

# The Untellable Story

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# Abstract

## *The Untellable Story*

Several centuries after a double catastrophe brought about by human attempts to intervene in both the effects of climate change and the effects of Alzheimer's disease, the human race is left largely without the ability to tell stories. Annabelle, born a Storyteller into a world hostile to her ability, is forced to hide her identity to protect her life. When her secret is discovered, she must flee the village of her birth and enter a shadow world in which the few others who share her power plot to dominate.

## *Twice Upon a Time: Starting Over After the Apocalypse*

This exegesis explores the subgenre of YA postapocalyptic fiction, discussing the way in which the apocalypse has been adopted as a metaphorical rendering of the turmoil of adolescence and as a "clean slate" upon which new stories can be written. Moving to an examination of the role of storytelling in building and maintaining cultures, societies and individuals, the exegesis interweaves critical thinking on story from narratology, psychology and other fields with an analysis of how concepts of storytelling are reflected through the creative component of this thesis.

# Statement of Originality

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Tim Sinclair, August 2016

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# 1/

An icy hand dragged me from my dreams. Somebody was whispering into my ear.

“Annabelle, wake up! You have to wake up!”

“...Dafydd?”

His hand abruptly left my shoulder, but his urgent whispering continued. I forced myself to try to wake up and rolled over to face him. He leant over my bed, his body outlined against the low-burning fire at the end of the hall. He was shaking. All around us our cousins slept.

“You have to go,” he said. “Now. You have to go. You have to leave.”

“...what?”

“I heard them,” he said, and then stopped, glancing quickly over his shoulder. “Come on. Now. We can talk outside.”

I heaved myself out and wrapped my cloak over my nightclothes, picked up my boots from the foot of the bed. He was halfway down the hall already, moving silently between the sleeping bodies. I followed.

A tiny arm flopped into my path. “Up time?” muttered Rachael, from a tangle of blankets. She was still getting over the autumn fever, still drifting in and out of her days. As I was one of the oldest cousins, the Workmother had

assigned me to look after her. I hushed her gently and smoothed down her bedding, then followed Dafydd to the end of the hall.

As soon as I shut the door behind me he shoved me roughly in the back.

“That way,” he whispered. I started to turn with a sharp retort ready, but he shoved me again between the shoulder blades. “To the barn!”

I dragged on my boots and started forward slowly. Dafydd grabbed my arm and then dropped it with a shudder. He stared at me helplessly for an instant, our breath frosting and mingling in the moonlight.

“Now!” he said, and strode towards the barn. Nothing made sense. I still had the taste of Rachael’s sleepy cheek on my lips. In the end I followed. What else could I do?

He was waiting inside as I slipped through the barely-open door. He pushed it shut behind me and thrust a satchel into my hands. His hands were shaking and he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“It’s just a couple of things. It’ll help. But you have to go now.”

“What’s happening?” I couldn’t stop myself. “What’s going on? *Tell me.*”

“I heard them,” he said, staring at the hard-packed dirt between our boots. “The Headman and Father Shoma. I was fetching more wine and they didn’t hear me come back. I heard what they said about you.”

At last he met my eyes, fear and defiance shining in the gloom. “You’re a Storyteller,” he said. And then he looked away again.

Just for a moment, I had a sense of relief. Sixteen years is a long time to keep a secret. And then my world began to spin and I had to reach out for the wall of the barn. I was glad of the rough timber under my palm when Dafydd spoke next.

*“They must not be allowed to live,”* he intoned. *“They will bring destruction to the world again.”*

I knew the words, of course. We all did. But now they were being said by Dafydd, about me. He looked up again, in pain and betrayal.

“It’s me,” I said, on the verge of tears. “Please, Dafydd, it’s only me.” I grabbed his arm, refused to let go.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was sorry for everything. There was so much more that I wanted to say, but all of our time had been wrenched out from under us.

I let him go then, because I couldn’t bear how uncomfortable I was making him. I nodded my thanks.

I fled.

I walked as fast as I could along the path that led out of our village, shivering in my nightclothes despite my cloak. Dafydd’s satchel bounced on my shoulders. I made myself move, even though all I wanted to do was sink down into the mud.

It was too much to take in. Dark shapes of familiar houses loomed at me from either side of the path, and every comforting form made me realise I would never see them again. I was lost to the people under those roofs. My village was dissolving like smoke all around me, even as I stumbled through it.

The last house I had to pass was Father Shoma’s, on its rise just out of The Village proper. I slowed then, for I could not bear to have it gone so quickly. I had found home and comfort by the hearth of that house.

As I hesitated, a figure emerged from beneath the eaves. I startled violently, and then Father Shoma spoke.

“You should be gone already, my girl,” he said. His voice was harsh. Another of my kinsmen, dismissing me forever. At least he didn’t seem afraid of me. He stood close, tall, reeking of his favourite pipe smoke.

“They will hunt you. They will find you. Everything you’ve lived until now, it’s over. They will try you and find you guilty. You know what that means.”

The gallows by the well had never been used in my lifetime, but they were in no state of disrepair. Every month the Headman made a show of inspecting the trapdoor, checking the rope. *We will be ready, should the need arise.* Like so much of life in The Village, it was a ritual. I had thought it an empty one until this moment.

Father Shoma nodded, seeing that I understood.

“You know, then. Good. Truth is your ally. It is not a comfortable ally. It won’t keep you warm, or fill your belly, but it will free you.

“Tonight your truth has freed you from this place. It is not the way I would have wanted it. But if you are to survive you must do as I tell you.”

I reeled. I had never heard anyone speak the way I thought. I had known Father Shoma was a little like me, but his rich words in this moment were a gift.

He gave me complicated directions then, landmarks to watch for and hidden trails to take; ways to avoid the search party that would be on my trail as soon as the truth of what I was emerged. And then he took me in his sinewy arms and held me for a moment, something he’d never done before. I



rested my head on his chest, took a moment to draw strength from his fiercely beating heart.

“Now go. Go!” He opened his arms. “I’ll do what I can to confuse your pursuers.” I gaped at that, still not quite ready to accept my kin as my enemies. I tried to thank him, thinking for the first time of the danger he was putting himself in, but he was already urging me on.

“Go!” He said, fiercely. “Go, with the truth!”

And I ran.

Lightning illuminated the rock as I staggered down the path, and I knew this must be the landmark Father Shoma had described. Thunder exploded overhead and the rain began to come down. I scrambled around the base of the rock and collapsed under a small overhang, panting heavily. I was exhausted, but I didn’t think I’d come very far, stumbling through the storm-looming darkness.

I wrapped my cloak tightly around myself, wanting to conserve what little warmth I’d made. The ground dropped steeply away in front of me, and I was almost level with the tree tops lashing back and forth. I shuddered as the rain poured down in front of my face, and tried to push myself further back into my shelter.

I had no idea what time it was, but I realised it must have been late when I caught myself drowsing. I jerked myself fully awake. To fall asleep now would be death. I had to make myself understand that.

In need of distraction, I opened my satchel for the first time. In the bag was a pouch of dried fruit, a water bottle, some strips of dried meat, a knife. I

put a small amount of dried fruit in my mouth, forcing myself to chew slowly, and tried to imagine how Dafydd thought he could get away with the theft. The food would be easy, the bag less so, but it was virtually impossible that a missing knife would go unnoticed. If anybody asked him directly, he would have to tell them. It was the way of our people and it was the only way. I suppose he hoped nobody would ask him. I said a silent *thank you* as my body received sustenance. I tried not to imagine what would be done to him if he was discovered.

All of our lives we'd been told the Truths about the Time Before filled with fictions and lies; how something had happened that stopped us telling stories, and saved our world on the edge of its destruction.

Storytellers still appeared every once in a while. Like a horse with five legs, or a puppy that never learns to open its eyes, they were feared and despised, to be destroyed as soon as the curse showed itself.

And now I could no longer pretend. I was a Storyteller for all to see. I had no people now. I had to make my own ways. I had to make my own decisions. And here was my first. Father Shoma had told me to turn here. He could not tell outright lies the way that I could, but he could possibly evade a direct answer if the Headman asked him if he knew which way I'd run.

Could I trust Father Shoma? It was a question I didn't want to have to think about, but it was now forced upon me. I could continue along the path I'd been on which would eventually take me to the next village over, or I could take this side trail, leading, as Father Shoma had said, down towards the lowlands. He thought I'd be safer there.

Neither way seemed good. Apart from anything else I was ill-equipped to be outside for long, dressed in nothing but my cloak and my nightclothes. At least I'd had time to pull on my boots.

I stared into the night. The rain was easing now but the track I'd come down was gurgling like a creek. It led that way back to The Village, and that way on to the next village — another small world like the one from which I'd just fled.

No. I would trust Father Shoma. I hauled myself upright, chilled muscles making me unsteady. Pulling my pack over my shoulders and my hood back over my head, I stepped onto the trail.

The side trail was rough and slippery, and it made my progress along the Village Road seem like an easy walk. The rain had stopped but the night was still very dark. I slid or stumbled on every second step, my feet feeling out the ground as it fell away sharply beneath me. I was desperate now to make more distance, as the truth of my situation ground up against me, but if I slipped now I would probably break my ankle, leaving me wide open like a beetle on its back when my pursuers caught up with me. I inched down the path, with the wind whipping at the trees all around me.

I soon had to rest again. Seeing nothing around me like shelter, I simply squatted down on the path, wrapping my cloak as tightly as I could about my body. I let my head fall against my chest and closed my eyes. My legs were shaking from the constant descent, I was cold, I was tired, I was hungry. I curled in on myself and tried to make it all go away for a moment.

Balled up in my state of exhaustion, I fell into a semi-trance. Instead of sitting on my heels on an unknown mountainside, I imagined myself lying in

my nest in the hayloft with the soft whicker of the horses beneath me. I could almost smell last summer's hay in my nostrils, feel the scratch and prickle through my tunic. I'd discovered my spot when I was four years old and guarded it jealously ever since, taking great pains to cover my tracks, and keep its existence from others.

That was how Father Shoma first realised I had the curse. He was more observant than most in The Village, and he was the first to notice the small holes of time I was digging for myself. Nobody could be spared for dreaming. Nobody could be spared for *anything*, and, had I been a normal child, the Workmother or Workfather would simply have asked me where I'd been, received the answer, clouted me across the head, and sent me on to the next chore. I craved that dreaming time, however, as much as my companions seemed to crave sleep, or the sweet cakes we were given on special occasions. I needed it so much that I told stories for it. Without having any idea what I was doing, I began my life as a Storyteller.

The Workfather would ask me where I'd been, and I'd bend the truth a little. I'd been clearing stones in the top paddock. The herb garden beds had taken a little while longer to weed than he'd thought they would. Children of The Village were independent early, at least within the land we'd carved for cultivation from the forest, and there was rarely anyone to question my story. And of course, nobody would have bothered. They asked where I'd been; I told them. If I'd been normal, that would have been the end of it. If you can't tell stories, you can't lie.

I can tell stories. I build things out of my words.

## 2/

It was the first bird call that pulled me out of it. My daydream began to crumble at that jarring note, and then fell away entirely. I looked up and saw that the sky was starting to lighten. I had to move.

Leg muscles protesting, I stood up and stretched. I had no way of knowing if the people of my village would try this path, or how far behind me they might be, but I had to get further from here.

I continued down the track, my progress becoming slightly easier as the sky, low and grey, started to lighten. I was bitterly cold. The slow steps I had to take did nothing to warm me.

Down and down. The single bird call was gradually joined by others but it seemed a muted chorus. Even the birds had been cowed by the storm.

Eventually the path levelled out into a small clearing with a rain-swollen creek rushing through it. Through no conscious choice of my own, I collapsed onto the ground, having just the presence of mind to aim for a slightly drier spot. For a few minutes I simply lay there, letting the sound of water over river stones soothe me.

I dragged myself up to a sitting position and opened my satchel. In a hurried gulp I drained my water bottle, then ate some of the fruit and meat.

My supplies were now reduced almost to nothing. I added this truth to everything I now had to contend with. Death by execution. Death by starvation. Death by exposure. At least I was in no danger of dry death.

I couldn't do this much longer. I had to find a hiding place and restore what strength I could.

I unlaced my boots and hung them around my neck. I could see the path on the other side of the creek. I stooped to fill my bottle from the fast-running water, braced myself and stepped in. It was shockingly cold, and as I approached midstream the current was much stronger than I had thought. It was all I could do to keep myself upright, and several times I almost lost my balance. To slip would surely be to drown. *Death by drowning*. I managed a smile at that, as I staggered towards the bank.

On the other side I stumbled on, looking around constantly for somewhere I could take shelter. There was no good option so I chose a particularly dense patch of scrub and made my way into it. I tried to move carefully to avoid leaving traces, but my exhaustion made me clumsy. Crawling over a fallen trunk a few dozen paces off the path, I slipped and fell again. Underneath me was a thick layer of leaves and bark, and to one side a boulder provided a little shelter from the wind. It would have to do. Curling into as small a ball as possible, I pulled my cloak around me and closed my eyes. I slept instantly.

I was woken by voices. Men from my village, sounding very close. My heart hammered, and I involuntarily raised my hand to cover my mouth. My treacherous mouth, spilling story after story; the reason I lay here in fear for my life.

The voices were coming towards me, and there was nothing I could do. I lay on the ground, shivering and helpless as a baby bird, waiting for the cat's jaws.

And then they were falling away, fading into the distance.

I let out the breath I'd been holding and slowly pulled myself up. My pursuers had walked straight past without realising I was here.

What now? I couldn't know how many people had been sent to search for me. (My people, intent on my death. I pushed this aside again). I could not know if the group I'd just heard go by was the only group, or if search parties had been sent in all directions, and were scouring the mountainsides for me.

The Headman was not somebody who took his duties lightly. A village runaway would be a great shame on The Village. A runaway *Storyteller*, though, was unheard of. If the word spread along the mountains that this had been allowed to happen unchecked, our village...The Village... would receive derision and hatred. We...they...had few people to spare. I couldn't believe the Headman would authorise endless manpower for this hunt. But I also couldn't take any chances.

It was starting to get dark again. I had slept for a long time. I cursed myself, but my exhaustion was probably what had saved me. With my pursuers in front of me, though, any village I might encounter would now be warned and on the lookout.

More pressingly, however, I had to find food, and I had to find better clothes. My nightclothes were just that, and were already starting to show the strain of my exertions. What was I going to do?

First I was going to wait, and then I was going to walk. There was nothing else I could do.

I waited. I ate the last of my food. Then I got up, and pushed back through the tangle of scrub and onto the path. I continued down, slowly and carefully. There had been at least three men in the search party, and they hadn't been moving particularly quietly, but still. They were in front of me now, and it would be stupid to get caught.

I walked until the light had almost gone, with no sign of my search party. Through the tall trees above my head, the stars started to appear. I was both relieved and nervous. I couldn't take another night of pouring rain, but a clear sky meant deadly cold, and I could feel the small warmth of the day leaching away. To light a fire would be foolish.

I wrapped my arms around myself and walked on. The path was still falling, but much more gently. A light scattering of leaves brushed the hard-packed dirt. Apart from the cold, it was relatively easy travelling, even in the dark, and without the urgent drive of knowing my pursuers were behind me, I had time to wonder just where this path was taking me. I knew so little of the world outside of my village, yet I was better travelled than most. Since Father Shoma had taken me into his training, I had been to several of the villages spread out across the mountains. Birth days and death days required a Custodian to murmur the necessary Truths over the body, whether it was full of new life and surrounded by joy, or cold and still at the centre of mourning.

As the only Custodian of the mountain villages, Father Shoma's influence spread wide. In return for what he offered them, he brought trade goods back to our village: cheese or wine or bags of apples, leather goods or knives. And,



as I had quickly learned when I started to accompany him, those who wanted an extended visit made sure to include a good supply of tobacco in their payment.

We never stayed long, but I'd had time to notice the similarities between our villages, and the subtle differences. A lighter feeling here, where the harvest had been bountiful, a sadness there where autumn fever had taken more than usual. Father Shoma did not encourage me, and I soon learned to keep what I learned to myself. I started to wonder if he was afraid I would see somewhere I preferred to our village. As marriage was the sole reason a woman might leave her village, and as that option was not often taken by someone undergoing my training, I didn't see that he had much cause for alarm.

It would not be until later that I realised the truth behind his reluctance, and the deep tendrils of power and influence with which I was bound. For now, however, I had to leave these thoughts behind. I had a hard choice to make. I'd been walking more and more slowly, scared of stumbling over my pursuers in the dark, and I was freezing. Breath-frosting, bone-shaking freezing. I was so cold I caught myself half-wishing I would find my hunters, so I could sit in front of their fire and warm myself for the last time in my life. I had to find shelter and warmth, or I had to turn around and go back the way I'd come, trusting to the hill to warm me up keep me safe.

In my befuddled stupor, I slowly became aware that the forest was thinning out around me. A sense of space creeping in beneath the trees; more and more stars above me. I staggered to a stop, confused.

The forest really was opening out. Tall trees gave way to a scattering of bushes and saplings in an open field. A field, in fact, just like the one I had driven our goats to most days of my life. I was on land at the outskirts of a village.

Wary, I dropped to the ground. I huddled my knees to my chest and wrapped my cloak as tightly as I could, trying work out what to do. Somewhere around here there was a village, and if my pursuers had come this far they would have made themselves known to this village's Headman. That much at least I knew for certain. It would be a breach of courtesy for them to pass through without making the proper greetings. And that meant that they would have been put up for the night in the common hall.

I could put them out of my mind for the moment, but the cost of this peace of mind was a whole new village full of worry. I knew that the sensible plan of action would be to pass through in darkness, make the most of my lead, get as far in front as I could. But as I huddled in this unknown field, frozen to the bone, desperately tired, desperately hungry, I knew I could not be sensible.

Looking up from the ground in front of me, I saw a dark shape looming on the edge of the field. If this village was anything like where I was raised that would be an outlying feed barn or winter stock shelter. I pulled myself up and walked in that direction, moving as quietly as my frozen limbs would allow. My guess was right. As quietly as I could I pushed open the rough slab door. Not a sound from inside. Stepping cautiously forward, I moved in a few paces towards the back of the shelter, and nearly fell over what I'd been hoping to find.

The shelter was half full of sweet-smelling hay. I clambered up the loose stack towards the ceiling and dug myself a trench. Wrapping my cloak tightly around myself, I collapsed into it and then pulled layer after layer of hay over myself until only my face was uncovered. I was freezing still, but I could already feel the layers starting to trap the little heat I had left in my body. I was going to survive the night.

Then, because I'm a Storyteller, I told myself a story. I told myself I would just sleep for a little, until before sunrise, and then I would hide back in the forest when the daylight came, and work out what to do when my brain was working properly. I slept.

# 3/

When I woke, it was to the cool stare of a young man looking down at me.

“I know who you are,” he said. His eyes never left mine. Light filtered in through the cracks in the walls.

I struggled up, out of the web of sleep and hay. Sitting, I was at least on the same level as him. But I was still terrified. He knew. My people must be in his village, must have told them what I was.

I started to say something, then stopped. What could I say? There was no way out of this situation.

He knew it, too, standing there so sure. He was probably looking forward to the rewards he would receive, bringing the Storyteller in like a wild dog caught in the sheep paddock. And with that thought I was fully awake, energised with my sudden anger.

“Get away!” I shouted.

He took half a step back, but if I had hoped to frighten him off it had failed. I would have thought everyone would be a little frightened of me. I was a monster – we’d all been brought up to believe that. Made of untruth, definitely to be feared.

Maybe he didn't understand? Maybe he was like slow-witted Lachy from The Village. Maybe I could talk my way out of this yet? But then he spoke again, and I saw the intelligence in his eyes.

"I know who you are. I don't care." This startled me. "They're looking for you, the men of your village. The men of my village are looking too, now. Your Headman's set a reward."

A reward. Of course.

He leaned in towards me, searching my face, something fierce in his eyes. "You could help me."

This was the most surprising thing he'd said so far. I was desperate enough to play along.

"How?"

And then he seemed to deflate a little. His eyes lost some of their fierceness, his head sinking a little towards his chest. He wasn't as old as I had thought. Perhaps my age, perhaps a year older. It occurred to me that he was only looking down at me because of the hay underneath him.

"I... want to leave the village." He looked up, the defiance back on his face. "I have to."

"Ok..."

"And you can help me. You're on the run anyway. It would be easier if there were two of us."

I thought back over the last couple of days. It certainly would. But why would he trust me? And how could I possibly trust him?

"There was a girl like you in our village," he said, staring over my shoulder into memory. Another Storyteller? How had I not heard about her?

“She didn’t like who she’d been promised to. She... had another person who she cared about. But she’d been *promised*.” He spat out the word. “And *The laws are kept as the truth runs true.*”

Our Headman was very fond of this saying. Its repetition eased the passage of all manner of decisions.

“She ran away. Like you. It was winter. They... found her. After just two days. She was frozen to death.”

I pulled my cloak tighter around me, aware for the first time since being woken up of just how cold it still was. My action brought his eyes back to mine, but not before I saw the mix of hatred and sorrow cross his features.

I had to be very careful now. If I understood what he was saying, I might have a way out of this.

“So... they’ve told your village about me?” I asked. Prompting for what I hardly dared to hope.

“Hah! Our Headman was very sympathetic. And very quick to gloat. *Precious property! One of the Headman’s sons, eh? No daughter of our village would ever be allowed to get away from a promise.*”

It was true then, but I was still shocked at the audacity of the lie. The Headman? Him too? This needed some thinking about, but that was going to have to wait. For now, I had to deal with the situation in front of me. The boy in front of me.

“Alright,” I said. And I held out my hand, imitating the gesture I’d seen the traders do so many times. He carefully placed his palm on mine, and I got the feeling he was as new to this as I was. Callous to callous.

We touched for a second, and then he jerked his hand away, would not look me in the eye.

“Our truths have met,” I said, completing the ritual.

“Our truths have met,” he stammered.

And then he regained his composure, staring over my shoulder once more.

“Here’s what I’m going to do,” he said. “I have to do my duties today, so nobody gets suspicious. There’s men out looking for you already, so they’ll notice if I’m not around.

“At least,” bitter smile, “they’ll notice if the cattle aren’t brought in. I’ve got some supplies stowed already—things I’ve been taking for the past few months. I’ll take whatever else I can today.”

“Please,” I interrupted. “Can you get me more clothes?” I didn’t like to bond myself further, but I was desperate. He nodded.

“I’ll come back here after dark,” he said. “We’ll leave then. Nobody ever comes out this far except me. Not at this time of year.”

It was a horribly risky plan, full of all kinds of holes. And the biggest one had just occurred to me.

“What if somebody asks you?” I said. “What if somebody asks if you’ve seen me?” If they asked him directly, he’d have to tell them. It was the way of our people and the only way.

“I don’t think they will,” he said, touching his fingertips to his temple. “I don’t think anyone will ask me. I don’t think anyone will talk to me.” He dropped his hand and brought his eyes back to mine.

I nodded slowly. Doubtfully. I was in his hands. I didn’t like it at all.

“Here,” he said roughly and thrust a bag towards me. “I’ll come back after dark. Don’t leave the shelter.”

I nodded again. And abruptly he left, sliding down the hay and slamming the door of the shelter behind him. I was in his power, and I didn’t even know his name.

I sank back into my makeshift bed, mind rushing. He didn’t know what I was. I knew our Headman was ruthless, but I hadn’t realised how cunning he was as well. He was spreading the story around the Mountains that I was promised to one of the sons of The Village. But our people told no stories. Had he too lied? No. He simply knew how to make truths.

As soon as he’d realised I’d escaped, he would have realised the shame I could have caused him, and then the loss of power. And rather than deal with all of that, he must have promised me on the spot to one of his sons. That way he could tell people he was hunting for a promised wife. If anybody had asked him for the whole truth, he would have had to tell them, of course, but why would anybody possibly ask if his son’s promised was also a Storyteller?

It was the first time I’d been confronted with the truth about Truth. The slipperiness of it, and the way it could be remade, even by a man who had only truth to use. It was to be the first of many such revelations. I might be a Storyteller, but there were more ways of lying than simply making up stories.

After that there was nothing I could do but wait. I bolted down the food the boy had given me, trying hard to believe that his gesture of self-deprivation meant I could trust him. He would surely go hungry today. I paced back and forth in the gloom. I slept. I squatted in the corner, kicking dirt from the floor over my traces.



There was one thing I knew for sure. I had to get away from the boy as soon as I could. As soon as he had helped me out of his village, as soon as he stopped being useful to me, I would have to get away from him. He could only bring me danger. There was no telling how he might react if he discovered what I truly was. No telling how soon he might betray me. Our people did not tolerate Storytellers.

And as the light started to fade, I crept back into my trench to wait, covering myself again with hay. Trying not to feel like an animal in a trap, waiting for the arrival of the hunter.

The door juddered inwards, filling the shelter with the fresh cold air of night. I dropped my head down and held my breath. What if it wasn't him? What if it was, and he'd brought other men of his village? Why had I lain here all day when I could have been running? My heart pounded wildly, and I had to force myself not to jump up and try to flee.

"It's me." I recognised his voice immediately, even though he'd only said a dozen words to me in the morning. I had a sudden rush of relieved familiarity, and was instantly suspicious of it. I was alone and frightened, but I couldn't let my guard down at the first sign of an ally.

I sat up slowly, then struggled out of my trench and down to the floor of the shelter, brushing hay from my cloak. There was hardly enough light to see his face, but he seemed to be amused at my state, and my relief at seeing him turned at once to annoyance.

"What?" I said. He shrugged.

“I brought you some clothes.” He held out a hessian bag towards me. I was being ungracious.

I grunted my thanks, took the bag, and dragged out a pair of heavy trousers and a thick woollen jumper. I looked up again, and he had already turned his back to me, giving me a little privacy.

I dropped my cloak and dragged the jumper straight on over my filthy nightclothes, the trousers straight over my muddy boots. They were both too large, but wrapping my cloak back around myself I felt warm for the first time in my flight.

“Thank you.” I said it properly this time. I meant it. The world now seemed just a little less hostile.

He turned back, nodded. “There’s food in the bag too. Eat I brought too much.”

For the first time I saw the bulging pack on his back. My turn to nod wordlessly, grateful beyond belief. Thankful. Suspicious.

I sat and started greedily stuffing bread into my mouth.

“Thanks,” he said dryly. “But I already ate.”

I tried to swallow the chunk in my mouth. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m rude.”

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t tease you. You’ve been here all day.”

There was a lightness about him I hadn’t sensed this morning. I almost thought I could hear a smile in his voice.

“You’re pleased to be going?”

“I’ve been ready to go for a long time,” he said. “I’m glad you came.”

Was it possible he was as kind as he sounded?

“They’ve been out looking for you all day. The men from your village as well as mine. They’re in the hall now, eating. They’ll be going out again tomorrow.”

“Not my village any more.”

He looked startled at that, and I realised I might have said too much. Although wouldn’t a girl running from a promise feel as though she’d been abandoned by her home? As though it was no longer her home? I didn’t know what I should be telling him. I had to be more careful with my stories. Or at least, I had to be careful that they all matched, and that my language stayed like his, not like the rich streams of my mind.

He coughed. “Well. The men of *both* villages will be searching for you again tomorrow. They went out today along the western flanks; they’ll be searching the eastern ways tomorrow.”

Now this was valuable information. “So we go west,” I said.

He nodded. “We go west.”

Before we left the shelter, I wanted to pull myself back, just a little, from my bond. I held up my satchel, empty but for a knife and a water bottle. “Let me carry something. If we’re together, let’s work together.”

He simply nodded, and dropped his pack to the floor. Opening it up, he started to pass things over – a loaf of the heavy bread I’d been gorging on, some fruit, some dried meat, another water bottle, a blanket. Luxury. When our packs were a little more even, he stopped.

And then he stood, and raised his palm, and intoned the traditional traveller’s pledge. “My name is Yoshi. Let us travel the roads together, until we part.”

My turn to be startled. And honoured, and grateful. This, more than anything he had done for me today, put me in a frame of mind to trust him. The traveller's pledge was an alliance of equals.

I raised my own hand. "My name is Annabelle. Let us travel the roads together, until we part." And again, the brief contact of palm against palm. I couldn't see his eyes in the darkness.

# 4/

*If we're together, let's work together.* It was a good sentiment, a fine one – but they were my words, not his. Why was he in this with me? What possible advantage did I bring him? He must know the area better than me, and he was clearly better prepared than me.

One foot in front of the other in the darkness. I shouldn't be thinking such things. I should be focussing on the path in front of me. So that I didn't fall and become even more of a burden, so that I might learn some landmarks. We'd been walking west along a rough track through the trees. Mercifully the track followed the contours of the hillside, making for somewhat easier going.

I was warm with the rough bulk of jumper beneath my cloak, I had food in my belly, and someone else was leading the way with an assurance that had lulled me into a state of calm I had not felt since I fled village. But now my mind was waking. How had I put so much trust in this boy so quickly and so completely?

Roused from its sluggishness, my mind couldn't let go of thoughts of betrayal. Was he taking me in a circle, only to come back to his village where he would restrain me and claim me as the spoils of his hunt? Was I the prize

with which he could gain money and influence and a social step up in an order that obviously had not treated him well?

I was sure Father Shoma would have approved my wariness, but then he was too well versed in the ways of Storytellers. Truth was all I had, and it was, truly, an uncomfortable ally. It brought me a grim smile then, there in the dark, imagining him saying that through a mouthful of putrid pipe smoke. Until I knew the truth of this boy leading me onwards, I could not trust him to keep me safe. And truth, as I was beginning to learn, was not the stable thing I had once believed it to be.

Just as I had reached this conclusion, my foot caught against a jagged stone on the path. I cried out and stumbled, and my next step would have slammed me to the ground if he hadn't instantly spun around and grabbed my shoulders.

"All well?" he asked, righting me. I gruffly thanked him, and shook him off, ungracious as ever. And there was my answer. I couldn't trust him, but right now he was useful to me.

We walked along on the narrow path until the sky started to cloud over. Cold wind rose as the stars disappeared. It quickly became clear that we would have to stop, as even Yoshi was stumbling without the faint starlight to guide us. The first drops of rain began to fall, with the heavy feeling of settling weather.

"Is there shelter near here?" I asked. I was determined to make myself more involved in our flight.

"There is," he said. "But it's risky. The hermit lives not far from here. He has a barn we could hide in."

It was tempting. “But if he finds us?”

Yoshi nodded. “If he finds us, it’s not good. He owes no allegiance to my village—he hates them. But still, if they come this way again, if they ask him...”

“If they ask him, he’ll have to tell them he found us,” I filled in. Noting his use of the word *them* to describe the people of his village. Was Yoshi already as removed from his village as I felt from mine? Was I with him or simply another one of *them*? Did he mistrust me? So many things to question, so constantly. I was weary of it all.

It was too much to consider on a cold night in the rain. And it was too much to spend another night exposed so soon as all the others. “Let’s risk it,” I said.

He nodded. “It’s not far from here.”

He continued along the track at a slower pace, searching hard in the trees to his right. At some marker, unseeable to me, we turned off and began to walk up the rise. My heart rate started to climb. Was this where Yoshi would spring his trap?

My knife. I could feel it behind me, carelessly shoved into my bag. Out of reach if it came to a fight. Through the deepening gloom I could sense some kind of rocky outcrop rising out of the ground beside us.

Menacing shapes. The silent boy in front of me. The rain now coming down hard in the darkness.

Out of nowhere, memory assailed me.

*Father Shoma striding through the darkness, my small legs struggling to keep up, wrenched from our lessons in his smokey cabin by the taunting voices of The Village*

*children. Something sharper than usual in their tone. How I collided with his legs as he suddenly stopped, taking in the faces of the now-silent children ringed around Thomas. Bleeding from his nose and from cuts on his face, curled into a ball in the mud of the path, half undressed in the gloom.*

*Father Shoma's burning eyes seeking out the leader, finding Brendan in the huddle. Seizing him and demanding answers from the bully of The Village.*

*"They must not be allowed to live," said Brendan, defiance in his voice. Scared faces all around him, backing away from Father Shoma's fury.*

*He said it again, looking for support in the mob he'd persuaded of his truth. Not finding as much as he would have liked – those same scared faces now starting to consider what they'd done to the boy in front of them.*

*Brendan bowed his head, not saying the word that all of us could hear, clear in this scene of denouncement.*

*Storyteller.*

Perhaps Yoshi's hatred of my kind was so intense that he meant to sacrifice me out here in the darkness. The practise was outlawed *the law's not the law unless it's witnessed by all* but rebels were not often brought before that law. Some people knew them as saviours.

At that moment he turned and hurled his weight onto me, dragging me down to the ground and slapping his hand over my mouth. I struggled, fiercely, while he hissed into my ear, words at first that made no sense at all, as terrified and as crazed as I had let myself become.

*"Quiet, quiet, he'll hear us, he'll hear us! Quiet!"* Over and over, until I stopped struggling. And then I saw a flicker of torchlight throwing shadows



on the trees all around us. And I understood at last, and went limp beneath Yoshi's body.

He released me from his grip then, and I saw what he had seen. The light clearly outlined the rocky outcrop we were sheltered behind. Wild shadows loomed on tall trees, limbs swaying as the wind continued to rise. We both lay as still as possible then, and I could feel his heart hammering against me.

I couldn't bear to lie there and just hope we would be safe. I squirmed out from under Yoshi, ignoring his whispered protestations, and wormed my way up to the base of the rock. Setting my pack down quietly, I reached out to the rock in front of me and started to clamber up. Sudden lichen slipped against my palms. I held myself flat against the steeply sloping rock, searching out the cracks and the protrusions, and scrambled up in the darkness.

Just a body length above me there was a cleft in the rock, glowing orange in the flickering light. I dragged my body carefully across the rock face, then positioned my feet under the cleft to keep me steady. Then I raised my head.

The hillside we were on was steep, and on this side of the rocks my eyes were just above ground level. And in the orange flare of torchlight I saw a giant in enormous boots raise his axe above his head and bring it crashing down onto a shape in front of him. Blood splashed the rocks beside my head.

I startled back and felt my feet slip off my precarious ledge. My face slammed into the rock as I slipped and tumbled back down, pulling small stones away with me that rattled down the rock face. My knees buckled under me as I hit the ground, and the breath was slammed out of my body.

Before I'd had any chance to recover, the giant's head stuck through the cleft, and he bellowed "Who's there?"

And Yoshi was there, standing over me, spreading his cloak wide as he raised his arms.

“Maldor! It’s me!” A shaking in his voice. “Maldor! Please.... It’s Yoshi!”

I could no longer see the giant’s face, but I could hear him cursing.

“Yoshi, is it? Come up so I can see you!” There was no warmth in that tone. There was command, and there was anger. A bloody axe in the night.

Yoshi dropped his right hand, waving desperately at me to move back under shelter. I dragged myself back into the shadows, hoping I had not been seen. Yoshi walked slowly around the rock face towards the clearing I’d peered into. I waited and then quietly pulled myself up, picked up my bag and followed around the rock face. There’d been no welcome in that voice. I couldn’t let Yoshi face the giant alone.

I slowed as I neared the edge of the rocks, and tried to hear around the corner. A drop in the wind left a bubble of quiet, filled by the booming voice of the giant.

“...his end. His time. Lambs been terrified.”

“You always did care about the lambs,” said Yoshi.

“Always,” echoed the giant. And then the sound of his axe connecting again with flesh, violently. “Always.”

And I had a vivid, sickening flash of Yoshi’s cleaved body, cut and smashed and ruined on the rocks. But then I heard his voice, speaking calmly.

“It’s in the past, Maldor.”

“In the past. Yes.” Again, the giant’s rumbling voice, echoing Yoshi, but an octave or two deeper. “All in the past.”

And then a long silence, filled by the wind rushing back into the trees. At last he spoke again.

“Not going to ask what you’re doing here.”

Yoshi laughed.

“Stay in the barn,” Maldor continued. “Tonight. Tomorrow, if you want. Then you have to go.”

“Thank you.”

And with that it seemed conversation was over. There was the sound of Maldor’s axe again, hitting the body of what I now assumed to be one of the enormous wild dogs that roamed the mountains. He gave a satisfied grunt.

“This way.”

And with that, the orange flicker of his torch was raised high, and I heard heavy footfalls moving rapidly away from me up the hill.

Just for an instant, I imagined myself turning and running back down the path, leaving this boy I knew so little about and this giant with his axe. It seemed easier, for an instant. Cleaner.

And then I remembered the cold. I remembered the dark. I remembered the fear. And I stepped out from behind the rock and followed them up the hill.

I kept my distance but my caution seemed unnecessary. The giant had a ferocious stride, and I could see Yoshi struggling to stay with him as he powered up the hill, blazing torch held high in his right hand. We continued up the rough path before he stopped by a wooden structure that loomed out of nowhere in the dark. I dropped into a crouch on the path.

I saw him say something to Yoshi before motioning him inside and closing the door. I had a bad moment then — that axe vivid in my mind — but then he stepped back and seemed to lose himself in thought. He stood stone still then, staring at the ground. And then he raised his head and looked back down the path. Straight at me, although there was no way he could have seen me. I forced myself to remain still, although my heart was racing wildly.

He held his gaze in my direction for a moment longer, and I would almost have said he was smiling, although it was hard to say what kind of emotion that face held, cloaked in shadows and masses of knotted hair, bound up tight in the harshness of his existence. Finally, he nodded. Dropped his gaze and turned, and then continued up the path, his torchlight dwindling through the trees until I could no longer see the bobbing shadows it threw.

I made myself wait until the night had leached me of my heat, and my legs had started to ache beneath me. Moving my stiff body as quietly as I could, I approached the shelter.

At the touch of my hand on the door, it swung out towards me, and Yoshi's face appeared in the gloom.

“Annabelle.”

Someone in this night knew my name. It was the first time he'd used it. I bowed my head quickly and pushed past him into the shelter.

“You'd better close the door. Maldor might come back,” I said.

“He won't. He's a good man.” There was defiance in his voice. “A man of his true word.”

And I wanted to believe him. Wanted to believe *in* him — in the kindness of not one but two strangers, perhaps more down the road. I felt my way across

the shelter in the almost-total darkness and pulled myself up onto the hay. I got as comfortable as I could and felt the warmth beginning to flow back into my clenched body.

Yoshi clambered up beside me. Remembering my manners for once, I felt for his hand in the darkness and gave him some of the dried fruit from my pack.

“So,” I said. “Tell me about Maldor. Tell me his life.”

*Tell me his life.* It’s what the Headman said to the traders who came through The Village. *Tell me your life.* Tell me what you know of the world. Tell me what others have told you, about conditions on the plains, about the flow of the river now the snows are melting, about the village you grew up in. *Tell me your life.*

Once Father Shoma had realised who I was, and *what* I was, once he had taken me in and started teaching me how to conceal my curse, once he was sure I understood the consequences I would face should that curse be uncovered, then, and only then, did he teach me the little that he knew of Storytellers. The truth of them.

It was far too much to take in, in one sitting. Father Shoma was gentle with me, as he pulled at the loose threads I had not realised were hanging from my world. By the end we both sat knee deep in a tangle. There was indeed a Truth, as we had all learned since we could understand the words the parents said, but the truth we were told was not the whole truth. It was not as though our elders were lying to us, for that was not possible. It was just that they didn’t know it.

Eventually we got to *stories*. The way people used to tell each other stories. Not like I did, to conceal my actions, but for entertainment, or to pass the time, or as a way of making history more interesting, or memorable. For *fun*. I wouldn't believe him at first, but after many sessions and much discussion I finally came to accept how it had been. That in a different time, in a different place, what I would have said to Yoshi just now was *Tell me Maldor's story*, as though he could concoct something from nothing.

All of this flickered through my mind, and then Yoshi started speaking.

# 5/

“All the village children knew about him. His was one of the first names we learned outside of our own names. *Maldor*. It sounded dangerous, the way the parents said it.

“They used him as a threat to get us to behave, they used his truth as an example to us all. We used to whisper his name in the dark of the hall when all the parents had left, trying to scare each other.”

Sitting still for once, I could think about Yoshi’s upbringing; how it was that he seemed so easy leaving his home behind. My time in the dark and the cold tonight had shaken me – fear and distrust had been so quick to pounce. I had to learn more about this boy.

“His name was frightening,” Yoshi continued. “He was somehow not like us. He bore us ill will. This was how we thought of him. These were the truths we were told.

“Despite it all, he had the right to enter our village. He could not be denied permission, but he always had to ask. And as I grew older, I began to realise what humiliation that must have been. The more I thought about it, the more I came to understand his hatred of us.”

Yoshi paused a minute then, and I wished I could see his face. He settled in the darkness, then continued.

“I’m getting ahead of myself. His first appearance. I was in the far outer paddocks, watching the flock where Marcus had left me while he was away in the hay shed with a girl from the next village. I was old enough to know what they were up to, but too young to think much of it, or what the consequences might be for them should any of the village elders find out.

“I’d moved away, sick of their laughter and the sounds they were making, and without thinking where I was placing my feet I found myself on the edge of the forest, on the very edge of the land that our village could claim as its own. I was drawn there as I had been since I’d first come this way, when a father was showing me our boundaries. Because *here* was home and *there* was not. Just over this invisible line, just there in the forest where the path called out to me, just *there* where the shadows of the trees began, and the winding of the dirt path lead on to mystery, that was where I found my feet taking me, that day.”

Such longing. I was beginning to understand, because I’d felt it myself. *Something more out there. More than this little life.* I’d played at the forest edges often myself, lying, because I could, if anybody asked me where I’d been.

“And suddenly he was there. Looming, silent, watchful. I never would have told my cousins, but seeing this figure standing quiet in the trees was just about enough to make me piss in my trousers.”

There was a chuckle in his voice then, warm in the darkness. I found it very easy to imagine this Yoshi-child, shaking in his breeches at the very edge of his world.



“He was watching me. Probably had been since I’d started walking his way. Waiting, as he was oath-bound to do, until somebody acknowledged his presence. It’s just that it should have been Marcus, who would have known what to do, who would have seen him there and been prepared.

“‘Boy,’ he said. And his voice was as they told it. Deeper than that of any man of the village, and carrying effortlessly across the wide space between us. I could see his bloody axe nowhere, but when he spoke he was every inch the giant. Piled up high beside him I could see a bundle of skins.

“‘I wish passage to enter... your village,’ he said. The ritual words, prescribed by the council. The words he must ask, or be in violation of his exile, and in danger of his life. *Your village*. Perhaps I imagined his pause.”

In the dark I felt him reflexively reach for his temple.

“Perhaps my thinking about it for the very first time, confronted there on the edge of my homeland, was what gave me empathy. I was still frightened though and failed to find my voice. He waited, patiently, seeming to sense my fear. Or perhaps I imagined that too. He gave so little away that I could not read him, whereas he seemed to have the perfect measure of me.

“He spoke again, but more gently this time. ‘Boy.. If you can’t answer me, I can’t come in.’ And then, *‘And the ritual must be observed.’*

“The ritual. I knew the words. It was part of Maldor’s truth. I stumbled the first time I tried to get the words out. Cleared my throat and tried again. ‘Passage is granted you. For one day only.’

“I heard it properly for the first time, then. The constraint and the coldness. *We threw you out of your place of birth, and by our dispensation you may enter again for one short day.*

“He did nothing except nod and heave up his bundle and start walking forward. I suppose the hurt behind the words had long been removed.”

His arm rustled past me again as it travelled to his temple.

“I thought he would walk straight past me, and on into the village, but instead he paused beside me. He unburdened his shoulders of his bundle up close, he really *was* enormous and squatted onto his haunches and looked me in the eye.

“He asked me my name. And then he said ‘I’ve not seen you before. It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. You know who I am though.’ I had no way of telling what was going on behind those dark eyes. I couldn’t look away and I had no thoughts of running. There was something calming about this enormous mass of man squatting so solid and so quiet beside me. It was only afterwards that I recalled my childish fear, and considered that he could have dived on me and squashed me flat right there in the paddock.

“‘Well, Yoshi,’ he said. ‘I’m going into your village now. You are supposed to accompany me. Although the reason you are supposed to accompany me is to prevent me from stealing any sheep. Do you think you could prevent me from stealing any sheep?’

“And then I saw the most unexpected thing. This gigantic man was smiling at me. Just the corner of his mouth twitched up, for just a fraction of an instant, but it was there. A twinkle in his eye.

“‘Come on, then,’ he said. ‘You have sheep to protect.’ And he stood up, and strode towards the village, without bothering to check if I was following.

“It was then that my world began to change.”

I nodded, in the darkness, on the very edge of sleep.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, as exhaustion overtook me.

I don't think I woke once that night, there in a trough of hay in a giant's barn in the middle of the forest. No dreams of his wild hair, no dreams of his axe — just blackness and rustling warmth.

I dreamed most nights of my life. And I had learned very quickly that the other children didn't sleep like me, didn't wake each morning full of slowly-fading visions. I stayed quiet, training myself for a life of secret keeping. It was only once I entered Father Shoma's confidence that I even learned the word. *Dreams* came from the Time Before, when everyone was riddled with story.

When I finally came to consciousness, it was to the sound of Yoshi's gentle snoring, and weak light leaking in through the cracks and knotholes of the barn. The scent of hay filled my nostrils.

I stretched my arms above my head and yawned enormously. I didn't have to jump up and run. I felt almost at peace. Despite the unknowns in front of me, I had food, shelter, and a companion I found myself beginning to trust.

I raised up onto my elbow and looked over at Yoshi, where he lay cocooned in sleep and hay. Without the strain of pursuit, his face was peaceful. Young. Grubby. I grinned to myself at that, imagining for the first time since I'd run from my village what I must look like. I'd never been vain, unlike other girls of my village, but even by my own standards I must have been a mess.

I sat up as quietly as I could and eased my stiff body to standing. My bladder was bursting, and I didn't really want to squat in the corner with Yoshi just there. With my ear pressed hard to the door, all I could hear was

gentle wind in the trees. Surely someone as enormous as Maldor couldn't move without making at least some noise?

I eased the door open slowly and crept out. No Maldor. No birds, no animals, no rain for once – just a deep, dense fog, rolling slowly down the hillside in front of me. Heavy drops of condensation fell from the tree branches to the thick leaf litter below. Everything was muted, everything was peaceful.

I watched the fog swirl for a while, with no particular thoughts in my mind. The trees appeared and disappeared again, just a few paces in front of my face. Any direction I turned my head, the view smeared into white.

I had no idea where I was going, and no way of knowing what lay between me and my unknown destination. All I could do was walk into the mist, seeing a few paces in front of me and feeling it close up behind me. My little white bubble. At least that bubble now had Yoshi in it.

After relieving myself, I sat against an enormous tree, allowing its ancient trunk to support me. Peace flowed into me. Then I must have lost track of the time, because I gradually came to and realised it was getting dark. I'd mistaken mid-afternoon light for mid-morning light. We'd slept most of the day.

At that moment there was a cursing and a crashing from somewhere up the hillside. Maldor must be coming down towards the barn. The barn, where my bag lay open next to my all-too-obvious sleeping hole.

I stumbled up, legs cramped, and lurched back to the door. I threw it open and light spilled in on Yoshi where he lay still asleep. At the intrusion he screwed up his face and started making sleepy protest noises.

I slammed the door shut behind me, then reached in the gloom for his shoulder and shook him.

“Maldor’s coming! Help me hide.”

He was fast. He was still waking up, but he was with me straight away.

“Up the back! You can hide at the top of the stack.”

He clambered up the pile and started digging frantically into the hay. I grabbed my bag and joined in until we had a decent hole.

“Get in. I’ll cover you up.”

I got into the hole, clutched my bag to my chest, and pulled my cloak up and over my face. This was not going to be pleasant. At my nod, Yoshi scattered the loose hay from our sleeping holes over my curled-up body. I tried to breathe as slowly as I could, and gather up some of the calm I’d found outside. It was not easy, back in the dark, in this shallow grave.

There was a fist on the door.

“Yoshi?” Maldor’s voice.

I lay as still as I could as the door swung open, clutching my bag to my chest to stop myself shaking. It would be alright. It had to be.

“Been sleeping all day, eh, lazy?” rumbled Maldor. Yoshi said nothing, but from what he’d told me last night, this was Maldor’s way of being affectionate.

“Take a look outside,” he continued, and I gathered Yoshi was taking in the fog.

“You’ll get nowhere tonight. I’d be killing you, sending you out in this. Then again,” he paused. “If anyone *does* happen to be following you, they’re not going anywhere tonight either. You’d better stay here. Head out before the dawn. You’ll make some headway.”

I heard Yoshi mutter thanks, and assure him he would be gone before Maldor knew about it. At that moment the breath I'd been holding forced its way out of my body, and my hasty breath in filled my lungs with dust. I was immediately choking, desperate to cough. Tears poured from my eyes as my chest shook and heaved, and I knew I must be rustling the hay around me.

Yoshi must have heard it too, because he raised his voice from its usual calm quiet, thanking Maldor again, profusely, and loudly telling him things about his village that Maldor couldn't possibly want to hear. Eventually I got control of myself and subsided once more into quiet.

I heard a thump on the floor then, and Maldor's rumble. "Here's a bit of food for the road. And a little extra, for that... dog of yours that's been digging holes in my barn. I probably won't see you again, will I?"

And Yoshi had no answer for that. I heard the two shuffling together, a possible bear hug from this bear of a man, and then the door slammed shut.

I waited. Yoshi waited. We both listened as Maldor's heavy steps receded back up the hill. Eventually, in the gathering gloom, he spoke. "He knew."

I pushed up through the hay, brushing dust out of my eyes. "But he didn't." I was sure of that. "He didn't know. He *made sure* he didn't know."

Truth was becoming more and more slippery, the more I considered it. I doubted Maldor was a Storyteller. I doubted it very much. But he knew, if he asked Yoshi, that Yoshi would have to tell him. And then Maldor would know, and would have to tell anyone who asked him. So Maldor had chosen to remain ignorant, had chosen to interpret a rustle in the straw as Yoshi's dog.

There was so much more to truth and to Storytelling than I had imagined. I had so much to learn, and nobody to teach me anymore. Even Father

Shoma's small pool of knowledge was forever out of my reach. And then I realised I had a tiny scrap of information, a possible way out of my bubble.

Father Shoma had spoken briefly to me of The City, the settlement at the centre of civilisation, where knowledge and power was wielded. Everyone in the village had heard some tiny truths of this place, but he had hinted something more — that there might be others like me, or at least others who could help me. He had been reluctant to tell me this. Perhaps he'd been trying to protect me from exactly what I was about to attempt to do

Now I had a goal. Running blindly was no longer an option. I knew what happened when our hunters ran down a wild pig. It would run, and it would run, but it would always be followed, and no matter how long and how hard the chase, it would be brought down in the end.

I had a goal now, and that was to find somebody who could teach me about the power I possessed; the curse I'd been born with. I had to get to The City, wherever that might be, and I had to find somebody to teach me about how to hide this thing I carried. I had to learn how to blend in, and how to throw the hunters from my trail for good.

All of this flashed through my head in an instant and was gone, leaving me face to face with Yoshi in the murk. He had a strange expression on his face.

“Yes,” he said, eventually. “Yes. He wouldn't have anything more to tell than he had to. He's a good man.”

I could tell there was more he wanted to say, but he clearly wasn't ready to say it now.

# 6/

We spent the last of that foggy day resting and eating, for Maldor had brought us far more food than we could carry. A good man indeed.

“He always did love the lambs,” mumbled Yoshi happily, as he tore into yet another slab of mutton. I could only nod, belly swollen, lamb fat smeared on my fingers. It might be a while before we ate this well again.

With thoughts of my new goal in mind, and how much longer Yoshi might be beside me, I fell back down into sleep.

It was Yoshi who shook me into consciousness this time, and it took me a long time to come to the surface. After grumbling and blinking my eyes open, I realised I couldn't see any light coming in through the walls. I was suddenly wide awake.

“What is it?”

“It's time to go, that's all,” said Yoshi.

We set off into the predawn dark.

That day we walked through the densest fog I'd ever encountered. There was no sound but our own footsteps and the slow and constant drip of condensation onto the forest floor.



The fog cleared on the evening of the first day, and the stars came out, bright and unforgiving. We kept moving for as long as we could in the cold, stumbling over starlit hillsides until we found a dense stand of trees in which to collapse. No fire, of course. No roof above us, no straw to burrow into. We had only our cloaks, and the awkward warmth we could draw lying back to back and pressed together, huddled and shivering as the sun came up and slowly dragged over our heads.

And so we ran. Under those trees, or wedged under rocky overhangs, in whatever kind of shelter we could contrive for the day, I came in and out of consciousness, never able fully to sleep, never able fully to wake.

Our night travels had the quicksand-drag of nightmare. Every step I took on the path in front of me seemed to get me nowhere. We got up as the sun went down, to stretch cramped limbs and begin again, our backpacks getting lighter as we ate our way through our supplies.

And then one night the quicksand swallowed me.

All night Yoshi had been drawing further and further ahead. I would see him become aware of it and force himself to slow down, but then he would start to draw away again, disappearing into the darkness. No sight, no sound, as he moved nimbly over the same rough ground that was causing me to stumble again and again.

My limbs were heavy. My feet weren't going where I thought I was telling them to go. My head pounded, my body ached, and my face flushed hot, sweating in the chill. My body felt so alien to me that I thought I must be dreaming; that I must be curled under a rock somewhere with the sun burning my face and my legs twitching in dream-spasms.

And then I fell, knocking all the breath out of my body. And it felt good to lay still, cold earth pressed to my burning cheek, my heart skipping in my chest. I thought I would rest for a minute.

And then my dreamscape began in earnest. I have no clear recollection of what happened next. I have nothing but fractured impressions and certain truths.

The main truth is this: Yoshi saved my life. I have no doubt of that.

He must have realised what had happened very soon after I fell. He must have come back and picked me up, carried me off the path, wrapped me in his own cloak and set about building the shelter I found myself in a day or two later – digging the carefully concealed fire pit in which he heated smooth stones to lay against my body, cooking up a lamb broth that he could feed me, sip by painful sip.

The second truth came to me soon after I regained consciousness properly for the first time. I was lying on my back, staring vacantly up at the blue sky through small cracks in the fibrous slabs of bark above my head. I propped myself up gingerly on an elbow and took in the shelter, the small clearing it nestled in. Yoshi was nowhere to be seen, but I had a dozen memories of his careful help. I had not been abandoned. And that's when I realised I was very deeply bonded now. I could not entertain any more thoughts of leaving him when it became convenient for me. I had a heavy responsibility to repay, and I had no idea how I could do that.

That moment of realisation was all my newly-recovering body would allow me, and I fell back into slumber with its weight upon me. The next time I woke, Yoshi was just outside the shelter, tending his small fire with his back

to me. *This boy saved my life.* He must have heard me stir, for he turned to check on me.

“Huh.” He smiled slowly. “About time you woke up.”

I cleared my throat, unsure how to begin. “Yoshi.... all this... everything you did...” I waved my hand weakly around the clearing, at all the ingenious and self-sacrificing things he’d done to keep me alive. “It’s... too much.” I had no idea how to say I owed him, that I had abandoned my half-unconscious plans to ditch him on the road, that I was both deeply grateful and deeply resentful of his help.

“Well,” he said gravely, “...you probably should have told me that before passing out for three days.” He was laughing at me. Or was that with me? I was too tired to think straight, so I focussed on the simple things instead.

“Three *days*?” This was bad. “We’ve lost our lead then.”

He turned instantly sober. “I’ve been keeping a watch. We’re a way off the track here, but I’ve been trying to listen out, see if anyone went by. I... I couldn’t really keep a proper watch, by myself...”

He trailed off, and it seemed he was genuinely apologising that he couldn’t have singlehandedly kept watch twenty-four hours a day. As well as keeping me alive. As well as keeping himself alive. He looked haggard, now that I looked more closely at his face.

“We don’t even know they came this way.” I wanted to make him feel better. I wanted to make myself feel better. There was death behind me.

“We don’t.” He poked the fire viciously. “But maybe they did. Maybe they’re in front of us now, waiting in ambush. Maybe they’ve spread the word

through all the towns in front of us. Maybe we should just stay here and raise sheep.”

I had no answer for that, so I laid my suddenly-heavy head back on the ground.

Dawn was breaking when I next came to. Yoshi lay beside me, covered in a thick layer of dry leaf litter. I realised guiltily that I was still wrapped in both of our cloaks. At least, with my fever broken, he'd allowed himself to sleep.

We spent two full days more in the clearing, as I slowly regained my strength. I wanted to leave earlier but had to abandon that desire the first time I attempted to stand. At least I had the strength of will to make Yoshi take his cloak back. Yoshi had some ownings about what the sickness was, and where I might have got it from, but I didn't much care. All I wanted to do was be better.

The enforced rest allowed me to think through my circumstances properly for the first time. *Our* circumstances. I had to consider Yoshi as part of my plans, now.

I made him tell me everything he knew about the land we'd been travelling through, and what lay ahead; what he knew of the people of these parts; any snippets of truth he'd gained from traders. I was so ignorant of this wider world. I wanted anything he could give me.

He didn't know a lot, but he sensed my eagerness and dug out all his scraps for me. He had more than he realised, and as he piled up all his information, I resolved never to be this ignorant again, never to be this powerless.

He never questioned my motives for learning all he knew, and I was very grateful for that. I don't know what I would have told him if he'd asked.

Eventually I was going to have to tell him some part of who I was. How else could I explain what I was trying to do? How else could I explain that what I wanted was to learn enough about who I was so that I could hide myself?

To be able to hide I would have to come out in the open. And I was so afraid of doing that.

I watched him as he moved around our tiny clearing, gathering wood for the hidden fire, bringing water back from the spring he'd found, making up yet another batch of lamb broth for me. He wouldn't turn on me. He wouldn't kill me outright when I told him what I was.

But he would flee. He would take a look at this monster who'd betrayed him and run as far and as fast as he could. I couldn't bear the thought. As resentful as I was of the bond I was under, I couldn't bear the thought of being alone on the road again. I would have to work out a way to ease him in to my truth. I would have to make up a story about how I could make up stories. My life hadn't trained me to be so subtle.

As it turned out, however, the problem was to be wrenched out of my hands.

# 7/

On the third day we left our campsite. We had decided – *I* had decided, and made Yoshi agree – that we would be safe enough now travelling by daylight. Our pursuers, if they had come this far, would surely be ahead of us by now.

We travelled half days, walking into twilight. I pushed myself to stay focussed and stay upright, keeping careful eyes in front for the men of my village, and wary eyes out behind for any stragglers.

A week's travel, by Yoshi's owning, would bring us to the town of Outgarth. It was nothing more than a name in his mind, but it was the name of the town that the traders came from. He told me what he had heard of it, from those worldly yet reticent visitors his village received once or twice each year, but his secondhand and jumbled truths didn't make much sense to me.

From what he had told me of his own village, it was about the same size as mine, and the idea of a place with multiple streets and hundreds and hundreds of people was too much for either of us to understand. The idea was daunting, but I was desperate. I had to find out if there was anything I *could* find out.

We plodded on then, through the twilight world, day after day as I slowly regained my strength, moving warily but steadily towards this unknown destination. We saw no sign of pursuers and I began to hope that we had thrown them off altogether.

Then Yoshi got sick.

He must have been hiding it, to try and get us closer to Ottgarth. Stubbornly, foolishly, just like I had. Because when he fell, he fell hard. Shaking and sweating, collapsed on the dirt in the slow greying down of the day.

I squatted beside him and pulled him up to a sitting position, supporting his shaky body with mine.

“I’m sorry, Annabelle,” he muttered, panting. Eyes closed, head lolling to his shoulder. “I thought I could endure.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. Although it wasn’t. I had no idea what I was going to do.

“It’s not,” he said, and started to cough. Shudders across his body. “You’ve got to keep moving. They’ll find you.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I said. And I meant it. I was almost pleased with how much I meant it. I had no intention of stepping away from my bond. Father Shoma would have been proud.

But still, I was in trouble. We were in trouble. Yoshi was bigger than me, heavier than me. I could hardly drag him to his feet, let alone far enough off the path to remain hidden until he got well.

His head slid further down my shoulder. His pupils flickered beneath his eyelids and his mouth hung open. Sweat popped out on his forehead. He was gone.

We were in trouble.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my surge of panic, but, as though my thoughts had created my fears, I heard voices approaching along the path.

Before I had time to think of a plan, the owners of the voices rounded the corner, and I looked up at two men with a heavily-laden horse dray. I had a moment of seeing myself through their eyes – a filthy figure hunched over a body lying in the middle of the track – before coming back to myself. I had to make this work, for myself and for Yoshi.

I stood up.

“Please, sirs, can you help us?” The words were coming faster than I could think through their meaning. “My husband’s sick, he just collapsed, I can’t take him into town on my own, please can you help...?”

I was not storytelling my fear and desperation. I had just dug myself all kinds of holes with my words – holes that could easily be my execution – but for the moment at least I had no choice.

The two men looked like the kind of men I had grown up with: dependable farmers with no time for chatter; and no hesitation when it came to helping somebody in trouble. They swiftly came to my aid, slinging Yoshi up and onto the dray like another bag of produce, and offering me a drink of their fierce apple wine, *for the shock*.

I’d had a moment or two while they were settling Yoshi to think through what I’d told them. *My husband*.



Various stories had passed through my mind as I had lain in the clearing. Stories that would be both believable and that Yoshi could tell people. I hadn't come up with anything he could say. And now 'husband'. It was a story so large it would fall apart with only the slightest testing.

At some point in the future I would have to figure it out. For the moment, though, we were on the road. We were heading in the right direction, with a couple of people who could help me out. I had to cling to that because I didn't have much else to cling to.

We walked slowly through the deepening twilight. Matthew and Jansen were their mumbled names, two syllables each for the sake of civility, and then no time to waste as we continued on our way. The fall of hooves, the tread of boots, the creak of leather harness. The horse kept a steady pace, bulging sacks of apples and potatoes securely fastened to the dray, with Yoshi's slumped body held securely between them.

Because they didn't say much, I didn't have to say much either, and I could contain my story to the one big lie I'd told. I tried to work on some details as we walked.

*My husband.* That bit was possible. I was sixteen, after all. As to what we were doing, and where we'd come from, I could make up anything, and nobody would question it, but Yoshi wouldn't be able to confirm any of it. He wouldn't be able to say it.

And that was when I learned my first big lesson about lying: the bigger the lie, the harder you have to fight to keep all the details in place. Lying about my whereabouts on a summer afternoon had none of the consequences of this lie.

It was time to build the story.

“I didn’t know he was getting sick, you know,” I said into our trudging silence. It wasn’t hard to put distress in my voice. I *hadn’t* known.

“People get sick,” Jansen said eventually. They did. What did he care? But I was trying to build my story.

“He couldn’t tell me,” I continued. “He can’t talk. He was born a mute.”

The second big lie. Bigger than the first. It was the only way I could think of to cover my first lie, and all of the lies I would have to tell next. It was the only way I could think of that would get us through this, for it meant nobody would ask him questions, or make him contradict what I had said. I wasn’t even sure that Yoshi could stay quiet, if somebody asked him a direct question, but I had no way to test that.

When Yoshi eventually awoke, I would have to be there first. I would have to tell him what I had told them. And that meant, of course, that I would have to tell him I was a Storyteller.

My companion grunted sympathetically at my revelation. I’d known a lot of men like him. Good men. We plodded on.

It turned out that we were in fact close to Outgarth, and my companions were keen to get into town that night. If they had been worried about how stopping to help us might slow them down they hadn’t said, and I was determined not to be a burden.

I focussed my newfound strength on keeping a steady pace, occasionally checking that Yoshi was secure, with his cloak firmly wrapped around him. He was sweating profusely, and I was scared for us both that he would mutter

something in his fever, putting the lie on my lie. But there was nothing I could do about that. And so I walked.

We walked on, with a rising moon to guide us, and soon the forest began to thin out around us, and the track to widen into something more than uneven single file. I began seeing other tracks joining ours from the forest. Trickle flows flowed into a swelling stream, until our track was like a mountain river, wide enough for us all to walk abreast and make good time on the smooth packed dirt. We were heading down into a valley, the hills rising steeply on either side.

My companions perked up at this change in pace and brought out their apple wine again, passing the leather bag back and forth between them.

“Not long now, missus,” Jansen said. “You got somewhere to stay in town?”

I’d been preparing for this too, ever since my enforced days of recovery in the clearing, when Yoshi had shown me his carefully hidden money bag. I’d seen money, of course, but only in the strongboxes of the Headman, and Father Shoma. In The Village we bartered with each other, and mostly with the traders too, although occasionally they liked to be paid in coin.

Seeing Yoshi’s small supply had filled me with a fierce resentment – of him, of my debt to him, of the kind of village we’d both grown up in, where it was unheard of for a girl to hold coin, but quite possible for a boy to do so. And we would need Yoshi’s money, to travel as I planned. We would use his money, and I would be yet further in his debt. And that spending would have to start tonight.

“We do not,” I said, careful to use the plural. “Can you take us to the inn?”

At that, he burst out laughing.

“And which inn would that be, village woman?” said Jansen.

My embarrassment must have shown on my face, for he smiled at me for the first time since I’d met him.

“We’ll take you to Farmers Rest. It’s where we always stay. The people there are usually friendly, aren’t they Matthew?”

Matthew nodded. Not one to be caught into a smile that easily.

I nodded back. These men had been kind enough so far, and I needed kindness in a town full of strangers.

And it was full of strangers; full of strangeness.

I was smart. I had abilities beyond most of the people in my village. Not just my storytelling abilities, but my wit, the speed with which I could grasp new situations. Father Shoma had schooled me in reasoning, and in logic, and in solving problems within the limits of our world. And he had praised my quickness and my desire for greater challenge; my desire to know all there was to know. And because of that I had thought myself worldly.

I was not.

Rounding a corner of our smooth dirt road we came all at once upon the lights of Outgarth. I kept walking, to keep pace with my group, although all I wanted was to stop and take it in. It was as though the valley was full of orange stars—hundreds of flickering lights, and each one holding many truths. We walked on.

Cobblestones clicked under my feet. It was the first paved road I’d ever walked. Streetlights lined the roadway, orange flames cast flickering light.

House after house all squashed in together, as though swept up by a giant's hands. The smell of animals and humans, of cookery and ale.

But mostly, of course, what I saw was the people. More people than I'd seen in my entire life, walking and laughing and cooking and talking and fighting and shouting and all around us.

"Market day tomorrow," Jansen said. As though that explained the chaos.

I found myself shrinking up closer to the horse, seeking animal comfort from its steady pace, reassurance from its familiar smell. My nervousness brought out the father in Jansen, for he walked ahead of me, clearing the way through the endless crowd of people. Matthew brought up the rear of our group, and even though he had not said a word to me, I found myself grateful for his stolid reserve.

I had been worried our appearance would be notable. Those worries were now dispelled. Market day apparently meant the arrival of many travelling groups like ours, and in the throngs of pack animals loaded with produce, the light and the noise and the smoke, I wondered if anyone would even notice Yoshi slumped between the sacks.

As we continued down the street, my breath started to come a little more easily. My eyes began to adjust, and slowly I realised there wasn't much that was *new* about this scene.

The man roasting meat on skewers, the woman selling wine skins, the boy watching horses, the women comparing babies, the traders coming in to town, the merchants looking to buy their wares, the greetings and gossip of old friends – these were all things with which I was familiar. It was all just happening faster, more loudly, more intensely and more often. I almost

tripped over my feet several times as I spun my head this way and that before realising I couldn't possibly keep up with it all.

We passed an inn and Jansen muttered something cautionary about *bad men in there* as we pushed on by. A small part of me wanted to go straight in, to see what a room full of *bad men* might look like. But now I was on the run from men I'd always thought of as good, who had suddenly become bad from my point of view.

Perhaps I was a little worldly after all. I turned back to the street.

After pushing our way through the crowds for some time, we arrived at the Farmers Rest. It was a sprawling place that looked like it had grown out of the large barns on either side of it. Jansen steered us in to one, calling out with easy familiarity to the stable boy within.

"We'll just get the horse in and settled, and then we'll see about getting you young 'uns a room, eh?" he said.

"Of course," I said. "I know horses are more important than people."

He laughed at that and shook his head. "That's the way."

Matthew grunted and jerked his head at Jansen, and then turned and headed for the main entrance.

"We've a regular spot in the farmer's quarters, but Matthew can ask about a room for you," Jansen said. I wondered if Matthew ever spoke. I wondered if I should trust him. There was little for me to measure him by. This was something else for me to consider in my newfound consciousness of truth and stories. How could you measure the lie of a mute? How could you judge the truth in silence?

Despite his stated preference for horse over human, Jansen was very careful as he eased Yoshi out of his slump and propped him up on a bench by the wall. And then he did take care of the horse, unloading the produce quickly and efficiently, removing the harness and leading the beast over to a stall where he carefully brushed and rubbed it down, murmuring soothing things as he did so.

While Jansen tended his horse I tended Yoshi. His forehead was still burning but his body was shaking with cold. He seemed completely unaware of being carted around like turnips. Remembering only too clearly his devotion to me, I took off my cloak and wrapped it around him. I had every advantage that he hadn't had, and I was determined to treat him as best as I could.

"Nothing like the care of a little lady, is there?" I jumped and spun around to find Matthew standing over me, with a strange smile on his face and beer on his breath.

"I got you a room," he said. "For just the two of you." That twisted smile. I nodded.

"Have something to pay for that, do you?" He looked me up and down.

"I do," I said. I liked him better silent.

Thankfully Jansen chose that moment to finish up, and he walked over to our group and slapped his arm around Matthew's shoulders.

"Get them a room, did you?"

Matthew nodded, struck dumb again.

“Good!” said Jansen. “Let’s get you inside.” And he picked up Yoshi and slung him over his shoulder. I followed in his footsteps, with Matthew stumping along behind us. I resolved never to be alone with him again.

Jansen led us through the main door of the inn and again I felt dumped into confusion. Shouts of laughter and the roar of men, tobacco smoke and the stench of ale, burning meat and unwashed bodies.

A bellow of greeting sounded by my ear, and I turned to find an enormous man reaching out his hand to Jansen, nodding to Matthew, taking us all in. There was nothing to do but play along, as conspicuous as we had just become. The crowd of onlookers observed Yoshi’s feet, dangling from Jansen’s shoulder.

“So these are our little lost newlyweds, eh?” boomed the man.

Jansen nodded, and then looked suddenly shocked. He gave himself an exaggerated smack in the forehead. “This is.... Who is this? What’s your name?”

At least I had planned this. “I’m Rachael,” I said. Of all the people of my village I could be missing, her tiny and affectionate presence was the one that came to me most in the lonely hours. Using her name was as close as I would get to having her near me.

“Rachael! I’m Simmons.” The man held out his hand.

I took his hand, a little taken aback, but I was a married woman now, to be extended the courtesies of that position. *I am a married woman*, I reminded myself again.

“Our truths have met,” he boomed.

“Our truths have met,” I said.



“I’ll show you to your room. Get you out of this stinking place!” He winked at that, and it was a wink to trust, I thought. Matthew had thrown me into confusion.

Simmons picked up a lantern and led us out of the bar, and then, shaking each stair with his heavy footfalls, up to the next level of the building. He took us a short way down the corridor then opened a narrow door. He held up the lantern and ushered us in while remaining outside, and when I got in I could see why he’d done so. There was a bed that filled the tiny room and a nightstand in the corner. There was barely room for the door to open inwards.

“It’s not luxury, but it’ll keep you secure,” he said. “Keep you right until your man recovers!” Another one of his winks at that, and yes, I decided, perhaps I could trust him.

“Thank you.”

He leaned in then to pass me the lantern, as Jansen lowered Yoshi to the bed. “I’ll send my wife Shara shortly. Once those people down below have finished stuffing meat down their throats.”

I nodded at that, more grateful than I wanted to show.

“Alright,” said Jansen. “I’ll leave you now. I’d better go find my companion.” He scowled. “Before he spends all of our money on ale.”

I nodded again, and the two men disappeared into the darkened hallway, leaving a sudden vacuum of quiet in their wake. I swung the door shut, put the lantern on the nightstand, sat on the bed and stared at the wall just in front of my face. Muted sounds from the bar below. Wooden slats tight across a tiny window. The sound of Yoshi’s breathing. No air. No motion.

After the constant travel, being so still put me on edge. I stood up, wanting at least to pace the floor, try and figure out what I had to do next, but the room was so small that I ended up digging myself into further frustration. I sat back on the bed.

I was startled by a gentle knocking on the door.

“Hello?” I called.

At that the door swung open, and a young woman holding a tray came in. She smiled at me and put the tray on the nightstand, straightening up to look at me properly. Intelligent eyes in a sharp face softened by kindness.

Something very matter of fact about her presence.

She held out her hand. “I’m Shara.”

I took it, still uncertain of this new courtesy.

“I’m Rachael. Our... our truths have met,” I said, stumbling.

She completed the ritual and then looked from my face to Yoshi on the bed. I suddenly realised that I’d left him lying there like a crumpled-up cloak. A devoted young wife would surely have tried to clean him up a little, and would certainly have put him into the bed.

I had to decide, straight away, how to play this. Stories, once started, seemed to have no end. I looked up at Shara, and then to Yoshi.

“I didn’t know what to do,” I said, in as shaky a voice as I could muster. “I’ve never seen him sick before.”

She interpreted this as I’d hoped she would. “Don’t worry. I’ve seen far worse than him come through this place.” She touched her fingers to her temple. “It’s my thought that he’ll be fine.”

She looked to me for permission, and then wriggled her way sideways between the bed and the wall and leaned in over Yoshi's face. She put a well-practised hand on his forehead, and fingers on the pulse at his throat.

She nodded. "How long's he been like this?"

"Just today," I said. "I think he's been getting sick for a while, but he never said anything while we were travelling."

"Oh, how like a man!"

She roared with laughter at her own joke, inviting me in to share her mirth at the fallibility and the pride of men. It warmed me to my core.

I took a second look at this new stranger. She was a few years older than me, I guessed, and would certainly have been judged pretty by the standards of my village. It was her self-confidence that made her attractive though, and I realised it would take a particular kind of person to deal with a shouting crowd like the one waiting downstairs.

She smiled again, to show me she was being serious now. "From what I see he'll be fine." Fingers to her temples. "Rest, and warm, and as much of my soup as you can get into him. Just a few days, and he'll be fine. That is what I think."

She pointed to the soup on the tray. "See if you can't get some into him now. And there's water there for washing too, if you want to clean up a little. I'll see you downstairs tomorrow, alright?"

And she waited then, to see I'd understood, but also to see if I *was* alright. And I loved her a little for it.

"Thank you," I muttered.

“Privy down that way.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “I’ve got to get back to the drunkards now, but I’ll see you in the morning.”

She left me then, and I set about tending to Yoshi, unwrapping him from cloaks and boots and easing him into the bed, scrubbing the worst of the grime off his face and laying a cooling cloth on his forehead. He was still too far away to eat, so I ate some of the soup myself, marvelling at its taste and warmth, and feeling again a kinship with Shara.

The moment of menace with Matthew had shaken me, and I found myself very grateful that I was not entirely in the realm of men, in this strange new inn in this strange new town, in this strange new life that had been thrust upon me.

I laid down beside Yoshi then, feeling odd as I did so. We had shared our warmth many times before, but this felt very different. In a real bed, with people all around us, with the enormous story that was our marriage hanging over us, I was aware of an intimacy I had been able to ignore up until now. I was glad he was unconscious.

I thought I would be kept awake for hours by this, but wrapped in the warm with a belly full of food, I fell asleep almost instantly.

## 8/

I was startled awake by a knocking at the door. I had been lost in dreams of pursuit and panic, and the softness of my surroundings felt like another trap.

Shara's cheerful voice brought me into reality.

"It's another day!"

I opened my eyes properly, blinking to focus, and found Shara at the end of the bed, bearing yet another tray.

"How late is it?" I mumbled.

"Late for breakfast, that's what it is. The men are all up and out and selling their wares by now. They make money so we make money when they all come back and drink too much."

As she talked she collected empty bowls and trays and opened the shutter to let in some light. I took the opportunity to check on Yoshi. He seemed much the same as he had last night—feverish, but not desperately so, and still no sign of consciousness. I left my hand on his forehead much longer than necessary, until I was sure that Shara had seen me doing so. My husband. The big lies had to be told and retold, it seemed.

"The same, then," said Shara. I nodded. She slid up between the wall and the bed and placed her hand on his forehead.

“I’ve seen worse, like I said last night. I’ve seen much worse. But I think he’s going to be a day or two, like this. This is what I see.”

I nodded again. It made sense. I’d been laid up for three days in the clearing.

“You weren’t in a hurry to get where you were going, were you?”

The way she phrased her question made me like her even more. There were no demands in that query. I wanted to start building the next part of my story though I wanted to make it very clear to those around us that we were a young married couple. That we were not, for example, two runaways from two different villages.

If the men of my village saw me, of course, they would know me. But if they were asking around, they would not be asking for a married couple. Only the Headman knew my secret, and he would keep that to himself if at all possible.

“We’re travelling to The City,” I said. Her eyebrows rose. “My husband has distant family there. He’s been offered work in the family business...” I trailed off suddenly, realising I hadn’t thought this through far enough.

“Hah!” she jumped in, smiling and saving me. “Typical *man*. Not even letting you know what’s going on, and then getting himself too sick to tell you! Typical!”

Again she was inviting me in, and it made me start to think about what it would mean to live in a place like this and do the job that she did meeting new people all the time, learning a string of new names and new faces. It was dizzying, exciting, yet another way to be in the world. My village was becoming smaller and smaller on a rapidly expanding map.

“Well,” she said then. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I was hoping you could tell me whether there’s any medicine for his condition?” I had no idea, but I had hope. I wanted Yoshi better as soon as possible.

Shara immediately gave a complicated set of instructions as to where to go, what to get, how much I should pay, and where else I might like to stop along the way.

“And take your time,” she added. “I can keep an eye on your man.”

She was so matter of fact in her generosity. I seized.

“Are you sure?” I said. “Is that really...”

She cut me off. “I’ll be around. I’m *always* around!” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll come up and check on him now and then.”

I thanked her profusely, which she waved aside.

“Have your breakfast, clean yourself up, then come down and tell me when you’re ready to go out.” She smiled again and swept out with her tray full of empties.

It was not a hard offer to take up. I needed information as much as I needed medicine. Yoshi had kept me alive in the clearing by looking after me physically, but also by looking out for me. Keeping an eye on the path for our pursuers, keeping in mind our escape. It was my job now to find out what I could about The City, and how we could get there, without being too conspicuous.

I owed it to Yoshi to find out what I could.

I left the Farmer's Arms with Shara's reassurances fresh in my ears. The street looked different in mid-morning light. I wasn't sure if my eyes were adjusting to town life, or it was simply the absence of flickering torchlight.

I continued along the main street past more of the huddled-up houses, matching my steps to the flow of people, trying to sink into the rhythm of this place. There were definitely more people going in my direction than against me, and it seemed we were mostly heading to the market square.

I heard it before I saw it, and started to smell it too – cow dung and frying meat and sweet baking scents, grain and cheeses, people and animals. I was in the middle of it all before I could stop and think, being jostled back and forth by everyone else who seemed to know where they were going.

I chose a woman with a basket of flowers on her shoulder and a skilful way with her elbows and followed her. She led me, unknowingly, through the livestock section, with chickens and ducks in tiny wicker cages, then past the fishmongers with their silvery haul displayed, before marching determinedly towards a half-empty stall and almost throwing her basket at the young man standing behind it.

“Here!” she spat. “Now the morning's half gone. I own your father's going to beat you bloody when he hears about this!”

I glanced up at the young man's face to see guilt, shame and fear sweep across it – quickly replaced with anger as he started shouting back at her. I moved on hastily before things became too heated, wondering at the spectacle and the way that nobody else paid any attention. I had to remind myself not to get caught up in everyone else's troubles. I had my own to deal with.



The crowd carried me then to what must have been the centre of the square, obscured as it was by people and stalls and mayhem. A section of chairs and tables clustered in a loose circle around yet more stalls, these ones selling food and drink. I watched carefully to see how it was done and observed people buying their food and then sliding in hastily to empty seats.

One of the stalls was selling mugs of a delicious-smelling tea, so I gathered all my courage together and ordered one in as bored a voice as I could manage. I fumbled the coins a little, but only a little. It was the first time I'd ever bought anything. Seeing a seat, I quickly sat down and turned back to the market, taking slow sips of my hot spicy tea, and trying to summon order from the confusion around me.

I'd just started to relax a little when a heavy hand fell onto my shoulder. I twitched so much that most of the contents of my mug spilled across the wooden table.

“Oh, Rachael, I'm sorry!”

I looked up to see Jansen standing over me, frowning at what he'd done. “Here. Let me get you another.”

“Oh no, I couldn't...” I started to protest, but he waved my objections away and turned to the tea stall.

He was quickly back at the table with two fresh mugs in his hands. The elegant young man seated across from me, who'd been regarding me with some disgust since my spillage, took one look at the hairy farmer looming over him and stood up hastily.

“Much obliged, sir,” said Jansen, and I could see him trying not to smile. “City folk, eh?” He said to me. “So how're you liking the market?”

“Uh...”

He nodded as though he understood. “It took me a while to get used to it, too. You do though, you know. It has its own truths.”

I nodded. He was being so kind to me, and I didn’t have much to offer in return.

“Did you sell your produce?” I asked.

He grimaced. “Not yet. I left Matthew in charge for a bit. More fool me.”

We sipped our tea in silence while I tried to decide how to ask him what I needed. My mind rushed for a moment before I realised I should just be as straightforward as possible. After all, this was my truth.

“I need help to get to The City,” I said.

He nodded.

“I know a trader who’ll be heading that way. Perhaps you could talk to him. Unless...” and he looked suddenly doubtful. “Perhaps it’s better to wait for your husband?”

Of course. I tried to keep the lightness in my voice when I replied. “My husband trusts me in these matters. I’m sure he’ll be happy with whoever I choose.”

Jansen simply nodded. “Good then. Finish your tea, and I’ll take you to meet him.”

Following Jansen through the crowd was like following a shepherd through a flock of sheep. People just seemed to stand aside for his mass. He led me through a section of grain and wool traders to a stall covered in woven rugs. Bright colours, swirling and intricate patterns. Most of the women and

some of the men of my village would have traded all manner of things to own one of these. The stall was crowded with people.

I wanted to pause for a while to take in this new wonder, run my eyes and my hands over the gorgeous designs, imagine a life where choosing one of these rugs was a part of my existence and the rest of my house was equally splendid, where I had no need to run and no need to hide and could simply wallow in my life. Jansen had no time for any of that. He marched straight in and up to the stall holder.

“Benoit!” he called.

The man started up from his ledger at that, and I had a feeling of being tallied up as his eyes glanced over me, before he turned fully to face Jansen. His face went from scowl to smile.

“Jansen! I’m delighted!”

The two men shook hands, and then Jansen put his arm out to include me in the conversation.

“Benoit, meet Rachael. She’s travelling to The City with her husband, and they need someone to guide them.”

He then told my story as though he’d known me for years – more enthusiastic than I’d seen him yet – and I began to realise what I had done. Most of the stories I had told in my life had been small things, inconsequential things – stories that had little or no impact on others, and definitely not stories that anybody would bother repeating.

And now I stood in the centre of a market in the centre of a town that I hadn’t even known existed until just a few days ago, as a stranger repeated the details of a life that I knew to be false. My life.

It was terrifying, but I had to keep all my fears locked inside and smile winningly and look trustworthy. This man could be our next step forward, and I needed him on my side.

He listened carefully and he nodded in sympathy, but by the end he was shaking his head.

“I’m sorry my friend,” he said to Jansen. “Would that I could help this young lady, but I am not going back to The City for some time. I have a large shipment to sell, you see.” He gestured at the heavily-laden walls around us. “And I cannot return until I have something else to return *with*. It does not seem to be as easy as it used to be.”

Jansen nodded at that, in sympathy perhaps with the endless difficulties of the merchant. And then Benoit turned to me.

“You might try Chow, the knife seller. He’s on his way back in, I think. People still have some desire for *cookware*.” He sniffed.

I looked to Jansen for his opinion of this development. “Well,” he said. “Any friend of Benoit here...”

“Now I didn’t say *friend*,” Benoit interrupted. “But Chow is a fine merchant, and he travels light. He’ll have you both in The City quicker than most would. And he won’t be, ah, rude with the young lady here, as I own some of the other traders around here might be.”

He raised an eyebrow at Jansen. I wanted to reassert some control over this situation. I could not let myself go back to my village way of thinking, where I allowed my life’s decisions to be in the hands of two old men.

“Where do I find Chow?” I said.

Benoit smiled at that. “Decisiveness is a most attractive feature in a young woman,” he said, and I started to wonder if *he* might have been one of the trouble makers on the road.

He gave me detailed directions and a description of Chow, named the maximum price I should pay, and then made his apologies to us both.

“As you will see, I am busy with people.” And he indicated the crowd meandering around his stall. “Perhaps not busy with *sales*, but certainly busy with people. May your truth go easily, Rachael. And goodbye my friend.”

As we left the stall, Jansen pulled me to one side.

“I’m sorry Rachael,” he said. I started to shake my head, but he wasn’t finished. “I have to get back to my stall. Matthew’ll be wondering where I’ve got to. Do you know where to go?”

I assured him that I would be fine, and he nodded and shoved his way back through the crowd. I set off to follow Benoit’s directions, troubled by what had just happened. My story, told to a stranger. My *story*, becoming real before my eyes, with all the consequences that bore for myself and for Yoshi.

It was too much.

That story, that reality, it was too much. It bound us in too tight. In the version of me that Jansen had just told, Yoshi would be required to stay silent for the entire time it took us to get to The City.

Pushing back through the crowds of people, I worked on a new story. Something simpler, something easier. Something that would get us to The City with the minimum amount of storytelling. Some story with fewer holes, something I wouldn’t have to be so vigilant about.

And as I did that, with the chaos of the market all around me, with the voices of literally hundreds of people living their lives in the only way they could, I had a sudden wave of vertigo. I was changing reality. The cheese seller there would always be himself, known to the town and known to his family. He didn't have the option of changing his story, changing his life, *changing the world*.

I felt dizzy with the realisation of the power I held in my mind, and I had to steady myself on the supporting pole of the cheese seller's stall. The rough-carved wood, smoothed by the hands of generations, helped to bring me back to myself. The market. The crowds. The noise and the smell. None of these things were changeable. I had no power over them.

I told myself that, over and over. I walked on.

Chow's stall was in a section of the market selling tools and light farm implements and kitchenware, and I found myself appraising the selection. Dafydd would have found those long-handled shears very useful. The thought popped into my mind before I had a chance to quash it. I was failing in my efforts to leave him behind but I had no room for him now.

I forced myself to focus. The third stall on the left. Knives laid out on a blue velvet cloth. I marched up directly to the man behind the counter.

"Are you Chow?"

He regarded me coolly, rearranging his display. "Yes."

"I've been sent to you by Benoit, the rug seller. He told me you're heading in to The City, and that you might be able to take me and my husband."

"Did he now," said Chow. "I see. And you'd have *money* to pay for this passage, would you?"

“I would. I do. Yes. There’s money for this.”

He was making me nervous, with his hands in fluid motion over the glistening blades in front of him. He cocked his head to one side, regarding his new arrangement.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “I’m not sure when I’m going back in. I was thinking perhaps of staying out for a while...”

He looked up at me then, to see what I made of this piece of information. And for the first time in days I felt as though I’d found my feet. It was all I could do not to smile. Even though I’d never bought anything with coin before today, I’d had a lot of experience bartering. And this was obviously his opening gambit. This game I could play.

“Oh, I see,” I said. “Oh, I’m sorry to bother you. I’ll have to find somebody else.”

I turned and started to walk away.

“Well now,” he said quickly, as I knew he would. “Well now, I didn’t say I’d made up my mind.”

And so we played, back and forth. I was careful to make us out as easy travelling companions – young and strong and not likely to hold him back. I did have to say that Yoshi was sick, and wouldn’t be able to travel just yet, which Chow was quick to try and use to his advantage, but I turned it back on him by mentioning that any negotiations we carried out now would have to be approved of by *my husband*, when he was recovered (implying, of course, that Yoshi would be a harder person to bargain with than I was).

I was painstaking in pointing out how diligent Yoshi was, how adaptable, and how pleasant of manner. I did say he was shy and very quiet. I did not say he was mute. I couldn't hang that weight on him.

It seemed we were quite evenly matched at this game, for I negotiated a price that was close to the estimate that Benoit had given me. Chow actually did have some business in a nearby village that would keep him occupied while Yoshi recovered, and we shook hands on a meeting in a few days' time, when we would all start the journey back into The City.

I left Chow's stall buoyed up with success. Progress. It was not just the bartering; it was the feeling that I was taking charge again. Moving towards, instead of running away. It was the difference between being a mouse and being a cat.

I strode confidently back to the centre of the market, bought some food and found a free table, and sat down to eat and turn my smug cat belly up to the sun.

Which of course is when the dog appeared.



# 9/

He didn't seem like a dog at first. I have learned since then that they very rarely do. He seemed like just another person in this town full of people, another nameless face in the crowd.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" He indicated the chair beside me at the table.

"Not at all," I said. Suave and catlike. Already so sure of myself in this new world of mine.

He sat down with his mug and stared out at the crowd. I turned back to the bowl of stew in front of me. I hadn't been able to resist its rich smell and had eaten half the bowl already.

And then the stranger leaned in casually, as though simply passing on market gossip, and murmured something that made me drop my spoon onto the table.

"I know what you are," he said.

I hunched over my bowl, willing his words away, trying to see from the corner of my eyes if he had accomplices gathered around me, waiting for me to spring up and try to escape. But where would I run, in this town I didn't know? And even if I could outrun this man, would I really abandon Yoshi?

I carefully picked up my spoon, wiped it on my trousers, and forced myself to start eating again. I had paid good money for this. Yoshi's good money. I had no right to let it go to waste.

"Who are you?" I muttered, staring down at my stew.

"Robbins. My name is Robbins. And it is usual," he continued, "to shake a person's hand when they introduce themselves to you."

I looked up to see his right hand thrust towards me. I looked up further to meet his gaze and distrusted him immediately. There was a cold intelligence watching from inside those eyes.

But what could I do? Whoever he was, whoever he was working for, he knew about me. I put down my spoon and took his hand. He nodded.

"Our truths have met," he said. I muttered the reply.

"Good," he said. "That's good. It's important to act as normally as you can, at all times. That's how you pass undetected. You should probably finish your stew."

He dropped my hand. I wanted to wipe it immediately.

"I've been watching you," he said. "I have an instinct. I saw you come in to The Farmer's Arms last night. And today... well, today I thought I'd have a market day. Perhaps have a look at carpets. Or maybe some kitchen knives..."

I was dimly aware that the commotion of the market was carrying on all around us as normal, but we seemed to have retreated into our own little bubble of quiet. His voice was pitched low, for my ears only.

"I found myself taking quite an interest in your companion," he continued. "Your *husband*. I found it quite...remarkable... that in the time it took you to

cross the market he could recover from a lifelong inability to speak. *Quite* remarkable.”

So he had heard everything. Overwhelmed as I was by this place, I had assumed that the market crowd was the same for everybody — an anonymous mass into which you could blend and go unnoticed. Of course I had not thought about someone who knew this town and knew its crowds. He must have been standing right behind me at both of the stalls.

It might be my last mistake. I put down my spoon then. I was sick of this game. Ready to run, if I could, ready to fight if I needed to. I slid my right hand down to the knife at my belt.

At that, he grabbed my shoulder, and leaned in closer, whispering urgently. “*Don’t* do anything stupid. You must not draw attention. *Never* draw attention.”

And then: “I’m like you. I can help.”

And then he sat back to regard me carefully.

I sat frozen, with my hand on the hilt of my knife — heart pounding, and legs coiled taut underneath me, ready to spring up and get away from here.

I forced myself to take a breath.

“Prove it,” I said at last.

Again, he gave me that look of cold consideration.

“I do not have quite the, ah, *power* that you seem to possess,” he said. “I cannot bend the truth around the way you seem able to. But I can go along with what people think. I can encourage them to think certain things about me that aren’t true. I can nod my head at a falsehood in a way that most people can’t.”

I was having a great deal of trouble taking in what he was telling me, but before I could spend any more time trying to understand I needed my proof. I needed some leverage against him, because right now I was in his power.

I looked at him more closely his hair, the lines on his face, his posture.

“You’re forty-four years old, aren’t you?” I said.

He nodded. And then I took a breath. There was no other way to do this.

“You were born forty-two years ago, weren’t you? You’re forty-two years old.” I said. “Aren’t you?”

Again, he nodded.

The breath I’d been holding whooshed out of my body, and I slumped down against the table, shaking. I found his voice in my head. *Never draw attention*. I forced myself to sit back up and continued trying to eat, but my hands were shaking so badly that I had to abandon my food. I felt utterly exposed.

“I... didn’t know,” I said eventually, gripping the solid wood of the table to steady my hands. “I didn’t think there would be anybody else.”

I looked back at his face, wondering for an instant if I might see some kindness there, some connection, but all I saw was harshness, and hardness, and something else glimmering. Something like excitement, something like greed.

“There is much,” he said, “that you don’t know. There is much I have to teach you. And much, I think, that you could teach me.”

Again that look of greedy excitement. I was in his power now. As he was, I supposed, in mine, although right now he had the upper hand in our dealings.

I didn't even know how his curse could be proven except through my accusation. And who was I to accuse? Who would listen to me?

"How is your husband?" He asked conversationally. As though we were old friends. He seemed determined to keep me off balance.

"He's sick," I said. "As well you know."

He nodded at that. "Yes. I was wondering, though, just *how* sick he was. Because I think it would be a good idea if he could travel soon. Quite soon. Before, let's say, a certain knife seller gets back from his business out of town.

"I can help you," he continued. "But only if we get away from here. I can take you to The City, and I know my way around. In fact, I know some people who would be very interested to meet you."

He offered this last piece of information to me as though it were a further incentive, but to me it felt like a threat. Everything he had said felt like a threat. He did have information that could help me, though. And I was starting to appreciate just how much power there was in having information. Perhaps he would feel less threatening when I was with Yoshi.

Yoshi.

"Y...", I stumbled, realising just in time to play my knowledge closely. "My husband. He doesn't know about me."

I looked up then to see how he would react. He nodded his inscrutable nod that might mean any number of things.

"I wondered about that," he said. "I wondered how closely you'd kept this secret. I wondered what you'd told him. How do you think he'll react?"

I stared at him then, this greasy man who'd spent all day snooping behind me, and I felt like crying. How *would* he react? What if the best I could hope

for was that he would choose not to turn me in? What if all I could look forward to, for the rest of my life, was a life on the road with this Robbins? The thought was unbearable.

“I think,” I said carefully. “That he’ll be okay. I will tell him, when we’re out of Outgarth.”

I looked him directly in the eyes then. “*I will tell him. You will not. Is that understood?*”

He smiled a sardonic smile then and gave me an oily bow. “You have the power, my lady Rachael.”

He even knew my name, or at least the name I’d been giving in this town. I suppressed a shudder.

“And now,” he said. “You should probably see to your husband. You need to know when he’s ready to be on the road again.”

I left him then and walked slowly back to the inn, stopping only at the herbalist Shara had directed me towards. My mind was spinning. I could see no way out of this. Perhaps we could escape him once we were on the road, but he had the power as long as we were in town.

My thoughts were so preoccupied with the situation that I was almost knocked down by Shara as I entered the Farmer’s Arms.

“He’s awake!” she cried excitedly. “Your husband, he’s awake!”

Yoshi. My husband. The mute.

What had happened? What if he’d spoken? This day was full of trapdoors.

I ran up the stairs with Shara just behind me. I hadn’t been able to tell from her exclamation what she already knew, or what unspeakable amount of trouble we were in.

I stopped outside the door.

“If you don’t mind,” I said to Shara, “I’d like a minute or two alone.”

“I see,” she said. I could see her disappointment.

I opened the door to find Yoshi sitting up slightly in the bed. I made urgent eyes and silent shushing noises with my mouth while I pushed the door shut behind my back, and then quickly raised my fingers to my lips.

*I know*, he mouthed. He raised a hand and mimed clamping his lips closed.

I stared at him in astonishment. It was too much to comprehend. Another shock for a shocking day. Aware of Shara, impatient outside the door, I slid up the bed and put my hand on Yoshi’s forehead, and another on his chest.

*Sorry*, I breathed into his ear. He looked like he was trying to suppress a smile. He was still warmer than he should be, but not burning like he had been last night.

Evidently at the bursting point of her discretion, Shara knocked once before pushing open the door.

“Such dedication!” she cried. “You’re a devoted wife Rachael my dear!”

Despite everything, I smiled at that. And then perhaps emboldened by the shock, I said something to her that had been on my mind all day, ever since passing Simmons idly drinking in the market square.

“I should think you know a thing or two about devotion. Looking after your husband’s inn all day.”

“Oh hush now,” she said. “That’s just my job. We all have our jobs to do. I mean, look at you, caring for this... uh... I mean... look at you caring for this sick young man.”

Yoshi smiled at her and nodded his head, eager to impress upon her that while he may have been mute, he was not stupid. Or deaf, for that matter. I was having trouble not laughing.

Shara slid up to the bed head, and took her own measure of Yoshi's temperature.

"Good," she nodded. "He's getting better. Did you get that medicine?"

I nodded.

"Good. Give him another day or two and I see him getting up and out. I'll bring up some more soup."

And she hurried out before I could thank her.

Listening carefully as her footsteps retreated, I turned back to Yoshi.

*You can probably stop checking my heart rate now*, he mouthed. I jerked my hand away. He was smiling again.

"We have a lot to talk about," I whispered. "Far more than I can understand. How did you know not to speak?"

"You're right," he whispered back, so quiet I had to lean in to hear him. "We have a lot to talk about. Not now though." And he coughed weakly and pulled himself down from the pillow he was propped on. "Later."

And he was asleep almost instantly, leaving me to collect the tray from Shara when she bustled gaily back in, and walked out again on ostentatious tiptoes. I remembered my own time in the clearing, how quickly I had slid between states of consciousness.

How Yoshi had always been there when I woke.



I could not resent him for this new mystery, but it gnawed at my mind for most of the night. I fretted beside him, trying to work out what was going on, and how it was going on, and what I could do with this new information.

I had a frustrating day ahead of me when I woke. Yoshi remained asleep most of the day, and the few minutes of consciousness I had with him were too closely patrolled by Shara to risk having him talk. I was in her debt for the time she'd spent looking after Yoshi, so I really couldn't be angry at her.

In the end I gave up any attempt at communicating with him except through hand gestures and smiles, and inane chatter that nobody overhearing me could think I expected an answer to. I would have to trust that he knew what he was doing, somehow.

Needing something to occupy myself with until we could talk, I found my way out to the stables in time to say my goodbyes to Jansen and Matthew. They had had reasonable success at the markets, it seemed, and now must return to their farms and their families.

Jansen enquired after my husband and wished me a safe voyage onwards to The City. I was pleased that I had kept him from learning Yoshi's name, and that I also managed to give him the impression, without directly saying so, that Chow was indeed to be the one taking us onwards. I had not seen signs of pursuit from my village, but any false trail I could lay made me feel more secure.

I was sad to bid Jansen farewell, for he had been nothing but kind and generous towards me. I owed him, and I was unlikely ever to get the opportunity to pay him back.

Matthew had reverted to his customary sullen silence as he harnessed up their horse. I couldn't decide if he was ashamed of his moment of lechery or simply annoyed that I hadn't responded.

Once they had gone I had nothing much to do but sit in our room and wait for the night and for no one to be around. And then wait for Yoshi to be conscious enough to talk.

In the end, it was him waking me. I had fallen asleep in my clothes, and the hand on my shoulder startled me awake from a complicated web of dreams.

"Annabelle," he whispered, into the darkness.

I had no sense of what time it was. There was no sound to be heard from the inn around us, no sound to be heard from the street. It was utterly dark in our room — no stars to connect us with the night. I hadn't realised until that moment how much I'd been missing them.

I turned over to face him and kept my voice as quiet as I could. I had so much to ask him, and so much to tell, so many plans I wanted to work out together, but the first thing that came out of my mouth surprised me.

"Thank you," I said. "We can talk about all of this later, on the road, but thank you."

There was a very long pause then, and I thought he might have gone back to sleep, for his breath came slow and heavy. But then he murmured, "I'm a little bit like you, you know.... I'm a little bit like you."

Then he was asleep, leaving me to roll over on my back and stare up in the darkness to the low wooden ceiling. Could he really have meant that we were the same? Was it really possible that three people afflicted with the same

problem could have found each other like this? The thought of Robbins and his cunning eyes held me awake for hours more before I finally fell asleep again.

The next day passed in much the same way, and I was desperately aware of the time slipping away. I did not have long before Chow would return to Outgarth and seek me out. On one of my ventures downstairs I encountered Robbins in the corridor. He didn't say a word to me, but his eyes told me a story of watchful distrust and dire consequences if I should try to go back on our bargain.

I managed to communicate to Yoshi, as a good wife should, that he should get as much rest as he could, and sleep as much of the day as he could.

*Because tonight, I tried to say with my eyes, tonight, we must talk about what's going on.*

Yoshi pleased Shara hugely with his improving appetite for her meals. He really did spend most of the day sleeping, and I began to wonder if it was in any way realistic to expect him to be back on the road so soon.

That night, however, he came awake as the inn went quiet, and we whispered to each other again in the blackness.

"It was one of the first things I heard," he said, his voice the faintest rustle on the pillow. "I didn't know where I was, or how I'd got here, or who the other people in the room were. I was starting to panic, but then I heard your voice, and it was all I needed. I held onto it, and to what you were saying. Even though it didn't make any sense. I remembered the words you'd said. About me being mute.

“And so.” He took a deep breath. “So I became. I don’t know what you’ve figured out about me, but I’ve figured out that you’re not like everyone else. I knew it almost straight away.”

At my shocked indrawn breath, he was quick to reassure me. “I knew it because you’re like me. Nobody else would have seen it, I’m sure. But I wondered about it, from the moment I heard about you in The Village. It was possible of course that you were nothing but a bride fleeing a village son, and I made myself hope for nothing more than that. But then I found you in the shelter, and I started to wonder.”

From that far back? I had thought my cover impenetrable. He went on.

“In Maldor’s barn, when you talked about him deliberately not wanting to know about you, choosing to remain ignorant so he couldn’t betray me, I realised you’d thought about this, and I started to become even more hopeful.

“And then I heard you telling Shara I was mute, and I knew. I knew. I had thought you might be just like me, but you’re a Storyteller. A *Storyteller!*”

Even though his voice was so quiet that a handspan away from him I could hardly hear it, that word seemed to shout itself into the night. I suppressed a shiver. But he was here. He was here beside me, he was not denouncing me, he was not disgusted.

“But you’re not?” I asked at last.

“I’m not. I can’t tell stories. But I can acquiesce with a story that’s been told.”

I could feel him wanting to say something else. I reached out in the darkness and put my hand on his shoulder. He was shaking.

“I didn’t know I could, until I betrayed a friend. He and I were close, among the cousins. Sometimes wrong things would come out of his mouth. He didn’t know he said them, and mostly they made no sense at all. The other cousins didn’t like him because of it, and they shunned me for being close to him.

“He wasn’t a Storyteller, but one day he said something wrong about broken fences and goats being loose to a Workmother. I knew it wasn’t true because I’d checked them the day before, but I wanted an excuse to go with him and get out of the village.

“He’d said it so I could repeat it. I didn’t realise she’d come with us. Maybe she’d been watching him, I don’t know. But she came with us, and saw what I knew she’d see, which was that the fences were fine. And this time, with his rambling so close to reality, it was enough to accuse him of telling stories, which she did. And accusation is enough.

“He was hanged. While everyone watched. Including me.”

His bitter voice. The silent night.

I tightened my grip on his shoulder then, as his body shook soundlessly beside me. How many years had he been holding this inside, knowing that everyone was watching, waiting for him to betray even the slightest deviation? Being friends with a supposed Storyteller was a dangerous position to be in.

After a few minutes his shaking subsided, and I felt him collapse once more into sleep.

A little before dawn we talked again, whispering our secrets into the stillness. Our *stories*, for that was what they were. Yoshi remained in awe of what I could do, and the ease with which I could do it. I had to reassure him,

again and again, that I would always tell him the truth, no matter what happened. He promised the same to me, although his promise was far less necessary than mine.

We were each all the other had, and we had to trust each other. It was that simple. And it was that complicated. How could I be sure that I could tell him all this, and not have him perhaps accidentally expose me to the world? Even with who he was, and what he was, he had years of belief to fight against. At one point, with my brain spinning from the complexity of it all, Yoshi grabbed my right hand in his.

“My name is Yoshi,” he said, intoning the opening of the traveller’s pledge. “Let us tell the truth to one another. No matter the truth, no matter the circumstance.”

I looked into his eyes then, emerging from the darkness in the first light of day. And I made my decision.

“My name is Annabelle,” I said. “Let us tell the truth to one another. No matter the truth, no matter the circumstance.”

And after that it was just a question of how. Yoshi was still weak, but not as weak as he’d been pretending to Shara. He thought he could leave the next morning. He took the news of Robbins in his stride, agreeing we could ditch him somehow in The City, as long as we didn’t give too much away about ourselves on the journey there. We both agreed there was much more to discuss, and much more to discover about who we were, but that would have to wait for time and space, for the absence of troublemaking ears.

All of which is how we found ourselves heading out of Outgarth just a day later — Yoshi bundled in all his clothes plus a blanket a distressed Shara had

thrust upon him, Robbins confidently leading the way, and myself bringing up the rear.

I tried not to look back at the town where I had discovered a little more about friendship and a little more about storytelling, a little more about my own capacity for courage and independence.

And where I had discovered that I was not alone with my curse. I was in the company now of two who shared it — afraid of one, and afraid for the other.

# 10/

Our first few days were frustrating. Maddening. I had so much to talk about with Yoshi and so few opportunities to do so.

He was still getting over his sickness, which meant that we had to travel slowly. I wanted to talk about our storytelling ability, but after we'd eaten and laid out our blankets, he would fall asleep straight away.

I knew it wasn't his fault, but I resented him for it. Resented him for leaving me stranded with Robbins, there by the fire in an uncomfortable silence. And during the day, of course, Robbins was there. Robbins was everywhere. He seemed to cling like greasy smoke. Even if Yoshi hadn't been exclusively occupied with putting one foot in front of the other, it would have been impossible to talk.

Robbins and I had not discussed our abilities any further either. We had not said a word about it. We kept our discussions civil and brief and practical. We had a long way to go; at this point we should follow this path; at this point we should divert through this small town; yes, it was time to stock up on supplies.



I was starting to doubt both the animosity I had felt towards Robbins and the kinship I had discovered in Yoshi that night in Outgarth. I was starting to feel like an outsider again, even in my tiny group of outcasts. I was lonely.

We'd been travelling for a week when Robbins raised the idea of stopping in the next town. We needed food, information, and a warm night or two for Yoshi, who took no part in the low-voiced discussion of his welfare, wrapped tightly as he was in blankets and misery.

"Look at him," growled Robbins. "He's slowing us down. Much more of this and you'll have a corpse on your hands. You want to add *that* to your story?"

He talked as though Yoshi couldn't hear him, as though there was no chance he would give away my secret to my supposedly-ignorant husband.

Yoshi couldn't hear him. Yoshi was somewhere else entirely, wrestling with an illness that didn't want to let him go.

Robbins still thought Yoshi knew nothing about my abilities though, and I took care to foster that delusion. He also thought that Yoshi's name was Daniel. Rachael and Daniel, the young married couple, off to their exciting new life in The City. Lying was becoming as second-nature to me as breathing. Sometimes I wondered if I'd ever be able to stop, but mostly I was too busy trying to stay ahead of the truth.

"Alright," I said at last. I had to admit he was right. "Please let's be careful though."

Robbins shot me a dark look. *Let's be careful*. Even I could hear how foolish that sounded. This man had spent his entire life being careful. It's why he still had one.

“The town’s called Thurston,” said Robbins. “It’s small, but they’re used to travellers passing through. As long as we’re *careful*,” I winced, “we should be fine. And I should be able to find out a little more about the road ahead. Save us some time getting through to The City.”

Thurston really was a small town, and I could see straight away that Robbins was right. The place where I’d grown up was the centre of the world when your world had no reason to be any larger. But the whole point of this town was to be a place through which people would pass. Through Shara’s eyes, I had started to see the appeal of this kind of life. New faces every night, new truths, new knowledge. So many ways to be in the world.

Robbins suggested a good cheap inn and I agreed to his suggestion. What choice did I have? I had wanted a guide for this part of the journey, but I was not easy with relinquishing this much control. I yearned sometimes for the mountain paths and twisting narrow ravines surrounding my village; paths I prided myself on knowing better than anyone else.

My village – swirling mist between familiar houses; the dull clank of the goats’ bells as I walked in from a day in the furthest fields; a warm mug of something to defrost my hands as I waited for supper to be ready. I had to remind myself of the welcome I would receive if I ever returned there.

At the inn we stuck to the truth we’d established in Outgarth. No embellishments meant not having to shore up a lie with more lies. Yoshi and I were a young married couple on the way to The City and Robbins was our guide. It was a common enough scenario. And if we all shared a room in this

dingy establishment that almost aided our story. Money was tight. People shared what scant resources they had.

In our room above the heady waft of the stables, I settled Yoshi into his narrow bunk, making sure he was well wrapped in blankets with a water bottle to hand. I murmured a few words into his ear that I thought might be reassuring, but I felt useless and guilty at how little I was able to do. I left him sleeping soundly and went down to find Robbins.

The bar was small and smoky and crowded, and it took me some time to see him. He was wedged against the wall on a long communal table, mug half empty and immersed in conversation. As he finished what he was saying the group roared with laughter, and he sat back to soak up their approval.

He fit. He was a part of this. I wondered how he did it. How was I to live with my vulnerability exposed? How was I to live knowing that others knew my secret? When I'd been on the road with Yoshi alone I'd been able to ignore these questions, but I couldn't afford to do that anymore. Much as I hated to admit it, Robbins had a lot to teach me.

He looked up and waved me across to his table. There was a round of rowdy introductions then, and the group shuffled up and let me in. With Robbins's tacit stamp of approval I instantly found myself a part of things. From the sense of camaraderie I had assumed this was a meeting of old friends, but it turned out that the only person Robbins knew in the room was the bartender. Most of them were strangers to each other as well, united only by their purpose of travelling the roads.

Food arrived then, steaming bowls of stew passed down the table from the kitchen behind the bar. A quiet fell for a few minutes, replaced by the sounds

of murmuring and gulping. I slurped and savoured and murmured my appreciation along with everybody else.

Once the empty bowls were cleared away, the drinking and the shouting came up again. Nobody spoke directly to me, and I was glad of the chance to sit back and observe Robbins in action. He was smooth and charming, and very instructive to watch.

He kept the beer flowing into everybody's mugs, peeling pack layers of discretion and mistrust with his boisterous geniality. There were many truths at the table, and he picked and searched through them all as he sought out the ones that were crucial to our journey, crucial to his own long life on the road.

Tonight, though, and for as long as we travelled together, our truths were intermingled. My first refill came with a solid kick under the table; his eyes flashing while his mouth held a smile. I got the message but I hated him for it. The beer had been working a warm liberation on me, freeing my thoughts and relaxing my fears. I'm sure that's what he was afraid of. If I was less drunk I would have been afraid for myself.

I kept my silence then; slowed down my drinking and watched.

"Precisely!" he roared, slapping his hand down onto the table. I'd been lost in my own musings; I didn't know what he was being precise about. The people around him clearly did though, nodding their heads thoughtfully, or murmuring assent.

"Things are breaking down," muttered an old woman, who I hadn't heard speak yet. "Things are different from what they used to be." Murmurs of

assent around the table. She looked around the ring of faces, enjoying her moment in the spotlight.

“You see things that you didn’t used to see. You hear things that you didn’t used to hear. I heard from Bannock the silversmith up at Outgarth, who heard from trader Hillman, who heard from trader Josephine, about a village in the mountains where the Headman’s going wild because one of the promised daughters of the village ran away. *Ran away*. Things aren’t what they used to be.”

Murmurs of assent around the table, a little more forceful this time.

It was as though someone had dropped a bucket of ice water over my head. Robbins was nodding with the rest of them.

“What kind of girl would *do* that?” he asked the table in general. Did he suspect me? Or was he just playing along?

“It shows no respect,” said a man sitting next to him. Nods around the table again. “I heard the same thing. From Kyle the fishmonger from O’Haran the farmer from Ricky the trapper. If you’re promised you’re promised!”

More murmurs around the table. More vehement nods. And for just a moment, it seemed that the eyes of the old woman lingered on me. A message? A threat? Did she somehow suspect me? Was she about to denounce me to the table at large? (Of course she wasn’t. Of course she couldn’t. I was travelling here with my husband. Everyone at the table knew that. But I thought I’d seen something in her eyes for that moment).

The talk moved on then, to other truths and other discontents. I could feel that Robbins wanted to know more about this, for this kind of knowledge was

the currency of the roads, but he had lost the chance to press for details without raising suspicion.

I had heard the same kind of talk in the markets at Outgarth. There had been a similar level of discontent in people's mutterings. I had ignored it as simple grumbling; part of the glue of low-level dissatisfaction that people use to stick themselves together. But here it was again. This feeling that something was coming apart.

I would ask Robbins about whether he'd noticed anything similar in his own travels. And then, even in my drunk and adrenalin-charged state, I noticed my weakness. I'd hired this man to be my guide to The City, not my guide to The World. How did I keep giving over my power like this?

I woke the next day to Robbins's snoring, the grunting of pigs in the barn below us, and the truth of my first hangover. My head was throbbing and my mouth tasted as though I'd been gnawing on my straw mattress all night.

Flashes of the night before flicked through my mind - a mood, a facial expression, an unexpected shout of laughter. It was very disconcerting, and I wondered if this was how most people perceived the world; how most people recalled the world to each other. It was like having a basket full of shiny beads but nothing to string them on. Everything jumbled in together, nothing in any order, no clues to tell you which bead was meant to go next to which.

As I lay there slowly sifting through this mess, I came across the face of the old woman, giving me a look that I still couldn't interpret. What had she been trying to say to me? Had she been trying to say anything to me at all, or was it only the alcohol playing with me?

I suddenly found myself on the floor retching into the chamber pot. After heaving for several moments, I looked up to find Robbins watching me from his bed, grinning sardonically.

“Good morning, my dear,” he said. “Have a little too much fun last night, did we?”

“Why would anyone do it?” I mumbled, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. The fumes of my bile were threatening to make me vomit again. “I mean, every *night* some people do it!”

“So much to learn, my little child...”

I gave him the most evil eye I could muster, then staggered to my feet and dragged my cloak on. I had to empty the chamber pot before I was forced to fill it up again.

I found Robbins again later that morning, having alternated between trying to make myself feel better and guiltily trying to tend to Yoshi, who seemed bound in his endless restless sleep. Robbins was sitting on a bench on the building’s verandah, feet up on the railings and pipe in hand as though he’d always been a part of this town. Again I had cause to marvel at his survival skills.

“Come here,” he said, when he saw me. “Drink this.”

He poured me a mug of tea from the pot sitting beside him, and I took it and sat down. It was hot, sweet, and bitingly strong, and I could feel my head starting to clear immediately. He nodded, then turned back to contemplating the quiet street. Steam rose from my mug; smoke from his pipe.

“We can use this, you know,” he said, after some minutes.

“What?”

“Your... delicate condition,” he said.

“What?” I repeated, struggling to understand.

“You and Deanne were the only women in the bar last night.” The old woman. Of course he’d found out her name. “She’s here again tonight,” he continued, “and I think you should take the opportunity to get to know her. Find out what you can from her, in a quiet room somewhere, away from the alcohol. While I dig into what the lads know.”

I snorted. “Because drinking is a *man’s* business? Because men have secret knowledge?”

He gave me one of his cold looks. “Some men won’t talk when women are around,” he said. “I’ve learned this the hard way. You should take advantage of my knowledge, while you have it.”

He turned back to the street then, and calmly drew on his pipe. I’d gone all the way from confused to furious in the space of seconds. How arrogant this man was, how full of his own importance!

“And good coin I’m paying you for this ‘knowledge!’” I finally spat.

He turned back to face me then, anger in his eyes.

“You’re young. Sheltered. You haven’t had to live the way I’ve had to live. You haven’t had to see what I’ve had to see. You need to listen and you need to learn. If you can’t do that,” he raised his fingers to his temples, “I think you won’t be around to worry about spending your husband’s money. You won’t be around to worry about *anything*.”

Threats, barbs, insults, truths. His words sank slowly through the clearing haze of my brain.



“So that’s settled then?” he said calmly, as though we were discussing the price of a jug of milk.

I grunted. He nodded. We watched the street.

That night I took his suggestion. I’d sought out both the innkeeper and Deanne earlier in the day and discovered a small and infrequently-used parlour at the back of the building. It was “where the ladies used to like to retire,” as the bemused innkeeper had put it.

Deanne had accepted my invitation without giving anything away, nodding her head brusquely before turning back to her cart full of lavish bolts of cloth. As I approached the narrow doorway that evening I couldn’t help feeling I must have read too much into her look last night. I resigned myself to a night of awkward chatter, and then pushed on the door’s smooth wood.

Deanne sat at a small table a mostly-empty glass of wine in front of her. So much for Robbins’ theory of the delicacy of non-drinking ladies.

“Come in come in, no need to be ceremonial.” She waved me over and I sat down opposite her. She had clearly put some thought into her presentation for this evening. Hair swept up, large ear rings, and a dress in one of the ornate fabrics I’d seen her with earlier in the day. She was not as old as I’d taken her to be the night before.

She saw me looking and smiled. “Can’t blame me for wanting to dress up, can you? No point looking fancy for *that* lot though.” She swept her glass contemptuously in the direction of the bar, and then swigged down the rest of her wine.

“But where’s my manners? Here.” She filled my empty glass from the jug on the table, and then refilled her own. “May your truth go easily.”

We clinked glasses and I took a cautious sip. The heady fumes of the dark wine sat uneasily in my nostrils for a moment. Vowing to myself to go slowly, I smiled and put my glass down.

“Let’s get something to eat, shall we?” said Deanne.

The food the kitchen brought to us was the same as last night, but like the extravagance of glassware, our stew was served in delicate china bowls that had Deanne snorting with laughter. She laughed freely and often, and I found myself enjoying her presence. It was the most adult meal I’d ever taken part in.

She also drank freely, and I had to work assiduously to avoid a repetition of last night. I took sips for her gulps and refilled her glass often, uncomfortable at how quickly I had adopted Robbins’s tactics.

“Trying to get me drunk are you?” chuckled Deanne at one stage. “I’m past all that now, deary. But it’s flattering that you’re trying.” She gave a theatrical wink, and placed her hand over mine. Was *this* the look I’d misinterpreted last night?

She sighed and withdrew her hand. The mess of our meal was spread across the table. She seemed to shrink into herself a little then, and suddenly looked a lot more like the old woman I thought I’d seen last night.

“That’s my truth, love, and it’s not always been an easy thing to live with. I would have liked to have a companion to travel through this life with. Still, it’s one of the things that’s meant I could do what I do. Don’t get many women traders with hubby waiting happily back home, do you?”

So. My world continued its expansion.

“I noticed you took an interest in my story of the runaway last night,” she continued. I tried not to look too stunned. “And I wondered if you were... happy. With your husband I mean?”

Was she asking what I thought she was asking? I could only nod, and stammer an affirmative.

“You hear a lot of strange things on the road,” she said. “Strange truths. Truths that sound like they couldn’t be truths, or like they could only be the truth of a madman’s mind.”

I nodded again. Vagrants had sometimes passed through our village. *Broken* they were called. Shambling ruins of people, spouting truths that were only true to them, distorted pictures that made no sense to anybody else.

“There was one I dismissed along with all the rest, the first time I heard it. An outlandish truth from a diseased mind. But then I heard it again, several years later. A truth about a place, a town, where everyone, *everyone*, is a Storyteller. Everyone’s got the curse, and nobody speaks the truth. An evil place, a place of *lies*, where nobody can even know anybody because everyone is telling stories.”

She’d been looking up at the ceiling as she spoke, staring backwards into the well of her life, summoning up this cracked truth. Now she turned her gaze fully upon me.

“Have you heard such a thing? Have you heard of this town of liars?”

I could only shake my head, almost hypnotised by the intensity in her eyes. ‘Lies’ and ‘liars’ were not words you heard everyday.

“I wonder, sometimes,” she continued. “I wonder what it would be like to live in such a place.”

And then she shook her head, laughed ruefully and poured herself yet another glass of wine. She continued shaking her head as she sipped, as though trying to clear the disturbing visions from it.

“It sounds like a story, doesn’t it?” she said. “It sounds like I’m a Storyteller.”

I shivered in the stuffy air of the parlour.

She then tossed back the rest of her glass, and seemed to lose all her energy, slumping in her seat and staring back up at the ceiling. As she did so I suddenly thought of Yoshi, of what he’d said about discovering who I was. Could I tell somehow, if I listened differently, if I learned some new way of seeing?

I closed my eyes, and tried to hear her with some unused part of my body. I felt like a blind person being told to open their eyes. I couldn’t feel anything special about her, but that didn’t tell me anything much. I would have to experiment with Yoshi, with Robbins. With, I realised, my travelling pack of liars.

I shivered again. It was all too much.

“Deanne?” Her head was lolling now as though she was going to pass out. Hearing her name, she started upright.

“I’m sorry, my dear. I’m terribly sorry. I seem to have drunk a little too much.” She raised her arm. “Would you mind helping me up to my room?”

I pulled her up and helped her up the stairs, her gentle murmurs of apology in my ear.

I got her into her room and I'd barely taken her shoes off before she began to snore. I stood for a while watching her face in the dim light coming in from the corridor. No, I decided, she really *was* an old woman, resting peacefully now as the wine took her deeper. It was only the animation in her eyes that had made her young again.

“Goodnight, Deanne.” I closed the door.

# 11/

And then slowly, quietly, Yoshi was back.

We stayed one more day in Thurston. One more day in which Yoshi slept, I fretted, and Robbins sat on the verandah smoking and drinking tea. His cover was very good if he was attempting to be seen as someone at ease with the world; someone not at all worried about being on the run.

Before we left I saw Deanne, briefly, as she loaded her wares in preparation for moving on to the next town. She looked old again, and dressed plainly for the road, but I'd seen into her eyes, seen the glimmer at the edge of her smile. This was her disguise for passing unchallenged through the world. So many ways to tell a story! So many ways to dress the truth!

She thanked me for our dinner, and she bid me well. She was gracious and she was kind, and she knew who she was. I had not encountered many people like her in my life.

The next day we were once more bound for The City. Yoshi walked beside me, as quiet as before, but after dinner that night he sat up for a while, listening as we told him about Thurston and some of what we had learned there. I made no mention of what Deanne had told me about the Town of Liars. I hadn't told Robbins either. It was something I had to understand

more within myself, as if I could weigh its truth just by keeping it silent within me. I wasn't ready to bring it out into scrutiny just yet, for fear of its dismissal, or for fear of what it might mean if it were real.

Yoshi didn't say much as we talked, but he took it all in. It was comforting to have his quiet presence beside me by the fire, providing some relief from Robbins's world-weary sarcasm and arch distance.

And the next day he was a little better, and the next day a little better still. And then he was Yoshi again, alert to the world around us, scouting out the path ahead, mindful of the dangers that followed behind, and always aware of our goal to reach The City.

I could almost have felt happy at this, except that when Robbins was around it wasn't Yoshi that travelled beside me — it was Daniel. And Robbins was always around.

It was Daniel, who could not make up stories the way that I could, but who had the ability to answer to that name for Robbins. It was Daniel who would nod along (because he could) when Robbins asked me about our marriage and I hastily fabricated some details.

Daniel was quiet, just like the cover story we'd worked out. Daniel was practical and knowledgeable and attentive to the needs of the party. Daniel nodded and smiled politely as Robbins tried to dig out the truth of him, and then he turned to me as “the wordy one of this couple,” waiting for me to fill in the details. Waiting for me to tell the stories for him.

It was Daniel who was becoming more deeply entwined in the precarious web I was spinning with Robbins, and it became yet another layer of distance between us. At least when he'd been sick I could console myself with the idea

that it was his sickness that was keeping us apart. Now it was my lies that were driving a wedge between us. I had only been a regular liar for a few weeks now, but already I felt sick of it, and sickened by the thought of an entire town of liars.

“Daniel,” I whispered one night into the darkness. It was some hours before dawn, several days after leaving Thurston. The three of us lay wrapped in our blankets in a loose triangle around the ashes of the fire. Yoshi and I had our heads close together. I tried to make out his face in the starlight, looking for some trace of the boy I had met in the barn.

I listened carefully for a moment more. All I could hear from the other side of the fire was Robbins’ steady snoring. I shuffled myself as close as I could and then put my mouth to Yoshi’s ear.

“Yoshi,” I whispered.

His eyes flicked open instantly, rapidly registering alarm, confusion, reassurance, and then alarm again. He struggled to rise.

“Shh,” I said, putting my arm on his chest.

“What is it?” he said.

“I just...” I trailed off. What was it? What could I say? “I just wanted to say your name.”

I turned away, heat rising into my face in the freezing night. Spoken out loud it sounded so stupid, so childish and needy. I started to pull away, preparing to lie back by the cold embers of the fire and drown myself in my foolishness forever, when he grabbed my hand.

“Annabelle. Remember. No matter the truth, no matter the circumstance.”



Our very own traveller's pledge. I closed my eyes a moment to stop the unexpected tears welling up. I hadn't realised how much I needed to hear something completely honest from him.

"It is a kind of lying," he went on. "This thing we're doing with each other. This story telling. I don't find it easy. But it's necessary. It's needful. And it's only for now."

"I know," I said. "I know."

"It's only for now," he said again, gripping my hand tightly. "Remember that. We will have our own truth again."

Robbins shifted in the dark, the regular rhythm of his snoring abruptly halting.

"Soon," said Yoshi, squeezing then releasing my hand.

I lay back in my blankets, breath frosting in the still air, as Robbins rolled over and started to snore again. Soon.

I had to hold that moment tightly to myself for the next few weeks. I had to make do with Daniel and I had to make do with Robbins.

"So Rachael. I've been wondering when you were going to have that little talk with your husband?"

We were setting up camp after a long and rainy day on the road. Robbins had sent Yoshi off to try and find dry wood while we set up the oilskin shelter.

"Unless," he continued, "you've managed to find quiet time without me noticing?"

His tone of voice suggested the utter impossibility of such a thing, and I realised that he'd been keeping a far closer eye on me than I'd been aware of.

“I haven’t,” I said shortly.

“Well then. Good.” This surprised me. “I think that’s good. Now let’s talk about what we can do with that information. Because information is power. And power is what you’re going to need when we finally get you to The City.”

He tossed me the coil of rope he’d been holding, which I automatically caught. We were quite the team now when it came to setting up camp. And I knew enough about Robbins by now to know that he would want to stay for as long as possible on any team that had any chance of holding power. As I bent to the task of securing the guy, he continued.

“Your husband’s going to a job in the family business, correct?”

I nodded, keeping my face towards the tent peg on the ground in front of me. I had almost forgotten that this was the version of my life he knew. I could not afford to forget these things. My life could depend on my memory.

“Good. Good, so you’ve got some solid cover there. You have, in fact, no real reason to tell him just yet about your... condition.”

I looked up sharply at that. “We agreed,” I hissed, “that *I* would be the one to tell him!”

He raised his palms. “You should be, you should! Just perhaps not yet. I think it might be... advantageous... if he stayed innocent of this knowledge for a little longer. I know some people in the city who would be very interested to meet you, but they’re a little... shy... about attention. The less people know about them the less people are involved, especially in a first meeting the more likely they are to be receptive to you.”

He looked at me hard then. “Do you understand?”

I nodded again in mute acceptance. I understood only too well that there was something going on in Robbins' head that he wasn't sharing with me. He obviously thought me a powerful piece in the next part of his game.

And then he looked at me curiously. "Is it tiring? Does it tire you?"

I looked at him blankly.

"In the market square in Ottgarth, I heard you give two different versions of the truth, but I haven't heard you do it since. At least, that I'm aware of." He arched his eyebrows, then continued. "It's exhausting for me to do what I do. The effort it costs me in concentration is enormous. I can't imagine what it must take out of you."

I bowed my head, nodding again. "Yes," I said. "Yes. It's exhausting. You probably didn't notice me slump because you had me so on edge. But I slept like the dead that night."

Sensing an advantage to be gained, I continued. "I've never told so many stories in such a short space of time. I don't actually know if I'll be able to do it again for a little while."

"Interesting..." he said. "Yes, very interesting. But my friends will definitely still want to meet you."

Yoshi came back then, with an armload of wood. As we went about our nightly routines of shelter and survival, I considered what Robbins had just given me. I was suspicious of his friends in The City, but much more importantly, he had revealed to me what bending the truth cost him.

It cost me nothing. Stories came to me free, a dozen at a time. It was as natural to me as breathing.

There was much that was mundane about being on the run. Every day we had to concern ourselves with food, with water, with shelter. Every night there was the worry about dry fire wood, and the shivering nights when there was none; the proximity of our camp to water; the trade-off between slightly warmer damp skies and clear starlight on biting nights; the occasional excitement of a fresh kill for our cooking pot and the stodgy stew for all the other days.

There was so much that was routine about this that I sometimes had to remind myself that I really was in danger; that all of us were in danger. Robbins could of course deny that he knew anything about me – he was capable of doing so, at a cost to himself, as I now knew – but there was still something of a risk for him, a danger by association.

I didn't care so much about the risk to Robbins. But I did care about the risk to Yoshi. How had I allowed myself to become so entangled with this boy?

I forbade myself from thinking too much about it, from thinking more than a day or two ahead. There was already too much uncertainty. Yoshi was not going to let me dwell on anything but the practical anyway. Now that he had recovered from his illness, I could feel his quiet head buzzing with what had to come next. I had managed to tell him about Robbins' plan to introduce me to his "friends" in The City, and about how Robbins wanted to keep Yoshi in the dark.

Yoshi was suspicious, but there was nothing that either of us could do. We could only walk on.

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If I'd been a horse I would have been snorting and taking half steps sideways for no reason. Today was the day.

We'd talked it out with Robbins last night. He knew the ways in well and had convinced me that this route contained the least chance of standing out. Safety in numbers.

The theory was sound. The practice was challenging. From weeks of travelling narrow paths, to the last few days of wider roads, to today. Today we approached The City, one party of many walking down this road. Our party was led by Robbins, a study of careful nonchalance.

I could feel Yoshi's breathing beside me, calm and regular. The same steady footsteps as always. How could he not be affected by this? I was almost breathless. I took my eyes off the road in front of me for a second to glance up at his face. He was looking up, looking ahead. I'd had my eyes down for what seemed like hours now, trying to block out all but the immediate needs of navigating through this crowd. So many feet in front of me – wagon wheels and donkey hooves and dusty boots; everyone moving at different speeds and rhythms.

Yoshi noticed my look and smiled. He reached out an arm and laid it on my shoulders, squeezed once briefly before dropping it.

“It's amazing, isn't it? Truly amazing.”

There was awe in his voice, and excitement, and perhaps a little fear.

“I... I'm glad you're here.” I stumbled over my words, like I was stumbling over my feet.

He smiled again, seemingly oblivious.

“I wouldn’t be here without you. Don’t forget that.”

I looked back down at the feet in front of me, the road beneath me, my boots.

“Annabelle,” he whispered, leaning in towards me. My name sounded like a shout. “Let the crowd take care of itself for a moment. Look up.”

I looked him in the eye, stumbled, cursed. He caught my arm to stop me tripping, and then kept it there.

“Look up,” he repeated.

I looked.

All the people I’d been trying to ignore, stretched out in an endless line across the plain in front of us. Heading for... but I was not ready to see what we were heading for just yet.

I looked at the people all of the people and I saw why Robbins had brought us in this way. For how could anyone spot us amid this sprawling marching cursing throng?

I looked to either side of us, at the landscape we walked through. It was nothing I hadn’t seen before, but it was all on a scale I found hard to take in. Robbins had sketched a map so I knew that The City was situated on a wide open plain, on the gentle curve of an enormous river. And I knew about farming, of course. And I knew about mouths to feed, and the never-ending press of hunger from babes and elders alike, the need to provide for those that could not provide for themselves, the need to produce a little more for dark times and bad times, the need to grow food for those who had other skills to offer and could trade for smithing or woodworking.

But this was on a scale I just couldn't comprehend. The fields went to the edge of the horizon. All well tended, all well cared for – prosperous and orderly in a way that our rocky hilly village farms could never be. And everywhere I looked there were people working, tending to the fields or tending to the flocks, bending their backs to the task of feeding this locust plague of people. What town could sustain such an invasion as this?

“So many...” I muttered.

Yoshi nodded. “So many people, so many fields, so many mouths waiting to be filled. I've been thinking that too.”

And then he grinned. “But you've avoided it for long enough. Take a look at where we're actually going.”

“Was it that obvious?”

He grinned again. “Don't worry. I'm just better at hiding my nervousness than you.”

I felt a flush rising to my face. I raised my chin and stared forward.

The City. This was the centre of it all. It rose from the plain in a sprawling mishmash of shapes and explosions of oddness.

As we'd come nearer and nearer to The City in the last few weeks, we'd heard more and more truths about it. From innkeepers, from traders, from farmers. Even in the village I'd grown up in people knew about The City. *The last remaining and the first reborn.*

Even from this distance I could make out the impossible shapes and defiant rises of its towers; the irregular piles of lower building scrambling upwards for the light. And I did tremble. Despite my pride, despite Yoshi

beside me and the people around me, I trembled. For I was looking back in time. I was witnessing the work of the people from the Time Before.

We saw it in the village I'd grown up in. Greystone, we called it. You never saw it in the fields though. It was useful for building, and most of the houses in The Village had a chunk or two somewhere in their structure. I'd never really considered how it might have been used Before, except perhaps in the way we used it, brick by greystone brick to build a house or a barn.

But here in front of us were greystone towers rising impossibly high into the sky. The City was built upon the ruins of a city from the Time Before. Built *from* the ruins, and around them and on top of them, built up layer upon history upon archaeology, built up on the truths and (I knew it now, instantly, instinctively) built up on the stories of the people who lived in that time.

There was no border, as I thought there might have been; no high wall or rampart or moat or ditch. The City was surely too vast for that in any case, too sprawling and too populous. We had spent all day walking through the fields at its edges, and now we walked through the beginnings of its buildings. As we continued along this main road, beset before and aft by the crowd, the walls rose higher around us. I didn't notice what was happening, at first, until Yoshi muttered something about the failing light. I looked up to find the position of the sun, only to find it blocked from my sight by one of the largest of the towers rising up in front of us.

The crowd seemed to be moving faster too, like a mountain stream forced into a narrow canyon. We gushed towards the centre with a momentum that could not be stopped. I had no time to look around and see what was



changing, see what this approach to the city held for us, see if I could hold in my mind some of the landmarks I would need should I have to retrace our footsteps.

It was all happening too fast. All this time I'd held out hope of The City as the place where I could be safe and free, and suddenly we were here. We were about to arrive in this place of sanctuary but it didn't feel safe. I recalled how I'd felt walking into Outgarth, my first real city of any size. That was nothing and nothing and nothing in comparison to this.

Too many people, doing too many things, at a speed and a volume I could barely comprehend, and all of us rushing and crashing through it, barely pausing to allow a breath, barely acknowledging anyone's presence, everyone busy and needing to be elsewhere, needing me to get out of the way. I was some speck of a farm girl, some annoying dirt on the side of their shoe that had to be scraped off as they ran through the streets, and we were pushed and we were jostled and there was no apologies and there was no embarrassment, there was only the people and their shove and their hustle and scrape.

And I was strong but I didn't feel it. I had led us through the woods and the wilderness, I had led us through sickness and struggle, I had brought us here to find sanctuary, and now I had to live with that. I had to bear my decision with strength.

Yoshi had his head down, moving like a horse cutting through cattle. I bowed my head too, to copy him copying the inhabitants of this place.

This was the start of us losing ourselves, the start of our new disguises.

I edged closer to Robbins, trying not to stumble in the pace of the street.

"You know where you're taking us?"

“I do,” he said. “Don’t worry about that.”

I was worried. I had to remind myself that he’d done everything he had said he would do. He had led us through countless small towns, and led us to safe places to stay in all of them. I should trust him.

I didn’t.

We walked. I had thought we were nearly to the centre of things, but The City’s towers appeared closer than they were and seemed to retreat as we walked towards them.

Robbins enquired at some point, with condescension in his voice, if I needed to stop for a break. In truth I would have loved to, but I was determined to remind him of my strength. We walked on.

# 12/

We'd been in The City for three days.

I looked up to the narrow strip of sky above my head. Somewhere up there birds wheeled freely, and clouds drifted from horizon to horizon. Between us was layer after layer of human construction, human pollution, laundry, street signs, shouting, and smells.

I stumbled against a pile of rubbish and Yoshi grabbed my arm.

“Don't look up so much,” he said.

He was a solid presence beside me, here in The City. He seemed able to *be* where he was, to *see* where he was, so much more easily than me.

So many faces, so many lives, so much interaction. I couldn't do as Yoshi did and just walk straight through, looking for the street sign, following the lead, navigating by abstract marks and the information of strangers.

By the scale of The City this was only a minor alleyway. That didn't stop the people hurrying about their business, the busy-ness of their days. I tried to watch the way they moved, deftly avoiding both eye contact and dog shit, and resolved to try and copy them. They seemed unaffected by it all.

This slipperiness was completely foreign to me. I looked up for a minute at the stream rushing past me, made eye contact for a moment with a stranger.

Nothing. Or something. I couldn't decide. Before I knew what to do with his look he was gone. To be replaced by another, and another. A seemingly-endless stream of people — more new faces every minute than I'd seen in the first fifteen years of my life.

I stopped, ignoring Yoshi's tug at my arm, and put my hand out to the solid stone wall. With my eyes closed I could focus on the sounds. With my eyes closed I could understand, because I didn't have to interpret the looks.

Conversations bounced back and forth between the narrow walls of the alley. Passing snippets between friends as they walked and idle chatter between vendors and customers. Shouts of merchants vending their wares, and shouts of people in minor altercations. Dogs. Wind in the awnings. A loose shutter banging somewhere up above. Even the faint cry of a bird overhead.

It was better with my eyes closed, but I could feel Yoshi beside me, and I knew it was time to move on.

“Okay?” said Yoshi.

I nodded once, determined to make it so. I was no use to anyone unless I could learn how to cope. We continued back to our inn, back to our room and its promise of refuge.

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Something was bothering me about the buildings in this place something more than the greystone towers that loomed over everything. I had finally managed to drag Robbins into the streets from his four-day ‘road

recuperation' at the bar, and I was making him show me what he knew of our neighbourhood.

As we walked down yet another lane of tightly-packed terrace housing I suddenly realised what had been troubling me.

“But where do the children grow up?”

He looked at me blankly for a second, and then roared with laughter, perhaps too hungover to care that he was breaking his own rule about drawing attention. He had his laugh and then drew me aside, where our brief sideshow quickly lost the attention of The City's ever-busy inhabitants.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh. But I forget what a Mountain Girl you are sometimes.”

I had not heard the term; I resented it.

“Take a look,” said Robbins, pointing up and down the street. “All these buildings? They're for families, mostly. A man, a woman, their children. Do you understand?”

I didn't. I must have looked as blank as I felt, for Robbins tried again.

“They call them Ma and Da. Those two adults are the only ones the children grow up with.”

“...Ma? ...Da?” I tried the words out in my mouth. They felt strange. I hadn't really taken anything else in.

“Just two adults to call your own,” he said. “Only two points of view to show you the world.”

I was still trying to understand. The best I could come up with was to repeat myself.

“Ma? Da?”

Robbins was shaking his head, trying not to laugh at me again. All I could think of was the sadness of growing up not surrounded by village cousins, the isolation of having only one or two others to talk to. The long low building I had grown up in was home to some of my fondest memories. Even I, cast to the edge of things for the way I babbled in my sleep as a baby, and later feared for the role I was given as Father Shoma's apprentice, found comfort in the animal warmth and the little dramas of the cousins that surrounded me.

"You know," said Robbins. "There aren't many things I prefer about you Mountain savages' way of life, but this may be one of them."

Every corner I turned in this place seemed to show me a new truth.

"There's something else..." I began. "People organise themselves strangely here. Or is that something The City makes them do?"

I didn't really have the words to explain. He shot me an impatient look. I'd brushed up against the edges of this idea with Father Shoma, in talking about the Time Before, but he didn't really understand it either. I tried again.

"It's just that, this street we're on... the people mostly look more like Father Shoma." They did. Dark hair, coppery skin. I hurried on, remembering he didn't know what Father Shoma looked like.

"And the area we came from before they mostly look more like you and me." They did. Lighter hair, lighter skin.

Robbins stopped then, and grabbed hold of my arm. "Yes," urgent whisper. "They do. But it's not something that people talk about here. It is one way to mark yourself *outside* of The City."

He clearly didn't want to talk any more about it. I got the message. If I really wanted to disappear into The City, I would have to blinker myself to

certain things. I would have to figure this mystery out later. I was used to people looking different from each other – all the villages were like that. What I wasn't used to was that difference having any significance.

Robbins didn't come back to the inn that night. I was worried until Yoshi talked me around, and then I felt stupid for worrying. And then I felt resentful. I had let him in too far, and I'd been trying to travel light.

Yoshi talked me down, like he always managed to do, with calm and with reason.

“And anyway,” he said. “This means we don't have to worry about him interrupting my story.”

I smiled. I couldn't help it. Every night since we'd come to The City, I'd told Yoshi a story. It was our private moment outside of the world in a place that always seemed to be watching. We were both nervous about our continuing failure to disappear into the cracks of this place; both tired from wearing masks all day.

This time belonged to us.

We lay on our single beds with the heads angled together into the corner, and it was almost how we had lain around the fire, smoke from the embers rising towards the stars. The single candle on the dresser burned low.

“What would you like a story about?” I asked. It was the next part of the ritual.

“The cat and the mouse,” said Yoshi dreamily, eyes already closed in anticipation.

“There was a cat called Chicken,” I began, revelling in this chance to use the language that was natural to my mind. “A large cat but a lazy one. He liked nothing more than to sleep in the sun in a field of flowers, and then curl up by the fire like a rising loaf.”

Yoshi sighed and settled back on his narrow bed, hands behind his head and a blissful smile on his face. This was another part of my power that I didn't quite understand. Every story I told Yoshi seemed to put him into a trance of some kind. His whole body posture would change, and no matter what the day had held I could feel him relax.

I would talk him to sleep, lowering my voice more and more until his breathing became snores. And even though I was tired from the day, even though my body hungered for sleep, I would find myself unable to simply stop mid-sentence. The story, once begun, demanded an ending. Or perhaps I demanded an ending of it. It was hard to tell sometimes. There was so much I had to learn about my talent.

My talent, my ability, my power, my curse: I didn't know what to call it. It was a slow death sentence, my doom and my shame, but it was the thing that had shown me that the world was bigger than I had thought possible. It was the thing that had brought me to this young man lying beside me.

“...and the mouse felt almost angry at Chicken's indifference, and became all the more daring in his raids on the kitchen...”

Beside me Yoshi was close to sleep. It was my favourite part of this ritual. If I stopped now he would shake and rouse, and tell me he was listening, that he needed to know what Chicken did after he fell off the table, or something else I had said five minutes ago. But if I kept talking for a few more minutes,



no matter even if I said the same words over and over again, he would fall deeply asleep.

The next morning I woke late and went down the inn's grandly-named dining room to find Robbins and Yoshi deep in conversation.

"And here's the young lady now," said Robbins as I approached, and Yoshi jumped. I blinked and then shook my head. He was smiling at me as he always did, while Robbins watched us both with his usual sardonic expression.

"Robbins has a couple of leads for me to try tomorrow on the other side of town," Yoshi said. "If I don't find work in the furniture quarter today."

"I've told him he won't," said Robbins. "But the boy is stubborn."

"The boy needs a job," said Yoshi, grimly, and then looked up at me apologetically. He knew how bad I felt that it was all his money we were spending, all his money that was nearly gone. He had some manual skills that he thought someone would pay for. The main thing I had was a fatal curse, and nobody much was paying for that.

"And what's your plan today, young wifey?" said Robbins.

"The markets," I said, ignoring his jibe. "Maybe someone there needs help with their goats."

Robbins raised his eyebrows, but I turned away before he could say anything else. I didn't think it likely myself, but I had to do something. Yoshi nodded, and I jumped up to see if there was any porridge left in the kitchen's crusty pot.

“These apples are of the finest quality, sir. I own you’ll find none better in this market. I know the farmer myself.”

I’d found a scrap of wall to lean against and was eating one of the apples in question. I’d bought it moments before, but hadn’t been given quite the same sales pitch. It was very crisp and very sweet.

“I know you know the farmer. You tell me so every time I come here to buy.”

I smiled, waiting for the comeback. I was glad to have found something to smile at after wandering pointlessly back and forth across the markets all morning. There was no work for me here. I was an outsider in too many ways.

The merchant adopted an injured tone. “I only tell you that, sir, to remind you of my connection to the place where they were grown. To remind you of my connection to the people who grew them. To remind you that we all depend upon the land.”

Despite my failure to find any kind of work, I found this place comforting. Even though the scale was immense, and the stalls clustered at the foot of a tower like fallen leaves at the base of a cliff, the interactions were something I’d grown up with. And given the urgency and the haste present in the rest of The City, it surprised me how often the negotiations here were carried out with leisure.

“We depend,” said the customer. “That we do. We depend.”

He reached out to take the apple the merchant proffered.

“Just like you, my friend, depend upon me to buy the apples. And I depend upon my employer to pay me, so I have money to pay you for your apples. We all depend.”

The merchant laughed at that. The people of The City were certainly more adept with their words – not afraid to waste them on a stranger or juggle truths playfully with a friend. Everywhere I went that people gathered, they talked as though nothing in the world were more important. And they said very little.

I walked back from the market through the furniture quarter, hoping to see Yoshi. I loved the warm smells of leather and polish, the resinous freshness of sawdust. But today The City seemed ravenous. I had always understood that humans needed shelter and food, but there were entire streets here full of shops that sold nothing but rugs.

Another street had nothing but kitchen furniture. Street after street ringing with commerce and the jangle of horse carts coming back and forth, carrying away the latest creations to somewhere else in The City. What would happen if people decided that their houses were fine as they were? That everybody had enough chairs in their houses, enough rugs on their floors?

But for the traders and the makers and the merchants of this quarter, business was clearly going well. Apart from all the other smells, there was the scent of money in the air. It was unmistakable to someone like me. I'd grown up accustomed to the scent of poverty, without realising that's what it was. But on this street, even the youngest apprentices carried themselves with pride, secure in the knowledge that they were on a safe path; that one day they would be masters of this place.

There was a price for that pride, of course. And it was paid by people like Yoshi. The City had very particular views on just who was able to take part in that prosperity.

I found him sitting at the bar at the inn when I returned. I'd never seen him drunk before. He was drunk now, and I was jolted to see he was bloodied, with one eye starting to swell.

The furniture maker's quarter took on a whole new cast for me when I discovered how they had treated Yoshi's naive enquiries after work. The first merchant had simply laughed at him. The next had shouted abuse, and the next (poor Yoshi, so full of determination) had set his apprentices on him as though they were a pack of dogs to be commanded, and he a troublesome rat.

It took me some time to drag this truth out of him. He was angry and he was drunk and he was ashamed.

"It's not your fault," I kept saying, but he wouldn't hear me.

"Arrogant," he slurred, staring at the wall. He would not let me look at his injuries. As he pushed me away one more time, I realised Robbins was standing right behind me.

"Happy?" I said.

He took Yoshi's shoulder and would not let himself be shaken off. It took Yoshi a moment to work out who it was.

"You're right," Robbins hissed. "They are arrogant. You are so much better than them. Never let them make you think otherwise."

"And no," he turned to me. "I'm not happy. Those self-indulged children will one day be wealthy men, and their masters won't let anyone in from outside to be a part of that. I'm not happy at all."

He waved the bartender over then. “Another one for this poor lad, and the same for me.” He turned back to me again. “You joining us?”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” I said.

“No,” he said, cutting me off. “You wouldn’t. I would. The boy deserves a drink.”

He put his arm around Yoshi’s shoulder, muttering consoling things. I just stared. I wanted no part of this.

I left them to their drinking.

# 13/

I heard him crash into our room at some point during the night. I left him snoring and belching out stale beer fumes the next morning.

I needed fresh air, and I needed to figure out what to do. I owed it to Yoshi. I hated seeing him like he'd been last night. My whole idea in coming to The City had been to fit in, to make it home. We couldn't disappear if we stood out.

I strode out to the verandah where Robbins was propped with his pipe and his tea. He nodded at me, not seeming much the worse for wear for his night of drinking.

"You said you knew people," I said, standing over his lazily reclining form. "People who would be interested in me."

He coughed. "Well. And a good morning to you too, my lady Rachael. Tea?"

"I'm serious," I said.

"Sit down," he said.

I didn't move.

"Now!"

I had a night's worth of irritation to pour into my movements as I pulled up a chair as slowly as I could.

"Thank you, my dear," he said, as he poured me a mug of tea.

"Do you always have two cups at the ready?" I said.

"As a matter of fact, I do," he replied calmly. "You never know who might come along with useful information to trade for a cup of tea. And today it seems like it might be you who needs information. I'm not sure that this is *quite* the best place to discuss it though."

He looked in my eyes to see if I was taking his point. I nodded curtly and then stared out at the street, hating him for being right. The usual foot traffic hustled past, the never-ending flow of people going back and forth. A boy pushing a dumpling cart looked hopefully in our direction and Robbins waved him over.

"I'm buying," he said, as I started to protest. "I know your resources are getting a little low."

Of course he knew. He'd taken most of Yoshi's money as his fee, after all. Coins clinked and the boy passed two steaming buns directly into our hands. I picked at the fluffy dough while Robbins wolfed his down.

"They are low," I said at last. "Our resources. I need work."

"Yes," he said at last, wiping sauce from his chin with the back of his hand. "And yes, I think I can help you with that. You will have to be a little patient, that's all."

Of course I would.

“I’ll make a few enquiries today,” he said. I nodded, trying to prevent my irritation from turning into rage. We sat drinking our tea as the street traffic started to thin out from the morning rush.

At last he turned to face me.

“Depending on what my people say,” he said quietly, “I think there will be work for you. *Very particular* work. It’s something that could get you very far ahead in The City.”

I laughed. He thought he was holding a lump of sugar in front of my nose.

“I don’t want to get far ahead,” I said. “That isn’t the point at all. Far ahead people get noticed. I just want to blend in. I want us both to blend in. I want us to become a part of this place so that no one will find us. *No one.*”

It was all I wanted, really, to be swallowed up by this place. To disappear from the hunt, stop being the quarry. I had not seen any sign of pursuit from my village for some time, but it was too much to hope I had been forgotten. There was no telling how the Headman might have organised his searchers or what kind of far-reaching network he might have activated. I no longer knew who to watch out for. It was exhausting.

He nodded, slowly. “But what if I could offer you a place where you could disappear from view, but have money and power? More than you could ever dream of?”

I just stared at him.

“You really haven’t listened, have you?” I said. “Which part of everything I’ve said to you has made you think that I want money? Or power?”

He waved his palms down to the ground. “No no. I understand. I do. I think I know more about what you want than you do.”



He hurried on as I instantly bristled.

“I don’t know who you’re running from, but I know you’re running. And I’ve been running for most of my life. It’s just that it’s easier for me to get away with. People see me and they see a trader or a guide, someone whose living keeps them on the road.

“But you know, I wouldn’t choose this life.” He gave me the most direct look he’d ever given me. For a moment I could almost believe I was seeing something real in that look, something behind the facade he kept up against the world.

“It can be exhilarating, but mostly it’s just tiring. It’s hours until the next rest stop, always. It’s wet boots and a wet bed roll at the end of the day. It’s knowing the best inn to stay at in every village and town, but knowing they only smile when they see you because you’re bringing them business again, and you won’t be hanging around for long enough to cause any trouble. Because that’s what you do. You move on. You always move on.”

He was talking about himself as though he was talking about another person. It was almost as though he was telling a story, but the story was him, the story was his life, the story was about a lost boy always on the move. I allowed myself to feel sorry for him.

“Very well,” I said.

He nodded. “I’ll talk to my people. It might take a little while to set up, but I am determined to make this happen.”

This was a Robbins less naked than the one I’d just seen. I sighed and sat back in my chair. There was nothing I could do now but wait.

It was a very long wait indeed. Days and days passed while he dithered and “made enquiries”. I had no leads of my own. Yet again I was forced to let Robbins lead the way. I hated it. More than that, I hated what was happening to Yoshi while I waited.

Robbins found him some work to do on the other side of town. He wouldn't tell me what it was. (“It's safer that way,” was all Robbins would whisper, insinuating danger and risk, and keeping the power clenched firmly in his fist). Yoshi wouldn't tell me either. He avoided my questions entirely at first, trying to laugh them aside. Then he grew dark and turned his head away. It was the first time he'd ever refused to meet my gaze.

I kept my hurt inside, watching him rise before dawn and return late, exhausted. During the day I wandered the streets and tried to learn the directions and the habits of The City. At night I kept to myself, avoided Robbins, and tried not to notice that Yoshi was never around. There was no more night time storytelling.

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“Exploring again today, young missus?”

I nodded at Luc, the tea seller on my corner. “I've only got a few more days until we leave. I'm trying to make the most of it.”

He smiled at my childish enthusiasm, a story I'd been cultivating with him. I'd decided I couldn't handle day after day talking to nobody. In this story, Robbins was my indulgent family friend, showing the naive young village girl around the city before she headed back to her hometown.

The first time I'd spoken with Luc about this, I'd watched the lie coming out of my mouth with as much pleasure and astonishment as he. I was becoming more and more adept at deception.

I chatted with Luc as I drank sweet spicy tea from one of the small clay cups he provided for his customers.

"How do you come to be here?" I asked.

"You mean here, on this street corner?" He chuckled.

"I mean here in The City. Tell me your truth? I won't be hearing much new when I go back to my village." I tried to inject a little wistfulness into my voice. My story said I was a young girl who'd had just a taste of the world, and was now sentenced to the rigid constraints of life afforded her in her village. It was a perspective I would never have had before. Fear was giving me the world.

He leaned in towards me then, a serious expression on his face. "I'll tell you a truth that not many know."

My heart pounded. Was I about to learn that he was like me?

Luc dropped his voice to a whisper and leant across his stall towards me. "I was born here."

It took me a moment to take in what he'd said, and by that time he was leaning back and roaring with laughter.

I smiled. I had to. And then I laughed; just the simple pleasure of laughing with someone I could almost call a friend.

"You tricked me," I said. "I'm a simple country girl." I tried to pretend to stand on my dignity, but it wasn't easy.

He laughed at me a little more, and then his face became serious. “You know,” he said. “You’re not a simple girl. Don’t let anyone tell you that.”

He reached out to take my empty cup, and then took my hand in both of his. Just for a moment, for just the right moment. The simple warm pressure of another human’s hand.

“I cannot know what your truth will be, but I hope it will be wonderful.”

He smiled then and waved away my coins, ushered me out into my day. His kindness warmed me to my core against the coldness of this place, where most interaction seemed based on nothing but commerce or exploitation.

I returned much earlier than usual to the inn. I found myself standing in the yard, half-hypnotised in the afternoon sun by the actions of the stablehands and the care and attention they lavished on the horses, the long smooth strokes of their brushes on the horses’ flanks.

I heard footsteps behind me, and turned around to find Yoshi watching me. Without thinking I ran to him and took him in my arms, heart beating wildly. It only lasted a moment, that thoughtless, careless embrace, but it was such a fierce joy of a moment. His arms stayed still by his side in surprise, but his body was warm against me.

And then I became self conscious, and I dropped my arms and looked down at my feet.

“Well,” he said. “Hello.”

I managed to look up then, and discovered he was smiling. I looked down at my feet again, and then slowly back into his face.

“I missed you,” I managed. “I miss having you around...”

It sounded so weak. So awkward, and so incomplete, so lacking in the complexity of everything I'd been feeling but hadn't been able to express until this moment. I was suddenly drowning in uncertainty.

He gave me a look I couldn't understand, and then he was the one staring at the ground between our feet.

"I'm not," he tried, and then coughed. "I'm not worth missing, right now."

He took a step backwards and addressed the air over my right shoulder.

"You wouldn't like the work I'm doing. You wouldn't miss me if you knew what I'd become."

"Then tell me," I said, my moment of joy blazing into anger. I seized his right hand in mine, forcing his palm against mine. "What is the value of our *very own pledge* if it can be thrown away so easily?"

I was shouting. The stablehands had turned to face us, mouths hanging open.

Yoshi tore his hand from mine. "I can't tell you," he said, and then turned and fled the yard.

I didn't see him again that night. I eventually tired of waiting for him outside, as the dark and the cold shivered into my bones, and I went in by the fire to find Robbins, and find some stew to put into the hollow of my stomach. I had trouble eating it, but I knew I had to. I was still ragged from the road, without reserves to draw on.

I passed the evening listening to Robbins tell me in excruciating detail all of the ways he was making himself indispensable, and then I excused myself to go and huddle under my blankets. The warmth of the food and the fire

soon leached away, and I was left once again to confront the hollow in my belly.

*I'm not worth missing right now.*

I missed him.

# 14/

I knew The City well enough by now to feel comfortable after dark. There were always people in this place, and there were always lights on and doors open, cafés and taverns and late night stalls, a sense that if something went wrong there would be somebody to witness, and someone to help.

Tonight Robbins was out with Yoshi, tending to whatever dark business they were carrying on. I considered staying ‘home’, but the thought of another night making small talk with the barmaid, avoiding the drunken conversations aimed at me by strangers, or staring at the closed-in walls of our room was enough to send me to despair. I decided to walk.

Even before this life of exile it was walking that had brought me to myself. Late winter evenings, bringing down the goats from the top fields, alone but for their comforting animal presence, I had started to try to come to terms with my difference. I would tell them tiny little stories, taking their bleats as approval.

I smiled at this memory as I set out down the cobbled street. I’d been lonelier than I realised. I’d held myself back from people, scared that if I got too close my secret would leak around the edges.

And then I had found Yoshi, and life had become a little more open, a little more rich. Now he seemed further away everyday.

I had to banish these fears. Yoshi was busy with Robbins, that was all. He was busy learning The City and the ways of the city. He was busy trying to help us both, just as I was. I was being ridiculous.

I strode then, pushing through stragglers and groups in farewell at the doors of inns. I walked as fast as I was able through the twists and across the cobbles, up stairs and down back alleys, around corners I had never turned before, along lanes I had only been half aware of, heart pounding with exertion and with fear and with foolishness.

The faster I walked, the more hostile The City started to feel, as though it both felt and was feeding on my fear. Loose cobbles rose up to trip me, blind corners were filled with market carts, alleys lured me halfway in before assaulting me with their stink of piss.

I broke into a run. Feet pounding, heart racing, breath drawing ragged and uneven in my lungs, sweat breaking out all over my body. My feet slipped and slid and then my ankle twisted underneath me, dumped me onto a pile of sacks on the edge of a market square.

Yesterday's cabbage. Or perhaps last week's. They weren't fresh but they were soft, and I lay in the stink of my good fortune, panting and trying to come back to myself.

I looked up at the stars. I had hardly seen them since we got to the city. I traced their familiar shapes with my eyes, the patterns I had learned and secretly named since I was a child. Their hard sparkling companionship had



kept me company on many cold nights. Perhaps this was all that I was. Goat girl, star girl. There were worse companions to have.

Scratchy sacking beneath me, a million stars above. I started to laugh. It welled up inside of me as though it had been waiting a very long time to come out. I surrendered. It came over me, sweeping everything aside – no consideration to how I might look, no fear of the attention I might attract.

I laughed until the tears came, great tears that poured down my cheeks until the back of my neck was soaked against the sacking. And my chest heaved and my nose ran and with every moment I grew lighter and lighter until I could almost feel my body rising, wanting to float up and join the stars, become one with the sky, my true companion.

I wept until I was done.

And then I pulled myself up and out of the pile, brushed myself down, and walked. I felt calmer and lighter than I had since we entered The City. I felt like myself.

I took my time walking back. I was lost quite completely, but I didn't let myself become worried. I was a city girl now, and it was time to use my head the way a city girl would. I knew parts of this place and I had a good sense of direction. I knew where the river was. I had the stars above me.

With the strength I thought I'd left back in the Mountains, I found my way home within half an hour.

I had found myself in The City.

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And then, finally, Robbins had a lead for me. It was as though The City was ready for me, now that I was ready for it.

I found myself waiting in the strangest shop I had yet encountered. I was drinking tea, but it wasn't a tea house. There was a man in the corner whose sole purpose seemed to be writing in a giant ledger. He sat at a desk covered in papers with his back to a bird in a cage. He wrote, ignored us as he ignored the bird with its constant entreaties for food. What was his connection with this place? What *was* this place?

I sat at one end of the counter with my tea, but down the other end two men were haggling over leather goods. My tea server had a sour look, and I couldn't tell if it was because I had breached some matter of etiquette. I didn't know the people or their habits. I had nothing to hang my understandings on. All I had to go on was the bitter stew of tea and the powerful smell of a caged bird's shit.

Ah well. I was tired of waiting, and I was hungry. I waved him over from his glower at the end of the counter.

"Do you have salty fish?" I asked. The tiny crunchy baked whole fish had quickly become a favourite.

He grunted and moved away.

"Yes," I said, under my breath. "Why yes. You need only ask and I am at your service."

It took two cups of tea, a plate of fish, and a lot of scowling from my friend behind the counter before Robbins finally showed up. My curses for him would have to keep, for he had a companion. A sense of power poured from

beneath the raised hood of his cloak. The counter man bowed his head obsequiously, waiting to be told what to do.

The hooded stranger stood aloof as Robbins approached. Robbins saw me, raised his hand in a *wait* gesture, and then murmured something to my sour friend who nodded and muttered back. Robbins handed him a small pile of coins and then looked up and pointed to me.

If my grumpy friend was surprised to find me associated with this figure, he did a good job of hiding it. He nodded at me, and then gestured for Robbins to follow him. Robbins again signalled to me, looking me in the eyes this time. *Wait*.

I was left in a strange silence with the hooded figure, who had not so much as acknowledged my presence. I tried to focus my attention on the old man with his ledger, who had not stopped muttering since I arrived at this place. The bird let out a screech and added to the pile of droppings at the bottom of its cage.

I tried not to rock back and forth on my chair. I tried not to stare. All of my attempts at being unobtrusive went unnoticed or unacknowledged by the hooded figure, who stood as though standing was enough. I had not seen many people so comfortable with their own presence.

Eventually Robbins returned. He nodded to the figure and then ushered him through the doorway. Almost as an afterthought he looked up and jerked his head at me. *Follow*. It seemed I was nothing but a pup in this interaction.

I followed, angry. We walked down a narrow flight of stairs into a basement, lit only by a single candle on the table in the centre of the room.

The hooded figure sat. We sat too, our knees almost touching beneath the small table. In the light of the single flame, I had an impression of cragginess. Deep ravines and pockmarks, bushy bearded undergrowth, long shadows in the gloom.

The silence stretched, and I was pleased to find Robbins for once at a loss for words. Perhaps I wasn't the only follower in this situation.

And then the hooded man surprised me by laughing. A deep, warm chuckle.

"Well, Robbins. This is suitably underground. I prefer a tea house in the park. Sunshine and so forth. But still," he paused, and turned his crags towards me. "Still I suppose you thought we needed silence, and darkness. I suppose you have brought me something... secret."

Robbins laughed nervously. He really was off-balance. I was delighted, but wary of this hooded figure. There was something about his laugh that made me think there was more to him than crags and power.

"Ah... certainly. Certainly I have something for you. For you and for your... master, I hope."

Heat surged through me. The suspense and the power, and now finally being referred to as a thing. Was I not here to change the situation for Yoshi and myself? I couldn't do that if I let myself be used.

I unclenched my fist and reached out my hand to the craggy man. "Hello. I'm Rachael."

Robbins sputtered. Craggy man looked delighted.

"Well well," he said. "My name is Wollstone. Our truths have met."

He took my hand in his, and I was surprised at the softness of his skin. There was power as well, in abundance, flowing just beneath his skin. He wasn't a Storyteller, I could tell that, but there was an undeniable aura of power about him.

"Well well," he said again, not letting go of my hand. He turned to Robbins. "I can see why you have brought this charming young lady to us."

I tried to snatch my hand back, but he held it tightly. He turned back to face me.

"There are many things you have to learn, Rachael. And one of them is when to show your hand."

He chuckled, and released me. It was not the pleasant chuckle of before. He continued to address me.

"I am not a Storyteller. You know that already. I have no power except that of a person who has spent most of my life around Storytellers. And I have learned a thing or two about spotting power."

My head was spinning. I could hardly breathe in this underground cavern, a million miles from the open fields of my childhood. How had I come here?

I could feel Robbins desperate to take the conversation back. "So you will know," he said quickly, "That Rachael is exceptionally powerful. You will realise what an asset she can be to your cause."

Wollstone laughed again. And then he turned back to me.

"Robbins seems to think you are an asset to be traded as he sees fit. How do you feel about that?"

He had me off balance again. One minute seeming sinister, one minute as though he was on my side. Robbins continued to make troubled noises on the other side of the table.

“Now that’s not what I meant...” he began, but Wollstone raised a hand to silence him. He was clearly a man used to being obeyed.

“Rachael?” prompted Wollstone. “How do you feel about that?”

I took a breath, slowly let it out, noticing for the first time the muffled sounds filtering down to us from the street above. I focused on the clean unflickering candle flame, trying to draw strength from its power.

“Robbins has brought me here. From far away. He has kept his part of a bargain we made, and for that I thank him. And now he has brought me to you. I don’t know what it is that you do, but I think perhaps you can help me.”

I straightened in my chair, looked where I thought Wollstone’s eyes would be under his hood. “But it has to be on my terms. Whatever it is you have to offer, I will trade with you of my own volition, or I will not trade at all.”

I was shaking, but I clamped down on it violently, willing myself still.

I was expecting him to chuckle again – that chuckle that told me that I was out of my depth, that he had the power, that I was deluding myself. He didn’t. Instead, he raised his hands and slowly pulled back the hood of his cloak. He smiled, and I could see it in his eyes as well.

“Well then, Rachael. I believe I may have something to offer you. And I believe you may have something to offer me. As for the terms that they are offered on.... well that’s not precisely for me to say. But I suspect, however,” raising fingers to his temple, “that you will be treated very well indeed.”

Robbins sat up straighter in his chair at that. I could almost hear the clinking of coins in his mind.

“And you, Robbins.” Wollstone turned his head, flint coming back into his tone. “There will be something for you. I can guarantee that.”

Robbins bowed, awkwardly. It was not a gesture I had seen him make before. I wondered again with whom I was aligning myself.

We talked just a little more then, arranging our next meeting. There was something I had to prove, I gathered, a test of my abilities. Robbins made very sure he knew the when and the where, made very sure that he was a part of this interaction. I didn't mind. As much as Robbins troubled me, he was at least a known quantity.

Details set, Wollstone pulled his hood back over his face. Our audience was over.

“I think,” he said, as though to himself. “You will leave this cellar before me.”

Robbins stood up so fast he almost tipped his chair over. Jerking his head at me, he once again made his awkward little bow and then hurried up the stairs. We paused briefly in the shop above, and Robbins handed my surly friend a few more coins. And then we left and moved blinking into the bustle and sunshine of the world outside.

I felt as though I'd been underground for days.

# 15/

Robbins left me then to continue his business in some other part of town. He wouldn't tell me more, saying that it would be better if I came to things with an open mind. I suspected he didn't know much more than me.

The one thing he would tell me he really didn't need to. "Don't say anything to Daniel," he said. I nodded.

Maybe this was the real me after all—a liar and a hypocrite. I had spent most of my life keeping secrets. Maybe honesty with Yoshi had never been more than a foolish ideal.

I waited, impatiently, for days, chafing against my deception every time I saw Yoshi. We'd hardly spoken since our fight in the courtyard, and I wanted to have something good to tell him.

He was coming home more and more dispirited. I could see the life being beaten out of him. Every day, walking around The City, I passed people, mostly men, who shuffled through the streets as though sleepwalking. I wondered if they had once had life and energy like Yoshi, if they had somehow fallen into the bad end of town, to have their flame extinguished.



Eventually Robbins negotiated a time and place. There were few details. There was no indication of what my 'test' would be. I muttered something vague to Yoshi, but I wasn't even sure he heard, as wrapped in exhaustion as he was.

Late the next night I walked with Robbins through the twisting alleys of the old quarter.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked again and again. He clearly thought I wasn't. Who knows how much my success might be worth to him?

"No," I kept saying. "Yes." I was as ready as I could be, not knowing what lay ahead. I was as ready to get Yoshi and myself out of this situation as I had ever been. I had no idea if I was ready.

At an unmarked door at the end of an anonymous alley, Robbins stopped and knocked a very precise pattern. The door opened a crack and a suspicious man regarded us for a moment.

"Come in," he hissed. "Quickly."

He pulled the door shut behind us and I found myself faced with a pair of massive forearms folded across an impressive chest.

"You," the man with the folded arms rumbled, nodding his head at Robbins. "Through there." Nodding to a small antechamber. "Wait."

The suspicious man was already dragging Robbins away.

"And you," Rumble directed at me. "That way." He nodded through a curtained archway. I looked in panic at Robbins.

"I need to stay with her," he said. I hated that I was grateful to him for that.

Rumble didn't even look at him. "What you need," he said, "is to go where I told you to go. We have *business* elsewhere that we need to take care of."

He had not laid a finger on me. Nobody had, despite Robbins being handled like an insect to be swept out of the room.

I held a hand up to Robbins. It was time to reclaim the lead. "It's alright," I said, with as much command as I could put into my voice. "This is my test."

Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw Rumble smile at that. He was as blank-faced as ever when I turned back to face him.

He nodded once and then ushered me through the doorway into darkness. He carefully closed the door behind him, and then stepped forward to sweep back the heavy curtain I hadn't realised was there.

"Please," he said, and I stepped forward.

The room we'd been in was all hard stone and bright lights. This corridor was the opposite. Plush rugs on the floor and heavy hangings on the stone walls meant my footsteps were muffled completely. The only light came from low-burning lanterns shielded behind blue-tinted glass, and I held out a hand to steady myself while my eyes slowly adjusted.

Behind me Rumble waited, keeping a respectful distance. It was a hopeful sign, but my nerves still thrummed uncomfortably high. Whatever this place was, the soothing atmosphere was not aimed at soothing me.

"Go straight down the corridor," Rumble murmured behind me. I clamped down on my twitch. "Right to the end. Wollstone is waiting for you in the final room."

And then he drew the heavy curtain back, and left me standing in the corridor. Behind me I could hear the heavy door into the entry chamber open and close, leaking just the tiniest amount of light and noise.

And then I was alone in the corridor, and the corridor was returned to silence.

No. Not silence, exactly. As my eyes adjusted more completely, I could see that there were a number of doors leading off the hallway, each one hung with a similar heavy curtain. And from behind each curtain came the softest murmuring.

I walked slowly towards the end of the corridor. Each doorway was the same. The heavy curtain, the murmuring voice. I could not make out what was being said, but there was a similar quality to each voice, a similar soothing rhythm and cadence. What was this place?

I was not entirely naive, despite what Robbins wanted to believe. I'd grown up surrounded by sex — my village depended on it. And through Father Shoma I knew about what went on behind the red lit doors of some of the larger villages we visited. This place was something different, but it had something of that feeling.

I walked on along the heavy rugs, past the murmuring doorways and low blue lamps, until I reached the door at the end of the corridor. I pulled back the curtain and knocked.

The door swung open almost immediately, on perfectly silent hinges. It was even darker inside than the hallway, and looming from the darkness with his hand on the door was the craggy shape of Wollstone.

He ushered me in, and then carefully closed the door, all without making or uttering a sound. I should have been terrified, but there was something strangely comforting about Wollstone.

The voice that spoke from behind him, however, had no hint of reassurance in it.

“So,” it said. “You have brought me something, Wollstone.”

The voice was dry and cold, both commanding and weary. I could not see its source, and I could not tell if it was a man or a woman speaking. More important than any of that, though, was the shot of fear it sent through me.

“This is Rachael,” said Wollstone. “I believe she can be of great assistance to us.”

I noted this: he did not say *there is something she needs from us*. He did not say *she needs our help*. He said I could be of assistance. This was someone who needed people who could help. I had to guard my expectations and hold onto the power they were giving me.

“Well,” said the voice. “come into the darkness, Rachael. Let us see your face.”

I forced myself to take another step closer to the source of that cold power. I heard the sound of a lantern shutter being lifted, and all at once I was blinded to anything else in the room, falling down a tunnel of light. The strange cold voice was all the company I had.

“You will pardon the secretive tricks, I am sure.”

I did. I found myself wanting to please the owner of that voice.

“When you understand a little more about me, you will understand why they are necessary,” the voice continued. “And you will understand why you have been brought here.

“Wollstone seems to think you can help us. He is rarely wrong about such things. So you have been brought here both as a gesture of faith and as a test of your abilities. Not many are admitted so easily to this sanctum.

“Do you know what this place is?” The voice asked me.

I shook my head, still staring into the lantern’s beam.

The voice took on an almost singsong quality. “This is the sanctum. This is the inner world. This is where you come to have your life fulfilled. This, my dear, is the Palace of Stories.”

I remained in the dark, there in the spotlight. From behind me I heard Wollstone’s deep voice, with perhaps just a hint of amusement.

“You forget that Rachael is new to The City. Such names perhaps don’t have quite the legendary tenor in her mind as they should have.”

“It is high time, then,” said the voice, “that she learned.

“Take her out, Wollstone, explain what she needs to know. Explain what it is that we require of her. And then, perhaps, I will talk with her again.”

I felt Wollstone’s hand on my arm. Gentle but definite. Our audience was over.

The lantern’s beam continued to shine from the dark as we left, leaving me no chance of seeing the face behind that voice.

Wollstone continued to guide me, for my night vision had been completely destroyed by the glare. He led me back down the corridor to another silent

door, another heavy curtain, another small and dimly lit room. He guided me to the room's one chair.

He stood for a moment, looming far above me, and then seemed to realise the position we were in. He gracefully lowered himself to the rug and sat cross legged in front of me.

“Let me tell you,” he said. “About the Palace of Stories.”

He sat silent for a moment, considering something.

“Forgive me,” he said at last. “There is much I should tell you. There are many pieces to this, and much history behind this truth. I can't tell you all of this tonight.

“What I will tell you is that my master created this place. You won't appreciate what it means coming here tonight, but believe me when I tell you that some in The City have been trying to find it for years. This is the inner sanctum. It is from here that the new way will begin.”

The New Way. This was already something bigger than I had thought.

“But I will come to that,” he continued. “First let me tell you about this place.”

“The Palace of Stories,” I said. There was something momentous about even the name. *Stories* was not a word that people used lightly, ever.

“Yes. Perhaps you have some inkling already what goes on here. You are a smart young woman. This is where people come to have their lives enriched. This is where people come to think better of themselves. This is where dull metal coins can be exchanged for shining visions.

“This is where you come to be told stories.”

I had had some inkling. But even then my lifetime of conditioning left me shocked. I was a Storyteller and I'd started to accept that. But part of that acceptance was in thinking of myself and of Yoshi as outsiders. And yet here was absolute belonging.

Wollstone went on. "Around us right now, in each one of these rooms, are the rich and disillusioned of this city."

And then he paused, and seemed to reach a conclusion in his head. He stood up as smoothly as he had sat down.

"I could give you long and wordy explanations," he said. "Or I could show you. I think I will show you. That you are here already is a matter of trust. What I am about to show you is a deeper matter, a matter that goes beyond that. I think you will not let me down in this.

"You must be absolutely quiet, and quiet in your mind as well. Nobody must know you are there."

All I could do was nod. I had no idea what he was talking about.

He carefully pulled aside one of the heavy wall hangings. There was a small door behind it, which he unlocked with a key on his belt.

"Secrets within secrets," he said. "You are one of the only people to know about this passage."

I don't think he realised the extent to which I sat outside his entire world. I could not appreciate The Palace of Stories, what it meant to be here, or what it meant to be shown the inside of the inside. Nevertheless, Father Shoma had always taught me to respect the ways of others. I tried for reverence as I followed Wollstone through the door.

If the main corridor outside was designed to muffle sounds, this secret passage was a body in a grave. The walls, the floor, the ceiling were all covered in a thick spongy matting. Wollstone raised a finger to his lips before pulling the door shut behind us.

We were in total blackness.

I was used to the dark. I was not scared of it. What I was not used to was a lack of light, a lack of sound, being in a closed off space with a giant of a stranger standing behind me. It took everything I had not to push this looming man away and run.

Wollstone touched my shoulder, lightly, and I felt his face next to mine. “This way,” he whispered, barely audible.

I held out a hand to guide myself, and we walked a short way along the passage. I could hear Wollstone searching for something on the wall, and then the sound of something being peeled back. And then a crack of light appeared in front of us as he eased a tiny hatch silently open.

I blinked in the dim light now coming through the peephole. The room beyond was very dimly lit, but it was a searchlight glare compared to the blackness we’d been standing in.

Wollstone took a moment and then carefully bent down to peer through the hole. I heard a low singsong voice. Apparently satisfied, Wollstone nodded, and then motioned me over to the peephole.

Before I bent to look, he gripped my shoulder, very tightly. I winced. He raised a finger to his lips again, and widened his eyes at me in the gloom. I nodded, and then shook him off.

I put my eye to the peephole.



# 16/

The room seemed to be set up like the one we had just left. One large and comfortable-looking chair, rugs and hangings on the walls, low lamps burning behind blue glass. The peephole was set behind the chair, and I was looking down on the grey-haired and balding head of an old man sprawled out at his ease. I could hear his low steady breathing, as though he was close to sleep. It was uncomfortably intimate.

There was no other sound in the room, however, and I wondered where the voice had been coming from. Suddenly my vision was blocked. I stifled a gasp, my fingers clutching silently on the soundproof matting I leaned against.

Just as suddenly the peephole was clear, and the woman whose head had been blocking my field of view leaned forward over the chair. She placed a hand on each of the man's shoulders and then slowly knelt down behind the chair. Resting her chin on the back of the chair, she turned her face towards him, and restarted her slow quiet recitation.

“And after that,” she crooned, “there will be almost no stopping you. You will look back at all you have achieved, you will look back at all the dreams you had, you will realise how small they really were, you will revel in the fact that you have made them all happen. And then.... then you will begin anew.

Bigger dreams, bigger ambitions, nothing will be forbidden to your power. Nobody will every dare to say no to you, no woman will ever be able to resist you.”

She ran her hand lightly down his arm as she said that, and I couldn't help but shudder as the man sighed in contentment. So many lies this woman was telling him — with her mouth and with her body.

And then I realised what I'd known from the moment she opened her mouth. She was telling him stories.

I'd had a moment of panic when we came to this place, imagining for a second that Robbins was selling me into a house of lust. But this place was for lust of something else entirely.

I listened for another few minutes as the woman crooned stories into the man's ear, puffing him up and inflating his life beyond anything anyone could hope for.

As she talked she occasionally glanced into the corner of the room, where I could just make out the shape of an hourglass. I couldn't see the sand but she obviously could, because a short while later she brought her story to a close.

“I'll leave you now, to enjoy your life,” she said, squeezing his shoulders gently.

“Oh, my dear, must you go already?” he said. “Can't you tell me just a little bit more?”

She only smiled, and shook her head.

He grabbed her hand then, and turned to face her for the first time.

Through my peephole I saw the face of a man filled with lust and sorrow and frustration.

“Tell me,” he said urgently. “Tell me again about how all the women will find me irresistible.”

She shook her hand free, clearly practised at this, and stood up smartly.

“Now why don’t you sit, and enjoy your life for a little?” she said. “It’s such a wonderful life I’ve woven for you. I wouldn’t want anything to spoil it.”

There was the clearest of warnings in her voice, but he didn’t want to hear it.

“But you *will* spoil it! You *will* spoil it if you leave me now.” He was whining like a child now – very far from the world-dominating man that she’d told him he was.

He stood up suddenly, lurching as though drunk, and I had a sickening fear for her safety.

“All the women find me irresistible,” he said. “It’s what you *told me*.”

Wollstone’s breath was suddenly close to my ear. “If something’s wrong, we need to go,” he whispered.

I shook my head, and he gripped my arm. I turned my head to face him in the dark, raising my hand to cover the tiny peephole.

“I have to see this,” I said. I was terrified for the woman. “If you try and make me leave, I’ll scream. I’ll let everyone know we’re here.”

I couldn’t see his face in the dark, but I was sure that he was scowling. I had him, though, here in his ‘secrets within secrets’. There was nothing he could do.

“Don’t do that,” was all he said.

In the room, the old man grabbed the woman’s arm with his bony hand and tried to draw her towards him. For a moment it looked as though he

might overpower her, as she scabbled above her head for something in the corner. Finding the cord she'd been searching for she gave it a sharp tug, and then turned her full attention back to her assailant.

She raised her hand higher still, open palmed as though to slap him.

“Sit down!” she said, her voice commanding, no longer the honey-toned croon.

“You are weak,” she said. “You are worthless. You hardly have the strength to stand upright. You are a pitiful man, you cannot oppose me, you have no strength, no strength at all.”

She kept her hand raised as a weapon in waiting, and pushed him hard in the chest with the other. He overbalanced and tripped backwards, sprawling into the chair behind him.

She stood her ground in the corner of the room, towering above him.

“You are nothing,” she said. “You are nobody.” She was battering him with stories now, wielding them like weapons.

“You cannot resist me, you cannot control me, you cannot stand up to me at all. You are nothing.”

Every word she said hit him like blows, and his frame seemed to shrivel as she spoke.

All at once the door was flung open and Rumble burst into the room. His furious presence seemed to fill the room, and as he reached out his massive arms towards the old man I actually thought he would kill him right in front of me. I thought he would break him like an old dry stick.

And then the woman placed her hand firmly on his shoulder, and his fire died in an instant.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m alright.” She held herself strongly, regal in her bearing.

He looked closely at her face and then nodded once, something unspoken passing between them. Then he turned his attention back to the man who cowered in terror on his chair.

Rumble took a deep breath, visibly containing the anger vibrating his massive frame.

“You sir,” he said to the old man. “It’s time for you to leave.”

He held out his hand as though in courtesy. The old man took Rumble’s arm in a way that suggested he was only doing so to follow protocol, but I could tell he needed the assistance. Rumble led the old man from the room, with a final look into the eyes of the young woman. She nodded again in reassurance.

As soon as Rumble closed the door, the woman collapsed onto the floor and started shaking. The breath left my body and I leaned hard against the wall. I felt like collapsing myself. My heart went out to this woman, alone in a room with nothing to comfort her but the sound-muffling rug she was sitting on.

I turned to Wollstone and once again put my hand over the peephole. “I want to speak with her,” I said. I reached for him in the darkness, trying to convey how desperately I felt with the strength of my grip on his arm. “We have to go to her.”

“Okay,” was all he said. Thinking back on it later, that one word was the reason I ended up trusting him so much.

He reached up past my head and slid back the cover as carefully as he had opened it, replaced the matting and led me back the few steps to the doorway through which we'd come.

He ushered me through and into the room, where we both paused a moment to let our eyes adjust. Then he led the way out and down the hallway, pausing outside the woman's door.

"Her name is Sasha," he said. And then he raised a heavy keychain from his belt. Noticing my look, he added, "They're locked in for their own safety."

He was not a Storyteller. This was a truth they all held, a truth they all believed to be true. Once again I was slipping among the definitions. Where did storytelling begin and end? If everybody could participate in the spreading of a truth that was only half true, then didn't that make them all Storytellers of a sort?

Everything was clouded and nothing was simple here in the Palace of Stories.

Wollstone turned the key, knocking gently as he did so. The young woman, Sasha, looked up as we came in, and then rose to her feet.

"I'm sorry you had trouble," said Wollstone. "Did Stefan help you?"

Stefan. The man I'd been thinking of as Rumble.

There was genuine warmth and compassion in Wollstone's voice, and I could see the young woman responding to it. He offered his arm and helped her across to the chair. She sat, and then registered my presence. Her eyes looked up at Wollstone for guidance.

“Sasha, this is Rachael. Rachael, Sasha. She is here to learn what it is you do.”

I quickly moved forward and took her hand in mine. I couldn't get her crumpled form out of my mind, but then I remembered her towering magnificence and the force she had crushed the old man with. She was far from a helpless victim.

All of this flashed through my mind, and then I held her soft hand in mine. “I'm sorry too,” I said. “That you had trouble.”

“It was nothing,” she said. With the sight of a calm and composed young woman sitting straight-backed in the chair in front of me, I was starting to doubt my own memory. But I knew. I had seen.

She dropped my hand and turned to Wollstone, studied boredom in her voice.

“Well. I can see she has power. What was it you wanted me to tell her?”

If Wollstone was taken aback by her attitude he did not show it. There was clearly a long history between these two.

“Everything,” he said. He spoke calmly.

She arched a delicate eyebrow at that, every inch the kind of sophisticated young lady of The City I could never hope to be.

“Everything?” she said.

Wollstone only nodded.

At that moment there was a knock on the door and Stefan reappeared, holding a glass of dark liquid. I almost missed the tremor in her hand as she took it.

“A restorative,” Wollstone said, for my benefit. “I’m sure you would understand how draining a whole hour of storytelling must be.”

I nodded, eager to maintain the illusion that I too was drained by such exertion. Maintaining this lie might give me some edge. Sasha drained the liquid at a gulp and sighed deeply. Almost instantly I could see her relax.

“Very well then,” she said. “I am here in this place because I am a Storyteller.”

She looked me straight in the eyes as she said this, as though expecting me to flinch. Only weeks ago I would have.

“I see,” was all I said.

“Outside, out there,” she waved a hand lazily to indicate The City streets, or perhaps the wider world, “I would be killed for this ability. But here my talents are appreciated. Here I am valued for what I am.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Oh, time passes differently, here in the dark,” she said, her movements growing more languorous by the second. “But I am well cared for, very well cared for.”

At that Wollstone stepped forward and rested a hand on her shoulder.

“Sasha has been with us for several years now,” he said. “She has made herself vital to the cause.”

There were so many layers to this conversation that I didn’t know where to start unpicking. It was also the second time tonight that this ‘cause’ had been hinted at.



Sasha was smiling. “Vital,” she crooned. “Yes, I am vital. My talents are appreciated here. Perhaps,” directed at Wollstone, “you could remind your employer of that, next time the coins are being handed out?”

“I will do that,” said Wollstone gravely, smiling all the while. “Now why don’t you tell Rachael a little more about what you do?”

“Men come here,” she said, “to be told stories of the lives they will never lead. Men come here to believe for an hour that the story I tell them is their truth, that their lives are truly powerful.”

She was so dispassionate in this speech. And yet I couldn’t get the image out of my mind of the desperate man grabbing her, wanting to wring this truth bodily from her.

“What do you tell them?” I asked.

“What they want to hear,” she said. “It’s always the same. Money, power, fortune. Women. Sometimes men. I take whatever their truth is and I wrap it in a ribbon. I smooth off all the ragged edges and then I build it higher. I give them a shining pillar of themselves that they will never have in real life. I shine their truth until it’s beautiful and let them wallow in that reflection for a while. I take them outside of themselves.”

There was conviction in her voice but there was also contempt; pride as well as sadness. And she spoke in a way that nobody but a Storyteller could truth and lies all mixed in together.

She paused for a moment, and Wollstone jumped in, giving me the details of their vetting process, the gentle nudging explorations undertaken by their scouts. The truths of the prospective clients were determined and passed

along, in order to give Sasha material to begin working with. Sasha, it seemed, was at the endpoint of a chain of months of careful work.

“And the most important part of that chain,” added Wollstone, with a smile, and yet another gentle touch to her arm.

She nodded. “The most important part. And right now, the most exhausted part. You know how much an hour of story takes out of me.” She stroked her hand slowly down Wollstone’s arm.

Wollstone’s turn to nod. “I do. I’ll let you rest now.” He looked her directly in the eyes. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

She dismissed his enquiry with a lazy flick of her fingers, as though to indicate that what had happened was in no way out of the ordinary. I wasn’t sure what was true, or what was more disturbing.

For a moment I had the twisted fantasy that Wollstone was going to lock her in the room again, as though she were a caged animal. I only realised I’d thought that when he opened the door and ushered her out ahead of us.

“Yes?” she said to me, as though reading my mind. “You think I’d be locked down here in the dark all the time? I am, don’t forget, *vital* to the cause, and I am given all the luxuries that amounts to.”

I only nodded. She was probably only a few years older than me but there was an entire world of experience and sophistication that stood starkly between us.

As we approached the entrance on muffled feet, Sasha turned at one of the identical-seeming doorways. For a moment her mask seemed to drop.

“It’s a good life, Rachael. Whatever you might think. I’d love to tell you more about it some time.” And as quickly as it had dropped, her mask was

back in place. “You get to push around the big men like Woolly here,” she said. She turned and disappeared then, down another long corridor. This place was a maze.

Wollstone watched her retreating form for a moment before turning back to me.

“This way,” he said softly. “Take a moment for your eyes.”

He pulled the curtain back and motioned me forward to the door. And then slowly, carefully, as silently as all his movements in this place, he inched open the heavy door and let the light and the sound spill in.

# 17 /

Robbins slammed another tankard down onto the table. Wollstone carefully raised his glass.

“So quite the experience you had, eh?” said Robbins. He thought he was asking me a question but all he was telling me was that he knew he’d missed out, and he was not happy about it. And him the brains behind the operation, and me the insignificant little girl. For a man who lived on his skills of trickery and deception, I was finding him incredibly easy to read tonight.

Or perhaps his bluster was simply more offensive than usual, given what I’d just experienced. Watching the old man assault Sasha had upset me more than I wanted to admit, and coming out into the light and the noise of Robbins’ overbearing attitude was making me understand why.

All of us, all of us, women and girls. Farm girls or farm wives or merchant’s wives or women in the Palace, even these secret women locked away in luxury – all of us were just waiting on the will of men. I’d seen outside my tiny piece of world only because I’d been forced to flee from it.

“Yes,” I said, looking straight in his eyes. “Quite the experience.”

Something in my tone sobered his bluster like a slap to the face.

“My my,” he said quietly. For a moment I almost wondered if something had penetrated his tough skin of self interest.

Wollstone’s expression had not changed. “Rachael saw something in there that I wouldn’t have necessarily liked her to see. She may tell you about it, if she so chooses.”

I liked this man.

He continued, “But I hope it doesn’t affect her willingness to become involved in the cause...?”

“Alright,” I said, changing course. “I need to know. What is this ‘cause’? What is it to me, and what am I to it? What am I to you?”

I had to be on top of this, or Robbins would twist my ignorance to his advantage. He had already started in on some *not-for-girls* bluster when Wollstone cut him off.

“If Rachael is to be truly of use to us, she has to know what’s going on.”

Robbins scowled into his beer. I suspected he hardly knew any more than me. We were sitting in the brightly lit antechamber of the Palace of Stories, where Robbins had been waiting for our return. Evidently it was a safe house for these kind of truths, because Wollstone had no hesitation in speaking out. It made me wonder how many more spaces like this there were around The City; how far this infiltration spread.

“So,” he said, turning back to me. “What can I tell you?”

I had so many questions, but I blurted the first thing that came to my mind. It had been bothering me.

“Is it only men who come here?”

“Ah. Yes. It is,” he said. “How perceptive of you to notice.”

I wasn't falling for his flattery this time. I was sure he knew more about this than I had managed to find out so far.

"Why?" I said bluntly. "Are women not allowed?"

"Well...no. It's not that. Technically women could come here. It's just that they aren't really in a position to do so."

"Not in a position to do so." I said each word slowly and carefully.

Robbins gave me a warning look. I ignored him. It seems I hadn't changed course after all.

"Women aren't really in a position to do anything in this city, are they? Any more than they are in the towns, or the villages, or anywhere at all unless that *position* is in the kitchen or on their backs."

It was pouring out of me now. I couldn't stop it.

"And you sit there telling me that I'm different and special, but I bet that's what you told all the women in there, isn't it? All the women locked in their comfy little caverns, just waiting to polish up an old man's life until it gleams the way he wants it to? And what for the women? What can they possibly get out of this?"

Wollstone remained calm, which was more than Robbins could bear.

"How dare you!" he spluttered, but Wollstone cut him off. He laid a hand on Robbins arm.

"Rachael has a point, it's true," he said, directly to Robbins. He snorted in contempt, but Wollstone continued to stare him down, not relinquishing his grip.

"There is much that is wrong with the way things are at present. There are many of us who are not happy about the way our lives are controlled and

constrained. Believe it or not,” and here he turned to me, “a great many of these unhappy people are women. A great many women feel as you do.”

Now I was the one who felt like snorting in contempt. How convenient that the issue that might sway me over to this cause was being dangled in front of me.

“It’s not the main thing we want to change. But it’s a significant part of it. You should remember that when it comes time for you to make your decision.”

I nodded, slowly. There was clearly something more coming. I looked across the table at this bear of a man, lit brightly this time with his face looking back into mine. There was passion there, I could see that. There was belief. I decided to trust him a little bit longer.

“Alright,” I said. “So tell me a little more about it.”

A flicker of smile passed across his face, and I nodded. *Yes. You have my attention.*

“You met its leader just now.”

Beside me I could sense Robbins straightening up in his chair, a mix of disbelief and anger in his frame.

Wollstone continued. “We say Machina, if we use our leader’s name at all. It is a word from before the Time Before. It means machine. Our leader is a machine, without emotion or human frailty. Our leader has nothing but passion and the truth. You may be surprised to learn that Machina is *not* a Storyteller. Machina recognises the power and the value of Storytellers, but much more than that, Machina is a teller of big truths.

“Machina was once a child, as everybody was once a child. Machina moved through the world as a child moves, believing all that adults tell it and behaving in ways that adults behave.

“But Machina has grown beyond that now. Beyond childhood, lies, age and gender, rising above it all in a way that even those of the Time Before could never have done.

“Machina will lead us all.”

There was quiet, fiery triumph in his voice.

Robbins broke into the silence. “So *Machina*,” tasting the unfamiliar word. “Is this *Machina* the leading woman of Rachael’s dreams? Is she someone that can make Rachael feel the freedom?”

Wollstone looked at Robbins with distaste, and with resignation. “You were not listening. Most people do not listen, or do not hear what their ears hear. Machina has moved beyond ‘man’ or ‘woman’, considering them unimportant. Machina is concerned with the liberation of the human spirit, not the constant boxing and dividing and breaking down that reduces us all to less than we can be.”

“Must make the lavvies a problem,” said Robbins.

Wollstone’s eyes blazed, but he didn’t move a muscle. I thought he might have hit Robbins for that. I’d wanted to see it.

“There will always be those who do not want to understand,” he said. “I think, Rachael,” turning to me and nodding his head in acknowledgement, “that you are not one of those.”

Guffaw and bluster, that’s what Robbins was. I’d been seeing it more and more clearly since we arrived in The City.



“It is very rare for an audience to be granted with Machina,” Wollstone continued. “He trusted my assessment of your power. It is a sign that you are considered of great value.”

“It’s a sign, alright,” muttered Robbins. “It’s a sign you’d better watch your step, girly.”

And that was it. I rounded on Robbins in exactly the opposite of the calm dignity I’d so admired in Wollstone.

“Enough!” I shouted. “Enough with the *girly*! Enough with the sneers and the leers and with all of it!” My voice shook and my face burned. “If you think I’m nothing but a poor little girl then it’s time for you to go. Not every *girl* is waiting for a man to tell her what to do!”

Robbins sneered. “Well don’t worry,” he said. “This man’s had quite enough trying.”

He shoved his chair back from the table, drained his mug and slammed it onto the wood.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he said to me. “Or not.”

“And you,” he turned to Wollstone. “Pay up.”

Wollstone shifted in his chair.

“What?” Robbins said. “Don’t want to admit to your *girl* that you paid a finder’s fee?”

And then he turned back to me. “You see, my girl? The world is not everything you want it to be.”

Slowly, deliberately, Wollstone reached into his coat and pulled out a small pouch of coins. He gravely placed them on the table in front of Robbins, who snatched them up immediately.

“Yes,” said Wollstone, addressing me directly. “Yes, we’re paying to expand the cause. It’s not something I’m ashamed of. All revolutions have come from the street, in whatever way they can.

“The cause. That is the important thing.”

Robbins just sneered, apparently empty in the face of such belief. He looked at Wollstone for a second longer, shaking his head. And then he stood up and staggered from the room.

Wollstone turned back to me. “Do you feel bought?” he asked, with disarming frankness.

I shook my head, but I wasn’t really sure what I was saying no to. Everything had changed so rapidly tonight. Thinking about it afterwards, I realised Wollstone was a master manipulator. He had sensed the tension between myself and Robbins and used it as a wedge, knowing that were I to free myself from one of my only stays, I would be flailing and in need of something else to tie me down.

“I understand you need to get people in whatever way you can,” I said. “I understand the need for secrecy. But I still don’t understand what this cause actually is.”

Wollstone nodded his head. He sat silently for a long time, and I started to wonder if I had breached something unspoken. Surely I was allowed to ask such a question, if I truly was on the *inside of the inside*.

Finally he spoke. “It is difficult to know exactly what to say, or where to begin. For those of us who are deep in the struggle, it seems that everything is self-evident, that the means by which we are oppressed and the reason for fighting are plain for all to see.

“But the nature of our oppression is such that most people cannot see, and in fact take part in their own oppression. The reason that The City does not need an army to ensure people obey the rules is that they are already so good at obeying the rules themselves.”

I thought of the gallows in the centre of my village, the pride we all took in knowing the right way of doing things. I nodded my head.

“It is this more than anything that Machina wants to break down. We shackle ourselves. Machina wants to set us free.”

There was more, so much more that night. At that small wooden table in the antechamber of the Palace of Stories, as the heavy curtain was parted for the wealthy-looking men that discretely came and went, as our tankards were topped up by a silent waiter, as the lanterns burned low and the night outside slowly spun towards the dawn, Wollstone told me the truth of the cause.

It had the passion of the true believer. It had the practised phrases of speeches delivered or whispered in the dark. Every word had been said before. I was part of a chain, part of an army. I was being recruited, but none of that lessened Wollstone’s fire, as though he was almost telling himself, grooving these truths deeper into his being.

There was much that was poetic and historic in what he told me, an epic line of truth stretching back to the Time Before. But at the centre of it all was freedom. Machina was intent on our freedom. For Storytellers, for men, for women, for those who did not even realise they were trapped. Freedom.

Until I had been forced from my home, I had not thought much about my freedom. I had not thought much about my life. All I had done was live it. Even with my Storytelling to hide, I still hadn’t thought much beyond the

borders of my village. And this was the point, according to Wollstone. I wondered if any of my cousins ever had. It seemed unlikely. When the life in front of you was hard enough, why would you look for complications?

“And the Storytellers?” I asked. “Why are they important?”

Wollstone gave me another look of mild surprise. I had come to know it well over the course of the evening. He still thought it was all self-evident.

I tried to make myself clear. “If Machina is not a Storyteller, why is he...” I corrected myself, “why is Machina concerned with Storytellers? Wouldn’t they — wouldn’t we — represent a threat to the cause? Could we not undermine everything?”

I was straying into unknown territory again. Spending my whole life trying to cover up my ability had slowed down my capacity to understand how it could be used as a weapon.

“Listen to me, Rachael. Machina is for freedom. For everyone. Machina believes that in a truly free world people will be the best versions of themselves that they can be. Storytellers can make our lives bigger.”

I snorted. “You mean like here, in this velvet cage?”

“This is not the world,” said Wollstone forcefully. “This is an escape from the world. This is where we bring people to show them the possibilities, to expand their mind to what could be. Once they have seen what is possible, then we can be sure of their help to make that possibility real.”

I had my doubts. I held my tongue. There had to be more to this than I had seen tonight.

Eventually Wollstone’s fire wound down, and he chuckled, surprising me. “I’m sorry Rachael. You might have realised by now how much this means to

me. I haven't had a chance to talk about it like this for some time. I hope I've give you much to think about. I hope you won't be long in joining us."

He raised his eyes to mine in his terribly frank stare. I nodded, at a loss for words.

"Machina wants you on our side," he said softly. "We need you."

He took his leave then, apologising, talking of the business he had elsewhere. He insisted that one of the serving men should escort me back to my inn. I tried to refuse but he would not hear it.

As we walked the streets, the silent reassuring bulk of the serving man by my side, I thought of Wollstone's final words, his plea for my assistance. And in the dark, on the dirty cobbles, I finally heard the warning in his words. Another threat, this one far less solid than the drunk or opportunistic men lurking in the alleys around us. *If you are not on the side of Machina, the threat went, then you are on the side of the enemy.*

# 18/

The sky was getting light by the time I got home. I was trembling with exhaustion and with cold and with the overwhelming night I had just had. All I wanted to do was to curl under as many blankets as I could find and make everything go away for a while.

Instead, I had a fight waiting for me. Yoshi. I hadn't spoken to him for days. He was sitting on his bed, dressed ready for work.

It didn't start out as a fight. I wanted to tell him everything, and I wanted to tell him that everything would soon be getting better, but I had to wait until I knew it would be.

He looked at me through sleep-deprived eyes. "I was worried about you."

"I was being careful," I said.

"I was worried," he said. Hurt and anger and fear in the words.

I remembered the exhausted boy I'd woken up to in the forest outside his village, the one who'd stayed awake for days to protect me while I was sick.

What I'd seen then had been physical exhaustion. This was something different, something more like a burnout of the spirit. Where had my Yoshi gone? And what was it he was doing that he refused to talk to me about?

"Stay," I said. "Stay with me just for today."

He shook his head. “You were out all *night*,” he said. “All night! I have to go to my job so we can afford to stay in this stinking room. We have one less person paying a share, you may notice.”

He gestured to Robbins’ bed and I saw it had been swept clean of his stuff. “He came back a few hours ago,” Yoshi said. “Got his stuff and went. Called you all kinds of things.”

“I’m sorry,” I began, but Yoshi cut me off.

“Don’t bother apologising,” he said.

“I am,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry you have to do whatever it is you’re doing! I’m sorry it’s so disgusting you can’t tell me about it! I’m sorry you had to wait up all night for me and then deal with Robbins! I’m sorry I don’t have any money to make things better, I’m sorry I can’t tell you what I’ve been doing to try and make things better, I’m sorry I don’t even know how we got here, I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.”

I was shouting now, trembling where I stood. Overwhelmed. So tired that I couldn’t even tell him what it was I couldn’t tell him.

I saw a change in him then, saw him realise how upset I was, but I couldn’t take his kindness. Nobody I had seen tonight had been treated with real kindness. Why did I deserve anything more than them?

“Just go,” I said. And I slumped onto the bed, kicked off my boots, and threw the blankets over my head. I was shivering with cold, with upset, with everything. I didn’t want him to see me like this. I didn’t want to look at him.

I felt him pause as he stood over me. “Go,” I repeated, through the muffle of blankets. He went.

I slept.

I slept all day, desperate to escape. When I awoke it was from cloying dreams, inky tendrils still wrapped around my mind. Slowly the world resolved around me — the sounds in the street of night-time traffic, clatter from the bar downstairs. Yoshi would still be at his work. Robbins, I supposed, would be far away. The Palace of Stories would be starting up trade for the night.

I felt disconnected from all of these things. I wanted to stay in my blankets forever — no storytelling, no revolution, no shouting. Eventually, it was the everyday that pulled me from my wallowing stupor. My body, demanding food, and a place to relieve itself. Perhaps it is our bodies that will save us from our minds in the end.

After splashing water here and there to make myself feel a little more human, I thought about food. I couldn't face eating downstairs again, and I needed to make something happen tonight.

Wollstone had left me no instructions, but I could no longer just sit by and wait while others decided my fate. The route I had been taken to the Palace of Stories had been deliberately complicated. The place where I had first met Wollstone would have to do. It was connected somehow to the cause, and most importantly right now, it had food.

As soon as I stepped onto the street I could feel something was wrong. I had been in The City long enough now that I could feel its moods. Something was off.

This was the time of day when people on the streets were usually jovial or at least polite. This should have been a time of contentment, but tonight there



was a strange wind blowing. Everything seemed just a little bit further; every footstep rang a little more aggressively.

I kept my head down as I walked and tried not to spook at shadows. I kept telling myself that my mind was playing tricks from hunger, disoriented from sleep through the day. But again and again I caught sideways glances, shutters banging closed.

I did not expect to recognise anyone on the street, so at first I didn't recognise him. I glanced across the road ahead of me, where a young man hurried in my direction. He wasn't looking left or right, as though focussed solely on his destination. Perhaps his focus was his undoing.

As he ducked across the mouth of an alley, two bulky figures emerged, in front of and behind him. As the first blocked his path the second struck – a violent blow to the head with a cudgel. He went straight down, completely silently, and the two of them lifted him and dragged him into the dark.

It happened so fast. If I hadn't glanced up at that moment my only impression would have been movement on the edge of my vision — perhaps a couple of dogs wrestling silently over garbage.

My feet kept moving and my newborn city instincts kept my eyes ahead of me. My chest was so tight I could hardly breathe, and my brain was finally catching up with the scraps my eyes had fed it. I knew that man. There was nothing I could do. I knew that man. He was probably dead by now.

I paced on more urgently, desperate to get away, fear riding high in my throat. It wasn't until I'd walked several more blocks that I finally made the connection. He'd been serving our drinks last night in the Palace of Stories.

Had I even looked him in the eye? Had he looked in mine? What was he doing out here? I didn't know much about how that place operated, but surely there were secrets going on in there that could not be risked in the outside world. Could he have been coming for me? We were a long way from the Palace. Was I just being self-centred?

Too many questions; far too much fear. I was sweating by the time I reached my destination. Cold sweat on my forehead, a warm trickle down my back. I had to go in, because I had to get off the streets, but I was not expecting comfort to greet me inside.

The bar at least was familiar, in its mixed-up and rundown way. I walked carefully to 'my' end of the bar, trying to return my breath to normal, trying to look as though I was supposed to be here. The man with the ledgers was nowhere to be seen but his raucous bird still held court. Someone seemed to have filled its tray with beer, and its screeching insults tore the smoky air. This time there were more people here eating and drinking than trading in animal hides, but the room remained confusing to my Mountain Girl eyes.

I took my time with these details, trying to steady myself, but in some ways the familiarity of the place made what had just happened even more frightening. Life carried on. I couldn't even be sure that that man had been who I thought it was.

I concentrated on my breathing, ordered from the barman when he grunted in my direction. I crouched over the bar with my salty fish and my tepid tea, desperately willing myself to stop shaking. I had no appetite. I had no plan.

And then a plan came for me.

I had dropped my guard. Perhaps it was the shock of what I'd seen. Perhaps it was the aftershock. With my head resting in my arms on the bar, I slowly became aware of a presence looming next to me.

“Not the best place for a nap, I would have thought.” A familiar rumbling voice.

“Stefan?” I tried the name for the first time as I looked up at the man towering over me.

He nodded, apparently exhausted by his lengthy speech. How had he found me? Was he behind what I'd seen on the streets? I clamped down quickly on this thought, and a thousand others that wanted to follow it. That way led me nowhere useful.

He leaned his head down to my level, attempted a rumble of a whisper. “You're needed.”

“At... The Palace?” I whispered back. He nodded again.

I could have refused. But whatever was going on had its centre at The Palace of Stories. I needed to be there.

We must have been conspicuous leaving together, but on the streets his purpose seemed to make him blend in. It didn't take long through twists and convolutions before he was once more opening that anonymous door for me.

His stand-in nodded as we came inside, and then Stefan motioned me through to the antechamber, resuming his post at the door. Wollstone waited at the same table we'd spent so long at, and I had the vertiginous sense that I'd never left, that all that had happened between then and now was some kind of delusion.

He looked worn, as though he hadn't slept at all. I thought again of the man being dragged into the alley — heels flopping on cobblestones as he was eaten by the darkness.

“Hello Rachael,” he said, the unknowing lie of my false name flowing so easily from his mouth. He made no reference to his state of dishevelment. “Thank you for coming again so soon.”

“It's an honour,” I said, playing my part.

“Tonight is an honour indeed,” he said. “Machina wishes to see you again. To test your abilities.” He looked at me evenly to see if I understood.

“You mean...”

“Machina wishes to observe you telling a story, here in the Palace.”

This was the path I'd been on from the start. The fear began rising in me again. It was so close to the surface tonight.

“Don't worry,” said Wollstone. “Machina knows you are new to this. There is no expectation of a polished performance. The story alone will suffice.”

I thought of Sasha's cooing voice, her hands running up and down the arms of that old man. My stomach heaved. And knowing that Machina would be there beyond the wall, peering in at me like an insect in a jar. It was too much.

I took a breath, slowly released it. I had to think of myself, and of Yoshi. I had to think of the path that *we* were now on. Unexpectedly, Father Shoma's face appeared in my mind, pipe smoke pouring from his sardonic smile. *Sometimes, my girl, the job requires you to stick your arm up the inside of a cow.*

I almost smiled, there in the harsh light of the antechamber of the Palace of Stories. I could do this.

Wollstone took me down the familiar corridor, stopping to unlock one of the doors and usher me into the room.

“Your patron will be here soon,” he said. “There is no need to feel alarmed.”

He closed the door behind himself and I heard the lock engage. Despite all the reassurances I had given myself, my heart rate rose instantly. *How how how?* How had I arrived at this point in my life, locked in this dark chamber at the mercy of a stranger?

I forced myself to breathe again, slowly and consciously. This was a test. I had to pass. When the knock came on the door I was as ready as I could be.

Machina stepped smoothly into the room. I couldn't stop my gasp as the room filled with the familiar enigmatic charisma. This seemed both harder and easier than storytelling to a total stranger.

Machina sat down with no acknowledgement of my presence, faced cloaked as before. I started to stand behind the chair as I had seen Sasha do, but Machina impatiently waved me forward, pointing to the opposite side of the small room. I stood against the wall, unsure how I should hold myself.

“You are not here to play host to me.” Again that genderless voice. Again that tone of command. “You are here to demonstrate your powers.”

Machina raised an arm briefly, as though addressing a crowd. “Demonstrate them.”

I had so little to work with. Even the bedtime stories I told for Yoshi's amusement had something to start with. *The dog, the house, and the man with no left hand.* I had no idea what would be pleasing to Machina.

The cause was all I had. So I began.

“The City was home to all kinds of people. But only some people were truly free to enjoy their home. Most people were only allowed to go to certain quarters, and would quickly be laughed out or chased out if they strayed from where they were meant to be. Some hotels had areas where only men could go, as though half the population of this place were worth less than the other half.”

As I told the story I realised I was telling my story. Yoshi’s story. Our story since we’d arrived, and all the bitterness I felt towards this place. I had been hearing about The City for as long as I could remember, but its reality was so much harsher than the truths that travelled as far as a village in the Mountains.

I had not realised how much resentment I had built up, nor how open I was to any idea that sought to change the way that things were. Perhaps I had found my home here after all, here in the depths of this cause.

Machina nodded at some point, and then impatiently tapped the armrest. “Yes. Yes. But I need to hear a story, not a truth!”

I had become lost in my own truth. This was not the time.

I rapidly invented scenarios – visions of what the city could be and the way that people would live here, somewhere where everybody had their place and their place filled them with happiness, where nobody wanted and everyone was satisfied, a place of luxury and abundance for all.

At first I thought I would get a negative reaction from this confection, but it seemed exactly the sort of thing that Machina had wanted.

“More,” that dry voice of command would say. “Give me more.”

I was being tested, and at first I held back, but that voice kept insisting. More. I poured the hurt and the fear and the terror in there – everything I had experienced in my time on the road – and I used it to feed my shining palace, my citadel of plenty. I lost myself, for a moment. I had stopped looking at Machina, and I was looking at my vision, gazing wide-eyed into the dazzle of my imaginings.

I fed the vision, the room around me fading to nothing, and as I stared and as I spoke, I became aware of a dark hunger in front of me – a sucking vortex, the bottomless mouth that was Machina’s greed, feeding from my fantasy like a drunk man from the bottle, like a baby at the breast, like a dying man takes the drug he knows is going to kill him faster.

I was frightened then, and my vision faltered, and my voice slowed down and the room returned, and even though I could feel Machina’s hunger, I made myself stop talking.

I had exposed too much. I would have nothing left to bargain with, and Machina would take it all. I did not understand this hunger, but I understood what feeding it did to other people. I made myself sway on my feet and slumped to the floor, head nodding down to my chest. It was crucial I feign exhaustion.

“So,” murmured Machina, sitting back. I could feel that hungry energy reaching towards me still. I shut myself down, slumped further into myself.

I could feel Machina staring at me. I forced myself to remain passive. At last I heard a rustle of cloth, as Machina stood up.

“You have... great powers. You will be an asset to our cause.” And then, almost as an afterthought, “I will send someone along to help you recover. You must rest. You must save your strength.”

And then I heard the door being opened and closing me in once again. Metallic snick of the lock.

I no longer had to feign exhaustion. I was sapped by that terrible need in Machina. If Machina ever found out about my inexhaustible ability I would be drained like a wine bladder, I was sure of it. That hunger seemed bottomless, as limitless as my capacity.



# 19/

I could almost imagine going to sleep right there on the lavish carpets. After some time there was a knock on the door, and with the familiar click of the lock I looked up to see Sasha standing over me. She swooped down over me, all concern and attention.

“Oh my dear, it’s hard isn’t it?” she gushed. “Machina was very excited. Very excited! I think there are big things coming for you, big things coming for us all.”

She fussed over me, cupping my face in her hands and smoothing my hair, encouraging me to sit in the chair, sitting beside me and placing her arm around my shoulders as though we were long lost friends. I hardly recognised this person from the sophisticated lady she had seemed the last time I saw her.

She gave me a glass of the dark liquid I had seen Stefan give her the other night. “It will take your pain away, my dear. It will make everything better.”

I sipped at the sweet and spicy liquid. Sasha would not let me put the glass down until I had finished. When I was done she smiled beatifically.

“You’re one of us now, my dear. One of us.” She took the glass from me and put it on the floor, and then leaned her body back against mine. The chair

was so comfortable, the room was so cosy. And in the soft glow of the lantern light Sasha's eyes sparkled so close and so beautiful.

"You're prettier than I remembered," she said, stroking my hair away from my face. I was intensely aware of the heat of her body, and the sweet fragrance coming from her smooth neck. "We don't get to see many pretty faces down here. All these rich ugly men." She giggled. I laughed. It wasn't funny but I couldn't stop myself.

With her hand still cupping my cheek, she bent down so her face was against mine. Her voice was a whisper of warm breath in my ear. I shivered with pleasure as she started speaking, so low I had to strain to hear her. I tilted my head to one side so her lips touched my ear.

"That's good," she whispered. "Keep acting like that and you'll be fine."

I almost pulled away at that, almost hurt. A warm cocoon enveloped me, taking away all my pain. The only thing keeping me in the room was Sasha's voice.

She sensed me stirring and gently pulled me back towards her. Her sweet smell filled my nostrils as I breathed her in.

"I've given you a drug," she whispered, as her hand caressed my face. "We all get it after a session. Some of us would lose our minds without it. You're strong. You might not even need it."

Something important. This was something important. I could hardly keep my eyes open, but she needed me to listen.

"This is how they keep us here. We'd lose our minds without the drug, but we've lost our freedom because of it. None of us can leave here now because of it."

She ran her fingers up the inside of my cloak then, her soft hands so delicate on the skin of my arm. I felt her touch though my entire body, a spark building up inside of me. Her lips touched the side of my neck.

Then she pinched the soft skin of my inner elbow, so hard I thought she must have broken the skin. It was enough to make me gasp, even from within my cocoon.

“Remember this,” she whispered fiercely. “This is not freedom. This is slavery.”

Then the door seemed to burst open and the giant form of Wollstone towered over us.

Sasha turned towards him coolly. “I said I’d bring her out,” she said, smiling up towards him.

“I’m sure you would have, eventually,” said Wollstone, “But that was not Machina’s wish.” He spoke abruptly, but with mirth in his eyes.

“It’s her first time,” said Sasha, with something like sadness and something like envy. “Don’t you want to let her relax a little more?”

“Jealousy is not attractive, my dear,” said Wollstone.

“Come on then,” he said to me, extending a massive arm in my direction. “I’ll have Stefan take you home.”

I had nothing but fractured impressions then, as the drug continued to pulse through me: the curtain at the corridor’s end enveloping me like a giant bat’s wing; the glaring glare of the antechamber’s lights; the massive bulk of Stefan as he half-carried me through the streets; the indescribable comfort I took from the warmth of his arm in the freezing night air; the way the journey home took both eternity and an instant; the sudden halt to the rush of images

when I realised I was in my room, he was saying farewell, I was lying back on my bed at last; the scratchy blankets' velvet luxury as I rolled myself up and wallowed into sleep.

Watery sunlight leaking in under the shutters woke me. My head was a fog of sleep and confusion, last night's dreams merging with last night's reality. I groaned and sat up slowly, head throbbing and throat thick with phlegm.

It was time to sort out what had happened last night. I dragged on my cloak over yesterday's clothes and shuffled downstairs to the washroom, trying to ignore the looks from the inn's other tenants as I passed.

In the washroom I stuck my head straight into the bucket of icy water, and came up sputtering and slightly more alive. I dried off and then headed to the kitchen, where I ordered a pot of strong black tea. It was mid-morning with nobody much around, so I took my teapot and sat by the fire, staring into the flames and trying to understand what had happened.

By my third cup I thought I had the night's events straight in my mind. As the last of the languor left me, I found myself absently stroking my arm, running my hand up inside my sleeve the way Sasha had.

*Remember*, she had said. *Remember*. My hand reached the tender spot where she had pinched me, and I felt a soft rustling inside my cloak. I dug around inside the loose folds of my sleeve and discovered a tightly folded piece of paper pinned to the inside. Not a pinch then. A stab. A stab of memory to pierce the drug's haze.

As I started to unfold it I heard footsteps behind me, and the weak sunlight was blocked by a shadow. A heavy hand fell on my shoulder.

I jumped and jerked back.

“Sorry, only me!” I looked up into the face of the barmaid’s husband. Not Wollstone, then. Not Stefan. Perhaps I had betrayed nobody’s secrets yet. I scrunched the paper further into my fist.

“She sent me over to tell you there was a big guy looking for you earlier. Said he’d meet you where you met before? Middle afternoon?” He shrugged as though passing on strange messages was simply a part of his job, and then lumbered back to his regular post by the stables.

*She his wife, he Stefan, where we met before* the strange bar with the stinking bird. That was my day then. But I needed to arm myself before that time, and I hoped I held a weapon in my tightly clenched fist.

A little more cautiously this time I smoothed out the paper. I could read, Father Shoma had made sure of that, but it was not something that came very easily to me. One of my favourite truths from the Time Before were his truths of the libraries. The libraries! Entire buildings filled with nothing but books, row after row of books filled with stories, more stories than one person could read in a lifetime. It was one of the few things that made me want to live in that time.

The truths of the Time Before were mostly bleak, filled with disease and hunger and too many people fighting for not enough food or water, or fighting for concepts I could barely understand. ‘Race’ and ‘Religion’ were terms Father Shoma attempted to explain to me, but I don’t think he understood them himself.

Despite the hardships of village life I would leave those ugly truths gladly for the chance to walk the top paddocks on a summer day, knowing peace and the promise of a meal when I returned back home. But the images of those libraries would fill my mind with hunger of a different kind, and I would ask Father Shoma to describe them to me again and again.

Sasha was clearly more practised than me in the art of handwriting, and I wondered what she had been before becoming a dream merchant at the Palace of Stories. And then I started to read the letter and stopped thinking about such trivial things as handwriting.

*I hope you find this. We all depend on you finding this.*

*But I am getting ahead of myself. I don't want to scare you. I need you to be focussed, not scared.*

I glanced up at that, checking around me. The room was empty. I hunched a little further over my note, moved a little closer to the fire. I read on.

*There are many things I would love to tell you, much that you need to know. But I don't have time. There are dozens of us here. Storytellers in cages. Machina has been collecting us for years. You must have felt it, that bottomless hunger for story? Machina has been doing everything to keep that hunger sated.*

*She is hungry. There. I've said it. Machina has transcended nothing. Not the hunger of the flesh nor the hunger of the mind for story, not humanity's greed for power, nor our greed to organise the world. This box or that one, this place or that.*

Even in writing, her rhythms were hypnotic. Perhaps the drug was not fully out of my system.

*Machina is a woman. I would say 'just like you and I', except she is very far from that. She is cold and she is ruthless and she is hungry for the kind of power that you and I would never dare to dream about, or that would sicken us to think of.*

*She has chosen this fantasy of 'transcending gender' both as a way of disguising her identity and because she realises that women are not the powerbrokers in this world. In this, at least, I will admit that I admire her.*

*But only in this, because she is ruthless and twisted. And she is an addict. As surely as I am addicted to their drugs and as surely as they want to make you, she is an addict of story and will stop at nothing to ensure her supply.*

I shivered, by the crackling flames of the fire. I kept reading.

*When Machina was young she discovered her addiction by accident. It was her childhood friend. As they played at the games that children play she noticed that her friend was making things that weren't real, was making things up, was telling stories. She was horrified – weren't we all horrified when we realised what we could do? Weren't we all so well conditioned to believe that we were abominations? But at the same time she could not resist the pull of this storytelling.*

*She decided to keep her friend's secret, on the condition that her friend tell her stories sometimes. Her friend agreed, reluctantly, but what choice did she have? It was either that or be hung up high for everyone to revile.*

I shivered again, my hands involuntarily going to my neck. A noose awaited us all.

*Machina kept her friend's secret. In that at least she was honourable. But as the years went by her addiction grew, until she was demanding too much of her Storyteller friend. Her friend broke down in the end, her mind destroyed from the*

*stress it was under, and she ran through the streets naked and cracked, screaming to the world of her evil.*

*It was bad for Machina then. She fled. She came to The City to hide, and started her life as she is today.*

I had to stop. I looked up, and out of the wooden shutters at the scudding clouds overhead. A grey day, a stormy night, a desperate girl fleeing from the place she'd been born in. How could our truths run so close together?

I stared a little longer. I turned back to my letter

*In The City she started to build her empire. More cunning now, more worldly, more aware of the dangers she faced – and with more to lose if she should fail, because her addiction had deepened and her life was on the line – she started to build up what is today the Palace of Stories.*

*She does want a revolution. That much is true. And she needs us all, to tell the stories of this new world, to convince people they need new truths. But her 'freedom' comes with a terrible price.*

*(If you are wondering how I know all this, it is pieced together from years of speculations and fragments). The next bit of Machina's life I don't have any detail for. It involves chemistry and compounds, and a world I know nothing of. Somehow she inveigled her way in to the world of the chemists and the alchemists, the most mysterious of guilds. Perhaps she winkled out a Storyteller there and held them under blackmail. It would not surprise me. She has never been afraid to be ruthless.*

*So I don't know how she got there, but I know all about the end result. I have direct experience of it every day. And you, my dear, are recovering from your very first dose, if all has gone to plan. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for you. And – such is the nature of this hateful compound – mostly what I'm sorry for is that you'll never*



*have the drug again. I hate it with the same passion with which I love it. I wouldn't be without it. And if you ever have it again, you will be addicted just like all of us are.*

*We are all on golden leashes here in the Palace of Stories – invisible ropes that bind us by the hour. We could no more leave than if we truly were locked in those little boxes.*

*So that is the truth of it. And that is why I'm telling you this. I don't beg for freedom for us. For us it is too late. I beg for freedom for those who come after. For the Storytellers Machina will uncover, for the ones she will enslave. For all the power she now holds, stretching her invisible leashes around half the rich and powerful men of this city, for all the damage she will inevitably cause, all in the name of 'freedom'.*

*And why have I picked you? There's something about you. You have a power I have not encountered before. You are strong, that much I could tell immediately. But you are determined as well, in a way that none of us can be. You bring a freshness that surpasses our weariness.*

*Please. I'm running out of time. I don't know what can be done for us, but I know you are the one to do it. I know this with the certainty that soon I will be shaking and sickening, desperate for my next glass of the accursed beloved juice of life.*

*With love, with hope, with certainty;*

*Sasha.*

I sat back, staring emptily into the fire.

This was too much. I felt the weight of this history as though the years had suddenly been piled on my back. I had started to believe in paradise, I now realised. I had started to think that a life was possible in which I wasn't always on the run, with people who understood what it meant to be like me.

That place *could* be mine, but only if I allowed myself to be bound by those golden ropes.

I could feel the temptation. Not just for the belonging I had been craving, but for that physical sensation. I could feel it as a dull ache through my whole body, a flickering tickle at the back of my mind. How satisfying it would be to answer that craving. I closed my eyes for a second and I could almost feel that languor again, that sweeping rush moving through my body, erasing fears, erasing concerns, holding me in bliss like the softest wool.

I snapped my eyes open and pinched myself in that same delicate inner elbow skin, hard enough to draw blood with my ragged nails. *Remember*, she had said. *Remember*. If I allowed myself to be swept away I would be betraying her trust and my future, the future of every Storyteller that would come after me.

And Yoshi. The thought hit me like a shock of cold water to wipe away the last of the floating temptation. Where was Yoshi? He had not been there when I came in last night, had he? I couldn't even say.

I hastily refolded the letter and stumbled back up to our room. His bed had not been slept in. Where was he? How long had he been gone? My heart pounded in my chest and my breath came irregularly.

Smashed from its velvety cocoon, my mind lurched crazily – image after image of horror and loss throwing themselves up against my eyeballs until I could no longer see the narrow pallets and the stained wood of the room. My knees buckled under me and I sank to the floor.

I stayed like that for a minute more before forcing myself to my feet. I had to get myself together. I had to figure this out.

Who knew where Yoshi had been working? Robbins. Where was Robbins? I didn't know. Robbins had been in the pay of Wollstone. Wollstone was my lead. It was unavoidable. I had to speak to him. I had to go back to the Palace of Stories.

# 20/

The same strange bar, the same strange and stinky bird, the same surly bartender. I waited. Stefan must arrive soon. He was my only lead to the Palace.

I waited, I drank tea, I imagined endless awful scenarios for Yoshi. How had I let this happen? How had I allowed such separation to enter our lives? I could not allow this to happen again.

Eventually, Stefan appeared at my elbow.

“Rachael,” he said. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

And then we walked – the same dark gritty cobbled streets, the same loops and curves and back alleys and stairways until I was, as ever, thoroughly lost. The Palace of Stories had many layers of protection.

As Stefan led and I blindly followed, my mind was free to focus on the message I’d been ignoring in Sasha’s letter. She thought I was some kind of saviour. Why did she think that? What had she seen that could possibly make her think I could change things?

My mind whirled, my feet trod the streets. I was caught somewhere between, as though separated from them both. I was nothing but observer. But Sasha believed in me. I had to find strength.

It was as well we arrived at the Palace when we did, for I was about to break into pieces under the grinding pressure of all these conflicting impulses. Perhaps the drug had not fully left my system after all.

The first face I saw in that now-familiar antechamber was Wollstone. He stood up when he saw me, responding to the distress in my face.

“Daniel,” I gasped out, before thinking clearly.

“Your husband,” he said smoothly.

They had never met. We had never talked about him. That should have been my first note of alarm.

“He is well. Don’t be alarmed.” That should have been my second note.

Despite all that I had just learned from Sasha’s letter, I couldn’t bring myself to believe that Wollstone was against me.

I just wanted to believe that Yoshi was alright.

“Your husband got into a little trouble last night,” said Wollstone, quickly holding up his hand to reassure me. “It was nothing serious, but we had to intervene on his behalf.”

And that should have been my third note. They were watching him. They knew where he worked.

But I was not looking for alarming signs. I was looking for reassurances. And here was Wollstone, offering them to me.

“Sit,” he said, extending his arm. “You don’t look well. Let me get you some refreshments.”

He was courtesy, charm, reassurance. I was scared and I was starving. I hadn't eaten since yesterday. I sat. I ate what was offered to me. I accepted his reassurances. I let myself slowly be stitched back into my cocoon.

I was so far back inside that I hardly noticed when Wollstone deflected all my questions, when he asked me to come with him, that he had somebody who could tell me all that was going on if only I would wait for a moment.

We walked down the familiar darkened corridor. He ushered me into one of the rooms. He sat me down in a comfortable chair and asked for me to wait. He locked the door behind him.

At first I fretted, rocking back and forth on the chair. Then I paced. Then I knocked on the door, and then banged on the door. I shouted for help. I screamed, images of my beaten boy swarming through my head.

I pounded the door until my hands started to swell, at the bottom of my darkest nightmare. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

When Sasha found me I was on the floor with my arms wrapped around my knees, the claws of my hands clutching my elbows.

"Rachael," she said gently, wrapping her arms around me. I had nothing left. I had hardly registered the door opening.

I let her warmth bring me back to myself. I was shivering. I was sweating. My head pounded, my heart raced, and the marrow in my bones felt like it was trying to get out. I'd been so locked in my images of Yoshi's pain that I hadn't realised how wrong I felt.

"Rachael," she said again, rocking me gently. "It's going to be okay."

“Yoshi,” I mumbled, not caring that I said his name, not caring that she didn’t even know who that was. I felt like crying there in her arms, as she rocked me like a child.

“I’m sorry for what’s been done to you,” she said. “And I’m sorry for what they’ve done to your friend.” She knew?

“Thank you,” I mumbled again, breathing in her beautiful smell. I hadn’t been held like this since I was a child. I felt like a baby here in the dark, crying for the touch of a comforting adult. I closed my eyes and for a moment I was in the long hall with the arms of a Workmother around me.

I tried to drag myself back to the here and now. I had to be here for Yoshi. I was confused, almost delirious, drooling on the shoulder of this virtual stranger.

“Rachael,” Sasha said again, drawing me back to urgency with that imitation name. “You have to listen very carefully now. I know you don’t want to. Believe me I know what you want.”

Were her arms around me trembling?

“You were brought here tonight to bind you forever to The Palace. Your friend was taken to make sure you came. You’re in the gravest danger you can imagine.

“I know what you’re feeling. I know what you want, even though you haven’t realised it yourself. You want another drink of serum, don’t you?”

I could taste it in my mouth. Realisation flooded my body.

“Yes,” I gasped, instantly in a whirlpool of longing.

“I know,” she said sadly. “I know. I’m supposed to be here to give you one.”

For a moment of hopeful madness I looked up. Perhaps what she meant was that she hadn't been going to, but now she had reconsidered? And then I caught myself thinking that. And then I was ashamed, and desperate, and confused.

She carefully pulled a small vial from an inner pocket of her robes. The dark liquid almost seemed to pulse. "I have your dose here," she said.

I yearned. The whole of my *being* yearned. I had never known a gaping desire like this.

"Rachael," Sasha's voice again. "You have to listen. I know where your friend is being held. I know how you can get to him. But you have to act now, tonight, before they realise you're gone. They think they've got you locked up now. They think that you'll be swimming again tonight."

Of course that was what it was called. Swimming in the most lavish ocean, safe and warm and free. I tried to listen to the words she was telling me, not just to the sound of her voice, the feeling of her arms around me.

"You won't be swimming. I won't let you. I gave my dose to the guard in the living quarters. He's never had it before. He won't be guarding anything tonight. But we have to move quickly, before anyone comes in to check on you."

I nodded. What else could I do? But I knew nothing of her plan, I knew nothing of what she knew of Yoshi. Here I was once again being thrown into the darkness. I ached. I wanted. And my only balm was the arms of a Storyteller, and the stories she might be telling me.



“It’s going to get better,” whispered Sasha in my ear. “You’ve only had the serum once so its hold is not so strong on you. You won’t have to suffer for long.”

There was definitely a tremor in her arms now, and a catch in her voice as though she were having trouble turning thoughts into words.

“But we have to move quickly. I’m not going to be useful to you for very much longer.”

“Why...” I began, and then faltered. “Why don’t you take my dose?” It cost me to say it.

She looked with longing at the vial in her hand, and then shook her head. “Don’t say that. I have to be able to help you.”

She shuddered then, and thrust the vial at me. “Take it away from me. I can’t hold it any more.”

And, at last, I trusted. Her pain must be intense. I could see sweat starting to appear on her forehead in the lantern light. I took the vial from her hand and put it in my innermost pocket, tried desperately to put it out of my thoughts. We didn’t have much time.

“Show me,” I said.

Sasha nodded and helped me up. Taking a keychain from her robes she unlocked the door, carefully locking it again behind us, and then led me down the corridor on silent feet. Just before the curtained entrance to the antechamber, she pointed to the door she had disappeared through last time.

“There’s a guard behind here,” she whispered. “He’ll be swimming by now.”

Could I hear Wollstone's voice through the curtain, through the door? Or was it just the sound of my paranoia? I couldn't trust my senses. I looked back at Sasha, trembling on the edge of this betrayal. The guard might not be in his right mind now, but he would remember at least some of this tomorrow. I owed it to her to protect her.

I held up my hand to Sasha, *wait*, and then gently opened the door. Standing with his back to me was an imposing figure, a truncheon swinging prominently from his belt. He turned slowly as he registered my presence and smiled enormously.

"It's *you*," he said, as though stating the most profound thing in the world.

It was time for me to play my part. I raised my hand to his broad chest, and pushed him back gently against the wall of the corridor.

"Yes," I said quietly. "It's me." I could feel his heartbeat, slow and erratic.

I made myself look straight into his eyes, then stood on tiptoes so my mouth reached his ear. He obligingly tilted his head down towards me, eager to hear what I had to say.

"Close your eyes," I whispered. "Be here with me."

His eyelids fluttered shut. Behind me I could sense Sasha moving soundlessly past.

"Here with me..." he echoed back, his voice a vibration against my palm.

"Good," I said, and I raised my other hand to his shoulder. I spun him gently so he faced the curtain we'd just come through, then lifted one of his hands to the velvet softness. He took the material in his fingers and let out a sigh.

I had a sudden wild stab of yearning. I wanted to feel what he was feeling. I wanted to be inside that serum-coated world again. I made myself release him as gently as I could, and then savagely pinched myself on the blood-blistered and bruised skin of my inner elbow. I had to be here. For Sasha, for Yoshi, for myself.

“Yes,” I crooned. “Keep your eyes closed. Be here in the velvet, here in the smooth. Be here.”

“Be here,” he echoed, as I slowly released him, both hands now stroking the curtain. “Be here,” he said again as I tiptoed away.

I caught up to Sasha around a bend in the corridor, who nodded as she saw me.

“Impressive,” she said. “I could probably get you a job here.” As she turned away a grimace of pain flashed across her face.

This corridor was not as lavishly decorated as the main hallway, but it had the same sound-deadening rugs and hangings. Everything here was like the cocoon of serum. No light or noise, not too hot or too cold. Everything was designed to soothe and to comfort. Some of the Storytellers might have no idea how long they’d been here, at the whim of Machina. I shuddered. We kept walking.

The Palace had the feeling that it might stretch for miles underground, a literal undermining of The City and its systems. Sasha led on as the corridor twisted away from the entrance and began to slope slightly down. Lanterns burned less frequently now, and the floorboards underfoot were bare. We had clearly left the cocoon.

At the last of the lanterns she paused. Ahead of us the corridor branched. She put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes for a moment.

I put a hand to her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Don't touch me," she snapped, and then instantly apologised. "I'm sorry Rachael. It's getting bad now. And I have one more guard that I have to get you past. I'm saving my energy for that. We're nearly there."

She lifted the lantern from its bracket in the wall, and took a hesitant step into the right-hand passage. Then she cursed and turned around and took the passage to the left. "We're nearly there," she muttered again.

The passage sloped quite steeply down now, and Sasha stumbled several times. I would have offered her my arm but I feared another rebuke. I concentrated instead on placing my own feet, noticing how the floorboards underfoot were more and more weathered, how the air was getting colder. It was the opposite of my cocoon and there was nothing I could do but endure it. It seemed we had been walking this way forever.

Sasha stopped in front of me.

"Hold this," she said roughly, shoving the lantern at me. I took it. She pulled a kerchief out of her pocket and wiped at her freely sweating face. "Wait," she ordered. "There's one more guard. We need to get into one of the cells."

"No," I said, barring her way. "Let me. Nobody needs to know your part in this."

I was a Storyteller. Time to tell a story. I grabbed Sasha's arm and pulled her roughly around the corner. Her cry of pain had the guard instantly on his

feet. His small stool crashed to the floor behind him. We were in a dead end corridor, with four doors in a row along one wall.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What’s going on?”

“This one was caught stealing serum,” I said, in the most authoritative voice I could manage. “She’s to be kept here to suffer until Machina can decide what do to with her.”

I shook Sasha’s trembling form, and she cried out in pain again. I was telling stories. She was not.

At the sound of Machina’s name the guard had straightened up. This was my way in.

“Look at her,” I said. “Pitiful cheat. Machina has set me to watch over her myself. And you. You’re to report to Wollstone immediately.”

I was hoping for another trigger word, and Wollstone’s name had the effect I wanted. Before he could fully take in my appearance, I moved in as close as I could.

“Machina has set me a task,” I said. “And Wollstone requires you to report. *Immediately.*”

Sasha’s head was bowed, but with her free hand she was tapping urgently on the fingers I had clenched around her bicep. *One two three... one two three...*

Hoping I had understood, I pointed to the third door. “In there,” I said to the guard. “Quickly.”

This was the true power of story then. This was what I had witnessed Sasha do the first time I had seen her, whipping her old man assailant with

the strength of her words. The guard hurried to obey, unlocking the door with the heavy key at his waist.

“Now, here, take her, chain her up,” I said, pushing Sasha roughly towards him. He reflexively reached out as she stumbled over her feet and sent them both crashing in and to the floor of the cell. As he was struggling to disentangle himself, I seized his stool and brought it down on his head. There was a sickening crack and he dropped.

I fell to my knees next to them both, shaking. There was blood oozing out of a cut in his skull, but I held my breath until I could hear his. I had not killed him. I wanted to collapse and weep my relief, but I had to keep moving.

We were in a small cell with a single low bench against one wall. What was this place? How was this an escape? Fears flooded my mind. I knelt down beside Sasha and gently stroked her hair, whispering her name over and over. She took a shuddering breath in and rolled onto her back.

“Rachael,” Sasha gasped. “I don’t have much time.” She barely seemed to register the guard lying unconscious and bleeding beside her.

“Under here.” She kicked at the bench by the door. “Trapdoor.”

It didn’t seem possible. She forced her head up to look at me, an imploring desperation in her eyes.

“You have to come back,” she said. “You have to. For all of us. For everyone. We’re rats in the sewer locked in by that lunatic.”

And then I took her hand, as gently as I could. She flinched for a moment but then relaxed.

“Thank you,” I said. “I want to help you, and everyone else. All of the Storytellers. But I don’t know how. I don’t know what to do. I don’t have an army to come back and break you out.”

My voice had been rising in despair as I talked. The thoughts had been gnawing at me ever since Sasha had placed hope in me. What could I possibly *do*?

Sasha’s half-closed eyes once again focussed on mine. She reached inside her robes and pulled out a leather wallet.

“Here,” she said. “Here is your army. Take it. It’s everything I’ve been able to discover about the town of Storytellers. I know you’ve heard a snippet or two. Everybody has. This is everything. All the snippets anyone’s ever heard. Here.”

I took the wallet, doubt and fear mingling with the smallest beginnings of hope inside me. It was true then. I had a sudden vivid flash of Deanne, drunk and hopeful, leaning in towards me to mutter the cracked truths she had heard on her travels. *The Citadel of Stories*, she had whispered. A good name for a place built of smoke and hope and tiny particles of truth.

I put the wallet away carefully. It was not much to go on. It was all I had.

I turned to the bench and grasped hold of the rough timber. After several moments of straining I finally felt a little give. I redoubled my efforts, sweat bursting on my back, and all at once the bench slid towards me and I fell back onto the floor next to Sasha. She chuckled weakly.

“I guess that was bound to happen, Mountain Girl.”

I crawled back to where the bench had been. The floor beneath looked just the same as the rest of the cell: solid dark timbers crusted in dirt and grease.

I looked up at Sasha but her eyes were closed against a spasm of pain. Could this all be a story? Could everything on those scraps of paper be nothing more than the drug-addled fantasies of captives desperate for a better life?

I looked back at the floor, examining it carefully. I found nothing. A wave of exhaustion swept over me then. I beat my fists stupidly against the solid timbers. I felt like crying, I felt like giving up, I felt like going back the way we'd come and talking my way back into my cell, waiting for Wollstone to come back and find me, losing myself in the easy bliss of serum.

I slumped down with my head on the floor. And as I lay there, I slowly became aware of a cool sensation against my forehead. A Workmother's calming hand in the middle of fever.

I opened my eyes. I was lying with my forehead on the gap between two floorboards, and there was a draft coming up between them. The air smelled sour and cold and dark, but it was moving.

I rose to a kneel and re-examined the boards. Scrabbling towards the wall of the cell I saw a dark line of shadow, as though *this* board did not go all the way in beneath the wall. I gave it an experimental push, and then a shove. Was it giving slightly? It had to be. This was my only hope.

I shoved again, trying for any movement I could make happen, and felt a definite shift. If this *was* a door it clearly hadn't been opened for a very long time. Eventually, with much nail-tearing scrabble, I felt the board slide a handspan beneath the wall. I grabbed the exposed end and heaved it back towards me, and I soon had a short length of floorboard in my hands.



I heaved it onto the floor and then tried to move the boards on either side of it. Nothing. After several minutes fruitless straining, nothing. I looked down again at the 'door' I'd created. Three feet long, one foot wide. A slit into the dark unknown.

# 21/

“Good thing you’re scrawny,” said Sasha weakly.

“This is the door?” I said.

“I guess it is,” she said.

Sasha summoned a small smile from the depths of her pain.

“You’ll be okay, my dear,” she said. She reached out her hand towards my face but did not touch me. And then her expression became deathly serious.

“You’ll be okay because you have to be,” she said. “For all of us.”

I nodded, forcing down my fears.

“Thank you,” I said. It was all I could manage.

She passed me a small stub of candle. I nodded again, truly fearful this time, but I understood.

“What about him?” I said. The guard lay sprawled where I had knocked him.

“He’ll be out for a while. Don’t think about him.”

I nodded. I levered open the lantern’s glass and lit my stub. I looked at Sasha, then looked away, looked back to the dark slot in the floor. I put my face back down to the floor, trying to see what was beneath.

Two feet under the floor there was dirt. That was all my candlelight would show me. The draught that had revealed this escape had a dark dead odour. The dirt beneath this floor had been a very long time without the sun or the rain.

I eased myself awkwardly down and sat on the strange dead earth, my legs stuck out in front of me into the darkness, looking up at Sasha's face. She nodded. I ducked my head and twisted my body and squirmed onto my belly.

The ground was uneven, strewn with piles of rubble and heaps of stones. I took a small smooth pebble, melted some wax and stuck my candle stub to it. This freed me to crawl. The floor was too close to my back even to allow me to be on all fours. My exit from the Palace of Stories was to be wormlike, with the slow wind of death blowing over me.

Sasha dropped the board back into place. My body jerked in response. There was a slow and painful drag as she heaved the bench above me, and then silence. My whole existence shrank down to the tiny pool of light cast by my candle stub.

Yet again I was running into darkness, leaving people who'd risked themselves on my behalf. Would Sasha be alright once she'd had another dose of serum? Would she be implicated in my escape?

So many questions, so much remorse, so impossible a time to think about it. My candle was burning down.

Piles of rubble and rubbish rose around me, all of it pushed up close to the floorboards above my head. I was going to have to travel a roundabout route to avoid getting trapped. In front of me – at least for the few feet I could see in my solitary light – there was a slightly clearer way forward. This way must have

been travelled before, but not for a very long time. I wondered again about the scraps of knowledge. To what network of half-buried truths did I owe this crawlway?

No more time for questions. I started forward. Elbows digging in and then a heave of my lower body, dragging me through the dead earth, the candle on its pebble shoved ahead of me with every wriggle. Shadows shuddered around me.

I crawled. Slowly and painfully. Dead earth collected in every wrinkle of my clothes, the smell almost enough to make me gag. Sweat poured from the back of my neck with this strange exertion. My breath came fast and ragged. I inched forward until I passed from under the floor of the cell and the roof above me became unhewn stone.

There seemed to be a path in front of me but I was no longer sure of anything. I would pass a twist of tangling wire, push it out of my way with a heave of my arm, only to have it snag my foot a moment later, coiling around and stretching and dragging, unknown creatures in the darkness.

And the fear in my mind and my body's betrayal made me more afraid and more ashamed, until I could hardly stand to be where I was, and hardly stand to be *who* I was, and I kept closing my eyes trying to make myself wake, and cursing myself for being so childish, and every sliding painful judder of my hip bones scraping ragged stone added layers of pain to my fear and frustration until I was panting for breath, panting for life, willing this to be over.

And then my candle blew out.

I gasped, inhaled the hateful earth, and started coughing. I curled up into a choking ball, a grub being crushed by the stone above me. Sparks flashed behind my eyelids.

Eventually my coughing subsided and I forced myself to open my eyes. So this was the worst it could get. So now what?

I turned my head back towards my feet. I didn't think I could retrace my route in total blackness. As I turned my head back to the way I'd been facing, the tiniest gleam of light caught my eye. I stared into the darkness trying to see where it was coming from, but it seemed to have disappeared. I turned my head and there it was again – the merest soft glimmer from the corner of my eye.

It was my only piece of hope so I took it. I crawled in its direction, agonisingly slowly, frequently scraping and hitting my hands without my tiny flame to guide me. I had to keep turning my head to get direction, finding this shy gleam with the corner of my eye.

The light slowly became stronger until I could see it by looking directly ahead. I pushed on, not daring to hope for too much, terrified it would betray me.

Eventually I got close enough that I could see what it was – a single beam cutting through the darkness, falling to the floor from a crack in the roof above. This shaft of white illuminated the cavern, and I began to be able to see the ground I was crawling over, the rocks that sought to block my way and keep me here forever. I tried to speed forward but my body wouldn't let me. Grunt by grunt, dead earth in my nostrils, I agonised my way towards this promise.

When at last I arrived at the searing white circle I collapsed onto my back, panting. Above me I could just make out a pattern of regular lines. As my eyes adjusted I could see that I was definitely looking at floorboards. I squinted outside my circle of light and the darkness seemed to be waiting to jump back in on me.

I shuddered and sat up, then raised cautious hands to the ceiling. I felt nothing but rough wood and solidity. Perhaps this was a false exit after all. I forced myself not to panic, to remember how tightly stuck the entrance to this tunnel had been.

I tried to be methodical then, pushing against each board along the length I could reach without getting caught in the rubble strewn all around me. I was close to giving up when I thought I felt something give, and then, in a rush, my panic had focus. I became a mindless animal, shoving and straining, whimpering as the board refused to move again, crying out in triumph as it gave a little more. I crouched up and hurled my shoulder against it, jarring my whole skeleton with the blow.

And then the board gave, with a screeching protest, tipping out onto the floor above and flooding me in light. I screwed up my eyes and slowly stood up.

I was waist high through the floorboards of a cellar, and light was spilling down from the trapdoor at the top of a ladder.

## 22/

I pulled my legs up and collapsed on the floor. I felt like I'd crawled out of my own grave. I lay on my back, breathing heavily and staring up at the square of light.

I gave myself a few moments, and then I forced myself up. I had no idea where I was, and somebody could come into this cellar at any moment. And my time was running out now. Even if Sasha had made it back undetected to her chamber, it could not be too long before somebody discovered the guard. They might not realise I had escaped the way I had, but they would realise I had escaped. And then Yoshi would be in danger.

That thought was enough to pull me up. I slid the board back into place and stamped it down. Checking that I had left no other visible traces, I cautiously climbed the ladder.

I was in a warehouse of some kind, full of cloth-wrapped bales. There did not seem to be anyone around, and I quickly made my way to the exit. Behind the wooden door I could hear the street sounds of The City. I took a breath, and then quickly slid the door open a crack and squeezed through.

I found myself on a bustling street in a part of town I didn't know, in a shaft of sunshine and a stream of abuse.

“Maybe muck *yourself* out next time you’re doing the horses, eh?” called a voice from a passing cart.

I looked down. I was filthy. I took off hastily in the opposite direction to the voice, brushing myself as I went. I stopped outside an inn with a horse trough, and washed the worst off my hands and face. There was nothing much I could do about my clothes.

I had to work out where I was; where Yoshi was. I slipped around the side of the inn and found a piece of wall to lean against. The late afternoon sun cast an orange light across me. It was time to investigate the parcel I’d been given by Sasha.

It was mostly notes and scraps on the Storyteller city – fascinating but not for now. What caught my attention was a map of The City. It was patchy, with immense amounts of detail in some places and frustrating blanks in others, but I soon realised that whoever had drawn it was closely connected with the Palace of Stories. They had known about the tunnel.

Once I had this connection, I traced it through excitedly. Here was the warehouse into which I had emerged. Here was the inn I had my back against. And here was something marked ‘Storyteller stockade’. Surely that was where Yoshi was being held? I had no choice but to try.

I kept my head down as I walked, trying to keep out of sight of hostile eyes, trying desperately to figure out a way I could break in to the stockade. In the end I could see only one way forward, and that was as a Storyteller.



On the outside, it was as discrete as the Palace of Stories. I would never have found it if not for my map. I knocked on the unmarked door at the end of a piss-stinking alley. The door opened a crack.

“This is a strange time to be calling,” said a voice.

“This is a strange kind of time,” I said, hoping the map-scrawled formula would still work. The door swung open.

Inside I was confronted by a Rumble-equivalent, who looked me up and down slowly. “You need a wash,” he said.

It was time to tell stories.

“You need to be more respectful,” I said. “What do you think Machina will say when Machina hears about the welcome I have received today?”

As I had hoped, the name struck home. His entire posture changed.

“Please excuse me,” he said.

“I need to see the boy,” I said. “The one that was brought in yesterday.”

He nodded once. “This way.”

So far so good. He handed me a lantern, picked one up for himself, and then led me out of the antechamber and through a complex series of dark corridors and stairs, feeding us, it felt to me, back down into the earth beneath The City. I tried not to panic. If all went well, I would not be here long.

At last we stopped outside a cell door. My escort reached for his keys and started to speak. I cut him off.

“Leave me now. I need to speak with him alone.”

“That could be dangerous,” he said, raising his fingers to his temples.

“It is a direct order from Machina.” I stared at him, thinking of Sasha, of Machina’s cold power, of the power of story.

He blinked and nodded. “Very well.”

I nodded, and he unlocked the door. I waited for him to leave, and then I swung the door open. The light from my lantern shone on the wasted body of a stick-thin old man sprawled across a grimy pallet.

Had I made some terrible mistake? Was this a trap? The old man lay unmoving, and I stepped in to take a closer look. At that, the door swung shut behind me, and a figure loomed with a clay flagon raised, ready to smash over my head.

I raised my hands to protect myself, but the blow never came. And suddenly there was a laugh I knew almost as well as my own.

I heard a crash as the flagon fell to the floor, and then Yoshi’s arms were around me so warm, his scent was in my nostrils, and he was saying my name again and again as though unable to believe I was real.

I kept my eyes shut in case this was a cruel fantasy, in case I was still underground, hallucinating from lack of light, from lack of sleep, from the last withdrawals of the drug from my body.

Then I forced my eyes to open, and forced myself to step out of his embrace. I looked into his face then and I gasped, because he was a mess of bruises and still-seeping cuts.

“What have they done to you?” I said.

“I... did not want to do what they wanted,” he said.

I looked him up and down. He clothes were torn and he seemed to be bleeding from a wound in his side.

“Oh Yoshi,” I said, and I felt myself close to tears. The serum had stripped away all my armour.

“We have to get out. We have to get away. We’re in terrible danger.”

Yoshi managed a smile at that. “Um,” he said. “Yes. We are.”

“Oh she’s a clever one this one,” croaked a voice from below me. I jumped. The old man was staring up at me.

I moved a little closer and he sprang up instantly, perched on the edge of the bed with his hands splayed out in front of him. I would not have thought it possible he could move with such energy. He had almost no flesh padding out those long bones.

“You just keep your distance, alright my love, and we’ll be everybody happy, now won’t we? Now won’t we.”

He nodded to himself as he talked. His good eye never left me, despite his wobble.

“We can try to get you out of here,” said Yoshi beside me.

At that the old man looked at Yoshi and sighed, and leaned back against the stone walls of the cell.

“The outside, yes, the high blue sky. I remember that. Yes, yes I do. I would like to see that again. I would.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, and then sprang back up to his hunched crouch, a bird of prey scanning the field for his rabbit.

“But can you do that, little man? Can you make that happen? Why should I believe that you can make that happen?”

I leaned in a little closer, in sudden realisation. I’d been sensing this all along, but I’d been too off balance to pay any attention.

“You can trust me,” I said. “I’m a Storyteller like you. And you can trust him as well, because I do.”

He sat back at that, and sighed again.

“You don’t escape these things, now do you? You never really get away. You never see another day.”

He stabbed at me with a claw-like hand. “You. You are, my dear, you are. I see. And *Machina* put you here, isn’t it? And now you are trying to escape those clutching clutches, those tendrilly touches. You want to get away. Yes.”

All I could do was nod, half-hypnotised by his babbling and his piercing eye.

“I’ve been here a long time, since *Machina* put me here, a good long time, and I would like I would very much like to see the sky again.”

“We will try to get you out,” said Yoshi again.

The old man nodded to himself for a while, looking down at the floor of the cell. And then he looked up, into both of our faces.

“Yes,” he said at last. “Yes yes.”

Yoshi had learned a little of the old man’s truth already, between rants and babbles. His name was Thomas. *Machina* had locked him here near the beginning of the growth of her underground empire, when he had started to protest at the way the Storytellers were being treated.

*Machina* had been frightened, it seemed to me, frightened of what might happen if all of her Storytellers banded together and demanded a change in the way that they lived. She threw Thomas into this cell and waited for him to die. Most Storytellers died within days of withdrawing from the serum, but somehow Thomas had survived, and *Machina* never came back to finish off

the job. He'd been here ever since – many years by his estimate – and he'd listened as the cells around him filled with rebels and outcasts and protestors.

The more I listened to this sad truth, the more sorry I felt for the old man, and the more determined that we should help him out, and help out all the Storytellers that were caught in this mess. First Sasha and now Thomas, and all the lives of all the others that lay hinted at below the edge of these truths. Something had to be done.

First though we had to get out of here, and that would not be as easy as it had been to get in. Any number of things could have happened to alert Wollstone to my escape. My stories would not hold forever. As quickly as I could, I sketched out what I had learned, and dumped out my wallet full of information on the floor.

I thought I had learned all there was to be learned but Yoshi soon started to pick out some more critical details. And as naturally as if we'd never parted, he carefully took my rejected scraps, folded them down and back into the wallet. I couldn't help but grin, despite it all. Even now he was the plan to my impulse.

He traced his finger over one of the places I didn't know.

“Here,” he said, stabbing his finger down. “Here was where I did my work. They took me from there. I tried to keep track, but I couldn't. I... I passed out.”

“They beat you until you passed out?” I said.

He nodded. I found myself shaking my head back and forth.

“No,” I said. “I will not allow them to get away with this.”

“Annabelle,” he said gently. “We need to work out how we can get away. That’s all that matters now.”

I looked into his eyes again at that, past the blood and past the bruises. It was Yoshi. I could believe him when he said that.

“And anyway,” he muttered. “The beating wasn’t bad. What I was doing was bad. They had me using my ability to trick men out of their livelihood, trap their daughters. I went along with terrible stories, Annabelle. Terrible stories.”

I reached out a hand but he brushed it away.

“Later,” he said darkly. “Later.” He turned back to the maps.

First they had crushed his spirit and then they had beaten his body. He was right, it was for later, but I burned for him, I burned for what they’d done to him.

I tilted my head back, and my eyes went again to the tiny grille in the wall. It was small, no bigger than the span of my hand, but the light that came through was definitely sunlight. I couldn’t understand how we could possibly be this close to the surface, for the guard had seemed to take me a long way down. All at once there was a flicker, and I caught a glimpse of a large bird’s wing.

I jumped up, trying to see more through the filthy bars of the grille. All I could see was sky. Here in the middle of this city full of towers – nothing but a vast expanse of emptiness.

I whirled around and looked back at the map. I stabbed my finger down, trembling with excitement.

“Those!” I said to Yoshi. “What are those? What does that symbol mean?”

He looked up at me with hope in his eyes. “Cliffs,” he said simply.

“Cliffs!” I repeated. “Yes!”

I traced my finger over the symbol, noticing how all of the roads and the alleys ended there. This cell must be halfway down the cliff face. And that fact in turn led my mind down to the river.

“The river,” I breathed, looking up at Yoshi. “If we can get down to the river, we can get away.”

He nodded. “Quickly. And quietly too. Nobody able to spot us on the streets.”

It seemed possible. I felt the beginnings of promise. I reached inside my cloak at that, and pinched my bruised elbow. Unwarranted euphoria was a dangerous drug, but Yoshi’s solid presence was almost unbearably reassuring.

“Let’s do that,” I said.

## 23/

“Okay,” I said. “What have we got?”

I had found a scribble on one of my notes about this place that mentioned *the rockway*, as though this were common knowledge. I couldn’t find anything else, but the mysterious and frustrating owner of that scribble made it seem as though it was a connection between this building and the river.

I’d told Yoshi about it, and he’d redoubled his efforts on the maps and scraps we had. Eventually he found something. The sketch of this building *did* seem to indicate a way out a little above us, but the maker of that particular map had discounted it as far too dangerous to attempt. It was our best chance.

Yoshi handed me the last of the chunk of dry bread we’d been sharing.

“This,” he said. “This is what we’ve got.”

He smiled his smashed up smile and I couldn’t help but smile back. I’d managed to wipe the worst of the blood off his face, and he assured me the wound in his side was okay. There was nothing else I could do for now.

I nodded. I wanted more rest, more water, more food. I wanted more time to adjust to where we were, more time to figure out a foolproof way to escape. I didn’t have any of those things.

We gathered up Thomas and left the cell.



We walked the opposite way to the way I'd come, until we reached a junction. I lowered the lantern for a moment. A glimmer from the corridor to my left; nothing to the right.

"Left," whispered to Yoshi.

This was the riskiest part of the escape. Apart from the risk that the rockway may have been nothing more than the delusions of a dying Storyteller, dreaming of escape.

Left led us through several chambers that could potentially contain guards; past more regular cells that could contain prisoners that might set up an alarm; through light, through habitation, through danger. It was our only choice.

Thomas managed to keep pace with us, despite his rundown appearance. He smiled and nodded and shook his head as we walked, but he stayed silent and he kept his footsteps quiet. We walked. I took the lead, listening hard, and Yoshi took the rear, whispering the instructions he'd memorised.

We walked slowly towards the light. As we came closer the glimmer resolved into the shape of a doorway, light leaking out around the roughly-finished edges. When we reached it I paused and pushed my ear against the planks. I could hear nothing but the sound of my own nervous breathing.

I gave a cautious push and the door swung open. Behind was a small room and silence, the steady gleam of lanterns along the walls. Thomas came through behind me, and then Yoshi, carefully closing the door. We stood for a minute to let our eyes adjust.

I looked at Yoshi and saw caution and determination. I saw courage, not fear. I hoped he saw the same in me.

We passed through several more rooms without sound and without incident, and then we came to a long corridor with several cell doors leading off it. Each door had an open grille in the upper half of the door, and from behind each one we could hear snores and shuffles and laboured breathing.

I nodded and we started to walk, on feet as silent as we could make them. As we tiptoed past I found myself wondering who these people were, and what they had done, and on whose authority Machina was holding them. It was unclear from our maps and our scraps how much more of a network there might be beneath The City, and my own experience told me that Machina held sway only in her domain. I had no real sense of the size of that domain; the extent to which her power was undermining The City.

There were a lot of people behind those doors though. Every cell seemed occupied, and some cells had several people, and there were dozens of cells stretched out along this corridor. How many enemies did Machina have?

At last we came to the place on our map where the rockway was supposed to be. We were in a narrow chamber with several doors leading off. That was it.

I squinted around, looking for something else. Yoshi carefully tried each door, but each one was only a storage room. Thomas stood muttering in the centre of the room. His ramblings were putting me on edge now. I was straining so hard to hear any sound of guards but all I could hear was his monologue.

After several fruitless minutes of searching I was no closer to an answer and I was starting to get desperate.

“What if it’s nothing?” I whispered to Yoshi. “What if that map was too old, too wrong?”

He nodded grimly. There was nothing to say. We’d prepared a backup plan but it was horribly risky, and even if we succeeded we’d be back in The City, wandering the streets with nowhere to go and all eyes hostile toward us.

At that moment Thomas started muttering more loudly. A crazed grin cracked his leathery face.

“Quiet,” I whispered forcefully. “Keep yourself quiet!”

But instead of listening to me he raised a long arm and pointed. “The sky,” he said. “The sky!”

I looked to the wall but could see nothing. The old man had obviously cracked.

He started to cackle, “The sky, the sky!” and I grabbed his arm and shook him.

“You *have* to be quiet!”

And then Yoshi looked up to where Thomas was pointing, and then backed himself up as far as he could against the opposite wall of the narrow chamber.

“What is it?” he hissed to the old man. “What do you see?”

But Thomas seemed almost hypnotised. Yoshi waved me over.

“Here,” he held out his hands in a stirrup. I put my foot in them and he hoisted me up towards the ceiling, and with my head finally at the same height as Thomas’s I could suddenly see what he was seeing.

The bright lanterns below had rendered all-but invisible the narrow ledge that ran the length of the wall, and with my head now up high I could see the

tiniest sliver of darkness running just above it. Thomas seemed convinced it was the night sky. Perhaps I would think so too, after years down here.

We had nothing else to go on. I lowered myself from Yoshi's hands, and had him lift me up again on the other side of the room. My eyes came level with the mysterious crack and I could feel a cool breeze on my face. There was nothing but darkness to be seen, but there was no denying that the air was fresh, with a slight tang to it. Could I be smelling the river?

"It is," I breathed. "It *is* the sky."

I quickly traced my hands along the crack. It was only a couple of handspans long, and at each end my fingers felt a slight curve upwards, as though the crack continued beneath the plaster. I leaned across, feeling Yoshi adjust beneath me, and tapped at the wall with my knuckles. Could that be a slightly hollow sound? Or was I as deluded and as desperate as Thomas?

I rapped against the plaster again, moving back and forth on the wall. *There*. No doubt. There was something beneath.

"I'm coming down for a second," I said to Yoshi, and he lowered me, stretching his arms gratefully. "I think this is it. But we're going to have to make some noise to get out. We're going to have to move quickly once we start. Is there anything we can use as tools in those storerooms?"

We looked through the rooms and turned out our great escape kit: some chairs for us to stand on while we battered our way out with loose bricks. It was not much, and it would wake everybody, but it was going to have to do. Every second longer that we spent trying to work this out was yet more time for us to be discovered.

Thomas meanwhile was sitting back on the floor, having worn himself out with his raptures. We carried the chairs over to the wall and then stood for a moment with our bricks upraised. I smiled at Yoshi for the absurdity of the situation and then nodded. It was time to find out if we had a chance of escape.

We brought our bricks down simultaneously, smashing away at the plaster. Thomas covered with his hands over his head as chips and dust filled the air. Hideous echoes bounced away down the corridor and we pounded as fast as we could. Beneath our hands a seam emerged. A hatch was being revealed.

And then we had our door: a ragged-edged portal into the unknown, with an inset handle still half-covered in plaster. I dragged on it with all my strength, feeling the weight of years fighting against me. In the distance I heard shouting, and my body surged with adrenalin. The heavy door screeched open towards me, throwing me off balance. I backed out of the way and Yoshi ducked as it slammed into the wall above him, sending more plaster skittering down.

Truth was on our side tonight, for the door just revealed had a heavy locking wheel on its inner face. If the bolts had been thrown we would never have been able to open it. I had a moment to glance down the tunnel revealed before the shouting intensified. We did not have long.

I looked down at Thomas, still crouched on the floor and muttering. I would not leave him behind.

As though reading my thoughts Yoshi stepped down from his chair. We hurried over, took an arm each, and heaved him to his feet.

Our touch seemed to snap him back to the moment for he came alive in our hands.

“The sky,” I grunted, as I propelled him towards the exit. He was incredibly skinny but incredibly tall and it was taking all my energy to keep him moving.

“The sky!” he said. “Yes, the sky!”

The shouting was growing louder behind us, and Yoshi pushed him up onto a chair, then put an urgent hand into his back to get him up through the hatch.

As soon as he was inside the tunnel his face transformed again. Perhaps it was the fresh night air with its promise of freedom. He lowered one of his tremendously long arms to me.

“Up, my dear, up!” he said, dragging me in as though I weighed nothing. He lifted Yoshi as well, and shoved him in towards me. Yoshi crawled past me to make room for us all in the narrow tunnel. I could hear the individual shouts of the guards now and the stomping of their heavy boots on the wooden floor.

Thomas reached his long arm to the edge of the hatch where it had slammed against the wall, leaning perilously out to do so. I grabbed onto his waist to give him more leverage as he strained against the weight and the reluctant hinges. Yoshi shouted encouragement behind us; the guards shouted alarms in front of us.

And then everything happened at once.

The guards burst into the room, weapons at the ready. The heavy hatch finally released and started to swing closed. Thomas fell back against me and

then slipped, almost falling back out into the room. And one of the guards raised his sword and thrust the blade up to prevent the hatch from closing.

Thomas grunted and then the hatch slammed into his body, throwing him back into the tunnel. A metallic clang filled the air as the sword's blade buckled under the pressure. The blade bent but held in place, wedging the hatch open. I could hear the guard cursing on the other side. The sword must have been torn from his grip.

And then Thomas hurled himself forward again. He shoved the hatch open just enough to let the blade fall, and then heaved back on the wheel with all of the leverage in his long skinny arms.

The hatch closed fully and Thomas ground the wheel through its reluctant turn. He collapsed back against me, panting with exertion. The hatch shook under the fists of the guards.

“You were wonderful, Thomas.” I said, holding his shoulder.

He nodded, his face pale. “Yes, my dear, yes I was my dear.”

He started to cough and his body spasmed. Specks of blood covered his chest. I looked down to see he was clutching at his stomach, dark red blood welling from beneath his hands.

“Thomas...”

“The sky, my dear, I would like to see the sky. The sky and I, I and the sky, my eye in the sky and I...” He trailed off and coughed again.

The battering of the guards' fists on the hatch faded beneath the roaring in my ears. I turned to Yoshi who had already realised, who was already coming to put a hand on Thomas' shoulder. He looked at me with grave eyes in the gloom and shook his head minutely.

I felt a sharp and violent spike of hatred for Yoshi. He was giving up too easily on this man who'd just saved us.

"We'll get you away, Thomas," I whispered in his ear. "We'll get you away and we'll fix you up. You'll see."

I shot a glare at Yoshi. I wanted to hit him.

And then Thomas raised one of his bony hands and touched it for an instant to the side of my face.

"My dear," he said. "You're a special one. But I just want to see the sky, one more sky."

And then Yoshi hunched up his battered body in the confines of the tunnel and awkwardly but gently put his arms beneath Thomas' shoulders.

"Take his feet," he said to me.

I took a breath. I took his feet. I ignored the pounding of the guards behind us, and the pain of my knees on the rocks as we slowly crawled forward through the tunnel, Yoshi moving awkwardly backwards and Thomas slung between us like a bony bleeding sack.

Thankfully we did not have far to go. Yoshi's boot connected with a metal hatch and we gently lowered Thomas to the floor. I watched Yoshi's capable hands searching in the gloom, finding the wheel, straining against corrosion. His whole being was bent to the task of getting us to safety.

My hatred died. The roaring in my ears subsided. I was in a tunnel with the ragged breath of a dying man, and the panting exertion of a boy who wanted nothing more than to grant him his final wish.

"We'll get you to sky, Thomas," I said. "I promise."



The exit hatch finally gave in to Yoshi's persistence. With his shoulder driving into the metal, it screeched open a reluctant handspan and then stopped. Nothing he could do would force it further open.

"It's okay," I said.

The night air really was pouring in now, fresh and cold and carrying the smell of the river. Thomas raised his head a little at the scent.

"The sky..."

"How are we going to get Thomas out?" Yoshi asked.

"Very carefully," I said.

"There's a ledge we could rest him on," he said to me. And then he touched Thomas gently on the shoulder.

"We're going to have to drag you out sideways," he said to him. "It's not going to be comfortable."

Thomas only nodded. He was fading rapidly.

Yoshi squeezed himself out onto the ledge and then reached back in to grasp Thomas around the shoulders. I picked up his legs once more, and we turned him onto his side. He moaned in agony and I almost dropped him.

"Just for a moment," said Yoshi.

And then we dragged and pushed and awkwardly manoeuvred him out into the night. Out beneath the sky.

I squeezed myself out through the crack and perched beside them both. We were on a narrow ledge on the side of a cliff, craggy rocks disappearing into darkness above and below us.

Yoshi crawled back beside me and shoved until the hatch swung closed once more. There was no sound from below. With two heavy doors between

us and the guards I couldn't hear them either. All I could hear was the sound of the wind moaning across the cliff face and Thomas' laboured breathing.

He was lying on his back just as we had dropped him. His mouth was open and his eyes were wide, taking in the sweep of stars above us.

I crawled across and sat my back to the cliff face, then carefully lifted his head to rest in my lap.

"The sky..." he whispered. I could hardly hear him. "Thank you my dear, my dear, my sky."

I bowed my head and felt the tears spilling over. I took his hand and squeezed it gently, and some moments later felt a tiny pressure in return.

"Thank you, my dear," he said again. And then he was gone.

I don't know how long I sat without moving, my head bowed to this dead storyteller in my lap. I would have to move soon, I knew that. My body was shivering in the freezing night air, we were far from safety, and we were halfway down a cliff face. But all I wanted to do was sit with my head bowed, feeling the tears still hot on my cheeks.

It was Yoshi who broke the silence.

"Annabelle," he said very gently. "Look up."

I didn't want to move at all.

Yoshi spoke again. "It's all that Thomas wanted to see. Look up. For him."

At that I slowly raised my head. The sky was magnificent. It felt like I'd been in The City forever, with its tall buildings and its flaming torches and its endless brightly lit chambers and tunnels.

But here was the sky, laid out above us. No clouds, no moon to dull the stars in their endless uncountable glory.

I turned to Yoshi in the fresh cold breeze, beneath the blessing of freedom shining down from above. I nodded. It was time to go.

# 24/

We had to leave Thomas lying on the ledge. There was nothing else that we could do. I crossed his arms on his chest and pulled his cloak over the wound in his belly. I went to close his eyes as I had seen done in my village and then stopped. This is what he wanted to see.

“The sky,” I whispered solemnly, and bent to kiss his cheek.

“The sky,” said Yoshi, and kneeled to do the same.

And then we set ourselves to finding our way down the cliff face.

The rockway did exist, but it was hardly a path. It would have been a challenge in full daylight, in full health, with all the right equipment. And here we were in the middle of the night, with nothing but the clothes we wore and the wounds that we carried.

It was slow and perilous. We both lost our footing several times and had to endure the sound of rock shards shattering far below us as we clung to our handholds. At times there were steps carved into the rock, or a natural ledge or crevice to cling to. At times we lost our way altogether and had to retrace our steps back up the cliff face.

There were times when it almost seemed easier to give up, to close my eyes and relax my grip and let gravity take care of the rest. But then I would picture

Thomas lying above us, staring up at the sky with sightless eyes, and I would check my handhold and cling more tightly, carefully place my foot on the next step down.

When I took my final step it took me several moments to realise I'd reached the bottom. I collapsed onto the stone beneath me, legs shaking, shoulders aching, the stars above nothing but a reminder of Thomas somewhere back up the cliff. Yoshi clambered the final steps and sank down beside me.

We had climbed down into a natural enclosure, with large rocks rising on all sides around us. Now that I wasn't concentrating all my senses on the cliff in front of my nose, I could smell the river and hear its powerful murmur in front of us.

According to all that we had gleaned from our information, there should be a landing very close by. Our plan depended on there being some kind of boat we could steal.

"Alright?" I said to Yoshi. He nodded, going along with my story. He looked terrible. We had to push on though. Dawn could not be far away.

I scoured the gloom and realised there was a narrow crevice leading out of our enclosure. I pulled Yoshi up from his slump and led the way through, stepping high on the uneven path. We scraped out of the crevice and onto open ground. In front of us I could just make out a short jetty, with numerous small boats tied up to it. I took a step forward, relief rushing through me. I stopped.

From his sitting position at the end of the jetty, an imposing figure raised himself up to his full height.

“Hello Rachael,” said Wollstone.

No. After all that we’d been through, after everything that had been lost, this couldn’t be the way it ended. And yet I remained frozen to the spot, Yoshi half a step behind me. Even his solid practicality couldn’t get us out of this one. We were both half dead with exhaustion.

Wollstone walked calmly towards us, as though sensing our resignation. I could just make out his face in the gloom, and it looked ragged, desolate in a way I’d never seen him look. He looked us over as though assessing us for damage, nodding slowly to himself.

“What?” I burst out. I couldn’t stand the silence. I didn’t care about the consequences. “You’ve got us now. Take us! Take us back to that prison, chain us up like animals, I don’t care! Or take me back to your *Palace*, chain me up with your drugs, keep me on a velvet rope like your little friend Sasha!”

He jerked his hand back at that, poised to strike me down, and Yoshi shoved me aside to stand in the way. The blow never came. Wollstone slowly lowered his arm, bowed his head, and then raised his eyes to mine.

“Sasha is dead.” Such pain in his eyes. “Sit.”

He sat down then, easily lowering his massive body to the ground, and motioned for us to do the same. From the pack slung over his shoulder he pulled out some bread and cheese and a water flask.

“Eat,” he commanded, and then stared into the distance.

I was starving. I ate. Yoshi did the same, both of us paused in this strange picture of grief and power, entirely unsure what was happening but too exhausted to do anything but what we were told.

After a few moments Wollstone broke the silence.

“I didn’t believe you’d make it this far. I didn’t think you were this strong. Sasha knew.”

His voice was very carefully even, not a hint of emotion displayed.

“I’ve read all the papers you have, Rachael. The maps and the notes. It’s why I’m here, instead of up in the prison. We don’t have very long.

“I honour the truth of what Machina is doing. I honour the truth of the cause. But I have at times had doubts. I used to speak with Sasha about them. She was the only one I could trust. It’s how I know about the town of Storytellers. She thought there was a better way to do what Machina is trying to do. If we had someone to lead us differently.”

He looked me in the eye.

“I didn’t think you could possibly be the one. I still don’t. But I’m here because of Sasha, and the bargain I made with myself. I told myself that if you could escape from the Palace, if you could break out of the prison, if you could find your way down here in the dark, then you at least deserved a chance to get away.”

“What you do with yourself after that is the real test,” he continued. “I don’t really expect to see either of you again. But Sasha did. And I’m going to grant her this last thing.”

He was silent then for a very long time.

“Sasha...?” I began, and he cut me off with the same flat monotone.

“They found her in her chamber earlier today. She was dead of an overdose of serum. It happens, sometimes, to our Storytellers. Mostly it doesn’t. Not to the careful ones. And Sasha was very careful.”

I started to say something, to find some words of sympathy that would give some comfort, but again he cut me off. There was no misconstruing what he had told me.

“You have to go now. It won’t be long before the guards will be here. It’s a very long way around, and they’ll look at the top of the cliff before they look at the bottom, but someone will figure it out eventually. They’ll be here soon looking for your bodies.”

“What about you?” said Yoshi. I hadn’t thought about that detail. Of course. “What happens if somebody asks you what you know?”

“People don’t ask me,” he laughed darkly. “I don’t invite questioning.”

I could easily believe that. But then I was faced with the starkness of this truth. “What about Machina? Machina will get your truth.”

At that he reached into his cloak and held up a vial, and looked me directly in the eye again.

“This is serum,” he said. He didn’t have to tell me. My body still craved. “I’ve never taken it before. You’re going to hit me over the head, hard enough to knock me out. And then you’re going to pour it down my throat.”

“When I wake up I’m going to be out of it. Concussed and confused and under the influence. Nothing I say is going to make sense, but I will be able to tell anyone who *does* ask me that somebody knocked me down, forced me to drink serum, left me for dead. That’s all the sense that they’re going to get out of me.”

It was a risky plan. A horrible plan. And I was about to make it more so. With a shaking hand I drew out the serum from deep within my own cloak.



“It won’t be enough,” I said to him. “One dose. You will remember most things. You will not be able to protect yourself from Machina.”

It was a terrible plan. He knew it, and I knew it. Yoshi looked back and forth between us, no doubt puzzled by the details but feeling the weight of the moment.

“You’re right,” said Wollstone at last. “Do it.”

He was a general, decisive. He knew the risks.

“What if it’s too much?” I could hardly bring myself to say it.

He stared at me bleakly, and then out across the water, out across the rippling reflection of the stars. He spoke so quietly I could hardly hear him.

“If I died the way she did? Maybe that’s not so terrible a thing...”

My heart filled at that, with the pain of it all. I started to lean towards him and he thrust out his hand with the vial.

“Take it,” he said.

He pushed it into my hand, and then pointed out a small boat at the end of the jetty. “There’s supplies in there. Enough for a few days. Don’t stop, don’t linger. You’ve got a head start. Use it.”

I didn’t know what to say. He was helping us beyond anything that could be asked for.

“Wollstone...” I started, but he raised his hand to cut me off.

“Do it,” he said. “Now.”

All I could do then was nod. He turned his back to us, and sat watching the river.

My hands were shaking again. I held two vials. It would be so simple to just break the seal and throw the contents of one down my throat, swim the pain away.

There was obviously something wrong with me. Yoshi stood up then and pulled me to standing. He put his arms around me and held me tightly, his fiercely warm body easing my shakes, his courage spilling into me.

And then he released me, and stepped back. He picked up a large stone and walked up behind Wollstone, touched his shoulder very briefly in warning, and then slammed the rock into the back of Wollstone's head.

He went down without a sound, and I rushed to his side, Yoshi kneeling to check his breathing, and to check the back of his head. He was bleeding, but not profusely. He was out.

"I wasn't sure I could do that," said Yoshi shakily.

"We're one for one now," I said softly. I felt numb.

I was surrounded by such courage. It was time I found my own. I tipped Wollstone's head back and broke the seals on the two vials, carefully dropping the dark liquid beneath his tongue. He coughed a little, but the serum went down. I laid him back on his side.

I would have liked to wrap him in a blanket against the night's chill. I would have liked to thank him properly. We could do neither. The only thing to do was to use the start he had given us.

I nodded to Yoshi and we ran down to the boat at the end of the jetty. It was tiny – barely more than a canoe – and that was a relief. I'd had a small amount of experience with similar craft in the mountains, and from the way

Yoshi handled the oars it looked like he'd had about the same. It was going to have to do.

I untied the mooring rope and pushed off against the jetty with my oar. The current was strong and quickly took us in its hold. I glanced back for a moment to the shore, hoping for reassurance. I couldn't see the slumping bulk that was Wollstone. I could hardly see the jetty anymore.

I steered us out further and further into the river. It was so wide at this point that I couldn't see the other bank, but on our left was the looming bulk of The City, full of spying eyes and trouble and fear and darkness.

I fought the current, I pushed us further out, I urged Yoshi to paddle faster and harder, until finally he collapsed and lay back against the sacks of provisions between us. Only then did I allow myself to stop paddling and catch my breath.

I turned. The City loomed large still, but it shrank with every moment. In the predawn grey I could make out the towers, and the occasional flare of a fire.

But it was fading. All of it was fading away, dropping behind as we raced towards our new unknown, cloaks on our backs and paddles in hands and a few days' food in the bottom of our canoe.

The current sped us on.