

THE NOTION OF THE VANISHING OF REGRET

A Novel

by

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The Notion of the Vanishing of Regret

A Distinct Point of Jasmine

2036

New Kolkata, India

Oskar Tigunait sat on a high stool, mug of chai held by his unsteady right hand, and watched the rain soaked streets of New Kolkata through the windows of Café Ciel Bleu. His black, thinning wisps of hair were tousled by the breeze of air conditioning; goose bumps on his skin played deceitful counterpoint to the steaming rain beyond the glass. A damned early monsoon season; it hadn't relented for almost a week, now, and he had resigned himself. He had brought the rain inside with him, dripping from the sleeves of his jacket.

Oskar's other hand held a pencil over a forgotten notebook. Half-finished notes about Higgs Field Fluctuation and Variable Speed Neutrinos waited on the paper as Oskar's mind pondered the beauty of the nautilus shell his niece had sent him from her vacation in Cape Town. The shell rested on the counter next to his barely touched quiche. The way such shells twisted deep into themselves had always mesmerized Oskar to a state of trance, his full understanding of Fibonacci sequences doing nothing to dull the wonder.

Over visual chat earlier that morning, he had attempted to explain to his niece the way the twist of a shell or the spiral of a galaxy could be mathematically analyzed using the Golden Ratio.

"You're welcome, Uncle Oskar!"

The rather sharp twelve-year-old had rolled her eyes, chuckling at the impromptu tutelage session. Oskar had sighed, holding up the shell to the camera.

“Uh, right, thank you, Nina. Call me if you have any questions with your Calculus.” She had disappeared from the screen already, replaced by the apologetic shrug of Oscar’s younger sister, Sierra. “It’s a bloody good thing your spawn has half a brain, Sierra.”

“Scraggly hair. Genius in Maths. Social hermit. She has got all the same genes you got, you old bugger. Her dad hates it. Says it’s like he didn’t contribute at all!” Sierra had said, her British accent all the more pronounced than his own, as she had never moved away from South Hampton.

“Let’s hope she didn’t get all the same genes.” Oskar had held up his awkward right hand in front of the screen at his sister.

Sierra grimaced, but covered it with a sardonic cocked eyebrow. “She’s fine on that front. The one seizure’s all that’s happened, and that’s been years now.”

“Yes, well, that ruined gene of ours has a nasty way of expressing itself.” Oskar had reminded her. “Keep an eye out.”

“Um hm. Her chip will catch any irregularities. Don’t go fretting, Uncle Oskar. That’s her mum’s job.” Sierra at once had chided and reassured him. His sister had always been wiser than he, even at sixteen years his junior. She leaned forward and looked at Oskar’s neck and the necklace that he was wearing. “That looks familiar.”

Oskar scratched his chin and reached forward to end the conversation. “Right. Carry on, then.” Oskar had winked back and closed his screen.

Oskar decided to sketch the shell and see if he could capture it in all of its intricate detail, how each segment was double the dimensions of the segment that preceded it, forming the

classic spiral. He glanced at the tiny scar on his left forearm where his radio frequency chip had been for five years and wondered how his life might have been if he'd had one as a young boy, if it had alerted his parents in the middle of the night when he woke up scared and gasping and unable to move half of his body. The clunky lines and shading on his sketch of the shell displayed how truly right handed he was and that he would have been able to draw much better if his entire body worked.

As he came close to finishing his sketch, Oskar noticed someone waving at him from the other side of the window. There were two students from the university, neither of which he recognized, gesturing with enthusiasm from under their dripping umbrellas. He put his pencil down and waved back at them, offering a curt but pleasant smile and making sure to keep his right hand as unnoticeable as he could. The students grinned back then continued on their way down the street, nudging each other and chatting. For almost thirty years, he'd been well known the world over for his theories in Particle Physics, Astrophysics, and Theoretical Physics. But he had never acclimated to the random attention he was paid, so sporadic and undeserved as it seemed. It wasn't as if many people actually understood the work he did or the theories that he had posited or proved; the reality was that the world had simply wanted a second Hawking, a title he had been called far too fucking many times. There were plenty of people smarter than he, and even a few smarter than Stephen Hawking, roaming the planet. But none of those people added the romance of coupling intellect with disability. Oskar would have much preferred obscurity.

Oskar didn't hurry out of the café to get to work. He had long since been relieved of teaching actual classes. Instead, he oversaw a few post docs and developed experiments for the

Collider down in Australia, giving the occasional seminar on advanced topics. The office could wait for him to complete his sketch.

An hour later, Oskar walked into his office in the physics complex. He left the door half open, hoping one of his students might come in with a tough question to break the monotony of the morning's work. He hung his rain covered jacket onto a hook, and sat down in his chair. He hated the idea of crunching numbers that his post docs and colleagues didn't have the chops to crunch. Being the smartest guy in the room wasn't always a boon.

He snapped his fingers and the screen woke up. He gestured at the sensor, finding the file that he wanted, and brought up a diagram of the Massive Hadron Collider that resided in the Outback, buried deep into the ground. It used fifty times the piping and tunnels of the old Cern Collider and had already yielded two successful tests, one involving a rather wayward route to achieving dark matter detection. There was a pulse of guilt that Oskar felt as he thought of leaving India in a few weeks to return to working at the Collider without first visiting his parents in France. He decided to book a brief flight west to remedy the problem.

Oskar began to mess with some numbers on a neutrino test when he heard a firm knock.

Roshan Jankar appeared in the door and sat down in the chair on the opposite side of Oskar's desk. Oskar slid his screen to one side.

"Oskar! Hello, beautiful man. What's going?" Roshan, never fully free from his thick Hindi accent when he spoke English or French, smoothed his hands over his tech pants and grinned through a thick strand of mostly silver hair.

"More calculations, as always. How's the research?" Oskar asked, smiling at his friend's loudness.

“Good, good. Making progress as always.” Roshan said. “But it has been a ridiculous morning. Prime Minister Chadha phoned about some nonsense or other and he prattled on for over an hour. But, whatever. Damn, man, it’s good to see you! I’m happy you’re having wine with us, tonight. Finally; you never take a break from your work. Do you have anything to drink?” He immediately stood back up and walked over to Oskar’s small fridge, snatching a cola.

“Have a drink, you spry old bastard.” Oskar felt his high British slog over his clumsy tongue in comparison to Roshan’s fast talking.

“Cheerful as always, in the mornings.” Roshan took a swallow. He peered and gestured at the necklace around Oskar’s neck. “Is that?”

“Yes, it’s the one Teresa gave me.” Oskar said, more sharply than he had planned.

“Uh huh. I haven’t seen it in a while.” Roshan’s eyes narrowed.

“I’ve been told it looks flattering.” Oskar slipped the woven hemp under his shirt.

“Still looks good, I suppose.” Roshan drank his cola, but kept his eyes on the necklace for a moment. Then, with little warning, he turned on his heels and headed toward the door, motioning for Oskar to follow him. “Come on. We’ve got to run somewhere.”

Oskar frowned. “Roshan, you’ve been here less than a minute.”

Roshan nodded. “Mhmm. Yes. But I’ve got some things to show you. Bought one of them last week.”

Roshan immediately led the way out the door. Oskar struggled to shut down his screen, gather up his coat and umbrella and follow his manic friend, lurching and dragging his right leg behind him.

They crossed the campus and came to the library parking lot. In the front, with a small crowd of admirers, an unblemished custom hard top convertible waited, double parked.

“Whose ostentatious penis proxy is this?” Oskar asked, failing to hide his admiration.

Roshan approached the car and waved his forearm. The chip in his arm blinked faintly through the skin and the gull-wing doors rose open. He looked at Oskar and grinned. Oskar rolled his eyes.

“Really?”

“The new Tesla Motors prototype, Oskar. The Golden Eagle. A gift from Mr. Musk, if you can believe that.”

“Actually, I can’t.”

Roshan looked at one of the female students closest to him. “Gorgeous, huh?” The student blushed and nodded back, her friends giggling at her. Oskar wanted to nurture some disdain for the excessive automobile, but the car was too beautiful. “Ultra-light carbon fiber exterior in gunmetal grey, solar panel imbued one-way mirror windows, exposed hydrogen fuel powered engine pushing twelve hundred horsepower.” Roshan said. Oskar sat down in the passenger seat, marveling at the cockpit enough to forget his discomfort in front of the gawking students and faculty. Fortunately, Roshan and his family money and intellectual fame were enough to distract from Oskar’s own quiet celebrity.

Roshan slid in and started the car up. Without signaling, he whipped the automobile out of the parking lot and into the busy streets, revving the monstrous engine. The shouts of excitement from the small crowd were barely audible and Roshan saluted as he drove off. Oskar look over at Roshan, who was plotting a course back to his penthouse using real time satellite data on the mist hologram embedded in the dash. Roshan sipped his cola. “God, man. Governor Mittra dropped the ball on her promises of first world public transport Traffic is shit right now.”

“Traffic is always shit.” Oskar shrugged. “So, what’s with this harried jaunt to your place?”

“It is a surprise, my dear Oskar. Always so impatient. How did you ever finish multiple doctorates or satisfy a woman, always wanting to rush to the end of things?”

Oskar massaged his right hand. “People are always telling me I need to slow down.”

Roshan glanced over at him. “Speaking of women, did you ever call Prithee?”

Oskar frowned at him. “Prithee? Your pubescent intern I’ve never met or seen?”

“No. Prithee, my top of every class she ever attended, thirty year-old post-doctoral assistant. God, how perfect does a woman have to be for you to come down from your throne of genius?”

“Oh please. How imperfect does she have to be before you decide to spend a night alone?”

Roshan cackled. “Come. You know I have impeccable taste in women.”

“The secret to all of your happy relationships, I suppose.” Oskar muffled a chuckle.

“I forget how bloody mean you can be. A man tries to find you an attractive woman worth spending your time with, and—”

“You think I can keep up with a thirty year old? I live in reality. I’m not you.”

“No. You’re quite beyond me, my friend. Quite beyond me.” Roshan turned onto a major thoroughfare and swore. “It rains every year and still, nobody knows how to drive in this mess.”

Oskar rolled his eyes, let a few moments pass. “So. Your call this morning.”

“Ah, god, the Prime Minister! As if I could donate another pound or rupee to that blowhard for his so-called elections. He’s worse than the Governor.”

“Tell me. Did that fresh, blackberry-coloured lipstick find its way onto your collar before or after your very important call with the Prime Minister?”

Roshan stared for a moment, running a red light without the slightest hesitation. A grin appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“During.”

Oskar tossed around some calculations in his head as Roshan tore down the nearly empty street to his penthouse. The deep whine of the car softened at the garage door that began to open. Just before Roshan rolled the car inside, he glanced past Oskar to a woman on the sidewalk carrying a bag. The woman, an Untouchable, was dressed in sopping clothes. She slumped as she walked and left a thin veil draping loose over her eyes.

Roshan braked hard and dropped Oskar’s window. “Hey. Excuse me!”

Oskar sank into his seat, embarrassed. “Roshan, leave her alone. She’s probably having a crummy day as it is.”

Roshan glanced at Oskar. “Excuse me-- What sort of bastard do you think me, Oskar?— Yes. Ms. Sanjaya.”

The woman turned around and froze in fear. “S--sir?”

“Were you treated well last weekend?”

Oskar looked at Roshan, eyes furrowed. “What the hell are you doing, Roshan?”

“Shut it for one moment, Oskar, my god.— Were you treated well?” Ms. Sanjaya stammered for a moment, then nodded her head as the rain soaked her veil. Roshan frowned. “Ms. Sanjaya, did my guard pay you the fifty British pounds I told him to?”

She stared, unable to speak. Roshan growled. “Ah! He shorted you, didn’t he? Bastard. I thought he was acting particularly nasty on Sunday. Come here. Please, please.”

She hesitated, cautiously approached the car. Roshan reached into his glove compartment. “Let me guess. He gave you twenty pounds and threw you out on your ass.”

“Y--yes, sir. It was very good pay, sir.” Ms. Sanjaya’s accent was lost in her mumbling.

Roshan pulled out a wad of cash and counted it. “Bullshit. One of my guests decides to vomit all over the museum floor when my maid has the week off and my guard hauls you off the street to clean it up in a hurry so he doesn’t have to do it. That’s worth more to me than what you were paid. Here.” Roshan handed the money to her.

Ms. Sanjaya nodded her head over and over. “Thank you, Mr. Jankar. Thank you.”

“Please, it’s Roshan. And this is Oskar, a dear friend of mine. Have a pleasant morning.” Roshan pulled the car into the garage and the door closed behind, Ms. Sanjaya, still waving her thanks in the downpour.

Oskar was silent as the gull-wing doors rose. Roshan looked over at him.

“I’m sorry, Roshan.” Oskar said. “So many people treat lower castes like trash. I just forget that not everyone—”

“I’m not all Brahmin, Oskar. My grandfather was an Untouchable yet he managed to get my mother an education. He died the day she was married to my father. Never told you that, did I?”

“You’ve left some gaps.”

Oskar looked at Roshan, who grinned back at him and slid out of the car. “Don’t be so serious, Prof. Tigunait. I have something exciting to show you.”

“New illicit antiquities, I’m sure.”

Oskar pulled himself carefully from the bucket seats and slowly followed his intrepid friend to the elevator. “Indiana Jankar! I like the sound of that.” Roshan pressed the elevator button and leaned against the wall.

On the top floor of the building, Oskar walked out of the elevator and over to the windows. New Kolkata, curtained in rain and mist, spread as far as he could see and he thought of the city’s staggering smallness in comparison to the whole of India, to the Earth, to the Galaxy, to all of Nature. He recognized himself the most insignificant detail of the Universe, forgettable only if, by some miracle, he had been at all notable to begin with. So much filled his mind as he stood amongst the brand new luxury furnishings.

“So Oskar, first things, first.” Roshan walked over to a glass case raised up on a pedestal. The case contained a dirty wooden chest with the lid cracked and off-center. Oskar followed him, peering into the case.

“Where did this come from?”

“Winston, an old friend, runs an archeological dig off the east coast of Nova Scotia using a submersible. He found this a month ago, the day before I arrived to visit him. It just came in last week.”

Roshan beamed with love for his treasure. Oskar stared.

“What’s so fascinating? I mean, all it is— it’s a wooden box for god’s sake!” Oskar shook his head.

“The chest is Icelandic, from the 18th Century. Found all by its lonesome. Pretty common, honestly, if somewhat misplaced. There isn’t a thing about it that’s remarkable, other

than its fine condition despite being underwater for three hundred years.” Roshan said. He glanced at Oskar, a clever grin.

“It looks like you mailed yourself a waterlogged old chest, Roshan.” Oskar said.

“Ah, but inside.” Roshan stood Oskar up straight and placed his left arm next to the case. The small screen on the pedestal blinked, showing Oskar’s face and a green ‘Confirmed’ response. The case broke its seal and yawned open.

“When you close it back, the system will pump out all of the air and fill it with Argon to avoid Oxygenation.”

“Roshan. Why does my I.D. chip open up this case?”

“Because, I trust you with this. I want you to have access to it whenever you want. The whole place, in fact, is programmed to open up for you.” Roshan clapped Oskar on the shoulder. Oskar shook his head.

“How about that car down there?” Oskar cocked an eyebrow.

Roshan cleared his throat. “I don’t know if we’re that close, old friend.”

“Figured I’d give it a shot.”

Roshan lifted the lid and revealed the contents inside. A few grey dresses, smooth brown leather boots, scarves.

Oskar laughed out loud. “Women’s old, musty clothes. Wow. How much did Winston sell these to you for?”

“Philistine.” Roshan reached underneath the boots and produced a music box. “See this music box?”

“Does it work after all these years under water? That is kind of a keen find.” Oskar said. He reached for it.

Roshan pulled back. “No offense, but let me do it.”

Oskar nodded, squeezing his partially paralyzed right hand. Roshan wound the box and the music played back, perfectly. Oskar listened. It was pristine, to be sure. “That is in quite amazing condition...” He said.

“It all is. So much so that Winston wondered whether it’d been dropped into the water within the last couple of years. Some sort of elaborate fake. But he’s determined that it’s legit.”

“Kind of strange. And he let you take it?”

“I made it worth his while.” Roshan smiled.

“Sure you did.” Oskar touched the music box.

Roshan opened the music box up and lifted the mechanism. “This is the most interesting part, my old friend. This young lady hid something.”

Roshan took a sleek, greenish black stone from within the box. He dropped it into Oskar’s left hand. Oskar cradled it. “God, it’s slippery! And lighter than it looks.”

“Neat, huh? No idea what it is. How’s your mineral knowledge?”

Oskar looked at the stone and tapped it against a nearby table. The resulting sound was similar to a deep echo, though he could tell there was solidity to the stone from holding it. He cradled it in his palm again, matching its shape. “Huh. I know my minerals pretty well, but I have no idea. Let me know when you get it analyzed.” He offered it back to Roshan, but Roshan took it, dropped it into a small leather bag with a draw string, and gave it back to him.

“Find out for me, if you can?”

Oskar pocketed the stone. “The school’s spectrometer may help. I’ll see what I can figure.”

Roshan closed the chest and shut the glass case. “But that’s not the big stuff.”

“What, the Ark of the Covenant is next?” Oskar felt light, vital, almost excited beyond what he would usually have felt over Roshan’s acquisitions.

“Follow me, oh you of little faith.” Roshan led Oskar to a long desk made of a single slab of thick glass, green at the edges, propped atop two boulders. Oskar touched the desk.

“It’s pretty amazing, Roshan. They’ve balanced it perfectly.”

Roshan laughed. “Not the desk! I mean, it’s a bloody beautiful desk, but that’s nothing.” He directed Oskar to sit in the desk chair and moved his forearm over the glass. A display appeared and Roshan spoke clearly. “Display File: Final Telomere Solution.”

Oskar jolted, looked up at Roshan. “Really?” Roshan’s smile was subtle. He avoided looking at Oskar.

The computer system’s voice came on, feminine, firm, and German. “Chip and voice recognition confirmed. Palm print and eye scan confirmation required.”

“Of course, your computer has a sexy Kraut’s voice.”

Roshan bent over and placed his hand on the desk. A soft beam of light was emitted from the desk’s surface, scanning his eyes. “For your information, Oskar, Elisa came with the desk display. It’s a commanding military officer’s program. State of the art security.”

“Do you have bodyguards at your lab at the University, too?” Oskar laughed, but Roshan looked at him.

“We do, now. I ran into Marcus Ryson at the Children’s Hospital fundraiser the day before I left to meet Winston in Canada.”

“The drug fellow?” Oskar asked.

“President of Ryson Pharmaceutical. He said a few things that made me question his stability. Bastard is more interested in money than science.” Roshan looked down at the display as the computer opened a file.

“Scans complete. Welcome, Dr. Jankar. And welcome, Professor Tigunait.” Elisa said.

“She knows me, too?” Oskar asked.

“She does, indeed. Ah, here we are!” Roshan spread his hands to make the hovering display larger and scrolled through several pages to get to some videos. “This is the clearest one. It’s woven footage of Brigitta, one of our chimpanzees, who we treated with our hundred and twelfth iteration about a year and a half ago. We had her stand in front of the camera every day, look into it for a few moments, and then perform several physical activities. The last part of the video is one year ago.”

The video played and Oskar watched. Roshan pointed to Brigitta’s face and movements. “The growth on her skin is massive, almost the size of a second head. But do you see how her color is changing each day? And how she’s able to climb higher and reach further? It’s subtle at first, but these three weeks seem almost unreal. Her playing with a newspaper and showing the date was my idea. Trying to think ahead of the skeptics.”

Oskar was speechless. Brigitta, decrepit and barely able to move at all in the first part of the video, was jumping high and throwing balls and munching food with the vigor of a healthy adult. He knew enough about apes to know that Roshan hadn’t switched animals or played the tapes in reverse. The malignant growth had vanished from her body.

“You got Brigitta, how long ago?” He asked.

“We shipped her here from the Bogota Zoo about three years ago. We didn’t have her when she was as young as she appears to be at the end of this video. Amazing, isn’t it? The

cancer was literally eating her body away.” Roshan played another video showing the newly young Brigitta playing in a yard. The video was spliced with the cancer-ridden version of Brigitta laying around, barely walking to pick up food. “These two videos are less than four months apart.”

“Roshan. You’ve had these results for a year, now? Why the hell haven’t you published?” Oskar couldn’t free his eyes from the display.

“We had to wait. We’ve had similar results in the past, but whenever we’ve achieved total cancer eradication it has always been accompanied with rampant tumors appearing throughout the body after a few weeks. But this time...” Roshan looked at Oskar, then produced a third video. “This video was filmed early this morning.”

The video showed several slides of MRIs, bone scans, X-Rays, and the like, all of a healthy chimp with no sign of tumors. Then, there were slides of various physiological tests. Finally, there was a video of Brigitta dancing to Zydeco music with an attractive woman in a lab coat. Likely Prithee, Oskar figured. Oskar sat back in his chair. “You did it. You’ve conquered the emperor of maladies.”

“Mmm. Several researchers had this approach figured out with rats almost two decades ago, but making the switch to primates has been troublesome at best. So far, Brigitta is cancer free. Not just four weeks after reversion to a youthful state, but fifty-four weeks. The others are showing the same response.” Roshan looked down to Oskar. “We may have finally tricked the telomeres in such a way as to reverse the metastasis.” Oskar had never before heard Roshan sound weary as he did in that moment.

“They told you it was a dead end. Roshan. When you publish, they’ll give funding to people all over the world for this research. Didn’t you say; it’s only a short skip to figure this stuff out for humans?” Oskar was babbling.

“Human testing will be very easy, indeed, Oskar. Very easy.” Roshan said.

“Easy? Really? I thought there were serious concerns, just as with—”

But Roshan stopped him, hand on his shoulder. The elevator had opened without their noticing and a beautiful woman with a jet black pixie cut, jeans, and a snarky expression was watching them. Roshan chuckled a little.

“Let me guess, I’m late, aren’t I?” Roshan closed the file before walking over to the woman and kissing her hand.

“You’re always late. But I’m not up here for you; I’m just here for the view.” The woman’s thick Portuguese accent poured from her lips as she walked to the large windows and looked out over the city.

“Oskar. Allow me to introduce you. This is ‘Cinda Morito, a very dear friend. ‘Cinda, this is THE Professor Oskar Tigunait who I’ve told you about. My oldest friend.” Roshan spoke as he went to grab some ice water for the striking woman.

Oskar strode over to ‘Cinda, shaking her hand with a strength he hadn’t expected from himself.

“It’s lovely to meet you. ‘Cinda, short for Lucinda?”

“In deed.” She said.

“Your Brazilian accent is lovely.” Oskar felt more comfortable in his speech than he had for a long time. Maybe Roshan was right and he needed to spend some more time around available women.

‘Cinda nodded.

“You’ve a good ear. It’s nice to finally meet the legendary Oskar. Our wild Roshan’s best friend.” ‘Cinda grinned at him.

Roshan walked over, handing her a glass of ice water.

“When a model and fashion tycoon calls you wild, Oskar, you know you’re doing something right with your life.” He chuckled, kissing ‘Cinda’s neck.

“And on that note, I think I’ll be catching the trolley back to work.” Oskar began to shuffle toward the elevator. “‘Cinda, it was wonderful to meet you.”

‘Cinda nodded back. Roshan joined Oskar at the elevator. “No one outside the lab knows. We can’t risk anyone tampering with things until we’re certain.” Roshan whispered to him. “But I needed someone outside I could trust.”

“My lips are sealed. Thanks for showing me! All of it. Oh, and, isn’t she a tad bit young for you, old man?”

“Get out of here, you grouch.” Roshan chuckled at him and patted his shoulder as Oskar walked into the elevator.

“Grouch. Funny. It’s been ages since I’ve heard that one.” Oskar was going to say more, but he saw ‘Cinda peel off her t-shirt and bend over to the floor, taking her jeans with her, and his mouth stopped working. Roshan shrugged at him as the elevator door closed.

It was evening and the young upper crust of New Kolkata swirled around Oskar Tigunait in Donatello’s Wine Bar. Oskar ambled through the beautiful, Westernized crowd while dragging his right leg and stowing his right hand into his pocket with a practiced casual air. He had given up trying to shake the damp from his jacket.

“There’s Oskar. Oskar! Up here, man.” Roshan sat on a raised part of the floor up a few steps with a balcony view over the rest of the bar.

Oskar looked up and saw him seated with a few others. He grasped the rail and climbed the steps, his clumsy old sneakers dragging on the polished stone floor. At the table, Roshan stood to greet him, clapping him on the back as if they hadn’t seen each other that morning. Oskar never could decide whether Roshan might be coddling him or showing him off.

“Glad you came by! Please, sit, sit. Allow me to introduce you.” Roshan grabbed a pitcher of sangria and poured it for Oskar as Oskar sat down. “Oskar, these are two of our new assistants at the lab, Prithee Thakur and Radeep Jha. Radeep specializes with the chimpanzees and Prithee’s background is in Nuclear Oncology. And you know Anup Zacharias, of course.”

Oskar nodded at the two strangers. He pulled his inflexible right hand from its pocket and shook Anup’s hand. “Anup, yes. I remember.” His telltale slur seemed pronounced in the fancy atmosphere of attractive, young professionals.

“Good to see you again, Professor.” Anup said to him.

“Please, just Oskar. We’re out drinking, no?” Oskar smiled, sipped at his sangria.

Anup nodded. Roshan sat down, popped a deep-fried escargot into his mouth, and crossed one leg over the other. Oskar couldn’t help but notice the Italian leather shoes his friend wore. His own shoes felt too loose on his feet.

Prithee looked at him with an unabashed stare that caused him to shift in his seat. Her shoulder length haircut and designer glasses made her look like the actress who should be playing the version of her much less impressive, real self. “Professor Tigunait. I’m going to embarrass myself, but I have to tell you. Your first book on Astrophysics was the reason I chose science for my undergrad instead of business.” She said in her American accent.

“Oh, well, my apologies. I hope you didn’t suffer through the entire thing.” Oskar tried to grin ironically.

Prithee laughed too hard at the joke, star struck to Oskar’s chagrin. “No, no! I’m so happy with my choice. I mean, I went into medicine instead of physics, but being a scientist became a non-negotiable for me.”

“If I’d waited ten years on ‘The Path toward Forever’, Prithee, I would have saved myself a lot of apologies and corrections down the road. Still. Glad it inspired you.” Oskar looked over at Roshan, who was watching him.

Roshan drank deeply from his sangria and leaned back. “A travesty, Oskar. Writing that book at age thirty-four instead of twenty-four would have partially concealed the fact that you’re a genius. The world, myself accepted, of course, would have no idea of your brilliance and you would have had to shove open doors that have, instead, parted willingly for you like an eager lover.”

Anup and the other doctors laughed even as Oskar rolled his eyes. He thought of another person who had known him before his fame had surprised him and changed his life. It would have been nice if he could smell Teresa, right now, as when she had just come in sweating from a workout. The necklace against his chest no longer smelled anything like her, though it had taken almost a decade to lose her usual jasmine scent. The glass of sangria found its way to Oskar’s lips with fewer rests on the table. He tried not to look at Prithee, who refused to look elsewhere. Roshan winked at him.

But Radeep leaned forward, the only one at the table with a beer, munching on a scotch egg. “Profess— I mean, Oskar. Doc Jankar says you think the end of the universe is a good thing?”

Oskar sighed, relaxed into his chair. “That’s why you’ve invited me out here, is it Jankar? Showing off your little physics monkey to the new kids?” He held in an anticipatory smile, honest, at least with himself that he could never pass up a big debate.

Roshan shrugged, feigning innocence. “You are a super villain, after all, Oskar. Playing at the end of the world all the time, what with your massive colliders and your black hole machines and dark matter detectors and whatever the hell you sinister people do.” He polished off his drink and poured himself another.

“I don’t hope for the end of the universe. I simply think that it’s the way of things, is all.” Oskar addressed the other three; Roshan had heard it all before. “I suspect that it is the nature of Nature to end. Everything within it does, after all. Entropy. Time’s Arrow. This is the law of existence from which nothing escapes.” Oskar raised his hands, emphatic, British accent thickening. “Even stars end. But their destruction is what gave the materials to form our experience of life. We needn’t rush to maintain the universe as we know it; it’ll change into something else without our say so, anyhow. Maybe our destruction will yield something beautiful, even as the death of stars yielded us.”

Prithee beamed, but Radeep shook his head. “I don’t understand, Oskar. Wouldn’t it be worth it to figure out how to put things back together rather than watch them break apart? Isn’t that what Science is for, after all, making our lives here better. I would think you, of all people, would want the world to improve, rather than worsen. What with your handicap and all.”

Prithee’s mouth fell open at Radeep’s words. “God, Radeep! What on earth is wrong with you?” She offered Oskar an apologetic grimace.

Roshan raised a calming hand in her directions. “Relax, Prithee. Oskar’s no softy.”

Oskar chuckled, looking at no one as he massaged his right hand. “It’s a fair question. I would love to mend the results of my childhood illnesses. But that’s you people’s job, no? It’s not for physics to fix the rules of reality. It’s for physics to discover those rules. I’m more than content with that.”

Roshan straightened in his seat and poured Oskar another glass of sangria, to his friend’s unenthusiastic protest. “Oskar has held this pious, ‘man of the scientific cloth’ position for as long as I’ve known him. Laws of Thermodynamics and the like. ‘Entropy is like a casino’, he says. ‘The house always wins,’ He says.”

“I’m quite certain that entropy belongs with gravity, the speed of light, all of the universal constants that bind us to our state of existence. Even tapping the Higgs hasn’t changed that. Why not simply accept our lot and live to the fullest?” Oskar’s glass hit the table with much more force than he had planned. He decided to let his drink rest, then looked over at Prithee and picked up his glass, again.

Prithee ventured touching his forearm. “It’s a noble notion, living your life without regret or fear of the end.”

Oskar nodded, vindicated, but Roshan interjected. “I’m no silent slaughterhouse animal. I think it’s our calling to cheat death. To cheat time, even.”

Oskar raised his eyebrows. “Calling? Who is it that is calling us to this heroic task, Roshan?”

“Yes, yes, I know. Godless heathen.” Roshan laughed.

“Says the Buddhist of the Year!” Oskar roared.

Roshan laughed again. “You’re being a bastard in front of my colleagues, Oskar! God, this man never gives me a break.”

Oskar finished his second glass. “Perhaps it’s my calling to hold you to task, you oaf.”

The table laughed at the two friends. Anup finally spoke. “So Roshan, what do you hope for humanity?”

“Are you trying to get a raise, Anup, giving me the floor again? I’ll have you know, it’s working well for you.” Roshan said.

Anup shrugged. “Oskar’s vision just seems so sober, if a bit depressing.” He folded his hands in apology to Oskar, who waved it away.

Roshan cackled. “It is sober, unlike he is now. And a hell of a lot more depressing than you might realize at first. This is the man who says that intelligence might be a failed evolutionary experiment. That we may be thinking our way out of existence.” He kicked his feet up on an open chair.

Prithee tried to reassure Oskar with a smile that contradicted her words. “That is pretty hopeless sounding, I suppose, Oskar.”

Oskar sat up to be heard in the ever growing ambient volume of the wine bar. “Every invention we wrench from our new understandings of physics and engineering; they’re all met with questions from politicians and business men. ‘How do we weaponize it? How do we get ahead of Russia? Can we keep the Chinese and Americans from gaining the upper hand in the science race?’ It’s as if the search for knowledge wasn’t a universal human search, but a war between our mighty little anthills of civilisation.” Oskar forced himself to cross his right leg over his left. He placed his left hand over his right, covering its deformity.

Roshan watched Oskar over his drink. “When I look at humanity, I mean, when I look through all of the flaws and the cock-ups and the weaknesses, I see an intrepid species with a near endless imagination.” Roshan said. “I don’t think that it’s merely our job to escape the

inexorable pit of death and entropy and the like. I think it's our lot to guide the rest of life into that terrifying wilderness that is the Universe and cultivate it, tame it. Make it our permanent home for all eternity." Roshan seemed distant, despite his always booming voice.

Radeep laughed. "You do sound a little too, romantic, for lack of a better word, Doc J. But I still have to side with your view over the misery of inevitability. Sorry, Oskar."

Oskar raised his glass, his slur more pronounced than he could manage to control. "No apology necessary, Dr. Radeep, sir. To the contrary, I feel sorry for you, that your hope and the hope of Roshan the Dreamer will one day be dashed against the jagged boulders of entropy and reality."

"And may Professor Oskar Tigunait be dead wrong in his thoughts about our dear, brutal, beloved universe." Roshan said.

Oskar laughed heartily. "Hear, hear!"

They drank, but Oskar noticed Roshan glaring with a dark expression at another table on the far side of the wine bar. He glanced in that direction, but Roshan grabbed everyone's attention before Oskar could see much of anything. "Another round, I'd suggest!" Roshan caught their server when he passed by.

Later, Oskar regretted draining that third glass of sangria when he stood up to seek out the restroom. On his way, he nearly ran headlong into a dark-haired American man with a close fitting suit and a slender trophy girlfriend.

"Hey, Fred Astaire. Dance floor's the other way." The man said, snickering. His girlfriend rolled her eyes.

"Sorry. Sorry." Oskar said, as he made it to the restroom door. "There'll always be jerks, I suppose." He couldn't wait for his bed.

It was nearly two thirty in the morning when Oskar shrugged off his drenched jacket, pulled off his shoes, and fell into bed, exhausted. The taxi home had taken nearly an hour and a half and the wine was making his head and right leg throb already. He had finally chosen sleep and was just about to fall into it when his wireless rang.

Oskar growled, cursing himself for forgetting to shut it off. But when he looked at the display, Roshan's name appeared on the screen. He received the call.

"Roshan, is everything all right?"

"Oskar? Is that you?" An older, female voice shook on the other end of the phone. Oskar recognized his friend's mother, immediately.

"Mrs. Jankar? I'm surprised to hear your voice. Is everything all right?" Oskar frowned at the ensuing silence. But the half thwarted sob told him more than Roshan's mother could.

"Oskar. My son, he, he's in hospital. Could you please come by?" Mrs. Jankar's inhalations were shaky, uncontrolled.

Oskar was already standing, finding the clothes he had just thrown off of himself.

"I'll be there soon, mum. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Oskar's eyes were dry, his lips hung open. He did not speak, perhaps because his friend did not speak. Roshan's nose and mouth were covered by a large cup shaped device, feeding him oxygen and moisture. A blood feeder/oxygenator was connected to a port near his heart, keeping his body supplied with nutrition. One of his eyes was covered by bandaging, as was the majority of his shaved skull. The other eye had been gently closed by a nurse to keep it from drying out.

As motionless as he was silent, Roshan's presence still demanded attention in the center of his hospital room. Oskar leaned in the doorway, hapless in his regard for his friend, until Roshan's mother finally looked over at him.

"Oh, Oskar. How long have you been standing there?" She asked him. Mira Jankar, graceful and at home in her aging body, stood up from her seat by Roshan's bed and took Oskar's hands in hers. Roshan's father, K. Pratap Jankar, did not stand up, simply nodded to Oskar, and returned his gaze to the wireless tablet he held in his bony knuckled hands. He didn't seem to openly acknowledge Roshan's still form at all. There was a detective in a suit standing by the window, speaking into his wireless earpiece. Mira held Oskar's hand. "The doctor said he's in a coma. They don't know for how long."

Oskar walked with Mira the few steps to Roshan's bedside. He tried to relax his brow, hearing the echo of his friend's voice teasing the focus and concern he could never hide from his face. He looked down to Mira.

"Mrs. Jankar. What on earth happened?"

"He was attacked while he was waiting at a stoplight. Hit badly on the head."

"Hold a minute, Choudry." The detective put his call on hold. "You're Dr. Oskar Tigunait?" His voice was scratchy and unusually high for a man. He was, maybe, a couple years older than Oskar, but looked every minute of it.

"Uh, Professor. Yes. I'm a friend."

"As Mrs. Jankar said. I'm Detective Momar Seth. Your arm chip says you were with Dr. Jankar yesterday in the late morning for a short time. You spent the rest of the day at the University where you work. And then you went out with him and his colleagues to a wine bar?"

The Detective Seth was looking at a small wireless pad as he spoke, glancing up to check Oskar's eyes as he responded.

"Yes, I hired a taxi home and arrived, uh, about an hour and a half ago. Then I went to bed. For a minute, anyway." Oskar shifted, failing to find a comfortable stance.

"Did you see anything suspicious during your time with Dr. Jankar, today, Professor Tigunait?" Detective Seth looked tired.

Oskar tried to deepen his shallow breaths. "Nothing suspicious that I remember. It wasn't a random mugging?"

Detective Seth shook his head. "His attackers tried hacking into some very specific things. Enough to suspect that he was deliberately targeted."

Mira held Oskar's arm and patted it, absent mindedly. "Who would do anything like this?"

Oskar shook his head. "Roshan hasn't been shrewd in avoiding enemies. If someone attacked him, they might have done it to get his research to someone who was paying for it."

Detective Seth nodded. "We've got a list of some of Dr. Jankar's regular antagonists from his coworkers. Insurance Companies, rival researchers. There were some mercenaries who were caught hacking into his personal information a few years back. Nothing is showing up, so far."

Oskar cleared his throat. "Sir. What exactly happened? If we're allowed to know, I mean.

Detective Seth sighed, glancing at Roshan's sleeping form. "The attackers must have surrounded Dr. Jankar's car with untraceable vehicles. They likely demanded a pass code or direct access and he refused, so they hit him in the back of the skull with a blunt object."

Mira put her hand to her mouth.

He continued. “Dr. Jankar’s chip was used in a failed attempt to access the computer display in his car and a personal safe under the seat after he was rendered unconscious. We know someone was looking for particular information by the files they tried to open.”

Mira Jankar tugged at Oskar’s sleeve as she looked at the detective. “How would the chip work if Oskar was unconscious?”

“The chip would have deactivated itself if his heart and brain had stopped, Mira, but it wouldn’t necessarily be programmed to know if its user is conscious or not.” Oskar said. “Since they had to rob his personal files, his heart and brain had to be alive and functioning.”

“Dr. Nair told me that his survival is impressive.” Detective Seth started to walk out of Roshan’s room, addressing his call again. “Hey, Choudry. Start over from the top.” The detective left.

Oskar turned to see Mira’s cheeks wetted over her son. He touched her arm and she patted his hand for a moment before walking out the door. “I, I need to freshen up my face—”

Once she left, there was quiet for a long time, which was okay for Oskar as he wasn’t sure what to say to the aging father who was so close to losing his only son. Oskar leaned against the window sill. He didn’t look at Roshan. It made him even more uncomfortable than the thought of speaking in front of his silent face. He realized how few friends he had in the world, how desperately few good friends.

But he chanced a glance up at Roshan’s face and felt his lip curl into a slight snarl. Roshan was a fool, had been a fool for the entirety of his fifty-four years. In reality, Oskar was angry at being deprived of the one person who had befriended him before knowing of his intelligence, the only aspect of himself Oskar considered distinguishing. Or, at the very least, distinguishing in a positive way. He massaged his right arm.

Oskar wanted to know why Roshan had always flirted with dangerous people. Why he had laughed at threats and jumped at the chance to make enemies with the cruel and unscrupulous. He had a boredom that would overtake him if he weren't constantly in motion, but surely, by now, he would have grown past this incessant need for impact. Foolish man. Oskar feared his own coming solitude, knowing he rarely socialized unless invited out by Roshan. He was about to take his leave, not sure of his use to Roshan's parents.

"Oskar. Have you found yourself a woman to pleasure you, yet?" One of K. Pratap Jankar's softball questions. Oskar grinned a little. "If you don't use it, it falls off. Didn't you know?"

Oskar almost laughed out loud, despite himself. K. Pratap never looked at Oskar or Roshan as he spoke, but continued to read numbers, reports, and articles on his tablet. Oskar shouldn't have been amazed that Roshan's father would broach such a subject, even considering the present circumstances. The old tycoon held little sacred. "Oskar. I know you like to hide behind your crippled arm and leg and your slur and the like. But I also remember the look on your pretty fiancé's face all those years ago."

"God, K. ..." Teresa's face immediately flashed into Oskar's mind.

"I never saw a more satisfied look on a woman my whole life. Well, except on my dear Mira, of course. So I know that you know what you're doing in the old sack. It's a shame about her. What was her name, again?"

"Teresa." Oskar spoke soft, trying not to remember.

"Yes, that's right. Such a big, beautiful black girl."

Oskar looked over at K. Pratap. "K., it's been twenty years since. I'm older than you were when you met me."

“And you’re walking stronger than ever; don’t think I haven’t noticed. Look at our boy, Oskar. You don’t know how long you’ll be vital. Quit wasting your time.” K. Pratap Jankar stopped speaking, scrolling through an article on stocks or futures or some other topic, Oskar couldn’t quite see. He looked over at Roshan.

Oskar stepped out of the room for a moment as Mira was returning. He called his parents in Nice, and told them about Roshan’s condition. As they spoke, he strained to detail every component of their words and voices in his memory, certain not to forget any part of their personalities or facial features after they had closed the conversation. When he hung up, he bought jet tickets to visit them before his next season at the Collider.

Oskar fell into bed after shutting his window shades against the rising sun. He noticed the leather pouch that held Roshan’s sleek, Icelandic stone on his desk where he had left it earlier in the evening and wondered if he should leave it with Roshan’s parents. But he remembered the mass spectrometer in the Chemistry Department and told himself he’d analyze it when he had the chance. It was too much to think about right now. Oskar worried he wouldn’t rest at all, with the hour so late in the morning, but sleep took over before he could fill his mind with anxious thoughts.

The air pushes hard past, as in unending exhale. A weighted billow of clouds floats over arctic blue sea that washes cakes of slush from the black sand beach below. Oskar stands in snow that hides a grassy hill overlooking the whole of the landscape; there is a collection of small huddled houses and boats tethered to a dock not too far behind him. His back is sore and his feet exhausted. He feels heavy and full, as if he is about to burst from the inside, and he

almost gasps with every breath. Along the white-on-black beach, a slight, silent blonde girl walks slow, side-by-side, with a tired, hunching older woman whose fine hair whips in the wind over a worn and sunken cheek. The silent girl stops the hunching woman, her mother, and they stare at the sea for a long time, heavy heads resting against each other. The girl plays with her hair for a moment, then massages her mother's back with her hand. She whispers into the older woman's ear. After a time, they turn to walk back toward the small houses. The silent girl puts something back into her hood that Oskar hadn't seen before. She looks up at him, recognizing him, her lips in a slight part and eyes shining with study and suspicion. The air pushes again with a dense chill. The mother takes off her bright green scarf as they walk, placing it around the girl's neck to warm her better. The girl and her mother disappear down the beach, arm in arm.

When Oskar glanced around his bedroom, he marveled at the cold being spit out of his central air. He leapt as best as he could and ran to shut off the thermostat, undaunted by the promise of being awakened in his sweat soaked bed a few hours later from the New Kolkata heat outside. He couldn't remember whether he had dreamt for long, or about what he had dreamt, but he knew he would rather be asleep than awake. When he looked at the clock which read close to noon, he remembered his trip to the hospital early that morning, and covered his face in his pillow, angered at the power his emotions had to drive him so close to tears.

As Oskar walked through the lobby of the University hospital over a week later, he worried that Roshan might never wake. Oskar had managed to visit him almost every day and always found K. Pratap and Mira there, waiting and otherwise conducting their business in the presence of their unmoving son. Mira usually displayed a fearful hope, but K. Pratap held his

stoicism firmly, revealing neither optimism nor sorrow. Oskar knew that the longer Roshan was lost to his coma, the less likely it was for him to escape it. Oskar wondered when he should stop visiting so often, or whether he should just continue ad infinitum until he had to return to Australia.

“Professor Tigunait?!” The greeting from Prithee Thakur pulled Oskar from his musing. He tried not to act startled and was certain that he failed.

“Ah, Prithee. Hello.” Oskar stood off balance, annoyed that he had somehow neglected to put his right hand in his pocket before leaving Roshan’s hospital room.

“I’m so worried over Dr. Jankar. Were you visiting?”

“I was.”

“God, things are crazy, now. Anup upped security at the lab. I’ve an escort back to my apartment after my shifts. I’m a little scared.”

“I’m sure the police will figure things out, quickly.” Oskar shifted, sneaking his hand inside his pocket.

“Yes, though Roshan had already decided on armed guards at the lab until human testing is over, so I’ll have to get used to that part for a few years.” Prithee shrugged, watching Oskar.

“Human testing?”

“Ah, uh well, we’re quite close to it.” Prithee looked around, as if an eavesdropper might be close.

“Of course.” Oskar said. “I had thought maybe you started already. But that would be mad without government permission.”

Prithee produced her wireless from her shoulder bag and gestured at Oskar to grab his. “In case we need to contact each other about Roshan or anything else.”

“Yes.” Oskar held his wireless out and she waved hers over it. A novel, automatically composed tune played to signal a sync of their contact information, Oskar’s wireless emitting the melody and Prithee’s emitting the harmony. “Anything I can do to help.”

“Thank you, Oskar. I’ll be in touch.” Prithee said. “I guess you were right about things always falling apart.”

“Let’s hope otherwise.” Oskar tried to smile at her and figured himself for successful.

Prithee nodded to him and walked away toward the elevators. He saw her reach into her jacket pocket for a prescription bottle, opening it to take a couple of pills. She certainly didn’t seem like there was anything wrong with her; damn Roshan for planting a seed of romance in his mind. Oskar tried not to notice Prithee’s figure as she left.

Oskar studied at the spectra visualized on his hand screen, annoyed at what he was seeing. The results of the spectrometer scan on the curious stone that Roshan had given him were awkwardly inverted, with numbers somehow negative that couldn’t be negative and the machine reading the ions of the holding compartment. It seemed as though the machine was functioning perfectly as he ran a test scan before placing the stone inside. But as soon as he ran the test, the results came out skewed and impossible to determine, as if there was some sort of scrambling. At least it didn’t take forever like the old days, and the electron multiplier was conveniently attached to do a much better job of reading the ions, but none of this was helping much.

Oskar wondered what might be interfering with the machine, when an idea sent him reeling. “Oh, shit.” In a flash of horror, Oskar stumbled out of the room, locked the door, and half ran down the hallway to a supply closet. He found a Geiger Counter inside and took it back to the room that housed the spectrometer and several other scanning devices. Oskar opened the

compartment, switched the Geiger Counter on, and held it up to the stone. The counter seemed to read almost nothing and Oskar breathed a sigh of relief. “That would have been a bloody good mess of Roshan’s.”

Oskar put the counter back in the supply closet and pondered the stone as it sat in the spectrometer. At least it wasn’t slowly killing him with radioactive particles. He decided to try again on another day. He had calculations to finish for Drs. Hakon and Lu. They had run into confusion down at the Collider’s main readout and Oskar had decided that it would be a fun task to throw at his students. Unfortunately, no one had determined a proper solution to what had happened with the numbers and the issue was sent to him to figure out, though Oskar was becoming concerned that a few in his field would simply ferry any difficult dilemmas toward him before they had exhausted their own mental faculties. Genius janitor didn’t sit so well with him.

Oskar put the stone back into the little leather bag and put it in his right pocket before locking up after himself. The mystery would have to wait for another day.

In the late afternoon, Oskar slowly stepped off the tram into the middle of a bustling downtown market. The rain had let up for a few hours and it was pleasant to be outside without hurrying under an umbrella. He hadn’t cooked much in the past few weeks and felt sloppy and heavy because of it. Cooking was something he’d done with Teresa almost every week for seven years, all those years ago. And since K. Pratap had mentioned her, Oskar couldn’t manage to go more than a day without thinking about her, though he admitted that, perhaps, this was already the case. He fingered the hemp necklace as he began to walk amongst the stalls of fine-spun cloth and fresh produce and live animals, pressed from all around by people.

The smell of basil and cumin, black pepper and anise, hit him first and he remembered running fast through the New Delhi market with a small cricket bat in hand, his mother chasing after him trying not to laugh. He felt the hard dirt hit the soles of both feet equally as he sprinted past cows and lorries and squawking women winding rainbows of silk cloth. The desire to be an all-star cricket bowler pumped through every vein of his five year old form, a full year before the seizures and a massive midnight stroke hurled him full force into lifelong academia. Oskar didn't quite understand enough, at his young age, to regret the total course change of his life. As a boy, he had merely wanted to be well enough to play cricket and football the next day. As months and months went by and he realized that he was too slow and too uncoordinated to keep up with his friends, he stopped going outside all together. If his parents hadn't shown him Carl Sagan's science show, *Cosmos*, he wondered if he would have done much of anything. But a telescope followed the show and a computer followed the telescope and Oskar dumped every ounce of his love for sport into the stars and into maths and into the vast empty spaces between matter. It was rare that he indulged his regret or remorse over sport, but he was often reminded of his loss. He had quit watching his favorite teams on the telly long ago.

As Oskar weaved through the press of shouting shoppers, bartering for some of his spices and vegetables, his slur diminished considerably. He wasn't so struck by this since he had always been comfortable in markets due to spending so much time in them as a boy. But he should have noticed the newfound comfort with which he walked, the ease of the usually constant ache in his right leg. Oskar surveyed the booths for a decent chicken that had already been plucked, found a rooster, instead, from a cheerful old man, and walked back toward the tram stop.

Oskar bumped into a pale haired European man in jeans and a black t-shirt, bowed a little in apology, and made his way up onto the next tram. There was the scent of jasmine that

followed him on the tram ride through town, driving his thoughts back toward Teresa. He wondered if he had any scented tea at home to accompany his meal.

In his neighborhood, the pedestrian paths were less crowded as more people drove cars and took electric trains instead of the quaint little tram he preferred. He stepped off of the tram and walked down the street toward his condominium.

“Oskar.”

An accented voice he didn’t recognize stopped him and he turned. A woman in her late thirties, worn and heavily freckled, watched at him from behind a pair of sunglasses that were too expensive for the rest of her motley patched outfit and marred red leather shoes.

“Uh, yes, Miss?” Oskar knew several of his neighbors, but couldn’t remember having met this woman. She was immediately strange, if unthreatening.

“Would you join me for a chai?” The woman stood as if at the ready, eyes narrow and always shifting. She wouldn’t look straight at him

Oskar looked around, wondering what she was looking for. “I’m sorry, I don’t recall us being introduced—”

The woman lunged forward, grabbed his right wrist with quite a lot of force, and began hauling him out toward the main thoroughfare. Oskar tried to pull back. “Excuse me, Miss! What are you doing?”

They reached the street and the woman turned around and put a rough fingertip against Oskar’s lips. “Please, Oskar. Have a chai with me.”

He grimaced, exasperated. She peeked over his shoulder, then dragged him further down the street. He thought he noticed someone he had seen in the downtown market, but he wasn’t sure, they were moving so fast, weaving amongst the shoppers and school children. The woman

ignored his hard stumble over a raised cobblestone and darted with him down an alley, ducking into a tiny tea house. She made sure he sat with his back to the door and when he turned to look behind himself, she grabbed his chin and redirected his face. He let his grocery bag slump by his chair onto the unpolished granite floor. Oskar was so thrown off by the entire circumstance, the scent of jasmine had grown, but he pushed this thought aside.

He sputtered a little. “I’ll expect an explanation—”

“What will you all have today?” The shop owner, thick Pashtun accent coating each Hindi syllable, stood over them in the small, yellow-walled shop.

The woman answered back in Hindi in her deep, gruff voice. “Hey. We’ll each have the house chai, today; he’ll take milk and sugar. Just milk for me, today.” The woman didn’t seem capable of sitting still, but almost bounced in her chair. She reached back for the shop owner.

“And hey, do you think you could close that door a little. It’s a bit dusty out, today.”

“Uh, sure, I suppose. I was just trying to keep the air moving.”

“Sure, sure, yeah. But it’s not so hot out now, anymore, today.” The sheen of sweat on the woman’s face would have made Oskar chuckle on another occasion. The shop owner closed the door to the shop, checked to see that the sign reading ‘open’ still faced outward, and went behind the counter to prepare their drinks.

Oskar leaned forward, his left arm pressed against the wallet in his vest pocket. “What on earth do you want with me? ‘Today’?”

The woman ignored his mockery. She looked over every part of him, save his eyes, for almost a minute before she took off her expensive sunglasses. She took a deep breath and spoke in English. “We met a few days back, Oskar.”

“No we did not. I would have remembered your face.” Oskar said.

“I didn’t quite let you see my face. I’m uncomfortable with strangers.” Her accent, he finally figured, belied Pashto as her first language.

“How did we meet and I never saw your face?”

“You were in Dr. Jankar’s very fancy car outside of his penthouse.” She said, eyes going glassy for a moment, tongue pushing at the corner of her open lips.

Oskar shook his head. “Wait. You’re the housekeeper? Ms. Sanjaya?”

“You remembered my name.” She said. “And no, I’m no housekeeper. But someone offers you fifty pounds to clean up what your family used to smell like every morning they came home from work? Huh. Don’t argue.”

“I see.”

“You don’t.”

Oskar couldn’t hide his flinch. “I suppose not.”

“No. But you’ve got your own cross to bear, as they say, yeah?” She looked up and down his right arm, making his face flush.

“Look, Ms. Sanjaya—”

“Call me Nareen. Don’t like the surname. It’s my stepdad’s, anyway. My real dad died when they were raising Burj Khalifa in Dubai, anyway. Mom was glad to see him go, though.”

“Sure. Uh, Nareen. Why do you think it was appropriate for you to drag me into this place?” Oskar shut his mouth as the shop owner brought their chai. He nodded in thanks and watched as Nareen sipped from her wide brimmed mug. She didn’t respond, but looked out the window. Oskar tried his chai, which was decent, but a little heavy on garam masala for his liking. He looked at Nareen again. “Uh, Ms., er, Nareen?” He started to turn, again, to follow her gaze. There was a blond man who walked past the window in jeans and a black t-shirt.

Nareen leaned forward and caught his chin again. This time, she turned it slowly back and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. She sipped her chai a little more and continued to watch the sole window of the tea shop. Oskar froze, starting to comprehend for the first time. Finally, Nareen put her drink on the tiny table between them.

“Is someone out there?” Oskar asked.

Nareen nodded. “It’s one of the same guys that was following Dr. Jankar’s car the day we met.”

“There were people behind us?” Oskar tried to think back to the day.

“Not behind you, precisely. But I could see they were tailing you. I thought they might be personal bodyguards, but they didn’t act like his other men act. I noticed that guy outside the other day when I was out. Thought maybe I could lift something off him, since he’s a foreigner.”

“Excuse me. Lift something?” Oskar asked.

“Wallet. Watch. Passport.” Nareen said.

“Oh.”

“But then I ran into him today at the market and he recognized me.” Nareen sat back in her seat. “Not my first mistake.”

Oskar’s chair grew unyielding and hard beneath him. He squirmed a little. “May I please look, now?”

Nareen shrugged. “You won’t see anything.”

Oskar looked behind him, quickly turned back around. “You’re using me.”

“A couple on a chai date are not so much noticeable, right?” Nareen stole Oskar’s chai, sipped from it, recoiling. “You British like your sugar.”

“You ordered it for me.” Oskar thought back to his ride in Roshan’s car. Poor Ms. Sanjaya had been a meek, terrified old homeless woman who jumped at her name being called. This Nareen Sanjaya was a bold, sly, common criminal using him as a shield against some hired thug. A thug who may have had to do with Roshan’s attack.

“You put on a nice act the other day, Nareen.” He said.

“What?”

“At Roshan’s garage. You behaved quite meekly. As though you were terrified of his every word.”

“Of course I was scared. A rich man takes a street woman into his house to clean? I thought he’d accuse me of stealing.” Nareen said.

“Did you steal anything?” Oskar asked.

The offended look on her face made him regret his question in an instant. Nareen pulled a man’s wallet out of her back pocket and tossed it to Oskar. He barely caught it with his left hand and opened it, revealing a massive wad of cash and no I.D. or transportation passes. Oskar returned the wallet. Nareen studied the wallet and its contents for a moment. “Belonging to the man following me. Not an honest man’s wallet, huh? Only criminals and poor people carry cash.” She put the wallet away. “Dr. Jankar’s a nice person, Oskar. I don’t steal from nice people.”

“Sure you don’t.” Oskar said. He was dubious of her Robin Hood claims, but he felt the guilt of his British privilege supersede his indignation. He considered whether he could trust her enough to warn her against the man she’d stolen from. “I don’t suppose you know, Nareen, that Roshan is in hospital in a coma.”

Nareen took another sip from Oskar's chai. "No, I didn't. I wondered why I hadn't seen him driving any of his cars around in the last week or so. Thought maybe he was out of town. Sorry to hear."

"He was attacked driving home from a social gathering and his personal files were hacked into."

"You think it may have been the man following me?" Nareen asked.

"The man you stole from, yes." Oskar didn't feel as satisfied as he had hoped by naming her crime outright, largely because she didn't appear to feel any guilt over it whatsoever. "He might be more dangerous than you realize."

Nareen looked out the window, shrugged again. "Then we should go, probably. He just passed by again." Nareen stood up.

Oskar glanced at the counter. The shop owner didn't seem to have heard anything they were saying. "What if the man outside asks him about us?"

"Don't worry. He barely speaks Hindi. He probably doesn't speak any English at all." Nareen purred. "He won't know what we talked about." She threw a couple of bills on the table and stood up.

"Please, I can get this." Oskar reached for his wallet. She shooed him away from his pocket.

"Don't worry. This one's on our friend outside."

Oskar stood as Nareen turned and leaned against the counter and spoke in Pashto. Oskar barely comprehended.

"Hey, sir?"

“Yes? Would you like anything else, this afternoon?” The shop owner sat on a stool, polished mugs as he spoke.

“Uh, no. But we were wondering something. There’s some guys out in the alley and I think they’re trying to arrest me for deportation.” Nareen chewed on the earpiece of her expensive sunglasses.

“Deportation. Back to Afghanistan?” The shop owner frowned.

“No. You see, my papers say Pakistan, even though I’ve lived here almost all of my life.” Nareen said.

The shop owner jumped up in horror. “What? They can’t send you back to Pakistan! You’ll get radiation from the war!”

“I haven’t done anything wrong, sir. Truly, I promise you. Is there a back way out of here?” Nareen asked.

“Yes, yes. This way. Please, young lady!” The shop owner opened the supply room just behind him. “Please come. Hurry!” He ushered them through the door.

They tripped past a crate, stacks of tea boxes, pu-erh cakes, an espresso machine starting to rust over. Out the back door, they found themselves in an alleyway crammed with trash bins and bags of rubbish. Oskar cringed at the stench.

Nareen turned to bow to the shop owner. “Thank you so much. We won’t forget your kindness.”

The shop owner glanced at Oskar’s relatively nice clothes. “Is he your fiancé?” He asked.

“My lawyer.” Nareen took Oskar’s hand. They both bowed to the shop owner, again, and began to navigate the alley.

After they'd moved out of earshot of the shop owner, Oskar glanced at Nareen. "My Pashto has been rusty for a few decades. Are we married, now?"

Nareen grinned a little. "You're my legal counsel. He had an Indian flag and an Afghani flag on the counter, so I guessed he wasn't antagonistic toward Indians. But I didn't want to risk more than that"

Oskar wanted to laugh, but was too winded. Nareen led him for a few blocks in silence.

Once they reached a larger street, Oskar hailed a cab.

"If this guy was following Roshan last week, I'm going to the police, immediately."

Oskar told her.

"I don't deal with police." Nareen said, shaking her head.

"What?"

"No police."

"But you don't have to tell them who you are if you don't want to." Oskar said, opening the door of the cab for her.

Nareen stood back, again. "The cameras read your face when you enter the premises. And they always scan your arm chip. They'll know me whether I want them to or not." She looked around.

Oskar shrugged. "At least ride with me past the station. Then the driver can take you wherever you want."

Nareen hobbled back and forth for a moment. "Okay, yeah, sure." She slid into the back seat of the cab. Oskar carefully sat down, reaching across his body to shut the door with his left hand.

"Where to?" The cab driver tapped the old touch screen meter.

“Eleventh district police station. I believe it’s at West 32nd and—”

“I know where it is, friend. Are you sure you want to go there? They’re the mean ones.”

The cab driver pulled away from the curb, made a u-turn, and headed toward downtown.

Oskar saw a blond European man in jeans and a black t-shirt with no eyebrows that might have been the man he bumped in the marketplace. The man was looking the other direction, then turned to see Oskar through the cab window. The man blew a bubble with his gum as the cab was driving away.

Oskar sat back, feeling more at ease. “I’m quite sure, thank you.” The driver shrugged and closed the separation window, turning up his music.

Oskar looked at Nareen Sanjaya who hadn’t buckled her seat belt and was watching out the window, breathing quick and shallow. Oskar wondered where she lived, if she had a home. She seemed to be quite smart, but clearly had spent more time on the streets than in class rooms during her youth. She turned to see him studying her and crossed her arms, returning her gaze to the passing streets. “I hope you haven’t caused any more trouble for Roshan. Or for myself, for that matter.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Oskar. I’m good at cleaning up messes.” Nareen said, still watching outside.

Oskar left her alone. He sighed as he watched the streets move past him, the whirl of the engine lulling him as the uneven ride jolted his back and buttocks. He was exhausted from the tension of the ordeal and wished he could simply rest at home with a glass of wine. But Oskar’s wireless played Prithee’s tune that pulled him from his moment of rest.

Prithee’s face appeared on the screen. “Oskar. How are you? Are you still on campus? I’m about to go find dinner—”

“Prithee. There was a man following Roshan and I last week, the day he was attacked.”

Oskar said. “I may have just run into him, again.”

“What!” Prithee’s mouth opened.

“Three men.” Nareen didn’t turn from the window.

“Three men? I saw one.” Oskar looked over at her.

“Yes. But there were three today and there were three, a week ago.”

“Who are you talking to, Oskar?” Prithee asked. Oskar could see from behind her face that she was moving quickly through the lab. “Anup! We need to get security up here right away!”

“A friend.” Oskar said to her. He glanced again at Nareen, who hadn’t moved. “I’m headed to the police station right now.”

“Good. Text me when you get there.” Prithee said.

“I will. Be careful. If they’re bothering to follow me around...”

“Exactly. Don’t worry over us. I’ll talk to you soon.” Prithee disappeared from the screen and the wireless screen went black.

Oskar sighed.

“She’s kind of pretty.” Nareen said. “Young for you, but pretty.”

“Right.” Oskar tried to sit up, straight. “She’s one of Roshan’s assistants. They’ve had to add security at his labs.”

“Labs? His guards said he was a doctor.” Nareen glanced back at Oskar.

“Research medicine. One of the brightest in the world, actually.” Oskar said. Nareen nodded.

Oskar dialed Detective Seth. An automated message came up with the Detective's face, likely from his desk.

"This is Detective Seth. Leave me a detailed message and your contact info if I don't have it. I'll respond promptly."

"Detective Seth. This is Oskar Tigunait. I'm on my way to your offices right now. I believe I'm being followed by men having to do with Roshan Jankar's attack." Oskar closed the screen and sat back. He looked at Nareen. "You sure you won't come in with me?"

Nareen was silent. Oskar let it drop and waited for the rest of the ride to be over.

When the cab pulled up to the police station Oskar got out, making sure to grab his groceries in the seat, and went to pay the driver.

Nareen leaned out the window and snapped at him. "It's on our friend, remember?"

"Of course." Oskar turned to go, but stopped. "Thanks for telling me about the men following Roshan, Nareen."

"Thanks for being a good decoy." Nareen disappeared back inside the back seat and the cab pulled away.

"Sure." Oskar frowned and watched her ride off. He looked around for a moment before walking up the steps to the station.

Just as he was about to open the front door, Detective Seth burst out of it, hollering into his wireless. He stormed right past Oskar, followed by two other detectives.

"Make sure no one questions anyone until we get there. No. No one talks to them. And give the State Police the jerk around for a few minutes if you can. They'll just fuck it all up, otherwise." Seth said

"Detective Seth?" Oskar said.

Seth didn't hear him, but one of the other detectives tapped him on his shoulder, pointing up to Oskar. The other detective was a little bigger than Seth, greying, with an old school feel about him that suggested that his toughness trumped his age.

"What is it, Choudry? Dr. Tigunait?" Detective Seth held up a hand and looked at his screen. "One moment, Sergeant."

"I am so sorry to bother you, Detective." Oskar started.

"Dr., One of my other cases is blowing up at the moment. I really can't talk." He continued his descent of the stairs. "Sergeant, how close are you to the first crime scene?"

"Someone was following Roshan the day he was attacked, Detective." Oskar more shouted than said.

Detective Seth stopped. "Sergeant, I'll call you right back. Message me any updates." He closed the screen and turned back up the stairs to Oskar. "Someone was following him, Dr?"

"Yes, and I saw one of the men in the market, downtown, near my neighborhood. Not fifteen minutes ago."

"You're sure about this?" Detective Seth was massaging his temple. Detective Choudry and the other detective sent messages in their phones.

"I barely saw him, but it was on a few separate occasions—" Oskar was starting to slur more heavily and his right arm felt constricted.

"Barely saw him?"

"Yes, but a friend of mine noticed him." Oskar felt like he couldn't get the words out fast enough.

"You were with someone?"

“Uh, she said she saw the man following us on the day that Roshan was attacked. Well, she saw three on both days. But I only saw one, today.” Oskar felt unsteady in both limbs and his stomach was twitching.

Detective Seth came up the stairs to meet Oskar. He glanced around. “Where is this friend of yours, now?”

Oskar grimaced. “She’s afraid of the police. I think her parents must have been Dalit.”

Detective Seth nodded. “Sure, sure. Some cops still haven’t heard the Caste system was outlawed a few decades back. Does your paranoid friend have a name?”

Oskar shook his head. “She wouldn’t want me to—”

“Jesus Christ.” Detective Seth rolled his eyes. “Can you at least describe the man following you?”

“Barely. The only head-on look I got was from a few yards away. Definitely European. Blond. He had no eyebrows, from where I could see. Maybe 6’ 3” and around ninety kilos.”

“Sounds like a big ex-military fellow.” Detective Seth looked to one of the other detectives. “Take him inside and get a full description if you can, then get him to a temporary room. Have a uniform check out his condominium just to be on the safe side, and assign someone to stay near his hotel. In case they were following you, too, Professor. Choudry, you’re with me.”

The other detective nodded. Oskar watched Detective Seth and Detective Choudry drive off. He turned and followed his minder up into the police station, worried that he wouldn’t be able to recall the blond man’s face well enough. He slid his right hand into his pocket, frowned, and looked all about on the ground. Like a fool, he had lost Roshan’s curious stone. He swore

and imagined where it might be: the market, the tea shop, the dirty alleyway, the cab, the hands of a woman who had admitted to being a criminal.

“God damn it.”

Oskar sat in his bedroom, book in hand. Detective Seth had told him that his condo had been untouched, but that there had been two foreigners skulking nearby with sketchy visa papers. Neither matched Oskar’s description of the blond European who had been following him. Seth had decided that it wasn’t his problem if the men had gotten their feelings hurt and had them handed over to Federal authorities for deportation. Oskar felt a little better, but not enough to relax into sleep.

He patted his right thigh and wondered whether Nareen had stolen the stone off of him. He kept imagining her with it and swore he’d had it before he left her in the cab. “Don’t steal from nice people.” He muttered to himself. Was he not a nice enough person? She had used him as a smokescreen, after all. But, a thief is a thief, he supposed. He was annoyed that he hadn’t discovered the makeup of Roshan’s stone and had lost it on top of everything. Worse yet, there was no one for him to speak with about the whole thing. Seth had asked him to contact no one for twenty-four hours without first clearing the call with the police. Other than a quick message to Sierra and his parents, Oskar had not spoken with anyone since he left the police station, leaving his wireless blocked to all but Detectives Seth and Choudry.

He lay down on his bed, feeling the hemp necklace shift underneath his shirt. It would have been perfection if Teresa had been laying there beside him, helping him to ease his mind. They had been true opposites; he lost in his thoughts, she secured in her body. Until Sierra had once challenged him about the connection between them, it had never occurred to Oskar that

Teresa's excellence as a professional tennis player had been of surrogate appeal to him. He wondered if his understanding of the Universe had been a plus for her. She had always told him how much she loved his thoughts, but he had taken this as affectionate pillow talk instead of psychological insight into her need to live vicariously through his intellect. It was unusual for him to delve so far into twenty year old memories of her, but he felt isolated beyond what he was comfortable with and decided to let himself linger on remembrance of her rich mahogany skin, sly hazel eyes, tight curls kept in a modest afro, generous lilting laughter.

But as always, the thought of her led to images of his last moments by her bed before she disappeared into a surgery from which she would never return. The horrid quickness of Teresa's illness, despite the genetic warnings from her family's own battles with Sickle Cell, had been at once cruel and kind. Oskar had barely dated since then, and the constant onslaught of guest professorships and Collider work and needy students and science interviews had protected him from the need to try his hand at forming new close connections. He didn't want to try with any women, anyway. That most of those his sister or Roshan introduced him to had been aware of his fame and presumed he was rich was deterrent enough. Sierra had given up years ago. Roshan didn't seem to ever give up on anything.

And, as if in response to his last thought, a call came through and Oskar smiled to hear Prithee's tune and see her face on the screen. Had he slipped up and left his line open to her? "Prithee! Are you all right?"

"Hello, Oskar. I'm sorry, I meant to call you earlier, but we suffered a cyber attack at the lab. Are you safe?" Oskar could see that Prithee's smile required effort.

"A cyber attack? What did they hit?"

“Some of our computers were completely scrambled by a virus and someone managed to hack into our cloud server and erase a bunch of data. Oskar, are you safe at home?”

“I am, I am. There’s a police watch outside my building. Will you be able to recover any of your research?”

“We should.” Prithee said. “But it may take a few years to get things back to where we had them.”

“A few years?”

“Yeah. And if we don’t have Roshan, it’ll take longer than that. So much of our processes are based on decades of his work.” Prithee looked exhausted.

Oskar frowned. “I’m so sorry, Prithee. I know you’ll make it work.”

“We’ll try our damndest. But they hit us very hard.” Prithee rubbed her eyes.

“Well, be careful. I hope to see you again.”

“Hopefully, soon. Good night, Oskar. I’m sorry you’ve been pulled into this.” Prithee said.

“Good night, Prithee.” Oskar closed the screen and fell back on the bed, steering his thoughts away from Teresa and toward the young doctor. She was clearly concerned about his safety and wanted to spend time with him. But that, as usual, had to do with his fame as a scientist. He was older than her by two decades and he couldn’t imagine that she would be so turned on by a physics wunderkind as to miss his misshapen body and unimpressive manhood. She’d grow tired of his company after a short while, he knew.

But the screen lit up, once more, and Oskar opened it to see Prithee’s frowning face.

“Prithee? Did you need something else?” Oskar asked her.

“Oskar. I’ve just come to the hospital check on Roshan room. But it’s empty.” She said.

“Was he transferred? I would think Mira would have mentioned—”

“No, Oskar. His door was closed and when I came in, his IV and ports and leads and all were still on the bed, but he’s gone. The police and guards hadn’t realized anything.” Prithee was looking around. She looked lost to Oskar.

Oskar frowned. “I’ll call Detective Seth. Something’s not right.”

Oskar sat in sun room of the clean, modern home of Mira and K. Pratap Jankar, sipping coffee as the monsoon rains pounded the roof. It had been three weeks after Roshan’s disappearance and Oskar still hadn’t learned of his friend’s whereabouts or whether he was dead or alive. Detective Seth had given them very little information and Mira was at her wits’ end over the entire debacle. Oskar watched as she bustled about the house on menial errands, most of which had already been completed by her staff. K. Pratap was at his office, likely more as a distraction than a necessity, and Mira had invited Oskar over to take his place for brunch. Oskar smiled as Mira finally returned to sit down at her half finished French toast.

“How is your coffee, Oskar? Would you prefer some tea? Roshan always takes coffee and I just made some without thinking.” Mira said, pouring some coffee for herself.

“It’s just fine, Mira, thanks. I got a taste for it when I studied in New England.” Oskar said. He watched as Mira picked over her food. Her face was worn and she had the look of someone who hadn’t slept. Neither had mentioned Oskar’s departure for the Massive Hadron Collider in a week’s time; Oskar suspected that it might only add to Mira’s anxiety and so, chose to avoid the topic.

“I hope the French toast is tasty.” She mumbled.

“Very.” Oskar set his coffee down and reached over to hold Mira’s hand. “Mira, are you doing all right?”

Mira nodded. “Sure, sure. The police assure me that everything is being done to find Roshan’s whereabouts. I just don’t understand why it’s taking so long. If he was kidnapped or killed—”

“We shouldn’t think in that direction, Mira.” Oskar said. “He probably just disappeared to protect you and K. from the people after him.”

“But the police should be able to track his arm chip, Oskar.” Mira looked at him, eyes wide.

“Roshan is resourceful. Of that, I am certain.” Oskar doubted every word that he told her. If there was anyone else involved in Roshan’s disappearance, they could have destroyed his chip and dumped his body. Oskar hated to think that way, but unfortunately it wasn’t an impossible scenario. Roshan had no weak enemies, and as his work was a threat to the profits of several wealthy parties, Oskar could imagine what might be done to stymie progress. Roshan had mentioned the boldness of the CEO of India Strong Insurance Group who had grabbed him in a restaurant and promised to have him sold into slavery in Myanmar. Another scientist had sworn to burn Roshan’s labs to the ground over research techniques she had sworn he’d stolen. And there had been Marcus Ryson of Ryson Pharmaceutical just a month before, threatening god knew what. Roshan had laughed at all of them, fully aware of how serious each was. The man could have done his work in complete secrecy and no one would have been the wiser, but, of course, Roshan couldn’t have that.

“Why do you think Roshan never married, Oskar?” Mira asked him.

Oskar hadn't expected this question. "Well, Mira. I suppose that Roshan wants to have everything at the exclusion of nothing. Hard to settle down when that means limiting yourself."

"Hmm. K. and I taught Roshan that the world was his oyster, that he could have anything he was willing to work for. I guess that backfired on me. Well, there are other things in life than grandchildren." Mira wiped at a coffee splatter on the table.

"True." Oskar finished his coffee. "Mira, I can let myself out. You may want to try and relax for the rest of the morning. Brunch was delicious."

"That's a good idea. I'll let you know if Momar has any news." Mira said, standing up.

"Momar?"

"Oh, Detective Seth, I mean." Mira walked into the living room.

As Oskar was leaving through the front, he wondered why Mira was on a first name basis with the Detective. He raised his umbrella and began to walk to the tram station nearby.

As the tram rolled down the very clean streets of Uptown New Kolkata, Oskar's wireless hummed a shortened version of the tune Oskar and Prithee shared. Oskar looked down at it to see a message from her.

Lunch with Anup and Radeep at the Kashmir Bistro in an hour. Interested? -Prithee

Oskar considered the work he needed to do before the week was over and he returned to Australia; he and Dr. Hakon were nearly finished with prep for his Tachyon detection studies. But, he decided a detour might be worth it.

I've eaten, already, but I'll join you for a Coke. -Oskar

Great! -Prithee

Oskar hadn't spoken with Prithee or anyone else from the lab since Roshan had disappeared. It had been easy to focus on the Collider when no one had received any news, good or bad.

The tram stopped to let a few passengers out in front of an art gallery. Oskar was settling in when he looked out the window and saw a familiar face inside the gallery, surrounded by a small group.

"Well, I can't believe that." Oskar said to himself. He stood and grabbed the rope just before the tram pulled back into the street. "My apologies. My apologies." Oskar rushed as he made his way down the aisle and disembarked from the tram. He immediately got wet from the rain and decided it wasn't worth it to open his umbrella as he hurried over to the art gallery.

Oskar pushed the door open, hung his umbrella on a stand, and stamped his feet on the mat. The gallery was painted in earth tones and there were rock sculptures and wood carvings set all about the space. Oskar nodded to the attendant in the front and walked over to a small group of well dressed people surrounding one of the sculptures and listening to the artist speaking. One of the members of this group was Nareen Sanjaya, dressed in designer clothes with well styled hair and the same expensive sunglasses on which she was chewing.

The artist was excited about his work. "It's believed that great men of the steppe tribes would keep a staff crowned with horse hair to hold their souls during battles and inspire their people after they died. But the Great Khan had two, one for war and one for peace. The white peace staff was lost to history after Kubilai's reign, so I've recreated it, here." The artist gestured to the slender staff. It was two meters high, painted with white chalk, and had silvery white animal hair bound to the top. Oskar thought it looked like a paint brush.

Oskar watched Nareen out of the corner of his eye, anxious to question her further. He was about to approach her when the artist noticed him.

“Ah! Professor Tigunait?” The artist said. He addressed the group. “I took a workshop on Upcoming Theoretical Physics a few years back with the Famous Oskar Tigunait! Though I did quite awfully.” He beamed. “I had no idea you were an art fan.”

Oskar shrunk a little before the unplanned for attention, but tried to smile. He didn’t remember the artist at all. “We’ve got to keep well rounded, haven’t we?” He said. “Though I can assure you I haven’t nearly the talent for art that you had for Physics.”

The group laughed at that and Oskar shook the artist’s hand. As the artist began to lead the group to another piece of his, Oskar noticed that Nareen had nearly made her way over to the restroom. He broke off from the group and went after her, just catching her arm.

“Nareen.”

“Oskar. I was just headed to the loo. How are you? How’s the good Dr. and his research?” Nareen said, hiding behind her sunglasses. “I had no idea you were a famous physicist, and all!”

“Where have you been? The police haven’t found any concrete evidence of the men you said were following Roshan. I think it was just a smokescreen so you could use me to cover up your theft.” Oskar asked. His voice was getting heated.

Nareen put a finger to his lips, checking the group. They didn’t seem to have heard him. “Oskar. I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t, you know, talk about those things near my new friends and all.” She stood strongly, eyes no longer shifting about but matching his own stare without fear. “And it wasn’t a tale. It was all true, it just happened to be convenient too. Besides, I don’t do those things anymore”

Oskar studied her. Around her neck, Nareen wore a necklace of colorful twine that wrapped around and held a stone. And Oskar immediately recognized the stone as Roshan's, even through the mass of twine. "Is that so? You don't do those things anymore?" She had stolen it after all.

"I don't. Like I told you, I never took from nice people, but I don't even steal from crooks anymore. I don't need to." Nareen took her sunglasses off and chewed them, again.

Oskar let go of Nareen's arm. He wondered at the gall of the woman. "So you're reformed?"

"I found work as a personal assistant for an actress. I've made rich friends with sophisticated taste. Who needs to steal, anymore?" Nareen leaned against the wall, looking Oskar up and down. Her nonchalance was nuanced, however. "Don't ruin it for me. Okay, Oskar?"

"I would never." Oskar leaned in. "But I'll require a price for my silence."

"I figure a famous guy like you can find willing girls for that kind of service." Nareen puckered her lips. "Or at least be able to afford it." Oskar snickered, reached up, and yanked the twine necklace from Nareen's shoulders. Nareen's eyes grew wide and she looked, sharply, to make sure no one had seen. "What the hell, Oskar. They'll see! Besides, what's a silly little rock between friends? What? Was it a gift for your pretty doctor girl?"

"It belongs to Roshan Jankar. And I figured I should keep it for him in case he turns up." Oskar said. He pocketed the stone, twined still wrapped around it. "Though now that he's disappeared after being attacked, it's more likely they'll dredge him out of a river. If they find him at all."

Nareen put her sunglasses back on and waited. Oskar glared, knowing he wouldn't get an apology from her. He hadn't realized how truly angry he was, not just at her, but at the police, at

the criminals who were surely behind Roshan's disappearance, and even at Roshan, himself. But he smelled, again, that distinct point of jasmine that made him think of Teresa, and it felt wrong to simply walk away. "Nareen. Good luck with your new life."

Nareen nodded and returned to her group of friends with an imperfect smile on her face. Oskar shook his head and left the gallery.

Oskar had managed to relax a little by the time he reached Kashmir Bistro a few blocks from the University. When he went inside, he saw Prithee sitting at a table with Radeep, who was standing and typing into his wireless. Prithee dropped two pills into her hand from a prescription bottle and swallowed them. Oskar might have normally felt unsure of whether to sit or stand, but he simply sat down, deciding he needn't wait on a second invitation.

"Oh, Oskar. How are you?" Prithee looked up and smiled, shaking his hand.

"All right." Oskar said. "My apologies. I was delayed by an acquaintance." He missed the smell of jasmine when he said it, and somehow realized, for the first time, that it was what Nareen had worn each time he'd met her.

Radeep dropped his phone into his pocket and waved a goodbye. "Sorry, Professor. First Anup cancelled. Now, I've got to run. One of the apes is becoming very ill. I thought I'd be able to take some time away, but I'm afraid we'll need to euthanize. Enjoy lunch without me." He went to go, but Oskar stopped him.

"Not Brigitta, I hope." Oskar thought of the video Roshan had shown him with the healthy, cured ape dancing with Prithee.

Prithee and Radeep glanced at each other. Radeep frowned. "No, she's fine... You know Brigitta?"

Oskar shrugged. “Sure. Roshan showed me the hundred and twelfth iteration results on visual file last month.”

“I never saw you at the lab.” Radeep said.

“It was at his place.” Oskar said.

“His place? I had no idea he had any lab files on a personal computer. I hope it was secure.” Radeep scratched his head.

“Military grade security. The man spares no expense.” Oskar laughed at this. “It’s got a sexy woman’s voice that recognized me from my arm chip and gave me my own security clearance.”

“Sounds like the Doc. Well, good to see you again, Oskar. At the lab, Prithee?” Radeep asked.

“Tomorrow. I’m pretty done for the day.” She said. Prithee looked at Oskar with an apologetic smile after Radeep left. “Sorry. I didn’t intend for this to be a date.”

“It’s fine.” Oskar said. He let himself look at her without abashment. “Roshan would be happy. He’s been wanting me to ask you out for months, now.”

“Really? Sly bastard. He never said anything except that he was friends with you. I had assumed you were married or something.”

“Married to the Collider, perhaps.” Oskar sat back. He felt aware, strong, at ease, even flirtatious. Maybe his choice to be spontaneous had been a good one.

The server brought him a menu and Prithee looked over hers for a moment before leaning in with a tone of play conspiracy. “Oskar. I actually am not much of a fan of this restaurant; it was Radeep’s idea. Would you be willing to walk me to my place so I can have some leftovers? I’ll make you some tea, if you want.”

“Prithee, I’d love some tea.” Oskar said. He was certain he’d inflected a healthy bit of roguishness into his words. He was also certain that Prithee had blushed at it.

The monsoon rains had gotten torrential, but their partially submerged walk to Prithee’s apartment went by, quickly; Oskar barely noticed the slog, or his fading limp. They got to her four-plex Prithee ducked into the lobby with him, shaking her umbrella. “God, the rain! It just won’t let up.”

“I’ve lived here since they started rebuilding the city and it has never been this heavy, or this early for that matter.” Oskar said.

They climbed the steps and Prithee unlocked the door and led him into her apartment. Oskar noticed a small stone statue of Ganesh, the popular four-armed, elephant-headed Hindu god, on a pedestal by the doorway. There were red and yellow flowers on the dining room table.

“You’re Hindu?” Oskar asked.

“Not quite. The Ganesh was a gift pressured on me by my aunt. It doesn’t clash with my place, too much, fortunately.” Prithee took his coat. “I’ll put your tea on. Feel free to sit anywhere. The water won’t hurt it.”

“Actually, if I could use the restroom.” Oskar said.

“Down the hall. Help yourself to a towel if you need one.”

Oskar went into the restroom and dried off his hair. He could hear Prithee moving about the kitchen in the next room, getting water for the tea and sending a message on her wireless. Her heart was pounding from the walk through the rain and he noticed that his breathing had entrained with hers, an even but insistent rhythm. Oskar was curious as to how he noticed all of these things, but when he looked at himself in the mirror, he noticed how straight he was

standing and that his right leg didn't ache. He was holding the towel in his right hand and felt his grip sturdier than he had ever remembered it in his adulthood. It may have even been the case that his slur had almost vanished earlier, though he wasn't sure. It was suspicious to him, how unhindered he felt, how uninhibited. Even his vision was strong. Roshan's sleek stone weighed down the pocket of his pants and he looked downward to take a glance at it when he noticed several prescription bottles in the waste bin by the sink. Each label had Prithee's name on it with the name of the drug, one Oskar had never heard of, and a small stamp with the word RyPharm.

Oskar was tempted to study the bottles further, but the tea kettle began to whistle and he could hear Prithee pacing, tapping silently onto her wireless. He decided to curtail his curiosity for the moment and found his way down the hallway.

Prithee brought tea into the living room and sat down on a designer couch. Oskar continued to stand, watching her. "You're not hungry?" He asked. His slur was most certainly gone.

She shook her head. "Not at the moment. Thinking of Roshan."

"How so?" Oskar poured tea for the both of them. He handed her a mug as he sipped his own, feeling the shy warmth exploring his throat, belly, then his back and chest and the rest of his body. He felt not only warmer, but less tired, less old, less useless.

"His secrets. He kept a lot from all of us. If, if he's gone. I mean, if he's dead, we'll have lost everything. The cure for cancer will be set back a decade or more." Prithee held her tea close and Oskar almost felt the steam as it bathed her face. "I'm sorry. This was supposed to be a relaxed lunch."

Oskar gripped the stone in his pocket. The rain outside began to pound the roof and he wondered about Nareen back in the gallery and whether she had found a good place to live that

kept out the rain, or whether she was merely faking at being successful. He dropped a sugar cube into his tea. “I’m rather conflicted about Roshan, myself. I’m not sure whether to start mourning or live in a state of horrid hope.”

“I think I’m experiencing both.” Prithee looked to Oskar and placed her hand on the couch beside her.

Oskar sat down next to her. “Money counts for a lot in this country. But I don’t know if it can cover up the murder of a prominent researcher who’s the son of a famous industry tycoon. I’m sure whoever is behind it simply wants to steal Roshan’s life’s work. Or destroy it, somehow.”

“A competitor in the field? Or a foreign government, maybe?”

Oskar sipped his tea through a grimace. “Highly skilled hacking, foreign mercenary thugs. This was someone with plenty of money and influence. Considering how inept the police have seemed, I’m wondering if Roshan’s attackers haven’t paid them off, as well.”

Prithee watched the rain outside. “Who would try to stop his cure like this? It’s pretty awful.” She drank some of her tea and set it down on the table by the couch.

“People have their motives.” Oskar watched her as she stood up and looked down at the streets through her bay windows, her rain sodden shirt still clinging to her back. He started to think back over the events of the past month, sensing that he was on the cusp of seeing something that he had missed all the while. He thought about his brunch with Mira, that morning, and how she had mentioned Detective Seth as if he were a boy. He sent a quick message to the detective, making sure Prithee hadn’t noticed. I have an idea about the attack. Please contact me. He hid the wireless away and wondered if Prithee had any secrets of her own.

“Prithee. Both you and Roshan had mentioned the next phase of testing—”

But Prithee had returned from the windows to sit down, very close to him. She rested her head on his shoulder and Oskar felt the brush of the stone against his leg, the warmth from Prithee's breath, the press of her fingers on his leg. He saw an ever so slight look of hope in Prithee's eyes and considered what she might be about. He decided to push all of his concerns away, if only for the time being, took Prithee by the hand and pulled her firmly down on top of him. She responded in kind, kissing him and pulling her glasses from her face and dropping them on the couch. Prithee surrounded Oskar's waist with her legs and massaged his chest with her fingers as they kissed.

"I didn't know if you wanted me." She said, voice soft and unsteady.

"Impossible that I wouldn't." He told her.

The sensation of physical closeness was like an old memory brought sharply into focus for Oskar. Or perhaps it was even more potent than before. The warm rush of blood to each place on his lips and cheeks and ears that greeted Prithee's kisses, the heave of his lungs as her thighs gripped his torso, the twitch of his nerves from her fingers caressing his neck, all were vivid beyond what he might have remembered from the last time he had been this near to a woman. There had been a couple partners after he had lost Teresa, but none for a very long time.

Prithee pulled her shirt and bra off and tugged his shirt free from Oskar's shoulders. They held tight for a moment, embracing. Oskar kissed her again and they lay down together. She slid her jeans off and reached down into his underwear, then pushed herself onto him. He felt her body flex against him as she grunted, softly, and gripped his back. His own body grew quite hot. Prithee's exhalations turned to moans and her moans turned pants. After a time, she let out a quiet cry and trembled.

She looked at him, sweat causing her hair to streak over her face. "Did you?"

“Not yet.” Oskar said breathing heavily himself and brushing the hair from her nose.

Prithee nodded, kissed him, and slid downward, nibbling at his neck, then chest, then stomach. Oskar’s breath caught sharply and he put his left hand on her cheek. He looked down at Prithee, but noticed out of the corner of his eye that her wireless had fallen from her jeans on the floor. It had a message on its face. Jha knows something he won’t tell. One hour.

Oskar didn’t have the wherewithal to wonder, yet, about that message, but turned his full attention to Prithee.

The roar of the rain continued outside as Oskar was dozing, enjoying the weight of Prithee on top of him.

“Prithee. Are you sick?”

Prithee adjusted her position, tapping his shoulder with her thumb. “I have a disorder called Reflux Sympathetic Dystrophy. It’s near constant pain throughout the body without proper treatment.” She said, as if it were nothing at all. “But fortunately, I’m able to afford the medication, now. For a while, it was bankrupting my family.”

Oskar noticed that she was studying his right arm.

“You said you were a child. Do you remember when it happened?” She asked.

“I do. It was a pretty awful, long night, laying there paralyzed. My parents didn’t realize until the next morning. I really ought to have died, but medicine in the 80s was far along enough that they were able to save me. I re-learnt most everything, of course. Walking, eating, and that sort. But at least my family was well off and able to devote time to helping me. And I discovered I very much liked Maths and Engineering and the sort early on. I might have missed all that as a star bowler for the British National Team.”

Prithee nodded. She touched the hemp necklace at his throat. “Did someone give you this? I wouldn’t have guessed that it was your style.” She chuckled.

Oskar had forgotten that he was wearing it, and had been wearing it all month. “A gift years ago. My fiancé.” He said.

“So, you were involved.” Prithee kissed him. “How did she miss out on a man like you?”

Oskar sighed. “I was engaged to Teresa Helm.”

Prithee pulled away, her mouth open both in admiration and shock. “My god, Oskar. The tennis star?”

“Yes.”

“She was so amazing; I remember watching her.” Prithee’s eyes welled up. She looked away from him and Oskar sensed shame, guilt, as well as sadness. “I’m sorry. It was so sudden, wasn’t it?”

“A few hours. A strange mutation of an already twisted gene.” Oskar almost laughed at his next thought. “And as I say it, I’m realizing that I’ve been enraged at Roshan for years over it.”

“Roshan? Why?”

“Because he’s a genius. And I think he might have found the cure for it a decade sooner, which would have saved her.” Oskar was amazed at his own silliness.

But Prithee held his face. “But he pursued the biggest, most famous disease possible while you lost your lovely fiancé.”

“Quite.”

“We’re all selfish sometimes, Oskar. Don’t count it against yourself.” Prithee rested her head on his chest and Oskar let himself sleep for a few minutes.

It is dark, warm, and the smells of wood and peat and dung burning in the fireplace are strong, like home. Oskar feels a stirring at his chest, a pale baby girl only a couple of months old sleeps, dreams, rests her soft head and feathery brown hair against the hollow where his chest and neck meet. Oskar turns his head to one side to see the sleeping form of a nine year old girl beside him underneath the covers, then to the other side to watch the fire popping under the grey stone chimney. There is no other light but the fire; it is still far from burning out and he dares not wake either child to stoke the flames before he must.

There is a hollow space in the bed beside him. Someone else is usually there, where the older child sleeps now, but is gone for a time. Oskar wants to return to sleep, but hears a breath besides his own and those of the two daughters with him. He looks up, with care so as not to disturb the baby, and sees the silent blonde girl standing in thick coats. She has been there for some time, perhaps, though he cannot say for how long. She has the green scarf she wore before, on the black sand beach.

The silent girl walks over to the fire and slides three logs underneath the main embers by lifting the burning parts with the small shovel. She then approaches the bed, touches his cheek, moves her lips in silent whisper. She reaches underneath the mattresses and pulls something from them. Oskar notices the sleek, red/black stone she has taken in her hand before she ties it up in her hair and covers it with a shawl and hood. The silent girl pulls the light brown hair from Oskar's forehead, smiles a little, then kisses the baby's soft forehead. She walks to the bedroom door and waits for a moment, opening her mouth to speak. But she doesn't. The firelight bathes her eyes and Oskar wonders whether he is dreaming her presence. She disappears through the

door and a moment later, Oskar feels the air change as she opens another door to the wintry outside, shutting it with a gentle firmness.

The fire pops, again, and Oskar loses his focus on the door. He looks back to the fire and feels a small jolt as a hand touches his shoulder.

The footsteps on the stairs woke Oskar and, by the soft knock on the door and the sound of a clearing throat, Oskar somehow knew the man's identity. At this, all of his curiosities and suspicions poured back into his mind and he thought of the video of Brigitta, Roshan's angry glare at the wine bar, Detective Seth's evasiveness, and Roshan's disappearance. He felt sad and frustrated and he started to wonder if he was at all desirable to Prithee, even as he considered what the next few moments of his life might entail.

Oskar felt Prithee next to him slip her clothes on and walk over to open the door without checking the peephole. He sat up and put his pants on as Detective Choudry came into the apartment, shaking an umbrella. He slid on his shirt, grabbed his jacket, and stood.

"Professor Tigunait. Will you come with me?" The big, aging detective asked, though it wasn't a question.

"I figured you'd be here, soon, detective. I hope the rain didn't trouble you." Oskar said. "Where are we headed?"

"Dr. Jankar's penthouse. We can't access it, so you'll be helping us out with the security clearance." Choudry had an annoyed, almost frustrated look, though Oskar didn't presume that it had anything to do with himself.

"So, Prithee, here, told you I had access? Sure, Detective Choudry. Anything to help the police." Oskar snickered, making sure that Choudry knew that he wasn't fooled.

Prithee was watching the rain outside. “Oskar, I’m sorry. Believe when I say—”

“I understand. The money was too good.”

“No.” Prithee shook her head and he knew that her tears were unbidden. “Not money, Oskar. My life”

Oskar remembered the prescription bottles and the brutal disease that Prithee fought every day. He wanted to offer her some kindness, some forgiveness, but Choudry took him by the arm and led him down the stairs. Oskar didn’t have to look back to know that Prithee was watching them all the way down.

Outside, Detective Choudry put Oskar in the black hum-vee waiting in front of the apartment. The water was up to the vehicle’s headlights, but continued to run without issue. Choudry got into the driver’s seat and shut the door. “You’re going to unlock Jankar’s files for us. Simple enough.”

Oskar leaned forward to Choudry. “It’s not likely, Detective. I prefer not to betray the trust of my friends—”

Choudry rested his hand on the nightstick on his belt. “Tigunait. It won’t be much trouble for me to—”

“You didn’t let me finish, Detective.” Oskar sighed. “They say everyone has a price. I have mine. You want my help? You’ll take me to my new employer. Simple enough.”

Choudry sighed and pulled out his wireless, sending a message. After a few minutes, he received one back. He looked at Oskar. “Wish granted, Professor.” Choudry pressed a few more buttons on his device and Oskar immediately felt an intense searing in his left forearm. The radio chip glowed inside his arm and a thin trail of smoke floated up from the scar. Oskar groaned as he gripped his arm, failing to massage the pain away.

He eyed the two men in the front seat as they looked at their wireless devices. He felt a surge of rebellion that made him think of Roshan. Prithee's prescription bottles gave him enough to make a clever guess. "So, Detective. How long have the two of you gentlemen worked for Marcus Ryson?"

Choudry and the other passenger stopped what they were doing and looked at each other. Choudry handed his pistol to the man beside him. The passenger, the blond European with no eyebrows, turned around with a blank look on his face and cracked Oskar's temple with the butt of the gun.

Oskar woke with a dark hood over his head long before they arrived at their destination, but he played at sleeping so as not to further exacerbate the European's poor graces. Smaller cars, mostly the electric variety rather than the heavier hydrogen fueled, were floating away in the growing torrents of the flooding. The rain was manic in its rush down to the earth. The hum-vee was heavy enough to navigate the streets at the moment, but he wasn't sure for how long. But the silence in the front seats made him maintain his own silence, and he longed for a warm bed with a roaring fire beside him and a family he knew he would never hold.

It was hard not to be angry at Nareen and Prithee. He felt that both had betrayed him, betrayed Roshan, betrayed the world if Roshan's cure for aging never saw the light of day. He thought it might be even worse if the cure for cancer was priced exorbitantly so that only the very wealthy could afford it, clearly the reason that Prithee had chosen to help Ryson Pharmaceutical; her own treatment was beyond her family's ability to pay. But it was much easier to think sourly on the men in front of him. As the hum-vee traveled up hill and out of the

flooding, Oskar pondered how he might give himself a useful advantage. Oskar decided Detective Choudry might be key if he could play events properly.

Oskar suspected, as they rose higher and higher, that they must have been traveling up towards the Governor's mansion. Choudry drove the hum-vee through the side gates with nothing more than a wave to the guards. Oskar peeked under the hood at the twenty room mansion the regional governor enjoyed; even from the vantage of the back door they would enter from, the place was modern, clean, and impressive. Choudry parked by a food supply van and hopped out from the seat.

Choudry opened the backseat door and shook Oskar, who sat up and slid out without complaint. His head had ceased bothering him from the pistol whipping; he wondered what Prithee was thinking after their afternoon together, whether she had slept with him to keep him in her apartment for Choudry, or whether she had truly wanted him for his own sake. The sun was hidden somewhere behind the clouds, but the rain kept the sky dark and the New Kolkata streets below shrouded. Choudry took him by his still burning arm, again, and they walked into the back door near what sounded like a busy kitchen with the European behind them.

They walked through the expansive bottom floor and came to a large library with black wood shelves and cream colored walls. Inside, the floor was a polished grey stone. Detective Choudry took the hood off of Oskar's head and walked him to a wide, round table, made of black wood matched to that of the book shelves, where a striking woman in her sixties sat looking at various papers. She was dressed down, though dressed smartly, and Oskar immediately recognized her. No one interrupted the blond, muscled young man in designer jeans and a polo shirt walking about on the upper level, ranting into his wireless in his east coast American

English. The European nodded up to the man and the man raised his index finger as if to demand an extra moment.

“Detective. You’ve been busy down there.” The woman, Governor Alia Mitra said to Choudry as she took a sip of her coffee and placed a signed document underneath a heavy lava rock paperweight.

“The flooding has all of us up today.” Choudry said. He clapped Oskar on the shoulder. “He was at Dr. Thakur’s place. And we’ve put Dr. Jha in solitary confinement. If he knows anything, he still isn’t talking.”

“Who?” Governor Mitra didn’t bother to try and sell her false ignorance. She looked up briefly at Oskar. “You’re a friend of K. Pratap Jankar’s son, aren’t you. The Collider physicist. Would you like some coffee? Tea, perhaps?”

“Good afternoon, Governor. And no, thank you.” Oskar slid his shoulder out from under Choudry’s paw. “I appreciate your use of paper in governance.”

“It feels more real.” Governor Mitra said, dipping a pen into an inkwell and signing another document. “The young folk of this society, they don’t yet understand the need for the feeling of permanence. They haven’t grasped how terrifying the impermanence of their lives really is.”

“Agreed. Speaking of permanence. May I?” Oskar gestured to the paperweight.

“Please. It’s an Icelandic lava rock. Nothing of particular value about it other than my own sentimentality.” The Governor said.

Oskar picked it up. “Hmm. I disagree. It’s quite lovely, in a rugged sort of way.” The lava rock felt good in his right hand and a brief hint of question flashed across Oskar’s mind as he noted how even his strength had grown.

“I’m not sure if you fully understand what’s going on here, Professor Tigunait.”

Governor Mittra said, finally looking up. “The seriousness of it all.”

“I suspect I very much understand, Madame Governor.” Oskar said, turning the lava rock over in his hand. “Did you know that, if I’m judging the age of this rock from just my eyes, that it’s actually a very foolish stone?”

“Beg your pardon?” The Governor cocked an eyebrow.

“Well, you got this about twenty years ago or so, I’m guessing?” Oskar asked.

“Just about. The Icelandic Ambassador gave it to me when my husband was senator.”

“Precisely. I suspect that this is a souvenir from the Eyafyallajokul eruption, making it younger than all of the people in this room, even your handsome guest up there on his wireless who insulted me at a wine bar a few weeks ago. This means that, unlike many rocks and boulders, this lava rock lacks the wisdom that comes with millions of years of watching the goings on of the Earth around it. It has much less knowledge to offer us that know how to communicate with it. It, instead, might learn a thing or two about the world from us.”

“You’re a physicist and a storyteller on top of it. Who would have known?” The Governor looked to be finished entertaining Oskar’s musings.

“My niece and nephews certainly know. They get quite tired of hearing my little stories.” Oskar smiled.

The Governor crossed her legs and sat back in her chair. “Professor. It would be quite helpful if you were to tell the Detective, here, Dr. Jankar’s location or help him unlock the files if you’re able. It would make everything a lot easier. More pleasant.” She said, sipping her coffee again.

“Ah! I am quite happy to know that my guess was right.” Oskar smiled.

“Your guess? About the lava rock?”

“No. I had figured that you all had no idea where Roshan was. He’s clever like that.”

Oskar said.

Governor Mittra chuckled a little as Detective Choudry sniffed, crossing his arms.

Oskar took the opportunity to swing the lava rock as hard as he could, cracking it against the base of Choudry’s neck. The detective crashed to the polished floor in a pile as the Governor swore out loud. Instantly, Oskar found himself pinned against the large table top, arm gripped tight with the feeling of a nozzle against his jaw. The cock of a pistol hammer was felt more than heard, but the Governor spit vitriol at the European. “Don’t you dare pull that trigger in here. I’ve covered enough of your foul-ups. Damn it, Detective; look at him down there.” Oskar watched the Governor as she placed her coffee on the table and shook her head at him. “Why would you make things even more complicated, Professor?”

But the ranting from the upper level had ceased; the American had come down the steps to the table.

“I thought you said this guy was a cripple.” He said.

“He is.” The European said.

“Pretty fucking strong cripple, if you ask me.” The man turned his head to look Oskar in the eye, straight brown strands falling over his forehead.

“That really is an antiquated term, Mr. Ryson.” Oskar told the man. “That could get you into some serious public relations snafus.”

“Indeed, indeed. Thanks for that advice.” Marcus Ryson said to him.

“I figure that’s all the help you’re going to get out of me, sir, so I might as well offer it pro bono.”

Ryson sniggered and stood back up. He jabbed the European with his elbow. “Johann, Jesus Christ, let the man up. Our super cripple.”

The European eased up on Oskar and took a single step back. He nudged Choudry with his toe and Choudry stirred a little.

“You were in Donatello’s Wine bar a few weeks ago.” Oskar massaged his still burning left forearm with his newly strong right arm. “With a pretty lady if I recall.”

“Huh. I don’t remember you.”

“Of course not.” Oskar said, straightening himself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Ryson. Governor. I won’t be helping you steal Roshan’s cure. You don’t have enough money to offer me.”

“I’m not sure about that. I’ve got access to quite a bit.” Ryson said. “But I just want you’re your buddy’s files; I don’t want his cure. You think I couldn’t get Dr. Thakur to sell it to me?”

“I figured you could have motivated her, yes. I was only seeking that last bit of information.” Oskar said, realizing that he could hear the many footsteps down the hallway before anyone else in the library could.

Ryson glanced at Governor Mittra. “I think this guy’s a little off, Al.”

“You know not to call me that.” The Governor said at him, in a tone icier than had yet escaped her lips.

Ryson leaned close into Oskar’s face. “I’m thinking I’m going to have Johann throw you in a dumpster for being difficult. I’m thinking, since Choudry already fried your chip that the dumbfuck police in this town are too lazy to figure your whereabouts in any sort of timely fashion. I’m thinking, we can have our eggheads hack into the Doctor’s penthouse computer to

get what we need.” He sniffed at Oskar. “That. Or, you can walk out of here rich man with all of your blood inside of your body. I assume you have a preference?”

“I think it’s interesting that you try to pull off the urban Boston toughness when it’s obvious you grew up in Connecticut suburbs. The little dialect changes you’ve made are easy to spot if you know where to look for them.” Oskar said, staring Ryson down.

Ryson nodded at the European. “Johann. Do what I said you’d do.”

The European took Oskar by the arm and made to lead him out of the library, but Oskar felt the footsteps from the hallway almost upon them and reached for the Governor’s attention once more.

“Governor Mittra. Did you know that, while a typical Indian citizen has a radio chip in their arm that will relay the physiological metrics of their most recent seventy-two hours once accessed by police or medical personnel, that a police officer actually has a chip that is in constant contact with his or her superiors?” Oskar asked.

Governor Mittra frowned. “What?”

Johann stopped at Ryson’s raised hand and Oskar continued. “Yes. It was explained in an article on July 12th, 2021, a couple of years before the technology became widespread. Even an off duty policemen, such as Detective Choudry, here, has a chip that would immediately notify his department of his whereabouts and health status if he were to, say, befall some injury or other threat to his personage. Perks of being an officer, from what I read.” Oskar could hear the footsteps finally arrive.

“Son of a bitch.” Ryson said. “Stalling us.”

Detective Seth, two other detectives, and three plain clothes policemen arrived at the entrance to mansion’s library. The policemen had their guns drawn, but Seth simply looked at

the scene, sighing at the sight of Choudry lying on the ground. Oskar noticed that the Governor finished her cup of coffee and Ryson began messaging someone on his wireless.

Seth walked up to Oskar who was immediately released by Johann. “Professor Tigunait. You have an idea. Then you disappear. Then Choudry’s chip goes berserk. And what are you doing with all these rich people?”

“I’d love to explain it to you, Detective.” Oskar said.

Seth let out a weary attempt at a laugh. “Is this your European?”

The European’s face bore no emotive response and Seth yawned. Oskar watched as he pointed to the blond man and to Ryson. The detectives took out their zip cord cuffs to arrest the men as Seth walked past Choudry’s groaning form and leaned heavily on the round table in front of the Governor.

Governor Mittra took her pen and signed another document. “Detective. What can I do for the eleventh district, today, seeing as your Mayor has his hands full with the flooding.”

Detective Seth poured himself a cup of the Governor’s coffee and took a slow sip, nodding with approval. “This is damn good coffee, Professor.” He said in his high, scratchy voice back to Oskar. “You really should have a cup.”

Outside, on the front porch of the Governor’s Mansion, Oskar stood with Detective Seth, watching the rain.

“I’m letting the young pups deal with all of the paperwork from this shit. And the Chief can handle the press, I need my goddamn bed.” Detective Seth said, his nose still hovering over the Governor’s coffee.

Oskar stood with his hands in his pockets, one holding the sleek stone with a loose grip.

“Have you gotten any sleep, lately?”

“Not a lick.”

A blue helicopter appeared out of the warm rain and mist and made to land in the front yard of the mansion. Oskar frowned, but Detective Seth clapped him on the back. “That’s you, Professor, Courtesy of Rosh. Come down to the office, when you get some time this week. A statement will be helpful.”

“This is for me?”

But the detective had already disappeared inside of the mansion’s front door. Oskar looked around him, watched some of the police hum-vees drive off with their detainees, and decided to jog over to the helicopter.

He climbed into the side door and the pilot leaned back.

“Professor Tigunait. Good to meet you. The flight’ll be a couple hours. Feel free to recline the seat and sleep. I’ll let you know when we’re close.” The pilot said.

Oskar slid the door shut and sat down in the plush seat. It reclined almost all the way back and he decided not to question when he already knew the answer.

The hill has a very gentle slope and meets a wood filled with a dozen different types of trees and is split by tiny, fish-laden springs. So much lush grass, so many dense and towering trees somehow strikes Oskar not as unfamiliar but as home as it should be. The sun is warm, but not unaccompanied by gentle autumn coolness that sneaks over the late summer flowers and through Oskar’s hair.

His older daughter is dancing and playing with twin boys who wrestle and dig for worms and holler. Beside him, his baby daughter is laying on a blanket, not asleep, but not awake either. Oskar notices a line of ants beginning to crawl on her tiny, chubby leg. He is about to reach over when the silent blonde girl appears from behind him, takes her shawl from her head, and brushes the ants away. He nods to her and she sits down, lifting the baby and holding her close. The silent blonde girl whispers to Oskar's daughter, chuckling at every hiccup and impulsive cry that escapes the baby's mouth.

Oskar watches her for a time, then turns around to look up the hill at a huddle of cottages near the top. There is a tall, strong girl with her long red hair hanging down in undone braids about her waist and wrists. The strong girl seems to look deep into Oskar, even from so far away, pulling apart the layers of his body and soul so that Oskar feels both safety and trepidation at once. She eventually scratches her neck, kicks a troublesome chicken from pecking by her feet, and disappears into the forests by the hill.

When Oskar returns his focus to the baby, he finds her asleep on the silent girl's shoulder. The silent girl watches the three children playing and Oskar takes in a sharp breath as the wind lifts a twist of leaves into the sky.

He awoke on his own, again, and the city of New Kolkata had disappeared from the outside, replaced with farmland and jungle and tiny villages, many of which had been drowned out by the monsoon floods. In the horizon, the rain clouds stretched as far as could be seen, a very low ceiling that threatened to collide with the cowering, muddy ground. More and more jungle blanketed the ground as the helicopter tore through the sky at breakneck pace, the ride no less comfortable considering their speed.

The helicopter pilot looked back at Oskar, waved at him, then circled the helicopter down to a small clearing. Once they were on the ground, the pilot pointed to a few huts that hugged the border of the trees and the muddy grass.

Oskar climbed out of the helicopter and slid the door shut. He walked across the sucking, soft earth toward the huts as the helicopter ascended into the rainy sky. The large hut in the middle of the others was open and Oskar chose it to enter.

Inside, a few men of the village, clothed in loose brown pants and hanging shirts sat on simple polished tree stumps in an uneven circle, sipping hot tea despite the wet warmth in the air. With the men was a man clearly not from the village. His head was shaved, bald, and his body was somewhat slumped from weariness, though his expression was bright.

“Roshan.”

Roshan looked up at Oskar, as if he hadn’t heard the helicopter’s arrival. He grinned wide and forced himself to leap up from his tree stump to embrace his friend. Oskar studied Roshan’s scared face and head and neck, the bruises still on his bare arms.

Roshan presented him to the men of the village in a language Oskar couldn’t comprehend. The men all bowed to him and one whistled at the door.

Roshan returned Oskar’s scrutiny. “Still have Teresa’s necklace on?”

“Yes. I’m not sure how to be rid of it.”

“Sure.” Roshan said. “Well, you look amazing. My old buddy Momar said you’d been kidnapped, I expected them to deliver you on a gurney or something.”

“I realized you two were old friends only this morning. I wouldn’t have trusted him, otherwise. You’re supposed to be in an indeterminably long coma.” Oskar said back to him.

“I certainly feel beat to hell. Sorry for the Houdini act, by the way, but I’m glad you’re finally here. I’ve very much wanted to introduce you to this tribe of Rabhas. Anup and I have volunteered our services here every few months for some time, now. It’s a friendship, now, more than charity.”

A soft featured woman came into the hut from the outside and offered Oskar a cup of tea. He accepted and Roshan led him to a seat in the circle of men.

Oskar drank the tea, slowly. “This is the village that you’ve been experimenting on?”

Roshan smiled, as if to himself. “Marcus Ryson told you all about it, no doubt? Don’t know how he found out, but he desperately wanted proof.”

“I figured it on my own; got him to let a few things slip.”

“Ha! Of course you did. Smartest guy in the room, as always.” Roshan set his tea down and looked at Oskar. “So what did you figure?”

Oskar didn’t find himself fuming or judgmental. He simply sat, feeling at more peace than he had in a long time. “Roshan. You’ve started illegal human testing of the hundred and twelfth iteration of your telomerase reprogramming treatment. Quite early. Why you’ve decided to be so impatient at this juncture, I’m not sure. But, apparently, Prithee Thakur figured it out, and Ryson Pharmaceutical pounced, having had their grip on her over an expensive medication for some time. Ryson, a ‘silent donor’ for Governor Mittra, bought her help and her leverage over the police to try and find the proof of your illegal trials out here. He was going to leak the information to kill your research for good. How am I doing?”

Roshan clapped. “Jolly good, Professor. Jolly good.” Roshan laughed out his best stuffy British accent. “I hadn’t any idea of Prithee being sick. Makes a lot more sense, though, the attack and all.”

“I’m sure she didn’t expect all the violence.” Oskar said.

“No. She is still a doctor. And a damn good one.” Roshan gestured to a middle aged man who stood and approached them. Roshan spoke a few words in a tongue Oskar didn’t understand and the man nodded and took a few pictures from his pocket. The first one was of himself. The next one was of an old man, nearly thirty years his senior. “Oskar. This is Harij. Our most recent test subject.”

Oskar knew how things would go. Harij showed Oskar all of his photographs, displaying the quick change between the photograph of his cancer ridden skin and the photograph of his new healthy self. Harij revealed a toothsome smile and shook Oskar’s hand, vigorously.

He spoke and Roshan translated. “He says the cancer in his gut has gone away and he feels healthier than he has since the radiation came from the nukes. Anup confirmed that fact only yesterday when he arrived with his equipment.” Harij took his pictures back to the other men and they looked over them. A couple of other men produced their pictures as well.

Oskar watched them. “It’s all very well and good, Roshan. But what about the failures? What about those that didn’t make it?”

Roshan shrugged. “There are those for whom the treatment was far less successful, to be sure. But no one gained rampant response cancers and died. In fact, everyone who’s had the treatment is still alive, save for a gentleman that was killed in a hunting accident. The treatment is safe. We did this part first, then translated it to for the chimps.”

“How on earth was this wise, let alone right?” Oskar stared his friend in the face.

Roshan walked over to one of the men, regarding his pictures alongside him. “They asked me to, Oskar.”

Oskar stood back, looking at the pictures with the quietly joyful men.

After supper, Oskar lay down on a straw mat provided to him by the tribe, but found the sleek, smooth stone pushing gently against his thigh. He sat back up and went outside to where the rain had quieted and Roshan was watching the moon and stars peek through a rare break in the clouds.

“God, it’s beautiful out here, without all of the lights of the city. Amazing what we forget about, in our beacons of civilization.” Roshan said, scratching at his shaven scalp.

Oskar took the stone from his pocket and placed it in Roshan’s hand. “I figured you’d want this back.”

Roshan regarded the stone. Instead of shining in the moonlight, it seemed almost to soak it up, growing darker. “A curious stone, indeed. Did you ever find out what it was made of?”

“No. It was stolen from me for a while. By Nareen Sanjaya.”

“That woman I hired to clean?” Roshan seemed surprised, but not angry.

“Yes. She took it right out of my pocket one day.” Oskar said.

“Huh. I saw her a few weeks ago, I think. Don’t know if she recognized me.” Roshan seemed to be watching the reflection of the stars in the stone’s sleek face. “If she liked it so much, she can have it, I suppose.”

“Really?” Oskar smiled at his friend’s selflessness. “You don’t want to know what it’s made of?”

“I’m sure I’ll live.” Roshan took a last look at the stone and placed it Oskar’s hands.

Oskar considered his friend, the stone, and the poor woman who had used and cheated him. “Well. Well, all right.” He said.

He stood beside Roshan holding the stone in his right hand, returning his focus to the galaxies above him that tore so inexorable and slow through the vast and endless dark.

Beneath the Eternal Blue Sky

For Translation's Sake:

China-	Called Cathay in Khitan Called Zhonghua (formal) or Huaxia (nickname) in Sinitic/Chinese Called Han in Mongolian
Mongolia-	Called Yeke Mongol Ulus (Great Mongol Nation) Called the People of the Felt Walls
Horde-	Called the Ordu (Mongol Court)
Korea-	Called Goreyo
Japan-	Called Nihan or Cipan
India-	Called Hind, the Five Indies, or Bharata

1225

Yeke Mongol Ulus

The small boat slid over the water under a heavy noon-day sun. Ling Pei was careful to keep her balance, not certain whether the high sulfur content in the abrasive caldera would damage her skin. Jet and silver hair in braids fastened tight to her head with a scarf to keep clear her vision, she guided the boat to the far shore and climbed out. Up the edge of the sloping inner wall of the volcano's mouth, she came to a grove of pine trees that reached so high that they peered out above the lip of the mountain. She had been watching the grove all morning from a distance, her heart pounding as she imagined what lived there.

Ling Pei took the coil of rope she carried on her shoulder and tied it to the belt around her waist. She smelled the smoke still stuck in her Khenbish's trousers that she wore and imagined him back home in the cave they used as a workshop, leaning on the heaving billows to build up the heat of the forge. Ling Pei took a few breaths, secured the satchel over her opposite shoulder, and approached the tallest of the trees. She noted how alone she was inside the volcano and started her climb.

Every time Ling Pei covered the distance of ten arms' lengths, she untied the rope from her waist, gripping the new branch with her legs, and pulled the entire rope upward to secure it to the branch. She then retied the end of the rope to her belt and climbed further. It was slow going, but she'd fallen once, years ago, and swore to herself that she never would, again.

Ling Pei rubbed the black and amber sap from her fingers onto her trousers and began to climb again. The crowding branches hid the distance to the ground, though she expected that she was almost as high as the great temple back home in Huaxia in the capital, Lin'an. She felt that she was nearing the top and her bounding heart hurried her upward; she couldn't wait to find the gift for Khenbish. But the earth far below shook and she slipped, cutting her shin against the knobby bark. A line of blood was born from the leg and she knew Khenbish would be sore with her. The reminder of the danger underneath the tree, too, sobered Ling Pei, for her father had explained all about the destructive power of such mountains and she had even seen the fire, once, as a girl. But there was a tiny down feather hanging just above her on the next branch and this was all that she needed to renew her ambition in earnest. She hid the feather behind her ear and climbed further.

When she reached the top of the crown of the tree, nearly an hour later, the wide nest of an eagle revealed itself and the wind whipped hundreds more of the down feathers in the hot, dry

sun. Ling Pei climbed, horizontally, over to the eagle's nest. The mother was nowhere to be seen and only one of the three eggs had hatched. The baby bird looked around, frantic, and let out tiny yelps as Ling Pei reached over it. Ling Pei took hold of the egg furthest from the baby. She held it up to the sun and studied it, suspecting that it would be the last to hatch and, in turn, the least well fed.

"Will you best our dearest Yul? We shall see; he is, after all, quite the specimen." Ling Pei imagined their prize eagle's wingspan. She was certain that it was impossible to match it.

Ling Pei opened her satchel with her free hand and lifted one of the layers of silk cloth she had taken from home and placed the egg between it and the layer beneath. With her prize in tow, she began her precarious downward climb.

Once she had returned to the bottom, Ling Pei shoved the boat off of the shore and began to paddle her way back to the other side. Towering around her were the edges of the volcano in which the lake sat. the shores were dusty and covered with boulders black and pocked. Ling Pei sighed at the thought of climbing back out, with her boat, while protecting the eagle egg. But as she came close to the far shore, the whole of the ground under her lurched again letting forth a giant groan. Ling Pei began to paddle harder. The ground rumbled again, sending boulders into the water. Then, there was silence. Ling Pei paused, thinking how Khenbish would be cross at her extravagant risk taking.

But there was something floating in the water, what looked like a thick block. Ling Pei rowed over and hefted the block into the boat. It was cloudy, more opaque than translucent, and Ling Pei touched it again. It was very cold. She studied it for a moment.

"Ice? In this heat?"

Ling Pei grinned. She could have studied it for hours on end, there in the oven-like rays of the sun. But when the volcano shook another time, she paddled quickly back to shore. Once she landed, it was a simple trick to take the cloth scarf with which she had tied her hair and fashion a sling from it with which to carry the ice.

As she trudged back up the trail out of the volcano, Ling Pei couldn't contain her excitement over her new prize. She remembered to protect the egg, but it lost its primacy in her mind. Ice in a volcano was too unique a discovery. Khenbish would be rapt. Her father would have been delighted.

It was near to sunset when Ling Pei returned to the cave and surrounding gers that were her home. Ger was an unfair description; her husband Khenbish had designed and built great luxurious tents that might have drawn envy from the village/camp below had he not couched them behind a grove of bamboo that reached double the height of their cooking, bathing, and resting houses. Whereas felt was usually the main component of the circular tents, Khenbish had used bear, caribou, and wolf fur and woven them into a novel cloth that was both waterproof and extra warm. The bamboo structure was both lighter and stronger than the other gers, as well, making it easy to pack and carry. It made Ling Pei feel like a rich woman, again, though it hadn't cost them anything but sweat and ingenuity.

Several stars had snuck into view in the orange and lavender sky. At this proximity, the mountain range was hidden by the foothills against which her home rested. About a thousand footfalls below, the lights in the small gers and lean-tos began to glow while village guards early for the first watch stood atop a modest lookout stand that Khenbish had conceived and crafted. One guard looked up and, even in the softening light so far away, noticed Ling Pei's backward

glance and raised his hand in greeting. She waved back, but noticed to where he turned his gaze. There were three horses with ornate saddles and packs waiting near the village shaman's oversized ger. Most certainly Mongol officers with advanced rank had come to visit. But Ling Pei knew that she and Khenbish had done nothing wrong and that the village was in good standing with the Ordu.

"Ling Pei, you look tired." Temulun, the village chief's niece, was carrying a sack full of dried horse dung back to her ger. Ling Pei hadn't noticed the woman at first, though she was quite close.

"Ah, yes. Temulun." Ling Pei's tongue struggled to hold onto the language so different from her own. "It's been a very strange and interesting day. Full of curiosities!" Ling Pei was certain she had chosen the correct words, but suspected the clumsiness of her execution of tenses.

"Curiosities? Uh, I suppose. It's been very hot, even for summer." Temulun said, dropping the sack near the door.

"Yes, yes. Very hot. But regardless of the overtly extreme air and water temperatures, there was the most exhilarating piece of solid material that resembles either a glass or a strangely resilient block of..." Ling Pei wanted to explain what she had found, but thought twice when she saw Temulun's face, already frowning at Ling Pei's words. "Uh, did I use the wrong word?"

"You always use words I don't understand, Ling Pei." Temulun said, collecting a few cakes from the sack and pulling open the flap of her ger. "Tell Khenbish that my father sends his greetings."

"Okay, okay. Yes, I will. And bid your mother a hello from me as well." Ling Pei said. Temulun nodded, smiling politely, and disappeared into her ger. Ling Pei tried to pronounce,

silently, the words she had tried and failed to use when she realized that the uneducated Temulun likely didn't know them in the first place. Khenbish had taught her a great many uncommon bits of vocabulary in his native tongues and she had worked to learn them all. This along with her Sung Huaxia accent was often a barrier to her conversations with others in this village. Not that she had been so much more graceful back home, either.

She trudged her last few steps, marveling that the ice in her satchel had not yet melted, despite the brutal and unusual heat from the south.

Thin hairs of smoke curled from a recently extinguished cook fire at the mouth of their cave. Khenbish must have traded crafts for a boar from one of the hunters and roasted it all day; the smell still lingered. Ling Pei's breath heaved with effort from carrying the ice block over one arm and the precious egg over the other. Her dearest friend in the world, Khenbish was the only man, only person other than her father, who had understood her hunger for knowledge and experience. She owed him for the chores he'd done for her, and figured this curious ice would thrill him thoroughly, along with the addition to their little aviary.

She left the rope outside the cooking house, peeked at the still solid ice block in her silk sling and set it down in the bathing house. The eagle egg, she took out and placed inside the resting house where it would be warmest. She brushed her hair from her face and pulled her sandals off before entering the cookhouse.

The interior of the cookhouse smelled of glorious garlic and chilies and boar. Ling Pei sent a silent prayer upward to Khenbish's mother, who had bestowed her culinary prowess onto her already gifted son. Khenbish crouched before a pot of steaming rice, a flat wooden spoon in one hand and a hunk of meat in the other. His lean, but strong form was clear from the muscles on his neck that showed from under his loose deel robe. The hair on his head, too, had frequent

strands of grey like hers, strands she had tried to convince him were distinguished, appealing. Both of their fathers had greyed early. But Khenbish hadn't believed her praises. He looked briefly up at her as she approached their meal.

"You were gone a long while."

"Mm. It didn't go as planned." Ling Pei kneeled down opposite Khenbish, who ate a mouthful of rice before handing the spoon to her. "But I did find what I needed. I think you'll be very pleased." They spoke both of their languages at different points, depending on which language was most important for the subject being discussed. The Han language would always be easiest for her, though.

He never took his eyes off of the pot of rice, but tore into the boar meat, chewing and furrowing his brow. Ling Pei watched him for a moment, spooned some of the rice into a bowl that he had already filled with meat for her. Something in his expression set off an alarm in her mind, though she wasn't sure for what reason. She looked around the cookhouse as she ate and saw ducks that had been cleaned and dried, hanging on the wall. Rice had been bought from a Jurched merchant and stored in Khenbish's specially made pots, a device for pumping air from them rested just beside. Most of her tasks had been finished. She tried to catch Khenbish's eyes.

"And thank you for taking care of my chores. I would have stayed up late to finish them." She said.

"I was distracted. I mean, I needed distraction. It was—" Khenbish muttered nothings, still watching the pot and eating the boar.

Ling Pei debated whether she should show him the block in the scarf now, or after they'd eaten. She worried much of it would soon melt. He seemed very ill at ease

“There was something quite interesting, today, Khenbish. I should tell you, though, it wasn’t at the river where I had previously—”

“I received a summons, today.” Khenbish’s voice was rougher than usual, distant.

“What? From those officers?” Ling Pei set her bowl on the floor.

Khenbish reached into his robe and pulled a rolled parchment free. The wax was already broken. He handed it to Ling Pei, who unfurled it and eyed the gracefully scribed letters. She sighed.

“The scribes have altered their writing technique, further. It looks so very elegant.”

“The Khan is sure to remember my father’s war devices during the Jurched campaign. It’s likely that someone will recognize the family resemblance.” Khenbish bounced on his haunches as he stared at the rice.

“You’re meeting with the Khan, himself?” Ling Pei’s felt her neck break into a fresh sweat.

“The Lieutenants tell me he wants to meet, personally. I had hoped that the court wouldn’t have noticed my return while they were fighting in the west. But word must have reached the Ordu about my little constructions, here. There’s no other reason for him to request my presence. I am nobody, after all.” Khenbish glared into the pot.

Ling Pei tried to ignore her husband’s unkind reference to his own name. It was a name that meant ‘no one’, meant to fool evil spirits and prevent them from killing a newborn son. Obviously a battle over superstition Khenbish’s deeply logical father had lost to Khenbish’s mother. “Do you think he’ll want you to live nearer to Avarga? This place is so lovely, I’d hate for us to leave what you’ve built.”

“I suppose I’ll do whatever it is he and the Eternal Blue Sky desire me to do, Ling Pei.” Khenbish stood, his meal unfinished. “I’m expected in his audience in four days. I have to leave in the morning if I’m to be on time.” Ling Pei handed him the summons and he left the cookhouse. She heard him trip over the rope, curse himself, and pull open the flap of their resting house.

Their life with this village camp had been quiet and easy going. No one had challenged the familiar way with which she treated her husband. She was older than he by a couple of years, as was often the practice in this part of the world, but few men allowed their wives to take their leave with such freedom or to make decisions about important matters in public without first deferring to their husbands. They had not asked how it was that she had come to be a doctor and to read and write; few of them knew how to do either and assumed that most Cathay, or Han as they were called more and more often, knew such skills. The influx of foreigners resulting from the Great Khan’s conquests had made strange faces familiar to the Mongols, though there were almost none besides Ling Pei in this village. Few had asked to know why she left their home and the nearby village to travel the wilderness only to return with soil and rocks and mushrooms and plants and animal carcasses. There was little inquiry as to Khenbish’s constant devotion to his craft, hammering constantly in the cave with smoldering coals and a small, hidden stream that bubbled up from the ground. And not a soul had asked how such a healthy young husband and his slave wife could still be without children after seven years and why Khenbish hadn’t taken extra wives to compensate. Could life closer to the Ordu ever feel so safe?

Ling Pei pondered Khenbish’s state of mind. She had spent so much time preparing her apothecary minerals and hunting for the eagle egg; Khenbish must have spent hours alone brooding over his coming meeting. He was never so quiet, so aloof, as he was tonight. He always

had questions, always showed her what he had worked on that day if she had been gone for more than a few hours. She worried over her friend, her partner, who'd had to play at being her husband for so long.

Ling Pei quickly stored the left-over food from supper and tied the cookhouse door-flap shut, behind her. She ran over to the resting house, peeking in through the doorway. Khenbish was already sitting on his mat on the left side of the room, which was opposite her own. He wrung the summons in his hands as he stared at the wall. The paper was beginning to tear and broken pieces of wax formed a small pile in front of him. Ling Pei ventured a whisper.

"I'm running down to the village to fetch something. I'll return in a moment."

"It's already dark." Khenbish continued to stare.

"I'll be quick about it, Khenbish." Ling Pei dropped the flap and considered her plan. It was a variation on one of the solutions that they had sought in the past and there was little guarantee that it would work, but she hoped it would pull him out of so glum a mood.

She took a bundle of sticks tied together with leather from beside the resting house. It had already been dipped in fat and she ran over to the cave mouth, stealing the last living coal with nearby tongs, and set her bundle into a torch.

Ling Pei ran down the hill as fast as she could manage in the limited light. It took her more time than she would have liked to reach the first of the huts of the village and she feared that the people would soon be asleep. But procuring proper attire was essential to her plan.

After a brief search, she found the ger she was seeking and poked her head inside. The smell of sandalwood and peppered goat greeted her; the felt walls were hung with richly colored silks and there was the cross of the Nazareth god hanging high on a post. Ling Pei's own resting house had fewer decorations, but each was a keepsake from her old home far away.

“Pardon me?” Ling Pei smiled and laughed, but she was too loud and closed her mouth with her palm.

It wasn’t quite against etiquette, this late at night; her fellow villagers were relaxed and none seemed to mind her sometimes curiously timed arrivals and strange requests. She and Khenbish more than contributed their fair share to the goings on of the village, so social strangeness was forgivable. Thankfully, the four children of the family were still eating. An old woman looked up first.

“Oh, Ling Pei! Yesu’s blessings. Is everything all right?” the woman asked.

“Yes, yes. How are the warts on your ankles?”

“All fallen off. Thank you. You Cathay physicians have such interesting methods, just like my grandmother’s.”

“I’m glad to hear. Is your son-in-law home yet from the woods?” Ling Pei placed the torch on the ground and stepped inside to keep the wind out.

“No, not yet. And Odval is getting extra oil from Nekhii’s wife for the morning meal. Did you need something?”

“Well, I had an idea for cleaning the sap from Sukh’s cloak. It takes some time, so I figured I would get it from him now, if I could.” Ling Pei knew she was biting her lip, as she often did when she stretched the truth. Sukh’s mother suspected nothing.

“It was so warm today. He left it here.” The old woman took the cloak from a chest decorated with gold in designs from the Five Indies and handed it to Ling Pei.

Ling Pei bowed, graciously, and took the cloak with both hands.

“Please tell him, I’ll have it back fresher than new by tomorrow evening. I have a new process that may work better than traditional washing. It uses the juices of certain inedible

berries mixed with oils from a—” She planned to explain her entire process, but the old woman’s eyes glazed.

“Uh, yes of course, Ling Pei. I’ll tell him. Yesu’s blessings on you and Khenbish and your, uh, house.”

Ling Pei nodded, enthusiastically, and stepped out of the hut, ignoring the often mumbled “odd woman” that she heard when leaving the company of steppe peoples. She breathed deeply the scent of sweat and dirt and sap from the cloak and grabbed the torch, running back up the hill.

Once she had reached the bathing house, Ling Pei extinguished the torch and threw it over by the cold coals at the mouth of the cave. She went into the bathing house, peeled off her robes and undergarments, and dropped them next to her satchel. She took a washed pair of Khenbish’s pants from their place hanging on the wall. Rubbing the pants against Sukh’s cloak, she dropped them in a pile and pulled a length of cloth from a box. Ling Pei wound the cloth around her torso, binding her chest as flat as she could manage, and tied the cloth off at her ribs. She took one of Khenbish’s western tunics that he never wore and pulled it over her head, patting her chest and grinning.

Once wearing the pants, tunic, and cloak, Ling Pei went back into the cookhouse. She opened a precious jar and dipped her hands into the oil within. Reaching beneath her pants, she anointed her body with the oil, first covering her front between her legs, then slathering her backside and the space between her buttocks. She replaced the covering on the jar, blew out the last two candles in the cookhouse, and walked over to the resting house.

Outside the door flap, Ling Pei paused, weighing things in her mind. It was a challenge to focus in this way and she remembered from the last time that it would be best to twist up her hair

into a quick braid and hide it under the hood of the cloak. What would her mother think to see her this way, dressed as a man and living in a ger out on the barbarian steppes? Finally ready, she slapped the door flap loudly, grunted, and puffed up her chest, adopting a brutish expression. The hood hung over her eyes.

A moment later, Khenbish raised the flap open and stared at her, more tired than confused.

“Ling Pei, what are you—”

“Hey, friend. Call me Feng.” Ling Pei spoke as low in her register as she could, spitting common Mongolian words like a Siberian herder might, instead of the language of her homeland, Zhonghua.

Khenbish sighed.

“Feng? What? I don’t unders—”

“You got any tea inside?” Ling Pei looked past his shoulder, into the house.

“Uh, of course we do, Ling—” Khenbish shook his head.

“I’ll have some, then.” Ling Pei pushed past Khenbish and squatted down at the fire.

Khenbish followed her, eyeing her as he knelt to pour her a cup of tea. When she took the tea from his hands, she watched his eyes fall, slightly, as he smelled her clothes. She saw him briefly clench his jaw and she grew certain of her imminent success. She downed the tea, quickly and set the cup roughly in his hand.

“Like I said, call me Feng. You got a nice big home.” Ling Pei stood, letting the cloak fall open a little to show that her chest was flat. She watched Khenbish from the corner of her eye as he looked her up and down.

“Thanks... Feng.” Khenbish dropped the tea cup in its place and stood up, slowly.

Ling Pei walked over to her mat.

“Been out in the woods all day, rounding up some wild mares and stallions. No time to make it all the way home. I’ll sleep here, tonight. Unless you got a problem with guests.” Ling Pei stretched and bent over at the waist, smoothing her mat and placing her pillow in the right place. She grunted, again, upon standing, as viscerally as she could manage. She looked over at Khenbish.

“You going to put that light out?” She threw a nod over at the candles in the house.

Khenbish stared for a minute, then walked over to the door and tied it shut. He blew each candle out and placed a forged iron grate around the fire pit.

In the flickering light of the small fire, Ling Pei knelt down, a moment’s doubt sneaking into her thoughts. But Khenbish’s hands were soon on her, gripping her in the near dark. She resisted the urge to respond as she might otherwise have, and simply exhaled with all the masculine fervor she could summon. Khenbish held her close, smelling her cloak at the crook of her neck and groaning with anticipation.

Ling Pei fell to all fours as her husband bore down on top of her, rubbing her stomach, thighs, her flattened chest through the tunic. Khenbish had already hardened; she could feel through their clothes. She reached down with him, almost tearing the pants from her hips down to her knees. She felt him reach toward a jar for something, but she snatched his hand up in her own and directed it toward her backside where she had covered herself with oil. Khenbish sniffed her neck and she reached back to help him pull off his own pants.

Only a moment after she’d grabbed the blanket to place under her hips, Ling Pei felt Khenbish push himself inside of her, between her buttocks. She grunted again, the sensation new

to her each time, so infrequent was their curious love-making. Her legs were squeezed tight together and she felt his stomach quiver as his knees pressed, surrounding hers.

“...Feng...”

With each hushed whisper of her new male play name, each inhale of her adopted, rustic scent, Khenbish's movement grew deeper, more desperate. Ling Pei was quite pleased over his response. Her husband's breath grew more rapid and certainty of her success was at hand. She hadn't planned to find much physical enjoyment, herself, but she found her body building up a sensation as Khenbish's breathing flooded her ear and his hands massaged her thighs and belly.

Khenbish clung tight. His fingers dug into her skin and his legs shook beyond his control. His final pushes were accompanied by a tremulous, deep exhale from his throat.

Her husband's forehead fell against her shoulder. He was still inside her and she was no longer in control of her faculties. Ling Pei reached back and held his neck in one hand, the other hand she snaked between her thighs. Her massaging grew furious in only a moment, so excited by Khenbish's enjoyment had she found herself. In an instant, the moment of her full satisfaction came upon her in a surprising wave and Ling Pei moaned long, loud, her sweet feminine voice filling the resting house.

She came to her senses, but it was too late.

Ling Pei had felt the recoil behind her. Khenbish hesitated for a moment, then separated himself and fell to his back on the floor. Ling Pei looked over at him, able to make out the lines of his profile only by the dim firelight behind him. It was only then that she realized how her hair had fallen loose from the hood, how the wrap around her torso had unwound itself in her enthusiasm, revealing a womanly breast dripping with sweat. Ling Pei stretched her hand out toward her husband.

“Khenbish. I’m—”

“No. I am sorry. You needn’t be.” He spoke formally, in the Han language of Zhonghua. Khenbish was already sitting up. He stood and walked over to his mat on the far side of the house and fell into it, covering himself with the blanket. The faded smile he tried to send her over that vast distance stung just as a scowl might have, Ling Pei felt such failure.

“I’ll be up early, Ling Pei. Don’t worry about seeing me off, you deserve some rest. I, I think I’ll bring Yul along on my trip.” Khenbish turned away, saying no more.

Ling Pei stood, peeled the tunic off of herself, and covered her body in the blanket. She stepped outside, and took from a jug of water to clean herself. When she returned, Khenbish was still facing the far wall. She lay down on her mat, pushing Sukh’s cloak, the pants, and the tunic out of reach. She looked to Khenbish, wondering if he thought of Tsung Lo, the charming poet who laughed or slept or drank good wine so many hundreds of leagues away.

They lay wide awake, very still, until well into the third watch when sleep finally claimed Ling Pei.

Ling Pei woke slowly, images of her father in her thoughts. His round cheeks often pushed up in a smile, curving his eyes under grey eyebrows and a bound knot of grey hair streaked with black. It wasn’t that her father was never cross, she had known him to fly into rages at the ignorance and destructive choices of his peers and superiors, but it was impossible to remove his smile from her memory of him. He was so very sweet to her, sending her mischievous winks as her mother would dote over his clothes before his meetings with Generals and Princes. He paid Ling Pei more attention than most men paid their boy heirs. He had never resented being without a son, but educated her with his knowledge of medicine and science and

language, assuring that she would be capable of handling herself in their male dominated culture. She knew that it had been with the utmost effort that her father had protected her from her mother's attempts to marry her to an older wealthy man whose body odor was so noxious, Ling Pei had nearly gagged out loud upon meeting him the first time. And it was her father, who had summoned the brilliant insight to marry her daughter to his best friend's son, a Khitan young man from the north that everyone knew to be a lover of the cut sleeve, so that she would never be married to a cruel or ugly man. Plain women didn't quite have their pick of the finest men in The Great Sung dynasty of Zhonghua, and Ling Pei had been plain from birth.

But Ling Pei's father faded from her thoughts as she heard the snorting of horses and hauled herself from the shallows of her waking. She secured her robe and peered out of the door flap.

Outside, Khenbish was standing on the ground beside their mare. He was surrounded by three mounted horsemen, one of whom was tall and imposing with a great scar on his forehead. He glanced over at her as though she were so much rubbish. Khenbish petted Yul, their trained golden eagle, and fed him. Yul was perched on Khenbish's arm, which was covered by a thick leather and fur armguard. When he was ready, Khenbish extended his arm and Yul rose up, flapped his wings heavily, and flew off over the hills.

Khenbish stowed the arm guard in a pack on their white mare and looked over at Ling Pei. He waved for her to come out. Ling Pei stepped out of the ger and stood, silent. Khenbish looked up at the tall man on the horse.

"Lieutenant Khydir of the Great Khan's personal Zagun unit. My wife."

The tall man, Khydir, looked at Ling Pei and nodded, impatient. She bowed to him and the other men. To be of the Khan's top hundred men was a serious honor and privilege and Ling

Pei let her bow linger for a time. Khydir pulled his long braid from his lap, draping it over his shoulder, and turned his horse to where the sun was rising. "It's growing hot." He was handsome, if brutish, and she thought she saw Khenbish take a lingering glance at the lieutenant's strong forearms.

Khenbish huffed and lifted himself up into his saddle. One of the other men looked at him. "Friend Khenbish. Does this wife have a name?"

Khenbish took the mare's reins. "She does." He put the mare to a trot and began descending the hill. Khydir followed, without a word. The third man laughed, shaking his head. He bowed, politely, to Ling Pei, and took off with the fourth man after Khydir.

Khenbish may have been angrier with her attempts to seduce him that night prior than she had realized. Ling Pei knew that he was protecting her, avoiding the topic of her name and heritage, but he had barely acknowledged her presence. She wondered if he ever hated being a "lover of the cut sleeve", a man that loved men. She thought, as she watched the soldiers ride off, about the story of the Zhonghua king who felt such admiration and affection for his male lover that he cut the sleeve of his own royal robe in order to avoid waking him from a peaceful slumber. Ever since, the story had been referred to when discussing men like Khenbish. In Huaxia, such a thing was a well accepted part of society. Not so in the Chingiz Khan's empire.

Ling Pei's anxiety over Khenbish's annoyance led her to rush about their home all day, cleaning and preparing things as if he would be home that very night, though she knew it could be a fortnight or longer depending on the Khan's demands. At one point in the day, she ducked into the resting house and remembered to check on the egg. Her heart sank, further, when she found it cracked and foul smelling. Her work climbing the tree the day before had been mostly

for naught, but she took the egg and threw it into a pit that she and Khenbish occasionally used to capture boars. This disappointment drove her to working even harder, taking care of all of their animals and property.

Her busyness distracted her long enough, until almost sunset, before she turned her attentions to the bathing house. The moment she looked at it long enough to register her forgetfulness, she rushed inside to see if the ice was still frozen. It was a ridiculous notion, of course. Even though it had been floating in the steaming water of a caldera, the ice had been carried along a dusty road and had sat in a hot ger for the entirety of a long summer's day. It must have been a giant piece of ice that had slid down from the highest point on the caldera's lip and melted for hours until it became a size small enough for her to pick up. Mere chance. Her hair wrap and robes would be soaked.

She unwrapped everything and laughed out loud at the bizarre sight before her. The chunk of ice had not only remained, it seemed just as smooth and hard as the day before. Ling Pei forgot about all else. She carried the chunk of ice into the cave a few steps away and placed it atop Khenbish's largest forging anvil. As the sun was almost set, she lit the work lamps nearest the anvil and ran to grab her parchment and ink. She lit the lamps closest to a blank space on the cave wall, much of it was covered with scribbling and calculations for Khenbish's constructions, and drew a quick sketch of the ice on the wall. She should have been exhausted and famished from her day, but she was already deep into her method and knew she wouldn't sleep that night.

First she wrote down, in her native language, all of her assumptions about ice and its traits and properties. Then she wrote down what she had observed thus far about this particular piece of ice. She was used to studying all manner of materials, stones, woods, furs, anything that

might have unseen properties. It was always the case that she sought to learn more in order to help Khenbish with his constructions, but it was just as true that she had a bottomless curiosity.

Satisfied with her initial preparations, many of which she had learned from her father's own methods, she began to work in earnest. Ling Pei pulled a sharp stone pick from Khenbish's cache and used it to knock off a tiny piece of the ice chunk. She looked at it carefully, realized it was melting, and placed it in a small clay bowl where she observed it melt fully into water. Now she was puzzled in earnest. She knew that the burning sulfur water should have eaten through the ice, but this particular ice wasn't behaving at all as expected.

Next, she removed another sliver of ice from the larger chunk, placed it in a clay cup, and heated it deliberately with a torch. The water melted, and then evaporated as she boiled it into the air. She shrugged, scribbled the results on the cave wall, and promptly smacked herself in the forehead.

"Foolish girl. Initiating physical tests before you've properly observed!" Her words echoed her father's from childhood. She left the stone pick in its place, replaced the torch up against the wall, and held the chunk of ice up to the waning light with a piece of cloth as protection against the warmth of her hands. Inside, she spied an object suspended in the ice. "Ha!"

Of course there had been more to the event than she had at first thought; she shouldn't have been so hasty. The veins of the ice's structure shot from the floating object in pinched circles emanating from the opposite ends. After rotating the ice in her hands, Ling Pei ran over to the cave wall and began a rough sketch of what she had studied. Even as she drew, she knew that she must be careful to record everything before she did what she desired most.

After a few hours of close observation and study and moderate tests, Ling Pei finally returned the chunk of ice to the top of the forging boulder and found a rock she could heft over her head. She brought it down with finality on the chunk of ice. But the ice barely registered the blow and Ling Pei felt her bones rattle in protest. She stood back, gathering herself for a moment. After recording the result and building a good sized fire, Ling Pei laid the chunk of ice in a large hewn stone bowl and placed both over the fire. After an hour, when the ice seemed to soften slightly, Ling Pei pulled it out of the bowl, rested it on the boulder once more, and smashed it with the rock. It cracked into almost perfect halves and Ling Pei dropped the rock, exhausted.

Inside, she found a simple blue on black stone which was shaped like a shallow, cupped palm. When she touched it, Ling Pei gasped at its smoothness; it was difficult to hold in her hands, though there was nothing slimy coating it. She took a thin blade of iron from Khenbish's pile and pressed the edge against the stone. She found no invisible pull as she had with the rare earth stones her father had shown her years ago. After looking closely, it was impossible to decipher at all what mineral the stone was made of. Ling Pei would have to move permanently to the cave wall to record all of the traits more efficiently.

She pulled one of Khenbish's stools over to the wall, moved a few of the lamps, and placed the stone on the stool before beginning to draw and write. Every single detail she could think of, she put down on the wall. She planned, as soon as she had finished, to copy everything onto parchment so that she could carry the knowledge with her. It was likely they would move to Avarga for the sake of the Khan's growing empire, and Ling Pei couldn't bear to lose all of her new found discoveries. It was tedious work, but she was certain she had recorded everything she

could think of. She was so lost in the effort, she didn't realize that she had not needed to fill the lamps with oil as the light from the sun had entered the cave, making her task all the easier.

"Uh, Emchi?" The voice startled Ling Pei and she jerked her head toward the wide mouth of the cave. Standing there was the heavy, slow Sukh, a herder, carver, and woodsman. He had referred to her profession as a physician using the Mongol word to which she had still not gotten comfortable. His boots were muddy and his deel was too tight for his growing belly. He was of the Khitan tribe, like Khenbish, but related as closely to the Mongols as to the Khitans like the rest of their village/camp. He stared at the various implements in the cave.

"Oh, Sukh! You're out very late." Ling Pei dropped the stone in a fold in her robes and walked over to the bewildered man, wiping her hands on her sleeves.

"Out late? The sun has been up for quite a while, but I believe it is still morning." Sukh looked outside, trying not to be confused by the strange woman.

Ling Pei looked out with him, aware for the first time that she had worked through the night and well into the morning. "Ah, so it is. I've been quite busy in here. Did you need help with anything? How is your father's testicle. Back to the correct size?" She tried to smile a nonchalant grin, but she was anxious to return to her observations and worried he might need medical treatment that the shaman couldn't offer.

Sukh frowned a little. "Uh, he's stopped complaining of it, so it must be better. He only complains when something's bothering him, but never lets you know when things are good. Thanks for the medicine."

"Of course, of course." Ling Pei shifted, waiting.

Sukh cleared his throat. “Odval’s mother said you took my cloak to clean it? I was wondering if I could have it back, soon. I heard from the bone reader that it might rain tomorrow.”

Ling Pei stared, trying not to roll her eyes at the mention of fortune telling by the scattering of goat knuckles onto a dirt floor. But then, she remembered her night with Khenbish. “Oh, my! Yes. I am so sorry, Sukh. Khenbish was called for a meeting at the Ordu yesterday and I’ve been so distracted!” She tried to laugh casually and it came out too loud and forced. She was certain she had offended him, but Sukh’s face grew into a foolish grin and his shoulders slumped, bashful and warm.

“Well, Emchi Ling Pei. It’s no problem. I was just curious to know what you were going to do with the cloak. You’re so clever and you and Khenbish build such strange things. How long will it be until the cloak is ready?” Sukh shuffled his feet, all of a sudden avoiding Ling Pei’s eyes.

Ling Pei was confused. The usually angry, impatient Sukh was pleasant for the first time. She smiled at him, setting him even further off balance. “Sukh, I know I can have it ready before supper. Would you like some roast boar to take home for Odval and the family?”

“Oh, my! Sure. That’s very kind of you.” Sukh chuckled, adjusting the cap on his head. Ling Pei bowed and led Sukh out of the cave. As she left, she slid the stone into the small clay cup where she melted the first sliver of ice. Sukh tripped over his own boot as he followed her. She caught him, with no small measure of grace, keeping him on his feet.

A few minutes later, after she had ridden herself of Sukh’s nuisance, Ling Pei returned to the cave. She was finally starting to grow tired, but wanted to finish her notes. She ran to the

cave wall, renewing her scrawling, and looked around for the stone. She reached into the small clay cup, expecting to find the wet stone inside. Instead, the stone was dry, resting on a hard sliver of ice the same shape as the one which she had chipped from the larger chunk.

Ling Pei held the ice sliver in her hand, looking at it with her mouth hanging open. “How is that possible?” Ling Pei put the ice down and picked up the stone, cradling it in her hands for the first time.

It had been three days and Ling Pei still hadn’t slept. Her feverish efforts revealed that the stone might be invulnerable to all types of impacts and temperatures. This was terrifying to her, and exciting, also. What could be done with such a unique material? What could Khenbish build? Had anyone else in the world encountered such bizarre rocks? Her usual mania was stronger than it had ever been and she wondered how long she could keep up such a pace. She hadn’t been so excited about a material since she was a very little girl and her father had showed her those rare earth metals that clung to each other until pulled apart. She wished that he was there to explain all that was before her, certain that it was another secret he’d been waiting to reveal until he felt her wise enough to learn it. But she knew that there was no way of going backwards in life to rescue him and bring him safely to the present.

Ling Pei stowed the stone in her pocket and ran to the resting house to grab the inks that she kept in an old chest she had borrowed from her father. She sat down on her mat for a moment to rub her feet, laid down to catch her breath, then fell asleep for two days straight.

Ling Pei crouches at a stream on the outskirts of a great and unfamiliar city whose structures tower like mountains. A light mist falls down on her from above, a quiet reprieve from

further storms she knows will come. She dips a thin piece of paper into the water and watches it for a few moments. She fears that it may change from a pale blue to red or green, but it remains its original color of blue. She smiles and leans down to sip from it, then fills two large buckets.

There is a handsome man standing down a ways on the other side of the stream, his grey umbrella useless in the weather. She notes his expensive clothes and wonders why such a wealthy man stands in the rain, watching the city skyline. He doesn't see her for the moment, merely enjoys the world before him, occasionally massaging his bald scalp. Ling Pei sees that he has a scar on his head a few about his neck and arm. She thinks, perhaps to go to him and speak with him because he feels familiar, but she senses that it may be unwise to disturb him and so, leaves him be.

But another man, younger and less relaxed, runs up to the handsome man from further downstream and they hug each other with vigor. The handsome man makes to follow the other man, then turns back, noticing Ling Pei for the first time. He smiles, waving to her with an air of charm and cordiality. Now she knows that she recognizes his face. But all she can do is bow, so as not to offend his importance or his class. The handsome man grins back at her, shaking his head as though to admonish her politeness, and follows his younger friend away and back into the massive city. The rain falls harder and Ling Pei looks upward at the belching clouds, thinking that there may be nothing between herself and people like him. She puts her hands in her coat pocket and feels a sleek, hard stone nestled inside, a stone that only recently she came to possess.

When she opened her eyes, Sukh was kneeling over her and a fire was lit in the center of the ger. She roused herself as best as she could and sat up, pulling away from the gawking man. “Uh, Sukh. What are you doing in my home? Did you need your cloak, back? I think it’s ready.” He didn’t look as though he intended to touch her, but she couldn’t be sure. Had she forgotten to bind the door?

“Oh, Emchi Ling Pei. Glad to find you safe and asleep. I had been worried about you.”

“What about, Sukh? I’m just fine here, without Khenbish. We’re used to spending a few days apart on occasion.” For a brief moment, she remembered week-long hunting trips her young husband would take with Tsung Lo back in Huaxia while she waited at home building potions and sharpening acupuncture needles. Ling Pei looked around, not sure why Sukh needed to be so close.

“Well, Odval wondered if you’d been hurt after we didn’t see you for a time.”

“No, I’m just fine. Please, I’m not quite dressed for a guest.” She’d taken her robe off in her sleep and was barely covered by her blanket.

“The cave is pretty badly damaged. I’m glad you weren’t inside.” Sukh sat down, missing the hint about her state of undress.

Ling Pei frowned, and then looked at Sukh in the light coming through the doorway.

“The cave?” She grabbed her robe and began to dress underneath her blanket.

“That earthquake came out of nowhere. I hadn’t ever felt one, before. It was very unsettling, that one great smack. Have you been ever felt such a thing?” Sukh offered her some yak butter tea he had prepared on the fire.

Ling Pei hated the stuff, and his batch wasn't particularly brilliant, but she was famished and thirsty from her long sleep and the warm, heavy, sour swallows she took helped her to relax. "Sukh, what earthquake are you talking about?"

"Ha! It was yesterday, early in the morning. It must have woken you. My mother-in-law sleeps like a dead horse and she was screaming like a stuck sow. Three times in the space of an hour." Sukh sat down on a stool. "I tried to prop up everything that fell over in your gers. Not too much was spilled, though you did lose some milk you had in a jar in your cooking house. But we'll replace some of it for you."

"Thank you so much, Sukh." Ling Pei stood up, trying to feel less small next to the thick shouldered man. She looked around the resting house, but found no structural damage or sign of upheaval. How could the other structures suffer damage from a quake without this one showing any sign of unrest at all? Was he making up a story to get close to her? She thought about how strong Sukh must be due to his work and wondered if she could run fast enough to get to the village if he meant to chase her.

Ling Pei hadn't expected to look down and find her tea bowl empty. Sukh immediately took the bowl from her and filled it again. She failed to suppress a shudder, and returned to sipping. "But you said that the cave was damaged?"

"Ah, yes. I don't know if I could repair all of that stuff that Khenbish has in there. I barely understand what most of it is." Sukh poured himself an ample bowl of tea and drank it in two gulps.

"A lot of the devices were designed by our fathers back in Huaxia. He's perfected a few of them, I like to think. Let's have a look, shall we?" Ling Pei hurried out of the door after setting down the remainder of her tea. Sukh took her bowl and drained it before following her.

They walked over to the cave mouth and Ling Pei groaned. "It's quite bad."

"I'm amazed you don't remember the earthquake, Emchi Ling Pei. It was something awful." The mouth of the cave had been changed. A great piece had broken off and several of the larger stalactites had fallen from the roof and smashed into the cave floor. Ling Pei started to walk inside, but Sukh held up his hand. "It may not be so steady in there."

"I'll be all right, Sukh. Thank you." Ling Pei walked into the rubble, surveying the destruction. She saw several projects of Khenbish's and a couple of her own smashed by the fallen rock. There was even a jagged chunk of minerals that seemed to be steaming in a deep hole. Had it fallen from above and hit the still warm forge below? "Curse this shitty cave." It had taken her several weeks to help Khenbish clean and clear this cave of bat crap and boulders. After that, it had become the perfect workspace for the both of them. Khenbish was a master builder. And he would be annoyed at this mess. As for the notion of an earthquake, however, she continued to wonder. It couldn't have happened without waking her.

As if to answer her doubt, the ceiling of the cave crumbled further and she dove to avoid more falling boulders and dust. Immediately, Sukh was by her side, pulling her from the cave and dusting off her robes and her hair. "Are you okay?"

Ling Pei released the hard grip she had been holding on the sleek stone in her robe pocket, though she hadn't before noticed. "I'm fine. I suppose the earthquakes weren't finished." She fanned her face, noticing the glare of the sun above her. "And this heat isn't letting up, either."

"It's been hot, even for summertime. The weather from Hind has followed our Khan north for revenge." Sukh shrugged at his own joke.

Ling Pei crouched down, catching her breath. “Khenbish is having a terrible week. First the summons, now all of this damage. It’ll take a long time to fix or rebuild everything.”

“He won’t take it out on you, will he?” Sukh was standing above her, watching her with unrelenting eyes.

Ling Pei stood up. “Of course not. He never does.” She looked away, embarrassed at his question.

She wanted to return to the cave to see if she could save any of hers and Khenbish’s sketches from the cave wall. She didn’t fully register, for the first moment, that Sukh’s hands were on her body, trying to pull away her robe and grip her breasts. She didn’t shriek, as she had never been touched by anyone but her husband and hadn’t realized what was happening. Sukh’s mouth was on her neck, the husky and sour aroma from his yak butter tea invading her nostrils. He sniffed her in the most intimate, familiar way and Ling Pei took more than a few gasps of air, not sure whether she should try to stop him or call for help. But she felt Sukh’s coarse stubble against her cheek and thought how unlike Khenbish’s soft, Manchu-style mustache it was. Ling Pei grabbed Sukh’s wrists, twisted them like her father had taught her years ago, and slid away from him. He didn’t renew his attempt, but neither did he stand apologetic. They watched each other for a long moment.

Finally, Ling Pei managed to spit out her words in a stutter. “The Great Law forbids adultery, Sukh. You should know that and not risk your family’s well being. Khenbish will be home, soon, from his meeting with the Ordu. He may even return today. You ought not try such a thing, again, if you—”

“I know you can’t have children, Ling Pei.” Sukh said. Ling Pei looked down, ashamed at the statement being made aloud. She wanted to run away, but something in Sukh’s gaze held

her in place. Was it admiration? No, it must be lust, merely. Sukh continued. "But I don't care if you are barren. Odval seems to get along easily with you and we have plenty of children already. You could live with us and be my second wife. I provide plenty of food. It is, well, you're so beautiful. I couldn't help but say."

Ling Pei stared at Sukh. She realized that no one had called her beautiful since her father had died, a decade before, and that no one had called her beautiful before that time other than her father. And she knew her father to be near-sighted.

But now, this man, a man of no education and barely any manners, had called her beautiful to her face. He was a man who couldn't possibly understand or appreciate her intelligence, he didn't know if she could cook, well, and he assumed that she was barren. It made no sense why he would want to marry her. But, Ling Pei thought of her last night with Khenbish before he left to meet with the Khan, and she wondered whether he would even care if she left him to marry another man. She would never be the pretty Tsung Lo, lithe and clever and muscled, not to mention wealthy; Tsung Lo was so rich and charming that he hadn't even bothered to marry a woman for the sake of social graces. Sukh continued to watch her with that look of admiration, or lust, or awe. She needed to escape it, but she wasn't sure she wanted to.

"Uh, Sukh. I'm flattered by your offer, but, I, I must see what my husband thinks of the idea." She wasn't quite sure of why she said it that way, but Sukh's nodded as if it were a normal matter.

"He may desire a wife who can give him children. I need no more. Please come down to our home for supper, this evening. We would love to spend more time with you."

"I have to clean the cave, Sukh. I, I suppose I'll consider." Ling Pei backed away and started to step through the rubble.

“I’ll make sure Odval has extra helpings for you! Please be safe, Emchi Ling Pei.” Sukh waited a very long time before he finally turned and walked away down the hill toward the rest of the camp. Ling Pei watched him leave out of the corner of her eye and couldn’t help but wonder whether she had misinterpreted something he had said. Even after seven years of living in the new Mongol empire, she was still thrown off by certain customs and cultural morays that Khenbish hadn’t thought to explain to her. Did such proposals and invitations happen often, here? Khenbish had never mentioned it. She knew there had been horrible battles fought over the wives of powerful chieftains in the past, and The Great Law didn’t suggest that women were so interchangeable or unimportant that it was commonplace to attempt seducing the wife of another man during his absence.

Ling Pei began to pick through the debris in the cave, guessing at the damage of each object and searching for her parchments. She worried about her Zhonghua style paper. It held ink better than Goreyon paper, but broke apart in water faster. Miraculously, she found a large, wide bowl which still held some of its water from her tests a few days earlier. She looked at the reflection it showed of her, studying it.

She seemed a little younger, though that was probably a trick of the reflection. She noticed that the chip in her tooth she’d gotten from one of her countless stumbles was no longer so pronounced, also likely a result of the imperfect reflective surface of the water. The silver streaks in her hair was absent in this light, but she was no less plain than she had always been.

Ling Pei sighed, turned away from her reflection in the water, and set about surveying the walls of the cave that hadn’t been covered with dust. Her stomach growled at her, however, and she thought about how nice it would be not to have to make her own supper for the evening.

Ling Pei hadn't had time to change into her cleaner clothes before sunset and she descended the hill toward the village camp concerned that she was too dirty to be eating as a guest at her neighbors' home, especially if she was being considered as a potential wife. She thought about the way Sukh had grabbed her, as if overwhelmed by the attractiveness of her features. Perhaps a slow-witted, common man didn't have too particular a taste. Odval wasn't ugly, but nor was she pretty by southern standards. Perhaps that was it. Ling Pei's Han heritage might have seemed exotic to Sukh. A plain woman to the Hans was an intrigue to the Khitans. Yes, that was the best explanation.

"I assure you louts, she is considering."

Ling Pei could hear a conversation before she was anywhere near the gers of the village camp. It was Sukh's voice speaking with three or four others, probably all men. She was over five hundred strides up the hill, yet, but their words were clear.

"No one cares about your proposal, Sukh. Cathay women don't fart flowers any more than our own women, do." The other voice was Tuul, a guardsman and herder. "And she's not even so pretty."

"No, you just haven't paid attention to her qualities. Ling Pei is busy, as a woman should be; that is why you've missed it. She's healthy and young and she works hard." Sukh said.

"And has no children, you monkey. And surely that part is her fault. No Khitan or Mongol man has troubles with his lovemaking. Even a man as peculiar as Khenbish." That voice was Nekhii, a hawk trainer and breeder.

"Yes, surely Khenbish is no nobody when it comes to a man's nighttime duties. It's that fancy Jurchen woman of his. Her belly is dry as autumn snow." Tuul again.

Sukh grunted. "You're all blind, I assure you."

“And you’re a fool, Sukh. Good luck keeping your wife from poisoning your new woman’s supper.” Said Tuul.

“Or your own supper, for that matter!” Nekhii laughed hard, and the others were with him.

Ling Pei found herself in their midst before she expected to be. She was so startled that she almost didn’t notice how much she, herself, had startled all of the men. Each fell silent as she bowed politely as she could. “My apologies for interrupting.” She tried to walk to the door of the ger, where she knew there would be sanctuary among the women. But Sukh and the others were slow to make way for her. They gazed at her as none of them ever had before, as no one had done before Sukh that morning.

No one was rude, yet they were silent as night out on the steppe. She weaved her way between the men and ducked into the ger. As the smoky warmth greeted her, she heard Nekhii release a long held breath. “Boys. Our man Sukh is not so dim as we have called him.”

“Ah! Ling Pei. You’ve arrived! And you look so, so striking.” Odval’s voice greeted Ling Pei from near the fire. Ling Pei bowed and sat down beside the plump, dimpled woman in garish Persian robes with makeup on her eyes. The children were playing a game with their grandmother, but all stopped to look at Ling Pei.

On any other night, Ling Pei would stutter, trip over her words, or speak so incessantly that anyone nearby would find excuse to seek out menial tasks to gain refuge from her presence. Instead of this, Ling Pei grinned at the children and their grandmother, then touched Odval’s arm, as though they were sisters. “Supper smells delicious, Odval. Is it your own recipe?”

Odval blushed and shrugged. "It's an old family dish, but I've added some Arabic spice. Here, taste it with me. Tell me what you think." Odval tasted from the steaming cauldron, then offered a spoonful to Ling Pei.

Ling Pei ate with great relish. "You make such a delightful home."

Ling Pei was starting to wonder who she was, this Ling Pei who walked gracefully, charmed women, and drove men to silent stares. And had she stopped her attempts to analyze the scenario for even a moment, she might have realized how much she was enjoying herself.

A week later, after supper every night with Sukh and Odval, Ling Pei had made up her mind to become a second wife. Annoyed by the practice when she witnessed it in Zhonghua and even horrified by the occurrences she'd seen here in the north, Ling Pei had to admit to herself that Sukh and Odval were different than she had expected. They treated her as an equal, often better. Every idea she had for improving life in the hills and out on the steppe, they drank up with enthusiasm, suggesting actions be taken immediately. It felt like it might become a true partnership, like the one she had enjoyed in the early years of her social marriage with Khenbish, before they ran from the Sung Dynasty and life became lonely and routine. Ling Pei had never needed to admit to herself that she wanted a real marriage with real affections and maybe even normal lovemaking, though the thought of the latter with Sukh was not exactly an exciting one; she simply had got so used to her lot in life that she never considered a different one.

And she felt eloquent and clever and funny in this language that used to feel so awkward to her most days. In truth, she felt healthy all of the time, despite the growing heat. She had spent a lot of time walking the hills, even running some mornings. She had deduced new ways of training their meager livestock to behave specially on command. She also figured out a way to

repair a few of the tools from the debris in the cave and use them to fix the bridge Khenbish had built which had been damaged by bandits earlier that summer.

When she thought of Khenbish, however, she felt uncertain. She thought about her newfound ease in life and wondered if his recent coldness had caused her social difficulty. That idea, she knew, was unfair to him; she'd never been a woman of grace or charisma. But Khenbish's growing distance certainly hadn't made her any more elegant. Maybe she had just needed a man to pay her some attention, the kind that Sukh had paid her without alcohol or role playing or begging on her part. She had considered succumbing to Sukh's advances, but held off, still. Was Odval actually okay with having a second woman in their home? Ling Pei understood women even less than she understood men, but knew that vengeance and jealousy were no less likely to arise in the heart of a woman than a man.

Ling Pei finished repairing Khenbish's forging billows just after playing with an arrow design that had never been completed. The billows had taken her nearly a day to complete, but seeing as its building from scratch had required weeks of planning, failure, and rebuilding, Ling Pei was very proud of her accomplishment.

It had taken some time, during her work in the cave, but she had also finally deduced that there had been no actual earthquake. The heated mineral pile had not fallen on the forge, it had come from the sky. This she knew to be possible, explained by her father's astronomer friends as a natural phenomenon, but it was amazing to have come so close to it. If the villagers had never been in an actual earthquake, like those the volcanoes created, they might have mistaken the unfamiliar impact for something they'd heard of. Ling Pei made sure to keep a piece of the mineral once it had cooled.

She looked out over the shallow valley, past the village camp, and over the wide stream that ran nearly dry from the baking sun. In the pale sky, a league away, she saw a speck that approached. After squinting for a moment she walked inside of the newly reinforced cooking house, she had strengthened the bamboo supports two days prior, and emerged with the arm guard. She took her time securing it to her forearm and made certain the furs were on top. From her pocket, Ling Pei pulled a large mouse that she had trapped and saved for the occasion.

A screech pierced her ears and she extended her arm out from her side. A moment later, their powerful golden eagle landed on her arm. Ling Pei fed him the mouse and placed a leather cap over his eyes. "Yul! Welcome home. Khenbish sent you to greet me, yes?" She tied him to his perch and went to wash up and change into her cleanest clothing. She might intend to be married to another man, soon, but she would never greet Khenbish unkempt and dirty after he had been on such a journey. He deserved an orderly home and a clean woman to come home to, at the very least.

But Ling Pei considered that, other than the first few weeks after they had run from her home to settle in the land of his childhood, she and Khenbish had never really tried to live as married. They were more like business partners as she studied materials and practiced medicine while he designed and built complex machinery. It had become evident early on that she was far clumsier a lover than Tsung Lo and it was difficult for her to connect to Khenbish, as she had never been with anyone before him. She hadn't been a very quick study. But Khenbish had been patient with her, almost endlessly in those days, and they hadn't given up love making until the morning she had inflicted a minor but unpleasant injury on him, leaving him hunched for three days. He was still ready to help her learn, after that, but Ling Pei couldn't bear her

embarrassment and suggested separate sleeping spaces to insure against further mistakes on her own part. Over time, Khenbish had come to decline their interactions even more often than she.

After that it had become only on occasion, when he was overwhelmed by lust and she relaxed by alcohol, that they joined awkwardly as lovers. But it always turned out funny for them both. If they lay as man and woman, Ling Pei could not help but feel Khenbish's inadvertent recoil from her body before he forced himself forward. If they lay as man and man, she always left the encounter feeling like a failure. But the role play of the previous week had been an excellent idea and had almost worked; she would need to make sure her costume was better secured the next time. But no, she wouldn't. She would be married to Sukh and Sukh was actually drawn to her feminine form. She would never need to pretend again.

It was almost dusk when she could see Khenbish arriving on the outskirts of the village camp. She smiled that he was unaccompanied, until she looked out beyond, in the crimson glow, and saw a team of men and carts far behind him. She waved a fly away from her face and went inside the bathing house, took the boiling cauldron off of the fire and cooled it a little with water from the kettle. Supper was ready in advance inside the resting house. She had turned down Odval's personal invitation for dinner, an event that seemed to induce a noble suffering in her eager hostess.

A few minutes later, Khenbish came up the hill on their slender white mare. Without a word, he half fell out of the saddle, tied the mare near the wide mouthed jar of water Ling Pei had prepared for her, and walked over to the bathing house where Ling Pei stood, door flap open. Khenbish stopped at the door and looked up. Ling Pei had never seen him so hard and beaten and

weary, but his expression softened, melted even, when he saw her. She'd never before heard him trip over words, either.

“L, Ling Pei! Uh, how have you been?”

“I’ve been well, Khenbish. I hope your travels were uneventful.” Ling Pei hoped that speaking in the lyrical language of her home would be a comfort to him after days of his own, rougher language. She took him delicately by the hand, the way she remembered her mother escorting her father when his sight began to go, and led him into the bathing house. She untied his boots and pulled his clothes from his body. He watched her, really watched, as she scrubbed him with clean cloth and poured the hot water over his back and neck and dusty hair until it shone. She wrapped him in a clean deel, placed silk Han sandals on his feet, and led him to the resting house where dinner waited.

They sat and he began to devour the goat she had braised. “Everything looks wonderful, Ling Pei. You must have spent no time preparing tinctures for medicine.”

“I tried to keep things in order and had very few patients to attend. But the cave collapsed.” Ling Pei sipped her genmai cha, even though she had so little left of it from home.

“The cave collapsed?”

“An earthquake. Well, mineral boulders fell from above the sky, actually. A lot was destroyed, but I’ve managed to repair the billows and the tall bow. The new catapult model was completely crushed, though, and I haven’t gotten to rebuilding it and some of the other things. And I meant to tell you before you left that I found another eagle for your aviary, but it cracked the day you left and wasn’t developed. I do know where to find another one, however.”

Khenbish stopped eating and stared at her. “Thank you!” he blurted it, frowned at himself, and went back to eating. Ling Pei waited until he had finished his meal before giving

him a cup of her tea, the love of which they had always shared. When he sipped from it, she thought of the day their fathers had sat them down to tell them of their coming marriage, when the four of them had shared the genmai cha while her mother was away, arranging another match for her. They had all been through so much difficulty together, it had surprised them that such a long time had passed before anyone suggested she and Khenbish be joined legally.

“What happened during your meeting with the Khan?”

“He was still at Burkhan Khaldun, praying to our ancestors. Instead, it was that Khydir you met and the Khan’s second son, Chaghatai. I tried to downplay my usefulness, but, they’d heard about my siege designs and Khydir studied that bridge I built when we first arrived. They want me and my work in Avarga by the end of this week.” Khenbish sipped his tea, distant, again, for a brief moment. But when Ling Pei sighed, he was immediately roused from his listlessness.

“More weapons of war?” She watched back at him over the tilt of her tea cup.

Khenbish nodded. “Indeed. But Chaghatai won’t listen to any new ideas, as I had hoped. He just wants stronger bows, tougher armor, faster arrows, lighter saddles. He’s finished with his father’s reforms.”

“Not all men are improvements on their fathers.” Ling Pei finished her tea and stood up, a little surprised at her assertion.

Khenbish watched her. “I don’t know whether I can navigate all of this. I want to add richness to people’s lives, not help slaughter them in droves.”

Ling Pei looked down at him as she closed the flap of the resting house and bound the door. “You’ll be just fine, Khenbish. I’m certain you can manage all of the blood and the politics without too much strain.”

Khenbish caught Ling Pei's gaze. "You're coming with me, yes, Ling Pei?"

Ling Pei did her best to hide her surprise. Though she had been promised as a slave wife to him when her father was captured and assigned to serve his father, they had never considered that he would own her when they reached adulthood. Particularly due to their time of relative freedom under the Sung in Huaxia. Khenbish now looked as he at times had when they were younger, eyes widening, lower lip protruding; he had never before begged her for her attentions thus. She took a deep breath. "I assumed you would be called to work for the Ordu and I wasn't sure if you'd want me there alongside as a burden. Besides, Emperor Ningzong won't be sending anyone to look for us within the Khan's borders, so I can wait here indefinitely if need be." Khenbish set down his tea and looked at the fire. Ling Pei continued. "Also, Sukh, the wood carver, asked if I was interested in being his wife if you weren't coming back."

Khenbish chewed on his mustache, a nervous gesture Ling Pei had noticed once, a few days before their wedding, and very few times since. She wondered about telling him so soon after he had returned, particularly now that she was falling back into uncertainty. Khenbish stood to face her. "What did you tell him, Ling Pei?"

Ling Pei looked down, a faux yawn accenting her words as she stretched her arms. "I told him I'd have to speak with my husband, first."

Khenbish's eyes were vacant for a moment. He then burst into laughter that shook his body deep from within his chest. Ling Pei chuckled with him, brushing her hair from her eyes and smiling at her gentle friend. Perhaps it was the tea and the reminder of their fathers' friendship that made her change her mind. Perhaps she had looked at his face and understood how truly alone he was in his own homeland. Or perhaps she sensed a need in herself for his

company beyond what had been their daily lives and the thought of him continuing on somewhere without her was more than undesirable.

He embraced her and she felt pushed against her thigh the almost forgotten stone still stowed in the pocket of her clothes.

They had been on the steppe for two hot days, as many of their unique tools and designs and inventions that could be loaded into the Khan's carts following behind them. Inside the makeshift ger that Khenbish had raised, Ling Pei unrolled mats for another windy night.

Ling Pei felt almost chilly, somehow, in her chest, even as her skin was flush. She looked at the tall bow prototype resting on a pack, Khenbish had refused to leave it in a cart for one of the Khan's servants to damage, and thought about her husband's intelligence and strength of will. How had she even considered Sukh? The dull droop of Sukh's lower lip was just beginning to fade from her memory; she had seen it last as she rode out of the village camp. He hadn't appeared angry or sad, only stared at her, she was certain, for a long time after she had turned to face her destination. Sukh severely lacked faculties in comparison with Khenbish. This, Ling Pei had known all along. The memories of his impatience, the severity with his children that Ling Pei had witnessed on multiple occasions prior to her week of courtship with him, his stubbornness in always wanting to perform tasks his way, the same way, every time, all had returned with Khenbish and his long lost smile. How longing had she been for a hungry touch to have been so certain about the other man?

But Ling Pei remembered Odval. She was a pleasant enough woman, after all. Even before Sukh had made his proposal Odval had treated Ling Pei and Khenbish kindly, gifted them

extra firewood behind Sukh's back, even helped Ling Pei carry water up to their gers when she had time to spare. She was a bright enough woman.

"Poor Odval. Stuck with that stump of a man." Ling Pei frowned at her chilliness in the uncommon heat and put her cloak back on, feeling instantly better.

"Ling Pei, come and see!"

Ling Pei ducked out of the ger and walked over to a brook where Khenbish stood with Yul perched upon his arm. At Khenbish's feet was a very large hare.

Ling Pei smiled. "Such good work, Yul! I'm impressed with his growing strength."

"Yes, but his sister can fly quite a lot higher than he can." Khenbish hefted the hare and walked back towards the ger, followed by Ling Pei. He placed Yul on a makeshift perch and walked to Lieutenant Terbish of the Khan's Zagun, the polite warrior Ling Pei recognized from the week before. "Lieutenant Terbish. Would you like a hare?"

Terbish was squatting, stoking a fire. He stood to look at the hare. "Ha, quite big! I'd love it. Did you trap that or did your eagle catch it?"

"A gift from our strong Yul. I'll have Ling Pei prepare it for you."

"So, the wife has a name. And a Sung name at that! But no need, Khenbish. I can skin an animal all on my own. I'm sure you all have plenty to do. But feel free to have some of the stew from this big thing. I'll be making plenty tonight." Terbish grinned, bowed a little to Ling Pei.

"Sure." Khenbish handed Terbish the hare and led Ling Pei back to their ger.

Inside, Khenbish took the tall bow in his hands and studied it. Ling Pei unraveled a parchment with design sketches to remind herself of the particulars of a saddle that she and Khenbish had worked on together, but she noticed him looking at her. She returned his gaze in inquiry and he smiled at her.

“Ling Pei. You said that you repaired this prototype after the cave ceiling damaged it?”

“I tried to fix as many things as I could.” Ling Pei returned her eyes to the sketch, conscious of biting her lip. She crouched down and laid the skin on the ground where the last of the setting sun lit up the design. But Khenbish knelt beside her.

“You repaired it just as I had it before?”

“I’m sorry if I didn’t return it to its original state. I was sure you could mend anything that I couldn’t.” Ling Pei watched anything but Khenbish. Khenbish picked up the quiver leaning against the ger wall and walked outside. Ling Pei knew that he meant her to follow him and did so, saddle design still in her hand.

Khenbish led Ling Pei far away from the camp to where no one could see them. There was an old horse that had died only two hours before; Ling Pei remembered that Terbish had figured its meat too old and tough to be worth eating and the body had been left in the grass to disintegrate into the earth or be devoured by scavengers. They measured five hundred paces away from the dead horse; Khenbish prepared the bow string, then bent and strung the tall bow using all of his strength. He took an arrow from the quiver, but kept it from her sight as he sighted the horse corpse.

Ling Pei looked at the bow. It was taller than her husband by three hand lengths. The string was a specially braided line of sinew that she and Khenbish had spent months testing and creating. And it had been Khenbish’s idea to form a clasp where the handle was traditionally placed, allowing for the shooter to extend one leg with which to hold the bow while using the arm of the same side to draw and fire. Unlike the old two footed, two handed design used in Ling Pei’s home land centuries before, Khenbish had discovered that a steady warrior could fire the tall bow from horse back with mobile and devastating results. But for all of their work and

ingenuity, he had never been able to aim the arrows the way he needed and Ling Pei had felt his frustration over the project wane into apathy.

Ling Pei watched as Khenbish stood on his right foot, placed his left foot in the clasp on the tall bow and extended it straight out. He knocked the long arrow and drew the bow string long and tight, taking aim. She could see the arrow he had chosen, now, and held her breath. Khenbish released the arrow and it flew over the steppe grasses. The ensuing blast was short but loud and there was a small finger of smoke that rose into the air over the arrow's intended target. He lowered the bow, unstrung it, and walked the five hundred paces back toward the horse. Ling Pei followed him.

Khenbish pointed at the small, blackened hole and the bits of horse strewn about.

"See, Ling Pei. I was able to hit it dead on without any awkward measurements. And the bow is nearly four times as powerful as before. That keeps the rider safe from the explosion. And that black powder arrow that I had given up on last year has mysteriously worked perfectly."

"Your no-wick design was always brilliant. And at five hundred paces." Ling Pei knew that she'd been discovered.

"My design. Ling Pei, I can't find any points of breakage on this bow." Ling Pei was silent as Khenbish studied the bow. She watched his shoulders, but they stayed low and relaxed. She looked at his jaw, but it was soft. "I wondered, at first, how it had been broken. But this bow has never been broken. Has it?"

"No."

"You made an entirely new bow."

"The old one was shattered beyond repair, Khenbish. I didn't want you to fret over its loss."

“And the arrow, Ling Pei?”

“I had an idea that I hoped would solve your old difficulties with it. It seems to have worked, properly.”

“Didn’t you think I would notice? You kept with my designs, my carving marks almost perfectly. But I spent weeks with the old bow.” Khenbish looked at her, his eyes narrow.

Ling Pei looked away from him. “I assumed you would realize the subtle changes eventually.”

Khenbish took her chin in his hand. “When it fired better than it ever had before? And this exploding arrow is amazing. How you made it so small is impressive. I studied an empty arrowhead all last night by the fire. You’ve bested my designs, Dr. Ling Pei.”

“I had wondered how you’d feel.”

Khenbish carried the tall bow over to a jagged boulder, regarded it for a moment, and smashed the bow against it four times until it splintered. Each smack caused Ling Pei to wince. Khenbish carefully picked up the ruined pieces and returned to her, dropping them at her feet.

Ling Pei’s tongue pushed hard against the roof of her mouth and her throat held her breath in her lungs. She tried to roll up the parchment she had been looking at, but her hands were unsteady. She gave up, staring at the sketch but seeing nothing of its details. Khenbish stood before her; his quiet grin was conspiratorial.

“With your new bow and arrows, Ling Pei, the Khan might have slaughtered the whole of the world.” Khenbish rolled the sketched design for her and placed it in her hand. “We’ll empty the other arrows and destroy the heads before supper.”

Ling Pei nodded, breathing with greater ease. “I had wondered how you’d feel.” She said again.

The warmth of Terbish's thick stew kept the evening frost from Ling Pei's bones. The other warriors and workers ate heartily, impressed by Terbish's cooking and Khenbish's eagle training.

"No, no. She figures out all of the difficult problems. I just hammer things into place." Khenbish had said. That had elicited raucous laughter.

"I'll bet you hammer things into place!" The warriors and workers clapped Khenbish on the shoulders and he laughed in spite of himself.

Ling Pei tried not to be scandalized, though she'd never grown used to such open talk. No such thing would ever be mentioned back home. There were no other women with them and Ling Pei sat close to Khenbish as they ate; the soldiers passed around the airag and sang songs while Terbish plucked the strings of his morin khuur. Ling Pei declined the airag. She was pleased to see that Khenbish also declined the fermented horse milk; it soured one's breath worse than the yak butter tea.

Ling Pei and Khenbish retired to their ger while the men outside continued to sing and drink. Terbish was a mellow man for a Mongol officer and they were yet far from the Khan's severity. Khenbish tied the flap against the steppe's night wind, pulled his boots off, and dragged his mat beside Ling Pei's. Ling Pei untied a heavy blanket and covered both of the mats, removing her own boots and crawling underneath. Khenbish crawled under and held her.

Ling Pei's eyes were heavy and she sighed at the thudding of her husband's heart against her back. She drifted off once or twice, but was woken by the singing outside and the pleasant strangeness of being in someone's arms. Khenbish's breathing was deep and even, but Ling Pei put her hand on his cheek.

“Khenbish?”

“Mm. Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“What?”

“The arrows.”

“Mm. Hmm. Impressed.”

Khenbish grunted, hugged her tight, and was asleep again. Ling Pei closed her eyes. The singing no longer kept her awake.

Five days later, the wind was still pushing through the hills and the sun was scorching over head. Ling Pei was following Khenbish over the crest between two mountains when her horse stopped short. She had been playing a target game with Lieutenant Terbish and two of the other horsemen. One player would choose a far off object for the next player to attempt to hit with a small pebble, thrown by the hand. She was increasing her accuracy and enjoying the game immensely, but missed her last throw when her horse ruined her aim.

“Ah, bad luck, Lady Khenbish.” Terbish laughed, his half moon eyes nearly closed. He had taken to calling her Lady Khenbish, she assumed, to put his valuable ward at ease. “You have to be prepared for your horse’s attitude, as well.”

“I’m certain to get the next one, Lieutenant. Be assured. Khenbish, what is it? Oh—”

Ling Pei looked past her husband to see the ger city of Avarga sprawling before them in the distance. Gers were lined for a long way on the island-like land between the Tsenker and Kherlen Rivers. She could see the confluence a long way off and watched women crossing over the bridge closest to the hills. At the horizon to the south, a great train of camels laden with

treasure sidled over the steppe. She thought of how much bigger Avarga had grown than the reports she had heard from travelers. It still wasn't like home, by any means. The Khan preferred felt walls to stone walls and horses to palaces, but that didn't mean that he was to be neglected. To the contrary, Ling Pei could see from the warriors patrolling and training just how worthy of attention the Mongol ruler was.

Lieutenant Terbish rode up and clapped Khenbish on the shoulder.

"Come along, clever man. I'll take you to your place. Your belongings will arrive, soon."

Terbish shouted a few orders to the other horsemen about the carts and packed horses, then led his own horse down the hill and out of the mountains. Khenbish looked to Ling Pei for a moment, then led his horse after Terbish. Ling Pei figured that she was meant to stay with Khenbish's belongings and flared her nostrils.

She watched them for a moment, then threw one last flat stone and made it curve against the wind. It hit the bush thirty paces away that she had missed before. Ling Pei kicked her horse into a trot and went after Khenbish.

Terbish led Khenbish and Ling Pei along the tents of Avarga. Ling Pei noticed all of the different types of people on the way. While the majority of the camp's denizens were Mongols, there were those of darker, browner skin, some with her own features, and even a few with pale skin and wavy hair. She saw a flag with a crescent moon in a few door flaps, Yesu's cross above the doors of other homes, statuettes of fat and grinning men, a drawing of an elephant face with a human torso her father had taught her was Ganesh. So many people from so many nations, but there was little doubt that the Khan was leader of the empire; most everyone bowed low to Terbish when he rode by.

Ling Pei saw a woman shaman from the mountains laughing with a black-capped Child of Israel and was amazed that the Khan allowed such openness of worship, though all the while a man like Khenbish was forbidden from seeking the closeness he was desirous of because every Mongolian man needed to have many children.

There were tents and gers as far as she could see, and only a very few solid structures of wood or stone. When Ling Pei thought on the great towers and walls of the Jurched courts, or the majesty of the Grand Temples in the Sung Capital, Lin'an, it was almost impossible to imagine that the man who had mastered the majority of the world resided in a city made of animal skins and flimsy cloth. It was an uncommon and bizarre manifestation of power that the rulers defeated by the Khan's campaigns had been unable, time and again, to comprehend. The Mongol warriors had always moved quickly. It was so quickly that even her wise father had failed to predict their siege against the Jurched leaders fourteen years before when he'd taken Ling Pei to visit a mathematician friend of his. Ling Pei's father had lost his friend in the violence, but gained a new one when Khenbish's father had recognized a clever man of learning fallen to his knees, begging for the safety of his twenty-one year old daughter. Khenbish's father had worked swiftly to protect them both from the other warriors.

Terbish slowed in front of a wood and clay building. He entered through the space at the front into a modest courtyard and Khenbish and Ling Pei followed. Terbish dismounted, inviting them to do the same. He showed them the four rooms and the stairs to the roof.

"The Khan used this structure for storage of excess goods. He left Han and Muslim tools for you to use if helpful. You should find it sufficient. And safe." Terbish smiled.

"Safe? You mean guarded." Khenbish was surely holding back more venom from what Ling Pei could see, but Terbish paid the harsh tone no mind.

“Protection is highly important. We are finding spies from all over the world; they’ve taken quite an interest in the Khan’s empire, and for good reason, wouldn’t you think?”

“Spies?” Khenbish appeared as curious, now, as he was angry.

“Yes, spies from across the sea from the Nihon island, from the other side of the world where the Saxons rule. We’ve arrested men sent by the last surviving Sultans of the hot deserts, Siberian barbarians from the frozen north. Even merchants from Lady Khenbish’s home land of Han have been found to be spies.” Terbish’s tone was mellow as always with his last statement, but Ling Pei’s stomach would, nonetheless, remain twisted for the rest of the day. Terbish continued. “We have to protect against those spies learning of our tools and strategies. The Khan likes to have as many cultures under his tent as he can, but he doesn’t mean to trust all of them.”

“I suppose a spy could spoil a whole campaign if he learned the right information.” Khenbish looked at Ling Pei. She felt that he looked very much like his father in that moment, heavy with too much thought.

“Of course. Even if a spy had gotten a hand on an instrument that had been deliberately destroyed, it could still be learned from if not properly disposed of.” Terbish smiled again, bowed, and leapt up onto his horse. Ling Pei dared not look at Khenbish in that moment. Somehow, Terbish knew the fate of the tall bow and exploding arrow. “Have a good night’s rest. Lieutenant Khydir will expect you to begin work soon, Khenbish.”

“Be well, Lieutenant.” Khenbish sighed as Terbish rode out of the courtyard.

Ling Pei touched his arm. “Was he warning or threatening?”

Khenbish walked over to the mare and began to unpack her, saying nothing. Ling Pei stared at the doorway out of the courtyard for too long before beginning to unpack her gelding. There were many hours left before the day’s end.

It had been a week in the Khan's tent camp and Ling Pei was still unused to the sensation of sleeping in a structure made of anything other than wood and animal skins. There was an unwelcome silence that came from sleeping so far from nature's night sounds. Khenbish was capable of sleeping anywhere and snored softly next to her. Ling Pei got up and walked into the next room where some of their supplies from home still sat unopened. She searched with a torch until she found the correct pouch and took from it a dried root. She cut away a small slice of the root, returning the rest to its pouch, and chewed on it for relaxation as she climbed up onto the roof.

Looking out over the vast camp with all of its silk brocade designs and iron kettles over dead and dying fires, Ling Pei somehow felt a little closer to Lin'an in Huaxia, though the fact that these physical reminders of home were the spoils of war was not lost on her. She set the torch down and stared at the far away watch fires and constellations above them, her hands in the pockets of her robe where the sleek stone had accompanied her from their village camp that was so far away. Ling Pei touched her belly; she knew that what had happened between her and Khenbish on the journey to Avarga had created an unexpected result. She grinned some, but felt scared, and missed her mother more than her father for the first time in her life.

It had been hard for her not to resent her mother since she and Khenbish had rushed away from life under the Sung. Neither as a child nor as a young woman had Ling Pei ever managed to grow close to her mother. Her mother was quite the opposite character from her father; she was fiery and passionate, a socialite who kept their family in the good graces of politically powerful families her father had managed to irritate, a spiritualist who's deeply held superstitions had driven Khenbish to fond chuckling in remembrance of his own mother. But Ling Pei had chafed

against her mother remarrying so quickly after her father's imprisonment and death, and to Ling Pei's father's cousin, at that. Ling Pei's new stepfather hadn't intended to protect Khenbish any longer than was needed in order to appease Ling Pei's mother, and notified the local governor of the presence of a second steppe warrior living under the roof of Sung nobility as soon as it was clear he wouldn't offend his new wife. Ling Pei's mother had chosen her new husband over the safety of her daughter's. Ling Pei bristled at remembering all of this, but wanted her mother's knowledge and company all the same.

Ling Pei sat down, unable to imagine returning to sleep in the stuffy structure beneath her. It was a pleasant night out. The torch had been blown to ash not long after she had come out. Only the stars and the distant watch fires lit up the night.

Ling Pei felt the gaze of her husband as she awoke on the rooftop of their home in Avarga. Khenbish wasn't upset with her.

"Too warm inside?" He smiled and shook his head.

Ling Pei rubbed her eyes and sat up from the floor of the roof. "Mm. And too quiet."

He sat down next to her, tapping the floor. "And too soft, as well?"

Ling Pei laughed. "I hadn't planned to sleep out here. Can we raise a ger next to this structure?"

"Of course. My barbarian wife."

Khenbish kissed her behind her ear. Ling Pei knew that Tsung Lo had taught Khenbish how to kiss, as Khenbish had grown up giving affectionate sniffs to mingle souls as most steppe tribes did. She managed to be grateful instead of jealous toward Khenbish's true love for the helpful lessons. Khenbish had become an excellent kisser. And like every other time since they

had left for Avarga, she was surprised by it and pleased by it. It had been the best week of their lives, at least their lives together. Ling Pei didn't know why his attention for her had been so invigorated in his brief absence from their home, but she was so taken with it, she had forgotten about Sukh's proposal and the dumbstruck faces of the other men in their old village. Neither the cheerful and strangely kind Lieutenant Terbish, nor even Lieutenant Khydir, who was certainly attractive and powerful, were of any real interest to her. There was only Khenbish.

And she reveled in the surprise that she would give him in a few weeks. It had happened once, when they were first married and had tried to live like a normal couple. But nature had been cruel. She was determined to wait at least a little while to let Khenbish know.

They had kissed and touched for a while and the sun was already rising. "Come back to bed for a little while. It's not so warm down there, anymore." Khenbish was starting to undress her even there on the roof and she wasn't stopping him.

"Yes. Okay." Ling Pei rose to her feet and Khenbish stood beside her, never releasing her from his grasp. As the sunlight wove itself between the strands of her hair, she felt strong and vital.

"Uh, sir." The voice from behind them elicited an annoyed sigh from Khenbish. Ling Pei slid her robe back over her shoulder and looked past Khenbish at the young messenger who had discovered them on the roof. "My apologies, sir."

"Yes?" Khenbish was without patience and Ling Pei laughed a little at his frustration.

"Sir. Lieutenant Khydir on behalf of the Khan wishes to know of your progress." The messenger couldn't manage to avert his eyes from Ling Pei's figure. She looked him up and down, pleased at her cruel flirtation. The messenger stuttered without managing any full words. "W-whatever progress you m-may have—"

Khenbish snapped at him. "Our progress? Tell the Lieutenant that we unpacked everything and managed some sleep over the past week. And tell him that the arrow plans he left me are worthless without making adequate alterations to the bow structure. In addition, his new armor will need to be entirely redesigned if he actually intends to ride while wearing it. I will continue work on both disasters after I've eaten something."

Ling Pei let out a soft chortle, but both men heard it. Khenbish dropped his head, smiling against his will at her inappropriate response. The messenger's eyes grew wide and he fled the roof without further comment. Ling Pei let out a long laugh and Khenbish tickled her.

"You're going to get me executed, woman." He said to her.

"I think your attitude is going to get you into more trouble than I do." She pinched his rear end.

He grunted. "They know what I'm worth. Khydir doesn't like me, but the Khan will forgive me much if I deliver. And I will." He began to grow sober, but Ling Pei grabbed his face.

"After you've eaten something, yes?" She kissed her husband's bare chest and he succumbed to her touch.

Ling Pei was still lounging on the bed after Khenbish had dressed and he looked over at her. "I do hope you'll help me, with all of this. If we please the Khan enough, he may just let us live where we want."

"If he likes what you do, he'll want you close. Especially considering me." Ling Pei said.

"What do you have to do with it?" Khenbish asked.

"You tried to tell them that I'm smarter than you."

"You are."

Ling Pei rolled her eyes. "As ridiculous as that is, Khenbish, if the Khan believes it, he won't let us beyond his sight."

"It sounds like you're suggesting that you're some sort of great treasure." Khenbish kissed her forehead. Ling Pei pulled away.

"No Khenbish. I'm Sung aristocracy from the Han." Ling Pei sat up in the bed and covered herself.

Khenbish's expression grew dark. "He might expect you to betray the empire."

"The more I know about the capabilities of the Ordu, the more dangerous I'll be if there is any further conflict with Sung Dynasty. And there surely will be. There are riches under the Sung roofs that the Jurches never came close to matching. The Khan doesn't know that we can't go back home as who we once were." Ling Pei said.

"And he might not believe if we explained." Khenbish peered at her. "I'm not used to you predicting political moves and analyzing motives. I knew you were the smartest."

She laughed a little. "I'm going to wash. I'll meet you for breakfast?"

"Sure." Khenbish disappeared from the room and Ling Pei stood, looking for her robe, and absentmindedly placed the stone into a fresh robe before washing herself. After she finished, she put on her undergarments and pants, wrapping the robe around herself. She felt the stone through the outside of the pocket.

She found Khenbish in the courtyard, drinking tea and studying some plans on a parchment. She said nothing to him, but sat down and began to eat her breakfast. Khenbish looked up at her and winked before returning his attention to the plans.

Ling Pei sat down, content to eat. But standing in the entry to the courtyard was the towering figure of Lieutenant Khydir.

They had stood or paced for several hours, Khenbish and Khydir, discussing armament, weaponry, and the like. Many of the topics had been listed and drawn out on parchment which was stacked on the table. Ling Pei had been sent out of the courtyard, but she could hear the sharp edge to Khenbish's quip, the low simmer of Khydir's retort. She peeked in occasionally while she busied herself with organizing the blocky structure that was their new house, but the men had rarely moved further than a few steps from the small table.

Eventually, she decided to work on the far edge of the courtyard. She had lit a fire and had placed a large rooster over the coals. But she noticed silence and glanced behind herself. Khenbish was detailing his saddle design, but Khydir had stopped talking and was staring at her. Against any judgment she stood up straight and stared back. He placed his hand on his sword and Khenbish stopped.

"Lieutenant, what— Ling Pei? You were to unpack." Khenbish was doing well, moderating his voice, but there was strain.

Ling Pei shrugged to Khenbish. "You two have been discussing all morning. Will his Lordship join us for a light meal?" She returned her steeled gaze to Khydir. Ling Pei used a title of nobility precisely because there was no blood power under the Khan's rule. It might have been insulting to Khydir to suggest that he hadn't entirely earned his position, and she enjoyed this possibility. Khydir had no good reason to treat them with such disdain.

Khydir turned to mutter something to Khenbish, but Ling Pei heard it well. "A woman with a strong will requires heavy discipline."

Ling Pei returned to preparing the meal, but could not resist speaking out loud to herself. "Discipline builds a strong will. Why trade a disciplined woman for a weak one?"

Khydir watched her for a moment longer. Ling Pei paid him little attention while she tended the food. She plucked free one of the rooster's gonads and popped it in her mouth. She guessed that Khydir held back a smirk. He sat down at the low table when Khenbish offered him a place.

When the rooster was fully ready, Ling Pei served the two men, bringing them yak butter tea that Khydir had refused earlier that morning. Khenbish shot Ling Pei a look of reproach, to which Ling Pei bowed with grace. Khydir sipped the tea with trepidation, then his eyebrows rose and he cleared his throat, nodding. Khenbish sipped the tea, as well, and laughed.

"Ling Pei. This is the best you've made."

"It's a new iteration of the old recipe. To celebrate our new home. And new comrades."

Ling Pei avoided Khydir's eyes as she returned to the fire to clean up.

Khenbish shook his head and drank his tea. Khydir spoke as he drank his tea and ate from the rooster.

"Tomorrow, you appear before the Khan. You will discuss everything we've discussed today and he will make corrections where he sees fit."

"Of course, Lieutenant Khydir." Khenbish shifted, glancing back and forth between Khydir and Ling Pei.

Ling Pei returned to refill Khenbish's tea. She plucked the second gonad from the rooster and ate it. "Finally. I've looked very much forward to meeting the Great Khan."

Khydir dropped the rooster leg he was eating and stood, towering over Ling Pei. Ling Pei felt her heart race as she looked up past the great black beard and into the large man's eyes. Khenbish leapt up, trying to get between them. But Khydir pushed him back. "No one gains an

audience with the Khan without special permission. Particularly no Han woman. If your husband does not know how to keep you in line, perhaps I will demonstrate for him.”

Ling Pei spoke her Mongolian words perfectly and without accent for the first time.

“Chief Khydir. It is not hard to see that Khenbish’s wife is of Han lineage. Let the Khan meet me, so I can prove to him I am loyal.”

“Loyal to the Mongol empire? Or to fled Jurches of Cathay?” Khydir almost sneered.

“Loyal to my husband. Khenbish would never betray the Khan and I would never betray Khenbish. Are you as loyal to the Khan?” Ling Pei had a feeling that she had struck a tactical vulnerability, though she wasn’t sure how it was that she knew this. Khydir confirmed her suspicion.

“Woman, I am a member of the Khan’s personal Zagun unit!” Khydir drew his sword and glanced at Khenbish. “I’m ridding you of this loud mouthed wife, Khenbish. Find yourself another.”

“Khydir, please!” Khenbish was going to throw himself between them again, Ling Pei could see. She stood closer to Khydir and locked eyes with him.

“The design of your saddle is very clever, Lord Khydir.” Ling Pei said.

“Cease you talking, woman.” Khydir grabbed Ling Pei by her hair and pointed the sword at her throat.

Ling Pei ignored the point of the sword that was already cutting into her skin, springing a tiny string of blood that tickled her chest. For all the blood Khydir had spilt in his life, she knew he would still prefer to avoid contact with any; the steppe peoples had such funny taboos for butchers. “My father. My Han father. He taught Khenbish’s father how to position the stirrups that allow you to stand and fire arrows from a more stable stance while moving at a gallop.

That's what makes you so successful in your raids." Khydir paused at this. Khenbish was so close; Ling Pei could smell his sweat mingling in the air with the rooster meat from Khydir's breath. She continued. "And Khenbish's reinforced arrow you demanded wouldn't be so strong if I'd not told him from what tree to take the wood. Like our fathers before us, Lord Khydir, we add to one another's knowledge. Feel free to waste Khenbish's loud and useless wife. But don't expect the Khan will be happy with your initiative."

Khydir stared at her. He wiped the small amount of blood on his sword onto Ling Pei's robe, picked up his leg of the rooster, and walked out of the courtyard, taking a juicy bite. "I think you may have, indeed, married a man, Khenbish. See that his mouth doesn't cost you your neck." Khydir disappeared amongst the gers of Avarga.

Khenbish turned to look at Ling Pei. She returned his gaze, but she was not prepared when he hit her hard with the back of his hand. She staggered, more shocked than hurt. The pain, in fact, was vanishing quickly and the blood from her neck had ceased all together.

They were quiet a long time. Ling Pei straightened herself.

"Khenbish—"

"Don't ever endanger yourself that way!" Khenbish spoke low, but with a tremor that she had never heard before. "I've lost my mother and my sisters. You're all that's left."

"I'm trying to protect you."

"By vexing one of the most dangerous warriors in the world!" Khenbish's breaths were shallow and inconstant.

"By endearing you to the most powerful ruler in the world." Ling Pei touched his arm and he didn't pull away as she expected.

"How?"

“Let me bear Yul to the Ordu, tomorrow. I’ll show you, Khenbish.”

Khenbish nodded. “I’ll raise that ger for us before preparing my presentation for the Khan.” He walked away into a store room, shoulders drooping like a man twice his age.

Ling Pei watched him go, then sat down to look at some of the plans and sketches. Her eyes devoured them rapidly and a breeze from the confluence made fresh the hot air inside the courtyard.

The tents of Chingiz Khan’s Ordu were large and many. Around each were guards who watched everything and Ling Pei was certain they had trained themselves not to blink. The Ordu was in the center of Avarga and Ling Pei thought it the safest, most dangerous place in the world. The Khan, when he was a boy and unknown in the world, had killed his older stepbrother in order to take over their poor, small household. As a young man, he had forced himself upon countless women during his rise to authority against the many powerful khans and warlords of the steppes, ensuring the breadth and longevity of his line. As a warrior, he had driven hundreds and hundreds of peasants into moats to be drowned and crushed under siege engines as his warriors rode over them and tore down the walls of many a mighty citadel. It was difficult, while surrounded by the Ordu tents, for Ling Pei not to think of these feats of cruelty, despite the progressive law and order that followed them. But the Khan had created order, at least for those under his rule. Many of the great sorrows he had endured in his youth he had sought to prevent with his written laws. Adultery and kidnapping, a mainstay event only thirty years prior, were now illegal so to prevent needless infighting amongst the Mongol people. Animal theft was punishable by death. And the laws were above all people, rulers and followers, so that corruption would be prevented.

As the guard led Ling Pei and Khenbish toward a large ger, she held tightly on to the leather straps that were tied to Yul's feet. Yul was perched on her arm and flapped mightily at the smells and sounds. She had left the leather cap over his eyes and he squirmed to remove it. Ling Pei figured he sensed a great change occurring; he had always been a bright animal. She whistled to him, high and gentle, and he calmed his wings and twisting.

Beside her, Khenbish was silent. She wasn't sure why he had accepted her ideas, but she imagined that he had given up and was prepared finally to die. The Eternal Blue Sky had made its decision, he must have thought, and Ling Pei would be the vehicle of his demise. She, however, was almost certain that her ideas would please the Great Khan. But the guard interrupted her thoughts when he stopped at the open flap of a larger ger and motioned for them to enter. The door was so high that she figured Khydir could have leapt through without upsetting his hair.

The interior of the ger was simple and put Ling Pei at greater ease than she had expected. Absent were the gold trimmings and bejeweled armaments that she had seen in the Sung and Jurched courts in her youth. Simple cushions, albeit covered in highly rare black sable fur, clean silk wall hangings in the colour of the Eternal Blue Sky, the scent of jasmine. It was not the throne room of an opulent, self important fool that displayed riches to assuage his self doubt. No, there was the feeling of home on the steppe, a simple and unpretentious form of survival. Now she knew that bringing Yul had been the wise choice.

The ger was empty but for the old man with an unfamiliar hat sitting bent over on cushions near the center of the ger, his eyes shut as if dosing. A scraggly beard and long fingernails both rested against a bulging belly. Ling Pei frowned, but started to approach the old

man to kowtow until Khenbish touched her free arm, stopping her. He whispered. “An imam who attends the Ordu.”

Ling Pei nodded, annoyed with her silly presumption. She looked to one side of the ger and saw two staffs stuck into the ground. As Khenbish rearranged the parchments in his satchel, Ling Pei left his side to study the two staffs that she understood to be suldes. Each had a crown of horse hair bound to the top. One sulde was made of pungent cedar and the flowing horse hair was the brightest pearl and silver tied to the staff with gold thread. It stood above her, almost touching the sloping roof of the high ger. Beside it, the second sulde was a rich mahogany and the chocolate and midnight strands of horse hair were braided and twisted around the top, tied with thin iron bands.

“You have taken interest in my soul, I see.”

Ling Pei took a deep breath and turned away from the suldes. Past Khenbish and his strained expression stood a thick man even taller than Khydir who didn’t quite look at them, so tired he seemed. The man was pleasing to the eye, if almost twice her age, and he wore simple grey boots, cap, and a worn deel that must have once been the colour of spring leaves but had faded. The man scratched his long, almost fully grey beard, and walked over to a stand that held a stack of blue noms, books of the law. Ling Pei watched Temujin, the Chingiz Khan, take note regarding a legal matter before he stood to face her and her husband. Khenbish fell to his knees and Ling Pei placed Yul on the ground beside her and followed suit. They touched their heads to the floor nine times in kowtow, leaving their eyes downward when they finished.

“Stand, please. There are no attendants recording your rights and wrongs today.” Temujin Khan set the blue nom book back down in its stack and walked over to where Ling Pei was standing up. He touched the white hair sulde, as if studying it after a long absence. “A man who

rules so much of the world as I do requires two suldes to house his soul. One for peace time.” He tapped the cedar sulde, then reached over to touch the mahogany sulde. “One for war time. What most khans and sultans, I am sure even popes, learn all too late is the same thing that I have learned all too late.”

Ling Pei kept her eyes low as she spoke. “That it takes a different man to rule in conquest than it does to rule in quiet?”

Khenbish went from soft but labored breathing to utter silence. Ling Pei looked up to see Temujin Khan regarding her. Her smile was slight as she bowed her head once more.

Temujin Khan’s frown was not of malice and he nodded, once. “Very much. Very much. And I am not sure how to be both men. I sometimes wonder if it is the fool’s path, or the sluggard’s, to choose the easy way. For me, the saddle has always been easier than a cushion.”

Ling Pei uttered no reply. Temujin Khan left her side, lifted a table, and set it next to Khenbish. “Khenbish. A Khitan, yes?”

“Yes, Khan.” Khenbish’s shoulders were rising and falling again with ease and Ling Pei watched her husband speak with the ruler of Yeke Ulus Mongols, the Great Mongol Empire.

“Lieutenant Khydir has spoiled much of your presentation. But despite his disdain, and my son’s impatience, I am impressed with what I have heard of your progress.” Temujin Khan never seemed to waste a movement; every glance, every breath, every pause was deliberate.

“I am happy to hear this, my Khan.” Khenbish had taken his parchments from the satchel and spread them on the table. He held up a lamp so that Temujin Khan could study. Ling Pei stood, still and proud, as Khenbish explained the details he had developed and she had altered with him. Temujin Khan nodded, asked questions, even prodded on occasion. Ling Pei marveled

at the man's intelligence. He was no engineer, but he understood even Khenbish's new designs as well anyone could have.

The entire time, the tiny old imam sat on the cushions without speaking. He finally fell forward a little and woke himself, suddenly. He slowly nodded off, again. Ling Pei smothered a laugh, but Temujin Khan noticed her.

"The old imam is here to pray to his Allah on behalf of our People of the Felt Walls. As if his Allah was somehow above the Sky." He looked at the imam, then back to Ling Pei. "He was surrounded by the bodies of his sultan's court when we discovered him. He approached me, as if I were a little boy, and put his hand on my head to bless me. I've kept him with me ever since." Temujin Khan returned his attention to Khenbish's work.

Ling Pei studied the Khan's body language as he spoke with Khenbish. A call from outside was heard and Temujin Khan called back. Two men, each in their forties, entered the ger, followed by Lieutenant Khydir and an older general who was as wide as two normal men. One of the men had a relaxed grin on his face while the other was more stolid. The old, heavy general had a beard as grey as the Khan's, but walked with great confidence despite his size and age. The four men stood near the table, each looking down at the plans before them. None of them failed to notice Ling Pei and she offered a benign smile to each, including Khydir. Temujin Khan welcomed them.

"Khenbish is well educated in the engineering arts, Chaghatai. You were not wrong." The Khan said. Chaghatai nodded and Ling Pei saw Khydir straighten himself at this. Temujin Khan continued. "However, I suspect that he is hiding some of his skills from us. A man this bright must not hide his knowledge. I would have hoped that the two of you would have seen it."

The grinning man chuckled a little at Chaghatai and spoke up. “Will you have this man build us fortresses and farms like a civilized nation, father?”

Chaghatai glared at the grinning man. “Ogodei! Respect father’s wishes. We will always be a people of felt walls.”

The old, heavy general clapped Chaghatai on the shoulder. “Don’t be so explosive, young man. Your brother jests, I’m sure. We could never fall to laziness like those cows we’ve conquered.”

Ogodei shrugged. “Ah, see, father. Cousin Subodei always understands me.” He grinned, again, and took a long look at Ling Pei as Temujin Khan looked down to distribute some of Khenbish’s plans. Ling Pei now understanding these two men to be the Khan’s oldest surviving sons, she realized that she was seeing the heir to the seat of the world in Ogodei, the younger and more playful of the two. She liked him at first glance, though the notion of his replacing his father was an unsettling one.

“I fear, my sons, that many of our people have already fallen into laziness. They long for more treasures from the West and the South. This is why Khenbish’s saddle, arrow, and bow designs will be given to every Mingan leader to copy and issue to his men for alterations. Another campaign will tax our old resources.” Temujin Khan sighed, softly, and Ling Pei saw him glance at Khenbish with the briefest flash of regret, though no one else noticed. He stood up, straight. “We’ll consider what else our Khitan friend has to show us, soon. Lieutenant Terbish says he may know a little about Han powder.” Temujin Khan looked at Khenbish, who stole a glance at Ling Pei. She remembered the exploding arrow out on the steppe.

“He seems to have good taste in all Han goods.” Ogodei laughed, saluting Khenbish and raising his eyebrows at Ling Pei. She rolled her eyes a little at the statement, letting his admiration slide off of her, which she worried immediately afterward might intrigue him further.

His glance lingered, but Temujin Khan was finished with the meeting. “Go. Show the Tumen and Mingan leaders these parchments and make sure that each is copied stroke for stroke before the engineers begin to build.”

“Yes, of course, Chingiz Khan.” Ogodei said. He left, spry in his step, and sent a last playful glance toward Ling Pei. He was followed by his brother Chaghatai and the old general, Subodei.

Temujin Khan stopped Khydir. “Lieutenant. See that Khenbish has any extra materials and assistants that he needs. Report your readiness in one week’s time.”

Khydir bowed. “Yes, Chingiz Khan.” Khydir left without looking at Khenbish or Ling Pei, but Ling Pei saw a smile on his face that confused her.

Temujin Khan looked at Khenbish and Ling Pei once they were alone, again. “Subodei has grown fond of Arabian marzipan. I suspect it in the widening of his waist.” Ling Pei laughed out loud and Temujin Khan smiled at her. She could taste, somehow, the fish and dried seaweed her father would prepare for her when they traveled without her fussy mother. The salt and the oil and the pin bones she pried from between her baby teeth. The Khan was nothing like her father, but he cast a hedge about her that made her feel somehow safe. Temujin Khan looked at Khenbish. “Ogodei has grown confident ever since I named him my successor two years ago. Some days, I would prefer more wise sons than bold ones.”

Khenbish must have been unable to speak as Temujin Khan began to leave the ger, but Ling Pei stooped to pick up Yul and place him on the arm guard she still wore over her arm.

“Lord Khan.” Temujin Khan stopped and turned to her. “Lord Khan. We brought a gift.” He returned to her and she showed him Yul’s magnificent wingspan.

He nodded. “An excellent gift. He deserves a place in my aviary. The guard outside will take him from you.” He turned to go, again, but Ling Pei touched his arm.

“Ling Pei!” Khenbish couldn’t stop his shout, but Temujin Khan raised a hand, silencing him.

Ling Pei locked eyes with the Khan. “Allow us to demonstrate why your aviary is not deserving of our strong and brilliant Yul.”

Temujin Khan held her gaze for a moment, then nodded.

An hour later, Ling Pei sat on the brown mare given her by the Khan’s guards. She looked over a plateau that displayed Avarga and the surrounding steppe. Beside her sat Temujin Khan on a young reddish grey stallion and Khenbish on a brown stallion. A dozen of the Khan’s guards sat behind.

Ling Pei whistled a series of complicated notes to Yul before removing his leather cap. Yul looked around at the men surrounding him, then out over the plateau, then up into the hills behind them. Ling Pei petted his head and extended her arm. Yul flew high into the sky with a clarion call, disappearing amongst the tops of the hills.

“Your wife is confident in your eagle training, Khenbish. Very confident.” Temujin Khan studied Khenbish’s expression.

Ling Pei saw that Khenbish gave him as little to study as he could. “She is, Khan.” Khenbish watched the steppe below the plateau.

Ling Pei could see admiration, despite frustration, in the Khan's eyes. He spoke again. "Your prudence of tongue will not be counted against you. The clever man speaks entertaining words. The wise man, few."

Khenbish's face softened. They waited there for several minutes and Ling Pei wondered if she had been overzealous about Yul's capabilities. But then, she saw that familiar speck following the line where the hills met the steppe. She narrowed her eyes, then clapped loudly, once, and pointed.

"Chingiz Khan, see. Our gifts bear gifts!" Ling Pei shouted. In the distance, the speck grew into the shape of Yul, who carried with him a great load.

Ling Pei raised her eyebrows at Khenbish and he returned the look. She knew, now, that her boldness had paid off. The Khan was desirous to hold on to the simplicity of his upbringing, the wholesome traditions of the steppe. Riding, hunting, animal training, they were the essences of this world that so few outside of it got the chance to experience; they were the soul of the Mongol culture that had grown so expansive and bloodthirsty. Watching a near perfect eagle, who didn't merely capture big game but brought it back because of his immense strength, was likely a pastime that Temujin Khan was too busy to enjoy at the peak of his great reign.

When Yul finally arrived, he nearly crashed onto the sun baked grasses of the plateau. In his talons was a fawn so large even the Khan gasped. The fawn was still alive and Ling Pei, without thinking, leapt off of her horse and snapped its neck. Temujin Khan nodded to one of his guards, who joined Ling Pei on the ground and hefted the fawn up so that the Khan could see it. The Khan's pleasure was obvious. Ling Pei extended her arm and Yul alighted, accepting his reward of raw fish. The guard carried the fawn to his horse and began to tie it to the saddle.

Ling Pei bowed to the Khan, displaying Yul before him once again. Temujin Khan looked at Khenbish. “Khenbish, I might consider taking your wife for myself if my own law did not forbid it!” Khenbish chuckled at this, likely somewhat nervous but complemented nonetheless. Temujin Khan clapped him on the shoulder. “How is it that what Khydir told me is true? You have no children?”

Khenbish’s face drained of colour and the way he opened his mouth told Ling Pei he would trip over his words without ever achieving any sentences. She stood up straight.

“Our lives beneath the Eternal Blue Sky have demanded patience of us, Lord Khan. But.” She touched her belly and looked over at her husband. “Our patience has been rewarded.”

Khenbish’s eyes grew wide and she knew that he understood that it was true.

Ling Pei walks throughout a large, beautiful house filled with wealthy, well dressed, cheerful people holding drinks in their hands. The house is lavishly decorated, songs are played by a great band of musicians, and there are tables laden with food that Ling Pei has never seen before. She feels out of place, lost, but finds herself constantly accosted by all of the fancy people. Each of them are desperate to speak to her, to know her name, to ask about her life. She struggles to make up a story that is interesting, but not too interesting; she knows they’ll sense an extravagant lie. The evening flies by, Ling Pei is the center of the gathering. The hostess beams, speaking to her and inviting her back. Ling Pei has never had such a magical night.

But when she leaves the beautiful house and the handsome people and delicious food, Ling Pei knows that she is still a nobody, that her lies don’t change the truth of her life. She walks back to her tiny shack, a place she has found pleasant enough until today, and takes from her purse all of the jewelry and candlesticks and coins and even food from which she could not

help helping herself to as she floated about the party. She can't see any future where she'll be different from the person she is, and she struggles to remember a time when she was a person that she liked.

For ten weeks, Ling Pei assisted Khenbish in designs and builds and attended to their household. Khydir and Terbish visited every few days, though never together, and looked over plans. Khydir all but ignored Ling Pei, but Terbish maintained an air of politeness that helped her feel at ease. She often stole looks at Khenbish as they were working, only to find him watching her, his expression a mix of fondness and studying. Even when she wanted to collapse at the end of a long and involved day, the life in her belly pushing her to exhaustion, she found it easy to stay awake just a little longer when Khenbish lay down beside her. But they never spoke about the child or about Khenbish's new desire to bond with her. Khenbish avoided either subject whenever she attempted to broach them, and after a short while, Ling Pei chose to accept her new fortune without exploring the doubt and suspicion that hovered in her thoughts. In truth, she was too busy with her role in the Khan's capital to think far beyond the logistical aspects of her daily life.

In addition to helping Khenbish with his designs in the evenings, Ling Pei held a small clinic in their ger for the Zhonghua workers in the city who desired their traditional medicines and practices. Ling Pei had informed a few of them that many of their medicines and treatments had been learnt from the Mongols in decades past, but this was usually met with dismissal. Her father had often laughed at Zhonghua intellectual arrogance, citing all of the Mongol, Arabian, and Hind origins of his culture's expansive knowledge. Not to say that much perfecting had not

been achieved by the Han over the centuries, he would reassure, but it was always necessary to remember that no culture was an island, not even the island cultures.

It was early in the afternoon and Ling Pei had just released a patient suffering from a cough out of her care when the young messenger appeared in the doorway of the ger. She smiled at him and he blushed before he spoke.

“Uh, Emchi. The Khan and his sons require a lesson in how to communicate with Yul, the eagle you offered as tribute.” The messenger said.

“When is this lesson to take place?” She asked.

“Now.” He replied. Ling Pei saw him fail to conceal a longing look at her neck before he retreated from the ger. She considered how young he was and wondered that so many Mongol men of different age and status had suddenly taken interest in her after years of invisibility.

“Really? In the middle of the Nadaam?” The Nadaam, the horse riding games, were a great to do in Avarga, as they were among all of the horse rearing steppe tribes. Ling Pei hadn’t had the time to see any, but even Khenbish had taken a break from his work to see a few contests. Ling Pei scribbled a quick note for Khenbish. She had always been comfortable venturing off back at their village camp, but in Avarga she never went far from their ger or their clay structure. After washing and changing into riding trousers and a long, semi-formal gown split at the legs, she brought an extra arm guard for Yul’s perch and followed after the young messenger.

The messenger led Ling Pei through a forest to a small sloped clearing on the side of a foothill a few leagues away from Avarga. Alone in the clearing, sitting atop a beautiful grey and black stallion, was Ogodei, the heir apparent to the Mongol Empire. Ogodei grinned as they

approached. Ling Pei had heard about the man's reputation of raucous indulgence and love of women; she sent an accusatory glare at the young messenger, who avoided her look and, instead, saluted Ogodei.

"Thanks. You can go." Ogodei told him.

The young messenger turned his horse and escaped the scene. Ling Pei was alone with Ogodei. She didn't bother to hide her sigh of mild exasperation, but pulled her gelding up alongside him, dismounted, and bowed. "Are we to wait for the Chingiz Khan before our lesson begins?" She asked, allowing herself to make eye contact with him. While Temujin Khan without a doubt required serious reverence, Ling Pei suspected she would need to assert some manner of confident equality with the indulgent Ogodei, if only to prevent his assumption that she was easy prey.

"No need to wait. He'll be late if he arrives at all. Too much to do, running this corrupt world. I'm quite busy, too, with the next few campaigns coming soon. But we want to know how to deal with your gift." Ogodei said, pointing up to the top of a tree where Yul was perched in rebellion.

Ling Pei frowned. "What is he doing up there?"

"He won't come down. All of the normal commands don't work. I left him up on the side of a high cliff the other day, I was so tired of his strong will." Ogodei almost laughed at this. "I complained about it to some of the men tending the aviary, and they said that he had returned ahead of me. They showed him to me and there he was, perched as if nothing had happened, eating the last bits of a gorgeous hare he had no intention of sharing. Made me look like a damned fool!"

Ling Pei chuckled with Ogodei, despite herself. He was too charming. She held out her arm and whistled a few notes. Yul descended from the tree and landed on her arm. She offered him no treat, but petted him a little, trying to hold his attention as she spoke to Ogodei. “Captain Ogodei. Yul does whatever he wants to do. You have to be smarter than he. Trick him into thinking that what you want is the same as what he wants.” She gave Yul a small push and Yul flew up to land on Ogodei’s arm.

Ogodei shook his head. “Now you’re making me look a fool, as well. How do I get him to bring me a sparrow or a dove instead of ground game?”

“It helps to whistle your commands like a Han would speak tonally. It isn’t necessary, but he’ll be more likely to listen if you’re nonchalant instead of demanding.” She told him, whistling a few command examples so that he could hear.

Ogodei cocked an eyebrow. “Nonchalant? That’s ridiculous.” He frowned at Yul. “You shouldn’t be so difficult, you behemoth.” Ogodei whistled a command in Yul’s ear, making a blasé face at Ling Pei to show how nonchalant he was being. Ling Pei laughed up at him. He extended his arm and Yul took off and disappeared amongst the trees.

Ling Pei clapped. “Very good, Captain!” She was genuinely impressed. He had picked up her intonations almost perfectly.

Ogodei shrugged, hopped out of his saddle, and sauntered up to her. “My father taught us quite well when we were boys. And we’ve had to learn a lot of languages over the years. Though I don’t know about all of this use of the Han tongue.” He leaned in towards her, looking her up and down.

Now Ling Pei blushed, despite herself. His likeability was a danger to her, if a pleasant danger. “It’s quite effective for animals.” She said. “The inherent musicality in the Zhonghua

language is easy for them to hear.” Ling Pei turned her body carefully, creating some distance between them without making it too obvious.

“Inherent musicality, huh? Who knew birds and beasts were so sophisticated.” Ogodei looked up at the sky and around at the trees. “Your Yul may be gone for a while. How might we pass the time? Any other lessons?” He caught her eyes with his own.

Ling Pei held her eye contact with Ogodei. She figured he wasn’t used to confident women. “I could teach you different techniques for commanding your mount. Khenbish and I have created an excellent system of vocal and non-vocal commands. Horses take to them very well.”

“I’m already quite good at being in command. And even better at riding.” Ogodei leaned forward and licked Ling Pei’s neck. She ducked away from him, trying to gage whether she could leap onto her horse and ride away before he could catch her on his own horse, a far superior animal by all appearances.

Ling Pei played as if he’d crossed no boundary and reinforced the subject. “Were you ever a champion at the Nadaam?” She asked.

“Champion? Not quite.” Ogodei said, rolling his eyes at her question about the riding games. “But my skills always won me more than adequate admiration from women of many cultures.” He quickly pressed his face to Ling Pei’s chest and sniffed her deeply, his hands grasping her waist. She gasped at his strength and the immediate intimacy. But he stopped sharply and locked eyes with her, a grave expression on his face. He spoke in perfect, sincere Zhongua. “Emchi, Ling Pei. I am so sorry. I truly am. I don’t quite know what came over me. I forgot that Han women very much prefer lip contact instead of sniffing.”

Ogodei grabbed Ling Pei's cheeks and kissed her on the lips. It wasn't an affectionate, deep kiss, but a firm and playful one. Ling Pei stifled a shocked giggle and grabbed him by his wrists, pushing his rough, strong fingers away and separating her mouth from his. She turned away, thinking, in that brief moment, that he had all of the brutishness that Sukh possessed, and much of the intelligence she prized in Khenbish. And he tasted better than she would have expected, tasted earthy and pungent and even a little sweet. And he made her laugh. But Ogodei was a great spiller of blood, an heir to a brutal empire whose laws he clearly felt little respect for. He consumed other men, while Khenbish sought to enrich them. Still, he was quite charming.

Ling Pei felt Ogodei hold her hair up to his face, breathe in deeply. "I suppose my skills are limited. All the better to mingle our souls."

She needed to alter the course of their interaction until she could figure out a way to extract herself. She didn't sense that anyone would soon interrupt them; everyone was at the Nadaam. "Captain Ogodei. Are you sure that all of the admiration you've received is due to your talent and skill, or rather due to the great renown of your famous father?" Ling Pei couldn't see Ogodei's expression, but the silence that followed was both alarming and reassuring. She had hoped the question would cool his advance, though she understood that he might have heard it as a violence inducing insult.

But Ogodei heaved a few heavy chuckles and whipped her around by the arm to face him, again. His expression had indeed changed, from casual lust to lustful intrigue. "You're trying to get me to raise my fist. Why? Beating a woman is not nearly enjoyable as, well, enjoying her." He smiled slyly at her, trying to break her of her poise. Ling Pei held onto her stolid resolve for a moment, her will strong enough. But Ogodei reached his foot behind her leg and kicked the back of her knee, making her fall forward against him. He deliberately crashed

onto his back as she landed on top of him. “Ah, Han oppression! Han oppression! Cousin Subodei, send me reinforcements!”

Ling Pei erupted in giggles as Ogodei played at struggling, grasping her fingers between his own and pulling her arms up so that her body stretched along his. He gently bit her ear and she felt her body shudder as he raised his knee up to separate her legs, finally extracting a moan from her stubborn lips. As she felt her resolve falter, Ling Pei feared losing her new connection with Khenbish. She feared the iron wrought law of the Chingiz Khan. But she also feared to miss out on such a man as Ogodei. He was rarer than she had first suspected.

And it was only when Ogodei released one of her hands to move his own along her arms, down her chest, toward her thighs, that Ling Pei felt the warm space inside of her stomach push her towards thoughts of her husband. Khenbish wasn't merely her friend, he needed her. And she couldn't allow this powerful man to possess her, as he surely desired, when Khenbish would fall into jeopardy without her help. She decided to trust in her suspicion that Ogodei was a man of more than mere pomp and fragrance. She kissed him and he returned the kiss.

“Ogodei Khan.” She said in a whisper.

“You needn't call me that.” He told her, gripping the small of her back with his other hand.

She sighed at his touch, but took his face in her hands. “But you will be Khan.”

Ogodei grunted. “Temujin is nearly unbreakable. I'll be an old man before I reach coronation.” He went back to kissing her, but she separated their lips, again.

“Ogodei. You can have anything you want. You can take anything you want.” She told him.

“Ah, indeed. And isn’t this Han tongue I’ve found good for so much more than mere talking, Emchi.” Ogodei chuckled. He kissed her again.

“Hear me Ogodei Khan. Your future greatness will be judged as much by your restraint, your discipline, as by your prowess and lavishness. You impress me. But, I would be far more impressed if you didn’t have to take what you wanted. By force or by pedigree.” Ling Pei scratched Ogodei’s beard with a familiar affection, hoping to make him feel even less authority.

Ogodei sighed. He held onto her, rolled over so that he was above her, and pulled away to rest on his haunches as Ling Pei sat up. He picked up a small twig and picked his teeth with it, pondering. “Hmm. Measuring me by my father. A clever trick, if a bit unkind.” He shrugged. Ling Pei waited, letting him think. His distant expression caused her, for the first time, to see the depths of Temujin Khan in him. Ogodei cocked an eyebrow, refusing to be free of levity for too long a time, but Ling Pei already knew that she had secured her safety from his advances. “I suppose it isn’t always best to get what you want.” He said. “Though I can’t imagine when that would be true.” He rolled his eyes and Ling Pei grinned at this.

She bowed her head, briefly, and stood. “You’ll have won my willful loyalty, rather than my grudging loyalty. And my husband’s as well.”

“Have I?” Ogodei asked, looking up at her. “Thanks for the lessons, Emchi.”

Ling Pei breathed deeply, holding her belly with one hand. “It is my joy to serve you, Ogodei Khan.”

A few hours later, Ling Pei stoked the fire a little and sat down beside it, too tired to prepare their supper. Khenbish lay his sack down on the floor and produced spiced, dried meats all the way from Goreyo and a skin of sheep’s milk.

“You are wonderful.” Ling Pei said, immediately taking a bite of the meat. She had changed back into her physician clothes as she didn’t yet want to tell him about the afternoon with Ogodei, suspecting it would cause him undue worry.

Khenbish sipped at the milk. “A gift from Lieutenant Terbish. He didn’t quite know what to do with the meat and his wife sent the extra milk.”

“Almost like family.”

“Yes. Under the bluster and armor, we’re all just cousins, tribes on the steppe.” Khenbish said.

Ling Pei wanted to protest, wanted to point out all of the spilled blood and the burned homes and the slain royalty and the used women for which the Mongol Empire was responsible, but she noticed Khenbish regarding her with a sweet expression. “What is it?”

“Nothing at all.” Khenbish responded, offering her the sheep’s milk.

She drank from it as he ate some of the meat. Ling Pei thought of the risk she had taken to deny Ogodei his lustful intentions, the risk she had taken for the sake of her closeness to Khenbish. She wanted to know why he had changed, and how.

“Khenbish. What was it that made you give up the cut sleeve?” She asked.

Khenbish’s expression fell and Ling Pei silently cursed herself for bringing it up. Neither had mentioned this issue between them out loud since their marriage had been arranged for the second time back in Huaxia. She hadn’t been aware of his difference at the time he and his father had captured them in the Jurchen fortress.

“I. Ling Pei. I’ll never be able to change that.” He said.

Ling Pei frowned. She thought of all of the nights they’d spent in embrace, the lovemaking, and most of all, the child inside her. He hadn’t recoiled, not once, from her touch.

He had even initiated some of their joining. “Has this all been an act, then? To appear traditional in front of the Ordu? Are you just behaving this way to protect against the Law?” She started to wonder if she had missed an opportunity to be lover to the future ruler of the civilized world, if she had chosen to protect a relationship based in theatrics.

Khenbish watched the fire for a moment. He spoke softly, but not in conspiratorial tones. “I’ll always be of the cut sleeve, Ling Pei. I’ll always crave the touch of a man. And I suspect that I’ll always miss—” He paused.

“Tsung Lo?” Ling Pei said, feeling a wave of regret that made her belly feel heavy.

“Not exactly. But that sort of companionship. Tsung Lo wasn’t the paragon of men, after all. I think you hold him up too highly.” Khenbish peered at her.

“He was always everything that I wasn’t.” she replied.

“That used to be true. But as far as our last few months together, I don’t think that it’s me who is different, Ling Pei.” Khenbish sipped from the sheep’s milk, again. “You’ve become more than irresistible.” Ling Pei considered this, considered Sukh and Ogodei and the countless stares and smiles she’d received from people all over Avarga. Khenbish continued. “I’ve always cherished our friendship, Ling Pei. But I’ve felt drawn to you more than I’ve ever been to any woman. More than most men.”

Ling Pei thought about the clumsy, plain, confused woman of twenty that he had met when they were young. “I don’t suppose that I’m quite the same woman that was enslaved to you thirteen years ago.”

“No.” Khenbish grimaced at her words. “My people have made your life awful.”

Ling Pei touched his shoulder. “And mine meant to kill you, no matter how peaceful you chose to be.”

Khenbish kissed her and whispered into her ear. "Let us be each other's people and protect the other."

Ling Pei nodded. "Always."

They embraced each other, but the ger flap opened.

"Please, can it wait until tomorrow?" Ling Pei asked, looking to the dim light from outside.

"It cannot. It will not." The intruder was Khydir. Khenbish and Ling Pei separated and stood. Khydir motioned to both of them. "A word with you, Khenbish." He said.

Khenbish nodded, unafraid to show his displeasure on his face. "It's been a long day, Khydir."

"It has. And Terbish has a task for your wife." Khydir said. He made to leave the ger, then turned back and spoke directly to Khenbish. "It's a little early, yet, for that."

Khenbish ignored this and walked out in front of Khydir. Khydir looked back at Ling Pei. She flashed a quick smirk at him and followed Khenbish outside.

In the dusk, Ling Pei found Terbish on horseback with a second horse behind him. Khydir strode into the stone structure where they had made their workshop. Khenbish touched the small of her back before leaving her with Terbish.

"Ah, Lady Khenbish! Good evening." Terbish said, his half moon eyes cheerful as always.

"Good evening to you, Lieutenant. Thank your wife for the supper she sent." Ling Pei bowed to him and hopped up on the second horse.

They set off, trotting between the gers and tents. Ling Pei glanced back at the courtyard where Khenbish was lighting torches by which to study a map that Khydir had brought.

“She is my favorite wife. I’m glad you got to taste it, if only briefly. My apologies for interrupting your meal, but the Khan would like a word with you.” Terbish said.

Ling Pei squeezed the leather reins as they rode. “What!? I’m not properly dressed, Lieutenant. I’ve no gift or obeisance.”

Terbish chuckled. “No need, Lady Khenbish. This is an informal visit.”

He said nothing else and Ling Pei worked hard not to fret. Had he, somehow, discovered her interactions with Ogodei? She had been certain that Ogodei had merely used the Khan’s name to lure her into his company. Would the Khan be angry that they had come so close to breaking his Great Law? Would he be angered that she had denied his son his advances? Perhaps her heritage exempted her from the Law, despite her marriage to Khenbish who was merely a Khitan and not a Mongol. Or maybe he had learned who Khenbish’s father was, or worse yet, her own father. Was a Sung aristocrat, an enemy, worse than a fled Khitan engineer, a deserter? She and Khenbish had agreed to be forward and honest if they were ever asked, but to never volunteer the information, though she felt that this decision had been almost a betrayal of their fathers.

As the horses stepped over rocks and tufts of golden yellow grass, Ling Pei looked about her and noticed that they weren’t headed towards the Ordu tents. Terbish looked back at her. “The court isn’t inside their gers, just yet, Lady Khenbish. Too much excitement over the Nadaam.”

Terbish led her toward the river Kherlen. There was a wide open field that separated the gers of Avarga from the river and Ling Pei could see, even in the failing light, the myriad hoof prints in the sod from the games earlier in the day. The mountains of the horizon were hulking shadows and the river played a mellow base note beneath the whistling of the warm winds. Near

the river there were several glowing campfires, one larger and brighter than the others. Its orange yellow glow drowned out the stars over the dimming sunset the closer they came to the river. Several dozen people sat around the fires, talking, laughing, and eating. Ling Pei could hear from their voices that most were Mongol, Khitan, or Kereyid.

Terbish dismounted his horse and Ling Pei followed suit and a young boy with a fading blue birthmark on his neck took the horses from them. It wasn't difficult to pick the Khan out from the group; even seated, he towered over the others. Terbish and Ling Pei stood just outside the circle as Temujin Khan played a song on the morin khuur. He was a fair player, but not a great one, and as soon as he finished playing he looked up at Terbish.

"Ah, see. Here is a man who can truly make music!" Temujin Khan said.

"You're too kind, Khan." Terbish said, grinning.

"There are few rumors of my kindness. Come, play for my family. It took me weeks to learn to play that song as poorly as I did." Temujin Khan stood and handed the morin khuur to Terbish. Terbish sat down and began to play while Temujin stood next to Ling Pei. Terbish began to sing an old Long Song and the Khan's family began to close their eyes, humming along to the soaring notes.

Ling Pei could have stood for an eternity in that moment, listening to the music and the wind and the water and the grumbling of the campfire, but Temujin motioned to her and began to walk away from the circle. Ling Pei walked with him, glancing back at the circle to meet the sharp gaze of a woman a few years her senior. Ling Pei bowed to her, cautious, and continued to walk. When they were away from the Khan's family, Terbish's singing and playing finding them in the dark by the water, Temujin Khan nodded back toward the other woman.

“She is my second wife, Yesui, and my most important now that Borte has gone back to the earth.” He said. “She suspects that I have intentions toward wedding you and means to warn me against breaking my own laws.”

“I don’t understand, my Khan.” Ling Pei said, thinking of Ogodei.

Temujin Khan laughed softly to himself. “I believe that you do understand. That you understand more than most.”

Ling Pei was silent. Was she about to be stolen from Khenbish and made the wife of the Chingiz Khan? Would the Khan break his own Great Law simply to have her? How would Ogodei respond to this? Would Khenbish be sent away or killed in order to make the entire event more convenient?

Temujin Khan let his words hang in the air for a time before speaking again. “How is your child?”

Ling Pei was surprised by such a deeply personal question. She touched her belly. “Very well, my Khan, very well. Not moving yet, but, soon.”

Temujin Khan nodded. “I have made a decision, in regards to you and your husband.” Ling Pei watched him as they walked. He had led her to another, smaller bonfire, attended by no one but themselves. The Khan bent down and threw a few sticks of wood into the fire, observing the smoke as it sought out the clouds above.

Ling Pei frowned. “Yes, my Khan?”

“But your child, be it boy or girl, will marry one of Ogodei’s heir.” Temujin Khan looked down at her, his eyes falling half shut, his breath causing his chest to bulge outward, retreat inward.

Ling Pei couldn't breathe. She couldn't take her eyes from the Khan. Even with her newfound keenness, she was at a true loss. She hadn't stuttered in weeks, yet she felt unable to form any thoughts, let alone words.

The fire popped loudly. Temujin Khan didn't yet free her from his stare and she wondered if this was some sort of test. Why was he making this decision? Why was he telling her instead of Khenbish? What would his sons say? What risk would be over her child's head?

At long last, she spoke with as much caution as she could manage. "Chingiz Khan. This is quite unexpected."

Temujin Khan laughed out loud. "Unexpected that I would have your line joined with my own? Indeed it is, Lu Ling Pei, daughter of Lu Zhun."

Ling Pei froze at the name of her father. It felt as though the earth beneath her had vanished and she hung suspended by the thread of the Chingiz Khan's expression. Temujin offered her a drink of water from the skin on his belt. Ling Pei used all of her remaining strength to accept and drink from it. She watched the fire, not daring to be caught in his gaze, again. It was strange, hearing the name of her father spoken out loud. It was as if the Khan had breathed life into her father, speaking his name. Though she wasn't sure whether that life had been given merely to exact punishment on her and Khenbish.

"You know my father?"

"I know of him. Terbish is in direct communication with my spy network in Zhao Guo's Empire." Ling Pei flinched instinctively when Temujin used the Sung Emperor's birth name instead of his great formal Temple name. But she remembered that birthright was held cheaply under the Khan's rule. "Your father was a well learned man. Given to seek knowledge invention, rather than war or politics."

“Yes.”

“In my youth, I might not have prized such a man as would have been wise. Such a man’s child, I will not fail to recognize.” The Khan said.

Ling Pei nodded, slow and cautious. “Did you know Khenbish’s father, also?” She asked, already certain of the answer.

“Enkh? I did. He joined me during my feud with Ong Khan of the Kereyids. I hadn’t expected him to abandon me after the Jurched campaigns.” Temujin Khan said. “While Terbish’s spies had told us of your arrival six years ago, I recognized his face in your husband’s, immediately. His genius in the work of Khenbish’s hand was merely confirmation.”

“This desertion so many years ago, yet you choose his grandchild to marry your own kin? My Khan, I do not understand.” Ling Pei returned the Khan’s water. She decided that it was no longer of any use to cower and turned to face him. And in that moment she saw how tired he truly was, how hunched. There was even a flicker of horror in the curl of his lip, as if he saw a dark and wretched future that no one else could see. She wondered if a single man could bear the weight of all of the brutality and the blood and the bitterness of the civilized world.

Temujin Khan pulled a sweated strand of hair from Ling Pei’s face. “I have chosen to change many things in this world. Aristocrats have fallen under the hooves of my men more often than commoners, despite what you may have heard to the contrary. I’ve demanded that I and my leaders be held to the same laws as all of our people, regardless of rank. I’ve ended the rule of blood lineage in a dozen kingdoms, favoring loyalty and capability over birthright and privilege. How can I not challenge the same under my own tent?”

“But the descendant of both an enemy and a deserter? What makes our child so deserving, if I may ask? It will be a great risk to her.” Ling Pei said.

“I have never encountered, in all my journeys and campaigns, a man and woman of such wisdom and talent as you and the son of Enkh. I have watched you more than may have realized, through Terbish and Khydir and Subodei. I have seen, not merely intelligence, but shrewdness and strength. And, unlike myself and my children, you and your husband each display the worthiness of a white sulde.”

Ling Pei remembered the two suldes in the Khan’s ger, the black staff for a soul at war, the white staff for a soul at peace. She cradled her still flat belly in her hands, the bulge where the sleek stone hid inside of the knot of her cloth belt fitting easy against her fingers. A hot wind tore across the river Kherlen, but she couldn’t help but shiver. It seemed that the greatest letter of blood under the sky was capable of imagining a different world than the one he had torn, a different world than the one he had wrought.

“I might have renamed the two of you my direct successors, but my sons would rend the world at such a notion. But the child of such a couple as you can be prepared with all of the knowledge and wisdom to bond with my own family. Perhaps, one day, the black sulde can be forever left in the shadows.”

Ling Pei wanted to protest. She wanted to scream at this man, the most powerful man in the world, that he could not force her to raise her child for his own purposes. She wanted to demand that she and Khenbish be returned to their hillside with Sukh and Odval and all of those silly, uneducated villagers. But much more so, Ling Pei wanted to return home, to her real home. She wanted to spend hours studying minerals and star charts with her father, to dress up and eat fine meals with her mother and listen to music. She wanted to be Khenbish’s friend without fear of their constant inability to be married as a normal man and wife. She wanted to be leagues away from all of the blood and the violence and the strife.

But her keenness had not failed her, for her only reply was a pragmatic one.

“Chingiz Khan. My husband and I will be honored.”

“I will not count Enkh’s desertion against his son, nor his grandchild.”

Ling Pei remembered the last moment she saw Khenbish’s father, Enkh, dragged away by the Sung Dynasty’s inspectors. His look entreated her to keep his son hidden. She had tried, and failed. “You should know, Great Khan, that Enkh was arrested and interrogated after living with my family for five years. And while he chose to live amongst my people far from the bloodied fields of your campaigns, he never revealed any privileged information to our dynasty till the day he was executed.” She didn’t have to insist, she knew that Temujin Khan trusted her word. He nodded, said nothing.

Ling Pei accompanied him as he walked slowly back to the bonfire where Terbish and the Khan’s family still sang. She had no word, in any language, for the crushing twist of emotions that pulled at her body and soul.

By the time Terbish had returned her to her ger, Ling Pei felt numb. She slid off of the horse, bowed to Terbish, and went inside. Khenbish was already asleep on the floor, or so she thought. When she lay down next to him, he stirred and turned to her.

“Are you well, Ling Pei?” he asked her.

“The Khan means our child to marry into his family.” Ling Pei said, struggling to feel his embrace through her numbness.

Khenbish pulled back and looked at her in the failing light of the embers.

She touched his face. “He knows who we are and swears that we won’t be punished for being the children of our fathers.”

Ling Pei felt her husband tremble at her words. He never responded, but she remembered his shivering until her last moments of waking.

It was still deep night when the stone, pushing against Ling Pei's belly, woke her from her dreaming. She reached into the cloth belt that she had left tied to her waist after her meeting with the Khan, and pulled the sleek, blue on black stone from her pocket. She hadn't regarded it for a long time, but as she could see its form clearly in the utter dark, she began to wonder over it for the first time since she had freed it from the ice, for it felt intimately connected to her dreams. She fell asleep with it cradled in her hands.

Almost a week following Ling Pei's intimate discussion with the Khan, there was the welcome news that Khenbish had given her; the antagonistic Khydir was leaving on a special campaign against the Kievan Rus' to the West. He would lead a single Mingan, along with ten thousand Turk warriors to the northern waters, most of which stayed frozen even in the summers. There, Khydir would study the resources and limits of the Kievan Rus' and decide whether it was worth the effort to finish the campaign that Subodei had prosecuted earlier in the year, conquering the entirety of the weakened Russian Empire. Ling Pei hated that she felt relief over this, the knowledge that the Mongols had turned their cruelty towards another people, sparing her beloved Huaxia for a time longer. At that thought, she began to fret over her mother, wishing there was some way for her coming child to meet her.

But her focus was divided. Ling Pei had once again begun to study the sleek stone and she snuck away as often as she could to discover more. She learned that it was barely luminous in pitch dark, but seemed to soak in light, making it shadow-like in the day. She discovered that

it appeared to flex under pressure, but never looked to change shape after the pressure had been removed. It was late in the evening, in their ger by the fire, that she took it out in Khenbish's absence.

The evening before the campaign embarked, when Khenbish was working with Khydir, Subodei, and Chagatai over the plans for their siege devices, Ling Pei took the stone from within the cloth belt around her robe, and observed it under the light. She had deduced that the stone had a significant effect on everything around it, sometimes reversing degenerative effects or impacts. She had broken apart a small stick of wood and left the stone beside it for a night. When she returned, she had found the wood reattached to itself.

Ling Pei had decided that it was time to test the stone's effects on a living thing and found a small blade near their cookware. She picked up the stone and took it outside of the ger, careful to conceal it in her cloth belt. In the back of the ger, she and Khenbish had kept several goats, all of whom seemed to be annoyed that the summer had continued on well into what should have been the winter months. She untied their oldest goat and took him away from the others, retying him to a stake under the ger. She found the least sensitive place on his flank, held him down, and placed a small cut into his flesh. The goat protested a little, but Ling Pei held him in place and watched the blood fall from the little wound. After a moment, Ling Pei took the stone from her belt and held it against the place she had cut. She wasn't sure how long to hold it, so she sang a little nursery song to herself that her mother had sung when she was less than a year old. Ling Pei noticed that the air outside was terribly hot, even as the evening was coming on and the winter snow should have begun to fall weeks before. Above, a half dozen shooting stars streaked across the growing dark of the sky.

Ling Pei finished singing, wondering at her ability to remember a song she'd heard at such a young age, and took the stone from the goat's hide. She stared at the goat's unbroken, unmarked skin. She regarded his face, seeing that he seemed happy and energetic enough, and looked back at the sleek stone that continued to hide from the lights of Avarga's campfires and Zhonghua lanterns.

"This is fantastic, indeed." Ling Pei couldn't keep her grin from growing on her face. She knew it wasn't magic, couldn't believe that it was magic, but it felt enchanted. How could such a thing exist? She would have to beg leave of the Khan to return to the caldera near their old village to search for more.

She pushed the old goat down to a seated position and straddled his body. Ling Pei took a deep breath, held the small blade to the goat's neck, and sliced firmly. The goat thrashed briefly underneath her, but soon fell to the ground and ceased to move. Ling Pei stood up and dropped the blade to the ground, waiting.

After a few moments more, when she was certain that the goat was dead, she rested the stone against the cut on its throat. Thinking that the stone's effects might take some time, Ling Pei took a blanket and covered the goat's body with it. She took water from a jug and cleaned her hands of the goat's blood, then went inside to avoid disturbing the test.

She worried that the goat might suffer in the process. She had tried to minimize its pain; Zhun, her father, had always told her to prevent suffering in all lesser creatures in order to condition her compassion towards mankind. Because of this, she couldn't abide the way the Mongols strangled their animals in order to minimize their contact with blood.

Ling Pei waited a long time, expecting to have heard a stirring outside of the ger, but there was nothing. Finally, she went back outside and lifted the blanket up off of the goat. But

she dropped the blanket in shock and stood back from it. The goat was badly decomposed and maggot ridden, almost half of its meat and even parts of the bones were broken up or gone and turned into dirt. Ling Pei crouched down, looked about the goat's corpse, and found the stone. She picked it up, it was clean and unblemished as always.

She went inside and stared into the blue on black shadow in her palms. How to ponder this change in events, she wasn't sure. The stone had almost always caused good results, making things better after a negative force or impact. Why would the goat not have been revived? The stone had only repaired things up until this point.

Ling Pei thought over and over in her head how to explain. The goat was healed, but not brought back to life. Why? She lay down, stone resting in her palm, and let her head fall sideways. There was a small chest her mother, Min, had given her that she had taken when they had fled the Lin'an. Carved on the side was the perfect circle, split in two by the Yin and the Yang. Ling Pei had ignored Taoism, Buddhism, even the writings of Kung Qiu, all because of her father's disdain for religion and social morays. But a teaching from the spiritual arts, that death was no more an evil than life, was the notion that granted her illumination over the stone in her hands.

The goat had gone on into the earth, making it rich for subsequent life. Hence, the stone would not bring a creature back from the dead, as its properties guided things toward repair. It was a lot to think about, but she was astonished at the idea.

She looked back at her hand that held the stone, only to find that she had left it too close to the fire. Her instinct was to jerk her hand away, but she saw that it was uninjured. Ling Pei sat up and wrapped the stone back into her cloth belt. These results could change their lives in the most immense ways. She had to show Khenbish everything.

Ling Pei peeked cautiously inside the courtyard of their workshop. The remains of torches, long since cooled, rested against the walls. There was no one there, or inside the rooms, and Ling Pei wondered if Khenbish had been taken to the Khan's gers to solidify the last of the designs. She hated the idea of holding in her discovery, but decided that it would have to wait. But then, she thought of the roof and climbed the stairs to see if he had gone there after the meetings to rest.

Once Ling Pei came to the roof, she saw Khenbish by the light of the stars. He sat, his pants around his shins and his deel robe still on his shoulders but wide open. Another man, it was Khydir, had buried his head in Khenbish's lap, hands gripping and caressing his chest. Khenbish sighed, his face almost strained by bliss.

Ling Pei caught her breath, but even this quiet disturbance caught her husband's attention. When he sat forward, startled, Khydir turned to see her. He too, was partially undressed and appeared to Ling Pei for the first time to be fearful.

Khenbish didn't speak, only watched back at her as she looked at him. She had once, back in Lin'an, walked into his room not realizing that Tsung Lo was also inside. He had been embarrassed, though Tsung Lo had simply laughed and waved to her. She'd never seen any man naked before that afternoon, and while Tsung Lo was very good looking, Ling Pei had felt a spark towards Khenbish that had never gone away.

Khydir pulled up his pants and wrapped his robe, almost clumsy, about his muscular shoulders. Ling Pei all but ignored him. She didn't care that his cruelty had been jealousy, or that he had likely intended to try to steal Khenbish away from their earliest meetings. She only tried to understand the hurt that she felt from her husband. It was an encompassing hurt, as if their

entire history hadn't been of any consequence, but only the last few months of life as husband and wife. She felt a deep betrayal, though he had never promised her anything beyond the friendship he had given.

It was because of her intense focus on Khenbish that Khydir's rush toward her surprised her, so. He had grabbed a knife and had charged hard, knocking her on her back. She only just managed to catch the sharp blade in her right hand as she felt the full weight of the warrior on top of her. The blade sliced deep, it hurt too much to scream, but the strength that she felt inside of her blood allowed her to keep him at bay. She was almost lifting him up with her left hand while the other was being cut down to the bone.

And then, the weight was gone and Ling Pei sat up. She saw that Khenbish had grabbed Khydir and shoved him to the other side of the roof. He shouted his whisper at Khydir.

"Damn you, Khydir. She wouldn't have told anyone!"

Khydir kneeled, hunched over, breathing heavily. "You can't know that. The Khan would put me to death. It is the Law." Khydir stood. "She will not be the end of me."

Khenbish backed up, holding his arm between Khydir and Ling Pei. "No one will know."

Ling Pei looked down at her right hand. It was mangled, a stream of blood pushing out from her palm.

"No. No, they will not." Khydir looked at Khenbish and Ling Pei could hear almost a note of apology in his voice.

Khenbish sighed. "You made me cut my robe and you gave me a half eaten peach."

Ling Pei recognized the quote from that Zhonghua king who had turned on his male lover after years of affection, their past acts of love corrupted into excuse for dismissal and disdain.

She stepped in front of Khenbish and held out her right hand to show Khydir in the light of the rising moon.

“Lieutenant. See this injury you’ve done. Do me the service of considering my next offer.” She said.

“There is nothing that you—” Khydir started.

“A trade. Great power for our lives.” Ling Pei began to untie her belt with her left hand.

Khydir merely sneered and approached them. Ling Pei pressed the sleek stone against her right hand and grimaced at the touch. Khenbish tried to pull her back, but Ling Pei stood her ground until Khydir was close enough for her to smell him. But the pain was already gone and she held up her hand to show the men her healed palm. Above, the sky streaked with myriad shooting stars and the wind blew warm all about them. In the distance, she felt the shrouded impacts of fallen mineral rocks as they tumbled from the sky.

Khenbish marveled at her hand. Khydir stopped. His expression was of disbelief, distrust. She placed her hand on his chest, showing that it was healed.

“What is this sorcery? You are a witch?” Khydir’s voice trembled; Ling Pei could see the hunger in his eyes for her offering.

Ling Pei smiled, graceful as if in a formal meeting. She held up the stone in her left hand. Its strangeness made the men stare so that they never noticed the heat or the far away earthquakes. She felt the impulse to laugh at them, but reminded herself of the many hours she had stared in secret. “It is no sorcery, friend Khydir, but a gift from the Eternal Blue Sky. It heals injury and mends brokenness with only a touch.” To prove this too him, she leaned in, found the scar on his forehead, and held the stone up to it. After she removed it, the scar was gone. She nodded to him and he touched his forehead.

“My cousin gave me that cut, thirty-one years ago, when we fought over the woman who would become my first wife.” Khydir seemed to be lost in thought.

Ling Pei held the stone out to him. “Accept this as my pledge of silence. Use it in battle to heal your wounds and you will grow to even greater standing in the eyes of Chingiz Khan. Please him enough, and he may give you a seat of your own.”

Khydir reached out and took the stone from her. He nearly lost his grip on it and had to let go of the blade to grasp the stone tightly with both hands. With curt grunt to Khenbish, Khydir walked toward the steps. She could see his heart was intent only on power.

“Lieutenant Khydir.” Ling Pei called after him.

“Yes, Ling Pei?” Khydir had never used her name before, but it came from his lips with a strange mixture of respect and disdain.

“Do not fear death. In such an event, prepare a trusted friend to lay the stone on your chest. You will know life once again.”

Khydir’s face flashed distrust for the briefest moment, but he then nodded and left the two of them alone.

Ling Pei wondered at the hatred that had welled up in her heart at that moment to deliver such a lie. But she knew from where it came. She refused to look at Khenbish, but left him on the roof, alone. She wasn’t sure how to remedy her feelings of abandonment, of foolishness, of loneliness.

She lay down inside the ger and cursed herself, for a moment, that she should trade the comfort and strangeness of that sleek stone for her life and the life of her husband.

It was well before sunrise the next morning when Khenbish woke her with a harried suddenness.

“What?” She asked, laying back down. She couldn’t even try to treat him graciously.

Khenbish immediately pulled her back up and held her face in his hands. “Ling Pei. I know you must hate the sight of me, but you must get up and get ready. Now.” He stood and walked across the ger, filling one of her packs with her clothes.

Ling Pei frowned at him. “What’s happening? Are we going somewhere?”

“Terbish is outside, waiting. We only have moments. Take what you can carry.”

Ling Pei got up and grabbed a few designs, stowing them into her satchel. Before she had finished even that, a quiet whistle came from outside and Khenbish took her by the arm and led her outside.

In front of the ger, Lieutenant Terbish sat on a horse with their white mare and brown gelding waiting behind him. Yul was perched on the back of his horse.

“Yul?” Ling Pei was confused as she leapt up on the gelding. Khenbish tied their packs to the gelding and the mare and climbed up onto the mare’s back.

“Yes, Lady Khenbish.” Terbish was whispering. “The Khan requires extra training for Yul and desires that you start today.” Ling Pei understood Terbish’s facetiousness from the lack of his usual grin.

Terbish immediately kicked his horse into a trot and they made their way through Avarga in the pre-dawn dark. She was starting to suspect that they were running from something, though she couldn’t guess at what, or who, it was. The capital seemed empty and few people were awake, but Ling Pei could see a cloud of dust in the distance. She pulled her hood over her head

as their trot turned into gallop after they left the city outskirts and forded a shallow section of the Tsenker, rather than riding up to the bridge a half a league away.

Terbish led Ling Pei and Khenbish up into the foothills just before the sun began to color the sky. At the top of one of the smaller hills, he turned around to show them what was happening. Ling Pei could see a line of a thousand riders, prepared for battle, riding away from the city. She knew that it was the Mingan unit led by Khydir. She knew how few men there truly were, but it seemed like a great host all the same. Terbish crouched down and pointed out where Chingiz Khan, Subodei, Chaghatai, Ogodei and youngest son Tolui stood on another foothill, observing the Mingan's departure.

"We're using Khydir's exit as a distraction for your own, clever friends." Terbish said. He led them back to their horses and handed Khenbish a map. "This is a safe place, near a mighty lake. The villagers have been prepared to welcome you without questions. You will wait there until your child is old enough to marry into the Khan's family."

Khenbish looked back at Ling Pei. She wanted to disappear, she was so lonely, so afraid. "Terbish, why must we leave?"

Terbish shrugged. "Chaghatai has discovered his father's intentions and I suspect he means to kill you both behind the Khan's back. Likely before your child is ever born. The genius of your family would be a great boon and Chaghatai doesn't want Ogodei's family to grow any stronger than his own. As Tolui is already loyal to Ogodei because of the Chingiz Khan's decree, Chaghatai will go to great lengths to tip the balance of power. An open feud between the rulers is problematic for the entire empire, but spies and murderers are used all of the time. The Khan wants his prized future grandchild safe from his selfish older son." Terbish leapt up onto his horse and trotted over to Ling Pei. He gestured to Yul and she reached up and took him from the

back of the horse. “Send Yul back to us once you’ve arrived, so that we know you’re safe. We’ll use him to communicate over the next few years. Now, move. You’ve only got a few hours before your absence is discovered by Chaghatai’s agents.” Without another word, Terbish blinked his half moon eyes and rode off back down the foothill.

Ling Pei felt Khenbish studying her in the dark silence, but she kept her eyes on Yul. With all the poise she could muster, she put Yul on the back of the gelding, climbed up, and waited. Khenbish climbed onto the mare, sighed, and kicked her into a trot. Ling Pei followed behind, the first cool breeze of winter greeting them from the mountains.

After several days of travel, the baby in Ling Pei’s belly grew greedy and she was weary as they rode. At one point, she even drifted off to sleep, dozing as she rode.

It is a summer morning that will soon grow hot and the mist hovers over the river, reaching up to the bridge where Ling Pei stands watching the towering city. Ling Pei peers down into the water, pondering her future, pondering her past, thinking on her loneliness. A pensive man limps up beside her, watching the river with her. She knows him, knows that he does not like her because she has used him in the past. She suspects that the pensive man is lonelier than she. Ling Pei thinks to escape his presence, but he does not seem angry, as he was when they last met. The pensive man does have a new weariness that weighs on him beyond that of his painful youth and Ling Pei finds herself curious as to why.

But the pensive man doesn’t speak. He offers her a weak smile and places something in her hand. As Ling Pei’s fingers grip the gift, she knows that it is the sleek and curious stone that she stole from him weeks before. This kindness from him is confusing; he has every reason to

think ill of her. She distrusts this kindness, looks around to see if the pensive man means to entrap her or imprison her. She flings the stone into the river.

It is gone, she knows, sinking below the surface. Her stomach feels wrenched by her own foolishness and she knows that the pensive man will fly into the expected rage. She looks over at him; his mouth is wide in shock and horror. Ling Pei puts on a cocky face, waiting for his ire.

The pensive man sees her expression, then bursts into laughter. He shakes his head at her, still laughing. She feels an embarrassed grin flash over her face, but turns away to hide it. The pensive man leans onto the bridge, chuckling to himself. Ling Pei leans next to him, trying to maintain her composure. She imagines herself swimming through the mist that is slowly being melted away by the summer sun.

1227

There was frost on the ground and Ling Pei fretted over whether Zhun should play outside. But the giggling of her little girl confirmed that she was over worried. When Ling Pei ducked out of the ger, Zhun was waddling around the cold grass, chasing at the birds. Ling Pei shook her head, smiling, and sat back down in the ger to prepare breakfast.

Zhun had been an easy birth compared to all those that Ling Pei had overseen as an Emchi. She and Khenbish had decided on a boy's name, in humorous honor of the superstitions of Khenbish's mother, Saikhan, and so gave her Ling Pei's father's name as a double tribute. It was one of the few times that Ling Pei had laughed with Khenbish since Avarga. She had felt so lonesome, after seeing him with Khydir, knowing that even in her newly graceful state she was still of secondary appeal to her husband. They hadn't touched each other with affection over those two years, she too embarrassed as a measure of her clumsiness had returned with the sleek

stone's absence, Khenbish too distant over the hurt that he realized he had caused her. They had talked about taking lovers, but neither had ever made any move to do so as Zhun had become the center of their lives. Ling Pei also lived in constant fear of the future, certain that they and their child would not be safe from Chaghatai's scheming, even after Zhun was married to one of Ogodei's sons.

"Yu! Yu!" Zhun's voice was loud in her excitement. Ling Pei ducked outside to see what she exclaimed over.

Zhun was pointing out over the lake. The lake was a rich cerulean that shone in the morning sun. The villagers had told Khenbish, on their arrival, that it was deep as an ocean and full of life. Khenbish had opted to keep their lives even humbler than in their old village in order to avoid attention and Ling Pei had agreed. They kept a single ger and lived quietly on Khenbish's daily catch of fish. There was a brown speck on the far side of the lake.

"Yu!" Zhun shouted again.

Ling Pei knelt beside her and brushed her straight black hair from her dark eyes. Zhun was handsome, like her father. "What do you see? Do you see our friend, Yul?" she asked.

"It Yu." Zhun said, looking up at Ling Pei.

"Can you get his chair?"

"Yes!" Zhun did her best to run inside the ger, appearing a moment later with an arm guard.

Ling Pei put on the arm guard and held it out. Yul arrived and alighted, flapping powerfully. Ling Pei fed him his prize. She took the small wooden canister tied to Yul's leg, then placed him on his stoop for Zhun to see, though Zhun was careful to stand back at a safe distance

from his powerful beak and talons. Ling Pei opened the canister where yet another note from Temujin Khan waited. She opened the paper and began to read:

Khenbish, Lady Khenbish. I am sorrowful to tell you that our Khan has succumbed to an illness and injury that he has fought for many weeks. Tolui acts as minister until Ogodei, is crowned the Khan of the Golden Ordu. Chaghatai, has discovered the noms where many of Temujin's secret decrees were written. Of the Law involving the future marriage of your daughter to Ogodei's line, he has committed them to fire and has ordered his Mingans to execute your family if you're ever found near Avarga or Kharakorum. Ogodei has decided not to fight his brother in this regard, though he regrets that he will not see you again. We have done what we could to erase as much information regarding your family as we can and no one but myself knows of your location.

Also, our Lieutenant Khydir and his cavalry were lost to flood and no one has heard tell of any survivors. It seemed, to me, that you would wish to know this, given your close service with him.

Live a quiet life. There is so much blood.

Your friend, Terbish

Ling Pei stood with the letter in her hand, reading it over and over, for nearly an hour. She might have stood for longer if Zhun hadn't leapt up and run across the grass to greet her father, who returned with a bundle of healthy fish in his grasp.

Ling Pei caught Khenbish's regard; he seemed to see something of the news in her expression. She didn't know what was to be said; her new freedom was so precarious, so lonely.

Perfect Chaotic Dark

1783

Iceland

Disa Olinsdottir heard a shuffling outside her heavily shuttered window in the middle hours of the frozen night. The sixteen year old listened to the quiet form of her cousin, Solan, beside her, who hadn't been woken by the noise at all. Disa decided to slide out from beneath the dense quilted blankets and stole her way across the cold floor to peek through the cracks in the shutters. The silhouettes of two men carried some formless piece of material from the back of a horse into her family's barn. The two men, Disa recognized as her father, Olin, and his cousin, Austmar. The moonlight was too muted to see what they carried, but it must have been heavy for her father to have needed a second man to help him.

They emerged from the barn and Olin shut the door. Austmar grunted a farewell to him, leapt up onto the horse, and kicked it into a trot. Olin began to walk toward the cottage and then looked straight at the window. Disa flinched a little, then waved to him. Her father offered a playful wag of his finger, though he was no true disciplinarian like her aunt.

"Back to bed, petal." She knew he was saying, though she couldn't hear his voice. Disa slid back under the covers and waited to hear the cottage door open and close. When she heard Olin open the bedroom door beside her own and Solan's, she let her eyes fall shut.

Disa knelt in the quiet chapel in early evening. Normally dim, the chapel was now almost pitch black from lack of sunshine in the late of the Iceland winter and the laziness of the boys assigned to change the dying candles along the altar.

Rushed whispers, soft, fierce, trickled up to heaven from Disa's trembling lips, her forehead pressed hard against the beaten dirt of the chapel floor. Unbecoming as it might be in public, her dark auburn hair was strewn in front of the altar, hiding most of her face as it cascaded outward. Disa shifted; her clothes bunched under her legs, robbing attention from the Almighty. She raised her eyes and rubbed a shell she wore around her neck, a gift her father had given her. She had always prayed for him, as her mother had taught her, asking God to protect him from the dangers of working the dock and from the tumult of sailing the seas.

Kneeling beside her, with slender knuckles clutching a woolen cap, Disa's cousin Solan prayed with unmoving lips and heavy, fluttering eyelids. Solan shouldn't have kneeled, Disa thought, as it would be difficult for her to stand up again. But then, Disa realized that she, herself, was thinking instead of praying and she shut her eyes tight.

Disa worked to remember each of her prayers, reciting psalms that her Aunt Roslin had demanded she memorize; Olin often glanced over at her recitations from his whittling in the corner, rolling his eyes at Roslin. Disa knew that she had skipped a few stanzas of the unending Hundredth Psalm but couldn't recall them in the proper order. Her tongue was growing so stubborn in her mouth that she held it firm between her teeth.

Disa felt certain that Solan knew all the most important Psalms by heart, though she couldn't prove this. Because Solan didn't speak, Auntie Roslin never made her recite the words. But no one doubted she knew them all. Solan was smaller than Disa, though a year older, and frail. She acquiesced without hesitation or complaining glares to anything she was asked to do. How could she have disobeyed the discipline of memorizing scripture?

Disa closed her eyes for a few moments, struggling at whispering the words of St. Paul instead of King David, but all she could summon were the exhortations of meaningless Minister Larus had spoken of only once.

“What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened, what is lacking cannot be counted.” Disa spoke into the dirt so that Solan wouldn’t hear her.

It had been a single Sunday five years ago and the Minister had never again repeated any of the ideas from that dark book, Ecclesiastes. Yet, that meaninglessness had stuck with her. She could parrot him, still, with ease, not a word out of place. But Disa pushed the intruding verses from her thoughts. She hoped that she might be able to think of appropriate Psalms to pray if she waited quietly, and so she hushed her lips.

But the walls of the small chapel groaned as a bullying wind enclosed them and the thought of a God abiding inside a building made less and less sense compared with a God who hovered out over nature.

Disa stood, wrapped up her long hair in a shawl, quiet so as not to distract her cousin. She realized that she had left her overcoat in the cottage, but buttoned her undercoat without worry. She walked to the front altar, found a lone lit candle, and held it to the other cold candles below the cross, holding her breath so as to preserve the flames. The burning wicks struggled against the drafty cold of the chapel and darkness retreated little.

Outside, the snow had begun to fall afresh and their footprints on the path from the chapel up to the hill where their cottage sat were already starting to grow shallow. Disa breathed

deeply, the beauty of Creation around her. She had come to love the rocky, wild country she had grown up fearing. As a child, she had always asked that they move closer to the one of the bigger ports where she hoped more children lived. That Disa found herself more and more inclined to explore the open, despite her growing responsibilities, would have been a surprise to her had she realized. Little else beyond the natural world would mitigate her brooding of late. She missed her mother and her father had become more and more interested in drink and women in recent years. Disa wondered if he would become more like he had once been when they moved to the Americas. She suspected he might remarry after they had settled, though he never suggested such to her.

Looking high up into the iron colored sky, Disa began to walk away from the edge of the village and into the snow fields bordered by craggy hills and the sea beyond. She could walk a long time, regardless of the wet and heavy cold, and did so without heeding the dying light of the day. She didn't know to put word to the added ease with which her breath came to her upon her exit from the chapel; the softening in her chest and the lightness of her shoulders were an unheeded relief.

It was close to the end of the day as Disa ran toward their cottage which sat on the far edge of the little village. She had wandered for too long and realized her tardiness for supper when she was almost two miles from home. As she ran, Disa saw the two gravestones, one Filip's, the other Petra's, from the corner of her eye. She never looked directly at them.

The sun was gone from the sky and there was almost no light left. She could see the grey, lifeless vines hanging down the walls of her aunt and uncle's cottage, bare in the cold; the thick

peated roof was covered in full and sopping white. She passed the barn and the drying house, but stopped.

Disa remembered the mass that her father had brought in late the prior night and wondered if it was still inside the barn. It was quite possible that he wouldn't tell her what it was, even though she had witnessed he and Austmar carrying it; Olin liked to tease her by loudly keeping secrets from her. She couldn't resist going to check, and ducked inside the barn, despite the smells of supper coming from the cottage. Inside the barn, the cows stood, lazy as ever, and the chickens had settled down for the day. It wasn't hard to see what was out of place, despite the failing light from outside. Disa left the door open so that she could study the mass of seaweed and leather and bits of metal that had been left in a heap against the near wall.

At first, it seemed to be nothing in particular, only left over trash. But Disa noticed a flowing symbol, both painted and carved, of nine white bands on one section of the leather. And the bits of metal were gussets that reminded her of the old Viking armor she had seen in books, but was very different in its design and the symbol seemed foreign. Disa crouched down and investigated, further. It was certainly an armor from somewhere, though she couldn't determine. The whole thing was hollow, unbuckled at the side, but held together by all of the seaweed. Disa pulled the seaweed back and opened the armor. Its inside was almost perfectly preserved, down to the blood staining the leather, and there was even a bundle of silk cloth at the bottom where the wearers belly would have pressed.

Disa took the silk cloth in hand and found that it held a small object. She took the object out of the bundle and discovered a palm sized slimy ball. Inside the slime she could just see a stone, smooth and solid. Disa had never touched such a stone. Despite its dirty coating she could see its form and carefully peeled away some of the flotsam. The surface was clean unlike

anything from her homeland. Disa hid the stone away in her pocket. She put the armor back into its original heap and left the barn, excited to keep her own secret for once.

But at the door cottage, she started to feel strange. The door opened before Disa had reached the handle and Eydis Hakonsdottir, the minister's fat and bossy wife, nearly ran into her.

"Young woman, you are more than late for supper." Eydis said, eyeing Disa with a disapproving air.

"Yes, I forgot it was so late." Disa said, wanting to sidestep the round woman, but unsure of how to do so without seeming impatient. Eydis loved having people's full attention.

"Disa. I know your father doesn't put his hand to you like you might need, but that doesn't mean you should be lose or flighty." Eydis said. Disa noticed that she had a few hunks of cheese that Solan and Roslin had made. Some of the family's tithe. "You need to be an example for your little cousin, that poor slow girl."

Inside, Disa saw Solan look over from the rocking chair by the fire and frown. Disa looked up at Eydis. "Solan isn't slow. She reads faster than me. And she understands German and French, already. I still haven't been able to understand French."

Eydis rolled her eyes. "She reads faster. How do you know? She can't talk."

"I don't know, I just know." Disa feigned shivering and Eydis noticed, hurrying her inside as if Disa had been choosing to wait in the cold of her own accord.

Eydis shook her head. "Your mother's smarts and your father's silliness. What a shame, Disa. You'd better keep bending those knees in prayer." Eydis left, closing the door. Disa stared for a moment at the closed door, thinking where each of those hunks of cheese would deposit themselves on Eydis' rump. But she was too tired to laugh at this.

The little twins Evan and Thor sat at the table with Uncle Kacper, who was feeding them the last of their dinners. Thor was bouncing in his seat. “Daddy, when we’re in the new home, mommy said you’re not going to be a farmer anymore.”

Kacper nodded. “I hope to teach at a school again. This farming business is for younger folk.”

“Are you not younger folk?” Thor asked.

“No, no. I’m very much an old man. You, sir, are younger folk.” Kacper tousled Thor’s hair.

Thor’s brother, Evan, looked up at Disa. “Disa. Where is your coats? Aren’t you cold?”

Disa said nothing, sat down at her place, and stared at the bowl in front of her; Solan, probably still annoyed by Eydis Hakonsdottir, tried to get Disa’s attention with a glance, but her eyes returned to her book as Auntie Roslin turned from the stove.

Auntie Roslin looked at Disa, quiet for almost a minute, before placing a bowl of stew on the table. “The boys are hungry and your cousin's bones are chilled. Your time isn’t just your own, Disa Olinsdottir. We ate without you, which is against the rules. You have no responsibilities that should keep you from being at supper on time. Who knows, you might have avoided that conversation with Eydis.”

“That’s unlikely, Roslin.” Kacper whispered, chuckling. Roslin rolled her eyes in agreement, but kept her attention on Disa.

Disa continued to stare. There was the familiar tension before the usual duel and Roslin opened her mouth, to demand apology or explanation. But there was a jarring knock on the door. Roslin looked down at Disa, whose stare changed from secretive to blank. Roslin sighed and looked at her other niece. “Solan. The door, child.”

Solan nodded, stood carefully from her seat, and walked to the door and opened it. Immediately, she recoiled, head fallen down and eyes averted. A tall, solidly built man with a firm belly and blond beard entered the cottage and pushed past her, slush clinging to his boots. Most days, Disa took notice of her father's cousin, Austmar. There was something in his size and in his smell that caused her to stare at him and she sometimes thought of him at night after Solan had fallen asleep beside her. This evening, however, Disa continued to stare, an unsettling premonition of calm washing down her spine.

Roslin put down the bowl she was filling. "Cousin Austmar! Are you lost? Your wife's probably got dinner on your table. And where's—"

"Disa. You need to come outside with me." Austmar's gravel voice, strange in its uncharacteristic softness, filled the small room nonetheless. He looked straight at Disa.

Everyone else looked to Disa as well, who continued to stare at nothing. Solan's eyes, then cheeks, grew wet and red and she went to grab Disa's arm. Roslin swatted at Solan, took Disa by the arm. Disa looked up, only into Solan's eyes. "They've asked for me?" Solan nodded. Disa walked with Auntie Roslin to the door. After a moment, she looked up at Austmar. "Please show me."

Austmar snorted, led Disa outside. Roslin and Solan began to follow with Disa's coat and boots, but Disa raised her hand to them and they waited. Kacper left the boys to their dinner before standing as well.

Outside, Austmar led Disa to a cart surrounded by a half dozen other men, their rough faces familiar from the docks where her father worked when he wasn't at sea. Austmar looked unsettled but Disa was fixated on the still figure resting inside the cart, covered by canvas. Without coat or boots, she trudged through the snow. When she met the cart, she peered at it,

dragging her fingers along the splintered wood. Austmar pulled the canvas back to reveal the face of a man with a broad mustache and a strong nose. Deep and handsome wrinkles, rough, ruddy skin darkened by sun and textured by sea and work and travel, his hair half red, half grey. The dock workers and sailors had not bothered to hide the massive gash in this dead man's neck. Disa closed her eyes and leaned forward, trying to breathe through her nose. If he smelled right, smelled of salt spray and bitter sweet liquor and rotted shark meat, she would know for certain it was him. Austmar ventured the first kind thing Disa had ever heard come from his mouth. "Your Papa Olin. He was, he was a real man. More like a brother than a cousin."

Disa, eyes still closed, continued to breathe through her nose. She still couldn't smell him with such cold air all around her body and she wanted to be closer and closer to him. Austmar shuffled in place. The other men had stepped away, toward the cottage where Roslin and Kacper stood at the door. Disa placed her hand on her father's chest, begged God to instill in it some of her own, unimportant life. But his chest was cold, empty. She looked up at her father's cousin. "May I be with him for a moment?"

Austmar left her, maybe he was as glad to be away from Olin's body as much as Disa desired to hover over it. She laid her head on her father's stomach, her ears shutting out all else but the silence within him. She would have stayed there for nights and days on end, seeking a fleck or stumble of life wherever it might be hidden inside of him, but, not far behind her, the sounds of her aunt weeping and clinging to Kacper rescued Disa from her reverie. She lifted her head and looked to her father's face. Olin's clothes were soaked through and there were remnants of fish guts and scales in his fingernails. His mouth was slightly open. The swollenness of the injured, drowned flesh left a curious expression with no trace of emotional charge. One boot had been pulled off and lay next to Olin's body, its foot twisted strangely, and there was a

tangle of frayed netting wrapped around the opposite ankle. The netting was entwined with seaweed, bits of fish. Disa found her attention caught by the netting and she wanted to take it with her. She tugged at it, twice, but stopped because it pulled at her father's leg in a way that she thought would make him feel uncomfortable.

Disa noticed Austmar whispering to some of the other men, Kacper holding Roslin close, Solan still inside the cottage door holding the twins' hands. Disa let go of the seaweed and let her hand fall into her pocket where the stone she had borrowed from the suit of armor rested. Her father would never get to know what it felt like. She glanced at her family and her father's fellow workers. No one was watching her and she slowly stood, her face marked with the ghosts of tears. She walked away from her family across the snow covered grass. Her distance didn't rob her of their conversation, however, and their words found her as if they had been spoken in front of her face. Her mind was too much on her father for her to question why she still heard their discussion.

"The ship was falling apart like it was a hundred years old." One fisherman said.

"But I had seen it go out this morning. It was brand new out of a Dutch yard. Just a single voyage on its hull." Another fisherman said.

"You had them mixed up." Austmar spit as he glared at the other man.

But the fisherman insisted. "They lost seven men in that storm, Austmar. When Olin went up to help them untangle a net, he fell against the hull and sank into the water like a boulder. We were lucky to pull his body out. That ship was cursed." The fisherman's voice seemed to shake.

"The old spirits are still punishing us for taking up with the Christian god." A dock worker spoke more calmly, though he stood the furthest from Olin's cart.

“Not in front of the children, Austmar. This is a Lutheran home.” Roslin’s voice was razor through her tears. Disa looked back to see her shoo the twins back inside. But Solan’s face appeared at the tiny window, darting between Disa, Olin’s body, and the large Austmar.

“Surely you old grandmothers aren’t still afraid of Loki! They’re superstitious fools, Roslin. It’s an accident like any other. He’d just never been one to slip before.” Austmar said.

He glared at the fishermen and dock workers, but the first fisherman was bold in his fear. “Say what you want, Austmar.” He started to walk away and the others followed.

Austmar sat down on a large boulder, face in hands. “I’ll help you set up a pyre, Kacper. As soon as you’ve all said your good-byes.” He looked to the house at the window. Solan’s face vanished.

“The pyre is for the pagans, cousin. I’ll get the shovels.” Kacper looked over at Olin’s body.

“The ground’s frozen solid, Kacper. Are you sick in the head?” Austmar kicked at pebbles.

Kacper shrugged.

“A small bonfire will soften the ground enough. We want him as whole as possible for the Lord’s return. We’ll put him with his Petra near to Filip. The move will be much tougher without him.”

“We’ll manage.” Austmar told him.

Kacper walked into the barn, followed by the grumbling Austmar. Roslin returned to the cottage and shut the door.

Disa hadn’t realized, but she’d been glancing behind her as she walked and was now almost a quarter mile away at the top of a larger hill. The sky was almost entirely dark now.

Images of her stoic father filled her thoughts, distracting her from her heightened senses, and she strained to think of her mother as well. She could barely summon her mother's face, though, finding it always substituted with that of her ill Aunt Minna.

In her frustration, she squeezed her hand tight over the stone in her pocket. She fell backward and hit her head on an icy slab of rock. The slab felt like it had cracked, but Disa didn't bother to look as she massaged the base of her neck. It was a strange sensation, hurting without hurting.

Disa wondered if the tears she'd offered at the death of her mother years before had all but emptied her; there was no remnant left for her father. Her father, who had been hard toward everyone around him, but her family. Her father, who had worn his body in the docks only to come home and work the land with the aging Kacper. Her father, who had come home smelling of other women after her mother was gone, but who had always produced a candy or a shell or sometimes even a book for his only daughter. How had she nothing left in her eyes for him?

The last bits of light in the sky strained through monstrous clouds that began to belch snow and sleet. The wind cut at her in its brutality. The ground beneath rattled. She almost didn't notice that she had been followed. Disa lifted her head and looked over to see Solan standing near her on the hillside. Her fingers relaxed their involuntary grip on the stone in her pocket and the world seemed to lean a little back toward equilibrium. Solan watched her, silent as always. Disa sat slowly up and brushed off some of the snow around her. Solan sat down next to her, looking for a long time at the deep crack in the rock where Disa's head had hit. She almost loomed, terribly close. Disa could hear, loud, each blink of Solan's eyelids, each sniff of her nose or brush of her coat.

Disa drained her lungs of air, pushing herself to emptiness, and drew in the refreshing cold that calmed her blaring mind. Her lack of coat and boots almost registered, though she was still overfilled with other sensation. “Solan, look. My father and Austmar found something and left it in the barn. It’s curious, isn’t it?”

She took her hand from her pocket and showed the stone to Solan. Solan pulled off her mittens, cautiously touched the stone. She took some of the nearby snow into her cupped palms, breathed into it, and dripped the water into Disa’s open fingers. With a mitten, Solan scrubbed at the stone, careful not to take it from her cousin’s hand. Disa watched her clean all the grime from the stone, then a hard layer of dirt, then ash. Beneath, the stone was red on black, impossibly sleek, almost difficult to hold onto, delicious to the touch. Disa dropped the stone into Solan’s hands. Solan studied the stone with her searching green eyes, brushing her tow-headed wisps behind her ear. Even at age seventeen, Disa thought she still looked like a young girl.

“I’ve never touched something so smooth before.” Disa said.

Solan nodded, touched the stone to her cheek, and smiled. Disa took the stone back from her and stood up, stowing it in her hood behind her back.

“Let’s go back. I want to see my father again.” Disa began to walk and Solan took her hand.

By the time Olin had been laid in the ground the day following his death, the sky had quit its torrent and the setting sun left a deep orange softness in the far away clouds above the ocean. Much of the farming village had gathered and everyone was silent as Minister Larus Larusson finished his speech and mumbled a few words meant only for the Lord’s ears. He touched Disa’s shoulder and she knelt down, leaving a necklace of shells she had made from the scores her

father had brought to her over the years. With the necklace resting on Olin's chest, Austmar, Kacper, and few of the dockworkers covered the makeshift casket with a plank of wood and began to shovel the hard, rocky dirt into the hole. The dirt clattered against the wood of Olin's casket and Disa could see the uncovered corner of her mother's casket just beside, being covered for a second time.

Roslin straightened Disa's coat and spoke close to her, but clearly so that everyone could hear. "He's beside Petra with the Lord Christ. I'm sure they're wondering what's taking the rest of us so long to get there."

"Indeed." Minister Larus nodded to Roslin, smiled gently to Disa. His wife, Eydis, nodded with him, hands folded in piety.

Disa thought in the hollows of her mind and wondered how her father and mother could stand next to Jesus if every other Christian who had died that week was also standing next to him. There wouldn't be space and surely there were people more holy that Jesus would want to have close to him. She also wondered if she had prayed enough to the Lord to free her mother, and now her father, from the purgatory her grandmother used to fret over. Petra had died before her family had fully embraced Jesus and Olin had very much enjoyed drinking and loose women in her absence; it was a reasonable question. Surely, as her family had little money, the Lord would accept piety and dedication when there were no coins to offer. Though, as she thought about it, she realized that purgatory was a false idea, brought by the Catholics, and they had been banished from the island years ago, her grandmother being a rather vocal holdout. Minister Larus had worked hard to fully convert Disa's grandmother from Catholicism, but the task had been left unfinished when her grandmother passed. Maybe her parents were okay.

She smiled at Minister Larus and walked away from the bluffs and over to their home across the family's frozen field. In the corner of her vision, she could see Solan sitting next to the lone grave stone of her father, Filip, while watching Olin's burial. Evan and Thor hung close to Roslin, their usual boyishness muted by their uncle's death.

When Disa reached the cottage, she sat in a chair by the window and watched the hill where she and Solan had sat the day before. She wondered if she would forget her father's face, one day, as she had forgotten her mother's. Maybe she would ask Solan to draw it for her. Solan could draw better than she could, but Disa could sing rimes.

She ignored the door when it opened, her family, Eydis, and Minister Larus appearing for supper at the table. She ignored the meal prayers, aware that her distance would be forgiven in the light of the cruel week's event. She forgot Larus and Eydis's exit and the sending of the twins to bed. She barely noticed Solan's disappearance outside on some unknown errand and later, Austmar's sudden and blunt farewell as he left to go home. She watched the hill during the cleaning of the dishes, the removal of the untouched plate by her feet, Solan's silent and harried return, and Auntie Roslin's kiss on her ash dry cheek.

The flames in the fireplace were being stoked. Kacper placed a few more logs atop the broken pieces and glowing embers and crouched beside Disa's chair. He took her chin and pulled it to face him, freeing her gaze from the hill in the distance.

"Disa, I've built up the fire in here for you tonight. It's best if you get to bed with your cousin, though. I don't want you taking sick in this room with no blanket. Winter's still full force. You're lucky to have avoided cold from being out without a coat yesterday." Kacper's eyes reddened and his fingers on her chin shook a little. "And don't think that we're changing

plans about the coming summer. We'll still be making our new home in Nova Scotia. Austmar and I are determined."

Disa smiled up at him. "Thank you, Kacper."

Kacper stood, shoulders slumped and eyelid twitching, and walked into his bedroom and shut the door.

Disa turned her head back and watched the hill once more. The heat from the fireplace warmed her back and she soaked it in while leaving her dress loose in the front. Wind tugged at the grassy roof without apology and Disa felt that she could hear the far away grinding of the surf against the bluffs that held the bodies of her uncle and her parents.

The hill grew dark in her sight as her vision grew narrow. A sharp fizz from an ember succumbing to the heat within itself was the last thing she heard before sleep and dream overcame.

The grunt of the giant white mare beneath her is baritone to the soprano shriek of the great bird that hugs the curve of the golden grassy hills, talons laden with prey. The bird seems to have covered the whole of the steppe in a single flight, so wide are its wings. When it lands on the arm of the clever man beside her, Disa thinks only with disgust that this hunting bird is too rich a gift for the ruler upon which it will be bestowed. He may be great, but she can be greater. The clever man takes a heavy rabbit from the bird, feeding it and covering its eyes with a leather cap. Disa covets the bird and the rabbit, but more so, the clever man who is so pretty and so desirable. He looks at her, expression veiled.

Disa woke only to a muted morning, the sun having failed to show itself through the billowing clouds. Her hand was cupped over her father's stone that rested on a solitary patch on the ground. The sensations and memory of vision, though vivid beyond her clearest dreams in the past, flew from her with haste and she thought of her morning chores. She pulled herself to her knees, dropped the stone into the hood of her overcoat, and found her feet in an uneven daze. Looking around, Disa realized that she had gone up to the hill in the early morning in her sleep. She felt fine, but she was surprised that she hadn't frozen to death.

She took to run back down the hill toward home, only then remembering the two days that preceded that one. In the near distance she could see the edge of the bluffs and the three gravesites, two of quarried rock, a temporary one made of wood. She would no longer run, but pulled the lacing of her boots tight and stumbled down the snowy hill.

It was clear that Uncle Kacper had awoken early. The family mule was gone and the tracks that lead toward their village center were nearly invisible. Disa edged close to the front window and leaned her head near to listen. Roslin was in the kitchen, cooking and singing an old song Disa was certain her mother, Petra, had sung when Disa was very little. The boys were likely still asleep, perhaps Solan, as well.

Disa walked toward the barn, intent to appear as though she had woken early for her chores. She thought she might do Solan's chores as well, allowing her cousin to sleep a little longer.

Disa found the door of the barn cracked open. She frowned, wondering who would have been so lazy as to let the cold in on the cows all night. But a strange sound stayed her hand before she reached to pull open the door. She stopped, straining to hear above the lowing of the

cows and the wind's constant brushing. There were hushed, forced breaths, followed by intermittent whimpers, then a muted cry.

Disa crouched down, glancing around her. She looked through the small space between the doors and saw her cousin standing alone in the back of the barn. Solan's dress was peeled off of her shoulders, lowered down below her knees. She leaned heavily, supported herself with one arm against a wooden beam that reached the ceiling. In her other hand, Disa saw that Solan was holding a thin sewing needle and that the bright red tears that dropped from its tip matched the long trickles that followed her contours down before falling into the damp hay of the barn floor.

There were pierced points in careful clusters all about Solan's torso, her right breast, the front of her hips, the left crook of her neck. Solan sucked in a cold breath and jammed the needle deep into her right breast yet again. She made a choked sound and her face flashed a contorted expression of shock. Disa's eyes watered; a disgusting shiver of undesired sympathy made her stomach draw upward. Solan pulled the needle out again and a whimper followed. She pushed the needle into the beam before her and stood more erect.

Disa thought to go to her cousin. But Solan pulled up a handful of the cloth of her dress and stuffed it in her mouth. She wound her fingers around a small bunch of strands from her hair, balled her hand into a cruel fist, and yanked. A second, less muted, pinched cry. Disa nearly cried out with her. Solan looked at the hair in her fingers for a moment, studying, let it fall. There were a few similar tufts in the hay at her feet.

Disa lost her balance a little and leaned against the door. The ensuing creak sent her silently, swiftly into hiding behind a barrel, not a second before Solan's eyes appeared at the door. Disa could not see her cousin, but guessed at the shame her countenance might hold. The firm smack of the door shut out the cows' lowing and Solan's pained breaths.

Disa forced herself to breathe, glanced at the door, and walked over to the drying house with its stinking shark flesh, the hakarl, hanging in the growing, dull light of the morning. She collected her mind from its scattered state. A tendril of her own hair fell into her view and she shuddered again, touching her chest to ease away the hurt. Why would Solan do such a thing to herself? She had never heard of someone making themselves bleed on purpose. Solan was inflicting a lot of pain on herself, but afterward she seemed to feel almost relieved. This wasn't entirely hard to understand, Disa used to pinch herself, hard, during school lessons whenever she made a mistake. It made her feel less of a failure when she punished herself. But Solan drawing blood with a needle seemed another thing, entirely. For some reason, it made Disa want to avoid her cousin as much as help her. After standing still a very long moment, she took down a medium sized fish from the hook, careful to avoid the rotting hakarl her aunt and uncle loved so much, and left the drying house.

Inside the cottage, Disa found Roslin cooking eggs, still singing the same song. Disa laid the fish on the table and began to pull the pin bones from it. Roslin looked over at her, straining skyr yogurt with a cheese cloth. "You could have slept a little longer, Disa." Roslin said. "You didn't have to go to the chapel this morning and do all of the chores."

"I wanted to pray at the altar. But it was Solan that did my chores." Disa hoped her lie about the chapel wouldn't be discovered later, but Roslin and Kacper would have been concerned that she had ventured out into the morning only to fall asleep in the snow. She laid each pin bone from the fish at the corner of the table as she found it, avoiding Roslin's eyes. The fish had absorbed some of the hakarl stench, but not enough to injure Disa's nose. The sweet baking bread in the oven warmed her nostrils, a luxury meant for Christmastime months past.

“Well, your cousin’s always been a pleasant girl.” Roslin finished straining the skyr and peeked in at the bread in the oven.

“Mm hm.” Disa checked the fish a second time for bones before cutting it into servings and placing it on a large plate.

Roslin ran her fingers through Disa’s long, unkempt hair. Disa subdued a shiver. “And you, as well, Disa Olinsdottir. When you’re not arguing with me.” Roslin kissed Disa’s head. “I’m going to check in on the boys.

Roslin disappeared into her bedroom. Disa spooned some of the skyr into a bowl and sat down to eat. She felt uneven, all of a sudden. She looked behind her to see Solan standing in the open doorway. Solan nodded at her and walked over to their bedroom, tossing her overcoat inside. She sat down beside Disa to eat. Disa could see that Solan’s scarf was still wrapped close around her neck to hide the needle wounds. Solan stood and looked inside the oven at the bread. She took it out and set it on the table, slicing a piece for herself and one for Disa. Disa watched her own food as Solan sat back down. Solan was quiet, as she always was. But today, she sat without slouch or tension, an uncanny ease defined the flick of her finger as she lifted a chunk of bread into her mouth. Disa felt this more than saw it, her eyes she kept low.

Kacper came in to the cottage, pulled off his boots, and joined them at the table. He kissed each of the girls before sitting down. Solan served him.

“The snow’s not so heavy today. It may be an early spring.” Kacper spoke to the open air and Solan and Disa nodded. Roslin appeared with the twins, guiding them to the table. Evan immediately tore into the bread and Thor simply laid his head down on the table, holding on to the last of his sleep.

“You’ve got the boys up early, yet, Roslin.” Kacper said.

Roslin sat down, giving the boys their skyr and fish. “I wanted to take them when I go to see Minna. We’re going to look at maps of Nova Scotia so that she and the boys have an idea of how far we’re traveling.”

Kacper nodded.

Disa glanced up at Solan and wondered if she should try to get her to speak. “I saw you took care of my milking and morning cleaning, Solan. Thank you very much.” Disa tilted her head to look at Solan.

Solan slowly raised her head, finishing her bite. She looked at Disa for a moment, nodded, and went back to her breakfast, lips parted in a half pucker, half grimace. Disa’s throat drew close and she sipped her water unsteadily, slurping some. The rest of the family had ignored Solan’s expression, but Disa was fearful for her cousin. Maybe fearful of her. She decided to watch Solan as closely as she could.

Disa stood up to wash her plate. Solan stood with her, taking it from her hands and walking to the sink. Solan had never been able to easily look Disa directly in her eyes, due to her smallness and her meekness. But at that moment, she locked eyes with Disa until she forced her cousin’s surrender. Disa sat down by the fire and Roslin brought her a cup of tea. Disa churned, looking into the fire. She realized that she was still very cold from the night spent outside.

Kacper chuckled a little to himself. “I forgot to pick up those new pots for you, Roslin. I’ll head back to the village after breakfast.”

Roslin put more water over the fire to boil. “Solan can go get them if she takes Brigitta or the mule. It shouldn’t take too long. She was supposed to go by the Jonsson’s for extra porridge.”

Disa watched as Solan nodded, offering a gracious smile.

“Solan. That would be a big help if you went for me. I’ve got to get that extra fish cleaned and drying, soon.” Kacper took another piece of bread. “You know how to find Sira Eriksdottir’s shop.”

Solan finished washing the dishes and began to put her boots on to go back outside. Disa listened to all of this. She wanted to argue, wanted to follow along to watch her cousin who was clearly upset over something. But her bearing waned and her posture began to slump. In a moment, Aunt Roslin had Disa in her arms, walking her into the bedroom.

“Let’s get you back to bed. I knew you hadn’t slept enough, my girl.” Roslin sat Disa down on the bed and helped her undress. “Such a hard few days.”

Disa couldn’t voice her protest. She laid down as Roslin covered the lone window in a thick curtain and pulled up the fallen blanket from the worn floor boards. Roslin took Disa’s overcoat instead of Solan’s with her by mistake when she closed the door to the room. In the darkness of her bed, Disa sank into a paralyzed slumber, her aunt’s vanishing words slipping beneath the door.

“She’s always harder on herself than anyone else. She’s like her mother was, that way...”

The front door to the cottage opened and shut. Disa knew that Solan had gone.

Disa had been staring at the ceiling for a long time, unaware she was awake and no longer dreaming. She had dreamt of a woman who always looked in another direction. That woman’s long brown hair hid the details of her face, a face that Disa’s eyes and fingers and cheeks desired greatly to know. The dream had faded into waking as the woman, her vibrant and healthy mother, Petra, had lain her down to sleep. Disa had sat up in the dream to watch her mother leave, to try and catch a glimpse of her face. Only that flick of hair could be seen as Petra

vanished behind the door, encouraging Disa to go to sleep. Disa lay back down, looked up at the ceiling, and blinked her eyes once. Then, she was awake, filled with ache at missing her mother whom she could not see, and filled with regret about her father whom she failed to weep over. Disa began to whisper the only scriptures she could perfectly remember. "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure... everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun." Disa bit her cheek hard, tasted the trickling iron warmth against her tongue, but no tears came.

She began to wonder if she was a fallen creature, an unsalvageable soul that was more kin to the demons who would tremble before Jesus' name than to the saints who would praise it in the new heaven. Shouldn't she love her father more than her mother? He was, after all, the head of her home and the very image of God, even if he hadn't always been quite exemplary. She would have condemned herself a moment later if she'd not been distracted by the warming of her blood and the rising of hope that came with the aroma of sweat and fish and alcohol from the other side of her bedroom door.

The smell of her father, Olin, caused her to leap up, dressing quickly in her stupor. She was aware but unconcerned that she knew he was gone, so strong was the effect of his scent that she had been unable to detect two days before out in the cold. When she swung open the door of her and Solan's room to find instead her father's cousin, Austmar, standing in the doorway, kicking the snow from his boots, she understood the heat in her blood.

She ought to have known. The alcohol had been wrong. Olin always drank beer while Austmar preferred the horrid svarti daudi liquor that made Disa dizzy whenever she smelled it. Disa wanted to be disappointed, but she thought of how much she wanted to brush the heavy

snowflakes off of Austmar's beard with her fingers. Austmar looked up at her, longer than he normally did, before returning his attention to his boots and shutting out the cold.

"Is your uncle here?" Austmar never could speak softly. She stared at him for a moment longer. He frowned and looked up. "Well, girl. Is Kacper here?"

"He's in the drying house." Disa spoke quietly, her voice muted by her heavy sleep.

"I checked there already. And the barn. Nothing but cows and chickens and their shit." Austmar stood straight and looked at her, waiting. Disa shook herself and rushed over to the kitchen to put water over the fire for tea as Austmar sat down at the table. "I didn't want to take the wrong cow to my place. Two of ours were stolen and we need extra milk for Fastny. The baby should come a few weeks before we set sail for Nova Scotia."

"Yes." Disa stood before the fire, watching the pot and hoping it would boil soon, hoping it would never boil. She was fully awake, now, and noticed that her dress was hanging off of her shoulder, showing much of her neck and the beginning of the curve of her breast. She pulled the dress back up into place, thinking Austmar hadn't noticed. When she looked back at him, he was watching her.

Disa blushed and busied herself with the cups. He wasn't near to intoxicated in any way, but when he exhaled she could smell the alcohol that mixed with his sweat and she shivered a little. The water began to boil and she wrapped cloth around the pot handle, pouring the water for tea and adding sugar and a small amount of butter instead of cream, the way her parents had taught her. Austmar took his cup and breathed in the steam. Disa waited, watching her cup, resisting the urge to sit next to him. Then she spoke, entirely against her will it seemed.

"I thought when you came in that you were my father."

Austmar put his cup down on the table and looked up at her. She wasn't sure why she had said it and felt stupid for doing so. Austmar said nothing at this, but she noticed that he looked, again, at her neck before returning to his tea. "Only your mother made this better." He said. Another kind thing. "You favor her."

"Thank you." Disa looked at the fire.

The door opened and Kacper walked in. "Ah, Austmar. Here for the cow?" Austmar grunted ascent. Kacper looked at Disa, smiling gently. "Did you get any rest, Disa?"

Disa nodded, taking her tea and sitting in the chair by the fire.

Austmar finished his steaming drink, wiped his mouth, beard, and face with a napkin from the table, and stood. "I wasn't sure which one you could spare."

"Take whichever two you want to replace yours. The others will be enough for us for the time being."

"Your generosity will have you poor as a pauper, Kacper." Austmar grimaced and went outside. Kacper followed, chuckling and winking at Disa, before he closed the door.

Disa could hear part of their talk outside.

"Oh, and Kacper. I'll take that bit of armor out of your way."

"I had wondered about that old thing. Unique, isn't it?"

"Sure. Olin figured it from the Orient. We thought it might be worth something. I'll split any money I make with you."

"Not necessary, cousin. But the sentiment is appreciated."

Disa pondered that armor her father had brought home. She wondered if she should show Austmar the special stone she'd found inside, though she couldn't imagine that he would care about a strange rock. She tasted her tea; it was still too hot for her, but she sipped it anyway, as

she considered what chores ought to be done. But the napkin that Austmar had left on the table drew her attention and she looked at it for a long time. She reached out and took it, stowing it inside her dress pocket, and asked no questions of herself.

By the time Roslin returned with the twins, Disa had forced herself to take up her afternoon chores, secretly adjusting the wood pile and cleaning the chicken coop for Solan as well.

That night, as she was undressing for bed, Disa noticed Solan staring at her. Solan had just come inside from the barn and closed their door before taking her overcoat off. She handed the overcoat to Disa, who frowned.

“Auntie Roslin gave you my overcoat this morning, by accident?” Disa asked her cousin. Solan nodded. She took off her coat as Disa draped the overcoat on a chair. Solan then unwrapped her scarf from around her neck, revealing the left crook. Disa glanced over, seeing that Solan’s neck had healed entirely from the cruel punctures of the morning in the barn. Disa frowned.

“Solan?”

Solan didn’t respond to Disa, but undressed for bed and lay down under the covers. Disa lay down next to her. She blew out the last candle and the darkness covered them. Disa could hear that Solan’s breathing had already found the rhythm of sleep, but she whispered to her anyway.

“Will you tell me why you did that to yourself? With the needle? I know it’s a sin to mutilate the flesh, but maybe I can help so that Roslin and Kacper never find out.”

Solan's breathing stalled for a moment and Disa's teeth clenched in fear that her cousin might actually have heard her question. But Solan's breathing returned to that of sleep and Disa exhaled with a little more ease.

Disa recited one of the old rimes her grandmother had taught her when she was a girl, but did it only in her thoughts so as not to wake the house. She let her throat tighten and soften, as though she were actually singing out loud, to help the rime come out properly. When she had finished and she was certain that Solan was asleep, Disa quietly got out of bed and reached into her dress pocket for Austmar's napkin she had stowed earlier in the day.

Disa stood in front of the window and peered out of the crack between the shutters at the shadowy landscape. She glanced back at Solan's form beneath the quilts and blankets, rising, falling. Disa turned back to the window and held the napkin to her face, breathing deeply of Austmar's scent until it filled her mouth and head and lungs. She felt the heat in her blood, again, and she placed her palm flat between her legs, rubbing as noiselessly as she could. It wasn't hard to imagine the weight of Austmar's chest as it might have pushed against her own, how his thick hands could be gripping her back and her hair. Disa had heard him grunt as he worked and built and swore; she imagined his breathing in her ears. She only glanced back at the door and her cousin twice while she sinned.

But after her final shudder, Disa could only think of the disapproval with which God must have been recording her failure. After returning the napkin to the pocket of her dress, she got back into the bed next to her sleeping cousin, fretting over church the next morning.

Disa wondered at the fact that both her gratification and Solan's suffering were evils in the eyes of the Lord. Would she ever find a husband for herself who wasn't rough handed or half drunk? And how would Solan ever find a husband who would warm to her grave-silent tongue

and her mad mother stuck in a small room in the fishing village? If God were going to mend their sinful hearts, why hadn't he yet?

Disa knew what her father would have said. *Don't annoy God with your silly questions, petal. He's busy, well, making the world work. You think he cares about whatever you do? Just don't let your Aunt Roslin find out. She's the one you need to worry about.* Disa smiled, remembering how Roslin would glare at Olin's teasing. Olin would often pull Disa's wayward hair from her cheeks, extracting grass or seaweed from the strands, before kissing her on the forehead and disappearing out the door with Austmar and a jug of alcohol and a plate of shark steak. Roslin never dared argue with him, the husband of her older sister being nearly twenty years her senior. But she would always set Disa to Psalm recitation after his departure.

Disa hoped that Olin was right.

Minister Larus had smiled warmly at Disa as she entered the chapel. But as he spoke his message, Disa found her focus weak and she looked over at Austmar in the pew across the aisle where he sat next to his wife Fastny and their daughter Lara. Fastny was pretty enough, Disa figured. She was only a few years older than Disa and had married Austmar at sixteen when he was well into his twenties. Fastny's belly looked near bursting and must have had a boy the size of his father stretching and kicking within it. Fastny noticed Disa watching her and gave a silly little wave. Disa looked away, rolling her eyes.

When it came time to pray, Disa cheated another look at Austmar and she felt her heart thump hard in her chest. Solan, head bowed, was sitting just in front of her next to Uncle Kacper. Austmar had failed to bow his head, was looking at Solan, tongue working behind his closed lips.

Disa knew that she was fitter, prettier than her older cousin who often grew faint after too much exertion and always had a paler complexion. Why should Austmar care about Solan, who was unlikely to bare any children and who never spoke to anyone? Disa wanted to will Austmar's gaze away from Solan when she felt a little finger tap her knee. She looked down to see Evan looking up at her through squinting eyes, straining to look at her while he kept them closed. He whispered.

“Why is your eyes open?”

Disa put her finger to his lips, pointing at Minister Larus, and bowed her head. Evan squirmed in his seat, but managed to keep quiet throughout the rest of the prayer, but Disa forbade herself from looking, again, at Austmar and Solan. It didn't matter, anyway.

When service was over, Evan and Thor jumped from their seats on the pews and sprinted toward the door. Evan burst out of the door into the snow, but Thor tripped over his feet and hit the stone ground of the chapel floor hard. He was silent for a moment, then a howl erupted from his chest before Disa saw the blood dripping from his mouth.

Roslin and Kacper ran to scoop up the boy, inspecting him and holding him close.

“Blast it, I think his tooth is cracked.” Kacper groaned in his empathy for the four year old. Evan watched from outside, tearing up over his twin brother's crying.

Disa had run to Thor, too, unsure of what to do. But Solan appeared beside her, unraveling her scarf from her neck. Disa noticed that she took something from the braid in her hair and hid it inside the scarf. Solan deftly stole Thor from Roslin's arms and held her scarf against his mouth.

The congregation watched with whispers of “poor boy” and “it was a baby tooth, right?” while Solan put her temple to Thor’s forehead as he wailed. There was a sympathetic wail from the sky outside as a storm churned in the north. The chapel walls creaked under the stress. Disa glared at Solan, the center of everyone’s attention. She glanced at Austmar who was busy holding little Lara’s hand and shushing her. Fastny looked fat and tired standing on her feet and Disa hid a smile at this.

Soon, Thor’s wailing subsided and he calmed down. Solan pulled the now bloody scarf away from his mouth and inspected his lip and tooth. Disa saw the subtlest, craftiest smile on Solan’s face before she shoved the scarf into her overcoat pocket and handed Thor back to Roslin. Kacper looked at Thor, again, and grinned a little. “Ah! The bleeding’s not so bad after all. And his tooth isn’t even broken.”

“Hard not to imagine the worst, Kacper. But grace prevails. Even the weak and the ill are blessed with gifts.” Minister Larus told him. “Your niece has the gift of nurture.” He patted Solan on the head, as though she were a child. Disa saw Solan grimace at the minister’s words. She had to admit to herself some frustration over the other villagers’ perceptions of Solan, that she was slow or stupid because she didn’t speak. If they all would spend more time with her, they would understand how smart, maybe even crafty Solan was. They would notice her differently. She wished that Austmar hadn’t noticed Solan at all.

Disa watched Roslin inspect her more timid son. “You must have scared your father, Thor. He thought you’d cracked that skull of yours in two.” Roslin kissed Thor for a long time, suppressing her shaking with deep breaths for her son’s sake. “Do you want to play with Evan or do you want me to carry you?”

“I want you.” Thor still sobbed a little, but he looked to hold on to his mother out of comfort rather than shock. Evan hung close to Kacper, loathe to distance himself from Thor.

As Kacper helped Roslin stand and everyone followed them out of the chapel, Roslin touched Solan’s shoulder. “You’ve your great-grandmother’s touch, Solan, girl.” They went out onto the snowy path.

Fastny caught Disa’s attention and whispered loudly to her, as if Solan wouldn’t be able to hear her. “Disa! Who knew your cousin was so good with children? I wish I knew how to stop Lara from crying when I was her age.”

“Yes, she’s always good with our boys.” Disa didn’t mention that Evan usually preferred her over anyone else or that it was often her job to read to the twins at night before bed because Solan didn’t read out loud.

“When do you think you’ll get married and have children of your own?” Fastny asked her.

Disa bit her tongue to keep from glaring. “I pray every day for the best husband.”

Fastny beamed at her. “That’s a good thing! I’ll pray for you, too. It’s too sad that Austmar’s little brother died when he was little; he’d have made a good husband. Their family is full of strong men.”

Disa faked a smile as Fastny squeezed her hand and followed Austmar out the door of the chapel. Austmar and Fastny were the last to leave, just behind Minister Larus. Austmar glanced over Fastny’s head at Solan, who looked away and wrapped her coat tight around her shoulders. Disa felt her teeth squeak as her jaw tightened . Solan was ignoring him.

Disa and Solan stood alone in the chapel. And when Solan turned to look at Disa, Disa could not remember any of the events that had just passed, so greatly had her cousin changed.

Solan was striking. She stood with more strength than Disa had ever remembered and her expression was at once both fierce and calm. Disa felt arrested, unable to recall any desired word. Solan scratched her nose, turned and left the chapel, and looked up to the sky outside that had turned violent since service began. She rebraided her hair as the wind unsettled her coat.

And it was only upon Solan's exit that Disa realized. Solan was wearing the wrong overcoat, again. Disa put her hands inside the hood of Solan's overcoat, unable to find her father's curious, hard, impossibly sleek stone.

Disa hauled urine soaked hay and manure out of the barn, piling it a few dozen steps away. Each time Disa returned with a full wheelbarrow, the prior pile had frosted over.

For a week, Disa had thought about Solan wearing her overcoat. She had made sure to wake up early that day after church, claiming her own coat and stepping out of the bedroom before Solan was dressed. But she had clenched her teeth ever since she had stepped outside to milk the cows and found her hood and pockets empty. Solan had slipped away to walk to the fishing village down the road from their farming village to spend the week with her mother, Minna, who stayed under a special doctor's care; Disa nearly spit over it.

Now, with the week's chores nearly done, Disa couldn't help but think that her always diligent cousin had decided to skip her share of the work and blatantly steal on top of it. As she shoveled the refuse, Disa worked to memorize every one of Solan's failings, counting every instant Solan had eaten a last candy without sharing or left a chore for Disa to finish while she feigned exhaustion. When Solan returned Disa would tell her all about herself, humbling her cousin and demanding back what belonged to her. There was a small, guilty feeling of early victory when she thought of Solan's inability to respond.

Evan and Thor squealed by the cottage and Disa looked up from her wheelbarrow to see Solan walking up the path from the fishing village. Solan had a new, bright green scarf on and smiled as she pushed over the snow. The boys ran out to hug her and Kacper came from the drying house to wave. Disa watched her, felt an urge to keep Solan for herself, to protect against anyone else's attention. But she forced herself to remember Solan's theft, strove to remember all of her complaints against her cousin. Disa looked at Solan's coat and felt emptiness in her hands.

Kacper walked over to Solan, touching the green scarf. "That's very pretty. Did, did your mother give this to you, Solan?" Kacper frowned more than smiled in his asking. Solan grinned, however, leaning over to let the boys touch the scarf. Roslin came out of the cottage to see what the fuss was about.

"Solan. How's Minna, today?" Roslin asked.

Disa sneered to herself. Roslin visited her sister twice most every week. Nothing had ever changed for the better; Aunt Minna only got more distant and more confused, saying strange and awkward sentences punctuated by immense stretches of silence. Solan had been allowed to skip chores for the entire week to visit her mother. Disa had no one to skip chores for.

"I think Minna gave her that scarf." Kacper told Roslin, eyes brightening.

Roslin stepped back, then looked at Solan. "Solan, she gave this to you?" Solan nodded and pointed to her mouth, moving her lips. "And she spoke to you? Then, she's doing much better."

Solan hugged Roslin. Disa could see that Roslin had tears in her eyes. Roslin looked at Kacper.

"Kacper, I know it's near sundown." Roslin sputtered.

“I’m done with the horse for the day. Why don’t you go ride her over to see your sister. Austmar and Fastny are bringing some potatoes to add to the meal. We’ll get supper ready and keep some hot for you when you get back.” Kacper said.

Roslin hugged him and walked quickly over to the barn, taking their horse, Brigitta, from the stall and leading her out into the yard. Disa thought she looked like a young girl for the first time since she had married Kacper nine years before. Roslin kissed Evan and Thor on the forehead, leapt up onto Brigitta without any help from Kacper, and rode off toward the fishing village where her sister stayed. Evan was animated, asking Kacper what had happened. Solan picked up Thor and spun him around.

Disa watched the hollows of the horse’s hoof prints in the snow for a moment, near only to the pile of waste and hay she’d been making, then kicked the spilling wheelbarrow over and tromped into the barn. She walked to the far side, near to the roosters and chickens, and crouched down to look at them as they pecked at the seed in the dirt. “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” She whispered to the chickens, imagining the day when they no longer had any eggs to give her family and the hatchet that they would face.

Behind her, the wheelbarrow screeched as it was pushed into the barn and the door was closed shut. Disa didn’t need to look over at who had retrieved the wheelbarrow, the quiet was telling. With the wheelbarrow stowed in its place against the near wall, Solan came and kneeled down beside Disa. Solan didn’t touch her as she often did, but simply waited with her, watching the chickens.

“You, you shouldn’t kneel, Solan. It’s not good for your knees and you know you have weak knees.” Disa couldn’t start her tirade against Solan’s sins as she had intended. Solan

seemed so calm. But Disa looked at the chickens, thought of the hatchet, and bit down hard on her tongue. She looked beside her at her cousin. Solan studied the chickens' pecking. "Solan. I think I grabbed the wrong overcoat again, the other day. Do you want to switch right now? Then you could always keep your pretty new scarf next to yours so we don't mix them up. Mine looks a little big and funny on you, after all."

Disa willed her trickery to undermine her cousin. But Solan continued to watch the chickens in silence. Disa glared at the ground at this silence until Solan finally stood up, unbuttoned her coat, and dropped it to the floor.

"Why didn't you just hand the coat to me?" Disa started to ask.

But Solan plucked a small sewing needle that had been slipped into the fabric of her undercoat. She took Disa by the wrist, turned up her palm, and pricked it, hard.

"Solan! Don't!" Disa stood, pulling back from her cousin; her ears grew hot and she wanted to smack Solan with the bleeding hand that she now clutched. Disa strained to claw Solan's face, if only with her gaze.

Solan blinked, pulled off her hood, and unbraided her hair. As her hair unraveled, she took Olin's stone from within it, snatched Disa's hand once more, and pressed the stone into Disa's palm. Disa grasped the stone with a tight and trembling fist; her tongue stung from the bite and her palm pulsed with a deep thud. She watched at her cousin from the corner of her eye, unwilling to look away from the stone. Solan pulled her hair back into a simple ponytail and put her coat back over her shoulders. She stepped past Disa to where the rooster was strutting amongst the chickens. She deftly took the rooster in her arms, walked over into the corner, and snapped his neck. Then she sat down on a barrel and began to pluck his feathers in preparation for dinner.

Disa did not see or hear, only felt, her cousin's movements. She sank, instead, into the stone in her hand and noticed how terribly long it seemed to have been away from her. The walls of the barn creaked from a change in the air.

Solan glanced back at Disa and touched her own palm. Disa peeked at the needle wound and found it gone, if still a little achy. It was a healing stone. Magical, like an old Norse relic. Disa tried not to think of Solan's seeming generosity in giving her back the stone, the harsh and distant ease with which she offered it; the stone was Olin's, after all. Disa put her other hand over the stone and walked to the door. She toed it open a crack, peered out, and slipped through, shutting it behind her.

Outside, even though the sky began to churn, Disa took as deep and sweet a breath as she had taken in days. She shut her eyes as she walked, found Olin's stone was sleek and warm in her hands. What little blood there had been from her pierced palm was vanished beneath it and the pain, now, was all gone. She could hear Kacper and the twins as she went past the drying house; the twins were watching Kacper work and asking endless questions and hollering at the smell of hakarl. Disa listened through the walls of the barn to the brushing of the feathers against Solan's hands and the contented heartbeat pounding inside her cousin's chest. She could smell salt in Solan's hair, the old musty coats of her Aunt Minna, the roasted sweetness of a Dutch candy; they must have walked along the beach of black sand by the fishing village only hours before. Disa hadn't eaten all day, but she could taste on her tongue chicken and pepper and spices she did not recognize. A strong floral scent drifted in the frozen air. She could feel dust and grit in her teeth and the stale, dried sweat on her skin from a long day on sun scorched grasses that spread toward the horizon; the late winter cold was vanquished by the heat of that far away summer plain. Only when she opened her eyes could she reconcile her reality with her

senses. The chilled cyan and white of the sky, the charcoal of the laden clouds, the muted earth tones of the snowless plateau walls, all rescued her back from the stone's unbounded sensations.

Disa found herself in the valley between the eastern hills as she walked. She went down to stand on the hard surface of a frozen river blown snowless by the winter's winds. From this shadowed corridor, the distant slopes of Mount Laki could be admired easing upwards into the sky where they joined with hanging nimbus and soaring infinity. The crags of earth carved severe on either side of the river, hid the ice from the plains above, dripped fingers of water frozen months ago at the death of summer. Even on so remote an island, this was a hollow of superior solitude. She looked down and stared at the stone in her hands for a long hour. It grew clear to her that this had never been Olin's stone, after all. She could feel nothing of her father on it or in it or about it. There had been and would be others who had touched it, would walk the Earth holding it close to them, but none were her father. It must have been his only for that day before death. If this, then, perhaps, it didn't either belong to her.

The sky burst open, a torrent of snow almost rose up from beneath her, thick and heavy in an instant around her ankles. Disa walked up the steep river bank and began to walk back toward her village and her cottage. The snow was easy for her to step over and the cold did not whip at her lips or cut against her cheeks. As she moved, her feet fell light and easy. And yet she was filled heavy with certainty in each of her steps and she sensed that she could finally stand before Solan, again, at peace and undaunted. Then the storm began to crowd all around the plains and the hills. And Disa walked softly in its midst.

The night had fallen early from the heavy storms by the time Disa had returned home. She frowned, then ran toward the barn which had suffered a tear in the northern wall from the

high winds. She could see their horse Brigitta tied up, Roslin had returned, but there were two other horses in the barn besides the mule and all were rearing back and making a great noise from the thunder and tumult. Disa scrambled through the opening in the wall, stone still in her hand; she hugged tight each of the horses until they calmed. The shaggy grey horse, she recognized, belonged to Austmar. She stacked up some hay bales against the hole in the wall and shut the door behind her before running through the snow toward the cottage.

She stowed the stone in her hood as she opened the door to the sound of a woman's scream.

"Auntie Roslin?" Disa saw Roslin rushing across the room with a stack of blankets.

"Oh, Disa! We were about to send Kacper out to look for you in this storm."

"Who is screaming?" Disa grabbed a blanket that had fallen from the stack. She could see Kacper sitting in her own room with Evan, Thor, and Austmar's daughter, Lara.

"Austmar and Fastny came by to share supper, but Fastny started contractions. It looks like the baby is coming very early. And I've only just gotten back from seeing Minna." Roslin put her shoulder to the door as another scream shot from inside Olin's room.

Disa followed Roslin. Inside, Olin's coats and boots and chest of clothes had been pushed to one corner to make room for the stack of blankets and a basin of water. Fastny was sprawled on the bed on her back, legs open under a blanket with the pillows propping her up. Solan knelt beside her, giving her water and adjusting the pillows. Austmar stood beside the bed, watching Fastny, watching Solan. Disa's eyes lingered for a moment on the forearms of her father's cousin; she hadn't seen them bare since the summer before, when Kacper and Olin had gone to help him re-raise his barn after an earthquake. She only needed to take one step to be close enough to brush against them, but a groan from Fastny rattled the room. Underneath the din of

the storm and the heaving breaths of the young mother, Disa heard the sound of Kacper singing songs with Lara and the twins the next room over. Roslin dropped the blankets onto the rug, then took the blanket from Disa's hand and unfolded it. In unison, Austmar lifted his wife's legs up while Solan took the blanket and pulled it flat from Roslin so it rested underneath Fastny's body. Austmar put Fastny down and Roslin checked her forehead temperature.

"Solan, Disa. Do you remember how I was with the twins?" Solan and Disa nodded back to her. Roslin took a cloth and dipped it in the basin of hot water, wiping Fastny's forehead. "This will be similarly difficult. Even though there's only one baby, it's coming early. Solan, can you fill another skin with hot water from the cauldron?"

Solan slid off of the bed. She touched Disa's arm before hurrying out the door. Disa touched the place on her arm that Solan had touched, felt it radiating.

Fastny grabbed Austmar's hand. "It's going to go good, isn't it?"

"We're here with Roslin and Kacper. You'll be fine." Austmar said.

"And the baby." Fastny insisted, locking eyes with Austmar.

He looked straight back at her. "And the baby. He'll be fine." Disa wondered if he believed that he was lying. Besides, how could he know anything for certain? Petra hadn't been fine. And neither had Disa's little brother.

Fastny nodded, squeezing her eyes shut as another groan escaped her throat. Disa walked over and stroked the hair from Fastny's face as Roslin looked under the top blanket at Fastny's dilation. Disa wiped some sweat from Fastny's brow with her sleeve. "But, cousin Austmar. How do you know it's a boy? It could be a girl." Disa never glanced behind her at Austmar, but felt the heaviness of his attention fall on her back.

Roslin looked up at her. "She's still not very far dilated. We've got a full night ahead of us." She said. "And Disa?" Disa took her gaze from Fastny's face. Roslin cocked an eyebrow at her. "Now's not the time for contrariness."

"Yes, Auntie Roslin." Disa propped Fastny up a little, making sure the pillows underneath her stacked comfortably.

"Go see if you can get some early milk from the cows, we'll need extra if Fastny needs to eat something in the middle of labor. Milk will be the easiest to get into her stomach." Roslin reached down into a leather bag for a small jar of ointment.

Disa nodded, then remembered. "Auntie! The barn has a hole in it! The north wall. The storm must have torn into it. I'm sorry, I forgot from when I came in with the baby coming."

Roslin looked at Austmar. "Can you and Kacper fix it in this?"

Austmar stood up. "Maybe a patch. At least to last the night." He took his hand away from Fastny, who moaned and reached for him.

"No, no, no. Austmar!" Fastny spoke through clenched teeth. Fastny was so impractical, so silly sometimes, Disa thought.

Roslin caught her hand and held it firm. "He'll be back, soon."

Disa ran through the bedroom door, on the way passing Solan carrying the hot water skin. They looked at each other without looking. Kacper and the children were still singing and drawing on wood slabs with coal pieces. As she heaved on her overcoat and took a milk jug from beside the kitchen table, she heard Austmar call for Kacper.

Disa opened the cottage door and was pressed backward by a firm wave of wind. She stepped outside over a waist high snowdrift, strained to close the door behind her. She trudged to the barn. The hay bales had blown over and the wall was splintered wider. She found the cows

lowing and chickens scattered, but the three horses and the mule were still calm. Disa flung blankets over each of the larger animals, taking time to whisper to each of the cows and pet them. She gathered the chickens, one by one, and put them in their coop, hoping they wouldn't peck each other's eyes in terror. Then she began to milk the cows, thinking how much stronger she was than Fastny and how she would never have any difficulties when her own children were to be born. She banished thoughts of her mother's own difficulties that might have contradicted her confidence, certain that she had all of the strength of will that her father possessed.

A loud sound caught Disa's attention and she looked behind her to see Kacper and Austmar hammering wood planks over the gaping hole in the barn wall. The milk jug was only half full as the cows hadn't yet slept and they were thin from the heavy winter. Disa considered milking the goats as well. The cold and draftiness had diminished greatly with the mending of the wall and Disa could see that Kacper and Austmar were half finished with the tear. While Kacper stayed outside to hard pack the snow around the barn, Austmar started stacking the hay bales, again, to bolster against the cold. Disa watched Austmar as he worked. Even through his overcoat, she could see his great shoulders moving; he worked with very little noise or grunting, only his breathing could be heard. He paused for a moment and turned around. Disa didn't look away. Instead, she stood and approached him with the jug in her hand, offering it to him.

"That's for Fastny." He said, thought he didn't seem cross.

"There's enough. You're tired." Disa told him. She felt as though she gained as much energy from watching him drink from the milk as he did from drinking it. Austmar returned the jug, but didn't return to moving the hay bales until he had watched her walk to the last of the cows to continue milking. Disa knew that he watched her; she found that she didn't feel the need to hurry over the milk.

Kacper came inside the barn from outside to move the horses to the far side of the barn. Disa pulled her attention from Austmar for the moment, content that she had distracted him in sufficient measure. She thought that she saw Kacper glance between the two of them, but told herself that her uncle could have suspected nothing. Soon, Disa finished with the cows and began to milk the goat as well, dismissing a remembrance of her father's old glare over mixing the milks in the same jug. The barn door swung open and Solan ran in without her coat or boots. She grabbed Disa and Disa immediately ran with her, leaving the jug behind.

"Uncle Kacper, bring in the milk when you're done!" Disa shouted and followed Solan out of the barn. Something must have gone very badly.

Back inside, the cottage was only noise. Fastny was screaming, again, but her voice was different, twisted. The timbers on the roof flexed loudly from the wind. Lara stood at the door to Olin's room, an incessant shouting for her mother growing hoarse. Evan and Thor were sitting on the floor in Solan and Disa's room, weeping. Solan took Disa's hand and pushed it against the stone hiding in the hood of the overcoat. Disa stopped and caught Solan's eyes, shaking her head. They hadn't ever discussed it out loud, but there had been an agreement that no one else would know about the stone for the time being. Disa didn't care what was happening to Fastny, the healing stone should be a secret. Solan frowned at Disa's reticence. She gestured to Lara, reached for Disa's neck, and pulled the shell necklace up so that Disa could see it. Disa knew that her cousin meant for her to think of her own parents, but she put a guarded hand over the stone in her hood, just the same. Solan left her, rushed over, and lifted Lara into her arms. Lara struggled and reached for her mother, but Solan carried her into the room with the twins and held the three children tight as they sobbed.

Disa walked into the strained cries inside Olin's room and nearly threw up. The bed was soaked by a line of dark liquid and Roslin pulled a scarlet, sopping towel from between Fastny's knees, dropping it into an empty bucket.

"Disa, I need fresh water, now. Where is Solan?" Roslin said. Her voice was quiet, but Disa felt a sharp edge in her words. Disa ran out, poured some of the water in the cauldron over the fire into a bucket of cool water, and carried the water back to Roslin. Roslin soaked a cloth in the warm water and began to clean Fastny's legs of the blood. She leaned in to whisper to Disa as Fastny screamed again with a raw throat. "We may not be able to save either of them, but we have to try everything."

"Okay Roslin." Disa words felt unsteady, from fear, or maybe from anticipation. Roslin had an expression, as though she was recalling something, and Disa felt a flash of memory from the far quieter night of her little brother's birth seven years earlier and the losses that had been suffered. But she tried to bury them when she looked over at Fastny.

Fastny's chest convulsed and her throat let out a gurgle as her eyes rolled up in her head. "Damn it!" Roslin pointed to the leather bag on the bed as she lifted Fastny to a full sitting position. "There's a root inside, Disa. Grab it for me."

Disa rummaged through the bag and found the small root inside, wrapped in cloth. She took it out.

"Bite off a piece and chew it a little, then put it in my hand."

Disa broke off a piece of the hard root and bit down into it. A slight tingle blossomed into a painful burst of fire against her lips and tongue and gums. Her eyes poured tears and she rushed to breathe in deeply, though each inhale seemed to stoke the heat. She spit the root into Roslin's outstretched hand and Roslin rubbed a small amount on Fastny's lips.

“Auntie!” Disa spit the rest of the root out on the floor.

“I know it seems mean.” Roslin said. “But we need her awake when it’s time to push.”

Fastny stirred, then woke with a shake in her chest and a renewed groan. After Roslin let her back down, Fastny mumbled. “Auntie Roslin, it hurts a lot. It’s not like with Lara. It’s not the same as with her. It’s not.”

Roslin patted Fastny’s sweated forehead. “We’ll make it work, Fastny. I have another few ideas. You just need to breathe deep.”

Disa watched Roslin and Fastny, still spitting the heat from her lips. Fastny must have been in agony not to notice the bits of burning root spread on her mouth. The door opened and Austmar leaned in, seeing all of the blood.

“What the hell happened, Roslin!” Austmar slammed the door open, cracking it at the hinge. “You’re supposed to be helping!” He grabbed Roslin by the arm.

“Austmar, let go of me!”

“You said you could help. You said you knew what to do.” Austmar snarled his words and Fastny’s groans turned to gasping.

“Austmar, you need to go get Eydis Hakonsdottir, she’s been through—” Roslin spoke in unsteady rhythm, gripping Austmar’s wrist.

“Larus’ wife? I don’t want her.”

“We need the extra help. She knows—”

“She’s a bitch and an idiot, we don’t need her! You promised—” Austmar shouted.

“I didn’t promise anything. Go get her! This is more difficult—” Roslin said.

Kacper looked in the door and immediately ran to pull Austmar away of his wife.

“Austmar, you need to stop. Come out here with me, you’re not helping.”

Austmar let go of Roslin and grabbed Kacper. “Man! Don’t you touch me. Your wife was supposed to help mine!”

“Then go get me Larus’ wife!” Roslin shouted.

Disa watched their argument. The storm overpowered their shouting with its gales from the sea beyond the bluffs outside; the snow dragged heavy on the roof. Disa could almost see Fastny’s life evaporating from the surface of her skin, leaving it pasty and cold. Disa looked at Austmar, his power weighing over her aunt and uncle. He would need a new wife soon, she was certain. Even a man of his stature could hardly manage without one.

But as Fastny’s gasping disintegrated into a hiss while her husband fought with Roslin and Kacper, Disa heard a familiar verse echo in her thoughts. She whispered it to herself and heard it above the fight and the weeping and the storm and the coming death. “What is crooked cannot be straightened. What is lacking cannot be counted.” She spat the last of the fire from her mouth and counted each of those words a lie. She knew that it wasn’t true; she had seen things fixed, the wound on her hand, the pierced points on Solan’s body. She felt the stone in her hood, against her back. Just because Fastny had more than she deserved didn’t mean Disa would let the dark Ecclesiastes be proven true.

Disa climbed onto the bed as Austmar shoved Kacper backward and over into the water basin. Roslin ran to help Kacper up while Austmar roared at them in blame over the loss of his son and his wife. Disa took the stone from the hood and hid it inside her mouth, nestled in her cheek. She laid herself between Fastny’s legs and held her face against the tearing skin that leaked so much blood. It was the only warm place on Fastny’s body, her thighs were already going cool to the touch and her fingers were icy. Disa simply held close, gripping Fastny’s waist and pulling her tightly against herself.

The storm brought down snow that made the roof of the cottage splinter. The ground beneath lurched, the floor and the wall both formed a narrow split, and the children cried out loud in the other room. A great heap of snow fell through the opened roof, drowning everyone in freezing wet and dousing the candles. Darkness was interrupted only by a sliver of light from the fireplace beyond the bedroom.

But Disa ignored all of this, keeping herself in her place against the dying young mother. Long moments followed, moments solely of sensation. The shouting had vanished with the snow and Fastny's breathing had fallen to total silence. There had been the snow flood of chill all over Disa's back and legs and then a weary hand brushed it away. Light returned to the room. And with it, slowly, warmth to Fastny's unmoving legs and back. Fastny's body pushed soft against Disa's face, a quiet pulse of blood and a quiet pulse of breath and an uneven kick of tiny legs. Disa heard her name being spoken, but she refused to move. First the gentle hand, then a gentler hand, then that rough, heavy hand she desired so much shook her shoulder. But only when Fastny reached down to touch her did Disa lift her head to look over the swollen belly dripping fresh, warm sweat. Fastny looked back at her, face flush with red, flush with life. Disa peered back at Kacper, Roslin, and Austmar, who stared.

"Disa, dear. What did you pray?" Roslin asked her.

"I didn't." Disa pushed herself away from Fastny and the bed. She stumbled over the wetted blankets, tripped over the crack in the floor, and pushed her way out of Olin's room. She whispered back behind herself. "The baby. She'll be ready to come out very soon."

Disa went to stand in front of the fire, more for light than for warmth. She wiped Fastny's blood off of her face, then spit the stone out into her hand as she stared at the fire.

Solan was beside her a moment later, holding Lara and trailed by Evan and Thor. When Disa let out a great exhale, Lara tried to speak. “Did momma and the baby die like Aunt Petra and her little boy?”

Disa bore down against a welling up of bile against the eight-year-old and melted it into numbness. “They’re okay, Lara. Your little sister is almost here.” Disa told her. Lara nodded and held Solan, tight.

Disa didn’t watch as Austmar carried Fastny from Olin’s ruined bedroom into Kacper and Roslin’s room. Roslin led him, carrying her leather bag. Kacper followed them, holding the basin. Disa didn’t watch as Solan put Lara down and grabbed the cauldron from over the fire to fill the basin with fresh hot water. Disa didn’t watch as the children sat down in front of the fire, humming chapel songs on their own, until Kacper came out to sit with them. She turned and left the cottage, kicking the door shut without a word.

The storm had raged less and Fastny’s birth pangs could be heard from outside. But they were healthy cries and Disa forgot about them. She stood looking past the bluffs out into the dark, only rarely catching a vision of the sea and the sky from retreating lightning. There were cities and mountains and graveyards and weaving rivers and farmlands far across the water before her. There were peoples with languages and practices and knowledge that were foreign, alien. There were songs and stories and sorrows and sweetness. The wind upset Disa’s coats and hair less and less as the night continued. A shovel she had brought with her rested against a gravestone.

Disa had stood all night. The sun might have touched the lip of the horizon behind her, but the overcast sky diffused the morning light into a flatness that made shadows without edges. Disa still stared out over the bluffs and across the waters beyond. The raw and scabbed pads of her fingers throbbed with a chill-numbed ache and a splinter from the shovel's handle hovered beneath the surface of the skin on her palm; her lips were chapped behind her dusty plum colored scarf. But there was enough of a warmth in the air to keep her from falling to her knees; winter was finally beginning its surrender.

The wafting breeze of flowers teasing her nostrils was out of place, though. They were too early, and Disa knew why. She knew why they had sprouted over night and how they had pierced through the dense crust of snow. And as she stood there, she imagined crushing each of the flower petals, wasting their beauty and their vitality even as they seemed to waste her own with their presence.

He had said it several times before she could hear him.

“Disa?”

Kacper's voice spoke with trepidation at the sight before him, Disa could sense. “Disa, you need to come inside. Breakfast is prepared for us.” Disa didn't respond, but she knew that Kacper had taken no offense. “Disa. You've been here all night?”

Disa turned to look at him and her breath somersaulted in her throat. Kacper was surely amazed as well. What Disa had assumed to be a few wretched petals peeking above the graves had proven to be a small field of wild flowers whose stems reached up to her knees. She took in the brightness of the purples and reds and yellows that peppered the white beneath her.

“Kacper?”

“Disa, come inside, please. It's not good for you to wallow like this.” Kacper said.

Disa stood over one of the three gravestones, her mother's. Kacper frowned. Disa's face began to tighten and her chest and fists grew rigid. "Kacper, I thought that. I thought— But it was wrong. The Bible was wrong. It's not all meaningless. Life isn't all meaningless like it said."

"Disa, I don't see what you mean." Kacper shrugged against the still cool wind.

"It said that everything is meaningless. But that's a lie. Solan, Solan's. Minna is better. She's getting better. And Fastny was, she was almost gone. She was going to die."

"Yes, Disa?" Kacper tried to reach for her but she pulled away.

"She was going to die, Kacper, but she had the baby. The baby girl."

"Yes, she had a baby girl. A healthy baby girl."

"And Fastny is okay, too."

"Yes, she is. Uh, Disa, please come inside." Kacper said.

But Disa's heart pounded uneven and her voice trembled. "If Solan and Lara can have their— Uncle Kacper, why can't I have Petra back? How come these god damned silly flowers instead of her!" Disa's eyes burned behind her tears.

Kacper sighed. He looked down at the flowers and out at the sea and there was a flimsy crack that pervaded his lost voice. "Disa. I do not know."

Disa felt somehow sated by his honesty and fell against him, letting her old, still strong uncle bear her weight as they walked through the field of flower flecked snow to their tousled cottage.

Inside, Disa could see Roslin sitting against the wall of the kitchen, eyes shut in her exhaustion and mouth drooling a little. Evan and Thor slept, too, with their heads rested on their

mother's lap. Solan cleared the table as the old, squat Eydis Hakonsdottir prepared a bowl of porridge for Disa.

"It really would have been better if you had fetched me last night, Kacper." Eydis said as Kacper closed the door. "It's a blessing that the Lord saved both of them without my help." Disa wanted to laugh. The Lord was going to let them both die.

"Yes. That storm was horrid though, Eydis. And the earthquake. We might not have gotten to you in time." Kacper said, sitting down at the table and sipping from his tea.

"Oh, a little snow builds character. I'm not afraid of it. But I'm very happy to prepare breakfast for all of you, what with the night you've had. Fortunately my arthritis isn't bugging me this morning, or it would have been quite difficult." Eydis said.

Disa would have rolled her eyes at the fat woman, but she went straight for the fireplace, instead, and shed her coats and boots and heavy skirt and scarf and over shirt and hovered on her knees as close to the flames as she could, holding back her hair with one hand. The new heat felt cleansing.

"Well, it certainly is looking a lot like Spring outside, already. Beautiful flowers and all!" Kacper said to Eydis.

Solan brought Disa's bowl of porridge to her, glancing with expectation. Disa took the offered bowl, returned the glance with blankness, and began to eat. Solan stepped away and hovered for a few minutes before disappearing out the cottage door.

When Disa finished eating, she stood, wavered for a moment, and strode toward her father's bedroom. The bed was still soaked with the blood and the wall and floor were cracked from the earthquake. Dull sunlight shone on the soggy floor where the snow had fallen through the roof. She shut the broken door and walked to Roslin and Kacper's room. She eased open the

door, and saw Fastny, snoring, with the new baby resting on her chest and Lara asleep beside her. She looked back at Kacper and Eydis. “What’s her name?” She whispered.

Eydis groaned. “Your father’s cousin insisted on the name Ari.”

“Like, as in an eagle? But that’s a boy’s name.” Disa said.

“Again, he insisted and wouldn’t budge.” Eydis said. “Poor girl. She’ll always know her father wanted a boy.”

“Maybe Austmar just likes eagles. Half of eagles are girls, didn’t you know?” Kacper said, chuckling at himself.

“No.” Eydis said, not getting the joke. “He wanted a boy, I can tell with men like him. He was cranky when Lara was born, too. Stormed off to drink with Disa’s father, if I recall. Ari...” Eydis shook her head.

“Where has cousin Austmar gone?” Disa asked.

“Off to town to bring the doctor.” Kacper said with a long yawn.

Disa slipped into the room and sat next to the sleeping mother and her girls. She touched Ari’s tiny, soft blonde eyebrows and her active, puckered lips. The baby’s eyes already fluttered in dreaming. Disa looked at Lara, dried tears mixed with charcoal still smeared on her face. Fastny stirred, returned to snoring.

Disa leaned forward to whisper in Fastny’s ear. “Always remember. You should have died. I would have had him. Always remember.”

Fastny didn’t respond. Disa saw that she continued to sleep in an undeserved peace. But when Disa sat back up and stood to leave, Solan was there, staring at her with a long-stemmed meadow flower crowned with purple petals in her hand.

When night had grown deep, Disa and Solan rose together from their pallet on the floor near the fire. They quietly put on their outdoor clothes and eased the cottage door open on its creaky hinge offset from the cold and the quake. They stole into the barn and took a shovel before walking out to the bluffs. Disa kept checking behind her, though she knew that everyone was hard asleep. The outside glowed a cool blue and silver from the dark sky stuffed with stars. The myriad flower petals in the snow had chosen not to close with the setting sun; they drank in the moon as noonday light.

When they reached the three graves, Disa picked up the shovel she had left that morning. Solan took her shovel and began to dig in front of Olin's gravesite.

"Solan. This one." Disa said.

She began to dig in front of her mother's grave where she had dug the night before, aware that Solan stared at her. She offered no explanation and Solan eventually joined her. It would have been the sensible thing for Disa to try and return life to her father, so recently passed away as he was. But Disa missed her mother. Missed her more than anything else.

They stopped just short of the coffin beneath. In the dim star glow, a large, thick flower bulb could be seen sprouting a bud. Disa fell to her knees, reached down to push the bulb aside, and found the stone under it. She lifted it in her hands and drank in its red on black sheen. It seemed hard, hollow, translucent; the reflection of the swath of stars splayed over the air above seemed to shine deep from its inside. The stone arrested Disa more than it ever had before, but she lied to herself and tried to regard it with a casual air. She stepped free of the hole and held the stone up for Solan to see its changed nature. Solan's eyes shone.

"It gives life to the living, cousin. But it kills the dead. Are you sure you want it?" Disa asked.

Solan held out her hand. Disa tossed the stone at her but Solan deftly caught it, to Disa's annoyance.

"Neat, huh?" Disa said, wanting her cousin to reveal some sign of greed and selfishness. But it was impossible to feel anything but the thoughts over Aunt Minna pouring from Solan's mind and Disa remembered that Solan had always been a better person than she. Solan pushed the stone into her braid and wound up her hair, covering it with her hood. She began to fill the hole of the grave again. Disa watched Solan, let Solan, put dirt over Petra for the final time. The stone wasn't only good, couldn't be; Disa had felt the shaking of the Earth below her and the gale of the skies above her when Fastny was healed. She was certain that the stone had angered nature.

When Solan had finished and the grave looked as untouched as before, the two girls walked back to the barn to put away the shovels. They slid inside the cottage and pulled their clothes off again for bed.

When Disa lay down with her back to Solan, the sound of the crinkling of the cooling ashes drifting too far from the heart of the flame sent her to her sleep in an instant.

Disa walks along a grassy steppe as hard sun bakes from above. Yellow and brown grasses cover the ground and a great chain of forested mountains peaked with white presidences over all. After walking for hours, Disa finally sees the approaching edge of a dense forest and a stream that flows out of it. Where the forest, the steppe, and the stream meet sits a small, round, undecorated tent with smoke escaping the top. When Disa is close enough to smell burning wood and animal dung, an old woman peers out from behind the flap of the tent. Disa continues forward, but the old woman points to a neck high pile of rocks.

“Ovoo!” The woman tells her.

Disa stops, looks at the rocks, and hides a grunt. She walks slowly around them once, senses that more is required, and circles them two more times with her head bowed. She pulls a small animal skin from her robe pocket and pours sour smelling milk from it; the white stream is flicked and sprinkled by the wind. When the skin is empty, she looks back at the old woman who nods and disappears into the round tent. Disa follows her inside.

Disa stands tall, head almost touching the highest part of the tent roof. The old woman gestures toward the fire and Disa kneels beside it on the left side, the masculine side, noting the large iron bowl that holds the embers. She takes a length of silk from within her robe and hands it to the old woman, who inspects it briefly before taking it to a chest next to a blanket on the floor. The old woman returns and spreads a goat skin on the dirt, then hands Disa a shallow, wide brimmed cup. Disa shakes the contents of the cup and strews them onto the goat skin. Sun bleached sheep ankle bones tumble from the cup onto the skin and the old woman begins to mumble in a rhythmic, melodic drone as she lets her eyes roll back into her head and her body bows and flexes.

Nearly an hour passes before the drone ends. The old woman convulses a final time, hunches her shoulders, and looks Disa in the eye. She shakes her head, with finality, and begins to gather up the ankle bones and the goat skin. The old woman is certain, as the ancestors have told her, that what Disa wants cannot be had. Disa stands, swatting the bones and the skin from the old woman's hands and spitting at her feet. She tears the flap off of the tent as she exits and stands under the eternal blue sky, still holding the felt tent flap in her hand. The upset air whips her long, black braid into her face and she doesn't care.

Two months after Olin's death, Disa had moved her belongings into his room, if only for a few days before the long journey. The roof, wall, and floor had been repaired and Disa felt a measure of peace in the room where she had grown up with her parents. As she moved her books and bible into the room, she heard Solan organizing the other room, making space for Aunt Minna's clothes. She left her new room and looked through the door at Solan as she moved the small chest of Minna's dresses to the foot of the bed. Minna sat on the mattress, eyes far more aware than when last Disa had seen them, hair more feathery than frail. Her body had filled out in the months before as Solan had encouraged her to eat better and taken her on more frequent walks. She and Solan didn't look so much alike; Solan was a near copy of the lean, tow-headed Filip with his blue eyes that had laughed with the least excuse. Minna was thicker, with sandy hair and hazel eyes that grew richer all the time. Disa had avoided talking directly to Minna ever since she was four years old and Filip had died. Minna had grown strange and incomprehensible and the doctor in the fishing village had eventually volunteered to keep her with his family in order to treat her properly. The family had paid the doctor in food from the farm and in fish from Olin's weekly catches, but Minna had only faded with the years.

Minna looked over at Disa and smiled as if remembering, as if discovering. "Disa. Hello."

"Hello, Aunt Minna." Disa said, avoiding Solan's glance at her.

"Our ship has arrived in port. We'll be off soon." Minna said.

"Yes, we will." Disa replied, not sure what else to say. "I, well, I'm off to help Kacper."

She smiled, politely, and left them alone to go outside. The ground was soft from the melt of the final snows and the summer sun had been up almost all day, with only a brief slip below

the mountains. Disa opened the door to the drying house where Roslin pulled bones from a great fish and Evan and Thor played at hanging small fish up to dry.

“Roslin. If the boys want to sleep in my room, tonight, I was thinking of taking the mule up the mountain to watch the cows for Kacper. I’d like to go one last time.” Disa said.

“Oooh, can we? Mom, can we?” Thor asked.

“Olin’s bed is bouncy and you can jump, so high up into the ceiling!” Evan cried, almost trembling.

Roslin cocked an eyebrow at Disa, then fixed a faux serious stare on the boys. “I suppose these hooligans can stay in your room, as long as—” The boys waited and Roslin extended her pause, “—as long as no one gets their heads stuck through the roof!” The boys exploded with laughter and ran around the drying house, acting like their heads were stuck in a roof. Disa and Roslin laughed at them. Disa started to close the door, but Roslin walked over and caught her arm, gently. “You can stay up there if Kacper is going to stay with you, or if you’re alone.”

Disa frowned. “Oh, okay, Roslin.” She tried to leave, but Roslin pulled her back, close.

“I don’t want you up there if Austmar hasn’t gone home before you arrive.” Roslin’s face fell stony.

Disa lied to herself as she lied to Roslin. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do. Kacper and I have been foolish. Or naïve. Just promise me, Disa.” Roslin said.

“I promise.” Disa told her, swearing the opposite in her thoughts.

“Thank you, Disa.” Roslin smoothed Disa’s wayward red strands back out of her face. Disa couldn’t look at her aunt and Roslin turned her around pushed her, sweetly, out the door of the drying house.

Disa walked back into the cottage and grabbed her satchel from Olin's room. She then went over to the barn and put a saddle on the mule. He was more ornery than usual and it took her quite a while to get him settled enough to ride. She hoped that Kacper would take him home so that she could ride Brigitta the next day.

Disa finally mounted the mule and set him in the direction of the hills to the west. It was good to be outside without coats and full boots and the sun made work much easier. Flowers were everywhere, now, and the grasses had grown up billowing from the long, wet winter. As she rode further away from the sea, the wind grew less salty and the dust dried the air and made the floral aromas fill her nostrils, sweet and pungent. The hills began to rise higher and less rounded. To one side spread the desert with its coarse sand granules and shrubs. To her other side, in the far distance past the river, was Mt. Laki and the Skaftar range. The green of the surrounding hills began to fade to beige and basalt the higher up Disa traveled. There were fewer birds, now, though the flies and gnats still hung close to the grassy path where the mule's hooves pushed into the soft earth.

Disa decided to take a long detour. She remembered a beautiful sight that she hadn't visited since she came with her mother and father the year she turned eight. She encouraged the mule up a long, rolling slope of basalt pebbles until she reached the top of a low mountain. The brim of the mountain was wide, reaching at least a league all the way around. Down in the middle was a lake blue with melt water that reflected the downy clouds smeared high in the sky. Disa hopped down off of the mule and let him nibble on the sparse tufts of grass for a while as she walked slowly around the entire brim of the mountain. She admired the lake and the mountains in the distance as she walked, emptying her thoughts for the first time in so very long.

When she returned to the mule, he seemed rested and ready to continue, so she climbed into the saddle and led him down the mountain and back in the direction of Kacper's camp.

As Disa rounded the last hill, she could see Kacper and the cows at the top of the next. There was no sign of Austmar or his shaggy grey gelding and Disa felt almost betrayed by Roslin's request, as though her aunt had willed Austmar's absence. She couldn't help but chuckle, though, as she watched her uncle chase one of Austmar's cows away from the lip of a small precipice.

Disa followed the curve of the hill downwards, then began to head up the last hill. The earth shook just slightly and Disa felt her expression fall. She reminded herself that the island often shook from all of the volcanoes, that not every shock of nature came from Solan using their secret stone for her mother's sake. As the mule carried her to the top, she could see all of the cows, Kacper's tent, and the makeshift wall of large rocks he had begun to erect to keep the cows from falling off of the one sharp decline on the hill.

Kacper grinned when he saw her and walked over to help her off of the mule. "I think I see an angel. Or at least someone that an angel would be jealous of." Disa hugged him. They walked over to the wall of rocks and she began to carry some into place. "I forget how strong you and your cousin have gotten. No soft, fat, western Europeans in this family." Kacper said.

"Daddy used to say we were all pure blood Viking women so we hated warm weather and lifted oxen with our bare hands." Disa giggled at the thought of her father teasing the women of the family.

Kacper chuckled with her. "Well, of course. Olin, Filip, and I all discussed it beforehand, didn't you know? 'Get a hold of one of the Sindrison daughters and you'll never need to work a

day in your life! They'll take care of it all.” Kacper grinned, remembering. “There’s certainly more of sparkle than of triviality about those women.”

“Sparkle?”

“Ah. Your grandfather’s name is an old Norse name. It means ‘nothing’ or ‘trivial’, a nobody, but it can also mean ‘sparkle’. Like magic.” Kacper said, placing a rock just so.

Disa copied his placement on her end of the wall. “Not such a magical life for them, though.”

Kacper shrugged. “Their children are strong, healthy, well-fed, even a little intelligent, by some standards.” Kacper winked at Disa and she shook her head at the back handed complement from the former school instructor. “That’s more magic than a lot of people on this island get to see.”

Disa tried to lift a rock that was too heavy and chose to push it instead. “I suppose so.”

Kacper looked at her. “Ease up on that, there, my dear. Some can just sit there and be rocks. They don’t all have to have a purpose.”

Disa continued pushing. “Yes. They do.” She knew his eyes were on her with each straining lunge, but she continued on until the rock made up the corner stone of her end of the wall. She lifted another to place above it.

“Disa.”

“I can do it, Kacper. I’m fine.” Disa dropped the stone, barely missing her boot as she jumped out of the way. “Damn it!”

“I know you can do it, Disa. You just don’t have to.” Kacper said.

He sat down on the wall as Disa stood over her rock, hating it for its weight, hating it for its awkward shape, hating it for its very existence. He waited until she finally robbed the rock of the blunt of her ire. “Disa. No one would ever think you don’t deserve to be angry.”

“How could I help it if they did?” She said. “Why would I care?”

“Well. That I don’t know. But I’d recommend you start working at giving it up, that anger of yours.”

“But. But I deserve to be, don’t I? Don’t I deserve it?” Disa asked. She bit her lip hard to stop it from shaking.

“Maybe, sure. But what good it’ll do you I bet you can’t tell me. And I know for certain that I couldn’t tell you.”

What good, Disa thought. She wondered if she even had the energy not to be angry, it came so naturally, now. Kacper picked up a jug he had left beside the wall and unscrewed it, taking a sip. He offered it to Disa who hesitated for a minute before walking over and tasting it. She sputtered. The drink was somehow sour and sweet and bitter all at the same time, and the tiny bubbles buzzed on her tongue as if she had swallowed a hundred tiny bees. “Is that beer?”

“Indeed. It keeps the belly full and slakes your thirst on top of it.”

Disa offered to return it, but Kacper nodded back to her. She shrugged, drank a little more, and found that it went down easier. “I didn’t know you drank at all.”

“Never around Roslin or the boys. A man isn’t always the same man when he has drink in him. It’s never been a problem for me, but I’ve always wanted Thor and Evan to have good, solid memories of their old dad. And I wanted to have some of those memories, myself, truth be told.”

Disa sat down beside Kacper and they passed the beer back and forth. "I'm glad you don't drink, much, Kacper. I always took you for less manly than my father and Austmar, but—"

"Well, I've never been so strong as either of those two on their weakest days."

"Maybe. But they've never been so generous as you on their soberest days." Disa said, taking the last sip of the beer at Kacper's behest. Her body felt a little lighter and her lips a little tangled and she giggled and shuddered at the same time. "Hard to blame them, though. This feels good."

Kacper shook his head. "The fun usually stops there, for me. Other people go until they're face down in the dirt. I think I've been a boring old man since I was a little boy." He stood and began walking over to the tent. "I'll raise up a partition so you can have some respite from my snoring."

"Wait, Kacper. I, I'm here so you can go home."

"What? I thought you were coming to keep me company, my dear." Kacper said.

"Well, of course, if you want to stay. But I gave the boys my bed tonight and I'm sure that Aunt Roslin would appreciate a few hours without any squiggling children in the room." Disa stood up, unsteady at first, and stretched. "I just wanted to see the countryside one more time before it was too far away."

Kacper nodded for a while and shrugged. "Honestly, Disa. As much as I love camping out on these hills, I would love to be in a bed for a couple of nights before we leave. If you're sure about being up here all alone—"

"The cows and I will be just fine." Disa said, admiring their little rock wall.

"Well, all right. I'll be on my way." Kacper disappeared into the tent to pick up his pack. "I'll leave you with all the supplies and be back to help move the cows to town in two days."

Selling them will give us a bit of extra money once we get to Nova Scotia. A cushion should be nice.”

“Okay.”

“And how about I take that old mule back, in case you want to ride Brigitta around the hills, some, tomorrow?” Kacper asked.

“Kacper, you don’t have to do that.” Disa said, giving him a sardonic laugh. “But it would be wonderful if you did.”

“He’s an unwieldy stump, isn’t he? But I think he’s had a long enough rest.” Kacper untied the mule and climbed up on top of him.

“Have a safe ride, Uncle Kacper.”

“You keep a rock in hand, in case some ruffian happens upon our little pasture.”

“I’ll take plenty good care of myself.”

“You? I’m worried over the cows.” Kacper winked at her. “Only a fool goes after a Viking woman.”

Disa laughed as Kacper rode the mule down the hill. She ducked inside of the tent to prepare her supper and thought she remembered a dream about a strange round tent, a frightened old lady, and another pile of rocks.

Disa knew that it was long past time when she should have gone in to bed that night, bright as it was outside. The cows all stood together with their heads facing inward, half asleep. But she knew that there would be a few moments of relative darkness and she couldn’t help but wait on them. She sang old Rimes that her mother and grandmother had taught her. She plucked

at Kacper's fiddle for a while, dancing to a made up tune and imagining the fiddle as her dashing dance partner.

Finally, the sun began to hang low where the mountains rose up and Disa took a blanket to the stone wall and lay down on top of it. As the sun left the sky, the stars blinked for their brief moment in the deep cerulean dusk/dawn. There was no way to see them for certain, but Disa could guess at the constellations from a few of the telltale stars. She could see the archer, the bull, the scorpion that her father said she that she had been born under. Olin's lessons about each and their usefulness at sea blinked into Disa's memory with each star and she wondered who she would be if she lived in a different time, in a different part of the world, born under a different star.

Her father had traveled to many places, even sailed to the Halifax fishing port in Nova Scotia during a war, before he had married Petra. It was Olin who, two years ago, had decided on moving the family there, where winters were slightly milder and the economy bustling from all of the colonization. With Kacper's teaching experience and the women's sewing and cheese making, there was little doubt that they would fare better than their fellow poverty stricken Icelanders. Disa had made herself trust the excitement, but when she thought of leaving Filip's, Olin's, and Petra's graves behind she felt fledglings of sadness.

When the light was at its least, Disa closed her eyes and drank in the cool touch from the fledgling night and the softness of the pollen dusted breeze. Austmar drifted into her mind's eye and she asked herself whether she could stop wanting him. He was all of the worst parts of her father, but he was, at least, enough like Olin to offer some comfort. Disa pulled off her riding trousers, brushed her hand across her thin blouse creating tingling shivers, and let herself fail, yet again, to be holy. All alone out in the hills she didn't rush herself, but took as long as she liked

and sinned as many times as she wanted. Long after the sun had again risen to invade the hills with its light, she climbed off of the rock wall, wrapped herself in the blanket, and stepped down into the tent to sleep, suspiciously free of her usual burden of shame.

Kacper was good at wrapping the tent in such a way as to drown out all of the light from the midnight sun and Disa slept heavy from the beer and the long ride and from her sinful exertion.

The loud smack of an explosion jerked her from the safety of her slumber. The following violence of the shaking and of the grinding roar from the Earth's belly rolled Disa out of her blanket and her legs landed in the remains of the fire she had lit the night before. She pulled them out and swatted at the burn spots, still blind in the darkness. And though the poles were embedded firmly into the ground, the tent collapsed around her and she scrambled to crawl out from underneath and pull the canvas off of the embers inside before the whole thing burned.

Disa managed to rescue the tent and tried to catch her breath when a second quake shook the hills and sent her to her back. The cows were lowing loudly and most of them had scrambled off of the hill down into the valley below. Disa watched as Brigitta bucked hard, pulled her reins from the stake that Kacper had driven into the ground, and galloped down the hill in the opposite direction of the cows. Disa stood and walked over to the rock wall that she had helped raise the day before. One of the cows had sprinted through it and now lay twitching at the bottom of the precipice.

"Blast it." Disa sighed, debating as to whether she should go kill the cow or run off to round up the others before they became impossible to find in the hills.

She noticed that the sun was growing dim behind a cloud and cursed her luck at having to do all of this in a rain storm. But when she looked up, she saw that the cloud was a plume of ash spewing from a crack in Mt. Laki. The ash was white and grey and traveled high into the sky until the sun was rendered a waking twilight. As the light fell, Disa could see the earth illuminated by thin, glowing rivers leaking from four new craters split from the sides of the Skaftar Hills. A third rumble knocked her sideways. But Disa kept her feet, grabbed her satchel from the tangle inside the tent, and ran down the hill in search of Brigitta. She had to get home to warn everyone, cows be damned.

It had taken Disa over an hour just to run Brigitta down in the valleys. Once she had caught hold of her and helped her to quiet, she rode bareback as hard as she could back toward home. Not a few times did she see a burning hunk of ash, hurled from the volcano, crash into the hills about her.

Volcanoes were a part of life on the island and no one complained over the occasional eruption or the damage that came with an earthquake. But Disa had never heard of such a blast as the one she'd just witnessed. Not only did the smoke look to reach a mile up into the sky, but multiple rivers of lava had formed about the hillsides. Disa didn't think that the hot ash would reach home, but she knew that other gasses could come from eruptions; Kacper had taught her all about them.

She wasn't sure how long it would take her to reach the village at a full gallop, but she figured—

She hadn't heard it, but there was heat and there was pain and there was the ensuing crash to the ground that nearly knocked her out. She rolled several times and lay on the ground for a

long time, grass and mud jammed between broken teeth, her right hip bent strangely. She had nearly bitten through the side of her tongue and she could taste salty blood pooling in her cheek.

Disa didn't understand quite why she was on the ground; she spit the musty earth and a few bloody teeth from her mouth. Her jaw and skull throbbed a brutal rhythm with the harried beating of her heart. She tried to look around herself. Brigitta's body had been flung far from her and was still burning in the grass, unmoving. The hunk of steaming rock that had hit them smoldered nearby. Disa tried to stand up, but found that the entire right side of her body was numbing and sluggish. She could smell the burning of the skin on her neck and back and torso and finally understood what had happened after long moments of near oblivion. As she felt her lips spilling her life onto the blades of grass below her, she understood that the Skaftar Hills had sent their fire after her and that she would most certainly die from the burning of the liquid rock that had killed their horse.

She sat still, gathering her scattered self even as she felt her mind pulling away from her body. After that first jolt that hurled her from Brigitta's back, the pain had hidden behind the shock. But it was starting to creep up, again, around the edges of her conscious thoughts and she had a horrible premonition of its coming intensity. There were still some pieces of the burning rock on her back and cheek and they seared as they ate away at her skin and flesh; Disa could smell her body's acrid suffering. Somehow, the satchel still clung to her left shoulder. She felt lost. With Brigitta dead and her own body broken, Disa figured herself for dead knowing no one would find her. She hugged the satchel to her body, grimacing at the increasing halo of heat around her burned skin, the wrench in her joints, ichor leaking from the crack in her temple and into her eye, the tear of her right shoulder and leg muscles, sharp pangs from each and every individual nerve. Her vision warped with each beat of her heart that pumped blood and supplied

life and hurt to every one of her injuries. She hadn't felt so aware of everything in and all around herself for a long time.

In fact, Disa thought, she hadn't felt so aware since Fastny had her baby girl during that brutal winter storm and earthquake only a few weeks ago.

Disa frowned. She had tried to put Olin's stone out of her mind over the past weeks. But she always felt when Solan had it near and she felt it as much when Solan had left it with Minna, a few miles away. She felt it close, now, too close. Disa used her left arm to search the satchel, horrid and slow moving as she felt and devoid of much ability to think. Underneath some food and a book she hadn't yet opened, wrapped in a bundle of cloth, was the curious, sleek stone that Disa had taken from her father's flotsam covered armor the day he died. Solan had snuck it into her satchel, though at what point, Disa couldn't be sure. She trembled, at odds with herself over Solan. Her cousin had saved her life, though she surely hadn't expected such a catastrophe as the volcano, and the act of silently returning the stone had surely been meant to bury discord between them. But Disa felt certain that the stone had created all of the violence around them over the past weeks, and she also knew that Solan suspected this as well, choosing against those consequences to continue relying on its strange powers to fix Minna. They ought to have left it under the earth, or perhaps have thrown it into the sea. But the ground beneath Disa shook and she saw the remains of their horse's body rocking, lifelessly. "Brigitta." Disa didn't want to die, too. She rolled the cloth around the stone held it in her mouth, as she had with Fastny. She lay down flat on her back and took simple breaths, trying to gather herself and prepare for the growing discomfort she would face.

The sky grew mottled in her sight as her eyes focused in on a tiny mote of dust that hovered just above her eyelashes. It was so close that it should have been invisible, but she

followed with perfect clarity each of its dancing spins and zags, up and around for all of the eternity spanning the inside of a single thought. How long had that mote been dancing without her knowledge? She fell into the comfort of knowing that she would never know. Disa chose, instead, simply to absorb the experience of its movement letting her soul dance in mirror to it, her mind quieting even as the pain in her body began to roar. A warm push of air stole the dust mote from her attention, air too warm even for the summer months. The rumblings of Mt. Laki spoke to her from the ground underneath her head and the immensity of the cavern of boiling rock that the volcano crowned became an image in her mind's eye. The years, all of those years that it had flexed and strained under the pressures from the two sides of the entire world should have sent her mind to reeling. But all of that stretch of time, when she listened and discovered the vastness of it, seemed commonplace and natural and of almost trifling consequence compared to the ages of the eons of the near eternal sky above her. She suppressed shame at having been party to bringing about the eruption earlier than it might have otherwise come, but reminded herself that it would have come, inexorably, in time.

Finally, Disa sat up. The bleeding had stopped in her mouth, so she took the stone out and tied it around her waist with the cloth like a sash, ensuring the stone rested over her right hip. After another moment, she put all of her weight on her left leg and arm, and stood. The first step on her right side was more than excruciating. She had never felt anything so wretched before, not in her own life, and not in the numerous dreams she'd had of a brutal warrior living in a distant land and time, all forgotten until now. But she placed her weight on her left leg again, making sure to move ever forward, and began her slow trek. And almost in protest, the earth began to rumble beneath her as the air turned to a cutting wind.

After a dozen painful steps, she passed Brigitta. There were already tears in Disa's eyes, but they flowed anew when she saw their family horse. The dear creature had always been gentle, easy to ride, and clever enough to be a friend. Petra had named her and so it seemed to Disa that yet another part of her mother had been taken away. But she knew there wasn't time to grieve. She set herself to each slow step as her body screamed at her above the bellow of the wind and the crying of the earth.

Disa hurt so very much, but she still knew what she was doing. With every moment she kept the stone close, she knew that the world around her tore at itself and endangered everyone on the island, maybe even everyone in the world. She couldn't know for certain. More burning ash and rock fell, though most of it fell behind her, now, rather than around her. The holler of her nerves refused to lessen and her steps were great lurches; Disa's hip was snapped from its socket with each footfall even as it was pulled back into place with every lift of her leg. She stumbled heavy, even crashed, each time a clod of dirt or a tuft of grass caught her toe. Her speed was excruciating as was the sensation in her body. The hot wind filled her lungs, and her pain mixed with vigor. Every breath worked against the endless pain as the rage in Disa's body turned into violence over the Earth.

Disa kicked off her shoes and reached down with her left hand, ripping her stockings from her legs; the warm grass greeted her bare feet, a measly respite from agony. She slid the satchel from her shoulders and turned around for the first time to see from where she had come. The horizon was still dark, the sun deadened by grey and black blankets of smoke, and the sky was a shade of seasick green. In a valley between hills, Disa could no longer see Mt. Laki or the rest of the Skaftar Hills, but it only took that momentary study of the coming disaster to set her back towards home.

Her walking became jogging and her jogging turned to running. The pain multiplied with her speed, but her body no longer threatened to fail at any moment; the stone was having its effect. She spurred herself on to run harder, shrugging off the sharp pokes from a few edged rocks on the bank of a creek as she leapt through. The cool wetness was welcome in the heat and Disa set herself to a sprint. She had never run so fast in her life and the landscape was a blur to her left and right as she pushed further West and South. Her lumbering stride matched the weakness of her breath and she felt her muscles and joints tearing with each impact, mending with each rest. All the while, the ground continued to rattle. She ran for more than an hour, begging anything or anyone that could hear her suffering for a single painless breath. But the last shards of her ribs had yet to be purged from her right lung by the sleek stone's power and she never felt respite.

As Disa followed the valley, there rose ahead of her a great hill that blocked her path. It was a quick decision that climbing would be quicker than travelling around and Disa set herself to the steep incline and its slick vegetation. There was faint smoke in the air that scratched her throat, but she felt as though she pushed it from her body through sheer power of will. The climb had slowed her journey, but only just so, the summit of the wide hill was already near as she powered her way upward. Once she had reached the top of the hill, Disa could finally see the ocean far off, and the tiny nook where her village lay.

Behind, there was only darkness. Disa wanted to run from it, but first thought of its cause. There was still pain all over her body; Disa had been too close to death for the stone to fix every part of her in an instant. And her run home hadn't helped. Disa touched the marred skin on her cheek and neck. The burns still oozed, her hip was wrenched, maybe forever, and her ribs felt

shattered. But the earth shook and Disa feared that every moment that she kept the stone close to her body, she threatened greater destruction.

She unwrapped the cloth from around her waist, held it away from her body. And in that instant, she wished she hadn't done so, for her body wasn't yet ready to part with the stone and she collapsed to the sloping ground and began to slide. Disa couldn't stop herself as she rolled down the side of the hill, she could only manage to hold onto the stone inside the cloth as she fell. The hill ended in a tiny cliff that overlooked a slow river. Disa tumbled through the air and hit the water below, her body instantly cooled by the ice melt that covered her.

The water surprised Disa pulling her along in a slow current. She wanted to find the surface of the water to take a breath, but her body was paralyzed from the ice and paralyzed from the fire and paralyzed from the ensuing panic. She was failing to fight her body's need to gasp.

But Disa didn't feel alone. An echo of another who had struggled against flood and death encircled her belly and she let herself float in the frigid water, drinking up that courage and calm. Letting go of what might have been, what used to be, the notion of the vanquishing of regret remolded her mind as the water enveloped her flesh. A very little thread of light shone through the oil black clouds in the sky, illuminating her halo of hair that spread out in all directions. The coldness of the water was eased just enough.

In that moment of peace, something crashed through the surface of the river and took hold of Disa's waist, lifting her out of the water and carrying her to the river's shallower bank. Disa gasped for breath, only passively noting the cooling of the air, the quieting of the wind, the softening of the earth's shaking; the cloth with the stone still hung from her fingers. The last thing she saw was Solan, hair drenched, standing over her with a look of horror. The last thing she felt was her ruined body being held by those thin pale arms, far stronger than any man's.

It was the rocking that woke Disa from a slumber whose beginning she could not recall. She lay in an unfamiliar room that smelled of the thickness of closely set people, though the two dim, swinging, lamps revealed only the truth of darkness beyond her own weary eyelids. Her arm and ribs still pulsed and her jaw was in pain. Disa thought it strange that she had all of her teeth, but couldn't remember why it was that she shouldn't have them. The room was rocking, and it was a time before Disa realized that it wasn't the unevenness of her own head, but the actual movement of the room itself. Then she noticed creaking, like giant rocking chairs slowly lulling massive babies all below and above and around her. She giggled at the thought of the big babies rocking back and forth.

A muffled cough fully roused her and she noticed the sleeping forms of Aunt Minna, Auntie Roslin, and the twins not far from her. Her eyes adjusted a little and she saw, just beyond Roslin, a broad shouldered man asleep with a woman and two children rested against him. Austmar and Fastny and their girls. Disa was puzzled by the largeness of the room, it was wide, though with a low ceiling, and the walls seemed to bow. There was a set of wide stairs leading up to another part of the building on one end and a few giant wooden posts joining the ceiling and floor.

"Disa?" It was Kacper's voice. Disa sat up. Beside her, Kacper crouched, watching her. "Are you feeling all right? How is your leg?"

"It hurts a lot, but I can move it. I feel tired. A little confused. Everything feels like it's rocking." Disa said.

"You've been asleep for almost ten days, dear." Kacper touched her forehead.

“Mmm.” Disa nodded, then remembered the awful sights she had seen. “Uncle Kacper! There was an eruption! The Skaftar Hills were on fire and the smoke was—”

“We know, Disa. The whole island was shaking.” Kacper’s smile was strained, but genuine. He seemed, to Disa, to be missing something.

“Is it over?” Disa asked. Her voice croaked and she touched her cheek where the burns had been. Her skin was smooth.

“I’m not sure. But I suspect there’ll be aftershocks. There always are.” Kacper said, sitting down next to her. “But we don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

“Why not? This room doesn’t feel so sturdy as it is.”

“This room? Disa this—” Kacper started to say.

But Disa’s eyes squinted in the dark. She heard the shouts of men above her in the night, the call of a seabird, and finally the crash of waves against the hull of the vessel. Disa felt as though she had nothing beneath her, nothing to hold on to.

“We’ve left already?” Disa asked.

“We have. I’m sorry, Disa. You were asleep from your wounds and—”

“We’ve left. Kacper. I. I didn’t—” Disa tried to stand, still unsteady, but fell back to the floor. Kacper tried to catch hold of her arm, but she pulled away. Solan, who had appeared behind her, touched her face and Disa allowed her for a moment. But it was all too strange and sudden and Disa turned away. She shook, remembering their dead horse and the lost cows and her flight from the volcano. She thought of home and the barn and the little chapel and the villages in the hills, out by the sea. She could taste the salt spray on her lips, smell the wildflowers dense in the spring, hear the frantic winter winds racing over acres of snow drift. But

nothing else was important beyond the gravestone that she'd avoided visiting for the last seven years. That stone she knew that she would never get to see again.

Disa covered her face, wishing Solan and Kacper would leave her to herself, wishing they would wait with her forever.

A few nights later, Disa sat in the still swaying dark as the passengers slept around her. Kacper lay next to Evan and Thor while Solan rested on Minna's lap. Disa had learned in a quickly scratched out note from Solan that her cousin had nursed her with the stone for as long as she felt was wise, until the eruptions and the ensuing storms had threatened the boat. Solan had then hidden the stone inside her father's old music box, one of the few things she'd brought with her in their rush to leave the island. The rest of the voyage had been calm, though fraught with fear as to whether Disa would ever wake up from her injuries. Disa was still in pain, but her body was far from destroyed as it had been in the hills and she wondered if anyone in her family would question how she had survived Mt. Laki's destruction.

Disa munched on some bread, her teeth and gums sore but functional, and she drank a little of the mead that a sailor had offered her. She heard a muffled moan and looked out into the darkness. She could see well enough because of her close time with the stone and she spied Fastny's form, with Austmar behind her. Disa noticed that Aunt Roslin was asleep near Kacper, holding baby Ari and Lara next to her. The moan again. Disa could see that Austmar held the front of Fastny's waist with one hand and gripped her breast with the other. He kissed and bit her neck and Fastny seemed to stifle a pleased giggle. Disa felt a welling of envy towards Fastny, annoyed to witness her with Austmar. She hated that the volcano had left her so weak and scarred; Disa had become stronger than Fastny as she'd gotten older, and she'd always been

prettier. She would have made a good wife, or at least a good lover. But now, she suspected that Austmar would prefer anyone over herself. She looked away from Fastny's enjoyment, only to see that Solan was awake and watching her in the dark.

Disa knew that Solan could see just as well as she could because of the stone's effects. Her cousin's stolid expression unnerved her and distracted her from her annoyance with Fastny. For some reason, it made her think of the day when she'd seen Solan wounding herself with a needle in the barn back home. Though the stone had mended Solan's wounds, Disa had never been able to forget the sharp cries of pain that had come from Solan's lips, the only sounds she had ever heard Solan utter. Disa glanced back at Fastny and saw Austmar's hand in her hair as they quietly made love. Disa remembered the tuft of Solan's light blonde hair as she had ripped it from her head, dropping it into the hay beside splatters of blood that dripped from her neck and hip and chest. All the places that Austmar now touched on Fastny. She remembered over many months, Solan's avoidance, her fearful face, her hiding whenever Austmar was in the cottage or on the farm. Disa remembered Roslin's warning about Austmar and how it had seemed that her Aunt had looked right through her into her thoughts; she now realized that Roslin had merely suspected, not Disa's own deviance, but the source of Solan's greater remove over almost two years. Disa looked back at Solan. Solan was watching Fastny and Austmar and Disa could only think that she looked smug, satisfied, even peaceful.

A few minutes later, when Fastny and Austmar were asleep again, Solan stood, careful so as not to wake her mother, and searched through the chest that sat between herself and Disa's pallet. Disa watched as she took out Filip's music box and came to lie down next to her. The rhythm of the boat's rocking quickened a little, and while Disa was concerned, Solan offered her the music box. Disa took it, opened the lid, and lifted up the mechanism under which Solan had

stowed Olin's stone. She took the stone into her hands; it was now a deep indigo on black and no less slick to the touch, though Disa had learned how to hold on to it. She was careful not to grip it too tightly, careful not to breathe or sweat on it, as she knew the stone became more active the more closely it connected with a person's flesh and blood. She put it in Solan's hands. Solan didn't look at it, but breathed in deeply its dense, sharp aroma that Disa hadn't realized it possessed before that moment. She put her lips to it, as in tasting, and looked to fall into a trance for a few minutes. Finally, she returned the stone to its place inside the music box and rested her head on Disa's unhurt shoulder.

Disa held her cousin's hand and stroked her forehead. "Solan. I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know what he had done." She wondered that the thing she had wanted so very much had been so horrible for Solan. Solan looked up at her, her face inquisitive. Disa guessed at her question. "I wanted him. I wanted Austmar for myself, to take him from Fastny. I hated that he noticed you, instead."

Solan seemed to consider this for a long time. She reached up, took Disa's scarred neck and head in her hands, and began to whisper into Disa's ear. Disa lip trembled as her cousin's mellow, alto voice spilled out its secrets. Solan told her fifteenth birthday when she'd first been touched by Austmar and how he'd seemed ashamed and threatening each time afterwards. She knew that Austmar believed that her leaden tongue would keep the molestations from coming to light. She told her about how he had touched her body in the same places each time, and how she had punished herself for two years for causing his sins. She told Disa about how the stone had loosened her tongue when she had first held it and about how she had sworn to herself to keep her mouth shut for fear of Austmar.

Disa was greatly troubled as she thought of everything her cousin had shared. She was filled with anger and with horror at herself that she that she would still feel any envy towards Solan even after she had seen Solan's shame inflicted wounds.

But Solan interrupted her thoughts, whispering about the revenge she had taken. For, to Austmar, Solan had done a great kindness. She had cured baby Ari of pneumonia over several days of visits before Austmar's helpless eyes, though he had no idea that she was using the sleek stone in her remedies. He could see that he had been at Solan's mercy, just as she had been at his. Disa didn't understand why Solan had been kind when he had hurt her so. Solan whispered to her that her revenge had come in the form of Austmar's shame and regret, his inability to apologize both in his strength and in his weakness. Austmar hadn't even played at touching her, since.

Disa held her cousin, close, hating herself for her jealousy, wishing she could have spent those awful stolen moments with Austmar. She didn't know why Solan didn't want him, but she knew that Austmar had used Solan for her weakness. Disa looked down at the music box where the sleek stone hid. "It doesn't fix everything, does it? And it costs so much."

Solan looked away, to her sleeping mother, Minna. "It fixes enough." She said.

The day before the ship hit landfall, Disa had started to teach herself how to walk again. She had exhausted herself moving up and down the stairs out of the lower deck and had stopped to rest. Most of the passengers had gone above deck to see the distant shoreline and take in some fresh air. Only a few people remained below deck, most reading or sleeping.

Disa noticed Fastny watching her in the lamp light. Disa frowned a little and moved to sit near her. Fastny was feeding baby Ari while Lara slept on her leg. Disa wasn't sure if she should say anything, but Fastny smiled at her.

"I don't know what I did to gain such good friends as cousins." Fastny whispered.

"What?" Disa asked. Fastny thought they were friends?

"You helping me when I had that awful birth. Solan bringing charms to keep Ari from being so sick. I don't think we would have managed without. Good cousins. Good friends. I hope Austmar and I can make it up to you in Nova Scotia. Cousins ought to stay close." Fastny moved Ari from one breast to the other.

"Yes, they certainly ought to." Disa said.

Disa wanted to tell Fastny about Austmar. About how weak he truly was, that he would need to steal from Solan who could never defend herself. Disa wanted to tell Fastny about her lust for him, about how she was learning to seduce him and that she could take him away whenever she wanted. She wanted to push Fastny down into her place and she wanted, truth be told, not just to have Austmar, but to own him, to rule him. That her desires had become so clear to her was shocking in the least. And she realized that, with Olin's stone, she could have everything that she wanted in time. She could restore herself, fully, and grow strong enough to rule over Austmar in his brutish, false strength. She and Solan could become great, indeed.

But Disa could see, in that moment, how close in age Fastny really was to herself, and how frightening it must have been to travel to a different part of the world with an infant. It would have destroyed Fastny to know what kind of man Austmar was and it would have terrified her to be without him in a new home and country. That Disa had been willing to take apart a woman who treated her so kindly was more than unsettling. Disa thought of how much she had

missed her mother, Petra, and how Fastny had lost both of her parents at Disa's age, driving her to marry Austmar for security. Perhaps, Disa thought, they could fill in the gaps that the other felt. She held Fastny's hand and brushed a booger from Lara's nose as she slept and wondered, for the first time in her life, if she didn't have to go backwards in order to be okay.

Disa waited until long after Fastny fell asleep before she stood and walked over to the small chest that held the music box and the stone within. With her stronger left hand, Disa took the chest by its handle and carried it up the steps into the daylight.

On the upper deck, the passengers and crew watched the approaching horizon, green and hilly, foreign, but familiar. Disa walked away from the front of the ship and stood near the back and looked over the edge into the dark green water. She waited, the muscles in her arm straining from the weight of the chest. Only a moment later, Solan appeared beside her, having left Minna beside Roslin and Kacper's family. Solan looked down into the water with Disa.

Disa set the chest down between herself and her cousin. "I'm too foolish, Solan. I'm too foolish and too selfish. I worry that we'll rend the world with it. Can you tell me that we should keep it?"

Solan's quiet was telling.

They stood there for a long stretch of time, long enough to birth a single, solitary thought. Disa didn't know what regret Solan felt, but her cousin had always been wiser than she. Solan took the other handle of the chest and lifted it with Disa. When no one was watching, the cousins, together, hefted the entirety of the chest over the bow and watched as it was dragged down into the water.

Disa stood with Solan and faced back to the Northeast, back towards home, back towards memories and lost family and easier lives. And together, they let go of the hope for returning to what was already gone.

Disa watches the collapse of the outer wall of a wide, rock-hewn fortress. Her men on horseback, and their servants before them, horde about the fortress fighting its pale skinned defenders with sword and arrow. Disa takes from her saddle bag a mystic stone, given to her in trade for her mercy a few weeks before. She knows that it will give her great power in this battle and places it inside a silk pouch underneath her armor. The blood from a wound on her cheek mingles with sweat as it trickles down her chest, soaking the silk pouch and covering the stone. Disa finds her body invigorated; she leads a charge toward the gates of the fortress, slaying as she rides.

As the battle rages and as her enemies stumble and flee, Disa feels the heat in the air and sees shooting stars in the sky by the dozens. She knows that her victory will soon lead to her dominion, that the world will one day bow before her, that the old woman in the round tent was a fool.

And then, there is the first crash. Then the second crash and the third crash that rock the earth. Above, Disa sees great boulders, lit with flame, streaking across the sky brighter than the sun. Another crashes into a faraway mountainside with a sound like thunder. More slam into the thick walled fortress before her, crumbling it and setting it aflame. The defenders cry in terror. Disa roars with relish, rallying her riders around her, for she is certain that the ancestors are with her in her pursuit of power over all the earth. The perfect, chaotic, dark stone that

presses against her belly is indeed a gift from the Eternal Blue Sky and it summons destruction onto her enemies.

But more flaming boulders fall from the sky. One cuts a cruel path through the ranks of her warriors, tearing her army in two. Another boulder collapses the pass by which is her army's only means of retreat. Finally, a boulder pummels the wide levies made by the enemy to keep the cold northern seas at bay. In only seconds, the blood drenched valley begins to fill with the rushing, frigid waters.

Disa watches as her men and their horses are surrounded and swept away by the salty flood. The cries of all the men, her own and the enemy, are drowned by deluge and a wave knocks Disa from her mount. She feels the weight of her armor holding her below the surface as her body tumbles. With all of her strength, Disa pulls the armor from her chest and legs, swimming to the surface of the greedy sea. All about her is death. Warriors disappear beneath the waters, the last towers of the fortress are inundated and swallowed, the snow atop a mountain avalanches as flaming boulders crash into land and sea.

Disa is arrested. Her thick black hair undone and matted over her neck and face and she swears at the loss of the men and the battle and the renown that she is owed. But, in that moment, she realizes that inside her armor is the stone that had given her power in an instant, and that had robbed her of it just as quickly. It is gone, along with everything else.

Disa crawls out of the water, bare and alone. Her conquest is destroyed, her hope of future power, lost. She wants to vow her return, wants to vow ascendancy to the throne of all of the countries in the world. But she feels an embrace, as though a young girl, auburn hair and green eyes, wraps her arms about her tough and scarred torso that has seen so much war. Disa wonders if there is another life to be lived. And the cacophony within breaks apart into peace.

Nova Scotia

1784

Disa slowly read the weeks old Parisian newspaper that Kacper had brought back from Halifax that morning. The sun illuminated the words and Disa fought hard to keep from sounding out loud each syllable of the curious language that her uncle insisted she learn. She glanced out the window of their home and saw him, up the hill, working a plow as Austmar chopped wood from a mighty pine he had felled the day before. She returned her attention to the newspaper and continued to read. It was horrific; the volcano had erupted several times after they had left, according to fishermen, and there was starvation all over the island when all the domestic animals died from noxious gasses. The weather in Europe was akin to madness, according to the writer, and burning rain fell that ruined crops as far as St. Petersburg. Disa swallowed her guilt at this, hoping that her certainty over the effects of Olin's stone had been wrong.

She put the newspaper down, deciding that it was time to gather blackberries for dessert that night. She left her room, limping on her right leg feeling her hip pop when she first put weight on it. She took up her basket and decided it wasn't worth covering her hair on such a lovely spring day.

In the main room, she found Minna and Roslin sitting, repairing the twins' torn clothes and chatting. Minna flashed a grin at Disa and Roslin turned around, startled.

"Oh! Disa. My goodness." Roslin said, putting her hand on her chest.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I was sneaking." Disa said, kissing her aunts on the cheek.

But Roslin shook her head. “No, I heard you. It’s just. If you didn’t have your father’s hair, you were like a perfect painting of Petra the way you came out of that room.”

“Mmm, yes she was.” Minna said. “So focused and purposeful.”

Disa nodded slowly, a little uncomfortable and lost. Roslin touched her arm. “It’s a good thing, Disa, my dear.”

Disa smiled. “Thank you, Roslin.” She walked to the front door that was already wide open. “I’m going to get berries for dessert.”

“All right.” Roslin said.

Disa blinked in the bright sunshine. She looked down the hill and saw Lara and the twins running and playing near a creek at the bottom. Solan held Ari in her arms as she sat next to Fastny. Disa watched Fastny, feeling echoes of her old envy that still refused to abate. But when Fastny turned to look at her, she felt the envy recede a little. She kicked at a chicken that was pecking too close to her feel, turned toward the woods near their new cottage, and went in search of the juicy new fruits in which she had fallen is so much love. She thought her mother and father would have loved the taste of them.