide closure. Like I said, I hadn't cried; I felt like an imposter. What could I contribute to this moment?

"Lam, are you ok?" The priest laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, Father."

"You don't need to speak if you don't want to."

I did not feel relief, but I wondered momentarily why I had been asked to speak. Leslie checked all the boxes. She was shattered after our brother's passing. She couldn't get out of bed some days, and her temper flared like never before. I was careful of my words, such as mentioning "*brother*" or the smell of gasoline. Anything that remotely reminded her of Joey would bring her to tears.

"I'm OK, Father."



I took a deep breath to steady my voice. "We're here to remember my brother, Joseph Portillo III, who served his country and protected others in his unit." I didn't mention that he also saved Senator Goldman's and his family's life; they knew.

"We got many people here who didn't know him, but Joey is famous. He is a hero." That word always sat uncomfortably on my tongue. '*Hero*.' It was grandiose, too large, too absolute. The funny thing is that I had always imagined this title for myself in some grand narrative, not for my brother, who had quietly worn it long before anyone thought to crown him with it. But now, in death, it belonged to him, and I was left grasping for its meaning, wondering if I'd ever measure up to that word myself.

"A hero isn't just someone who fights battles; a hero is someone admired, of noble character, who acts with integrity, no matter

the circumstances. Joey was that kind of hero twenty-four-seven: noble, courageous, and thoughtful."

Don't get me wrong. Joey could be a shit; everyone has their moments. But I couldn't think of them now. He stole my favorite clothes before prom, my 7th-grade girlfriend, and my hashpipe. But I certainly hadn't appreciated him as much as I should have when he was alive. I would cause trouble or embarrass him in front of his friends for no reason. I would often steal money from his room.

Yet, no matter how I behaved, Joey always protected, cared for, and loved me and Leslie. Though he was the youngest, we all looked up to him. He wasn't just a brother; he was my best friend. But I wasn't going to share all that. Some things were meant to stay between us.

My mind went back to that angel I think I just saw. Joey believed in angels. I told him he was crazy and that angels did not exist. At our parents' funeral, Joey stood beside me, eyes fixed on the sky. That day, the air was thick with the weight of loss. I thought I saw blood on top of the casket. I tried to show Joey, but his expression was filled with wonder, like he had just discovered fire.

"Do you see it?" he whispered, tugging at my sleeve.

"See what?" I asked, glancing up at the gray clouds above us. I wanted Joey to say that he saw blood.

He smiled, small but sure. "The angel. Right there, by the clouds."

I shook my head, not sure if he was serious. Then I peered hard at the box of wood, I no longer saw blood on the coffin. I did not fault him; Joey was just a kid. But I remembered that he slowly looked up, like he was *really* seeing something. I didn't

see anything. It made me pause. He was either nuts or the best fucking actor I had ever known. There was something about Joey, a quiet certainty that made me wonder if he knew more than the rest of us ever would.

Another day, Joey told me that right before us, a celestial angel named *Ikart*, along with our parents' guardian angels, were ascending into the heavens where legions of angels would welcome their souls into a new dimension we call Heaven. All I saw that day was a clear, blue sky; nothing more. But the name stuck with me, maybe because it was so strange. How did Joey even know the fucking angel's name? Do angels have name tags?

Another time, he claimed a woman on the moon named Lakita was watching over us. What was it with my brother and these weird names and strange things that he would talk about? I remember thinking my little brother had lost his mind. But then he looked me in the eye, with a seriousness that belied his age, and said, "Lam, you'll remember this day when you're much older, at another funeral." Now, here I am, remembering.

I remember asking him about these visions and super-whatever beings. He looked at me seriously and said, "Lam, you have a special guardian watching over you now. She told me to tell you to not forget to love your family." It didn't make sense then. Joey was so convincing, so wise beyond his years, that I believed him. At the same time, my intuition told me that he was full of shit. Today, I believe he saw things we could not see. More importantly, I think he was telling me things I needed to hear today.

"Lam, are you ok?"

"I'm cool." I did feel cold, as if I were locked up in a refrigerator.

I looked up. The clouds remained unbroken, and the sky was a vast, indifferent grey. No light. No angels. Just the memory of a brother who saw wonders where I could not. He had visions, but Joey was not a kid in *La La Land* either. Despite my sister and I being adopted, Joey never saw us as anything but siblings. Even as a kid, he had a remarkable calmness and steady composure that reminded me so much of our mother. He'd sit on our front steps, his deep, thoughtful eyes mirroring hers.

I was in a bit of a daze, but I remember that I spoke about Joey for ten minutes, maybe more. I shared stories that explained Joey's courage, his sense of duty, and the way he always seemed to know exactly who he was. I remembered the day he came to me, just seventeen, I think. He told me he wanted to join the military when he turned eighteen. I remember feeling a surge of pride for him, a fierce admiration for his conviction.

But I didn't tell the crowd everything. I didn't mention the anger that had flared up in me moments after Joey told me he had sex with my girlfriend. Later, I went into a rage about him breaking my bike. The truth was, I broke my bike. I wanted an excuse to hurt him. I hit him hard, repeatedly, finally breaking his nose and leaving him with a black eye. He never told our parents; he always covered for me. And I loved him for that, even as I struggled to understand the darkness in myself that had lashed out at him.

Instead, I shared the stories that honored him, stories that captured the best parts of him. I spoke until I felt I'd given him everything I could with words, then I stepped back from the podium. As I did, a weight lifted off me, and I could finally breathe for the first time that day.



Congressman Goldman had arranged the repast at a nearby hotel, knowing most of us were from out of town. I walked over to Leslie, hugged her tightly, and kissed her cheek. Despite the grief on her face and the slightly disheveled hair, she looked beautiful: earthy and grounded, and the scent of her was warm and musky. Her black attire underscored the quiet strength she carried. She forced a smile that lit up something in me.

"That's pretty creepy," I said with a wink.

"I love you, Lam." Her arm wrapped around me, her touch feather-light. Her voice sounded far away, like it was passing through thick glass. I saw her lips move, but her words slipped past before I could catch them. I nodded anyway, unsure if I was responding to what she was actually saying.

The air felt thick, dragging me down like I was under wet blankets. Her hand lingered on my shoulder. I think she said something about greeting the guests. I blinked, trying to focus, but the moment had already drifted away.



When I arrived at the hotel, most of the guests had left.

"Good," I muttered, happily surprised at the nearly empty room.

Once filled with guests, round tables sit empty, some still draped in white tablecloths with a few scattered napkins and

half-empty water glasses. The buffet table near the back of the room was nearly bare, with remnants of food: a few slices of cake, trays of picked-over sandwiches adorned with discarded wooden sandwich picks, and an almost empty bowl of salad.

Dimmed chandeliers cast soft light, their long shadows stretching across the polished floor. A few staff moved through the space with quiet efficiency, careful not to disturb what little mood remained.

I grabbed a beer and sauntered to my sister, who sat silently. The small talk about food and farewells was a necessary distraction for her.

"How're you holding up?" I asked, stepping into the ballroom, my voice softer than usual. In the center of the room, a photo memorial of my brother stood prominently, anchored by a large portrait that stirred bittersweet memories of a life gone too soon. "It's cold as shit in here."

Leslie looked up, her slightly puffy eyes weary but steady. "I'm okay. You did well out there. I'm glad you spoke. I wouldn't have been able to hold it together."

I gave a small, tight smile. "You would've done just fine. You can deliver the speech when I kick the bucket."

She frowned, genuine annoyance flashing across her face. "That's not funny, Lam."

I shrugged, trying to deflect. "What would you have said if you had given the speech?"

Leslie hesitated, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I would've said... I wish I'd spent more time with Joey."

I nodded. Her words hung in the air, heavy with regret. "You know he was always thinking of you," I said, trying to make my tone more compassionate.

She nodded, her eyes glistening. "I know. He never forgot my birthday or Christmas. He even sent flowers and See's Chocolates on Valentine's Day. He knew those were my favorites. He was a terrific brother."

I watched as she fought to hold back the tears. I didn't interrupt; there was nothing left to say. I realized then how lucky I had been to share so many moments with Joey before he decided to join the service. Then, bang, it happened.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I don't think I have any regrets... at least not when it comes to Joey," I said, my voice steady. "We did a lot of wild stuff, guy stuff. We always had each other's backs."

Leslie looked at me, concern deepening in her eyes. "It's good you had that time together. You were fortunate to be adopted before me. But Lam, you seem angry. You say you're fine, but I can tell you're not. What's going on in that head of yours?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Leslie, how am I supposed to wrap my head around him dying? I can't just bury him and move on like it's nothing. There has to be a reason for all this; somehow, his death should make us better people. We should love deeper, travel more, value each other."

She placed a hand on my arm, her voice gentle but steady. "Yes, Lam. We need to give it time."

I pulled away slightly, frustration rising. "How can you be so sure? How can his death make us better? At Arlington Cemetery, no one remembers those soldiers, not really. They say they do,

but they have a grave for the one they forgot, the forgotten soldier."

"You mean the unknown soldier," she corrected softly, her voice tinged with sadness.

"Same difference," I muttered, bitterness creeping into my voice. "And we buried Joey near our great-grandparents. We don't know anything about them. They're just names on a stone. Everyone says they died for us, like some sacrifice. But what does it mean?"

Leslie's grip on my arm tightened, a warning in her eyes. "Lam, lower your voice. There are still people around."

I looked away, the frustration still simmering. The question hung in the air, unanswered: How do we make sense of a sacrifice no one remembers? "Let's talk about something else. What do you think of the food?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"The food's pretty good. Someone must have known that he loved those triple-sweet and spicy wings. They are great when you are stoned. I'm pretty stoned now. It's helping me feel his spirit. I feel he is at peace."

"I can feel his spirit too. You're right; I feel strange but comforted. Did you see those pictures of him? He was huge. Like, what the hell were they feeding him? He was a beast!"

"Yeah, special forces bulked him up. But he was always solid, built like a tank."

"You're looking pretty good yourself, my handsome brother," Leslie teased, lightly touching my arm before moving to my chest.

I looked at her more carefully, unsure if she should stay here. Regardless, I didn't mind the touchy-feely moment, maybe I even

liked it. But the awkwardness made me try and deflect her attention.

"Gotta keep in shape; I've got some big plans coming up," I said, noticing my sister was closing her eyes.

"I think you've had a bit too much to drink. Let's head up to our rooms."

Before heading to the foyer, I grabbed a plate of cold cuts, cheese, and three unopened beers. Leslie had already gotten to the elevator, selected the floor, and was, surprisingly, waiting for me.

We got to her room, 1202. I was in 1203. I sank onto the couch, cracking open a beer. They were not cold enough, so I put the remaining bottles in the freezer. When I opened the freezer compartment, I found some gummies tucked away. Without much thought, I popped a few.

Leslie emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel. "Do you want to tuck me in, Lam?" she teased, a playful glint in her eye.

"You're something else," I said, uneasy. I couldn't tell if she was joking. I didn't know how to answer.

Leslie let the towel drop, slipping a T-shirt over her head. Tipsy, she swayed, and I caught her just in time. She leaned into me, her breath warm with the faint scent of wine. Her lips brushed against mine: tentative, soft. I didn't pull away.

Memories of that night after prom rushed back, a blend of uncertainty and unexpected comfort. In that brief moment, the room felt smaller, quieter.

That night after prom, I arrived early and found her in my shower. It was exhilarating, especially after an uneventful evening with my date, not even a goodnight kiss. I quietly closed the bathroom door and

went to my desk, excited and confused. She emerged a few minutes later, wrapped in a towel, and walked over to me.

I felt awkward. She wasn't my biological sister, but I didn't want to cause any issues with our new parents. She asked me if I thought she was pretty. She was stunning, but she didn't seem to believe it. We shared a brief, tentative kiss, which left my teenage self reeling with a flood of emotions, hormones, and an erection. Something startled her: a noise, maybe the cat jumping, and she left my room abruptly. The next day, she acted like nothing had happened. I thought I was being a gentleman by not bringing it up again.

After our unexpected kiss, she stumbled to the bed, sprawling on the covers. Her limbs splayed loosely, her head turned to one side; mouth open, her eyes were closed in deep, satisfying oblivion. Realizing Leslie had passed out, I sighed and continued to nurse my beer. After I finished my beer, I shook my head, walked over to her, and, with a sense of relief, gently covered her with a blanket.

I grabbed the beers from the freezer and entered 1203, the need for a cold shower pressing on me.

Back in my room, I caught sight of the gold coin on my dresser. It was one of the Chauvin gold coins passed down through the Portillo family. Joey's coin now sat there, a weighty reminder of our history. Mine was kept locked away. I knew I should have put it in the hotel vault, but I figured it was safe enough where it was.

It was 12:30 a.m., and I couldn't sleep. Lying still forced my mind to conjure up things I didn't want to think about. The effort exhausted me, so I texted Camilla, a name from an escort ad I'd stumbled upon. She offered outcall massages, but I don't need to

stipulate that a backrub wasn't the point. Camilla replied quickly, saying she'd be there in an hour.

I locked the coin in the vault and turned on the TV, letting the noise fill the room's emptiness.

A news report caught my attention: a robbery in D.C. The witness they interviewed had a familiar face. For a fleeting second, I could've sworn it was my stepmom. I shook off the thought, lying back on the bed as my mind wandered.

My mom and stepmom had moved to France, finding solace in each other's company. They loved each other deeply, and I missed them every day. There were so many questions I wished I could ask them about our past, questions I didn't care about when I was younger. But now it's too late: they're both gone, and it's confusing as hell.

There was a knock at the door. I had drifted off. The girl looked nothing like her sexy profile pics, but she was extremely hot nonetheless. I let her in, and after some preliminary business, we went to it. About an hour later, she let herself out.



"Lam!"

"Good morning, sis. How did you get in?"

"You do know we have adjoining rooms?"

"Yes, but my side is locked," I remembered checking it.

"Nope, I opened it yesterday."

"Oh."

"Thanks for making sure I got home ok."

"You need to watch how much you drink." She gave me a strange smirk.

"Are you done? I need to get dressed."

She didn't move. We just sat in silence for a while.

"Are you going to get dressed?" My sister's eyes were staring at my crotch under the blankets.

"Sorry, getting up."

"Do you have any regrets?" Leslie asked half-heartedly.

"About you seeing me naked?"

"No. I have seen plenty of woodies before, hmm. I'm talking about Joey." Leslie turned away to sit on the sofa and winked at me. "I think you have smoked too much pot. Do you wish you and Joey had done something together, or did you need to tell him something?"

"I don't feel we missed telling him something or doing something. I think that he was a bit favored over us. But we talked about it."

"Because we were adopted? We were never treated any differently." She looked at me with a straight face.

"C'mon! They bought him a car for chrissakes!"

Leslie laughed. "It was a used piece of shit, and they wanted him to be able to drive home to see us while on leave."

"I wish they had bought me a shitty car like his."

"Okay. Mom and Dad were good to me. They were good to you, too, with gymnastics and fucking piano lessons."

We both laughed at the many hours we spent practicing for Mrs. Bonner. Mom was always listening to us practice our scales.

"I am never doing that to my kids. And I will never do what Dad did to us. He fucking left."

"Seriously? You don't remember the weird shit our grandparents did?"

I grabbed another beer, hoping the dull buzz would settle the chaos in my head, but it further blurred the lines. My memories drifted, pulling me in strange directions, back to that night after prom, the odd connection with Leslie, Joey's talk of angels, the way he saw the world so differently. The details were slipping away, getting more challenging to grasp as if they had evaporated into the dim air around me.

As the conversation with Leslie dissolved into silence, my mind unraveled the day in fragments. The weight of Joey's death, the strangeness of the past few hours, the worn lines of grief on my sister's face, everything started to feel distant like I was watching it all from behind a pane of glass. Even the room felt smaller, as if the walls were closing in.

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was exhaustion. But as I lay there on the bed, the room around me began to twist, turning into something unfamiliar.

The ceiling blurred, edges bleeding into shadow. Somewhere underneath the haze, a sound I couldn't place: metal, maybe, or a door. I let it go. I always let it go.

I closed my eyes.

The sharp buzz of overhead lights snaps me back, pulling me out of the dream and into the brutal reality of the present. My body feels like lead against the thin mattress, the broken coils digging into my skin. For a moment, I don't remember where I am. There's a disorienting second of believing I'm still in the hotel, back in that room with Leslie. But then the cold slap of reality sinks in. I'm not there. I'm here.

"Up for count!" a guard's voice booms from down the corridor, bouncing off the concrete walls like a bullet ricocheting through my skull.

I groan, rubbing my eyes, trying to shake the fog from my mind. The stench of rust and sweat fills my lungs, dragging me down into the gritty, relentless present.

Another day. Another nightmare.

I closed my eyes; I wanted my dream back.

In my dreams, I'm free. I can be with my family how I want to remember them, not how they were. In the dream, I have control. Sometimes, I wish I could undo what I did. But even then, I'd keep my parents dead. They deserve that much. I'll never forgive them for adopting another child. I was supposed to be enough. I was always supposed to be enough.

But dreams don't last. Nothing does.

I sit up, rubbing my eyes, and the judge's voice creeps in like a bad song stuck on repeat. No matter how much I try to block it out, it always returns: "The acts you've committed are beyond comprehension. You extinguished four innocent lives, including two children who never had the chance to experience the world. Your actions have left a void that no sentence can ever fill."

A void.

His words echo in my head, a weight that never lifts, crushing me slowly. He got what he wanted, life without parole. Justice, he called it. But for me, it's just another kind of death.

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.

Being Bella

The nightwinds carry sweetened air. Floral. Deceptive. The kind that exists to make you forget what it covers. Our gentleman warden has his own version: terror dressed as cologne, charm as a second skin. His destination lies beyond the stone cells beneath the church, in another kind of cell entirely. Here, pain wears silk. The bars are not iron but flesh. Control has been perfected into something that passes for intimacy. Only the texture of suffering changes.

Fear shares the space here, veiled, perfumed. Whispers slip between lips that know too much. Just beyond St. Nicholas' cemetery, down the hill from Rosocova's cleanest shops, sits the Little Admiral's Tavern. It overlooks the town. The local police know of it. So does the mayor. In the finest private chamber, Alexei emerges from the shower. Steam rises. The mirror clouds. The windows blur. The fire crackles, warm and insistent. He has been here before. Others have too.

Alexei wipes the mirror clean, revealing skin still flushed with heat and a face rehearsed to charm and conceal. Wine curls in

his glass like a half-uttered spell. Classical music drifts through the chamber, a lullaby for appetites dressed as civility.

He closes the doors. The night prepares its script. And I prepare to watch.

Mortals fortify themselves before a performance: wine, sweets, the little armor of a pressed suit or a new dress, a dainty lingerie that leaves nothing to the imagination. They sense, perhaps without knowing it, that watching someone else's vulnerability requires its own kind of preparation. I require nothing. I have watched scenes like this across centuries, and what I feel most keenly is not dread or pity but gratitude, gratitude that I am the one holding the ledger and not the one being written into it. That relief, if I'm honest, is the only comfort I allow myself anymore. I settle in. The night has prepared its script. And I am thankful, deeply, quietly thankful, that my only role is to record what happens next.

He strolls to the vintage leather chair: worn, regal, softened by decades of indulgence. Moonlight spills across the tranquil pond below, where ducks glide effortlessly, sending ripples over silvered water. Alexei settles into the cool, firm leather, leaning back with ease.

Swirling his wine, his mind drifts, not merely to the Cohiba Behike en route, but to the delivery girl, and the pleasures the evening promises. He savors a slow, deliberate sip, warmth spreading through his chest.

A knock, gentle, expectant, breaks the hush.

Alexei rises. Opens the door.

And there she stands.

Bella, on the trembling cusp of something not quite fate: a name awaits her inside, not her own, and tonight she must carry it.

She does not want this. Not exactly. But she isn't running either.

She leans, toward choice, toward risk, toward a kind of becoming that has no script.

In this world, will, even fragile, even frightened, is holy.

Make no mistake: she is not powerful, not yet practiced. But she is listening. She is learning.

The fire glows behind Alexei. Bella steps toward the warmth, not because she is cold, but because she knows that the fire will burn with or without her and that direction holds promise.

She walks deliberately. Beautifully. Without apology.

I am an observer, bound by oath to the Council. Bound to watch, not interfere. I record what the world tries to forget, so Jehovah may amend His entries in the Book of Life.

He does not erase. That is not His way.

But the Council must tell Him where the lines need adjustment.

Bella is not here to seduce. She is here to survive.

And at her Guardian's request, I watch with an open mind.

This is not about pleasure. Or not only.

It is about performance. Expectation. The cost of being seen and the trick of living for another day.

And Bella, soft as she is, is trying to learn.

Carpe diem.

She must learn what her audience expects, and how to make them long for it, even grovel.

Tonight, she practices.

She is not alone. Even now, another watches, appointed not by chance but by Essence itself. She is one of mine, though her charge is Bella. Quiet. Steadfast. Present.

I rarely speak the names of guardians I supervise.

But now it matters.

Edna.

Like us, whether carbon or prana dust, Edna serves the will of Essence and the cosmos. She is not judge, but witness: watching what Bella does with the name she has been given, and offering counsel when she can.

Edna watches Bella. I watch Edna watching Bella.

Bella remains oblivious, blessedly so. She is far too busy being Bella.

A knock on the door. Measured. Deliberate.

It slices cleanly through the hush.

Alexei rises and opens the door. She stands framed in the amber light of the hall, a robe clinging gracefully to her frame, gold earrings catching the fireglow. Jet-black hair, unbound, spills over her shoulder like a velvet curtain.

For a moment, just one, he is elsewhere.

Young again. A bull in his prime. His face unlined, his knuckles unbroken, his body unscarred. The man he once was rises through the man he has become. The firelight reshapes her, not Bella. Memory. The lashes. The eyes. That impossible blend of vulnerability sharpened by defiance.

Heat coils within him. Something old. Unfinished. He places a hand on her shoulder. Leans in. Lips graze her cheek.

"Good evening, Aisha."

Bella flinches, slightly. Not from fear. From recognition. He does not see her. He sees something else. Someone else.

And still, she smiles. A gentle smile, carefully measured. A pause. Then:

"My name is Bella."

Alexei studies her, eyes narrowing, mouth softening, but he still does not see her. Not really. He never does.

"Aisha," he repeats, softer this time, a whisper shaped like a wound.

Bella breathes. Keeps the tremor in her chest where it belongs.

"Sir," she answers calmly, "you know my name."

Alexei strokes his chin, a smirk curling at its edge.

"I heard."

Today is a stage, and Alexei intends to direct the scene. The past may be etched in ash, but tonight he believes it can be rewritten.

Bella stands at the edge of his myth: survivor, symbol, siren. He does not realize she is none of these things. Or worse: she is all of them, but not by choice.

Her eyes shimmer in the firelight. Wide. Measured. Fear tucked neatly behind the shine.

"You look stunning, Bella," he says, lingering on the name like it's borrowed. He nods toward the small table, two glasses waiting, already breathing.

"Do you like working for Anechka?"

His tone is casual, but Bella hears the audition behind it.

"She treats me well," she replies, lifting the glass with steady fingers.

Alexei begins his monologue, part seduction, part scripture. Tales of power. Business. Women. Lies wrapped in velvet. Achievements lacquered in wine.

Bella listens, nodding at the right moments. She glances at the closed door. Locked.

Her mind drifts, past the furniture, past the fire, to the quiet place where her true name waits.

He notices the drift. The slight delay in her gaze. And pivots.

"Are you nervous?" he asks, his robe shifting as he leans back, revealing the edge of intent.

"A little," she says truthfully. "I've never done this before."

A flicker, surprise, curiosity. Then she smiles, adjusting:

"Not like this."

He happily remembers her red name tag on her waitress uniform. He had spent the day in anticipation of this moment. He softens, reassured.

"Good. No one is forcing you?"

"No," she says, without flinching. "I want this. I need the money."

He nods, pleased.

"My cigar."

She moves smoothly, offering the box like a ritual object. He takes it, lights it, watches her through the glow.

"Smart girl. You've got the right temperament. Anechka will guide you."

He exhales a trail of smoke, approval curling at its edges.

"Tonight," he adds, "I'm just another client."

Bella nods. Not shy. Not eager. Poised.

"I'm here to please you," she says, not to him, but to the space between them. A pretense. A spell. A mantra.

"It's just a role," she adds softly. Somehow that makes it truer.

"The robe," Alexei gestures.

Bella's fingers hesitate, only for a skipped heartbeat, before she loosens the knot.

The robe slips from her shoulders, smooth and deliberate.

She lets him watch. She feels his gaze.

To be desired is power.

Let him want.

Her body is not submission. It is strategy.

What Alexei sees is skin.

What Bella performs is presence.

But I see what stirs beneath the surface: a name unmoored from flesh, a soul deciding where to land. And beneath it all, the faintest trace of Chaos, Essence's counterpart, flickering like static across the cord of fate. I log it for my report.

He sees Aisha.

But Bella remains.

She steps forward, not as the woman he names, but as the girl who knows what a name means to a man like him. She moves with confidence born not of belief, but of calculation.

Bella is poor, vulnerable, forgotten.

But tonight, that story is dressed in red silk and mistaken for something else.

Let him name.

Let him imagine.

Let him ache.

She knows exactly who she is.

Alexei exhales slowly, watching her.

"That's better," he murmurs. "Now you understand."

She does not correct him. She doesn't need to.

She breathes deeply, stepping closer, letting him see what he wants, and nothing more. Cool air brushes her exposed skin, sharpening her senses. Her nipples stiffen, not with shame or fear, but with the physical truth of the moment. Real. Present.

"Turn around," he commands softly, voice warm and coaxing.

She obeys, not from obedience, but from discipline. From control. She arches slightly, offering not submission but precision.

His gaze and his hands travel slowly, savoring every inch. She feels it, the unmistakable weight of his wanting.

And for the first time, she understands: this body, her body, is not a mask.

It's a boundary.

He may call her Aisha.

But only Bella decides what he gets to touch.

And tonight, he doesn't even know who he's reaching for.



Alexei lifts the hem of Bella's satin slip, his gaze drifting downward, absorbing every detail.

His low, husky growl says everything. What rises inside her is not a form of surrender; it is calculation sharpened by heat. She feels his wanting and studies it, the way a survivor studies a choppy sea before daring to dive in. A part of her sees the warning signs and yet gives in anyway.

"Come here," Alexei whispers, his warm breath skimming her skin, making her heart quicken just a little. The closeness sends

another jolt of excitement through her, nurturing a fragile strand of confidence. His warmth surrounds her, his gaze heavy, blazing with a desire that sears straight through her composure.

Bella leans into the old man, drawn by his desire and propelled by the rising passion within her.

She feels his hands pull her in slightly from the back of her slender thighs. He kisses gently down her waist, slower than she expects, his mouth trailing toward her inner thigh.

She glances down at the top of his head, wondering if she's doing any of this right. Her experience is limited; she thinks more than she feels, and she knows it. She's relieved he didn't kiss her, that would have been too much, too close.

Then, his tongue teases her, just lightly.

Her thoughts scatter. The moment overtakes her. Yet even as her body reacts, she senses something inside remains still, watching, measuring, learning: the part of her that has never once confused pleasure with safety.

Anticipation rises, neither romantic nor tender, but undeniably real.

A moment of clarity strikes her, this isn't just about power, it's about control. She has him exactly where she wants him.

She closes her eyes, just for a moment. She lets herself feel it, but not for too long; she can't risk losing control.

Then Bella feels him looking up at her, his breath warm against her skin. She meets his eyes.

There's a spark, real, but not romantic. I know what she's thinking: closer to chemistry than connection. I can read it on her face the way one reads a map.

When he rises, his mouth finds hers with a practiced certainty.

She lets it happen, not because she's changed her mind, but because in this moment everything feels inconsequential, purely physical. She tells herself that.

The kiss is long, playful, intentional.

She catches the scent of her own arousal mixed with the faint edge of cigar smoke, and it surprises her how much she likes it.

She isn't thinking anymore, not about tactics, not about identity.

Her thoughts shift to sensation alone: color, heat, and soft tones I cannot name.

After what feels like a brief, lovely eternity, she moves closer, drifting in a soft state of forgetfulness. His strong hands settle at the small of her back. Her lips brush softly against his ear. "I'm ready," she whispers. For a moment, she forgets why she is with this man at all. With quiet confidence, her hand finds the back of his head. She guides him downward, over the expanding rise of her chest, drawing him into her warmth, not submissive, but sure.

The scent of her arousal lingers between them, thick enough to taste. Alexei inhales it with a long, deliberate breath, his grip tightening as he pulls her closer, not enough, never enough. His breathing deepens, warm and ragged against her skin. She feels his mouth return to her body, and her own breath catches, following where his lips lead.

He holds her tightly, possessive, almost desperate as though closing the gap between them might somehow make him whole.

She repositions herself, straddling her right leg over his shoulder. Alexei smiles, clearly pleased by her movements. His hands settle on her hips, guiding her with a gentle but insistent grip. "Lower," he urges, his breath warm against her skin.

Bella's eyes drop to the robe, her mind racing with anticipation edged by trepidation. She hesitates, her inexperience leaving her unsure of how to proceed.

Alexei senses her uncertainty and, with a gentle smile, starts to loosen his robe. As the fabric falls open, revealing him beneath, Bella's gaze is pulled toward him; her expression blends fascination with apprehension.

As the final layer of mystique falls away, she studies him, unflinching, but not without thought.

He's aroused. Contained. Real.

She studies him the way an engineer studies a cathedral, less for worship than for structure. Something once imagined, now standing before her: solid, undeniable. I've seen this before: the moment when fantasy becomes fact. It's remarkable how quickly the mind adjusts, how quickly fear transforms into something else.

The head is smooth and taut, already slick with arousal. His shaft curves slightly, veins rising beneath the surface like delicate wiring.

She observes everything: the density of him, the symmetry, the way he twitches subtly, unconsciously. She's fascinated, not by lust alone, but by the fact of him. The anatomy. The architecture. A living structure once confined to diagrams and whispers, now real, near, offered.

I do not often describe the body in such terms, but her gaze demands it. Tonight, it becomes its own quiet theology, and I must follow where it leads.

Bella compares without intending to the few partners she's known, the whispered descriptions from her Persian friend, even the soft-focus porn they once laughed at together. This isn't ide-

alized or exaggerated. It's present. Alive. Dangerous because she is...because she enjoys sex. For a fleeting moment, she justifies it to herself: this is work, perhaps the only skill she has and she could get used to it.

Bella inhales, steadying herself. There is no blueprint for this, no precise measure, no reliable schematic to follow. She pauses, catches herself, then glances around the room and gives a small shake of her head. This isn't a job, she tells herself.

Her fingers close around him, gently at first, testing the weight, the texture. He's warm, pulsing. She watches his breath stutter slightly. That, more than anything, emboldens her.

She moves slowly, purposefully. Not coy. Not sultry. Curious. Determined. There's control in that, her way of turning confusion into method.

His body responds. He thickens slightly in her grip. His hips shift closer. And for the first time, she feels it, not just analysis, but impact.

She's affecting him. She has his full attention. And I feel her knowledge of it bloom inside her, powerful and unexpected. For a moment, she disappears. In her place, something older. Aisha. Or the memory of what he thinks Aisha was. The transformation is instantaneous. I watch it happen and I am, if I'm honest, pleased with myself for seeing it.



A light rap at the door. Bella's eyes widen as the door slowly opens. Alexei, an elderly statesman of leisure, sees what he

wants: large, adoring emerald eyes submitting to him. He smiles, reassuring.

The moment fractures, but it does not vanish. The atmosphere still hums, desire suspended, not extinguished.

Bella's hand moves toward her robe, quick but measured. She ties it, just tight enough to shield herself, but not to hide. A flutter catches in her chest. Should she have waited for Anechka? The question stabs her like ice. Was she supposed to wait?

A flash of doubt sweeps over her, cold and sharp, too late to resolve. Her thoughts scatter as she wonders if she went too far, out of line, exposed. A nerve hums beneath her skin, tightening the knot in her stomach.

Alexei grins. "My love."

"One of many," Anechka's voice slices through the tension, teasing, slow, and deliberate. She steps into the room, her eyebrows rising as she takes note of Alexei's obvious bulge beneath his robe. Anechka's attention shifts to Bella, measuring her with that quiet confidence, a reminder of her dominance.

Anechka walks to the velvet Louis XV knockoff chaise and tosses her gloves and overcoat, revealing the soft tone of her skin beneath a red satin teddy that catches the light, framing her form with elegance and power.

Bella straightens slightly, unsure if the moment calls for apology, or simply more waiting. Her pulse stirs with the uncertainty of not knowing what Anechka expects, but Anechka doesn't need to say anything. Bella already knows that this moment is not for her to dictate. Everything from here on out is for her to learn.

She steps into the space as though she owns the air itself. Her gaze sweeps deliberately: half-filled glasses, a discarded robe, the

warm edge of intimacy still hanging in the air like mist and lands, finally, on Bella.

"Starting without me?" she asks. Her voice is soft, measured. But there is no surprise in it, only assessment.

Bella straightens, a gesture of grace rather than defense. There is dignity in her movement. "Only preparing," she replies.

Anechka's smile deepens, not warmth exactly, but the particular pleasure of a woman who has arranged the room, the evening, and the players, and is now watching it unfold exactly as she intended.

"You've been busy," she murmurs, now behind Bella. "That's good."

Her fingers brush Bella's shoulder. The touch is not affectionate. It's evaluative.

"The clients want confidence," Anechka says. "But never arrogance. You understand?"

"Yes," Bella answers, softly. But firmly.

Anechka glances toward Alexei. "And you? Is she what you imagined?"

His voice is quiet, reverent. "Better."

Anechka's smile deepens. She lowers herself to her knees beside Bella. Bella tenses, not from confusion, but from the sudden closeness of someone who, until this moment, existed above her. Anechka pats her back, a small, steady pressure between the shoulder blades. It's alright. The gesture is almost maternal.

With a glance up at Alexei and a wry grin, Anechka joins her, lips moving slowly, tongue working with a deliberate rotation that is less passion than pedagogy. Bella watches from inches away, close enough to study the method.

After a few minutes, Anechka draws back, guiding Bella forward. Slowly, they begin the duet, moving in synchronicity. Not quite by accident but by design, their lips meet at the crown. Bella takes him deeper, her mouth closing around him until her lips press firmly against Anechka's, mouth to mouth over him, an intimacy she hadn't prepared for. Something flickers across her face, there and gone. Anechka catches it. Neither of them acknowledges it.

Anechka pulls away, a thread of saliva catching the firelight. She doesn't wipe it.

Bella continues alone, trying to mirror Anechka's rhythm: slow, deliberate, unhurried. Then she feels Alexei's hand settle on the back of her head, hears the low groan she's been waiting for without knowing it. A small relief floods through her. *I feel her emotion and the validation it gives her. She believes she has pleased her examiners. The thought is small, but I catch it, the way relief can feel like success when you've been taught that survival depends on pleasing others.*

Anechka rises, gives Alexei a long kiss, letting him taste what's just been done to him before crossing to the sofa, settling with the kind of grace that suggests years of wielding power from a reclined position. She does not lounge, she reigns.

"Pour me a glass," she says to Alexei, and then, to Bella, "Continue. I'm watching."

I watch, but I do not intrude. There are rites older than my wings, and even we do not interrupt them.

Edna twitches slightly. Our spirits do not speak, not overtly, but I feel her awareness sharpen. She observes Bella as I observe her, and still further, I feel the currents ripple outward.

Something has begun, more than seduction. A transformation. A test. A rite.

Anechka refills her glass. The fire settles. And Alexei, watching Bella from across the room with an expression Bella cannot yet read, reaches into the inside pocket of his robe and withdraws something small. A photograph. He does not show it to anyone. He looks at it for a moment, just long enough, then tucks it away.

Bella does not see his face in that moment. But I do.

He has been waiting since the night he made waiting permanent. I do not think he knows this. The most costly mistakes rarely announce themselves as such.

He glances at Bella, at the line of her jaw, the particular way she holds her shoulders and something shifts in his expression. Not desire. Recognition. Or the ghost of it. The way a man looks at a copy when what he wants is the original.

"Aisha," he says, quietly. Not to anyone. Not quite.

Anechka hears it. Her eyes move to him, just briefly, just long enough and what she sees there is not a man lost in the room with her. It is a man standing in a different room entirely, reaching for someone neither of them is.

She says nothing. She raises her glass instead.

Bella hears the name too. *She files it in the place she keeps things she does not yet have language for: the same place she filed the locked door, the photograph, the particular quality of his wanting that never quite landed on her. She does not know yet what the name means. But she knows she is not it. She knows she has never been it. And she tells herself this is fortunate, though some part of her, the part that still holds hope, is not entirely certain she believes it.*

And far across the city, as night thins and light begins to push through rusted bars, another kind of deal stirs in the darkness.

It, too, is being watched.

The First Battle of Cuzco

At dawn, hours after Bhutswami's final preparations, the battle for Cuzco begins.

As Chief Prefect of Guardian Oversight, servant of Jehovah and of the Council of Ancients, the welfare of Celestials and carbon-forms weighs heavily upon me, and so too does the debt I owe my servant. The following account, of the battle that began in Telis, came to me through him, borne across the angelic communion.

My reluctant regard is to my underling, Ikart. By my order to observe and not interfere, he stood nearer the field of battle than wisdom allowed. As is ever his nature to thoroughly investigate, his integrity nearly brought his demise. He remains a great warrior for Haven, steadfast against the domains of darkness. Without him, I would have known nothing. Yet even that debt cannot wholly soften my distrust of him.

Among Celestials, such concealment is no small discourtesy. It is a breach. We do not withhold ourselves from one another in this way. And yet he went where I could send no other, and returned bearing what no other servant of mine could have carried back. When at last I saw what that labor had written upon him (though

I will not yet speak of it) something stirred beneath my irritation for which I had no rightful name.

I should tell you how Ikart's account reached me: not as a written report, not as facts delivered across a desk, but through Camille, the celestial communication network, personified and omnipresent, who carries not only what was observed but what was felt, what was inferred, and what conscience demands be known. Camille does not deliver messages. She delivers obligations. What Ikart observed with his eyes, I received in full fidelity, every vivid particular, every color and sound and weight of the thing. And yet something arrived alongside it that I can only call a thinning. Not a gap in the transmission. A gap in the man. As though he had handed me a complete document and stood watching while I read it, knowing which passages I would not think to question.

What he inferred from a posture, a hesitation, a micro-expression caught at close range, I received that too, along with the confidence he assigned to it. Where he could not see directly, he reasoned from evidence and transmitted his conclusions alongside the reasoning. That Camille carried this particular account without interruption, without the friction she reserves for transmissions she judges incomplete or evasive, is itself a thing I have not stopped considering. I have held Ikart's account up to the light many times since, examining the seams between what he witnessed and what he assembled. I will tell you where those seams are. Most of the time, I trust his assembly. Not always.

Before I tell you what happened on that field, you need to understand what crossed it.

The Aurumon are not a single design. They are a philosophy of war refined across generations, each one built on the lessons of the last.

The first generation, the originals, large and devastating, were built to carry enormous payloads. They broke cities. They ended the resistance of three nations before Victoria's forces had found an answer to them. Their size was their power and their limitation both: heavy-framed, deliberate, unstoppable in a sustained advance but difficult to reposition quickly once committed.

One of Sodo's students changed the calculus. He had been studying Zeus and his relationship to the feared yet far weaker Nyx, the way a lesser force, if swift enough and distributed enough, could accomplish what brute mass could not. The student brought the insight to Sodo.

Sodo, who creates because problems interest him and for no more complicated reason than that, saw the elegance in it and built what the student described: smaller, faster, more maneuverable units carrying a reduced payload. He called them the Nyx-Aurumon. They were not built to end cities. They were built to move through whatever resisted the first generation, to flank, to find gaps, to operate at speed in terrain where the originals could not follow.

The Nyx-Aurumon had a flaw. In the battle at Telis, an angel in the Republic's service identified it: a microscopic scar of corrupted prana at each unit's core, a structural consequence of the bonding process. One precisely tuned low-frequency burst and a Nyx-Aurumon imploded from the inside out. The angel sent this intelligence to Victoria. The Republic spent the months between Telis and Cuzco building its response around that flaw.

Sodo, characteristically, had already moved on. By the time Bhutswami's forces staged at Cuzco, the Nyx-Aurumon had been modified. The vulnerability had not been eliminated, Sodo acknowledged no vulnerability he had not himself decided was worth solving, but it had been masked. The seams were camouflaged, each unit in a paired system concealing the installation point of its partner. The Republic's Telis-based intelligence was not wrong. It was simply pointing at a target that had learned to wear a different face.

This was what would cross the flat toward Victoria's line: a main force of modified Nyx-Aurumon (faster than the originals, more maneuverable than any army the Republic had faced) with their flaws hidden and their paired camouflage intact. Ikart did not yet know this when the first wave fell. Neither did Victoria.



Hidden gas lines ignited. Buried fertilizer caches erupted. Methane and phosphorus climbed in smoking columns into the burning sky. Villages vanished inside firestorms. Shockwaves rattled adobe walls, split narrow roads, and set the terraces ablaze. Above the chaos, some descending missiles burst apart mid-flight into clouds of diamond-edged shards, and from those glittering deaths the spider-constructs fell, eight-limbed, scuttling through flame and ruin, eyes that spat light, claws that opened whatever they touched, moving through the fleeing and the fallen without distinction.

Near the central church, market stalls draped in bright mantas vanished in sheets of fire. The village plaza collapsed into dust. Thousands of peasant soldiers armed with rocks and machetes fought in vain, swallowed almost at once by heat, gas, and steel.

Dogs charred where they stood. Birds fell from the sky. Molten metal seeped into the soil. The smell was tremendous and specific: burning hair, hot iron, something chemical underneath that had no name in any language Ikart had been taught.

This was the Black Brigade's first wave, total saturation, designed not to destroy Victoria's army but to collapse the telepathic relay chains between the curs and the Controllers under enough noise and heat that the Celestial response would arrive fragmented, each piece unable to find the others.

It nearly worked.



Beyond the devastation stood Dr. Abigail Bhutswami, Commander of the Black Brigade, who had marched into the capitals of three nations promising liberation and left them burning. She had spent three months mapping Victoria's defensive geometry: the telepathic relay chains between the curs and the Controllers, the elemental dependencies of the Master Controllers, the precise activation thresholds of Mâr-e Tiz's mountain bonds. Ikart watched her from the field's edge and recorded what he saw in her bearing: she did not flinch. Her war was devouring cities, yet nothing in her posture suggested triumph. She stood as one testing a new order against the old, cold precision in her gaze,

jaw set against whatever the field had left to offer. What moved in her mind he could not directly know. What her body said to an investigator trained to read bodies, he transmitted completely.

At the far edge of the ruin stood Victoria, the meek Commander of the Republic, blind and burdened with fate. Her stillness was weighted with grief, not only for the battle before her, but for the inescapable truth that she, too, would kill before the day was done. She had prepared for this. So had her Lt. Commanders Mâr-e Tiz and Lakita, who stood at her shoulder, Lakita's shiny black dragon boots catching the firelight of the burning field below. Whatever they saw in Bhutswami's progress, it had not shaken them.

Mâr-e Tiz, her will braided to the mountain spirits, once Bhutswami's closest friend, now her fiercest enemy, had spent the opening bombardment in hushed telepathic communion with commanders scattered across the altiplano, reading the pattern of Bhutswami's assault, measuring its rhythm, waiting for the seam.

All the while, her fingers brushed the back of her right hand in small, repetitive strokes: mountain, valley, river, sky; which spirits still answered, which had gone quiet, which names belonged on the prayer lists moving through her warriors.

Lakita, frustrated by the enemy's first wave, had made adjustments for the Republic's fighters based on new intel. When the first wave crested and the Aurumon began to advance across the burning flat, Victoria was ready with a counter-move. She gathered elemental force and raising her arms she allowed the power to surge through her all the while holding it within, a fist not yet opened.

Victoria was not a commander who announced herself to the enemy. She stood at the edge of the field, invisible to anything Bhutswami's sensors could register, her presence carried only on the private channel she shared with her Controllers, a frequency no outside ear could intercept. Not separate by any deliberate distance, simply placed where she could see everything without requiring anyone to account for her presence. Her patience in those minutes was the patience of someone who has operated on a longer timeline than the battle she was standing in.

Around her, the Celestial Army waited. Michael and Gabriel moved over the land with sword and shield. Prayer warriors lay prone, their chants threading through smoke and ash. Controllers and their forces were in their places, still and ready.

Slightly apart from them, upon a rock, knelt a woman I did not recognize. She was not chanting. She was not prone. She was simply still, in the particular way that is different from waiting, her lips moving without sound, her hands open on her knees, her attention oriented toward something I could not identify on any sensor available to me. Not the field. Not Victoria. Not the Aurumon advancing in their pairs across the burning flat.

I noted her the way I note things I cannot file: as data pending a category that had not yet presented itself. Ikart's account did not include her. I did not ask him about her afterward. I am not certain why.

Whatever she was doing, she had been doing it for some time before the battle began. Whatever it was, it was not preparation for what came next. It was something else entirely, something I would only recognize as cause once I had already seen its effect.

Across the flat lands beyond, packs of curs rested in loose clusters. A few nosed at chickens. One shook ash from its coat. When Mâr-e Tiz released what she held, they would move. The power within Victoria increased. A glow increased in intensity within the empty sockets where her eyes once were.



A quick and sudden shift of eyes from Lakita to Victoria commenced the plan. The plan was exact. Victoria lowered her arms toward the oncoming enemy. Erupting from her emanated a hollow fury begetting powerful storms, obscuring the field and throwing the enemy into confusion.

Meanwhile, Mâr-e Tiz would drive the mountain's host downward, fierce, agile imps, spirits of nature, and dragons alike, poised to force the Aurumon to the ground. Commander, Victoria's warhound, would lead the curs through the breach; his packs would strike the exposed seams before the machines could mend themselves. Behind the curs, imps and elves would pin the damaged constructs in place. The Finishers, Archangels paired with junior Controllers, cleaned up. They made sure that the Aurumon would never be deployed again.

It was a sound plan built on sound intelligence. The intelligence was a year old, and its target had not been idle.



Bhutswami moved first. She was being baited.

Farther out, moving through flame and rubble like a thing half-seen, Commander led a rough legion of curs and forsaken beasts up the center of the field. Chauvin enhancement had sharpened his natural instincts into something astonishing, effectual, and bordering on the supernatural. Louie, a ruthless white cur, held the East. Kurmondi, a long-legged Siberian husky, held the West. With the Telis intelligence as their foundation, their noses, ears, and battle-honed instincts had already located what they believed were the vulnerable points in Bhutswami's biobot designs. The seams appeared to match what the report described. The curs were confident. They were working from a map that Sodo had quietly redrawn.

Bhutswami had been watching Commander's advance through sensor feeds routed to the relay unit at her left shoulder, a compact device, no larger than a fist, that aggregated battlefield data and projected it as a faint overlay across her field of vision. She had identified Commander as the pivot of Victoria's tactical design within the first ten minutes of engagement. Eliminate the relay between the curs and the Controllers, and Victoria's response would slow just long enough for the Aurumon to close the distance.

Before Mâr-e Tiz could unleash what she had gathered, Bhutswami sent a flanking surge of Nyx-Aurumon around the eastern edge of the field. They moved with the speed the design had been built for, lighter frames, tighter turning, covering ground that would have slowed the originals to a crawl. They were not driving at Victoria's line. They were driving at Commander's eastern pack, aiming to collapse Louie's flank and force a breach in

the curs' link to the Controllers before the packs could reach the biobot seams, the seams the Republic still believed were exposed.

It worked, partially. Louie's eastern pack scrambled. The wedge opened.

And in the gap, the curs found the seams exactly where the Telis intelligence said they would be. Commander's packs struck. The vibration-and-lightning approach that had dismantled Nyx-Aurumon at Telis landed, and accomplished nothing. The camouflage held. The units absorbed the strike, rerouted, and kept functioning.

For a long, terrible moment, the Republic's answer failed to be an answer.

What saved the window was not the plan, but a mistake on Bhutswami's own side: her flanking surge, pulling covering units forward too quickly, had left a cluster of her biobots exposed mid-reassembly. In the gap, a Republic stealth unit found them.

Roxy, a brave cur running point on the stealth patrol, caught their position and sent it telepathically to Commander. One clear window, unrelated to anything the Republic had planned for. If he could relay it to Victoria before Bhutswami's flanking units closed the gap entirely, the plan could still hold.

But the instant he turned to relay the warning through his bond with Victoria, the flanking units struck. Fire raked the ground. Metal shrieked. Roxy and her patrol were pinned, caught in the open, the field closing around them before the warning had finished traveling.

The window was closing.

Beside Victoria, Julia knelt in prayer. Victoria faced the heavens with hands raised. The jolly laughter that lived in Julia was gone,

only purpose remained. She poured raw energy into Victoria, and Victoria drove it through her staff into the earth. Roots burst from the soil. Vines twisted upward. From earth and memory rose spectral warriors that hurled themselves into the flanking units, tearing through the biobots before the machines could reform, ripping them apart piece by piece. Metal screamed. Circuits crackled. The wedge collapsed. Amid the confusion, Roxy and her pinned patrol broke free, regrouped, and the warning reached Commander at last.

The window held.

Bhutswami saw it close and did not hesitate. She pulled the relay unit from her shoulder, studied the overlay for four seconds, and issued a single command to her reserve line: seal the center, redirect the eastern units inward, prepare the second wave for full advance. She had lost the flanking gambit. She would not lose the field.

Bhutswami's eyes narrowed as she turned toward Victoria across the broken ground between them.



"Still blind, Victoria. Even before darkness took your sight, you mistook endurance for wisdom. You still cling to an order already passing."

Victoria tilted her head. The faintest smile touched her mouth.

"El amor y la amistad nos unen de una manera que tus máquinas jamás podrán entender." Love and friendship unite us in a way your machines will never understand.

"Memory." Bhutswami's voice did not waver. "Affection. Reverence for the dead. You dress decay in sacred language and call it strength. Tomorrow will not be built by what lingers. It will be built by what can still be made."

Victoria's smile held. "Hablas demasiado, mi fría reina de hielo." You talk too much, my cold ice queen. Her voice carried the warmth of someone who had known this woman long before the war made them enemies. "Once you believed in something beyond the next design. I have not forgotten, even if you have."

Behind them, the Aurumon were already repositioning, their mirrored bodies catching the firelight and breaking it into hard, fractured brilliance. The second wave was forming. Neither woman moved.

"Not mindless machines," Bhutswami said. "Evolution. Faster. Stronger. Freed from the weakness you still call wisdom."

Victoria was quiet for a moment.

"The dead do not forget, Abigail. And soon, they will make you remember them too." A beat of silence. "I do not wish judgment upon you. I only hope you turn from this path before it consumes you."

Bhutswami's expression hardened. "The old ways end today."



She raised her hand.

The Aurumon surged forward, the full remaining force now, no longer probing or flanking but driving straight at Victoria's line

with the terrifying coherence of a design that believed efficiency itself had earned the right to inherit the world.

Victoria did not move.

"Julia, now."

Julia stepped beside her, no laughter, no prayer, only purpose. She poured raw energy into Victoria, and Victoria drove it through her staff into the earth. That force met Mâr-e Tiz's held elemental charge coming up from below, the two streams joining in the root system beneath the field, combining into something neither had shaped alone.

Then something else entered the chain.

I cannot tell you with certainty what it was. I have turned it over many times since, and I remain unresolved. It did not belong to Julia, nor to Mâr-e Tiz, nor to any hand I could identify among the forces assembled on that field. It entered without announcement and without limit. As though the wound the battle had opened had drawn something toward it from a distance I could not measure. Whether it was called or merely came, whether it had been waiting or only passing, I cannot say.

What I can say is that the field changed when it arrived. Bhutswami felt it before her sensors registered it. Ikart felt it too. He transmitted that feeling without explanation, which is the only honest way to transmit what has no explanation.

The ground answered all at once.

Roots, wind, and living force erupted together, taking the shape of spectral warriors. They struck the Aurumon in midair, tearing metal from metal and flooding Chauvin cores with undiluted life. The machines convulsed. Their joints seized, not at the seams the Republic had mapped from Telis, which the camouflage had

hidden successfully, but at deeper structural points the spectral force appeared to locate by some other means entirely. Their cores flickered and went dark. The land wrapped itself around them and dragged them down.

Commander's packs were already moving. What the living force had cracked, the curs finished, ripping through joints that could no longer repair themselves, finding the seams now that the units could no longer hold their concealment under the onslaught. Behind them, imps and elves swarmed the damaged frames and pinned them. The Finishers came last and executed flawlessly.

Bhutswami pulled the relay unit back to her eye. The overlay was returning noise where it had returned data. She made two rapid adjustments, trying to reroute through a secondary sensor cluster, and got nothing. She lowered the unit slowly.

Her models were failing. Her patterns were unraveling. The camouflage had held. The Telis countermeasures had failed. The flanking surge had failed. The second wave had failed. The field itself had answered outside her design (answered at points her design had never exposed) and the sensor array that had given her three months of tactical advantage had just gone blind. She had prepared for Victoria. She had prepared for Mâr-e Tiz, for the curs, for the Archangels, for elemental force directed by trained hands. She had not prepared for something that entered without being directed at all, and located what her engineering had successfully hidden from everything else on that field.

Then, barely audible beneath the thunder of earth and metal, the name left her lips.

"Sodo..."

Not a command. Not a curse. A recognition, the name of something she had not accounted for, spoken the way a mathematician speaks when the proof returns an answer the equation was never meant to produce. Ikart, positioned at the field's edge, heard it.

He transmitted it as he heard it: barely audible, spoken to no one, carrying the stunned clarity of a person recognizing the shape of their own blind spot. He did not know at the time what she meant by it. Neither did I.

We both know more now. I will not say it here.



Across the broken field, the Cur Brigade and the attending spirits moved among the fallen Aurumon and set deep within their ruptured shells the Vexing Stones Lieutenant Commander Lakita had prepared, each one carrying a curse built not around the seam vulnerability the camouflage had masked, but around a deeper property of the Chauvin bonding process itself. The Telis angel's original report had only partially described that property. Ikart had spent the time between Telis and Cuzco completing the description. Lakita had spent it building the key.

The curse took hold at once. What had fallen would not rise again. Their frames went dark beneath it, sealed against repair, as the morphing pellets unknit into earth and gas until no form remained for memory or machine to recover.

This was not victory. The Black Brigade still held the high ground to the north. Bhutswami still had reserves Ikart had not fully mapped, and whatever she intended by the name she had just

spoken, it was not surrender. But the Aurumon, the weapon that had broken three nations, the weapon the Republic had no answer for through two years of burning cities and collapsed lines, had just been answered. The camouflage had held against everything the Republic brought to the field. It had not held against what the field brought to itself. Every unit that fell today would stay fallen. Bhutswami knew it. The relay unit hung at her side.

For the first time since the war began, the Black Brigade would have to fight without certainty of what came next.

So would the Republic.

But the difference, today, was theirs.



I should tell you one more thing before I close this account of that field.

It did not come through Ikart. It came through the infrastructure itself, through Camille, who carries more than observation when she chooses to, and who on this occasion chose to carry something I had not requested and did not know how to file.

I cannot describe it as a sound, because it was not a sound. I cannot describe it as a decision, because no decision was announced. What I can say is that something in the quality of the prana moving through celestial channels shifted in the hours after Cuzco fell quiet, not dramatically, not with announcement, in the way that pressure in a room shifts when someone present has made up their mind about something and has not yet spoken. I am a careful servant. I notice

these things as data without presuming to interpret them. What the data said, I noted. What it meant, I did not ask.

I have served long enough to know there are questions you do not put into a transmission.

What I will say is this: I have worked within celestial infrastructure for longer than most beings in this universe have existed, and I have felt that particular quality of shift before. Not often. Not without consequence. The archive I carry includes the record of what has followed it, in other times, in other arrangements that no longer exist.

I noted it. I closed the channel. I did not put it in my report.

Some things belong to the record. Some things belong to the servant who received them. I have learned, across a very long tenure, to know the difference.

Night Becomes Her

6 p.m.

Evening light scatters through the blinds. Blue skies bruise to orange. She sits in growing darkness at the kitchen table, watching the second hand crawl.

The cats curl up, asleep. Their food is cold, edges darkened. Her fork untouched.

She traces the table's scratches, ghosts beneath her gnarled fingers. This room recalls laughter. Now silence presses in, thick and tight.

Barefoot, bare, she drifts to the bedroom. The ghosts follow. A photo lies facedown on the nightstand. She sits. Unfamiliar faces on the wall, her own among them: smiling, laughing.

The mirror holds her: thin frame, wrinkled skin. She rises, hastily. Her hand catches the frame's edge; it slips, shatters at her feet. A step. A sharp sting. On the unmade bed, she sits. Blood.

The stench of cigarettes, cat piss, stale booze hovers. She pulls the shard free, thinking of fragments, a life she can't reassemble.

Moonlight creeps across the cluttered desk. Scattered papers. Medical records. Court files. Pills spilled from half-open vials.

The cats weave around her legs, brushing the ghosts aside. She crouches, buries her fingers in their indifferent fur. She wishes she could live as they do: eat, sleep, roam. No regret.

I wish I'd— Her mother's voice, unfinished, lodges in her chest anyway.

She lies down. Wraps in a blanket. No warmth. The cats don't care.

His voice follows. *Terrible wife. Terrible mother. They'll know. They'll leave you.*

He kept his word.

She stares at the ceiling. Same patch. Same shadow. Eyes frozen.

She hears ticking. The clock is still. Cars pass outside, headlights drifting in and out. Time stretches into eternity.

She pulls the blanket tighter around her curled body.

7 a.m.

Sunlight hammers the blinds. The cats strut, lick their paws.

Covers over her head.

"Fuck the clock."

Julia

The cool night air of Lima came through the cracks around the window frame. Julia had not lit a lamp. She sat with her face close to the glass, eleven years old, the days behind her stacked into something that felt to her like an eternity.

None of us has felt eternity. Not Ikart. Not I. Not Jehovah, who has ended the world and built it again more times than he has told anyone. Only Essence could use the word and mean it, and Essence had already chosen her.

I was not at that window. I cannot be everywhere; that was never given to me. What I have of that night came into me the way all of it comes, by nearness, afterward. I was not given the choosing of which parts.

What reached me of her delighted me, the way my Bubbe once had. Bubbe had soup and a spoon. Julia had grit.

I begin with Julia at this window because it is where she always is when I go back for her. One thick lock of dark hair had fallen loose from its braid and hung over her left eye. She never pushed it back. A half-hidden face draws less attention than a whole one, and she had known that a long time.

She was not frightened, and she was not grieving. *I want to be exact about this, because everyone who came after got it wrong.* She was angry, and she was patient, and at eleven she had already learned that those two things could live in one body without either being compromised.



The eighteenth-century house belonged to Señora Viento. All beds were made before noon. The china dusted on Sundays. Meals prepared her way precisely on schedule. No one ate until she was seated.

The arrangement had been made in February, in the doorway of her father's dirt-floor kitchen in Soto Pampa, by a Limeño, a city man in a clean shirt and polished boots, carrying a folder.

Soto Pampa sat three hours above Uranmarca, nineteen households perched on a shelf of rock, built out of whatever the ridge gave them. The Limeño had walked up from the town below, which impressed everyone. He wore boots. Everyone else in Soto Pampa wore ojotas. He preferred to speak Castellano, but spoke broken Quechua for their sake. He spoke of wages sent home each month. Of girls Julia's age living under the same roof. Of a school six blocks from the door, uniform included.

Her father made him repeat the part about the school in Quechua. He repeated it twice, patiently, and then a third time without being asked, which her father took for honesty.

Julio Quispe was not a man who sold his daughter, and I will not have him read as one. He was a widower with a bad hip, a failing

plot, and a mother-in-law who could no longer climb to the water. He stood in that doorway and was worked on for two hours by a professional.

He asked the right questions. He got the right answers.

This is what corruption looks like when it is done well: nobody is bought, everybody is handled, and the man who agrees is the last person in the room who understands what has happened.

There was no school. There were girls her age. They worked other rooms and other hours, and Julia did not speak to them, except when the work required it. She saw them in the evening line and nowhere else.

Her wages went home for four months and stopped, and no one in Lima was ever asked about it. The only man who noticed was three hours above Uranmarca.

In her first weeks in Señora Viento's service, the Spanish orders came at Julia like bad weather, something that happened around her and to her and offered no handles.

By July, she understood most of what was said to her. By the second summer, she could have answered in Spanish and chose not to. She had worked out that a servant who spoke well was a servant who could be argued with, and an argument was a thing you lost slowly and paid for afterward.

So she kept her Spanish small and her Quechua private and let Señora Viento believe she was simple.

It cost her nothing.

She turned eleven in December. Nobody said anything, and she did not either, and by the following week she was no longer certain of the date.

Her brother Elias was somewhere in this same city. He had come down eight months ahead of her to find work in the tanneries, and he did not know the man with the folder had come to the door, and he did not know she had gone. She held on to the fact of him. Everything else she knew was about the house.

Señora Viento's son Guillermo came and went by the back door at any hour and nobody asked him where. There was mud to the ankle of him most nights and more of it on the floors, and the china was dusted on Sundays and nothing was ever said about the floors, and Julia did them again. She learned the sound of that door the way she learned the boards. It was the only door in the house that was never locked.

The beatings were not events. They were a feature of the evening, like the shutters.

Ten workers lined up for inspection. Shopping, laundry, dishes, windows, the managers. Julia did the floors and the beds and the dusting and saw none of them until the line formed. A large man stood nearby with a switch and leather lash while Señora Viento watched from her lounging chair.

The absence of heat was the part Julia never got used to.

Anger she could have understood.

This was bookkeeping.



The letter came in January. Señora Viento read it at the table with her coffee, did not put it down, and did not hand it over.

"Your grandmother is dead. In November." She folded the paper along its old creases and put it in her skirt pocket. "The parish sent it here."

Julia asked for the letter. She asked in Spanish, which she almost never did, and Señora Viento looked at her with mild interest, as one looks at a dog that has done something novel, and said no.

Then she said the other thing. She said it without cruelty, in the tone of a woman passing on a small sadness, which is how she said everything that mattered.

"Your father knew what the work was. He knew before he signed. They always know." She drank her coffee. "So you see there is nowhere for you to go."

That was a lie, and she told it in January, and it did more damage than every blow she ever landed. Julio Quispe was alive in Soto Pampa with a bad hip and a picture of his daughter and no idea what had been done to her. He had letters written for him and sent to the address he had been given. Four letters. The address was a printing shop on Avenida Grau that had closed before Julia was born.

I could have told her. I want that on the record, since I am the one keeping it. I have stood in that kitchen thousands of times and never once been permitted to say the sentence that would have ended it.

After January, Julia stopped saying the word papá. Not out of anger. She simply had nowhere to put it.



She prayed every night, and the praying was not what people afterward assumed it was.

Kneeling on the cold, splintered boards, she clutched the hem of her dress, the last thing she had carried down from Soto Pampa, its faded flowers ghosts of themselves. Her long, thin fingers traced the worn edge as if the cloth still remembered the hands that had made it.

"Help me, St. Jude," she whispered in Quechua, because her grandmother had taught her the words in Quechua and she had never once tried them in anything else.

Patron of lost causes.

Her gaze remained fixed on the cracked ceiling above her cot.

"Get me out of here. Take me home."

And then, most nights, the other thing. That Guillermo would stop looking at her. She had no word for the way he did it and she did not try for one. She asked for it to stop, in the same breath as the rest, the way you ask for rain.

This was not a child begging into an empty room. Julia had been at this since she was old enough to kneel, and she was already good at it. There were things in that house that came when she spoke and went when she told them to go.

She did not think of it as power. She had never been given a word for it. She thought of it the way you think of your own hands.

But she knew.

It wasn't her hands.

The silence afterward was total. She went on anyway, laying the words down one at a time, stones toward home.

It was the only work in that house that nobody had assigned her. It was the one thing that was hers.

She thought no one was listening. *I have never once found a way to tell her how wrong she was.*



Julia learned to read the house by sound, and by the other thing, the one that had no name.

She knew the creak of the board outside the bathroom, the particular one that meant standing and not passing. She knew which nights Guillermo lingered near the kitchen long after his mother had gone up, calling for her to bring him something when there was no one else awake to hear him ask. She knew, some evenings, before he called.

One night, he caught the door before she could close it.

Not the bathroom. The narrow pantry off the kitchen, where she had gone to put away the last of the dishes.

He said nothing at first. He looked at her the way he always did, which was longer than looking requires. There was mud on the floor she had done twice that day, and she looked at that rather than at his face. He had gotten the braces in the spring. When he smiled she could hear his tongue move against the wire.

He asked whether she wanted to sit with him a while, since everyone else was asleep.

Julia said she had chores.

He did not move.

She said it again, louder, then ducked under his arm and slipped past him before he could decide whether to allow it.

The dish towel was still balled in her fist when she reached her cot.

After that she learned the floorboards better than he did. She timed her trips to the bathroom for the sound of his door closing. On the evenings he stayed in the kitchen she went hungry rather than walk past him. When his calls came late she did not answer, and folded herself into whatever corner of the house lay furthest from his voice: under the bed, in the linen closet, anywhere small enough that no one would think to look.

Some nights at the window she wanted to go through it and not care what was underneath. Then her grandmother's voice came up in her, low and certain. "You are the mountain's daughter." Her spine straightened before she had decided to let it.



In April, fourteen months after she came down, after a beating that went past the bookkeeping into something else, Julia's fists came up without instruction.

She was small for her age. It made no difference.

The anger had been sitting in her chest with nowhere to go, and it went now, all of it, and she struck hard enough to send Señora Viento back against the doorframe with a hand to her cheek and no expression under it.

The scream came after. Julia did not stay for it.

She went down the stairs and out into the street with the cold biting through her thin dress and the sound chasing her, and she went the way she was sent on errands because it was the only way she knew, and she did not stop, and she could not stop, and somewhere in the third block she let herself think of the mountains, not as something lost behind her but as something she might still be walking toward.

She passed a park entrance.

A figure sat on a bench in the shadow, watching her, tracking her.

She saw moonlight on his braced teeth and was already swinging wide when his hand closed on her wrist. He did not stand. He pulled, and she came.

His other hand clamped over her mouth, and it was wet, and it smelled like the floors.

He was there because he was there most nights, and she came down the one street she knew, and that is all it was.

Fear came up through her and her body started the work it knew: going rigid, going small, going elsewhere and leaving the body to be dealt with.

Then the fear was taken from her.

I am going to be careful here, because this is the part that matters and I am the only one who saw it. It was not courage. Courage gets made out of what a person has, and Julia at that moment had nothing to make it from. It was not her grandmother's voice. It was not, and I have checked, anything of hers at all. This was a taking. The fear went out of her the way water goes out of a wrung cloth, and it did not go slowly, and it did not go because she asked.

Something reached in, removed it, left the space behind it empty and level, and did not explain itself. Not then. Not since.

I have watched ten thousand mortals meet violence in the dark. Most of them are attended. Almost none of them know it. She was attended by something that does not report to me, and I have never been told its business, and I have stopped expecting to be.

What she had, where the fear had been, was information. He was still sitting. His sandaled feet were under her and his face was level with her shoulder, and she saw both things at once, as she saw which boards to skip. She drove her heel down onto his toes. His grip broke. She swung her elbow into his mouth and the yell that came out of him was higher than his size.

He was still bent over his own blood when a voice came out of the dark behind her, low and even, observing that the police were already on their way from across the park and asking whether he meant to be here when they arrived. The man went. First walking. Then running.

Her rescuer was tall, and that was the whole of what she could ever say about him. Afterward, when she tried for his face, there was only the sensation of standing out of the wind.

She never saw what I saw. When he turned, the streetlamp laid his shadow across the grass, and the shadow had wings. He showed them to no one. Not to the girl, not to the man bleeding on the bench, not to anyone breathing on that street. But a shadow tells what it falls from, and I know wings when I see them. I did not know him. I have made inquiries. They have not been answered.

She turned to him and found the only word she had. "Tío."

Uncle. Yet, no claim of blood, and she would have known that. It is the word you hand a man you have decided to trust because you

have run out of alternatives. He understood it. He nodded once and walked into the dark, and the dark closed over him without a sound.

She knew she should leave that park and keep going. Instead she lay down in it, curled at the foot of a tree near where he had stood, and could not have said why, except that the ground there still felt as though it belonged to somebody.



Julia woke shivering, damp sunk into her bones, the sun coming weak and gray through the trees. She pushed herself upright and brushed the dirt and leaves off her thin dress.

She had nowhere to go, yet she knew exactly where she was going.

She had decided it nights ago, flat on her back with her eyes on the cracked ceiling. She listened to the house. The things in it answered her, and she listened to them.

She had lain awake for weeks planning to walk into a station and tell them. She would not do that now. The police were meant to keep people safe and free. Usually people with money. Not people like her.

Her Heavenly Father and the angels would free her instead, and show her the road home in good time. The thought settled over her with the same quiet her grandmother brought into her dreams.

Elias was in the tanneries. She did not know which one, or how far, or what she would do when she got there. She knew what part

of the city smelled of hides, because everyone did, and she knew he was in it, and that had always been enough.

Two policemen came up the path from the street. One of them said her name. The other said they were taking her to the station.

She made herself walk it, rather than be brought. Her bare feet shuffled raw on the cracked pavement, until the doors of the station rose in front of her. The lights inside were cold. She stepped through.

She did not know that Señora Viento had been awake since two in the morning. She did not know that the woman had walked into this same building at half past six, in navy with every hair in place, and filed a report about a servant girl who had stolen from her and run, and had been thanked for her trouble, and had been asked to wait in case the girl turned up. She did not know that the girl always turns up.

Julia did not walk into that station to make an accusation. She walked into one.

They put her in a rigid metal chair in a room colder than the street had been.

She had decided against the station. The words did not seem to care. She had built them on her cot in the dark, when the truth was simple and she had lived inside it long enough to know its shape by heart, and they followed her through the doors anyway.

But there is a difference between knowing a thing and saying it to two strangers in uniform, in a building that smells like nothing you recognize, in a language that is not quite the one you think in. She opened her mouth and the practiced words were gone, and what was left were fragments that connected to nothing: the work, a hand, a door that locked from the outside.

She gave them what she could, then less than that, and then she found she had stopped, hands folded in her lap, watching the pen instead of the officers. A girl who says too much to people with power is a girl asking to be corrected by it. She had paid for that lesson and she was not going to pay for it twice.

She did not tell them about the park. *I have turned that over for a long time. The park and the pantry had become one category in her, filed under a single heading, and she already knew what happens to a girl who opens that file in front of adults. There was a second reason too, which she could not have named. The park was the one thing in fourteen months that had ended well, and she was not going to hand it to two people in uniform and watch them decide what it was.*

She had been corrected before. Not by these two. But by enough people, in enough rooms, that the lesson had become hers without anyone needing to repeat it: that a girl from Soto Pampa, eleven years old, with no papers and no money, does not get to be believed simply for telling the truth. Belief happened to other people. People with someone behind them. Julia had a grandmother in the ground, a brother somewhere in this city who did not know she was in it, and a father who, she had been told, had known what he was signing. She did not know how to explain any of that to Officer Díaz. She let the silence finish the sentence she could not.

At first she thought they believed her. Officer Díaz leaned forward, her features softening into something like concern, her pen moving steadily across the page, though there was less to write than she seemed to have expected.

Officer García stood nearby with his arms crossed, watching her with the particular patience of a man who has filled out this form

before. Julia had not moved the hair out of her eye since she sat down, and the absence of that gesture caught on him before he could place why.

His daughter did that.

He did not know why the girl's hair caught on him. I will tell you what he could not have. Manuela was nine, and when her mother's voice rose in the kitchen she went still and small inside herself, her own loose bang falling forward, and she let it stay, as if she would rather see the world through a curtain than be seen seeing it.

García had always taken it for a habit. A kid thing. The kind of detail you notice only because you love someone enough to notice everything. It had never occurred to him that it was something a child does when she is afraid of being looked at.

"Take your time," Díaz said, gently, as you might coax a stray.

Julia did not take her time. She said only, "She told my father I could go to school," so quietly that Díaz had to lean in, and then nothing else. A tear slid down her cheek and she did not wipe it. Drawing attention to her own crying had always made things worse than staying still.

The door opened without a knock.

A woman stepped in, tall, taking her time in a way that made the room smaller. Her heels struck the tile with a confidence neither officer could match, and the notebook in her hand was already open. García's arms came uncrossed before he seemed to decide to move them.

"Lucía Ferrer," she said, giving the name as someone who expects it to have been recognized already. "*Diario Sur*. I'm told this station has a girl in custody. Trafficking complaint?"

Díaz's pen stopped moving. "There's no complaint filed." She had begun to say something else and thought better of it midway. "This is a private domestic matter."

"There's a girl crying in an interview room, and I've spent three weeks filing complaints of my own about men in stations like this one. So you'll understand if I find the timing interesting."

She said no more, and appeared to think no more was required, and she would have left it there.

Her paper had run its first piece two Sundays before, careful and unnamed, sourced to officers with knowledge of internal operations. Upstairs, two captains and several men whose names never appeared on anything had read it over coffee and gone on with their morning.

Díaz went back to her form. García looked at the reporter as a man looks at rain falling on someone else's street, and smiled.

The smile was what did it.

"Four girls since the summer," Ferrer said. "South of Chorrillos. The youngest was nine." She turned a page without needing to. "Your captain calls it a coastal matter because the sand is not his jurisdiction."

"You have no power here, señorita." García said it almost kindly. "Write whatever you like."

"I will. And one of these mornings a man is going to walk in here with mud to his ankles and nobody will have written anything down."

Nobody answered her. Díaz's pen had stopped again and she did not seem aware of it.

Julia's hands stayed folded in her lap. She did not look up, and she did not look at the door, and nothing at all happened in her

face. The night before she had put her elbow through a boy's mouth in a park and left him bleeding on a bench, and she was the only person in that building who knew it, and she had already decided that she was going to stay the only one.

Ferrer crouched, bringing herself level with the chair, her voice gentler than it had been. "What's your name?"

"Julia," Díaz said quickly, before Julia could answer for herself. "Señorita, this is an active matter, you cannot be in here."

"I asked the girl." Ferrer did not look up. "Julia. What happened to you?"

Julia's eyes went to Díaz, then García, then the door, as if Señora Viento might already be standing in it. She said nothing. Another tear followed the first, and Ferrer saw this one, and the professional distance dropped out of her face for a second before she caught it and put it back.

"It's all right," Ferrer said, quieter. "You don't have to say anything you don't want to."

"That's enough." García stepped between them, not touching her, close enough that the message was plain. "We're handling it. We'll bring in the employer, hear her side, follow procedure. There's no story here, Señorita Ferrer. A domestic dispute."

He delivered it like a bus schedule, already certain of the answer.

"A domestic dispute," Ferrer repeated, flat, and wrote it down anyway.

Díaz did not look up from her form. "If there's exploitation, it goes in the report."

"It always goes in the report," García agreed pleasantly, and the word report sat in the room like a coin at the bottom of a well.

"Unless it doesn't," Díaz murmured, just to García, in the way people talk over the head of someone who does not count.

Ferrer's pen kept moving. She did not sit. She did not leave either.

A man appeared in the doorway, lean, in a gray suit that cost more than everything else in the room, a leather portfolio under one arm. Ferrer's paper kept him for exactly this kind of morning. Behind him a second man lifted a camera, not to his eye, just far enough to be seen.

Díaz stood up. She had not stood for the reporter.

"Lucía." The man in the suit said it quietly, almost apologetically. "The Captain will see us now."

Ferrer closed her notebook without hurrying, as one closes something she intends to reopen. She looked once more at Julia, then at Díaz, then at García, and let her gaze rest on him a beat longer than it needed to.

"That was fast," she said to the lawyer, though her eyes had not left García. "Tell him I'm still asking the same questions I was asking yesterday."

She followed the two men out. The photographer swept the room once before he turned to go.

The door fell shut. Nobody spoke.

Díaz sat back down, set down her pen, and pressed her fingers to her temple. García glanced at the closed door as if to confirm it would stay that way, then crossed and turned the lock.

They did not have to send for Señora Viento. She had been in a chair by the front desk since before Julia was brought in, her purse on her knees, and García stepped out and came back with her inside a minute.

She swept in, the tailored navy fitted to her thin frame, the bun drawn so tight it dared anyone to see her as less than in control. Her gold-ringed fingers tightened on the clasp of her purse, the only outward sign that she felt the room looking at her.

Her gaze settled on Julia, briefly. Even here, surrounded by uniforms, Julia felt the promise in it. Not a threat exactly. A schedule.

"Officers. 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 Díaz with a calm, calculated smile. "From her father, may he rest in peace. He entrusted her to me to give her a better life. You see, she comes from a very poor family in the sierra, and I have cared for her as my own."

Julia's head came up.

Here is the thing I have never been able to file properly, and I have had a long time to try. Señora Viento buried a living man in a police station, in front of his daughter, to close the last door in the building. She had never met him. She did not need to. She had worked out, correctly, that a dead father is a simpler object than a live one, and that nobody in that room would check.

Díaz opened the letter and studied it, her brow furrowing. Julia's heart dropped. She knew what it said before the officer read it out.

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

"He's alive. He's in Soto Pampa. He didn't write that. He can't write."

Nobody moved. Díaz's pen stayed where it was.

Then Señora Viento sighed, as a woman does who has explained this before. "He dictated it to the parish priest, of course. The poor man couldn't hold a pen. Half the sierra signs that way. Surely the officers know this." A small pause, perfectly weighted. "And the child has been told about her father. More than once. She does not accept it. I don't press her."

She did not raise her voice. She reversed a true sentence and a false one inside four seconds, and the room went with her, because the room had been going with her since half past six.

Díaz looked at Julia, and something gave in her face, and then she looked away and the professional mask came back. "Her story is compelling. But without hard evidence."

They did not believe her, or they did and it was not going to matter. From where Julia sat those looked identical, and I will not pretend she was wrong about that.

"Sit down, Julia," Díaz said, not unkindly, though Julia had never stood. It was a thing she said in this room, to people in that chair, and she said it without looking.

Señora Viento shook her head, disappointed, and made sure the room could see it. "You see what I mean. She is ungrateful. I took her in, and this is how she repays me. Lies and trouble. I only want what's best for the girl."

García looked at the hair still hanging over Julia's eye, and thought of Manuela going quiet at the kitchen table, and for a moment he did not move at all.

Then he stepped forward, took the letter from Díaz, and inspected it himself, tilting his head. "The hand is decent. It isn't

notarized. Do you have anything else? Adoption papers. Proof of guardianship."

The smile faltered, briefly, before she recovered it. "She is like family. There's no need for all this paperwork." A dismissive hand. "But you have the letter. Her father trusted me."

Díaz leaned back and exchanged a glance with García. "Julia. Are you telling us your father did not write this letter?"

"It's not him," Julia said, so softly the words barely made it across the table. Nothing else. She had learned, somewhere in the last year, that the more she said the more there was to be punished for later, and the woman sitting three feet away would remember every word of it.

"Enough of this drama," Señora Viento said, sharpening. "The child is confused. She misses her family, I understand that, but she doesn't see how much I have done for her. I feed her, I clothe her, I put a roof over her head. Without me she'd have nothing."

García sighed heavily and handed the letter back. "We're sorry for the trouble, ma'am. You can take her home."

I have filed a great many reports on the moment a door closes. This one closed quietly and stayed closed, and nobody in that room was punished for it, then or afterward.

Julia did not shriek. She did not run for García's arm. She sat very still, gripping the edge of the chair until her knuckles whitened, and looked at him with an expression he would remember for years without ever being able to say what was in it.

"Please," she said. Just that.

García did not meet her eyes. "I'm sorry. We can't do anything without more proof."

Díaz avoided her too, packing up the notebook. Señora Viento took Julia's arm with a firm, possessive grip, her nails finding the skin, and steered her toward the door.

"Thank you, officers. I'll take her back now."

Julia's knees buckled as the hand clamped and pulled. The certainty that had carried her here went out from under her all at once. The mountains were impossibly far again, and the grip on her arm was the only real thing in the world.



Guillermo was in the front room when they came back. His lower lip was split and swollen out of shape, and he held the newspaper in front of him without turning it. He looked up, took in his mother's face and the girl's bare feet, and looked down again. He said nothing. He was not going to be able to say anything, and both of them knew it, and his mother stood between them and did not know it.

That night Julia heard the board outside the bathroom at ten past eleven. She lay still with her eyes open until it went quiet.

That is how she understood she was home.

The beatings resumed. Julia bent and did not break. She kept her grandmother's words folded and unspent, through days that ran out past the end of themselves and nights of quiet crying into a thin mattress.

She thought often of her grandmother's hands, rough and warm, pressing dough into bread, working a comb through her hair before bed. Those were her refuge when the sharp words

cut too deep and her body ached from the day. Stay strong, mi niña, her grandmother had said the day she left. You are the mountain's daughter.

There was an arithmetic to it now. Julia learned the value of a swept floor, a folded sheet, a meal served before it was asked for. Each one bought an hour in which the hand stayed at the side instead of rising. She kept a tally without numbers, only a feeling in her chest that told her when she had earned enough quiet to risk sitting still a moment, and when she had not. On the mornings she guessed wrong she paid before noon.

On the mornings she guessed right she sat by the window with the hem of her dress in her hands. She used to imagine, sitting there, that somebody out in the world already knew her name and was walking toward it. She had stopped. She could not have said which week the imagining ended, only that it had, the way a candle does not announce the moment it goes out.

She still prayed. Not as she had before the station, when each word was a stone laid toward home and she believed the road was being built somewhere. Now she said the words as she swept the floors, because they were hers to do, and knelt on the same splintered boards, and asked St. Jude for the same things in the same Quechua, and expected nothing back.

And the things in the house still came when she spoke. That did not stop. It has never stopped. What stopped was her belief that it meant anything, which is a different loss and a heavier one, and I have watched grown men of my own order sustain it and go to pieces.

She counted what she had asked for and what had come.

She had asked the police for help, and they had written things down and given her back. She had asked with her whole face,

once, and a man had looked at her as if he recognized something, as if for a minute she were somebody's daughter and not another item in his morning, and then it closed, and he was sorry, and she was in Señora Viento's grip before the sun went down.

Sometimes she remembered the station and felt a coldness that had nothing to do with what happened in it. The floorboard feeling. Standing and not passing. She had carried it into that building without knowing and it had not left her the whole time she sat in the metal chair, as if the station were a house too, one where she could not tell which doors were unlocked, or for whom. She had no words for any of it. She only knew she would not go back.

She had asked St. Jude every night since her grandmother taught her the words, and could not point to one thing in her life that had arrived because of it. The saint of lost causes. She understood the name better now.

He is not the saint who finds what is lost. He is the saint you are given when everyone else has stopped listening, so the words have somewhere to go.

She prayed that night anyway. She no longer watched the road.

I am Chief Prefect of Guardian Oversight. I file what I witness and I am not asked for my opinion. What I witnessed in those months was a child laying stones in the dark toward a road that was, at that moment, being built from the other end, by hands she would not meet for another season.



Word travels strangely where the powerless have nothing else to trade. A neighbor's cook, who had once worked beside Julia's grandmother, caught the name in October when whispers about the sierra girl went through the market stalls near Señora Viento's house. She sent for Elias.

He had been looking since March, when a man down from Uranmarca found him in a tannery in San Juan de Lurigancho and told him two things in the same breath: that their grandmother was in the ground since November, and that his sister had been taken to Lima by a man with a folder. Elias walked out of the tannery that afternoon and did not go back. He went to every parish and every station in the city with a name, a description, and no papers of any kind.

He had already been to García's station. He came in June, and García did not go to the cabinet. There was no record, he said, and no report, and no girl, and Elias believed him, being a man who believed men in uniform when they said no.

Lucía Ferrer never got her story. The paper ran two further pieces and then it ran none, and nothing upstairs moved. What she got instead was small, and she never knew she had it. For months she went on putting questions to García in cafés he chose, and one of them she put to him more than once, because she was not a woman who let a thing go: what had become of the girl from the sierra.

He had no answer. That was the trouble. She kept asking a man who could not answer, and a question you cannot answer does not

leave you. It goes and stands in the hallway outside the bathroom and does not pass.

When Elias came back in November, García was at the front desk. Elias did not recognize him. He had stood in front of a great many uniforms since March and had not looked at one of their faces, and he told it all again from the beginning, the name and the description and the man with the folder, exactly as he had told it in June.

García knew him before he finished the first sentence.

He listened to all of it and wrote nothing down. Then he told Elias to wait outside, and came out ten minutes later on his own cigarette break, and gave him the address on the street, off the book, with nothing on paper and nothing in the file, in a manner both men could deny afterward and did.



The door opened on a Tuesday afternoon.

She had swept the front room that morning without being told. She could not have said why. I could, and I am not going to.

"Julia!"

She was already standing when he said it.

Then she saw him. Her brother in the doorway, older than she remembered, his face drawn, his clothes dusty from a walk across a city he could not afford to cross any other way. His eyes found her before anything else in the room, as they always had when they were small and she had hidden somewhere just to see how long he would take. He did not look at Señora Viento. He did not

look at the house. He looked at Julia, as if she were the only thing in the building he had come to see.

"Elias?"

"I've come for you, hermanita."

Señora Viento was already moving. "Who are you, and what do you think you are doing in my house?" She put a hand on Julia's shoulder and gripped. "This child is in my care. You have no right to be here."

Elias's hands were trembling at his sides. He kept his voice level. "I'm her brother. I only ask to see her. To know she's well."

"She belongs to me. Your family left her in my charge. I have the papers to prove it."

"Papá's alive," Julia said.

She said it to Elias, not to the woman. She said it as a question. It was the first time in ten months she had said the word out loud.

"He's alive, Julia." His voice went on her name and came back.

"I don't know anything more than that. I wasn't there."

Whatever Señora Viento said next, neither of them heard the end of it. Julia twisted out from under the hand. Elias caught her wrist and pulled her past the older woman, his shoulder taking the doorframe, and they were down the steps and into the street with the scream following them and neither of them looking back.

She had asked for exactly this, in the same words, in the same language, every night for twenty-one months. I make no claim about the mechanism. I am setting down the sequence, because I was there for all of it, and because somebody should.



Señora Viento went back to the station on Thursday.

She wore the navy. She had a fresh complaint and a name and a story about a laborer who had entered her home and removed a child in her legal care, and she was very good, and she had every reason to expect the same result she had received in April.

García took the complaint himself. He listened to all of it. He went to the cabinet, and came back, and told her, with the particular patience of a man who has filled out this form before, that there was no report on file. No April report. No missing servant. No girl.

She asked him to look again. He looked again.

He had burned it on the Tuesday, in the yard, with the incinerator men watching and not caring. That was the second thing he did, and it cost him considerably more than the first, and he did it anyway, and he never once told Ferrer, who would have wanted it, and never told Díaz, who would have understood it, and never told his daughter, who was the reason.

There was no consequence. Nobody was disciplined. Nobody was transferred. Two years later he made sergeant. I record it exactly as it happened, without a moral, because in that city that is how it happened, and it is still how it happens, and the arrangement is older than the city.

Señora Viento went home. She did not come again.



Elias took Julia to a convent in the city center and explained that he could not care for her and needed her safe. The sisters took her in, their voices gentle, their eyes kind, everything the opposite of what she had learned to survive. He came on Sundays. He was saving for two fares.

Peace did not arrive all at once. In the first weeks Julia flinched when a door closed hard, and ate her meals facing the room with her back to the wall. Sister Rosa noticed and said nothing about it, only began leaving an extra blanket folded at the foot of the bed each night without explanation, until one evening Julia understood it was simply meant to be hers, with no conditions attached to it.

The small things worked on her slowly. A bowl of soup that came without being earned first. A girl her own age, Marisol, who showed her how to braid palm leaves into little crosses and laughed, without cruelty, when Julia's first attempt fell apart. The sisters never raised their voices, not even when the younger children broke things or cried in the night, and after enough days of watching this Julia began to test it. She dropped a clay pot on purpose and braced. Nobody struck her. Nobody so much as lifted a hand. She cried harder that afternoon than she had in months and it took her a long time to understand why.

They gave her a gray convent dress. The old one, with its faded flowers, she folded under her mattress and took out sometimes at night and put back.

In December she turned twelve. Sister Rosa put a candle in a piece of bread at supper and the whole table sang, badly, and Julia sat through it with her hands in her lap and her face carefully still, and afterward went out to the cloister and stood in the dark until she could come back in.

By the time the weather turned she had stopped sleeping with her back to the wall. She spent her days in the gardens or reading with the other girls, her anger softening into something she could carry, something that no longer needed to live in her fists.



She was kneeling in the rows, working a stubborn weed loose from around a tomato stake, when a shadow fell across her and stayed.

She looked up expecting a girl and found a dog. Big, calm, the color of dry earth, watching her work with his head tilted. He had been at the gate the morning Victoria arrived and nobody had ever established where he came from. The sisters fed him scraps at the kitchen door and pretended it was against the rules.

Behind him stood a girl Julia took for a few years older. Her eyes were odd in a way Julia could not name, too still, like water with no wind on it, and they did not follow her hands while she worked. She stood there while Julia pulled, and Julia pulled twice more, and the second time the stem snapped.

"You're doing that wrong."

Before Julia could answer she had dropped to her knees in the dirt, heedless of the skirt, run two quick fingers down the stem to the root, and worked another one free without snapping it.

Julia looked at the one she had broken and she said something over it, very quietly, and held it out.

The girl took the plant and smiled.

Julia stayed where she was.

Her name was Victoria. She talked like the convent fountain ran, steady and a little too fast, filling silences Julia had not noticed she was keeping. The dog was called Commander and he was never anywhere she was not.

Julia never asked why she was there. Every other girl in that garden had asked her inside a week, and Julia never did, not once in four months, and Victoria noticed it on the first day and did not mention it for thirty years.

I want to say something about how that girl moved, because the obvious explanation is the wrong one. Victoria went through the world as though it could not surprise her. That was not courage and it was not the blindness. Everyone in the convent took her for older. She was three weeks younger than Julia.

She had already been shown the worst thing the world had available, in her own house, by a man who is still alive, and everything after it was arithmetic. I am not going to tell you what happened to her. It is hers. I will say only that when she felt down a tomato stem for the root, she was doing the same thing she did with people, and she was faster at it than any adult in the convent.

"Where are you from?" Julia asked, days later, in the shade of a tree, weaving flower crowns, Commander stretched between them with his chin on Victoria's foot.

"A village up in the sierra. You wouldn't know it." Victoria laughed. "Uranmarca."

Julia's fingers stopped mid-braid. "That's my district. Soto Pampa, up past the ridge."

"Soto Pampa." Victoria said it slowly, tasting it. "I knew it. First day, in the garden. You talk like home. The Quechua sits under your Spanish like a stone under water." She turned toward Julia without quite arriving. "Maybe we're family."

Julia looked down at the crown in her hands and did not answer.

Victoria, who could not leave a silence alone, filled that one too, all valleys and road names and what the air is like up there in the mornings. She did not seem to mind, when the bell called them in, that Julia had said nothing at all.



She came back to it a week later, and this time she had a route.

"There's a truck," she said. "My mother's cousin drives as far as Andahuaylas, twice a month, and he owes our family more than he's ever going to pay. From Andahuaylas it's two days walking and Commander knows every meter of it. He was born up there." A pause, one beat too long for the sentence it sat in. "And there's a house."

Julia noticed nothing. There was no reason she should have.

I noticed. There is a house, she said. Not my house. Not my father's house. That girl was twelve years old and she had already learned to build a true sentence that carries a lie on its back, and she built that one in the time it takes to breathe, and she did it because she wanted

a sister on that road and knew she would not get one if she said what was standing in the doorway of it.

*Her father is dead. He was killed for the gold under his floor by **the** man who is now her mother's husband, and it is her mother she is going back for, and she has not mentioned her mother once in four months except to place a cousin who drives a truck.*

"Who's in the house?" Julia asked.

"My mother." Victoria's face did not change at all. "And a man."

She went back to the flower crowns after that, and talked about the road, and Julia let her.



That night Julia lay on her cot and looked at the ceiling. Whole, this one. No cracks. She had made her decisions under a broken ceiling for so long that she hardly knew how to think under a good one.

She weighed it as she weighed everything. The blanket that was hers with no conditions. The soup that came unearned. Marisol's laugh, the garden rows, doors that closed without making her flinch. Sister Rosa, who had never once asked her a question she was not ready for. Elias on Sundays.

Against all that: the mountains. The smell of the earth after rain. A road she did not know how to travel. And on the far end of it, a man on a ridge with a bad hip, who had either been lied to or had known exactly what he was signing, and there was no way on this earth to learn which one without walking there and looking at his face.

That was the whole of it. Counted honestly, staying won. She could see that it won.

She prayed while she counted. Not before, not after. The words went alongside, as they always did now, stones laid down while her mind did its other work. She did not ask for a sign. She had stopped asking for anything that could be pointed to. She laid the words toward home, the same words, and let them sit next to the counting, and somewhere before she slept the two of them came to an agreement she had not been consulted about.

I was present for that. I am not permitted to tell you which of them moved, and I would not be believed if I did.

In the morning she knew, and could not have said whether the counting or the words had decided it. She thought of Victoria saying Uranmarca under the tree, as easily as saying pass the thread. Years of stones, small and unanswered. Perhaps this was where the road came out. She held the thought as she had once held the hem of her dress, knowing it proved nothing, keeping it anyway.



She found Victoria at the fountain before breakfast, Commander's tail going before Julia had said a word.

"We're not family," Julia said. "I asked Sister Rosa to write to the parish. My grandmother knew every household in Uranmarca and not one of them is ours."

"I know." Victoria turned her face toward the sound. "I had her write in January. I've known since January."

"Then why did you ask?"

"I wasn't asking whether we were." Victoria said it as the most obvious thing in the world, and to her it was. "I was asking whether we would be."

There is no word for what those two did at that fountain, in Quechua or in Spanish or in any of the tongues I was issued. Blood was not consulted. Blood was not present. I have watched armies swear to one another with a god standing in the room to witness it, and I have watched those oaths come apart inside a decade over money and precedence and who was owed what.

I have also watched two girls in a garden, with no god in attendance, no priest, no paper, and no advantage to either of them, agree to be family on the grounds of nothing whatsoever except that each had decided the other one would do. Of the two arrangements I can tell you which one held. I have been watching it hold for a very long time.

This is the family of man. It does not run on blood and it has never once needed my authorization.

Julia was quiet a while. Then she reached up and pushed the hair back out of her left eye, and held it there with two fingers while she spoke, so that she could be seen speaking.

"I have to tell my brother."

"Bring him," Victoria said.

"Okay." Julia let her hand fall. "Let's go home."



That is where I am supposed to stop. The record ends when the subject leaves the jurisdiction, and she left it that week, and everything after belongs to another file and another officer.

I am going to break something. I have been warned. I know what it costs.

There is a woman she has not met yet whose daughter will matter more than any of us are prepared for. There is an afternoon on the road out of Andahuaylas that I have never been able to write down correctly. And there is a place in the mountains where a great many things get settled that were left open long before Julia was born.

It is more than I am allowed and less than I want to say, and I have been carrying the difference for a long time.

What I will say is that nobody in the convent understood what left it that week.

They counted two girls and a dog and a brother who had been saving for two fares, and they were kind about it, and they were wrong. Everyone who came after wrote it down as the day a frightened child was taken in hand. I have read their accounts. I corrected none of them, because I was not asked, and because there is a kind of person you cannot tell anything to.

She was not rescued. She was answered. The road was hers, and the answer was hers, and she never let it fall again.

La Traviata

There once was a heartbroken traveler, restless and unmoored, who wandered the City of Glass: transparent, endless, and cold. His youth had been filled with joy, but life eventually calcified into burdens and disillusion.

Now he drifted along a nearby stream that ran through the Valley of Butterscotch Chrysanthemums, a hapless crayon-blue sky skirting the horizon above him. He felt slightly blue, muttering ancient banterings that slowly tensed his body and edged his demeanor toward tangerine red. The water's fleeting ripples and enticing gurgles offered him hollow relief, pleasures that promised more than they gave. All the while, he searched earnestly for a remedy for his pain: a path, a prophetic voice, a drink to forget, a miracle. All eluded him; of those he tried, none proved true.

He was no longer a traveler but a meanderer, circling himself.
Stuck.

Frozen.

He pressed against the fracture that muted his essence. The fracture pressed so hard that in his stillness, he nearly fell into a slumber. A beauty, who had happened into this place, woke him,

soon becoming his source of hope and pleasure, and became his betrothed. Even she grew bitter due to her love's inability to move beyond the dome. She encouraged and supported the Meanderer. In desperation and heartache, she died in his arms of boredom.

The hunt for the exit halted; he acknowledged his failure with resignation. Thus he abandoned the search for the path; with his love gone, instead of healing, he allowed these and the sorrows of others he did not know, to seep in. Their tears became his own, an omen for the living.

The traveler's sorrows overwhelmed him, and his gathering tears rushed downward to become a great lake, threatening to drown him and all who lived in the Valley.

No one knew why he returned to his quest. He had invited death to his bed. But as suddenly as he had resigned, hands on hip and chest puffed out, he began to search for an escape again, a way from that which held him captive, a door leading to freedom. He searched for a crack, a chink in the armor, the slightest exposed breach: an exit for the sake of his progeny.

For their sake, he removed his hand from his side and placed it on his plow. He could see it, almost feel it, but could never cross its threshold; his heart was in the land his feet touched. 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 circled like a serpent, indifferent, consuming itself. The dome held true from above, complete with the walls.

One evening, as the Meanderer 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, Travelers!"

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.

"Gold is the answer," said the Earth.

"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 all. He clapped his hands, and the scene dissolved for a moment. With nothing left to distract, he looked on. One monk, restless, 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 exasperatedly, 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, watching 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 about freeing the siren, whom he wanted as his new bride, before he could leave. 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.